

BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPROVING ATTENDANCE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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In the following report, Hanover Research examines research-based strategies for addressing truancy in middle and high schools. The report also profiles three school districts who have been successful at improving student attendance.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

Regular school attendance is the necessary foundation for effectively preparing a child for a productive adulthood. Truancy and chronic absenteeism have been linked to negative immediate and long-term consequences for youth, their families, schools, and communities.¹ Research consistently demonstrates that absence from school is often the greatest single cause of poor performance and achievement and is noted as the factor most associated with high school dropout rates.² Given the emphasis on ensuring that all students are meeting and exceeding academic standards and the pressure on schools to increase their graduation rates, it is paramount for school districts and schools to identify ways to increase student attendance rates.

In the following report, Hanover Research reviews the secondary literature on research-based practices for improving student attendance at the secondary level, including both middle and high school. The report comprises the following three sections:

- **Section I: Overview of the Causes and Effects of Truancy** reviews the literature on the risk factors that contribute to student truancy and examines the effects of truancy on students, families, and communities.
- **Section II: Best Practices for Addressing Truancy in Secondary Schools** highlights a number of critical components of effective truancy prevention programs, and describes best practices for addressing truancy in secondary schools.
- **Section III: Case Profiles of Truancy Interventions** highlights three school districts around the country that have employed effective programs or specific strategies to combat truancy.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Understanding the causes and effects of truancy has critical implications for the design of strategies and programs meant to target student attendance.** Research indicates a wide range of risk factors that contribute to student absenteeism, including family background and relationships, past academic performance, disengagement, and school and neighborhood characteristics. Truant students can experience lower grades, need to repeat grades more often, have higher rates of expulsion, and lower rates of high school graduation.
- **A comprehensive, collaborative approach is necessary for effectively targeting truancy at the secondary level.** School districts and schools need to identify truant

¹ Maynard, B.R. et al. "Indicated Truancy Interventions: Effects on School Attendance Among Chronic Truant Students." The Campbell Collaboration, 2012. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED535217.pdf>

² Railsback, J. "Increasing Student Attendance: Strategies from Research and Practice." Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, June 2004. <http://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/increasing-student-attendance.pdf>

students early, link students and their families to needed services to address the underlying causes of truancy, provide positive reinforcement for attendance and timely consequences for non-attendance, and track student data consistently.

- **Individual support strategies, including mentoring and graduation coaches, can help promote school attendance and foster school engagement.** Mentoring provides students with role models and helps build relationships and establish trust. Graduation coaches use data to identify trends in student absences and find creative ways to encourage students to attend school.
- **Small Learning Communities (SLCs) offer a more flexible, personalized, and responsive environment that contribute to increased student attendance and academic success.** Freshman academies are designed to ease students' transition from middle school to high school. Career academies integrate academic and vocational instruction. Research indicates several key components of effective SLCs, including autonomy, identity, personalization, an instructional focus, and accountability.
- **Engaging and meaningful instruction also promotes student attendance at the secondary level.** The research suggests that service learning or community-based projects can help promote personal and social growth, as well as foster career development and a sense of attachment for students. Teachers can also promote active learning by fostering a sense of competence in students, embracing collaborative learning opportunities, and establishing positive teacher-student relationships.

SECTION I: OVERVIEW OF THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF TRUANCY⁷

Lack of school attendance is defined in multiple ways by different stakeholders. The difficulty with clearly defining various behaviors of school attendance stems from compulsory education laws that differ from state to state, and the number of unexcused absences required for a student to be considered truant varies considerably.³ **For many school districts, truancy is defined as one or more unexcused absence.**⁴ However, reliable national or state data on truancy are difficult to locate. Although the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act required states to report truancy rates by school, aggregate national data are not available due to discrepancies in state definitions.⁵ A report by The Campbell Collaboration, however, suggests “the rates of truancy have at best remained stable or at worst been on the rise, depending on the indicator utilized to assess truancy rates.”⁶ One study by Henry (2007) examined data from a national survey of drug use and noted that about 11 percent of eighth graders and about 16 percent of 10th graders were truant at least once in the previous four weeks.⁷

Given that there is no nationally accepted definition of truancy, the National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention provides the following definitions to capture the different categories of behavior related to school attendance:⁸

- **Truancy:** Absence without an excuse by the parent/guardian or if a student leaves school or a class without permission of the teacher or administrator in charge.
- **Habitual Truancy:** A specific number of consecutive unexcused absences from school or a total number of unexcused absences over a semester or school year. Habitually truant students may become involved with the juvenile justice system if school response efforts fail.
- **Chronic Truancy:** Accumulated unlawful absences despite court or school mandate for a student who has not responded to previous habitual truancy response efforts.
- **Chronic Absenteeism:** This term often refers to younger children (K-3) who miss 10 percent or more of school each year.

This lack of consensus around the definition of truancy has posed challenges to accurately assessing truancy rates across the country as well as evaluating interventions that may target

³ “Truancy Prevention Efforts in School-Community Partnerships.” National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2012.
http://www.promoteprevent.org/sites/www.promoteprevent.org/files/resources/Truancy%20Prevention%20Efforts%20in%20School_0.pdf

⁴ Maynard et al., Op. cit.

⁵ “Truancy Prevention Efforts in School-Community Partnerships,” Op. cit.

⁶ Maynard et al., Op. cit.

⁷ Henry, K.. “Who’s Skipping School: Characteristics of Truants in 8th and 10th Grade.” *Journal of School Health*, 77:1, January 2007.

⁸ Bullet points adapted from: “Truancy Prevention Efforts in School-Community Partnerships,” Op. cit.

student attendance. Therefore, the following report will use the term *truancy* in general when describing issues of school attendance at the middle and high school levels.

In this section, Hanover Research briefly discusses the risk factors related to truancy, as well as the consequences of truancy on students, schools and communities.

THE CAUSES OF TRUANCY

Understanding the broad range of risk factors that may contribute to truancy has critical implications for the design of strategies and programs aimed to combat school attendance issues. Researchers over the last decade have attempted to examine a wide range of risk factors that contribute to student absenteeism, including family background and relationships, past academic performance, disengagement, and school and neighborhood characteristics. **Minorities, males, and urban students, as well as those from low income, single parent, and large households, are particularly susceptible to chronic truancy.**⁹ For example, one study by Johns Hopkins University indicates that the reasons for student absence may include the obligations or circumstances that prevent them from going to school, their intention to evade events or interactions at school, or their lack of effort to get to school.¹⁰

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) conducted a literature review and identified four broad categories of risk factors associated with truancy:¹¹

- **Family factors** include lack of supervision, poverty, alcohol or drug abuse, lack of awareness of attendance laws, and attitude toward education.
- **School factors** include school size, attitudes of students, staff, and teachers, inflexibility toward meeting different learning styles, and inconsistent procedures for dealing with chronic truancy.
- **Economic factors** include employed students, single parent homes, high mobility, parents with multiple jobs, and lack of transportation.
- **Student factors** include drug and alcohol use, lack of understanding of attendance laws, lack of social competence, and mental and physical health problems.

