



Understanding District Successes and Challenges in Reducing Chronic Absenteeism and Implications for Statewide Supports

August 2022

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Executive Summary

Chronic absenteeism has affected a significant percentage of California’s K-12 student population and is likely to continue to do so over the coming years due to the lasting impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. School absences negatively affect academic and socioemotional outcomes for all students – especially youth of color and other vulnerable student groups – making improving attendance a top priority for school systems.

This attendance brief aims to better understand how the issue of chronic absenteeism has been addressed by districts and what improvements could yield better student outcomes. It highlights insights and best practices collected from districts that were able to decrease their chronic absenteeism rate in the past five years and offers recommendations on how local educational agencies (LEAs) could help increase student attendance.

Because the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) assists local educational agencies (LEAs) to support learning and well-being for all students, it is uniquely positioned to help LEAs meet the chronic absenteeism challenge by leveraging the vast resources in California's educational community.

A workgroup of educational partners convened by the CCEE identified 80 school districts that had made significant progress in addressing chronic absenteeism in California over the past five years and interviewed teams from nine districts across the state, varying in size and grade spans. Although these districts had slightly different approaches to improving attendance, they shared common characteristics and offered some replicable takeaways in the areas of:

- shifting mindset and building understanding;
- leveraging strong data practices;
- integrating practices across the whole district;
- utilizing early intervention;
- providing consistent and focused wraparound communications;
- ensuring strong support and staffing;
- maximizing community partnerships; and
- developing flexible paths for students.

Based on the information gleaned from district leadership teams in the course of six months, the workgroup highlighted six potential areas for implementing systemic practices that could help mitigate chronic absenteeism:

- clear and consistent messaging and communication;
- flexibilities around how and when learning takes place;
- updates to the School Attendance Review Team (SART) and the School Attendance Review Board (SARB);
- training and tools to support attendance;
- forging a path for a more “connected system” and inter-agency collaboration; and
- effective data systems and practices.

Ultimately, the causes of chronic absenteeism remain complex and the workgroup believes that continued study and the sharing of promising practices can help create a roadmap for addressing it.

Introduction

At the core of learning and well-being lies attendance. School absences negatively affect academic and socioemotional outcomes for all students, making improving attendance a top priority for school systems. Frequent absences have an even more detrimental effect: chronic absenteeism has been linked to reduced student achievement, social disengagement, and feelings of alienation (Gottfried, 2014; Gottfried, 2015; Johnson, 2005).

Students in California are considered [chronically absent](#) if they are absent on at least 10% of the instructional days that they were enrolled to attend. [Pre-pandemic data](#) (2019) show that chronic absenteeism affects 12.1% of California public school students, with disproportionately high rates of absenteeism and suspensions for youth of color, as well as low-income, unhoused, foster, and special education students.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the attendance problem, elevating both the number of school absences and the importance of taking action to reduce chronic absenteeism. Advances in tackling chronic absenteeism could create a virtuous cycle that may yield significant benefits not only for students but also for the communities they are part of.

Because the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) assists local educational agencies (LEAs) to support learning and well-being for all students, it is uniquely positioned to help LEAs meet the chronic absenteeism challenge by leveraging the vast resources in California's educational community.

This attendance brief is an effort to better understand how the issue of chronic absenteeism has been addressed by districts and how different parts of the system could improve to yield better outcomes for students. To that end, this brief highlights insights and best practices collected from districts that were able to decrease their chronic absenteeism rate over the past five years and offers recommendations on how LEAs could implement systemic practices to increase student attendance.

It includes:

1. A brief background on chronic absenteeism and its impact on student outcomes
2. Overview of the data collection processes for this report
3. High-level findings
4. Districts' practices and strategies
5. Statewide support opportunities

Background

In September 2010, then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed legislation encouraging districts to collect chronic absence data and add the data to the CALPADS longitudinal student database. Three years later, the California Attorney General's office began analyzing the extent and impact of elementary chronic absence.

