

BEST PRACTICES IN IMPROVING STUDENT ATTENDANCE



In the following report, Hanover Research examines research-based strategies for combatting absenteeism in schools. The report also reviews the strategies that four exemplary districts implemented for improving student attendance.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

Improving student attendance and preventing truancy is consistently on the agenda of educators, parents, and communities. Students who are not in school typically cannot get the formal education they need and are at a higher risk of dropping out completely. Raising school attendance rates is often a multi-faceted task, involving not only school personnel, but also students, caregivers, and the greater community. In the following report, Hanover Research reviews the secondary literature on research-based best practices for improving student attendance at all school levels. The report comprises the following two sections:

- **Section I: Best Practices for Improving Student Attendance** reviews the literature on the underlying factors that contribute to student absenteeism and examines successful strategies that other districts and communities have implemented to improve student attendance.
- **Section II: District Profiles** reviews four successful school districts' attendance improvement programs, including the associated components and outcomes.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Chronic absenteeism has been shown to reduce educational outcomes at all school levels.** At the elementary level, chronic absence is typically associated with poor performance in core academic subjects, while absenteeism at the high school level is statistically linked to higher dropout rates. Students from disadvantaged groups and those living in poverty are more likely to experience harmful effects of missing school and be chronically absent.
- **The most successful attendance policies should involve families and the broader school community.** Communications between schools and parents about the importance of attendance is necessary for reducing chronic absenteeism. Schools must clearly disseminate information about their attendance policies in a variety of accessible formats, and ideally in multiple languages if appropriate. Successful attendance campaigns normally utilize websites and local media to communicate to parents and students about the importance of attending school. Moreover, effective programs should connect families with relevant counseling services or transportation resources to ensure that students feel safe and have the necessary means to get to school.
- **Research suggests that pairing students with a dedicated mentor can help boost school attendance.** A mentor may meet with parents and occasionally participate in home visits for students with attendance or behavior issues. The "Check and Connect" model, a research-proven method for reducing absenteeism, recommends using mentors or liaisons to monitor student progress and work alongside families and communities to improve attendance.

- **Attendance incentives using non-monetary rewards are highly implementable, cost-effective strategies for combatting student absenteeism.** However, incentive-driven strategies tend to be most relevant for students in lower grades and be less effective for high school students. In addition, incentive programs should be highly targeted to avoid actions other than incentivized attendance behavior.
- **Attendance policy success is often contingent upon collecting and correctly interpreting well-targeted school attendance data.** Teachers and other school personnel should receive professional development in properly classifying, collecting, and reporting data. Successful data collection by districts has been shown to help strengthen school-specific problem areas in attendance, such as specific grade level absenteeism or demographic trends.

SECTION I: BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPROVING STUDENT ATTENDANCE

School attendance is vital to student academic success at all levels. Research suggests that students with good attendance records are more likely to improve academically and to graduate, compared to their peers with poor attendance records.¹ In this Section, Hanover Research briefly discusses the causes and impacts of absenteeism, before reviewing best practices and strategies for improving school attendance by using prevention techniques as well as targeted interventions.

OVERVIEW OF ABSENTEEISM

Generally, “chronic absenteeism” is used to describe situations where students miss 10 percent or more school time in an academic year.² Though the definition of absenteeism may differ slightly, the National Center for School Engagement asserts that the outcomes of a student missing class remain constant regardless of how truancy or absenteeism is classified.³ Several studies suggest that chronic absences frequently lead to notable academic problems.⁴

Absenteeism at all levels can negatively impact a student’s long-term achievement, beginning with critical skill development in the early grades and then academic performance and graduation rates in middle and high school.⁵ Chronic absence in Kindergarten has been linked to lower academic performance in Grade 1, with absent low-income students experiencing the greatest effects.⁶ For instance, a 2010 study by Johns Hopkins University on absenteeism in U.S. public schools found that, when compared to students with average levels of attendance, chronically absent students gained 14 percent fewer literacy skills in Kindergarten, as well as 15 percent fewer literacy skills and 12 percent fewer math skills in Grade 1.⁷ By the end of high school, absenteeism is the strongest predictor of course performance and graduation.⁸ A study by the Georgia Department of Education found a “strong relationship between attendance in Grade 8, Grade 9, and Grade 10 and grades and graduation rates, controlling for student demographics.”⁹

¹ Balfanz, R. and V. Byrnes. “The Importance of Being in Schools: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation’s Public Schools.” Johns Hopkins University, May 2012. pp. 23–25. http://www.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf

² *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

³ Maynard, B., et al. “Indicated Truancy Interventions: Effects on School Attendance Among Chronic Truant Students.” The Campbell Collaboration, July 5, 2012. p. 10. <http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/lib/download/2136/>

⁴ “Collaborative Approaches to Reducing Absenteeism Among K-12 Students.” Stanford University John W. Gardner Center, April 2012. p. 1. https://mnyouth.net/files/7-FactSheet.Absence_Interventions_PFS.pdf

⁵ Balfanz, R. and V. Byrnes. “The Importance of Being in Schools: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation’s Public Schools.” Johns Hopkins University, May 2012. pp. 18–19. http://www.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

BEST PRACTICES IN COMBATting ABSENTEEISM

Students miss school for a number of reasons, some of which can be attributed to factors beyond their control. Minorities, males, and urban students, as well as those from low-income, single parent, and large households, are particularly susceptible to chronic absenteeism. For example, the Johns Hopkins University study notes that the reasons for student absence may include the obligations or circumstances that prevent them from going to school, their intention to evade events or interactions at school, or their lack of effort to get to school.¹⁰

Additionally, a student's past truancy can be a notable predictor of future truancy. In particular, the National Center for Education Statistics notes that, "high school dropouts have been found to exhibit a history of negative behaviors, including high levels of absenteeism throughout their childhood, at higher rates than high school graduates."¹¹ This finding indicates a potential need for districts and schools to address absenteeism early in a student's academic career. To help combat absenteeism in early grades, educators should pay more attention to the signs of disinterest or struggle. **Some studies suggest that elementary level interventions are more effective in boosting attendance than those that begin in middle or high school.**¹²

In addition, the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, an interdisciplinary research center at Stanford University, introduced four broad categories of factors that may contribute to student truancy and absenteeism, including:¹³

- **Individual issues** that may discourage school attendance include learning disabilities, poor school attachments, behavior problems, perceived or real lack of safety, boredom, or indifference in class, lagging schoolwork, or the need for employment.
- **Family issues** may include poverty, single-parent status, child maltreatment, parental disabilities, lack of parental involvement in education, family mobility, or family care responsibilities.
- **District and school policies and practices** that may encourage student absenteeism include attendance policies, a lack of individualized attention, and relationships between students and teachers.
- **Community issues** such as high levels of family mobility, violence, child maltreatment, crime, drug abuse, or unemployment may lead to absenteeism.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

¹¹ "Every School Day Counts – The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data." National Forum on Education Statistics, February 2009. p. 1. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009804.pdf>

¹² Railsback, J. "Increasing Student Attendance: Strategies from Research and Practice." Northwest Regional Educational Practice. p. 16. http://educationnorthwest.org/webfm_send/302

¹³ Bullet points adapted from: "Collaborative Approaches to Reducing Absenteeism Among K-12 Students." Stanford University John W. Gardner Center, April 2012. p. 2. https://mnyouth.net/files/7-FactSheet.Absence_Interventions_PFS.pdf

The following subsections review best practices in combatting absences that result from these four categories of contributing factors. **In general, many student motivations for absenteeism can be addressed through prevention strategies.** However, if prevention fails, educators may follow up with early intervention, targeted, and/or legal interventions.

