

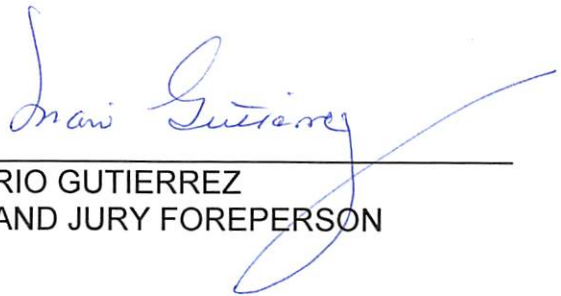
A REPORT BY
THE 2017-2018 CONTRA COSTA COUNTY GRAND JURY
725 Court Street
Martinez, California 94553

Report 1810

Chronic Absenteeism in West Contra Costa County School Districts

APPROVED BY THE GRAND JURY

Date June 11, 2018



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ACCEPTED FOR FILING

Date June 11, 2018



ANITA SANTOS
JUDGE OF THE SUPERIOR COURT

Contra Costa County Grand Jury Report 1810

Chronic Absenteeism in West Contra Costa County School Districts

**TO: Contra Costa County Superintendent of Schools,
Governing Board of West Contra Costa Unified School District,
Governing Board of John Swett Unified School District**

SUMMARY

California is one of seven states that funds schools based on Average Daily Attendance (ADA) rates. ADA rates are calculated by dividing the total number of days students attended by the number of instructional days in a regular school year. School districts receive State funding proportionally based on daily attendance data. As an example, a school district with a 95% ADA and a projected annual budget of \$300 million would receive only \$285 million, having been reduced by 5% due to their ADA rate.

In the past, school districts in California developed policies and procedures to improve attendance with policies focused on ADA and truancy. National and State education officials have expanded their focus to include chronic absenteeism. They believe this is a more accurate way to measure attendance because it takes into account all types of absences, including excused, unexcused, and suspensions. Students become chronic absentees if they are absent for 10% or more of the school days in the school year.

In December 2017, the California Department of Education (CDE) released the California School Data Dashboard (Dashboard). This tool provides districts and schools information about school attendance at the county, district, and school levels. Through the Dashboard, chronic absenteeism data is now available for all districts and schools in the State.

According to the Office of Attorney General (OAG) *In School + On Track* reports, chronic absenteeism rates are high among communities of low-income and of color. One of the most economically and racially diverse populations of Contra Costa County (County) is in West County. The Contra Costa County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury)

investigated five elementary schools in low-income West County neighborhoods to determine what steps are being taken to reduce chronic absenteeism.

Based on this investigation, the Grand Jury recommends that school districts in West County consider ways to improve parental engagement and also consider posting current attendance data on their websites on a regular basis. The Grand Jury also recommends that the Contra Costa County Superintendent of Schools consider using available media platforms to promote kindergarten and the *Every School Day Counts* campaign to the communities-at-large.

METHODOLOGY

In the course of its investigation, the Grand Jury:

- Interviewed officials from the Contra Costa County Office of Education
- Interviewed school district attendance supervisors
- Interviewed school districts superintendents
- Visited five elementary schools in West County and interviewed school administrators and staff
- Reviewed educational websites at the national, state, county, and school district levels
- Researched school attendance-related resources

BACKGROUND

California is one of seven states that funds schools based on ADA rates. The CDE defines ADA as the total days of student attendance divided by the total days of instruction. School districts receive State funding proportional to this ratio.

The chronic absenteeism rate is defined as the percentage of the student population that have been absent for 10% or more of the school year. A chronic absentee misses a minimum of a month of instruction within one school year. Attendance Works is a national non-profit organization dedicated to reducing chronic absence. In 2011, it published a report on ADA and chronic absenteeism effects in three large urban districts. The report showed that:

- Schools with ADA rates higher than 97% rarely have a problem with chronic absence.
- Schools with ADA rates between 93% and 97% have chronic absenteeism rates from 7% to 15%.

- Schools with ADA rates below 93% have chronic absenteeism rates greater than 15%.