Following these initial developments:

- **2014 - School Attendance Awareness Month declared:** On September 11, 2014, the California legislature approved Assembly Concurrent Resolution No. 149, authored by Assemblymember Shirley Weber, which declared September "School Attendance Awareness Month."
- **2015 - CSBA drafted sample board policy:** The California School Board Association released a [chronic absence and truancy sample board policy](#).
- **2016 - State dashboard started measuring chronic absenteeism:** Attendance continues to be part of the state dashboard and continues to be a measure of success for LEAs.
- **2017 - SARB sample attendance policy created:** The California Department of Education's School Attendance Review Board's (SARB) most recent [sample attendance policy](#) became effective on January 1.
- **2019 - SPI made chronic absence a top priority:** State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond made reducing chronic absenteeism one of four top priorities for 2019.
- **2020 to today - Covid-19 exacerbates attendance struggles:** Districts continue to adapt to the persistent and evolving challenges of schooling during the pandemic.

Context

According to Ed-Data, more than 12% of California's K-12 public school students were chronically absent in 2018-19 (reporting for chronic absenteeism was not required for SY 2019-20 or SY 2020-21), with rates of chronic absenteeism increasing with grade level. Chronic absenteeism rates for vulnerable student groups such as unhoused students were much higher (i.e. 25% chronically absent).

Chronic absenteeism, along with suspension rates and other measures of student engagement, is a problem that disproportionately affects youth of color, as well as other vulnerable student groups: low-income, homeless, foster, and special education students. If absenteeism reaches high levels systemwide, it can impact all students in the classroom and not just those students who are absent.

Poor attendance is also an indicator of low achievement in transitional grades and can act as an early warning system for identifying students at high risk of dropping out. Chronic absenteeism has long been associated with risk factors for elements of student academic and social-emotional success that include: reading proficiency, social and emotional development, academic confidence, test scores, early literacy and math development, and high school completion.

The Chronic Absenteeism Research Learning Network

The Chronic Absenteeism Research Learning Network was convened by the CCEE under the leadership of Aldo Ramirez, Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services for the Salinas City Elementary School District, from January to July of 2022 to understand district successes and challenges in reducing chronic absenteeism and its implications for statewide support. Membership of the working group was intentionally representative of diverse stakeholders and also included:

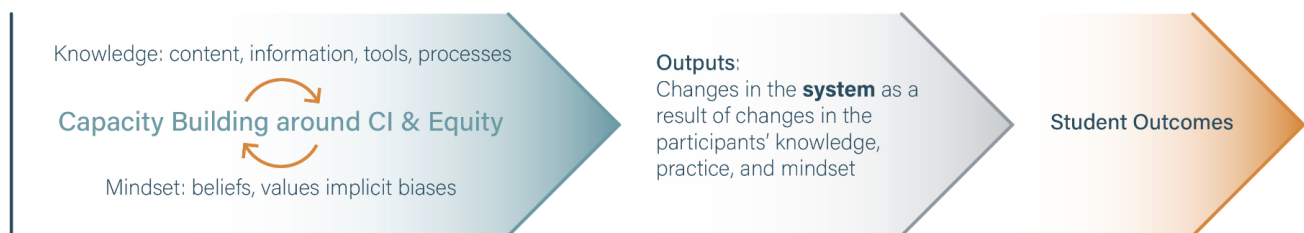
- Caryn Lewis, Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services for Monterey Office County of Education
- Sandra Lyon, retired Superintendent of Palms Springs Unified and former CCEE board member
- Hedy Chang, Executive Director of Attendance Works
- Sujie Shin, Deputy Executive Director for the CCEE
- Jennie Wright, Senior Manager of Teaching, Learning, and Leading for the CCEE

Additional technical support was provided by Nicole Assisi (Senior Advisor), Shelli Kurth (Advisor), and Daniel Assisi (Managing Partner) of Copernicus Solutions.

Theory of Action

Our approach to examining the issue of chronic absenteeism is grounded in CCEE’s theory of action, which examines capacity building through the lens of change practices impacting knowledge (e.g., new content, information, tools, and processes) and shifts in mindset (e.g., beliefs, values, and implicit biases) to change the way systems do things (outputs) and ultimately improve outcomes for students.