Figure 1.1 below outlines the “continuum approach” highlighted by the John W. Gardner Center. Along this continuum, prevention and early intervention strategies are those that target most of the students with absence issues, while targeted interventions are those directed at a few chronically absent students. Meanwhile, legal interventions are typically reserved for the most extreme cases of absenteeism.¹⁴

Figure 1.1: Strategies to Increase Student Attendance

STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION
<p>Prevention</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Establish sound, reasonable attendance policies to set clear standards and high expectations for students ▪ Create a positive school climate ▪ Increase engagement and personalization with students and families through family involvement ▪ Create a culturally responsive environment ▪ Educate parents about the risk factors for youth absenteeism and truancy, including gang involvement, violence and other anti-social behaviors
<p>Early Intervention</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reduce barriers to attendance, especially in elementary school ▪ Increase monitoring of attendance and inform parents about the importance of attendance when students begin to show absenteeism patterns
<p>Targeted Intervention</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Specifically designed to help students with attendance and dropping out include in-school, alternative, and community-based programs; and partnerships between school, community organizations, and community juvenile justice agencies. Most of these programs are at the high school level, although some are in middle schools as well
<p>Legal Intervention</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use courts for families or older students who do not respond to other intervention forms. Some court-based truancy interventions have been successful, but punishment can further deter children from coming to school

Source: Stanford University¹⁵

While the preventive strategies presented in this section cover all levels of schooling, **some studies have found that interventions that start in elementary school are more effective in increasing attendance than those starting in middle or high school.**¹⁶ Reaching vulnerable students early may help young children “establish a positive relationship with the school

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Contents taken verbatim with minor edits from: Ibid.

¹⁶ Railsback, J. “Increasing Student Attendance: Strategies from Research and Practice.” Northwest Regional Educational Practice. p. 16. <http://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/increasing-student-attendance.pdf>

system” rather than feel being forced “to rectify a negative relationship when the child becomes an adolescent.”¹⁷

INDIVIDUAL STRATEGIES

This subsection explores several student-centered attendance strategies that educators have successfully implemented. It should be noted that fewer strategies in this area have research-based evidence for their overall impact compared to strategies in other categories. However, anecdotal evidence from a large number of schools suggests that individual strategies, such as student incentives and the use of outside volunteer “monitors,” have been found to increase student attendance rates.

STUDENT INCENTIVE STRATEGIES

Student incentive programs have become a common attendance strategy implemented in many school districts. A study by the Brookings Institution, a non-profit, independent think tank, examined student incentive programs in five major U.S. cities. In particular, students in these programs were monetarily compensated for educational inputs (e.g., reading books, completing homework, or attending school) or student achievement outputs (e.g., standardized test scores or classroom grades). For example, a Washington, D.C. program noted in the study incentivized five student behaviors, and participating students were eligible to receive up to \$10 per day for meeting specific behavioral expectations.¹⁸ While no program rewarding outputs showed statistically significant results, these programs yielded positive findings in academic achievement.¹⁹ However, similar incentive programs conducted in other cities have demonstrated mixed results.²⁰

The literature suggests that student attendance incentives do not need to be costly. For example, successful incentives can include extra recess time or homework passes. Class-wide incentives that encourage friendly competition between classes also tend to be powerful, as students can encourage their peers to attend school so that the entire group can benefit from the competition. In particular, Attendance Works, a national and state initiative promoting better policies and practices around school attendance, provides some example ideas for student attendance incentives, highlighted in Figure 1.2 below.

¹⁷ Ibid., citing Ford, J. and R. Sutphen. “Early Intervention to Improve Attendance in Elementary School for At-Risk Children: A Pilot Program.” *Social Work in Education*, 18:2, 1996.

¹⁸ Allan, B. and R. Fryer. “The Power and Pitfalls of Education Incentives.” The Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institute, September 2011. pp. 8–11.
http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/fryer/files/092011_incentives_fryer_allen_paper2.pdf

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

Figure 1.2: Attendance Incentive Ideas

FROM TEACHERS	FROM SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Positive comments ▪ Positive notes home to parents ▪ Extra time at the computer ▪ Homework pass ▪ First-in-line privileges ▪ Cookie or snack coupons ▪ Pencils, pens, stickers, bookmarks, etc. ▪ Team certificates ▪ Name on an “attendance wall” in the classroom ▪ Chance to act as teacher’s assistant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recognition during morning announcements ▪ Certificate at student assembly ▪ Breakfast/lunch with principal, superintendent, school board president, etc. ▪ School supplies ▪ Food coupons redeemable in cafeteria ▪ Food gift certificate for restaurants ▪ Ice cream/pizza party for class with best attendance ▪ Choice of donated items, such as movie tickets or gift certificates ▪ Traveling trophy for homeroom with best monthly attendance ▪ Parking space near building for student with most improved attendance

Source: Attendance Works²¹

One successful incentive strategy was implemented by the Corona-Norco Unified School District (CNUSD), a runner-up for the 2012 Broad Prize for Urban Education, which is an annual prize awarded to districts successfully narrowing the achievement gap.²² The district implemented a nearly cost-free strategy to increase student attendance. It first analyzed student data to identify attendance patterns, including the particular days on which students were more likely to miss school, and then created incentives for students to attend class on these specific days. For example, teachers changed to test students on Fridays, creating motivation for them to attend class on this commonly missed day of the week.²³ There is no conclusive data to show the effectiveness of this strategy; however, it remains as a low-cost, low-risk, and easily implementable solution for schools and districts that wish to improve attendance.

