The Impact and Effectiveness of Student Attendance Policies

In the following report, Hanover Research outlines the effect that student attendance policies have on overall attendance rates, as well as proven methods of program implementation. The report examines the effectiveness of and differences between incentives, discipline structures, communication strategies, and comprehensive approaches to student attendance.

HANOVER RESEARCH

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

The correlation between student attendance and student learning has recently garnered significant attention from education stakeholders, including state-level policymakers. Consequently, school districts are increasingly being asked to report attendance data.[1] In the following report, Hanover Research outlines the impact that different types of school- and district-wide attendance policies have on student attendance patterns.

KEY FINDINGS

The following points summarize the key findings found within this report:

- **Long-term, comprehensive strategies that take a holistic approach to student absenteeism are more effective than shorter, one-dimensional programs.** Successful strategies actively target lower age-brackets, recognizing the link between early absenteeism and chronic truancy later in a student's academic career. Most policies struggle to affect real change at the high school level, but have demonstrated sizable impact with elementary and middle school students.

- **The most successful attendance policies extend beyond school walls, heavily incorporating students' families as well as external community service organizations**. Programs achieving the best results clearly articulate attendance policies to families, holding them accountable for student absences when applicable. These programs also connect students and families to law enforcement agencies, counseling services, and transportation resources. Doing so establishes clearer communication channels between relevant stakeholders and alleviates some of the administrative burden felt by school districts.

- **Program success hinges upon the collection and interpretation of accurate, well-targeted data.** Teachers collecting this data should receive professional development to ensure buy-in and proper use of classification systems. In the recent past, successful uses of data have allowed districts to quickly adapt and customize attendance programs to demonstrated problem areas (e.g., specific grade levels, neighborhoods, and income levels). External auditing and data analysis services have proven effective; however, these processes can also be conducted in-house.

- **Student and teacher incentives for reaching attendance goals represent the easiest, most inexpensive strategy for combatting student absenteeism.** These programs are almost exclusively relevant for lower grade levels but are largely ineffective for high school students and teachers. Incentive programs should be

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[1] "Every School Day Counts – The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data," National Forum on Education Statistics, February, 2009. p. 1. http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009804.pdf

highly targeted, so that they do not spur any actions other than the incentivized behavior.

- **Though prevalent across the country, discipline solutions for absenteeism do not encourage attendance**. Instead, these punitive approaches create a disconnect between the student and his or her school, reducing the chances of future attendance. Effective policies aim to support positive adult-student relationships and set high academic expectations.

- **Communication strategies offer cost-effective solutions for districts working to improve attendance rates.** Successful campaigns use school websites and local media outlets to communicate to parents and students the importance of attending school. Automated systems can immediately generate customized communications (e.g., emails and telephone messages) for families based on student attendance data.

- **Past truancy is a strong predictor for future truancy.** For this reason, addressing factors that cause absenteeism early on in a student's academic career are important. Left unaddressed, attendance issues in a school can lead to a host of negative consequences for students' academic achievement and health.

SECTION I: METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the rationale behind the terminology employed throughout this report, as well as the criteria used to select profiled attendance programs.

TERMINOLOGY

Little consensus exists regarding the proper method for classifying various student behaviors related to school attendance. Terms such as "truancy" and "chronic absenteeism," for example, are defined differently by education researchers than they are by law enforcement agencies.[2] While some school districts define truancy as one or more unexcused absences,[3] law enforcement agencies describe it as any absence that is *illegal*.[4] These slight discrepancies in terminology across various studies and practice areas complicate the identification of best practices pertaining to student attendance.

The National Center for School Engagement claims that the outcomes of a student missing class remain constant regardless of how the activity is classified or whether it was known by a parent. Therefore, this report uses the terms *chronic absenteeism* and *truancy* interchangeably, yielding to a particular study's preference when necessary.

IDENTIFICATION OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS

Most programs addressing absenteeism have not been proven effective in rigorous research studies. However, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) maintains a database cataloging the few (25) programs that have demonstrated success after thorough evaluation. The OJJDP also ranks these programs by their effectiveness.[5] Section VI of this report focuses on truancy reduction programs listed in this database that have been implemented by school districts and counties nationwide. It also uses the available literature to complement the findings of these studies. Because of the complex, comprehensive nature of these policies, section VI presents program profiles rather than attempting to isolate absolute best practices within these approaches.

