



RAISE-ing Attendance: A Networked Approach to Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in California

Chronic absenteeism continues to pose a significant challenge in California. Despite the tireless efforts of schools and districts to boost student attendance, chronic absenteeism rates remain well above pre-pandemic levels. This persistence stems from a notable underestimation of the problem's complexity, a disproportionate overreliance on schools to solve it, and a reflexive tendency to look for one-size-fits-all solutions. To effectively address chronic absenteeism, we need a new approach that recognizes the magnitude and multi-faceted nature of the problem. We propose a comprehensive, systems-based approach that leverages the key elements of the Networked Improvement Community (NIC) model - improvement science and networks - while evolving its design to address the specific challenges of chronic absenteeism.

Current State of Chronic Absenteeism in California

While chronic absenteeism - defined as missing more than 10 percent of enrolled days during a school year - declined from its historic highs during the pandemic, in 2023-2024, nearly 20 percent of students in California were still chronically absent, twice the pre-pandemic rate (CDE Dataquest, 2025). For the most vulnerable student groups, rates remain much higher, further reinforcing long standing educational inequalities. Nearly 30 percent of students with disabilities and 25 percent of socioeconomically disadvantaged youth are chronically absent. The impact of chronic absenteeism on students is profound, resulting in missed learning opportunities, increased likelihood of dropping out of high school (Rumberger, 2011), as well as lower academic achievement and social skills (Gottfried, 2014).

The effects also ripple through the system, gradually eroding its stability and capacity to support all students. In 2024, over half of California schools reported chronic absenteeism rates above 20 percent. This ongoing churn in student attendance frays social connections, disrupts instructional continuity and classroom routines, and strains already overburdened schools with the added cost of supporting students who have fallen behind (Gottfried et al., 2024). Because school funding is based on average daily attendance in California, the financial toll is severe (Hahnel & Baumgardner, 2022); school districts statewide lose about \$3.6 billion in annual funding due to absences (San Jose Mercury News, 2024).

In response, many schools and districts have ramped up efforts to increase student attendance over the past few years. However, many of these efforts draw on conventional

strategies - such as attendance campaigns and incentive programs - for which evidence of effectiveness is limited. These interventions are also often implemented in isolation, resulting in fragmented supports and missed opportunities for early, coordinated action. In addition, the root causes of chronic absences often lie beyond the school walls: lack of access to housing, transportation, and healthcare (Lenhoff & Singer, 2025; Before the Bell Brief, 2024, Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Yet, most responses still tend to focus narrowly on school-level solutions rather than broader, community-driven activities (Lenhoff & Singer, 2025). In light of these realities, we believe a more systems-based and integrated approach is needed to help students return and stay in school. Enter RAISE.

Raising Attendance and Improving Student Engagement (RAISE) Network

RAISE¹ is a bold, statewide NIC with a clear aim: cut chronic absenteeism in half – from 20 percent in 2024 to 10 percent in 2029 – returning more than 656,000 students across the state to school. While an urgent and significant aim, improving attendance isn't enough. RAISE envisions a future where EVERY student in California comes to school, feeling connected, supported and engaged in their learning.

To fulfill this vision, we believe a reimaged NIC model² offers the most promising way forward. NICs bring together two powerful ideas: improvement science, which gives organizations a disciplined structure for learning what works for whom under what conditions, and networks, which allow organizations to leverage each other's innovations and insights, accelerating collective progress. This model stands in contrast with typical reform efforts where prepackaged solutions are rolled out system-wide with limited opportunities for adaptation or iterative refinement, and where schools and districts operate in isolation with few opportunities for shared learning.

RAISE is built on many of the key foundational elements of a NIC. At its center is a common aim - a clearly defined and measurable goal that serves as the network's guiding star. It also brings together the diverse expertise of practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and others to shape the work. Finally, it coordinates the efforts of its members to facilitate joint learning, shared problem-solving and collective progress using the principles of improvement science. However, while rooted in these core elements, RAISE also redefines their application³ to better address the complexity and unique challenges of chronic absenteeism. Specifically, it dramatically broadens the scope of stakeholder involvement, moves students and families closer to the center of the

¹ RAISE is an initiative of the High Tech High Graduate School of Education (HTH GSE) in partnership with the Improvement Collective (IC) as part of the work of the National Coalition for Improvement in Education (NCIE). HTH GSE and IC together serve as the hub or founding stewards of the network.

² Over the past decade, NICs have become a popular approach to addressing problems of practice in education. The model was developed by Anthony Bryk and colleagues at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and detailed in *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better* (Bryk et al, 2015). The NIC approach has been used successfully to improve outcomes in community college developmental math (WestEd, 2022), middle and high school reading achievement (Premo and Schunn, 2025), and 9th-grade on-track (Mathematica, 2024).