In addition, one study suggests a link between bullying and truancy, indicating that the victim becomes less engaged in school and may stop attending and achieving.¹² Another study highlighted that students missed school because it was “cool to miss school”, and that cyberbullying, lack of sleep, and alcohol or drug use contributed to the problem.¹³

⁹ Railsback, Op. cit.

¹⁰ Balfanz, R. and V. Byrnes. “The Importance of Being in School: A Report of Absenteeism in the Nation’s Public Schools.” John Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools, 2012.
http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf

¹¹ Content taken verbatim from: “Truancy Prevention Efforts in School-Community Partnerships,” Op. cit.

¹² Seeley, K. et al. “Bullying in Schools: An Overview.” Juvenile Justice Bulletin, 2011.
<http://www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/234205.pdf>

¹³ Reid, K. “Finding Strategic Solutions to Reduce Truancy.” *Research in Education*, 84:1, 2010.

Furthermore, research indicates that a student’s past truancy can also play a significant role in predicting future truancy and this habit potentially impacts a student’s chances of on-time graduation. The National Center for Education Statistics claims, “high school dropouts have been found to exhibit a history of negative behaviors, including high levels of absenteeism throughout their childhood, at higher rates than high school graduates.”¹⁴ In addition, a study conducted by the Rodel Community Scholars at Arizona State University tracked students from kindergarten through high school. Results highlighted that dropout patterns were linked with poor attendance, an issue that often began in kindergarten. In fact, high school dropouts missed an average of 124 days by eighth grade.¹⁵

Truant students viewed classes as boring and irrelevant, and they did not have positive relationships at school, felt unsafe at school, and were suspended too often.

Yet, if schools want to understand why secondary school students are not regularly attending school, it becomes critical to consider students’ voices and perceptions. For instance, the Oregon Department of Education interviewed high school students who were placed in an alternative setting in order to understand their perceptions of their experiences. **Students emphasized the need to be respected by adults, to have teachers who hold high expectations for them, and to provide them with the tools they needed to achieve success.**¹⁶ Research also highlights that truant students viewed classes as boring and irrelevant, and they did not have positive relationships at school, felt unsafe at school, and were suspended too often.¹⁷ A peer-reviewed research study also identified the following six variables as being statistically significant predictors for distinguishing absentee high school students from regularly attending students:¹⁸

- **Students’ school perceptions:** Students who were absent were less likely to hold a favorable perception of school.
- **Perception of parental discipline:** Students perceived discipline as lax or inconsistent.
- **Parents’ control:** Students felt their parents aimed to exert more control over them.
- **Students’ academic self-concept:** Students felt inferior in terms of their academic performance.
- **Perceived family conflict:** Students experienced family conflict at home.
- **Social competence in class:** Students did not feel socially competent among peers.

¹⁴ “Every School Day Counts: The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data.” National Forum on Education Statistics, February 2009. p.1. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009804.pdf>
¹⁵ “Why Attendance Matters.” Great Schools, June 2016. <http://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/school-attendance-issues/>
¹⁶ Railsback, Op. cit.
¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ Bullet points adapted from: Corville-Smith, J. et al. “Distinguishing Absentee Students from Regular Attenders: The Combined Influence of Personal, Family, and School Factors.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 27:5, 1998.

It is important to note that there is no sole reason for why students fail to attend school on a regular basis. Research highlights that it often a mix of interwoven factors, and that schools need to target more than one area in order to be effective.

THE EFFECTS OF TRUANCY

Students’ inability to attend school on a regular basis poses several harmful consequences, not just for students, but also for families, schools and communities. Primarily, truancy is linked to poor academic achievement and success. **Compared to non-truant youth, truant students have lower grades, need to repeat grades more often, have higher rates of expulsion and lower rates of high school graduation.**¹⁹ In addition, research has highlighted that truancy is also a risk factor for delinquent behavior and crime, including substance abuse, gang activity, early sexual behavior, and dropping out of school.²⁰ In one study, for example, truant youth were found to be more likely to smoke, drink, and use illegal drugs than students who attended school on a regular basis. At the age of 15, half of all truant youth in the study reported using drugs during their last year of school. This increased to two-thirds among long-term absentees.²¹

The effects of truancy are also visible in adult life. A report by the National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention indicates that “adults who were chronically truant from school as children or adolescents are at an elevated risk for a host of problems, including poor physical and mental health, poverty, incarceration, and raising children who exhibit problem behaviors.”²² Figure 1.1 highlights a few truancy predictors and outcomes evidenced in the research literature.

Figure 1.1: Truancy Predictors and Outcomes

TRUANCY PREDICTORS	TRUANCY OUTCOMES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Disengagement from school ▪ Lack of success in school ▪ Association with delinquent peers ▪ Personal delinquent values ▪ Lack of family attachment 	<p>Increased risk of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Poor academic performance ▪ School dropout ▪ Delinquency ▪ Teenage pregnancy ▪ Substance abuse

Source: Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools²³

¹⁹ “Truancy Prevention Efforts in School-Community Partnerships,” Op. cit.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Reid, Op. cit.

²² “Truancy Prevention Efforts in School-Community Partnerships,” Op. cit. p.4.

²³ Content taken verbatim from: “Truancy Numbers Hard to Count.” *The Challenge: A Publication of the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools*, n.d.

SECTION II: BEST PRACTICES FOR ADDRESSING TRUANCY IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Although the importance of attendance is well understood by educators and policymakers, effective strategies for increasing it are not as well defined. Some research has examined comprehensive intervention programs aimed at targeting chronic truancy, while other research has explored early prevention techniques aimed at targeting the issue in earlier years in hopes of mediating its effects in middle and high schools. The research highlights that **elementary-level interventions are more effective in boosting attendance than those that begin in middle or high school. This reinforces that school districts with excessive truancy at the secondary level should rely on a combination of prevention and intervention efforts.**²⁴

In this section, Hanover Research examines research-based best practices aimed to address absenteeism at the middle and high school levels. **Effective truancy reduction interventions are comprehensive and respond to risk factors relevant to truancy.** These best practices and strategies for targeting absenteeism in the upper grades can be broadly placed into overlapping categories, including sound attendance policies, truancy reduction programs, and strategies to increase engagement and personalization with students and families. It is important to note, however, that although this report is concerned with addressing truancy rather than school dropout, these two topics are often closely intertwined in the literature. As a result, many strategies for addressing truancy overlap with dropout interventions and strategies.

