



RESEARCH BRIEF

Preventing Chronic Absenteeism

Interventions and Implementation Strategies

District Leadership Forum

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1) Executive Overview

Key Observations

Chronic absenteeism, which the U.S. Department of Education defines as missing at least 15 days of school in an academic year, affects students of all races, genders, and ages, but affects certain grade levels and races disproportionately. According to a Department of Education report, more than six million students, or 14 percent of the student population, missed at least 15 days of school in the 2013-14 academic year. However, Pacific Islander and American Indian students, as well as those in high school, experienced chronic absenteeism at substantially higher rates. Chronic absenteeism affects even districts with high overall attendance rates. For example, 10 percent of students at **District C**, which has a 94.8 percent attendance rate, are chronically absent.

Skipping school becomes an increasingly student-driven decision as students age because of anxiety. Contacts at **District D** report that this anxiety can stem from increased face-to-face interaction at school among students accustomed to communicating through mobile/digital methods. Meanwhile, contacts at **District B** report that anxiety may stem from when students miss school at younger ages and fail to develop a strong academic foundation.

Profiled districts identify individual student barriers to attendance to tailor intervention strategies. Districts determine why students miss school through conferences between students and school employees, social workers, and specialized intervention teams. **District A** and **District C** each deploy intervention teams at the school level, while the intervention team at **District D** sits at the district level. **District B** uses a three-tiered system of intervention teams. Students escalate through the system based on the number of absences they accumulate.

Initial intervention strategies aim to deter chronic absenteeism by warning students and their families about poor attendance and its consequences. For example, attendance specialists at **District D** send a letter to parents/guardians with information about state truancy laws after students accumulate two unexcused absences. Attendance specialists send a second letter after no more than four unexcused absences inviting parents/guardians and the student to a conference and warning recipients about potential legal consequences.

Several profiled districts try to build student engagement with school material to increase attendance. For example, schools within the **District B** offer Saturday school sessions about once per month for all students, not just those who already are chronically absent. Teachers encourage students to attend by leading lessons on topics of their choosing (e.g., English, math, science) through nontraditional formats and activities. To assess the effectiveness of these sessions, the District's Student Services Specialist gathers feedback from families about how their students engage with the material in a new way and become more interested in school.

Profiled districts offer onsite trainings and information sessions for administrators, teachers, and staff to facilitate a coordinated and consistent approach to addressing chronic absenteeism. For example, the Director of Alternative Education and Continuous Improvement at **District C** leads sessions in the summer and early fall. During the fall session, schools bring five employees (e.g., teachers, administrators, staff) to learn about the District's expectations for specific interventions.

2) Scope and Causes of Chronic Absenteeism

Measuring Chronic Absenteeism

Millions of Students Experience Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism, which the U.S. Department of Education defines as missing 15 or more days of school in an academic year, affects students of all genders, races, and grade levels in districts across the country. In one report, the Department of Education found that more than six million students, or about 14 percent of the student population, missed at least 15 school days in the 2013-14 academic year.¹

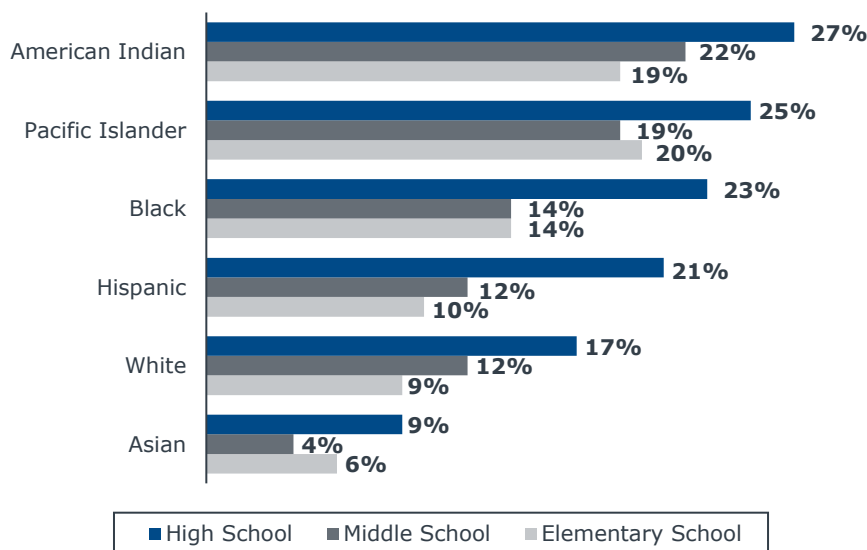
Chronic absenteeism even affects districts with high overall attendance rates. For example, the attendance rate at **District C** is 94.8 percent, but 10 percent of its approximately 26,000 students experience chronic absenteeism. Meanwhile, contacts at **District B** report the District's 97 percent attendance rate would be higher if not for chronically absent students.

