JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER *for Youth and Their Communities*

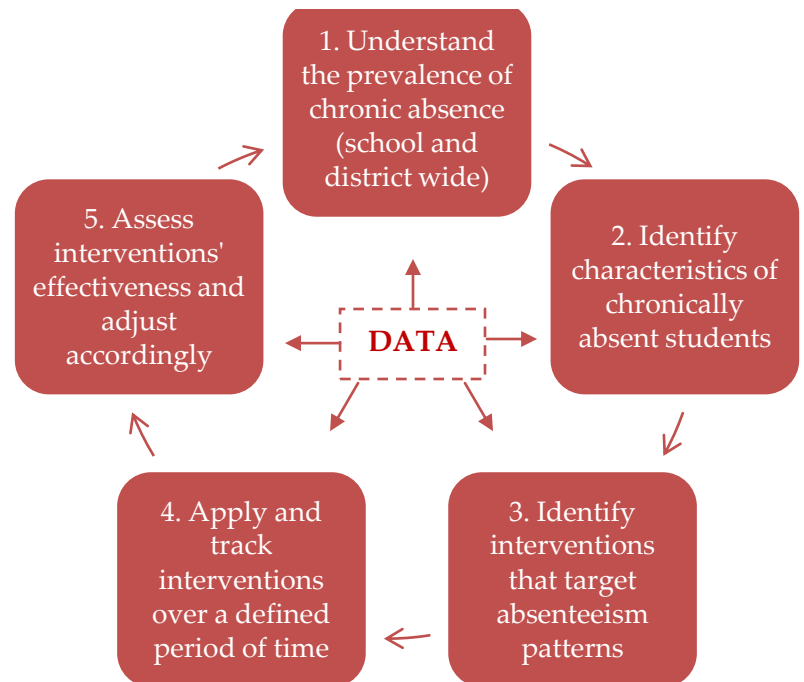# Collaborative Approaches to Reducing Absenteeism Among K-12 Students

Steps to Addressing Truancy and Chronic Absenteeism

Research shows that truancy and chronic absenteeism[1] can be precursors to school drop-out, academic failure, and juvenile delinquency. A companion issue brief examines truancy and chronic absenteeism in Redwood City, CA and finds that chronic absence is associated with lower student academic achievement as well subsequent chronic absence problems.[2] Given the extent of the absenteeism problem and its known negative consequences, schools, districts and communities across the country are actively seeking solutions, focused especially on interagency collaboration in order to address the multi-faceted issues that underlie absence problems

Addressing chronic absenteeism is a continuous process that involves understanding its prevalence, identifying characteristics of chronically absent students, identifying interventions that target absenteeism patterns, applying and tracking interventions, assessing their effectiveness and adjusting them accordingly (Figure 1).

A core piece of addressing absenteeism involves creating a data system, which sits at the center of all subsequent steps in the process. Collecting and analyzing data can be both resource and time intensive, but it is a critical foundation to understanding the prevalence of absenteeism and the student characteristics associated with chronic absenteeism, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of interventions.

Figure 1: Using Data to Address Absenteeism

1. Understand the prevalence of chronic absence (school and district wide)

2. Identify characteristics of chronically absent students

3. Identify interventions that target absenteeism patterns

4. Apply and track interventions over a defined period of time

5. Assess interventions' effectiveness and adjust accordingly

DATA

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[1] Truancy refers to students who have repeated, unexcused absences; chronic absenteeism refers to students who repeatedly miss school for any reason.

[2] Sanchez, M. (2012). *Truancy and Chronic Absence in Redwood City*. John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities, Stanford University.