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[2] Leff, L. "New Attendance Push Prized by Students, Educators." *USA Today.* http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/education/story/2012-09-03/education-attendance-incentive/57561242/1

[3] Maynard, B., et al. "Indicated Truancy Interventions: Effects on School Attendance Among Chronic Truant Students." The Campbell Collaboration, July 5, 2012. p. 9. http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/lib/download/2136/

[4] Maynard, B., et al. "Interventions Intended to Increase School Attendance in Elementary and Secondary School Students." Campbell Collaboration Systematic Review Protocol. p. 2. http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/lib/download/709/

[5] "Deinstitutionalization of Status Offenders Best Practices Database," Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. http://www.ojjdp.gov/dso/dsoSearch.aspx

SECTION II: OVERVIEW OF THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF ABSENTEEISM

CAUSES OF STUDENT ABSENTEEISM

A recently conducted meta-analysis of the existing research and literature on truancy reduction finds that approaches to the issue span numerous academic disciplines and yield largely disparate results.[6] As such, identifying a conclusive list of the causes of absenteeism proves challenging. However, a general consensus regarding the major factors related to poor attendance has emerged. These highly inter-related categories include:

- **Students' perceptions of school:** Absent students are less likely to perceive school in a favorable light.[7] Conversely, building a sense of attachment and belonging to a school can mitigate chronic truancy. Research also shows that authoritative school climates that demand more from students and provide increased support yield better attendance records than more lenient schools.[8]

- **Family characteristics:** Not surprisingly, family environment greatly influences a student's attendance pattern. Ultimately, a stable home environment, as well as parental attention and involvement in a student's schoolwork, is critical for increasing attendance.[9] Students are more inclined to miss school if they perceive discipline at home to be lenient or inconsistent.[10] However, absenteeism is also more likely among students who believe their parents are exerting too much control over them.[11]

- **Personal or psychological factors:** Feelings of academic inferiority in the classroom, as well as social incompetence, can spur a student's desire to miss school.[12] Specifically, fear of bullies and pressure from peers to miss school often contribute to a student's absenteeism.[13]

Males, minorities, and urban youth students – as well as those from low-income, single-parent, and large family households – are particularly susceptible to these truancy-causing forces.[14] Also noteworthy, past truancy is a strong predictor of future truancy. The National

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[6] Maynard, B., et al., "Indicated Truancy Interventions: Effects on School Attendance Among Chronic Truant Students," Op. cit., p. 48.

[7] Railsback, J. "Increasing Student Attendance: Strategies from Research and Practice." Northwest Regional Educational Practice. p. 6. http://educationnorthwest.org/webfm_send/302

[8] "Improving School Attendance: A Resource Guide for Virginia Schools." Virginia Department of Education, August, 2005. p. 8. http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/prevention/dropout_truancy/improving_school_attendance.pdf

[9] Ibid.

[10] Railsback, J., Op. cit., p. 6.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Malcolm, H., et al. "Absence from School: A study of its causes and effects in seven LEAs." Department for Education and Skills. p. 30. http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8655/1/RR424.pdf

[14] "Improving School Attendance: A Resource Guide for Virginia Schools," Op. cit., p. 8.

Center for Education Statistics points out this correlation, noting that "high school dropouts have been found to exhibit a history of negative behaviors, including high levels of absenteeism throughout their childhood."[15] This finding demonstrates the importance of addressing factors that cause absenteeism early on in a student's academic career.

