

# RESEARCH BRIEF

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## Improving Attendance In Our Schools: A National Review of the Issues and a Look at Interventions from Communities In Schools

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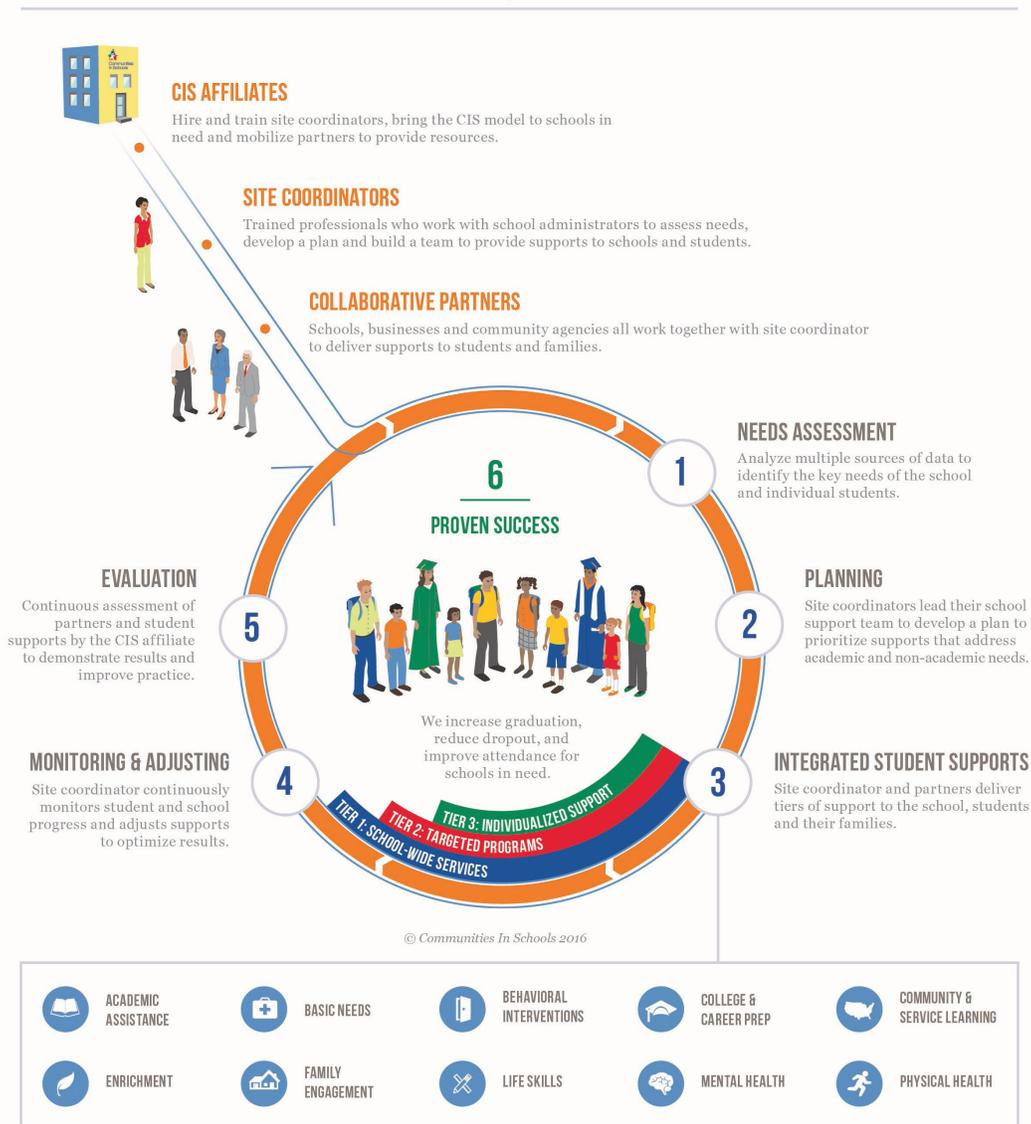