Student attendance incentives have been implemented by many school districts due to their low cost. Several best practices for using incentive programs have emerged from the literature, including:

- **Attendance incentives are most effective when they are part of a more comprehensive approach**, including outreach to families, the development of a school-wide culture, and increased student engagement.²⁴ Isolated effects from

²¹ Chart contents taken verbatim from: “Establishing School-Wide Attendance Incentives.” Attendance Works. p. 2. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/incentives.pdf>

²² “Corona-Norco Unified School District Receives \$150,000 in College Scholarships.” Corona-Norco Unified School District. <http://www.cnusd.k12.ca.us/Page/17311>

²³ “2013 Broad Prize: About the Finalist, Corona-Norco Unified School District.” Broad Foundation, 2013. p. 3. <http://broadfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/coronafacts.pdf>

²⁴ Railsback, Op. cit., p. 19.

incentive programs are modest at best, and students rarely internalize these incentive structures.²⁵

- **Low-cost incentives generally work as well as high-cost, monetary incentives.** Low-cost incentive examples may include certificates, extra recess time, homework passes, and pizza parties.²⁶ These strategies are primarily used for targeting attendance among primary school students.²⁷
- **Schools should avoid recognizing “perfect attendance” only and reward punctuality in general.** As any missed class time can impact student achievement, attendance should be recognized in a variety of ways.²⁸
- **Programs that align the incentives of teachers, students, and parents** have the greatest impact on direct outcomes.²⁹

USING MENTORS TO IMPROVE ATTENDANCE

Another strategy frequently cited in the literature for reducing truancy among students is the “Check and Connect” model, which uses relationship-based interventions for students with both chronic absenteeism issues and behavioral problems. Using this model, educators are encouraged to refer at-risk students to a “monitor” who acts a mentor and liaises between the student’s parents, school, and community agencies. Monitors work to build trust between students and their families, and identify barriers hindering their regular attendance. They also check in with students monthly and evaluate their behavioral and attendance marks, modifying intervention strategies as deemed necessary. Generally, monitors work with students and their families for up to two years.³⁰

A number of other examples in the literature indicate that student mentorship programs successfully reduce absenteeism. For example, a 2013 analysis of “Success Mentors” that worked with chronically absent students in New York City found that each participant gained about nine days of school per year, and that high school participants were 52 percent more likely to remain in school the following academic year compared to their peers who did not receive mentoring support.³¹

It is essential that mentors have access to students’ attendance data and maintain a consistent, yearlong relationship with students as well as a connection to school leadership. Through mentoring arrangements, some schools also pair students with community members

²⁵ Allan and Fryer, Op. cit., p. 21.

²⁶ Railsback, Op. cit., p. 14.

²⁷ “Establishing School-Wide Attendance Incentives,” Op. cit.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Allan and Fryer, Op. cit., p. 16.

³⁰ “Relationship Building: The Role of the Monitor.” Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice. <http://cecp.air.org/safetynet/check.htm>

³¹ “Success Mentors.” Attendance Works. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/new-york-city/success-mentors/>

such as City Year’s AmeriCorps workers, retired professionals, social work interns, college students, and/or guidance counselors.³²

FAMILY STRATEGIES

Engaging families is also an important strategy in improving school attendance, and effective communication with families has shown positive results.³³ Family involvement practices for improving student attendance may include communicating with families about student attendance, providing families with contact information at school, conducting attendance workshops, and offering after-school programs. Direct methods such as parent phone calls and regular attendance updates have also been associated with improved attendance rates.³⁴

Some researchers recommend that schools establish a designated contact for attendance issues, as providing parents with a specific contact to discuss attendance issues and occasionally conduct home visits may reduce chronic absence.³⁵ The National Center for Children in Poverty, a non-partisan research center promoting the interests of children in low-income families, supports this finding, arguing that attendance monitoring and contacting parents when troubling patterns of absence occur can improve overall absence rates.³⁶

Importantly, districts should be advised to use communication methods that are accessible to families from all cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Districts with chronic attendance problems sometimes lack the staff capable of communicating directly with non-English-speaking families about school attendance policies.³⁷ Families with other cultural backgrounds may not be aware, for example, that education in the United States is compulsory from a young age. Districts should distribute information to families about attendance in languages other than English, and in accessible, low-literacy formats when possible.³⁸

In particular, Attendance Works recommends a set of best practices for communicating with parents and guardians who may be difficult to reach. These recommendations are summarized in Figure 1.3 below.

³² “Collaborative Approaches to Reducing Absenteeism Among K-12 Students,” Op. cit., p. 5.

³³ Sheldon, S. and J. Epstein. “Getting Students to School: Using Family and Community Involvement to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism.” *School Community Journal*, 14:2, 2004. p. 52. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ794822.pdf>

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³⁵ Balfanz and Byrnes, Op. cit., p. 36.

³⁶ Chang, H. and M. Romero. “Present, Engaged, and Accounted for: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades.” National Center for Children in Poverty, September 2008. p. 11. http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_837.pdf

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁸ “Strengthening School Attendance Policies/Practices to Address Educational Neglect and Truancy.” Student Advocacy, November 2008. p. 2. <http://studentadvocacy.net/AttendanceMemoFinal4-6-09.pdf>

Figure 1.3: Strategies for Communicating with Hard-to-Reach Parents

STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION
<p>Start with the Basics</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ask students for their home phone number, as well as any relevant cell phone numbers ▪ Talk to a chronically absent student’s siblings if you can’t reach the student ▪ Look at school forms – accurate phone numbers are often on free and reduced lunch forms
<p>Seek out the Parents</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ For younger children, approach the person who picks up the child ▪ Send a formal letter home informing parents of their legal obligation to provide up-to-date emergency numbers and contact information
<p>Get Creative</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If an event is coming up that parents are likely to call about, such as school picture day, be sure to alert office workers to ask parents for their contact information ▪ Use address information to find and get in touch with families who live near chronically absent kids whose parents you’re having a hard time reaching

Source: Attendance Works³⁹

Moreover, Student Advocacy, a non-profit educational organization advocating for student success in New York, recommends the following action steps for ensuring that parents are aware of attendance policies and the overall importance of school attendance:⁴⁰

- Sending a summary of the attendance policy by mail at the start of the school year, and asking parents to sign and return a statement indicating that the attendance policy has been read and is understood;
- Encouraging families to seek clarification from a specified school official of any aspect of the school’s attendance policy when anything is unclear, including the difference between excused and unexcused absences;
- Holding small meetings as school begins, especially for families new to the district or those whose children have already had attendance problems, reviewing why regular school attendance is so important;
- Encouraging families to discuss the attendance policy with their children, reinforcing the school’s expectations for excellent attendance;
- Highlighting that it is the family’s responsibility to ensure that their children arrive at school each day on time, remain in school for the full day, and attend school consistently throughout the year;
- Clarifying that families should notify the appropriate school official by phone on the morning of the student’s absence and provide a written excuse when the student returns to school; and

³⁹ “Getting in Touch with Hard-to-Reach Parents.” Attendance Works.
<http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/hardtoreach.pdf>

⁴⁰ Bullet points taken verbatim from: “Strengthening School Attendance Policies/Practices to Address Educational Neglect and Truancy,” Op. cit., pp. 2–3.

- Emphasizing that families need to respond immediately to any call or letter from their child’s school regarding absenteeism.

Similarly, the California Department of Education suggests that districts use targeted communication strategies to encourage attendance, including informing parents or other caregivers via telephone to verify absences and conducting regular home visits.⁴¹ Specifically, some experts recommend that schools provide a “home family liaison” to act as a facilitator to reduce student absenteeism.⁴² An article in *School Community Journal* asserts that the most effective communication practices for improving student attendance include sending newsletters that list the students with the best attendance, giving families the name and phone number of a school contact for attendance policies and issues, providing online student attendance records, and conducting parent orientations on attendance expectations.⁴³

Finally, **building an attendance culture requires a universal and preventative approach that involves families in students’ early academic careers.** Coordinating with families should ideally focus resources on the families with the highest needs, and begin as early as possible in the school year.⁴⁴ In particular, Attendance Works outlines a plan for schools to design an early intervention plan during the summer months. Many elements of this plan may already exist in some schools, but oftentimes are not systematically coordinated. This summer model for outreach and intervention coordination is summarized in Figure 1.4.

