



**AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE  
ACHIEVEMENT INITIATIVE:  
A CLOSER LOOK AT ATTENDANCE OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN OUSD  
OUSD 2010-11**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, **A Closer Look at Attendance of African American Males (AAM) in OUSD**, examines data, best practices, and policies related to attendance and chronic absence and offers recommendations for reducing the levels of chronic absence for AAM in OUSD. The report analyzes one year of attendance data (2010-2011) for AAM in OUSD, looking at chronic absence by grade level, types of absence, and reasons given for absence, as well as comparing rates of chronic absence for AAMs to other male groups in OUSD. Also examined and analyzed are reasons for attendance disparities for AAMs and recommendations for addressing them from a survey of research literature. Finally, we analyzed California Education Code, OUSD School Board policy, teacher contracts and guides, and the OUSD Parent Guide to help us formulate recommendations for OUSD policy, procedure and practice to address disproportionately high levels of chronic absence among AAMs.

### Major Findings in the Data

1. African American boys were almost twice as likely as OUSD students as a whole, and more than three times as likely as White boys, to be chronically absent in 2010-11. Addressing disparities in attendance alone will not be sufficient, because the overall chronic absence rate in OUSD is too high.
2. Roughly one in five African American boys was chronically absent in elementary, middle, and high school in 2010-11 (21% in elementary school, 18% in middle school, and 22% in high school).
3. From 2006-07 to 2010-11, the rates of chronic absence among African American boys and OUSD students as a whole both declined by four percentage points.
4. While six elementary schools had a chronic absence rate for African American boys lower than the goal of 6%, no middle or high schools reached that goal.
5. Among chronically absent African American boys in elementary school, illness was the leading cause of absence; in middle school it was illness followed closely by unverified absences (where parents could not be contacted); in high school, unverified absences were the leading cause of missed school days.

African American boys were almost twice as likely as students in the general OUSD population to be chronically absent.

### Major Trends in the Literature

The literature on attendance – particularly chronic absence – is relatively new and, consequently, measurements of disparities by ethnicity/race and gender are not well-developed. However, significant work has been done on attendance disparities for children living in low-income, urban environments, which is where many African

American boys in Oakland reside. The literature points to three major areas of concern for this population:

- poverty and its impact on health and wellness;
- family and student relationships with the school; and
- reactive (often punitive) rather than preventative attendance policy

### **1. Poverty and Health**

It is overwhelmingly clear that low family income level and related health and wellness issues have a strong impact on attendance for many African American boys living in urban areas. Ill health, poor health care access, trauma at home and in the neighborhood, housing instability and unreliable transportation – experienced separately or as a combination of factors – are common barriers facing African American males trying to get to school regularly.

### **2. Family and Student Relationships with School**

Low income families' relationships with schools are also different from more affluent families because they often lack the time, social capital or regular access to school that establishes and strengthens this relationship. Schools concurrently have not been skilled at creating an environment conducive to developing relationships with low-income families and strengthening engagement with students to support a collaborative approach to reducing chronic absence and increasing attendance.

### **3. Reactive Attendance Policy**

The lack of engagement with families and students is compounded by the fact that current attendance policy is mainly reactive, occurring when students are usually already experiencing significant absence and related disconnection from school. Truancy is the intervention point in most districts, but truancy is typically a district-level intervention that follows a prescribed legal process and draws families in at a crisis point. There is a need for greater attention to meaningful prevention and intervention as early as possible after attendance problems are noted, and for more detailed and “real time” tracking of attendance and absence. Research shows that when schools develop programs of school, family, and community partnerships, they have higher levels of parent involvement, and rates of chronic absenteeism are reduced.

## Major Findings from the Policy Analysis

1. As is true nationally, state Education Code and local policy as well teacher and parent practices related to attendance focus primarily on truancy as an intervention point, while current research identifies chronic absence as a more timely, effective and easily tracked trigger for intervention.
2. State and local policy is not clear on how soon intervention should occur (at the point of truancy or earlier) and can be more immediately punitive for tardiness than absence, which are two different problems with different causes.
3. Current policy prescribes initial intervention (for truancy and poor attendance) more clearly from the central office perspective than from teacher and other staff's perspectives at the site; for example, students are designated truant when they receive a Notification of Truancy (NOT) from the district but there is currently no protocol for schools to be so notified.
4. The truancy notification and intervention process is legally prescribed, and although intervention services can be helpful, it may feel to the family that supports are mandated as solutions to a problem rather than as supports to prevent a problem.

Current research identifies chronic absence as the most effective method for tracking attendance and planning for intervention, but State Education Code and OUSD Board Policy still rely primarily on truancy to address irregular absence.

## Recommendations

We made recommendations in this report in **six major categories** that address chronic absence and attendance. Our major recommendations from these categories are below; a detailed list is part of the body of this report.

### 1. Data Collection and Analysis

- a. OUSD should use data disaggregated by race/ethnicity and gender to track African American male chronic absence, and use it to intervene early with AAMs at risk of or already chronically absent.
- b. The district should explore patterns of tardiness and truancy for AAMs to see whether and how these behaviors are linked to chronic absence. (They may be predictors, triggers or warning signs for one another.)

## **2. Policy**

- a. Attendance policy should identify all groups in the district that will look at African American male attendance (at district and site level) and identify the range of options available for intervention.
- b. OUSD should designate a single senior administrator responsible for coordinating all attendance efforts for AAMs and sharing lessons learned from each program.
- c. Review and revision of attendance policy should include parent and student engagement and feedback for families of African American males.

## **3. Standards and Procedure**

- a. OUSD should define thresholds and procedures for intervention for chronically absent African American males by school staff, site and regional teams, and district.
- b. Standards for absence (excused and unexcused) and tardiness should be applied equitably to all students.

## **4. Prevention Strategies and Programs**

- a. Sites should study patterns of chronic absence and tardiness among their African American male students and identify strategies for prevention and intervention before a student is designated truant and triggers a process that can have punitive legal consequences.
- b. OUSD should create district and school plans for attendance improvement, including an analysis of how effectively they address attendance barriers for African American boys. These plans should have a particular focus on addressing early grade chronic absence of AAM, a common pattern in OUSD elementary schools and a leading indicator of future poor academic achievement.
- c. Plans should support African American student enrollment in Early Childhood Education and include a focus on building a culture of attendance in ECE programs.

## **5. Student, Family and Community Engagement**

- a. The attendance policy and the connection between attendance, school achievement and graduation should be the focus of student instruction and family engagement at the beginning of the school year and be reinforced periodically throughout the year.

- b. The school should problem-solve with AAM students and their families on how students can get to school on time and regularly, and what local resources are available to help them get safely to their site (walking, bus, crossing guards, etc.).
- c. To learn about strategies for intervention, schools should discuss with AAMs about what keeps them from coming to school and/or from coming to school on time.
- d. The school should share with AAM students and parents what health-related services, youth development, and family advocacy resources are available on site or through referrals to other organizations.
- e. OUSD should engage community agencies and organizations that work with African American families and students and focus on youth services, academic enrichment, family engagement, and supporting a safe environment around schools.

## **6. Professional Development**

- a. Ongoing staff development should focus on providing school leadership and staff with the expertise to develop interventions and incentives effective for African American males who are at risk for or who are currently chronically absent.
- b. Staff should be trained in and aware of culturally appropriate support and intervention strategies and agencies for referral.

## INTRODUCTION

Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) in partnership with Urban Strategies Council, Partners in School Innovation, and the East Bay Community Foundation, launched the ambitious African American Male Achievement Initiative (AAMAI) in late 2010. The AAMAI aims to reverse the academic and social inequities facing African American males (AAM) in Oakland in seven key areas: the achievement gap, graduation rates, literacy, suspensions, attendance, middle school holding power, and juvenile detention.

Urban Strategies Council's role in AAMAI has been:

- Data analysis, indicator development and tracking, and quantification of targets in the seven goal areas
- Research into strategies to improve outcomes for African American boys and eliminate disparities
- Policy analysis
- Special research projects, including this report

Our analysis of indicators in the seven goal areas brings to light the dire situation of African American boys in OUSD. Generating effective strategies for changing outcomes in these seven areas, however, requires a more nuanced understanding of the situation of Black boys in the District. Knowing that 33% of African American male middle school students were suspended and that 18% were chronically absent in 2010-11 does not tell us what percentage of these boys are having trouble in both areas, nor does it tell us about those African American boys who are doing well.

The current report, **A Closer Look at Attendance of African American Males in OUSD**, examines the data and policies related to attendance and chronic absence and offers recommendations for reducing the levels of chronic absence for AAM in OUSD. This is one of three reports Urban Strategies is producing using 2010-11 school year data on African American male students in OUSD. The other two reports are the following:

1. **A Deeper Look at African American Males in OUSD** which examines AAM who are on course for graduation, at risk of being off course for graduation, and off course for graduation, providing a profile of those at risk of not graduating.
2. **A Closer Look at Suspensions of African American Males in OUSD** which examines the 2010-11 school year data on suspensions of African American males, analyzes state and local policies that could be contributing to the disproportionately high rates of suspension for AAM, and offers recommendations for reducing the disparities for AAM.

## Questions Guiding This Report

A series of questions guide this report in three sections: the research/data section, the literature review, and the policy analysis.

Our ***data analysis*** focused on answering the following questions:

1. Are African American boys more likely to be chronically absent than other students?
2. How does chronic absence among African American boys vary by school and grade level and how does this pattern differ from that of other groups?
3. Has the prevalence of chronic absence changed in recent years?
4. Are there specific schools which have exceptionally high or low rates of chronic absence among AAM?
5. What are the primary types of absence among chronically absent African American boys in elementary, middle, and high school?

Our ***literature review*** addressed the following questions about the causes of disparities in the chronic absence of African American males:

1. What are the economic and health factors that impact the attendance of African American males?
2. What issues around family and student engagement impact the attendance of African American male students?
3. What safety issues impact the attendance of African American male students?
4. What school policies impact the attendance of African American male students?
5. What does the literature recommend in terms of:
  - a. Data collection?
  - b. Policy?
  - c. Procedures?
  - d. Staff development?
  - e. Systems reform?
  - f. Family and student engagement?

Our ***policy and practice analysis*** focused on the following questions:

1. How are chronic absence and truancy defined in the California Education Code and OUSD School Board policy?
2. What are the policies around attendance and particularly around addressing disparities in the chronic absence of African American males?
3. What are the common practices and trends around attendance and particularly around addressing disparities in the chronic absence of African American males?
4. What are some of the current promising practices being utilized in OUSD for reducing disparities?
5. What do we recommend in terms of:
  - a. Data collection?
  - b. Policy?

- c. Standards and procedures?
- d. Strategies and prevention programs?
- e. Student, family and community engagement?
- f. Professional development?

