

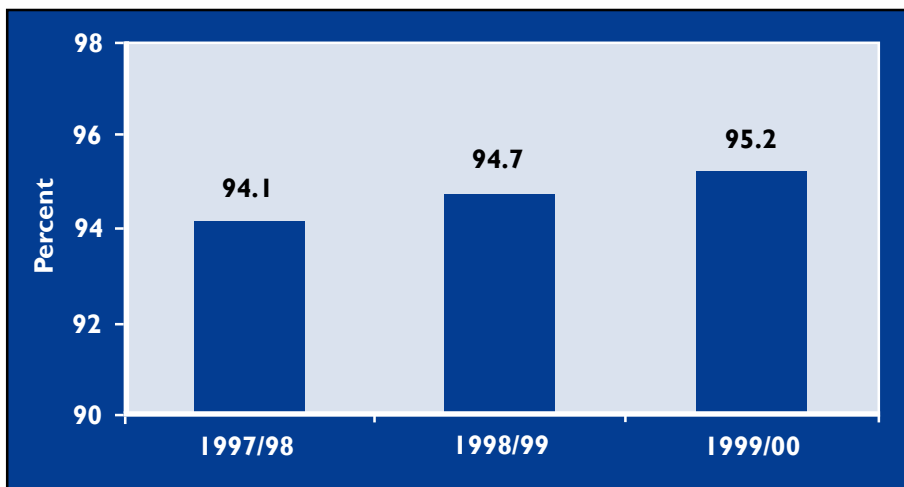
Telling the Story: Elementary School Absenteeism in Santa Cruz County

What Is It?

There is universal agreement that the increasing academic expectations for students require that students be in school. Elementary absenteeism is a strong predictor of absenteeism in middle and high school, which in turn is a predictor of high school dropout and ensuing problems in later life. Research shows that truancy also correlates with drug use and with daytime burglary. Schools and communities throughout the state and nation are increasingly focusing on improving school attendance beginning in the lower grades. In order to minimize unnecessary absences throughout the grade levels, Santa Cruz County is adopting a countywide focus on reducing elementary absences.

Absenteeism is the number of students who are not in class on any given day. Because of the way the State collects and reports attendance, it is currently difficult to compare data across districts, and with recent changes in state law, comparable data are not available prior to 1998. In October 2000, the school districts in Santa Cruz County agreed to a countywide standard for collecting and reporting attendance data, which will be available beginning this year. The Pajaro Valley Unified School District (PVUSD) has compiled the data below.

Actual Elementary School Attendance (PVUSD)



Note: Nine elementary schools are grades K - 5, six elementary schools are grades K - 6.
Source: Child Welfare and Attendance Office, Pajaro Valley Unified School District.

Story Behind the Trend

Increased attendance is good for student achievement and for district finances as well. Schools receive state funding based on Average Daily Attendance (ADA). In July 1998, a new state law changed the financial incentives for school attendance. Prior to 1998, ADA provided the same funding for students with an "excused absence" (such as illness) as students present in the classroom. Beginning in 1998, ADA includes only actual attendance, so schools have a financial incentive to increase the number of students in school. This prompted PVUSD to focus on increasing attendance through site-level incentives and public campaigns. These strategies are paying off with reduced absenteeism.

Risk Factors

Most of the risk factors for elementary school absenteeism are related to the child and family. Children are at risk of absenteeism if they have health problems ranging from head lice to asthma; learning disabilities or other academic struggles; social isolation including language or cultural barriers; low self-esteem, separation anxiety, or fear of school; or mental health or behavioral problems. Family factors include problematic home environments, little family structure, inconsistent or poor parenting and communication, family violence, or health, mental health or substance abuse problems. Parents who have language or transportation barriers, or have economic or housing problems including homelessness are also less likely to focus on daily school attendance. School and community risk factors include schools with a highly mobile student population, poor attendance tracking, or an unsafe school environment including tolerance of bullying.

Protective Factors

Protective factors that reduce the risk of absenteeism must include the child, family, school, and community. Young children who are behaviorally, socially and cognitively ready for school and who have caring adults in their life are less likely to miss school. Family factors include support for education, parent involvement in the classroom, the ability to help with homework, and strong school/family partnerships. Schools experience less absenteeism when they understand student needs, have clear expectations and consequences including positive incentives around attendance, and provide engaging activities in the classroom. Schools benefit from a good classroom environment, stable teaching staff, access to health services in the schools, and the ability to identify risk. Community level protective factors include creating consistent community expectations supporting the importance of school attendance, maintaining cohesive neighborhoods, and providing services and resources for families including assistance in meeting basic needs such as food, housing, health care and transportation.

Partners

Partners in turning the curve on elementary school absenteeism include students, parents and families, schools, businesses, and the community. Everyone has a role to play—community leaders, college students, senior citizens and other adults, the media, health providers, employers, the faith community, recreation centers, and law enforcement. Key partners are family resource centers and Healthy Start sites that provide comprehensive services for families.

How We Can Make a Difference

There are a variety of services and activities that can impact elementary school absenteeism by reducing risk factors and building protective factors. Promising practices include changing community expectations through public awareness and media campaigns, providing culturally competent parent education, providing universal preschool, training child care providers about school readiness, and sponsoring homework clubs through family resource centers, churches and other sites. It is important to change student habits through positive incentives and anti-bullying programs. Changing school staff norms calls for providing extra support for teachers, focusing on high expectations, and establishing positive incentives for schools and teachers. The school environment can be improved by providing extra academic support and more after school programs, enriching school programs such as music and art, better transition at entry to kindergarten, using multidisciplinary teams to work with the family, and strengthening the school/parent relationship. Healthy Start provides an excellent model of linking the services of outside partners. Family resource centers can provide centralized case management for families with multiple problems. Health services provided on the school campus including perinatal outreach, school-screening assessments, and assistance enrolling in health insurance are effective. Home visitation, outreach, and linkages to support groups make a difference. Developing alternatives to suspension, improving communication by promptly calling parents when a student is absent, and countywide coordination of school calendars can also make a difference.