



A Comprehensive Approach  
to Improving Student Attendance  
in Los Angeles County

# Executive Summary

*A Report from the School Attendance Task Force  
(Originally Convened as the Truancy Task Force)*

A Project of the  
Los Angeles County  
Education Coordinating Council

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## **A Comprehensive Approach to Improving Student Attendance in Los Angeles County**

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## Overview of the Problem

The issues of school attendance and truancy should be of importance and concern to nearly every governmental and community agency in Los Angeles County. Because attendance rates are directly tied to school success, there is a critical need for interventions that are capable of assessing and effectively addressing the root causes of truancy and poor student attendance and helping young people to get back on track. The findings from national and state research bear this out.

- ❖ The negative impact of absences on literacy is 75 percent larger for low-income children, whose families often lack the resources to make up for lost time on task.<sup>1</sup>
- ❖ Poor children are four times more likely to be chronically absent in kindergarten than their highest-income peers. Chronic absence in kindergarten predicts unsatisfactory fifth-grade outcomes for poor children.
- ❖ Chronically absent sixth-graders have lower graduation rates.<sup>2</sup>
- ❖ Ninth-grade attendance predicts graduation for students of all economic backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

Although the courts, law enforcement, schools, and many community organizations are engaged in efforts to address truancy and attendance issues, very little coordination has existed among these entities, and little effort has been made to assess the effectiveness of any given strategy employed. Too often, law enforcement has been called upon to impose criminal punishments on children and families, even though research shows that such methods have little impact and, in fact, actually increase the likelihood of school push-out and drop-out.

In sum, a countywide effort—to systematize and integrate practices with other agencies, promote reforms, eliminate practices that have proven to be ineffective and/or are not supported by research, and align the practices, funding, and resources of agencies with research-based approaches that have proven to be most effective—is long overdue.

## History of the School Attendance Task Force

Under the leadership of Michael Nash, Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Court and Vice Chair of the Los Angeles County Education Coordinating Council (ECC), a countywide School Attendance Task Force was convened in the fall of 2010, under the auspices of the ECC, to better understand the issue in Los Angeles County and, ultimately, to develop a set of recommendations for countywide implementation. To this end, the Task Force explored:

- The approaches being used in the county and elsewhere by major stakeholder groups, including the courts, law enforcement, schools, and communities
- Which policies and practices appear to be working and which are not
- Current research-based models for improving attendance and reducing tardiness

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<sup>1</sup> Ready, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Baltimore Education Research Consortium, SY 2009–2010.

<sup>3</sup> Allensworth & Easton, *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools*, Consortium on Chicago School Research at U of C, July 2007.

The Task Force has met each month since its inception, and includes leaders from each major stakeholder group (see the list of School Attendance Task Force members on page iii of the full report). The Task Force spent its first year reviewing information on current programs being developed or implemented by school districts, the juvenile court, law enforcement agencies, community groups, and the business community both in Los Angeles County and around the country. The meetings included presentations on these programs and a review of data and other measurements of outcomes for students who participate in these programs. A summary of the topics covered in the monthly meetings is provided in Appendix E of the full report.

## Summary of Task Force Findings

Among other findings, the Task Force members learned that a myriad of reasons cause students to struggle to get to school and to get there on time. Of the thousands of students in Los Angeles interviewed by the Community Rights Campaign (one organization participating on the Task Force), many reported that their only means of transportation (the MTA bus) frequently runs late; they must walk their siblings to another school with a similar start time; they have a medical appointment; they are dealing with mental health issues; they have unaddressed special education needs or a chronic illness; they are being bullied; they are experiencing family problems at home; or student do not see the benefit of an education or feel connected to or safe at school.

