



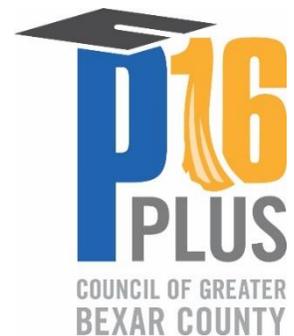
# San Antonio Kids Attend to Win: 2016 Update

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White Paper on Chronic  
Absenteeism in San Antonio Schools



P16Plus Council of Greater Bexar County  
August 2016



## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Literature Review: Research on Chronic Absenteeism .....	4
Design of the Study .....	6
Findings .....	7
Characteristics of Chronically Absent Students .....	8
Results of Targeted Interventions.....	14
Suggestions for Improvement.....	17
Conclusion.....	19
References .....	21
Resources.....	22
Acknowledgements .....	22



## Introduction

San Antonio Kids Attend to Win is an initiative focusing on improving attendance, especially for the most chronically absent students. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing more than 10% of school days, or in a 180-day school year, at least 18 days total. All schools report and analyze average daily attendance, but do not necessarily look at individual students. When schools are able to analyze attendance at the student level, they discover that the same students tend to be absent over a longer period of time. For example, if a school has an average daily attendance rate of 97%, they might not realize the 3% who are absent tend to be the same students. By focusing on chronic non-attenders, schools can impact individual students as well as increase average daily attendance.

Chronic absenteeism is not the same as truancy, which is defined as a certain number of unexcused absences within a certain time period (in Texas, missing ten days in six months or three days in four weeks). Truancy does not reflect the entirety of the absenteeism problem, as it only counts absences which were unexcused and is a higher threshold than chronic absenteeism. Additionally, processes for filing truancy vary among school districts, including student & parent involvement as well as referral time. While truancy is an important legal issue, chronic absenteeism affects academic performance before truancy referrals are even an option.

During the 2015-2016 school year, the P16Plus Council of Greater Bexar County (P16Plus) worked with 21 campuses in Harlandale Independent School District, 10 campuses in San Antonio Independent School District and 16 campuses in Southwest Independent School District. All three school districts serve a majority Hispanic and economically disadvantaged population. Harlandale ISD serves 15,086 students, is 98% Hispanic/Latino, and 86% economically disadvantaged. San Antonio ISD serves 53,069 students, is 91% Hispanic/Latino, and 92% economically disadvantaged. Southwest ISD serves 13,692 students, is 90% Hispanic/Latino, and 82% economically disadvantaged (TEA Student Enrollment Reports 2015-2016).

This report will review research available on chronic absenteeism and its impact on student academic performance. We will then focus on the SA Kids Attend to Win initiative, showing characteristics of chronically absent students as well as data on students who improved attendance throughout the year. We will conclude with survey and focus group data, including reflections on positive outcomes of the program as well as suggestions for further improvement.



# Literature Review: Research on Chronic Absenteeism

Several national and statewide studies have focused on chronic absenteeism, its causes, and effects on academic performance. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) have designated three categories for school absence—students cannot come, will not come, or choose not to come to school. Students who cannot come most often cite illness as the reason for absence, of which asthma was most common. A P16Plus study from 2011-2013 of Pre-K and Kindergarten students at 30 campuses throughout San Antonio was consistent with this finding. Balfanz and Byrnes also note that lack of transportation, housing instability and family responsibilities fall into this first category of why students cannot come. Reasons that students will not come to school include wanting to avoid harassment or bullying, embarrassment over poor abilities, and hesitation in new environments. A third category covers additional reasons that students choose not to come to school—they do not value school and have the ability to miss class, especially for older students, or perhaps their parents don't see the importance of coming to school every day, particularly in Pre-K and Kindergarten. P16Plus also found in the 2011-2013 study that lack of knowledge of attendance requirements in Pre-K and Kindergarten affected attendance rates in those grades.

Student reasons for not attending school:

Cannot come	Will not come	Do not come
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Illness (especially asthma)</li> <li>• Lack of transportation</li> <li>• Housing instability</li> <li>• Family responsibilities (work, childcare)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoiding harassment or bullying</li> <li>• Poor abilities</li> <li>• Hesitation in new environments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not value school</li> <li>• Parent does not know importance of attendance</li> </ul>

Numerous studies have found a significant relationship between chronic absenteeism and lower academic performance throughout school. Douglas Ready (2010) researched younger students and found that in first grade, chronically absent students gained 15% fewer literacy skills and 12% fewer math skills than students who were never chronically absent. Additionally, this difference was intensified for low-income students, as school time is more critical to their success. Ready noted that low-income students with high attendance rates gain more literacy skills in kindergarten and first grade than higher-income peers of all attendance rates. Chang and Romero (2008) also studied chronic absenteeism in kindergarten and found that negative effects lingered for low-income students until fifth grade. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) also looked at how chronic absenteeism affects high school test scores. Data from Florida indicate that math performance in ninth grade is more sensitive

*"A more intensive focus on intervention and preventative measures during the middle grades is one of the most crucial directions for district efforts in reducing the dropout rate." (Mac Iver, 2010)*

to missed days than reading test scores, though both are negatively impacted by low attendance. Ginsburg, Jordan, and Chang (2014) performed an analysis of national testing data and found that students with higher absenteeism rates have lower scores than those with low absenteeism rates on the National Assessment for Educational Progress.



High school dropout rates are also significantly impacted by chronic absenteeism. A study in Baltimore found that absenteeism predicts dropout rates as early as sixth grade (BERC, 2011). Seventy percent of low-absence students (fewer than 10 days missed in sixth grade) graduated within one year of expectation, compared to 51% of students missing between 10-19 days, 36% of students missing between 20-39 days, and 13% of students missing over 40 days. Mac Iver (2010) studied characteristics of high school dropouts,

and noticed that a majority entered ninth grade with a history of chronic absenteeism, many of whom had been chronically absent for several years. In an effort to get ninth grade students on-track, a study in Chicago (Roderick, Kelley-Kemple, Johnson, & Beechum, 2014) incorporated initiatives to improve attendance with a range of strategies, and found that graduation rates rose for the cohorts who improved the rate of ninth grade on-track students. Further underscoring the link between attendance and high school graduation rates, studies in Georgia and Utah found strong relationships between chronic absenteeism in grades 8-12 and graduation rates (Barge, 2011; The University of Utah, 2012).

Chronic absenteeism also impacts college enrollment and persistence. The Rhode Island Data Hub reported that only 11% of high school graduates who were chronically absent made it to their second year of college, compared to 51% of their high attending peers (those who missed less than 5% of school).

A number of studies have also focused on identifying effective strategies to improve attendance. In their 2012 report, Balfanz and Byrnes defined the main steps to improve attendance. First, it is important to closely track attendance, especially the rates of chronic absenteeism, not just average daily attendance. Schools and supporting organizations also need to develop the capacity to determine the causes of absence for their students and problem-solve to address the root issues. Additionally, schools need to build relationships with students and families and encourage community involvement. Another important step is recognizing and rewarding good and improving attendance. Finally, all involved must commit to what works and expand their reach to impact more chronically absent students. Utilizing mentors and providing incentives have worked well. Balfanz and Byrnes also conducted a study in 2014 on the New York City Mayor's Interagency Task Force on Chronic Absenteeism.

This task force paired 10,000 chronically absent students throughout NYC with mentors—non-profit partners, teachers, or twelfth grade peers. The chronically absent students who had mentors improved an average of nine days per year and were 52% more likely to remain in school the following year (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2014). Other ideas that work to improve attendance include public ad campaigns, homework centers in homeless shelters, web-based access to student attendance data for parents, and asthma-friendly school campaigns (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Based on data available across the United States, it is clear that attendance is critically important for successful academic performance. Chronic absenteeism affects reading and math abilities, test scores, and graduation rate. High school absenteeism can even affect college persistence. However, there are many successful initiatives throughout the country aiming to increase student attendance rates, including SA Kids Attend to Win, which we will explore in further detail.

