



OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE-BALTIMORE



MISSING SCHOOL: THE EPIDEMIC OF SCHOOL ABSENCE

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POLICY PAPER #1

IN OSI-BALTIMORE'S STUDENT ATTENDANCE SERIES



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NATIONWIDE, STUDENTS ARE ABSENT FROM SCHOOL IN LARGE NUMBERS AND FOR A MYRIAD OF WELL-KNOWN REASONS, INCLUDING ILLNESS, SUSPENSION, AND TRUANCY. BUT THEY ALSO MISS SCHOOL FOR LESS OBVIOUS REASONS, SUCH AS POOR TRANSPORTATION, FEARS OF PERSONAL SAFETY, DISENGAGEMENT, UNWELCOMING SCHOOLS, SCHOOL POLICIES THAT PUSH THEM OUT, AND FAMILY OR WORK RELATED RESPONSIBILITIES.

Oftentimes, school absence is an indicator of challenges occurring within the family, school, or community. Regardless of the reason for school absence, however, students who miss school are losing out on critical academic and social learning opportunities. And as they fall behind, students disengage from school and become much less likely to graduate.

Too often, parents and guardians, schools, communities, and city agencies perpetuate the cycle of disengagement and absenteeism either with indifference or with punitive responses to absence. When students' absences are ignored, the reasons for those absences are not resolved. Worse, when schools respond to tardiness and truancy by suspending students, they send a clear message that certain students are not wanted back in the classroom. Researchers are just now delving into the short and long-term effects of school absence; this emerging body of research shows that frequent absence unambiguously predicts later academic problems, dropout, and even criminal justice involvement.

Throughout this paper series, Baltimore will be used as an example to highlight the problem and the likely solutions to frequent school absence, as Baltimore exemplifies the attendance problems that so many school districts are facing nationwide. Among districts in Maryland, Baltimore has the lowest average daily attendance (89.4 percent) and the highest truancy rate (9.17 percent). It also has the second lowest graduation rate of all U.S. cities. Baltimore truly faces an epidemic of student absence from school, with serious repercussions for students.

This issue brief will begin by defining key terms. It will then turn to a review of local, state, and national data on habitual truancy and chronic absence, including who is absent, why students are absent, and what the outcomes of school absence are. Finally, it will outline the major policies affecting school attendance: weak and indifferent attendance policies, harsh discipline policies that undermine school climate, and accountability systems based largely on standardized test scores.



01. TAKING ATTENDANCE: DEFINITIONS & CATEGORIES

When a student misses school, the absence is classified as either an excused absence or an unexcused absence.

In Maryland, an absence may be excused for student illness, death in the immediate family, court summons, religious observance, school-authorized work or activity, hazardous weather conditions, state emergency, lack of authorized transportation, and suspension. All other absences are considered unexcused, and any unexcused absence is considered an incidence of truancy.

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) uses information provided by school districts about excused and unexcused absences to publish four measures of student attendance: average daily attendance, habitual truancy rate, rarely absent rate, and chronic absence rate. These measures are lacking in two important ways. First, they rely on measures of student enrollment that have been compromised by the lack of a unique student identifying number, which has resulted in miscounts of an unknown, but likely significant, number of students, particularly poorly-attending students.* Second, the calculation of these measures is described inconsistently in MSDE publications. These two important caveats aside, these measures provide a good deal of information about the nature and extent of attendance and absences in districts and schools across Maryland.

The first indicator measures student attendance and is known as the **average daily attendance rate** (ADA). According to one MSDE publication, the average daily attendance is calculated by dividing the total number of students who are present each day during the school year by the total number of students enrolled during that school year.¹ Attendance is calculated in half-day units, so that students who attend any part of a day are considered present for a half of that day; students who attend more than half of a day are counted as present for a whole day.** High mobility rates within and between districts, difficulty tracking students who simply fail to show up for long periods of time, different systems for attendance-taking, poor record keeping, and the only recent adoption of a unique identifier for students, as described above, make the calculation of ADA difficult and less accurate at the individual child and school level. Further, because school and district-level measures of ADA are averages, they do not reveal the often significant number of students whose attendance is very poor. While useful as a comparison among schools and districts, this rate alone does not accurately represent the magnitude or details of the attendance problem in Baltimore and other districts.

The remaining indicators measure absence from school, rather than presence in school. The first of these absence measures is the **habitual truancy rate**. The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires statewide reporting of habitual truancy; however, each state may define habitual truancy differently, making nationwide comparisons and evaluations impossible. In Maryland, a student is considered an habitual truant if he or she was age five through 20 during the school year, enrolled in a school for 91 or more days, and unlawfully absent for 20 percent or more of the days enrolled.² Because this figure includes only unexcused absences, it misses a significant percent of students who are lawfully absent for reasons such as suspension and chronic illness. This measure likely suffers more from the same accuracy problems as the ADA rate, given that it relies on enrollment numbers for calculation and that habitual truants are more likely to be mobile students who are hard to track. Moreover, it does not include recently enrolled students. However, this rate does provide important detail about which and how many students are missing many school days for unexcused reasons.