# PART I: ANALYSIS OF CHRONIC ABSENCE DATA ON AAM IN OUSD

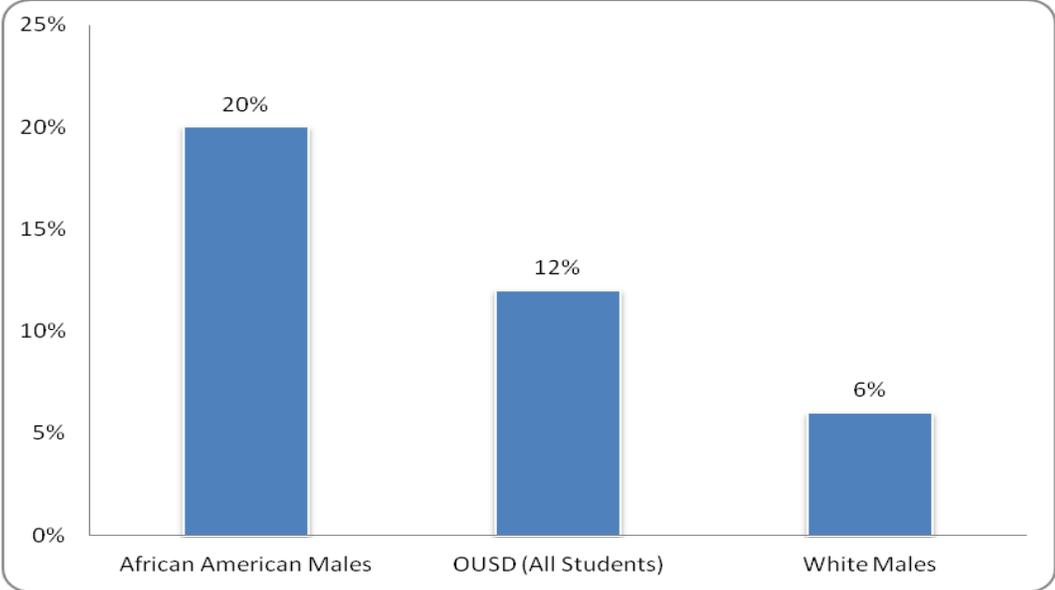
In this section of the report, we examine the data on chronic absence for African American males to better understand the patterns and sources of the disparities to inform our analysis of policy and practices as well as our recommendations for addressing high rates of chronic absence among African American boys.

In the 2010-11 school year, 6,415 African American boys were enrolled in OUSD, accounting for 17% of the 37,527 students enrolled in the District.

## 1. Are African American boys more likely to be chronically absent than other students?

- AAM students were almost twice as likely to be chronically absent (20%)– defined as missing 10% or more of school days during the year – as OUSD students as a whole (12%),<sup>1</sup> in 2010-11 (See **Figure 1** below). The rate of chronic absence in the District as a whole is too high, so simply eliminating the disparity between AAM and the District rate is not sufficient. The Superintendent has established a goal that all students will attend school 95%+ of the time.
- One in five AAM students missed 10% of school days or more during the 2010-11 school year (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1: Percentage of Students in All Grades Chronically Absent, 2010-11



<sup>1</sup> The comparison group, OUSD students as a whole, includes African American males.

- Chronic absence affected 4,567 students in OUSD in 2010-11, of which 1,267 were African American boys (see **Table 1** below).
- African American boys accounted for 28% of chronically absent students in OUSD, though they comprised just 17% of OUSD students (see **Table 1**).

**Table 1: Number of Chronically Absent Students in OUSD, 2010-11**

Chronically Absent Students			
OUSD 2010-11			
	OUSD	AAM	AAM%
Elementary	2,274	653	29%
Middle School	800	244	31%
High School	1,274	323	25%
Alternative	219	47	21%
Total Chronically Absent	4,567	1,267	28%
	37,304	6,415	17%

While AAM comprised 17% of the enrollment, they accounted for 28% of chronically absent students in OUSD.

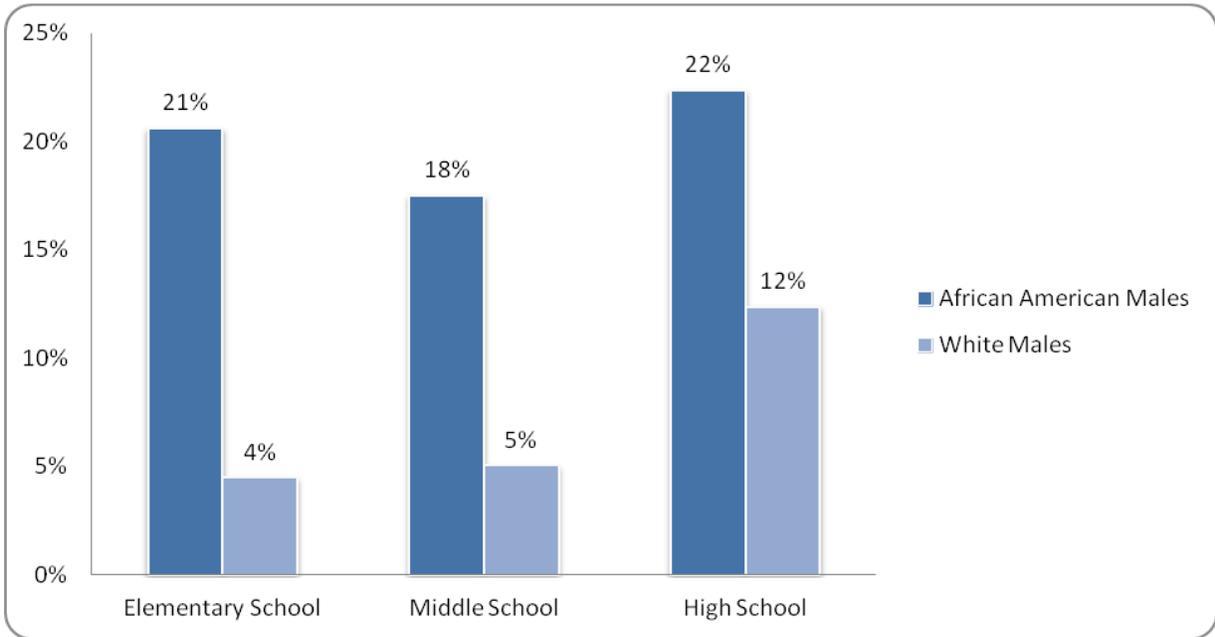
## 2. How does chronic absence among African American boys vary by school and grade level and how does this pattern compare to other groups?

According to data from 2010-11, the pattern of chronic absence across school levels was different for African American males and White males.

- AAM students in middle school were slightly less likely to be chronically absent than AAM elementary or high school students, with more than one in five elementary and high school students missing 10% of school days or more compared to slightly less than one in five middle school students (See **Figure 2** below).
- Among White males, the percentage of chronically absent students in high school was more than double the percentage for White male middle school students and three times the percentage for White male elementary students (see **Figure 2**).

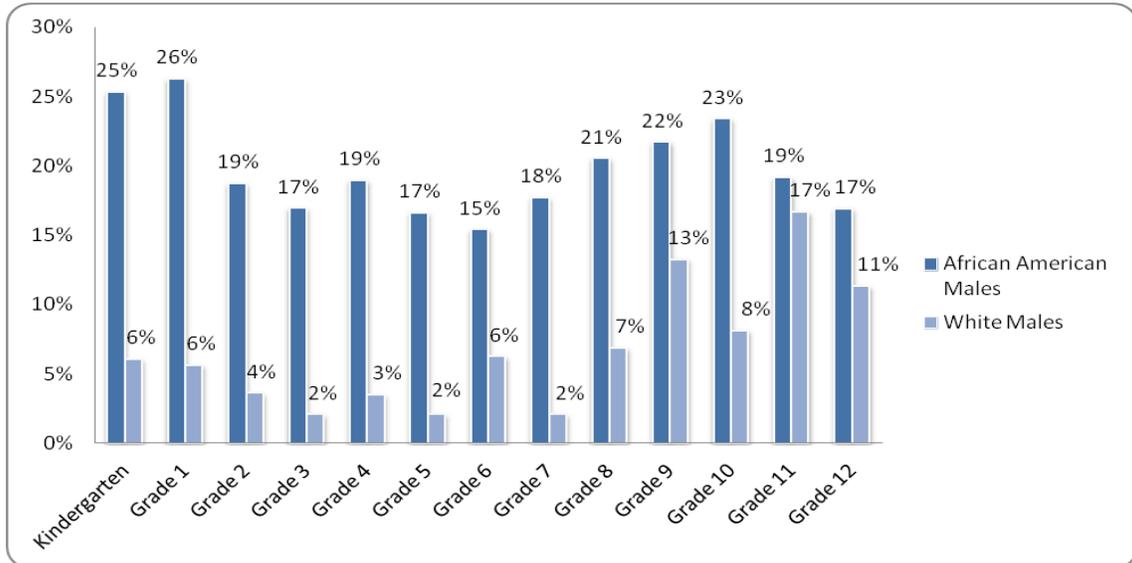
African American boys in kindergarten and first grade are five times as likely as White boys to be chronically absent.

**Figure 2: Percentage of African American and White Male Students Chronically Absent (Missing 10% of School Days or More), by School Level, 2010-11**



- At every grade level, African American male students were more likely than White male students to be chronically absent in 2010-11 (see **Figure 3** below).
- Chronic absence was particularly high among AAM in kindergarten and first grade, with one-fourth of students missing 10% of school days or more. More than one-fifth of African American boys in grades 8, 9, and 10 were chronically absent as well (see **Figure 3**).

**Figure 3: Percentage of Students Chronically Absent, by Grade Level, 2010-11**

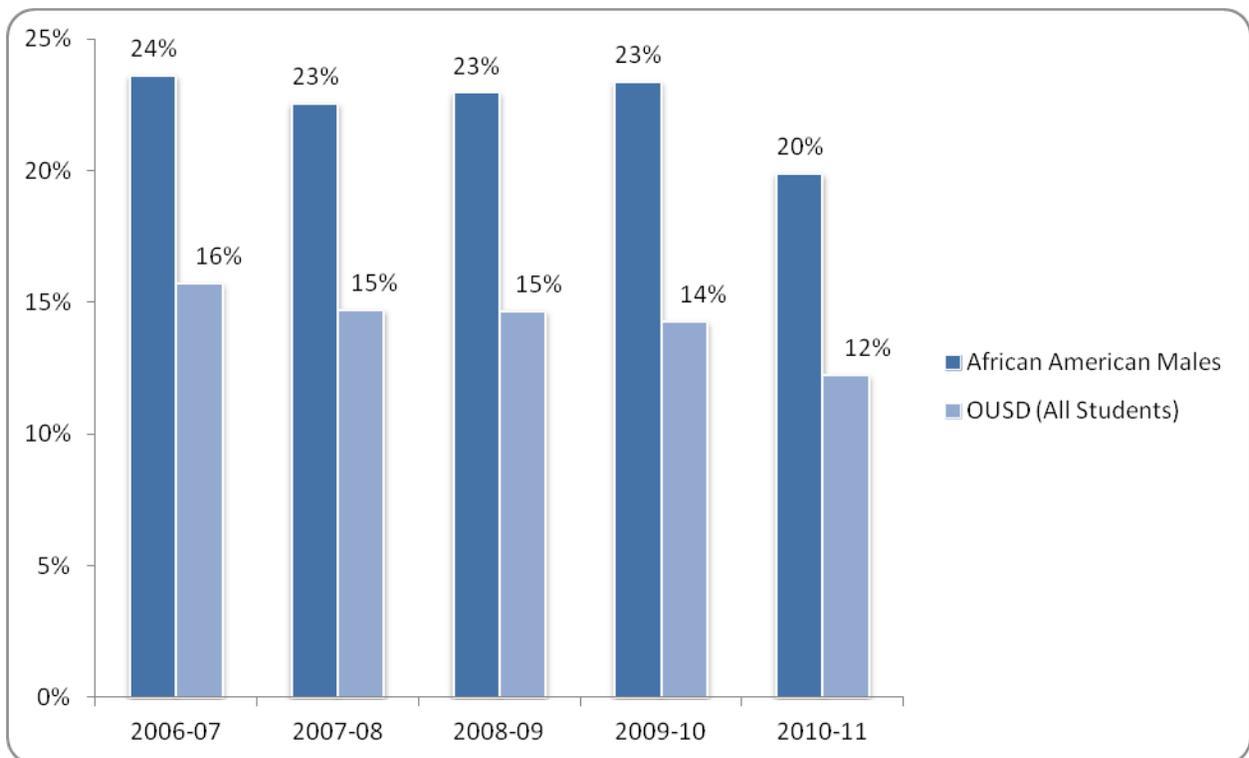


### 3. Has the prevalence of chronic absence changed in recent years?

#### District Wide

- The proportion of all OUSD students who were chronically absent declined in the last five school years, dropping by four percentage points between 2006-2007 and 2010-2011 from 16% to 12%. (See **Figure 4** below.)
- Among African American boys, the proportion chronically absent also dropped four percentage points in the same time period (from 24% to 20%), though most of the change occurred in the last year (a three percentage point drop). (See **Figure 4** below.)

