

## School Attendance: Focusing on Engagement and Re-engagement

*Students cannot perform well academically when they are frequently absent. An individual student's low attendance is a symptom of disengagement and academic difficulties. But when many students have low attendance in classes, such behavior undermines the capacity of all students and teachers to pursue high quality education.*

From: Habits Hard to Break: A New Look at Truancy in Chicago's Public High Schools

*Attendance Matters! – New Research supports the unquestionable link between attendance and student achievement. Students who attend school between 85 and 100 percent of the time pass the state tests in reading and math at much higher rates than students who attend school less than 85 percent of the time.*

From Minneapolis Public Schools <http://www.mpls.k12.mn.us/attendance.html>

Every student absence jeopardizes the ability of students to succeed at school and schools to achieve their mission. School attendance is a constant concern in schools. Average daily attendance rates are a common determiner of school funding, so schools funded on the basis of average daily attendance have less resources to do the job. Students who are not at school cannot receive instruction. Academic achievement scores are correlated with school attendance. Excessive school absence is a precursor of school dropout. Some youngsters who are truant from school engage in behaviors that are illegal. And the negative correlates related to school attendance problems go on and on.

Each school, district, and state have statements of policy regarding attendance. They address such questions as: What is an excused absence? What should be done about unexcused absences? When are absences severe and chronic? When does the school team work with the legal system to address truancy? What are the interventions and consequences for truancy?

Reducing school absences is one of the most challenging matters facing schools. Prevailing policies that simply mandate attendance and spell out increasingly harsh punishments for unexcused absences fail to take into account the range of underlying causes of attendance problems and the range of prevention, early intervention, and ongoing support that might more effectively address the problems.

In addressing the problem, it is important to begin by exploring two questions: What factors lead to student absences? How can schools more effectively address the problem? We have addressed these matters in a policy and practice analysis brief entitled: *School Attendance Problems: Are Current Policies & Practices Going in the Right Direction?* online at [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Briefs/school attendance problems.pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Briefs/school%20attendance%20problems.pdf). On the following pages, we excerpt from that report implications for intervention.

### ABOUT THE CENTER FOR MENTAL HEALTH IN SCHOOLS at UCLA

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### **Why are Students Absent?**

According to the report *Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades* by Chang & Romero (2008) ([http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub\\_837.html](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_837.html)), while the reasons children are absent vary, poor and low-income children are especially vulnerable because their families often lack resources such as transportation, food, clothing, and social supports that help ensure regular attendance.

Attendance suffers when families are struggling to keep up with the routine of school despite the lack of reliable transportation, working long hours in poorly paid jobs with little flexibility, unstable and unaffordable housing, inadequate health care and escalating community violence.

Other common contributors to absenteeism stressed in the report include teen motherhood, single motherhood, low maternal education, welfare, unemployment, food insecurity, poor maternal health, having multiple siblings, or other serious family concerns (such as mental illness, homelessness, child or domestic abuse, incarceration of a parent) that make school attendance difficult for children.

### **So What Needs to be Done?**

From an intervention perspective, current policy is mainly reactive. There is a clear need for greater attention to prevention and intervening as early as feasible after attendance problems are noted. There is a need for a comprehensive, multifaceted and integrated approach that weaves together the resources of school and community. As the folks at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory have noted in discussing dropouts in their *School Improvement Research Series*:

“Children at-risk need to be identified at a young age (as early as preschool) so that early sustained intervention can be applied. Success in the elementary grades diminishes the possibility of later dropping out in high school. The key ... is helping youth to overcome their sense of disconnectedness. It is imperative not to isolate or alienate any students from the school. Not all factors related to dropout [and truancy] reduction are school controllable, and solutions to the complex problem[s] of dropouts [and truancy] cannot be achieved by the schools alone. ... It requires resources that go beyond the school, and solutions require a team approach – the combined efforts of students, parents, teachers, administrators, community-based organizations, and business, as well as the federal, state, and local governments.”