Next is the percentage of students who have missed fewer than five days for either excused or unexcused reasons. Published on the Maryland School Report Card, it is broken out by school, race/ethnicity, and gender.³ As this measure has no official name, we will call it the **rarely absent rate** for the purposes of this paper. This third measure is important, because it may point out schools and districts that are doing a good job getting students to school and can be looked to for guidance about effective policies and practices.

* Maryland instituted a unique student identification program beginning Fall 2008. As this paper goes to press, information about it is limited.

** For the purpose of these calculations, students who are absent any part of a day are considered absent one-half of a day, and students absent more than half of a day are considered absent one full day. This can complicate measures, since a student who attends for half of a day is technically counted as absent for a half day and present for a full day (since the student was in attendance for more than half the day, as discussed above).



The fourth and final rate, also found on the report card web site, is the percentage of students who have missed more than 20 days for both excused and unexcused reasons. This indicator is the **chronic absence rate** and, as is true of the rarely absent rate, it is disaggregated by school, race/ethnicity, and gender. Comparing it to the habitual truancy rate will show the extent to which a school's absences are caused by truancy and the degree to which they are the result of legitimate reasons such as poor student health, high levels of suspension, or other excused reasons. Recognizing that all absences reduce the likelihood of steady academic progress, Maryland schools can use these rates to diagnose attendance problems and design solutions. This is particularly important for elementary schools, because students who miss many days of school for excused reasons in the early grades often begin to miss school for unexcused reasons as they progress into middle school. If elementary schools focus only on truancy cases, they will miss an important opportunity to address school absences before they undermine a student's school career.

To track improvements in attendance and to determine effective interventions based on reasons for and types of absence, all four measures need to be readily available to and frequently consulted by parents, community members, school staff, and public officials.

02. HOW BIG IS THE PROBLEM IN BALTIMORE? ▶

During the 2006-2007 school year, 9.17 percent of Baltimore students – about 7,550 youth – were considered habitually truant.

This was the highest rate of all school systems in Maryland, more than twice that of the district with the second highest rate (Prince George's County, at 4.17 percent) and more than quadruple the statewide rate (2.21 percent).⁵ In addition to large numbers of children who are truant, the Baltimore schools have suspended and expelled close to ten thousand children each year for the past decade, with 9,854 students suspended in 2006-2007 alone.⁶ Somewhat ironically, 1,896 out-of-school suspensions were even given to students for missing school due to class cutting, tardiness, and truancy.⁷ Suspensions are considered excused absences; but, regardless of their classification, suspension policies and practices have greatly enlarged the number of non-attending students in the city. According to the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS), an average of 270 students miss school every day due to long-term suspension or expulsion – and even more are out of school on short-term suspensions.⁸ To make matters worse, few suspended students receive educational services, many do not return promptly to school after their suspensions are completed, and most fall behind in their studies.

Within BCPSS, rates of habitual truancy and school absence vary greatly among schools and age groups. For instance, although the overall truancy rate in BCPSS was 9.17 percent, twelve middle schools and high schools had truancy rates above 30 percent, which means that approximately a third of their students were habitually truant.⁹