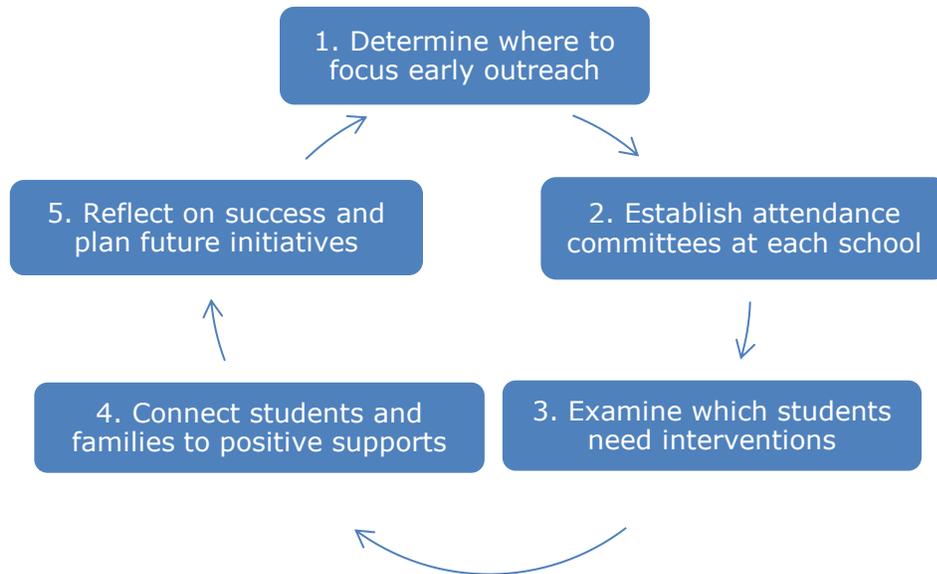
## Design of the Study

The SA Kids Attend to Win initiative focuses on positive interventions to improve student attendance, using resources from the Attendance Works campaign, a national initiative that promotes better policy and practice around school attendance. Participating schools were selected due to high numbers of low-income students as well as commitment to attendance by school and district leaders. During the 2015-16 school year, participating schools created attendance committees, including principals, teachers, counselors, social workers, and in some cases community-based organizations. The teams met monthly to discuss positive reinforcements for attendance for students and families. Attendance teams reviewed a list of chronically absent students to identify root causes of absences and created individualized attendance plans for each chronically absent student. Interventions included incentives for students who improved. To address overall attendance at school, classroom competitions were instituted to encourage teacher and student motivation and support towards the attendance goals. At some schools, mentors met with students to discuss the importance of attendance weekly. Social workers conducted home visits to increase parent awareness of the importance of education and help problem solve barriers to students attending school every day. P16Plus worked with a variety of partners, including Communities in Schools San Antonio, City Year, the San Antonio Education Partnership, Trinity University's College Advising Corps, and others to ensure the message that attendance matters was consistent for students and families.

Because chronic absenteeism in the first month of school can set students back more than at other times during the school year (Olson, 2014), P16Plus developed an early warning index to allow attendance committees to identify students who were most at risk of becoming chronically absent based on past attendance. This allowed attendance committees to work with students before they had missed ten percent of their first month of school. With a focus

on the sustainability of the project, P16Plus trained staff at district offices and campuses to identify at-risk students and provide appropriate interventions.

P16Plus' strategy includes the following steps for implementing SA Kids Attend to Win:



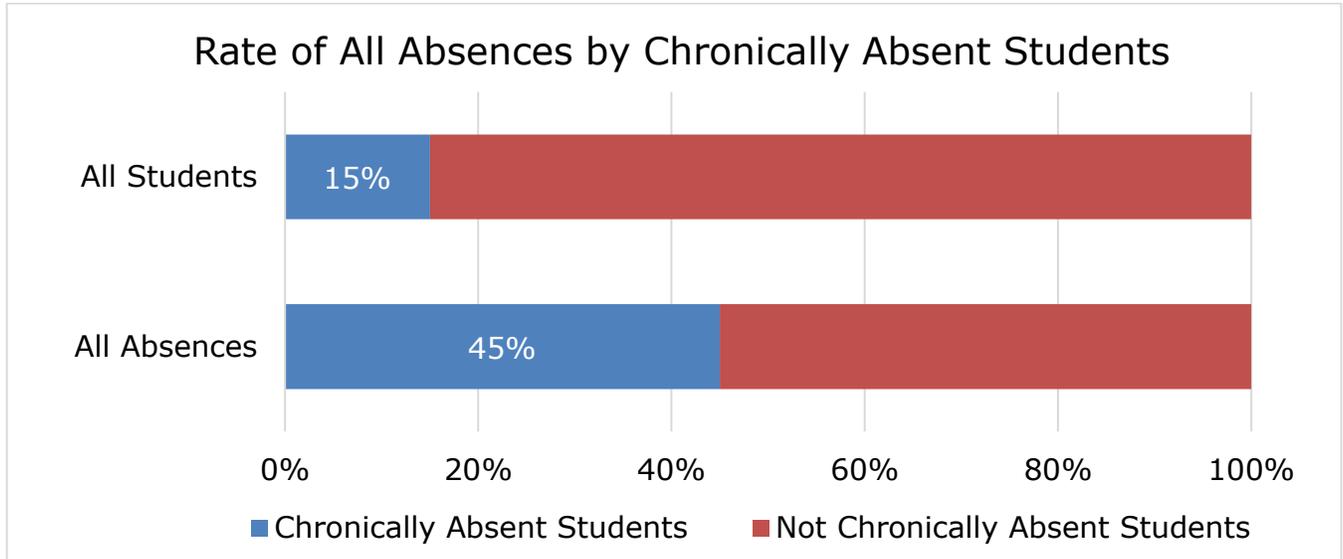
During the first year of the project (2011-2012), SA Kids Attend to Win worked with several elementary schools throughout the county and reduced the number of chronically absent students. P16Plus expanded the program in the second year to elementary schools in six independent school districts. The third year (2013-2014) included the participation of middle and high schools as well. Over 1,800 students were directly impacted at 30 campuses. During the 2014-2015 school year, SA Kids Attend to Win worked with 40 campuses in two school districts, and over 5,000 students received attendance interventions. In the most recent school year, 2015-2016, SA Kids Attend to Win worked with 47 campuses in three school districts, impacting over 6,000 students. Differences in data availability, methodologies, and participating school districts prevent comparison among SA Kids Attend to Win results across years.

