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INFORMATIVE

TO: Members, Board of Education
Austin Beutner, Superintendent

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SUBJECT: HOW STUDENT AND SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS INFLUENCE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Student attendance is clearly vital for student achievement, and attendance rates impact several outcomes such as school funding. Thus, it is important to understand the factors that influence whether or not a child will be *chronically* absent. A chronic absentee is defined in the California Education Code as 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 the pupil is enrolled."

Using student-level data from the 2016-2017 school year, we find[1] that several student and school characteristics are strongly associated with whether or not a student is chronically absent:

- Students in *magnet programs* are *105% **less** likely* (less than half as likely) to be chronically absent than students in non-magnet programs.
- Students in *dual language* programs are *81% **less** likely* to be chronically absent than students in English-only settings.
- Students whose parents have a *college degree* are *33% **less** likely* to be chronically absent than students whose parents did not attend college.
- *English learners* are *6% **more** likely* to be chronically absent than non-ELs.
- Students eligible for *free and reduced price meals* are *101% **more** likely* (more than twice as likely) to be chronically absent than students not eligible for reduced price meals.

Compared to Hispanic students:

- *Black* students are *131% **more** likely* (more than twice as likely) to be chronically absent.
- *Pacific Islander* students are *73% **more** likely* to be chronically absent.
- *White* students are *33% **more** likely* to be chronically absent.
- *Asian* students are *75% **less** likely* to be chronically absent.

Keep in mind that many of these characteristics overlap, so broad inferences should be made with those overlaps in mind.[2] For example, many Hispanic students are English learners, and a small proportion of

[1] We use a logistic regression of chronic absenteeism on student and school characteristics.
[2] In other words, many variables are collinear, which is a potentially serious statistical problem with smaller sample sizes. However, the sample size of nearly 300,000 students provides a high degree of resolution for distinguishing the effects of simultaneous factors.

those are in dual language programs. Thus, it is probably the case that Black students are **much more likely** to be chronically absent than Hispanic English learners, especially those in dual language programs, even though English learners in general are more likely to be chronically absent than non-ELs. However, it is possible that a Hispanic student who is an EL in a dual language program—who is eligible for free and reduced price meals, and whose parents lack a college education—is **more likely** to be chronically absent than a Black student whose parents have a college education and who does not qualify for low-income meal programs. Additional statistical study with more data and more complex modeling would allow making such distinctions with more precision and confidence.

In addition to student characteristics, we find that the following school characteristics are strongly associated with chronic absenteeism:

- Students attending *high-poverty*[3] schools are **more** likely to be chronically absent.
- Students attending schools with *higher shares of ELs* are **more** likely to be chronically absent.
- Students attending schools with *higher shares of Hispanic* students are 27% **less** likely to be chronically absent.

These results suggest that **targeted interventions** have the potential to reduce chronic absenteeism more effectively and efficiently than across-the-board interventions. For example, the subgroup at greatest risk of chronic absenteeism is Black students, with more than double the rate of Hispanic students. When combined with low parental education and low family income, along with attendance at a high-poverty school, this rate of absenteeism will be even higher. Attendance initiatives focused on such students—assuming the initiative is successful—will have a greater impact on District attendance than virtually any other combination described above.

At the same time, these results suggest that there are factors related to chronic absenteeism that should be considered in seeking to improve attendance. It might not be enough simply to focus on the behavior of chronically absent students if the reasons for their absenteeism are rooted in the socioeconomic conditions of their neighborhoods (high-poverty schools) and families (low-income and low-education). **Initiatives to improve the family and neighborhood supports for attendance may be more important than motivational programs focused on the students**. For example, such students may be unable to attend because of untreated health conditions, lack of access to a local clinic or pharmacy, and lack of family transportation to get to a clinic or pharmacy, treat the health condition, and get to school. Anything the District can do to help interrupt such a negative cycle could reap great benefits for students and their education.

There are many factors associated directly or indirectly with chronic absenteeism that are not included in this brief analysis of readily available statistics. Further study is warranted to identify such factors and how they interact with the ones in this analysis.

[3] High-poverty schools are those that have higher than average shares of students eligible for free and reduced price meals. In L.A. Unified, the average is 84%.

Appendix

Table 1. Odds Ratio from Logistic Regression of Chronic Absenteeism on Student and School Characteristics (*N*=298,741)

	Odds Ratio
College-Educated Parents	0.75***
	(0.015)
Free/Reduced Price Meal	2.01***
	(0.067)
English Learner	1.063 ***
	(0.017)
Dual Language Program	0.55***
	(0.027)
Magnet Program	0.49***
	(0.012)
Race/ethnicity	
Native American	2.13***
	(0.236)
Asian	0.57***
	(0.022)
Black	2.31***
	(0.044)
Pacific Islander	1.73*
	(0.148)
White	1.33***
	(0.033)
High-Poverty School	1.44***
	(0.031)
School with High Shares of English Learners	1.41***
	(0.076)
School with High Shares of Hispanic Students	0.79***
	(0.014)

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses.
** p < 0.05. ** p < 0.01. *** p < 0.001.*