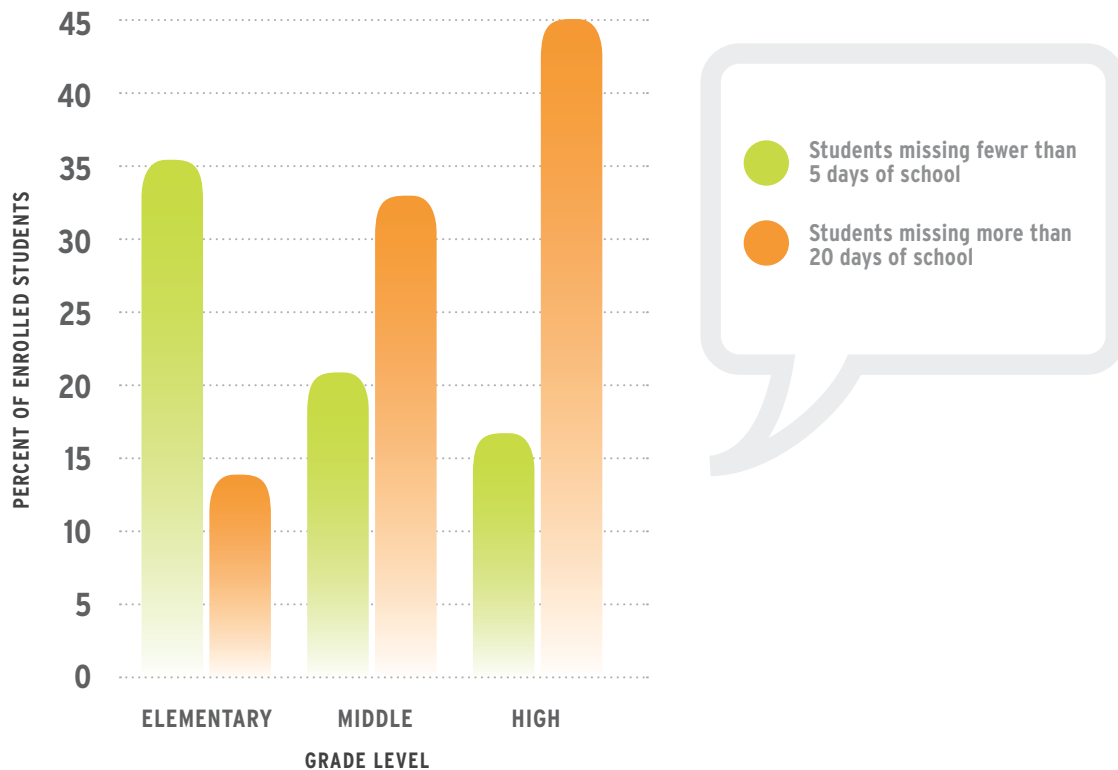
Average daily attendance rates provide additional information about the school absence problem. During the 2006-2007 school year in Maryland, average daily attendance (ADA) was 95.6 percent of elementary school students, 94.4 percent of middle school students, and 92.3 percent of high school students.¹⁰ In Baltimore, ADA was significantly lower, especially at the middle and high school levels: 94.1 percent of elementary school students, 88.3 percent of middle school students, and 82.7 percent of high school students.¹¹ ADA was even lower for certain demographic groups; for instance, special education high school students in Baltimore had an attendance rate of 74.9 percent.¹² This means that, on an average day during the 2006-2007 school year, one-quarter of special education students who were enrolled in a BCPSS high school were absent.



Finally, huge numbers of Maryland students missed more than 20 days of school during the 2006-2007 school year: 6.1 percent of elementary school students, 12.4 percent of middle school students, and 19.5 percent of high school students were in this chronically absent category.¹³ The rates were even higher in Baltimore, where 14.0 percent of elementary school students, 33.7 percent of middle school students, and 43.5 percent of high school students missed more than 20 school days (see Figure 1).¹⁴ Data from the 2006-2007 academic year in BCPSS show dramatic variation among elementary schools, with chronic absence rates ranging from zero to 56.8 percent.¹⁵ Moreover, the rarely absent rates in Maryland (the percentage of students who missed fewer than five days of school) were disappointingly low: 40.6 percent for elementary school students; 35.7 percent for middle school students; and 30.6 percent for high school students. Baltimore's rarely absent rates came in even lower at 35.8 percent, 21.2 percent, and 16.0 percent, respectively.

Statewide, rates of chronic absence were nearly equal for males and females, although in Baltimore, males were slightly more likely to be chronically absent than females (45.5 percent and 41.7 percent, respectively). Both statewide and in Baltimore, and at all grade levels, special education students were more likely to be chronically absent than their peers.¹⁶ Also, students eligible for free and reduced price meals were more likely to be chronically absent statewide and in Baltimore. This is true for all grade levels - except among Baltimore high school students, where students eligible for free and reduced price meals were about equally likely to be chronically absent as their peers (43.2 percent of students eligible for free/reduced meals versus 43.8 percent of ineligible students).¹⁷

FIGURE 1: STUDENT ABSENCE, BALTIMORE CITY 2006-2007



† This figure may be misleading because a significant number of high school students from low-income families do not sign up for the free and reduced price meal program and therefore are not counted as “eligible for free and reduced price meals.”



03. WHO IS ABSENT & WHY? A LOOK AT NATIONAL DATA

▶ **Most U.S. students miss at least a few days of school per year due to minor illnesses or other unavoidable family events or circumstances. A large minority of children, however, miss many days and, as these days increase, so too do the reasons for the absences.**

Children's reasons for frequent absence vary with age, gender, and family resources, but can include chronic illness, work, childcare or family responsibilities, fear of bullying or safety concerns, disengagement from school or push-out practices of schools, involvement with drugs or crime, and lack of easy, reliable, and affordable transportation. A national study of 4th- and 8th-graders in 2005 found several demographic factors correlated to school absence. The study found that students in both grades were more likely to report having missed three or more days of school in the prior four weeks if the student spoke English as a second language or if the student had a disability. Also, for both 4th- and 8th-graders, a lower percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander students and a higher percentage of American Indian students reported missing school than their peers in other racial and ethnic groups.¹⁸ Students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch were also more likely to report absence from school for three or more days than those who were not.¹⁹ A study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which included children from Baltimore and four other cities, reported that an elementary school student would be most likely to be absent if he or she lives in poverty; if the student's mother is a single parent, has limited education, is in poor health, depends on welfare, and/or has three or more children; and if the student experiences domestic and/or community violence.²⁰

