STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING STUDENT ATTENDANCE

At a Glance

In order to succeed academically, students must attend school on a regular basis. Because absenteeism can have serious negative effects on students, school districts across the country have introduced activities that are designed to boost student attendance. This Information Capsule summarizes strategies that have been found to lead to increases in student attendance.

Research shows that students who attend school regularly have higher levels of academic achievement and are more likely to graduate from high school than students who do not have regular attendance. Because absenteeism can have serious negative effects on students, districts across the country have introduced activities that are designed to boost student attendance at their schools (Concordia Online Education, 2013; Freeman, 2012; John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009; Railsback, 2004).

The causes of absenteeism are varied and include chronic illness, lack of access to health or dental care, homelessness, housing mobility, family responsibilities, job responsibilities, fear of gangs or bullying, lack of a safe path to school, academic struggles, boredom in class, lack of attachment to school, involvement with the juvenile justice system, and lack of understanding of the importance of attendance by parents or students (Attendance Works, 2014; Balfanz & Chang, 2013; John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, 2012).

Because there are so many different causes for absenteeism, no single solution to the attendance problem has been found to be effective for all students. Researchers have concluded that efforts to increase attendance must include a combination of strategies and involve all stakeholders, including school staff, students, parents, and community members, in order to be successful (Indiana Department of Education, 2015; Concordia Online Education, 2013; Johnston, n.d.).

Based on the existing research, the following strategies have been found to lead to increases in student attendance.

- **Explain attendance policies to students and their families.** Parents must be made aware of attendance policies and procedures and their responsibilities at the beginning of the school year as well as throughout the year. The consequences of non-attendance must be clearly communicated to both students and their parents. At some schools, educators have created an easy to understand reference guide that summarizes rules,

rewards for good attendance, and consequences of poor attendance. They ensure that the reference guide is accessible both at home and in the classroom (California Department of Education, 2015; Concordia Online Education, 2013; Attendance Works, 2010; Railsback, 2004; Columbus City Schools, n.d.)

- **Promote awareness of the importance of regular school attendance.** Schools that have increased their attendance rates have worked to promote awareness among parents and community members about the importance of children attending school every day. Activities and materials created to increase awareness include:

  o Stickers or buttons;
  o Posters and banners displayed on buses and other modes of public transportation;
  o Billboards;
  o Handouts;
  o Op-ed pieces in local newspapers;
  o Use of social media to keep parents informed; and
  o Summer door-to-door campaigns that remind families of the date the new school year begins (Attendance Works, 2014; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Freeman, 2012).

- **Identify students who are most at-risk of becoming chronically absent.** Studies have found that one of the first steps toward improving student attendance is the development of an effective monitoring system to help educators identify students who are most at-risk of becoming chronically absent. Educators are increasingly relying on early warning systems to prevent school absenteeism. Researchers point out that monitoring systems need not be complicated and can consist of a simple spreadsheet indicating the number of days absent and the type of interventions provided to the student (Indiana Department of Education, 2015; Railsback, 2004).

- **Start interventions during the early grade levels.** According to some studies, interventions that start with elementary level students are more effective in increasing attendance than those that begin with secondary students. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory explained that working to help a student establish a positive relationship with his or her school in the early grades is more effective than working to rectify a negative relationship with the school when the student is older (Railsback, 2004).

- **Provide an engaging curriculum.** Studies have found that when students are engaged and involved in the learning process, they are more likely to attend school. Instruction should be based on a challenging and culturally relevant curriculum that allows students to become active participants in the learning process (Attendance Works, 2015; National Center for School Engagement, 2014; Musser, 2011; Railsback, 2004).

Examples of strategies that increase students' engagement in the curriculum include:

- o Educational technology allows students to engage in authentic learning and adapts to their different learning styles.
- o After-school enhancement programs develop students' interest in a variety of areas and give them the opportunity to feel a sense of accomplishment.
- o Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs prepare students for skilled work once they graduate from high school. Studies have found that high-risk students enrolled in CTE programs have fewer absences than their peers who are not enrolled in such programs (Smink & Reimer, 2005; Columbus City Schools, n.d.).