CCEE Theory of Action



We observed that districts that were successful in lowering chronic absenteeism rates shared the following four characteristics:

1. **Attendance work was systemic:** All parts of the school/district system treated attendance as critical and worked together to make it a priority.
2. **Relationship building and connection were essential:** Districts created multiple opportunities for student-to-student, teacher-to-student, admin-to-student, counselor-to-student, and community-program-to-student connections. Every student had at least one person and a place they connected to.

3. **Data was timely, informative, and led to action:** Districts created processes for pulling, sharing, and acting on data regularly, and students, parents, and staff could all easily access this data.
4. **Resources and attention were committed over time:** According to participants, staff time and funding were targeted to elevate attendance as a priority across their systems.

Data & Sample Size

In identifying district partners to interview, we looked for districts that had successfully reduced their chronic absenteeism rates so we could learn what strategies and approaches were most helpful. Though data show that chronic absenteeism significantly increased during the pandemic (by some measures, it almost doubled), for the purpose of this report, districts were identified based on improvements to their chronic absenteeism rate from 2016-17 to 2017-18 and from 2017-18 to 2018-19 (with an allowance for very small fluctuations of data of less than 0.4% increase in any year). From these districts, only those districts that showed improvements to their chronic absenteeism rates (with minor exceptions as described below) were included.

That list was further filtered to only include:

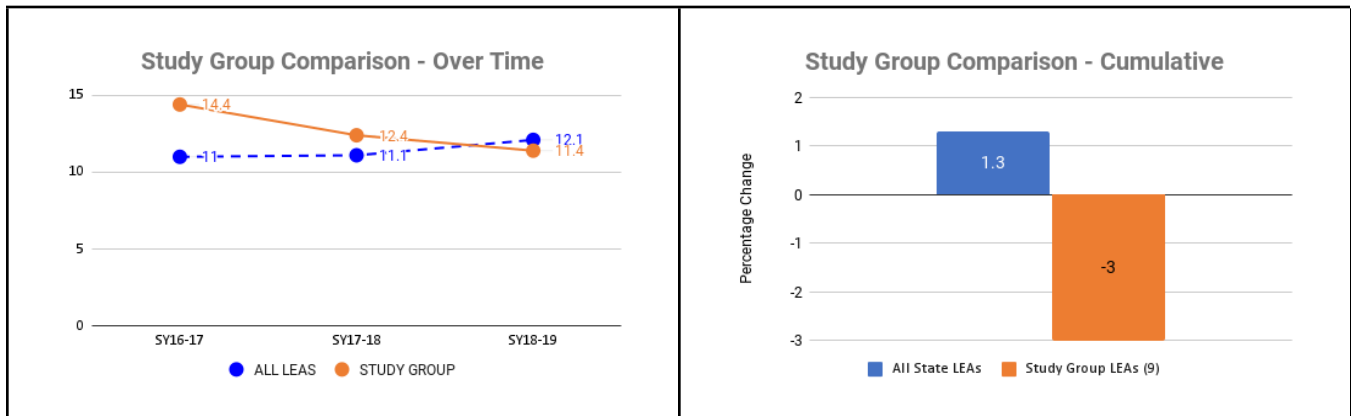
- districts that had at least 60% unduplicated pupils, to mirror the state average; and
- districts whose enrollment size was at least 1,500, in order to examine generalizable systemic approaches

This yielded a list of 80 school districts, 38 of which are unified, 11 high schools, and 31 K-8. To find systemic practices and avoid discrepancies in data created by smaller sample sizes, we contacted all districts on the list with at least 4,000 students.

Given that this study took place at a very busy time of year and at the end of a particularly difficult one, we had challenges securing responses. We were, however, able to meet with teams from nine different districts located across the state and varying in size and grade spans. In total, the districts in our study represented an approximate combined enrollment of 142,000 students.