In a 2000 survey of 9th graders who reported having unexcused absences, about 50 percent reported discretionary reasons for missing school (such as oversleeping, wanting to hang out with friends, etc.), 25 percent reported feeling pushed out of school or bullied, and the remaining 25 percent cited "pull-out" factors such as family or work obligations.²¹

Male and female students are about equally likely to have unexcused absences, although their reasons often differ.²² Girls are more often absent because they are caring for children or elderly relatives, while boys are more likely to be absent because of playing with peers, gang-related activities, etc.²³ Males who are truant are twice as likely to have Individual Education Plans (IEP), indicating special education status, than females who are truant.²⁴ Males who are truant also have lower grades in math, English, science, and social studies than females who are truant.²⁵ Males may also suffer greater consequences for unexcused school absences than females, because males are slightly more likely to be sent to court for truancy than their female counterparts. According to juvenile court statistics from the National Center for Juvenile Justice, 54 percent of all petitioned truancy cases between 1990 and 1999 were for males and 46 percent were for females.²⁶

Another study examining the characteristics of self-reported truants (defined by that study as students who reported having one or more unexcused absences within the past four weeks) found a variety of family- and school-related factors associated with truancy. The study found that students whose mother or father did not receive a college degree were more likely to be truant than students with a parent who graduated from college.²⁷ Furthermore, students who reported using drugs were significantly more likely to have unexcused absences from school.²⁸ Factors associated with a lower probability of truancy included participation in religious services, limited unsupervised time after school, participation in college preparatory courses, strong academic achievement, feeling safe at school, and lack of drug use.²⁹

As this research demonstrates, a large part of the truancy problem is that students choose not to attend school. However, in at least as many cases, it is the profound spillover effects of poverty, not personal choice, that



make regular school attendance harder and less likely. Families without healthcare or adequate nutrition have children who miss more school due to poor health; similarly, dependence on poor public transportation can make the route to school longer, less safe, and less reliable. When lack of parental insistence on regular school attendance, substance abuse and addiction, unstable housing, foster care placements, and student disabilities are added into the equation, it becomes clear why many students struggle to get to school on time or at all.

04. WHAT EFFECT HAVE CITY & SCHOOL POLICIES HAD ON ATTENDANCE IN BALTIMORE?

Many people, when queried about why students don't attend school, will instinctively fix the blame on individuals – neglectful parents and/or lazy, undisciplined youth.

After all, it is the responsibility of parents to make sure their children are in school and the responsibility of students to attend regularly. Parents and guardians should be reminded of the importance of their children's daily attendance and held accountable when they allow their children to skip school.¹ But when frequent school absence is common across an entire school district, it is very likely that larger forces are adding fuel to the individual-level reasons and that a systemic approach will be needed to address the problem. From this perspective, the persistently poor attendance rates in Baltimore tell us that current policies and practices have not been effective at engaging students and increasing regular school attendance. In this section, we analyze three types of policies, each of which has contributed unintentionally to the widespread problem of poor school attendance in Baltimore. These policies include:

- A. weak and indifferent school and city agency attendance policies and practices,**
- B. school discipline policies that put children out of school without supports, and**
- C. the near exclusive use of standardized tests to measure school effectiveness.**

Baltimore's schools and city agencies must be held accountable for serving all children, and understanding how policies have exacerbated the problem and can be changed to support students' school-going. New policies and practices will be critical to getting dramatic improvements in student attendance.

A. WEAK ATTENDANCE POLICIES AND EVEN WEAKER ENFORCEMENT

Baltimore schools and city agencies lack consistent procedures to prevent, respond to, and address students' absences. Despite BCPSS policies that require follow-up, many city schools do not have a standard way of alerting parents or guardians of a student's absence. One historical measure of the lack of attention given by BCPSS to school attendance can be seen in the resources of its Office of Student Attendance. The district has not provided Student Personnel Workers to its schools for nearly a decade. The Office itself has been staffed only at minimal levels and has been unable to respond to even a minority of truancy cases; indeed, for the two years that followed the 2004 budget crisis, it had just one staff member. Fortunately BCPSS has recently added staff to this office, although its resources are still not adequate to address truancy, and it has yet to enlarge its scope to address chronic excused absences.

Responses at the city level have been equally weak. For example, the city government began a novel, model program in 2003 called the Baltimore Truancy Assessment Center (B-TAC). Originally, it was charged with picking up children who were on the streets during the school day (thereby violating the daytime curfew law) and assessing the cause of the truancy problem with counselors and follow-up. After several years of inconsistent and inadequate funding, staffing, and inter-agency cooperation, B-TAC closed in 2008. During its later years of operation, it operated largely to pick up curfew violators and return them without services to schools.

¹ Under Maryland law, criminal misdemeanors may be filed against the parents/guardians of habitually truant students and, in some counties, civil petitions may be filed against children who miss school for unexcused reasons. See Md. Education Code Ann. §7-301-(e1) (2008) and Md. Courts and Judicial Proceedings Code Ann. §3-8C-03 (2008).