Chronic Absenteeism Disproportionally Affects High School and Non-White Students

Nationally, chronic absenteeism is most common among high school students. Nearly 19 percent of high school students were chronically absent in the 2013-14 academic year, compared to 12 percent of middle school students, and about 11 percent of elementary school students.¹

Pacific Islander and American Indian students also experience chronic absenteeism at rates considerably higher than their peers. For example, these students were over 65 percent more likely to miss three or more weeks of school than their white peers in 2013-14.

Percent of Students among Key Racial Groups Who Experience Chronic Absenteeism¹



¹Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools," U.S. Department of Education, <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>

Causes of Chronic Absenteeism

Family and Mental Factors Contribute to Chronic Absenteeism

Some causes of chronic absenteeism are consistent across grade levels, but contacts report that missing school often becomes an increasingly student-driven decision as they age. Common causes, regardless of grade level, include socio-economic status, issues at home (e.g., families with drug or alcohol abuse), a misunderstanding among some families about the importance of attendance, and physical and mental health conditions.

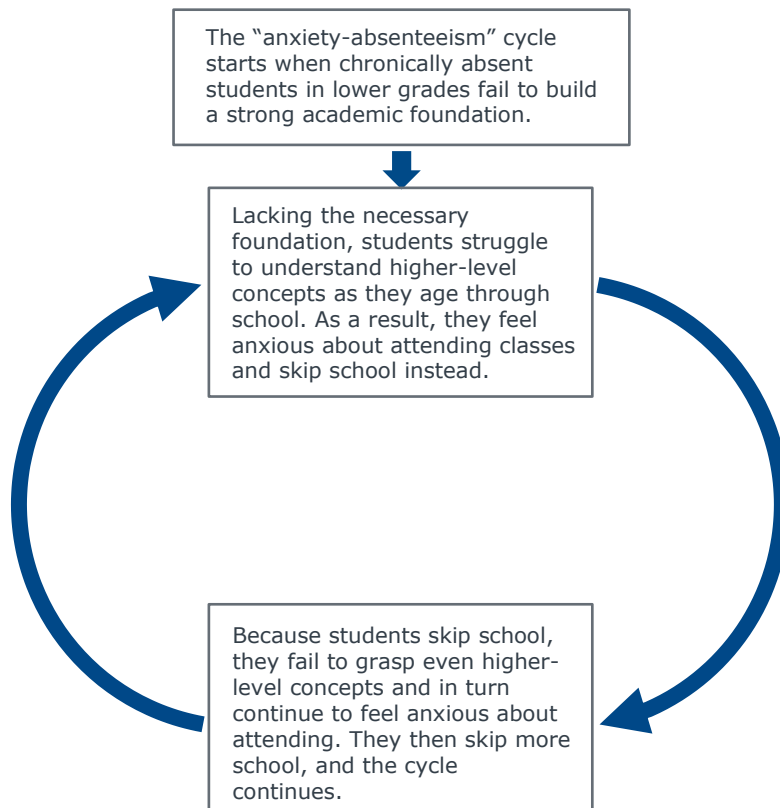
Meanwhile, contacts report that anxiety causes much of the student-driven absenteeism in later grades. Contacts at **District D** report that this anxiety can stem from emotional issues, as well as changing social norms among students today (e.g., less frequent face-to-face communication outside of school). Alternatively, contacts at **District B** report anxiety may develop from missing school in lower grades, resulting in a so-called “anxiety-absenteeism cycle” where students who fail to develop a strong academic foundation in lower grades skip school as they age.