**Figure 4: Percentage of Students in All Grades Chronically Absent (Absent 10% of School Days or More), 2006-07 to 2010-11**

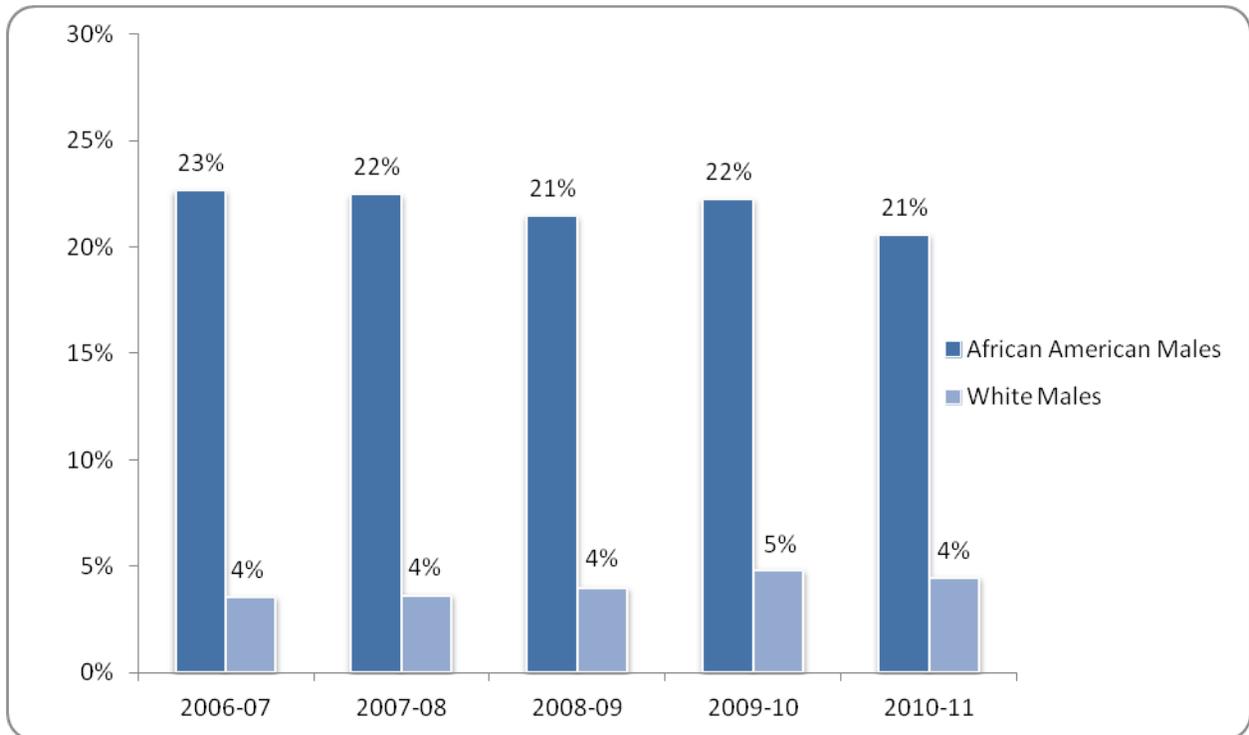


#### Elementary School

- The rate of chronic absence among AAM elementary students declined over the past few years from a high of 23% in 2006-07 to 21% in 2010-11 (see **Figure 5**).
- More than one in five AAM students in elementary school missed 10% of school days or more in each of the past five years. (See **Figure 5** below.)

- Over the past five years, AAM students were more than four times as likely to be chronically absent compared to White male students.<sup>2</sup> There has been little change in the rate of chronic absence among AAM or White male elementary students during that time period. (See **Figure 5** below.)

**Figure 5: Elementary School – Percentage of African American and White Male Students Chronically Absent, 2006-07 to 2010-11**



### Middle School

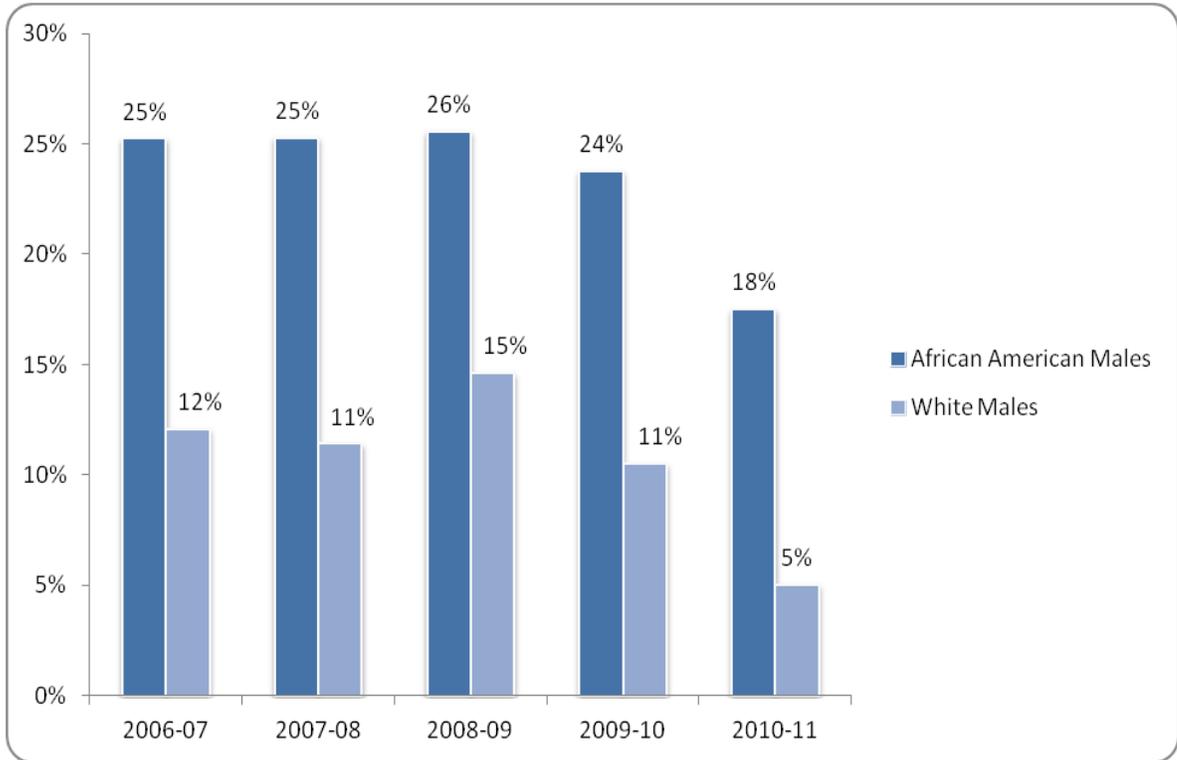
- Nearly one in four AAM students in middle school missed 10% of school days or more from 2006-07 to 2009-10 (24%-26%), but in 2010-11, that figure fell to less than one in five (18%) (see **Figure 6** below).
- White male middle school students also saw a decline in chronic absence in this period, from 12% in 2006-07 to 5% in 2010-11 (see **Figure 6** below).

While African American boys were still **three times** as likely to be chronically absent as their White male peers, chronic absence in middle schools dropped markedly in 2010-11.

<sup>2</sup> 2010-11 OUSD Enrollment in Grades K-5: African American Males: 3,196; White Males: 1,532

- African American boys still were three times as likely to be chronically absent as their White male peers in 2010-11<sup>3</sup> (see **Figure 6** below).

**Figure 6: Middle School - Percentage of African American and White Male Students Chronically Absent, 2006-07 to 2010-1**



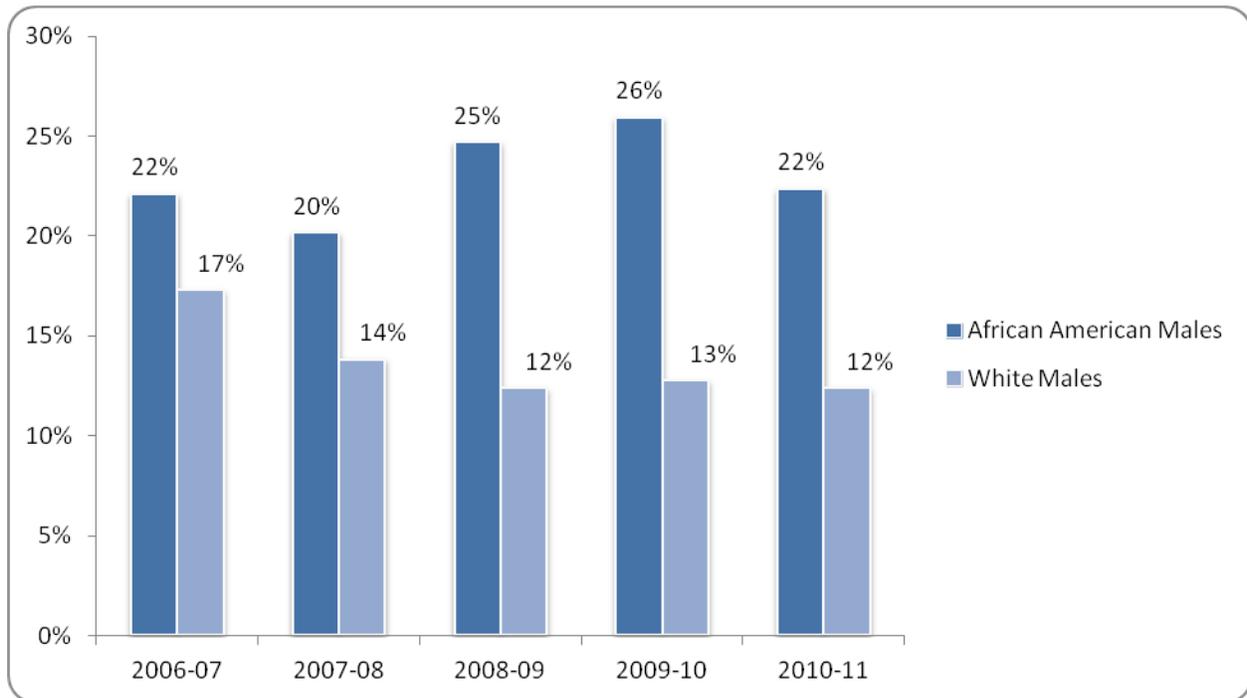
### High School

- The rate of chronic absence among AAM high school students increased from 20% in 2007-08 to 26% in 2009-10, then fell to 22% in 2010-11 (see **Figure 7** below).
- The gap between AAM and White males in chronic absence was consistently smaller in high school than in elementary school, because White males in high school were much more likely to be chronically absent than White males in elementary or middle school<sup>4</sup> (see **Figure 7** below). Given the high attrition rates of AAM, it may also be the case that African American males with chronic absence problems were no longer enrolled in OUSD by their high school years having dropped out or been pushed out of school.