## ABOUT COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS AND INTEGRATED STUDENT SUPPORTS

Communities In Schools (CIS) is a national network of independent 501(c)(3) organizations working to keep students in school and on the path to graduation. Serving nearly 1.5 million students in over 2,300 schools in 25 states and the District of Columbia, CIS collaborates to surround students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life. In schools, site coordinators and other local affiliate-level staff are deployed to serve and connect at-risk students and families with resources via an evidence-based model of Integrated Student Supports (ISS - see below).

Integrated Student Supports are defined by Child Trends as “a school-based approach to promoting students’ academic success by coordinating a seamless system of wraparound supports for the child, the family, and schools, to target students’ academic and non-academic barriers to learning” (Moore K. A., 2014). Each year, CIS site coordinators conduct a comprehensive assessment in order to identify and prioritize risk factors, such as chronic absenteeism, teen pregnancy, trauma and violence, and poverty. Based on the results of the needs assessment, Communities In Schools focuses on 10 categories of support to best serve disadvantaged students across the United States.

## OUR UNIQUE MODEL



## ATTENDANCE: AN OVERVIEW

One of the key ways to help students stay in school and graduate is to ensure that students are consistently in the classroom. Although ensuring that students have good school attendance seems like an obvious solution to school success, its importance is often questioned by parents and students and misinterpreted by schools. According to the Office of Civil Rights, during the 2013-2014 school year more than 6.8 million students in the U.S. were chronically absent (missing 15 or more days of the school year). This equates to about 14% - or 1 in 7 - of all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Despite some progress in recent years, millions of students still face barriers to regular school attendance.

This brief will discuss the importance of school attendance, reasons that students are often absent from school, and how commonly reported school data can mask chronic absenteeism. We will also provide information on how to work with students, families, and schools to increase student attendance, and highlight some of the whole-school and individual student attendance-focused interventions implemented by CIS in schools across the country. Finally, we will look to the future, discussing opportunities for CIS affiliates nationwide to leverage the CIS model in partnership with schools as they align with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to report and address absenteeism.

### Improving Attendance Matters Because It Reflects:

- **Exposure to Language:** Starting in Pre-K, attendance equals exposure to language-rich environments especially for low-income children.
- **Time on Task in Class:** Students only benefit from classroom instruction if they are in class.
- **On Track for Success:** Chronic absence is a proven early sign of academic trouble and dropping out of school.
- **College Readiness:** Attendance patterns predict college enrollment and persistence.
- **Engagement:** Attendance reflects engagement in learning.
- **Effective Practice:** Schools, communities, families can improve attendance when they work together. (Attendance Works, 2014)

For research, see: <http://www.attendanceworks.org/research/>

### Why is school attendance important?

Students are required to spend, on average, between 175 and 180 days in school a year (Center for Public Education, 2011) for the 13 years from kindergarten through 12th grade. If a child misses one day of school every two weeks, they miss 18 days each year. If that student continues to be absent over the

course of 13 school-going years, he or she will have missed 234 days out of their entire time in school. In other words, a day of missed school every two weeks can lead to over a year's worth of school missed over the course of a school career.

When students miss school, it not only impacts their learning but also the school climate and the effectiveness of teachers with other students. Absent students miss out on presented material, the chance to engage in rich dialogue with adults and peers (which may not be possible in the student's home environment), and social interactions with other students. Children who attend school regularly may have "diminished" educational experiences "when teachers must divert their attention to meet the learning and social needs of children who miss substantial amounts of school" (Chang & Romero, 2008).