EFFECTS OF STUDENT ABSENTEEISM

Left unaddressed, attendance issues in a school can lead to a host of negative consequences for students' academic achievement and health. As school districts continue to develop strategies and policies to shrink achievement gaps, attendance remains paramount for the success of such programs. Simply put, school districts cannot close achievement gaps if students do not attend class.[16] Students who frequently miss school face statistically significant odds that they will underperform when compared to their non-truant peers,[17] and high absenteeism is the factor most associated with high dropout rates.[18]

This issue holds for younger students as well. Those who are chronically absent as early as kindergarten demonstrate lower achievement in later grades.[19] For example, a California study found that only 17 percent of children who were chronically absent in both kindergarten and grade 1 were proficient readers by the end of grade 3. In contrast, 64 percent of their peers who attended school regularly were proficient readers at the end of grade 3.[20] Students across all grade levels who *do* attend school regularly will benefit regardless of a school's strategies for closing achievement gaps. In fact, one study asserts that the annual predicted test score gain from simply improving a child's attendance is the same as the gain expected when a child transfers to a high-performing charter school.[21]

Despite the benefits of being in class, students who do attend school regularly are negatively impacted by their truant peers. Research shows that students gain more when attending schools with higher attendance rates. Specifically, when comparing two students with similar attendance records and controlling for demographic variables, the student attending a school with higher attendance rates will perform better in grade 4.[22] Attendance is also related to student health. A study of 10th graders in Michigan found poor attendance to be the only statistically significant predictor of behaviors such as cigarette use, binge drinking, and marijuana use. A larger-scale study of students in grades 7–12 found that truancy predicts a student's cigarette, alcohol, and drug use as well as risk for weapon-related violence, suicide, and early sexual intercourse.[23]

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[15] "Every School Day Counts – The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data." National Forum on Education Statistics. February, 2009. p. 1. http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009804.pdf
[16] "Taking Attendance Seriously." Campaign for Fiscal Equity. May, 2011. p. 1.
    http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/CFE_Attendance_FINAL.pdf
[17] Ibid.
[18] Railsback, J., Op. cit., p. 6.
[19] "Taking Attendance Seriously," Op. cit., p. 2.
[20] "Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism in Indiana: The Impact on Student Achievement." Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, Summer, 2012. p. 2. http://www.ceep.indiana.edu/projects/PDF/PB_V10N3_2012_EPB.pdf
[21] "Taking Attendance Seriously," Op. cit., p. 1.
[22] Ibid., p. 59.
[23] "Improving School Attendance: A Resource Guide for Virginia Schools," Op. cit., p. 9.

SECTION III: INCENTIVE PROGRAMS

District- and school-wide incentive programs represent one of the easiest to implement – and often most cost-effective – attendance policies. However, their long-term effectiveness remains largely up for debate. While most policy briefs and truancy reduction organizations mention quick-fix incentive programs as a solution to school absenteeism, very few offer evidence of their impact.

STUDENT INCENTIVES

Often considered controversial, student incentive programs have become a common practice in school districts nationwide. Program specifics and costs vary, as do their outcomes. Ultimately, the lack of evidence demonstrating incentive programs' influence on either student attendance or achievement should give pause to those using these programs to generate measurable growth.

A recent study conducted by the Brookings Institution examined student incentive programs in five major U.S. cities. Students participating in these programs were monetarily compensated for educational inputs (e.g., reading books, completing math homework, or attending school) or for student achievement outputs (e.g., standardized test scores, class grades).

For example, a Washington, D.C., program profiled in the Brookings Institution report specifically incentivized five student behaviors: attendance, behavior, wearing a school uniform, completion of homework, and completion of class work.[24] Students were eligible to receive as much as $10 per day for meeting these expectations. While no program rewarding outputs showed significant results, programs rewarding inputs such as the Washington, D.C., incentive structure yielded positive results in terms of increased student achievement. However, these positive results were not statistically significant.[25] Thus, this study adds credibility to programs incentivizing educational inputs such as attendance; however, a lack of statistically significant growth in student achievement suggests that other interventions may be more appropriate.

One example of a successful attendance incentive program can be seen at Corona-Norco Unified School District (CNUSD), a 2012 Broad Prize finalist. The district implemented a virtually no-cost strategy to increase student attendance. CNUSD analyzed student data to identify attendance patterns, including particular days on which students were more inclined to miss school. With this information, teachers created incentives for students to attend class on these targeted days. For example, CNUSD teachers began testing students

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[24] Allan, B. and Fryer, R., "The Power and Pitfalls of Education Incentives," The Hamilton Projects, Brookings. pp. 8-11.
   http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/fryer/files/092011_incentives_fryer_allen_paper2.pdf
[25] Ibid.

on Fridays, creating more impetus to attend class on this commonly skipped day.[26] While no conclusive data exist to prove this program's ability to increase attendance, it nonetheless represents a low-cost, low-risk, and easily-to-implement solution for districts.

