

IMPROVING ATTENDANCE AT A RURAL ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL: A LONGITUDINAL CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This longitudinal case study follows the three-year implementation period of attendance interventions at a rural alternative high school with low socioeconomic status and high Hispanic population. The data pulled from four years at the school shows overall improvement in average daily attendance. This paper delineates the three phases of attendance interventions implemented and discusses the data results from each phase. The epidemic of poor attendance continues in the United States (Department of Education, 2024) and this case study shows one current process for addressing absenteeism. The paper concludes with four recommendations for practice and alignment of those findings with other current research: 1) Improve Instructional Experience 2) Align Scheduling 3) Stricter Policy and Expectations tied to Absences 4) Increase Stakeholder Communication and Awareness.

Keywords: Absenteeism, Attendance, Interventions, Alternative School Improvement, School Change, High School Leadership, Educational Leadership

1. Introduction

Student attendance in K-12 schools has become a problem nationwide. Over the last four years average absenteeism rates have doubled across the United States (Department of Education, 2024; Swiderski et al., 2025). In the case of Hispanic students, statistics show an even bigger absenteeism growth, both tripling the rate of average daily absences and doubling the chronic absenteeism (Dee, 2024; Department of Education, 2024; Malkus, 2024; Swiderski, et al., 2025). This problem is exacerbated in low-income areas (Dee, 2024; Klein & Sosu, 2024) and at alternative schools. In Arizona, the chronic absenteeism rate in 2022-2023 for the state was 41% of students (Dept Ed, 2024). Chronic absenteeism indicates that a student missed more than 10% of school days in that year, so this means that in Arizona two out of every five students were absent more than 18 days each school year.

Poor attendance at school is known to affect learning, retention, and other outcomes. On average students with low attendance have poorer academic outcomes such as grades, reading, and math levels (NCES, 2023; Wei, 2024). Absenteeism has also been linked to issues such as mental health problems (Allison, 2019), risk of drop out (Avsar et al, 2024; Salzer et al., 2024) and decreased connectedness to peers and helpful resources or adults (Department of Education, 2024). Addressing this complex challenge requires multi-faceted, sustainable strategies that are responsive to local context.

This study tracked and evaluated average daily attendance and chronic attendance at a rural alternative high school in Arizona where multiple interventions were documented. The data was gathered for four years, and multi-faceted interventions were implemented and monitored for the last two and a half years. Interventions included increasing engagement in classrooms, altering class schedules and bell schedules for students, and tightening policy in regards to attendance.

The study also tracked data for instructional engagement and credits earned towards graduation to monitor attendance throughout changes. This study is not transferable, but may offer recommendations for school leaders facing an attendance problem in similar school models. The following paper delineates the phases of interventions and attendance outcomes using data over four years from 2021 to 2025.

2. Methodology

This longitudinal case study took place at an alternative high school in a rural district in Arizona. The study utilizes attendance data from four consecutive years of the school, and five questions from an anonymous student survey. Attendance data was provided with permission and disaggregated in the following formats, by period, week, quarter, and year for the length of the study. Various interventions took place over two and a half years of the study that are detailed in the data and results section below. The school qualifies for 100% free meals based on income. The demographics over the four years remained steady at approximately, 70% Hispanic, 15% Native American, 10% White, and 5% other races. The instructional experience survey was given anonymously and consisted of five questions shown in Table 5. All data was provided with permission from the school district.

3. Data and Results

As shown in Table 1, the baseline data used is the 2021-2022 school year attendance data. The average daily attendance for the year was 70.4%. The attendance rate dropped each quarter, starting at 74.5% in the first quarter and ending the year at 69.8%. In the 2022-2023 school year the first two quarters showed a similar trend, starting at 76.8% attendance in the first quarter and dropping to 68.4% average daily attendance in the second quarter. This data became a focus for a group of teachers and leaders to make a change. At the end of the school year 2024-2025, the attendance rate had risen significantly to 82.3%. This section will discuss the journey and the data along the way to this attendance growth. Table 1 shows the quarterly attendance rate and end of year attendance rate for each school year. Table 2 shows the average attendance rate by class time in the day. The first class of the day was the same time each year. All three manners of looking at the attendance of students were monitored throughout the study and decisions were made from these data sets.

