Sonoma Valley High School

Making School a Place Students Want to Be

At Sonoma Valley High School, a campus of approximately 1,200 students in Northern California, attendance improvement has become about far more than tracking absences. School leaders have spent the past several years addressing the underlying factors that influence whether students feel connected, supported, and motivated to come to school. Serving a community with both rural and suburban characteristics, Sonoma Valley High enrolls students from a wide range of economic backgrounds and has welcomed a growing number of newcomer students in recent years.

In 2021–22, when the current principal began serving as an assistant principal, attendance concerns were compounded by broader challenges involving school climate, trust, and student engagement. She viewed attendance as a reflection of students' overall school experience rather than a standalone issue. “We knew attendance wasn't going to improve just by sending letters home,” the principal said. “We had to understand what students were experiencing and create a place where they wanted to be.”

In 2022, 39% of Sonoma Valley Unified students were chronically absent (missing at least 10% of school days). By 2025, that number had dropped to 17%, representing a major improvement in overall attendance in the district.

Moving from Compliance to Support

One of the most significant shifts involved changing how the school responded when students began experiencing attendance challenges. Previously, attendance interventions relied on group meetings that fulfilled procedural requirements but provided limited insight into individual circumstances. "Those meetings felt like a checkbox," the principal said. "You couldn't really understand a student's full story in a group setting." Today, when attendance concerns arise, the first step is a collaborative review by the school's support team.

Rather than focusing solely on compliance, the meetings tailored to building relationships between students, parents, and staff members. The conversations are designed to uncover root causes and build solutions collaboratively. Sometimes the issue is a difficult relationship with a teacher or a class the student is avoiding. In other cases, anxiety, depression, family stress, transportation issues, or unmet basic needs are contributing factors. Those conversations often lead to targeted supports, including referrals to the wellness center or connections to community resources.

The school's bilingual liaison also plays a critical role in reaching families and helping schedule meetings when traditional outreach efforts are unsuccessful. "We still discuss attendance

expectations and legal requirements," the principal explained. "But we frame the conversation around support first. Families are much more willing to engage when they feel we're trying to help rather than punish."

Prioritizing Student Health and Wellbeing

To better understand those experiences, the school partnered with an independent research organization to conduct student listening sessions. The conversations gave students an opportunity to speak candidly about issues ranging from safety and belonging to academic engagement and mental health.

What began as a targeted effort evolved into an ongoing focus on gathering student voice to guide school improvement efforts and identify student needs broadly. A key component of that support system is the school's wellness center, which provides students with easier access to mental health and wellness services on campus. Located on campus, the center helps students access mental health and wellness services that might otherwise be difficult to find in the community. Staff members can connect students with resources quickly, reducing delays that might contribute to continued absences. Student-led wellness groups have helped reduce stigma around seeking support, making it more likely that students will access resources before challenges escalate. Student support is shared across staff in the high school; counselors, psychologists, administrators, teachers, district staff, and family liaisons work together through the school's Coordination of Services Team (COST), which meets regularly to review data and coordinate interventions.

Fostering Connections

Attendance improvement efforts extend beyond student services. The school has emphasized relationship-building in classrooms, encouraging teachers to increase student engagement through discussion, collaboration, and interactive learning. Staff members are also encouraged to build connections through simple practices such as greeting students by name and fostering positive classroom environments.

According to the principal, the school's success has been driven by collaboration and a collective commitment to student well-being. “You need to know who all the touchpoints are,” she said. “Attendance improves when everyone works together instead of working in separate systems.”

Lessons Learned

- Listening, partnership, and a coordinated system of support creates an environment where students feel seen, connected, and prepared to succeed.
- Community organizations have become key allies in addressing attendance barriers.

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