When a large number of students are frequently absent, teachers have more difficulty building students' skills and monitoring progress (GreatSchools, 2014). Moreover, students cannot progress and ultimately graduate if they are not in school. Missing 10 percent or more of the school year – just two to three days per month – is a proven early warning indicator of academic failure and, eventually, high school dropout (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Multiple sources show that "school attendance is a strong predictor of course performance and the strongest predictor of high school dropout" (Rogers, Duncan, Ternowski, Subramanyan, & Reitano, 2017).

When examining the relationship between attendance and test scores, Dr. Robert Balfanz from Johns Hopkins University reported an "essentially linear relationship between each missed day and lower test performance". The reason for the absence – whether it is excused or unexcused – does not matter. Any absence has a negative impact on student success (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

The importance of attending school regularly begins in kindergarten and continues throughout a child's education until high school graduation. Researchers and practitioners have traditionally focused efforts to address absenteeism, especially truancy or unexcused absence, on secondary schools. Yet research published in 2008 by the National Center for Children in Poverty showed that the ill effects of chronic absence extend to kindergarten and elementary school students regardless of gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Chronic absence in kindergarten is associated with lower academic performance in first grade. For low-income children, the connection to poor performance extended through fifth grade (Chang & Romero, 2008).

Communities experience the negative consequences of absenteeism as well. When students miss out on opportunities to learn, they could be more likely to participate in risk-taking behavior, such as fighting and shoplifting. They also might lack

important skills that would contribute to the local economy (Kim & Streeter, 2016), thus continuing the cycle of poverty in their communities.

### Why do students not attend school?

Students miss school for many reasons. According to Dr. Balfanz, in a report on absenteeism in the nation's public schools, the reasons can be divided into three broad categories:

1. **Students who cannot** attend school due to illness, family responsibilities, housing instability, the need to work, or involvement with the juvenile justice system.
2. **Students who will not** attend school to avoid bullying, unsafe conditions, harassment and embarrassment.
3. **Students who do not** attend school because they, or their parents, do not see the value in being there, they have something else they would rather do, or nothing stops them from skipping school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Dr. Douglas D. Ready, citing statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics in an article in the journal *The Sociology of Education*, notes that “children living in poverty are 25 percent more likely to miss three or more days of school per month. There is a direct and complicated link between family income and children’s school attendance” (2010). Absenteeism is particularly prevalent in areas where children face barriers like poor transportation, inadequate housing, and insufficient health care (Manko, 2016).

Children living in poverty are far more likely to be chronically absent from school. One of the most effective strategies for providing pathways out of poverty is to create opportunities and interventions to get students who live in high-poverty neighborhoods to attend school every day. According to Dr. Balfanz, these interventions – even without any additional qualitative improvements in the American education system – will increase achievement, high school graduation, and college attainment rates (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

### What is chronic absence?

All schools track data on attendance. In many states, school funding is attached to reported average daily attendance (ADA). ADA is “the aggregate number of days of attendance of all students during a school year... divided by... the number of days school is in session during that year” (USLegal, 2017). When looking at trends, ADA shows who is there each day and which days of the week have the worst attendance. Schools also track truancy, which is defined as an unexcused absence from school. If a student is absent without an excuse by the parent/guardian or if the student leaves school or a class without permission of the teacher or administrator in charge, it will be considered an unexcused absence and the student will be considered truant (National Center for School Engagement, 2006). Collecting

truancy data lets you know how many students are missing days without adult permission – in other words, how many students have unexcused absences.

What many states and school districts did not track until recently is chronic absence. Chronic absence is most commonly defined as missing an extended amount of school for any reason, and includes both excused and unexcused absences. In the report *The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation’s Public Schools*, Dr. Balfanz defined chronic absence as “missing 10 percent of a school year for any reason” (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). With the passage of ESSA, states are now required to report chronic absenteeism rates (Attendance Works, 2015).

