

INTRODUCTION

During the 2016-17 school year, twelve schools within Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) participated in the Chronic Absence Learning Collaborative (CALC). Chronic absenteeism was a new focus for all CALC schools when they joined CALC; six elementary schools and one high school joined the project in August 2016, while one high school joined the project in September 2015, and the remaining two elementary schools, one K-8 school, and one middle school, began in fall 2014.

4.1 Practices

In fall 2016, new CALC sites began to build and implement attendance promotion plans using a template, the Multi-tiered Attendance Support Systems (MASS) protocol, while the returning sites honed their existing MASS plans. The MASS template highlights the centrality of monitoring attendance and intervention impacts, as well as the need for a variety of types of support to address attendance obstacles. Also, it recognizes that while attendance promotion strategies should be pursued for all students, those who remain chronically absent may benefit from additional types of interventions. The template hypothesizes that if effective population-wide supports are in place, the numbers of students needing more intensive supports should decrease. The MASS plan is a living document that can help schools: 1) document existing efforts explicitly focused on attendance monitoring and promotion; 2) identify existing resources that could be marshaled to support attendance that had not been previously considered in that manner; and 3) identify gaps in practices and assess how to fill them. This documentation and gap analysis enables participants to inform school site planning, budgeting, community partnership development, and district office feedback. Finally, the emerging attendance support documentation offers a basis

for ongoing system implementation, reflection, and modification.

Analyses of plans in fall 2016 and again in spring 2017 reveal attendance promotion strategies, as well as schools' experiences using this planning tool.¹ Interviews with core attendance team members were conducted at each site in the fall and spring to discuss their MASS protocols and overall approach to attendance promotion and chronic absence.

MASS Protocol Summary

Figure 4.1 and the following summary of intervention strategies combine data from the twelve sites' self-reported MASS templates, as well as their fall and spring interviews, and reflects key MASS template categories of interventions.

Attendance Promotion Strategies

All twelve school sites reported employing at least one strategy from each intervention category over the course of the year.

Engaging Students and Families

Throughout the year, all schools reported employing procedural family and student engagement strategies, with some sites scaling up their targeted, recurring events, and all sites providing student

Below, an "X" indicates that a school reported having implemented at least one intervention from that category, while a check mark (✓) and bolded definition indicates a school having developed a new intervention in that category during the winter/spring of the 2016-17 year.

¹This is based upon analysis of all schools' MASS plans as of 10/05/16 and interviews conducted with school attendance teams during October-November 2016 and April-May 2017.

Figure 4.1 MASS Summary of Interventions, CALC Sites 2016-2017

| SCHOOL | | | | | | | | | | | | INTERVENTION | EXAMPLES |
|--------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|---------|------|------|------|---|--|
| ES1 | ES2 | ES3 | ES4 | ES5 | ES6 | ES7 | ES8 | ES9/MS9 | MS10 | HS11 | HS12 | | |
| ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Family and Student Engagement | School-wide or grade-level presentations; attendance letter update; revising/publicizing attendance information in student/family handbooks; phone call home; home visit; PTHV ; case management; survey students; student incentives ; connect families with needed foster care, homeless, or law enforcement services; campus monitors; SST including attendance focus; SART/SARB letters/hearings; Family Attendance Success Plan Meetings ; preventative SART/SARB, truancy court, parenting classes; annual school-wide events, targeted recurring events . |
| X | X | ✓ | ✓ | X | X | X | X | X | X | ✓ | X | Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)/ Relationships | Student Support Center referral; City Year services or alternative check-in program ; individual and group counseling; 504 intensive intervention ; use of SST to include SEL; school-wide SEL efforts; daily greeting; recess/lunch activities; mentor program ; Student Council/Leadership Team. |
| X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | Mental/Physical Health | Health presentations to students; physical health referrals or services; health related services (e.g. occupational therapy; individual and group counseling; school-based mental health services; outside referral to counseling). |
| X | X | ✓ | X | X | X | X | ✓ | X | X | ✓ | X | Attendance/ Intervention Monitoring | Attendance Tech monitors attendance; generate and review monthly CA list; track chronic absence and corresponding interventions; attendance team meetings to identify chronically absent students and triage or refer to MDT or COST meetings ; MDT or COST meetings to discuss students' needs and plan to provide follow up services ; use of SST to address attendance ; SSC treats chronic absence as a referral; health absence reminder; mid-year attendance reminder; CPS contacted. |
| X | ✓ | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Positive Behavioral Supports/ Restorative Justice | Behavioral and/or attendance incentives/awards ; family meeting; SST; HV; City Year or alternative check in program providing student recognition for meeting attendance goals; counseling for students and/or families; restorative healing circles ; class meetings and/or class buddies; half days or suspension . |
| X | X | X | X | ✓ | X | X | ✓ | ✓ | X | ✓ | ✓ | Academic Support | Online affiliated schools to support enrichment; credit recovery ; Individualized Education Plans (IEPs); Multi-Disciplinary Teams (MDTs); and/or Student Study Teams (SSTs); Alternative learning/SPED; after school program; tutoring; FTAT; Parent-Teacher conference; travel packets; Teachers visit feeder schools to check on student proper placement (general education, SPED) . |
| X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | Basic Needs | Provide school supplies, food, clothing, targeted resources; transportation, information on housing resources, medical/mental health care, and legal services. |