The State Education Code defines the following terms related to absence:

- **Excused Absentee** (EC Section 48205): "A pupil ...shall be excused from school when the absence is due to illness, quarantine, medical appointment, funeral services of an immediate family member, appearance in court, and other reasons within the discretion of school administrators."
- **Truant** (EC Section 48260): "A pupil ... who is absent from school without a valid excuse three full days in one school year, or tardy or absent for more than a 30-minute period during the school day without a valid excuse on three occasions in one school year, or any combination thereof...."
- **Chronic Absentee** (EC Section 60901): "A pupil ... who is absent on 10 percent or more of the school days in the school year, when the total number of days a pupil is absent is divided by the total number of days (in the school year)...."

By focusing on ADA and truancy, California education system data has masked chronic absenteeism problems. The focus has gradually shifted to chronic absences (excused, unexcused, and suspensions). According to Attendance Works, chronic absenteeism is one of the primary causes of low academic achievement and is a predictor of which students may eventually drop out of school.

Office of the Attorney General

The OAG released four reports from 2013 to 2016. These reports emphasized the significant impacts truancy and chronic absenteeism had on school funding and student academic success. The initial report *In School + On Track, Attorney General's 2013 Report on California's Elementary School Truancy & Absenteeism Crisis* uncovered this crisis in the State schools. The report indicated that truancy and chronic absence were very high in the State's elementary schools, where one in five students were reported as truant. Almost 85% of truant students were from low-income families. At 30.4%, Contra Costa County had one of the highest elementary school truancy rates among San Francisco Bay Area counties.

The reports outlined the importance for districts to track chronic absenteeism and for the CDE to modernize the state-wide student records system. As a result, districts are upgrading their Student Information Systems (SIS) to monitor attendance. These systems track absences and notify parents if the student is absent for three or more days.

Contra Costa County Office of Education

The Contra Costa County Office of Education (CCCOE) provides services to schools and school districts in the County. The CCCOE evaluates and approves each district's

Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). The LCAP is a three-year plan that districts complete to describe their eight goals and associated actions, services, and budgets to promote student outcomes. The CCCOE also facilitates and promotes County-wide attention to improve student attendance.

From 2014 to 2017, the CCCOE partnered with Attendance Works to offer Learning Works, a three-year pilot program for districts to address chronic absenteeism. District teams received training on how to analyze their attendance data. They learned how to generate attendance reports, develop strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism, and draft a plan for addressing chronic absenteeism in their LCAPs.

The CCCOE and the County District Attorney's Office are partners in a County-wide Attendance Awareness campaign, *Every School Day Counts*. This is the fourth year of the campaign. Its purpose is to communicate the importance of attendance to schools, students, and the community. It is not highly publicized beyond the school communities.

The CCCOE has a permanent forum called the Coordinating Council. Participants are school district administrators and key personnel from other County agencies who work with students on attendance and behavioral issues. The Council meets every two months to discuss topics such as best practices, current education laws, and concerns related to the School Attendance and Review Boards (SARBs). A SARB is a district-level body composed of district, school, and community members who meet regularly to diagnose and resolve students' persistent attendance or behavior problems.

California Department of Education

In December 2017, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction announced the availability of its California School Dashboard website (www.caschooldashboard.org). The State began collecting attendance data from districts in late spring 2017 for the 2016-2017 school year. For the first time, this tool presents Statewide chronic absenteeism data as one of six State performance indicators:

1. Chronic Absenteeism
2. Suspension Rate
3. English Learner Progress
4. Graduation Rates
5. College/Career Readiness
6. Academic Performance

California School Data Dashboard

The screenshot shows the California School Data Dashboard interface. At the top, there are navigation links: Home, FAQ, Resources, Glossary, Translate, and Search. A 'Generate PDF Report' button is also present. Below the navigation, summary statistics are displayed: Enrollment: 698, Socioeconomically Disadvantaged: 93.7%, English Learners: 72.2%, and Foster Youth: 0%. The 'Dashboard Release' is set to 'Fall 2017'. A 'Student Group Report' tab is selected among other report options.

The main content area displays a table of State Indicators with performance levels for different student groups. The indicators and their performance levels are as follows:

State Indicators	All Students	English Learners	Foster Youth	Homeless	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	Students with Disabilities	African American	American Indian
Chronic Absenteeism	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Suspension Rate (K-12)	Green	Green	*	*	Green	Yellow	Red	*
English Learner Progress (1-12)	Yellow	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
English Language Arts (3-8)	Red	Red	*	*	Red	Red	*	*
Mathematics (3-8)	Red	Red	*	*	Red	Red	*	*

Performance Levels: Red (Lowest Performance), Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue (Highest Performance). An asterisk (*) shows that the student group has fewer than 11 students and is not reported for privacy reasons. The performance level (color) is not included when there are fewer than 30 students in any year used to calculate status and change. An N/A means that data is not currently available.

