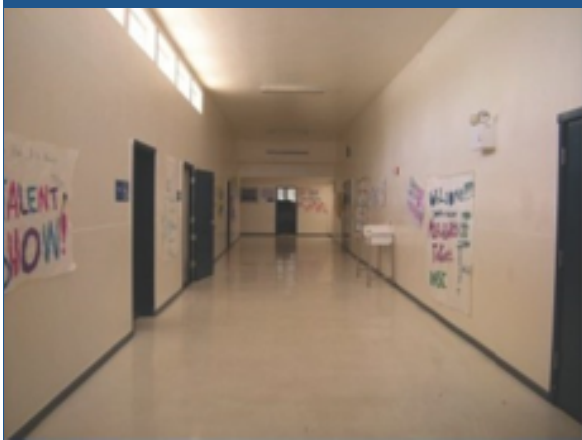


Winter 2015



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>

WP 2015-1

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

**Generous Support for the  
Sacramento Unified School District Chronic Absence Learning Collaborative  
and this Report Provided by The California Endowment**



**Preferred Citation:**

Erbstein, N., Olagundoye, S., Hartzog, C. (2015). Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District: Emerging Lessons from Four Learning Collaboratives Sites. Davis, CA: UC Davis Center for Regional Change. © Regents of the University of California, 2015.

## Table of Contents

	<b>List of Figures and Tables</b>	i
	<b>List of Terms and Acronyms</b>	ii
	<b>Executive Summary</b>	iv
<b>1.0</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	1
	1.1 The Chronically Absent Student Population	1
	1.2 School Attendance Barrier and Motivators	2
	1.3 Chronic Absence Learning Collaborative Background	4
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Draft Chronic Absence Guidelines</b>	6
	2.1 Strategies Pursued	7
	2.2 Strategies of Interest	8
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Site Level Chronic Absenteeism Patterns</b>	10
	3.1 Chronic Absenteeism Patterns Varied Across School Sites	10
	3.2 Seasonal Chronic Absence Patterns	11
<b>4.0</b>	<b>Site Level Chronic Absence Intervention Patterns</b>	14
	4.1 Reach of Interventions	14
	4.2 Intervention Use	15
	4.3 Interventions and Attendance Outcomes	18
<b>5.0</b>	<b>Emerging Lessons About Addressing Chronic Absence</b>	19
	5.1 Supportive Strategies and Resources	19
	5.2 Challenges to Addressing Chronic Absence	21
<b>6.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>	25
<b>7.0</b>	<b>Appendices</b>	28
	Appendix A: Intervention and Outcome Relationship Analysis	28
	Appendix B: Will C. Wood Middle School Interventions/Infrastructure	28
<b>8.0</b>	<b>References and Notes</b>	29

## List of Figures and Tables

Table 1.2.1	Barriers to Student Attendance, SCUSD 2012-2013
Table 1.2.2	Motivators of Student Attendance, SCUSD 2012-2013
Table 1.3.1	Learning Collaborative School Background, 2012-2013
Table 2.0.1	Draft School-Level Chronic Absence Guidelines
Table 2.1.1	Interventions for Three Pilot Sites
Figure 3.1.1	Number of Chronically Absent Students by School
Figure 3.1.2	Number of Chronically Absent Students by School and Month, 2014-15
Figure 3.1.3	Percentage of Students Who Were Chronically Absent All School Year, by Grade Level
Figure 3.1.4	Number of Chronically Absent Students by School and Grade
Figure 3.2.1	Seasonal Chronic Absence Patterns, All Learning Collaborative Schools
Figure 3.2.2	Seasonal Distribution of Chronically Absent Students, by School
Figure 3.2.3	Fall Chronic Absentees' Pattern of Chronic Absenteeism, by Fall Attendance Rate
Figure 4.1.1	Percentage of Chronically Absent Students that Received No Interventions
Figure 4.1.2	Mean Number of Interventions Received by Chronically Absent Students
Figure 4.1.3	Number of Interventions Received in Fall, by Grade Level
Figure 4.2.1	Percentage of Chronically Absent Students that Ever Received Each Type of Intervention, All Pilot Schools
Figure 4.2.2	Percentage of Chronically Absent Kindergartners at Learning Collaborative Schools that Received Intervention
Figure 4.2.3	Percentage of Chronically Absent Primary Grade (1-3) Students at Learning Collaborative Schools that Received Intervention
Figure 4.2.4	Percentage of Chronically Absent Intermediate Grade (4-6) Students at Learning Collaborative Schools that Received Intervention
Figure 4.2.5	Percentage of Chronically Absent Middle School (7-8) Students at Learning Collaborative Schools that Received Intervention
Table 7.1.1	Correlational Analysis of Intervention and Moving Out of Chronic Absenteeism
Table 7.2.1	Will C. Wood Middle School Interventions/Infrastructure

# Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

## List of Terms and Acronyms

**504 Plan:** Section 504 of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is designed to help parents of students with physical or mental impairments in public schools, or publicly funded private schools, work with educators to design customized educational plans. A 504 Plan details the services and accommodations to be provided.

**ADA:** Average Daily Attendance, the percentage of enrolled students that attend school each day at a school or district. Public schools are funded by the state based upon their ADA.

**Chronic Absence:** When a student misses at least 10% of school for any reason, regardless of whether absences are excused, unexcused, or due to suspension.

**CAFallOnly:** Chronic Absence; fall only.

**Chronic Absence Letter:** A school-issued letter mailed to a student's home expressing concern about missed school and information about available support.

**Chronic Absence Phone Call:** Phone calls made by school staff to parents/guardians of students who had missed, or come close to missing, at least 10% of school, in order to encourage attendance.

**City Year:** A nonprofit program, which places young adult AmeriCorps volunteers in schools to connect with students who miss 10-15% of school. Mentors provide daily student check-ins, monitor attendance and students' self-reported wellness, and connect students with site services.  
See: <http://www.cityyear.org/sacramento>.

**COST:** Coordination of Services Team, a dedicated team of school staff that determine how to deploy various existing school and district services.

**Learning Collaborative School Sites:** The four schools within the Sacramento City Unified School District participating in our collaborative chronic absenteeism project in 2014-15.

**Persistent Chronic Absence:** Chronic absence throughout an entire school year or multiple school years.

**PTHV:** Parent-Teacher Home Visit, a program active in Sacramento City Unified School District, in which teachers conduct home visitations with their students and their families/caretakers.  
See: <http://www.pthvp.org/index.php/sacramento-region>.

**Home Visits:** Home visitations conducted by student support coordinators, interns, and/or school principals.

## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

**IEP:** Individualized Education Plan, a blueprint for a child's special education experience at school. The IEP Plan must be created and assessed by a team consisting of the child's parent/caregiver, at least one of the child's general education teachers, at least one special education teacher, a school psychologist/social worker (or other specialist who can interpret evaluation results), and a district representative with authority over special education services.

**SARB:** School Attendance Review Board, composed of representatives from various youth-serving agencies that help truant or persistently absent students and their parents/caregivers to solve school attendance and behavior problems through the use of available school and community resources. County SARBs are convened by the county superintendent at the beginning of each school year. SARB review is the next step when parents/guardians do not attend a SART meeting or a SART agreement is not upheld.

**SART:** School Attendance Review Team, a school site team designed to identify possible solutions to improving the students' attendance and/or behavior, which includes participation from the student and parent/caregiver, school principal, and the School Attendance Review Board chairperson. SARTs have typically been a response to truancy. The student and parent/caregiver must agree to abide by the directions of the SART by signing a document. Failure to attend this meeting with the School Attendance Review Board chairperson will result in a referral to the district's School Attendance Review Board (SARB).

**SCUSD:** Sacramento City Unified School District

**SSC:** Student Support Center, a school resource hub that connects parents to resources, staffed by a coordinator, social worker, and graduate student interns.

**SSC Coordinator:** Student Support Center Coordinators, staff positions that oversee Student Support Centers.

**Student Study Team:** A group formed within the school to further examine, and propose interventions for, a student's academic, behavioral, and social-emotional progress. The team usually consists of a teacher, administrator, support personnel from the school, student and parent/caregiver, and sometimes a special education teacher.

**Truancy:** Defined in California as missing three days of school without a valid excuse or being late to class three times without a valid excuse.

## 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.

## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

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.



## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

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.

## 1.0 Introduction

This report documents early efforts to reduce chronic absence among four Learning Collaborative school sites within the SCUSD during the 2014-15 school year. Chronically absent students are those who miss at least 10% of school, meaning they've attended school less than 90% of the time. Chronic absence rates reflect all absenteeism, regardless of whether absences are excused, unexcused, or due to suspension. Chronic absenteeism is associated with lower levels of academic learning, high school non-completion, unemployment, incarceration, poor health, and compromised connections to peers, teachers, and schools.