Figure 1.4: School-Wide Attendance Planning during the Summer Months

LEVEL	SUGGESTED ACTIVITY	DESCRIPTION
Universal	Teacher Welcome	Teacher contacts family to welcome them to school, remind of the first day, and invite them to Back to School Celebration
	Back to School Celebration	Backpack giveaway, announce attendance incentives, gather families living in same area to talk about coordinating getting to school
	Community Partner Welcome	Staff member introduces staff, reminds family of first day of school, invites to community-led Back to School celebration(s)
	Back to School Neighborhood or Community Rally	N/A
Early Outreach	Parent Education	Schools and/or community partners offer workshops, classes, Pre-K “boot camps” to high-need families/communities

Source: Attendance Works⁴⁵

⁴¹ “School Attendance Improvement Strategies.” California Department of Education. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ai/cw/attendstrategy.asp>

⁴² Railsback, Op. cit., p. 41.

⁴³ Sheldon and Epstein, Op. cit., p. 48.

⁴⁴ “Connecting with Students and Families to Reduce Chronic Absence: A Model for Outreach and Intervention.” Attendance Works. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Tips-for-Outreach-1st-Day.pdf>

⁴⁵ Chart contents taken verbatim from: Ibid., p. 2.

Attendance Works further notes that districts may need to implement the following infrastructure supports and training to support the recommended summer outreach model:⁴⁶

- Community partner training on chronic absence;
- Teacher, administrator, and school site-level staff training on chronic absence, attendance incentives, celebrations/rituals;
- Teacher training on communicating/building relationships with high-need families [including home visiting] ; and
- District provides chronic absence data to school, community partner staff.

DISTRICT- AND SCHOOL-LEVEL STRATEGIES

To ensure that students adhere to attendance policies, districts need to clearly communicate its policies to students and disseminate information about the importance of school attendance.⁴⁷ School attendance polices should ideally set clear expectations, be aligned with the overall district policies, and promote the understanding among all school community members, including parents.⁴⁸ One example of how to make student attendance a priority throughout the district is Baltimore’s Student Attendance Campaign. Key strategies in the campaign include hosting a series of community workshops, conducted by the Open Society Institute-Baltimore to promote school attendance and gain support from the city’s mayor as well as the superintendent of Baltimore City Public Schools. Other major characteristics of the Student Attendance Campaign include:⁴⁹

- Use of electronic dashboards where principals receive automatic alerts when students show signs of chronic absenteeism;
- Revision of school district discipline code to increase interventions for misbehavior and reduce the number of offenses for which suspensions or expulsions are possible outcomes;
- An attendance campaign for high school students that includes post card mailings, welcome back to school calls from local celebrities, and targeted home visits; and
- Revised attendance measures and strategies based on a continuum of attendance that include high attendance (5 or fewer absences), regular attendance (95 percent rate), chronic absence (attendance rate of 90 percent), severe chronic absence (attendance rate of 80 percent), and truant (unlawfully absent 20 percent of days).

DATA COLLECTION

⁴⁶ Bullet points taken verbatim from: Ibid.

⁴⁷ “Attendance Policy and Procedures Manual to Promote Positive Attendance.” Oakland Unified School District, 2012. p. 10. http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Attendance-Manual-Final-from-Editor_v9-1.pdf

⁴⁸ Railsback, Op. cit., pp. 14–15.

⁴⁹ Bullet points adapted from: “Collaborative Approaches to Reducing Absenteeism Among K-12 Students,” Op. cit., p. 6.

School administrators and district leaders need to examine data to understand both general and specific problems with chronic absenteeism. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) emphasizes that student data “provide the information needed for schools to formulate practices, programs, and policies to improve attendance rates.”⁵⁰ The recommended first step is to develop a data system to collect and analyze student data. Data collection and analysis can reveal the characteristics of chronically absent students, and allow the district or school to determine corresponding intervention strategies.⁵¹ Districts must also ensure that they utilize precise data collection methods and interpret the data correctly. For example, as opposed to collecting school-wide attendance averages, the NCES proposes a taxonomy of attendance codes that provides more information about student absence and allows for comparisons across schools. Examples of these codes to signify absence include:⁵²

- Non-instructional activity recognized by the state or school;
- Religious observation;
- Illness, injury, health treatment, or examination;
- Family emergency or bereavement;
- Legal or judicial requirement;
- Family activity; and
- Student skipping school.

Additionally, the NCES recommends that districts issue clear, consistent data collection policies and communicate these policies with school staff. The success of attendance data collection often relies on the teachers who are tasked with updating attendance records. Because data quality suffers without clear collection policies, school administrators should ensure adequate professional development and, ideally, a comprehensive handbook. To lessen teacher responsibilities and streamline data collection and analysis, districts can upgrade their information systems to automate data collection and immediately notify parents if their child is absent.⁵³ Some researchers also suggest that when reviewing absence data, districts should evaluate the percentage of time a student spends in class as opposed to the number of days he or she is absent.⁵⁴

BEFORE- AND AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

⁵⁰ “Every School Day Counts – The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data,” Op. cit., p. 3.

⁵¹ “Collaborative Approaches to Reducing Absenteeism Among K-12 Students,” Op. cit., p. 1.

⁵² Butted text taken verbatim from: “Every School Day Counts – The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data,” Op. cit., p. 25.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 12, 15.

⁵⁴ Sparks, S. “Spurred by Statistics, Districts Combat Absenteeism.” *Education Week*, October 1, 2010. http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/10/01/06absenteeism_ep.h30.html

After-school programs have also shown promising results for promoting regular attendance in many districts. These programs can help students preserve a sense of belonging, help make connections with adults, and promote academic achievement.⁵⁵ In addition, after-school programs can relieve potential transportation issues for parents who work late or during overnight hours. A 2012 article in *Expanded Learning*, a non-profit educational foundation, indicates that after-school programs are well positioned to have a positive impact on attendance as “after-school leaders can help schools partner with parents and build good attendance habits.” Attendance Works also finds that afterschool programs can help engage students in activities that develop persistence, “a trait critical to later success in school and life.”⁵⁶

Another important strategy to promote student attendance is to ensure safe, adequate school transportation options for students. Students frequently miss school if they lack consistent transportation from parents, the bus routes are inadequate, or they feel unsafe. In Springfield, Massachusetts, teachers and students reinforced school transportation by creating a “walking school bus” project, in which teachers and parents led an organized walk to school every morning, collecting students as they go. Students using the “bus” were found to be more likely to attend school.⁵⁷ Even in situations where school districts cannot ensure full transportation to school every day, schools can take steps to ensure better transportation. For example, in Baltimore City Schools, a large number of middle and high school students take public transportation to their schools. During “school choice events,” in which parents can sign their children up to attend a certain school in the district, the district hosted a “calculation station” that allowed parents to see how their school choice would impact school commute times and transport options. One of the station’s designers indicated that families carefully reconsidered their school choice after learning that it would take more than one hour on public transportation to reach the school.⁵⁸