- ❖ The Task Force also found that a number of California statutes—found in penal, education, and municipal codes—criminalize student tardiness and attendance issues. Under them, students and their families can face fines, juvenile delinquency enforcement, and/or jail time. Unfortunately, in the absence of a comprehensive, research-based approach to addressing attendance-related issues in Los Angeles, the enforcement of daytime curfew laws, which subject any student absent from school to a citation by police officers, has often been the primary response to truancy. Extensive resources and effort have been focused on using law enforcement to ticket and cite students. For example, between 2005 and 2009, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and the Los Angeles School Police Department (LASPD) issued more than 47,000 tickets under the Los Angeles City curfew ordinance.<sup>4</sup> The city curfew ordinance’s burdens have fallen most heavily on low-income communities and on families who are least able to afford them.<sup>5</sup>
- ❖ Although the prosecution of students and parents may be appropriate in extreme cases—or as the last step in a broader, graduated system that provides assessments, referrals, and sufficient support to ensure that students and families can access services and resources to address the underlying conditions or reasons that caused the attendance issue—the Task Force was not able to identify any research supporting the efficacy of prosecution as a primary means to improve student attendance on a large scale. Indeed, research on effective approaches over-

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<sup>4</sup> See “Map of LAMC 45.04 Day-Time Curfew Citations,” available at <http://www.thestrategycenter.org/blog/07/30/mapping-lamc-4504-truancy-tickets-geographical-area-race-and-gender>.

<sup>5</sup> A majority of LAUSD students live in families near or below the poverty line (California Department of Education DataQuest [2010]). Daytime curfew enforcement inherently targets lower-income students because students from poorer families are more likely to walk or take public transit than their higher-income peers. Data collected also shows that schools where curfew enforcement has been most aggressive are concentrated in lower-income communities.

whelmingly supports school-based rather than law enforcement–based interventions as the most effective for both improving attendance rates and reducing rates of chronic absence.

- ❖ Specifically, through the Task Force’s review of published studies measuring the effectiveness of various attendance improvement programs around the country aimed at addressing truancy or improving school attendance, it found that successful programs include:
  - A complete assessment process to determine the primary causes for student attendance issues
  - A strong and comprehensive data-tracking system to effectively identify students with attendance issues early, and quickly target interventions
  - Strong parental involvement and participation
  - Use of incentives for positive behavior and attendance
  - A three-tiered approach to improving student attendance that provides broad interventions for all students, more targeted interventions for students who meet the criteria for being at risk for poor attendance, and substantial interventions for students with intensive needs
  - Cognitive behavior therapy for students with poor attendance, especially when paired with parent and teacher training
- ❖ In Los Angeles, some reforms that align with research and best practices are already underway. During the past two years, the LAPD and LASPD have worked closely with community-based organizations, as well as other government agencies, to revise existing procedures aimed at reducing the number of daytime curfew tickets written to students—particularly African-American and Latino students, who are disproportionately represented. They have issued directives instructing ticket task forces generally not to cite students during the first hour of classes or on campus and, instead, to help students get back to school and access school-based interventions.

This changing emphasis coincides with an increasing recognition by school districts of the need to address student attendance in a comprehensive manner. Several school districts have begun implementing promising programs using research-based strategies that focus on identifying the root causes of chronic absences and quickly providing intensive and tiered resources and interventions to address those problems. Two school district programs in particular stood out to Task Force members because they provide comprehensive, school-based approaches to addressing student attendance issues that incorporate research-based practices and were supported by data reflecting improved outcomes.

First, **Alhambra Unified School District**’s attendance improvement program, the core of which is called Gateway to Success (“Gateway”), has resulted in a 42 percent reduction in truanancies after one year of implementation, and a 61 percent decline in year two. The Gateway program, which is supported by a federal Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant of \$7 million over four years, links district students with counselors or other health and wellness resources to help them with the challenges that interfere with their academic, personal, or social adjustment. Mental health and wellness programs are brought directly to school sites and services are available to all students, whether they have health insurance or not. This framework was developed to align with a three-tiered public health framework aimed at improving prevention, diagnosis, and treatment services. The continuum of efforts includes:

- **Universal prevention** strategies aimed at reducing risk factors, enhancing protective factors, and ameliorating difficulties before they occur
- **Early intervention** emphasizes the early identification of and intervention for at-risk youth
- **Intensive strategies** involve treatment to reduce the impact of existing problems

This evolving framework has now expanded district-wide and employs a multi-layered approach, incorporating comprehensive prevention and intervention services to reduce campus violence and student behavioral and substance-related problems, and increase the reach of school-based mental health services. Key features of AUSD's program include:

- **A multidisciplinary management team:** Central to the program's framework is a multidisciplinary management team consisting of leadership from the school district, community partners, and higher education.
- **Collaboration and ongoing training:** All school personnel and partnering agencies participate in joint training sessions on topics that include the identification of mental health risk factors, available services, the referral protocol, school culture, collaboration strategies, confidentiality, and family privacy, as well as culturally sensitive intervention.
- **A comprehensive information management and data-tracking system:** To evaluate the impact of this coordinated mental health structure, a computer-based information surveillance system tracks student referrals and linkages. This robust systems allows school officials to intervene early and in real time as attendance issues develop.
- **Parent involvement and education:** An innovative Parent University holds monthly workshops at which hundreds of parents learn techniques to help their students improve.
- **Revised student discipline procedures to minimize exclusions:** Recognizing that disciplinary exclusions greatly affect student attendance, AUSD reviewed the number of suspensions and expulsions in its schools and developed policies to minimize disciplinary exclusions, such as requiring schools to use multiple interventions prior to initiating a suspension, and to document these interventions for such low-level offenses as defiance. As a result, disciplinary exclusions have dropped consistently and significantly over the last two academic years.

Similarly, the **Baltimore City Public School System** has employed a three-tiered approach that focuses on universal strategies to improve attendance, early intervention when students show signs of poor attendance, and intensive interventions for students with severe attendance issues. Key features of Baltimore's program, which was developed after convening a task force with almost a hundred community and business partners to study the problem, include:

- **Universal strategies to improve attendance:** Baltimore developed a number of policies that emphasize and prioritize good attendance, including same-day follow-up with parents for every absence and utilizing attendance incentives and rewards for good attendance. Recognizing that a key element of improving attendance is improving the school climate and making schools places where students want to be, Baltimore has also taken steps to focus on improving the quality of instruction, reviewing the curriculum to evaluate ways to make school more engaging and relevant to students, and improving parent and family engagement and outreach.

- **A robust data system to track attendance:** Baltimore developed a data system that tracks multiple measures of attendance in real time, and ensured that it is available at school sites and is reviewed regularly. Using this system, Baltimore built an early-warning system that uses these multiple measures—including suspension—to identify students that are at risk and intervene early. Additionally, trends are monitored and interventions are developed accordingly.
- **Intervention strategies for students who consistently miss school:** When students are identified based on their attendance history, they receive individual assessments and community supports. Additionally, schools develop a service-rich plan for students who have been chronically absent in prior years, including wraparound services, case management, and special activities to increase their feeling of belonging. When students continue to miss school, they receive increased interventions that may include home visits by social workers or school counselors, assigning a mentor for daily check-in, inviting the family to school attendance hearings, and, as a last resort, conducting a court-based student attendance hearing through family court.
- **A revised discipline code to minimize unnecessary student exclusions:** Baltimore also targeted its high suspension rate, recognizing that sending children home puts them further behind academically and makes them far more likely to drop out. The school district partnered with community stakeholders to review and substantially revise the discipline code, particularly provisions that had allowed high rates of disciplinary exclusion for absences and for defiant behaviors such as talking back. As a result, the number of suspensions dropped from 26,310 to 9,712 over a two-year period.
- **Emphasizing rewards and supports over punitive approaches:** In all instances, Baltimore’s policy also requires that schools offer positive supports to promote school attendance before resorting to punitive responses or legal action. In general, the Baltimore program includes many more incentives than punitive responses in its graduated response to poor attendance.

The Task Force concluded that both model programs closely align with social science research on effective student attendance programs. Both programs also are supported by outcome data demonstrating improved student attendance since their inception. As such, the Task Force found that a three-tiered school attendance program is an essential element to any reform approach and, as explained in greater detail below, recommends that all school districts in Los Angeles County adopt and implement that approach.

## Summary of Task Force Recommendations

Based on the School Attendance Task Force’s research and review of effective policies and programs employed by various government and non-governmental agencies to address attendance issues in California and nationwide, and taking into account some of the unique circumstances related to size and transportation in Los Angeles County, the Task Force has developed a set of recommendations for creating a comprehensive and integrated system that should result in significant reductions in attendance-related issues, stronger school outcomes, and less court and criminal justice involvement.