Questions or comments? Send them to lcff@cde.ca.gov

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Chronic absenteeism can be further analyzed by categories such as gender, English learners, students with disabilities, ethnicity, socioeconomic disadvantage, homeless, and foster students. “This data helps us determine which schools, districts, and student groups have the largest concentration of chronic absences, allowing educators and community members to focus attention and resources and take actions needed to keep those students in class and back on the path to academic success.” (*CDE News Release*, December 5, 2017.)

The Dashboard provides color-coded comparisons of school districts based on current performance levels and yearly growth. Some school districts and educational organizations have developed tutorials and learning modules to help educators and community-based organizations use and interpret the information. These modules are in addition to the videos and tutorials already provided by the CDE.

DISCUSSION

Within the past eight years, the Grand Jury has published two reports on school truancy:

- Report 1012: *Truancy, “The Kindergarten of Crime” (2010)* focused on tracking and reporting of attendance data.
- Report 1615: *Truancy and Chronic Absence in Contra Costa County Schools (2016)* focused on software systems used to collect, analyze, and report attendance data.

Since the 2016 report was published, the CDE, school districts, and schools have focused on chronic absenteeism. The State has published chronic absenteeism data since December 2017. The final OAG 2016 *In School + On Track* report showed that districts and schools have reduced truancy and chronic absenteeism through consistent tracking and monitoring. They have also improved information sharing about attendance among districts and schools.

This Grand Jury investigation focused on the strategies of five low-income elementary schools from the West County to improve attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism.

Chronic Absenteeism and Socioeconomic Problems

A 2008 report by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) indicated that chronic absenteeism was highest among children living in low-income communities and poor families. This study also showed that these children are more likely than children from affluent families to experience family risk factors that impact a child’s school performance. These factors are more likely if the child lives with a single parent, has multiple siblings, has food insecurities, lacks transportation, lives in a high crime neighborhood, or lives with a parent who has a low education level, poor health, is on welfare, or is unemployed.

According to the Dashboard, 91% of West County’s elementary school students who were chronically absent were from socioeconomically disadvantaged families. The Dashboard categorizes chronic absenteeism into subgroups. One of the subgroups is Socioeconomically Disadvantaged (SD). The State Board of Education defines the SD subgroup as consisting of students who meet one of two criteria: neither of the students’ parents is a high school graduate, or the students are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program.

Charts A through E are based on data from the CDE website. Chart A illustrates that absenteeism in elementary schools is more prevalent in the County’s school districts that have a higher percentage of SD students. The blue bars show the chronic

absenteeism rate percentage, while the orange line shows the percentage of SD students in the schools.