COMMUNITY STRATEGIES

Building relationships between schools and families is crucial to combatting chronic absenteeism. Coordinating with the broader community allows more stakeholders to be involved and thus has a larger impact. The trend of large-scale attendance campaigns demonstrates that communities should be actively involved to combat school absenteeism, including cross-sector collaboration and early prevention efforts in students’ academic careers. Community organizations may also be able to help address a variety of social issues

⁵⁵ Chang, H. and P. Jordan. “Building a Culture of Attendance: Schools and Afterschool Programs Together Can and Should Make a Difference!” *Expanded Learning*, 2012. http://www.expandinglearning.org/docs/chang_jordan.pdf

⁵⁶ “Making the Case: How Good After-School Programs Improve School-Day Attendance.” Attendance Works, September 2011. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Afterschool9.20.pdf>

⁵⁷ “Springfield: Walking School Bus.” Attendance Works. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/springfield-walking-school-bus/>

⁵⁸ Dorsey, C. “At Choice Fair, Calculation Station Helps Students Figure Out Commute Times.” Baltimore City Schools, December 2012. <http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&ModuleInstanceID=20221&ViewID=047E6BE3-6D87-4130-8424-D8E4E9ED6C2A&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=21997&PageID=6030>

that may contribute to absenteeism. Examples of community organizations to which students and families could be referred include:⁵⁹

- Community service agencies providing grief counseling, charitable interventions, parenting skills classes, or drug and alcohol counseling;
- Health referrals to agencies that offer techniques for dealing with head lice and clinics that offer low-income services;
- Legal services by lawyers and consumer credit counselors;
- Agencies that offer shelter, counseling, mental health services, and suicide or other hotlines; and
- Youth organizations which offer mentoring, tutoring, and after school programs.

The literature broadly recommends that educators and community partners begin attendance outreach before the start of the academic year and continue throughout the school year. In particular, Attendance Works notes that community organizations are particularly well positioned to help schools reduce chronic absenteeism by addressing potential barriers such as “unreliable transportation, unstable housing, and poor health.”⁶⁰ To that end, it offers a number of specific recommendations for engaging the community, which are typically implemented in September.⁶¹ These community engagement strategies include training volunteers to serve as student mentors and holding parent summits with child-serving agencies as well as community-based groups.⁶²

Moreover, the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities outlines some additional best practices for absenteeism prevention, which include the following:⁶³

- Engage an array of stakeholders, such as schools, law enforcement, youth organizations, libraries, and social services. Collaboration helps to pool resources and allows for more community input; and
- Make attendance a community priority, and communicate that attendance is not about blaming either schools or families, but about galvanizing community resources to ensure that all students have the chance to succeed.

PROGRAM-LEVEL INTERVENTIONS

In addition to the aforementioned strategies, some schools have also had some success implementing multi-site attendance programs. Figure 1.5 below summarizes some of the

⁵⁹ Bullet points taken verbatim from: “Strengthening School Attendance Policies/Practices to Address Educational Neglect and Truancy,” Op. cit., p. 6.

⁶⁰ “Community Organizations and Faith-Based Groups.” Attendance Works. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/5668-2/>

⁶¹ “Attendance Awareness Campaign: September 2016.” Attendance Works. <http://awareness.attendanceworks.org/>

⁶² “Community Organizations and Faith-Based Groups,” Op. cit.

⁶³ Bulleted text adapted from: “Collaborative Approaches to Reducing Absenteeism Among K-12 Students,” Op. cit., p. 3.

most common attendance programs cited in the literature as a “what works” best practice by Attendance Works.

Figure 1.5: Multi-site Attendance Programs

PROGRAM	DESCRIPTION	RATIONALE / RESULTS
<p>City Year Attendance Initiative: Near Peers⁶⁴</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Non-profit program in partnership with AmeriCorps ▪ Based in 20 cities; members range from 17 to 24 years old ▪ Each City Year intervention has team of eight to 20 members ▪ As part of the initiative, students are welcomed to school each morning by City Year members ▪ Interventions intended to ensure students reach Grade 10 without graduation early warning indicators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Program guided by 2006 Johns Hopkins study that poor attendance vastly reduces graduation rates ▪ In 2011, more than half of the students below 90 percent in average daily attendance in the fall achieved 90 percent attendance by the spring
<p>Diplomas Now⁶⁵</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Serves approximately 26,000 students in 13 cities ▪ Fully integrated approach that improves school curriculum while providing ABC support – attendance, behavior, and course performance ▪ Mostly staffed by City Year corps members ▪ Program team ensures each at-risk student has caring adults to help him/her improve achievement ▪ Together with educators, the team sets goals based on student attendance, behavior, and course performance ▪ Each student receives an individual student plan, and early warning data is identified and regularly reviewed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Approach has led to significant attendance increases at several Diplomas Now schools ▪ In addition to attendance, program has helped improve student achievement and reduce the number of student suspensions
<p>Central Texas: A Regional Campaign⁶⁶</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “E3 Alliance” regional campaign with 14 school districts, businesses, and community partners to increase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implemented largest Texas flu immunization campaign, with 6,500 free vaccinations, underscoring link between health and attendance

⁶⁴ “City Year: Near Peers.” Attendance Works. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/multi-site-programs/city-year/>

⁶⁵ [1] “What We Do.” Diplomas Now. <http://diplomasnow.org/about/what-we-do/>

[2] “Diplomas Now.” Attendance Works. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/multi-site-programs/diplomas-now/>

⁶⁶ “Central Texas: A Regional Campaign.” Attendance Works. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/central-texas-a-regional-campaign/>

PROGRAM	DESCRIPTION	RATIONALE / RESULTS
	<p>attendance by at least 2 percentage points</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Overall campaign with triple mission: teachers are able to teach, students are able to learn, and schools receive extra money based on attendance ▪ Launched analysis on reasons students missed school ▪ Leveraged objective data, community outreach, and business partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Campaign alliance disseminated fliers before holidays reminding families of the cost of missing too many school days ▪ Created <i>Parent's Guide to Student Attendance</i>, which provided advice to parents when children are ill at home ▪ Full guide was condensed to a refrigerator magnet, using financial support from local businesses ▪ Result of analysis determined 26 codes to be tracked at nine sample schools
<p>MicroSociety Program⁶⁷</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Non-profit organization which aims to create learning environments applicable to real world settings ▪ Based on notion that students need motivation to attend and stay in school ▪ Produced 250,000 graduates in 40 states ▪ Approved for Title III due documented track record of success, particularly with English Language Learners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One school in El Paso, TX had test scores improve 200 percent after adopting MicroSociety approach ▪ Cited by U.S. Department of Education as improving attendance, behavior, and attitude toward school

⁶⁷ "Facilitate Language Acquisition and Cultural Assimilation." MicroSociety International. <http://www.microsociety.org/why-microsociety/>

SECTION II: DISTRICT PROFILES

This section examines the successful strategies that four exemplary districts have implemented to improve student attendance. Each of the following district profiles includes strategies that have been shown to yield significant results as determined by the non-profit education group, Attendance Works. The organization particularly highlights “what works” attendance programs that show notable evidence of success in reducing chronic absenteeism. Attendance Works further identifies the following key strategies as having a long-term impact on reducing absenteeism:⁶⁸

- Recognition of good and improved attendance;
- Engaging students and parents;
- Monitoring attendance data and practice;
- Providing personalized early outreach; and
- Developing programmatic responses to barriers (as needed).

