

This summary was written by Kim Marshall and was retrieved from [The Marshall Memo](#).

Improving Attendance and Engagement in a San Diego High School

“Simply stated, it’s hard to learn when you’re not in school,” say Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp in this *JESPAR* article. They go on to describe how, over three years, they improved student attendance in a 500-student San Diego high school from 90.3% to 95.6%, a level comparable to suburban schools, and addressed student engagement and achievement.

Fisher, Frey, and Lapp started by comparing the attendance of the highest-performing 10% of students and the lowest-performing 10% of students over a five-month period. They found that the former (overwhelmingly white and Asian) were absent an average of 1.8 days a month, with none missing more than four days, while the latter (overwhelmingly black and Latino) missed an average of 6.5 days a month, with some missing as many as 15). In addition, Fisher, Frey, and Lapp documented a lack of engagement among low-performing students when they were in school. Here’s what they did next:

- *Sharing the data* – The school’s staff was startled when presented with the attendance figures and came face to face with their previous acceptance of low attendance among some students. “I guess I’ve just grown used to the idea that [student’s name] isn’t going to be there five days a week,” said one teacher. “We need to find ways to let them know it matters when they’re not here,” said another.

- *Coming up with a strategy* – Teachers decided that their approach shouldn’t be punitive. “They’re not going to respond positively to a negative system,” said an English teacher. Within a few weeks, a schoolwide plan was in place, focused on building a sense of community among students.

- *Noticing absences* – Each time a student was absent, a personalized note – with variations on the theme “We missed you today” – was mailed home. Administrators signed the notes, and teachers began adding personal messages before the notes were mailed. One student wrote back, saying, “I didn’t know it mattered I was gone. I missed you too. Thank you for that note. It made me feel special.”

- *Home visits* – Administrators visited the homes of students for every fifth absence, using a cumulative absence tally. “Are you gonna keep coming when I’m gone from school?” asked one student. “I was sick this time.” The principal asked if there was anything that the school could do – like bringing some chicken soup.

- *Reversing unexcused absences* – The school’s social worker assistant, a paraprofessional funded by Title I, began making home visits to students with unexcused absences. If he found the student at home with an adult present, he advised the adult that

the child must be in school. The school followed up with truant officers in chronic cases, and filed with child protection after ten days of truancy. When the child returned to school, he or she was warmly greeted.

- *Celebrating attendance* – Each grade’s daily attendance was posted prominently for students, faculty, families, and visitors to see, which sparked comments among teachers (“What’s up with the seniors?”), e-mail exchanges (“Let’s hear it for 9th grade! 100%, baby!”), reactions from parents (“I didn’t realize that keeping him home this week to help his cousin move made such a difference”), and, when the slices of pizza were offered to any class with perfect attendance, exhortations from students (“No one be absent tomorrow! Don’t mess it up!”).

- *Improving engagement* – “Getting students in the classroom is one issue,” say Fisher, Frey, and Lapp. “What happens when they get there is another... In too many classrooms, the dominance of teacher talk fosters student passivity.” Many students find the very common *initiate-respond-evaluate* pattern predictable and dreary: “What are the names of the particles in the nucleus of an atom?” “Neutrons and protons.” “Correct!” Students in other cultures find this dynamic baffling: why would a teacher ask a question to which she clearly knows the answer? In professional development sessions, Fisher, Frey, and Lapp worked with teachers to break out of this pattern and have more extended discussions with students in which the teacher was not always the dominant player. Teachers used videotapes of their classrooms to analyze and enhance student discourse.

- *Reducing teacher talk* – Fisher, Frey, and Lapp shared with the faculty the research on the dominance of the teacher’s voice in high-school classrooms, especially with lower-achieving students. One study found that teacher talk takes up 55% of the air time in high-achieving classrooms versus 80% in low-achieving classrooms. Professional development in the school focused on gradual release of responsibility, with students taking on an increasingly important role in class discussions and activities. “Productive group work is the linchpin of learning,” say the authors. “Students collaborate to refine new learning through tasks designed to promote interaction. In the company of fellow novice learners, they ask questions of one another, clarify understandings, demand justifications, and formulate ways to complete the assignment. It’s noisier, to be sure, but administrators and teachers understand that this is what learning sounds and looks like. Students, otherwise left to fend for themselves through independent work, have the *safety net* to hone their learning before attempting it alone.”

What have been the academic results at this high school? After three years of intervention on attendance and engagement, the percentages of students passing California’s tenth-grade tests the first time have increased steadily, reaching these levels by the end of the 2009-10 school year:

- 91% of students passed the ELA test (compared with 79% statewide).

- 88% of students passed the math test (compared with 80% statewide).
- 94% of African-American students passed ELA (compared with 69% statewide)
- 69% of African-American students passed math (compared with 64% statewide).
- 86% of Latino students passed ELA (compared with 71% statewide).
- 88% of Latino students passed the math test (compared with 72% statewide).

“Focusing on the Participation and Engagement Gap: A Case Study on Closing the Achievement Gap” by Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp in the *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, January-March 2011 (Vol. 16, #1, p. 56-64),
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a934414973>; Fisher can be reached at dfisher@hshmc.org.