In this report, we briefly describe overall SCUSD patterns of chronic absenteeism and highlight barriers to, and motivators of, school attendance. We then describe Learning Collaborative schools' preliminary intervention protocols, as well as their site level chronic absenteeism patterns throughout the 2014-15 school year. Finally, we provide lessons learned from the Learning Collaborative through their efforts to begin intentionally addressing chronic absenteeism, and conclude with recommendations for the district office and schools.

## 1.1 The Chronically Absent Student Population

From 2010-2013, districtwide patterns of chronic school absenteeism were as follows:

1. *Chronic absence rates varied across grades.* Kindergartners and 12th graders had the highest rates of chronic absence and together comprised one quarter of all chronically absent students.
2. *Most chronically absent students lived in low-income households.* One indicator of low family income is receiving free/reduced-price meals (FRM). FRM recipients made up the majority of chronically absent students. Thus, each year a substantial proportion of chronically absent students lived in households struggling financially to meet basic needs.
3. *Chronic absence rates varied across broad racial/ethnic categories.* Black/African American and Native American/Alaskan Native students were chronically absent at higher rates than we might expect given their representation in the overall district population. Hmong and Laotian students were over-represented among chronically absent Asian/Asian-American students. While Latino students were not over-represented, they comprised a large number of chronically absent students. Students identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander were also chronically absent in higher rates in 2011-2013 than in 2010. These trends highlight the need for collaboration between school and community leaders to provide culturally responsive engagement and support for students and families.
4. *Large numbers of chronically absent students were English Learners.* Across the three academic years respectively, 8.3%, 9.0%, and 8.1% of English learners met the threshold for chronic absence, underscoring the need for culturally and linguistically appropriate outreach and support strategies.

## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

5. *Approximately one in five special needs students were chronically absent each year.* Students classified as having one or more “disabilities” comprised 8.2% of the overall population in 2010-2011, 8.8% in 2011-12 and 9.0% in 2012-2013.
6. *Large and increasing percentages of young people in foster care were chronically absent.* More than one in four students in foster care were chronically absent. Students in foster care were an increasing percentage of the overall chronically absent student population from 2010-2011 (1.5%) to 2012-2013 (2.7%).
7. *More than one in four homeless students were chronically absent.* Overall, more than one in four homeless students were chronically absent during each academic year from 2010 to 2013, with increasing percentages each year.
8. *High rates of school transfer were associated with high levels of school absenteeism.* Approximately one in five chronically absent students transferred to different schools in the district at least once during the academic year. Students who transferred more than once during the year were almost four times more likely to be chronically absent than their peers.

When looking at trends in persistent chronic absence—chronic absence throughout the entire school year—students who remained persistently chronically absent from 2010-2011 through 2012-2013 missed especially large amounts of school, contended with economic poverty, and experienced high levels of residential and school instability.

### 1.2 School Attendance Barriers and Motivators

In 2014, a study of 191 chronically absent SCUSD students found that most faced multiple obstacles to regular school attendance. On average, each experienced ten attendance barriers, illustrating that multiple strategies must be coordinated to effectively reduce chronic absenteeism. The following is a table of comprehensive student attendance barriers:

Table 1.2.1 Barriers to Student Attendance, SCUSD 2012-2013

Attendance Challenge	% of Participants Affected
Student Physical Health	36%
Parent/Caregiver Discretion	31%
Transportation	28%
Academic Issues	27%
Student Mental Health	24%
Relationships	22%
Parent/Caregiver Health	17%
Student Responsibilities Outside of School	17%
School Related Discipline	16%
Lack of Coordination with Other Services	15%
Unfulfilled Basic Needs	13%
Student Safety Concerns	10%
Student Access to Health Care	6%
Cultural Disconnect	2%

## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

Moreover, the 2014 study on barriers and motivators of school attendance revealed an exhaustive list of student attendance motivators, as seen in Table 1.2.2:

Table 1.2.2 Motivators of Student Attendance, SCUSD 2012-2013

Attendance Motivation	% of Participants Affected
People/Relationships	81%
Learning	63%
Compulsory	62%
Stability	56%
Non-academic Programs	47%
Aspirations	46%
Performance	42%

One Learning Collaborative school, Oak Ridge, further explored student motivators and barriers to school attendance using a student survey that they administered to the entire school's student population (n=519). The same survey was administered to two different student groups — those that were identified as chronically absent (n=12%), and those that were not (n=88%). Across both groups, students identified similarly with their motivations to attend school: "to learn," "to have fun...I feel happy at school," "friends," and "to help me have a good future." However, chronically absent students ranked "food" just above "safety" as an attendance motivator, while other students ranked "safety" just above "food."

Students from both survey groups also provided numerous examples when asked "What else could Oak Ridge do that would make you more excited to come to school?" with the top factors for both groups being "expand program offerings" and "academics." Regardless of priority, "increase safety" was a notable response from both student groups.

When asked why students miss school, responses varied by survey group. Among chronically absent students, the most common reasons were "I get sick" and "things at home." Within the "things at home" category, barriers included:

- Homeless or moving around a lot;
- Grown-ups aren't able to help me get to school;
- Not enough money for clothes, supplies, and/or alarm clock;
- My family cultural and/or religious traditions (i.e., special events, customs, holiday traditions);
- I have to go to appointments (i.e., doctor, social worker, court, immigration office); and
- Home responsibilities (i.e., need to take care of other kids, need to help family members that are sick, need to help in other ways).

The third most commonly reported reason that chronically absent students missed school was "no transportation."

## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

Non-chronically absent students reported different reasons for missing school that were not widely-shared with the chronically absent student population. Common attendance barriers included:

- I don't feel well emotionally;
- Relationships with other students (i.e., bullying, no friends);
- A health issue that keeps affecting me (i.e., asthma);
- I don't get along with some school staff; and
- I don't feel safe getting to and/or from school (i.e., not safe to leave house, not safe to walk to school).

Students from both survey groups also provided numerous examples when asked "What else could Oak Ridge do that would make it easier for you to come to school?" Transportation assistance was the key shared finding among both groups, as well as assistance with time management, and health.

Overall, research found that finding ways to monitor and respond to missed school, incentivizing attendance (i.e., making school a fun, safe, and supportive environment), and minimizing barriers to attendance will realize the most positive attendance gains. Chronically absent students reported that they want to learn, want to be challenged, and want to have positive relationships with others. These are all attendance motivators that can and should be at the heart of the school experience for every child, and can serve as an important foundation of efforts to address chronic absence.

### 1.3 Chronic Absence Learning Collaborative Background

The Chronic Absence Learning Collaborative was launched during the 2014-2015 school year through the Attendance and Student Support Services Divisions of SCUSD. The aim of this collaborative was to begin learning about district and school practices that could address chronic absenteeism and be scaled up district-wide.

SCUSD, established in 1854, is one of the oldest K-12 districts in the western United States. It serves approximately 43,175 students on 75 campuses, spans 76 square miles and employs 4,213 people with an operating budget of \$383 million. SCUSD's board-adopted mission statement promises the community that students will "graduate as globally competitive life-long learners, prepared to succeed in a career and higher education institution of their choice to secure gainful employment and contribute to society." SCUSD's students reflect the rich diversity that is a hallmark of Sacramento. The student population is 37.1% Hispanic or Latino, 18.8% White, 17.7% African-American, 17.4% Asian, and 7% Native American/Alaskan Native. Approximately 5.3% of students identify with two or more races or ethnicities. Residents within SCUSD speak more than 40 languages and 38% of students do not speak English at home. Approximately 75% of students qualify for free/reduced price meals.

The four collaborating pilot schools included two elementary schools, one K-8 school, and one middle school. Three of the four are part of the Priority Schools program, which was launched in the spring of 2010 to accelerate the rate of student learning in low-performing, high-poverty schools.

## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

Priority School teachers have received additional professional development and are protected from seniority-based layoffs; these sites have an extra administrator and a full-time curriculum coordinator/teacher trainer on staff.