- **Call students in the morning.** It is often difficult for students to wake up early in the morning, especially when they become adolescents. Research has found that most high school students are actually sleep deprived. A study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* (cited in Duval, 2010) reported that only about eight percent of high school students get enough sleep on an average school night. Some school districts have reported that they increased their attendance rates by using celebrity wake-up calls - students sign up to receive pre-recorded wake-up calls from celebrities and student role models (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Freeman, 2012).

- **Engage in health-related initiatives.** Research has found that two activities designed to reduce the transmission of common illnesses have a strong impact on student attendance - aggressive hand washing programs, and improved quality of school ventilation (Indiana Department of Education, 2015; Adams, 2013).

- **Provide support and encouragement to chronically ill students.** Dental problems and long-term, non-contagious illnesses, such as asthma, diabetes, and sickle cell anemia, often contribute to absences, especially among low-income students. These students should be encouraged and supported when they are at school and allowed to complete all assignments and tests missed during legitimate absences (California Department of Education, 2015; Balfanz & Chang, 2013).

- **Create a safe and respectful school climate.** School climate research suggests that positive interpersonal relationships can lead to increased attendance. When students feel valued, welcomed, and comfortable at school, they are less likely to be absent. The presence of bullying, fights, and discriminatory practices or language have all been found to contribute to students' reluctance to attend school (Indiana Department of Education, 2015; Attendance Works, 2014; Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2014; Concordia Online Education, 2013; Smink & Reimer, 2005; Railsback, 2004; Vandiver, 2003; Columbus City Schools, n.d.; Los Angeles Unified School District, n.d.).

- **Create a caring school community.** Studies have found that students are more likely to attend school when they believe that their teachers and other school staff really care

about them. When students are absent, as many staff members as possible should talk to them immediately upon their return and let them know they were missed. Students have reported that having a person at school who is checking up on them gives them the sense that someone cares and motivates them to come to school (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2014; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Smink & Reimer, 2005; Railsback, 2004).

The California Department of Education (2015) suggested that attendance office personnel, including office aides, clerks, and secretaries, make individual contact with high-risk students on a daily basis. Experts also recommend that every student have at least one teacher or staff member who is available to provide them with academic, emotional, and personal support. This policy has been found to be especially effective in large secondary schools where students are less likely to form personal relationships with their teachers (Concordia Online Education, 2013; Railsback, 2004).

- **Personalize the learning environment.** Research strongly suggests that schools that have created smaller and/or personalized learning environments have higher attendance. Many large high schools have created small schools-within-a-school in an attempt to bolster attendance rates. Schools-within-a-school have their own culture, program, staff, students, budget, and school space. Academies (smaller groups of students within a school, usually organized around a certain theme) and magnet schools are other ways that districts can personalize students' learning experiences (Indiana Department of Education, 2015; Smink & Reimer, 2005; Railsback, 2004).

- **Establish mentoring programs.** Research on national mentoring programs, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters and Across Ages, has demonstrated that mentoring has a positive impact on student attendance. Mentoring is one way to ensure that students have continuous, sustained, and caring relationships with trusted adults – whether inside or outside of school. Attendance initiatives use three different pools of mentors: (1) internal, or school-based, mentors, such as teachers, coaches, and security officers; (2) external mentors, including members of law enforcement, business leaders, retired professionals, and staff from community organizations; and (3) peer mentors, or older students who have excellent attendance records (California Department of Education, 2015; Indiana Department of Education, 2015; Attendance Works, 2014; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Freeman, 2012; Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Railsback, 2004).

An evaluation of a multi-component New York City initiative to reduce absenteeism found that the program had a statistically significant and educationally meaningful impact on chronic absenteeism levels at high-needs schools. The greatest improvements in attendance rates were observed for students who participated in the individual mentoring component of the initiative. The program's positive impacts were reported to be consistent across all grade levels and most pronounced for students who lived in poverty, were homeless, or were overage for their grade level (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013).