### **What Schools Can Do Now**

As stressed by our Center’s New Directions for Student Support Initiative (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/ndannouncement.htm>), ultimately schools must develop a *comprehensive system of student and learning supports to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students*. Such a system includes a range of supports for transitions and classroom and school-wide programs designed to re-engage students who have become actively disengaged from schooling. Our focus here is on these two major intervention concerns.

## Transition Interventions

Periods of transition can increase school attendance problems. Greater attention is needed to designing potent interventions to ensure students are welcomed and connected with ongoing social supports during each of the following transition periods and special attention is paid to students identified as at risk:

- >Entry into school at kindergarten
- >Moving to a new home and entry into a new school
- >Beginning a new year in a new class
- >Articulation from elementary to middle or middle to high school
- >Re-entry from suspensions, expulsions, juvenile detention
- >Inclusion from special education to regular education

In our work on support for transitions, we suggest the following:

**Think in terms of general facets and intervention tasks related to *supports for transitions*.** While the nature and scope of transitions vary, there are common features in planning and implementing interventions to support transitions. And, as with every intervention, considerations about time, space, materials, and competence arise at every step of the way.

### *Three Overlapping Facets*

In planning and implementing supports for transitions, a major concern is developing a range of practices to address barriers that make it hard for students in transition to function effectively. The overlapping facets that encompass these practices are:

- > Broad-band practices (often designated universal approaches) to ensure support is in place for each identified transition where intervention is indicated.
- > Enhanced personalization to accommodate minor differences (watching for those having minor adjustment problems and providing just a bit more personalized assistance, e.g., aid in overcoming minor barriers to successful adjustment, a few more options to enable effective functioning and make participation more attractive).
- > Special assistance (identifying as early as feasible those who have not made an effective adjustment or who remain uninvolved due to major barriers, an intense lack of interest or negative attitudes, and/or lack of capability). This facet requires continued use of personalized approaches, as well as intensive outreach and special assistance.

### *Key Intervention Tasks*

Each intervention facet encompasses four major intervention tasks:

- > Establishing a mechanism for prioritizing development, planning, implementation, and the ongoing evolution of the needed transition programs
- .> Developing specific strategies and activities related to each transition program (e.g., social supports, enhancing motivational readiness for involvement, capacity building)
- > Initiating each transition program

- > Ongoing maintenance and creative renewal of all programs designed to support transitions

The range of practices requires planning for personalizing the school schedule and providing interventions and monitoring until the student's problem is corrected. Assistance from student/learning support personnel can provide the safety net that allows these students to increase regular attendance.

*Planning  
Programs to  
Support  
Transitions*

Every school needs to ensure the focus on all attendance problems includes planning and development of programs to support transitions. Most schools have teams that react when an individual student is identified (e.g., a student support team, an IEP team). These teams focus on such functions as referral, triage, and care monitoring or management. In contrast to this *case-by-case service* focus, some schools have a mechanism (e.g., a Learning Supports Resource Team) that takes responsibility for ensuring that needed *school programs* for addressing barriers to learning are developed. Sometimes this function is left to a school improvement planning team or a student support staff member.

To ensure programs to support transitions are fully integrated into a comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated approach for addressing barriers to learning, gap analyses must be made and resources (re)deployed. To ensure these programs are given a high priority, they must be fully integrated into school improvement plans.

**Mapping Transition Programs at a School**

(self-study survey available at ><http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu><)

As a school sets out to enhance the usefulness of education support programs designed to address barriers to learning, it helps to clarify what is in place as a basis for determining what needs to be done. Special attention must be paid to

- >what is in place
- >what needs improving
- >what is missing

This provides a basis for resource analysis. Such analysis decides what is worth continuing as is, what is not worth continuing, how resources can be deployed to strengthen current activity, and what the priorities are for developing additional programs. In the process, recommendations can be made about (a) what procedures are in place for enhancing resource usefulness and (b) how to improve coordination of resources and better integrate activity.