The Baltimore City Department of Social Services, which has responsibility for the more than 6,000 children in foster and kinship care, also has a weak record of getting students enrolled in school. Nearly one-third of the children in care are not enrolled in school within the one week standard set by the federal government.³⁰

Baltimore also has several pilot truancy prevention programs, such as the University of Baltimore's Truancy Court and the University of Maryland's Truancy Mediation Center, but these are small relative to the population of irregular attendees, focus mainly on unexcused absences, and have had to rely largely on private and grant funds for support.

As a result of the lack of attention and resources, school officials admit that a student with an unexcused absence may face any number of consequences: some have been suspended for missing school, others have been picked up by police and simply returned to school without any effort to address the causes of their attendance problems, some receive a letter from the school or a home visit, and still others have not even merited a phone call to investigate the absence or to urge them to return. Lack of response tells students that their attendance is not important and that they are not missed, while inconsistent responses are likely to confuse and alienate students. Both result in further disengagement, and ultimately undermine Baltimore's effort to improve its schools. Excused absences garner even less attention than truancy, even though they can be just as harmful to a child's academic career and can be the harbinger of later truancy. This failure to respond quickly and robustly leads to the problems of school disengagement, academic failure, dropout, and involvement in drug markets, crime, and the juvenile justice system.

B. DISCIPLINE POLICIES THAT HAVE RESULTED IN NEITHER SAFE SCHOOLS, NOR DISCIPLINED STUDENTS

The effect of school discipline policies on student attendance is one of the most poorly understood and contentious issues in Baltimore today. City residents and school staff justifiably find it untenable for teachers and administrators to work in classrooms and school buildings that lack the resources and tools needed to support academic and behavioral learning, and equally untenable for students to attend unsafe schools. What is not as well understood, and may seem counter-intuitive to many, is that BCPSS's decade-long reliance on suspension and expulsion has contributed to poor behavior, violence, unwelcoming schools, and academic failure.

Suspensions have been used excessively, indiscriminately, and to the exclusion of efforts to teach and reinforce good behavior or to treat mental health conditions and other serious underlying behavioral problems. The moment a student misbehaves is the very moment when the teaching, supports, and supervision that schools can provide are critical. A compelling body of research shows that suspension fails to remediate poor behavior and, in fact, can make it worse. When suspending or expelling a child is necessary, as in the case of violent or dangerous behavior that threatens the safety of students or school staff, the offending child must be referred to services so that they learn appropriate behavior. Instead, BCPSS (and other districts statewide) have suspended and expelled students for nonviolent and subjective types of offenses such as disrespect and insubordination, and have typically not provided any of these services. And with 9,854 suspended students and a total of 16,752 suspensions in BCPSS in 2006-2007, suspension is far too common to be seen by students as a disgrace or a deterrent.

As with other types of absence, suspension and expulsion leave young people outside of school at a time when parents or guardians are not home to supervise suspended children, and where suspended students are likely to fall behind academically. The overuse of suspension and expulsion also contributes to a negative, combative



school environment where students are not taught appropriate behavior and teachers and administrators are not given the tools to engage in positive classroom management.

The fallout from these policies is evident in student responses to school surveys:

- 1/3 of students reported feeling unsafe on the way to and from school, and an equal number reported feeling unsafe while at school.³¹
- 1/3 of students reported that teachers at their school do not care about the students - a highly troubling statistic because the attention of caring adults is one of the most powerful predictors of school attendance and success.³²

It is the job of parents and communities to help children learn appropriate behavior. But public schools are not only required to serve all children, they are now held accountable for graduating all children as well. When children come to school without the necessary social and emotional skills, a school must shoulder a major portion of the responsibility to teach them or it will fail to meet its mandate. To handle this larger task, districts must provide school staff with the training and resources to ensure that misbehaving students get explicit teaching about their behavior, emotions, and how to act in school, consequences that help them redress the harm they have caused, and supports to ensure that they continue to progress academically.

OSI believes that all students need this trio of services: continued opportunities to learn appropriate behavior, to make amends for misbehavior, and to keep doing their school work. For students who are violent, these lessons will likely need to occur in alternative school settings.

The Baltimore City Public School System, under the leadership of CEO Dr. Andrés Alonso, is working to reduce its high rates of suspension and expulsion. In 2007-2008, BCPSS convened a work group comprised of administrators and principals, parents, and community organizations to revise its discipline code. The resulting Code of Conduct limits the use of suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests to the most serious offenses and provides alternatives that help students make amends for their misbehavior and learn how to react differently in the future.

Because of the scale and importance of this issue, suspension and expulsion are the subject of the second paper in this series, *Putting Kids Out of School: What's Causing High Suspension Rates and Why They are Dangerous to Students, Schools, and Communities*, where disciplinary exclusion policies are discussed in detail.