Despite minimal evidence of their value, student incentives for attending school have cropped up in districts nationwide because of their low cost. As such, a general consensus on best practices for incentive programs has emerged:

- Attendance incentives are most effective when part of a more comprehensive approach, including outreach to families, development of a school-wide culture, and increased student engagement.[27] Isolated effect sizes from incentive programs are modest at best, and students rarely internalize these incentive structures.[28]

- Simple, low-cost incentives work as well as high-cost, monetary incentives. Examples include certificates, extra recess time, homework passes, and pizza parties.[29] These strategies are primarily useful for targeting attendance among primary school students.[30]

- Schools should avoid only recognizing perfect attendance and take care to reward punctuality as well. Because any missed class time can impact achievement, attendance should be recognized in a variety of ways.[31]

- Programs that align the incentives of teachers, students, and parents have the greatest impact on direct outcomes. Because all three of these stakeholders affect student attendance, they should all be pushed in a similar direction.[32]

TEACHER INCENTIVES

Districts also have the option of incentivizing teachers to help meet school goals. The Brookings Institution studied the impact of teacher incentive programs on specific variables, including student attendance. The programs studied include:[33]

- **New York City:** Schools meeting achievement targets were awarded $3,000 per teacher, and schools meeting 75 percent of the target received $1,500 per teacher. The progress report card score used to determine awards comprised three categories: progress, performance, and environment. Attendance represented 5 percent of the total score. Disbursement of awards to teachers was decided upon by individual schools, with most using an incentive scheme that granted teachers the

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[26] "Corona-Norco Unified School District – District Profile," The Broad Prize. p. 3.
   http://www.broadprize.org/asset/coronafacts.pdf
[27] "Establishing School-wide Attendance Incentives," Attendance Works.
   http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/AW-Incentives-two-pager-1-4-11.pdf
[28] Allan, B. and Fryer, R., Op. cit., p. 21
[29] Railsback, J., Op. cit., p. 14
[30] "Establishing School-wide Attendance Incentives," Op. cit.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Allan, B. and Fryer, R., Op. cit., p. 16.
[33] Ibid., pp. 12-14.

same amount regardless of seniority. However, the study concludes that no evidence exists to suggest that teacher incentives augment student performance, attendance, or graduation rates.

- **Nashville:** Middle school math teachers were awarded $5,000, $10,000, and $15,000 bonuses, depending on student performance. This program demonstrated no impact on student achievement, nor did it affect the way that teachers instruct students in the classroom.

These programs, and others like them, show that incentivizing teachers rarely affects their instructional technique and in turn does little to change student behaviors, such as school attendance. More thoughtful approaches to shaping teachers' behaviors, such as extensive professional development, are required for any lasting changes in student attendance.

SECTION IV: DISCIPLINE AND ATTENDANCE

This section addresses the various effects that discipline and punishment programs have on student attendance, whether they are an attempt to increase attendance itself or a means to correct other student behaviors through suspension or detention. For the most part, the literature suggests that these policies *negatively* affect student attendance.

Research suggests that pro-attendance discipline programs are largely ineffective. "Zero tolerance" policies in which students receive suspensions and detentions for unexcused absences or tardiness further remove them from critical instruction time. These practices spur a disconnect between students and their schools, creating a negative and combative school environment, especially for low-income and minority students.[34] Organizations focused on absenteeism advocate for keeping students engaged in some form of instruction, regardless of a student's wrong-doing. Because research shows that missing class increases the likelihood of future absences, more and more schools now use in-school suspension programs rather than sending students home.[35]

Some disciplinary systems used to discourage absenteeism also involve academic repercussions, another largely ineffective technique. For example, course instructors at Creekview High School in Cherokee County, Georgia, must fail a student upon his or her accumulation of seven unexcused absences.[36] The National Center for Education Statistics warns that such a punitive method further excludes students from critical learning opportunities.[37]

One anomaly among these primarily invalidated discipline strategies was implemented at Berkeley Unified School District. There, school administrators performed routine sweeps of the popular hangout destinations of chronic truants.[38] Although this tactic accompanied other pro-attendance policies and was not studied in isolation, the district's efforts led to a $1.4 million increase in revenue due to improved attendance.

