

Emerging Practices: Possibilities and Challenges in School Responses to Chronic Absence

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INTRODUCTION

Twelve Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) school sites participated in the Chronic Absence Learning Collaborative (CALC) in 2016-2017 to pilot interventions and share their learning about effective approaches to reducing chronic absenteeism. In the process, sites also identified barriers to moving ahead. Five schools were returning CALC sites from the previous year, and seven were new to CALC and chronic absence work this year. The CALC sites included: eight elementary schools, one K-8 school, one middle school, and two high schools. Focus groups at each CALC site in fall 2016 and spring 2017, along with CALC meeting discussions and observations, suggest both emerging possibilities and challenges to attendance promotion and chronic absence intervention at the school site level.

5.1 Emerging Practices

School staff (including Student Support Coordinators, school administrators, and often available social workers) identified emerging practices over the course of the year as especially important in their efforts to promote attendance and reduce chronic absence at their schools. The following seven emerging practices reflect suggestions from across CALC sites; few schools implemented all of these practices throughout year.ⁱ

1. Standardize attendance monitoring and promotion practices.

All CALC sites agreed on the benefit of establishing an attendance team (including the Attendance Technician), with designated responsibilities and regular meeting times to discuss attendance and supportive interventions. Five out of twelve CALC sites (three elementary schools, one middle and one high school) are now utilizing Coordination of Services Team (COST) meetings to specifically

discuss student referrals for attendance, triage interventions, and provide follow-up coordination (ES5, ES7, ES8, MS10, HS11).

CALC sites also identified specific core monitoring and promotion practices, including designating a staff member to coordinate and facilitate regular attendance meetings and follow-up to ensure meeting consistency, and reviewing their Multi-tiered Attendance Support System (MASS) planning protocol weekly to stay grounded and make adjustments as needed. Additional practices include the principal reviewing the attendance log daily (ES3), having administrators share school-wide attendance expectations in physical education classes to reach every student (MS10), and utilizing existing attendance promotion materials from

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organizations like Attendance Works for outreach (ES4). When student attendance slipped at one middle school, they sent home modified attendance letters that included an ascending list of follow-up consequences if poor attendance continued. This standardized process allowed the school to “nip” poor attendance right away. Four out of twelve

ⁱMS10, a returning CALC site that began its CALC work three years ago, and who also has a history of lowering chronic absence rates through its large infrastructure to support chronic absence efforts, exhibited all of these practices in the 2016-2017 year.

sites shared the importance of examining incoming students' "cumulative files" to learn about new student attendance history (ES6, ES8, MS10, HS12). Perhaps most importantly, schools found it was important to pilot interventions and monitor their progress to continually strengthen monitoring practices.

2. Develop a data-driven approach to understand attendance barriers and assign interventions.

Seven out of twelve CALC sites launched data-driven approaches to tackling chronic absence. For example, one elementary and one K-8 school regularly monitor and track individual student attendance trends. Students at these sites who improve their attendance and move out of chronic absence status receive an incentive. Other elementary schools used attendance data as a basis for grade-level, classroom competitions for the best attendance. School leaders found that using data to assess which students need resources and when their attendance improves allowed them to serve more students throughout the year.

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Additional practices included identifying the students early in the year who were persistently, chronically absent by comparing the Student Academic Review Team (SART)/Student Academic Review Board (SARB) lists from the previous spring with the week eight chronic absence list (ES7). Other sites checked incoming students' attendance records from the previous spring so they could welcome those with pre-existing attendance issues with additional outreach, encouragement, and support right from the start of the school year. One middle school identified these students' interests and connected them with relevant activities, social networks, and mentors at the start of the year, in

order to cultivate their personal connection with the school and increase their overall attendance. Staff-members at this same school also recommend engaging students in the data collection process by surveying students about their attendance barriers.

3. Develop an attendance-going school culture through an engaged staff/team approach.

All five returning CALC sites, along with a new elementary school site, emphasized the need for supportive and involved administrators that prioritize and lead attendance efforts, while ensuring a contingency plan for staff coverage of key activities. One elementary school accomplished this by engaging their SPARK Social-Emotional Learning initiative leadership team in chronic absence work to ensure staff coverage beyond just the Student Support Center (SSC). Another elementary team suggested the following breakdown of staff monitoring duties: (1) the attendance clerk calls absent students' caregivers; (2) interns and the school-community liaison staff the buddy program for students with a second attendance letter; (3) the school-community liaison calls all caregivers of students with SART-level and above attendance rates at the beginning of the year, as well as flags those with SART, SARB, and truancy court in the Student Information System; and (4) there is regular Principal-SSC communication about chronically absent students, particularly to review incoming transfer students' cumulative files, and marshal-needed resources to support their attendance.

