PACE

COMMENTARY

Leveraging the Opportunity of Adolescence to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism



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The nationwide spike in chronic absenteeism from school, which peaked following the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption of in-person schooling, has only slightly abated. California is no exception: during the 2022–23 school year, nearly 25 percent of California's students were chronically absent, representing roughly double the prepandemic rate but a decrease of 5 percentage points from the previous year. Both in California and nationwide, higher rates of chronic absenteeism are generally found among students from historically marginalized communities, and initial research indicates "that the pandemic growth in chronic absenteeism exacerbated pre-existing inequalities." Researchers acknowledge multiple underlying causes of chronic absenteeism. Structural conditions, such as poor transportation infrastructure and teacher shortages, affect student absenteeism rates. In addition, a recent PACE commentary described the student-level factors underlying the rising rates of chronic absenteeism, which include unstable access to basic needs, uncertainty about safety, lack of a sense of belonging and connection, and students' inability to find value in schooling.

We at the UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent (CDA) recognize that approaches to remedying these underlying challenges at the middle and high school levels should be responsive to the unique developmental needs of adolescents, which can be distinct from those of younger learners. **Based on insights from decades of research in the developmental science of adolescence, we suggest a way forward for secondary school leaders and policymakers as they navigate a path to addressing more equitably the challenge of low attendance and engagement among our middle and high school students.**

The science of adolescence across multiple disciplines—neuroscience, psychology, education, and other social sciences—tells us that adolescents (young people ages 10–25) are motivated to explore, discover, and connect with the world around them. Limbic regions deep within the brain responsible for motivation, learning, and feelings of reward become more active and responsive to social experience. Connections between these regions and cortical networks responsible for planning and social cognition refine during the important years between childhood and adulthood, with implications for learning, emotional development, and social behavior.

Together, these neural changes create unique opportunities for adolescent learning and development. Youth aremore likely to take risks to learn about the world around them. They are also more tolerant of uncertainty and more likely to respond to new environments or to making errors by updating their prior knowledge. Adolescents are driven to understand the world and their place in it, both among their peers in school as well as within broader society. Any conversation with youth about their future goals inevitably raises their desire to develop a sense of purpose, to have an impact on their world.

Unfortunately, many of the factors identified by PACE as key contributors to students' chronic absenteeism highlight a disconnect between these unique opportunities of adolescence and the school-based settings our young people encounter every day. The lack of safety, belongingness, relationships, and feeling of being valued in California's schools expressed in the interviews creates significant barriers to the motivation to explore, discover, and connect with the world that typifies the adolescent period.

We previously have offered three key types of experiences that take advantage of the opportunities of adolescence to promote mental health and engagement in learning. All three—in combination with the mitigation of structural factors known to impede consistent attendance—could be equally relevant for enhancing young people's connections to school and reducing chronic absenteeism.

First, adolescents need compelling and supported ways to explore the world. Thoughtfully designed efforts both inside the classroom (e.g., project-based learning) and outside the classroom (e.g., interest-based clubs and activities) leverage adolescents' natural inclination to explore and learn from experience. These efforts also can capitalize on the strong emphasis on social relationships during adolescence by incorporating peer collaboration. Evidence-based lessons from service-learning programs highlight the importance of giving students agency and the opportunity to process their learning from such experiences.

As one example, California's education leaders have the opportunity to fold these insights into the ongoing effort to craft the state's Master Plan for Career Education. From a developmental perspective, giving young people the opportunity to build new skills and try out different abilities is critical. Yet a robust, developmentally aligned approach to career education must also anticipate that adolescents will make mistakes along the way and have a plan for how to support their ability to learn from failure. In fact, brain development during adolescence is particularly focused on enabling youth to monitor errors and learn rapidly from those mistakes. During adolescence, failure is a key driver of exploration and an important source of feedback that facilitates learning.

Second, young people need avenues to contribute to their schools and communities, in ways both small and large. Longstanding research on classroom environments points to the ways in which incorporating student participation in decision-making promotes motivation and achievement. Similarly, extracurricular programs that encourage adolescents' contributions to their school, teams, and communities enhance students' attachment to school.

Finally, healthy and supportive relationships with adults remain essential during adolescence. Having these relationships at home and in the school and community is predictive of virtually every aspect of healthy adolescent development, including engagement with school. Although time spent with adults may decline relative to time spent with peers during adolescence, strategic and supportive connections with caring adults remain essential. They give adolescents the means to obtain support and guidance as they engage in the complex tasks of exploring, discovering, and making connections with the world around them.

Inequities in the availability and quality of each of these three experiences exist, many times coinciding with structural inequalities and high rates of chronic absenteeism found in some historically marginalized communities. Efforts to eliminate such disparities should pay equal attention to adolescents' access to opportunities to explore, contribute, and form strong relationships with adults as they do to their basic needs for food, housing, and dependable transportation.

Many of our teachers and educators are fully aware of and distressed about the ways in which our education systems fail to provide these experiences to our youth consistently. Indeed, these experiences have been part of numerous current and previous efforts to improve secondary schooling. UCLA CDA has held workshops and convenings with educators who have been trying to institute such experiences in their schools, only to be constrained by limited resources and time. Many of these educators are experts on adolescence and have valuable ideas about how to make their schools more welcoming and supportive for young people. This local expertise benefits our students—there is no universal solution to chronic absenteeism, and we must work collectively to support the conditions that will enable our young people to attend school consistently. As leaders partner with our young people and communities to create and test new approaches to restore attendance, they can draw on key insights from developmental science to enhance their efforts.

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