The Data: from 2017 to 2019

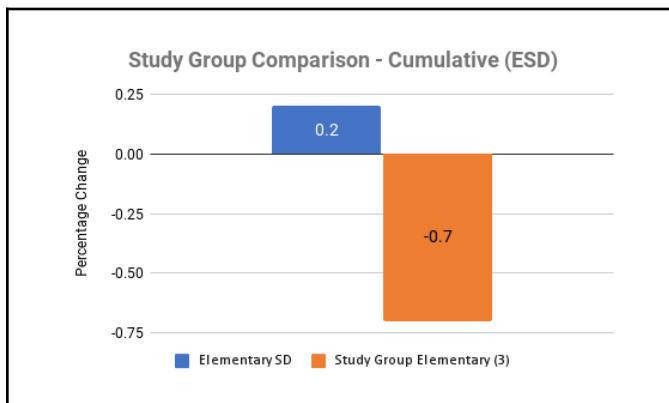
When it comes to decreasing chronic absenteeism, data suggest this cohort of nine districts has been making consistent progress in the three years span between 2017 and 2019. As illustrated in Picture 1 (below), consistent gains over time have led the cohort to reduce chronic absenteeism on average by 3% during the same time period in which all California LEAs experienced an increase of 1.3% in absenteeism rates.



Picture 1: The cohort of 9 districts selected for the study demonstrates consistent progress in decreasing chronic absenteeism from 2017-2019.

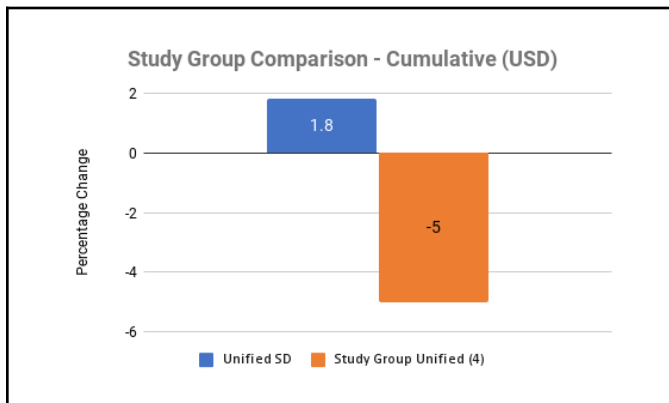
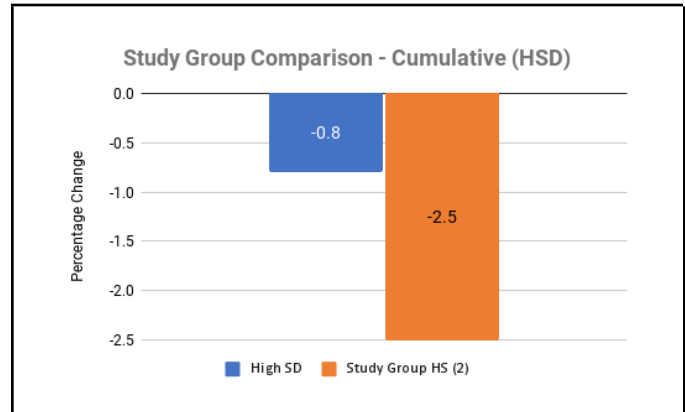
Put another way, the 3% overall progress in decreasing chronic absenteeism rates demonstrated by the study cohort over the 3-year span equates to approximately 4,620 students across the state no longer being considered chronically absent. Further, if we consider that the state experienced an increase of 1.8% in chronic absenteeism during the same time period, it can be argued that the **true rate of improvement of districts in the study was in fact 4.8% on average – or approximately 6,800 students being no longer classified as chronically absent.**

Also of note, the nine districts in our study as a group outperformed all California LEAs' improvement rates across different grade spans during the same time period. Pictures 2a, 2b, and 2c below illustrate the cumulative difference in chronic absenteeism rates for Elementary, High, and Unified School Districts respectively.