Factors that Contribute to Truancy and Chronic Absenteeism

Research shows that contributing factors to truancy and chronic absenteeism fall into four broad domains:[3]
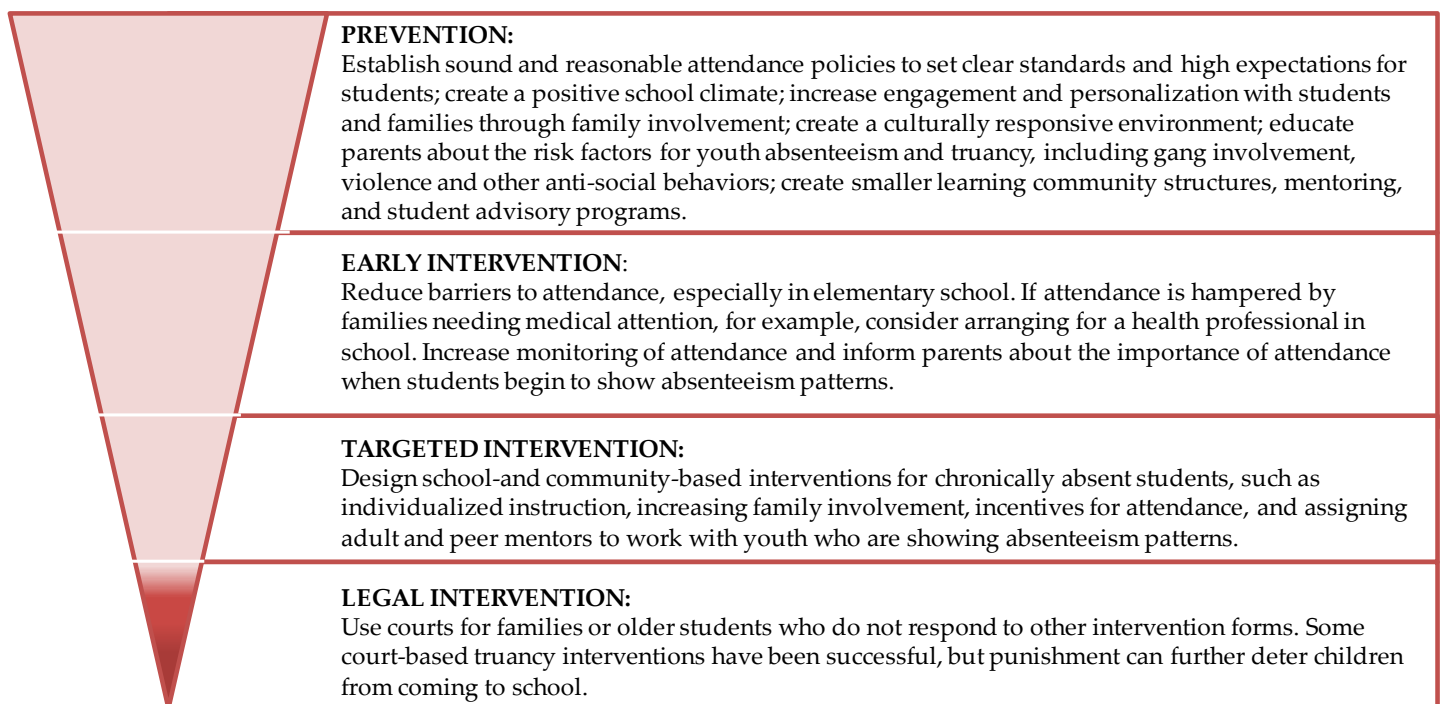
- **Individual:** school phobia, learning disabilities, poor school attachments, behavior problems, perceived or real lack of safety, boredom/indifference in class, lagging schoolwork, need for employment;
- **Family:** low family income, single-parent status, child maltreatment, parental disabilities, lack of parental involvement in education, family mobility, family care responsibilities;
- **District/School:** district/school attendance policies, diverse student learning styles that make individualized instruction challenging , relationships between students/families and teachers; and
- **Community:** high levels of family mobility, violence, child maltreatment, crime, drug abuse, unemployment.

The extent to which these factors play a role in chronic absenteeism varies based on a student's age, with family factors more likely to influence elementary school students and all types of factors likely to influence middle and high school students.

Best Practices for Districts and Schools to Reduce Truancy and Chronic Absenteeism

There is a continuum of efforts intended to increase attendance: prevention, followed by early, targeted, and legal interventions.[4] The inverted pyramid of Figure 2 signifies that prevention targets the most students and legal intervention is needed in only the most egregious cases. Figure 2 outlines these approaches along with sample strategies.

Figure 2: Continuum of Approaches to Increase Attendance

PREVENTION:
Establish sound and reasonable attendance policies to set clear standards and high expectations for students; create a positive school climate; increase engagement and personalization with students and families through family involvement; create a culturally responsive environment; educate parents about the risk factors for youth absenteeism and truancy, including gang involvement, violence and other anti-social behaviors; create smaller learning community structures, mentoring, and student advisory programs.

