

Cleveland, Ohio



An urban district tackles extreme chronic absence through a combination of strong district leadership, staff training and community partners.

In 2015, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District launched a "Get 2 School. You Can Make It" campaign that significantly reduced chronic absence, from 35 to 29 percent during the 2015–16 school year in an urban district serving over 39,000 students, most from low-income families and nearly two-thirds African American.

The attendance campaign activities in Ohio's second-largest city include phone banking, canvassing, college scholarship opportunities, giveaway incentives, social media, celebrations and mentoring. Students are urged to miss fewer than 10 school days per year—a message inspired by the district's data showing that missing 10 or more days is associated with significantly lower reading and math achievement as well as being off-track for high school graduation.

Key to Cleveland's success has been the deep commitment of top school leadership, including district CEO Eric Gordon, and an attendance implementation team to organize the work. Other important

factors include the district's strong foundation of social and emotional learning practices and an investment in addressing barriers. School administrators and teachers also learn effective chronic absence reduction approaches during professional development gatherings and coaching support for staff working in the lowest-performing schools.

Many community partners have been engaged, including Cleveland Browns players, who have promoted attendance via school visits and phone messages. After learning that lack of clothing suitable for school is an attendance barrier, players hand-delivered "special teams packages" that provided clothing to over 2,000 students. In April 2017, a Chronic Absenteeism Summit held in the Browns' stadium attracted hundreds of educators and community partners, including some from other districts and the Ohio Department of Education. An inspiring example of how a district with extreme chronic absence can improve student attendance.



Grand Rapids, Michigan

Persistence, partnership and clear messaging help reduce chronic absence districtwide in an urban district.

Educators and community leaders in Grand Rapids, Michigan's second-largest city, knew they had to act after discovering that 36 percent of their nearly 17,000 public school students missed almost a month of school every year. Determined to reduce absences for all students (the district's diverse population represents 55 countries), they focused on scrutinizing pertinent data and providing support to students facing major barriers to getting to school – and the students' families. The startling result: Chronic absence dropped from 36 to 27 percent during the effort's first two years, as this [description and video](#) detail.

Grand Rapids has been persistent. When gains in attendance and achievement did not materialize after the effort's first year, the district and its partners kept meeting and fine-tuning strategies. Professional

development was intensified to help principals set attendance goals, use data to identify students in need of support, provide attendance incentives and promote messaging. A more concrete attendance message to the community was developed (known as [Challenge 5](#)) that urges students to miss fewer than five days of school each year.

A community-wide approach is "the secret" to the district's success, says Superintendent Teresa Weatherall Neal. This includes partnering with the [Believe 2 Become](#) initiative as well as a broader, regional initiative led by the [Kent School Services Network](#) involving community schools in nine school districts across the county. With Grand Rapids' chronic absence most recently at 21 percent, the work continues.



New Britain, Connecticut

Using data to target resources to reduce chronic absence among young students in a diverse district.

When school officials in New Britain—one of Connecticut's poorest school districts—first crunched their numbers in 2012, they discovered that an alarming 30 percent of kindergartners and 24 percent of first-graders were chronically absent. Armed with this information, the district and community partners launched a comprehensive strategy. Two years later, chronic absence rates in the district—which is home to 10,500 students—fell to 13 percent of kindergartners and 9 percent of first graders. And early literacy scores were on the rise.

New Britain's strategy includes forming school attendance teams and providing professional development to school teams and community partners. To inspire action, chronic absence data reports are distributed every 10 days. Home visits are made—with extra outreach to families of kindergarten and preschool students. The district's extensive parent engagement

and communications include intensive interagency case management for the most challenged students.

New Britain's success helped Connecticut, particularly the state's education department, make the case that reducing chronic absence is doable and critical, as reported in the New York Times. The state's effort has successfully resulted in over 10,000 fewer chronically absent students and measurable reductions for every student sub-population. Connecticut's strategies include using an interactive portal to make data publicly available and passing legislation requiring districts to monitor absenteeism and establish attendance review teams if levels are excessive. Districts now must address chronic absenteeism in their improvement plans and accountability systems. Connecticut also produced a prevention and intervention guide that includes strategies to increase attendance for students with disabilities.

