Student Attendance Barriers and Promising Practices at Three Elementary Schools with Comparatively Low Chronic Absenteeism

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INTRODUCTION

When a child is absent 10% of the time during an academic year they are considered chronically absent. Chronic absence is an early warning indicator because it is associated with a variety of negative educational, social, health and employment outcomes for children as they grow up. Chronic absenteeism is a significant concern in the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD), where more than one in ten students meet or exceed this 10% threshold. SCUSD has been working with the UC Davis Center for Regional Change and twelve schools with high chronic absence rates through a Chronic Absence Learning Collaborative (CALC), which works to address attendance barriers and identify effective support systems. In addition, three elementary schools with similar student demographics that have comparatively low rates of chronic absence have been a focus of study, with the aim of learning from their practices. Findings from these three schools are presented here.

Student Attendance Barriers at High Attendance Schools

While these schools have comparatively low rates of chronic absenteeism, it is important to note certain conditions present an ongoing challenge to school attendance. These include: parent/caregiver circumstances, seasonal factors, and cultural commitments.

Parent/Caregiver Circumstances
Each of the three schools reported obstacles associated with parents/caregivers facing challenging circumstances. For example, adults facing mental illness, such as depression, sometimes have difficulty getting up themselves in the morning; when they fail to wake up their child it causes the student to be late or miss the day entirely.

Another common barrier is transit. For example, interviewees noted that when parents/caregivers have to transport multiple children, by the time they return from a first round of drop-offs, those left behind fall asleep, which can result in a late arrivals or even absences. In addition, lower income families who drive older vehicles often contend with breakdowns, which can disrupt school transit.

Parent mobility and phone service also presents challenges. For example, a child was once absent for more than a week from school, their phone number was no longer working and staff could not reach them, so they were instructed to dis-enroll the child. Eventually the parent told the staff that the child was sick. There are also cases of custody battles over students, which disrupts the student's attendance when the parent is afraid to send their child to school out of fear the other parent will pick them up and take the child.

Seasonal Factors
There are certain periods in the year when these school sites experience a surge of absences, particularly during the colder, rainy winter months. These absences are typically due to illness or cultural reasons. Staff at two of the schools reported receiving more doctors' notes during this time to excuse children being sick. If one child falls ill, then it is more than likely that another will as well. Furthermore, it is quite common for students with family in Mexico to travel there during December to celebrate Christmas and the new year. Families tend to travel by car, which takes many days, so they tend to leave before the last day of school and/or return after the winter break has ended, generating unexcused absences.

Cultural Commitments
Family is an important part of Mexican cultures, and many students of Mexican descent still have family members in Mexico; Christmas and the new year are a rare opportunity when families can take time away from work to visit with their loved ones. These

schools are working to ensure that holiday trip plans are communicated to the schools in advance so that they can arrange independent study for students. They described times when families were not aware that their children needed to do the work packets in order to receive credit for school attendance.

Funerals also generate substantial absenteeism for students from specific cultural backgrounds. For instance, school staff reported that Pacific Islander funerals last about four to five days. Not only do these students miss important instruction, but the SCUSD considers students who have missed three days of school unexcused as truant, and those who are excused are required to bring a doctor's note after three days. This dilemma has yet to be resolved and requires policy-maker attention.

> " *It's the connections that the students and the family have with the school.*
> *- School administrator, Site ES_A* "

Problem Solving Strategies

Although these schools and their students experience difficult challenges throughout the academic year, each site demonstrated a focused urgency to break down attendance barriers. Community cohesion was the most heavily stressed factor in ability of the staff, teachers, families, students, and surrounding community members working together as a unit to ensure positive attendance. Next, these schools highlighted their focus on creating a positive culture of schooling that includes daily communications on the importance of attendance and involvement. School staff described specific structures that school sites have in place that promote attendance even further. Finally, staff reported various incentives and award systems to motivate their students to attend.

Building Community Cohesion
Strong relationships between the school and the families served were reported as one of the biggest

driving forces of students attending class everyday. Interviewees described many instances of teachers resolving attendance problems with caregivers. For example, exchanging personal cell phone numbers and messaging parents class information has been an effective approach. Schools noted the importance of teachers and staff living within the neighborhood and being a member of the community helps personnel establish trusting relationships. As a result, families feel comfortable giving information to them and staff can effectively communicate concerns about absences. For example, the attendance clerk at one school has known most of the families for years since she lives in the community. When the clerk receives daily attendance from the teachers, s/he calls the parents personally by phone instead of using the automated calling system to solidify that relationship and demonstrate that the school views each individual student as an essential part of the community.