Compassionate Schools Project²

District A is adopting the Compassionate Schools model, which focuses on examining the effects of trauma and chronic stress on the brain and how it frames students’ responses to different stress triggers.

Under this model, the District is modifying its approach to academic performance, including attendance, to focus on building resiliency among its students and their families. The District’s interventions moving forward will aim to teach students and their families skills to better manage their personal situations, so they do not negatively affect the student’s academics.

The ‘Anxiety-Absenteeism Cycle’



²Compassionate Schools Project, <http://www.compassionschools.org/>

3) Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

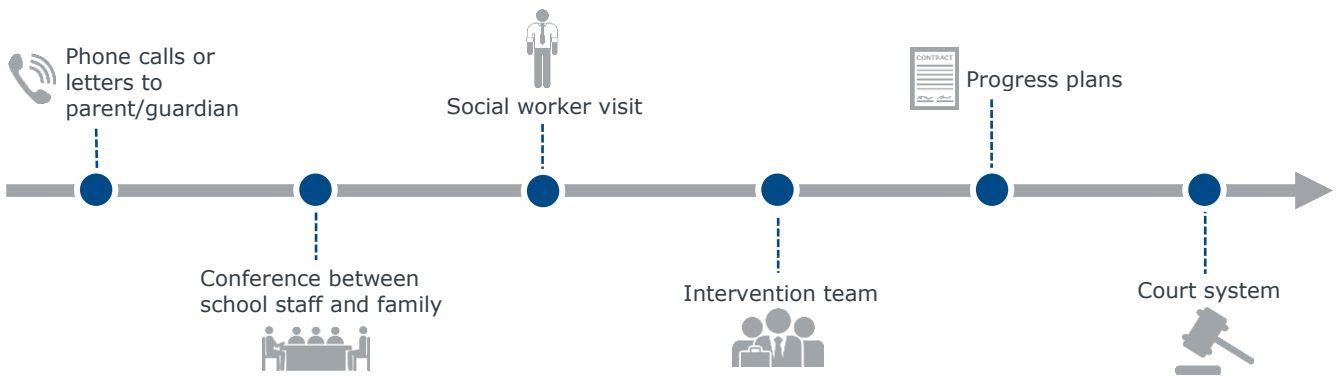
Tiered Intervention Systems

Profiled Districts Use Tiered Response Strategies with Increasing Intensity as Absenteeism Persists

Just as there are many causes of chronic absenteeism, districts use multiple strategies to address the issue. There are five or six stages in **District B's** intervention system, depending on whether the absences are excused or unexcused. In comparison, **District D** uses a 14-step intervention plan.

While the tactics within each district's intervention system vary, they share certain elements, several of which focus on identifying a student's barriers to attending school. By identifying specific causes, districts can direct students to resources tailored to their specific needs.

Elements of Tiered Intervention Systems



Initial Interventions Warn Families about Absences

Profiled districts contact students and their families to warn them about signs of truancy before students become chronically absent.

After five absences, **District A** requires teachers to contact students' parents/guardians, typically through a phone call or letter. This initial communication allows teachers to inform parents/guardians that they care about the student's attendance and offer help.

At **District D**, parents/guardians receive an automated phone call asking them to contact their child's school after the student's first unexcused absence. After the second unexcused absence, attendance specialists at each school send a letter to parents/guardians with information about state truancy laws. Attendance specialists send a second letter after no more than four unexcused absences inviting parents/guardians and their child to a conference at their school. The letter also warns recipients about potential legal consequences for continued absences.