Table 1.3.1 Learning Collaborative School Background, 2012-2013

Learning Collaborative School	Neighborhood	Priority School	Racial/Ethnic Groups >10%	% Socio-Economically Disadvantaged	% English Learners	Suspension Rates 2011-12/ 2012-13	% Met Fitness Standards	%Chronically Absent
Oak Ridge Elementary	Oak Park	Yes	Latino (50.2) Asian (23.0) Black (17.6)	100%	48.60%	19.0%/ 0.8%	30%	13.40%
Pacific Elementary	Parkway-- South Sacramento	No	Latino (54.8) Asian (25.1) Black (10.0)	100%	61.60%	15.1%/ 9.8%	n/a	14.20%
Rosa Parks K-8	Meadowview	Yes	Latino (38.1) Black (23.8) Asian (23.2)	100%	44.90%	60.2%/ 17.0%	29.30%	14.80%
Will C. Wood Middle School	Southeast Lemon Hill	Yes	Latino (41.8) Asian (36.0) Black (10.4)	100%	50%	44.4%/ 14.9%	n/a	13.60%

Our collaboration spanned the 2014-15 school year. In fall, school sites learned about chronic absenteeism, identified existing attendance promotion resources, and identified system barriers to getting accurate data on chronically absent students. In winter, sites developed draft chronic absence protocols to be implemented in 2015-16, continued to seek accurate attendance reports from the district database, and informed creation of an interim spreadsheet system to track chronically absent students and interventions. By spring, sites piloted the implementation of some elements of their preliminary chronic absence protocols and used the interim data tracking system to record chronic absence interventions used. The district initiated departmental coordination to improve attendance data and intervention tracking. UC Davis analyzed the intervention data and prepared findings, while collaborating with the district to improve data accessibility and prepare for the fall rollout of the next Learning Collaborative project cycle.

These schools have generously shared their evolving chronic absence guidelines, intervention data, and student attendance data in order to inform their own and others' practices.



# Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

## 2.0 Draft Chronic Absence Guidelines

Each Learning Collaborative school produced a preliminary set of school guidelines for addressing chronic absenteeism, building upon existing site resources and information about promising practices. The following chart shows these draft guidelines, which will be revised for fall 2015:

Table 2.0.1 Draft School-Level Chronic Absence Guidelines

School	Attendance Monitoring	Attendance Promotion	Early Interventions	Persistent CA Interventions
Oak Ridge ES	Generate monthly list of CA students.	Letter from school (in Student Handbook).	1st time on CA list: Initial contact via CA Letter, discussion with family, reminder of SSC, and MDT meeting.	2 <sup>nd</sup> time on CA list: Personal contact via personal phone call, SST, Home Visit, Meeting.
	Attendance promotion letter in Parent Handbook	Teachers call home in first 30 days of school year to remind parents of the value of attendance.		3 <sup>rd</sup> time on CA list: District support via SART/SARB paperwork. In extreme cases provide referral to Attendance Office Personnel.
Pacific ES	Generate monthly and weekly lists of CA students.  Teachers given CA grade-level list to monitor and/or contact parents.  Monthly Attendance Team meetings to discuss CA students and coordinate all services.	Annual interventions include: 1) Kick-off Kinder/1 <sup>st</sup> Grade Parent Meeting, 2) End of semester and year reward.	Weekly interventions include: 1) phone call to students missing more than 1 day/week, 2) meeting with Attendance Team if student misses more than 1 day/week, 3) positive reinforcement by grade level and class for regular attendance.	Monthly interventions include: 1) Letter to families of students missing more than 1 day/week to meet with Attendance Team, 2) Letter to families of students missing 3 or more consecutive days to meet with Principal,
Rosa Parks K-8	Bi-weekly Attendance Team meetings to identify existing interventions for CA students, including: SSTs, 504 Plans, SSC, City Year (CY), attendance letters and/or SART/SARB contracts.	Quarterly CA Notifications to families.	Students already receiving SSC or CY support will receive attendance support through these existing services.	Nurse interns will identify CA students with most absences and interview students and families to determine barriers and potential interventions.
	Use data system available to track attendance rates and assigned interventions.	Attendance promotion letter in Parent Handbook  Classroom competition with results posted in cafeteria	CY will preventatively choose students to work with who are approaching 10% of school missed.	Home visit by SSC Coordinator, Parent Advisor, and/or Administrator for students missing up to 10 consecutive days of school.
Will C. Wood MS	Monthly Attendance Team/COST meeting to discuss CA students and coordinate all services.  Generate monthly CA list.		Phase 1 Assessment: AP conducts phone call home. meet with student, counseling, continuous monitoring.	Phase 2 Intervention: AP provides incentives, lunch detention, COST referral, meeting with guardian, SST meeting, counseling, Home Visit, Probation Officer, SART Contract, continuous monitoring.  Phase 3 District: AP conducts SARB hearing, continuous monitoring.

### 2.1 Strategies Pursued

Sites' proposed activities varied, reflecting differences in pre-existing practices and infrastructure, levels of resources, grade levels served, and emerging ideas. Oak Ridge aimed for early intervention and family engagement, while recognizing the need to also be flexible for each individual student case. Pacific's protocol focused on student and parent communication weekly and monthly, while integrating a new Coordination of Services Team (COST) meeting infrastructure. Parks adopted a tiered approach, identifying actions to take for various possible attendance scenarios. Wood built upon an existing attendance infrastructure that had focused primarily on truancy, which includes an attendance assistant principal to implement their protocol, as well as a large dedicated team of staff to coordinate services via a COST model.

Each school held monthly Attendance Meetings—a new practice at three of the four schools—where a combination of staff including administration, SSC coordinators, school social workers, office clerks, City Year coordinators, probation representatives and/or afterschool program coordinators would meet to identify and discuss who was on the chronic absence list, and what interventions were needed. As noted above, some sites integrated this activity into existing or new monthly COST meetings, in which staff determined how to deploy various existing school and district services. Sites experienced difficulty in accessing accurate student attendance data analyses throughout much of the school year, which is an issue that the district office has worked to address for the 2015-16 school year.

There were varying approaches to chronic absence notification. In a climate of scarce resources, two sites sent a letter home as a first step. Another site allocated administrative time to determining the best course of action. A fourth site was inclined (and able) to have teachers make the initial contact with families about their child's chronic absence. These different approaches appeared to be driven by a combination of feasibility given school resources, as well as school culture and organization. Sites also presented varying philosophies regarding School Attendance Review Teams (SART) as a mechanism for addressing chronic absence. Some administrators viewed it as a tool that could be used to address chronic absence as well as truancy, particularly with the district reorientation to SART as an intervention rather than a punitive measure. Others noted that even with the district reorientation, families and communities still associate SART with punishment or the potential of losing services; in this context, they thought a student study team might be an early step toward addressing chronic absence that would better foster positive collaboration with families.

All pilot school sites adopted a mentoring and case management approach to helping some students/families get on track with attendance, while hoping that incentives, community building, and student/community outreach strategies might reduce the number of students requiring resource intensive mentoring/case management services. While three out of four pilot sites ultimately employed small incentives as an intervention, community and student engagement efforts were discussed but not pursued for various reasons, including lack of time or resources that year, and/or institutional challenges.



## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

The pilot school sites drafted these initial protocols in early winter 2014 and began implementing elements of them early in 2015. In light of ongoing student information system upgrades, schools tracked their intervention activity with individual chronically absent students using a spreadsheet system developed by the research team. Three of the four school sites tracked the following interventions. Wood adapted this tracking system to reflect their site-specific activities.

Table 2.1.1 Interventions for Three Pilot Sites

Intervention	Definition
Homeless Program	SCUSD Homeless Department interventions provided.
Foster Care System	SCUSD Foster Care Department interventions provided.
School Health Services (Physical or Mental)	School Health Service resources or interventions provided.
Incentives	Student received an attendance prize, recognition, or party.
Chronic Absence Letter	Parents/guardians were sent a school-issued chronic absence letter.
Chronic Absence Call	Student's parents/guardians received a phone call from school.
SSC	Student was referred to the Student Support Center on their school site.
Teacher	Teacher contacted student, family or Attendance Team.
COST	Student was referred to the Coordination of Services Team.
SST	Student was referred to the Student Study Team.
IEP	Student was referred for an Individualized Education Plan.
504	Student impairment triggered a blueprint for learning access
SART	Parents/guardians sent a School Attendance Review Team notice.
SARB	Parents/guardians sent a School Attendance Review Board notice.
After School Program	Student participated in an After School Program
Home Visit	Home visit by Student Services staff.
City Year	Student received City Year 1-1 daily check-ins and monitoring.

## 2.2 Strategies of Interest

Aside from the interventions pursued, school and district staff raised the following idea, which warrant further consideration by schools, the district, and community partners for future implementation:

- A media campaign focused on attendance promotion;
- Addressing transportation challenges (especially at middle schools);
- Getting local businesses to encourage youth to go to school and invest in attendance promotion;
- Encouraging local faith-based organizations to encourage attendance;
- Encouraging local pediatricians and family practitioners to ask patients about school attendance, promote attendance unless children experience serious illness, and attempt to schedule medical appointments outside the school day;
- Partnering with groups that could offer programming for student engagement at recess or lunch time (i.e., lunch clubs) that would engage students with varying interests;
- Regularly convening kindergarten parents to support community-building, school orientation, and attendance promotion; and
- Developing "walking groups" (also known as "walking school buses") as a means of addressing transportation issues and improving upon student/family/community engagement.

## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

All four schools also aspire to strengthen within-school prevention efforts. They identified the following proactive approaches, even though they were unable to pursue all of them:

- Engage teachers in early outreach by providing chronic absence data (including City Year's data), especially at the start of the school year, beginning of each quarter, and before parent-teacher conferences;
- Use data from the previous school year to pursue early outreach to students who have been chronically absent;
- Target transitional grades of preschool, K, sixth, and eighth grades as preventative turning points for future school success;
- Identify and reach out to students approaching the chronic absence threshold;
- Improve upon parent letters and orientation packets by including attendance information; and
- Periodically survey students/families to learn about attendance barriers/motivators and amend school protocols to reflect their interests and needs.

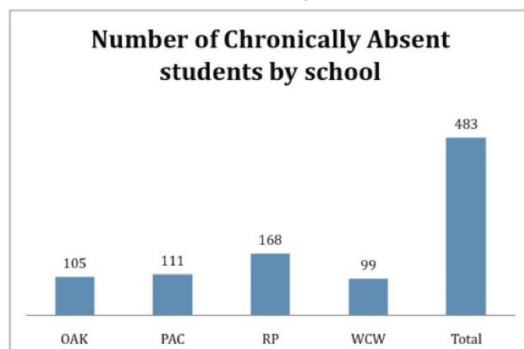
### 3.0 Site Level Chronic Absenteeism Patterns

UC Davis researchers identified chronic absenteeism patterns across all four Learning Collaborative schools, which are presented below. Additional within-schools analyses were provided directly to Learning Collaborative sites.

#### 3.1 Chronic Absenteeism Patterns Varied Across School Sites

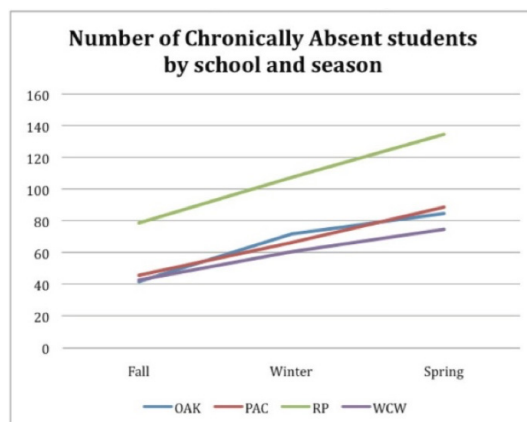
Of the four Learning Collaborative sites, Parks served the largest number of chronically absent students (see Figure 3.1.1) and had the highest chronic absence rate at 20% of the student population. Wood served the fewest chronically absent students and had the lowest rate of chronic absence at 15%.

Figure 3.1.1 Number of Chronically Absent Students by School



Across the 2014-15 school year the number of chronically absent students increased at all schools. However, the rate of increase slowed after January at both Wood and Oak Ridge, as depicted in Figure 3.1.2.

Figure 3.1.1 Number of Chronically Absent Students by School

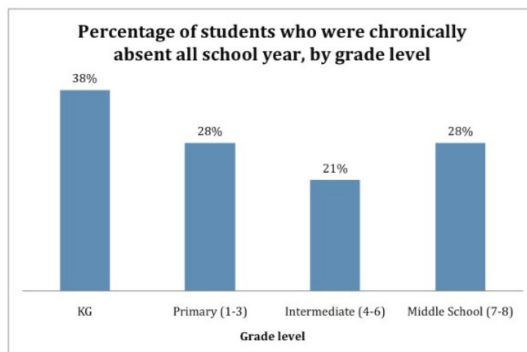


Students are chronically absent when they've attended less than 90% of school. Across the four sites, mean attendance rates for the chronically absent student population were quite similar for the 2014-2015 academic year, ranging from approximately 83%-85%.

## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

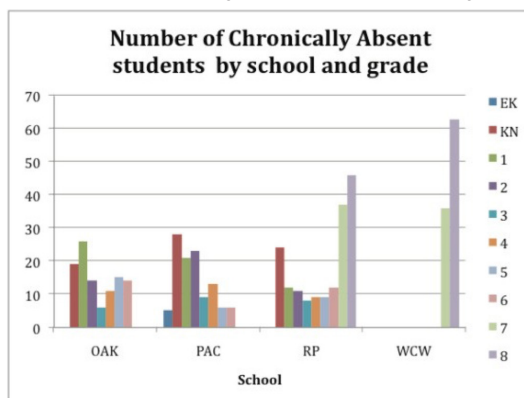
Across all schools, more than one in five chronically absent students were chronically absent throughout the school year. Out of all chronically absent students across all four pilot sites, chronically absent kindergartners were most likely to be chronically absent during fall, winter, and spring.

Figure 3.1.3 Percentage of Students Who Were Chronically Absent All School Year, by Grade Level



In elementary schools, the greatest numbers of chronically absent students were in kindergarten and first grades, while in middle school they were eighth graders. While numbers of chronically absent students differed across schools, patterns across grade levels were fairly similar. It is important to note that these patterns reflect data from only one academic year, so we cannot assume they are consistent from year to year; however, they do roughly mirror district-wide patterns assessed over a three-year period.

Figure 3.1.4 Number of Chronically Absent Students by School and Grade



### 3.2 Seasonal Chronic Absence Patterns

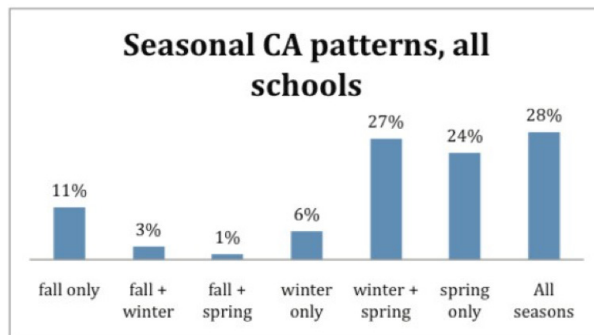
Figure 3.2.1 shows the seasonal distribution of chronic absenteeism among all students who were chronically absent for at least one quarter at the four schools.

Across all schools, among all students who were chronically absent for at least one season during the year, 28% of them were chronically absent all three seasons. Similarly, a relatively large percentage of

## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

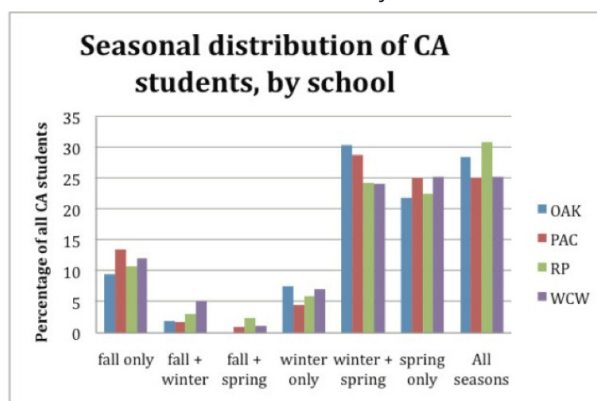
all students who were chronically absent for at least one season during the year were chronically absent during the winter and spring seasons (27%) or spring season (24%).

Figure 3.2.1 Seasonal Chronic Absence Patterns, All Learning Collaborative Schools



The seasonal distribution of chronic absenteeism is similar across all participating schools. Figure 3.2.2 reveals relatively small differences between the school sites, with Oak Ridge and Parks having a slightly higher percentage of chronically absent students who remained chronically absent throughout the year.

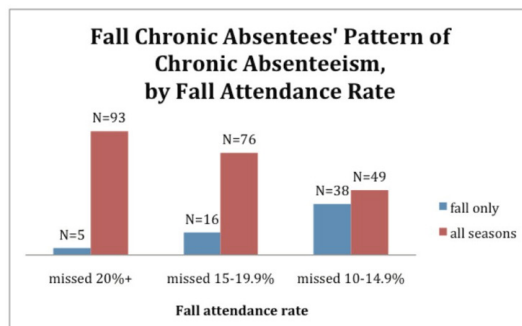
Figure 3.2.2 Seasonal Distribution of Chronically Absent Students, by School



Among chronically absent students, very low attendance in the fall is predictive of being chronically absent in subsequent seasons. Figure 3.2.3 shows that students who missed at least 20% of school in the fall quarter were much more likely to be chronically absent all year than to be chronically absent in the fall only. Students who missed 15-19.9% of the school during the fall quarter were also more likely to be chronically absent all year than the fall only. Among the fall chronically absent students with the lowest chronic absence rates (those who miss 10-14.9% of the school year), nearly as many were chronically absent for a single season as were chronically absent all year.

## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

Figure 3.2.3 Fall Chronic Absentees' Pattern of Chronic Absenteeism, by Fall Attendance Rate



Further analysis revealed that 64% of those students who became chronically absent in fall remained chronically absent in all three seasons.