incentives toward the end of the year (each received district incentive funds in May). Two sites (ES1 and ES9/MS9) experimented with new engagement approaches. ES1 moved away from implementing Student Attendance Review Teams (SARTs) altogether and experimented with holding Family Attendance Success Plan Meetings with chronically absent siblings and their caregivers, with the desired goal of providing positive, trust-building, and supportive opportunities to engage families in attendance discussions. ES9/MS9 recruited a Parent Intern of Pacific Islander descent to implement targeted events like Pacific Islander Parent Meetings. Three or fewer sites reported employing more time-intensive or targeted strategies, such as connecting with Homeless Services,ⁱⁱ surveying students, Student Study Team (SST) for promoting engagement, SART-o-Rama/SART marathon days, preventative SART/SARBs (Student Attendance Review Boards) or preventative warnings, truancy court, and parenting classes. As the academic year progressed, new CALC sites reported movement toward more strength-based approaches to family and student engagement, such as adopting SSTs with an attendance focus as an alternative to SART, while three out of five returning CALC sites (ES1, MS10 and HS12) currently practice this approach.

SEL/Relationships

All schools reported employing some SEL/Relationship support strategies, with eleven out of twelve sites employing school-wide SEL efforts and school-based mental health services, and all twelve sites providing mentoring programs. Half of the sites reported activity tailored to reach chronically absent students, with three or fewer sites employing City Year, Student Council/Student Leadership Team, and/or an SEL focus incorporated in SST. By spring 2017, two new CALC sites had developed alternative check-in and mentoring programs with an intentional focus on students with poor attendance.

Mental/Physical Health

Eleven out of twelve schools reported employing multiple mental/physical health strategies. Every school provided individual and group counseling as well as the types of SEL efforts noted above, and several sites described case management as dominated by mental health referral. However,

schools did not indicate use of preventive mental health strategies, such as meditation, yoga, and mindfulness work.

Attendance/Intervention Monitoring

While attendance/intervention monitoring efforts varied, all sites employed three or more strategies, including the baseline practice of generating and reviewing the monthly chronic absence list, and having their Attendance Technician and/or Student Support Coordinator (SSC) monitor attendance. This year, four out of seven new sites reported needing to build upon Attendance/Intervention monitoring practices, as well as three out of five returning sites. The latter also expressed the desire to implement systems to support this work. While two thirds of the sites formed Attendance Teams to hold regular meetings, more than half of the sites did not report holding Coordination of Services Team (COST) meetings. Three quarters of sites now have their SSC treat chronic absence as a basis for referral—a new practice this year.

Positive Behavioral Supports/Restorative Justice

While all schools reported positive behavioral supports and/or restorative justice strategies, these efforts varied. All sites employed behavioral and/or attendance incentives/awards (this was a new intervention for high schools) and offered family meetings, counseling for students and/or families, class meetings, and/or class buddies. Less than one third of sites reported utilizing Home Visit, City Year, Alternative Check-in Program, and/or SST (for behavior). Five sites self-reported the use of healing circles as part of their chronic absence reduction strategy.

Academic Support

Seven sites reported offering four or more Academic Support strategies to help get or keep students on track with their classroom learning, while the others reported implementing fewer than four. New support strategies this year included credit recovery and addressing proper student academic placement. Most sites utilized IEP (for all elementary schools and middle schools) and after school programs, with SSTs being implemented by eleven out of twelve sites.

ⁱⁱ Further examination of this low level of connection reported with Homeless Services is suggested to assess whether it reflects self-report error or actual contact.