EARLY INTERVENTION:
Reduce barriers to attendance, especially in elementary school. If attendance is hampered by families needing medical attention, for example, consider arranging for a health professional in school. Increase monitoring of attendance and inform parents about the importance of attendance when students begin to show absenteeism patterns.

TARGETED INTERVENTION:
Design school-and community-based interventions for chronically absent students, such as individualized instruction, increasing family involvement, incentives for attendance, and assigning adult and peer mentors to work with youth who are showing absenteeism patterns.

LEGAL INTERVENTION:
Use courts for families or older students who do not respond to other intervention forms. Some court-based truancy interventions have been successful, but punishment can further deter children from coming to school.

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[3] Sutphen, R. D., Ford, J. P. & Flaherty, C. (2010) Truancy interventions: A review of the research literature. *Research on Social Work Practice,* 20(2)**,** 161-171.

[4] Railsback, J. & Laboratory, N. R. E. (2004) *Increasing student attendance: Strategies from research and practice,* (Northwest Regional Educatonal Laboratory).

At all points along this continuum, it is important for diverse stakeholders to collaborate in order to design multi-modal approaches. Although definitive strategies to address truancy and chronic absenteeism are sparse, Figure 3 delineates some best practices.[5]

Figure 3: Best Practices for Absenteeism Prevention and Intervention Efforts

ENGAGE AND COLLABORATE WITH DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS	DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT MULTI-MODAL STRATEGIES
• Engage an array of stakeholders, such as schools, law enforcement, youth organizations, libraries, and social services. Collaboration helps to pool resources and allows for more community input. • Involve families in planning and implementing interventions to develop mutual trust. Educate students, parents/guardians, business and community leaders, and other citizens about their responsibility to get children to school each day. • Make attendance a community priority; communicate that this is not about blaming schools or families but about galvanizing the resources of the entire community to ensure all students have the chance to succeed.	• Target the underlying contributors to a child's absence (e.g., provide bus passes if transportation is a barrier). • Provide a continuum of supports that include academic, behavioral, family, and health components. • Use a staged approach that gets progressively more individualized (e.g., letter, phone call, home visit). • Educate families of chronically absent students about the importance of attending school through personalized phone calls and letters. • Include rewards for improved attendance and consequences for non-attendance. Consequences should keep students in school (e.g., in-school rather than out-of-school suspensions).

Selected Truancy and Chronic Absenteeism Interventions

Although there are many chronic absence and truancy intervention programs, our review found that few have been rigorously evaluated; authors of other recent literature reviews identified the same challenge.[6] One issue is that interventions lack a shared definition of truancy and chronic absenteeism (e.g., truant behavior can range from having between zero and 20 absences in a year, and chronic absenteeism is often not defined at all). Therefore, there is currently no distinction in the research about which strategies are effective for improving attendance overall and which help to reduce truancy. Two types of interventions have become the focus of research and policy. First is a set of interventions that follow a process similar to *School Attendance Review Boards* (SARBs), in which representatives from various youth-serving agencies help truant or recalcitrant students and their parents or guardians solve school attendance and behavior problems through the use of

[5] Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (2002). *Youth out of school: Linking absence to delinquency*. Denver, CO; Epstein, J. L. & Sheldon, S. B. (2002) Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement. *The Journal of Educational Research,* 95(5)**,** 308-318.; Sundius, J. & Farneth, M. (2008) An Epidemic of Absence: How Can We Get Kids To School? Open-Society Institute.

[6] Gandy, C. & Schultz, J. L. (2007) Increasing school attendance for K-8 students: A review of research examining the effectiveness of truancy prevention programs. Wilder Research; Railsback, J. & Laboratory, N. R. E. (2004) Increasing student attendance: Strategies from research and practice, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory; Sutphen, R. D., Ford, J. P. & Flaherty, C. (2010) Truancy interventions: A review of the research literature. Research on Social Work Practice, 20(2), 161-171; Thomas, J. M., Lemieux, C. M., Rhodes, J. L. F. & Vlosky, D. A. (2011) Early truancy intervention: Results of an evaluation using a regression discontinuity design. Children and Youth Services Review.

available school and community resources.[7] SARB involvement is part of the process outlined in the California Education Code to address truancy. Second, there have recently been several large city-wide initiatives (e.g., in Baltimore and New York City) to increase attendance, but these have not yet been evaluated. Below, we provide examples of both types of initiatives. The first two examples provide specific interventions to truant students. The latter two examples are community-wide attendance campaigns that are aimed at all students, are collaborative, and involve a multitude of prevention and intervention strategies, and create new ways to connect schools to local resources and services.