Staff at **District B** send different letters for excessive excused absences and unexcused absences. For excessive excused absences, a principal sends the first letter after six absences, informing parents/guardians of the number of days their child has missed and highlighting the importance of attendance. If their child continues to miss school, the principal sends another letter inviting parents/guardians and their child to meet with the school's intervention team to discuss reasons for the absences. For unexcused absences, the District's Student Services Administrator sends the first letter to parents/guardians after four absences. The letter includes language from the state Education Code that warns families about the consequences

Starting in the 2017-18 academic year, state law requires **District D** to use a formal assessment tool between two and five absences to diagnose a student's barriers to attendance.

Contacts at **District B** report that some parents criticize the harsh language from the state's Education Code.

of continued absences (e.g., juvenile court). If a student continues to miss school, parents/guardians receive a second letter inviting them to meet with the school's intervention team.



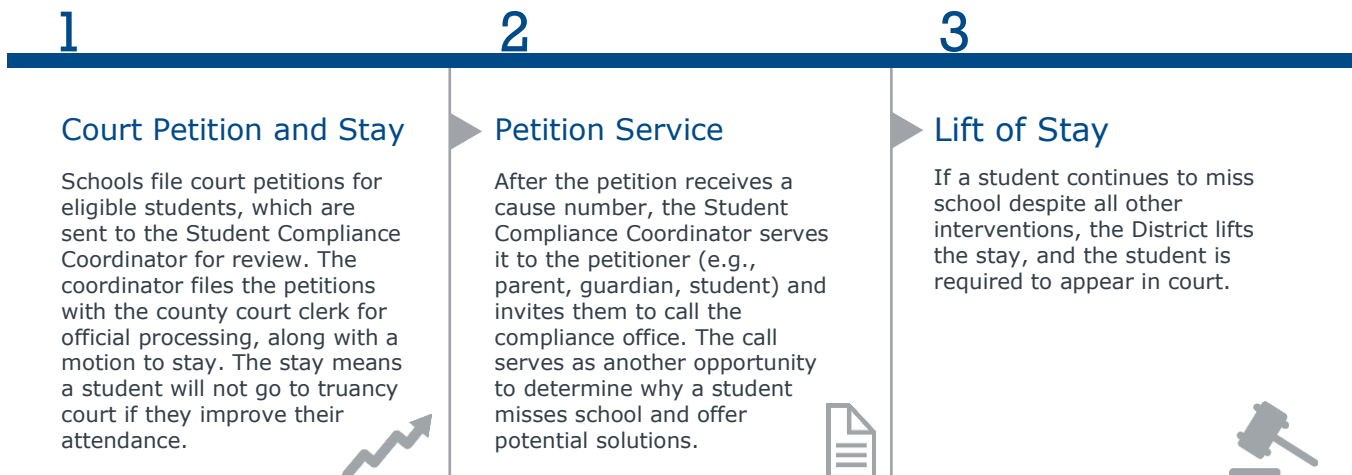
Targeting Students with a History of Chronic Absence

In the summer, administrative staff at **District C** send letters to families whose children have a history of truancy and are changing schools. The letter, which includes an attachment from the District's truancy judge, notifies parents/guardians about the District's attendance policy and encourages them to be proactive in getting their children to school.

Judicial System is a Last Resort among Profiled Districts

State law requires **District D** to initiate the legal process when a student accumulates seven unexcused absences in a month or 10 in an academic year.

The Legal Process at *District D*



To measure improvement in attendance, District D compares students' attendance data from 30 days before the petition was served to 30, 60, and 90 days after it was sent. If a student shows no improvement by 90 days, the District lifts the stay. Before lifting the stay, however, the District invites students to a Truancy Workshop at the county juvenile court. During these workshops, the County Commissioner discusses the legal and personal consequences of continued absenteeism and asks parents/guardians to sign a promissory note pledging their commitment to improving attendance.

Contacts at **District A** report that the District is hesitant to use the judicial system. When social workers or other designees file petitions, it is not necessarily about delivering a legal consequence. Instead, contacts report that juvenile court can connect students and their families to additional support services in some cases. Additionally, the petitions seek suspended judgments when students go to court. Because the judgement is suspended, students can return to court and review their circumstances with a judge if they improve their attendance.

Identifying Causes and Tailoring Support

The role of Attendance Intervention Teams at **District A** may change after it completes adoption of the Compassionate Schools model.