#### Absenteeism and ESSA

The Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, was signed into law in December 2015. It reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and made further efforts to advance equity and made schools accountable for measures of school and student success other than academic scores. For more information, visit: <https://www.ed.gov/essa>

Hedy Chang, the director of Attendance Works, “a national and state initiative that promotes... tracking chronic absence data” (Attendance Works, 2017) emphasizes the importance of tracking chronic absenteeism. According to Chang, when schools further analyze the data that show high ADA rates, they may be surprised by the high numbers of individual students missing 10% or more of the school year - the students who are chronically absent. In other words, schools may report high levels of ADA, but this statistic can mask chronic absence that specific students exhibit (Chang H., 2014).

Tracking how many and which students miss too much school provides school administrators a picture of the chronically absent students at their school. At the school level, data on chronic absenteeism will show specific students in need of intervention. For administrators at the district level, the data will show which schools have the highest concentration of chronically absent students. However, all three statistics – ADA, truancy, and chronic absence – are important to help understand attendance issues and to determine appropriate attendance interventions that are needed at both the school and district level (Chang H., Interview, 2014).

### PROMISING ATTENDANCE INTERVENTIONS

In a chapter in *The Encyclopedia of Social Work*, Dr. Johnny S. Kim and Dr. Calvin L. Streeter note that “[a] multidisciplinary strategy—addressing truancy from three different sides, i.e., student, family, and school—is the only way to make long-term strides in improved school attendance” (2016).

This section includes general examples of strategies that can be employed to address absenteeism and truancy, as well as specific examples of interventions being implemented across the country by CIS site coordinators and their community and school partners.

### What are some promising student interventions?

Literature on absenteeism indicates that there are multiple ways to encourage student attendance. Among some of the most promising interventions are:

1. Awarding simple incentives, such as recognition or extra play time; educators can also ask students what incentives they find to be the most rewarding (Attendance Works, 2011)
2. Targeted and personalized interventions, such as mentoring (Railsback, 2004; Attendance Works, 2016) (Kearney & Diliberto, 2014), social and emotional support (Kim & Streeter, 2016; Kearney & Diliberto, 2014), academic support (Kearney & Diliberto, 2014), tailored action plans (Attendance Works, 2016), and consistent, caring adult interactions (McLean, 2016)
3. Addressing the root causes of absenteeism, by providing school meals (Attendance Works, 2016) and connecting students with healthcare and mental health services that prevent them from coming to school (Kearney & Diliberto, 2014).

Many of these and other strategies are used by CIS site coordinators to help students improve attendance. For example, to address the root causes of absenteeism, many site coordinators work with individual students to provide coaching and goal setting; phone calls home to students and parents; and conferences with individual students or focus groups of students to find out why they are absent.

*“[A] multidisciplinary strategy - addressing truancy from three different sides, i.e., student, family, and school - is the only way to make long-term strides in improved school attendance.”*

– Johnny S. Kim and Calvin L. Streeter,  
*Strategies and Interventions for Improving School Attendance*

Site coordinators are also making an effort to help students understand the importance of attendance, the impact of attendance on students’ academic outcomes, and how just a few days absent a month can make a difference in a student’s inability to make up the work they have missed.

Some site coordinators personalize assignments by having students check in with them when they arrive at school and check out when they leave. That personal one-on-one contact may be just what a child needs to get them to come to school each day.

One of the most frequent strategies employed by site coordinators when working with individual students is to conduct home visits. In Communities In Schools of Miami, site coordinators often go out in teams as soon as they know a student is absent and try to get them in class the same day.

The site coordinator at Highland Springs Elementary School in Richmond, Virginia, noticed that several students struggled with unexcused tardiness, which caused students to miss instructional time. These students often fell through a gap in the school’s official attendance policies, since unexcused tardiness was not considered a full absence. The site coordinator consequently developed an intervention plan in which students simply checked in with the site coordinator in the morning before reporting to class. If they were on time, they received a checkmark; if they were tardy, they had to go straight to class without the acknowledgement of a check mark. On Fridays, they would recap their progress together, and the student could receive a small incentive based on how many checkmarks he or she had accumulated that week. This simple intervention has shown notable impact. In the first month of intervention, the participants were on time an average of 61% of school days. By the fourth month of intervention, their average had increased to 92%. The Highland Springs site coordinator stated, “this reinforces what CIS has said all along: the key is RELATIONSHIPS.” Knowing that even just one person is looking for them to show up at school on time each day can sometimes make all the difference for students struggling with attendance.

