Improving school attendance in Colorado: What it will take

Colorado School Attendance Taskforce

2018

Overview

WHO WE ARE:

The CDE School Attendance Taskforce is a cross-sector team of leaders in education across the state of Colorado working to answer the question: **How might we improve school attendance in Colorado?**

Overview

WHO WE ARE:
We are comprised of members from the Colorado Department of Education, state agencies, school-based truancy programs, community-based programs, and judicial truancy courts who convene together to proactively understand the factors influencing attendance in Colorado.

Overview

GOAL:

To collect and disseminate effective strategies for preventing school attendance problems, while increasing awareness to educational stakeholders of the magnitude and nature of the school attendance problem in our state.

Multiple ways to measure attendance

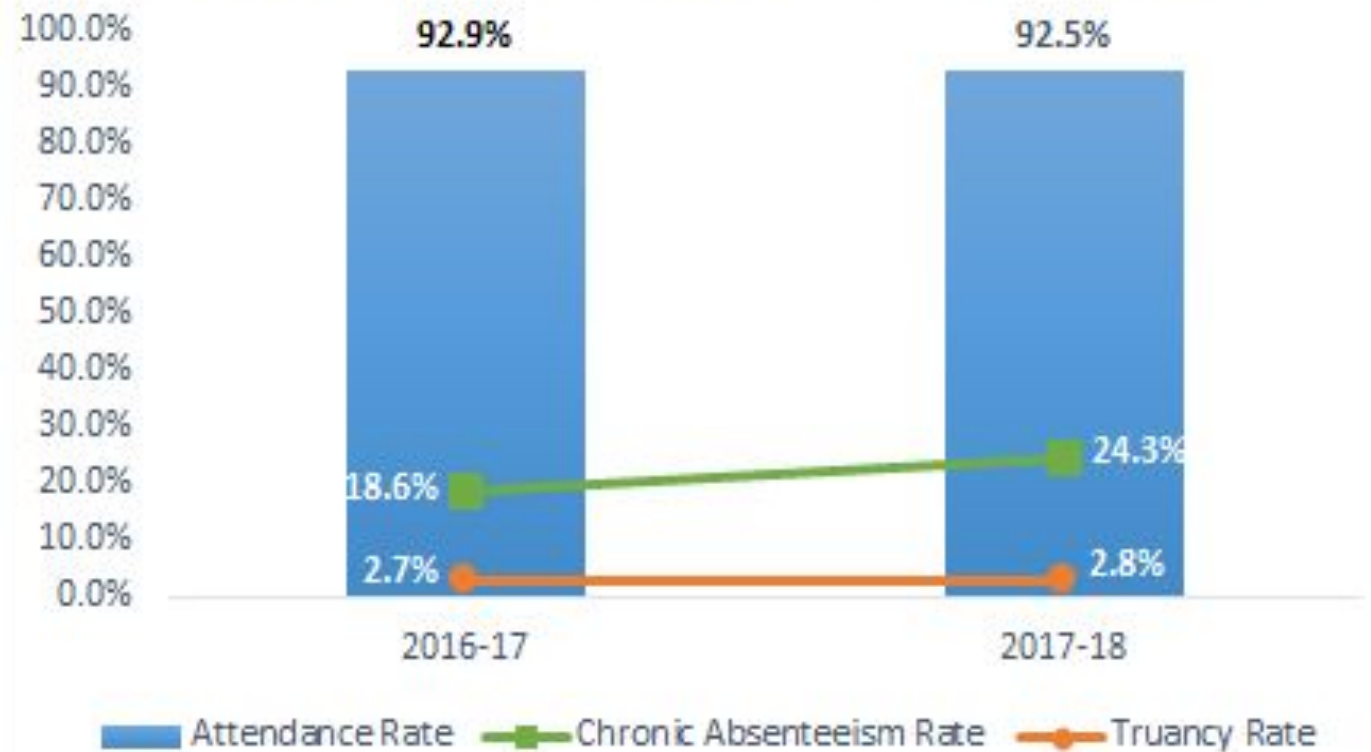Average Attendance → Truant & Habitually Truant → Chronically Absent