Intervention Teams Identify Barriers to Attendance

Intervention teams monitor attendance and meet in person to determine the cause of students' absenteeism. At **District A**, Attendance Intervention Teams meet with students and their families after six unexcused absences to develop a plan to improve attendance. The team consists of an administrator, a social worker, and a data manager at each school.

At **District C**, every school has a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) team charged with monitoring both students' academic performance and behavior (e.g., attendance, discipline). Principals refer students showing signs of truancy (i.e., five unexcused absences within 30 calendar days or 10 unexcused absences within 90 calendar days) to their school's MTSS team.

Team Composition:

- Administrator
- Guidance counselor
- Academic coach
- School psychologist
- Intervention specialist
- Exceptional Student Education Teacher

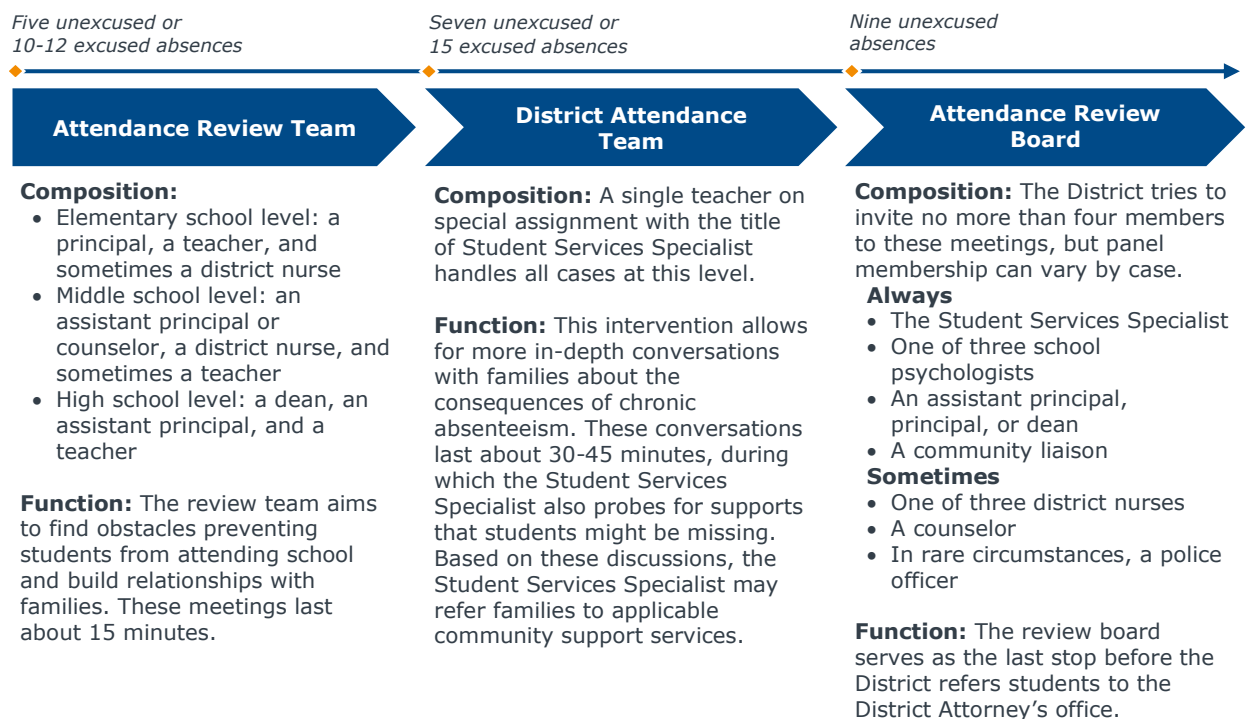
The Attendance Support Team at **District D** deploys after a student shows continued chronic absenteeism despite the use of previous strategies in the District's intervention system.