- **Avoid punitive policies.** Studies have found that punitive policies, such as suspension and detention, do not have a positive impact on student attendance. Researchers

recommend that school districts adopt policies and practices that keep children in school, rather than push them out. For example, in-school suspensions, where students are provided with academic support and are kept engaged in school rather than sent home, are a better solution than out-of-school suspensions (Attendance Works, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009; Reeves, 2008; Railsback, 2004; Johnston, n.d.).

- **Reward and recognize students.** The majority of studies have found that rewarding students for good or improved attendance leads to reduced absenteeism (Education World, 2015; Attendance Works, 2014). The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory suggested that using incentives or rewards in combination with other strategies may be the most effective approach (Railsback, 2004).

  Researchers note that schools should reward and recognize improved attendance, not just perfect attendance, because students should not be encouraged to come to school when they are sick (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2014; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Attendance Works, 2010; Los Angeles Unified School District, n.d.).

  Examples of rewards and incentives for good and improved attendance include:

  - The names of perfect and most improved attendees are posted in a highly visible location.
  - Students with perfect and improved attendance are recognized at school-wide assemblies.
  - Traveling trophies are presented to the homerooms with the best monthly attendance at each grade level.
  - Commendation letters are sent to students and parents for perfect or improved attendance.
  - Students are rewarded for improved or perfect attendance with homework passes, first-in-line lunch privileges, or a parking space close to the school building (at the high school level).
  - Food coupons redeemable in the school's cafeteria are given to students with good attendance.
  - Students who have perfect or improved attendance are rewarded with prizes donated by local businesses, such as movie tickets and restaurant gift certificates.
  - Classrooms with the most improved attendance are rewarded with pizza or ice cream parties.
  - A drawing is held among students with perfect attendance to have breakfast or lunch with the school principal, the school district superintendent, or a school board member.
  - Arrangements are made for a celebrity to visit the school that wins a district-wide attendance competition (California Department of Education, 2015; Concordia Online Education, 2013; Freeman, 2012; Attendance Works, 2010; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

- **Refer chronically absent students to appropriate school-based support staff.** Students with frequent absences should be referred to counselors or school social workers who can recommend solutions to alleviate the circumstances that are contributing to high absenteeism rates and seek referrals to support agencies within the community (California Department of Education, 2015; Railsback, 2004; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). The Los Angeles Unified School District (n.d.) encouraged all secondary schools to hire a full-time Pupil Services and Attendance (PSA) counselor. PSA counselors' duties included visiting students' homes to assess environmental factors and identify barriers contributing to high absenteeism, and helping families and schools develop strategies aimed at improving attendance.

- **Involve families.** Research has consistently linked family involvement to increased student attendance (Education World, 2015; Indiana Department of Education, 2015; Attendance Works, 2014; Smink & Reimer, 2005; Railsback, 2004). Suggestions from the research and school practitioners on how families should be involved in efforts to increase attendance include:

  - School staff communicate frequently with parents.
  - School staff establish immediate personal contact with families when attendance problems first arise. Staff should talk to parents directly, not their answering machines.
  - Parents are assigned a contact person at their child's school.
  - Clerical staff are assigned to make telephone calls to parents or guardians at work during the day. Updated contact information, including cell phone numbers, is obtained throughout the school year.
  - Bilingual aides contact parents with limited English speaking ability and send out school attendance notification letters in the language appropriate to the family.
  - Contact with parents becomes progressively more individualized (e.g., letter, telephone call, home visit). Home visits are conducted when parents or guardians cannot be reached by telephone.
  - Families are made to feel welcome at their children's schools.
  - Families are educated about the adverse impact of poor attendance on academic achievement through social media, the district's website, videos, newsletters, flyers, and emails.
  - Family workshops that focus on improving school attendance are conducted.
  - Family counseling sessions that focus on finding solutions to high absentee rates are conducted.
  - Parents are informed of positive incentives students receive for good attendance.
  - Incentives are offered to families, not just students. Families appreciate rewards such as food baskets and transportation passes (California Department of Education, 2015; Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2014; John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, 2012; Attendance Works,

2010; Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Railsback, 2004; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Columbus City Schools, n.d.; Los Angeles Unified School District, n.d.).

