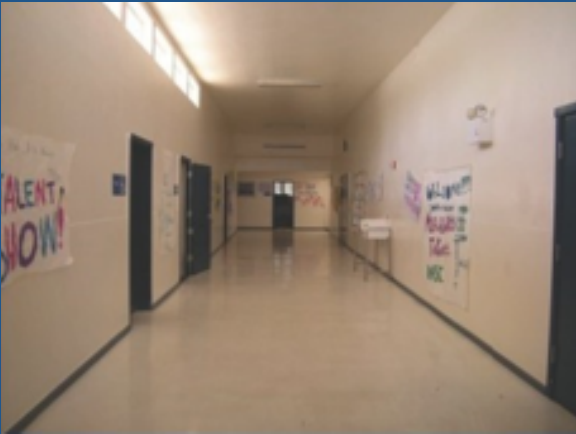


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Nancy Erbstein, Ph.D.
Stacy Shwartz Olagundoye, M.S.
Cassie Hartzog, Ph.D.

Center for Regional Change
University of California, Davis
One Shields Avenue, Wickson Hall 2019
Davis, CA 95616
(530) 752-3007
<http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu>

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Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District: Emerging Lessons from Four Learning Collaborative Sites

Generous Support for the
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Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

Executive Summary

Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) schools, students, and the community as a whole are paying a high price for chronic absence. Across the district, more than one in seven enrolled students (3,152 young people) were chronically absent in the 2014-2015 school year. These rates vary — and in some cases are much higher — across specific populations and places. As a result, schools are missing out on millions of dollars of funding each year, children’s learning is compromised, and broader social costs accrue, as demonstrated by research on district trends from 2010-2013.

In response, SCUSD staff, UC Davis researchers, and Community Link partnered with four schools in 2014-15 to begin exploring and addressing chronic absenteeism at the school site level. The four sites selected for this Chronic Absence Learning Collaborative included: Oak Ridge Elementary (Oak Ridge), Pacific Elementary (Pacific), Rosa Parks K-8 (Parks), and Will C. Wood Middle School (Wood).

For all participating schools, chronic absenteeism was a new focus, although each had pre-existing, varied mechanisms for engaging students/families identified as truant. School sites expanded upon a number of existing intervention strategies. In light of ongoing student information system upgrades, sites drew upon record data to retrospectively track use of these interventions with chronically absent students for the 2014-2015 school year using a data spreadsheet system developed by UC Davis. Results and analysis of these chronic absence interventions revealed that while there were key similarities across school sites, patterns were not exactly the same, highlighting the importance of assessing and building upon school and neighborhood level patterns, needs, and resources. Additional data were gathered from school site interviews and observations to provide emerging lessons about building school and district infrastructure to address chronic absenteeism (reported in sections 3.0 and 4.0). Our findings suggest recommendations for both the district and school sites.

District Recommendations

SCUSD leadership and support is needed to ensure that attendance is no longer an “invisible issue.” Important steps are as follows:

1. *Communicate regularly with schools, students, and families/caretakers in compelling, culturally responsive ways about attendance, the resources available to support it, and the efficacy of those resources.* School sites and their administrators articulated the need for greater district leadership to support and increase attendance promotion. Efforts should include site-specific, positive, solution-oriented tips and resources for students and families/caretakers that sensitively address family barriers to school attendance, in all primary languages spoken in students’ homes.
2. *Ensure relevant departments, programs and initiatives are all aware of chronic absenteeism as an issue, and coordinate attendance support activity across them.* Build a robust attendance infrastructure that includes cross-department representatives and communication channels through district departments, governmental, and community agencies to ensure that no student falls through the cracks.