Table 1: Average Daily Attendance by Quarters and Year Over Four Years

	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025
Quarter 1	74.5	76.8	76.8	78.9
Quarter 2	70.8	68.4	71.5	76.6
Quarter 3	67.2	72.5	71.8	84.6
Quarter 4	69.8	73.2	69.8	89.1
Yearly Rate	70.6	72.7	72.5	82.3

Table 2: Average Attendance Percentage by Year for Each Class by Timing in the Day

	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025
1st class	63	70	76
2nd class	76	73	88
3rd class	76	73	86
4th class	73	73	83
5th class		72	81
Yearly Rate	72	72	82

3.1 Phase 1

During the tenth week of the 2022-2023 school year an attendance task force committee was formed to enact ideas on how to get students to attend more. Based on the alternative school traditions the school ran on a quarterly (9-week) schedule with only four classes per quarter assigned to students based on their credit needs. Students did not choose classes, and about 20% of the students had computer-based learning all day to try to catch up on credits faster. The committee made two focused changes starting in January of 2022-2023 to attempt to increase attendance. The first intervention was for each teacher to choose an instruction improvement goal that tied to increased positivity and engagement in the classroom. The second was to change the schedule of the school by adding an elective course for all students during the first hour. The

elective course was chosen by the student and spanned a full semester but met for half the minutes a day compared to core classes. Every teacher chose an elective to teach in addition to the four core classes that students took. Electives included things such as yoga, nutrition, basketball, psychology, career exploration, and more. The aim of the committee was to create a culture where students wanted to come to school. Specifically, the elective was placed first hour because the attendance was at its lowest during the start of school. Another consideration of the committee was to combat lost credit of core classes needed for graduation. In other words, if students continued to show up late, they would only lose elective credit and would have more chance of earning their core class credits on time.

3.1.1 Phase 1 Results

The overall attendance rate for the year 2022-2023 did show a slight two percentage-point increase compared to the year prior (Table 1). The changes also appeared to stave off the year's drop in attendance for the spring semester. However, the first hour attendance did not improve in comparison to daily attendance (Table 2). The secondary effect of offering half a credit more and putting it during the worst attendance time in order to have students earn more core credits did seemingly work. Students earned on average 0.4 more credits than in the previous year (Table 3). A closer look at the data showed that it wasn't necessarily the 0.5 credits offered for 1st hour, it was more students earning that second hour credit that used to be first hour. Students earned an average of 5.6 credits that school year, a full-time student was offered 8.5 credits possible due to the added class (Table 3). Not all students were full time, but earned credit data includes all students, regardless of full-time status.

Table 3: Total Credits Possible and Average Credits Earned

School Year	Total Credits Possible per Student	Average Credits Earned per Student	Average Percent Earned of Possible Credits
2021/2022	8.0	5.1	63.8%
2022/2023	8.5	5.6	65.9%
2023/2024	9.0	6.5	72.2%
2024/2025	9.5	6.9	72.6%

3.2 Phase 2

The attendance committee reviewed the phase 1 data throughout the 2022-2023 school year and determined that the credits earned and the 2% attendance increase were enough to continue with the five-class schedule change that included a choice elective. The focus on instructional positivity and engagement also remained a priority for year two of the attendance committee. One added intervention change to start the 2023-2024 school year was to rotate classes in order that each morning class would take a turn as the first class of the day. This was to combat students not coming to first hour because it wasn't seen as important and also to artificially make it so that late students would have less absences all in one class, the absences would be spread through three classes in hopes that they could get credit for all three classes. The choice elective class was changed to only three times a week but it was still a full semester course. The other core classes were longer blocks of time and earned credit each quarter as before.