- **Involve the entire community.** Research shows that chronic absenteeism can be significantly reduced when schools and communities work together to build a culture of attendance and help families overcome barriers to getting children to school (Attendance Works, 2014; Balfanz & Chang, 2013; Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Smink & Reimer, 2005; Johnston, n.d.). The National Center for School Engagement at the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (cited in Education World, 2015) reported that collaboration with community members, such as law enforcement professionals, mental health workers, and social service providers, is needed in order to successfully increase student attendance. Examples of ways in which schools collaborate with community organizations include:

  - o Transit and police departments help create safer routes to schools.
  - o Community organizations educate parents and support families who need help with child care or transportation, and provide services to children and families who are in need of extra assistance.
  - o Businesses, faith-based groups, and nonprofit organizations provide adults to serve as mentors to at-risk students.
  - o Community and business leaders speak to students about the importance of attending and completing school.
  - o Community volunteers organize and run after-school clubs.
  - o Community organizations donate gifts to be used as prizes for students with improved attendance.
  - o Community organizations sponsor student recognition programs to honor students who have perfect or improved attendance.
  - o Social services agencies establish community task forces to ensure that children's social and mental health needs are being served (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2014; Balfanz & Chang, 2013; Musser, 2011; South Carolina Education Oversight Committee, 2008; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Columbus City Schools, n.d.).

- **Monitor and evaluate attendance initiatives.** Collecting and analyzing data is critical to understanding the prevalence of absenteeism and the effectiveness of interventions designed to increase attendance. Studies have found that successful attendance initiatives develop concrete and measurable goals for student attendance, and are characterized by the monitoring of attendance data and practices, and ongoing evaluation of progress (National Center for School Engagement, cited in Education World, 2015; Attendance Works, 2014; Concordia Online Education, 2013; John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, 2012; Railsback, 2004). Musser (2011) stated that schools should go beyond school-wide attendance averages to analyze how many absences, excused and unexcused, each student accrues and look for patterns in neighborhoods, ethnic groups, grades, and classrooms.

Summary

This Information Capsule summarized strategies that have been found to lead to increases in student attendance, including instruction that is based on an engaging curriculum; creation of a safe, respectful, and caring environment; establishment of mentoring programs; disbursement of rewards and recognition for perfect or improved attendance; and involvement of families and community organizations.

References

Adams, J.M. (2013). Study: Improved Classroom Ventilation Could Reduce Student Absences. *EdSource Today,* June 7, 2013. Retrieved from http://edsource.org/2013/study-improved-ventilation-in-classrooms-could-reduce-student-absences/33221.

Attendance Works. (2010). *Establishing School-wide Attendance Incentives.* Retrieved from http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/AW-Incentives-two-pager-1-4-11.pdf.

Attendance Works. (2014). *Reducing Chronic Absence: A Key Element for Student Academic Success.* Presentation to the United Way Women's Leadership Councils, July 23, 2014. Retrieved from http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Reducing-Chronic-Absence-United-Way-WLC-July-23-2014.pdf.

Attendance Works. (2015). *Principal Spotlight: Engaging Students for Better Attendance.* Retrieved from http://www.attendanceworks.org/principal-spotlight-engaging-students-better-attendance/.

Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2013). *Meeting the Challenge of Combating Chronic Absenteeism.* Johns Hopkins University School of Education, Baltimore, MD. Retrieved from http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/NYC-Chronic-Absenteeism-Impact-Report-Nov-2013.pdf.

Balfanz, R., & Chang, H.N-L. (2013). *A Focus on Attendance is Key to Success.* National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reston, VA. Retrieved from http://www.nassp.org/tabid/3788/default.aspx?topic=A_Focus_on_Attendance_is_Key_to_Success.

California Department of Education. (2015). *School Attendance Improvement Strategies.* Retrieved from http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ai/cw/attendstrategy.asp.

Colorado Foundation for Families and Children. (2014). *10 Things A School Can Do To Improve Attendance.* Retrieved from http://schoolengagement.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/10ThingsASchoolCanDoToImproveAttendance.pdf.