Team Composition:

- Student Compliance Coordinator
- Counselor
- Representative from county court
- A community member selected based on students' interests to help facilitate discussion with the student
- Assistant principal

Administrators at **District B** use a three-tiered system of intervention teams. A student escalates through the system based on their number of accumulated absences. A different number of absences triggers these teams depending on whether absences are excused or unexcused. Contacts prefer small teams (i.e., four members) because they intimidate students less. To assess the teams' effectiveness, the Student Services Specialist tracks how many students attend each type of meeting and monitors their attendance afterward.

Intervention Teams at *District B*



Analyze Student Barriers to Customize Responses

School administrators at most profiled districts invite students showing early signs of chronic absenteeism (e.g., more than five absences) and their families to meet with them in a conference setting. These meetings provide an opportunity for administrators to identify reasons for absenteeism before it becomes chronic.

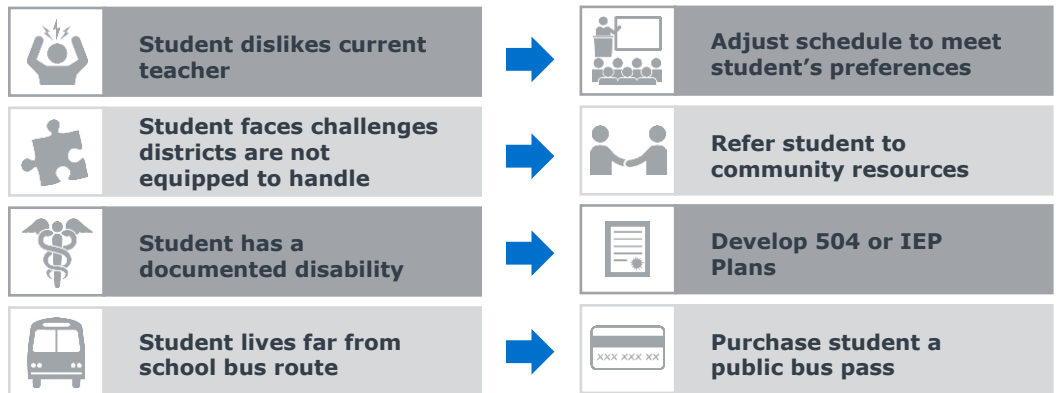
School administrators and counselors at **District D** convene conferences after a student accumulates five unexcused absences. They encourage parents/guardians to attend the meeting, but they will meet with just the student if their parents/guardian cannot attend. During conferences, the attending administrator and/or counselor offers strategies to overcome barriers to attendance. For example, conference members may suggest 504 Plans for students with disabilities who require accommodations or Individualized Educational Plans (IEP) for students with disabilities who require specialized instruction.

In some cases, conferences occur after students meet with an intervention team. If a student within **District A** continues to miss school after meeting with an Attendance Intervention Team and accumulates 10 absences, the team schedules a conference to determine whether their family has made a reasonable effort to comply with state attendance law. The team continues to monitor the student's attendance afterward and will adjust interventions if necessary.

In addition to conferences, social workers at District A can help identify barriers that prevent students from attending school. **District C** will not send students to truancy court until after a social worker intervenes.


After identifying the causes of chronic absenteeism, districts customize responses to students' circumstances.

Matching Interventions to Student Needs



Formal Plans Keep Students Accountable for Progress

Most profiled districts create plans to hold chronically absent students and their parents/guardians accountable for improved attendance. For example, MTSS teams at **District C** develop Progress Monitoring Plans that record how many absences a student accumulates, contributing factors to their absenteeism, proposed intervention strategies, and goals for improvement. MTSS teams house these plans in the District's homegrown database system and send them to parents/guardians. MTSS teams can revisit

 Please see "Accountability Plans" in the appendix on page 16 of this report for an example tracking plan.

monitoring plans to adjust the timeline or change and intensify or reduce their intervention strategies.

Prevention-Focused Strategies

Educate Families about the Importance of Attendance

To reduce chronic absenteeism, most districts work to educate students and their families about the importance of attendance. For example, three middle schools in **District A** incorporate attendance information in their weekly Homework Dinners, during which school employees and community volunteers teach parents/guardians different skills (e.g., how to help their children with homework). Also, a not-for-profit organization provides attendees with a meal each week during this time. Under the Compassionate Schools model, the schools recently added an attendance component to these events. Now, students who attend can make up an absence, while an onsite social worker educates families about how to prevent absences.