Table 4: Rotating Schedule Model for 2023/2024

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Choice Elective	Core Class B	Core Class A	Core Class A	Choice Elective
Core Class A	Core Class A	Core Class B	Core Class B	Core Class B
Core Class B	Core Class D	Choice Elective	Core Class C	Core Class A
Core Class C	Core Class C	Core Class C	Core Class D	Core Class D
Core Class D		Core Class D		Core Class C

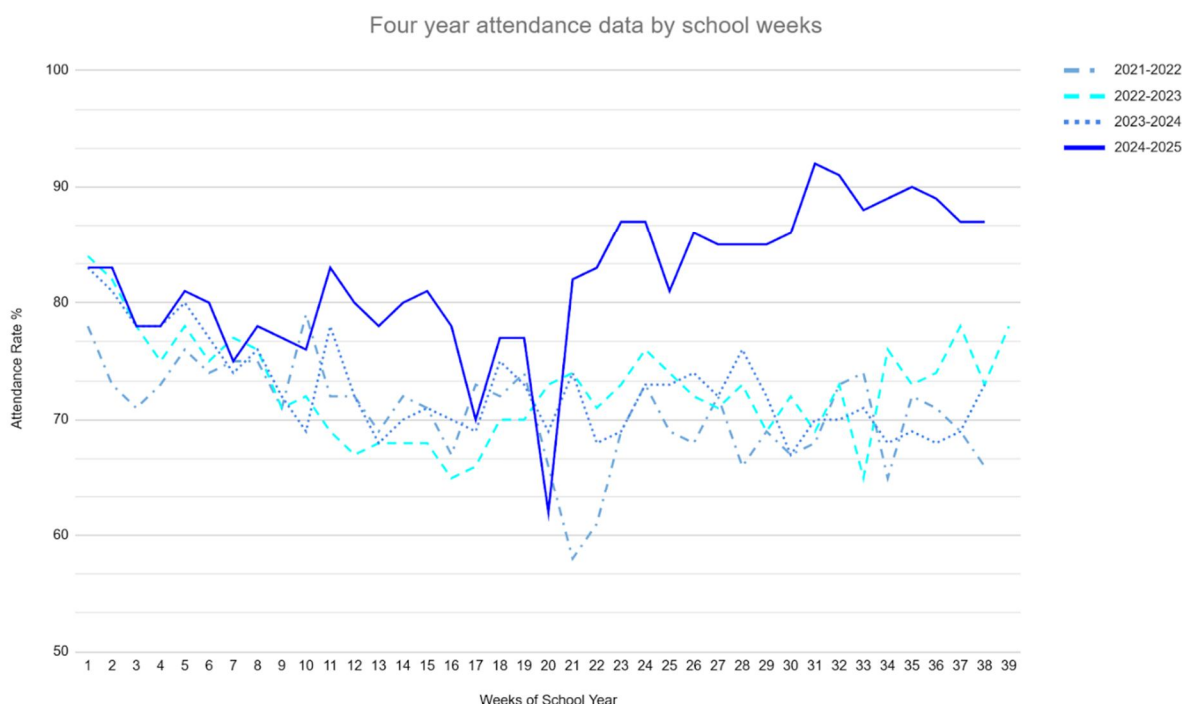
3.2.1 Phase 2 Results

The rotating schedule (Table 4) did create equal attendance rates for all classes as shown in Table 2 all classes had attendance rates in the 70s. However, it did not appear to increase overall school attendance (Table 1). Students did earn more credits in 2023-2024 than any previous year (Table 3), and attendance did stay the same 2% increase as compared to the 2021-2022 school year (Table 1). The average credits earned increase up to 6.5 per year when offered a max of 9 credits that year. Thus, with only 0.5 more credits offered, students earned 0.9 more credits on average than the prior year. This was due to the rotating schedule distributing absences more evenly among courses and students who were losing credit for being constantly late to school were able to earn their credits in more classes. Another corollary benefit to increasing credits earned was that graduation rate also increased. This was beneficial to the students and the school; however, the attendance rate had not moved significantly, therefore phase 3 brought in more change.

