



OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE-BALTIMORE



► **AN EPIDEMIC OF ABSENCE:**
HOW CAN WE GET KIDS TO SCHOOL?



SUMMARY ►

LIKE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS NATIONWIDE, BALTIMORE STRUGGLES WITH A BASIC CHALLENGE:

GETTING STUDENTS TO ATTEND SCHOOL REGULARLY.

Vast numbers of children miss school each day in Baltimore, and when they do, they miss out on critical academic and social learning opportunities. As these children begin to fall behind in classes, they pull away from school, perpetuating a cycle of absence and academic failure.

A new series of three research papers prepared by the Open Society Institute-Baltimore explores this problem and offers recommendations for policies and practices to boost student attendance. The reports were written by Jane Sundius, PhD, Director of OSI-Baltimore's Education and Youth Development Program, and Molly Farneth, Education and Youth Development Program Assistant. The papers grow out of a long-term initiative led by OSI-Baltimore to reduce widespread school absence through strategies that engage children in school and remove barriers to regular attendance, including the overuse of suspension and expulsion.

The papers in this series describe the root causes of these high levels of school absence and the academic and life consequences for children who miss many school days. **Together, the three papers depict an epidemic of absence – but one that can be stopped if parents and guardians, schools, and city agencies work together to ensure that every child is in an educational setting every day.**



IN BALTIMORE DURING THE 2006-2007 SCHOOL YEAR, 14% OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS, 34% OF MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS, AND 44% OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS MISSED 20 OR MORE SCHOOL DAYS – A FULL MONTH OF SCHOOL.

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.



WHAT'S THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM?

FREQUENT ABSENCE IS A SERIOUS PROBLEM WITH MULTIPLE CAUSES.

Some student absences are the result of misguided choices on the part of students. But more frequently they are the result of illness, suspension and expulsion, unstable housing, poor transportation, unwelcoming and sometimes violent schools, large numbers of new faculty and high rates of teacher and administrative turnover, fear of violence, and childcare or employment demands. To ensure that children are in school every day, it is essential to understand the root causes of absence, because, in the end, all types of absences must be addressed if children are to stay on track. The papers discuss these root causes and explore why current policies and practices have failed to improve attendance rates in Baltimore:

► **Baltimore schools and city agencies lack aggressive and effective procedures to prevent, respond to, and address students' absences.**

The Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) and Baltimore City government have not yet made student attendance a top priority. Many city schools do not have a standard way of alerting parents or guardians of a student's absence, and most do not have staff to follow up when a child repeatedly misses school. School system officials admit that a student with an unexcused absence may face any number of consequences: a letter or phone call home, a home visit, detention or suspension, being picked up by police and simply returned to school. A vast number, however, elicit no response at all. Meanwhile, city agencies that are responsible for students' transportation, safety on the routes to and from school, and other school-related factors must do more to ensure that their policies support daily, on-time school attendance.

► **Reliance on suspension and expulsion as the response to student misbehavior pushes students out of school.**

While it may seem counterintuitive, schools' reliance on suspension and expulsion has actually fueled poor behavior, violence, unwelcoming schools, and academic failure. The overuse of suspension and expulsion has contributed to a negative, combative school environment and has not taught appropriate behavior, held students accountable to redress the harm they caused, or kept them up-to-date with their studies. Teachers and administrators have not been given the tools to engage in positive classroom management. The upshot is that students often don't feel safe on their way to school or at school, nor do they feel like their teachers care about them once they're there.

Under the leadership of Dr. Andrés Alonso, BCPSS is working diligently to reduce the overuse of suspension and expulsion. Currently, however, an average of 270 students miss school every day in Baltimore due to long-term suspension or expulsion, and even more are out of school on short-term suspensions. While on suspension, students do not have the opportunity to remedy their behavior or redress the wrong they committed, and they return to school without the tools or skills to help them behave differently in the future. Moreover, few students receive educational services while suspended, so many fall behind in their studies. Students who are suspended are less likely to succeed academically and less likely to graduate from high school than their peers.

► **The reliance on standardized tests to measure school effectiveness can increase absenteeism.**

The No Child Left Behind Act's singular emphasis on raising test scores has unintentionally and ironically pushed students out of the classroom. In an effort to improve test scores and other accountability measures, too many schools have dropped students from the rolls, ignored absences, encouraged students to enroll in GED or alternative programs, discouraged their attendance, and suspended or expelled them - all unfortunate ways to ensure that struggling students are not a part of a school's enrollment, attendance, dropout, and standardized exam results.

The emphasis on improving standardized test scores has also resulted in curricular changes. More time during the school day is devoted to tested subjects (e.g. reading and mathematics), while less time is spent on subjects and activities like art, music, physical education, science, civics, and recess. As a result, the subjects and activities that keep children engaged in and attending school are less and less likely to take place during the school day.



WHAT MUST WE DO TO GET EVERY STUDENT TO SCHOOL EVERY DAY?

The authors conclude that school attendance can indeed be improved, and that with it, student engagement in education and graduation rates will also rise. The key to dramatic improvement will be new policies and practices that meet the needs of students, parents and guardians, and school staff, and hold them all accountable for regular school attendance. These policies and practices include the following:

► **Make Schools Safe, Engaging, and Attractive to Students.**

- Ensure that every student is known well by at least one adult at school.
- Restore and reinvigorate art, music, physical education, and other high-interest classes.
- Invest in out-of-school time programs, both summer and after school, that provide safety and exciting learning opportunities.
- Provide free breakfast and lunch in high-poverty and high-absence schools.

► **Make Attendance Everyone's Responsibility.**

- Educate students, parents/guardians, business and community leaders, and other citizens about their responsibility to get children to school each day.
- Recognize that school absence is an early predictor of dropout and ensure that there is a response to every absence.
- Improve safety and reliability of transportation to and from school.
- Fully fund and implement the city's plan to reduce gang violence.
- Ensure that students in foster care are quickly enrolled and regularly attending school.
- Determine whether youth services offered by city and state agencies create or reduce barriers to school attendance.
- Use data to find cost-effective strategies to Baltimore's attendance problem.

► **Eliminate practices that push kids out of school.**

- Create incentives for schools to increase attendance.
- Teach, model, and reward positive behavior.
- Revise discipline codes to ensure the fair, equitable and appropriate use of suspension and expulsion.
- Ensure that students have meaningful consequences for misbehavior, redress the harm of misbehavior and learn appropriate behaviors.

CHILDREN WITH A 6TH GRADE ATTENDANCE RATE BELOW 80% HAVE ON-TIME GRADUATION RATES OF JUST 5-13%.

IN 2006-2007, 9,854 BCPSS STUDENTS (12.5% OF ALL BCPSS STUDENTS) MISSED SCHOOL DUE TO AN OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSION.

The three papers are called "Missing School: The Epidemic of School Absence," "Putting Kids out of School: What's Causing High Suspension Rates and How They Hurt Students, Schools, and Communities," and "On the Path to Success: Policies and Practices for Getting Every Child to School Every Day."

- They can be found at www.osi-baltimore.org.