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[34] Railsback, J., Op. cit., p. 13.

[35] Sundius, J., and Farneth, M. "On The Path To Success: Policies and Practices for Getting Every Child To School Every Day." Open Society Institute – Baltimore. p. 9.
http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/whitepaper3_20080919.pdf

[36] "Establishing School-wide Attendance Incentives," Op. cit.

[37] "Every School Day Counts – The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data," Op. cit., p. 1.

[38] Leff, L., Op. cit.

SECTION V: COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Well-targeted communication strategies have demonstrated measurable impact on truancy and chronic absenteeism in several public school districts. The most effective initiatives focus on building out strong communication channels between schools and students' families. In most cases, these policies require few resources up front while still offering the potential for demonstrable impact. The following initiatives represent well documented examples of communication strategies. Although the ability to generalize these practices cannot be guaranteed, they provide examples of low-risk solutions for school districts:

- **Warm Springs Elementary School in Oregon** found that simply distributing official letters to parents and guardians outlining the consequences of frequent absences and tardiness *does not* impact student attendance rates. Instead, the school now requires teachers to send out weekly syllabi to families that detail the lessons planned for an upcoming week. The goal: Convince parents that their child's absence from school will result in him/her missing important content. In addition, Warm Springs publishes its attendance numbers every day on the front page of the school website, helping parents to recognize the issue as a top priority.[39]

- **The California Department of Education** claims to have experienced positive effects on school attendance rates through several communications strategies. Specifically, schools are encouraged to notify parents of their right to meet with appropriate school personnel to discuss their child's absenteeism. In addition, schools telephone parents and guardians in the evenings or at work to verify absences.[40]

- **Routine home visits have been proven to reduce a school's overall percentage rate of chronic absenteeism**. Railsback contends that schools should provide a "home family liaison" to facilitate discussion about students' absences.[41]

- **New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg established the Interagency Task Force on Truancy and Chronic Absenteeism in 2010.** Much of the program rested on communication strategies, including parent education programs stressing the importance of attendance. In 2011, the mayor integrated a multimedia campaign into the program in which celebrities stressed the importance of attending school to students. Students prone to absenteeism were targeted and received morning wake-up calls recorded by celebrities as well as congratulatory calls after demonstrated improvement. The program led to a collective 24 percent decline in the number of chronically absent students among ten of the pilot elementary schools. However, the seven participating high schools showed little change.[42]

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[39] Railsback, J., Op. cit., pp. 45-46.
[40] "School Attendance Improvement Strategies." California Department of Education.
    http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ai/cw/attendstrategy.asp
[41] Railsback, J., Op. cit., p. 22.
[42] "Taking Attendance Seriously." Campaign for Fiscal Equity. May, 2011. p. 57.
    http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/CFE_Attendance_FINAL.pdf

SECTION VI: COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIES

This section addresses the strategies and effects of more comprehensive, holistic approaches to student absenteeism, demonstrating why such programs have proven to be more successful in promoting student attendance than most other strategies. Best practices for comprehensive attendance solutions are drawn from the few well-tested programs that have shown statistically significant results, as well as other policies highlighted by existing research. This section also outlines how school districts successfully use data as part of these strategies. By far, these programs represent the costliest yet most effective methods for combating absenteeism.

Despite yielding largely positive results, criticism of these programs persist. For example, a recently conducted meta-analysis finds that collaborative and multi-modal programming produces mean effects "substantially similar" to those resulting from "simple interventions."[43] Thus, comprehensive programs should strive to achieve more than just complexity and should be evaluated with the understanding that these approaches may not justify increased costs.

PROPER USE OF DATA

Most multifaceted attendance policies succeed, in part, because of their effective collection, verification, analysis, and utilization of student attendance data. These systems' demonstrated impact on student attendance as well as student achievement underscores the necessity of high-quality attendance data in affecting systemic change. Several procedures and methods have emerged as the best practices for integrating data into a comprehensive attendance strategy.