<sup>3</sup> 2010-11 OUSD Enrollment in Grades 6-8: African American Males: 1,457; White Males: 313

<sup>4</sup> 2010-11 OUSD Enrollment in Grades 9-12: African American Males: 1,762; White Males: 300

Figure 7: High School – Percentage of African American and White Male Students Chronically Absent, 2006-07 to 2010-11



#### 4. Are there specific schools which have exceptionally high or low rates of chronic absence among AAM?

*This analysis of school-level data includes OUSD schools that had at least 20 African American male students in 2010-11. Schools with fewer than 20 AAM students were excluded to protect student privacy.*

##### Elementary Schools

According to data from 2010-11, 21% of African American boys in elementary school were chronically absent. The following elementary schools (see **Table 2**) had chronic absence rates for African American boys that were significantly<sup>5</sup> **lower than the overall elementary school rate of (21%)**:

<sup>5</sup> These differences all were statistically significant:  $p < 0.05$

**Table 2: Elementary Schools with Lower-Than-Average Chronic Absence Rates among African American Boys, 2010-11**

<b>ELEMENTARY SCHOOL</b>	<b>AAM Enrollment</b>	<b>Total School Enrollment</b>	<b>Percentage of AAM Chronically Absent</b>	<b>Percentage of All Students Chronically Absent</b>
Thornhill Elementary	22	376	0%	3%
Crocker Highlands Elementary	37	377	0%	0%
Redwood Heights Elementary	37	347	3%	4%
Peralta Elementary	24	304	4%	2%
Sankofa	45	135	5%	15%
Glenview Elementary	55	439	5%	5%
Joaquin Miller Elementary	29	363	7%	3%
Montclair Elementary	30	436	7%	2%
Grass Valley Elementary	137	281	7%	8%
Kaiser Elementary	54	255	7%	4%
Think College Now	26	290	8%	4%
Sequoia Elementary	61	384	8%	9%
Carl Munck Elementary	112	336	13%	15%
<b>All Elementary Schools</b>	<b>5597</b>	<b>18,096</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>11%</b>

The following elementary schools (see **Table 3**) had chronic absence rates for African American boys that were significantly<sup>6</sup> *higher than the overall elementary school rate of 21%*:

**Table 3: Elementary Schools<sup>7</sup> with Higher-Than-Average Chronic Absence Rates among African American Boys, 2010-11**

<b>ELEMENTARY SCHOOL</b>	<b>AAM Enrollment</b>	<b>Total School Enrollment</b>	<b>Percentage of AAM Chronically Absent</b>	<b>Percentage of All Students Chronically Absent</b>
PLACE at Prescott	58	187	33%	24%
Lafayette Elementary	103	315	35%	24%
Burckhalter Elementary	66	184	37%	25%
Santa Fe Elementary	100	237	37%	26%
Sobrante Park Elementary	44	237	37%	21%
Reach Academy	76	294	39%	29%
<b>All Elementary Schools</b>	<b>5597</b>	<b>18,096</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>11%</b>

<sup>6</sup> These differences all were statistically significant:  $p < 0.05$

<sup>7</sup> The 11 elementary schools with fewer than 20 African American male students in 2010-11 were excluded from the analysis.

### Middle Schools

According to data from 2010-11, 18% of African American boys in middle school were chronically absent. The following middle schools (see **Table 4**) had chronic absence rates for African American boys that were significantly<sup>8</sup> *lower than the overall middle school rate of 18%*:

**Table 4: Middle Schools<sup>9</sup> with Lower-Than-Average Chronic Absence Rates among African American Boys, 2010-11**

<b>MIDDLE SCHOOLS</b>	<b>AAM Enrollment</b>	<b>Total School Enrollment</b>	<b>Percentage of AAM Chronically Absent</b>	<b>Percentage of All Students Chronically Absent</b>
Bret Harte Middle School	157	685	8%	6%
Montera Middle School	204	930	12%	9%
Edna M Brewer Middle School	186	802	12%	7%
<b>All Middle Schools</b>	<b>2696</b>	<b>7181</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>11%</b>

The following middle schools (see **Table 5**) had chronic absence rates for African American boys that were significantly<sup>10</sup> *higher than the overall middle school rate of 18%*:

**Table 5: Middle Schools with Higher-Than-Average Chronic Absence Rates among African American Boys, 2010-11**

<b>MIDDLE SCHOOLS</b>	<b>AAM Enrollment</b>	<b>Total School Enrollment</b>	<b>Percentage of AAM Chronically Absent</b>	<b>Percentage of All Students Chronically Absent</b>
Elmhurst Community Prep	53	344	30%	18%
United For Success	27	425	33%	14%
Alliance Academy	38	357	47%	16%
<b>All Middle Schools</b>	<b>2696</b>	<b>7181</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>11%</b>

### High Schools

According to data from 2010-11, 22% of African American boys in high school were chronically absent. No high schools had chronic absence rates for African American boys that were significantly<sup>11</sup> lower than the overall high school rate of 22%.

<sup>8</sup> These differences all were statistically significant:  $p < 0.05$

<sup>9</sup> Two middle schools with fewer than 20 African American male students were excluded from the analysis.

<sup>10</sup> These differences all were statistically significant:  $p < 0.05$

<sup>11</sup> These differences all were statistically significant:  $p < 0.05$

One high school (see **Table 6**) had a chronic absence rate for African American boys that was significantly<sup>12</sup> **higher than the overall high school rate of 22%**:

**Table 6: High School<sup>13</sup> with Higher-Than-Average Chronic Absence Rates among African American Boys, 2010-11**

HIGH SCHOOLS	AAM Enrollment	Total School Enrollment	Percentage of AAM Chronically Absent	Percentage of All Students Chronically Absent
Mandela High School	48	309	35%	31%
<b>All High Schools</b>	3329	8677	21%	16%

## 5. What are the primary types of absence among chronically absent African American boys in elementary, middle, and high school?

### Patterns of Chronic Absence in Elementary School

African American male elementary students missed more days of school for every type of absence than did chronically absent students in other racial/ethnic groups. Chronically absent African American boys missed more 2.9 days on average as a result of illness while other chronically absent students missed an average of 1.1 days for illness. However, AAM also missed seven times as many days for unexcused absences, over four times as many days for unverified absences (where parents could not be reached), and four times as many days for excused absences (see **Figure 8**).

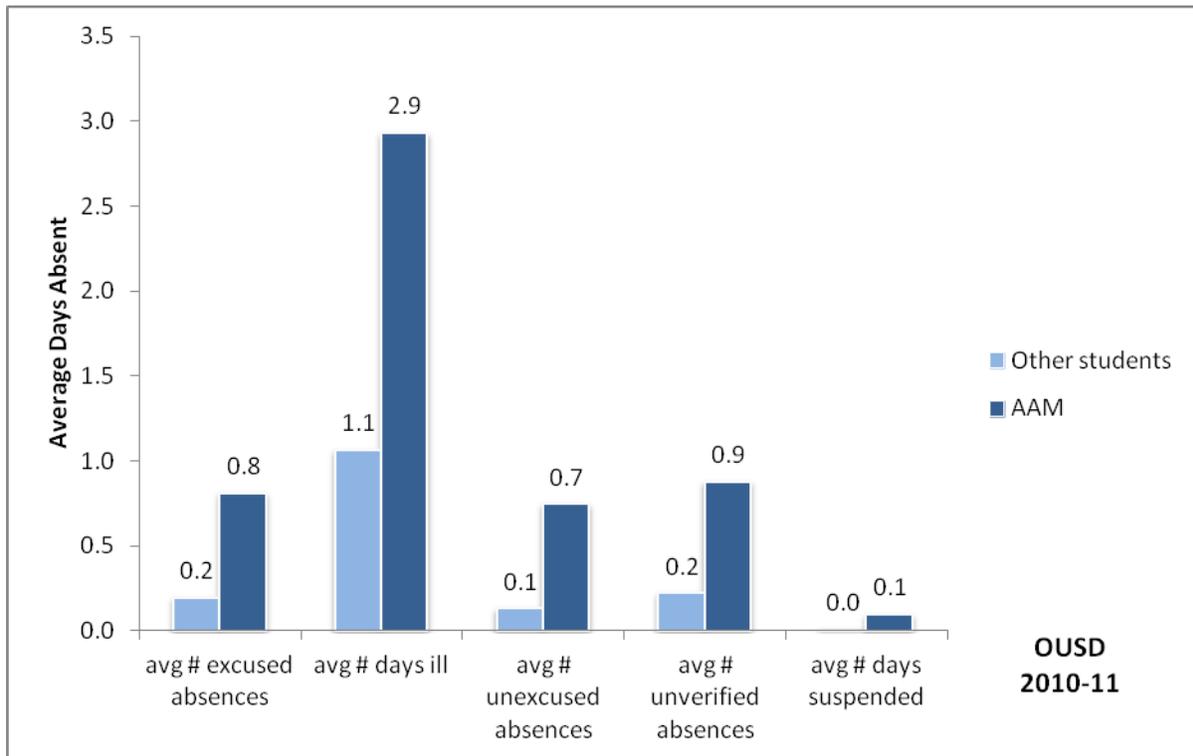
Chronically absent AAM elementary students missed almost **three times** as many days for **illness** as students from other ethnic groups.

**Note on Data Regarding Suspensions:** There have been difficulties that the district is trying to address with consistent coding of absence due to suspension; because of this inconsistency, there is likely a higher proportion of chronic absence due to suspensions.

<sup>12</sup> These differences all were statistically significant: p<0.05

<sup>13</sup> One high school with fewer than 20 African American male students in 2010-11 was excluded from the analysis.

