Evaluation of the CFLeads

California Chronic Absence Network

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Evaluation Overview and Summary

CFLeads contracted with Larry Best to conduct an evaluation of the California Chronic Absence Network (CAN). The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the quality of the experience among program participants and whether the program elements were successful in achieving the program goals. The evaluation begins with a description of what participants thought were the key elements and why, followed by an assessment of whether the goals of the CAN were achieved.

The evaluation consisted of in-depth interviews conducted from December, 2012 to January, 2013 with seven participants: four community foundation representatives, a parent and school district representative, and Hedy Chang, Director of Attendance Works.

This evaluation illustrates that the participants had a high quality experience and that the goals of the California Chronic Absence Network were achieved.

Program Introduction and Overview

CFLeads contracted with Attendance Works to create a regional learning network (California Chronic Absence Network) of 4 community teams led by community foundations. Together, these teams analyzed local attendance data, identified and built on what was already working to reduce chronic absence, and crafted strategies for improvement.

CFLeads, with Attendance Works as content partner, sought to mobilize the talent and resources of community foundations and their community partners to promote reading proficiency in the early grades by reducing chronic absence and creating a local culture of regular school attendance. Through a peer-focused, cross-sector learning opportunity, the goal was for participating community teams to strengthen the ability of schools and communities to work together to improve attendance and advance needed policy reforms.

Attendance Works is a national and state initiative focused on improving the practice and policy around school attendance. It builds awareness of the critical role good attendance plays in academic achievement and promotes better tracking of chronic absenteeism data.

The work of this initiative was critical for the following reasons:

- Chronic absence as early as kindergarten can adversely affect 1st grade academic performance for all children. For poor children, who lack resources to make up for lost time in the classroom, it predicts lower 5th grade performance.

- By 6th grade, poor attendance is a proven indicator of high school drop out.

- Nationally, nearly one in 10 kindergarten students is chronically absent—missing 10 percent or almost a month of school—over the course of a year. In some districts, it affects as much as a quarter of all K-3rd grade students.

The theory behind this initiative is that chronic absence in the early grades can be significantly reduced when schools, communities and families join together to monitor and promote attendance and identify and address the factors that prevent young students from attending school every day.

The goals of the California Chronic Absence Network were as follows:

- Increase understanding of the importance of chronic absence and its impact on student performance

- Increase knowledge of specific chronic absence issues in communities of participating teams

- Stimulate local strategies for reducing chronic absence, using data to drive the agenda

- Connect community foundations to other community foundations to deepen their impact on chronic absence – and potentially other issues of common concern

- Strengthen the community leadership practice of community foundations in order to advance education reform and other important community issues

In order to achieve these goals, the program had the following key elements:

- A network of 4 community teams made up of senior staff from community foundations as well as a representative from a school district and an organization with close ties to parents

- Three 2 day in-person meetings over a year to: 1) learn about the most current research on chronic absence, 2) work together to create improvement plans by focusing on "bright spots," and 3) reflect on what is needed for community foundations to be able to advance this work.

- A focus on early elementary grades

- An analysis of local attendance data

- Individualized technical assistance to understand implications of the data and how to communicate them.

Key Program Elements

What participants found most beneficial were the structured format and the accountability that was built into it. "Homework forced people to do the work. The bar was set high in terms of what was brought to the table: Presentations and speakers were great. They inspired action." For example, the Oakland Unified School District Superintendent (a speaker at the first meeting) inspired CAN members to action after sharing information about the success of the collaboration with East Bay Community Foundation to reduce chronic absence in his school district.   The message was very clear. "I did it in my district and you should do it too."

A key attribute of the program was Chang's deep expertise which elevated the issue and the high level of excellence, including research and materials and open access to her slide shows (open source).   Chang's involvement and expertise—her experience in implementing in several cities, her first-hand knowledge on what works and what doesn't was considered a key attribute. The data was accurate, meaningful, and powerful.   In addition to Chang's technical expertise--demonstrating the problem through the data--she helped participants address it.

CAN members credit Chang and CFLeads for gathering some of the best thinking on the topic and sharing it with the group.   Not only was current knowledge shared but new knowledge was generated.   Participants felt it was a great professional development opportunity and they appreciated the balance of team and presentation time.   As Chang stated, "we gave them the tools. It was up to them to apply them."

Participants also felt that sharing of promising/best practices across districts was inspiring. Conversations were candid and honest about school district challenges and successes which made it possible for authentic learning to take place.   Finally, participants appreciated the bright spot interviews with principals which illuminated why some schools were more successful than others in lowering the chronic absence rates.

Given these key program attributes, how successful was the program in achieving its stated goals?

Goal 1: Increase understanding of the importance of chronic absence and its impact on student performance

This goal was achieved by every participant interviewed. Chang made participants aware of the national research and presented the numbers in such a way that participants could see that average daily attendance masked the real problem. Participants learned that looking at absence through the lens of truancy only, masked a number of students missing school. It was important to look at absence for any reason; not just unexcused absence. She helped participants "to crunch their own numbers" to see the size and scale of the problem: It is possible to have 97% average daily attendance and have a high rate of chronic absence.