*Chronic absence prevention and early intervention strategies are critical.* Only a small percentage of students who became chronically absent in fall or winter were chronically absent in only that season. In fact, there were strong positive correlations between attendance rates in one season and the next. In other words, past attendance is a very strong predictor of future attendance. This suggests that student attendance patterns are hard to change, underscoring the importance of prevention and early intervention strategies.

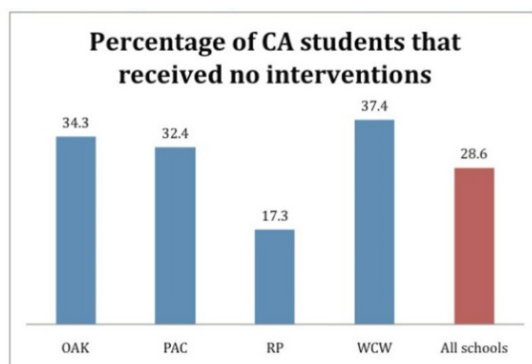
## 4.0 Site Level Chronic Absence Intervention Patterns

For all participating schools, chronic absenteeism was a new focus, although each had pre-existing mechanisms for engaging students/families identified as truant. The following section documents 2014-2015 intervention patterns, and shows that overall, three of the four schools demonstrated increasing levels of outreach to chronically absent students over the course of the school year. Wood pursued the greatest amount of intervention in the fall, which likely reflected a strong pre-existing infrastructure for identifying students getting off-track with unexcused absences.

### 4.1 Reach of Interventions

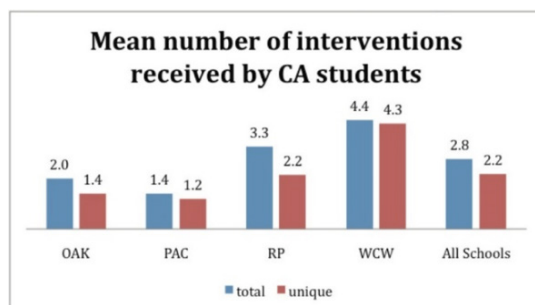
*Most schools increased engagement with chronically absent students over the year, but many chronically absent students were untouched by interventions. Across all schools, more than one in four chronically absent students were untouched by intervention strategies. This varied across school sites, as demonstrated by Figure 4.1.1:*

Figure 4.1.1 Percentage of Chronically Absent Students that Received No Interventions



*The mean number of interventions received by chronically absent students varied across schools and grade levels. This variation appears to have reflected the varying levels of resourcing, pre-existing infrastructure, and past focus on attendance within each pilot school site.*

Figure 4.1.2 Mean Number of Interventions Received by Chronically Absent Students

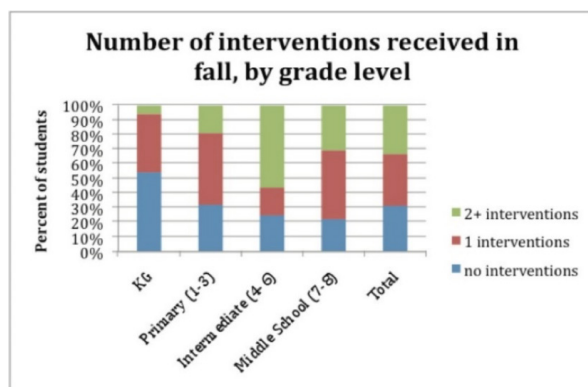


## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

Looking across sites, Figure 4.1.3 reveals that students at different grade levels also experienced different amounts of interventions in fall 2014. Grade levels with the lowest rates of chronic absenteeism appear to be receiving the most interventions; however, we were unable to assess whether or not there was a relationship between the higher rates of intervention and lower levels of chronic absence.

Of particular concern, over half of chronically absent kindergartners did not receive any intervention.

Figure 4.1.3 Number of Interventions Received in Fall, by Grade Level

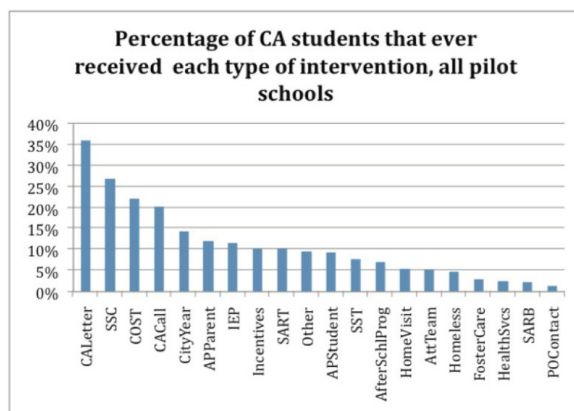


## 4.2 Intervention Use

Figure 4.2.1 reflects the variety of chronic absence intervention strategies employed by pilot school sites, and tracked for individual chronically absent students.

Note: Schools additionally employed school-wide interventions, such as attendance recognition assemblies at Oak Ridge and Parks, and the Parks school-wide attendance contest.

Figure 4.2.1 Percentage of Chronically Absent Students that Ever Received Each Type of Intervention, All Pilot Schools





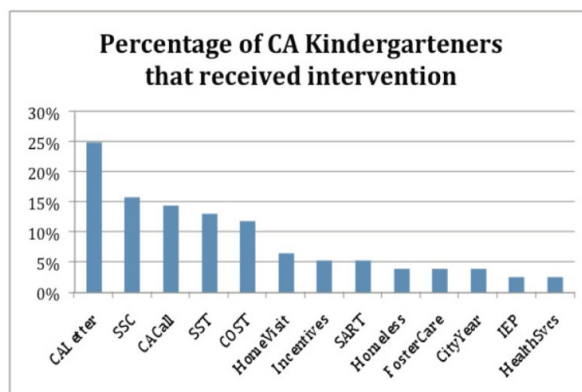
## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

Across all Learning Collaborative schools and all seasons, the Chronic Absence Letter was the most widely-used intervention, followed by SSCs and COST. Learning Collaborative schools sent letters to slightly more than one in three chronically absent students. Sites served approximately one in four students through Student Support Centers, and identified approximately one in five chronically absent students at COST meetings.

Intervention use varied somewhat across grade levels.

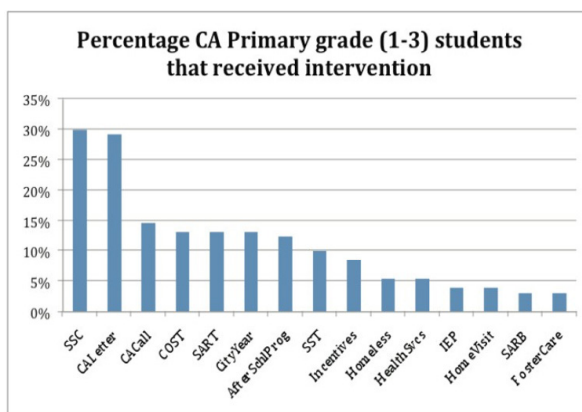
Schools were most likely to send chronically absent kindergartners a caretaker letter as their primary intervention, followed by SSCs and chronic absence call home. Schools sent one in four chronically absent kindergartners and their caretakers a chronic absence letter, while less than one in five kindergarten families received a phone call or service through Student Support Centers.

Figure 4.2.2 Percentage of Chronically Absent Kindergartners at Learning Collaborative Schools that Received Intervention



Schools were most likely to reach out to primary grade (1-3) chronically absent students and families through an SSC and/or a chronic absence letter. Among all interventions received by students in primary grades, less than one in three were served through SSCs, or received a chronic absence letter at home.

Figure 4.2.3 Percentage of Chronically Absent Primary Grade (1-3) Students at Learning Collaborative Schools that Received Intervention

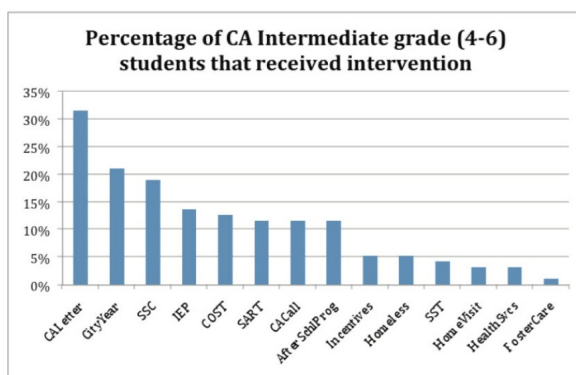


## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

Schools reached out most frequently to chronically absent students in intermediate grades (4-6) via a chronic absence letter to a caretaker, and/or City Year. Approximately one in three students/caretakers were sent a chronic absence letter at home, while just over one in five students received City Year services.