C. ACCOUNTABILITY: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN TEST SCORES TRUMP ALL OTHER INDICATORS?

Accountability is essential to improving youth outcomes. School accountability in Maryland is currently determined, first, by the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and, second, by the policies, priorities, and interpretation of NCLB by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). Although NCLB represents important advances in accountability - for example, raising up the poor performance of certain subgroups of students - it has serious flaws that show themselves most prominently in low-performing districts. We address two of these flaws here.

First, NCLB does not create incentives for, or draw attention to, a key question: who is coming to school? In urban districts, such as Baltimore, this question is even more fundamental and important to school reform than are the test scores that NCLB has deemed paramount. The non-test score indicators that Maryland has included in its accountability program are poorly measured and too few. These indicators are the average daily attendance rate, for elementary and middle schools, and the graduation rate, for high schools. Maryland's chosen methods



of measuring who is on the schools' rolls, who attends school, and who gets a diploma do not include all students: those who are highly mobile, frequently absent, or drop-out before high school are just some of the categories of students who are likely to "fall out" of the state's enrollment and graduation counts. Federal policymakers have recently announced new regulations to improve the accuracy of graduation and attendance rates, and Maryland has begun this year to assign each student a unique number so that they can be tracked if they move across district lines or drop-out and reenroll, but these measures will not be fully in place many years.

While improvements in measuring attendance and enrollment are on policymakers' minds, they have not begun to address the fundamental problem in NCLB's accountability matrix, namely its exclusive reliance on standardized test scores. It is an unfortunate fact that the emphasis on test scores gives schools little incentive to encourage the attendance or engagement of students who do not succeed academically or behaviorally. Because students who miss a significant number of school days are more likely to struggle academically and score poorly on these tests, schools may have a disincentive for enrolling, reenrolling, and getting frequently absent students to school, especially on testing days. To counteract this disincentive, NCLB requires that ninety-five percent of enrolled students be present on testing days. But the definition of enrollment excludes many of the highly mobile, frequently absent Baltimore students. Students are not included in a school's test scores unless they were enrolled from September 30 through the test days in May. Some suggest, however, that even with these weak enrollment definitions, schools will drop truant students from their enrollment rather than risk the repercussions of lower test scores.

Nor does school funding give schools as much incentive to keep students as one might expect. In Maryland, reimbursement to districts is based on students' attendance in a two week period at the end of September and beginning of October.* Some suggest that schools quickly "clean" the rolls after the enrollment counts are completed to discourage truant students from subsequent attendance. Anecdotal information from OSI-Baltimore grantees indicates that out-of-school youth face a good deal of resistance when they try to reenroll in school after a period of non-attendance. Some are told they were too old, that it was too late in the year to enroll, that they had failed too many courses, or missed too many days of school. Indeed, after responding to several such incidents, one local organization prepared a "how to" flyer for students and parents to advise them of their educational rights.

Dropping students from the rolls, not aggressively following up on absences, encouraging students to enroll in GED or alternative programs, discouraging their attendance, and suspending or expelling them are all effective ways to ensure that struggling students are not a part of a school's enrollment, attendance, dropout, and standardized exam results. Weak measures of attendance, when combined with exclusive focus on test scores and NCLB's punitive policies, have increased push-out practices, which, while subtle and largely unintentional, are nonetheless powerful. And as some struggling students choose to leave school when faced with the reality that they are unlikely to pass exams required for promotion or graduation, it intensifies the effects of these practices.

Evidence for these often hard-to-document push-out practices and dropout effects comes from Texas, the state whose accountability program became the model for the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). There, data show that the accountability strategies that rely only on test performance have actually increased dropout rates. Because school administrators are under pressure to show "measurable improvement" on a yearly basis, they have a strong incentive to retain students who have failed even just one course or to encourage low-scoring students to drop out of school altogether. The result, researchers maintain, is that more than 135,000 students are lost from Texas high schools each year.³³ Similar results have been documented in other states; in California,

* Until 2007-2008, enrollment was determined by attendance on one day, September 30.



for instance, the number of high school dropouts increased exponentially in the first year that seniors were required to pass an exit exam.³⁴

The second flaw is that NCLB requires that accountability is “based primarily on academic assessments.”³⁵ As in other states, Maryland assesses students’ academic achievement using standardized tests largely in English and math. Its accountability program does not include other measures of learning, such as students’ understanding of government and civics, career paths, effective work habits, and social skills – even though these subjects are essential to becoming informed citizens, productive workers, and nurturing family members. In districts such as Baltimore City, many students will receive few of these skills outside of school. Nor does it include other types of assessments, such as portfolios or students’ grades. The focus on reading and math mandated by NCLB has resulted in a documented narrowing of schools’ curricula in Maryland and nationwide. Since the implementation of NCLB, the school day has increasingly reflected tested subjects, and, within those subjects, only the test’s content. Nationwide, as schools increase instructional time on these few subjects, they must reduce time for other subjects and activities, such as social studies, science, art and music, physical education, lunch and recess.³⁶ These activities, which many students enjoy most, are being cut from the school day – and with them goes some of children’s attachment to school and motivation to attend. In addition, the tests limit teachers’ ability to adapt curriculum to the interests and learning needs of their students. When this happens in high poverty schools, children leave with large content knowledge gaps that later can serve as roadblocks to becoming socially, physically, emotionally, and culturally competent.