Chronic absence is now part of everyone's terminology, which was not the case prior to their participation. (For some, they were only familiar with average daily attendance.) For everyone, attendance issues are now much more prominent and for good reason. While one community foundation participant had an understanding of chronic absence from her prior experience as a teacher and administrator, she was not familiar with the research that shows chronic absence as a predictor of third grade reading success and that it is such a strong predictor of future academic success. Another community foundation staff who had some understanding of chronic absence prior to her participation, has become an expert and is now leading a group of policy leaders in San Mateo County to focus on the issue. As a parent representative put it, "I didn't understand chronic absence before. Now I understand it and can explain it to other parents. It has changed the conversation with parents. With data, it is a lot easier to make the case to parents." This increased understanding among parent and community foundation representatives galvanized them to work more closely with school district representatives to do something about the problem.

Goal 2: Increase knowledge of specific chronic absence issues in communities of participating teams

The Data Attendance Tracking Tool (DATT) was an important tool that each site used to track attendance. One of the key findings is that Kindergarten is the year with the highest chronic absence and that first grade followed. This was a surprising finding in which there was commonality across the districts and recognition that something needed to be done. As one community foundation staff put it, "This was a big issue for a significant number of kids." In San Francisco Unified District (SFUSD), for example, the overall chronic absence rate was 8%, but highest in Kindergarten. As a result, SFUSD decided to focus its attention on the early grades. Fresno Unified School District used chronic absence as a proxy for identifying other needs, for example, the need for home school liaisons for the most needy children.

The DATT also helped to reveal where there was low chronic absence in schools with a high concentration of low income students (positive outlier schools). CAN participants interviewed school principals to understand what made these schools "bright spots." What they learned is a positive school climate contributes to being a bright spot. If classrooms are happy and safe places to be, where kids and families feel cared about, then kids will want to come to school.

In addition to the DATT helping individual sites to reveal the extent of the problem (depending upon their level of data sophistication) and to identify bright spots, the individual teams use of the DATT also helped the tool developer (Attendance Works) to refine and improve the tool.

Attendance Works was successful in creating a sense of ownership of the problem by introducing the concept of chronic absence, having CAN participants do homework (e.g., interview positive outlier schools to identify bright spots), and report back to everyone else on what they learned and the results. According to Chang, "The numbers (data) speak for themselves. This allows for a paradigm shift once you get a combination of data and positive messaging—giving people a conceptual frame in which to address the data."

Goal 3: Stimulate local strategies for reducing chronic absence, using data to drive the agenda

Each of the sites used data differently to affect change. For example, South San Francisco has developed an ACCESS database which allows principals to get data in real time readily and easily. In addition to working with South San Francisco, Silicon Valley Community Foundation expanded their work to the Jefferson Elementary School District even though it was not originally part of this project.

When the Superintendent from the San Rafael School District saw the data on chronic absence, he contacted Attendance Works to get technical support to address the problem. A couple of strategies have been tried: members of the District Cabinet (Family Support Director and Data Analyst) are getting involved; the school principal includes a message about attendance in his welcoming message to parents. Now that the district is tracking the data, there is a different process in place.

The biggest changes are happening at the Fresno Unified School District. As a result of their involvement in CAN, there is a K-12 high-level District Steering Committee which meets monthly to address attendance issues (including communication and data personnel from the school district). In addition, CAN was a catalyst for "I Pledge to

Come to School Until I Graduate Campaign"[1] and an Attendance Improvement Plan district-wide. Another key strategy was developing tools (Data Dashboard) for school site staff to view student attendance - real time data to identify attendance issues. Finally, the meetings organized by CFLeads incentivized participants to get some real work done in between meetings with the school district since participants didn't want to come to future meetings without having their homework assignment completed. The parent leader has played an important role in communicating to parents that if their kids aren't in school, they aren't going to learn. In addition, Parent University (parent education) is incorporating attendance into its curriculum.

San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) has also made significant progress. For example, they educated parents in the early grades by sending a letter to families whose children in the previous school year went over the threshold of being absent more than 10% of the time. The letter referenced research that shows the relationship between attendance and third grade reading and encouraged parents to bring their kids to school more often. They also presented this issue to targeted communities at back to school breakfasts.

While there is a 7.6% chronic absence rate district wide, 50% of those who are chronically absent reside in public housing. SFUSD is planning a strategic approach in the Fall to target schools that have high concentrations of students with chronic absence. They are using restorative practices (less punitive approach) -- focusing on absence while still holding families accountable. Inspiration from working with the Network has shifted their practice to being less punitive.