Each of the districts profiled in this report has implemented some, if not all, of these successful strategies.

PITTSBURGH PUBLIC SCHOOLS (PA)

Chronic student absenteeism in Pittsburgh Public Schools and other districts in Allegheny County has become a community-wide concern.⁶⁹ Particularly for large, urban Pittsburgh schools, chronic attendance is increasingly problematic. For example, the Allegheny County Department of Health and Human Services found that during the 2011-2012 academic year, 23 percent of students missed at least 10 percent of their school time. In addition, 58 percent of the students who were absent for at least 20 percent of their school time were already in the County human services system.⁷⁰ To address school chronic absenteeism, community organizations such as the United Way of Allegheny County, together with county school districts and social/philanthropic organizations, offered prevention and intervention programs to students.⁷¹

In particular, Pittsburgh Public Schools launched the “Be There” campaign in 2013 to reduce absenteeism. The program, in partnership with the United Way of Allegheny County, focused on positive messaging and student incentives to encourage students to attend school

⁶⁸ Bullet points taken verbatim with minor edits from: “What Works.” Attendance Works.
<http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/>

⁶⁹ Fraser, J. “Attendance Matters: Allegheny County Targets Chronic School Absenteeism.” Pittsburgh Today.
<http://pittsburghtoday.org/special-reports/attendance-matters/>

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

regularly.⁷² Its initial goal was to have at least 300 organizations and community members who regularly work with children sign a pledge to help make student attendance a priority.⁷³

PROCESS

Data-driven analysis and communication with parents and families are two cornerstones of the “Be There” campaign. Parents need to be fully aware of school attendance policies and the negative impacts of absence on their children’s education.⁷⁴ One commonly quoted statistic in the program is that missing two days of school per month can lead to a 10 percent absence rate. During the 2014-2015 academic year, the United Way of Allegheny County worked with the University of Pittsburgh’s social work program and provided two interns at two schools within the district. These interns worked regularly with 20 to 25 students who had poor attendance records, regularly checking in with them and calling parents when students were absent.⁷⁵

Prior to the “Be There” campaign, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services established a data sharing agreement with all school districts within the County, including Pittsburgh Public Schools. Fourteen of the County’s 42 districts have signed the data sharing agreement, which allowed for both the schools and the County Department of Human Services to (confidentially) keep track of factors that might be influencing student achievement, such as grades, attendance rates, discipline records, mental health, and potential abuse.⁷⁶

One concrete, replicable element of the “Be There” campaign is an online toolkit designed for each school in the County to hold its own “attendance challenge” for students. The *Attendance Challenge Planning Guide and Toolkit* highlights the kinds of incentives that schools may offer and includes a step-by-step implementation guide. In addition, the “Be There” website offers free resources, including promotional material such as stickers and posters.⁷⁷

In particular, the “Be There Attendance Challenge” toolkit comprises five phases that describe the logistics and details for all stakeholders such as staff, parents, and community members to carry out the campaign during the academic year. These phases and the associated to-do lists are summarized in Figure 2.1 below.

⁷² “Who You Help: Be There Campaign.” United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania. <https://uwsdpa.org/be-there/>

⁷³ Chute, E. “United Way ‘Be There’ campaign Takes Aim at School Attendance.” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, August 3, 2013. <http://www.post-gazette.com/local/region/2013/08/19/United-Way-Be-There-campaign-takes-aim-at-school-attendance/stories/201308190167>

⁷⁴ “Pittsburgh: Be There Campaign.” Attendance Works. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/pittsburgh-the-be-there-campaign/>

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ “Attendance Challenge: Planning Guide and Toolkit.” United Way of Allegheny County. http://unitedwaypittsburgh.org/bethereresources/beThere_attendanceChallenge_toolkit.pdf

Figure 2.1: “Be There” Attendance Challenge Phases

PHASE	TO-DO LIST
<p>Phase 1: <i>Planning and Preparation</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Schedule planning meeting ▪ Encourage all staff to participate ▪ Assign roles and responsibilities ▪ Select Attendance Challenge beginning and end dates ▪ Brainstorm incentive ideas ▪ Talk to students about their wants ▪ Spread awareness around school
<p>Phase 2 <i>Challenge Kick-off</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Send home a parent flyer a week prior to kick-off ▪ Recruit volunteers and staff for kick-off event ▪ Cheer on students as they enter school ▪ Announce commencement of challenge ▪ Hold informal assembly or announcement ▪ Encourage students to attend every day ▪ Begin to closely monitor attendance data
<p>Phase 3 <i>Halfway Point</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Check accuracy of attendance data ▪ Begin to finalize incentive details ▪ Remind and encourage students ▪ Tell parents how their child is doing
<p>Phase 4 <i>End Celebration</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Print and prepare certificates ▪ Purchase prizes/incentives ▪ Coordinate logistics with staff ▪ Invite parents to assembly/ceremony ▪ Celebrate good attendance
<p>Phase 5 <i>Follow-up</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Thank all participants ▪ Check and compare attendance data ▪ Complete Be There evaluation

Source: United Way⁷⁸

Especially, the Attendance Challenge component of the campaign should involve a number of roles for successful implementation. These roles may include school lead, incentive coordinator, attendance monitor, and community organizer.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 7–11.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

OUTCOMES

Since its 2013 launch, the “Be There” campaign has reached 21 school districts and 12,000 students. Moreover, more than 300 community partners have joined the campaign, including serving on the campaign advisory committee. The United Way indicated that student attendance increased in 45 of the 49 participating public schools within the County.⁸⁰ As of March 2016, about 40 percent of the targeted at-risk students had shown an increase in attendance, while 32 percent of them moved out of chronic absence in the previous year.⁸¹

COVINA VALLEY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (CA)

Covina-Valley Unified School District (CVUSD) serves about 12,000 students in Los Angeles County, California. Its students come from diverse backgrounds, with 77 percent of them being Hispanic, 11 percent being white, 8 percent being Asian, and 4 percent being African-American or Filipino descent.⁸² Beginning in the 2011-12 academic year, CVUSD improved its average daily attendance rates by committing to prioritizing attendance. The District was recognized by the California Department of Education as one of six “models of attendance improvement and dropout prevention.”⁸³

PROCESS

The district’s overall attendance strategy revolves around hiring attendance personnel, in addition to a “district-wide emphasis on building a positive culture of attendance at school sites, actionable data, a Saturday Academic School, community partnerships, and a strengthened truancy infrastructure.”⁸⁴ As the first step, the district reinstated a dedicated administrative position, known as the Supervisor of Child Welfare and Attendance. In an effort to change the attendance culture, the district administrators prioritized training principals as well as local police officers in the “I’m in” model to expand the County school attendance campaign in their schools. The “I’m in” program provides incentives to students for good attendance and recognizes schools with improved attendance rates.⁸⁵

Additionally, CVUSD aimed at establishing reliable student data at the district level rather than relying exclusively on staff to generate attendance information. The Supervisor of Child Welfare and Attendance sends data to principals at the beginning of each academic year on any students who missed 15 or more days during the previous academic year, missed 10 days in a single semester, or had been identified for the Student Attendance Review Board (SARB)

⁸⁰ “Be Smart, Be Your Best, Be Ready!” United Way. <https://uwsdpa.org/be-there/>

⁸¹ “Pittsburgh: Be There Campaign,” Op. cit.