The self-study survey provides a starting point for such efforts. Each item is rated in terms of whether the intervention currently exists if so, whether it needs enhancement if it doesn't exist, whether it is something that should be established. Based on the self-study, staff, families, and communities are in a better position to establish priorities and plan and implement essential supports for transition. In doing so, the emphasis is not to establish another piecemeal "add-on" or special project. The point is to take another step in developing a sustainable, comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approach that addresses major barriers to students learning and teaching effectively.

## Connecting with Students Who Are Becoming Disengaged

For motivated students, facilitating learning is a fairly straightforward matter and fits well with school improvements that primarily emphasize enhancing instructional practices. The focus is on helping establish ways for students who are motivationally ready and able to achieve and, in the process, maintain and hopefully enhance their motivation. The process involves knowing when, how, and what to teach and also knowing when and how to structure the situation so they can learn on their own. However, students who manifest learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems often have developed extremely negative perceptions of teachers, programs, and school in general. Any effort to re-engage these students must begin by recognizing such perceptions. That is, the first step in addressing the problem is for the school leadership to acknowledge its nature and scope. Then, school support staff and teachers must work together to pursue a major initiative focused on re-engaging those who have become disengaged and reversing conditions that led to the problem.

Given appropriate commitment in policy and practice, there are four general strategies we recommend for all working with disengaged students (e.g., teachers, support staff, administrators):

(1) ***Clarifying student perceptions of the problem*** – Talk openly with students about why they have become disengaged so that steps can be planned for how to alter the negative perceptions of disengaged students and prevent others from developing such perceptions.

(2) ***Reframing school learning*** – In the case of those who have become disengaged, it is unlikely that they will be open to schooling that looks like "the same old thing." Major changes in approach are required if they are even to perceive that anything has changed. Minimally, exceptional efforts must be made to have these students (a) view the teacher as supportive (rather than controlling and indifferent) and (b) perceive content, outcomes, and activity options as personally valuable and obtainable. It is important, for example, to eliminate threatening evaluative measures; reframe content and processes to clarify purpose in terms of real life needs and experiences and underscore how it all builds on previous learning; and clarify why procedures can be effective – especially those designed to help correct specific problems.

(3) ***Renegotiating involvement in school learning*** – New and mutual agreements must be developed and evolved over time through conferences with the student and where appropriate including parents. The intent is to affect perceptions of choice, value, and probable outcome. The focus throughout is on clarifying awareness of valued options, enhancing expectations of positive outcomes, and engaging the student in meaningful, ongoing decision making. For the process to be most effective, students should be assisted in sampling new processes and content, options should include valued enrichment opportunities, and there must be provision for reevaluating and modifying decisions as perceptions shift.

*The potential of small classes and schools* – In a recent review of small schools in Chicago, the Consortium on Chicago School Research reports that students in the small high schools that are part of the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative “were absent fewer days than similar non-CHSRI students and were less likely to drop out of school.”

In all this, it is essential to remember that effective decision making is a basic skill (as fundamental as the three Rs). Thus, if a student does not do well initially, this is not a reason to move away from student involvement in decision making. Rather, it is an assessment of a need and a reason to use the process not only for motivational purposes but also to improve this basic skill.

(4) ***Reestablishing and maintaining an appropriate working relationship*** (e.g., through creating a sense of trust, open communication, providing support and direction as needed) – In applying the above strategies, maintaining reengagement and preventing disengagement requires a continuous focus on:

- > ensuring that the processes and content minimize threats to feelings of competence, selfdetermination, and relatedness to valued others, maximize such feelings, and highlight accomplishments (included here is an emphasis on a school enhancing public perception that it is a welcoming, caring, safe, and just institution)
- > guiding motivated practice (e.g., providing opportunities for meaningful applications and clarifying ways to organize practice)
- > providing continuous information on learning and performance
- > providing opportunities for continued application and generalization (e.g., ways in which students can pursue additional, self-directed learning or can arrange for additional support and direction).