Taken together, NCLB’s weak emphasis on student participation in school, its reliance on high-stakes tests, and its narrow subject range negatively affect student attendance. School administrators with limited time and money often commit all of their scarce resources to improving instruction, hiring additional teachers, and other academic-focused inputs – rather than to subjects and activities that are known to engage students and to staff that follow up when students don’t attend. These resource allocations are understandable given that reading and math test scores are the currency of the realm. But they are misguided in communities like Baltimore, where highly concentrated poverty ensures that many children are not academically, socially, or physically prepared to begin kindergarten, that just getting to and from school is a challenge, and that the adults in their lives often can not help them understand and master the academic, behavioral, and social requirements of school. While these regulations may have resulted in schools with better academic instruction, they are often less engaging and welcoming to students, with reportedly worse student behavior and less supportive staffs.

05. WHAT HAPPENS TO KIDS WHEN THEY MISS SCHOOL?

▶ **When students miss school, regardless of the reason, they fall behind their classmates and, without appropriate structure and supervision, can find themselves in harm’s way.**

▶ **Frequent absence from school is a powerful, highly predictive warning sign that a student is veering dangerously towards school disengagement or dropout.**

Regardless of whether an absence is excused or unexcused, when students miss school, they are more likely to fall behind academically, sometimes permanently. A recent study of Baltimore public school students found that those who were frequently absent in 9th and 10th grade, missing two or more months of school in a year, had very high dropout rates.³⁷ Moreover, several years before dropping out, most students began to miss more and more school. The study found that three years before a student drops out of school, his or her attendance begins to decline precipitously, and that the majority of students who drop out of school have missed between a year and a year-and-a-half of schooling from the 6th grade until the point at which they drop out.³⁸



► **Students who drop out of school are likely to face diminished lifetime earning potential and as adults, to be poor.**

The consequences of dropping out of school are well-documented, and include higher rates of unemployment and lower salaries. Data from the US Census Bureau show that high school dropouts had a 54.9 percent employment rate in 2006, compared with 70.1 percent for high school graduates, 76.1 percent for those with some college or an associate's degree, and 82.4 percent for those with a bachelor's degree or higher.³⁹ Moreover, among those with full-time employment, overall earnings are lower for high school dropouts than their counterparts. In 2005, median income for full-time employees ages 25-34 was \$21,500 for high school dropouts versus \$26,800 for high school completers, \$31,200 for individuals with some college or an associate's degree, and \$42,100 for those with a bachelor's degree or higher.⁴⁰ A study that looked at the social program use and tax contributions of US residents found that each high school dropout costs the public more than \$200,000 in social programs and criminal justice expenses over the course of his or her lifetime.⁴¹ By comparison, the cost of preventing and intervening when students begin down the path of missing and disengaging from school can be minimal.⁴²

► **Students who are frequently absent are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors.**

Students who are irregular school attendees are more likely to become involved in tobacco and drug use, delinquent behavior or criminal activity. An analysis of survey data from 28 communities between 1980 and 2000 showed that school absence is a good predictor of middle school drug use; the study found that truant 8th graders were four-and-a-half times more likely than their peers to smoke marijuana.⁴³ Meanwhile, increased drug use and delinquent behavior among youth who are truant can lead to higher rates of juvenile court involvement; for instance, a study of Colorado youth found that over 90 percent of youth in juvenile detention have a history of truancy.⁴⁴ Moreover, several studies have shown that these problems can persist beyond young adulthood and that individuals with a history of truancy are also more likely to face negative adult outcomes, including marital instability, job instability, criminal activity, and incarceration.⁴⁵

► **Schools with high absence rates have slower-paced instruction and lower achievement.**

When many students miss school each week, they not only limit their own achievement, but they also slow down the learning of their peers. In these classrooms, even the most able teachers will find it difficult to ensure that all children have mastered the daily lessons, received and completed their homework, and taken and passed tests and quizzes, for the simple reason that a different set of children is in the classroom each day.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION ►

Too many students are missing school in Baltimore - and missing out on the many benefits associated with regular school attendance. Weak and ineffective attendance policies, harsh discipline policies, and test-based accountability systems all ignore the warning signs that students send when they are absent. Together, these policies and practices leave too many students outside of school, often in homes and neighborhoods where they are unsupervised and unsafe, and on the road to failure.