Long Beach, California

Enlisting the community to focus on schools with the highest chronic absence as part of a district-wide campaign.

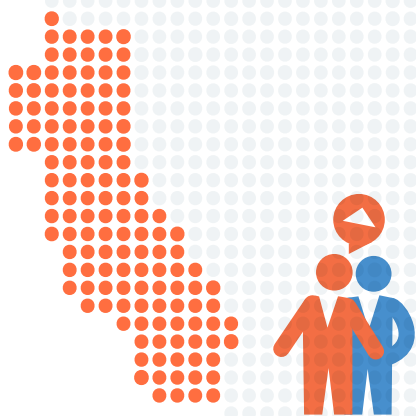
As the new student support services director for California's [Long Beach Unified School District](#), in fall 2013, Dr. Erin M. Simon was determined to understand the drivers of chronic absence that she knew contributed to the gap in achievement between low-income students and their more affluent peers in the district, which has a diverse enrollment of 75,000 students – 69 percent of whom are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

During a "road trip," she met with parents at over 40 schools in Long Beach – Southern California's third-largest city – sharing the importance of attendance and learning about barriers parents face to getting their children to school. Realizing that "community" was the missing ingredient for many students, she collaborated with the City of Long Beach's [Safe Long Beach](#) Violence Prevention Program to launch "All In" – a campaign aimed at ensuring that every student is in school every day. While it is a district-wide effort, the campaign focuses on four schools with the highest chronic absence, using data to drive action. Each school put in place a customized, multi-tiered support system and received help from social work interns assigned by California State University Long Beach. Three out

of the four schools saw an average reduction of 9 percent in chronic absence in school year 2015–2016.

The campaign enlisted teachers and families but also – to emphasize that school attendance is everyone's responsibility – the broader community, including clergy and businesses as well as the Long Beach Police Department and the Long Beach Fire Department. With federal Department of Justice funding, Simon and a small team of professionals and social workers visited chronically absent students' homes. In the four targeted community areas, they distributed school calendars, school staff information and "All In" decals to business owners, non-profit organizations and community members so they would know when and who to call if students were not in school.

Community and institutional partnerships are critical in the ongoing efforts of the "All In" campaign. Simon worked closely with an array of partners, including the city prosecutor on a pre-intervention effort to identify students with issues, rather than waiting until their absences lead to intervention from the [School Attendance Review Board disciplinary action](#). Middle school students were linked with the City's employee mentoring program for additional guidance and encouragement. The mentoring program was integrated into the City's [My Brother's Keeper](#) Initiative, and will continue to support the achievements of youth. Students and their families also receive medical and social services through a partnership with [The Children's Clinic, "Serving Children & Their Families" \(TCC\)](#). TCC, the only federally qualified clinical provider in Long Beach, has school and community-based clinics that address health challenges connected to asthma, nutrition and access to basic health services. Together, these and many other partners have forged pathways to ensure students are prepared to thrive in school and become leaders in their communities.





Contra Costa County, California

An alternative school improves attendance by leveraging the power of a learning network and county education office.

After reviewing attendance data, an alternative education school in California's Contra Costa County discovered that 71 percent of its students were chronically absent in 2014–2015. "Students were out so often we would celebrate when students were in school just three days a week," says Ed Brown, principal of the Golden Gate Community School, which serves about 75 students in grades 7–12 who have been expelled or had issues elsewhere.

Brown and his team learned to design and implement a tiered set of chronic absence reduction strategies, thanks to participation in the Contra Costa Attendance Learning Network, convened by the Contra Costa County Office of Education and Attendance Works. The result: The school reduced its chronic absence by 12 percent in only two years – illustrating that attendance is not a "lost cause" for the most vulnerable students. Working to understand these students' attendance issues helps educators better address the students' overall needs.