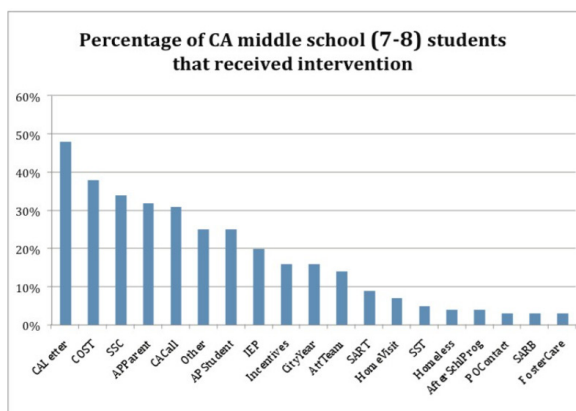
Only Oak Ridge and Parks provided City Year programming, which connected students who miss 10-15% of school with young adult mentors (mentors checked in with students each day, monitored attendance and students' self-reported wellness, and connected them with site services).

Figure 4.2.4 Percentage of Chronically Absent Intermediate Grade (4-6) Students at Learning Collaborative Schools that Received Intervention



Middle Schools (7-8) most commonly reached out to chronically absent students via a chronic absence letter to a caretaker, and/or by discussing at COST meetings how best to support them. Sites sent nearly half of chronically absent middle school students and their caretakers a chronic absence letter at home and identified just over one in three chronically absent students at COST meetings.

Figure 4.2.5 Percentage of Chronically Absent Middle School (7-8) Students at Learning Collaborative Schools that Received Intervention



### 4.3 Interventions and Attendance Outcomes

It is difficult to explore the relationship between specific interventions and attendance outcomes with available data, due to the lack of a control group and the relatively small numbers of students engaged in a given intervention or combination of interventions. However, three specific correlations raised important questions for reflection at each site and within the school district.

1. Students with worse attendance receive more interventions. It is not surprising that schools would intervene more as absenteeism increased. However, this finding raises two questions that warrant further consideration: *(a) Do certain attendance promotion interventions actually increase absenteeism? (b) Are school safety nets catching students and families too late?*
2. Chronically absent students who received an IEP in the fall were more likely to be chronically absent in subsequent quarters. In the United States, an IEP is mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. It spells out a child's learning needs, the services the school will provide, and how progress will be measured. Moreover, several people, including parents/caretakers, are involved in creating the document. Children requiring IEPs may be facing challenges that create additional barriers to school attendance within and beyond school walls, so this relationship between chronic absenteeism and IEP development is not surprising. *However, it does raise questions about whether IEP development and implementation adequately identify student's attendance patterns, address attendance barriers, and cultivate attendance motivators.*
3. Fall chronically absent students who attended afterschool programs were significantly less likely to be chronically absent in the winter and/or spring. It is possible that those students who were able to attend afterschool programs also faced fewer attendance barriers, and were therefore more easily able to improve their attendance. However, this pattern raises questions about whether attendance promotion strategies are effectively building upon known attendance motivators.

These analyses of chronic absenteeism and interventions reveal that while there are important similarities across sites, patterns are not exactly the same. As SCUSD moves toward scaling up a focus on attendance, promotion strategies should recognize the importance of assessing and building upon school and neighborhood level patterns, needs, and resources. The following sections draw upon interview and observation data to provide emerging lessons about building infrastructure to address chronic absenteeism.

### 5.0 Emerging Lessons About Addressing Chronic Absence

During spring 2015, Learning Collaborative participants (including core school site attendance team members, school administrators and district staff) identified steps and resources that they found useful in their emerging effort to address chronic absenteeism via questionnaires and focus groups. They also identified key barriers to moving ahead. These are described below, according to how frequently they were mentioned/observed across all sites.

#### 5.1 Supportive Strategies and Resources

*Convening a committed attendance team that met regularly was a critical step toward addressing chronic absenteeism.* School staff at one site commented that their attendance team was their “greatest asset” because everyone had a role: the SSC helped lend resources to parents directly, the SSC and principal conducted home visitations, the attendance clerk made phone calls and ran attendance reports, interns made additional phone calls, parent volunteers/translators held SART meetings, and City Year conducted personal student check-ins. Team members and their roles varied by site, in part reflecting differing levels of school resources and choices about resource allocation. Wood commented that having an assistant principal whose position is heavily focused on attendance, a position allocated to them as a Priority School, was a key resource; this same site noted that “the personal approach [by our attendance team] to students who are having a difficult time reaches out to them and shows them that someone cares, and that seems to be effective.” Other important characteristics of attendance teams included: someone with time allocated to collect and monitor attendance patterns; representation of the range of resources that could potentially be mobilized to promote attendance; representation of various ethnic/cultural groups served by the school; the ability to coordinate activity and work independently; and the ability to investigate and resolve problems efficiently.

*Student Support Centers offer valuable resources in addressing chronic absenteeism.* All four schools had on-site SSCs to provide social and health services directly to students and families. Student Support Centers—and the SSC coordinators who oversee them—provided an invaluable asset to increased family/caretaker engagement by coordinating student services with family referrals, facilitating attendance team meetings, and participating in COST meetings. Most school site administrators ranked Student Support Centers as pivotal in addressing chronic absenteeism, alongside having a committed attendance team.

*Attendance teams highly valued the further engagement of parents/caretakers.* While not all sites had the resources to prioritize the family/parent engagement, all agreed that it was an important chronic absence prevention and intervention strategy. Oak Ridge, in particular, chose to focus on positive approaches to family engagement because “strengths-based conversations and approaches are what’s working well.” Examples of their family engagement efforts included: providing opportunities for family volunteerism in the classroom or for yard duty; hosting monthly community

## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

meetings; hosting Family Teacher Academic Team family nights; actively supporting parent/caretaker involvement with committees such as the School Site Council or English Learner Advisory Committee; and prioritizing warm communication with families to encourage a positive school-family connection. In addition, Oak Ridge highlighted how the SSC and principal worked together to send targeted emails, make phone calls, and set up a system to text message the families of chronically absent students. Other sites generated ideas about proactive community-building efforts with parents/caretakers—for example, holding kindergarten parent meetings and offering participants bags of groceries — although ultimately most attendance-focused engagement focused specifically on getting chronically absent students back to school. Each pilot site agreed that holding regular monthly or quarterly events for parents is important, but all noted the difficulty of hosting successful meetings due to time and resources.

*City Year, community partners, and committed interns provide much-needed additional resources for personalizing and incentivizing positive attendance.* Two of the four school sites had Priority School resources that they chose to invest in City Year support, and all participating sites commended City Year's efforts to provide personalized student interventions through morning check-ins and attendance incentives. City Year provided a reliable, consistent protocol that never changed. As one site described, "their consistency and their protocol is so helpful and connected to the students. They're always out there, every morning, you see the yellow jackets [of City Year staff]." Similarly, the pilot sites agreed that community partners provided needed student attendance incentives that "created a positive buzz around school." All sites agreed that more community partnerships that could provide incentives would benefit student attendance. Two sites in particular stated that "student rewards are very helpful, like the Kings tickets, and... the McDonald's gift cards," and the "pizza party for the elementary school and middle school class with the best attendance was very effective." Similarly, one site commented that the district's support in procuring student incentives was helpful, and could be increased. Aside from incentives, three out of four pilot school sites also shared that "interns help us make phone calls home" when students miss a lot of school — a task that, while straight-forward, requires an immense amount of time and persistence. While interns and City Year provided important additional support, one challenge was ensuring that information they gathered informed school activity.

*Parent-Teacher Home Visitations (PTHV), home visits, and Student Support Centers (formerly YFRC) increased student and family/caretaker engagement.* Attendance teams across school sites acknowledged the power of engaging teachers in home visits for both building positive relationships and learning more about attendance barriers and motivators. However, while some site cultures supported active home visit programs, others did not. Others were quick to note that district-funded PTHVs were helpful, but less likely to occur than having the SSCs' conduct home visits. One site explained that at their school site, the SSC conducts home visits to specifically "connect families to needed resources," which differed from the traditional PTHV model. Another site stated, "Home visitation with our student support coordinator and principal are very effective for kids whose [phone] numbers we can't reach. Even if we just leave our business card on their doorstep, it's effective because they see we took the time to show up and care. Parent-teacher home visitations are very

## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

helpful too.” At this school site the attendance clerk notified the SCC when a student’s family was unreachable by phone to suggest a home visit to re-engage them. Home visitation guidelines as a school and district practice did not yet include an explicit focus on attendance promotion.