IDENTIFYING AND COLLECTING THE "RIGHT" DATA

Research shows that districts' proper use of data hinges upon what information the district collects and how it carries out the collection process. Overall, districts and their teachers must take care to target the *right* type of data. That is, systems must extend beyond collecting simple school-wide attendance averages and focus more closely on an individual student's number of absences, whether these absences are excused or unexcused, and exactly when absences are occurring.

The National Center for Education Statistics highlights the importance of creating a "mutually exclusive yet exhaustive taxonomy." Under this classification system, teachers are able to report virtually *any* attendance situation pertaining to a particular student without these category choices overlapping and confounding results.[44] These highly specific systems

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[43] Maynard, B., et al., "Indicated Truancy Interventions: Effects on School Attendance among Chronic Truant Students," Op. cit., p. 48.

[44] "Every School Day Counts – The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data," Op. cit., pp. 11-12.

allow for more in-depth analyses later in the process. The following are examples of such classifications used by many states employing "exhaustive yet mutually exclusive" attendance taxonomies:[45]

- Non-instructional activity recognized by state or school
- Religious observation
- Illness, injury, health treatment, or examination
- Family emergency or bereavement
- Legal or judicial requirement
- Family activity
- Student skipping school

Establishing a clear taxonomy also offers districts a chance to communicate their attendance expectations to students and families. For example, Michigan's Center Line Public Schools system benefited from clearly defining and articulating its taxonomy system. The district began classifying instances where students left class early as "absences."[46] Doing so emphasized to families the importance of students attending the full school day. In fact, this strategic change decreased the number of students leaving early for jobs or family vacations.[47]

Regardless of the level of specificity a district employs in its attendance classification scheme, the taxonomy and units of measure should easily align with those used in the respective state's accreditation process. For example, a district should record student attendance and absence by the minute if state accreditation calls for this information.[48]

Ultimately, the success of attendance data collection efforts rests with teachers themselves who are often tasked with attendance record-keeping. Because data quality suffers without clear collection policies, staff members should repeatedly be made aware of district procedures, either through professional development or a comprehensive handbook. Additionally, to prevent data procedures from over-burdening teachers, districts should upgrade information systems to make the process as automated as possible.[49]

VALIDATING DATA AND PRACTICES

Most successful attendance data systems and procedures employ some type of verification process, either conducted in-house or by an outside service. Schools that successfully validate data internally rely on a checks system that includes teachers, staff, families, and

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[45] "Every School Day Counts – The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data," Op. cit., p. 25.
[46] Ibid., p. 22.
[47] Ibid., p. 22.
[48] Ibid., p. 14.
[49] Ibid., p. 12.

the front office. Involving different stakeholders in the collection of data presents more opportunity to identify errors and irregularities.[50] Some districts also hire outside services to audit their schools' attendance data.[51] Common errors and patterns identified by attendance auditing services include:[52]

- Policies not in line with practice

- Inaccurate data collection

- Intervention systems largely consequence-based

- Intervention non-systematic

- Lag time between student choice not to attend school and consequence

- Communication breakdowns

- Hall pass inconsistency

INTERPRETING AND UTILIZING DATA

With large swaths of accurate data comes the task of interpreting the sometimes overwhelming amount of information and distilling it into actionable items. While most districts collect attendance data, many do not have adequate time or resources to review and act upon it. Outside services can certainly be called upon for data interpretation; however, some in-house best practices have emerged from recent research. In particular, districts are now advised to review absentee data in terms of the percentage of time a student spends in a classroom rather than the number of days missed. For example, if a student has missed 10 percent of the first month of school, this handful of days would normally not trigger alarm despite the fact that research suggests that this student is at risk for chronic absenteeism.[53]

Additional research recommends using targeted data to identify patterns and correlations between absenteeism and student neighborhoods, distance from school, race, grade level, or teacher. Swift recognition of these patterns is particularly critical for improving attendance in lower grades. Because younger students rarely skip school on their own volition, identification of barriers such as unreliable transportation or safety concerns can allow districts to adjust attendance strategies.[54]