## Findings

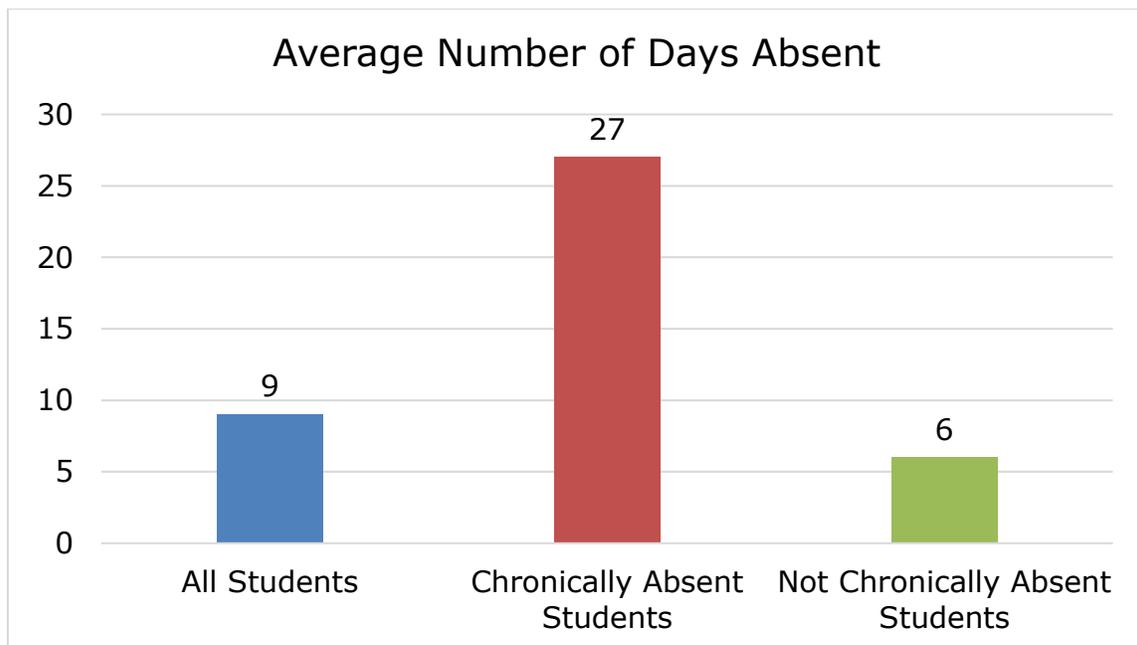
Throughout the 2015-2016 school year, P16Plus received student-level data on attendance at the beginning, middle, and end of the year for all students at San Antonio Kids Attend to Win participating schools in Harlandale, San Antonio, and Southwest ISDs, along with a variety of demographic information and third grade reading STAAR scores for comparison. First, we will review characteristics of students who were chronically absent throughout the school year (missing more than 10%, or about 18 days), and then we will analyze trends of students who improved due to SA Kids Attend to Win interventions.

## Characteristics of Chronically Absent Students

Overall, 15% of students were chronically absent at the end of the year, or 5,721 students out of 38,479. These students accounted for 45% of all absences in the participating schools.



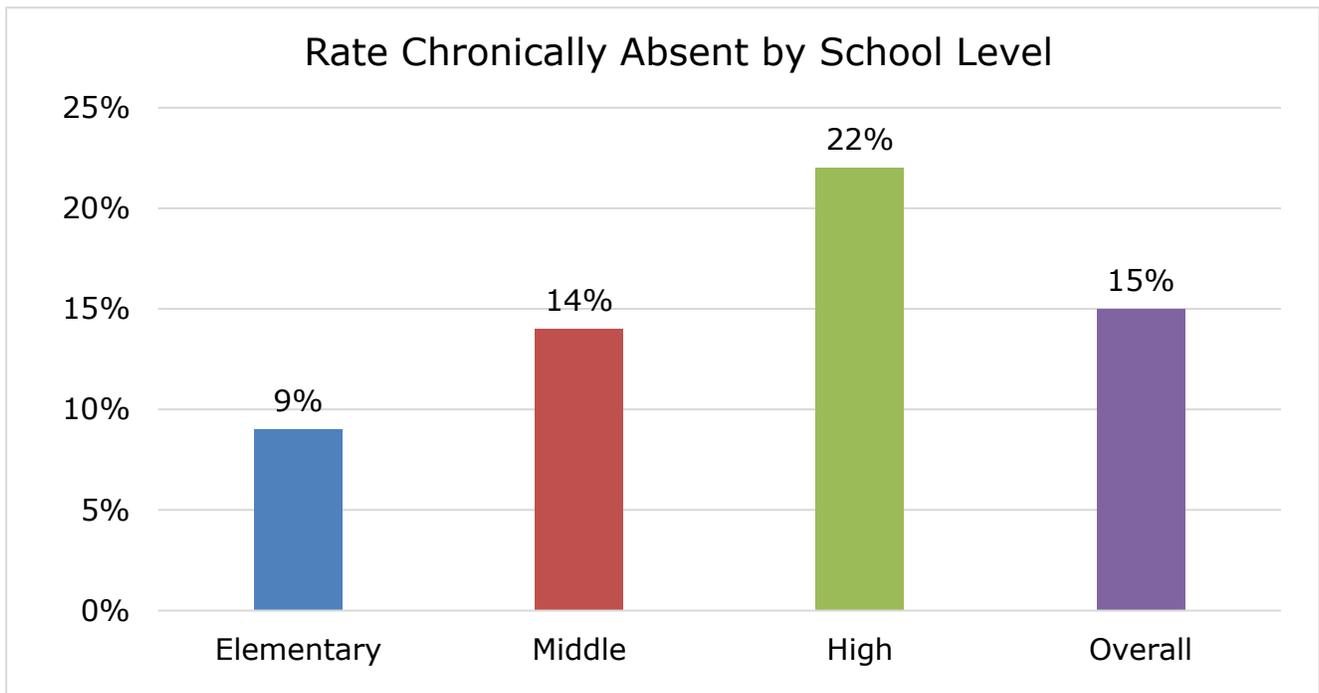
The average number of days absent for all students (both chronically and not chronically absent) was 9 days. For chronically absent students, the average was 27, compared to 6 for students who were not chronically absent.



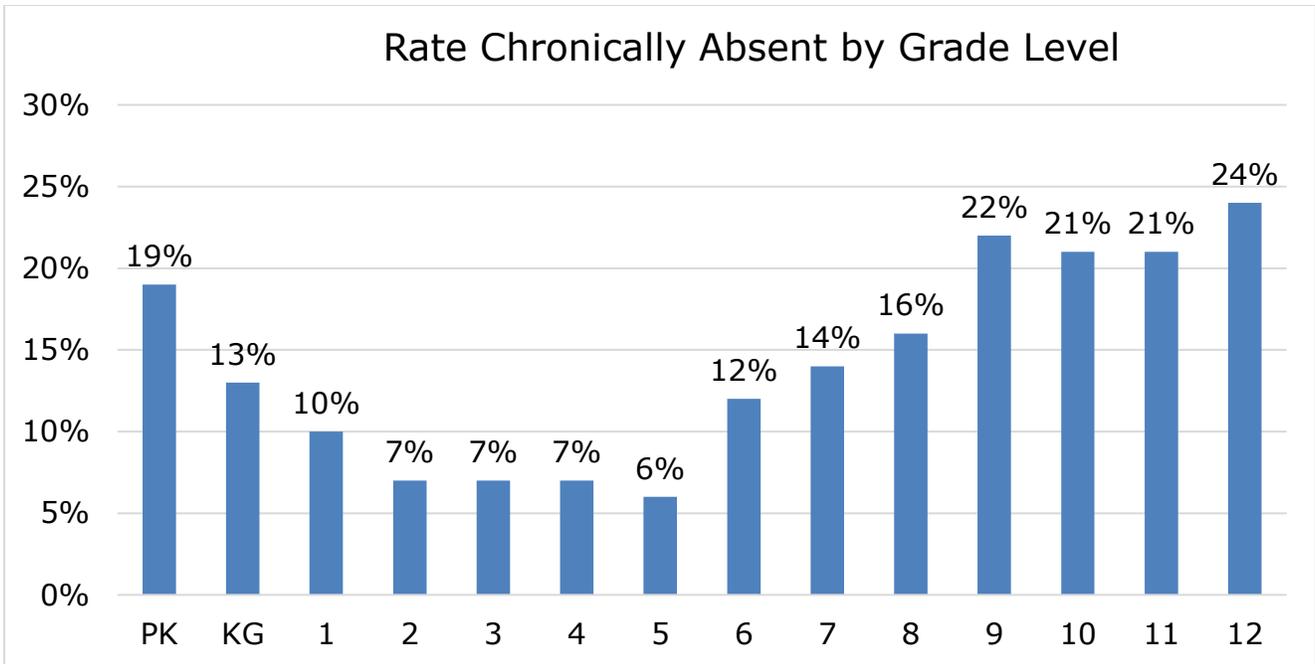
No discernible differences in chronic absenteeism by gender or ethnicity were evident in the results. Ninety-three of students at participating schools were of Hispanic or Latino descent, and there were too few students of other races or ethnicities to make any relevant comparisons.