Basic Needs

All schools employed two or more strategies to support Basic Needs, although three-quarters reported three or fewer resources in this area. Most sites provide clothing, resource information, and targeted resources such as health kits, shoes/socks, and school supplies, and a few reported directly providing food for very low income families through collaboration with food banks.

4.2 Outcomes

Intentional MASS Planning Supports Chronic Absence Efforts

Most CALC sites implemented what they planned to do at the outset of the year, stating that the MASS tool was helpful for mapping out their strategy early in the year. New CALC sites commented that it took most of the year to identify how to implement their targeted practices for monitoring and responding to chronic absence, noting that Year Two objectives include aligning interventions with their infrastructure and chronically absent students' needs while building these interventions into their site's strategic plan in order to coordinate further with school staff. Returning CALC sites agreed that they achieved greater success in their subsequent years by building upon their existing MASS approaches and eventually scaling up interventions, and/or experimenting with new efforts. Every CALC site indicated that the MASS protocol assisted their efforts to intentionally promote attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism across three tiers: prevention, students meeting the chronic absence benchmark, and students with persistent and high rates of absenteeism.

Implementation Barriers

A few CALC sites had anticipated pursuing interventions when developing their MASS plan that they were unable to implement this year. Key implementation barriers for CALC elementary school sites included: strain experienced with major staff and/or administration turnover at the start of the year; an overwhelming caseload of

mental health referrals that detract staff time away from implementing chronic absence interventions; teacher disinterest and perception of taking on "extra" work; and recognizing that sites new to chronic absence work do not have systems set up to support their desired efforts. The CALC middle school site was unable to implement the Success Mentor's program through the White House's My Brother's Keeper initiative due to the program being postponed until fall 2017 for logistical reasons at the district level. All program coordination has been designed and is ready to implement come fall. At the high school level, nearly all strategies were pursued, with the exception of one CALC high school citing that their attendance policy was translated into all student languages except Hmong, for which they could not find a translator.

New Approaches to Chronic Absence

Several CALC sites and groups experimented this year with new approaches to chronic absence monitoring that resulted in students receiving more attendance support. The following case studies highlight these new approaches.

Elementary School Cohort

Many elementary schools within the CALC cohort experimented with new approaches to addressing chronic absenteeism. For example, one site partnered primary and intermediate level classrooms as "buddy classes" to motivate students in monthly class attendance competitions. Class buddies focused on attendance promotion and celebrated their accomplishment together if their team had the highest attendance rate. Staff commented on the positive buzz created around school by this friendly peer competition. This same site experimented with holding Family Attendance Success Plan Meetings with chronically absent siblings and their caregivers. While chronic absence rates typically increase substantially from June through May, at this school chronic absence rates increased only slightly (0.69%) between January 2017 and May 2017,ⁱⁱⁱ suggesting the need for further assessment of buddy classes and/or Family Attendance Success Plan meetings and their impacts on attendance.

ⁱⁱⁱ This site's chronic absence rates across three time points in the 2016-2017 academic year were the following: Oct 2016 = 10.92%, Jan 2017 = 14.02%, May 2017 = 14.71%.

Another school focused this year on first grade interventions, as that grade level has one of the highest rates of chronic absenteeism at their site and provides an important foundation for subsequent school success. Comparing kindergarten chronic absence rates in May 2016 to first grade rates in May 2017 (i.e., the same targeted student population) revealed a decrease in chronic absenteeism by 4%.^{iv} Moreover, as chronic absence rates typically decrease between Kindergarten and first grade, comparing first grade chronic absence rates in May 2016 to first grade rates in May 2017 at this site revealed a decrease in chronic absenteeism by 1%.^v

Two CALC sites were dual immersion programs with organizational structures that prioritizes culturally responsive engagement efforts, which cultivated stronger connections with students and families, resulting in more committed families that rarely had absences. ES7 explained that their school structure contributes to the level of family commitment to attendance and participation, noting that within their two branches, the dual immersion branch tends to have more committed families who self-select into the program because of its focus on culture and language. Therefore, this school site experiences little chronic absenteeism, whereas the conversational Spanish branch has many chronically absent students due to the elective nature of their program, thereby requiring significant resources. ES8 also noted this trend, commenting that their bilingual Spanish Immersion teaching staff cultivate strong relationships with students and families, including celebrations that reflect cultural responsiveness. This site also began to implement the COST process.