THE CHRONIC TRUANCY INITIATIVE (FORMERLY THE EARLY ABSENTEEISM INITIATIVE)[8]

This campaign was a result of a citizen evaluation of community problems and needs in a Midwestern urban community. Residents of the community wanted to reduce the number of unsupervised children, juvenile crime, loitering, and graffiti in the community. This multi-modal, tiered approach addressed chronic absence among elementary-age students who missed more than 20% of school days within a 6-week period. Collaborating partners included schools, attendance officers, local community mental health agency, child and family social service agency, community-police officers. As the first step, principals sent a letter to parents or guardians of the chronically absent students informing them of the number of school days their child had missed and stressing the importance of school attendance. If absences continued, an attendance officer visited families and stressed the seriousness of the problem. If absences continued further, the family was referred to the local community mental health agency or the child and family social service agency, both of which were collaborating in the Initiative. If attendance did not improve after two weeks, a caseworker and a community-policing officer visited the home with the attendance officer.

THE TRUANCY AND ASSESSMENT SERVICE CENTER (TASC)[9]

TASC targeted K–5 students in Louisiana who had five unexcused absences at any time during one school year. Collaborating partners included families, schools, social service organizations, Louisiana State University School of Social Work Office of Social Service Research and Development (OSSRD), law enforcement agencies and courts. TASC was funded through a combination of state, federal, and local funds. As the first step, the school submitted a truancy referral along with a behavior checklist to the TASC office after the fifth unexcused absence. Using individual and family level risk factors (e.g., a learning disability or emotional disturbance, high family mobility), and protective factors (e.g., involvement with positive peer activities), TASC evaluated whether a student was "low" or "at" risk for continued truancy. If the student was "low" risk, TASC sent a letter to parents informing them about attendance laws. If the student was "at" risk, the student and family had conference with TASC to assess the family's strengths and needs, discuss attendance laws, and jointly decide on a tailored plan to improve the student's participation. TASC then ensured that the family was getting the support it needed, including medical or mental health services and family support.

[7] School Attendance Review Boards. In *California Department of Education.* Retrieved April 23, 2012 from www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ai/sb/
[8] Chronic Truancy Initiative. In *Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention*. Retrieved March 26, 2012, from www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/Chronic%20Truancy%20Initiative-MPGProgramDetail-594.aspx.
[9] TASC: TASC: Truancy Assessment and Service Center. In *Louisiana State University School of Social Work.* Retrieved April 5, 2012, from www.socialwork.lsu.edu/html/researchinitiatives/tasc.html

NEW YORK CITY'S "EVERY STUDENT, EVERY DAY" ANTI-TRUANCY CAMPAIGN[10]

Collaborating partners include the New York City Department of Education (DOE), Administration for Children's Services, New York City Police Department, New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, New York City Department of Homeless Services, The Children's Aid Society, United Way, Good Shepherd Services, City Year, BuildOn, Learning Leaders, Johns Hopkins Everyone Graduates Center.

Key strategies include:

- Collaboration with health officials, faith-based organizations and homeless shelters. Fifteen homeless shelters now have a point person to address homeless children's academic needs as well as data sharing agreements with DOE. All New York City shelters now have Student Homework Centers.
- Incentives for good attendance offered by Starbucks, the New York Yankees, Old Navy, Office Depot, and New York Skyride.
- Success mentors who work with 15 to 20 students who miss too much school. Schools use mentors from a variety of sources (e.g., City Year's AmeriCorps workers, retired professionals working through the ReServe program, social work interns, college students, guidance counselors, high-school seniors). Importantly, all mentors have access to attendance data for the students, a consistent, year-long relationship with students, and a connection to the principal and school leadership.
- Electronic Student Success Data Dashboards that provide a real-time look at performance in the three key "ABC" areas of Attendance, Behavior and Coursework. The principal, community partners, success mentors, and other principal designees collaboratively review the dashboard data at mandatory weekly Student Success meetings. The goal is to identify students who are falling further behind in attendance and give them directed interventions as appropriate. Those interventions can be after-school programming, case conferences, tutoring, special recognitions and other incentives.
- School-wide strategies such as pep rallies, contests, and Student Success Summits at each school in the first month of the school year, and throughout the rest of the year.
- Regular contact with students and parents, including daily phone calls home and letters. This includes WakeUp! NYC – a multimedia awareness campaign that partners with Viacom, MTV, local radio, TV, and social media networks to spread the word about attendance. It involves pre-recorded inspirational wake-up calls from celebrities, including basketball great Magic Johnson and R&B singer Trey Songz.