Columbus City Schools. (n.d.). *Missing School Matters.* Retrieved from http://www.ccsoh.us/Downloads/Attendance Supports, Programs and Services(2).pdf.

Concordia Online Education. (2013). *Successful Examples of Increasing School Attendance.* Concordia University, Portland, OR. Retrieved from http://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/ed-leadership/successful-examples-of-increasing-school-attendance/.

Duval, S. (2010). *Most High School Students Are Sleep Deprived.* Center for Advancing Health, Washington, DC. Retrieved from http://www.cfah.org/hbns/2010/most-high-school-students-are-sleep-deprived.

Education World. (2015). *Triumph Over Truancy: Tips for Improving Student Attendance.* Retrieved from http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin442.shtml.

Epstein, J.L., & Sheldon, S.B. (2002). Present and Accounted for: Improving Student Attendance Through Family and Community Involvement. *Journal of Educational Research, 95*(5), 308-318.

Freeman, A. (2012). 9 Surprising Ways Schools Are Boosting Attendance. *Takepart.com,* September 5, 2012. Retrieved from http://www.takepart.com/photos/9-surprising-ways-schools-boosting-student-attendance/buellerbuellerbueller.

Gandy, C., & Schultz, J.L. (2007). *Increasing School Attendance for K-8 Students.* Wilder Research, Saint Paul, MN. Retrieved from http://www.wilder.org.

John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities. (2012). *Collaborative Approaches to Reducing Absenteeism Among K-12 Students.* Stanford University School of Education, Stanford, CA. Retrieved from http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/resources/policy_fact_sheets/Absence_Interventions_PFS.pdf

Indiana Department of Education. (2015). *Preventing Chronic Absenteeism & Truancy.* Retrieved from http://www.doe.in.gov/student-services/attendance/preventing-chronic-absenteeism-truancy.

Johnston, H. (n.d.).*Truancy and Attendance: Interventions for High Schools.* Education Partnerships, Inc., Pittsburgh, PA. Retrieved from http://oregongearup.org/files/research-briefs/truancyattendance.pdf.

Los Angeles Unified School District. (n.d.). *Tips for Increasing Student Attendance.* Retrieved from http://notebook.lausd.net/pls/ptl/docs/PAGE/CA_LAUSD/LAUSDNET/OFFICES/COMMUNICATIONS/COUNT_ME_IN/TIPS/CMITIPS4SCHOOLS.PDF.

Musser, M.P. (2011). *Taking Attendance Seriously: How School Absences Undermine Student and School Performance in New York City.* The Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc. Retrieved from http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/nyregion/20110617attendancereport.pdf.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). *Every School Day Counts: The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data, Chapter 1: Why Does Attendance Matter?* Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/attendancedata/chapter1a.asp.

National Center for School Engagement. (2014). *21 Ways to Engage Students in School.* Retrieved from http://schoolengagement.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/21WaystoEngageStudentsinSchool.pdf.

Railsback, J. (2004). *Increasing Student Attendance: Strategies from Research and Practice.* Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Portland, OR. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED484551.

Reeves, D.B. (2008). Leading to Change/Improving Student Attendance. *Educational Leadership, 65*(8), 90-91.

Sheldon, S.B., & Epstein, J.L. (2004). Getting Students to School: Using Family and Community Involvement to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism. *School Community Journal, 14*(2), 39-56.

Smink, J., & Reimer, M.S. (2005). *Fifteen Effective Strategies for Improving Student Attendance and Truancy Prevention.* National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, Clemson, SC. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED485683.

South Carolina Education Oversight Committee. (2008). *Tips for Communities to Help Schools Succeed.* Retrieved from http://www.eoc.sc.gov/Information_for_Families/TIPS_Brochure/Tips Communities Web.pdf

Vandiver, D. (2003). Improving Attendance: A Formula That Worked. *Principal Leadership,* April 2003, 81-82. Retrieved from https://www.principals.org/portals/0/content/46854.pdf.