### How can stakeholders work with families to support attendance?

Parent and family engagement is crucial to any comprehensive approach to addressing attendance issues. Attendance Works has created a toolkit for parents, *Bringing Attendance Home: Engaging Parents in Preventing Chronic Absence*, which is a good resource to educate parents on the importance of attendance and how they can support their child and school by ensuring their child attends school regularly (Attendance Works, 2014).

Some general strategies for engaging parents in addressing attendance are:

1. Staying in consistent communication with families, by sending information on the importance of attendance and the impact that absenteeism has on success (Attendance Works, 2011), communicating daily if necessary, conducting regular conferences or home visits if necessary (Kearney & Diliberto,

2014), and even sending a postcard home to encourage families to improve student attendance (Rogers, et al., 2017).

2. Tailoring interventions to a family's needs by using a comprehensive approach (Kim & Streeter, 2016) and providing access to resources like food and transportation (Attendance Works, 2011), offering parent support groups to discuss parenting skills, "assisting parents with their child's homework instruction", and connecting parents with appropriate healthcare agencies (Kearney & Diliberto, 2014).
3. Respecting families by fostering a culturally responsive environment (Railsback, 2004) and valuing the insight and advice of parents and families (Kim & Streeter, 2016).

Many CIS affiliates are focusing on collaborating with parents to improve student attendance. Site coordinators communicate regularly with families, providing information to parents on the importance of attending school through home visits or during parent meetings. They also share information with parents on local attendance policies and assist with interpreting the data on attendance percentages.

At Denny Middle School in Seattle, Washington, the school site team provides an incentive and a frequently scarce resource - food - via a potluck supper held once a month that is attended by parents and students. Site staff members use this time to not only celebrate those students who have perfect or nearly perfect attendance, but also those who are struggling but showing improvement. The students who are showing improvement have been identified as chronically absent and are receiving support to address the root causes for their absences. During the event, site staff members take the opportunity to provide parents with information on district and state attendance policies.

The P16Plus Council of Greater Bexar County, a lead partner in education in San Antonio Texas, created a collaborative called SA Kids Attend To Win to communicate the importance of attendance in Pre-K through 12th grade. Their work with schools and nonprofit organizations focuses on chronically absent students.

With the help of Communities in Schools of San Antonio, which provided training and support, school staff reached out to families of chronically absent children by asking them "What are your hopes and dreams for your child?" This was a softer, non-accusatory approach which allowed parents to share barriers. Parents cited three major reasons for the lack of school attendance: transportation, health, and lack of awareness of the importance of attendance. After discussing barriers, Communities In Schools of San Antonio worked in partnership with other organizations in the San Antonio School district to help implement tailored interventions for each family. The interventions that Communities In Schools of San Antonio site

coordinators brokered or delivered were targeted to address the specific barriers that caused each child or family to struggle with attendance.<sup>1</sup>

### Two Partners in Preventing Absenteeism

1. According to their website, "Diplomas Now partners with the school community to reorganize the schedule so each student at risk has caring adults and those adults have the tools to improve achievement." (Diplomas Now, 2017). Diplomas Now collaborates with several partners across the United States, including Communities In Schools, City Year, and Talent Development. For more information, go to: <http://diplomasnow.org/about/what-we-do/>

2. Get Schooled's "mission has been to empower and engage young people and to give them the tools and inspiration to get the education they need to succeed." (Get Schooled, 2017).