School staff found district support around district-generated guidelines, the enrollment office, and *committed individual district staff to be helpful in addressing chronic absenteeism. However, they characterized specific district departments and the district toolkit as neither helpful nor unhelpful.*

One interviewee described how it is helpful to have existing district processes in place, such as the SART/SARB process. She explained that the “SART/SARB process works and student attendance improves, for the families that show up to the meetings.” Also, another interviewee noted the importance of district flexibility, particularly around modifying when the district sends attendance clerks the SART/SARB letters that eventually go out to families. This assistance was credited by school sites specifically to the enrollment office and committed district staff. However, despite the following district departments’ support to all schools, they were not identified as key resources for addressing chronic absence: attendance office; assessment, research & evaluation; information technology; youth development; homeless; foster care; Native American outreach; District English Learner Advisory Committee; SEL initiative; nurses; connect center; and mental health support. This might reflect the need for more coordinated outreach to school sites among these departments. Similarly, while several sites adapted materials from the district’s attendance toolkit, the toolkit was not mentioned as a significant factor in efforts to increase attendance.

### 5.2 Challenges to Addressing Chronic Absence

Learning Collaborative participants also identified a variety of challenges that compromise efforts to address chronic absenteeism. These challenges reflect data and procedural issues, resource access, skill-building needs, and leadership.

#### Data and Procedures

*The availability of accurate, easily accessible, and easily manipulated student attendance data posed a significant challenge to all pilot school sites.* For much of the 2014-15 school year, sites were unable to easily and accurately assess who was chronically absent. One site-based staff person pointedly remarked, “The district needs to get me accurate data as a basic precursor to my signing onto this project.” While a Student Information System (SIS) transition compromised data reporting, sites also noted several additional factors as affecting data accuracy:

- Slow recording of school transfer;
- Need for chronic absence calculations using periods rather than days as the unit of analysis to capture partial day absences in secondary grades; and
- Inability to track SARTs and SARBs via the SIS.



## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

To work on addressing chronic absence, sites wanted easy mechanisms allowing at a minimum, school administrators, attendance clerks, and SSCs to generate lists of students approaching and meeting the chronic absence threshold for specific windows of time. They wanted to be able to filter data for specific populations (i.e., by grade level, by teacher, a demographic or special needs group, etc.). Finally, they wanted to be able to track and monitor interventions in real time and in aggregate to assess what works.

*Sites need new transfer/enrollment protocols and procedures to enhance data access and ensure student safety.* Pilot sites noted they often do not hear that a student has left their school unless the family tells them, or another school requests a cumulative file. Conversely, inability to access transfer student records quickly generates challenges. Staff explained that cumulative files are slow to arrive, if at all, and there is no state-wide database for attendance (except for Special Education students), making it difficult to know whether incoming students have already had poor attendance at another school, or whether they have had a big gap in their enrollment.

As one pilot site hesitantly explained, “Students are at risk of not being tracked and getting lost in between school transfers... and, I’m just going to say it, have a greater likelihood of dropping out.” There is currently no safety net in existing district protocols to ensure the re-enrollment and actual school attendance of transfer students at their new school, due to limited coordination amount existing district resources, and between the school district, Child Protective Services (CPS), and social services.

School staff also worried about incidences in which parents/guardians of chronically absent students are non-responsive. A potentially dangerous challenge emerges when a student has a very high number of excused absences and caretakers do not respond to school visits/requests for meetings; legally they have not done anything wrong, so even when staff have requested CPS wellness checks, CPS will not typically do them.

One staff person described two of their special education transfer students and caretakers who were not attending school regularly, not communicating with the school (despite several home visitation attempts), and not attending SART meetings. The students were ultimately dis-enrolled through SARB hearings, which are only held at certain times of the year. During and beyond this process, the students were mostly untracked by the school, also posing concerns for student safety. Another school noted having had guardians not receive SART letters until their child had missed over 40 days of school, and expressed concern about why they hadn’t been engaged earlier.

*Other challenges to chronic absence efforts included: school calendars, personnel issues, and schools sites serving as a transfer student “dumping ground.”* Staff from one pilot school noted that the differing calendars and schedules of co-located elementary and middle schools presented an attendance barrier for at least some of the families, particularly on teacher conference days with early dismissal.

## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

Other interviewees reflected upon the varying levels of teacher willingness to reach out to chronically absent students and their families, either via phone or home visits.

Finally, sites identified challenges associated with district transfer of students. At the beginning of the school year, the district continues to move students to balance enrollment several weeks into the school year, destabilizing school efforts to build a sense of connection and community with students and families. Moreover, staff at one school site observed the tendency to transfer a large number of challenging students to them every spring just prior to testing, which spikes chronic absence rates and absorbs a significant amount of school resources. She noted, "In the spring, right before testing, it becomes the culture of our school, kids fight more because the transfer kids have behavior challenges...kids will hide by moving districts after they're SARTed or suspended, and they come here every spring [with pre-existing, unresolved attendance issues]."

### Resources

All pilot school sites and their administrators described the difficulty of creating staff time to promote attendance and address chronic absence. School staff and administrators understood that their choices about how to invest scarce resources had important implications for their sites' attendance support infrastructures. Some found the volume of chronically absent students to be overwhelming: "There's not enough time and energy because of the number of chronically absent students, which is about 150 right now. We can't focus on prevention because we can't get ahead." They believed that "home visits and phone calls home could be its own job."

Schools would like district assistance in acquiring resources for student incentives and building relationships with potential community and regional collaborators. School staff members are especially interested in launching programs that recognize excellent and improved attendance, and while they aim to implement creative strategies, they note the benefit of having access to some resources. One particular interviewee suggested that "the district should give incentives that are appropriate to our school demographics."

There is also interest in the district partnering with the city, community organizations, and agencies to generate additional resources and address widespread attendance barriers. One participant expressed hope that the district could help "target the local churches, fix the bus routes, have some awareness of what's local to our neighborhood and what's missing."

### Skills

*Addressing chronic absenteeism requires multiple skill sets for which staff receive limited professional development.* Collaborative participants noted the importance of building skills in the following areas:

- Using Infinite Campus and other district data systems;
- Identifying and implementing intervention strategies;
- Resource acquisition;
- Connecting families to resources; and
- Tapping other community resources.



## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

Schools might benefit from increased attention to building family engagement capacity. While Learning Collaborative participants expressed significant desire to engage families and implement new engagement strategies, as well as concern about limited family responsiveness to existing outreach efforts, there was little discussion regarding school staff cultural and linguistic capacity to engage with families. One administrator explained that “parents always want to know ‘why are you focusing on this topic [chronic absence] with me?’ if they are not currently engaged... it’s about earning trust...families feel their voices are heard, so it’s okay for us to roll out info about chronic absence to them because they trust that we’re here to help their kids.” However, across sites, there was little discussion about how to cultivate this kind of trust.

### District Leadership

*School administrators highlight the need for additional district leadership and resources to support attendances.* While administrators also underscored the need for improved data, procedures, and skills, their greatest concerns were competing priorities for time/resources and the need for leadership to elevate and champion improving school attendance as a priority. One principal characterized attendance as an “invisible issue” that profoundly affects schools and students, yet is not any district leader’s primary responsibility. Multiple programs and departments could be engaged in improving attendance, but all need to know that this is a priority, and intentionally determine how they will support this effort and have venues to coordinate activity.

### 6.0 Recommendations

Addressing chronic absenteeism within SCUSD will require increased commitment and new forms of collaboration. Lessons learned from the four participating pilot schools suggest a variety of next steps for the district and schools.

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

- 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;
- Ensure relevant departments are all aware of chronic absenteeism as an issue and coordinate attendance support activity across them;
- Identify and address policies and procedures that do not support school attendance;
- Continue resolving student information system challenges to attendance data and intervention tracking for the district and school sites;
- Invest in adequate staffing and training to accurately collect, document, and monitor attendance at every school, and especially those with high absenteeism;
- Have schools embed in School Site Plans attendance promotion strategies reflecting their school/student/neighborhood attendance patterns, barriers, motivators, and resources;
- Invest in community and interagency partnerships to: increase awareness that every day counts, extend school cultural competence, and tap additional resources; and
- Consider returning to sites a percentage of increased ADA funds generated by their decreased chronic absence and improved attendance.

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 suggests several important steps in the upcoming year:

- Implement a robust monitoring/intervention strategy on day one;
- Integrate prevention strategies through school-wide activities/communication and outreach to those almost chronically absent;
- At elementary schools, intensify K-1 interventions. Develop interventions for chronic absentees with neither the lowest nor highest rates of absence (those missing 15-19.9%);
- Define strategies for reaching persistent, non-responsive absentees; and
- Experiment with new ideas that build upon attendance motivators.

Additionally, we recommend that the pilot school sites consider expanding upon their existing chronic absence protocols to include the following elements:

## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

- 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/implementing promotion/intervention activity;
- Consider targeted outreach to students approaching chronic absence;
- Consider utilizing other existing campus resources, such as IEPs, restorative justice programs, social and emotional learning initiatives, and afterschool programs;
- Consider 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.