3.3 Phase 3

To start the year of 2024-2025 the schedule went back to a straight class schedule each day, but the changes made in phase 1 were maintained. The choice elective returned to its place as the first class of the day each day and instructional practices had changed (detailed in section 3.4 and Table 5) and were to be maintained. After the first quarter, the attendance team reviewed the data in chart 1 and determined that the weekly attendance rates were trending the same as years prior.

Chart 1: Average Attendance by Week Over Four Years



Therefore, the team decided that it was time to try tighter consequences for absences. With an average of 45 days per quarter and core classes counting as credit each quarter for the block schedule, the policy enforced post-2020 through quarter 1 of 2024-2025 school year permitted up to ten absences while still earning credit. Students with between 10-15 absences were allowed to petition and submit proof of mastery learning to try to still earn credit as well. This policy rendered attendance minimally-impactful, allowing for almost a third of the class instruction to be missed with students still allowed to earn credit. At the end of the quarter the attendance team decided to change the policy in an effort to try and allow only five absences allowed per quarter to earn credit. This was rolled out in increments.

First, students signed an attendance contract for every class that said they were only allowed five absences, between 5-10 would require the appeal, and anything above ten would be automatically no credit for the class. The team made a plan to allow ten absences for second

quarter, seven absences for the third quarter, and only five absences by the fourth quarter. During second quarter there was also increased auto-calls home for absences and notices given to students as they approached five, eight, and ten absences. Daily personal calls home became unsustainable for the team. In quarter three, only a targeted list of chronically absent students were personally contacted by a leadership team member in an effort to keep them under ten absences. Students and parents were notified after 3 absences and told they were only allowed five. Students signed a contract that stated they were only allowed five absences.

3.3.1 Phase 3 Results

At the end of the second quarter the data showed more failing grades than the first quarter and the average attendance rate had dropped compared to quarter 1 (Table 1). The team drilled down the data and found that the students who earned no credit were absent between 10-15 times and credit earned would have increased under the old policy because the absences were less excessive. Furthermore, the weekly attendance data showed an increase in attendance in weeks 10-16 (Chart 1) with a large dip in week 20 lowered the quarter's average attendance rate. Based on this closer look at the data, the school proceeded in the third quarter to reduce the allowable number of absences down to seven. At the end of the third quarter overall attendance was up over 8% (Table 1). The policy was stretched to allow eight absences before no credit was earned and that resulted in only 21% no credit grades. This was five percentage-points less than the quarter 2 attendance no credits of 26%. The policy seemed to be moving the needle. In 4th quarter it was again attempted to stick to five days allowed, but again at the end of the quarter the policy allowed up to eight. Fourth quarter averaged 89% average daily attendance (Table 1). A 20-percentage-point jump compared to 4th quarter of 2024 (Table 1 and Chart 1), and even the on the year average was up a full ten points (Table 1).

3.4 Other Data and Results Collected

Other school environment factors were tracked that may have influenced attendance and vice versa. The number of credits earned and instruction and grading changes were tracked and shown in Figure 1 and Table 3. Attendance was considered the number one reason that students did not earn credits for class according to the data, but these other changes must be considered as attendance interventions were not in a silo. Figure 1 shows the average credits earned each year; the attendance phases likely impacted the percent of credits earned by students. In the 2024-2025 year, though attendance was 10% better, the increase in earned credits was not as high because the attendance policy was stricter, but it still did increase 1.5 points (Table 3).