**Figure 8: Average Days Absent by Category for Chronically Absent African American Male Elementary Students Compared to Non-African American Chronically Absent Students of Both Genders**

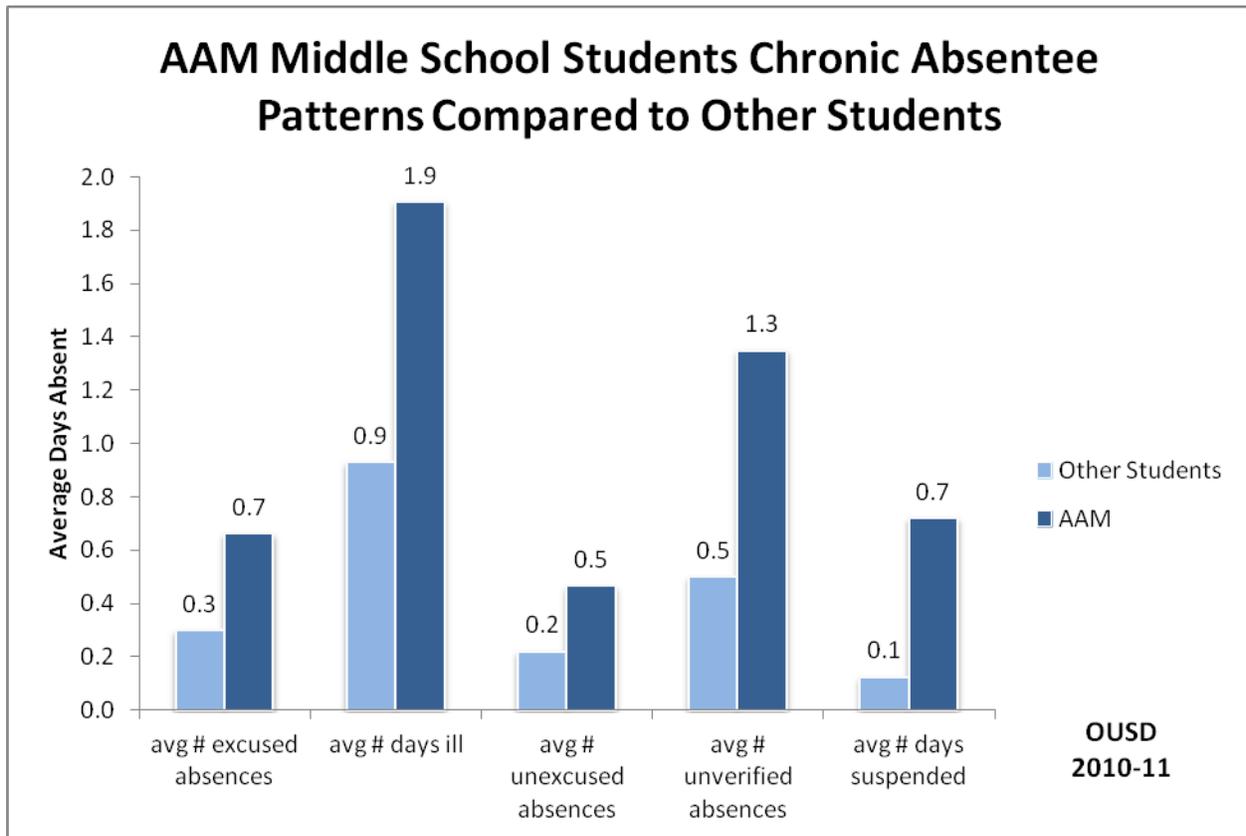


**Patterns of Chronic Absence in Middle School**

African American middle school students also missed more days of school in all categories than their chronically absent peers. Chronically absent AAM students missed more than twice as many days as a result of illness compared to chronically absent students of other racial/ethnic groups. In middle school, there were more unverified absences, and more absences as a result of suspension, with AAM students missing seven times the number of days due to suspension as did students in other ethnic groups (see **Figure 9**).

Chronically absent AAM middle school students missed almost **seven times** as many days for **suspensions**, **twice** as many for **illness**, and almost **three times** as many days for **unverified absences** as students from other ethnic groups.

Figure 9: Average Days Absent by Category for Chronically Absent African American Male Middle School Students Compared to Non-African American Chronically Absent Students of Both Genders

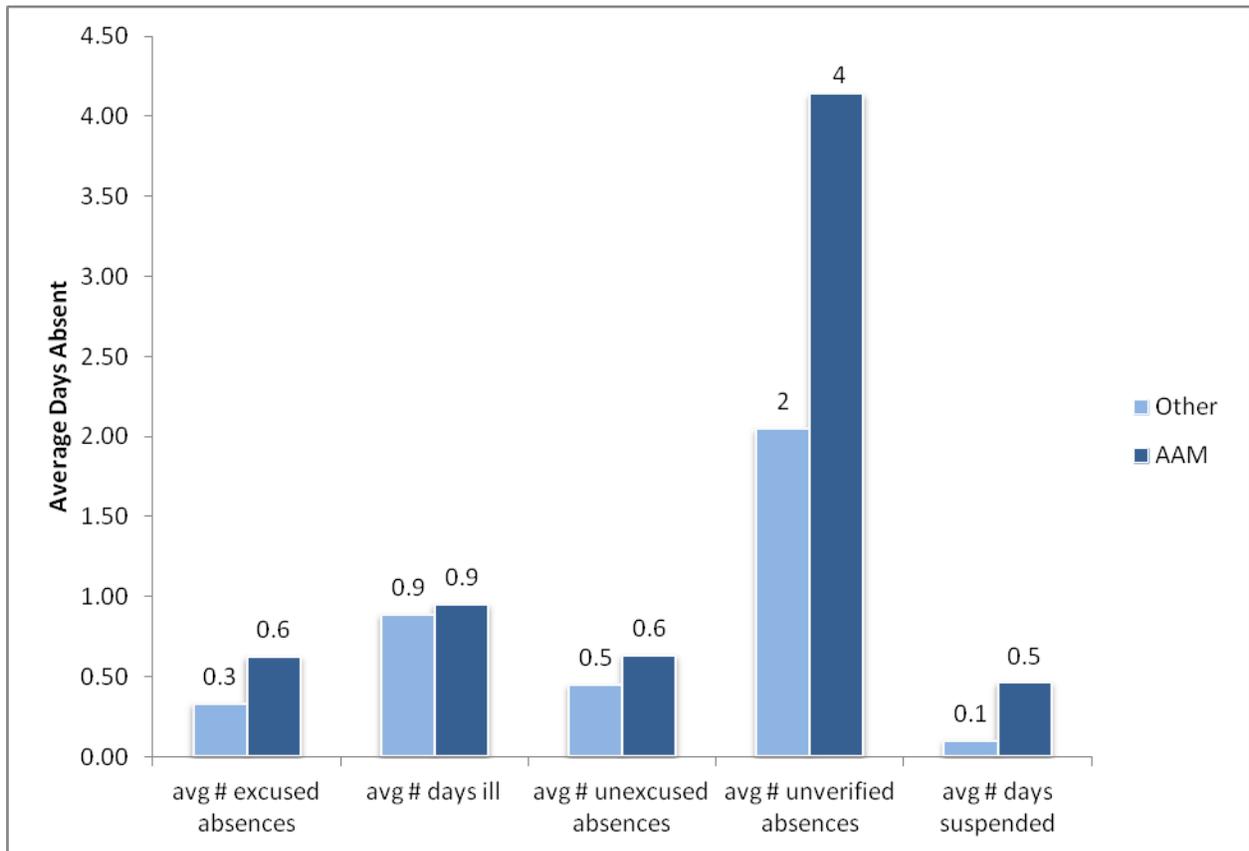


**Patterns of Chronic Absence in High School**

The pattern of days missed among chronically absent students in high school was different from other school types. For chronic absentees from all ethnic groups, students tended to miss the most days for unverified absences, where parents could not be reached; however, AAM students missed twice the number of days on average for this reason. Chronically absent AAM also missed five times as many days as a result of suspension compared to other students (see **Figure 10**).

Chronically absent AAM high school students missed **twice** as many days for **unverified** absences as students from other ethnic groups.

**Figure 10: Average Days Absent by Category for Chronically Absent African American Male High School Students Compared to Non-African American Chronically Absent Students of Both Genders**



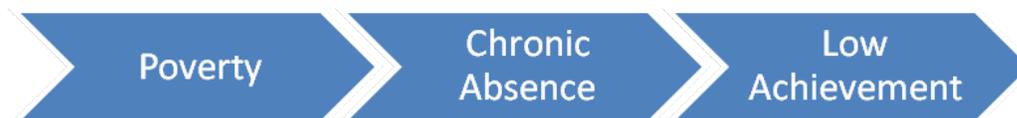
## PART II: LITERATURE ON THE CAUSES OF DISPARITIES IN ATTENDANCE OF AAM MALES

We conducted a review of the literature to identify theories of causation for racial disparities in attendance (particularly chronic absence) to inform our data analysis, policy analysis and recommendations. While literature on attendance disparities by ethnicity/race and gender is not well developed, significant work has been done on attendance disparities for children living in low-income, urban environments, which is where many African American boys in Oakland reside. The literature on attendance generally falls into three theories of causation for disparities for low-income, urban students: interlinked economic and health issues (including safety), school policy, and school strategies for family and student engagement.

**Economic & Health Impacts:** This extensively documented category of theories suggests that low family income level and related health and wellness issues are barriers to attendance for many African American boys living in urban areas, and that schools have not created an environment conducive to developing relationships with families to address these barriers.

Children living in poverty are 25% more likely to miss three or more school days per month than more affluent students<sup>1</sup> for reasons related to ill health, housing instability, poor health care access, unreliable transportation, and violence or trauma in the community. They are more likely to experience serious health problems including higher rates of asthma, as well as vision, dental and hearing disorders<sup>2</sup>. Skipping breakfast – which heavily impacts cognition and attendance – is prevalent among urban minority youth. However, school staff is typically not engaging students or families in a manner that would support their adjustment and success in this environment.

All children, regardless of socio-economic background, do worse academically in 1<sup>st</sup> grade if they are chronically absent (absent 10% or more of schooldays) in kindergarten<sup>3</sup> and among poor children, chronic absence in kindergarten predicts the lowest levels of educational achievement at the end of the fifth grade<sup>4</sup>. Simply put, when poor children regularly miss school, they fall behind in learning and the achievement gap between them and their peers widens considerably. Further, chronic absenteeism is a proven early warning sign of academic risk and school dropout<sup>5</sup>.



***Why is addressing the impacts of poverty important? Children living in poverty are more likely to be chronically absent from school, which predicts lower achievement and is an early warning sign for school dropout.***

Once children experience academic challenges, they begin to disengage from school, or an already tenuous bond to school is weakened. Coupled with this is a common problem: lack of consistency and uniformity to attendance policies and procedures within schools and districts. The U. S. Department of Education classifies this as a school-based problem contributing to truancy (unexcused absence)<sup>6</sup>. If school policy is not consistent and is not communicated clearly to families, students will certainly be unaware or confused about the definitions and consequences of chronic absence or truancy.

**Family & Student Engagement:** This category of theories suggests that low-income families' relationship with and communication with schools are different from more affluent families, and as a result educational priorities at home may not be synchronized with those of the school. Research suggests that the quality of education children receive is directly related to the ability of parents to generate social capital<sup>7</sup>. Social capital is used to describe benefits individuals derive from their association with and participation in social networks and organizations, including school PTAs and site committees. Building such relationships and participation with parents – which can begin by getting them to school for attendance events – generates bridges between schools and families that can be used to communicate about the positive (good or improved attendance) and negative (chronic absence). Building lines of communication and opportunities for participation also increases the chances of the school and family collaborating to support regular attendance.

**Reactive Policy-Making:** In addition, research shows that current attendance policy is mainly reactive<sup>8</sup>. There is a clear need for greater attention to meaningful prevention and intervention as early as feasible after attendance problems are noted. Studies have consistently shown, for instance, that using activities to celebrate good attendance helped improve levels of student attendance from one year to the next<sup>9</sup>. Research also shows that when schools develop programs of school, family, and community partnerships, they have higher levels of parent involvement, and rates of chronic absenteeism are reduced<sup>10</sup>.