In order for school investments to foster stronger educational outcomes, young people must attend regularly. Prioritizing chronic absenteeism and attendance will positively impact future school improvement efforts, as well as child, youth, family and community well-being in Sacramento.

## 7.0 Appendices

### Appendix A: Intervention and Outcome Relationship Analysis

To explore the relationship between interventions and outcomes we employed correlational analyses. Data were combined from all schools to achieve the necessary power to detect significant associations. Despite this, some of the interventions were delivered to so few students that they were not analyzed (the following interventions were documented as having been received by fewer than ten chronically absent students in the fall: probation officer contact, homeless, foster care, SART, SARB, home visits, and City Year). Data were restricted to students who were chronically absent in the fall, and analyzed several outcomes related to their subsequent attendance. Out of 210 students chronically absent in the fall, 55 (or 26.2%) moved out and stayed out of chronic absence throughout the year.

Associations were explored between interventions received in fall and moving out of chronic absence the rest of the year (i.e., chronic absence fall only or "CAFallOnly"). Pearson chi-squared tests of association were used to look for a relationship between the intervention and the outcome. The table below shows, for each intervention, the number of students who received the intervention, and the number and percentage of those who were not subsequently chronically absent. P-values are also shown. P-values of .05 or .10 are typically used to assess significance; larger values indicate no association between the intervention and outcome.

There are two associations that are significant at the .10 level, for Afterschool and IEP. Forty-six percent of students receiving the afterschool intervention were not chronically absent again, compared to 25% of those who did not receive this intervention, and the overall CAFallOnly rate of 26%. For IEP, the percentage age of students receiving IEP in the fall who stayed out of chronic absence in winter and spring was lower than the overall rate of 26%. In other words, chronically absent students receiving IEPs in the fall (15%) were less likely than students not receiving IEPs (28%) to move out of chronic absence.

Table 7.1.1 Correlational Analysis of Intervention and Moving Out of Chronic Absenteeism

	# Intervention Recipients	# CA fall only	% CA fall only	p-value
Afterschool	13	6	46%	0.091
SCCM	17	6	35%	0.373
Other	31	10	32%	0.405
CACall	41	12	29%	0.617
AttTeam	18	5	28%	0.873
AttClerk	38	10	26%	0.985
APParent	38	10	26%	0.985
APStudent	30	7	23%	0.701
CALetter	42	9	21%	0.433
Incentives	19	4	21%	0.593
SSC	20	4	20%	0.508
COST	38	7	18%	0.229
SST	12	2	17%	0.440
IEP	34	5	15%	0.096

## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

This analysis should be treated as exploratory due to potential data system errors in filtering out disenrolled students.

### Appendix B: Will C. Wood Middle School Interventions/Infrastructure

Table 7.2.1 Will C. Wood Middle School Interventions/Infrastructure

Intervention	Definition
Attendance Clerk Parent Contact	Clerk called parents/guardians
Assistant Principal Parent Contact	Assistant Principal called parents/guardians
Assistant Principal Student Contact	Assistant Principal gave student a motivational warning
Incentives	Student received an attendance prize or recognition
District Attendance Letter	Chronic absence letter sent to parents/guardians
PO Truancy Contact	Student contacted by a truancy Probation Officer
SC Case Management	Referred to Student Center for case management
Attendance Team	Attendance Team member communicated with student, parents/guardians, and/or school administration
COST	Referred to the Coordination of Services Team
SST	Referred to the Student Study Team
IEP	Referred for Individualized Education Plan
Other	Received another type of intervention
SART	School Attendance Review Team meeting called
SARB	School Attendance Review Board notice sent
Home Visit	Home visit by Student Center staff or Assistant Principal

### 8.0 References and Notes

<sup>1</sup> These figures are taken from AR&E's Infinite Campus report titled "Sacramento City Unified School District: 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 Chronic Absenteeism Rates."

<sup>2</sup> Chronic absence research on SCUSD from 2010-2014 can be found at:

<http://explore.regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/-publications/chronic-absence-scusd/>.

<sup>3</sup> Chronic absence rates reflect the percentage of students who were enrolled in the district for at least one month, and who missed at least 10% of the days they were enrolled in school. To assess chronic absence, we consider student absence rates, which are generated as follows: absence rate = (#days absent/#days enrolled) x 100%. These calculations rely upon district-generated data on "# days absent" and "# days enrolled." According to district staff, in secondary schools where attendance is marked for each class period, "# days absent" is generated by counting every day's worth of periods a student is marked absent as the equivalent of one day absent. Primary school "tardies" are not counted as absences.

<sup>4</sup> Erbstein, 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.

<sup>5</sup> Erbstein, Nancy (2014). Chronic Absenteeism Issue Brief Series. Chronically Absent Student Populations in the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD), 2010-2013. Davis, CA: UC Davis Center for Regional Change.

<sup>6</sup> Erbstein, Nancy (2014). Chronic Absenteeism Issue Brief Series. Persistent Chronic Absence in the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD), 2010-2013. Davis, CA: UC Davis Center for Regional Change.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> The % Socio-economically disadvantaged, %English Learners, Suspension rates, fitness rates, and priority status were taken from the 2012-13 SARC. Racial/ethnic demographics were downloaded from ed-data.org 9/18/15. Chronic absenteeism rates are based on SCUSD data.

<sup>9</sup> Will C. Wood Middle School, however, due to its large attendance administration infrastructure, opted to modify their list of interventions. See Table 7.2.1 in Appendix B for further details.

<sup>10</sup> For the purpose of cross-site analyses, in Will C. Wood's intervention model, "Attendance Clerk Parent Contact" was compared to "Chronic Absence Call" from the other 3 pilot sites. Will C. Wood's "SC Case Management" was compared to "SSC" from the other 3 sites, and Will C. Wood's "District Attendance Letter" was compared to "Chronic Absence Letter" from the other 3 sites. Comparison categories were combined when used to calculate total interventions across all schools. "Assistant Principal Parent and "Assistant Principal Student Contact" were unique to Will C. Wood alone.

This was attributed to Will C. Wood's investment in attendance infrastructure; hence, the existence of an Assistant Principal position devoted entirely to attendance, and the Office Clerk's focused attendance priority (which to the other pilot sites, was reflected by a chronic absence phone call). Will C. Wood did not track: "Homeless," "Foster Care," "School Health Services," "Teachers," or "After School Program."

<sup>11</sup> One Learning Collaborative site submitted a proposal to the district which explained how student-parent/volunteer neighborhood groups, with support from City Year, could form walk-to-school

## Chronic Absenteeism in Sacramento City Unified School District

groups and create walking sticks that would serve as designated neighborhood markers and sources of community pride. National Safe Routes to School technical assistance providers are prepared to provide guidance with respect to district-identified concerns about liability issues.

<sup>12</sup> The standard deviations of mean attendance rates vary from 4.7 to 11.6 across schools and seasons. Relative to the differences in attendance rates, the standard deviation is large, indicating there is no significant differences within schools across seasons, across schools, or by season within schools. One exception is that there is a significant difference between winter/spring attendance rates at Oakridge Elementary, when attendance rates improved.

<sup>13</sup> These combined winter/spring rates are based upon cumulative absenteeism and enrollment rates from January thru June. It is important to note that continued chronic absence in spring could reflect having missed a very large amount of school in winter, in which case the spring rate would still remain high, thereby skewing our understanding of when chronic absence actually occurred. For the sake of consistency, all chronic absence rates are listed by the season in which district reports filtered rates of 10% or higher of missed attendance, regardless of the season in which missed attendance occurred.

<sup>14</sup> Between fall and winter, the correlation in attendance rates was 0.76. Between winter and spring, it was 0.93. Between fall and spring, it was 0.67. It is possible that this higher winter-spring correlation is due to the long amount of time required to move out of chronic absence if one has missed a lot of school at one point in time. For example, if a student missed a lot of school around winter break, it could take into spring for this student to reduce/eliminate his/her chronic absence rate while his/her daily attendance rate increases.

<sup>15</sup> While these emerging correlations explore the relationship between specific interventions and attendance outcomes, it is not possible to infer causation due to both a lack of statistical power and the non-random assignment of treatments to students, which leads to bias. For example, the students who received IEPs were not a random sample of all chronically absent students, and were likely to have characteristics that contributed to their low attendance rate, which students without IEPs wouldn't share. Further correlational analysis using Pearson chi-squared tests of association were used to look for a relationship between the intervention and the outcome, and are provided in Appendix A.

<sup>16</sup> These populations include the greatest numbers of chronically absent students, but are often untouched by City Year or case management.

<sup>17</sup> This population includes the greatest numbers of chronically absent students that is often untouched.

<sup>18</sup> City Year was identified as having worked with seven chronically absent students in fall, 44 in winter, and 60 in spring.