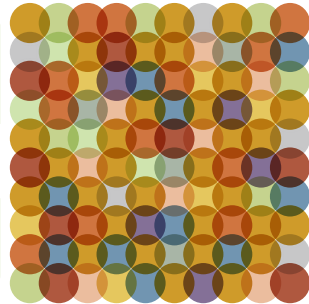




**A Compendium on Expanded Learning**



This article is one of more than 40 in an upcoming Compendium on the opportunities and potential of expanded learning opportunities and the importance of afterschool and summer programs, including 21st Century Community Learning Centers. With support from the C. S. Mott Foundation and under the leadership of executive editor Terry K. Peterson, PhD, the Compendium comprises eight sections with articles authored by thought leaders, policy officials, researchers, practitioners and other professionals in the field. Articles from the Compendium are available for download from the new website **Expanded Learning & Afterschool: Opportunities for Student Success** at [www.expandinglearning.org](http://www.expandinglearning.org)

## Building a Culture of Attendance: Schools and Afterschool Programs Together Can and Should Make a Difference!

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The leaders of SHINE (Schools and Homes in Education) Afterschool Program recently resolved to improve the school-day attendance for the students at their 21st Century Community Learning Centers in rural Pennsylvania. The program reached out to parents, offered incentives to students, and carefully tracked attendance data provided by the schools.

The results: a school attendance rate significantly higher than similar programs nationally, improved communications with parents, and a remarkable collaboration with school teachers that could prove a model for out-of-school-time programs.

“They look at us as an extension of their work,” director Jeanne Y. Miller said of the five public and four parochial schools where SHINE operates. “I think we’re building the mindset that we’re part of what they do.”

Research has long shown that good afterschool programs can improve school-day attendance (Huang, Gribbons, Kim, Lee, & Baker, 2000; Welsh et al., 2002). The sense of belonging, the connection to caring adults, and the academic enrichment that afterschool provides can make children more likely to go to school. Often though, improved attendance is a by-product of good programs, rather than a stated goal. SHINE’s experience in rural Pennsylvania, as well as an innovative approach used in Baltimore (discussed below), shows what can happen when afterschool programs take an intentional approach to reducing chronic absence.

## Defining the Need

Like afterschool programming, efforts to reduce school absences are animated by the need to provide students more time on task in quality learning environments. Children on the edge of failure, in particular, can experience an academic boost if they make it to school every day and spend a few extra hours in enriching activities after school. Right now, however, too many vulnerable children are suffering academically because they miss too much school.

Also, many vulnerable youth do not have access to quality afterschool programs. For example, when states hold a competition for 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants, they typically have two to three times more school and community groups applying than there are monies available to fund, leaving many neighborhoods and young people without afterschool programs (O'Donnell, 2012).

Nationwide, one in 10 kindergarten students misses nearly a month of school every year. For many low-income students, chronic absence in kindergarten can translate into poor academic performance throughout elementary school (Chang & Romero, 2008). By sixth grade, poor attendance is a proven indicator of whether a child will drop out of high school, regardless of economic background (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007). By ninth grade, missing excessive amounts of school can predict the likelihood of dropping out with more accuracy than past test scores (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

Unfortunately, many families and schools do not recognize they have a problem with attendance because they do not look at the data in the right way. Schools typically measure average daily attendance and truancy (unexcused absences). They do not pay attention to the total number of days each child misses in excused and unexcused absences. Research shows that when a student misses 10% percent of school days for any reason, or about 18 days, negative effects begin to appear in his/her academic performance (Chang & Romero, 2008). Chronic absenteeism can also affect the rest of the class by inducing the teacher to repeat old material rather than moving forward.

This is a problem that can be fixed. Throughout the country, schools and communities have been able to reduce absenteeism when they monitor attendance data and work together to identify and address barriers that keep children from getting to school every day. Afterschool programs are particularly well positioned to make a difference. In addition to providing good programming, afterschool leaders can help schools partner with parents and build good attendance habits. After all, many parents are more likely to see an afterschool provider at the end of the day, not a teacher.

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Notably, attendance is an area of focus in the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative, which funds afterschool and summer learning opportunities in almost 10,000 low-income sites across America. At the end of the year, sites are required to submit data to state education officials, including school-day attendance data for participants in the afterschool program. Local afterschool leaders could be using this data gathered during the school year—both the in-school attendance data and afterschool attendance data—to make improvements in afterschool programming and to enhance partnerships with schools, families, and other child- and family-focused community organizations in order to address poor attendance.

### **Connecting With Families and Schools**

Administered by Lehigh Carbon Community College, SHINE starts its attendance outreach with parents. The program operates across 430 square miles in Pennsylvania's Carbon and Schuylkill counties and draws from a population largely of low-income students—all of them referred for academic reasons, many of them chronically absent. When families sign up for the afterschool program, providers visit the home to get to know the parents and children. Parents must also sign a contract stressing the importance of attending school and the afterschool program. SHINE sends a midyear letter reinforcing the message.