## Grade Level

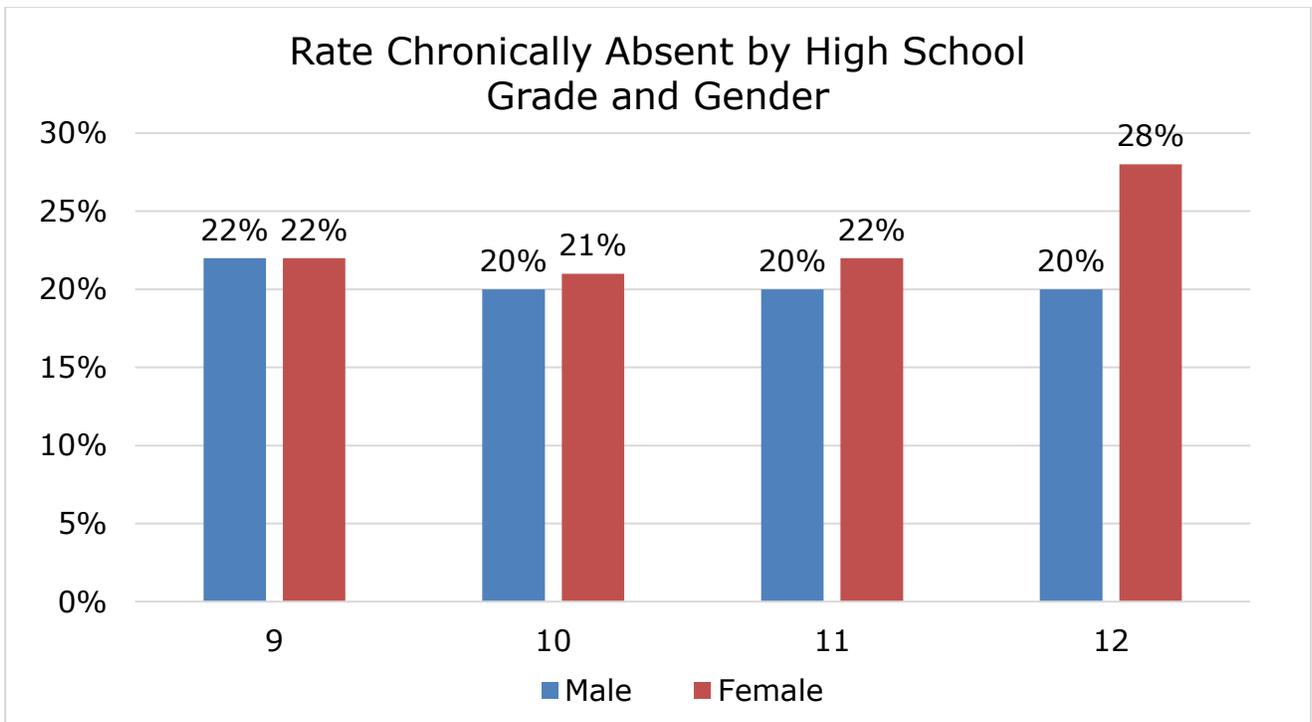
Results indicated that chronic absenteeism varies significantly across grade levels. In SA Kids Attend to Win participating schools, 9% of elementary students, 14% of middle school students, and 22% of high school students were chronically absent.



Generally, Pre-K students had higher than average chronic absenteeism – 19% of students were chronically absent. In elementary school, the percent of students with chronic absenteeism decreased to 6% in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. In middle school, the percentage of chronically absent students increased to 16% in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Ninth graders had a 22% chronic absenteeism rate, compared to 21% in 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Twelfth graders had the highest rate of chronic absenteeism at 24%.

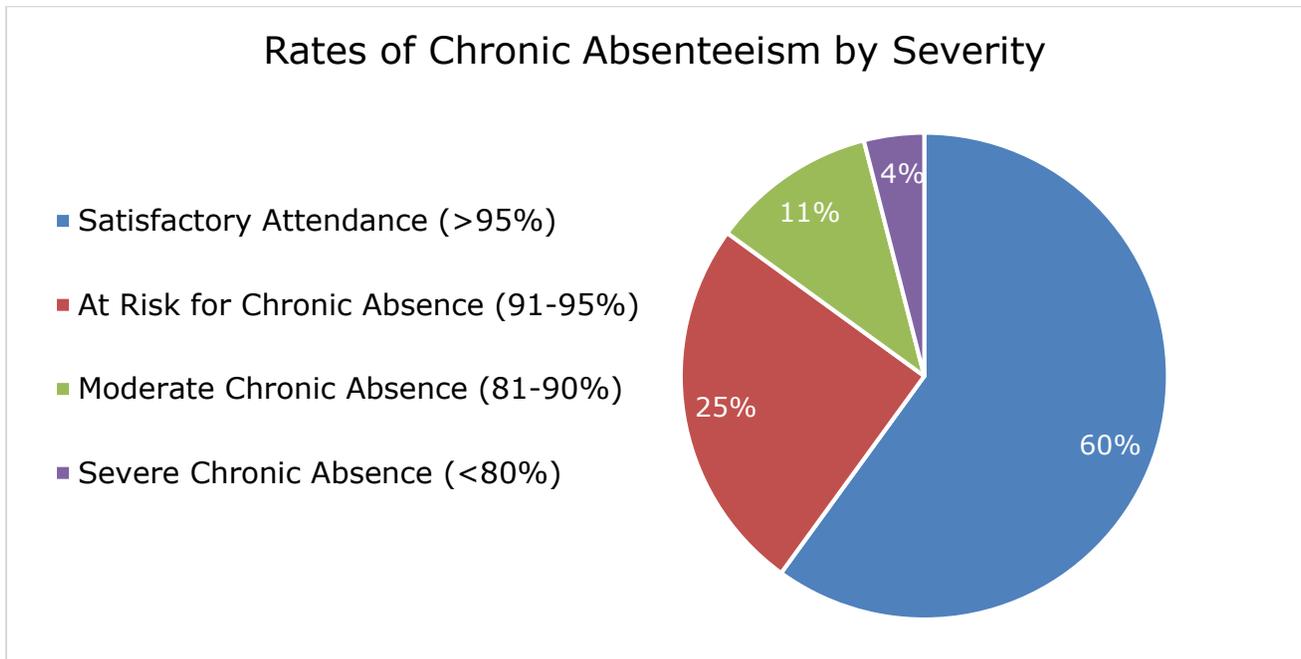


While there was little difference in chronic absenteeism by gender overall, there did appear to be a larger difference in high school. Overall chronic absenteeism in 12<sup>th</sup> grade was 20% for males and 28% for females.