Goal 4: Connect community foundations to other community foundations to deepen their impact on chronic absence – and potentially other issues of common concern

In general, community foundations felt better connected to one another and that they weren't working in total isolation. For example, staff from Silicon Valley and Marin Community Foundations became better connected on their related work on Pre-K to 3rd grade. However, for some, these connections were limited due to geographic difference and because the districts with whom they were working were so different. While one foundation staff didn't necessarily feel better connected to her peers, she thought that funders embracing the same goal—the relationship between attendance and third grade reading—is helping the field.

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[1] This year they launched a campaign about graduation telling kids in 1st and 2nd grade that they need to attend so that they graduate. They came home with a sticker with the year they will graduate from high school. The message was: "Make sure kids arrive at school on time and attend regularly so that they graduate."

In addition to community foundation staff connecting, the team work structure allowed for deepening of connections between community foundation staff and school district personnel. Chang also played a role in strengthening these relationships. Fresno reports a greatly improved relationship with the school district because of their involvement in the district-wide steering committee: "We are the community representative on the steering committee. This provided a great mechanism to work with them. We now have a great rapport." The parent network in Fresno also has a stronger partnership with the school district as a result of their involvement in the network.

Impact, Challenges and Lessons Learned, and Implications for the Fields of Community Foundations and Education

CAN positioned the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) to move forward to more broadly make use of partnerships in a way that the District hadn't in the past. It recognized the need to bring in other partners since it doesn't have an "Attendance Czar," like some other districts. SFUSD learned if you focus attention, outcomes will result.   In fact, last year, the District recouped 60,000 instructional days (and as a result received an additional $750,000 in funding) that it otherwise would have lost. A key factor is that Chang helped the District track data.

This year, there isn't the same focused attention on attendance and so the District doesn't expect to have the same impact.   To help sustain focus, Claudia Anderson, the SFUSD representative in the network, recommended for inclusion in the Superintendent's evaluation, a measure for reducing chronic absence. "Putting it in the Superintendent's evaluation adds a pressure point," Claudia stated.   "Now I can say to the attendance liaison that I have to focus on chronic absence. " This demonstrates the importance of sustained attention to attendance in order to achieve ongoing results beyond the life of this particular initiative.

Another related challenge that arose for community foundations is that there are critical internal issues to school districts over which they don't have control, and as a result, trying to affect change from the outside can be a slow journey. For example, changes in responsibility of district personnel can affect their ability to influence principals to take data seriously and to do something about it. Who and how motivated district personnel are can make a big difference.   Also, if a school district is a basic aid district, reimbursement is not tied to attendance and so they don't have the same incentive "to get the fire in their belly" as other school districts do.

CAN played a critical role because it provides a structure that motivates and inspires action in spite of these challenges.   As Chang observed, "The role of the program officer in being dogged is key and in seeing her/himself as a change agent. It is hard to

be a content change agent."

Attendance Works, by creating a set of tools, helped to catalyze change in local communities and at the same time, the network participants helped to refine the tools. Not only did it create a set of tools, it created a peer learning circle, the program elements of which can now be replicated in other places—truly an innovative model with economies of scale.

According to Chang, "it was important having community foundations as partners. They valued the work and kept it going. The community foundations played a central role and helped to sustain change over time. They were an ongoing champion from outside the school district raising the flag around chronic absence. The co-investing by community foundations led to greater ownership. I think it makes a tremendous difference if we can make sure community foundations or other funders are involved as change agents when constructing who makes up the teams that participate in a peer network. Community foundation support can help accelerate the pace of progress."

What is impressive about CAN is that it is affecting other areas of work. For example, at the Marin Community Foundation, program staff are beginning to infuse chronic absence into family engagement work. According to Don Jen, "There is recognition of the importance of school attendance and bringing attention of chronic absence to the family engagement task force so that school attendance and family engagement are not siloed." Fresno Regional Foundation is also infusing chronic absence into multiple areas of work. They are sharing resources with the Fresno Promise Neighborhood team— helping to inform their efforts.

Because of their work on chronic absence, the community foundation is now viewed as a resource in the 0-8 year old space for education. As a result, they are sharing resources with First Five to help them with their strategic plan. They are also very engaged with the public housing authority -- sharing data on chronic absence. The list goes on. Clearly a movement is building from the bottom up as well as from the top down.

Lisa Villarreal of the San Francisco Foundation summed up very nicely the implications for the community foundation and education fields: "Having one outcome to focus on is very impressive in the funder world. For example, at The California Endowment, which is set up to address health outcomes for youth, 3rd grade reading is now a solid indicator. Attendance is a proxy for health. If you are not healthy, you will not be coming to school; these indicators are proxies for each other's objectives. They are another way to get to the same outcome. Everyone (funders, policy leaders) is talking about chronic absence and the relationship with third grade reading. We are creating movement without awarding many grants (except for the Living City Award)."

Based on interviews of the network participants, it is clear that the goals of the Chronic Absence Network have more than been achieved. A new innovative model has been developed which has the potential to have a ripple effect across the country if it can be successfully replicated and brought to scale.