## **Structural Factors**

### **Economic:**

- a. Children living in poverty are 25 percent more likely to miss three or more school days per month<sup>11</sup>.
- b. Students in low income neighborhoods are more often without school bus service and in chaotic classrooms with an inexperienced teacher. They may also have no reliable transportation, little access to healthcare and unstable housing or no housing at all<sup>12</sup>.
- c. Multiple maternal and family risks impacting chronic absence (teenage or single motherhood, food insecurity, maternal unemployment, multiple siblings, etc.) are most commonly found among children living in poverty, from a racial/ethnic minority group, or in poor health<sup>13</sup>.
- d. Low-income students are more likely to work to make a living and help support family<sup>14</sup>, which may affect their regular attendance at school.
- e. Parents/guardians may have multiple jobs, affecting how much they can support their children in getting to school<sup>15</sup>.
- f. Chronic absence could reflect the lack of high quality early education experiences that help children gain the social and cognitive skills that make school a more positive experience<sup>16</sup>.
- g. Disadvantaged children are more likely to change schools during the school year; school mobility is linked to children's cognitive development and to school attendance<sup>17</sup>.

## **Behavioral Differences**

### **Family:**

#### **1. Relationship/Attitudes to School**

- a. Family has lack of communication with school<sup>25</sup>.
- b. Family has lack of familiarity with school attendance laws<sup>26</sup>.
- c. Family has varied education priorities; regular attendance may not rate high on the list<sup>27</sup>.

### **School Relationships and Policies**

#### **1. Lack of Engagement with Family & Students**

- a. Schools don't understand the importance of family and community involvement<sup>28</sup>.
- b. Schools fail to successfully notify parents/guardians about each absence<sup>29</sup>.
- c. The school is not celebrating good attendance with student and family<sup>30</sup>.
- d. Schools may lack flexibility in meeting students' diverse learning styles<sup>31</sup>.
- e. Issues with attitudes of school staff and fellow students can affect students' desire to be in school<sup>32</sup>.

#### **2. Attendance Policies Unclear or Inconsistent**

- f. There is a lack of consistency and uniformity to attendance policies and procedure within schools and districts<sup>33</sup>.

### **Student Disengagement:**

- a. Lack of connection to mentors<sup>34</sup>.
- b. Lack of family supervision and/or guidance<sup>35</sup>.
- c. Substance abuse<sup>36</sup>.
- d. Limited social and emotional competence<sup>37</sup>.
- e. Mental and physical health problems<sup>38</sup>.
- f. Student unaware and not familiar with school attendance policy and procedures<sup>39</sup>.
- g. Teen pregnancy<sup>40</sup>.
- h. Truant friends<sup>41</sup>.

**Health:**

- a. Low socioeconomic status children are more likely to experience serious health problems and are three times more likely to be chronically absent from school due to illness or injury<sup>18</sup>. Children living in poverty suffer much higher rates of asthma, heart and kidney disease, epilepsy, digestive problems, as well as vision, dental and hearing disorders, exacerbated by environmental factors associated with poverty<sup>19</sup>.
- b. Skipping breakfast is highly and disproportionately prevalent among urban minority youth. Missing the first meal of the day has a negative impact on cognition and attendance, which affects students' academic achievement<sup>20</sup>.

**Safety:**

- a. In poor, urban neighborhoods, high rates of violence and community crime can affect families' ability to get their children to school<sup>21</sup>.
- b. Exposure to community violence or trauma can impact early chronic absenteeism when students lose their ability to trust other people and institutions or develop avoidance behaviors stemming from anxiety, fear, etc<sup>22</sup>.
- c. When traumatic events like domestic violence or child abuse occur, children suffer the resulting psychological and physical effects as well as facing instability in their living situation<sup>23</sup>.
- d. Being a victim of bullying has been associated with decreased mental and emotional well-being, lower achievement, feeling unsafe at school, and lower connectedness with school, which leads to absenteeism<sup>24</sup>.

- i. Transitional failure can lead to school disengagement.
- j. Urban minority kids' lack of connection to school is intensified when they don't feel competent; don't feel self determining; or don't feel interpersonally connected<sup>42</sup>.

**RECOMMENDATIONS/STRATEGIES**  
**From the Literature to Address**

**Economic, Health & Wellness Impacts**

**Data Collection:**

1. Improve the accuracy and consistency of local data on attendance maintained by individual schools and district-wide<sup>43</sup>.
2. Adopt a common definition of chronic absence and regularly calculate/report on the number of children chronically absent by type of school (elementary, middle, secondary) and grade. Make this data publicly available<sup>44</sup>.
3. Check whether chronic absence is higher among particular student populations by race/ethnicity, gender, English Language Learner (ELL) status, home language, participation in special education, risk exposure, etc<sup>45</sup>.
4. Examine data on chronic absence in elementary schools for the following indicators:
  - a. Does the level of chronic early absence affect a significant proportion of the student population (10% or more)? High levels throughout a district suggest the existence of systemic challenges related to school policy or practice and/or problematic community-wide<sup>46</sup>.
  - b. What percent of the population of children who are chronically absent are also excessively absent (missing 20% or more of the school) or persistently absent (consistently missing school for extended periods of times for several years in a row)<sup>47</sup>?
5. Track chronic absence in pre-kindergarten programs if possible, so that districts can identify when attendance is problematic prior to elementary school<sup>48</sup>.

**Policy:**

1. Provide appropriate school health and mental health services for students with health issues such as asthma<sup>49</sup>.
2. Decrease teen pregnancy. Provide comprehensive sex education (i.e., including education about both abstinence and contraception) with the aims of delayed initiation of and frequency of sex, reduced number of partners, and increased contraception use<sup>50</sup>.
3. Make sure that a range of school and community-based interventions are available for students and staff members<sup>51</sup> including linkages with mental health services able to address the needs of traumatized students<sup>52</sup>.
4. Coordinate public agency and/or legal response for families in crisis. Public agencies should be working closely with schools to minimize the disruption to children's ability to attend school<sup>53</sup>.

**Procedure:**

1. Provide high quality breakfast programs and engage in practices that favorably influence dietary behavior of students<sup>54</sup>.
2. Include rates of chronic absenteeism in the school progress reports, and create an explicit incentive among school leaders to address the problem<sup>55</sup>.

3. Develop a crisis intervention team to help students cope with psychologically traumatic events and to identify those who need professional mental health assistance (e.g., those with PTSD). Team members, including some mental health personnel, may need additional training in crisis response<sup>56</sup>.
4. Design interventions to ensure students are welcomed and connected with ongoing social supports during each of the following transition periods, and that special attention is paid to students identified as at risk<sup>57</sup>:
  - a. Entry into kindergarten
  - b. Moving to a new home and into a new school
  - c. Beginning a new year in a new class
  - d. Articulation from elementary to middle or middle to high school
  - e. Re-entry from suspensions, expulsions, juvenile detention
  - f. Inclusion from special education to regular classroom
5. Identify formal and informal community resources that can help meet diverse mental health needs<sup>58</sup>.
6. Include chronic absence in evaluations of the impact of various programs serving families and young students<sup>59</sup>.
7. Conduct a multi-site study to determine how chronic early absences is affected by various family, school and community variables (i.e. poverty, proximity to school from child's home, rates of community violence, school funding formulas, levels of parent education, afterschool and family support programs)<sup>60</sup>.
8. For schools with a high proportion of African American elementary students who are chronically absent, recruit African American parents to conduct an absentee watch for a month. Contact all parents whose children miss school to identify reasons the children missed school and develop plans for addressing those reasons<sup>61</sup>.
9. Partner with community agencies, including early childhood agencies and families to understand the factors contributing to early absence to develop appropriate responses tailored to their realities<sup>62</sup>.
10. Conduct early outreach to families with poor student attendance. A social worker could provide ongoing case management for families struggling to overcome barriers to attendance. Family support programs can develop a strength-based approach to fostering family resiliency and offer supports such as parent education, peer support groups, assistance with basic needs, and referrals to other resources<sup>63</sup>.

### **Staff Development**

1. Offer teachers and school staff extensive training on how to deal with cases of suspected abuse or neglect and collaborate with an outside organization to help engage families and organize community-based family support or other services<sup>64</sup>.
2. Make school nurses an integral component in connecting children to resources from public health departments, community clinics, medical facilities, and local medical or dental schools to make sure immunizations and comprehensive screenings are up to date to avoid illnesses that can lead to extended absences<sup>65</sup>.

### **Systems Reform**

1. Federal, state and local governments can help schools improve attendance by implementing the following research and practices:
  - a. Federal, state, and local levels can collaborate to develop a joint national research agenda that documents the impact of high quality school health programs on educational outcomes<sup>66</sup>.
  - b. Federal policymakers can require reporting of chronic absence rates, not just truancy. They can require states to add absences to longitudinal student databases<sup>67</sup>.
  - c. Federal, state, and district leadership can identify schools with high rates of chronic absenteeism in high-poverty districts, and establish partnerships with outside organizations to put solutions into action. The DOE should require that each school assess the key factors behind the problem of chronic absenteeism. Principals should have access to outside technical assistance to perform this assessment, and this can come from skilled nonprofit providers, for example<sup>68</sup>.
  - d. School improvement can be assessed not just by standardized test scores but by an array of measures, including chronic absence rates. They can promote using federal grants to form school-community partnerships to reduce high levels of chronic absence<sup>69</sup>.
  - e. The reauthorization of ESEA at the federal level can require incentives for states to collect information on chronic absenteeism for all schools and districts and provide incentives through demonstration grants, use of ESEA funds and technical assistance and support to report and act upon chronic absenteeism<sup>70</sup>.
  - f. The federal government can promote data collection reforms through technical assistance as well as public investments in education data systems<sup>71</sup>.

**RECOMMENDATIONS/STRATEGIES  
From the Literature to Address**

**FAMILY AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

**Family Engagement:**

1. Schools need to improve and increase efforts to engage with families. Areas where increasing parent involvement and connecting with families may improve specific student outcomes<sup>72,73</sup> are:
  - a. Parenting support: Help families establish a home environment where parents understand and support regular school attendance.
  - b. Regular, multi-channel communication: Build multiple channels (written, verbal, electronic, in-person) to communicate about school programs and children's progress, including attendance.
  - c. Parent volunteering: Organize parent help at school, home or other locations.
  - d. Collaborating with the community: Connect chronically absent students with a community mentor.
  - e. Shared leadership and decision-making: Have families serve as representatives and leaders on school committees and offer a variety of opportunities to allow parents with varying levels of availability to participate.
2. Attendance-focused partnerships across the five types of involvement (a-e) will enable more families and community partners to monitor, encourage and support student attendance<sup>74</sup>.
3. Schools need to engage in consistent, frequent and positive communications with parents about attendance<sup>75</sup>.
4. Celebrate good attendance and improvements in attendance with student and families.
5. Utilize opportunities during school orientation nights to help parents understand why attendance is important. Staff can use interaction with parents throughout the year to reinforce this message<sup>76</sup>.
6. Make sure family support programs, if available, can offer strength-based approach to fostering family resiliency and offer supports such as parent education, peer support groups, assistance with basic needs and referrals to other resources<sup>77</sup>.
7. Schools should engage families so they understand what their children are learning<sup>78</sup> and build families' understanding of the education system so that they can guide their children in it successfully<sup>79</sup>.
8. Staff needs to understand the importance of engaging in collaborative work with parents to help get students to school<sup>80</sup>.
9. Develop a family-school partnership in which families and teachers work together to create a learning community using new activities to increase family involvement in their kids' education and improve their attendance<sup>81</sup>.
10. When contacting families, schools must adopt creative and effective ways to communicate with parents or guardians who struggle with unstable housing and/or other issues such as domestic violence. When possible, home visits are an ideal response to frequent absence<sup>82</sup>.