Data

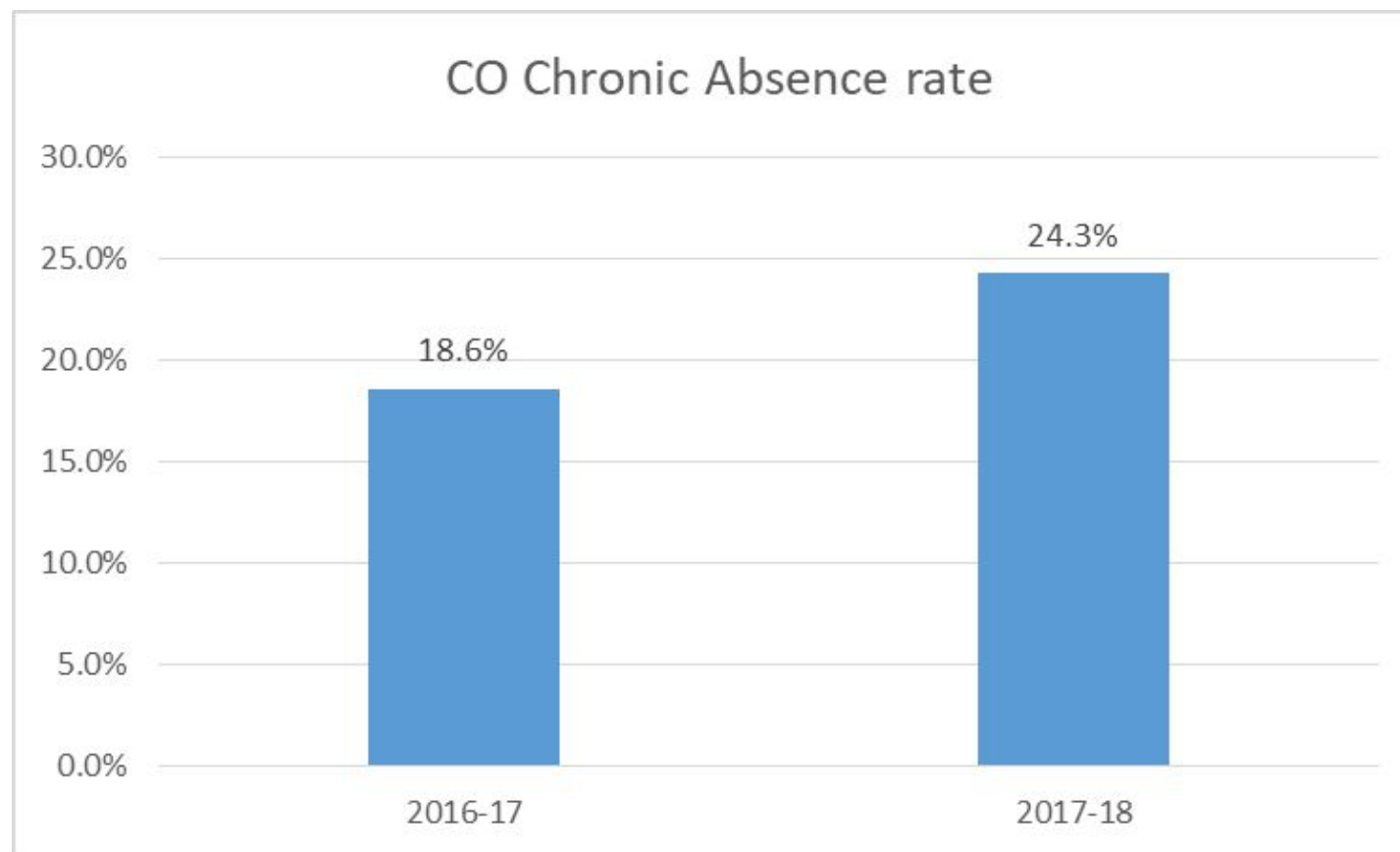Average Daily Attendance sometimes hides how large the challenge is that a school is facing.

Colorado School Attendance Rates

*School and district data can be found: Attendance Information Webpage.

