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& counting**

**School Practitioner  
Listserv**

**A Weekly Community of Practice Network  
for Sharing and Interchange**



**May 8, 2017**

**Attendance is Emerging as an Expanded Accountability Indicator  
>It's another opportunity to move forward with transforming  
student and learning supports!**

**Invitation to Listserv Participants to Share Perspectives**

**Colleagues Comment About Attendance**

**Featured Set of Center Resources on  
>Attendance, expanded accountability, and  
a unified, comprehensive, & equitable support system**

**Appendix  
>Increasing Student Attendance: Strategies**

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**Please forward this to a few colleagues you think might be interested.  
The more who join, the more we are likely to receive to share.**

**For those who have been forwarded this and want to be part of  
the weekly exchange, send an email to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**

**For previous recent postings of this community of practice, see  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>  
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**Note: In keeping with the *National Initiative for Transforming Student & Learning Supports*,\* this is being sent to and forwarded by over 114,000 school and community stakeholders concerned about (1) daily matters confronting schools, (2) promoting whole child development and positive school climate, and (3) the transformation of student and learning supports.**

**May is Mental Health Month –  
This year's theme is *Risky Business*.**

## Increasing Focus on Attendance:

### >Opportunity for Enhancing Student and Learning Supports

As an Associated Press article notes:

*States are beginning to outline new ways to evaluate their schools, rather than relying just on traditional measures such as test scores. The plans are required under a federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act. So far, nine states and the District of Columbia have submitted their accountability plans to the Education Department for review. Almost all of the first-round states have adopted chronic absenteeism, or how many students miss more than 10 percent of the school year, as a key metric....*

The question now arises: *What will be done to increase and sustain high levels of attendance?*

What most educators know is that a discrete program or a fragmented set of limited interventions can't address the complexities of the problem. In particular, punishment and coercive practices are not the route to *long-term* positive outcomes.

Needed is a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports that accounts for the variety of causes for nonattendance. So we suggest that the increased interest in addressing attendance problems is an opportunity to move toward transforming student and learning supports into such a system.

With this in mind, all staff concerned with enhancing student/learning supports should prepare to guide and shape upcoming discussions about improving attendance in major and sustainable ways.

Relevant resources to support the work are cited in the Featured Center Resources section of this community of practice and in the appended excerpt from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's document entitled: *Increasing Student Attendance: Strategies from Research and Practice*.

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## Invitation to listserv participants:

**Given your experiences, how would you answer the following questions?**

- (1) What do you think are the major causes of missing school at elementary, middle, and high school?**
- (2) What have you seen tried that does not work or even make the problem worse?**
- (3) What do you think are the best ways to address students/families/school related to attendance?**

**Share lessons learned. Comments. Recommendations.**

**Send your responses to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**

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## C omments from Colleagues in the Field

A few colleagues were asked to respond to the three questions noted above. Here are excerpts from comments received to date:

Q. 1 -- *What do you think are the major causes of missing school?*

- (A) There are so many things that contribute to absenteeism/truancy. We've seen instances of older siblings having chronic truancy issues because they walk their younger siblings to school each day. We've had students that are chronically truant because setting an alarm clock isn't a family norm, and we've seen teens who aren't connected to school and don't/won't attend.
- (B) Many major causes of missing school stem from parent limitations. At the elementary level, many parents (in low-income and minority areas) struggle getting their child to school consistently and on time. This can be for various reasons. One, ... lack of transportation. They might not have the financial means needed to take the bus each and every day. Second, parents might work long hours and might not have an adult present to drop students off for them. Oftentimes, parents leave their children with other siblings because they have no other option. ... Students also might feel a lack of motivation for school. This can stem from a hostile home-environment, an uninviting school-life, etc. When there is a lack of parent involvement, the student is not held accountable for truancy. ...
- (C) Unfortunately, looking only at attendance is like watching an eclipse of the sun through a pinhole in a piece of paper. You can tell something going on, but you're missing a lot of what's really happening. Typically, kids with chronic absenteeism have a host of issues that are not easily dealt with unless there is a system of supports in place. In my experience, the major issues related to problems in elementary have to do with parenting and bullying. For parenting — there could be a host of problems that keep parents from making sure their child gets off to school on time. This could have to do with work issues or even drug and alcohol problems. In most cases, getting a social worker or appropriate services involved is about all the school can do. As for bullying, the school is responsible to deal with the issue and make a safe environment for the student. For middle and high school youth, the problems can be more varied and difficult to pin down. Again, bullying can contribute to the problem, as well as other types of social relationships, lack of supervision in off-school hours, poor academic performance, substance abuse, etc. They could feel that school is a hostile place or go through an entire day without an adult speaking to them. Research shows that one positive student/adult relationship at school increases the likelihood of that student graduating by 50%. Simply assigning an adult to interact with a student on a daily basis could make a difference.
- (D) “Most common reasons:
  - >Physical illness, doctor's appointments, mental/emotional stressors; suspensions
  - >Some others: willful skipping; hardships such as homelessness or parent mental illness
  - >For some high school students, employment to earn money”