**Student Engagement:**

1. Offer students material (i.e. pencils or toys) and emotional incentives (i.e. acknowledgement in class, in assembly, extra recess time) for good or improved attendance<sup>83</sup>.
2. Connect chronically absent students with community mentors<sup>84</sup>.
3. Strengthen youths' bonds with positive, pro-social family members, adults outside of the family (e.g., teachers, coaches, youth leaders), and friends<sup>85</sup> would decrease barriers to school disengagement factors and issues with attendance.
4. For students already disengaged, take the following four steps: 1) clarify student perceptions of the problem, 2) reframe school learning, 3) renegotiate students' involvement in school learning, and 4) reestablish and maintain appropriate working relationship between student and school staff<sup>86</sup>.
5. Transform school climate by universal teaching of social skills and violence prevention. Training should be available for all school personnel in violence prevention, conflict de-escalation and classroom management<sup>87</sup>.

## PART III: ADDRESSING DISPARITIES IN ATTENDANCE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN OUSD

### Analysis of Attendance Definitions and Practices

#### Truancy vs. Chronic Absence

As noted above, chronic absence (missing 10% or more of school days) has been established as a sentinel indicator of students falling behind academically and eventually dropping out<sup>88</sup>. However, California Education Code (State Code), OUSD School Board policy and regulations, and the OUSD Parent's Guide focus primarily on truancy, or unexcused absence, as a strategy for recognizing and addressing attendance rather than addressing the core issue of missing school days and classroom time for any reason.

**California Education Code 48260** provides that:

“Any pupil subject to compulsory full-time education or to compulsory continuation education who is absent from school without valid excuse three full days in one school year or tardy or absent for more than any 30-minute period during the school day without a valid excuse on three occasions in one school year, or any combination thereof, is a truant and shall be reported to the attendance supervisor or to the superintendent of the school district.”

Based on that definition, **Board Policy 5113.1 - Truancy** mandates that:

“To improve student attendance, the Superintendent or designee shall implement positive steps to identify the reasons for a student's unexcused absences and to help resolve the problems caused by truancy. Such strategies shall focus on early intervention and may include, but not be limited to, communication with parents/guardians and the use of student study teams.”

In California as in many other states, truancy is defined as “unexcused absences,” which are not an accurate measure of the full number of days a child may be missing school. Because it looks only at unexcused absences, truancy relies on students missing schools without the permission of an adult. Therefore, truancy figures miss chronic absence, especially among young children, who typically do not stay home without the knowledge of an adult who can call in an excuse.

As the 2010-11 data for AAMs shows, chronic absence is highest in kindergarten (25%) and first grade (26%). As mentioned earlier, all children, regardless of socio-economic background, do worse academically in first grade if they are chronically absent in kindergarten<sup>89</sup> and among poor children, chronic absence in kindergarten predicts the lowest levels of educational achievement at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade<sup>90</sup>.

Further, when we look at AAM students who are chronically absent in elementary and middle school, their absences from school are more often excused (e.g. for illness) than unexcused. For example, during the 2010-11 school year, for chronically absent AAM students in elementary and middle school, the average number of days missed due to unexcused plus unverified absences, which are both used to track truancy<sup>91</sup>, was 0.85 days. Excused absences, on the other hand, accounted for an average of 1.6 days.

*Based on these figures, it is likely that students deemed “truant” in elementary and middle school have been absent about twice as many days as the number actually noted for their truancy. While the process of declaring a student truant is a necessary step for initiating legal action over lack of attendance, it may not trigger a school level intervention early enough to identify and address the reasons a student is not attending school regularly, especially during the crucial early years. This delay in intervention may allow enough absences to go unaddressed that a student is already falling behind academically and his connection to school significantly weakened by the time he is identified as truant.*

Although State Code does not look at other types of absences, Board policy recognizes the significance of *all* absences (not only unexcused). **Board Policy 5113 – Absences & Excuses, Students** states:

“The Board recognizes its responsibility under the law to ensure that students attend schools regularly...The Board shall abide by all state attendance laws and may use appropriate legal means to correct problems of excessive absence or truancy.”

“Excessive absence” is not defined in Board Policy, nor is there a detailed explanation of what it means for students to “attend schools regularly.” However, the Superintendent has identified an attendance rate of 95% as a goal for all students, and a reduction of 75% in chronic absence for African American males by the 2015-2016 school year. Even so, schools may need additional guidance to decide how many days or classes missed warrant intervention and how urgent that intervention should be.

## **Interventions for Poor Attendance**

The Education Code (48260.5) defines the required intervention for truant students, and provides that upon a student’s initial classification as truant, the school district is required to notify the pupil’s parents by email or phone that:

- “(a) That the pupil is truant.
- (b) That the parent or guardian is obligated to compel the attendance of the pupil at school.
- (c) That parents or guardians who fail to meet this obligation may be guilty of an infraction and subject to prosecution pursuant to Article 6 (commencing with Section 48290) of Chapter 2 of Part 27.
- (d) That alternative educational programs are available in the district.
- (e) That the parent or guardian has the right to meet with appropriate school personnel to discuss solutions to the pupil's truancy.
- (f) That the pupil may be subject to prosecution under Section 48264.
- (g) That the pupil may be subject to suspension, restriction, or delay of the pupil's driving privilege pursuant to Section 13202.7 of the Vehicle Code.
- (h) That it is recommended that the parent or guardian accompany the pupil to school and attend classes with the pupil for one day.”

It should be noted that truancy here connotes inappropriate student behavior, perhaps requiring a punitive response, rather than an early sign of distress in school, community or home that could respond to with appropriate early intervention. However, another section of the Education Code (48900(w)) does state that alternatives to suspension or expulsion are preferred when a student is excessively absent.

“It is the intent of the Legislature that alternatives to suspension or expulsion be imposed against a pupil who is truant, tardy, or otherwise absent from school activities.”

In Oakland, however, there are exclusionary consequences for truancy caused by tardiness. The OUSD 2011-12 Parents Guide states:

“Students who arrive in class after the bell has rung are considered tardy. Tardy students, especially at the secondary level, may be required to attend afterschool or weekend detention. Students who are 30 minutes late without a valid excuse three or more times are considered truant. Students who regularly arrive late to school may be excluded from extracurricular activities, including proms, athletics, and graduation ceremonies.” (p. 19)

Initial consequences are, oddly, more punitive for tardiness than for absence (excused or unexcused), and could be discouraging for students making a good faith effort to attend school on time but with a different set of challenges than those who are chronically absent.

Board policy does dictate that truancy trigger a strategic intervention from school staff, such as communication with parents or the use of Student Study Teams, but the process ultimately relies on individual school sites' resources and expertise, which may vary.

Further, because the truancy notification process is centralized and there is no protocol for informing a school when a student is designated as truant, site interventions for students who are already at risk academically may be delayed.

The Parent Guide explains the truancy intervention process, which begins with parents receiving a Notification of Truancy (NOT) letter in the mail from the District alerting them of their child's truancy:

“A student who receives a NOT letter in the mail may also be invited to a Student Attendance Review Team (SART) meeting, to be held at the school site with school personnel. An attendance contract is signed at that meeting. If the contract is subsequently broken, the school may refer the student to the School Attendance Review Board (SARB) for a hearing. If attendance still does not improve, SARB may refer the student and/or parent to the district attorney and/or probation department or to court for prosecution and/or disposition of the matter.” (p.19)

Currently, NOT letters are generated automatically by the central office based on attendance reporting from sites, but there is no accompanying notification to schools regarding which families are receiving the notices<sup>92</sup>. Because there is no protocol regarding how often and when schools should check the central attendance system for site-level notices, schools may not immediately learn about a student's truancy when the notice is issued, and as a result, intervention is delayed. (OUSD is currently looking at creating a protocol for issuing NOTs that would require the schools to send out the notices<sup>93</sup>.)

### **1. SART and SARB Processes**

After two NOTs are issued, the school sets up a School Attendance Review Team (SART) meeting with the family. Neither State Code nor Board Policy defines how soon after the NOT is issued that meeting must occur. SART membership varies by site but typically includes the principal or assistant principal, an outreach consultant, case manager, and attendance clerk. At the meeting, the parent, student and SART chairperson sign an attendance contract (see Appendix A), a standard document listing student and parent responsibilities which the school customizes by filling in referrals and supports the site will provide. Supports vary according to what resources the school has on site (e.g. school-based health clinic, after school programs) and where the school has referral relationships<sup>94</sup>.

If a student breaks the terms of the contact and/or continues to be truant, the student may be referred to a Student Attendance Review Board (SARB) or a hearing as described in **Education Code Section 48261:**

“Any pupil is deemed an habitual truant who has been reported as a truant three or more times per school year, provided that no pupil shall be deemed an habitual truant unless an appropriate district officer or employee has made a conscientious effort to hold at least one conference with a parent or guardian of the pupil and the pupil himself, after the filing of either of the reports required by Section 48260 or Section 48261. For purposes of this section, a conscientious effort means attempting to communicate with the parents of the pupil at least once using the most cost-effective method possible, which may include electronic mail or a telephone call.”

The SARB meets periodically to consider truancy cases, and typically includes the Oakland Housing Authority community affairs police officer, two community-based organization representatives including a case manager, someone from the business community, and a youth court representative. The SARB may include the SART chair from the school where the student is enrolled, but the process does not require it. As with SART, referrals can be made to various support services, such as mental health, etc, and regular check-ins are required to assess attendance.

With regard to Student Attendance Review Boards, State Education Code (48320) does make it clear that supporting attendance of all pupils should be a collaborative effort of school staff, parents, students and community members:

“In enacting this article it is the intent of the Legislature that intensive guidance and coordinated community services may be provided to meet the special needs of pupils with school attendance problems or school behavior problems. In enacting this article it is the intent of the Legislature to encourage school districts and county offices of education maintaining any classes in kindergarten and grades 1 to 12, inclusive, to adopt pupil attendance policies based on the active involvement of parents, pupils, teachers, administrators, other personnel, and community members which include proposals and procedures for the following:

(a) Notifying parents of pupil absences, including notification of parents on the day of each absence.

(b) Increasing parent and pupil awareness of the importance of regular pupil attendance.

(c) Auditing and accountability of pupil attendance.

(d) Staff development for certificated and classified personnel.

(e) Alternative learning programs designed to respond to the different ways pupils learn, such as independent study.

(f) Joint efforts between law enforcement and schools, such as school level attendance review teams and periodic efforts to return truant pupils to school.”

If an OUSD student continues to be truant or breaks the contract, the student and family are referred to the D.A's office, where the parents can plead guilty or go to trial (if the student is in 1<sup>st</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> grade) or the student and family can enter a mediation program (grades 6-12 only) replicating the SARB process, with services funneled through the probation officer and deputy district attorney's office. If neither of these is successful, the case may go to court and result in legal penalties for the student and parents.

While the truancy process is mandated by the State Education Code and establishes a process for incrementally more serious interventions and supports, it is not closely aligned with the most compelling research, which establishes chronic absence as an early indicator for academic decline. Because truancy addresses only unexcused absences and because there is no protocol for the district to notify sites directly when one of their students has been designated as truant, the process slows intervention and delays immediate engagement between the family and the school.

