

JANUARY 2026



Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in Community Schools

**Findings from Listening and
Learning Tour Visits**



A White Paper By:



Introduction



In 2025, Capacity To Impact (CTI), the data partner and program evaluator for the Southern Inland Regional Technical Assistance Center (SIR-TAC), conducted Listening and Learning Tours of a sample of Community Schools across the Southern Inland region. The focus of our visits to **El Camino Elementary School** and **Sultana Elementary School** centered on practices that contribute to substantial reductions in chronic absenteeism. The goal was to understand the **conditions, approaches, and practices** that support improved attendance and **reduce chronic absenteeism**, and to share these effective practices as a resource for schools across the Southern Inland Region and beyond.

The promise of the Community Schools approach lies in its ability to address persistent educational and community challenges, such as chronic absenteeism, poor academic achievement, low student engagement, and mental and behavioral health issues. It does so by aligning academic, social, and community-based supports around the strengths and needs of students, families, and communities. When built on a foundation of community strengths and guided by the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) Framework, **Community Schools create environments that promote improved attendance, stronger relationships, and more responsive systems of support**. Community Schools focus on student engagement, that is, the extent to which students feel connected to school and motivated to participate, which serves as a key driver of regular attendance.

CTI aims to **document and elevate effective Community Schools practices**. Listening and Learning Tours are particularly meaningful as they offer an opportunity to visit Community School sites in person, learn directly from practitioners, and observe firsthand how practices in Community Schools shape students' day-to-day experiences. Each series of site visits focuses on different aspects of Community Schools' implementation, highlighting the context and strengths of selected schools. The focus of this white paper is to share effective practices for reducing chronic absenteeism.

Site Selection



El Camino Elementary School and Sultana Elementary School both demonstrated **significant reductions in chronic absenteeism**. CTI studies of attendance rates from 2022 to 2025 show that El Camino decreased chronic absenteeism by 27.5 percentage points, and Sultana reduced by 22.0 percentage points. Additionally, these sites were recommended by the SI-RTAC lead, San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools (SBCSS), due to the **strong relational culture** they demonstrated, their **experience with Community School implementation**, and their **specific and intentional focus on improving attendance**. Their progress reflects practices that may be informative for other Community Schools grantees across the Southern Inland Region.

El Camino and Sultana Significantly Reduced Chronic Absenteeism in Three Years



This white paper summarizes the practices of El Camino Elementary and Sultana Elementary as shared and observed during our Listening and Learning Tour site visits. We highlight these effective practices, as a resource to guide and support learning and implementation in Community Schools.

Effective Practices Observed Across Both School Sites



Our Listening and Learning Tour visits highlighted **approaches and associated practices** at each site, which contributed to improvements in student engagement and reductions in chronic absenteeism. The practices that each school implemented reflected their unique context, community, and staff expertise. Yet, these practices followed several common approaches that were evident across both sites.

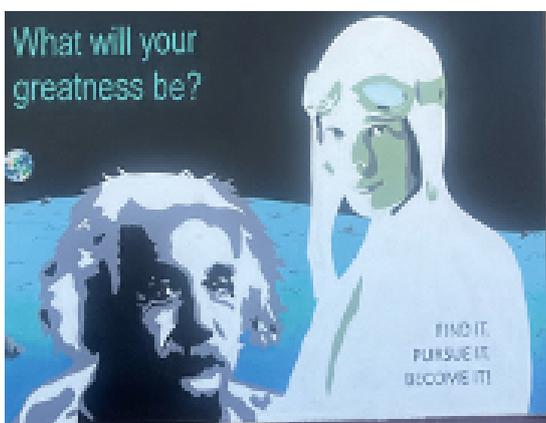
As an example, staff in both schools supported a highly relational school culture, emphasizing student peer relationships, student-adult relationships, and adult peer relationships. They intentionally created spaces throughout the school day for students to have positive interactions with one another and with caring adults. Another approach observed at both schools involved using attendance data strategically to encourage future student attendance. For example, they intentionally scheduled engaging activities on historically low-attendance days. We observed these and four other approaches at both schools that were used to drastically reduce chronic absenteeism.

The sections that follow describe the **six specific approaches** that we observed at Sultana and El Camino Elementary Schools:

1. A relational school culture
2. Strategic use of attendance data
3. Student voice in incentive design
4. Supportive and inclusive school environments
5. Removing barriers to student attendance
6. Engaging families in school activities

To further describe each approach and facilitate implementation across community schools, we provide several examples of practices that we observed associated with each approach at one or both of the schools. Of course, every community school will want to adapt these approaches and practices to their own context and realities.

APPROACH: A Relational School Culture



Both schools emphasized that strengthened relationships formed the foundation of their attendance progress. Staff members are intentional about learning students' names and greeting students warmly each day, and they maintain consistent communication with families regarding their care for and investment in each student. A key component of this culture is the commitment to regular positive interactions with students that are unrelated to instruction or discipline. These interactions may include brief adult-student conversations, informal check-ins, and moments of encouragement offered throughout the day. Home visits, personal outreach from staff and principals, and consistent follow-up extend this relational approach to families, creating school environments where students and caregivers feel known, valued, and welcomed.