As mentioned previously, automated attendance systems can alleviate some of the burden teachers face in collecting data. These systems can also directly act upon accumulated data in real time. For example, school districts can program automated systems to notify parents

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[50] Ibid., p. 12.
[51] Railsback, J., Op. cit., p. 50.
[52] Verbatim from Railsback, J., Op. cit.
[53] Sparks, S. "Spurred by Statistics, Districts Combat Absenteeism." *EducationWeek.*
   http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Spurred-by-Statistics-Districts-Combat-Absenteeism.pdf
[54] "Taking Attendance Seriously," Op. cit., p. 6.

immediately upon a student's absence. Software solutions can also generate automatic letters and phone messages, depending on the school's preference. Reponses can be customized by policymakers, and their frequency can be adjusted to align with a district's strategic attendance plan.[55]

KERN COUNTY TRUANCY REDUCTION PROGRAM

The Kern County Truancy Reduction Program (TRP), fully implemented in 2004 in conjunction with the Truancy Reduction and Attendance Coalition of Kern (TRACK), is a multi-functional early intervention program intended to improve school attendance. The key contributors to the success of this program include:

- Placing part of the blame for poor attendance on students' parents by subjecting them to consequences when truancy persists

- Allowing external community services and law enforcement agencies to shoulder some of the burden of reducing student absenteeism

- Combining mentoring and student tracking with extensive media campaigns and incentive programs

TRP AND TRACK PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The TRP and TRACK programs make use of significant parental participation, school and juvenile probation involvement, and individual case management. General program characteristics include:[56]

- Sponsorship by the Kern County Probation Department and the Kern County Substance Abuse Prevention Education Consortium, allowing for partnerships with relevant stakeholders within these agencies. The Department of Human Services also provides caseworkers to refer families to social services.

- A total of 39 participating school districts comprising 119 elementary, middle, and high schools.

- Focus on disseminating information about truancy-reduction initiatives, including a media campaign on truancy, attendance incentives, truancy "sweeps," and legislative advocacy.

PROGRAMMING SPECIFICS

The TRP and TRACK programs are far-reaching, targeting students in kindergarten all the way through 10th grade. Students are enrolled in the TRACK program after four unexcused absences or four incidents of extreme tardiness. Once enrolled, students may receive or participate in several program components, including assessments, home visits, student and

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[55] "Every School Day Counts – The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data," Op. cit., p. 15.
[56] "Kern County Truancy Reduction Program." Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
http://www.ojjdp.gov/dso/Kern%20County%20Truancy%20Reduction%20Program-DSOProgramDetail-796.aspx

family counseling, referrals to community resources, mentoring, and evaluation.[57] Participating students are monitored for an entire year after enrollment, although the program aims to improve attendance behavior within four months. Initially, enrolled students receive in-school services from the school's "student assistance team." However, if issues persist, students enter the TRP component. This involves notification and involvement of students' families, as well as more extensive referrals to outside services. In addition, this often means incorporating the District Attorney's office to work with parents to identify and mediate barriers to attendance.[58] If truancy persists, parents and students are required to meet with a "School Attendance Review Board (SARB)." Failure to do so leads to citations and ultimately court-ordered sanctions.[59]

OUTCOMES

Based on an extensive evaluation conducted in the 2005–2006 school year, the TRP and TRACK program yielded the following results:[60]

- Unexcused absences decreased for program participants by 45 percent during the first and second months from their initial referral.

- 59 students (15.2 percent) participating in TRP reported no further truancies, while another 138 students (35.6 percent) reported fewer than three additional truancies.

- 84.6 percent of TRP participants successfully completed the program.

- 15.4 percent of TRP participants had zero unexcused absences after the intervention, and 34.1 percent had one to three unexcused absences, resulting in almost half (49.5 percent) of the TRP students having fewer than four unexcused absences after the program.

- The combined total number of absences after TRP referral dropped 16.9 percent, from 1,798 before referral to 1,494 after referral.