Picture 2a (on the left): The three Elementary School Districts in the study outperformed the California State average by almost a full percentage point during the three-year period.

Picture 2b (on the right): The two High School Districts in the study outperformed the California State average by 1.7% between 2017 and 2019.

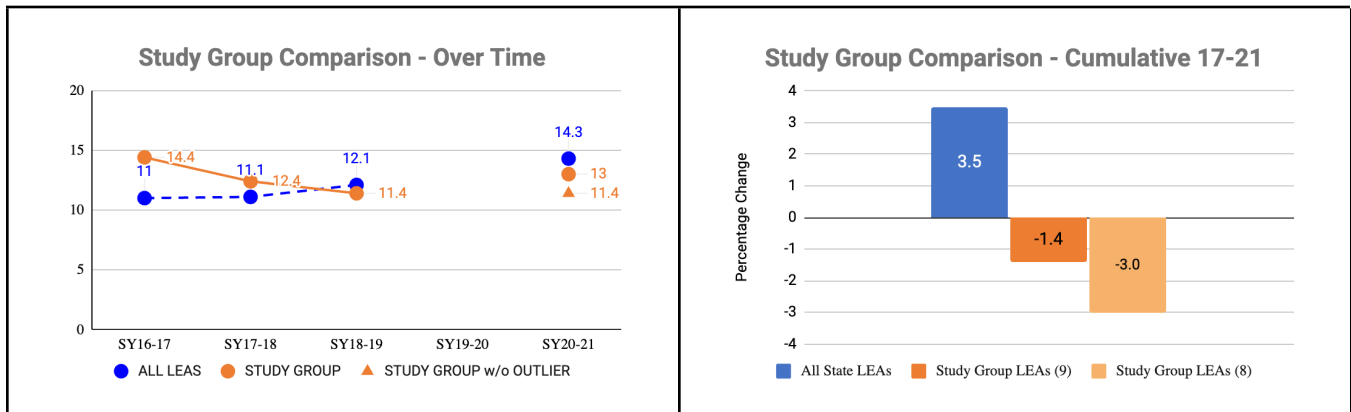


Picture 2c: On average, the 4 Unified School Districts (USDs) in the study demonstrated a 5% improvement in chronic absenteeism during the same time span that the California average for USDs slid back by an additional 1.8%.

The Data: from 2017 to 2021

The workgroup focused on pre-pandemic rates (2017-2019) as a more reliable indicator of systemic progress for reducing chronic absenteeism over time, given that the past two and a half years have been highly atypical. However, we cannot disregard chronic absenteeism even in the face of the pandemic, and although the data may not be as reflective of specific practices in any single district, we feel it is helpful to look at the data in the aggregate, as a measure of how districts who may have had systemic practices in place fared during the pandemic. As such, the workgroup also looked at absenteeism rates from 2017 to 2021 to evaluate any changes to perceived trends.

With that additional lens, the workgroup was able to validate the previously identified progress the LEAs in the study had made. When including 2021 data (the next year for which absenteeism data was available), the group still outperformed statewide LEA averages. Cumulatively, the group of nine LEAs studied demonstrated a decrease of 1.4% in chronic absenteeism rates from 2017-2021, while all LEAs in California experienced an increase of 3.5% (for a total difference of 4.9 percentage points). More impressively, when we removed an outlier district from the group of nine that saw its absenteeism rates go past the 25% mark during the pandemic, the remaining eight LEAs in the study shared a collective gain of 3.0% over the 2017-21 time period – a difference of 6.5 percentage points from all California LEAs during the same time. Finally, the LEAs in this study still remained below the state average of 14.3% for SY20-21 – with or without the outlier district. (See picture 1b below)



Picture 1b: The cohort of districts selected for the study still outperform statewide averages for the 2017-21 period.

As a consequence of the analysis of available post-pandemic data, the workgroup feels comfortable in continuing to suggest recommendations based on the lessons learned from the LEAs studied.

In short, the study team believes that the districts interviewed were making significant progress and could share promising practices that hold promise of being applicable across different grade spans statewide.

