

Toward a Collective Response to Chronic Absenteeism: School Needs for District and Community Agency Support

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INTRODUCTION

While schools must play a central role in addressing chronic absenteeism, the range of causal factors associated with chronic absence suggest that schools will require multiple partners to ensure that every student attends school regularly. During the 2016-17 school year, twelve school sites within Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD), along with SCUSD department representatives, participated in the Chronic Absence Learning Collaborative (CALC), along with UC Davis researchers. In fall 2016 and spring 2017, interviews were conducted by UC Davis at all twelve CALC sites, as well as within three district departments, to learn about strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism, and opportunities for the district and community partners to support this effort. Thirty CALC participants interviewed included twenty-six school site representatives from eight elementary schools, one K-8 school, one middle school, and two high schools, as well as four representatives from three district departments: Student Support and Health Services (SS&HS), Youth Development Support Services (YDSS), and Attendance and Enrollment (A&E). Overall, CALC participants shared district and community actions that would help their schools and district promote attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism.

Why invest in attendance promotion efforts?

Students must attend school to reap the benefits of classroom learning. Efforts to reduce chronic absence and promote attendance aim to ensure that every student is able to get to school regularly. Students considered “chronically absent” are those who miss at least 10% of school, regardless of whether the absence is excused, unexcused, or due to suspension. In 2010-11, SCUSD lost over four million dollars due to absenteeism beyond what was regularly expected, and 73% of the cost was associated with approximately 10% of students.ⁱ

Chronic absence is concerning not only due to the financial impact on schools, but also because it is associated with poor academic performance and negative outcomes for children, youth, families, and communities, including: compromised connections to peers, teachers, and schools; poor health; high school non-completion; unemployment; and incarceration. When used as an early warning system, chronic absence is an opportunity to identify students and families in need of additional support.

Recommendations for the District

Staff interviewed from twelve CALC sites and three district departments identified ways the district can further support attendance promotion and reduce chronic absenteeism. Together, they indicated eight desired district actions:

- 1. Proactively prioritize addressing chronic absence**
More than half of CALC sites and all district interviewees stated the need for more district staff dedicated to attendance promotion and chronic absence reduction. School sites suggested having district-appointed Attendance Coordinators organized by neighborhood to track, monitor, and support attendance across feeder schools in ways that account for neighborhood barriers and build on neighborhood resources. These Attendance Coordinators could foster school-community connections by providing schools with a list of local, community resources available to them and requesting that local agencies contact their neighborhood schools (to decrease the burden of schools having to track down their own partners). CALC site and district department representatives also encouraged placement of paid staff on the Student Attendance Review Board (SARB), which is currently staffed by volunteers as available, to increase student/family reach, provide required

ⁱErbstein, Nancy (2013). Chronic Absence in the Sacramento City Unified School District Brief Series: The Cost of Chronic Absence in SCUSD. Davis, CA: UC Davis Center for Regional Change.

home visitations and case reflection, and follow through to support all students in need.

Other ideas about how to prioritize reducing chronic absence at the district level include expanded trainings for school leaders and attendance clerks, and increased branding and communication to promote attendance (including creative, culturally-grounded district automated calls). Additionally, CALC participants stated that more nurses and social workers are needed to meet the demands of addressing the urgent psycho-social needs of students, with some suggesting embedding these in resource-rich, strengths-based Student Support Centers at every school or creating Attendance Centers for clusters of schools that play a similar role.

2. Focus on Kindergarten attendance

Kindergarten students are one of the largest chronically absent populations at elementary and K-8 schools. CALC sites shared three strategies they would like to see the district employ to address this grade-specific attendance problem:

- Encourage the state to make Kindergarten compulsory and lower the compulsory age to five years oldⁱⁱ,
- Sustain onsite preschools at elementary schools to build attendance habits,
- Offer full-day Kindergarten so that dismissal times are consistent with other grade levels in which these students may have siblings.

3. Target resources and support to neighborhoods and schools with especially high needs

Interviewees at two CALC sites encouraged the district to direct resources to neighborhoods and schools with especially high needs and utilize funds on the ground, rather than through district-wide initiatives that may or may not have a strong impact on young people in need of critical resources.