## **Countywide**

- ❖ Maintain a vibrant School Attendance Task Force for stakeholders to coordinate strategies, share best practices, track outcomes, and develop an action plan for implementation of the recommendations in this report.
- ❖ Develop information-sharing protocols among stakeholder agencies/groups.

## **Schools**

All school districts in Los Angeles should establish a sustainable district-wide model for ensuring that students regularly attend and stay in school by incorporating the critical elements of recognized, proven approaches—specifically the three-tiered approach that is strongly supported by research. Other proven strategies include:

- ❖ Creating a strong attendance-data collection and dissemination system that helps target interventions early and often
- ❖ Reducing school-initiated exclusions
- ❖ Partnering with families early and often
- ❖ Creating a communication/media campaign regarding the importance of attendance
- ❖ Creating a uniform system at each school site that focuses on prevention and intervention
- ❖ Maximizing partnerships to ensure a range of services that address the root causes of truancy
- ❖ A focus on high-need populations, schools, grades, and times of year
- ❖ Utilizing rewards and attendance incentives at the individual student, class, grade, and school levels
- ❖ Providing training to all school staff
- ❖ Addressing transportation and safety barriers so that it is easier, safer, and quicker to get to school
- ❖ Increasing the role of the youth voice in schools and learning from youth how to improve attendance
- ❖ Integrating the School Attendance Review Board process with the broader attendance initiative and utilize SARB referrals only after documented interventions have not worked, and only in connection with mental health and other resource-based strategies
- ❖ Referring truancy issues to law-enforcement agencies only as a last resort, and only if school staff can document multiple failed interventions



## **Juvenile Court**

- ❖ Collect and regularly publish data.
- ❖ See that the Department of Children and Family Services and the Probation Department develop policy directives ensuring that judicial officers receive the information they need to properly address attendance issues.
- ❖ Reform the Informal Juvenile and Traffic Court process to focus on solutions and supports rather than fines and court appearances.
- ❖ Ensure that judicial officers engage youth and parents to understand the root causes of truancy.
- ❖ Determine and address the causes of unexcused absences, such as any health issues of the youth or family members, real or perceived safety issues at school or in transit, the level of family support for educational values, peer influence, and substance abuse by the youth or family members. Also:
  - Ask social workers and probation officers what steps they have taken to address truancy and ensure that the youth attends school.
  - Refer youth to a 317(e) education panel of attorneys for follow-up action and advocacy to enforce the child's legal rights, where appropriate.
  - Assist in expanding needed services and supports and youth connections to them.
  - Ensure that youth with truancy issues are brought to court at a time that minimally interferes with school classes.
  - Ensure that incarceration is never used as a sanction for poor attendance.
- ❖ Ensure educational stability for youth under the court's jurisdiction.

## **Law Enforcement**

- ❖ Collect and make public data regarding the number of minors cited.
- ❖ Ensure that the primary focus in dealing with truant youth is getting students back to school and engaged in positive activity linked to community resources.
- ❖ Expand programs that connect at-risk youth with mentoring and other services.
- ❖ Develop protocols for dealing with truant youth that are different from traditional delinquency enforcement models.
- ❖ Include local prosecutors in developing a strategies related to truancy prosecution and enforcement.
- ❖ Develop information-sharing protocols among prosecutors' offices so that students are adequately tracked and protected when they do not attend school.
- ❖ Improve interagency data-sharing so that school districts and city and county agencies have as much information as possible before making decisions that will affect specific youth.

**Municipalities**

- ❖ Reflect current evidence-based research and proven best practices in ordinances on daytime curfew violations.
- ❖ Require the collection and regular publication of data from law enforcement entities enforcing curfew statutes regarding the number of minors cited, the location and time of the citation, and the age, ethnicity, race, and gender of the minors cited.
- ❖ Coordinate with local school districts so that city-funded services such as tutoring, mentoring, and other youth development programming are targeted to students who are most in need of the services.

**Parents, Guardians, and Caregivers**

- ❖ Seek out and advocate for leadership roles in their schools to strategize about how to improve student attendance.
- ❖ Create safe places and parent groups to help other parents struggling with a child or children who have school-avoidance behaviors.
- ❖ Advocate for schools to create strong policies supporting parents in getting their students to school regularly and on time.
- ❖ Demand that schools move away from approaches that criminalize students or result in school-imposed exclusions.
- ❖ Advocate for processes in schools where trained teams and parents work together to understand and address the root causes of truancy.
- ❖ Ensure that school policies and practices require that parents be contacted immediately at the first sign of an attendance issue.
- ❖ Seek out information and training from school and other community agencies if they are having a hard time getting their child to school on time.
- ❖ Demand to be included as equal partners in the dialogue around solving school-attendance issues.