Chronic Absence Levels have increased

Data
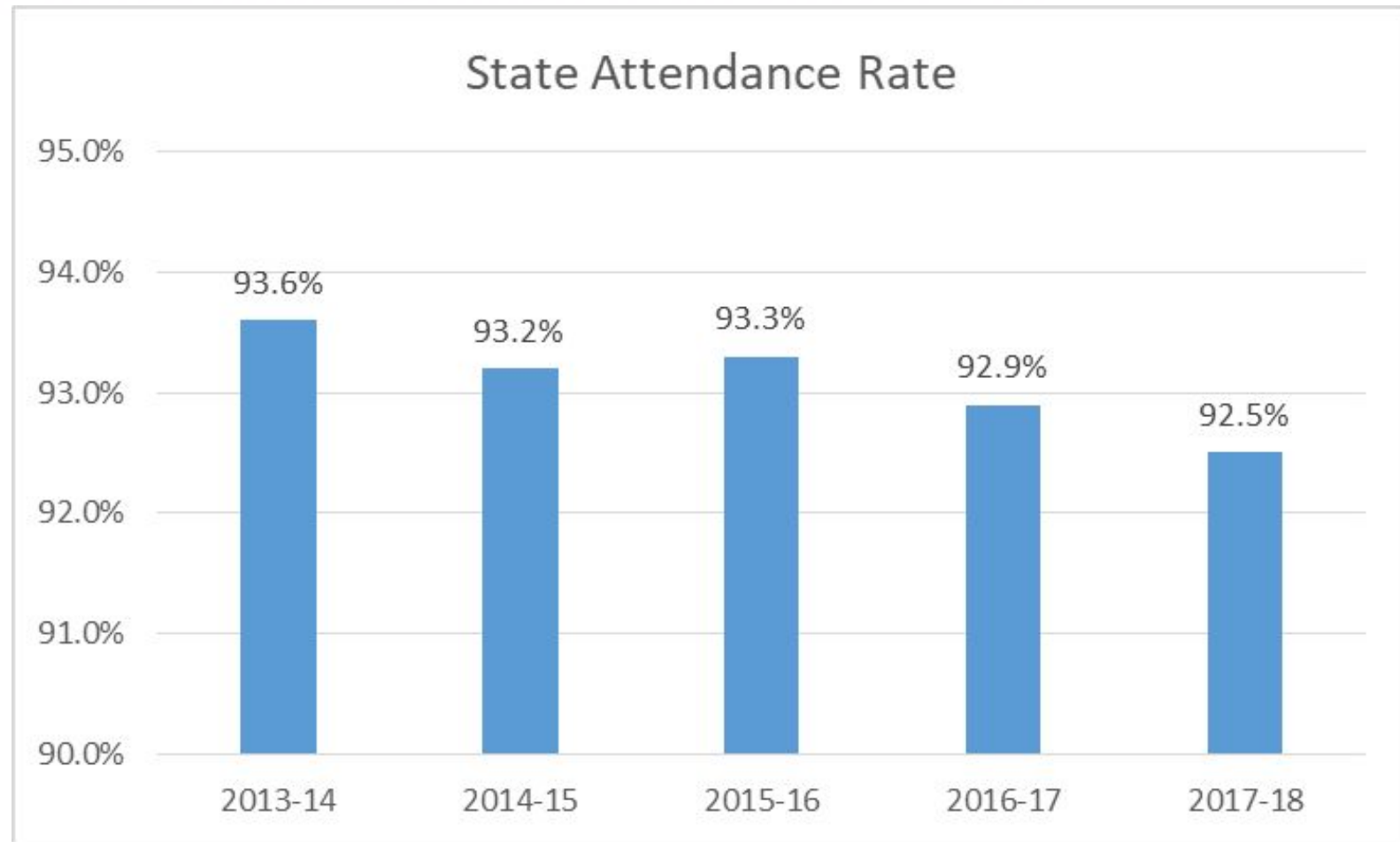
It is estimated that almost 1 in 4 CO students was chronically absent in 2017-18
(Over 210,000 students)

CO Chronic Absence rate

	2016-17	2017-18
	18.6%	24.3%

Collecting Chronic absenteeism data is a new data collection as of 2016-17.
Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing more than 10% of school for any reason.
The rate is calculated as the number of chronically absent students divided by K-12 pupil enrollment
*District data can be found at: Attendance Information webpage.