CALC sites also request that the district provide more information about resources and opportunities for their families beyond those provided by the school district. Interviewees noted particular interest in opportunities that support family and community stability, such as job training.

4. Provide materials and training to support chronic absence/attendance efforts in schools

More than one in four CALC sites requested support materials and training for school site staff on attendance promotion and chronic absence intervention. Support materials identified included:

- Classroom attendance flags,
- Positive attendance-messaging banners in multiple languages,
- Messaging toolkit with ready-to-use positive messaging materials for print or social media use,
- Connect Center messaging on chronic absence resources for teachers,
- Clear chronic absence reduction guidelines and expectations for administrators and counselors.

While the district currently provides annual training to attendance technicians each fall, several CALC sites shared their need for the district to provide training to new staff (e.g., teachers, office staff, administrators) on attendance policies and procedures; the difference between chronic absence and truancy; and how to use chronic absence as an early warning indicator. Additionally, the district underscored the benefits (and their expectations) of standardized training for all current/incoming principals and administrators on the issue of chronic absenteeism, the promotion of regular attendance, as well as the site staff's role in encouraging district-wide momentum. CALC site interviewees also requested that the district increase the cultural competence and responsiveness of the staff and administration in order to better address attendance barriers, and strengthen student and family engagement efforts.

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ⁱⁱCurrent state truancy policy only applies to children ages six and older, thereby leaving the first half of the Kindergarten year as technically non-compulsory and unenforceable.

5. Adjust Student Attendance Review Team (SART) and Student Attendance Review Board (SARB) processes to improve results

One-third of CALC school site participants suggested adjustments to SART and SARB processes. While acknowledging that the Attendance Office is understaffed, interviewees expressed concern that there are SARB waitlists and that the SARB process is undermined when it does not enforce timely consequences and provide urgently needed support. Participants overall noted that district capacity does not meet site-level demand, and the waitlist for SARBs is both overwhelming and unrealistic. Long waitlists mean substantial lag time between when a student/family is referred to SARB and when they are actually contacted, limiting its effectiveness as a tool for ensuring that students attend school regularly. Additionally, they specifically request that social services staff participate in the SARB process, and ask the district to strengthen their partnership with the County to achieve this. Sites from all grade levels share the desire for the district to prioritize SARB at the elementary school level for preventative action, instead of prioritizing it as it is now—at the middle and high school levels. Finally, while some interviewees recognize current district efforts to create a supportive environment for SARB hearings, others underscored the importance of modifying the SARB process start-to-finish to ensure a constructive, equitable approach to engaging struggling families.

6. Improve data systems

Interviewees at all CALC school sites cite the need for improved data systems, with one in three specifically asking about the status of a previously-promised student information system interface intended to assist in tracking, monitoring, and analyzing chronic absence rates and intervention data. Additional requests of the district include:

- Automatically flag students with excessive absences and enable connection with other districts in the region and/or the state CALPADS system to track down missing students,
- Create an AdHoc filter to track truancy letters and improve district-school communication,
- Analyze and share chronic absence data trends with all schools, including analyses of students

with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) as a sub-population.

7. Expand recognition of strong and improved school attendance

More than one out of seven CALC interviewees indicated interest in district-wide recognition events for attendance. Sites also requested expanded district monetary support for recognition events and resources, and encouraged district efforts to seek additional items from community partners that could be used to acknowledge strong and improved attendance, such as gift cards, bus passes, and bikes/helmets.

8. Increase support for school transit

Research conducted by SCUSD, Community Link, and UC Davis in 2014 cited transportation as a barrier to school attendanceⁱⁱⁱ. All CALC participants suggested that SCUSD students and families need more transportation support. Several sites specifically requested bussing and/or direct transportation for elementary schools district-wide, as younger students are often tardy due to lack of transportation options and their reliance upon siblings and caretakers. CALC sites also suggested collaboration among SCUSD, the city, and Regional Transit to reduce bus fares for students and caregivers who must accompany them to school, to ensure that transit costs are not a barrier to school attendance.