Q. 2 – *What have you seen tried that does not work (may make the problem worse)?*

- (A) Our legislature changed parts of the School Code to remove punitive, disciplinary responses to truancy. For example, beginning next school year, schools will no longer be able to place students in Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth programs for truancy. Instead, schools must focus on providing interventions and supports to help students and their families.
- (B) When teachers refer to parents as *pajama parents* (parents who come to school in their sleep attire) or address parents through a deficit lens, they show their lack of empathy and understanding. This type of communication is usually hostile and involves a lot of

judgement. Parents find a distrust in the school and a lack of support for their child. Schools cannot blame parents for the limitations they experience in their everyday lives.

- (C) I believe that the emphasis on attendance as a "behavior" issue is sorely misplaced. I look at attendance as the symptom and schools MUST find out what the true cause is. I've seen so many elaborate extrinsic motivation strategies put in place to get students to come to school. They may work for a brief period, but they aren't solving the root cause of what is going on. And often the students put on these incentive programs are not ever weaned off. How many times have we heard, "every time I ask them to do something they ask--what will I get?" We did that to ourselves by not understanding how to develop intrinsic motivation. Through relationships (the key) between school staff and students and families they must find out the cause--is it academic?--(ex. does the student not have the foundational skills he/she needs to be able to be successful in class so always feels stupid); is it behavioral?(and if so, what is the functional basis for the behavior?-- personally I've never found that the cause is a purely behavioral problem--there's always more behind it). Is it cognitive? do they just not comprehend the correlation between being at school and learning--or for high school the difference in gaining credits toward graduation vs just going through the motions and being passed through middle school) or...is it affective? does the child have no sense of belonging, no real connection to the school, feeling like no-one cares anyway so why go, etc.
- (D) >Suspensions for excessive absences  
>Not addressing root cause when it is social-emotional and/or academic  
>Discussing the attendance problem only with the student and not also the parent/guardian  
>Not explaining the relevance of the absences to the student and family”

Q. 3 – *What are the best ways to address students/families/school related to attendance?*

- (A) We have some counties that have created Truancy Task Forces that work with students and their families to get the student back on track, picking the student up and transporting to school, etc. Some districts send attendance officers out to knock on doors and escort kids to school. I think for these efforts, the focus has to be on providing positive support to the student — making sure he/she knows that the adults are helping, not punishing.
- (B) It is important to have a open line of communication. Many teachers often comment, "Well I called....." or "I sent an email." It is important for teachers and other school staff to realize that phone calls and emails may not be options for parents who come from low-income households. ... Teachers should be active in their communication even if the communication is not reciprocal. It is important that parents, no matter their form of involvement, see that there's a support system for their child at school. ...
- (C) The context of the situation and the feelings of the child are critical to understanding why the student is missing school. It may not be a student issue at all -- adding more consequences when the child is chronically absent can't improve a situation that isn't a student issue. Example: not showing up or not showing up on time because the child is with a non-custodial parent and they don't get the child back; they don't have transportation (or feel safe using what is offered); and sometimes family isn't making school a priority and the student doesn't know any better.
- Where adults develop strong relationships and make sure the students know they care that they are at school, there has been success--for example: Check & Connect--a comprehensive student engagement intervention. The community has to be involved in solving chronic absenteeism. The court systems and the consequences for truancy can work against what is in the best interest of the child. I've also worked with a community where the judicial consequences for students left families and students in a financial bind to pay fines for being truant--a panel of students shared that they couldn't go to school because they had to work to pay off their fines for not going to school! In the same community, some parents are begging for help--they've tried all