This portrait also demonstrates the power of a county education office to promote district collaboration and drive change. Seven of the learning network's

eight districts have seen chronic absence reductions, ranging from 0.5 percent to as high as 12 percent. The county office of education also conducts a year-long attendance awareness campaign "Every School Day Counts" that provides resources, key messages, tools and strategies to all of its 18 districts. The county education office is also a leader in the "Keeping Our Kids in School" countywide initiative, which is spearheaded by the juvenile court.

At Golden Gate Community School, a team now uses data to identify chronically absent and at-risk students, as well as the causes of poor attendance. The School Attendance Review Board switched from a negative, punitive process to a more positive process focused on increasing student supports.

Predisposed to high-intensity interventions (Tier 3) given its population, the school's most significant changes have been at Tiers 1 (prevention) and 2 (early intervention). The school now works to cultivate an attendance culture and uses incentives like gift cards to reinforce strong attendance habits.



Oregon Tribal Attendance Pilot Project

Schools, Native American families and tribes partner to reduce chronic absence in a small rural community.

Revealing that nearly one-third of American Indian/Alaska Native students were chronically absent, a **landmark 2014 study** motivated Oregon state lawmakers to create the **Tribal Attendance Pilot Project (TAPP)** – a \$1.5 million effort to reduce chronic absenteeism among native students in nine Oregon districts. The project's family advocates work to build a culture of attendance and help American Indian families learn to trust public schools, which in the past sought to strip native children of their language and customs, even forcibly removing them from families. The state education department administers and is evaluating the full TAPP initiative, which has received another two years of state funding.

At Willamina School District, in rural Oregon's Yamhill County – where 48.01 percent of students were chronically absent – the project resulted in the chronic absence rate dropping to 42.40 percent. While the rate is still high, the introduction of attendance assemblies, tracking attendance in each class and monthly attendance challenges is building a school-wide culture of attendance. The family advocate makes personal connections with families and creates individual family plans and student incentives to improve attendance.

A stronger relationship and communication between the school and the tribe was also reinforced.

At Warm Springs K–8 Academy in rural Oregon's Jefferson School District – where 29 percent of students were chronically absent in the first two quarters of 2014–15 – the project resulted in the chronic absence rate dropping to 23 percent (156 of 598 students) in first two quarters of 2016–17. The rate is still high, but the increased buy-in from the community is palpable: More families are willing to ask for help, and regular attendance has become a community effort. Successes have included drastically reduced truancy and a positive relationship formed with the local Juvenile Prosecution. Working with the school resource officer and the courts, the Warm Springs TAPP reduced the number of citations from 14 for the K–4 level to just one this year. Local store employees even call if they see students skipping school.

Other TAPP schools have embraced Native American culture and languages – creating a culturally responsive curriculum, having tribal members produce board books or offering Native American story times.

Trenton, New Jersey

A “full court press” makes a difference in improving attendance in an urban middle school.



Staff members at Hedgepeth/Williams Middle School of the Arts in Trenton, New Jersey, were shocked to find out in the fall of 2015 that nearly a quarter of their 471 students were already chronically absent. Led by Principal Adrienne R. Hill and Vice Principal Gregory Green, they worked to find out why students were missing school and launched a deliberate multi-pronged school-wide strategy to address the challenges they discovered, launching a “full court press,” as [this video](#) describes.

By the end of February 2017, chronic absence was reduced by more than half, to less than 10 percent. Hedgepeth/Williams was featured as a success story in a statewide report on chronic absence, [Showing Up Matters](#), produced by Advocates for Children of New Jersey, providing an inspiring call to action for educators throughout the state.

The entire faculty worked together to create an engaging school climate that lets all students know they are welcome and emphasizes the importance of being in class every day. The attendance team monitors students' attendance and develops interventions ranging from connecting students to staff mentors to sending letters to parents and “We Miss You” postcards directly to chronically absent students.

To create a greater sense of accountability among students and families, school leaders clarified consequences for excessive absences, such as the possibility of repeating a grade. They addressed issues that often affect attendance, for example, by offering online English language classes to parents who in the past had taken their English-speaking children out of school to translate at doctors' appointments or meetings.



