



TRANSCRIPT

Audio Interview: Using Improvement Science and Small-Scale Testing to Identify and Support Chronically Absent Students

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KENWYN DERBY

Hi, my name is Kenwyn Derby, and I'm a senior research associate with the Regional Educational Laboratory West, or REL West. REL West helps to support a collective impact effort in Utah, spearheaded by the United Way of Salt Lake, to improve outcomes for families in the region around the capital city. This effort includes individuals and organizations from across the community, including the state board of education, local school districts, the governor's office, local businesses, and many more.

As part of this initiative, the United Way of Salt Lake facilitates the work of a number of cross-sector networks concerned with educational opportunities and outcomes. Partnering with the United Way, I co-lead one network that's focused on reducing K-12 student chronic absenteeism.

Both nationally and in Utah, about one in seven students is chronically absent, meaning that they miss at least 10% of class time, regardless of whether it's excused—as when a child is out sick—or unexcused, as when a student is skipping. Because this can have significant negative effects on students' learning and their eventual ability to graduate, this is an area of concern among educators and other local stakeholders.

We recently launched the Chronic Absence Network to bring together a range of organizations to examine data in new ways, and to learn together about what works to significantly improve student attendance.

One district that jumped on board right away is the Salt Lake City School District, whose team lead joins me today to discuss their perspective on chronic absence, and their participation in this network. Jennifer Newell is the Salt Lake City School District attendance specialist. Thanks for joining me today, Jennifer.

JENNIFER NEWELL

Thanks for having me, Kenwyn.

KENWYN DERBY

So, first, can you tell me how your school district is approaching student attendance, and how that may have changed over time?



JENNIFER NEWELL

Absolutely. So, there have definitely been shifts over time, especially as far as I can tell over the, just maybe the past four or five years. And I think one of the biggest changes is the way that we're looking at absences. So for so long, we were looking at truancy. And so we weren't looking as much at excused absences.

And so a lot of times what I noted was that as long as the student was excused on the roll, then it was like, "Okay, they've been excused, we're good. They had a good reason for not being here."

But what we know is that a day missed of school is a day missed of learning, whether or not the student was out sick, or whether or not the student was out sunbathing. So, the bottom line is that we need to be looking at a broader picture and recognizing if kids are chronically absent, if they're missing more than 10% of the school days, then there's an issue. If it's illness, that's an issue. And so, what do we need to do about that?

Philosophically, we're moving in that direction of recognizing that reducing chronic absenteeism is about problem solving and support rather than blame and punishment. What we're moving towards in our district is really looking at, how do we dig deeper to find out what's really going on, recognizing that chronic absenteeism is usually a symptom of something larger. And so, treating it a like a mystery, what do we need to do, what do we need to find out, how do we dig deeper to figure out what the issues are at hand, and what we can do at this classroom level, the school level, and the district level to support students and their families in being in school.

KENWYN DERBY

It sounds like you are already doing so much work to improve student attendance in the Salt Lake City School District. What helped you decide to join this Chronic Absence Network?

JENNIFER NEWELL

There is so much more we know we can do, and I really am a strong believer in collaboration. I always work better when I'm collaborating, so I think the opportunity to work with some experts in the field, as well as work with other districts, and find out what they're doing, what their ideas are, and exchanging ideas.

So, it was just very exciting to me to be part of something bigger than just us.

KENWYN DERBY

So, at the beginning of this network, we kicked off working together by looking at data in different ways. REL West received data from the State Board of Education and created a number of data visualizations across each district, and statewide. And we looked at differences among student groups, we looked at grade levels, and we looked across years to see about the



differences in chronic absence rates. During that conversation, were there any “ah-hahs,” or were there data displays that confirmed what you already knew, or believed?

JENNIFER NEWELL

Looking over the data in that way I thought was really helpful and really exciting. I think one thing that was disheartening, but also kind of confirmed what I already think I know, was that it seemed as if our students on free and reduced lunch, and our students of color, tend to have higher rates of absenteeism than our White, middle class students. When we look at achievement data, we see that exact same thing. So, I really come with this lens of, are we as an institution, are we as our school districts, are we serving our students of color, and our low-income students?