At **District D**, leaders in the public information office, the student life department, and the community partner department share information about the benefits of strong attendance (e.g., higher GPAs, increased graduation rates) in a branded advertising campaign. Materials for the campaign include billboards, posters, handout flyers, and radio interviews. District leadership also plans to change its phone system's hold music to include informational soundbites about attendance.

Administrators at District D send attendance information in nudge letters to families of chronically absent students three times a year. These letters compare student's absence rate to the average among other students at their school and the average of all students in the District at the same grade level.

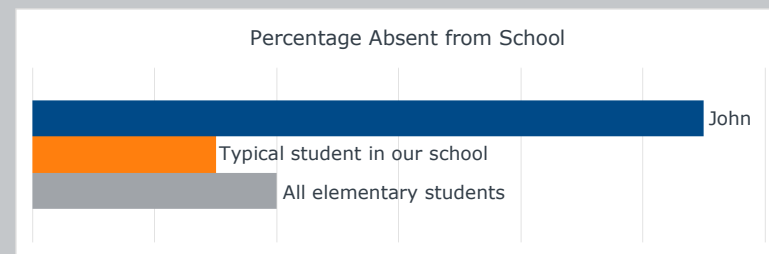
Sample Mid-Year Nudge Letter

Letter leads with importance of attendance

Dear Parent/Guardian of John,

In our District, we aim to improve the attendance of each of our students. Every school day offers opportunities to learn, and the impacts are noticeable when students miss time.

John has missed X days – or X% of school this year, more than the typical student at our school and in the district for the same grade.



Letter highlights student's performance

Visual element adds context for comparison to other students

Warning signs and myths educate parents/guardians about absenteeism

Warning Signs

Chronic absence = 10% or more of the school year
Warning Signs = between 5% and 9%

Common Myths

Myth 1: Only unexcused absences matter
Myth 2: Attendance only matters in high school

In reality, any time away from school matters, and attendance at every grade level is important to success.

We value John's contributions to the classroom and school. If you have any questions, please give me a call at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Jane Doe, Principal
Name of School

Phone call invitation sets up opportunity to discuss absenteeism with parent/guardian

Profiled Districts Encourage Engagement to Improve Attendance

Contacts report that students are more likely to attend class if they are engaged at school and with their peers and teachers. To build engagement among its students, schools in **District B** offer nontraditional Saturday school sessions about once per month. Typically, two teachers lead classrooms of about 15 to 20 students each, but staffing levels depend on student interest. To gauge demand for these sessions, schools send out flyers that parents can sign to indicate their children plan on attending. Contacts report it is difficult to quantitatively assess the effect of Super Saturdays on attendance. Instead, the administrators rely on anecdotal evidence from families about how their kids engage with the material in a new way and become more interested in school.

Nontraditional Saturday School



Schools select any topic (e.g., math, science, English) to teach in a nontraditional format.



Sessions are open to all students, not just those experiencing chronic absence.



Instructors teach lessons for two hours then swap students and teach the lesson again.



The District pays teachers who opt to participate in Saturday school sessions.

Meanwhile, staff at **District D** encourage interaction between students and staff members through its check-in/check-out system. After three unexcused absences, students are required to meet with a trusted staff member (e.g., teacher, counselor, dean) when they arrive at school and again at the end of the day. Conversations during these check-ins aim to build student-staff connections and facilitate stronger engagement with the school. In cases where staff identify more complicated issues that might pose barriers to attendance, they initiate the District's check and connect intervention. Similar to the check-in/check-out policy, students meet with a trusted teacher or staff member. However, these conversations focus on a student's attendance and what obstacles prevent them from attending school.

Reward Students who Demonstrate Improved Attendance

Most profiled districts incentivize attendance through formal and informal reward systems. For example, **District C** offers Positive Behavioral Intervention & Supports at each of its schools. When students meet certain attendance goals (e.g., no more than three absences in a quarter), they receive awards like attending a beginning-of-the-year pep rally or a game hour. Contacts report that rewards for attendance vary by school site.