For more information, visit: <https://getschooled.com/about>

### What works in school?

Any attempt at improving student attendance needs to be woven throughout the fabric of the entire school. In the resource guide *Improving School Attendance*, the Virginia Department of Education cites school climate as one factor that influences truancy, noting that "students [who] feel supported by peers, school staff members, or another caring adult" will feel more connected with the school and therefore will be more likely to attend school (Virginia Department of Education, 2005).

Examples of promising attendance strategies employed by schools and school districts across the country include:

1. Making school an engaging place by creating friendly, school-wide competitions and rewarding classes with the best attendance (Attendance Works, 2011); involving students in making school-wide attendance interventions and strategies (Kim & Streeter, 2016); providing unique after-school learning opportunities (Attendance Works, 2016) that students with good attendance can partake in (Kim & Streeter, 2016); and fostering a welcoming, warm school climate (Attendance Works, 2016; Kim & Streeter, 2016).
2. Creating supportive infrastructure by ensuring that schools have consistent policies, a data-focused culture, and cohesive leadership (Railsback, 2004); offering important initiatives, like healthcare programs (Attendance Works, 2016; Sparks, 2016) and truancy courts (Kearney & Diliberto, 2014) within the school; creating smaller class sizes (Kim & Streeter, 2016) that focus on "individualized and interdisciplinary instruction" (Kearney & Diliberto, 2014); and implementing whole-school programs like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (Kearney & Diliberto, 2014) and the Positive Action Program (Kim & Streeter, 2016).

<sup>1</sup> For more information about attendance resources available through P16 in San Antonio, visit: <http://www.p16plus.org/resources/sa-kids-attend-to-win/>

CIS affiliates across the country are working closely with the school districts and schools that they serve in order to help inform school policy and shape the school environment. During the 2013-14 school year, 21 schools participated in the Diplomas Now/Get Schooled challenge. Led by CIS site coordinators, each of the schools worked together to develop whole-school efforts to create an engaging environment that would encourage students to regularly attend school. One of the most important aspects of this challenge was the incorporation of student voices. Each of the schools identified a group voice of at least six student ambassadors. These 6-10 students helped the adult leaders of the challenge plan creative ways to get more students to attend school regularly. The student ambassadors held rallies in the school cafeterias, welcomed their fellow students into the buildings, made announcements to encourage regular school attendance, and helped hand out prizes to individual students and homerooms who won daily and weekly challenges conducted by the participating schools. The collaborative efforts of all the ambassadors, students, and school staff positively impacted attendance for the whole school.

At Rhodes Middle School in San Antonio, the principal decided that some of the ambassadors should be those students who were showing the most absences. When these students came to school, he recruited them to serve as the leaders who would design some of the interventions to get more students to come to school. This attention served as a huge incentive and provided motivation to get those students who had the most absences to attend school on a regular basis. The efforts of the participating schools resulted in a 2.27% increase in attendance rates across all the schools, with some schools seeing increases between 8% and 13%.

#### What are restorative practices?

“Restorative practices, which evolved from restorative justice, is a new field of study that has the potential to positively influence human behavior and strengthen civil society around the world. Restorative practices builds healthy communities, increases social capital, reduces the impact of crime, decreases antisocial behavior, repairs harm and restores relationships...”

The fundamental premise of restorative practices is that people are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes when those in positions of authority do things with them, rather than to them or for them.”

(International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2017)

Other CIS affiliates are working to provide the necessary infrastructure to promote attendance. One school district served by Communities In Schools, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), has been very proactive in moving away from a punitive/legal approach to behavior as well as attendance. For

example, ticketing students for truancy has gone down dramatically. LAUSD also recently passed the School Climate Bill of Rights that essentially prohibits police officers from being involved in any non-violent situations, such as with students skipping school or being truant. The site coordinators in CIS of Los Angeles are supporting each of their schools by implementing restorative practices to ensure that students are not being pushed out of school for attendance-related issues.