KENWYN DERBY

So, in addition to looking at these higher level data, it’s important, as you know, for schools to dig into the detailed student-level data, so appropriate interventions can be targeted to the students that need them.

To do the work partnered with districts and schools, we asked each district to select one or more schools to work closely with. Can you tell me about the school that you chose to partner with?

JENNIFER NEWELL

It was a new administrator at that school who was a very passionate administrator, and who wanted to focus on attendance at the school. He had actually had a team at that school looking at attendance and starting to dig a little bit deeper into what some of the issues might be at that school. So, I thought it was a perfect opportunity for us to develop a partnership.

KENWYN DERBY

What is the team’s initial target student population, and specific improvement goal?

JENNIFER NEWELL

One of the things that was especially exciting about working with this school was their willingness to look at the data in a disaggregated way, and then being able to see that there was a discrepancy with their Latino students, and then really wanting to address that in a proactive way.

Initially, what they decided was that what they wanted was for...their smart goal would be for the chronic absenteeism rates of their Latino students to be low enough that they would match those of the rest of the population of the school.

So, once you decided to focus on the Latino students, and you've created a measurable goal, the next step is to figure out the root cause of these absences—to really understand why these kids are missing school, so that you can target interventions to improve their attendance. How are you and the school team going about figuring out why the kids are missing more?

JENNIFER NEWELL

What the school did was come up with this great survey, questions about if they liked school, if they felt comfortable, if they had friends, if there was adults they connected with.

The survey also asked students directly, when they miss school, why that is, and they also asked what the school can do for all students to help improve attendance.

We just recently got the results for the survey, and so our next step—what we're really looking forward to—is actually being able to look through those responses on the survey, and to find out what students themselves are saying, and to glean information from them about what the issues are, and maybe some ideas about how better to address the chronic absenteeism.

KENWYN DERBY

So, now that you have a target student population, and you have your goal, and you're trying to figure out why these students are missing school more often, do you have an idea about the first changes that you're going to test out to try to improve the attendance rates of these Latino students?

JENNIFER NEWELL

I think a really important direction for us to move is to recognize the importance of relationships for our students, and how important school connectedness is.

We so often see students, especially our high school students that are simply disconnected from school. They don't feel connected to the adults at the school, they don't feel connected to the curriculum, they may not even feel connected to the other students at the school.

One thing that the school has already put in place to engage more students, both with their attendance and their academics is something they call the breakfast club. Basically, they have students come in in the mornings. They've kind of identified students that have high levels of absenteeism and, and that may be failing one or more classes. And they invite them into one of the counselor's offices before school each day. They check in with the counselor, they look at their grades, and then the counselor asks if they need tutoring during lunch and if they do, they connect them with someone that will be tutoring in their specific subject area.

So, that's been something really exciting that's happening at, at that school level, and we see that kids are really building relationships with those counselors. What we want to start introducing, too, is maybe specifically is targeting some of our Latino students that aren't already in the breakfast club, targeting them and having them join the breakfast club.



KENWYN DERBY

So, Jennifer, thinking long term, what do you hope to accomplish in the next year, or many years, through your participation in this Chronic Absence Network?

JENNIFER NEWELL

Well, I'm really looking forward to continuing the collaboration that we have with other districts—hearing, you know, and learning from them, seeing when, other districts, what kind of progress they're making, and how can we learn from what they're doing, how can we learn from the data that they're collecting. I think that's something that has been powerful currently and will continue to be.

Another thing that I really appreciate is the new tools, and the new processes that we're learning by being part of this partnership. And so what we're supported in doing is to go ahead and try things, and then look at the data frequently to see if what we're doing is actually working.

KENWYN DERBY

To learn more about REL West and our chronic absence improvement work in the Salt Lake City region, please contact relwest@wested.org. This recording is funded by the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education. To learn more, visit ies.ed.gov.