The second paper in this series discusses how high rates of suspension and expulsion contribute to the epidemic of school absence and how disciplinary exclusion policies undermine school climate, disengage students, and fail to improve students' behavior. The third and final paper in this series discusses the policies and practices that schools, communities, and city agencies must adopt in order to improve school climate, boost student attendance, and pave the way for better outcomes for Baltimore's young people and its future. It details the following recommendations:



- ▶ **Ensure that every student is known well and cared for by at least one adult at school.**
- ▶ **Restore and reinvigorate programs in arts, music, and physical education, as well as other high-interest classes.**
- ▶ **Invest in out-of-school time programs, both summer and after school, that provide safety and exciting learning opportunities.**
- ▶ **Provide universal free lunch and in-classroom breakfast in high-poverty and high-absence schools to encourage attendance and boost performance.**
- ▶ **Remind students, parents/guardians, business and community leaders, and residents about the importance of daily school attendance and their responsibility to ensure that children get to school each day.**
- ▶ **Improve safety, reliability, and ease of transportation to and from school.**
- ▶ **Fully fund and implement the city's plan to reduce gang violence.**
- ▶ **Ensure that the students in foster care are quickly enrolled and regularly attending school.**
- ▶ **Review all city and state agencies to determine whether their youth services create or reduce barriers to attendance.**
- ▶ **Use data to find cost-effective strategies for the city's attendance problem.**
- ▶ **Create incentives for schools to increase attendance.**
- ▶ **Teach, model, and reward positive behavior.**
- ▶ **Ensure that students have meaningful consequences for misbehavior, redress the harm of misbehavior and learn appropriate behaviors.**
- ▶ **Revise discipline codes to ensure the fair, equitable, and appropriate use of suspension and expulsion.**
- ▶ **Recognize that school absence is an early predictor of dropout and ensure that there is a response to every absence.**

If Baltimore and similar cities around the country are to improve the economic and social fortunes of its residents, there is no better way to start than to improve regular school attendance.



ENDNOTES ►

- ¹ Maryland's "Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook, October 2005" at <http://mdk12.org/assessments/ayp/MSDEConsolidatedAccountabilityWorkbook.pdf>, Section 6.1
- ² Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), Division of Accountability and Assessment. (November 2007). Habitual Truants, Maryland Public Schools, 2006-2007.
- ³ See www.mdreportcard.org.
- ⁴ MSDE, supra note 2.
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- ⁶ Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), Division of Accountability and Assessment. (December 2007). Suspensions, Expulsions, and Health Related Exclusions, Maryland Public Schools, 2006-2007.
- ⁷ MSDE, supra note 6.
- ⁸ Brice, J. (13 May 2008) Alternative programs and alternative schools, SY 2008-2009. Presentation to the Board of School Commissioners. Baltimore, MD.
- ⁹ MSDE, supra note 2.
- ¹⁰ 2007 Maryland Report Card: Maryland State Demographics. Accessed at <http://www.mdreportcard.org/Demographics.aspx?WDATA=State&K=99AAAA#attendance>.
- ¹¹ 2007 Maryland Report Card: Baltimore City Demographics. Accessed at <http://www.mdreportcard.org/Demographics.aspx?K=30AAAA&WDATA=local+school+system#attendance>
- ¹² 2007 Maryland Report Card, supra note 11.
- ¹³ 2007 Maryland Report Card, supra note 10.
- ¹⁴ 2007 Maryland Report Card, supra note 11.
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- ¹⁶ 2007 Maryland Report Card, supra note 11.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (May 2007). The condition of education 2007. <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2006/section3/table.asp?tableID=480>. Accessed on 23 October 2007.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
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- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
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- ²⁷ Henry, K.L. (2007). Who's skipping school: Characteristics of truants in 8th and 10th grade. *Journal of School Health*. 77(1). 29-36.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Maryland State Department of Human Resources. (February 5, 2008). 39th Semi-Annual Compliance Report, *L.J. v Massinga*.
- ³¹ Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS). (May 2007). SY06-07 School Climate Data: Students, Parents, and Staff. Accessed on 18 April 2008 at http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/Student_Performance/PDF/SY06-07_Summary_Report.pdf.
- ³² BCPSS, supra note 31.
- ³³ McNeil, L.M., Coppola, E., Radigan, J., & Heilig, J.V. (2008). Avoidable losses: High stakes accountability and the dropout crisis. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 16 (3).
- ³⁴ Williams, J. (7 Nov 2008). "California exit exam boosts dropout numbers." Associated Press.
- ³⁵ Maryland's "Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook, October 2005" at <http://mdk12.org/assessments/ayp/MSDEConsolidatedAccountabilityWorkbook.pdf>, Section 6.1
- ³⁶ Center for Education Policy. (2007). Choices, changes, and challenges: Curriculum and instruction in the NCLB era. Washington, D.C.: Center for Education Policy.
- ³⁷ Baltimore Educational Research Consortium (BERC). (2008). Lost Days: Patterns and Levels of Chronic Absenteeism Among Baltimore City Public School Students, 1999-00 to 2005-06.
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**ENDNOTES** ▶

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