## Severity of Chronic Absenteeism

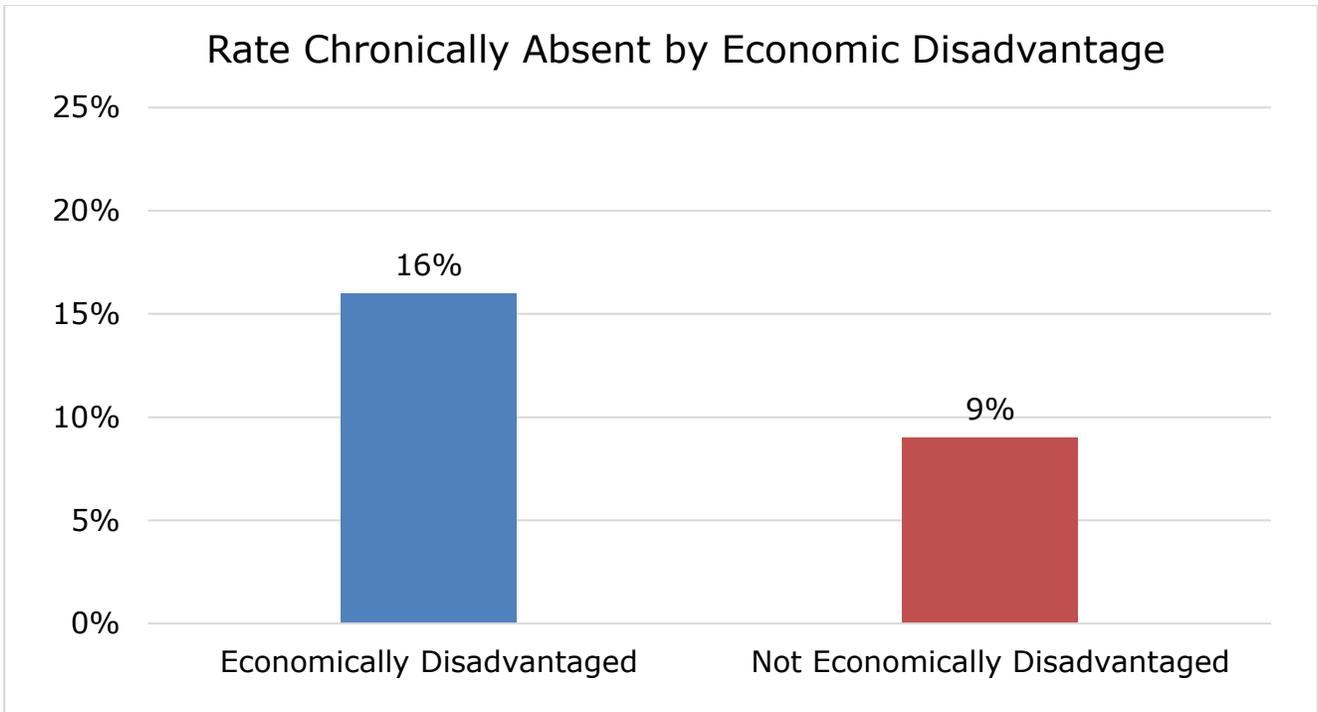
In participating schools, 4% of students had attendance rates below 80%, while 11% had attendance rates between 80 and 90%, considered chronically absent. An additional 25% of students had attendance rates between 91 and 95%, meaning they were at risk for chronic absenteeism. These students missed between 9 and 18 days of school. Sixty percent of students had attendance rates over 95%.



## Economic Disadvantage

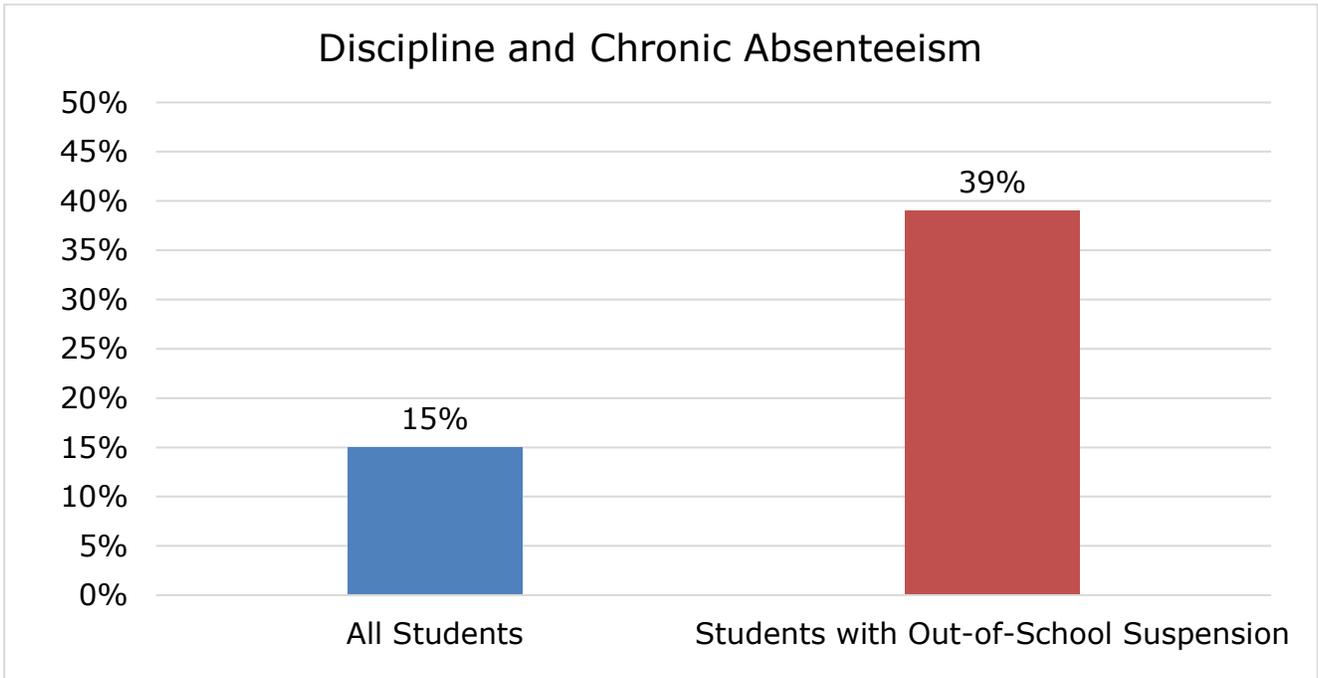
Chronic absenteeism is also correlated with economic disadvantage. Economic disadvantage is defined as eligibility for Free or Reduced Price Lunch, or other economic disadvantage<sup>1</sup>, for which 87% of participating students qualify. Sixteen percent of students in participating schools who were economically disadvantaged were chronically absent, compared to 9% of students without economic disadvantage.

<sup>1</sup> Other economic disadvantage includes household eligibility for other public assistance, such as TANF or SNAP, or with an income at or below the federal poverty line (PEIMS Data Standards 2015-2016)