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3. *Continue resolving student information system challenges to attendance data and intervention tracking for the district and school sites.* Provide clear pathways for the district and school sites to regularly access, import, and export student attendance data and intervention tracking. This will allow the district and school sites to analyze student attendance trends in a timely manner, allowing for timely responses and/or adjustments to intervention efforts. Systems should facilitate prevention as well as intervention.
4. *Invest in adequate staffing and training to accurately collect, document, and monitor attendance at every school, and especially those with high absenteeism.* Expand Attendance Office staff to train school site attendance clerks, Student Support Centers (SSC), and social workers throughout the year on accurate attendance data collection, documentation, and monitoring to ensure implementation of reliable attendance protocols.
5. *Have schools embed in School Site Plans attendance promotion strategies reflecting their school/student/neighborhood attendance patterns, barriers, motivators, and resources.* Chronic absence student outcomes varied by school site, reflecting the need for targeted resources within each school site community.
6. *Invest in community and interagency partnerships to: increase awareness that every day counts, extend school cultural competence, and tap additional resources.* We all have a stake in getting kids into classrooms. Build relationships in order to: extend support of school attendance across all community sectors, increase cultural relevance of school resources and staff competence, and improve upon interagency protocols to track students and families before they become lost in systems.
7. *Consider returning to sites a percentage of increased average daily attendance (ADA) funds generated by decreased chronic absence and improved attendance.* Rewarding successful chronic absence outcomes will encourage continuity of chronic absence efforts.

Recommendations for Schools

Chronic Absence Learning Collaborative schools are playing an important role in generating insights to inform district activity, their own practices, and efforts of other schools. Collective experience to-date suggested several important steps for Learning Collaborative sites in the upcoming year:

1. *Implement a robust monitoring/intervention strategy on day one.* Students are more likely to be chronically absent if they miss an excessive amount of school within the first eight weeks of the school year. Schools should roll out their attendance protocols before the start of the school year, and begin monitoring at the start of the school year those students who were chronically absent the previous spring.
2. *Integrate prevention strategies through school-wide activities/communication and outreach to those almost chronically absent.* Create a culture of attendance and focus preventatively on those students who are likely to become chronically absent.

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3. *At elementary schools, intensify K-1 interventions and create new student/family engagement strategies.* Over half of the chronically absent student population in K-1st grade received no documented interventions in 2014-15. Expand K-1 interventions to reach more students, and develop intervention protocols to reach students missing 15-19.9% of school, who tend to fall between the cracks of existing engagement strategies.
4. At middle schools, lookout for chronic absentees with lower levels of absenteeism (students who miss 10-14.9%). They make up the greatest numbers of chronically absent students and are often untouched. Develop protocols to engage chronically absent middle school students with lower levels of absenteeism.
5. *Use community partnerships and students to increase attendance awareness, extend school cultural competence, and tap additional resources.* Build relationships with local businesses and organizations to promote school attendance, provide cultural resources and/or training to school and staff, provide volunteer time, and/or make donations. Utilize older students to peer mentor younger students and instill a culture of attendance. Boost school staff cultural and linguistic capacity to engage with families to build trust and school involvement.
6. *Define strategy for reaching persistent, non-responsive absentees.* Ensure that no student falls between the cracks and slips into, or out of, the system without being reached.
7. *Experiment with new ideas that build upon documented attendance motivators such as meaningful relationships with adults and peers, young people's desire to learn, and personal aspirations.* Test new, creative approaches to attendance improvement. Consider expanding existing chronic absence protocols to include the following elements:
 - Extend attendance promotion work through targeted strategies for specific grades, populations, and student transition points (i.e., when transferring in to the school during the year);
 - Include community partners in planning and implementing attendance promotion/intervention activity;
 - Targeted outreach to students approaching chronic absence;
 - Utilizing other existing campus resources, such as individualized education plans (IEP) and student study teams, restorative justice programs, social and emotional learning initiatives, peer mentoring, the Parent-Teacher Home Visitation Project, SSCs and afterschool programs;
 - Involving a variety of people in outreach/check-in, such as yard duty/security, aides, teachers, older students reaching out to younger students, and parent volunteers; and
 - Develop strategies for persistent absenteeism and noncontact to ensure student wellness/safety.