Springdale, Arkansas

An elementary school tailors strategies to the culture and needs of families.

In the small city of Springdale, Arkansas, school administrators at Monitor Elementary School – which serves more than 860 pre-K to fifth-graders – were astonished to discover that their 94 percent average daily attendance rate in 2012–13 masked a 19 percent chronic absence rate at the school, where most students are from low-income families and two-fifths are Latino. Chronic absence was highest among kindergarten students and among certain populations, including **immigrants from the Marshall Islands**, who account for about one-fifth of students. Over the next two years, Monitor Elementary reduced its chronic absence rate to 6 percent.

The school raised awareness through banners and multi-lingual handouts and changed the practices of its well-intentioned front-office staff so they engaged, rather than scolded, families arriving late to school. When a student's absences mount, teachers call the student's home to express concern and offer help. They coordinate with the school nurse when health issues are involved. Teachers and staff members mentor students who are missing too much school. Attendance circles encourage students to share what they like about school and what might help them arrive on time every day. The school's community liaison schedules family conferences to talk about turning around absenteeism. The school partners with social services agencies and community nonprofits to help students and families with deeper needs.

A key to Monitor's success, as this **video** details, has been tailoring its family outreach to the communities it serves. The school, for example, hosts family nights for Marshallese and Latino community members. Because Marshallese parents are often not literate in their own language, a community liaison from the Marshallese community helps school officials connect with them via phone or in-person rather than relying on written materials. "It is a culture that holds personal connection primary," explains Sierra Engelmann, a school counselor. "Lecturing is very offensive but celebrations are very welcomed." The school hosts Islander nights, where parents bring food and good attendance is recognized.

Monitor is among several successful attendance-improvement efforts nurtured by the **Make Every Day Count** initiative of the Arkansas Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. Launched by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, the campaign is a collaboration of state and local nonprofits, parents and families, government agencies, foundations, educators, business leaders and policymakers committed to taking a comprehensive approach to ensuring all children will read at grade-level by the end of third grade.



West Newfield, Maine

A small rural school benefits from a larger prevention-oriented attendance effort.

Located in the tiny rural southwest Maine town of West Newfield, Line Elementary School once struggled to improve attendance. Like many rural Maine communities, families face challenging economic conditions as well as harsh winter weather. When Principal Tim Stinson began tackling the school's over 10 percent chronic absence rate with the support of Count ME In, a Maine attendance effort, he questioned the value. "Our past efforts to improve attendance didn't yield much," recalls Stinson, whose school is part of Regional School Unit 57 District, which includes seven schools in six rural towns.

But, soon after Line Elementary – which serves 284 students, over half from low-income families – began working with Count ME In to implement its district's attendance plan in Fall 2015, Stinson began to see the positive impact of work that included establishing an intervention team, a system to track absences and an accountability process. By the end of the

second school year, Line Elementary's chronic absentee rate decreased by 44 percent. Stinson and his staff were excited to begin a new school year with a plan they knew could make a difference.

Over the past three years, Count ME In has learned that implementing a comprehensive model to address chronic absenteeism requires supporting implementation of effective practice with fidelity at the school site. This approach involves raising awareness; engaging all staff including teachers and reaching out to absent students; intervention teams monitoring data and strategies; and school and community agency staff partnering with families to develop effective solutions. **Count ME In's** mission is to increase student attendance through data-driven strategies so every child is an engaged, successful learner. It partners with several districts, helping schools adopt a prevention-oriented approach to reducing chronic absence and nurture a school culture that promotes learning.

Phoenix, Arizona

A K-8 school improves attendance by creating a positive and safe school climate.

Located in Phoenix, Arizona, Loma Linda K-8 School once faced many challenges with gang activity, drugs, alcohol and weapons, especially among its older children. Fighting and bullying stemming from lack of social skills and the ability to solve conflicts were big issues for all grades – including during school recess.