Data

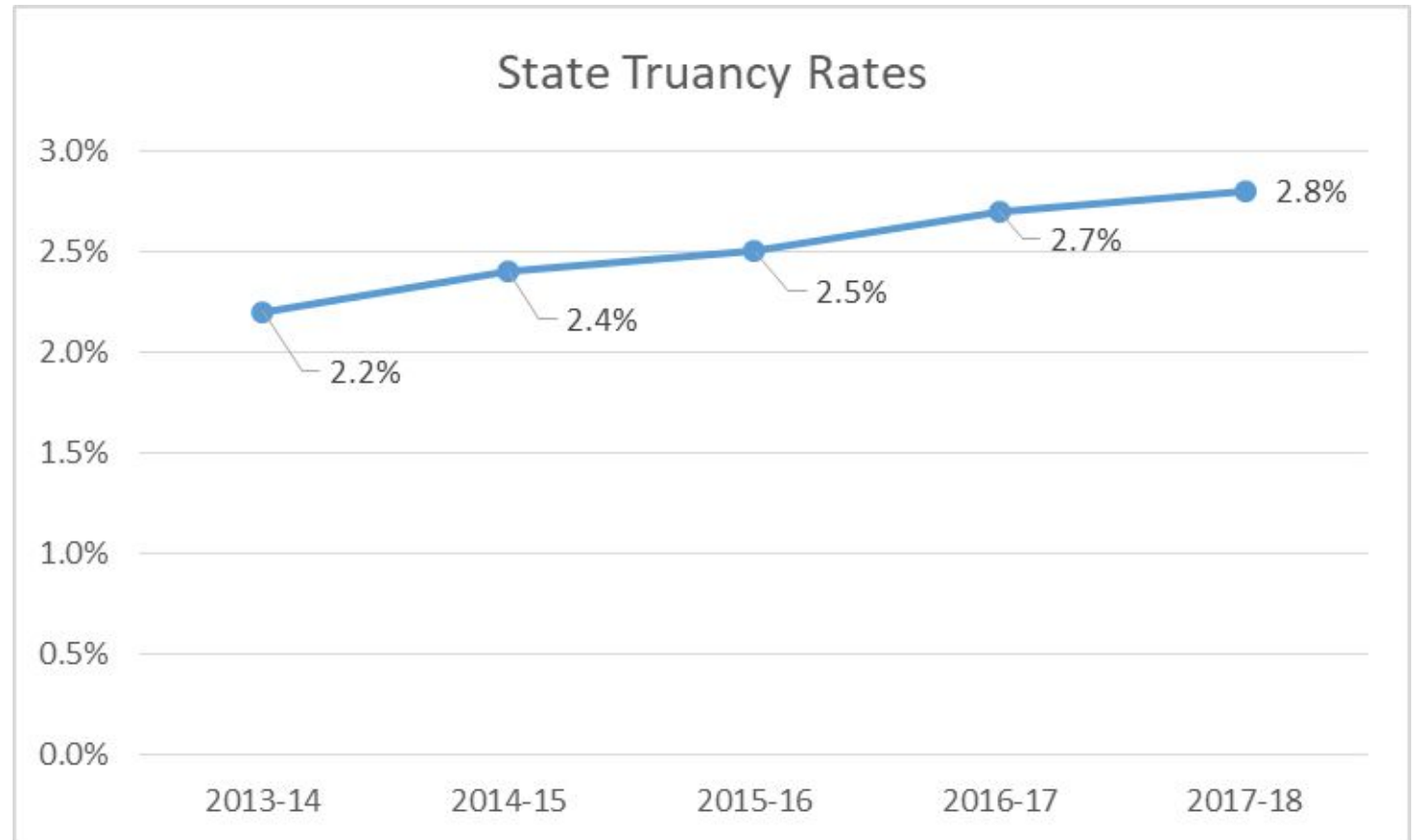Attendance rates have decreased slightly since 2013-14

State Attendance Rate

*Attendance Rate = Total Student Days Attended divided by the Total Student Days Possible

*School and district data can be found: Attendance Information Webpage.

Data

The truancy rate has increased slightly since 2013-14

State Truancy Rates

- 2013-14: 2.2%
- 2014-15: 2.4%
- 2015-16: 2.5%
- 2016-17: 2.7%
- 2017-18: 2.8%

Truancy Rate = Total Student Days Unexcused divided by Total Student Days Possible

*School and district data can be found: Attendance Information Webpage.

Number of Habitual Truant Students by Grade Level from 2014-15 to 2017-18

Data

The number of habitually truant students has risen slightly since 2014-15

*Habitual Truancy is defined as having four unexcused absences in a month or 10 in one year.

*School and district data can be found: Attendance Information Webpage.

Overview

APPROACH:
The taskforce disseminated questions and facilitated conversations with key informants across school districts, judicial districts, collaborative management teams, and internal taskforce members to generate information on proven strategies that prevent chronic absenteeism in our state.