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ⁱⁱⁱErbstein, Nancy (2014). Chronic Absenteeism Issue Brief Series. Factors Influencing School Attendance for Chronically Absent Students in the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD). Davis, CA: UC Davis Center for Regional Change.

Desired Community Actions

The twelve CALC sites and three district departments interviewed shared five community actions that would support attendance promotion and chronic absence elimination efforts at the site and district levels:

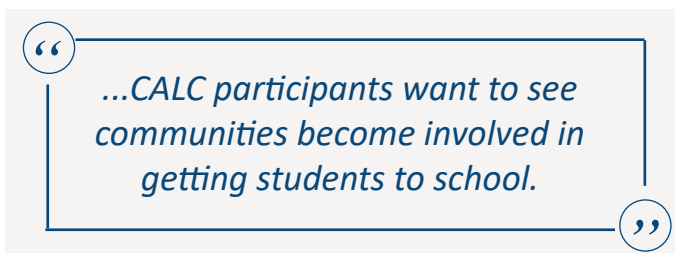
1. City and county investment in resources alongside transit (mentioned above) that would support a holistic approach to removing school attendance barriers

A 2014 study of chronically absent students and families in SCUSD revealed that on average participants experienced ten barriers to school attendance^{iv}. To help address these various barriers, CALC participants suggest three areas for increased partnership and coordinated investment with the school district:

- Case management that integrate attention to school attendance and coordination with school sites,
- Physical and mental health care referral and services, avoiding scheduling appointments during school, and education for families (especially focused on controlling asthma, de-stigmatizing mental health care, and immunizations),
- Meeting basic student and family needs for housing, employment, safety, and transit.

2. Help educate community partners/families about the importance of attendance

From creating and disseminating targeted messaging about why school attendance is important, to encouraging students at the coffee shop to get to school, to asking local courts and healthcare providers to schedule student appointments during non-school hours, CALC participants want to see communities become involved in getting students to school.



3. Provide funding and resources to acknowledge attendance improvement and excellence

Nearly half of CALC sites and all three district departments already request resources from community partners in the form of school donations. The most popular demands are prizes for students and families to recognize improved school attendance. Basic needs supplies (e.g., clothes, shoes, backpacks, school supplies) are always in demand, as well as gas cards, groceries, and gift cards from local businesses. A partnership in which the business and/or faith community hosts a local community-wide attendance donation drive would provide tremendous benefit to students, families, and schools, and limit school staff time spent seeking out these types of resources.

4. Partner with school sites to provide direct student and family support

Many CALC schools are interested in assistance to support individual students via mentoring or an adopt-a-school program with classroom reading buddies. Other suggestions include supporting and staffing after school clubs and helping ensure that people from our community, especially those who speak the languages of our students and families, are present at school events. Individuals and community-based organizations that are trusted among populations who are often uncomfortable engaging with public institutions may play a powerful role in assisting SART/SARB students and families in locating and utilizing available services.

5. Link child and family support-focused community collaboratives with schools

CALC participants expressed interest in being able to connect their schools with a “giant collaborative” of supportive community organizations and institutions that together offer a holistic range of resources, which would help them to quickly link students and families to urgently needed services and resources. Optimally such a collaborative would foster such connection without a lot of bureaucratic red tape (such as Memorandums Of Understanding).

^{iv}Erbstein, Nancy (2014). Chronic Absenteeism Issue Brief Series. Factors Influencing School Attendance for Chronically Absent Students in the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD). Davis, CA: UC Davis Center for Regional Change.

CONCLUSION

While school systems are crucial to improving attendance, they are inadequate alone. CALC school educators, counselors, classified staff, and administrators consistently identify a need for district and community involvement to fully address chronic absenteeism. District staff working in the areas of Student Support and Health Services, Youth Development Support Services, and Attendance and Enrollment agree. Together, schools, SCUSD, city, county, and other community partners alike can alleviate chronic absenteeism by recognizing and addressing attendance promotion and needed supports for students, families, and schools. All of us with a stake in young people's well-being need to be accountable to ensure that SCUSD students reap the full benefits of public education, which starts with them being at school.

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