Chart A

Chronic Absenteeism by District % versus Socioeconomically Disadvantaged %

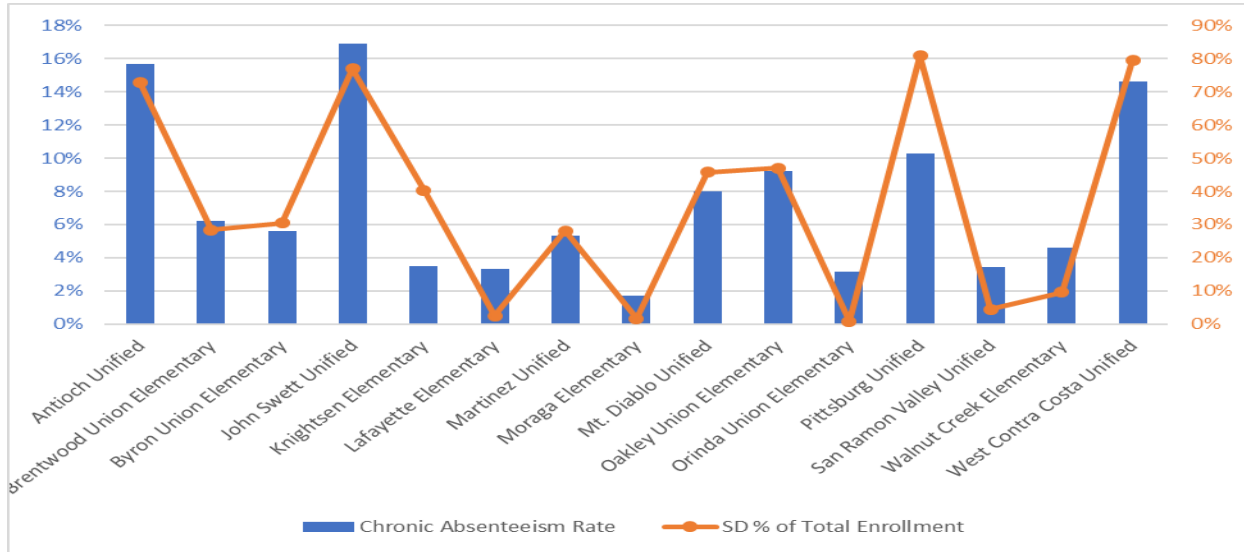
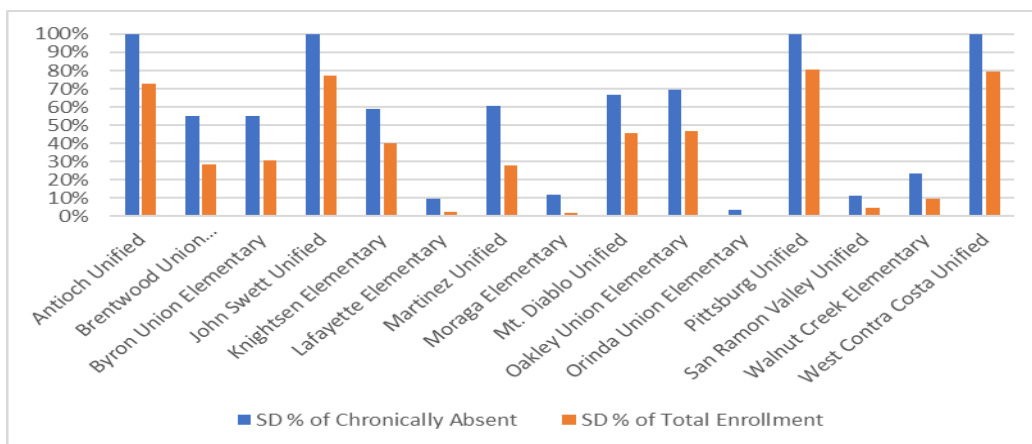


Chart B shows that the SD group represents a disproportionate amount of the chronic absenteeism in elementary schools. If absenteeism were equally distributed among all student backgrounds, the percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged students who were chronically absent (blue bars) would equal the percentage of SD students (orange bars) in the district. In other words, the blue bars would be the same height as the orange bars. This demonstrates the disproportionate effect of socioeconomic disadvantages.

Chart B

Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Make Up Disproportionate Amount of Chronic Absenteeism



West Contra Costa County School Districts

There are two unified school districts in West County: West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD) and John Swett Unified School District (JSUSD). These districts, which serve approximately 30,000 students, have some of the highest SD rates in the County.

The Grand Jury reviewed both districts' 2016-2017 LCAP Goal 4. This goal addresses student engagement, which includes attendance. One district plans to have all schools maintain an ADA rate of 95% or higher. It also intends to gradually decrease its 2015-2016 chronic absenteeism baseline rate of 16.1% by three percentage points per year, for the next three years.

The other school district plans to increase its attendance rate by one-to-two percentage points per year and decrease its chronic absenteeism rate by two percentage points per year for the next three years. Unlike the first district, the second district did not show its 2015-2016 baseline rate for attendance or chronic absenteeism.

From 2014 to 2017, both districts participated in the Learning Network, a three-year pilot program sponsored by the CCCOE and Attendance Works. The pilot program provided the districts with research-based strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism and improve overall attendance. One of the districts is currently working with Attendance Works on developing attendance training modules. Both districts continue to use Attendance Works as a resource.

The districts regularly send their attendance teams to the CCCOE Coordinating Council meetings. The teams stated that the meetings provided an opportunity to learn about other districts' successes and challenges.

Each district uses a different SIS and software to collect, analyze, and monitor student absences. The systems notify parents and guardians with automatic letters and/or phone calls when a student has three or more unexcused absences. District attendance supervisors send monthly attendance reports to each school to review and take actions as needed.

