

APPLICATION: Downtown High School

**Describe the critical challenge you would like to tackle in a different way.**

The critical challenge that X School grapples with as a continuation school is truancy. Most students who enroll at our school were referred for transfer due to truancy. One of our strategies has been to establish "Minimum Expectations" of 80% attendance or better to challenge our students to earn as many credits as possible. Currently, approximately 42% of our students are meeting this 80% minimum expectation. On average, 17-20 student are tardy each day.

At our school, we have the flexibility to award variable credits. However, attendance rate is connected to credit acquisition. Depending on how often students attend, they are eligible for a certain amount of credits each quarter. Students who attend school regularly and participate in some of the extended school day activities offered by our project-based learning program can earn up to 22.5 credits per quarter, for a total of 45 credits per semester (for comparison, a comprehensive high school typically offers 30 credits per semester). This accelerated credits option allows students to "catch up" on credits. However, due to truancy, only 42% percent of students are able to earn 30 credits or more each semester

We strongly believe that despite the fact that many outside factors such as poverty and systemic oppression create barriers to school attendance for our students, we can boost attendance rates if we focus on individual interventions, building close connections with families, removing basic needs barriers, and lastly and most importantly, creating a healthy community that compels students to become engaged and attached to school.

**What outcome(s) or change(s) would you like your design to achieve at your school site?**

We would like our design to result in a significant increase in overall attendance for the school – a minimum of 10% growth over a year.

We would like our design to institutionalize our minimum expectation and support school climate/healthy community.

We would like to increase student investment – students will know the minimum attendance expectation and express positive affect toward it as evidenced by student surveys.

We would like our design to help establish a more routinized way to address truancy and implement interventions.

Lastly, we would also like to increase consistent, meaningful reinforcement for students who meet the attendance expectations.

If the problem of truancy did not exist at our school, the majority of students would be able to graduate in a timely fashion and take advantage of the many opportunities offered by our thematic, project-based

curriculum. We would have more time to help our students express the brilliance and academic acuity of which we know they are capable.

### **How have you engaged your school to identify your critical challenge?**

The SAP Team, our Healthy Communities Committee and Leadership Team have all discussed the need for more interventions around truancy.

Truancy and Student Engagement are two of the major areas of focus for classroom and non-classroom staff this year.

### **What solutions have you tried or considered to address this challenge so far?**

One of the main strategies we have considered is Attendance Reinforcement:

- 3 times a quarter, BBQs are held for students who meet the 80% minimum attendance expectation. When setting goals with students, we use the BBQs as a marker for success for the students.
- We also utilize a token reward system called Rightations. Over time, we have realized that immediate, frequent rewards are important, so students can trade their "Rightations" for incentives when they earn, 3, 5, or 10 tokens.
- The Student Success Olympics are a way to build school culture. Students compete in fun competitions that they can qualify for if they meet expectations such as attendance and win further prizes during all-school assemblies.

We have also instituted PALs, or Project Attendance Liaisons made up of main office staff. PALs help track attendance with the teachers at 10-day intervals. They communicate with the homewhen students miss more than 2 days or the equivalent of more than 10 periods. When they call family, do problem solving and try to identify root problem/s. We have found by having 10-day intervals, student feel that they have a fresh start and that we also can catch students who might be attending but then become truant later. We also utilize the Student Assistance Program, weekly meeting to make support plans for struggling students. During this time we schedule home visits from our own staff and with support from the district attendance liaison. We have found that after a home visit, students will come to school short term, but unless there is consistent support, the students will fall back into truancy.

Lastly, we utilize the SART/SARB process. Unfortunately, this route rarely results in a change in behavior. Over the years, we have brainstormed many ideas to help support students to attend school, but many of them are hindered by funding issues, such as transportation support for students who live in areas where public transit is less convenient such as Bayview/Hunter's Point. We have also considered strengthening our incentive program with more attractive "rewards." We have also considered community partnerships to help with school climate and culture, such as CBOs that offer mental health and other wraparound services for the intensive needs that many of our students face.

## **How is this challenge an equity dilemma, one that is interfering with your school's ability to ensure that all of your students will thrive?**

Regular school attendance is the prerequisite for access to equity. We are aware that there are many reasons why students do not attend school, many of which have to do with equity issues that extend far beyond our school house, such as poverty, exposure to violence and abuse and the resulting trauma, and earlier experiences of disproportionate discipline practices for our majority student of color population. We attempt to support our students and families by implementing an array of strategies and practices that are directly linked to Vision 2025 essential shifts, as described below.

### Students Find Their "Sparks"—and Their Voices

Our school strives to develop young people who are serious scholars with an eye toward social justice. Toward that end, our school recently utilized our Professional Learning Community structure to define the concept of social justice and used it to help define one of our Expected Schoolwide Learning Results as we ramp up for our WASC reaccreditation process in Spring 2016. We strongly believe that focusing on issues of social justice that directly affect our students is a sure way to increase student engagement and attachment.

### Teachers at the Core of the Vision

Teachers at X School take our professional development very seriously. We believe that in order to serve our students, we must build our skills regularly and push one another to grow. Our school Leadership Team, made up of various stakeholders, plans our weekly professional development schedule during a summer retreat based on our assessment data and qualitative feedback from the staff. This semester, we are using the Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry to build our skills in the areas of academic rigor, school climate, authentic assessment, and support for students with IEPs and ELLs.

Teachers also seek their own enrichment opportunities. For example, three of our teachers our of our classroom staff of eleven are National Board certified, with three more seeking National Board certification in the coming years.

### The Re-Imagined Classroom

For over 10 years, X School has been offering thematic, project-based learning for students. These thematic projects in areas such as music, social justice, environmental justice, food justice, theater, and adventure-based learning offer students different trajectories from which to approach schooling. For many students, the alternative structure of our program allows students to re-engage with school in ways they never had before attending our school.

## The City as Classroom

Some students at X School are only in the schoolhouse one day a week because they are engaging in activities such as leading community groups in the Ropes Course at Fort Miley, building boats with the Maritime Museum, and learning to become junior lifeguards with the Embarcadero YMCA. Others spend days learning about urban farming at Alemany farms or learning about poverty and homelessness hands-on at Glide Memorial Church's food program. The expectation for every teacher is that they build strong partnerships with Community-Based Organizations to offer students unique and compelling school experiences.

## Parents as Partners and Advocates

Every quarter, parents and families attend our Family Conferences, where they can hear about the progress that their students have made. In between those times, we engage families by reaching out to address issues such as truancy and behavior or offering referral services through our Wellness Center.

## A Truly Equitable School District

Students at X School are referred to us because they were not successful at other schools. The demographics of our school are majority students of color and low-income. To re-engage and support our students in graduation is the very definition of equity. If we can support our students in being successful students and community members, then we will have addressed many of the inequity issues plaguing our district.

## **Who is on your design team? (the more diverse the better)**

Assistant Principal

Science and Math Teacher

Student

Special Education Teacher

Counselor

Wellness Coordinator

## **How will you make sure your team will commit the time needed to succeed?**

Our team meets regularly to address school climate. Should we be recipients of the Innovation Award, we will fold this work into our workflow for the year. Also, our Principal has committed funds so that those who qualify may be eligible for Prop A, extended hours, or flex time for the 10/30/15 training. Our student

participant will receive extra credit hours for attending the meetings when they fall outside of the school day.