

Valley Voice: Skipping school puts a child's future at risk

In December of the 2018-19 school year, the Palm Springs Unified School District launched a new "Attention to Attendance" (A2A) program in an effort to educate our families about the importance of regular attendance as well as to improve and increase communications between the school and family around individual student attendance issues.

From the beginning of the 2018-19 school year through the beginning of December 2018, our students collectively missed over 90,012 full days of instruction. Knowing that we are focused on improving outcomes for our students and that missing school correlates with student achievement, we know that simply getting our students to school, regularly and on time, improves their opportunities to learn.

We are encouraged that our first six months indicate that we are headed in the right direction, though we have a long way to go. More than 49,000 parent communication pieces were sent out during the second half of the last school year. More than 15,000 of these letters addressed truancy (a student who has three or more days of unexcused absences), more than 12,000 were about excessive absences (seven or more days of excused absences) and more than 4,500 were to parents of students with chronic absenteeism (missing 10 percent or more of the school year due to absences). The remainder of the communications were focused on educating the parents of our kindergarten through third grade students on the importance of regular attendance and commendation letters for students with excellent attendance.

Educating parents on risks of absenteeism

Conferences were held with the parents of 561 students with chronic absenteeism. The improvement rate among those students from the six weeks prior to the conferences to the six weeks after the conference was 26.8 percent. While the numbers improved the second half of the year, we still had more than 40 percent of our students who missed more than nine school days during the 2018-19 school year. We had over 2,400 students who missed between 18 and 36 days of school and 854 students who missed more than 36 days of school.

These numbers are unacceptable, as those absences negatively impact students' learning.



Students return for the first day of school at Bubbling Wells Elementary School in Desert Hot Springs, Calif., August 8, 2018. (Photo: Zoe Meyers/The Desert Sun)

We know that 83 percent of students who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade cannot read at grade level when they reach third grade. These students are four times more likely to drop out of school before they graduate, and drop outs are eight times more likely to be incarcerated than their peers with high school diplomas.

By sixth grade, chronic absenteeism becomes a leading indicator that a student will drop out of high school, and high school dropouts are not eligible for about 90 percent of the jobs in this country. Clearly, students who do not attend school regularly have long-lasting negative effects, and we will do all we can to prevent that from happening.

The work continues

As we continue our outreach work in the 2019-20 school year to ensure that our students are attending school each day, I ask for your help in spreading the crucial message that attendance at every grade level matters greatly.

It is unfortunate that kindergarten is not mandatory in the state of California. The statistics are proof that students who do not attend kindergarten regularly are at a huge disadvantage and experience an ongoing, uphill battle to stay on par with their peers.

<https://www.desertsun.com/story/opinion/contributors/valley-voice/2019/07/18/coachella-valley-parents-skipping-school-hurts-your-child-sandra-lyon-valley-voice/1769190001/>