The Five Elementary Schools

The 2008 NCCP report shows that schools with a high percentage of SD students tend to have high rates of chronic absenteeism. Chart C shows that the schools are similar in student-to-teacher ratio and teacher pay. Cumulative enrollment did not have much impact on chronic absenteeism rates.

Among the five schools reviewed, the one with the lowest enrollment had the highest chronic absenteeism and more teachers with fewer years of experience. The principal stated that high teacher turnover has made it difficult to build steady relationships between students and staff and between staff and community.

Chart C

Comparing SD Population with Chronic Absenteeism

SCHOOL	1	2	3	4	5
Cumulative Enrollment	413	752	459	806	382
ADA Percentage	96.1%	95.8%	94.6%	96.0%	93.1%
Chronic Absenteeism Percentage	10.9%	12.1%	16.6%	17.0%	30.1%
SD Percentage of Enrollment	90.8%	94.4%	96.5%	77.2%	83.5%
Percentage of SD Students that are Chronic Absentees	100.0%	95.6%	97.4%	86.9%	85.2%
Pupils per Teacher	19.5	21.9	23.1	19.1	19.1
Avg Teacher Yrs Experience	10	11	9	8	5
Teacher pay (lowest certified)	\$ 38,699	\$ 38,699	\$ 38,699	\$ 43,226	\$ 38,699
Teacher pay (BA+30, 5 yrs)	\$ 53,042	\$ 53,042	\$ 53,042	\$ 47,920	\$ 53,042

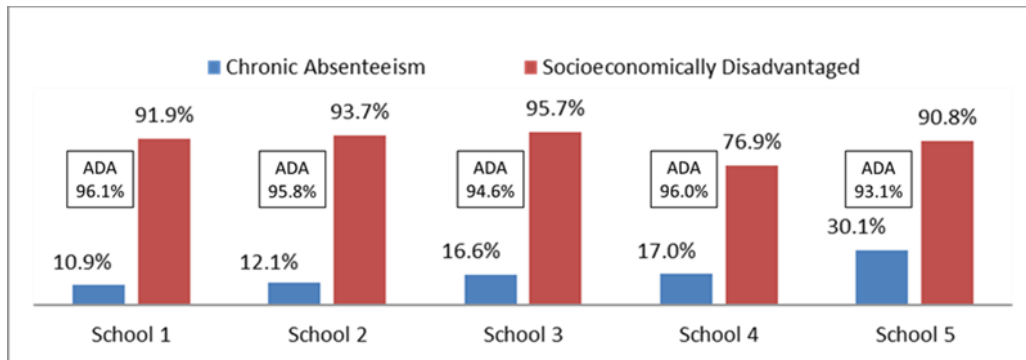
At both the district and school levels, SD population percentage is generally a predictor of chronic absenteeism rate. SD students make up a disproportionate number of chronic absentees. However, there are exceptions.

In Chart D, the five schools are arranged in ascending chronic absenteeism rate order. School 1 has the lowest chronic absenteeism rate while School 5 has the highest. The difference between the SD rates for these two schools is only 1.1 percentage points.

However, the difference between their chronic absenteeism rates is 19.2 percentage points.

Chart D

Five Elementary Schools: 2016-17 ADA, Chronic Absenteeism and Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Rates



Each of the five schools is unique, with different communities, staffing, and support services. Each used different strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism. These strategies can be divided into three categories: School Climate, Attendance Practices, and Family Support.

School Climate

The staff at all five schools stressed that building relationships among students, teachers, and families is essential for student success. Administrators, teachers, and staff members work to create a positive school climate by:

- Greeting students by name each day
- Expressing happiness that students who were absent have returned to school
- Offering incentives such as pencils, ribbons, pins, certificates, and school-wide activities to promote attendance
- Providing emotional support for students who are experiencing trauma

Attendance Practices

All five schools have clear attendance policies. Each school has an attendance clerk who monitors daily attendance and calls the homes of absent students. In some schools, the teacher or principal makes the calls and offers support to get the student back to school. Some schools review their monthly attendance reports as part of the regular faculty meetings. One principal’s constant attention to absences has improved attendance at that school by:

- Monitoring the school's attendance records closely to identify students who are absent more than two days
- Contacting the families immediately to determine if any services are needed
- Holding family meetings with parents of absent students
- Conducting Saturday classes for chronically absent students
- Continually reviewing and revising the attendance goals for the school

Family Support

All five schools' administrators stated that parental engagement is crucial to improving student attendance. The administrators stated that building trust with parents is important for improving student attendance.