Lastly, these schools pursue community interaction. One noted involvement in faith-based organization partnerships and community cleanups. Another school has a community garden to which anyone in the community can contribute, a lot of elderly residents participate in this garden, helping engage the broader community. Each school had a community liaison that helped with outreach by doing home visits to parents. These community relationships help the school support the students and families, which in turn supports attendance.

Teachers also play an important role since they are in direct contact with the students. Not only is it a part of their duty to report absences to the office, but in some cases they also reach out to parents individually. They are also encouraged to make sure parents/caregivers are aware of how their children can make up work and/or enroll in independent study and get a work packet for an extended absence.

Other staff members also play an important role in making the school a welcoming place. For example, interviewees described yard duty staff and custodians welcoming children and families, and a cafeteria worker letting a child arrive early for breakfast on a daily basis when they realized that the drop-off time was a barrier to that student's attendance.

Organizational Structures

Individual schools each discussed structures that support attendance. One site mentioned teacher looping, in which a teacher remains with the same cohort of students for more than one year. They note that teachers often get to know not only their students well, but also families and younger siblings (who subsequently become their students). These close relationships allow for open communication where the teacher can call the parent personally and talk through their attendance issues.

Full day kindergarten has been an experiment at one school. They indicate that this strategy supports attendance in at least three ways. First, they start early teaching students the importance of being at school. Second, an early introduction to a full day of school helps children get acclimated to being at school all-day. Finally, parents with multiple children at the school can pick them up at approximately the same time. This full day kindergarten communicates to parents the importance of attendance and how their child might miss something if they take them out for a day.

Student Support Centers, which support students who are struggling socially, emotionally, behaviorally, and/or academically, also help with reducing absences. When a student has been chronically absent, center staff can do a home visit, meet one on one with families, and help families connect with services.

Incentives and Rewards

To further encourage engagement in school, these sites offer incentives and also have reward systems for positive attendance. At one location, teachers award "[school mascot] tickets" for positive behaviors and accomplishments that students use to purchase snacks and stuffed animals from a student store. They also were able to use the tickets for an end of the year raffle for prizes like an iPad. Staff notes that having such incentives creates a fun environment.

Staff also presents awards to students. For example, at one school the staff chooses a different character trait each month and each classroom awards this honor to a student who embodies this trait. Interviewees reported that the students see this as a special, meaningful award that only a few are given. Schools also hold award assemblies for perfect and improved attendance. One school has had to move these ceremonies from every month to every trimester because too many children were meeting the standard. They challenged students to meet the new requirement and held perfect attendance field trips to further reward the students for their achievements.

Recommendations for SCUSD

Although these schools have comparatively low rates of chronic absence, as noted earlier, they still face challenges in fostering strong attendance. Interviewees offered the following recommendations to help improve attendance.

Caregiver Education

Many parents/caregivers are unaware of what counts as an excused or unexcused absence. There has been confusion in the past that resulted in student's attendance reported incorrectly. It would be useful to implement a broad informational and attendance promotion campaign.

Data and Procedures

Interviewees identified several concerns with the processing of absences and access to data. The first is the new student information system. Administrators, teachers and other staff members were familiar with the previous system, and they are having problems with using its replacement. The new system does have more tools, but it is more complex than they anticipated. There are a number of tools they still do not know how to use after several years, and it is not as user friendly. Offering multiple in-depth trainings on navigating this new system would be helpful, as would creating an overarching system that integrates data points collected through the new student information system and the academic data system.

In addition, one interviewee exposed concern about the district decision to only employ the state definition of chronic absence (based on full-day absences) to track chronic absenteeism. They would prefer to integrate data on partial day absences to reflect the full amount of time that students miss.

Interviewees also expressed concern with the SART and SARB procedures, viewing them as contrary to school efforts to build constructive, welcoming

relationships with families, and ultimately ineffective in promoting behavior change. They report struggling with how to make these procedures less punitive and more supportive.

School staff indicated an interest in having clear procedures for handling instances in which students are absent for an extended period of time and cannot be reached by school staff. In these cases, they would like to have additional assistance in trying to reach these children and caregivers in order to ensure their safety.

Finally, to assess student progress and ongoing improvement of attendance, one interviewee indicated interest in being able to access students' data after they move on to middle school and ensure feeder school articulation. Such opportunities would help the school further strengthen their practices.

CONCLUSION

These three schools provide important insights about promising practices and potential district strategies to provide additional support. These schools sustain multiple strategies for promoting attendance and addressing chronic absence. They place a high priority on universal attendance promotion efforts, which reduces the numbers of chronically absent students that require additional support and attention. Community engagement and involving the whole school in recovering absent students helps to create a welcoming environment and address attendance barriers, even as the details play out differently at each school site.

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