the suggestions and don't know what more to do to try to get their child to school. I also am a Youth Mental Health First Aid Trainer--the trends for anxiety, suicide, and other mental health issues in our children are frightening. We know we need more services and supports yet the funding for these supports isn't keeping pace (at all) with the needs. If the student can't identify or articulate what is happening and why they don't want to be at school, then they need the supports to assist them to figure that out. Consider it a partnership--including the student in an authentic role. Build relationships, build relationships, build relationships. Refrain from using consequences that "push" students and their families away. Collect and use your data.

- (D) Schools are skilled at writing intervention plans for all types of problems and could try involving the student and their parent(s) to problem solve. They can develop agreements for getting to school on time and developing possibilities for what to do should the student have these problems in the future. Naturally, these plans need to include the types of supports needed to help the student be successful and need to be regularly revisited to make sure things are working as intended. In the best of scenarios, a school could monitor absenteeism and develop a system to check up on students. There could be "levels" whereby occasion absenteeism is dealt with differently than more chronic absenteeism.

Regardless of the system or plans, the school needs the resources to follow through. Adding to the assignment of a single staff member is not an effective solution — there needs to be an intervention team that has the time and resources to develop a system, meet with stakeholders to develop student support plans, and have the ability to follow through with those plans. And, a good administrator will monitor the health and well-being of that team to ensure their effectiveness. And finally, as the team begins to work they may begin to find trends or common causes for absenteeism. These could have to do with transportation, needed services or even simple changes in school policies. (For example, a young mom I worked with wanted to attend high school part-time but school policy didn't allow her to do so. Unfortunately, she dropped out because she didn't have childcare for the full day.) These types of opportunities allow the school to partner with the community as well as raise issues with the board of education to support students and ensure they have what they need to get to and be successful in school. The best ways to address students/families/school issues? Head-on. The students and families know what the issues are — even if they don't want to talk about them. Get them involved, don't place blame and provide support. Working with everyone involved is the only way to wrap-around the supports that are needed.

- (E) >Rigor, Relevance and Relationships
  - >Deliberate efforts to foster caring school climate
  - >Deliberate efforts to engage all students in extra-curricular activities or clubs
  - >Clear attendance policies
  - >Educating students and families about why school attendance is important for student success (via teacher and school counselor sessions and phone calls)
  - >Strategies/Incentives to reinforce/reward/recognize attendance (I've seen elementary schools have success with simple things like monthly dance and popcorn parties for students with perfect attendance and most improved attendance, and class competitions for best attendance; end of year celebrations/field trips that required perfect attendance)
  - >Automated phone calls and letters that alert parents of absences
  - >School counseling for social-emotional barriers (referrals to community therapist for more intensive needs)
  - >School counselor referral for school social worker involvement/home visits
  - >Educating students and families regarding the legal obligation to attend school
  - >In most extreme cases in which all other strategies have failed, taking the family to court regarding violation of compulsory attendance law"

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## Featured Set of Center Resources on

### >Attendance, expanded accountability, and a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports

>School Attendance Problems: Are Current Policies & Practices Going in the Right Direction? [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/school attendance problems.pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefs/school%20attendance%20problems.pdf)

>School Attendance: Focusing on Engagement and Re-engagement <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schoolattend.pdf>

>Expanding the Accountability Framework for Schools <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/account.pdf>

>Addressing What's Missing in School Improvement Planning: Expanding Standards and Accountability to Encompass an Enabling or Learning Supports Component <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/enabling/standards.pdf>

>Establishing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports at a School: Seven Steps for Principals and Their Staff <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/7steps.pdf>

> Implementing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports: A Brief District Guide for Moving Forward <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/implementingls.pdf>

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**NEW!** As a basic resource, we have developed a new work entitled: *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System*. Available from Cognella – <https://titles.cognella.com/transforming-student-and-learning-supports-9781516512782.html>

**NEW!** Also just developed is a preliminary draft of another new book entitled: *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide* -- Available at this time as a free resource. Download at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/barriersbook.pdf>

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I hear you skipped school to play football.