To improve parental engagement with the schools, WCCUSD introduced a Parent University course in 2015. This seven-week course was designed to teach parents how to navigate the school system, build effective communication skills, become active parent leaders, and support their children's long-term academic success. Through this training, parents become more regularly engaged not only in the school system but also in their children's education.

Some schools encourage parent participation through activities such as School Site Council, English Language Advisory, Math Nights, Literacy Nights, and Special Celebrations. They also did the following:

- Help parents understand that missing school can negatively impact their children's academic success
- Encourage parents to visit and/or participate in their children's classroom
- Conduct home visits and offer support to families
- Encourage parents in the WCCUSD to attend the Parent University course

Broader family support includes a number of social services. Each school has a community outreach worker and access to social workers and mental health personnel. Three of the five schools were in San Pablo. They receive extra social services support from the San Pablo Police Department Parent Project Program, City of San Pablo & Bay Area Community Resource, and a School-Based Health Center Coordinator. Four of the schools are Full-Service Community Schools which bring together many partners to offer a range of support and opportunities for students, families, and the community. Some of the services include, but are not limited to, breakfast, lunch, supper, before- and after-school childcare, ESL classes for adults, tutoring, wellness clinics, and other activities to support the surrounding community.

Each school has a version of a School Attendance Review Team designed to create solutions to help students with attendance or behavior problems. The teams include the principal, teacher, student, parents, community outreach persons, social workers, and other personnel to connect the student to services, as needed. Sometimes, the solutions are as easy as a bus ticket, alarm clock, or enforced bedtime rules. One solution was to provide a used washer/dryer set for a family so the student would have clean clothes to come to school.

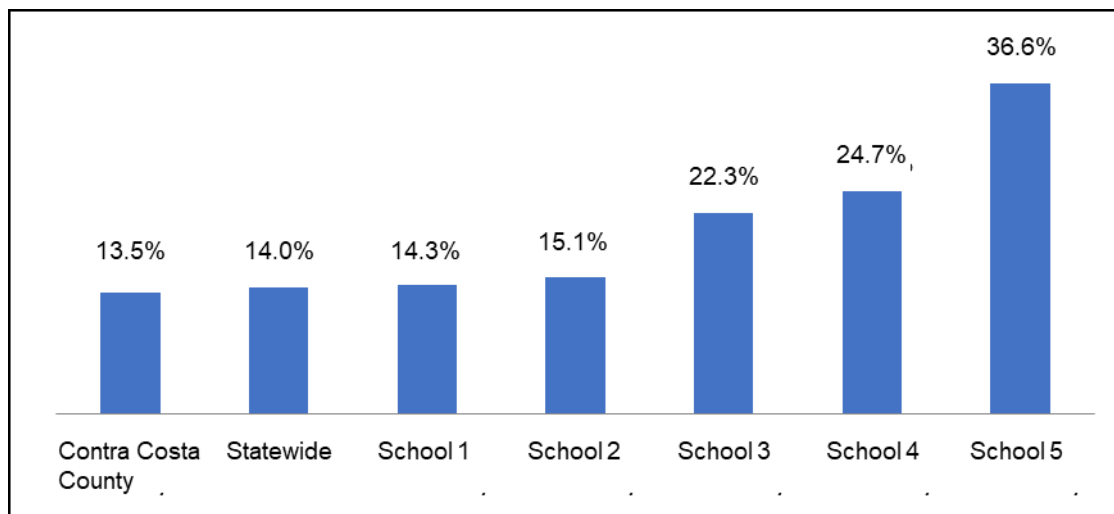
Impact of Kindergarten

The five schools' administrators reported that of all grades, kindergarten had the highest chronic absenteeism rate. Reports from the OAG and Attendance Works indicate that kindergarten is crucial to building good attendance habits in later grades.

Chart E indicates that the lowest kindergarten absentee rate among the five schools is 14.3%, which is slightly above the County and State rates. The highest rate is 36.6%, which is almost three times the County's rate. Since kindergarten is not mandatory in California, the percentages are based on enrolled students only.

Chart E

2016-2017 Kindergarten Chronic Absenteeism Rate



District and school officials suggested the following causes for high absenteeism:

- Kindergarten is not mandatory.
- Some parents do not see kindergarten as important.
- The school day for kindergarten is shorter than for other grades, so childcare and transportation may be issues for working parents.