BALTIMORE'S STUDENT ATTENDANCE CAMPAIGN[11]

Collaborating partners include a work group comprised of over 100 representatives from city agencies, state agencies, parents, universities, foundations, public interest groups, program providers and student organizations, including: The Baltimore Urban Debate, The Maryland Disability Law Center, Baltimore's Safe and Sound Campaign, The Family League of Baltimore City, The Central Maryland Transportation Alliance, and Public Justice Center.

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[10] Wake Up! NYC; Retrieved April 9, 2012 from http://wakeupnyc.org; NYC Expands Mentorship Program to Combat Chronic Absenteeism. In *Mike Bloomberg.* Retrieved April 9, 2012 from www.mikebloomberg.com/index.cfm?objectid=89CDE971-C29C-7CA2-FDDB6902FA1F03C9; New York City. In *Attendance Works.* Retrieved April 9, 2012 from www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/new-york-city/

[11] The Baltimore Student Attendance Campaign, Presentation to Los Angeles Truancy Task Force, August 9, 2011. Retrieved April 9, 2012 from http://educationcoordinatingcouncil.org/TTF_Page/Presentations/LA_Presentation--Final.pdf

Key Strategies include:

- Series of community workshops on attendance to promote the importance of attendance (conducted by the Open Society Institute-Baltimore).

- Gaining leadership support (e.g., Baltimore's mayor and Baltimore City Public Schools CEO incorporated attendance measures into school reform efforts).

- Electronic data dashboards where principals receive alerts when a student is showing signs of becoming chronically absent.

- Revised school district discipline code that provides increased interventions for misbehavior and reduces the number of offenses for which suspensions or expulsions are possible outcomes.

- Partnerships among different agencies (e.g., faith-based organizations) that leverage community supports to improve attendance such as calls home and connections to community resources.

- A coordinated campaign with partners that have expertise in particular areas, including efforts to address mobility, homelessness, transportation, and health.

- Use of frequent excused absences as an indicator to check in with the family and student about their health care situation.

- A back to school attendance campaign for high school students that includes post card mailings, welcome back to school calls from local celebrities, and targeted home visits.

- A back to school campaign targeting chronically absent students transitioning into grades K, 6, and 9 that focuses on identifying and solving reasons for prior year chronic absence.

- Revised attendance measures and strategies based on a continuum of attendance rather than a single measure of attendance: high attendance (5 or fewer absences), regular attendance (attendance rate of 95%), chronic absence attendance rate of 90%), severe chronic absence (attendance rate of 80%), and truant (unlawfully absent 20% of days).

- Rate Your Ride texting campaign where The Central Maryland Transportation Alliance uses real time data to address user concerns and improve transportation options.

- Increased data sharing and research, specifically focused on foster care students' attendance, grades, and discipline.

Conclusion

The recent rise in attention to school attendance problems is the result of strong research indicating the relationship between school attendance and academic success. Research has also raised awareness about the causes of absenteeism, which can include illness, suspension and expulsion, unstable housing, poor transportation, unwelcoming and sometimes violent schools, large numbers of new faculty and high rates of teacher and administrative turnover, fear of violence, and childcare or employment demands. Many of the reasons why students are absent can be addressed through innovative prevention and intervention strategies. The recent rise in large scale attendance campaigns demonstrates that communities are taking significant steps to combat absenteeism, including stepping out of their silos to form unique cross-sector collaborations, leveraging resources and investing in prevention efforts early on in students' academic careers. As this work continues, it is important to keep working toward evidence-based practices and rigorous evaluations to identify effective practices. By working collaboratively, researchers and community organizations who partner to establish and run attendance initiatives can make significant strides in improving outcomes for youth.