Best Practices and Strategies

Though the nine districts we interviewed all had slightly different approaches to improving attendance (based on community and context), they shared some common characteristics and offered some replicable takeaways. These takeaways aligned with the CCEE theory of action framework of leveraging both mindsets and processes to create continuous improvement cycles that lead to change and improve student outcomes. Successful districts shared the following mindsets and practices:

Shifting mindset and building understanding: Districts we interviewed all shared a common commitment to shifting views of the problems of attendance and root beliefs associated with attendance, and ultimately ensuring that people across the system had a common understanding of the problem and its impacts. Below are a few strategies they employed.

- **Shift from fault to responsibility:** They focused not on blaming students and families for absences, but rather on addressing systemic challenges. This can be supported by book study and professional development.
- **Explore impacts of attendance:** They built understanding across systems of how low attendance impacts students, the community, and funding (i.e. that everyone has something to gain when students are in school).
- **Embrace a belief in joint responsibility:** They created awareness that attendance is everyone's job and not the role of a single person. Everyone has a part in modeling the importance of being at school.

- **Commit to a joyful learning community:** Schools/LEAs that saw the greatest success focused first on building a culture of belonging and identifying programs that would make students want to be at school. They also made an effort to connect students who were disconnected to programs that would engage them.

Leveraging strong data practices: Effective attendance strategies were always rooted in timely, clear, and accessible data that was available to all stakeholders. The following practices were named as being particularly important and impactful.

- **Set public goals.** Make it public across the whole system to create collective accountability and celebrate progress together.
- **Run a total absence calendar review.** Find absence “hot spots” and make calendar adjustments to mitigate them, e.g., three weeks off in December.
- **Set system warning signs (“red flags”).** Set parameters that alert the team to begin interventions before a student becomes “chronically absent.”
- **Provide timely data reports to school sites:**
 - *Ensuring data reports were shared with and reviewed by school sites:* Data reports help sites to examine patterns and notice students who are becoming chronically absent.
 - *Consulting with data/SIS experts:* Systems are often underutilized. Investing in programming them to automate certain reports can create efficiencies down the road.
- **Hold attendance compliance reviews.** Some schools reported an increase of 3% in attendance by identifying students who missed the 10-day drop, students who moved to other schools, etc.

Integrating practices across the whole district: Districts that were more successful looked into system changes rather than temporary efforts. Below are some of the strategies they employed.

- **Make it part of your Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) and/or (Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) efforts.** Make attendance part of your PBIS system and consider an attendance campaign that:
 - *Spans four to six weeks,* with a big payoff in the end.
 - *Is consistent across all sites.* Having a common theme for all sites was practical for staff, simpler, and more economical.
 - *Provides incentives.* Celebrate improvement, not just perfect attendance. Incentivize and celebrate classes, individuals, and the whole school after setting goals for improvement. (Think: a door hanger saying “We are #1” for class leader.)
 - *Engages students in the process.* Tell students how many days they were absent and how many days they need to make up on Saturdays to make the goal and earn the prize.
- **Offer Saturday enrichment** that remediates loss and is hands-on, active, and engaging. Saturday programming is most successful when it makes students want to come to school! Some schools also provided education for parents at the same time.
- **Offer parent academies.** Offer training and support to parents not just to inform them about the impact of attendance but also to build their skills to support their learners.

Utilizing early intervention: Catching challenges early and building scaffolds to help students get to school was often named as a critical step in getting and keeping students at school.

- **Leverage your early warning system (“red flags”).** Develop a system that alerts you early and often before a student becomes “chronically absent” to begin interventions.
- **Build relationships with those parents and students.** Invest time to make sure every child and guardian has a connection to school, but pay special attention to children who are often absent. Provide them with information and training on the importance of attendance and help families find solutions when there are barriers to attendance.