- Kindergarten students cannot be referred to the SARB process until they are six years old.
- Kindergarten-age children are frequently ill.

According to the OAG reports, kindergarten is important not only for a child's social and academic development, it can also impact the student's future attendance patterns. *In School + On Track (2016)* reported that 75% of all students who were chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade did not meet the California state standards in third grade for mathematics and English language arts. Students who cannot read at grade level by the time they reach third grade are four times more likely to drop out of school.

Over the years, California lawmakers have written multiple bills to make kindergarten compulsory, but these bills failed. Opponents stated these bills would cost too much and/or stifle parental choice. According to an article in the *Los Angeles Times* (August 21, 2015), the State estimates that 80-86% of age-appropriate children attend public kindergarten in a given year. The cost of educating the remaining 14-20% is estimated by State sources to be \$276 million to \$620 million per year.

FINDINGS

- F1. The public does not have access to monthly attendance and chronic absenteeism data because districts do not consistently post this data on their websites.
- F2. ADA rates do not adequately indicate chronic absentee levels. Although the school districts in West County maintain ADA rates of around 95%, individual school chronic absenteeism rates range from 2.3% to 30.1%, with an average of 14.6%.
- F3. Average daily attendance is used to calculate funding for school districts in California. School districts can increase their future ADA funds by reducing their chronic absenteeism rates.
- F4. The school districts in West County have had success improving attendance rates by building relationships with students and families.
- F5. Since the 2015-2016 school year, the WCCUSD has offered a Parent University course. School administrators believe that this course helps parents, through increased engagement with the school, support their children's academic success.
- F6. School administrators in West County believe that incentives such as gifts, awards, and school-wide recognition motivate students to come to school.
- F7. Communities are generally not aware of the CCCOE Attendance Awareness *Every School Day Counts* campaign slogan because it is not broadly advertised on school marquees, school websites, and district websites.

F8. One of the barriers faced by West County districts in increasing kindergarten attendance is the belief held by some parents and guardians that kindergarten is not educationally important because it is not compulsory.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. The Governing Boards of the WCCUSD and the JSUSD should consider including previous year baseline rates, in addition to improvement goals, for attendance and chronic absenteeism in their LCAP Goal 4 by the next LCAP summary deadline.

R2. The Governing Boards of the WCCUSD and the JSUSD should consider requesting the district superintendents to post monthly attendance data on their websites by the beginning of the 2018 fall semester.

R3. The Governing Board of the WCCUSD should consider seeking funds, in time for the FY2018-2019 budget cycle, to conduct a study of the Parent University course and its potential in reducing chronic absenteeism through parental engagement. The findings can be shared through the Coordinating Council with other districts and schools to help them reduce their chronic absenteeism rates.

R4. The Contra Costa County Superintendent of Schools should consider expanding its Attendance Awareness *Every School Day Counts* campaign through community television and radio, social media, and school marquees prior to the 2018 fall semester.

R5. The Contra Costa County Superintendent of Schools should consider highlighting the importance of attending kindergarten through its Attendance Awareness *Every School Day Counts* campaign in time for the 2019 school year.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

	<u>Findings</u>	<u>Recommendations</u>
Contra Costa County Superintendent of Schools	F1 to F3, F7	R4 and R5
Governing Board of West Contra Costa Unified School District	F1 to F8	R1 to R3
Governing Board of John Swett Unified School District	F1 to F4, F6 to F8	R1 and R2

These responses must be provided in the format and by the date set forth in the cover letter that accompanies this report. An electronic copy of these responses in the form of a Word document should be sent by e-mail to ctadmin@contracosta.courts.ca.gov and

a hard (paper) copy should be sent to:

Civil Grand Jury – Foreperson
725 Court Street
P.O. Box 431
Martinez, CA 94553-0091

ACRONYMS

ADA: Average Daily Attendance

CCCOE: Contra Costa County Office of Education

CDE: California Department of Education

JSUSD: John Swett Unified School District

LCAP: Local Control and Accountability Plan

NCCP: National Center for Children in Poverty

OAG: Office of the Attorney General

SARB: Student Attendance Review Board

SD: Socioeconomically Disadvantaged

SIS: Student Information System

WCCUSD: West Contra Costa Unified School District