CRITICAL COMPONENTS OF TRUANCY PROGRAMS

Comprehensive programs specifically designed to target absenteeism, especially at the middle and high school level, can include partnerships between schools and community organizations, as well as in-school and alternative programs. In addition, some truancy prevention programs involve the juvenile justice court systems in deciding sanctions for truancy.²⁵

The Response to Intervention (RTI) model has been used to help districts and schools think about alignment between attendance strategies and level of student need. Tier 1 represents universal strategies that the school can use to promote and encourage good attendance. These types of strategies are typically low cost and aimed at preventing chronic truancy. Tier 2 strategies provide additional interventions for students who are already missing school on a regular basis. These strategies are more targeted and personalized. Finally, Tier 3 strategies provide intensive interventions for chronic absence. These strategies typically cost more money because they focus on providing case management support, often with the help of

²⁴ Railsback, Op. cit.

²⁵ Balfanz and Byrnes, Op. cit.

local public or legal agencies.²⁶ Figure 2.1 provides a comprehensive way to approach truancy through an RTI lens.

Figure 2.1: Response to Intervention Model for Targeting Attendance

TIER	TARGETED STUDENTS	STRATEGIES
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students missing less than 5% (satisfactory) ▪ Students missing 5-9% (at-risk) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recognize good and improved attendance ▪ Educate and engage students and families ▪ Monitor attendance data and set goals ▪ Establish positive and engaging school climate ▪ Identify and address common barriers to getting to school
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students missing 10-19% (moderate chronic absence) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide personalized early outreach ▪ Meet to develop tailored action plan ▪ Connect to a caring mentor
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students who missed 20% or more of school (severe chronic absence) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Intensive case management with coordination of public agency and legal response as needed

Source: Attendance Works²⁷

A comprehensive approach to addressing absenteeism is ideal.²⁸ Research and assessment conducted by the National Center for School Engagement and the National Dropout Prevention Center identified **six critical components for effective, comprehensive truancy reduction programs**, including:²⁹

- **Collaboration:** Establish a multidisciplinary group to guide and implement truancy programming.
- **Family Involvement:** Target family participation in school attachment activities, engage families in all truancy prevention and intervention efforts, and address family-based needs to support attendance.
- **Comprehensive Approach:** The reasons for nonattendance are varied, and a community’s response should be flexible and broad enough to take into consideration the specific issues experienced by students and families.
- **Use of Incentives and Sanctions:** A combination of motivating incentives and accountability-based sanctions works best with youth.
- **Operate in a Supportive Context:** To sustain programming, the program environment, including infrastructure and prevailing policies, must be a supportive source of energy and resources.

²⁶ “3 Tiers of Intervention.” Attendance Works. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools/schools/3-tiers-of-intervention/>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Railsback, Op. cit.

²⁹ Bullet points adapted from: Reimer, M.S. and K. Dimock. “Best Practices and Model Truancy Programs: Truancy Prevention in Action.” National Dropout Prevention Center, 2005. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED491287.pdf>

- **Rigorous Evaluation and Assessment:** Test the approach to see if the desired outcomes are produced and make midcourse corrections if necessary. Outcome data will help sustain funding for truancy programming and generate positive political will.

According to a report by the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC), truancy programs that are collaborative in nature are stronger and have more longevity.³⁰ Effective collaboration can take many forms between different agencies in the community and various stakeholders. This can include joint decision-making, financial support, and sharing of information about the youth involved. **Strategies for establishing an effective collaboration include: being persistent, resolving territorial disputes early and often, focusing on shared values and desired outcomes, and asking each participant to contribute to the process with knowledge or resources.**³¹

It is also critical to involve family members in truancy prevention and intervention approaches. The National School Safety Center identified family involvement in all truancy prevention activities as one of the five critical elements of a community and educational anti-truancy strategy.³² The National Dropout Prevention Center has also identified family engagement on its list of 15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention.³³ **Implementation of strategies aimed at developing family, school, and community partnerships has proven effective in increasing daily attendance rates as well as decreasing chronic truancy.**³⁴ Schools need to seek out parents/guardians for their advice, experience, and expertise, and should focus on family involvement as a natural process. Some strategies to ensure family involvement include: inviting parents to participate in school events, communicating with families in their home language, respecting a family's culture and values, assuming parents want success for their child, and ensuring that staff are culturally competent.³⁵ Epstein and Sheldon (2002) identified key suggestions when attempting to establish partnerships with families, including:³⁶

- Making home visits to families of chronically absent students
- Establishing a contact person at school for parents to work with
- Conducting workshops for families on attendance
- Referring truant students to counselors
- Using a truant officer to work with students and families on a consistent basis

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ "15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention." National Dropout Prevention Center. <http://dropoutprevention.org/effective-strategies/>

³⁴ Reimer and Dimock, Op. cit.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Bullet points taken verbatim from: Epstein, J. and S. Sheldon. "Present and Accounted For: Improving Student Attendance Through Family and Community Involvement." *Journal of Educational Research*, 95, 2002.

Research also highlights that **effective programs simultaneously focus on prevention and intervention**. According to the NDPC report, true prevention refers to school attachment activities. More specifically, “when the connection between youth and school is strong, and based on relationships with other students, teachers, or a significant adult, it can serve as a protection against the risk factors for truancy.”³⁷ However, **a comprehensive truancy program needs to be flexible and responsive to the unique needs of students**.³⁸ Moreover, such programs should also address truancy at the systemic level, with individuals advocating for systemic changes to address the root causes of the issue.³⁹

A combination of incentives and sanctions are also key components of effective truancy programs. It is important to design sanctions and incentives that are meaningful to youth and families. Incentives at the secondary level need to be geared toward students’ interests and should be implemented with consistency. It is important to note, however, that schools should not only recognize perfect attendance, but also reward improved attendance and timeliness. One suggestion is to ask students what they consider a meaningful incentive.

School policies may be unintentionally contributing to an increase in absenteeism and alienating students who are at risk for disengagement and truancy.

Attendance Works highlights engaging in a school-wide campaign that offers students positive rewards for getting to school. These incentives “should be part of a school-wide culture of attendance and accompanied by a deep commitment to ensuring students are engaged in the classroom once they show up.”⁴⁰

Although the research more commonly cites the use of incentives as being appropriate for use in elementary settings, simple rewards, such as homework passes, could also be included in the secondary setting. In addition, “interclass competition is a powerful motivator.” This option could help encourage students to be accountable to each other for attending class. Another suggestion is to offer incentives to families as well, such as food baskets or transportation passes. Overall, incentives should be implemented school-wide in order to be most effective.⁴¹ Figure 2.2 presents some incentives that can be appropriate in the secondary setting.

³⁷ Reimer and Dimock, Op. cit. p.19.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ “Preventing Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy.” Indiana Department of Education, January 2014.

<http://www.doe.in.gov/student-services/attendance/preventing-chronic-absenteeism-truancy>

⁴⁰ “Establishing School-Wide Attendance Incentives.” Attendance Works.

<http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/incentives.pdf>

⁴¹ Ibid.