## CONCLUSION

### How CIS can help schools interested in addressing chronic absenteeism for ESSA.

Absenteeism, and chronic absenteeism in particular, have become increasingly important topics after the passage of ESSA. ESSA requires that states measure data outside the typical course performance data, stipulating that they also need to find a measure of “school quality or student success” (Whitmore Schanzenbach, Bauer, & Mumford, 2016). Multiple organizations have come out in support of states using chronic absenteeism to measure school quality. In a report from August 2016, Attendance Works writes that “[chronic] absence... is a powerful early warning predictor of student performance. It also meets or exceeds all of the rigorous criteria ESSA has established for accountability measures. Finally, and importantly from a cost standpoint, it is a measure which school districts must already report to the U.S. Department of Education and is based upon data that they already maintain in their systems” (Attendance Works, 2016a). The Brookings Institution, in a December 2016 publication, reported that chronic absenteeism is a measure that is less “susceptible to manipulation” and that taking actions to reduce chronic absenteeism would “likely... enhance student learning” (Whitmore Schanzenbach, Bauer, & Mumford, 2016).

Communities In Schools can continue to support schools as they work to collect data on chronic absenteeism and incorporate programs and practices to alleviate it. As seen in this brief, site coordinators are already teaming up with students, families, schools, and communities to address the barriers that prevent students from regularly attending school. Through the implementation of the CIS model of integrated student supports, site coordinators ensure that students at all grade levels are in school every day with the academic, social, and emotional support they need to be ready to learn, graduate, and succeed in life.

A recent third-party study found that high schools and elementary schools had better rates of average daily attendance after implementing the CIS model of ISS than they were predicted to achieve without the CIS model. Additionally, elementary schools that implemented the CIS model showed greater gains in attendance than similar schools that did not implement CIS.

(Somers & Haider, 2017)

## FURTHER RESOURCES

- *Addressing the Problem of Chronic Absenteeism: A Promising School-Community Partnership* - an overview of Communities In Schools affiliate organizations partnering with schools to bring holistic solutions to absenteeism. <https://www.communitiesinschools.org/our-data/publications/publication/addressing-problem-chronic-absenteeism>
- *Summary: Improving Attendance through the Never Been Absent (NBA) with Communities In Schools of the Big Country* - an analysis of how Communities In Schools of the Big Country partners with a local school district to implement a comprehensive attendance initiative. <https://www.communitiesinschools.org/our-data/publications/publication/summary-improving-attendance>
- Attendance Works, cited several times in this brief, recently released the report *Preventing Missed Opportunity: Taking Collective Action to Confront Chronic Absence*. The report cites relevant statistics and spells out six steps to leverage chronic absenteeism data. For this and other resources, visit their website: <http://www.attendanceworks.org/>
- “How to Get Kids to Class: To Keep Poor Students in School, Provide Social Services” by Daniel J. Cardinali  
In this New York Times op-ed from August, 2014, Daniel J. Cardinali, former President of Communities In Schools, proposed a solution to ensuring that children of poverty are provided the right supports so they can access the same opportunities that their more affluent classmates have, thus eliminating the negative impact of poverty on attendance and school success. Cardinali suggests that dedicated social-service specialists be put in every low-performing, high-poverty school.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/26/opinion/to-keep-poor-kids-in-school-provide-social-services.html>
- Check & Connect is an intervention used with K-12 students who shows warning signs of disengagement with school and who are at risk of dropping out. One of the demonstrated outcomes of Check & Connect is increased attendance of the identified students. The Check & Connect website contains several online resources that could be useful in addressing parent engagement and attendance interventions.  
<http://checkandconnect.umn.edu/>
- The Civil Rights Data Collection has a wealth of information related to poverty, race, and education – including chronic absenteeism. Their 2013-2014 First Look highlights chronic absenteeism stats and includes information on chronic absences for different races, English language learners, and other measures. <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/>

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## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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