Schools within the **District B** employ a less formal reward system through individual interventionists. For example, to incentivize attendance among chronically absent students, some school employees may call a student's family to recognize improvement, while others might solicit donated meals or snacks to treat students.

4) Implementation and Guidance

Communicating Expectations

In its training sessions, **District C** emphasizes how to use data to improve attendance.

Visit School Sites to Train Administrators and Staff

Administrators at individual schools exercise a lot of autonomy in how they practice their district's attendance policies. To encourage a standardized approach, district leaders at **District B**, **District C**, and **District D** host in-person trainings for various stakeholders at school sites.

At District C, the Continuous Improvement Director leads training/information sessions in the summer and early fall. In the summer session, the director shares district- and school-level data, including attendance rates, with school administrators to compare performance year-over-year. During the fall session, schools gather five employees (e.g., teachers, administrators, staff) to learn about the District's expectations for specific interventions (e.g., how to develop a Progress Monitoring Plan). The District splits both summer and fall training sessions by elementary and secondary level.

The Student Compliance Coordinator at District D leads four training sessions in the summer and early fall. Each session focuses on a different set of school stakeholders involved in the District's intervention system (i.e., counselors, principals and other administrators, and all office staff). The first three sessions cover state truancy law and Title IX. The fourth session, designed specifically for attendance specialists, explores the details of the District's tiered intervention system.

Supplement Trainings with Other Outreach to Maintain Awareness

Contacts conduct regular outreach to school sites to maintain awareness of attendance policies and performance. For example, the Continuous Improvement Director at **District C** emails leaders at schools with attendance updates throughout the year, comparing that individual school's current attendance rate to the previous year.

Meanwhile, **District B's** Student Services Specialist sends emails to administrators at schools, which ask them to focus on specific students approaching chronic absentee status. The Student Services Specialist also delivers pamphlets with information on the district's absenteeism intervention system to each school site.

5) Research Methodology

Project Challenge

Leadership at a member district approached the Forum with the following questions:

- What percentage of the student population experiences chronic absenteeism?
- What are the most common causes of chronic absenteeism among students across the system? How do they differ by grade level?
- What universal support systems, services, or plans do districts implement to address chronic absenteeism?
- What proactive measures do districts take to prevent chronic absenteeism?
- Do services vary based on the cause of chronic absenteeism? If so, what prevention-focused strategies have been implemented to address specific causes?
- Who within the district directs these initiatives?
- How do districts communicate specific actions and expectations to school administrators?
- What external partnerships have districts formed to respond to chronic absenteeism?
- How do districts assess the effectiveness of their system wide intervention plans?
- What district-level strategies have been most successful in reducing chronic absenteeism?

Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB's internal and online research libraries (eab.com)
- The Chronicle of Higher Education (<http://chronicle.com>)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)
- "Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools." U.S. Department of Education. Accessed August 28, 2017. <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>
- Compassionate Schools Project. Accessed, August 28, 2017. <http://www.compassionschools.org/>

Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed student services leaders, compliance coordinators, and directors of continuous improvement at the following districts:

A Guide to Districts Profiled in this Brief

School District	Location	Approximate Enrollment (Students/Schools)
District A	South	25,000 / 41 schools
District B	Pacific West	25,600 / 37 schools
District C	South	26,000 / 31 schools
District D	Pacific West	29,000 / 57 schools

Appendix: Accountability Plans

Instructions

Equip your interventionists with this tool to record the reason for a student's absences, and the planned strategy to improve their attendance. Interventionists should update these documents with notes on a student's performance and progress toward the agreed upon goal. Intervention strategies and their frequency can be updated throughout the process if necessary.

Accountability Plan		
School Name		
Student:	Plan Year:	Status:
Content Area: Attendance		
Trigger/Reason for plan: Student has missed X days of school		
Hypothesis: Student has missed X days of schools because...		
Intervention Strategy:		
Frequency:		
Goal:		
Progress Data		
Date	Comments/Notes	