Figure 2.2: Incentives Offered in Secondary Schools

TEACHERS CAN OFFER	ADMINISTRATION CAN OFFER
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Positive comments to students ▪ Positive phone calls or notes to parents ▪ Free homework pass ▪ School supplies ▪ Certificates for the best record or most improved attendance record 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recognition during announcements ▪ Award at student assembly ▪ Breakfast/lunch with administrators or school board member ▪ Food coupons redeemable in school cafeteria ▪ Pizza party for the class/ team with the best attendance ▪ “School money” for the school store ▪ Choice of donated product (movie, tickets, gift card) ▪ Parking space near building for student with most improved attendance

Source: Attendance Works⁴²

Sanctions, on the other hand, need to be clearly articulated and related to the behavior itself.⁴³ Research highlights, for instance, that although attendance policies can help schools set clear standards and high expectations for student learning and success, **school policies may be unintentionally contributing to an increase in absenteeism and alienating students who are at-risk for disengagement and truancy.**⁴⁴ For instance, school suspensions and expulsions as consequences for poor attendance is “counterproductive because it pushes students out of school instead of encouraging them to attend school.”⁴⁵ In addition, the American Psychological Association suggests there is no evidence that zero-tolerance disciplinary policies applied to non-violent behavior improve the student’s behavior.⁴⁶

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Reimer and Dimock, Op. cit.

⁴⁴ Cumbo, G.L., H. Burden, and I. Burke. “Truancy Reduction: Research, Policy and Practice.” Center for Children and Youth Justice, 2012. http://ccyj.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/TRUANCY_Resource-with-publication-date.pdf

⁴⁵ Ibid. p.16.

⁴⁶ “Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in Schools?” American Psychological Association. 2008. <https://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/zero-tolerance.pdf>

School Profile

A Georgia middle school recognizes good attendance on a weekly, monthly and semester basis. The homeroom class in each grade level with the best attendance each month receives milk and doughnuts. Students with fewer than two absences can enter end-of-semester drawings for prizes.

A Georgia high school comes down hard on students who skip school: Seven unexcused absences a semester can mean course failure. But the high school also offers incentives: Those with fewer than two unexcused absences can receive 10 extra points on final exams.

Source: Attendance Works⁴⁷

Instead, middle and secondary schools can implement some of the following policies to recapture students and encourage student engagement, which ultimately contributes to reducing student absenteeism:⁴⁸

- **Award partial credit for completed course work:** Although grading based on attendance feels like a good way to reward students for participating in class, failing a student after a set number of absences is not an appropriate punishment. Once a student has failed a class, they are unlikely to return. A better alternative is providing partial credit for completed course work.
- **Eliminate automatic withdrawal due to excessive absences:** It is common for schools to withdraw and disenroll students over the age of 16 due to unexcused absences without any intervention. Overcrowding, limited school supplies and high teacher-student ratios may lead schools to let go of absent students. This policy only serves to increase the dropout rate because process for reenrolling can be complex for students and families, and delayed as a result.
- **Provide alternatives to out-of-school suspension and expulsion:** Using suspensions or expulsions to punish students for excessive absences is counterproductive. This practice does not increase school engagement or prevent future absences. In-school suspension and detention and catch-up class rooms or programs are better alternatives. Community service is another good alternative. Participation in extracurricular activities and field trips should be used as incentives not punishments.

In addition, research indicates the importance of a supportive context, or “an environment in which the truancy program engages youth and their family. This can be an umbrella agency, a neighborhood, a set of laws and policies, and/or a political reality”.⁴⁹ For instance, the Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project funded through OJJDP conducted a public awareness campaign, which ultimately informed communities about the real cost of truancy

⁴⁷ Content taken verbatim from: “Establishing School-Wide Attendance Incentives,” Op. cit.

⁴⁸ Bullet points taken verbatim from: Cumbo, Burden, and Burke, Op. cit. p.17.

⁴⁹ Reimer and Dimock, Op. cit. p.29

through posters, events at the local mall, golf tournaments, and contests.⁵⁰ Once again, school district policy should focus on keeping students in school rather than pushing them out. A good starting point for school districts is to examine their policies to identify areas of strengths and areas of need.⁵¹ Another strategy for creating and maintaining a supportive context is to hold public discussions about truancy at board meetings or city council meetings.⁵²

Data collection and analysis can reveal the characteristics of truant students, and allow the district or school to determine corresponding intervention strategies.

Ultimately, any district or school willing to tackle absenteeism needs to begin by collecting and examining data in order to identify specific issues and trends related to attendance. **Research highlights the importance of creating an early-warning system that uses multiple data points that are good predictors of whether a student is likely to drop out of school.**⁵³ This is important because student absences early in the academic term predict whether a student will graduate or encounter academic challenges that year. In fact, the National High School Center indicates that attendance in the first 20 days of an academic period serves as a high yield indicator for students who are likely to dropout or fail to graduate, and students who miss 10 percent of instructional time in their first year of high school are more likely to dropout.⁵⁴

As a result, **school districts and schools should have a solid data collection system in place to track student attendance and to evaluate efforts to see if the desired outcomes are produced.** The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) emphasizes that student data “provide the information needed for schools to formulate practices, programs, and policies to improve attendance rates.”⁵⁵ Data collection and analysis can reveal the characteristics of truant students, and allow the district or school to determine corresponding intervention strategies.⁵⁶ Districts must also ensure that they utilize precise data collection methods and interpret the data correctly. For example, as opposed to collecting school-wide attendance averages, the NCES proposes a taxonomy of attendance codes, such as “student skipping school” or “family emergency” that provides more detailed information about the cause of student absence.⁵⁷ Some researchers also suggest that when reviewing absence data, districts should evaluate the percentage of time a student spends in class as opposed to the number of days he or she is absent.⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Reimer and Dimock, Op. cit.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Heppen, J.B. and S.B. Therriault. “Developing Early Warning Systems to Identify Potential High School Dropouts.” National High School Center, July 2008. <http://glec.education.iupui.edu/equity/EarlyWarningSystemsGuide.pdf>

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ “Every School Day Counts: The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data,” Op. cit. p.3.

⁵⁶ “Collaborative Approaches to Reducing Absenteeism Among K-12 Students.” John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, April 2012. https://mnyouth.net/files/7-FactSheet.Absence_Interventions_PFS.pdf

⁵⁷ “Every School Day Counts: The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data,” Op. cit.

⁵⁸ “Spurred by Statistics, Districts Combat Absenteeism.” Education Week, October 1, 2010. http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/10/01/06absenteeism_ep.h30.html

TARGETED STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING TRUANCY

It is worthwhile to note that although many truancy intervention programs exist, there are very few rigorous evaluations to determine their effectiveness.⁵⁹ The Campbell Collaboration, located at the University of Pennsylvania, funded a systematic review of studies and reports between 1990-2009 to examine the effects of interventions on school attendance in hopes of informing policy, practice and research. Overall, the results of the meta-analysis demonstrated “significant overall positive and moderate mean effect of interventions on attendance outcomes.”⁶⁰ In 2008, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy reviewed evidence-based practices for truancy reduction at the middle and high school level. They concluded that **targeted programs for older students contribute to small positive effects on dropping out, achievement, and attendance.** Overall, results of the meta-analysis indicate that alternative educational programs, such as a schools-within-schools, and mentoring programs are the most effective at combatting absenteeism.⁶¹ More specifically, career academies positively impact all three outcomes.⁶² However, caution must be used when interpreting and applying the findings due to the small sample size and large heterogeneity between studies and within groups of studies. The following subsections present strategies that are most appropriate as Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions.

COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAMS

There are a vast number of comprehensive interventions designed to increase student attendance. **Interventions typically fall into three distinct categories: universal, selective, and indicated.**⁶³ Universal and selective interventions are more preventative; universal are for the entire student population while selective are for students most at-risk for developing a truancy problem. On the other hand, indicated interventions target students who have already experienced a significant truancy problem.⁶⁴ The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) created the Model Program Guide, which highlights 19 programs that have demonstrated effectiveness based on criteria established by the OJJDP.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the National Center for School Engagement has also included over 150 truancy prevention programs in their database.⁶⁶ However, truancy interventions vary considerably as they target “a variety of different risk factors and levels, are implemented in different settings, and are delivered through a variety of modalities.”⁶⁷ Nevertheless, “selection and/or

⁵⁹ Maynard et al., Op. cit.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p.7.

⁶¹ “What Works? Targeted Truancy and Dropout Programs in Middle and High School.” Washington State Institute for Public Policy, June 2009. http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/ReportFile/1045/Wsipp_What-Works-Targeted-Truancy-and-Dropout-Programs-in-Middle-and-High-School_Full-Report.pdf

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ “Truancy Prevention Efforts in School-Community Partnerships,” Op. cit.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ “Model Program Guide.” Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. <http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/Topic/Details/107>

⁶⁶ “Reducing Truancy.” National Center for School Engagement. <http://schoolengagement.org/school-engagement-services/reducing-truancy>

⁶⁷ Cumbo, Burden, and Burke, Op. cit.p.30.

adaptation of a truancy response program or protocol should be guided by the cultural composition, needs and strengths of the local community.”⁶⁸

One example of a school-based attendance program is the Coping and Support Training (CAST) program. It is a prevention program that targets middle school and high school students. It is a 12-session, small group skills training intervention meant to enhance personal competencies and social support resources. This program targets individuals or groups of students with the highest risk of suicide and/or dropping out. The overall goals are to decrease suicide risk and emotional distress, drug use, and school problems. The program is effective in not only increasing school satisfaction and attendance, but also enhancing protective factors, such as personal control and problem-solving abilities.⁶⁹

The National Center for School Engagement created a tool kit of ideas and relevant research related to truancy. Figure 2.3 provides a list of school-based truancy prevention programs highlighted in their report.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Ibid. p.30.

⁶⁹ “Preventing Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy,” Op. cit.

⁷⁰ “Tool Kit for Creating Your Own Truancy Reduction Program.” National Center for School Engagement, 2007.
<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/pr/217271.pdf>

Figure 2.3: Truancy Reduction Programs

PROGRAM	DESCRIPTION	RESEARCH STUDIES
<p>Behavioral Monitoring and Reinforcement Program</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cognitive-Behavioral Training ▪ Age: Early Adolescence ▪ Two-year program; booster sessions during following year ▪ Aims to prevent an increase in school failure experiences among high-risk adolescents ▪ Collect up-to-date information about students’ actions from teacher interviews and records of attendance, tardiness, and disciplinary action ▪ Provide systematic feedback to students and/or parents about the student’s actions ▪ Attach value to student’s actions (i.e., incentives provided for positive actions) ▪ Help students determine strategies for modifying their behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Eighty 7th Grade students ▪ 40 from low-income backgrounds; 40 from middle class backgrounds ▪ Longitudinal study involving randomly assigned intervention and control groups ▪ Post intervention year included booster sessions and interviews with participants ▪ Intervention subjects’ attendance and grades significantly improved ▪ Control subjects’ grades and attendance continued to decline ▪ One year after the program, intervention youths more likely to be employed and reported lower rates of drug and alcohol use ▪ Five years after the program, intervention youths were 66 percent less likely to have a juvenile record than control youths
<p>Career Academy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Age: Late adolescence ▪ A Career Academy (CA) organized as a school-within-a-school ▪ Students work in small learning communities with the same group of teachers over three to four years ▪ Use a career theme that integrates academic and vocational curricula ▪ Establish partnerships with local employers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Multi-site, random assignment research design – mixed-methods ▪ Sample: 1,764 8th and 9th Grade students ▪ Students had either a low, medium or high risk of dropping out of school ▪ Significant reduction in dropout rates, improvement in attendance, increase in academic course-taking, and increase in the likelihood of earning enough credits to graduate on time
<p>School Transitional Environment Program (STEP)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Age: Early and Late Adolescence ▪ Seeks to mediate the negative effects of the transition from middle to high school ▪ Focus is on increasing social support and decreasing task-oriented difficulties ▪ Homeroom or advisory teachers also take on counselor and administrator roles with their students ▪ STEP students assigned to classrooms in four of their classes only with other program participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Experimental study with treatment (n=65) and control (n=120) groups of rising ninth graders ▪ 57 percent African American; 22 percent Hispanic ▪ Program participants more likely to maintain academic level one year after transitioning to high school ▪ Participants were less likely to be absent from school ▪ Participants had a more positive self-concept and a higher positive perception of the school social environment

Source: National Center for School Engagement

MENTORING

Mentoring is one of the 15 effective strategies advocated by the National Dropout Prevention Center to help promote school attendance and peer support in hopes of maximizing student learning and success.⁷¹ Mentoring programs are one of the most popular approaches for building relationships, establishing trust, and ultimately, promoting students' school engagement. **They provide one-on-one supportive relationships by connecting students with an adult, and can help motivate students to attend school.**⁷² Mentoring is a successful approach because it relies on the notion of caring relationships. Students are more likely to remain and achieve success in schools when they perceive that someone genuinely cares about them. Research highlights that "in schools where there is trust, caring, and support, there is higher attendance, higher student performance, and a lower rate of suspensions."⁷³

There are many types of mentoring programs, ranging from community-based to peer mentoring and e-mentoring, or the use of technology to support mentees.⁷⁴ Students report that "having a person who is checking up on them gives the sense that someone cares and motivates them to come to school."⁷⁵ Often, mentoring programs are coupled with tutoring initiatives in order to bolster academic achievement. Mentors provide students with positive role models who help the student navigate his or her way towards academic success. They typically provide academic support, advocate for the student, and connect the student with additional resources needed to attain success.⁷⁶

A number of examples in the literature indicate that student mentorship programs successfully reduce absenteeism. **Research on two large nationally-recognized mentoring programs, Big Brother/Sisters and Across Ages, indicates that such programs can have a significant effect on student attendance, with students exhibiting more positive attitudes toward school.**⁷⁷ A 2013 analysis of "Success Mentors" that worked with chronically absent students in New York City found that each participant gained about nine days of school per year, and that high school participants were 52 percent more likely to remain in school the following academic year compared to their peers who did not receive mentoring support.⁷⁸

Another popular mentoring program is "Check and Connect", which uses relationship-based interventions for students with both chronic absenteeism issues and behavioral problems. Using this model, educators are encouraged to refer at-risk students to a "monitor" who acts a mentor and liaises between the student's parents, school, and community agencies. Monitors work to build trust between students and their families, and identify barriers hindering their regular attendance. They also check in with students monthly and evaluate

⁷¹ "15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention," Op. cit.

