



Cesar Chavez Academy Intermediate: Applications of the Multi-Tiered Attendance Strategy

Every School Day Counts Detroit Case Study #2

The César Chávez Academy District began operations in 1996 and has since expanded to four southwest Detroit campuses which include the Cesar Chavez Academy Upper Elementary (CCA Upper EI). The CCA District serves more than 2,000 students in grades K-12, and is the second-largest K-12 charter school in Michigan. Students at the CCA District learn in a culturally diverse and bilingual environment. Hispanic students account for 88% of enrollment, and 94% of students come from economically disadvantaged families.


At the start of the 2020-21 school year, Andrea Walley, the principal of César Chávez Academy Intermediate, set out to focus on attendance. She brought forward pre-Covid-19 attendance strategies that increased the percentage of students regularly attending school from 73% to 75% in 2019-20 and made adjustments in response to the pandemic.

Following the Attendance Works Peer Learning Network (PLN) seminars, Walley and her team added attendance to its PBIS program as a component of academic achievement and overall student success. They employed the Attendance Works [multi-tiered intervention framework](#) to guide their work with teachers, students, families and community partners. Each tier of the framework engages groups of students based upon their rates of chronic absence, and offers the following levels of support:

- *Tier 1* represents universal strategies to encourage good attendance for all students.
- *Tier 2* provides early intervention for students who need more support to avoid chronic absence.
- *Tier 3* offers intensive support for students facing the greatest challenges to getting to school, such as homelessness, chronic illness or neglect.

The *3 Tiers of Intervention* are bolstered by a range of *Foundational Supports*, which are the building blocks of good schools that promote attendance. CCA Upper EI embraces this approach to reduce rates of chronic absence.

School Data Snapshot



César Chávez Academy
Upper Elementary School

Location: SW Detroit @4100 Martin St, Detroit, MI 48210

Principal: Andrea Walley

Grades: 3rd - 5th

Total Enrollment: 432

Chronic Absence Rate (SY 19-20): 21.4%

Chronic Absence Rate (SY 20-21): data unavailable
*During Covid-19 pandemic, attendance has been taken as two-positive engagements per week.

Demographics (Race/Ethnicity): Hispanic - 91%;
 African-American - 2%; Caucasian - 2.5%; Unidentified - 4%

English Language Learners: 73%
Special Education: 21%

Unique Approach:

- a strong school leader
- a strong attendance team that coordinates across departments

Foundational Supports for Learning

Establishing foundational supports for learning during a pandemic is challenging, but not impossible. CCA Upper El demonstrated this by facilitating access to technology equipment and connectivity, supporting all families to facilitate learning at home, and maintaining positive relationships between school staff, students and families.

CCA Upper El team mobilized their family outreach efforts throughout the onset of the pandemic and at the start of the 2020-21 school year. Recalling the first weeks of the pandemic, Walley said, *“We had call lists and call lists and more call lists to just check on the families.”* Home visits were conducted for the small number of families who were unreachable by phone. From these calls and home visits, they learned that families needed laptops and hotspots to support homeschooling. CCA Upper El distributed Chromebooks, fifty hotspots and installed *GoGuardian* on each Chromebook to monitor student software usage.

The hope was to provide all families with support to facilitate learning at home for a short period of time. As the pandemic restrictions extended into the summer months, Walley prepared her staff and families for many more months of virtual learning and the options for in-person learning. Throughout the summer, school staff polled families to assess their preferences between in-person and virtual learning. The outcome of the poll was a plan for hybrid instruction that gave families a choice.

In September 2020, about one-third of students returned for virtual learning. Educators faced the challenges of getting those students to show up for Zoom sessions fully engaged and to follow through on offline assignments and asynchronous lessons. Walley said then, *“We’re working hard and we’re doing everything we can, but it’s just not the same as [students] coming to school. So, the parents’ ability and capacity to help their child is a huge piece of our virtual learning.”* Zooming into students’ homes and other learning environments gave educators a unique view of what was happening at home. CCA Upper El staff positioned themselves as a support not only to students but to the parents and caregivers shepherding virtual learning.

Walley identified a number of factors that she believed influenced students’ ability to stay on task during virtual learning. Parents struggled to make sure students logged in for Zoom meetings regularly and didn’t access online distractions like TikTok and YouTube. Yet expecting families to oversee distance learning while navigating the harsh realities of living paycheck to paycheck, with limited access to sufficient food, stable housing or health care is unrealistic. The downside of delegating oversight of distance learning to parents and caregivers trying to make ends meet is learning loss for students, Walley said.

For in-person instruction, certified teachers hosted instruction for students whose families opted to return to campus. The teachers were supported by staff who volunteered to work in the in-person learning labs. Walley had hoped that more volunteers and additional facility space were available to host additional learning labs on campus. For parents who are overwhelmed with homeschooling, returning to the building was the best solution to avoid student learning loss.