When students do not come to school, they cannot come to SHINE after school. For students who do improve their school-day attendance, SHINE offers rewards: a visit to the "treasure chest" for younger students, gift certificates for others. Parents, too, are entered in monthly drawings for gas cards, family dinners, or trips to Walmart.

It is the interaction with the schools, however, that is key to SHINE's approach. The afterschool providers receive report cards and attendance reports from school teachers every 9 weeks. Providers also track attendance for the afterschool program and submit this data, along with the school district information, to an evaluator.

Analysis of this data shows that the more students attend SHINE, the better they do in school and the more regular their attendance. Specifically, the data show that 88% of the SHINE students had satisfactory school-day attendance. Altogether 78% of the SHINE students improved their academic performance and 96% were promoted to the next grade.

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## Reflecting the Research

SHINE's results echo numerous research studies that have confirmed the role afterschool programs play in improving school-day attendance. Most recently, a 2011 study of the AfterZone program in Providence, Rhode Island, showed that middle school students participating in the program had an absence rate 25% lower than their peers. What's more, the improvement in attendance increased with the amount of time in the program (Kauh, 2011).

A 2009 study of seventh and eighth grade students at 10 Boys & Girls Clubs across the country found that those attending afterschool programs skipped school fewer times, increased school effort, and gained academic confidence; moreover, the first two outcomes cited above increased as the number of days attending afterschool programs increased (Arbreton, Bradshaw, Sheldon, & Pepper, 2009). In many cases, improved school-day attendance is an unexpected bonus. Some programs, such as SHINE and the Baltimore effort discussed below, have begun taking a more intentional approach.

## Making It Intentional in Baltimore

Baltimore has made improved attendance a top priority for the city's school district and has engaged the city's child welfare, health, and transit agencies, as well as foundations and church groups, to bring students back to school. Afterschool programs play a key role. The Family League of Baltimore City, which handles the city's out-of-school-time contracts, identifies increased school-day attendance as a key outcome for providers. It prioritizes service to neighborhoods based on chronic absence rates, among other factors. It explicitly asks programs to recruit and enroll students with poor attendance records rather than push out students who might bring down program numbers. It also requires each provider to outline a plan for reducing chronic absence in its application for funds.

The Family League's data show that afterschool is making a difference. At all age levels, students in their programs are less likely to be chronically absent and more likely to be good attenders (missing fewer than 5 days) than the general school population. This holds true, even though the students in these programs are more likely to be living in poverty than the general school population. (For more information, see <http://www.flbcinc.org>.)

## Taking Action

In response to the need to bring nationwide attention to the problem of chronic school absenteeism, Attendance Works was established as a national and state initiative in 2010 to promote better policy and practice around school attendance. The organization works to examine the causes, consequences, and potential responses to missing extended periods of school, starting in the early grades.

Building upon the experience of pioneering programs as well as emerging research, Attendance Works recommends schools and afterschool programs work together in the following ways:

- 1. Build a strong culture of attendance in the school and the afterschool program.** Strategies can include establishing a clear policy about the importance of attendance, offering incentives and other motivating activities, and analyzing attendance data to identify areas that need improvement.
- 2. Target students with at-risk levels of absence for recruitment and engagement in afterschool programming.** Especially for students who are just beginning to have problematic attendance, the extra support of afterschool may be just what they need.
- 3. Share data on program and school attendance.** Such data sharing is critical for identifying students in trouble, regardless of when they are experiencing an attendance problem, and evaluating the impact of program participation on in-school attendance.
- 4. Combine resources to engage families around the issue of attendance.** Together, school and afterschool staff can educate parents and students about the importance of going to school every day, as well as solicit their perspectives about the barriers to attendance and how they could be overcome.
- 5. Make better use of attendance data reported annually for 21st Century Community Learning Centers.** Program staff should collect and review in-school and afterschool attendance data throughout the year to identify students with chronic absence who might need additional support and to determine if any afterschool classrooms are challenged with large numbers of students with poor attendance. An unusually high level of poor attendance could suggest a lack of engaging afterschool activities, an unresolved problem with bullying affecting all the students in a class, or a problem with the facilities that is creating an unsafe or unhealthy classroom environment. Poor attendance can be an early warning sign that intervention is needed in order to maintain a high quality program.

Attendance Works has a valuable Tools and T.A. section that contains a self-assessment tool to help afterschool programs reflect upon their approach to improving school-day attendance, as well as flyers in English and Spanish to help educate parents about the importance of regular attendance for their children's academic success (<http://www.attendanceworks.org/>). To see an example of a professional development program aimed at strengthening the capacity of afterschool providers to improve school-day attendance, visit the website of the Maryland Out of School Time Network: <http://www.mdoutofschooltime.org/Attendance.html>.

Leveraging the power of afterschool programs to reduce chronic absence is especially important now given the economic challenges facing communities and schools and the growing number of students at risk of academic failure and dropping out. By having an impact on attendance, afterschool programs can clearly demonstrate how they benefit students and schools and better justify their own funding.

## » Resources

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## About the Authors

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For more information on this subject, as well as additional articles from the Compendium, please visit:

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