Mid-year, another elementary school brought a tele-health medical service on site, noting that it was very helpful in reducing early dismissals for student health appointments and health-related absences. The school referred SART and chronically absent students for appointments first to help prevent their attendance rates from decreasing. Although this site began with a very small chronically absent population, this site's chronic absence rates revealed a 0.33% decrease in chronic absenteeism between

^{iv} For this site, SCUSD data illustrates the number of chronically absent Kindergarteners in May 2016 was 27, or 16.56% (n=163), and the number of chronically absent first graders in May 2017 was 20, or 12.42% (n=161).

^v For this site, SCUSD data illustrates the number of chronically absent first graders in May 2016 was 24, or 13.48% (n=178), and the number of chronically absent first graders in May 2017 was 20, or 12.42% (n=161).

^{vi} This site's chronic absence rate comparisons were the following: January 2017 = 2.47%, May 2017 = 2.14%; May 2016 = 3.40%, May 2017 = 2.14%.

“
Mid-year, another elementary school brought a tele-health medical service on site, noting that it was very helpful in reducing early dismissals for student health appointments and health-related absences.
”

January 2017 and May 2017 (when this intervention was implemented), suggesting that this intervention warrants further exploration and assessment.^{vi}

Finally, an additional school made plans to use student data from the SIS as part of conversations with families to better align support resources with student and family attendance barriers. They took steps to implement this new teacher/student/family interview process next year.

K-8 Cohort

A K-8 school created several new culturally responsive student/family support opportunities:

- Mentoring for Latino and African American male students with concerning behavior, academics, and/or attendance;
- Two Self-Awareness and Recovery groups for COST-referred Latino and African American students that include positive attendance messaging; and
- A Parent Volunteer Intern of Pacific Islander descent engaged Pacific Islander families of chronically absent students, which has proven successful for establishing phone contact and achieving parental attendance at Pacific Islander Parent Meetings.

In addition, nurse interns served as student mentors and a point of connection.

Middle School Cohort

A middle school successfully surveyed students with a history of chronic absence to better understand their attendance barriers and motivations. They

reported that the results surprised them—students indicated they would attend school if they could: receive better grades, not have to arrive so early in the morning, have someone to help them with their work, and better understand what teachers want them to do. In response, they plan to share these results with their staff and devise strategies to address student concerns, to be implemented the next academic year. This school also offered a girls' leadership group through a local community partner, which school staff reported greatly improved attendance.

High School Cohort

HS11 adopted the 504 process for addressing intensive cases requiring targeted interventions, including home visits, as well as implemented COST, with a focus on identifying and monitoring their chronically absent student population within each of the three tiers. HS12 prioritized a restorative approach, using community circles instead of suspension, to address behavior issues, which they reported to have contributed to reducing their number of suspensions, thus lowering their chronic absence rate.

Three-quarters of CALC sites (a mix of elementary, K-8 and high schools) participated for the first time in Saturday School, thereby increasing Average Daily Attendance (ADA) and dollars earned per site, per student enrolled. CALC sites had their SSC treat chronic absence as a referral at the same rate—a new practice this year.

Many CALC sites also began to identify potential approaches to adopt in the coming year, including better acquainting site staff with the district's attendance policies and procedures toolkit; starting a buddy check-in program and enlisting staff to help coordinate it; establishing walking school busses to address transportation barriers; and promoting more whole-school attendance promotion initiatives.



CONCLUSION

Overall, returning and new CALC sites implemented attendance promotion and chronic absence intervention practices. Sites recognized the importance of developing clear systems and staff coordination to support their efforts, and some experimented with developing alternative approaches to fostering strong, culturally responsive, family engagement. Sites also stressed the need for consistent training, support, and reflection for administrators and teachers on chronic absence, student and family engagement, and behavior management (to explain and promote chronic absence efforts and reduce unnecessary student behavior referrals that detract from implementing targeted chronic absence interventions). Staff turnover presents a challenge to sustaining attendance promotion efforts, although some schools found that hiring staff internally and/or training incoming new hires prior to the start of the school year, ensured a smooth continuation of emerging efforts. Lastly, CALC participants underscored the importance of intentional strategic planning and calendaring in the summer, while revisiting the MASS plan quarterly to make realistic adjustments.

UC DAVIS CENTER FOR REGIONAL CHANGE

Nancy Erbstein, Ph.D.
nerbstein@ucdavis.edu



Jacqueline Rodriguez, LCSW
jacqueline-rodriguez@scusd.edu