

EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS:

re-engaging chronic truants

School attendance can be an early indicator of when something is going wrong with a student. Gathering, analyzing and acting on attendance information is a first step toward school improvement.

Despite millions of dollars spent each year monitoring and measuring public schools in California, a most fundamental performance question remains unanswered – how often do students show up to class?

Attendance is taken every day, in virtually every school and classroom. District business managers and superintendents statewide pay close attention to those reports. And indeed, the state pays out billions of dollars in education funding based on an average daily rate with which students attend school.

But California maintains no centralized depository of attendance information and cannot report with any accuracy its statewide attendance rate – something some experts believe inhibits many other, more expensive intervention and improvement strategies.

“I think it’s a tremendous omission,” said Jack O’Connell, former state schools chief

and now chief education officer at School Innovations & Advocacy.

“In some ways, collecting attendance data is the first step toward better schools,” he explained. “Getting kids in the classroom, increasing learning time and exposing them to high quality teachers – these are basic themes we need to address if we want to close the achievement gap and reduce dropouts.”

A growing body of research linking lower student performance in middle and high school with poor attendance in the lower grades has prompted new focus on truancy and chronic absenteeism nationwide. A 2011 study from Attendance Works, a nationally recognized anti-dropout group, found many schools that boast an average daily attendance rate in the mid-90s actually also had chronic absentee issues.

Today, there is increased emphasis on

By Tom Chorneau

monitoring absences by grade and classroom as well as by subgroup. Hedy Chang, director of Attendance Works, has called on school officials to concentrate efforts to improve attendance in the early grades, including kindergarten. And yet, California is one of just five states that do not collect student level attendance data, according to a recent survey co-authored by the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University.

Meanwhile, the majority of the rest of the states – both big and small – are moving to build and enhance what are called “early warning systems,” intended to flag at-risk students during their formative years to give teachers, administrators and parents a better chance at getting them back on track toward high school graduation.

Attendance: the common denominator

While there are variations in what data states collect and how it is used, attendance information is a key common denominator.

Seventeen states collect enrollment data daily, while 12 states collect attendance data daily and 11 states collect enrollment, attendance and discipline data daily, according to the November report, “On Track for Success,” co-authored by researchers from Johns Hopkins University and Civic Enterprises, a public policy firm based in Washington, D.C.

Efforts in California to develop an early warning system that would include many of the same categories of data – including attendance – received a significant boost two years ago when Senate leader Darrell Steinberg offered legislation promoting the idea.

His bill, SB 1357, signed into law by former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, requires the California Department of Education to include student absences in the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System. It also revised the state’s Annual Report on Dropouts in California to include chronic absence rates and established legislative intent that the report be used to develop more effective systems for keeping students on track for high school graduation.

Funding for carrying out this vision, however, was contingent on the award of a federal grant – something the CDE has yet to pursue.

There are a number of challenges with the proposal, one being the cost overruns and development delays surrounding the CALPADS program itself – something both Schwarzenegger and Gov. Jerry Brown have considered cause to kill the program.

But there have also been a number of funding opportunities on the federal level, including the \$100 million offered under

to have this data, and they use it for finding chronic truants and attendance problems,” he said. “But I don’t see the purpose for bringing it up into the state level because we are not going to act on it anyway in terms of contacting specific children or following up.”

Kirst said he fully supports the idea of using attendance data as one of the early warning indicators – but it should be a lo-



Enhancing Education Through Technology program.

Senate Pro Tem Steinberg said he still feels strongly that the state should collect attendance data and employ an early warning system.

“Frequently skipping school is like a gateway drug for students who end up completely dropping out,” he said. “Early intervention is the most effective way of acknowledging and addressing our state’s dropout crisis. Collecting data on absenteeism is key to identifying warning signs and providing the support schools and parents need.”

A local matter?

A spokeswoman for the Brown administration said the question over federal funding has never come up, and they have yet to take a formal position on the proposal.

But Michael Kirst, president of the California State Board of Education and key education advisor to Gov. Brown, said he does not support creation of a new attendance monitoring system on the state level, at least not at this time.

“The important thing is for local districts

cally driven effort. “That doesn’t mean that is shouldn’t eventually be a statewide issue, but there needs to be a compelling case made why it cannot be satisfied by a functioning local system,” he said.

Kevin Gordon, president of SI&A and one of California’s most experienced legislative advocates for public schools, said there’s a growing recognition that getting “real time” or “near real time” data to identify students who are off track is critical to supporting student advancement from grade to grade.

“The idea of the early warning system really stems from the realization that students disengage from school gradually,” Gordon said. “It isn’t sudden. Students send signals that they are drifting away and we have the ability to track those signals, flag them for teachers and parents and give schools the chance to intervene.”

According to the “On Track” report released in November, states are taking a variety of approaches to building early warning systems, some of which continue to evolve.

Four states – Delaware, New Jersey, Oklahoma and Virginia – provide feedback to educators on a weekly or daily basis. Louisiana

has a system that at one point measured 200 separate indicators.

Most systems focus on just three elements – attendance, behavior and course performance – the so-called “ABC approach” developed by noted dropout expert Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins. A red flag on attendance, for instance, might come if a student was to miss 20 days in the school year or 10 percent of the school year. Two or

more serious disciplinary infractions might also become a warning sign. So too could a sudden drop in classroom performance.

There is a pilot program launched under the leadership of the CDE last fall, where nine volunteer districts and 20 schools are using an early warning system developed by the National High School Center with support from the American Institutes for Research and WestEd. Results of the pilot could con-

tribute to a best practices program that middle and high schools could share in the future. But if the state were to require districts to report individual attendance data, the state would have to pay for it, noted SI&A's Gerry Shelton, vice president of education policy. “There is clearly a budget question with this and concerns over creating another new reimbursable state mandate,” he said.

Kirst said he is interested in having schools report their attendance records using the existing School Accountability Report Cards – already a state-funded activity that requires districts to report information about individual school sites.

“If you plugged it into the school report card, you would see attendance in a broader context of school variables,” he said. “Attendance can be influenced by many other things and a properly functioning School Accountability Report Card could provide that.”

Children reaching their potential

Children Now, one of the state's leading advocacy groups engaged with educational and health issues, was one of the key sponsors of Steinberg's bill two years ago and continues to place school attendance monitoring high on its list.

“We see a continuum of learning,” said Brad Strong, a legislative advocate with Children Now. “That means that they need to be ready to start school; reading by grade three; given the support they need in the middle years; and ready to graduate on time from high school.”

To ensure that each child in California has a chance to reach those potentials, Strong said it is essential that school attendance be monitored.

“School attendance is one of those early indicators of when something might be going wrong – not just academically but in other phases of a child's life, too,” he said. “We're still strongly in favor of gathering, analyzing and acting on attendance information.” ■



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Tom Chorneau is managing editor of SI&A's Cabinet Report, an online news service for California's education community: www.siacabinetreport.com.