⁷² Railsback, Op. cit.

⁷³ Ibid. p.27.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Cumbo, Burden, and Burke, Op. cit. p.24.

⁷⁶ Railsback, Op. cit.

⁷⁷ "Preventing Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy," Op. cit.

⁷⁸ "Success Mentors." Attendance Works. <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/new-york-city/success-mentors/>

their behavioral and attendance marks, modifying intervention strategies as deemed necessary.⁷⁹

In addition, the Rural Alaska Mentoring Project (RAMP) was implemented to reduce high school dropout in 23 rural Yup'ik Eskimo villages. The program provides school-based e-mentoring services, in the form of a computer mediated process, to 164 high-needs students in grades 4 through 8. The program is run through the district's social work program and is consistently supported by directors at the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University. Interestingly, the mentors selected for this program were high school students who were at-risk themselves, none of whom dropped out of school as a result of participating in this program. In addition, outcomes of this program have included "increased attendance and academic scores, and a dramatic decrease in office discipline referrals."⁸⁰

However, it is critical to note that not all mentoring programs are the same, nor do they all yield the same results. Dubois et al. (2002) highlight that a well-designed program should include the following factors in order to be effective:⁸¹

- Ongoing training for mentors
- Structured activities for both mentors and youth
- Expectations for frequency of contact, mechanisms for support and involvement of parents, and monitoring of overall program implementation

GRADUATION COACHES

A more recent trend has been the use of graduation coaches at the middle and high school level. **Coaches typically work in cooperation with the school's attendance officer to track daily attendance records and ensure open lines of communication between staff, students and families.** They are also responsible for targeting students who may skip school during the school day.⁸² A program evaluation report on the Georgia Graduation Coach Project demonstrates that graduation coaches had a significant impact on the dropout rate.⁸³ More specifically, during the 2007-2008 school year, 8,277 more Georgia students graduated from high school than during the preceding year. One contributing factor is the coach's responsibility to monitor school attendance. Primarily, these coaches use data to identify trends in student absences and find creative ways to encourage students to attend school. Using the data, graduation coaches investigate the various reasons why a student is absent, including student apathy, parent apathy, chronic illness, discipline issues, and even school

⁷⁹ "Preventing Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy," Op. cit.

⁸⁰ Cash, T. "Rural Alaska Mentoring Project (RAMP)." *The International Journal on School Disaffection*, 8:1, 2011. p.36.

⁸¹ DuBois, D.L. et al. "Effectiveness of Mentoring Programs for Youth: A Meta-Analytic Review." *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30:2, 2002.

⁸² "Georgia Graduation Coach Initiative." Georgia Department of Education, 2007. http://dropoutprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/GradCoachInitReport_20090908.pdf

⁸³ Ibid.

phobia. Many graduation coaches have developed general school programs, plans to address specific student needs, and reward programs to use as incentives to increase attendance.⁸⁴

Another study conducted by the University of Georgia revealed that **students across various high schools who were assigned a graduation coach attended classes more often, had fewer instances of misbehavior, and earned more credits than at-risk students who were not assigned a graduation coach.** In addition, the students with a graduation coach were suspended less frequently and missed fewer days of school.⁸⁵

SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

More often, school districts and schools are recognizing the need for creating small learning communities (SLCs) to foster more personalized learning for middle and high school students. SLC's go by other names as well; in different schools and districts, SLC's are also called schools-within-a-school, schools-within-a-building, clusters, pods, academies, or houses.⁸⁶ Alternative school structures can provide students with a more flexible and responsive academic environment that contributes to increased student engagement.⁸⁷ The high school reform literature has emphasized the importance of small learning communities to ensure a more personalized environment, ultimately resulting in better outcomes for students, including increased attendance.⁸⁸ **Teachers in these environments know students well, have higher expectations for students, help to foster critical judgement in their students, and engage in a variety of strategies to motivate their students.**⁸⁹

In addition, students report feeling safer in these schools and student, teacher, and family accountability is more pronounced. Small learning environments also necessitate greater extracurricular involvement (which improves school engagement); exhibit closer, more caring peer-peer relationships and peer-faculty relationships; display higher levels of parent involvement; show a greater personal efficacy among both students and staff; use more personalized learning activities; have more flexible schedules; and are more apt to employ innovations such as cooperative learning, teaming and interdisciplinary education.⁹⁰ One study compared small schools in Chicago, including schools-within-schools, with other schools in the system and found that attendance rates were higher in smaller schools.⁹¹

Academies are typically organized around a particular theme. For instance, freshman academies are designed to ease students' transition from middle school to high school. Research indicates that the transition between middle school and high school can be

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Philips, R.H. "Graduation Coaches Making Measurable Differences with High School Students." October 2010. http://blog.al.com/live/2010/10/graduation_coaches_making_meas.html

⁸⁶ Railsback, Op. cit.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ "An Overview of Smaller Learning Communities in High Schools." U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2001.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

especially difficult and students who are unable to successfully transition are at greater risk of dropping out.⁹² Career academies “integrate academic and vocational instruction, providing work-based learning within a personalized learning environment.”⁹³

Felner et al. conducted a comprehensive review of the effectiveness of small learning communities across multiple middle and high schools, based on three decades of evaluation work of the Project on High Performance Learning Communities. Overall, findings suggest that these learning communities positively impacted student attendance and student engagement, and ultimately led to a substantial decrease in the dropout rate.⁹⁴ Similarly, students in these restructured school environments were found “to have significantly more favorable attitudes about school, teachers, and themselves, including higher expectations, greater sense of achievement motivation, academic efficacy, and fewer socioemotional/behavioral difficulties than students who were not in such programs.”⁹⁵

The following are identified as critical components of effective smaller learning communities:⁹⁶

- **Autonomy:** Smaller learning communities can possess control over space, schedule, budget, curriculum, instruction, and personnel.
- **Identity:** Goals help to guide decisions and create unique conditions in smaller learning communities.
- **Personalization:** Teachers and administrators implement strategies that facilitate the process of getting to know each student on an individual basis.
- **Instructional Focus:** A clear emphasis is placed on maximizing students’ learning and success through relevant and meaningful instruction.
- **Accountability:** Students demonstrated progress on school and state-wide assessments, as well as progress towards the school’s goals, both academic and affective.