⁸² “Covina-Valley Unified School District.” Attendance Works. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/covina-valley-unified-school-district/>

⁸³ “State Schools Chief Tom Torlakson Announces 2014 Model Attendance Improvement Programs.” California Department of Education News Release, May 6, 2014. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr14/yr14rel49.asp>

⁸⁴ “Covina-Valley Unified School District,” Op. cit.

⁸⁵ “I’m In! Every School Day Counts.” Covina-Valley Unified School District. http://www.cvusd.k12.ca.us/district_office/departments/educational_services/Attendance/imin/

process.⁸⁶ As the school year progresses, trends in attendance are monitored to allow principals to easily see the school's progress in relation to other schools in the district.

Another notable offering of the district is the Saturday Academic School, which uses "enrichment and extracurricular activities to create a more engaging academic environment for students, elementary through high school."⁸⁷ Though students may attend voluntarily, the Saturday Academic School is designed for students to make up the learning loss from absences.⁸⁸

OUTCOMES

Through these strategies, the district's daily attendance rate increased from 95.6 percent to 97.8 percent, and the chronic absence rate dropped from 10 percent to 8.1 percent.⁸⁹ Each year, the Supervisor of Child Welfare and Attendance delivers a letter to parents emphasizing the importance of attendance and highlighting the various "I'm in" initiatives, including the CVUSD attendance goals and related activities scheduled to improve attendance for the first semester of the academic year.⁹⁰

OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (CA)

Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) is considered as a leader in addressing chronic absence in a large, urban district of more than 47,000 students.⁹¹ The district reduced its chronic absence rate dramatically, from 16 percent in the 2005-2006 academic year to 11 percent in the 2013-2014 year.⁹²

OUSD is one of the most active districts in California on improving chronic attendance rates. At the outset of each school year, OUSD informs each principal within the district of their school's attendance record from the previous year, as well as the history of each student in the school. Principals and staff then receive weekly attendance reports and the notifications of students "at risk" of becoming chronically absent.⁹³

At the beginning of their initiatives, the district did not have the data to fully understand the degree of the chronic absenteeism issue. OUSD had only monitored unexcused absences and average daily attendance, and lacked the personnel to monitor and get additional data.⁹⁴

⁸⁶ "Covina-Valley Unified School District," Op. cit.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ "Attendance Letter to Parents/Guardians." Covina-Valley Unified School District, July 2014.

http://www.cvusd.k12.ca.us/UserFiles/Servers/Server_117895/File/imin/I'm%20In%20Parent%20Letter%202014-15.pdf

⁹¹ "Oakland Unified School District Information." National Center for Education Statistics.

http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district_detail.asp?ID2=0628050&details=1

⁹² "What Works: Oakland Unified School District." Attendance Works. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/oakland/>

⁹³ "In School and On Track 2014." California Office of the Attorney General, 2014. <https://oag.ca.gov/truancy/2014>

⁹⁴ "What Works: Oakland Unified School District," Op. cit.

However, proper data analysis later helped the district administrators identify specific attendance challenges. In addition, the district's efforts to address chronic absenteeism involved the broader community, including city officials, community organizations, public health officials, and philanthropic organizations.⁹⁵

Improving student attendance continues to be one of OUSD's top priorities, and the district emphasizes collaboration across administrators, families, and the greater community in promoting attendance and supporting at-risk students. In addition, the district provides individual attendance and discipline support services, including:⁹⁶

- Building school staff capacity by assisting educators in identifying and supporting at-risk students;
- Supporting and training school staff to utilize strategies that promote good behavior and attendance;
- Providing parent notification, education, and outreach around chronic absenteeism, truancy, and disciplinary issues and referrals;
- Sending Notification of Truancy (NOT) letters;
- Facilitating School Attendance Review Board (SARB) and expulsion hearings;
- Facilitating the placement of truant and/or expelled students in the appropriate education program;
- Holding admission hearings for students returning from expulsion; and
- Establishing and maintaining relationships with community partners to promote positive attendance and alternatives for suspension.

PROCESS

Beginning in 2010, OUSD analyzed its student absenteeism data by demographic group, including race, grade level, and school. The results indicated that absenteeism at the elementary school level was especially poor, particularly in Kindergarten and in neighborhoods challenged by poverty and poor environmental health.⁹⁷

In addition, a 2014 study by the Urban Strategies Council, with the support from Great Oakland Public Schools, Oakland Public Education Fund, and Attendance Works, examined the particular challenges OUSD faced. The primary takeaways from the study include:⁹⁸

- **Chronic absence is a bigger problem at both ends of Oakland's K-12 continuum.** In kindergarten, 15 percent of students were chronically absent and about 16 percent of students in Grade 10 and Grade 11. By comparison, the chronic absence rate in Grade 6 was about half that rate.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Bullet points taken verbatim with minor edits from: "Attendance and Discipline Support Services." Oakland Unified School District. <http://www.ousd.org/Domain/83>

⁹⁷ "What Works: Oakland Unified School District," Op. cit.

⁹⁸ Bulleted content taken verbatim with minor edits from: Ibid.

- **About 18 percent of African American students were chronically absent**, a rate more than three times higher than for white and Asian students and nearly twice as high as that for Latinos.
- **English Language Learners are less likely than their peers to be chronically absent in elementary school**, but more likely to miss school in high school.
- **Students in foster care had a 19 percent rate of chronic absence**, and students with disabilities had an 18 percent rate of chronic absence.
- **Missing school makes it difficult for students to reach academic benchmarks.** Students who are chronically absent are less than half as likely to score proficient or advanced on the state reading and mathematics assessments as students who attend school regularly.

An essential part of the overall attendance program at OUSD is to provide training and support to school principals. Training is typically centered on attendance data and personalized early outreach to secure by-in and support from community partners. The district also makes chronic absence reports publicly available on the district’s website and publishes a district attendance manual, called “Every Day Counts,” to give staff clear guidance on how and when to address chronic absence.⁹⁹

Community outreach is also an important component of the district’s strategy to combat absenteeism. For example, OUSD released a music video to promote attendance that featured NFL player Marshawn Lynch, along with several students.¹⁰⁰ The district also partners with the Oakland Education Cabinet, which comprises education, business, and social services organizations as well as development foundations. The cabinet has a committee specifically focused on reducing chronic attendance in the early grades.

