

State of California ~ Department of Justice

OFFICE of the ATTORNEY GENERAL  
KAMALA D. HARRIS

## Report on California Elementary School Truancy Crisis: One Million Truant Students, Billions in Economic Harm

Monday, September 30, 2013

Contact: (415) 703-5837

LOS ANGELES – California Attorney General Kamala D. Harris today unveiled the first state-wide statistics on California's truancy crisis which reveal that, last year alone, 1 million elementary school students were truant and 250,000 elementary school students missed 18 or more school days at a cost of \$1.4 billion in lost funds to California school districts.

These findings are part of a report, *In School and On Track*, issued today by Attorney General Harris in Los Angeles where statewide education, public policy and law enforcement leaders were convened to discuss this crisis and identify concrete solutions.

"The California Constitution guarantees every child the right to an education, yet we are failing our youngest children, as early as kindergarten," Attorney General Harris said. "These are children as young as five years old who are out of school, falling behind, and too many of them never catch up. This crisis is not only crippling for our economy, it is a basic threat to public safety. It's time for accountability and to craft real solutions at every level - from parents to school districts, to law enforcement - to solve this problem."

According to the report, elementary school truancy is at the root of the state's chronic criminal justice problems. According to the report, missing large amounts of school is one of the strongest predictors of dropping-out, even more so than suspensions or test scores. Annually, dropouts cost California taxpayers an estimated \$46.4 billion in incarceration, lost productivity and lost taxes.

Information broken down by school district and county is available here: <https://oag.ca.gov/truancy> and: <https://oag.ca.gov/truancy/ch1>

### Key Findings from *In School and On Track*:

In California last year, 1 million elementary school students were truant and 250,000 students missed 18 or more school days.

In some California elementary schools, 92% of students were truant last year.

California school districts are losing \$1.4 billion in funding due to truant students.

### Solutions from *In School and On Track*:

California must create a statewide system to collect student attendance records.

School districts must improve the way truant students are monitored.

School administrators must meet with parents or guardians immediately when a child is truant.

Law enforcement must focus on early, positive intervention to empower parents and students.

Parents must be held accountable, including prosecution in the most severe cases.

Attorney General Harris was joined at the symposium by: Los Angeles District Attorney Jackie Lacey, California Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson, Compton City Mayor Aja Brown, Dr. Robert Ross, President & CEO of the California Endowment, Tom Saenz, President and General Counsel of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund and Hedy Chang, Director of Attendance Works.

The California Attorney General's office will issue this report annually. The office's Civil Rights Enforcement Section spent 7 months researching this crisis and convening stakeholders to devise solutions.

As the District Attorney of San Francisco, Attorney General Harris started a citywide truancy initiative in 2006. In the course of investigating factors contributing to the city's violent crime rate, she found that 94% of San Francisco homicide victims under age 25 were high school dropouts. Then-District Attorney Harris formed a partnership with the school district to inform parents that they had a legal duty to ensure that their children attended school, provide parents of chronically truant students with wrap-around services and school-based mediation, and prosecute parents in the most severe cases where other interventions did not work.

Over a two-year period, then-District Attorney Harris's initiative reduced truancy among elementary students in San Francisco by 23%, according to the San Francisco Unified School District. The initiative also served as a model for SB 1317 (Leno), which defined "chronic truancy" for the first time under state law and established the initiative's model of combining meaningful services with smart sanctions in the California Penal Code. The bill was sponsored by then-District Attorney Harris and was enacted in law in 2010.

The report is available in its entirety online at: <https://oag.ca.gov/truancy>

###