A FOCUS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

A focus on curriculum and instruction can also play an indirect role in helping to address absenteeism because it plays a significant role in impacting student engagement. Research demonstrates that **students who are disengaged in classes, particularly at the secondary**

⁹² “Keeping Kids in School: What Research Tells Us About Preventing Dropouts.” Center for Public Education. April 2007. <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Staffingstudents/Keeping-kids-in-school-At-a-glance/Keeping-kids-in-school-Preventing-dropouts.html>

⁹³ Railsback, Op. cit.p.25.

⁹⁴ Felner, R.D. et al. “Creating Small Learning Communities: Lessons from the Project on High-Performing Learning Communities About ‘What Works’ in Creating Productive, Developmentally Enhancing, Learning Contexts.” *Educational Psychologist*, 42:4, 2007.

⁹⁵ Ibid. p.215.

⁹⁶ Bullet points taken verbatim from: Railsback, Op. cit.

level, are at risk of truant behavior.⁹⁷ Figure 2.4 highlights several effective strategies to increase student engagement.⁹⁸

Figure 2.4: Strategies for Engaging Students in Learning

STRATEGY	KEY POINTS
Make learning meaningful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Connect activities to students’ prior knowledge and experiences ▪ Adult or expert modeling to highlight the relevance of the activity
Foster a sense of competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assign activities that are only slightly beyond students' current levels of proficiency ▪ Make students demonstrate understanding throughout the activity ▪ Show peer coping models and peer mastery models ▪ Include feedback that helps students to make progress
Provide autonomy support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Welcome students' opinions and ideas into the flow of the activity ▪ Use informational, non-controlling language with students ▪ Give students the time they need to understand and absorb an activity by themselves
Embrace collaborative learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Model effective activity ▪ Assign different roles ▪ Evaluate both the student and group performance
Establish positive teacher-student relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Care about students' social and emotional needs ▪ Display positive attitudes and enthusiasm ▪ Increase one-on-one time with students ▪ Treat students fairly ▪ Avoid deception or promise-breaking
Promote mastery orientations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Frame success in terms of learning rather than performing ▪ Reduce social comparisons ▪ Recognize student improvement and effort

Source: Edutopia⁹⁹

One of the strategies identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center is for schools to engage students in service learning or community-based projects.¹⁰⁰ **This type of learning can promote personal and social growth, career development, and civic responsibility.**¹⁰¹ A research brief by the Corporation for National Community Service highlights a national study that found that when high school students reported greater engagement in service learning,

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Contents adapted from: “Golden Rules for Engaging Students in Learning Activities.” Edutopia, December 2015. <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/golden-rules-for-engaging-students-nicolas-pino-james>

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Reimer and Dimock, Op. cit.

¹⁰¹ “The Impact of Service-Learning: A Review of Current Research.” Corporation for National and Community Service, January 2007.

they were more likely to be academically engaged and become attached to the school and community.¹⁰²

The Corporation for National Community Service identified the following components as necessary for ensuring effective service learning programs:¹⁰³

- **Service activities should be of sustained or significant duration.** Program experience suggests that a minimum of 40 hours during a school year is necessary to yield positive results for students and the community.
- **Teachers, after-school program coordinators, or sponsors need to work with students in order to draw the connections between what the students are doing and what they should be learning.** Even if service activities are conducted outside class, it is important that the project have clear and specific learning objectives.
- **The service that students perform should have a strong connection to the curriculum** they are studying or to their after-school activities.
- **The relationship between service and democratic practices, ideas, and history should be made explicit** in order that students see service as a civic responsibility.
- **Project participants should be given time to reflect on their service.** That may involve asking students to keep a journal, or having teachers and organizers lead discussions or coordinate activities that get participants to analyze and think critically about their service. These activities need to be planned, not left to chance.
- **Students should have a role not only in executing the service project, but also in making decisions about its development.** Students should be involved in leadership roles in all phases of the project.
- To ensure that service is really useful and strengthens community ties, **strong partnerships with community groups based on mutually agreed-upon goals, roles, and responsibilities are essential.**

TIER 3 INTERVENTIONS

Attendance Works provides a resource worksheet that suggests that Tier 3 interventions for student attendance, similar to Tier 1 and Tier 2 strategies, involve five core components: monitoring student data, engaging students and families, recognizing good and improved attendance, providing personalized outreach, and removing barriers.¹⁰⁴

The first step in the process is for schools to identify the number of students who have a history of missing a significant amount of school each year or are at risk due to other life

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Contents taken verbatim with minor edits: Railsback, Op. cit.

¹⁰⁴ "3 Tiers of Intervention," Op. cit.

challenges, such as homelessness or juvenile justice. This means taking the time to review attendance daily and following up with each student identified for Tier 3 intervention.¹⁰⁵

If the student and his or her family should require further outreach, schools should work to set up a meeting to coordinate community services. Schools can refer students and families to appropriate service agencies, such as social services or counseling. However, schools should be ready to also engage with these agencies in developing a partnership and a comprehensive educational plan for each referred student. However dire the situation appears, schools should continuously work with families as best as possible to ensure that legal consequences are avoided to the extent possible.¹⁰⁶

In addition, schools need to continue to recognize good attendance and provide personalized outreach to students identified for Tier 3 intervention. This means incorporating positive incentives and supporting the student's improved attendance. Providing continuous support and personalized outreach after each absence is critical in helping to build and foster relationships with students.¹⁰⁷

Finally, schools need to identify barriers to attendance, such as health, transportation or housing. One way is to create an intervention plan that is shared and agreed upon with the family. School administrators can then monitor progress accordingly. Once barriers are identified, schools can help connect families with school-based resources and community resources that can help overcome the challenges.¹⁰⁸

Attendance Works provides a tool that schools can use to assess and plan strategies for combating truancy. The complete tool includes 11 key elements to consider.¹⁰⁹ Figure 2.5 provides a sample of questions taken from the self-assessment tool.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ "Does Attendance Really Count in Our School? A Tool for Self-Assessment." Attendance Works, 2011.
<http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/School-Self-assessment-Rev-February-2011.pdf>

Figure 2.5: A Tool for Self-Assessment by Schools

KEY ELEMENT	STRENGTH	OK FOR NOW	COULD BE BETTER	URGENT GAP	DON'T KNOW	HOW DO YOU KNOW?
Every day, in every class, teachers take roll accurately and in a caring manner.						
Attendance data is entered daily into an electronic data base that can generate regular reports on average daily attendance, satisfactory attendance, chronic absence, truancy and suspension.						
Our school has clear guidelines in place about when absences are excused versus unexcused and has clearly communicated them to staff, students and families.						
An attendance team meets at least monthly to identify and share information about students in trouble as well as review attendance patterns by grade, student population and classroom.						
An effective school wide system of attendance incentives is in place.						