APPROACH: Strategic Use of Attendance Data



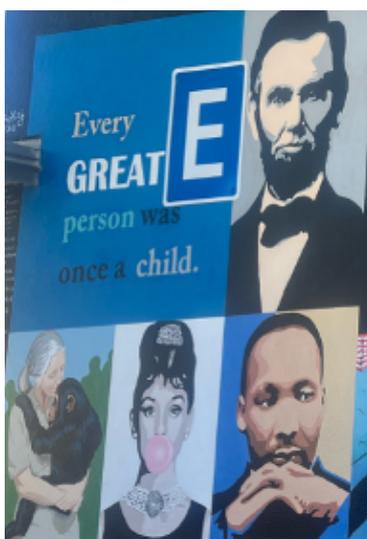
At each school, a team regularly reviews attendance data at the schoolwide, grade, classroom, and student levels to identify patterns and anticipate days when students are more likely to be absent. To encourage students to attend and participate in school, high-engagement activities (such as field trips, assemblies, incentives, and celebrations) are intentionally scheduled on historically low-attendance dates. Additionally, by reviewing attendance data at both the classroom and individual levels, staff can identify who needs support and positively intervene when students are at risk of missing instruction time, by helping them develop meaningful relationships and overcome barriers to attendance.

APPROACH: Student Voice in Incentive Design

Students play an active role in shaping engagement strategies and incentive systems, and both schools use a variety of methods to gather student input on decisions about incentives. Methods include formal surveys, in-class polls facilitated by teachers, dot voting activities, and a variety of other approaches that allow students to express their preferences. Staff members fully embrace student choices and implement them with genuine enthusiasm. This commitment strengthens student, staff, and family buy-in, ensuring that incentives reflect student values and contribute to higher levels of excitement and daily engagement.



APPROACH: Removing Barriers to Attendance



Both schools leverage Community Schools resources to address concrete barriers that can interfere with regular attendance and to support families in meeting students' basic needs. Staff connect students and caregivers to food and clothing programs, transportation assistance, counseling services, and referrals for housing, legal, and health supports. Home visits are supportive rather than punitive, allowing staff to understand family circumstances and partner in problem solving. Across both sites, staff described a "progress not perfection" mindset that encourages persistence, celebrates small steps forward, and reduces the shame or fear students and families sometimes

associate with conversations about attendance. By combining practical supports with a compassionate, solutions-oriented approach, both schools create conditions that make it easier for students to attend consistently and remain engaged in school life.

APPROACH: Supportive and Inclusive School Environments

Both schools integrate social-emotional learning and supports into their daily practices in ways that reinforce student belonging and reduce barriers to consistent attendance. Classrooms maintain calming corners and implement social-emotional learning routines that help students regulate emotions, recover from difficult moments, and reengage with learning more quickly. At one school, staff wellbeing is intentionally supported through a dedicated space where adults can reset and manage stress, reflecting a belief that caring for students begins with caring for the adults who support them. Further, staff members model emotional regulation by naming their own strategies for regulation and demonstrating how to use them, which helps normalize and reinforce these skills for students. Both schools have also created small groups for students who benefit from additional connection with peers and adults to enhance social skills, offering structured opportunities to build friendships, share meals, and have positive interactions with trusted staff and students. These groups are framed as exciting and special rather than corrective, which increases students' comfort and sense of inclusion. Together, these practices contribute to predictable and supportive environments where students feel safe, connected, and ready to participate in school each day.



APPROACH: Engaging Families in School Activities

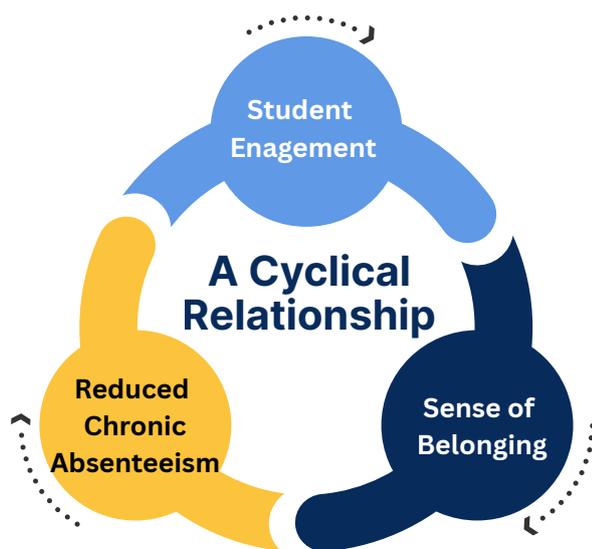
Both sites identified family engagement as central to attendance improvement. To improve family engagement and belonging, schools host large-scale events that bring families onto campus, strengthen relationships, and increase students' and families' sense of connection to the school community. Both schools reported striving toward a goal of 100% of students having at least one parent or guardian attend a school event.

Looking Ahead



The insights gathered from the Listening and Learning Tour visits highlight practices that contribute to meaningful improvements in attendance, reductions in chronic absenteeism, and increased student and family engagement at Sultana Elementary School and El Camino Elementary School. The significant changes observed in these schools is not a result of any one practice. Rather, it is the combined effect of **many focused, positive approaches applied consistently, with ongoing attention to learning and improvement**. These practices are implemented with careful consideration of context and may be adapted to different settings and populations, even within each school site.

Importantly, while both sites use California Community School Partnership Program (CCSPP) resources to expand staffing and create spaces that support relationship building, social emotional development, and coordinated student supports, the practices described in this white paper do not rely on Community Schools funding to be effective. They reflect approaches that can be adapted and implemented in a wide range of school settings to benefit all students, by strengthening **belonging, attendance, and engagement** - three interconnected contributors to student success.



As Community Schools grantees across the Southern Inland Region continue implementing their Community Schools strategies and planning for a sustainable future, we share these approaches and examples of effective practices to guide strategic planning, spark reflection, and support ongoing learning and student success.

We'd love to
hear from you!



If you have questions about the contents of this document or the SI-RTAC Evaluation, or if you would like to learn more about Listening and Learning Tour Visits, please contact CTI's Research Department at: research@capacitytoimpact.com.

If you have questions about the SI-RTAC's Technical Assistance services, please contact a representative from the Southern Regional Technical Assistance Center at: ccspp@sbcss.net.