**Communities**

- ❖ Be informed about and involved in developing and shaping policies around school attendance.
- ❖ Be engaged as partners, allies, and resources by school districts, individual schools, the courts, and law enforcement agencies.
- ❖ Come together around the schools, children, and families in their neighborhoods to offer services, housing, after-school programs, and support to prevent truancy and address its causes.
- ❖ Offer resources—intervention workers, transportation, technology—to create safe passages to and from school and to respond when a young person is faced with a dangerous situation.

- ❖ Be willing to partner and pool resources with other community organizations in the county to create a web of services in the community and on school campuses to address students' academic, social-emotional, and physical health needs.
- ❖ Come forward to provide alternative school models that are flexible and meet student needs, such as Big Picture Learning.
- ❖ Provide positive adult and peer relationships—whether with a family member, teacher, or mentor—as a key to reaching students, addressing their needs, holding them accountable, and motivating them to attend school.
- ❖ Create resource directories, such as the Healthy City database, to ensure that schools and courts can quickly and easily connect families with services.

### **Next Steps: Priorities for the Task Force in 2012**

The School Attendance Task Force has identified some priority areas and specific actions to focus on during 2012 to foster or implement these recommendations.

- ❖ Task Force members have already committed to making some key policy changes:
  - Juvenile Court Presiding Judge Michael Nash is finalizing key reforms to the operation of the Informal Juvenile and Traffic Court (IJTC).
    - ✓ His first directive states that, at the youth's option, community service will always be available in lieu of a monetary fine (including assessments and fees) for any offense adjudicated in the IJTC; the directive also lays out the implementation of that change.
    - ✓ A second directive issues guidelines for the IJTC's handling of school attendance cases, and states that the court shall dismiss any citation for which the evidence shows the youth was late to school or en route to school.
    - ✓ A third directive addresses informing youth and parents of their rights in the IJTC.
  - Los Angeles City Councilman Tony Cárdenas has proposed an amendment to the City Municipal Code that directs daytime curfew enforcement to those students who are intentionally avoiding school or loitering in public spaces, and targets resource-based community and school interventions for those students instead of assessing fines.
  - The City of Los Angeles Community Development Department and the Los Angeles Unified School District have agreed to work together to launch between eleven and thirteen Youth WorkSource Centers to serve truant youth and those who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out of school.
- ❖ As a whole, the Task Force will:
  - Request that the Los Angeles County Education Coordinating Council (ECC) adopt this report at its February 2012 meeting. In addition, the ECC should ask its members to commit to addressing the recommendations that specifically pertain to them and report back on their activities and their progress throughout the year.
  - Distribute this Executive Summary, which highlights the findings and recommendations of the full Report, to a variety of stakeholders at multiple levels through customized

meetings, conference presentations and workshops, seminars, and media exposure. The full Report will be posted on the Los Angeles County Education Coordinating Council website ([www.educationcoordinatingcouncil.org](http://www.educationcoordinatingcouncil.org)) as well as on the websites of other Task Force members, and electronic links to these sites and those of other key stakeholder agencies will be established.

- Identify and create meaningful tools (such as attendance plans) for judicial officers in the dependency and delinquency courts to use to directly address school attendance issues for the youth they supervise.
  - Explore options for securing free transit passes for school-aged youth, especially those residing in low-income communities or attending schools in these areas.
  - Develop a resource book or technical assistance guide to assist school districts in implementing the proposed recommendations for a comprehensive attendance program.
  - Continue to collect information on successful policies, practices, and models to help increase student attendance in Los Angeles County.
- ❖ Task Force work groups will be established to implement the recommendations in this report, including:
- Investigating ways to improve the interagency sharing of student attendance data
  - Developing ideas for a countywide public service announcement campaign that markets the importance of school attendance
  - Creating strategies for increasing connections between school districts and available community resources