No I didn't, and I have the movie stubs to prove it.



## APPENDIX

Excerpt from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's document entitled:

*Increasing Student Attendance: Strategies from Research and Practice*  
<http://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/increasing-student-attendance.pdf>

"... Statistics show that absenteeism due to reasons other than illness and cutting individual classes increases with each grade level, starting in the eighth grade.... Poor attendance is a major indicator of gradual alienation and disengagement, and may lead to a student dropping out permanently....

### **Why student don't attend school**

Before deciding what strategies to use to increase attendance, it can be beneficial to look at the reasons why students don't attend school, and just as important, why they do stay in school, and what they do like about it. There are well-established risk factors associated with dropping out and skipping school, including family background and relationships, past school performance, personal characteristics, and school or neighborhood characteristics ...

For instance, home dynamics such as impoverished living conditions, frequent home relocations, lack of child supervision, and other family issues are often related to non-attendance.... Six variables that were statistically significant predictors for distinguishing absentee high school students from regularly attending students:

1. Students' school perceptions: Absentees are less likely to perceive school favorably
2. Perception of parental discipline: Absentees perceive discipline as lax or inconsistent
3. Parents' control: Absentees believe parents are attempting to exert more control over them
4. Students' academic self-concept: Absentees feel inferior academically
5. Perceived family conflict: Absentees experience family conflict
6. Social competence in class: Absentees are less likely to feel socially competent in class ...

These variables are interrelated, targeting a single area for treatment is unlikely to be effective. They suggest that success is more probable if community members and organizations, parents, students, and school staff share in the task of identifying solutions to all these concerns...

To understand more clearly why students are not coming to school, many researchers and practitioners are interviewing and surveying students to obtain answers....

Below are other commonly cited reasons that students have given for not attending school...

- Viewed classes as boring, irrelevant, and a waste of time
- Did not have positive relationships with teachers
- Did not have positive relationships with other students
- Was suspended too often
- Did not feel safe at school
- Could not keep up with schoolwork or was failing (and there were no timely interventions)
- Found classes not challenging enough (worksheets and reading with lectures were the predominant activities), and students can miss class days and still receive credit
- Couldn't work and go to school at the same time

(cont.)

If schools are to successfully address low attendance, clearly they must understand why their students don't come to school, not just rely on national reports, as helpful as they may be. School staff members can conduct student focus groups, have an external organization conduct surveys, and meet with students individually to find out what the issues are, both in the school culture and their personal lives. ...

Strategies for increasing attendance can generally be placed into the following, often overlapping, categories:

- Sound and reasonable attendance policies with consequences for missing school
- Early interventions, especially with elementary students and their families
- Targeted interventions for students with chronic attendance problems, such as truancy reduction programs, both school and community based
- Strategies to increase engagement and personalization with students and families that can affect attendance rates; family involvement, culturally responsive culture, smaller learning community structures, mentoring, advisory programs, maximization and focus on learning time and service learning..."

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For additional resources, see the Attendance Works and Everyone Graduates Center >*Preventing Missed Opportunity: Taking Collective Action to Confront Chronic Absence*

[http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/PreventingMissedOpportunityFull\\_FINAL9.8.16\\_2.pdf](http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/PreventingMissedOpportunityFull_FINAL9.8.16_2.pdf)

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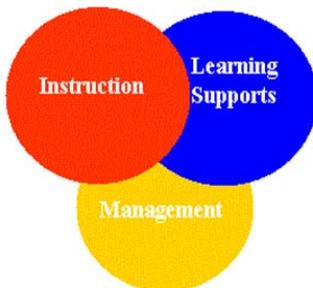
**THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND INTERESTING THE INTERCHANGES BECOME!**

For new sign-ups – email [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)

Also send resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences for sharing.

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\*For information about the *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

See report from the National Summit on the *Every Student Succeeds Act and Learning Supports: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching to Enhance Equity of Opportunity* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/summitreport.pdf>