RESULTS:

Six strategies emerged from the statewide-scan:

1. Create a multi-step process before a truancy court referral
2. Leverage funding from multiple sources
3. Focus attention on awareness of importance of attendance, truancy, and prevention and intervention supports that are available.
4. Build collaborative communities to help families navigate and more quickly access resources in the community
5. Improve school climate
6. Increase the value of education

Many people have a role in each strategy

State Agencies, School Systems, Courts, Communities, Students and Families

For each of the six strategies we identified, there are a range of potential things that each group or individual can do to implement the strategy. Recommendations for each of these groups are included.

An essential common thread: examples we observed often showed groups and individuals making adjustments in their approach to better meet the needs of more students.

STATE-AGENCIES

What state agencies can do

Priority focus:

1. Increase funding resources

2. Provide clarity on policies

3. Create awareness of state laws and regulations that address school attendance, chronic absenteeism and truancy.

4. Provide more guidance on reporting

5. Share information on research based practices and promising practices in Colorado

SCHOOLS

What school systems can do

Priority focus:

1. Create a multi-step process before a truancy court referral

2. Leverage funding from multiple sources

3. Build collaborative communities to help families cut through red tape

4. Improve school climate

5. Increase the value of education

COURTS

What courts can do

Priority focus:

1. Create consistent processes for processing truancy cases

2. Ensure local written policy and procedure that outlines process, timelines and stages and proceedings

3. Use Restorative Justice (RJ) approaches with truancy when appropriate

4. Formalize collaborative efforts with stakeholders with memorandum of understanding regarding case management

5. Provide leadership and support efforts to raise awareness of service needs

6. Eliminate the use of detention

COMMUNITIES

What communities can do

Community is a broad mix of individuals and organizations, including non-profit, schools, agencies, health providers, businesses etc.

Priority focus:
1. Identify a contact at the school district (eg: community/family liaison)

2. Consult with districts and schools prior to developing services to the school.

3. Focus attention on education of attendance and truancy.

4. Build collaborative communities and increase connections between partners.

5. Use collaborative communities to assist families in navigating and accessing services.

FAMILIES AND STUDENTS

What families and students can do

Priority focus:

1. Promote education and school attendance

2. Utilize community resources

3. Address social determinants

4. Self advocate with school and community resources

5. Look for opportunities to and provide feedback on what is useful and helpful in receiving support/improving attendance

Strategy 1

Create a multi-step process before a truancy court referral

Description of Strategy:

Multiple communities discussed focused steps taken at the school, district, and community-level prior to referral to truancy court.

Multiple judicial districts reported that they would send referrals back to school level staff if no interventions had been tried.

The Taskforce is highlighting this strategy because:

- This investment results in stronger relationships and connection with students, families, and schools.
- It allows communities to support root causes of absences.

Strategy 1

Create a multi-step process before a truancy court referral

What can SCHOOL SYSTEMS can do:

1. Engage service providers early enough in the process to prevent truancy court referral

2. Identify the issues in a valid way – Some use an assessment to determine mental health, trauma, or strict refusal to identify the issue and determine the needs of the child. This requires:
   - qualified assessors
   - time to give the assessments
   - getting families and students to the assessment meetings
   - (note- several districts indicated the process is overwhelming and too subjective)

3. Create a process that outlines and documents
   - The nature of the problem
   - Status after assessment
   - What needs to be done to remedy the situation
   - Or simply a checklist or protocols for preventative measures

4. Clearly articulate and consistently follow policies on truancy and truancy court including when to use courts.

Strategy 2

Leverage funding from multiple sources

Description of Strategy:
All districts had some general funds to support preventative efforts. Some started with state education grant funds (such as the Expelled and At-risk Services Grant Program) and built it in later.

Community funding varies widely, as multiple communities reported funding from community organizations, courts, and school districts.

The Taskforce is highlighting this strategy because:

- Education is a community project; by getting the community more involved as stakeholders, everyone becomes invested in the outcome
- Resources are a key barrier and a key facilitator
- At-risk students often need more resources than what's available, e.g. per pupil funding, special education and federal funding, Additional resources are needed to address attendance-related issues.

Strategy 2

Leverage funding from multiple sources

What can SCHOOL DISTRICTS do:

1. Advocate with school boards/legislature to set aside a certain fund allocation for truancy so the resources are available for truancy (could be a reallocation program)

2. Collaborate with your courts. The courts will not come up with the money since it is not allocated by the legislature, but could be strong partners through collaborative grant writing.