SCHOOL-LEVEL PROCESS

Several schools within OUSD have stood out for their success in reducing truancy among students. At Garfield Elementary School, for example, teachers and the attendance team focused on Kindergarten attendance and encouraged families through special events and weekly recognition to achieve perfect attendance.¹⁰¹ The attention to attendance began eight years ago when the district first offered more regular attendance reports to schools to identify chronic absenteeism. By the end of the 2012-2013 academic year, the school’s Kindergarten rate of chronic absence had been reduced by half, to 7 percent.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ [1] Ibid.

[2] “Attendance Policy and Procedures Manual to Promote Positive Attendance,” Op. cit.

¹⁰⁰ *I’m an Oakland School Kid (Ft. Marshawn “Beast Mode” Lynch)*. 2013. OUSDNews.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCH6kBNH2FQ>

¹⁰¹ “Garfield Elementary School.” Attendance Works. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/oakland/garfield-elementary/>

¹⁰² Ibid.

In addition, at Roosevelt Middle School, about 15 percent of its students were missing almost a month of school each year.¹⁰³ After the interventions, the school improved its absence rate from 15 percent in the 2010-2011 academic year to 8 percent the next academic year.¹⁰⁴ More specifically, the tools that Roosevelt Middle School used to improve its attendance included a number of specific measures:¹⁰⁵

- **Giving certificates of good attendance** and improving attendance and recognizing them in assemblies.
- **Organizing an “attendance team”** with various staff members, for example, an attendance clerk, a family liaison, a school nurse, a graduate student intern, and the school principal.
- **Setting goals.** Roosevelt’s goal was to have an average of 95 percent attendance overall and no chronic absence, and to have a similar attendance rate among the three biggest demographic groups (African-American, Asian Pacific Islander, and Latino).
- **Meeting every two weeks to look at the cases of chronically absent students and identifying the reasons for the absences,** as well as beginning to develop a picture of individuals and groups. For example, at Roosevelt, some students had transportation issues, while others had illnesses they previously did not know about.
- **Strategically assigning a team member to follow up on students and their families.** For example, Roosevelt’s nurse took students whose absences were primarily health related. Team members would speak with students and call families.
- **Having family conferences.** For students whose attendance rates did not improve, the attendance clerk and principal met with students and a parent/guardian to lay out expectations and sign an improvement plan.

Overall, the school attributes its success to a focus on data-driven attendance methods and support from district leadership.¹⁰⁶

OUTCOMES

Though OUSD has not reached its overall attendance goals, the district and community have clarified their goals and brought on board a number of stakeholders. According to Attendance Works, OUSD has become a district with a solid district-wide approach to reducing chronic absence. Absence rates have also steadily improved. During the 2012-2013 year, 69 percent of students had satisfactory attendance, up from 63 percent in the 2005-2006 academic year. Furthermore, an analysis conducted in 2014 found that 19 percent of its schools had reduced their chronic absence rate to 5 percent or less.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ “Roosevelt Middle School.” Attendance Works. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/oakland/roosevelt-middle/>

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Bullet points taken verbatim with minor edits from: Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ “What Works: Oakland Unified School District,” Op. cit.

PROVIDENCE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (RI)

Since high attendance is an expectation at Providence Public Schools, students who are absent for more than 10 unexcused days per semester or a total of 20 over the course of an academic year are denied course or grade level credit unless they can, despite absences, demonstrate end-of-year proficiency.¹⁰⁸ Unexcused absences, defined by the district, include truancy, skipping class, family vacations, tardiness, or missing class for out-of-school work. The district's attendance policies put the responsibility for assuring attendance on students, parents, and teachers. More specifically, teachers' main role related to attendance is to provide incentives for good attendance and make sure that students are aware of the school's policies.

Providence Public Schools was recently selected as a finalist by the U.S. Department of Education to participate in the My Brother's Keeper Success Mentors Initiative, which seeks to reduce chronic absenteeism by "connecting over one million students with caring mentors."¹⁰⁹ The district was selected partly due to its ability to provide separated data for chronic absenteeism. Most districts across the country only report average daily attendance, which is a statistic that frequently hides the smaller number of students who are chronically absent.¹¹⁰

PROCESS

At Robert L. Bailey IV Elementary School, in particular, the historical data shows that about 20 percent of students missed at least 18 days of school each academic year. This prompted a thorough examination of the absenteeism issue and the development of proactive strategies to reduce absence rates at the school.¹¹¹

In examining attendance patterns at this elementary school, administrators observed that parents working overnight shifts frequently do not wake up in time to take their children to school. To address this issue, the school offered before-school programming, including early childcare and breakfast, to help parents bring their children to school after returning from their overnight shifts.¹¹²

The district also worked with Providence Children's Initiative to create a "school attendance map" to illustrate the locations of families who identified barriers to attending school, which included "physical health, parental work schedules, and other issues that might prevent the child or children from leaving home in the morning to go to school." In response, the Initiative

¹⁰⁸ "School Attendance Policy." Providence Public Schools.

<http://www1.providenceschools.org/media/257329/attendance%20policy.pdf>

¹⁰⁹ Borg, L. "Providence Chosen for National Program to Cut School Absenteeism." Providence Journal, February 19, 2016. <http://www.providencejournal.com/article/20160219/NEWS/160219224>

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² "Providence: Community Resources." Attendance Works. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/providence/>

developed a “walking school bus” project in which students could gather in groups and walk to school with a group of adult volunteers.¹¹³

In addition, another elementary school and three middle schools enlisted AmeriCorps City Year volunteers to work with students who have a record of chronic absenteeism. City Year has worked with these schools since 2012 to help engage families and provide mentorship opportunities.¹¹⁴

OUTCOMES

After the district’s continued efforts, the rate of chronic absence decreased to 20.7 percent in 2014 from 36.6 percent in the 2009-2010 school year.¹¹⁵ Data from individual schools have also been promising. For example, the rate of chronic absence at Robert L. Bailey IV Elementary School dropped from 21 percent to 10 percent following its school-level attendance interventions, and the school’s reading scores rose from 28 percent performing at the grade level in 2006 to 59 percent in 2010.¹¹⁶ Additionally, because of the City Year contribution, Pleasant View Elementary School also reduced the rate of chronic absence from 36 percent in 2010-2011 to 29 percent in 2012-2013 and improved student academic proficiency.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ “Providence Children’s Initiative Introduces ‘School Attendance Mapping’ and ‘Walking School Bus.’” Family Service of Rhode Island, August 7, 2012.

<http://www.familyserviceri.org/PCIIIntroducesSchoolAttendanceMapping.asp>

¹¹⁴ “Bright Spot Providence Taps City Year To Boost Attendance.” Attendance Works.

<http://www.attendanceworks.org/bright-spot-providence-taps-city-year-boost-attendance/>

¹¹⁵ Borg, Op. cit.

¹¹⁶ “Providence: Community Resources,” Op. cit.

¹¹⁷ “Bright Spot Providence Taps City Year To Boost Attendance,” Op. cit.

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