Providing consistent, focused wraparound communication: As with so many things, communication was key. For attendance, this means sharing with families the impact of attendance, continuing to shine a light on the targets, and providing templates and tools to school leaders. Here are more specific tips:

- **Ensure internal messaging is consistent.** Make attendance part of all emails, reports, and meetings — and not just sporadically.
- **Ensuring families receive timely notification of absences.** Leverage communication to build community: express concern and educate families about the importance of attendance rather than taking a punitive or shaming tone.
- **Create a community campaign across sites that can easily be shared.** Develop a family and student campaign (posters, banners, social media), and create templates for site leaders to use when students are absent.
- **Make attendance goals public.** Communicate goals to all stakeholders via, e.g., thermometer graphics at sites, door hangers, and the weekly bulletin.

Ensuring strong support and staffing: Even when strong systems are in place, they need support to be maintained and executed. The following lessons share best human capital practices to support attendance.

- **Appoint a dedicated team.** Make it very clear who is responsible for what. The team needs ownership and authority to make changes to existing processes. Empower attendance leads the same way you empower academic leads.
- **Add trained staff.** Hire and train parent coordinators or attendance specialists. Don’t assume it is an innate skill: provide specific training for the work of attendance and supporting families.
- **Encourage/incentivize specializations.** Find pathways for existing counseling staff to add CWA certifications to their credentials.
- **Loop in mental health.** School absences can create or be a symptom of mental health issues. Be sure to connect the work to existing counseling and social services.
- **Leverage all staff to build relationships and check on kids.** It is everyone’s job to build relationships, not just teachers’. Outreach from someone who knows the student has an impact, especially when the child is on the verge of becoming chronically absent.
- **Add capacity through attendance support vendors.** Districts added capacity by hiring companies that could support timely notifications and data analysis. Get support with data pulls, truancy letters, and keeping the spotlight on students coming to school.

Maximizing community partnerships: Success does not happen in a vacuum, and systems that successfully reduced chronic absenteeism brought outside support into the district. Here are some ways through which districts did this.

- **Build a support network** that supports students and families beyond the school day (including afterschool, summer, etc.).
 - *Forge relationships:* Work with other organizations in the community to help serve families, provide support for students and parents, and perhaps alleviate some of the reasons students don't come to school. Think mental health, physical health, and other county services; counseling; transportation; and food programs. Consider investing in a long-term relationship by offering contracts or Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs).
 - *Parent/family education:* Connect with organizations that provide training and workshops for families.
 - *Leverage a referral system:* Whether it is referrals to district family resource centers or other community partners, ensure that people know who to turn to and where else to get help.
- **Create an alternative to a punitive SARB process.**
 - *Take a supportive approach:* Keep the focus on relationship and support programs by leveraging a district attendance review team (DART) to replace a SARB and better work within the system you have designed.
 - *Connect with the district attorney's office and county services:* Look for ways to help provide resources beyond your system. These relationships are particularly useful when the DA is committed to building relationships with families and taking a restorative/support approach.

Developing flexible paths for students: Especially during the pandemic, many students became accustomed to a more flexible day. Districts that offered flexibility for students to meet academic standards while also meeting some of students' and families' other needs were most successful in reducing chronic absenteeism.

- **Offer alternative times for learning.** Create a schedule that accommodates students with jobs or childcare conflicts.
- **Collaborate with other local schools.** Work with schools that offer alternative and hybrid schedules (charter schools or alternative district schools) to provide students with pathways that might be a better fit.
- **Offer credit recovery programs.** Create real-time recovery, quarter recovery (so that grades never hit the transcript), winter intersession, and summer school programs (online and in-person).