³ RAISE draws on the work of Learning Health Networks (LHNs), originally developed in healthcare, in its reconceptualization of the NIC model. Cincinnati Children's Hospital and Medical Center (CCHMC) is often considered the pioneer of this approach, having launched numerous LHNs, most notably Improve Care Now (ICN) and Children's Hospitals' Solutions for Patient Safety. LHNs are "multisite, practice-based clinical networks that use data for research and improvement. They involve collaborations among engaged patients and families, multidisciplinary teams of clinicians and staff, scientists and communities...[They] span a broad reach of conditions, settings and geographic locations and drive the spread of evidence and innovation." (CCHMC, Anderson Center)

work, and designs for scale from the outset. RAISE's guiding set of design principles both honors the core ideas of a NIC while advancing a new model tailored to tackle chronic absenteeism.

Centering students and families lies at the heart of this new model. Where the original approach calls for being “user-centered” around the problems educators face (Bryk et al, 2015), RAISE goes further by focusing on students and families affected by chronic absenteeism – ensuring that the changes are not just done to them but rather with them. We aspire to engage students and families as equal partners in all aspects of the work - as network leaders, designers, and contributors whose lived experience keeps the work grounded in real-world realities. Whether co-developing attendance messages that feel warm rather than punitive, or advocating for improved public transit routes to school, their voices shape the direction of the network. In a context full of shifting demands, contentious political dynamics, and competing priorities, keeping students and families front and center is what keeps the work anchored to what matters most.

Broad, shared ownership distinguishes RAISE from traditional NICs that primarily engage educators and researchers. RAISE unites multiple stakeholders – students, families, schools, districts, researchers, government agencies, advocacy groups and community organizations – to create a strong, integrated support system for every student in California. Indeed, over 60 stakeholders across the state contributed to the network's design, each offering insights that reflect their unique vantage point within the broader system.

In RAISE, all members are considered active problem-solvers, rather than passive recipients of top-down mandates – because sustainable solutions emerge when those closest to the challenges are empowered to contribute. Students and families co-develop and test ideas with school staff; schools and districts partner with transportation services, hospitals, and social service providers; policymakers create the enabling conditions for the ideas to scale; and researchers collaborate with network participants to generate and translate evidence into practical strategies that accelerate progress across the state. Everyone shares their knowledge and expertise, breaking down traditional silos, with the network aim and vision ensuring that each person's contribution leads to coherent and aligned improvements. All teach, all learn. Over time, RAISE aims to embed this shared ownership into governance itself, moving toward a model where leadership is distributed across stakeholders with the founding stewards playing primarily a facilitation and coordination role.

Disciplined and collaborative learning is how RAISE turns shared commitment into shared progress. Because there are no silver bullet solutions to chronic absenteeism – its root causes vary widely by student, school, and community – the network's success depends on its ability to learn its way into what works. A shared dashboard draws on real-time data from all participating districts. It surfaces bright spots the network can learn from as well as identify which practices are driving better outcomes in which contexts and where further improvement and

innovation is needed. Members engage in iterative and disciplined learning to prototype, refine, adapt and spread effective practices, drawing on both quantitative data as well direct feedback from students and families. A collaborative platform supports resource-sharing, crowdsourcing, and ongoing cross-network communications. Regular touchpoints – in-person convenings, virtual check-ins, all-network calls, emails and texts – keep members connected and in dialogue. Together, these routines create continuous feedback loops that accelerate learning across the network.

Candor and curiosity are the relational norms that facilitate this type of learning. Candor is the willingness to share one’s work, thinking and feedback openly; curiosity means staying open to new ideas and willing to revise one’s assumptions. Together, they foster honesty, transparency, and mutual respect that genuine collaboration requires. For example, in RAISE, all data is shared openly in the spirit of learning. When a site shows progress, we ask, “What can others learn from this?” When a site struggles, we ask, “What’s getting in the way and how can we help?” Real learning requires risk, and with it, failure. These are not obstacles to be avoided by expected features of experimentation. When an idea doesn’t work, instead of sweeping it under the rug, we lean into curiosity, asking what didn’t go as planned, why, and what can we learn from it.

Designing for scale from the beginning sets RAISE apart from NICs that often treat scaling as a future activity. With 58 counties, over 1,110 districts and 9,000 schools, reaching every corner of California demands foresight and deliberate infrastructure building. First, we need to determine what’s worth scaling. This is why creating a robust learning engine is essential – to identify what works, what can be applied universally with local adaptation, and what must be tailored to meet specific student and contextual needs. Demonstrating the real benefits for students and families through measurable and rigorous evidence is critical. But knowing what works isn’t enough. By engaging diverse stakeholders in the network, we are stitching together the system itself – creating connections across traditional silos, multiplying the pathways through which effective practices can spread, and building shared ownership that sustains real change over time.

Chronic absenteeism is a complex, systemic challenge that conventional approaches and legislation alone cannot solve. It demands something fundamentally different - a learning network that draws on the collective expertise and energy of every stakeholder to build a system where every student not only comes to school but feels supported, connected and fully engaged. That is the future RAISE is committed to making a reality.

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