The only other significant tracked change was the instruction changes. Because this was an emphasis of the attendance committee district anonymous survey responses were tracked. The chart below shows student responses to changes in the first two years. The survey sample size included 33-40% of the population each time and each question had five multiple choice options. 1) In all of my classes. 2) In most of my classes. 3) In half of my classes. 4) In a few of my classes. 5) In none of my classes. The response percentages shown in Table 5 are only the option

marked was “In all of my classes”. The goal for the school was to change the instructional experience of all students, not in just most classes. Student responses show a major increase in all of their classes, in some cases doubling the rate of response (Table 5).

Table 5: Student Survey of Instructional Experience

	Spring 2022	Winter 2022	Spring 2023	Winter 2023	Spring 2024
I give class presentations or share my work with classmates.	7.9%	14.5%	16.0%	17.8%	19.4%
I work with other students in pairs or small groups.	10.1%	15.5%	22.4%	29.7%	26.9%
I receive acknowledgement and/or praise for my strengths or accomplishments.	27.0%	29.0%	26.4%	35.6%	36.6%
I actively participate in class discussions and activities.	24.8%	26.8%	29.9%	32.2%	38.7%
I have choices in assignments and have rubrics or checklists to help me determine the expectations for success	19.1%	26.8%	33.3%	33.9%	40.9%

3.5 Limitations

This study is not transferable, but it may provide suggested steps to help improve attendance in similar schools. The research is unfunded with no affiliation. The researcher was also employed at the school and was the lead of the attendance committee. Researcher involvement in the intervention decision making and change process does pose potential bias and it is recognized by the researcher that unconscious bias does exist. Other factors, not tracked, may have influenced outcomes. There were staff turnover, leadership changes, instructional changes, and grading changes happening on campus that likely played a part in any data. The staff and student changes were a common recurrence each year, but it is unknown if particular staff changes could have altered the data. Permission was granted by the school governing institution.

4. Discussion and Recommendations

This case study found that culture and instruction matter but clear communication of policy, high expectations and parent notification seemed to be the most effective interventions to attendance.

A progressive tightening of absence thresholds, coupled with student contracts and early parent contact, resulted in the most substantial attendance rate gains. As supported by Singer (2024) and Salzer et al. (2024), clearly communicated expectations and consequences have a meaningful impact, especially when rolled out in progressive stages.

Although policy was most effective, it took place after two years of instructional change which likely contributed indirectly to attendance for all three years. Improvements in classroom experience, particularly increased participation and student choice, built a foundation that supported later policy-driven attendance improvements. Instructional groundwork fosters trust and readiness for more rigid accountability measures (Hamlin, 2021; Bergman & Chan, 2021) in both students and staff.

The rotating schedule was effective for student credit loss, but it did not solve overall attendance at school. A rotating schedule was a manufactured improvement that only allowed for tardies not to affect credits. By spreading absences more evenly across classes, students earned more credits, especially those who struggled with punctuality. Schools should analyze class period data to inform scheduling and ensure that attendance interventions are targeted effectively (Swiderski et al., 2025). It may be a good idea for this school to enter phase four by reintroducing the rotating schedule with the success of policy from phase 3 to see if credit earning increased, but it was not effective for attendance on its own.

Overall, the most likely reason that the attendance efforts were so successful in year three entailed strategic, multi-faceted longitudinal efforts from the attendance team and all staff on campus. Echoing findings from Jordan (2023), Heyne (2024), and Lenhoff et al. (2022), a combination of focused collaborative leadership, policy, culture, and instructional change yielded the most robust outcomes. The school attendance committee did not give up, but continued to layer more strategy and policy each year. The awareness about attendance for all stakeholders also increased each year. While personal calls were effective, scalable strategies such as automated alerts or apps (Bergman & Chan, 2021) may be more scalable solutions to sustain impact.

5. Conclusion

This longitudinal study highlights how persistent, collaborative efforts rooted in data and context-specific strategies can significantly improve student attendance. While challenges remain, this case study demonstrates that student-centered scheduling, meaningful instructional reform, and clearly communicated attendance expectations can combine to reverse absenteeism trends in high-need alternative school settings.

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