Opportunities for Statewide Support

Based on the interviews with district leadership teams, the CCEE attendance study group reviewed findings and district suggestions and provided six possible areas of statewide support. Although these are not exhaustive, the study group feels strongly that each area could create positive student outcomes. They are as follows:

Area 1: Clear and consistent messaging and communication

- **Creating a consistent and clear statewide communication campaign.** Covid-19 has created significant confusion about attendance. There is a need to shift messaging from “stay home if there is any sign of Covid-19” to “showing up to school matters for learning and well-being. Here is how to come to school safely. Here are the supports for showing up to school safely.”
- **Develop a framework for improving communication across systems.** There are gaps in data and information flowing from one system to the next. Improvements could be made in the areas of:
 - Tools for the Department of Children and Family Services (and others) to communicate more openly with schools
 - Compassionate transitions from elementary school to middle school to high school
 - Supporting data transfer (data traveling with students)

Area 2: Flexibilities around how or when learning takes place

- **Make attendance requirements less rigid.** Offer the choice between being accountable for a certain number of hours or days, not both. This could allow schools to build programs that offer what students need.
- **Allow Saturday school as an option for all LEAs. This option is currently not available to all LEAs.**
- **Increase flexibility for remote access.**
 - *Update current regulations for independent study* to align with regulations for all LEAs.
 - *Remove barriers to learning and funding.* Average daily attendance, engagement logs, and in-person requirements create challenges for students to access learning and schools to get credit/funding.
 - *Eliminate regulations that create barriers to online support* such as remote counseling and remote access to special education services.

Area 3: Updates to SART and SARB

- **Change requirements and process.** There is an opportunity to align with current best practices (PBIS and restorative work).
- **Consider making the SARB recommended but not required.** LEAs are doing powerful things that work better, and this process fails to get the desired results and creates extra work. Possible considerations include:
 - *Giving opportunities for districts and counties not to rely on DA or county,* given various discrepancies from region to region

- *Considering development of a DART process as an alternative to SARB for schools who choose it*
- *Creating a PBIS-based LEA model*
- **Best practices for district attorneys (DAs).** Create opportunities for DAs to review, discuss, and exchange best practices in supporting restorative practices and promoting a tiered approach.

Area 4: Training and tools to support attendance

- **Promote the integration of attendance into MTSS.** Create opportunities for districts to learn about and compare strategies for integrating attention to attendance into a comprehensive approach to MTSS.
- **Develop a toolkit for schools.** Include sample messaging, compliance letters, a sample data dashboard, clear early indicators, and a list of best practices.
- **Provide training.** Many LEAs are not yet providing training to frontline support staff, who are critical to the work. Offer best practices webinars or workshops for support staff.
- **Develop or open up certifications.** Certifications like Child Welfare and Attendance (CWA) raise the importance of certain skills and tools, but these are often under-enrolled and not available to those not pursuing a Pupil Personnel Services (PPS) credential. Consider making a similar program available for support staff, and raise awareness of the current certification.

Area 5: Forge a path for a more “connected system” and inter-agency collaboration

- **Leverage current community schools' initiatives and funding.**
 - *Use chronic absence to guide work* and to ensure early warning to community partners.
 - *Braid funding across cities* for mental health, transportation, schools, etc., to offer access to services like free public transportation for K-12 students or community mental health supports.
- **Enable the sharing of information.**
 - *Create sample master agreements/MOUs* that can be used at the county/state level to legally share information with other agencies.
 - *Set expectations with other state and county agencies.*
 - *Review Department of Children and Family Services' current roles* to find opportunities to overlap with schools/LEAs.
- **Lower barriers to entry.** Consider increasing access to mental health services, including online options.

Area 6: Effective data systems and practices:

Support the development of a statewide data portal around attendance. This could create opportunities for districts to learn about and compare effective strategies for reporting on attendance/chronic absence and then encourage schools to use the data to inform interventions.

Closing

Chronic absenteeism has affected a significant percentage of California's K-12 student population and is likely to continue to do so over the coming years due to the lasting impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Also of note is that chronic absenteeism will likely continue to disproportionately affect specific student subgroups and increase existing equity and social justice challenges unless progress is made.

The causes of chronic absenteeism remain complex, and the CCEE Attendance Study Group believes that continued study and the sharing of promising practices can help create a roadmap for addressing it. Further, the group believes progress can be made by advancing work in the six key areas listed in this brief, and that efforts by the CCEE, such as this one, may prove highly effective in helping coordinate resources within the System of Support to meet the challenges that school absences pose to overall educational attainment and social advancement.