## **Conclusions**

It is often said that school attendance is both a right and a responsibility. Certainly, those of us who value education can readily agree with this. And, for students who are absent from school because of circumstances over which they have no control, society has to play a greater role in addressing barriers that are abridging their rights.

However, there are some students who experience school as not right for them and, therefore, see school not as a right or a responsibility but as an infringement on their self-determination. From a psychological perspective, the problem becomes motivational (e.g., avoidance motivation, reactance). Therefore, addressing the problem requires strategies that are more psychologically sophisticated than the prevailing ones used by most schools and the society in general.

Given the variety of factors that play a role in school attendance problems, it is essential to avoid lumping all youngsters together. A particular danger arises when the problem is truancy. Some truancy is *reactive* and some is *proactive*, and the underlying motivation for not coming to school can vary considerably in both cases.

Ideas for developing more sophisticated approaches can be adapted from current efforts. But, policy and practice must now evolve so schools, families, and communities are working together to develop approaches that reflect the complexity of attendance problems. The complexity demands moving to more comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated solutions. Focusing only on “What’s wrong with that kid!” often is tantamount to blaming the victim and contributes to policies and practices that are not making significant inroads.

School attendance problems provide another indication of the need to move forward in new directions for student support.

## Some Resources

The Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Finds provide easy access to a variety of resources relevant to intervening to enhance school attendance. Start with the Quick Finds on

- >Attendance – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/attendance.html>
- >Motivation – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm>
- >Transition Programs/Grade Articulation/Welcome – [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101\\_01.htm](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101_01.htm)

Below are a few other online resources.

- >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 Engagement, Disengagement, Learning Supports, & School Climate  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schooleng.pdf>
- >Transitions: Turning Risks into Opportunities for Student Support  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/transitions/transitions.pdf>
- >Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf>
- >Education on Lockdown: The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track –  
<http://www.advancementproject.org/reports/FINALEOLrep.pdf>
- >Habits Hard to Break: A New Look at Truancy in Chicago's Public High Schools –  
[http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub\\_id=47](http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub_id=47)
- >Small Schools on a Larger Scale: The First Three years of the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative –  
[http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub\\_id=4](http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub_id=4)
- >New Approaches to truancy prevention in urban schools –  
<http://www.ericdigests.org/2004-2/truancy.html>
- >Truancy: Summary description, state of evaluation, performance measures, evaluations, related resources – <http://www.jrsa.org>
- >Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School –  
[http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/jjbul2001\\_9\\_1/contents.html](http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/jjbul2001_9_1/contents.html)
  
- >From the U. S. Department of Education
  - >>Truancy: A Serious Problem for Students, Schools, and Society –  
<http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/training/truancy/problem.html>
  - >>School Connectedness and Meaningful Student Participation –  
[http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/training/connect/school\\_pg3.html](http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/training/connect/school_pg3.html)
  - >>Dropout Prevention: A Practice Prevention Guide – <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>
  - >>Approaches to Truancy Prevention – <http://www.vera.org>
  
- >From the National Center for Schools Engagement/CO Foundation for Families and Children –  
<http://www.schoolengagement.org>
  - >>Guidelines for a National Definition of Truancy and Calculating Rates
  - >>School Policies that Engage Students and Families
  - >>Youth Out of School: Linking Absence to Delinquency
  
- >From the National Dropout Prevention Center – <http://www.dropoutprevention.org>
  - >>Planning, collaborations, and implementation strategies for truancy programs
  - >>Legal and economic implications of truancy
  - >>Best Practices and model truancy programs
  - >>Guidelines for evaluating truancy programs
  - >>Fifteen effective strategies for improving student attendance & truancy prevention
  
- >From the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory – <http://www.nwrel.org>
  - >>School Improvement Research Series, Reducing the Dropout Rate
  - >>Increasing Student Attendance: Strategies from Research to Practice