3. Create a common vision that connects different funding sources.

What can SCHOOLS do:

1. Identify people who may be able to serve multiple roles and support as attendance advocates, coordinators. For example: custodians, paras, lunch servers.

2. Have specific information on what funding is needed and for what types of support. For example: incentives, counseling, suicide prevention, or other things that can build a bridge between the school and student/family.

Strategy 2

Leverage funding from multiple sources

Go to sources for funding - District:
1. Division of Criminal Justice, Office of Adult and Juvenile Justice Programming, Department of Human Services
2. Formula grants - example Title 1, Title IV, per pupil revenue, free and reduced lunch type programs; rural area formula grants

Go to sources for funding - School/District:
1. Partnering with other districts to share resources - Hire a team across district lines
2. Competitive grants - private and public
3. Student Scholarships
4. In-kind supports through partnerships and donations
5. Student Assistant Programs
6. Colorado Department of Education Funding:
   - Expelled and At-Risk Student Services (EARSS)
   - Student Re-engagement Grant
   - School Health Professional Grant Program (SHPG)
   - School Bullying Prevention and Education Grant
   - Empowering Action for School Improvement (EASI) Application

Strategy 3

Focus attention on awareness of importance of attendance, truancy, and prevention and intervention supports that are available.

Description of Strategy:

There is a lack of awareness and understanding of the truancy process. Specifically, there is a common assumption that the process is punitive rather than preventative. Changing that mindset in the public is resource-intensive, but could be beneficial to engaging families and students in the process.

The Taskforce is highlighting this strategy because:

- Attendance and student engagement matters if we are to raise educational attainment in Colorado.
- Sanctions typically have short-term victories. Prevention pays off in the long-term.
- We are not seeing as much impact from punitive measures put in place by courts.

Strategy 3

Focus attention on awareness of importance of attendance, truancy, and prevention and intervention supports that are available.

What can SCHOOL SYSTEMS do:

1. Use on-on-one opportunities with students to change the narrative

2. Provide training for attendance clerks, principals on definitions, truancy court process, accurate attendance collection and a focus on prevention

3. Invite courts to present at Back-to-school night, information sessions on chronic absenteeism, or in-service trainings to share resources and process of truancy court

4. Identify ways to raise awareness among students and staff (For example, attendance awareness posters or events, social norming campaigns)

5. Ensure common definition of absences and provide training on chronic absenteeism, truancy, and habitual truancy

6. Ensure there is a process for categories of students who miss school for extended periods of time (students may be counted as absent when they are working with a tutor or with a teacher in a mental health facility)

Strategy 3

Focus attention on awareness of importance of attendance, truancy, and prevention and intervention supports that are available.

Talking Points for training and education:

1. Talk about what we are looking for instead of a deficit that we are trying to prevent. "Name and claim" the behavior that you want to see. Use PBIS as a model of how to create language around truancy and chronic absenteeism.

2. Truancy is not punitive, it is reframing education for the future. Truancy is supportive.

3. Education is important. Attendance is important in various forms (look for alternate options/individualized programming)

4. What is meaningful attendance?

5. How to better use technology. How can we continue to engage through different modalities?

6. Courts as supportive rather than punitive. Courts are looking at truancy from the vantage point to remove barriers.

7. Getting students back into school works through increasing intensity of supports with the most intense and highest level of support as truancy court.

Strategy 4

Build collaborative communities to help families navigate and more quickly access resources in the community

Description of Strategy:

Having all partners at the table helps families get quicker access to services.

Involve multiple organizations in the community to support families in their ability to improve attendance. This includes mental health services, homelessness services, and other organizations that can provide support for the root causes of students being absent.

The Taskforce is highlighting this strategy because:

- Truancy is team-based
- Streamlines the process for families
- Builds on two-generation approach
- Supports parents in self-identifying themselves if they need supports

Strategy 4

Build collaborative communities to help families navigate and more quickly access resources in the community

What can SCHOOL SYSTEMS do:

1. Use a central database that can be accessed by multiple partners

2. Serve as a central location to be able to connect families to community resources--the school is "the hub" where they can access multiple agencies in one location (the school).

3. Ensure common definition of absences and provide training on chronic absenteeism, truancy, and habitual truancy

4. Provide advocacy training for parents so they know how to:
   - access student portal information
   - understand and interpret student data
   - access resources on parenting

Strategy 4

Build collaborative communities to help families navigate and more quickly access resources in the community

By building and establishing these partnerships, student engagement is accelerated through shared resources.

