Vacaville High School

Improving Attendance Through Connection

At Vacaville High School, attendance improvement efforts have evolved beyond monitoring absences and enforcing policies. Serving more than 2,200 students, including many migrant and newcomer families, the school has embraced a relationship-centered approach that focuses on connection, belonging, and addressing barriers that keep students from coming to school.

School leaders recognized that attendance challenges are often symptoms of larger issues. Rather than focusing solely on compliance, staff work to understand the circumstances affecting students and families and connect them with appropriate support.

In 2022, 32% of Vacaville High School students were chronically absent (missing at least 10% of school days). By 2026, that number had dropped to 17%, representing a major improvement in overall attendance in the district.

Fulfilling Basic Needs

A key component of the school's strategy is meeting families on their timeline. Administrators learned that traditional daytime meetings often conflicted with work schedules and other family responsibilities. If families were asked to attend a meeting in the middle of the school day, they would need to miss work and find transportation to the school, which could be. Instead, staff offer evening meetings to create more accessible opportunities for families to engage with the school and discuss attendance concerns. These conversations frequently reveal unmet needs that contribute to absenteeism. Transportation difficulties, food insecurity, and housing are common challenges that the school helps to address.

School staff reach out to local community businesses on an annual basis, asking for support for their schools' families. This outreach often results in coupons and gift cards to local restaurants, and donations of food and clothing. The district provides additional support ranging from bus passes and connections to other essential services. For example, one student was struggling academically because of an unaddressed vision problem. With support from district partners, the student received an eye appointment and glasses which resulted in more engagement in class. School leaders are also exploring opportunities to bring additional community organizations directly to campus through resource fairs that connect families with health services, youth organizations, and other supports.

Building Meaningful Relationships

The school prioritizes building connections with students during the school day. Regular individual meetings with administrators and front office staff give students an opportunity to set attendance goals, discuss challenges, and celebrate progress. These interactions are intentionally informal and welcoming, helping students build positive relationships with supportive adults.

This approach is especially important at the high school level, where many students have established attendance patterns that can be difficult to change. School staff recognize that traditional interventions often have limited impact on students who have experienced attendance challenges for years. Instead, efforts focus on creating meaningful relationships and fostering a sense of accountability through connection.

An often-overlooked ingredient in the school's success is the role of front office staff and other support personnel. Attendance secretaries, registrars, enrollment staff, and nurses interact with students and families daily and often have valuable insight into emerging concerns. These employees frequently serve as the first point of contact for students and families, helping identify needs and connect individuals with support before challenges worsen.

Creating a Welcoming School

Creating a welcoming school environment is another cornerstone of the school's attendance work. Throughout the year, the schools offer activities and events designed to foster a sense of belonging. Events such as "Donut Be Late" welcome students with donuts and positive interactions, particularly during stressful periods such as final exams.

Additional wellness-focused activities help students manage stress and feel connected to the school community. Opportunities for yoga, meditation, and creative projects provide students with supportive spaces where they can engage with peers and staff in a positive environment. The school's flexible schedule also offers students opportunities to build connections through clubs, academic support periods, and lunchtime activities. Leaders continue to explore ways to expand recreational opportunities that encourage positive peer relationships and greater engagement on campus.

Lessons Learned

- Invest in early intervention, relationship building, and community support.
- Improving attendance is not simply about getting students through the door. It is about creating a community where students feel seen, supported, and connected enough to want to return each day.

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