Tier One: Universal Prevention

Walley used the *Every Opportunity* video shared by Attendance Works to help her staff understand the value of relationship building for getting students to school every day. *“First [the video] showed the students coming in and the staff was not very kind... And then it showed [staff] greeting the kids in this way that is personable and makes them feel welcome and the huge difference that makes. And it seems like it would be small, but I played that for my staff and I think some of them really were able to take that to heart.”* (Note: This video, produced by the Atlanta Speech school, can be found [here](#))

Monitoring student attendance, engagement and accountability during hybrid and virtual learning is a major priority for CCA Upper El staff. The key is maintaining a positive school climate and culture whether teaching is in person or virtual. *“If you [teachers] do nothing else, you need a relationship with your student because without that you can't reach them... When we go through our classrooms, we look for what we call a four to one positive ratio. If they say something corrective or negative, then they have to use four positives to keep that climate in the classroom at a certain level. And that [concept] comes from our school-wide PBIS program,”* Walley said.

Pre-Covid-19, the school community included a network of partners to provide attendance recognition, extracurricular and after school activities, transportation and health care. Examples of enrichment partners include *InsideOut Literary Arts*, which provides professional writers to work with students to show them that each unique voice matters, and *Living Arts*, a performing, visual and media arts program that brings teaching artists to schools supporting the core curriculum and training teachers to utilize the arts in their own classroom.

Absences due to illness are particularly challenging during the pandemic. Walley said, *“it is a really tricky thing this year because when students have any illness that has a symptom related to Covid-19, they cannot come to school for two full weeks and they have to be symptom-free.”* The reality is that symptoms of the common cold and Covid-19 are treated equally by quarantine guidelines. The school has experienced only one positive case among hybrid students and a few positive cases for virtual students.

Tier Two: Early Intervention

Walley understands that students who missed a certain number of days in the first month of the school year were much more likely to miss days throughout the year. She assigned two staff members to serve as attendance liaisons on top of their duties as math interventionists. CCA Upper El uses grant funds, including 31A funding, to fund additional hours for attendance liaisons. The attendance liaisons, along with district-level staff, teachers and partners, contacted and met with parents of students who showed early signs of chronic absence. For families who did not respond to phone calls, school staff conducted home visits.

If a student is absent for a certain number of days, CCA Upper El requires their parent or caregiver to come to campus for a meeting. They use this approach to show parents that they are serious about attendance. *“When parents come in for meetings, or we contact parents, we look to make sure that the attendance goes up, because if it doesn't start improving then we keep on with our interventions of contacting parents and trying to provide support,”* said Walley. By reaching out to families, talking with them and addressing their needs, the school establishes trust.

Tier Three: Intensive Intervention

For students who needed Tier 2 and 3 supports, teachers sent messages via ClassDojo or email. If parents didn't respond, teachers set up Google phone numbers to share with students and parents. Home visits were the best approach for keeping track of students needing Tier 3 support, Walley said.

From these conversations, the team identified the support families needed and provided resources that will enable students to attend school. The school works closely with a social worker, who handles follow-up with families and coordinates wraparound services. The social worker distributes food and clothing and helps families access Section 8 and SNAP. CCA Upper EI works with The Children's Center, Southwest Solutions, and Covenant House Michigan to address families' most unmet housing and mental health needs.

- The Children's Center provides comprehensive integrated health care to students.
- Southwest Solutions programs include mental health counseling, children and youth services, affordable and supportive housing, homeownership services, financial coaching, job training and adult literacy.
- Covenant House Michigan is a shelter and support system for homeless and trafficked youth.

More than a reflection of parental capacity, the demands of the pandemic are exacerbated by the systemic barriers created by a lack of socioeconomic support and resources — transportation, health care, living wages, etc. Surfacing and addressing these barriers faced by students and their families is a core part of CCA Upper EI's approach to student attendance and academic achievement.

Attendance Best Practices

A culture of personalized attention drives the teachers' attitude toward attendance at CCA Upper EI. Walley said, *"I've noticed a trend from the teachers, different teachers will have a 100% attendance and others will be missing four or five kids. So, there are things that staff are doing to reach out and make sure that students are connected. I have teachers with really high expectations and when the students don't come to school, they're like, 'Well, where were you?'"*

This school-wide attitude toward attendance can be attributed to the following:

- Exposure to best practices and training to address chronic absence.
- Integration of attendance into the school-wide intervention program connected to academic achievement and overall student success.
- Development of a comprehensive plan to address chronic absence with prevention and intervention strategies.

About the Every School Day Counts Detroit Case Study Series: In October and November 2020, Every School Day Counts Detroit and Attendance Works conducted interviews with school staff from five local public charter schools to document their efforts to sustain school attendance during the Covid-19 pandemic. The schools chosen represented diverse grade levels and were headed by leaders committed to implementing effective attendance strategies. Unfortunately, it was not possible to determine whether these practices resulted in reductions in chronic absence rates given shifts in attendance taking practices and the challenging economic, social and health conditions facing families and communities during the pandemic. This work has been made possible by support from United Way for Southeastern Michigan and The Skillman Foundation's investment in education and increased school attendance for all children in Detroit.