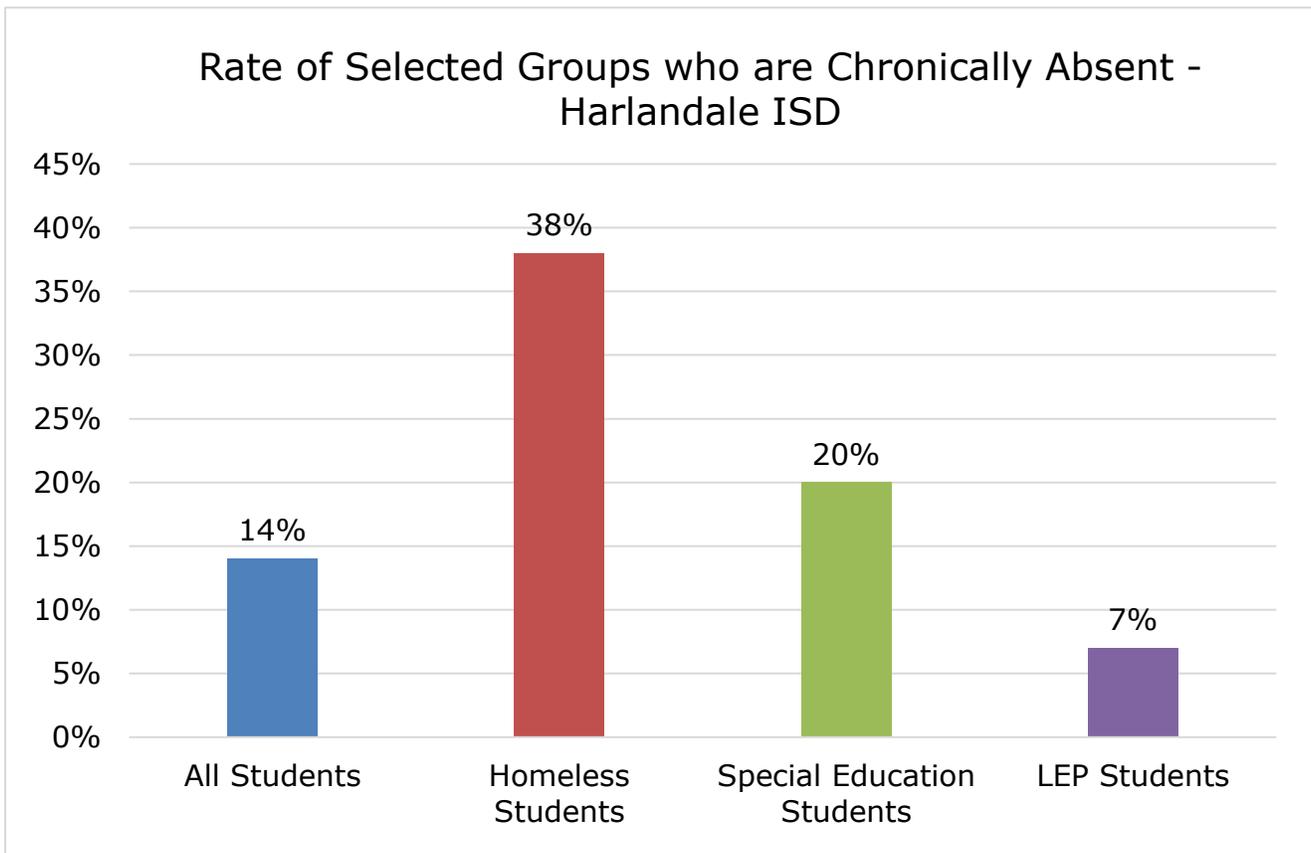
**Discipline**

Participating schools in all three districts provided data on out-of-school suspensions. Of all students with at least one out-of-school suspension, 39% were also chronically absent.



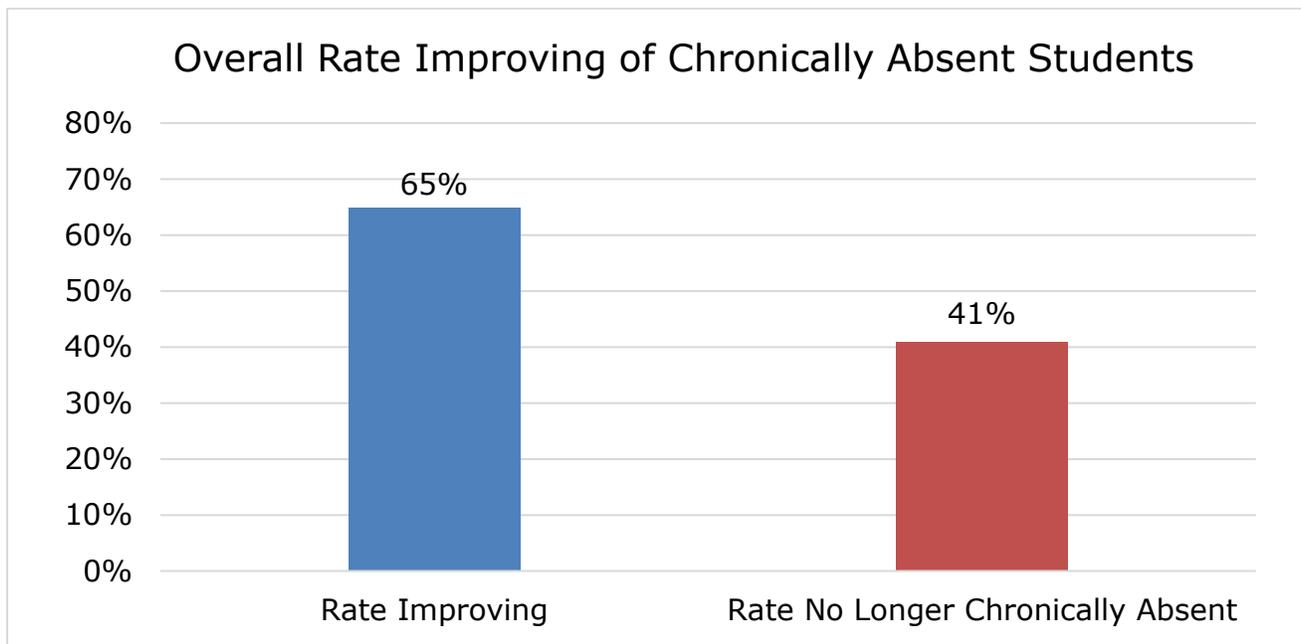
## Selected Groups in Harlandale ISD

Harlandale ISD also provided data on students who were homeless, received special education services, or were designated limited English proficient (LEP). Homeless students could be temporarily living with others, staying in a motel, living in a shelter or transitional housing, or unsheltered. Of all of these students, 38% were chronically absent. Of all students receiving special education services, 20% were chronically absent. Seven percent of LEP students were chronically absent, and 14% of all students in Harlandale ISD were chronically absent.



## Results of Targeted Interventions

Through interventions with SA Kids Attend To Win, participating schools saw 65% of their chronically absent students improve, and 41% were no longer chronically absent by the end of the year. Improvement means that a student who was chronically absent at the beginning of the year (reported in October) had a higher overall attendance rate by the end of the school year. "No longer chronically absent" means the students who were chronically absent at the beginning of the school year improved enough by the end of the school year to have an attendance rate above 90%.