## 2. Teacher Intervention

To learn whether there are other prescribed site roles for intervention and support around attendance, we also examined district practices identified in the teacher **collective bargaining agreement** (teacher agreement), which includes the following provision under **10.7 Teacher Commitment Program:**

10.7.1 "The Teacher Commitment Program shall include special efforts to reach parents/caregivers of students considered to be at risk of "falling through the cracks" in the school system. "At risk" students are to be identified by:

- their attendance;
- academic performance/or classroom conduct;
- citizenship grade below "C"

The contract further calls for teachers to identify "at-risk" students by the end of the fourth week of each semester and to contact the parents of such students by the end of the sixth week (Section 10.7.1). This built-in trigger is well-intentioned but it is not clear what combination of these factors qualify a student as "at risk" and what criteria define the first two, especially attendance.

The performance evaluation form in the teacher agreement also mentions attendance in **Article 13.1: The Evaluation System:**

13.1.2.4 Procedures and techniques for ascertaining that the certificated employee is maintaining proper control, and is preserving a suitable learning environment. Such procedures and techniques shall include:

- Implementation of the Core Curriculum.
- Increased student achievement as measured by various assessment measures, such as test scores.
- The use of curriculum embedded assessment.
- Increased student attendance.
- Reduced student discipline (such as suspensions and expulsions).
- Increased parent/caregiver contacts by letter, telephone or conference.

While it is clear that teachers are expected to be “front line” actors regarding attendance issues, it is not clear exactly what their role should be since there is no further description of what “increased student attendance” looks like and how teachers should be supporting it.

The **Evaluation Handbook for Classroom Teachers, Special Education, Teachers Psychologists, and Counselors** (Appendix 6 in the teacher agreement), includes evaluative criteria around attendance. A goal-setting form entitled “Objectives and Standards of Performance for Student Progress and Professional Competence” (Evaluation Handbook, p. 6, Revised 8/2000) lists six overarching criteria to maintain an environment conducive to learning, including:

- I. “Effectiveness of student control
- II. Effectiveness of staff-teacher relationships
- III. Effectiveness of parent-teacher relationships
- IV. Suitability of the learning environment
- V. Attention to safety and health standards
- VI. Pupil attendance and tardiness and attempts to reduce absences and tardiness”

However, the evaluation form used when observing teachers does not refer to when and how teachers should address absences and tardiness except by defining standards of communication. The Communication portion of the evaluation states (Evaluation Handbook, p. 31):

“B. Teacher/specialist will make reasonable attempts to maintain ongoing contact with parents regarding students’ attendance, educational, and social progress, including proficiency standards and career/vocational goals.

C. Teacher/specialist will communicate to students, as appropriate, the district, school, and department/grade level regulations and policies, such as uniform discipline policy, proficiency standards, graduation requirements, attendance policy, etc.”

## Summary of Policy and Practice

State, OUSD and teacher-level policy regarding tracking and intervening when students have poor attendance is defined primarily by focusing on truancy, an intervention that may come too late, can be more immediately punitive for tardiness than for absence, and prescribes initial intervention more clearly from the central office perspective than from teachers' and other staff's perspectives at the site. Current policy does not address chronic absence, which has been firmly established in recent years – through research and evaluation – as both an early warning sign for students at risk of decreased academic achievement and dropout and an opportunity for successful intervention.

## Promising Current OUSD Practices

- 1. District-Wide Goal of 95% Attendance for All Students:** OUSD has adopted a goal of 95% attendance for all students and a reduction of 75% in chronic absence for African American males by the 2015-2016 school year.
- 2. Attendance Data Template:** With help from Attendance Works and Urban Strategies Council, OUSD has created an attendance data template, which includes the number and percentage of chronically absent students at each school disaggregated by gender, race, and ethnicity, and includes reason codes for absences. The templates are used by principals to track chronically absent students and chronic absence patterns throughout the school year. OUSD is also using the disaggregated results to identify which sub-populations are showing disproportionately high levels of chronic absence and for what reasons.
- 3. Professional Development for Principals and Attendance Staff:** Principals received training this year on how to address what keeps students from attending school regularly, and are expected to develop site-based plans for how they will interrupt patterns of chronic absence. OUSD is also organizing a district-wide training on attendance practices for all school staff dealing with attendance.

#### **4. Intervention Strategies:**

- a. **Coordination of Services Teams:** Schools with COSTs have begun using these student intervention teams to address pupils who are chronically absent, identifying barriers to attendance, reaching out to parents, and making appropriate referrals according to need (health and wellness, family support, etc.).
  - b. **Attendance Teams:** A few schools have formed attendance teams that meet weekly to analyze chronic absence patterns and strategize about universal and targeted strategies for improving attendance.
  - c. **Service Providers:** OUSD is asking service providers working in schools to explain how their work will lead to more students attending school at least 95% of the time.
- 5. Student and Family Engagement:** The District has been collaborating with the Oakland Housing Authority to work with families and students on improving school attendance. They have so far targeted a group of four schools in West Oakland where 40% of the children live in public housing. (Of that group of students, 30% were chronically absent in 2010-2011.)
- 6. Oakland Education Cabinet:** The Mayor, OUSD Schools Superintendent and President of Mills College lead an education cabinet including representatives from public agencies, educational and health institutions, foundations, businesses and community-based organizations. They have formed a workgroup to address attendance and chronic absence.

## **Recommendations to OUSD**

### **A. Data collection and analysis**

1. Use data effectively:
  - a. Attendance reports should provide staff with a clear sense of reasons for absence and which reasons are contributing most substantially to chronic absence for African American boys.
  - b. OUSD should use attendance data disaggregated by gender and race/ethnicity to identify strategies that are effective for the demographic groups experiencing the highest levels of chronic absence (e.g. African American boys in kindergarten and first grade) to ensure that attendance initiatives reach those students.
  - c. The district should share data with staff regularly and use it as a basis for assessment, planning and intervention for African American males.
  - d. The district should explore whether and how truancy data is useful in relation to chronic absence data and whether African American males are disproportionately designated as truants.

- e. OUSD should explore how and whether tardiness data is useful in addressing chronic absence or risk for chronic absence, and whether African American males are disproportionately designated as tardy.
2. Purchase and implement attendance software that integrates with the school district database and allows for real time tracking and sub-population analysis of key indicators for student success or risk, including chronic absence. The system should be user friendly, providing clear student metrics, and early warnings to various stakeholders (teachers, parents, service providers) of African American male students on a path to becoming or already chronically absent.

## **B. Policy**

1. The District should identify a single office or senior administrator with responsibility for reaching the District-wide goal of 95% attendance for all students and a 75% reduction in chronic absence for African American males. This position should coordinate the various attendance-related initiatives underway and ensure that the lessons learned in each effort are shared throughout the District.
2. The district should create an interdepartmental attendance team including AAMAI staff that can analyze data and strategize about district wide approaches to reducing disparities.
3. OUSD should work with other public and community agencies to address barriers to AAM attendance including poor health, access to health services, neighborhood safety, family engagement, and the cost and reliability of transportation.
4. Review and revision of attendance policy should include AAM student engagement and feedback from families of African American males.
5. The attendance policy should identify all groups in the district that will look at African American male attendance (at district and site levels), and identify the range of options available for intervention.
6. The attendance policy should identify the procedures to be used by parents, students or staff if they believe that the policy is not being implemented correctly.

## **C. Standards and Procedures**

1. The district should define thresholds and procedures for intervention for chronically absent African American males by school staff, site and regional teams, and district.
2. Standards for absence (excused and unexcused) and tardiness should be applied equitably to all students.

## **D. Prevention Strategies and Programs**

1. OUSD should adopt a pilot project at one or more schools with significant African American male population to determine the causes for disproportionate chronic absence among AAMs and the interventions and supports that result in regular attendance for AAMs.

2. OUSD should create district and school plans for attendance improvement, including an analysis of how effectively they address attendance barriers for groups of students with the highest rates of chronic absence (e.g. African American boys).
  - a) These plans should have a particular focus on addressing early grade chronic absence of AAM, a common pattern in OUSD elementary schools and a leading indicator of future poor academic achievement.
  - b) These plans should support African American student enrollment in Early Childhood Education, and include a focus on building a culture of attendance in ECE programs.
3. In addition to asking service providers working in schools to explain how their work will lead to more students attending school at least 95% of the time, the District should create incentives for organizations to engage particular student groups who are disproportionately chronically absent (e.g. African American males).
4. Mentorship opportunities should be targeted to AAM students exhibiting or at risk of chronic absence.

#### **E. Student, Family and Community Engagement**

1. Students:
  - a. The attendance policy and the connection between attendance, school achievement and graduation should be the focus of student instruction at the beginning of the school year and reinforced periodically throughout the year.
  - b. The school should share with AAM students how they can problem-solve with their families about getting to school on time and regularly, and what local resources are available to help them get safely to their site (walking bus, crossing guards, etc.) both as a preventative strategy and for students who experience problems with attendance.
  - c. To learn about strategies for intervention, schools should discuss with AAMs what keeps them from coming to school and/or from coming to school on time.
  - d. The school should share with AAM students what health-related services are available on site or through referrals outside the school.
  - e. The school should share with AAM students the policy and procedures regarding chronic absence and truancy, including the consequences for a habitually truant student and the student's parents/guardians.
  - f. The district should incorporate attendance and discipline policies into a student handbook for high school and middle school students. Current practice requires only parents to review and agree to these guidelines; students should be informed as well.

2. Family:
  - a. The school should engage African American parents as partners in reinforcing positive standards of attendance by inviting parents to participate in home and school incentive programs and events.
  - b. All parents, but particularly African American parents, should be given the opportunity to attend an attendance policy orientation and to share problems and solutions for getting children to attend school regularly and on time.
  - c. Parents should understand the policy and procedures regarding chronic absence, tardiness and truancy, as well as the consequences associated with truancy.
  - d. Parents should understand what health and wellness, youth development and family advocacy resources related to attendance are available on site and by referral, and how to access them.
3. Community:
  - a. The school should engage community agencies and organizations that work with African American families and students and focus on youth services, academic enrichment, family engagement, and supporting a safe environment around schools.
  - b. The school should engage members of the African American community to act as mentors to AAMs who are experiencing problems with attendance.

#### **F. Professional Development**

1. Ongoing staff development should focus on providing school leadership and staff with the expertise to develop interventions and incentives effective for African American males who are at risk for or who are currently chronically absent.
2. All staff should be aware of and comfortable using appropriate support and intervention strategies when a student they are in regular contact with is chronically absent or at risk of being so.
3. Staff should be trained in and aware of culturally appropriate support and intervention strategies and agencies for referral.

## APPENDIX A: Student-Parent SART Agreement



every student. every classroom. every day.

Name of Student	Grade	School
Date of Birth		Parent's/guardian's name/DOB
Student's Address		Home Telephone
Street	City	Zip

### Student – Parent SART Agreement

It is with complete understanding that I sign this, knowing that further violations of school rules and regulations can result in a referral to the **Student Attendance Review Board** and/or the **Alameda County District Attorney**.

#### Student

- Attend all classes on time.
- Follow all school rules.
- Meet regularly with teachers, administrators and/or counselors.
- Take teacher-signed attendance card home for parent's signature and return it to the school office the next school day...
- Complete all class assignments.
- Take progress report home for parent signature and return report to the school.
- Attend the home work help classes at the School site and/or after school programs

#### Parent

- Cooperate with school officials.
- Ensure that student attends school every day, on time.
- Notify school when student is absent.
- Attend school with (son/daughter) as directed, if absences continue (Education Code sections 48900.1 and 48910).
- Attend parent conferences when requested..
- Excuse student only for valid reasons.

#### School

What will the school do \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student's signature Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/guardian's signature Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
SART Chairperson's signature Date

## ENDNOTES

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