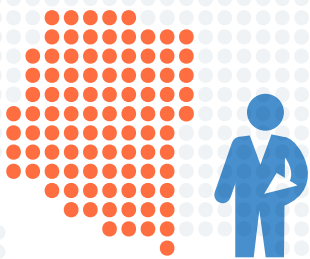
Loma Linda worked hard to put systems in place school-wide to reduce conflict, reduce suspensions and office referrals, and focus on teaching and learning. As one piece of the solution, Loma Linda partnered with Playworks, a national non-profit that builds social and emotional skills by introducing inclusive and fun playground practices that help students feel involved and active.

Now, Loma Linda's school climate has become safer and more positive. The change has had a direct impact on attendance. "Before we started with Playworks, our chronic absence rate hovered at 12 to 15

percent. Last year, we ended at about 4 to 5 percent," says Principal Stephanie De Mar.

To change Loma Linda's playground atmosphere and, in turn, its school culture, the Playworks intervention added more structure and routine. One strategy that proved particularly effective is "Class Game Time." During Class Game Time, a Playworks coach introduces students and teachers to games they can play at recess. Teachers welcomed the 30 to 45 minutes spent building relationships with students through something beyond instruction. Playworks coaches are trained to promote and teach activities to meet the needs of diverse learners, fostering an inclusive school culture and climate.

The number of students sent to the school office for behavior issues during lunch recess alone dropped from 400 the year before Playworks' arrival to four the year after. Most office referrals now are students who transferred to the school – and the longer students are enrolled in the school, the fewer issues they experience, a data review shows. Teachers are happier, too. Loma Linda's teacher turnover has decreased, and staff see benefits of the Playworks intervention in multiple aspects of their jobs.





Baltimore, Maryland

A K-12 Charter school network lays a foundation for excellent attendance through a unique structure for relationship building and engaging educational experiences.

Guided by the belief that children are creative, capable, powerful and worthy of the deepest respect, the City Neighbors is a charter school network rooted in the arts and project-based learning and inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy. Dedicated to promoting shared ownership, it is structured as a parent, teacher, student cooperative where all have a voice in shaping the curriculum as well as in governance, budgeting and hiring.

Comprised of three schools (two K-8 and one high school) serving 850 students, City Neighbors has no entrance criteria. Instead, students are chosen through a citywide lottery. Nearly 65 percent of its student population receive free and reduced-price lunch and a third are students with disabilities. Its chronic absence rates are three to four times lower than the rest of Baltimore City schools, falling below 5 percent in elementary and middle school and hovering around 10 percent for high school. Unlike most schools, attendance for students in special education is on par with the rest of the students. An essential element is ensuring that teachers have materials and supplies, including assistive technology, to effectively adapt classroom instruction as needed. Each school has an active administrative team that uses data, including on attendance, to inform the development of a tiered system of support.

City Neighbors High School demonstrates how to lay a foundation for excellent attendance through a powerful combination of relationship-building and engaging learning experiences. Every morning, the school leader and assistant principal stand at the front door greeting every child by name. They offer high-fives and take students aside to ask "Hey, what's going on

today?" The goal is for students to attend not because of the law or expectation, but because of their sense of belonging and purpose. An extensive internship program based on student interests brings over 75 business partnerships to the school and connects the community to the success of each student.

Each student is assigned to a pod – a physical space where 15 or 16 students gather every day with a pod advisor throughout their school years. Students have the opportunity to connect and interact with each other as well as their advisors. The pod – combined with challenging classes, project-based learning, performance assessment, structures that give students a voice and attention to the physical environment – fosters a culture of learning and respect. Students have access to meaningful community-based internships beginning in 11th grade.

The Pod Advisors serve as a direct connection to the students and families. Because of their strong relationships, families and faculty help each other through challenges that might otherwise affect attendance, such as arranging for car pools and reaching out to help with wrap around services for students and their families when they are challenged with a particular crisis.

City Neighbors reveals the power of providing a school experience that is rich in educational opportunity and of creating a structure for belonging designed to make sure that the City Neighbors motto comes true – "every student is KNOWN. LOVED, and INSPIRED."