4. Utilize community partnerships to leverage resources.

Six out of twelve CALC sites actively sought community partnerships to enhance their resources. The two most common approaches were partnerships with regional academic institutions to match graduate social work interns with local school sites, and neighborhood faith community outreach for donations. Sites reported that social work interns support chronic absence events, make phone calls home to families, mentor students, and help fill the overall staffing gap. Two schools paired with local churches, which provide donations for student and family attendance recognition events.

One CALC high school and one elementary school have contracted with on-site health providers.

Through these partnerships the high school provides on-campus mental health, substance abuse, and co-dependency services. A mobile medical service provides physical health services directly on the elementary school campus, which staff report has been very helpful in reducing early dismissals for student health appointments and health-related absences. Additionally, this school strategically referred SART and chronically absent students first to the clinic to address health barriers to attendance.

5. Implement alternative interventions to SART and SARB that promote positive family engagement.

Six out of twelve CALC sites utilized Student Support Team meetings (SSTs), Attendance Success Plans, or a pre-SART arrangement as an alternative to a punitive SART contract (ES1, ES6, ES7, MS10, HS11, HS12). These alternatives aim to promote student and family engagement and positive attendance through a supportive yet structured solutions-oriented discussion and an attendance contract to families. Based on Attendance and Enrollment Department advice, some sites began to share a blank SART contract with families to explain the next series of consequences if their attendance contract is broken. This strategy was shared toward the end of the school year and most sites will be implementing it next year.

6. Encourage staff to engage with students and families in meaningful ways.

Four of twelve sites suggested that phone calls home make a positive impact on students and families, whether teachers or principals call and leave a positive personal message, or an entertaining, automated, morning wake-up call. Sites mentioned that phone conversations, as well as existing organized parent groups (such as a high school's Parent University) are a great setting to discuss the importance of attendance, brainstorm solutions to attendance barriers, and share existing resources for supporting attendance.

One third of CALC sites also emphasized the importance of student and family engagement opportunities to deepen students' sense of belonging at school to support their attendance. To this end, a middle school and a high school identified incoming students from their feeder schools and

conducted preventative home visitations during the summer. An elementary and a K-8 school use mentor or check-in programs (provided by City Year) to support social-emotional learning and restorative justice, and deepen student engagement.

7. Approach interventions with an equity lens to support diverse school populations.

Four of twelve sites emphasized the importance of interventions tailored to their cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students' families and targeting populations over-represented among chronic absentees. For example, a K-8 school provided targeted resources for Chicano/Latino and African American students through self-awareness and recovery groups that have a social-emotional learning and restorative justice focus, and includes attendance awareness.

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5.2 Challenges

CALC schools also experienced constraints and challenges in their efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism. CALC participants together identified the nine points listed below. While all sites did not experience all challenges, more than half of the sites experienced the first four presented here. Together, these challenges also hint at important recommendations.

1. Leadership on culturally responsive family engagement strategies.

Three-quarters of CALC sites highlighted a need for expanded, culturally-responsive support and strategies for engaging families. One school team hoped to see the district prioritize investment in culturally-responsive, targeted strategies for diverse

student populations—particularly African American student populations with a generational history of disengagement and poor school attendance. Three other sites concurred that “school policies are not whole-child” and do not reflect the circumstances facing local families’ diverse cultures and backgrounds.

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Throughout the year, new CALC site staff struggled to identify what the best approach might be for serving their chronically absent population. Some sites identified translation and engaging a highly culturally diverse family population as a challenge because they serve speakers of 15 languages. Five CALC sites reported being unclear about how to increase family engagement, while three other CALC sites shared the need to facilitate a shift from a more punitive approach for families, to a school culture where family engagement is encouraged and supported.

2. Systems to protect and sustain attendance promotion activity.

Two-thirds of CALC sites reported that staffing issues or daily crises reduce their focus on attendance. For example, one elementary school was unable to hold regular attendance meetings this year due to staff on jury duty and the on-boarding of new staff, while another elementary school and a high school described activities such as calling homes, conducting home visits, and using SART as a solution-oriented plan as efforts that require time they don’t always have. Four CALC site staff noted that by only funding a portion of the Student Support Coordinator and Social Worker positions with district funds limits the

time they can spend at each school site to a few days per week. Daily student crises (often behavioral and/or mental health-related) are a challenge for three CALC sites, as the crises pull them away from the day’s anticipated work, making it difficult to balance their workload, given the unexpected and disruptive nature of when an emergency requires their immediate assistance. Balancing efforts to address chronic absence and promote attendance proved difficult for most CALC sites with the current levels of staffing.