Source: Attendance Works ¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

SECTION III: CASE PROFILES OF TRUANCY INTERVENTIONS

REX PUTNAM HIGH SCHOOL

Located in Milwaukie, Oregon, Rex Putnam High School (Putnam) has seen a dramatic increase in its attendance and graduation rates over the last decade.¹¹¹ School district administrators attribute this success to a variety of factors, including creating challenging, interesting classes for students, making sure each student is cared about, and a strong emphasis on learning. In 2004, Rex Putnam High School was featured in a report by Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory as a model high school for increasing student attendance.¹¹² After administering a comprehensive schoolwide survey to gather perceptions of the school from staff, students, families and community members, administrators were surprised to find a disconnect in perceptions. On the one hand, staff reported feeling connected to the students, while students felt staff did not care about them and reported feeling isolated. As a result, the school decided to approach the issue from multiple angles.

In order to address the low attendance rate and high dropout rate, Putnam instituted a few changes. First, it launched an “Access Period.” Students attended this advisory period every other day with the same teacher. During this period, students could visit with other teachers, if necessary, to complete missing work, get help with homework, take tests, and work on projects. In addition, in order to create a more personalized space for students, Putnam created a house system for ninth and tenth graders. In this case, a group of 90 students take core classes together for two years. Access periods occur within the houses, so teachers are much more connected to the students on their team. There were also additional supports for the incoming freshman class. For instance, rising ninth graders tour the school in early spring and on the first day of high school, Freshman Assurance Day, “a Link Crew leads the ninth graders through the day- all the staff are lined up in the hallway clapping and welcoming the new students.”¹¹³

However, it is important to note that these changes evolved over an eight-year period. As a result of all these efforts, attendance rates increased and dropout rates decreased. Today, more than a decade later, Putnam is still being recognized for its efforts and success in impacting attendance and graduation rates. A recent article in *The Oregonian* featured Putnam emphasized the practices used with freshman to ensure a solid transition to the high school setting.¹¹⁴ Putnam has continued to provide intense academic support of ninth-graders as well as value all students’ cultural and economic backgrounds. The school district

¹¹¹ Railsback, Op. cit.

¹¹² Ibid. p. 61.

¹¹³ Ibid. p. 62.

¹¹⁴ Frazier, L. “At Putnam High School, the Path to Graduation Starts with a Strong Freshman Year.” *The Oregonian/OregonLive*, January 2015.

http://www.oregonlive.com/education/index.ssf/2015/01/at_rex_putnam_high_school_the.html

has also focused on equity training for staff, which has resulted in focusing on students' individual experiences.¹¹⁵

Over the past year, the high school on-time and five-year graduation rates grew from 78 percent to 88 percent, which means an additional 27 students earned high school diplomas. This is even more impressive when you factor in socioeconomic status – almost half of the class of 2014 came from low-income families. More specifically, the four-year graduation rate for English language learners rose about 7 percentage points over the last year, and the five-year rate for low-income students jumped to 82 percent.¹¹⁶ Figure 3.1 highlights the four-year graduation rates (in percentages) from 2009-2010 to 2013-2014.

Figure 3.1: Four-year Graduation Rates

	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
Rex Putnam High School	70	74	76	78	88
North Clackamas School District	65	66	72	74	78
State of Oregon	66	68	68	69	72

Source: The Oregonian¹¹⁷

SAN DIEGO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

San Diego Unified School District has had an extremely low dropout rate over the past five years, with a rate as low as just 5.9 percent in 2011.¹¹⁸ According to school officials, part of the district's success is due, in part, to the success of in-school mentoring and the Check and Connect program.¹¹⁹

At James Madison High School in Clairemont Mesa, Principal Richard Nash decided to lead a pilot program mentoring a group of ten boys when he was the vice principal. All of these boys had excessive absences, been suspended at least once, and had a GPA less than 2.0. He checked in with each student once a day for four years. The group also met twice a week for the first three years to discuss organizational skills, completing homework on time, and ways to manage anger. The boys were also held accountable, required to hit GPA targets each year in order to participate in end-of-year school events. In addition, when the students became seniors themselves, they provided guidance and mentorship to incoming freshman. Overall, nine of Nash's mentees graduated on time.¹²⁰

Furthermore, in 2009 federal stimulus dollars were provided to expand mentoring to 16 schools across the district. When the funds ran out, the school district received a grant from the American Institute of Research to hire five full-time mentors. These mentors check in daily

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Calvert, K. "San Diego Schools Use Mentoring to Keep At-Risk Students on Graduation Track." *KPBS News*, September 7, 2012. <http://www.kpbs.org/news/2012/sep/07/san-diego-schools-use-mentoring-keep-risk-students/>

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

with about 50 students each, monitoring grades, homework assignments, and any behavioral issues or struggles.¹²¹ Currently, the American Institutes for Research is completing a study on these mentors and mentees as well as a control group of approximately 300 students who are not receiving this additional support to examine the impact of in-school mentoring on student success.¹²²

Created by the Institute on Community Integration at the University of Minnesota, the Check and Connect program uses an intervention model designed to promote student engagement with school, reduce dropout behavior, and increase school completion. Students who are continuously truant or tardy receive a mentor for support.¹²³ This mentor “serves as an advocate, mentor, and service coordinator for the referred student and his/her family for two years focusing entirely on preserving and enhancing the student’s attachment to school.”¹²⁴ Each month, the mentor checks in on a student, collecting attendance and behavioral data from teachers and staff. The data help guide the design and implementation of specific interventions. The mentor also monitors students and their families for at least two years, remaining with students as they move up grade levels.¹²⁵

Longitudinal studies have documented the effectiveness of the Check and Connect model on attendance, among other variables. One study demonstrated that after two years of implementation, the percentage of students absent more than 15 percent of the time decreased from 45 percent at referral to 32 percent.¹²⁶ These studies highlight that full integration of the model is essential in yielding significant gains in student attendance for school districts.

PASADENA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Small learning academies have been the main reform model utilized in Pasadena Unified School District in California. The district uses the Linked Learning model, a framework aimed at increasing academic achievement and learning, reducing dropout rates, and reducing the achievement gap between high- and low-income students. Linked learning uses multiple pathways that stress academic instruction with a technical curriculum, field-based learning, and student supports. The model is implemented across various educational settings, including career academies or smaller career-themed schools.¹²⁷

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² “Check and Connect Efficacy Studies.” University of Minnesota.
<http://www.checkandconnect.umn.edu/research/efficacy.html>

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Reimer and Dimock, Op. cit. p. 20.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ “Check and Connect.” Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
<http://www.ojjdp.gov/dso/Check%20%20and%20Connect-DSOProgramDetail-814.aspx>

¹²⁷ “Linked Learning in California: High School Transformation in Three Districts.” Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, 2013. <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/linked-learning-california-high-school-transformation-three-districts.pdf>

John Muir High School, the pilot school for Linked Learning in the district, has three pathways: the Arts, Entertainment, and Media Academy; the Business and Entrepreneurship Academy; and, the Engineering and Environmental Science Academy. More than half of the students in the school are either African-American or Latino. Results from 2008 to 2010 indicated that not only did attendance improve, but dropout rates overall fell from 34 percent to 9 percent.¹²⁸ Linked Learning's integrated curriculum, authentic learning experiences, and personalized supports are all factors contributing to the program's success.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

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