Beneficial school and community partnerships:
- Neighborhood Schools
- School districts
- Courts
- State agencies
- Police departments
- Community-based education non-profits (youth and adult education)
- Health Care Providers who can speak to illness-related absences
- Mental Health Providers
- Community navigators
- Libraries
- Employers
- Interpreter/ translator

Example: Collaborative Management Programs

In 2004, the Colorado General Assembly passed House Bill 04-1451 to establish Collaborative Management Programs.

The legislative intent of HB 1451 was to address the increasing number of families served by more than one agency or system (juvenile justice, child welfare, health/mental health, education), which has placed significant demands on agencies' resources.

Goals:

- Develop a more uniform system of collaborative management that includes the input, expertise, and active participation of family advocacy organizations

- Reduce duplication and eliminate fragmentation of services provided to families

- Increase the quality, appropriateness, and effectiveness of services delivered to these children or families

- Encourage cost sharing among service providers

Strategy 4 Example

Collaborative Management Teams

Collaborative Management Teams

Mesa County Collaborative Management Team

- The School district has approximately 20 internal services. Those services cover safety and security, attendance, mental health, social and emotional wellbeing, substance abuse prevention, and aid to homeless youth and families. Each service requires a referral, which will vary according to the service requested.

- These service then refer families to one of our 17 community based partners if they can determine a single need, or to a broader assessment group which creates an interactive web data collection site. This site involves all community partners, a district reporting person and the original district referral source. They provide input and data to the data collection site to create a comprehensive view of the family, and can quickly provide the correct supports.

Strategy 5

Improve school climate

Description of Strategy:
Build a positive relationship with students and families so that school feels like a place they want to be. Tap into students' innate desire to learn.

The Taskforce is highlighting this strategy because:

- This may be the most foundational strategy for prevention of chronic absenteeism and truancy.

Strategy 5

Improve school climate

What can SCHOOL SYSTEMS do:

1. Engage parents so that they are recognized as an asset and their child's primary teacher in life

2. Utilize school climate surveys to students and families

3. Districts take responsibility to manage challenging situations, have more positive than negative interactions to build rapport, 3 negative interactions creates a long-lasting negative perception

4. Recognize all students rather than just particular groups that typically get recognition

5. Include students in leading the changes in school culture

6. Utilize Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) core features: intentional efforts to make schools positive, consistent, predictable, and safe

Strategy 5

Improve school climate

What can SCHOOL SYSTEMS do continued:

7. Create a safe and connected environment.

8. Negotiated agreements, higher education elements of teacher programs. Having teachers be a part of processes. Remove built-in limitations (contractual hours…)

9. Use climate and culture perception surveys tied to emotional, cognitive, and behavioral factors. This includes measures of how people interact within the environment, aesthetics of the space, sense of place, connectedness, and belonging. Students are seen as an asset to school and community and school is recognized as an asset to the community.

10. Choose to make changes despite limited resources. There are very successful schools with little to no resources. Leadership attitude will determine how the staff follow.

11. Ensure two-way communication with families on the climate/policies/rules

Strategy 6

Increase the value of education

Description of Strategy:
When students and families see the payoff of their education, they will be more motivated to attend school.

The Taskforce is highlighting this strategy because:
- New strategies should be implemented to add value to a students' education so that students experience immediate pay-off.

Strategy 6

Increase the value of education

What can SCHOOL SYSTEMS do:

1. Implement dual credit programs so that students achieve industry-recognized certification or associate's degrees when in high school

2. Implement an Individualized Career and Academic Plan (ICAP) program

3. Utilize experiential learning

4. Utilize apprenticeship and internship models

5. Focus on development of high quality curriculum

6. Improve the student experience--students feel the curriculum is relevant

7. Hire and develop staff that has the capacity to form appropriate and deeper connections with student, who own the student success, who teach the student and not the content

Strategy 6

Increase the value of education

What can SCHOOL SYSTEMS do continued:

8. Student-centered as opposed to educator focused

9. Focus on learning and not completion--moving away from checking a box and focus on deep understanding of content (critical thinking)

10. Schools can make the effort to show families and students why graduating high school is important
    - Example: All staff in a school put what their education has been outside their doors
    - Example: How does writing affect your ability to complete applications
    - Example: How does reading affect your ability to perform well in your job and get raises over time
    - Example: At high school level, getting community partners to provide opportunities to get real world experience in their professions so students understand the connection between their education and what's required in the real world