3. Communication between district departments and school site staff on policies and procedures.

Seven out of twelve CALC sites (all sites new to CALC this year) experienced confusion about attendance policies and procedures, and how they are communicated from the district, despite district efforts to support their adoption at the site levelⁱⁱ. For example, staff wanted additional information about the SART process, including when SART letters go out, when a SART should be held, available resources to monitor the letter process, and how new administrators are trained on attendance protocols. During each CALC meeting, CALC site staff brought policy and procedural questions. While district representatives at the table always had answers, communication follow-up to ensure site understanding and improvement of district-wide communication channels presented a challenge with current levels of staffing.

4. Data access

Seven out of 12 sites reported that limited data access impeded their efforts to address chronic absence. More specifically, they described that because there is no way to run a report on attendance by classroom, hosting whole school attendance competitions proves difficult, as does sharing attendance data with individual teachers. The current SIS does not enable users to log information about student attendance barriers or track the number, type and timing of interventions in real time, so sites must create their own system for storing these data. Without such systems, this knowledge is easily lost or fragmented, and schools are unable to assess the relationship between specific intervention strategies and attendance outcomes.

ⁱⁱWhile returning CALC sites did not mention their confusion, they have reported confusion in previous CALC years. It is also possible that they felt continued confusion this year, but let the newer CALC sites publicly represent those sentiments.

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5. Procedures to ensure chronically absent students' safety.

Ensuring the safety of persistently absent, hard-to-reach students and families remains an ongoing concern. Two elementary school representatives explained with frustration that if a student disappears and they cannot reach the family, there is no mechanism in place for getting assistance with attendance-related wellness checks. Child Protective Services is not responsive to concerns about chronic absence/disappearance from school because they maintain that they do not monitor attendance. Staff reported no known protocol for requesting a police wellness check in these cases.

After ten consecutive days of unexcused school absence the school may disenroll a student. At this point, the student “disappears” unless the school happens to receive a request for their cumulative file from another school or district. Staff at one middle school described the need for someone to be able to check CALPADS to assess whether a student has re-enrolled elsewhere.

These concerns are extremely stressful for school staff and dangerous for children and youth. They were first raised by CALC members two years ago, and remain an issue today despite having brought them to the attention of various decision-makers.

6. Teacher involvement in meaningful family engagement.

One in three sites reported teacher resistance (ES1, ES2, ES6) to investing time in family engagement, or uncertainty about how to inspire teachers (ES2, ES8) to build relationships with their students' caregivers as their first point of contact with the school. These were wide-spread concerns across last year's CALC, suggesting that related leadership, strategies, and resources are still needed.

7. Political and physical climate impacts.

One in four CALC sites mentioned that chronic absence is higher than last year, and wondered whether the current political climate regarding immigration is affecting school attendance. All CALC sites noted that deportations, and potential for deportations, instill fear among their students and families, many of whom did not want to leave their house. Representatives from one elementary school reported that within their Spanish immersion program, entire classes didn't attend school during February 2017, due to fear of deportation from election mandates, and that parents were afraid to go to a group meeting that was advertised for English Learners. This political climate intersected with an unusually rainy winter, which elementary schools in particular noted as also factoring into caregivers' decisions to not have their children walk to school.

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8. Student Attendance Review Team (SART) and Student Attendance Review Board (SARB) processes.

Three out of twelve sites raised concerns about the effectiveness of SART/SARB processes. An elementary school representative noted that SART/SARB is viewed by students and families as punitive, embarrassing, and designed to punish (as opposed to resource-rich, conversational, and aimed to assist), which is not effective with the students and families at their site. A high school administrator shared that the process does not necessarily identify and address student and family needs. District staff-members expressed interest in providing schools with flexibility to shape the SART process to meet

their needs and the needs of their students, which suggests the importance of increased communication between the district attendance office and school sites regarding SART policies.

Other representatives indicated a need for more relevant SARB consequences and better follow-through. An elementary school leader noted that because there are no enforceable site level actions, once a student has a SARB contract, parents transfer their student to try to evade what they perceive as a district issue that will not follow them. This administrator also noted that district capacity does not meet site-level demand, and the waitlist for SARBs is both overwhelming and unrealistic. Long waitlists mean substantial lag time between when a student/family is referred to SARB and when they are actually contacted, limiting its effectiveness as a tool for ensuring that students attend school regularly.

CONCLUSION

These emerging practices and challenges reflect a year of experimentation and reflection by twelve CALC school sites. The emerging practices reveal intervention areas to further pursue and track, while challenges reflect specific areas for consideration and growth.

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THE CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT