

# **Student Attendance Barriers and Promising Practices at Three Elementary Schools with Comparatively Low Chronic Absenteeism**



**Vanessa Talavera**

Mentor: Nancy Erbstein, Ph.D.  
Human Ecology

## **Abstract**

Children who are absent at least 10% of the days they are enrolled during an academic year are considered chronically absent, a status associated with negative educational, social, health and employment outcomes. In the urban district where this study was conducted more than one in ten students meet or exceed this 10% threshold. Over the past several years, this district has been working to address attendance barriers and identify effective support systems. This qualitative study, based on focus group interviews with principals and key student support staff, reports on practices of three schools with comparatively low chronic absence rates. These high attendance schools identified attendance barriers including challenging parent/caregiver circumstances, seasonal factors, and cultural commitments. All three schools identified having a culture of community engagement and attendance promotion, full staff involvement, and certain critical school organizational structures as contributing to their low levels of chronic absenteeism. These findings suggest that careful attendance monitoring, strong community relationships and intentional full school participation in attendance promotion help decrease chronic absence.

## **Introduction**

In Northern California, approximately 1 in 10 students are chronically absent each year. Chronic absence is defined as a student being absent at least 10% of the time, meaning that in a 180 day school year a student is absent for at least 18 days (Erbstein, 2012). Chronic absence includes a range of different types of absenteeism. An excused absence is when the parent recognizes that the child is unable to attend due, for example, to illness, and notifies the school accordingly. An unexcused absence is an absence for a reason that is not designated “excused” by California’s Education Code, or for an excusable reason if a parent/guardian does not notify the school. Truancy involves missing school without notification of a parent/guardian three or more times. A final type of absence is a suspension, which is the school prohibiting student attendance for a certain number of days. This analysis of attendance concerns all these types of absenteeism, because no matter why a student is absent, they still miss out on learning time.

At the elementary level, families, home environment, neighborhood environments and school environments can impact children’s attendance. Along with this, some may experience homelessness, foster care, or toxic family dynamics, which can also affect attendance. When a district is experiencing high rates of chronic absenteeism, it is a cause for concern.

Studying chronic absenteeism within this district is significant for a number of reasons. Chronic absence is an urgent issue that has been overlooked for some years now as a result of most attention being driven towards average daily attendance (ADA). Although ADA is important, it can mask chronic absence. Students are projected to do academically worse if they are not present in the classroom; by 6<sup>th</sup> grade those who are severely chronically absent have a 56% chance of dropping out of high school (Attendanceworks.org).

Gottfried (2009) explains that urban, minority youth attendance is poorer than that of their non-urban, non-minority counterparts. He showed how poor attendance resulted in lower GPAs throughout elementary school. Consequently, this is related to more students dropping out. Ninth graders who have a history of chronic absenteeism will most likely drop out.

Preventing this requires strong intervention strategies to combat these poor attendance habits. In 2007-2008, 92.7% of dropouts failed at least one course and 63% failed four or more courses (Iver, 2010). These students are prone to more behavioral problems (Gottfried, 2014). It was found there is a negative relationship between chronic absenteeism and student outcomes. These outcomes can be associated with low economic status, lack of support services to increase attendance, or loss of communication between the school and families (Sugrue, Zuel & LaLiberte, 2016).

However, among somewhat similar populations in urban school districts, there are still differences in patterns of attendance across schools. The three elementary schools in this study have relatively low rates of chronic absence in comparison to nearby schools in the same district that serve similar populations. The purpose of examining these distinct schools is to identify key characteristics that set them apart from schools with higher chronic absence, as well as examining what attendance barriers are still present even though they have strong attendance. Over the past several years, this urban district has been collaborating with the UC Davis Center for Regional Change (CRC) and twelve schools with high chronic absence rates through a Chronic Absence Learning Collaborative (CALC). CALC is working to address attendance barriers and identify effective support systems. Through the course of this paper, I will discuss what previous literature has already found. Then I will describe the target urban district outcomes, the factors affecting the district and what strategies they used to combat these factors. Lastly, I will end with a discussion about how the findings compare to the literature.

were used to conduct the featured research. The rationale for choosing those strategies and materials should also be described in this section. If surveys, interview questions, or similar protocol documents were used to conduct the research, they should be described in the methods section, referenced in parentheses (Figure 1, Appendix), and included in the Appendix section for reader reference. It is advised that students work closely with their mentors to develop this section successfully.

## **Background**

Chronic absenteeism is an important issue that has been overlooked for many years. With schools recently required to report chronic absence, it has created confusion and complications on what to report, as well as new opportunities to monitor and address chronic absence. To ensure that students have positive attendance, effective strategies need to be implemented to encourage students while simultaneously preventing academic failure, dropouts, and poor life outcomes.

Balfanz (2016) suggests that reducing chronic absence involves identifying the core issues the child is having, providing support to the families, and making school a welcoming place. First, the school must acknowledge four distinct factors that affect a student's attendance.

1. One, students will experience outside influences that will prevent a student getting to school; such as health complications or transportation issues.
2. Second, students could be avoiding unpleasant situations that they associate with school, such as bullying. Sensitive situations such as bullying can be alleviated by establishing a staff member to focus on preventative and intervention strategies or having open discussions regarding bullying in the classrooms. The programs that have implemented these strategies saw a 50% decrease in bullying, leading to more children feeling safe and welcomed at the school (Bauman, 2008).

3. Third, the child may feel unwanted at school or indifferent about attending class.
4. Lastly, some students and parents/caregivers believe that it is okay to miss a couple of days of school per month without realizing the absences accumulate to have negative learning impacts (Balfanz, 2016).

Therefore, teachers play an important role. Teachers can help by partnering students who have different attendance patterns, which provides support and keeps the children accountable for attending school. Through this system it will make the teacher conscious of their student's absences and how they can support their students. Along with this, the school could also provide resources for children suffering from anxiety and parents who have separated from their partners (Lauchlan, 2003).

Additionally, previous research has shown that students with chronic absence experience barriers that fall into four dominant groups: individual, family, district/school, and community barriers. Individual barriers can include school phobia, learning disabilities, or not doing homework. Family barriers can include challenges linked to being raised by a single parent, lack of parental support, or child maltreatment. District/school barriers are the challenging relationships between staff and families or difficulties with individualized instruction. Community barriers include violent neighborhoods, crime, or drugs abuse (John C. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities, 2012). These barriers are an early warning sign that can lead to poor academic achievement, continued patterns of chronic absence, and reduced district funding. Families also play a significant role on the student's attendance that can be strong contributor to decreasing chronic absenteeism or increasing incentives to help support good attendance. The focus on student's positive attendance and participation are associated with higher rates of daily attendance that lower chronic absenteeism (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). To reduce barriers at the school level, Nauer (2016) suggests the school call the families personally about the student's absences instead of leaving a voicemail. By taking the time to identify children who are at risk, it will help the child succeed.

There are different strategies when it comes to intervention and preventative approaches. Ekstrand (2015) addresses how interventions strategies require increased control through the students' home life, health care, and corrective behavior measures. There are also preventative programs such as ACT Now and the Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program (TRDP) that help improve attendance. In the south east of the United States, truancy is treated as a crime where local law enforcement search for missing students. A different approach was through the Truancy Intervention Project (TIP) was used as an approach to have all school official increasing positive attendance. Some final strategies noted to develop a new school culture from the government level to the classroom level, connect with adults and space to reflect. If the child perceives school as fun, it will encourage them to go.

Another well-known strategy is communicating using the community relationships of the staff, attendance clerks, and other support staff. Having these positive relationships promotes attendance and a level of trust between the school and the families. For the families, it provides the school with a different perspective of the student that they may have overlooked or not recognized (Chang and Romero, 2008). Furthermore, Belfanz and Brynes (2013) discovered when staff mentor students, students are less likely to be chronically absent and displayed attendance rates of 95% or higher. Meaning, attendance increases as the student's needs are met. When staff support is provided it helps improve the student academically and lowers their risk of dropping out. For schools that have closer community relationships, Sanders (2016) shows it is linked to improved services for families, which in return increase family engagement in their child's education.

A study by Sugrue (2016) examined a chronic absence intervention program that focused on improving attendance in elementary schools. The first process they adopted was making a referral to the county attorney's office, sending a letter, and then issuing a parent group meeting. If the absences persisted, the county is notified again, a referral is sent to social services, and then a group intervention is initiated. If the absences continued further, the child was at risk of being sent to Child Protective Services. Besides their corrective measures, the schools provide support that extends beyond academic affairs like issuing school supplies and fostering relationships. They concluded that the schools that used case management may not be equipped to address the numerous barriers involved in chronic absenteeism.

#### *Within an Urban District*

This project was pursued in a K-12 urban school district in Northern California where chronic absenteeism is unevenly distributed throughout the student population. Additionally, this district has presented a trend of chronic absence. Over the course of three years (2010-2013) there has been a consistent trend of high chronic absence with kindergarten (20%) and 12<sup>th</sup> grade (27%). Elementary grades (1<sup>st</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>) show a steady decrease in chronic absent rates, but they begin to increase as they reach the 6<sup>th</sup> grade (Erbstein, February 2014). Notably, these results are consistent for three consecutive years. This shows that chronic absence is a persistent challenge in this K-12 district and that there needs to be changes in intervention strategies to improve these rates. Consistent with the data found in this urban district, third grade has the fewest number of students with chronic absences compared to any other grade. Despite this, it was found that there were no significant differences in the background of children throughout all the other grades, but students with more absences tended to come from lower income families (Applied Survey Research, 2011).

As in other settings, there is not only one reason for chronic absenteeism in this district. It is based on the individual differences that each student and the schools and their neighborhoods present. For instance, some students face barriers such as transportation or academic issues, or

external barriers outside of the student's control such as parental complications (Erbstein, 2014). Not only does chronic absence impact the student, it also impacts the school district. It was estimated that in the 2010-2011 academic year, the district lost approximately 4.3 million dollars as a result of the school absences (Erbstein, November 2012). These previous studies have set the stage for this project. If the study can identify viable strategies that elementary schools can use to improve the rates of attendance, then it can improve negative outcomes for both the students and the district.

## **Methods**

In this project, three elementary schools with comparatively low chronic absenteeism were selected. These schools were selected because they are within the same urban school district, have a similar student population, and are in the same geographic location as the schools with higher chronic absence. Before beginning this project, the Institutional Review Board approved the study as exempt, reflecting very low risk for participating human subjects. Interviews with school staff-members were then scheduled and completed. These semi-structured focus group interviews included principals, social workers, Student Support Center coordinators, and additional support staff. Interviews were conducted on the school sites, recorded, and later transcribed.

To preserve the schools' confidentiality, the three schools were coded as ES-A, ES-B, and ES-C. The interviews included information about key attendance promotion strategies, student attendance barriers, and unique problem solving strategies. Transcripts were coded to identify emerging themes with respect to each question and assess levels of cross-case agreement.

## **Findings**

The three elementary schools in this study have comparatively low rates of chronic absenteeism, but still have ongoing challenges when addressing school attendance. These include: parent/caregiver circumstances, seasonal factors, and cultural commitments. In addition to these challenges, each school has used unique problem solving strategies. These include: building community cohesion, creating a culture of attendance, full staff support, organizational structures, and incentives and rewards. While they may share the same challenges and strategies, they exhibit them in different ways. It is important to note these barriers do not define these schools; they are simply selected features of what ongoing challenges persist.

### **Attendance Barriers**

The attendance barriers presented in these findings reflect those addressed in the semi-structured focus group interviews. These key points were selected because they are shared by at least two of the schools.

### *Parent/Caregiver Circumstances*

One factor that contributes to chronic absence is parents/caregivers obstacles. Each of the three schools reported different obstacles to school attendance. For instance, adults with mental illness, such as depression, might have difficulty getting up in the morning. Consequently, they fail to wake up their child, causing the student to be late or miss the day entirely.

In relation to this, parents/caregivers struggle when it comes to transportation. One aspect of this is it is common for parents/caregivers to transport multiple children to school. Some guardians report taking a group of the children to one school and by the time they return, the child left behind to be transported later has fallen back to sleep, resulting in a late arrival or absence. Another aspect is the adult having car trouble in the morning. The schools reported that lower income families who drive older vehicles often struggle with breakdowns, which can disrupt school transit. The last aspect of transportation issues is that some children rely on public transit, resulting in transportation complications. According to data presented by the CRC, travel times for all students average around 30 minutes or more (Karner & Erbstein, 2017). The areas in the district that rely more on public transit have higher rates of chronic absence. In essence, barriers to transportation contribute to chronic absenteeism.

Parent mobility and phone service also present challenges. At one particular school, a child was absent for more than a week, the parent's phone number was no longer working and staff could not reach them. Therefore, staff were instructed to dis-enroll the child. Later, the parent re-established contact and told the staff that the child was sick. There are also cases of custody battles over students, where the parent is afraid to send their child to school out of fear the other parent will pick them up and take the child. Thus, they decide not to send them to school.

### *Seasonal Factors*

During the academic year, there are certain periods when these school sites experience a surge of absences. In particular, these absences are concentrated during the colder, rainy, winter months. These absences are typically due to illness or cultural factors. Staff from two of the schools reported receiving more doctors' notes during this time to excuse children for being sick. If one child falls ill, then it is more than likely that another will as well. Furthermore, it is quite common for students with family in Mexico to travel there during December to celebrate Christmas and New Years. These families tend to travel by car, meaning it takes them days to get to their destinations, so they tend to leave before the last day of school and/or return after the winter break has ended.

### *Cultural Commitments*

Within Mexican cultures, family is a big priority and influence on the child. In fact, many students of Mexican descent still have family members back in Mexico. Christmas and New Years are a rare opportunities where families can take the time to visit their loved ones. The three

schools work to ensure that travel plans are communicated in advance so they can arrange independent study packets for students. In previous years, families were not aware their children needed to complete work packets to receive credit for school attendance.

Funerals also generate substantial absences for students with specific cultural backgrounds. For instance, school staff reported that Pacific Islander funerals last about four to five days. The duration of these funerals cause students to miss important instruction. This also brings up an issue for the SCUSD, which considers students who have missed three days of school unexcused as truant and those who are excused are required to bring a doctor's note after three days. Some families do not go to doctors. This dilemma has yet to be resolved and requires policymakers' attention.

#### Problem Solving Strategies

In accordance to the attendance barriers presented, the three schools have collectively provided unique strategies to addressing chronic absence.

#### *Building Community Cohesion*

All three schools utilized the strategy of building strong relationships between the school and the families. This was reported as one of the biggest driving forces of why students attended class everyday. For example, teachers were able to communicate more effectively by and messaging parent's class information and being accessible at all times through their personal cell phone numbers.

Schools noted the significance of teachers and staff living within the neighborhood and being a member of the community to help establish trusting relationships. Families are depicted as being more comfortable by giving information to teachers and staff to effectively communicate concerns about absences. For example, the attendance clerk at one school has known most of the families for years since she lives in the community. When the clerk receives daily attendance from the teachers, they call the parents personally by phone instead of using the machine or a robot call. This solidifies that relationship and demonstrates that the school values that individual student as an essential part of the community.

Lastly, these schools pursue community interaction. One noted involvement in faith-based organization partnerships and community cleanups. Another school has a community garden that helps engage the rest of the community. In addition, each school had a community liaison that helped with outreach by doing home visits to parents. These community relationships help the school support the students and families, which in turn supports attendance.

### *Culture of Attendance*

In addition to community development, each school embraced the vision of creating a culture of positive attendance. Staff described intentional efforts to make school a welcoming place, where children want to be. They also explained that students are *expected* to attend school. It is an expectation that both the staff and the teachers communicate to the students and families. One principal in particular encourages continuous and complementary messaging throughout the whole institution where staff gives individualized attention to students and communicates in a positive manner. They believe that these types of messages, along with messages of care and concern, are crucial for keeping students from becoming chronically absent.

In addition, two of the sites have experienced a high amount of teacher turnover. Although this puts some barriers in maintaining a positive relationship with the community and students, they are still able to cultivate and maintain this culture of attendance. These sites ability to maintain and emphasize the importance of attendance highlights the hard work of the staff.

### *Full Staff Support*

At each of the schools, all staff-members are encouraged to see themselves as having a role in promoting strong attendance. This starts with the principal. For instance, one principal uses multiple outreach systems so that students and families are aware of events happening at school. They use Facebook, Instagram, and a text messaging system called Remind. By constantly communicating with the families, the principal emphasizes attendance as a priority. The attendance clerk also plays an extremely important role in reducing chronic absence. Any absence triggers a call to a parent/caregiver. This method establishes a personal connection and enables the clerks to identify absence patterns that need addressing. These attendance clerks work closely with teachers to communicate which students are missing and how they will contact them. Teachers also play an important role since they are in direct contact with the students. Not only is it a part of their duty to report absences to the office, but in some cases they reach out to parents individually. They also encourage parents/caregivers to be aware of how their children can make up work and/or enroll in independent study to get a work packet for an extended absence. Other staff members play an important role in making the school a welcoming place. For example, interviewees described yard duty staff and custodians welcoming children and families. A cafeteria worker letting a child arrive early for breakfast on a daily basis when they realized that the drop-off time was a barrier to that student's attendance.

### *Organizational Structures*

The three schools discussed structures that support attendance. One site mentioned teacher looping, in which a teacher remains with the same cohort of students for more than one year. They note that teachers get to know not only their students well, but also families and younger siblings (who subsequently become their students). These close relationships allow for

open communication where the teacher can call the parent directly and talk through attendance issues.

At a separate site, full day kindergarten has become an innovative edition to the school district. They indicate that this strategy supports attendance in at least three ways. First, they start teaching students early the importance of being at school. It brings an early introduction to a full day of school, so they get acclimated to being at school all-day. Finally, parents with multiple children at the school can pick them up their children together.

### *Incentives and Rewards*

To further encourage engagement in school, these sites offer incentives and have reward systems for positive attendance. At one location, teachers award “[school mascot] tickets” for positive behavior and accomplishments that students use to purchase snacks and stuffed animals from their student store. They also were able to use the tickets for an end of the year raffle for prizes like an iPad. The staff noted that having such incentives create a fun, engaging environment. Staff members also present awards to students during assemblies. For example, at one school the staff chose a different character trait each month and every class awarded this honor to a student who embodied that trait. Interviewees reported that the students see this as a special, meaningful award that only a few are given. Schools also hold award assemblies for perfect and improved attendance. One school has had to move these ceremonies from every month to every trimester because too many children were meeting the high standard of attendance. They challenged students to meet the new requirement and held perfect attendance field trips to further reward the students on their achievement.

## **Recommendations**

Although these schools have comparatively low rates of chronic absence, interviewees offered the following recommendations to help improve future attendance.

First, many parents/caregivers are unaware of what counts as an excused or unexcused absence. There has been confusion in the past that has resulted in student’s attendance reported incorrectly. Interviewers recommended that it would be useful to implement a broad informational and attendance promotion campaign.

The schools identified several concerns with processing absences and access data. The first is the new student information system. Administrators, teachers, and other staff members were familiar with the previous system and were having problems using the new system. The new system has more tools, but it is more complex than anticipated. There are a number of tools they still do not know how to use after several years, and it is not as user friendly. Offering in depth trainings on navigating this new system would be helpful, as would creating an overarching system that integrates data points collected through the new student information

system and the academic data system. In addition, one interviewee expressed concern about the district decision to only employ the state definition of chronic absence (based on full-day absences) to track chronic absenteeism. They would prefer to integrate data on partial day absences to reflect the full amount of time that students miss.

Interviewees also expressed concerns with the SART and SARB procedures. They were described as contradicting the school efforts to build constructive, welcoming relationships with families. Ultimately they were reported to be ineffective in promoting behavior change; instead of pushing away the families they were trying to retain. This was a constant struggle to manage the procedures and a supportive environment.

Furthermore, school staff indicated an interest in having clear procedures for handling absences extended over a certain period of time that cannot be reached by school staff. In these cases, they would like to have additional assistance in trying to reach these children and caregivers to ensure their safety.

Finally, one interviewee indicated interest in being able to access his student's data after they move on to middle school and spend more time on feeder school articulation. Such opportunities would help the school further strengthen their practices.

## **Discussion & Conclusion**

The findings presented in this exploratory project relate to past literature. These three schools provide important insight about promising practices and potential district strategies to provide additional support for future students. It is interesting to note that there are similarities within barriers and problem solving strategies for schools with chronically high absence rates and low absence rates. Although this study cannot speak for all urban school districts, it provides powerful insight into strategies that might be useful more broadly. However, most of the literature found focuses on the negative consequences found from chronic absence. This exploratory research expands upon the topic of chronic absenteeism because it highlights the positives of the schools' actions towards reducing chronic absence.

One area that was reflected in the literature as well as the schools was children dealing with toxic family relationships. For instance, like the Sugrue, Zuel, and LaLiberte (2016) article, there are families within urban districts that are struggling with toxic family relationships and struggles that come with low income. There are many students within this school district that are struggling with this as well. One school reported divorced parents battling to pick the child up from school because they were fighting for custody. Similar to the John C. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities (2012) recommendations, the school districts also provided resources for the community, students, and their families. This was done primarily through the Student Support Centers. Also at one of the sites, the principal was willing to provide her phone

number and support to the families and students. A major similarity with the previous research is the importance of the child perceiving school as a fun and welcoming place. All the sites report that they emphasize the importance of making a school a place where children want to be and getting them, families, and community involved to achieve that. Along with this comes with trust to establish this relationship.

One limitation of this study was it only focused on three urban elementary schools in Northern California. So these findings might not be the same if the study was conducted at schools outside of Northern California or those with a different student population. They might also look different at schools that are in rural areas. Another limitation of the study is that it is based solely on the comments of the staff in charge of each school. It would have been interesting to get information from the parents or students themselves. It would have also been interesting to observe the actions of the staff and teachers that create this welcoming environment to see how the students respond. Finally, this study focused on elementary schools; these findings might or might not apply at the middle or high school level. To expand upon this study in the future, I would like to take three elementary schools in the same school district with high chronic absenteeism and implement strategies that were used in these schools. The purpose of this would be to see if the strategies they used could be successful with others in the school district or solely at these three schools.

This study is novel in the fact that it focuses on the interviews from low chronic absence schools. These schools stand out in terms of sustaining multiple strategies for promoting attendance and addressing chronic absence. They place a high priority on universal attendance promotion efforts, which reduces the numbers of chronically absent students that require additional support and attention. The main points that are highlighted in this piece are their challenges and their successes improving their attendance through building community relationships, being diligent with attendance, full staff support, organizational structures, and valuable incentive initiatives. Overall, it was indicated by the literature and the schools in the study, involving the whole school in recovering absent students helps create a welcoming environment and helps address attendance barriers. This piece has contributed to the school district's efforts to reduce chronic absence and the literature on successful practices for preventing chronic absenteeism.

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