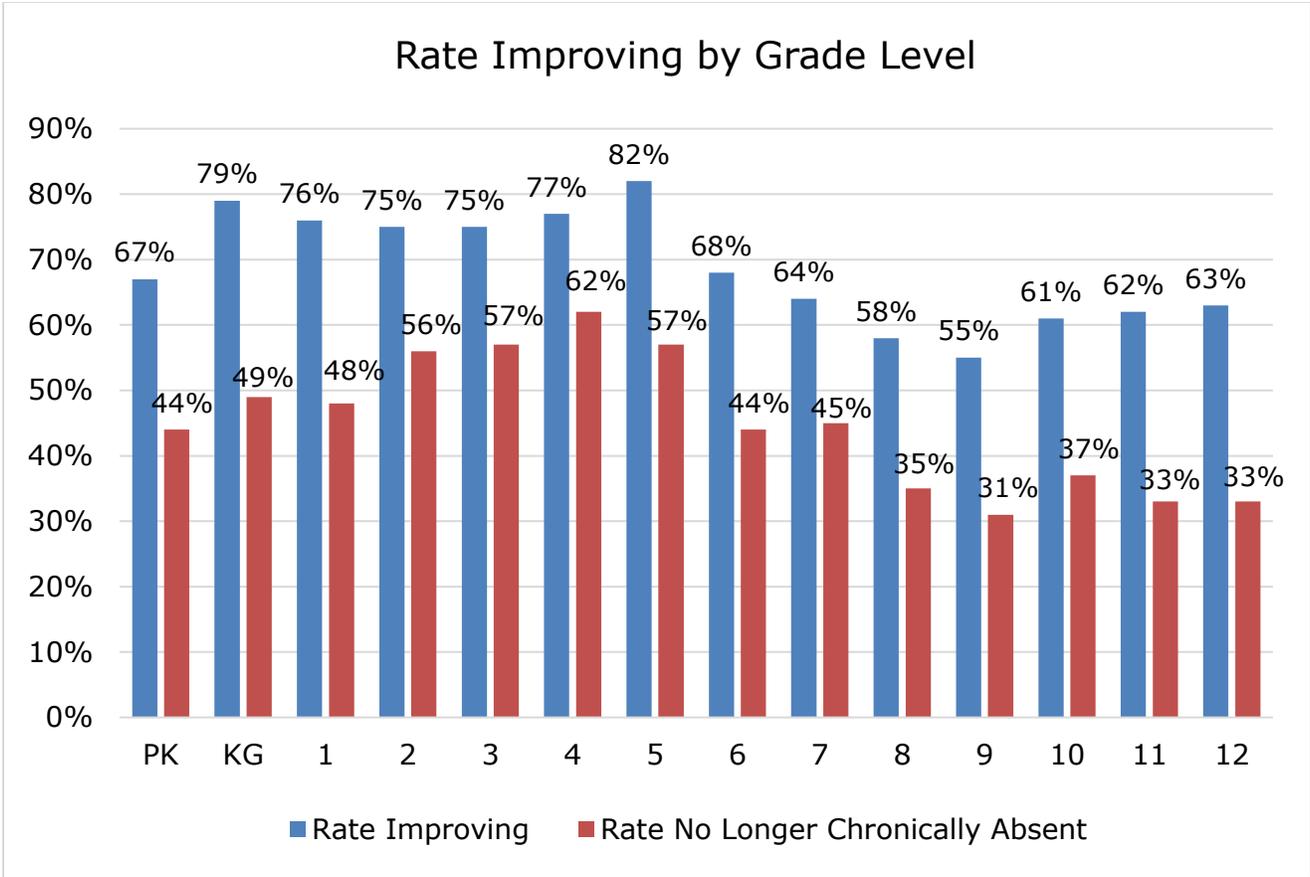


### Grade Level

Improvement in attendance among chronically absent students at the beginning of the year was most prominent in elementary school – 75% of chronically absent students in October had improved by the end of the year, and 52% were no longer chronically absent. In high school, by contrast, 60% of chronically absent students showed improvement, and 34% were no longer chronically absent.

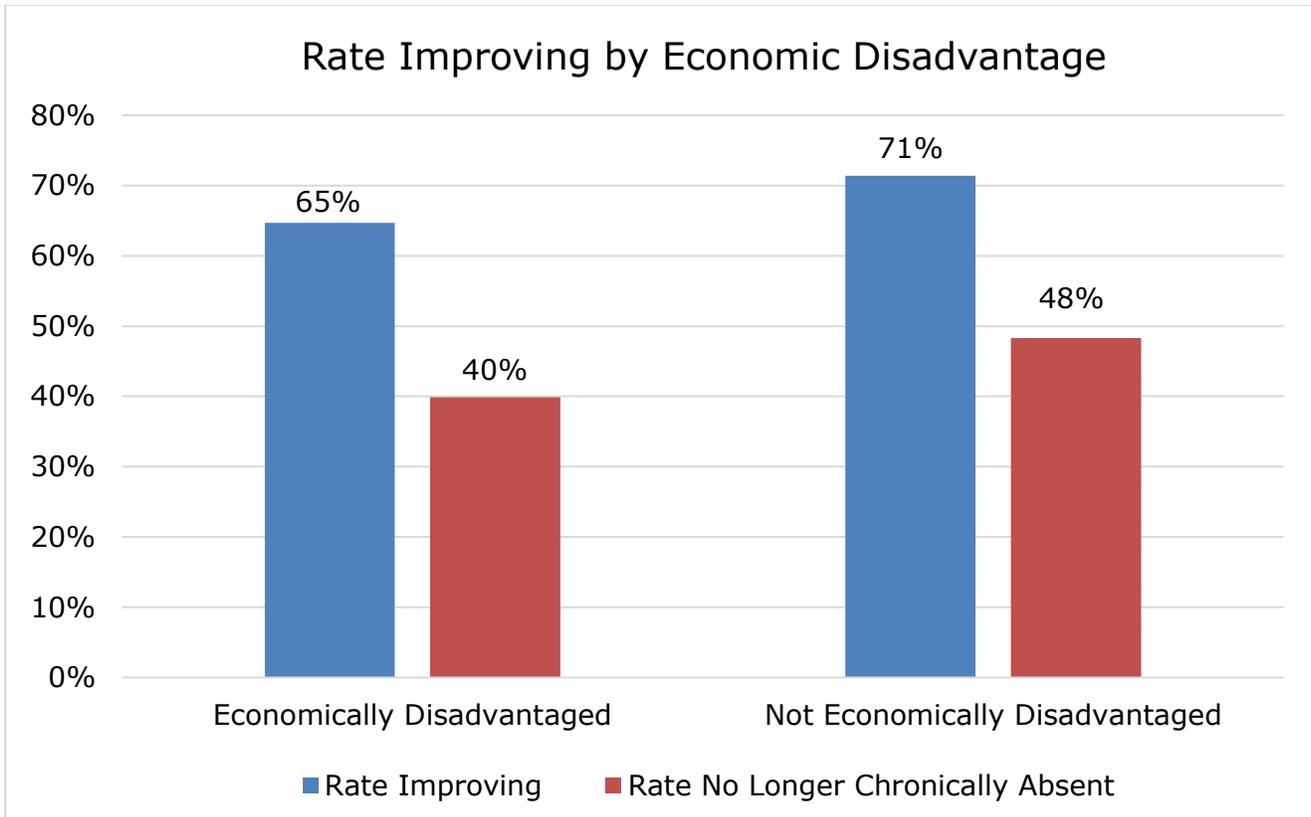
*"SA Kids Attend to Win has resulted in increased attendance of our most chronically absent students. Additional successes have included increased overall attendance at our campuses with a more focused practice of ensuring these students do not get 'lost.' This partnership is truly making a difference in our children's lives."*

– Dr. Carol Harle, former Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, Harlandale ISD



### Economic Disadvantage

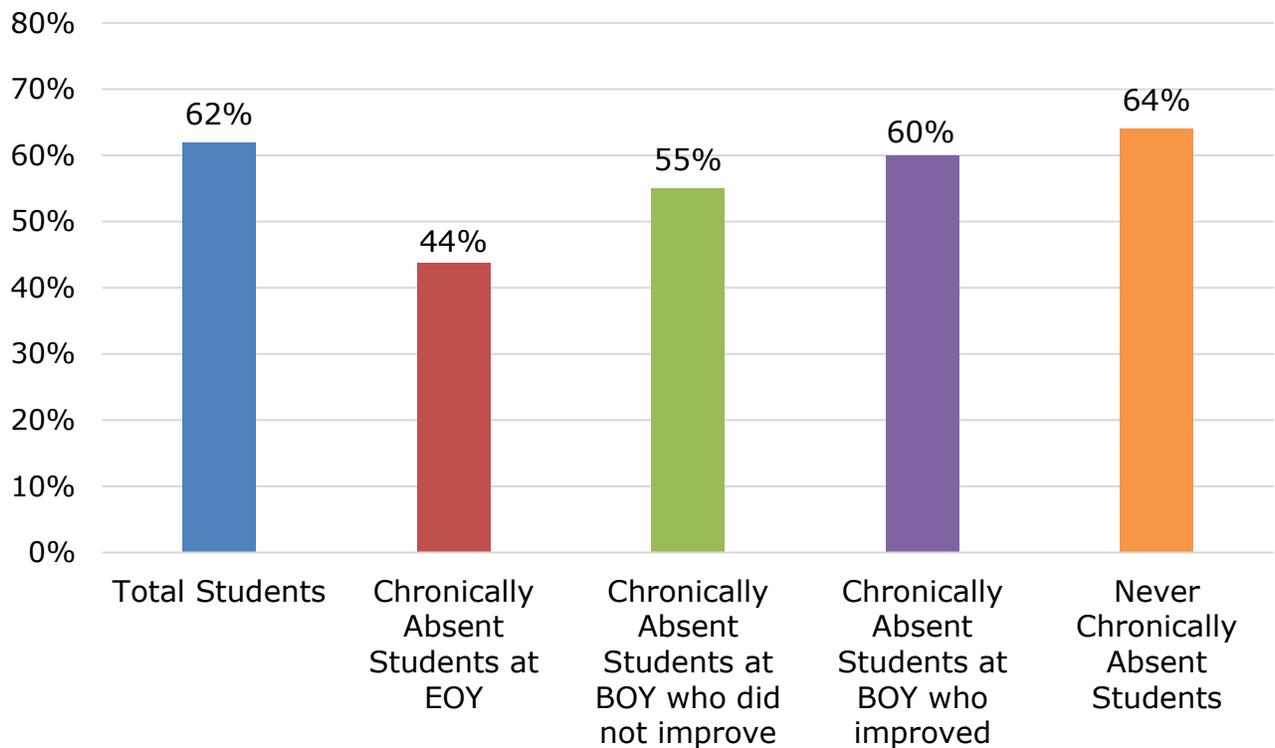
Improvements in chronic absenteeism are also associated with varying levels of economic disadvantage. Sixty-five percent of chronically absent students receiving a Free or Reduced Lunch improved their attendance (40% were no longer chronically absent), while 71% of students with no economic disadvantage improved (48% were no longer chronically absent).



### **Improvements and third grade reading passing rates**

Improvements in chronic absenteeism made a difference for students meeting the current standard for Level II (satisfactory) of the Third Grade Reading STAAR. Sixty-two percent of all students participating in SA Kids Attend to Win schools met the passing standard, compared to 44% of students who were chronically absent at the end of the year (EOY), 55% of students who were chronically absent at the beginning of the year (BOY) and did not improve their attendance, 60% of students who were chronically absent at the beginning of the year who improved, and 64% of students who were never chronically absent. It is clear that attendance rates, including improvements in attendance, are correlated with third grade reading STAAR passing rates.

### Third Grade Reading STAAR Passing Rate by Chronic Absenteeism Status



### Attendance and School District Funding

Texas schools are reimbursed by the state for each student in average daily attendance based on adjusted allotments and other variables. At an estimated \$42 per student per day for the three participating school districts, 2,817 students who were chronically absent at the beginning of the year improved an average of 11 days, for a total of \$1,274,972 saved for the school district due to improvements in attendance.

### Continuous Improvement

Teachers and students in several participating schools participated in focus groups or surveys during the 2014-15 school year to discuss what they appreciated about the SA Kids Attend to Win initiative as well as suggestions for the future.



At Collier Elementary School in Harlandale ISD, twelve teachers also served as mentors to students who were identified as chronically absent. These teachers met with students frequently—at least once a week—and provided encouragement. All of the mentors scored the program either 4 or 5 out of 5, and particularly enjoyed meeting with new students and getting to know them. Mentors rated their impact on students as an average of 4 out of 5, mentioning the students’ excitement at seeing mentors and earning rewards. Most believed the students they worked with

improved their attendance, and several also mentioned that attitudes and behaviors improved. Two teachers mentioned that they didn’t see a difference in rates of attendance for certain students. A common concern was that younger students (Pre-K and Kindergarten) didn’t understand the program as well as older students, and mentors believed the students didn’t have as much control over their attendance as their parents did. The teacher-mentors also appreciated that the program was based on positive motivation rather than threats of legal action. In the future, they suggested focusing on increasing parental involvement. Five mentors or teachers said that parents also need to recognize the importance of attendance, as they can influence their children’s rates of attendance. Several suggested having more incentives or more frequent rewards, perhaps a random weekly winner or class incentives for two-week periods. Additionally, a number of teachers mentioned that their other students who had good attendance but had never been chronically absent wanted to receive rewards as well, so they suggested additional benefits for good attendance in general.

According to students at Collier Elementary, those in all grades liked the incentives, but older students were more likely to mention they looked forward to seeing their mentor. About one third of younger students (those in Pre-K through Grade 2) mentioned that they wanted more prizes or would like to see their mentors more often, while only one older student (Grades 3-5) wanted more prizes. In general, older students were more likely to say they wouldn’t change anything about the program. When asked how their parents responded to their incentives, students of all ages responded that their parents liked the prizes, and older students said their parents were proud of them and congratulatory.

Teachers and students in several middle and high schools also participated in focus groups regarding SA Kids Attend to Win, noting elements they appreciated as well as future suggestions. Students liked both individual and group incentives, such as gift card drawings, paletas or ice cream parties, intercom announcements, and classroom competitions. Teachers agreed that monthly meetings regarding attendance worked well, in addition to creating short- and long-term goals for the chronically absent students. They also

appreciated social worker involvement, including home visits to engage parents and family members. In the future, teachers suggested starting interventions earlier in the school year, targeting chronically absent students each month, and including parents in the process, whether that is through education or involvement on attendance committees.

According to student focus groups in the middle and high schools, primary reasons for coming to school included parental encouragement, desire for higher education, and enjoyment of school. Chronically absent students mentioned that they don't come to school because their parents don't make them, they are sick, lack transportation, or have to work or take care of siblings. Students suggested incentivizing attendance and talking with parents to encourage attendance.

## Conclusion

Attending school every day is critically important to student success in the classroom and beyond. While the P16Plus initiative SA Kids Attend to Win is not a longitudinal study, other research indicates the detrimental effect of chronic absenteeism in the long-term, such as high school test scores and graduation rates.

SA Kids Attend to Win improves students' attendance habits through positive interventions in the classroom and at home. In this fourth year of the project, P16Plus has seen a significant improvement in attendance for those served. Of all students who began the year chronically absent, 65% improved their attendance, and 41% were no longer chronically absent by the end of the year. Improvements were most significant among elementary school students, especially fifth graders, 82% of whom improved by the end of the year. Also significant was the difference in improvement among those of varying economic disadvantage. Students with no economic disadvantage were less often chronically absent, and more often improved in attendance, than those receiving Free or Reduced Lunch. This suggests that economic disadvantage plays a role in attendance.



SA Kids Attend to Win improves students' attendance habits through positive interventions in the classroom and at home. In this fourth year of the project, P16Plus has seen a significant improvement in attendance for those served. Of all students who began the year chronically absent, 65% improved their attendance, and 41% were no longer chronically absent by the end of the year. Improvements were most significant among elementary school students, especially fifth graders, 82% of whom improved by the end of the year. Also significant was the difference in improvement among those of varying economic disadvantage. Students with no economic disadvantage were less often chronically absent, and more often improved in attendance, than those receiving Free or Reduced Lunch. This suggests that economic disadvantage plays a role in attendance.

P16Plus' analysis indicates a correlation between chronic absenteeism and third grade reading test scores as well. Sixty-four percent of students who were never chronically absent met the passing standard, compared with 60% of students who were chronically absent but improving, and 55% of students who were chronically absent and did not improve.

Student attendance is also a major element of school funding from the state. Based on school district estimates of funds received per student per day, the three participating districts saved over \$1.25 million due to improvements by chronically absent students throughout the school year. Because high attendance rates are linked to increased school district funding, it is important for administrators to focus on interventions that dramatically improve student attendance rates, such as SA Kids Attend to Win.

Teachers and students agreed that positive interventions are important, such as incentives and visits from mentors. Both also noted that involving parents and families is key to improving attendance, and their input can help attendance committees focus on root causes of chronic absenteeism.

It is important to note that conclusions are not generalizable to all school districts in Bexar County, but represent only the data from the participating schools. SA Kids Attend to Win will further its commitment to continuous improvement by participating in the StriveTogether Impact and Improvement Network, focused on reducing chronic absenteeism through a collective impact effort and identify root causes to absenteeism within the SA Kids Attend to Win school districts. Furthermore, for the 2016-2017 school year, SA Kids Attend to Win will expand to support schools within North East ISD. Student attendance matters, and P16Plus will work continuously towards improving rates of chronic absenteeism in positive and significant ways throughout San Antonio and Bexar County.



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## Resources

- Attendance Works: [www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org)
  - A national and state initiative that promotes better policy and practice around school attendance
- P16Plus Council of Greater Bexar County: [www.p16plus.org](http://www.p16plus.org)
  - A collective impact organization whose mission is to ensure that every child dramatically improves their educational success in school, college, and career within Bexar County

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