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[57] Van Ry, V. "The Kern County Truancy Reduction Program Summary of Findings 2005–2006." Office of Kern County Superintendent of Schools. p. 2. http://wwwstatic.kern.org/gems/schcom/0506trptext.pdf

[58] "Kern County Truancy Reduction Program." Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. http://www.ojjdp.gov/dso/Kern%20County%20Truancy%20Reduction%20Program-DSOProgramDetail-796.aspx

[59] Ibid.

[60] Verbatim from Van Ry, V., Op. cit., p. 2.

MULTNOMAH COUNTY SCHOOL ATTENDANCE INITIATIVE

The Multnomah County School Attendance Initiative in Oregon aimed to reduce K–8 student absenteeism as a means of improving high school completion rates. The program operated under the belief that small attendance problems, left unaddressed, lead to large truancy issues.[61] Similar to the TRACK and TRP programs, this initiative involves collaboration with a host of community organizations, including the Multnomah County Department of Community Justice. The major success factors from this initiative include:[62]

- Collaboration between Multnomah County Office of School and Community Partnerships, Portland Public Schools, Multnomah Education Service District, East Multnomah County Independent School Districts, Multnomah County–Supported Youth and Family Service Centers, Volunteers of America, and the Multnomah County Department of Community Justice.
- Year-long tracking of at-risk students after service referrals are made.
- Use of data to quickly adapt program processes. For example, early evaluations indicated that the program was less successful for 9th grade students. As a result, the program shifted focus and concentrated resources in elementary and middle schools.

PROCESS

The Multnomah County School Attendance Initiative process involves the following steps and procedures:[63]

- Teachers and staff refer frequently absent students to the program, after which staff attempt to contact the student's family within seven calendar days. Initial referral criteria include: students must be 15 years or younger, a resident, and have a minimum of three days of unexcused absences within the previous 15 days of school.
- Once contact is made, parents and guardians are informed of the student's attendance issue as well as their legal responsibility to ensure their child is in school.
- Referrals are made to assist families in addressing barriers to student attendance. Finally, targeted students are monitored for the remainder of the school year.

OUTCOMES

The Student Attendance Initiative resulted in the following positive outcomes between 1998 and 2002:[64]

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[61] "Multnomah County School Attendance Initiative (SAI)." Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. http://www.ojjdp.gov/dso/Multnomah%20County%20School%20Attendance%20Initiative%20(SAI)-DSOProgramDetail-779.aspx
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Verbatim from Ibid.

- Attendance of referred students improved by 12 percent after intervention by SAI staff.

- On average, referred students attended school 73 percent of the time before SAI intervention and 82 percent of the time after intervention.

- On average, only 3.4 percent of referred students were attending school 90 percent of the time before SAI intervention, but 30.6 percent of referred students attended school 90 percent of the time after SAI intervention.

THE "CHECK AND CONNECT" MODEL

Implemented in districts nationwide, the "Check and Connect" model has a proven track record of reducing truancy as well as increasing attendance and ultimately school completion. Similar to the TRACK, TRP, and SAI programs, the Check and Connect model relies on relationship-based interventions and is primarily informed by research stressing the importance of school communication with students' families.[65]

PROCESS

Under the Check and Connect model, staff and teachers refer students demonstrating notable attendance issues and behavioral problems. Once referred, students are assigned a "monitor" who serves as a mentor and liaison between the student's parents, the school, and relevant community service providers. The monitor takes care to develop high levels of trust with students and their families and to identify and address any barriers to a student's attendance. A monitor's approach is altered in real time. Each month, he or she "checks" in on a student, collecting attendance and behavioral data from teachers and staff. Interventions are designed and modified based on these data. The monitor works with students and their families for at least two years, remaining with students as they move up grade levels.[66]

OUTCOMES

Six longitudinal studies have been conducted to evaluate the Check and Connect model's impact on attendance, among other variables. In one study, "students prior to referral were absent on average 22 percent of the time and one in seven referred students was absent more than 40 percent of the time. After 2 years of [participation in the Check and Connect model,] the percentage of students absent more than 15 percent of the time decreased from 45 percent at referral to 32 percent." All studies show that full integration of the model yielded significant gains in student attendance for school districts.[67]

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[65] "Check and Connect." Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
http://www.ojjdp.gov/dso/Check%20%20amp;%20Connect-DSOProgramDetail-814.aspx
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.

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