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Increasing Attendance for Specialized Student Populations

LAUSD Leverages the DMBreakthroughTeams Approach

by Tess Nicholson and Kathleen Choi

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LAUSD Leverages the DMBreakthroughTeams Approach

Tess Nicholson and Kathleen Choi

In spring 2020, when all of the schools in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) closed and shifted to remote learning, Michael Romero, superintendent of Local District South, one of six local districts in LAUSD, recognized that his district's specialized student populations would need increased supports. Romero therefore formed a district-level Equity Team charged with streamlining support services for those students in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or involved with the juvenile justice system.

Over the summer, this Equity Team spent time developing their long-term strategic plan while addressing the immediate, urgent needs of students. With the strategic planning process, the Equity Team committed to three priority areas: reducing absenteeism, increasing academic achievement, and increasing graduation rates.

As Romero and leaders on the Equity Team were brainstorming how to meet the objectives of the strategic plan effectively and efficiently, Romero reached out to District Management Group to explore leveraging the DMBreakthroughTeams approach. Romero had seen great success with this approach: over 100 Breakthrough-Teams in his district's schools were making measurable progress in math, reading, graduation, and attendance by using this approach. Determined to take action, Romero engaged DMGroup to pilot eight teams across four middle schools and four high schools in fall 2021.

Michael Romero
Superintendent of Los Angeles Unified District South

Romero challenged these teams to focus on the first priority of their strategic plan: reducing absenteeism. Tackling attendance was a prerequisite to addressing the second and third priorities of increasing academic achievement and increasing graduation rates. The district's specialized student populations had shown high levels of chronic absenteeism in spring 2020 and were beginning to show the same in fall 2020.

After eight weeks of using the DMBreakthroughTeams approach, the results were impressive. Across the eight

schools, the Breakthrough Teams targeted nearly 500 of the 643 students in foster care or experiencing homelessness. The targeted group ended up with a rate of chronic absenteeism that was three times lower than that of the control group (*Exhibit 1*). And, even among those not categorized as chronically absent, attendance rates were significantly better than those of the control group (*Exhibit 2*): 75% of the DMBreakthroughTeams target population ranked in the proficient and advanced category as compared with 53% in the control group.

How did this work? Below, we take a closer look at the work done at Edison Middle School.

Case Study: Taking Action at Edison Middle School

At Edison Middle School, 100% of students experiencing homelessness and/or in the foster care system were considered chronically absent at the end of the 2019-20 school year. Being classified as "chronically absent" meant a student missed more than 9% of school days throughout the year — more than 16 full school days. The shift to virtual learning in the spring had dramatically increased absenteeism, a data point that elevated concerns about the 2020-21 school year, which was starting out in remote-learning mode.

Convening a Team

Edison Middle School selected five school-based staff members for its DMBreakthroughTeam. It was determined that the team lead for every team involved in this work

for Local District South would be a Specialized Student Support (SSS) counselor from the district's Equity Team. SSS counselors are charged with supporting specialized student populations across multiple schools and need to constantly collaborate and coordinate with school staff. Having SSS counselors as team leads for all eight teams engaged in this work would help strengthen relationships between the SSS counselors and school staff, break down silos that might exist, and promote collaboration — an important foundation to making progress on the strategic plan put forth by the Equity Team.

Edison Middle School BreakthroughTeam Members included:

- Specialized Student Support Counselor (Team Lead)
- Principal
- Assistant Principal
- Pupil Services and Attendance Counselor
- Systems of Support Advisor
- Intervention Coordinator

On October 18, 2021, the Edison Middle School BreakthroughTeam and their dedicated DMBreakthroughTeam coach came together via a Zoom room to review attendance data for the 73 students at the school who were experiencing homelessness and/or in the foster care system. At this point, two months of the school year had passed, and some students were already considered chronically absent.
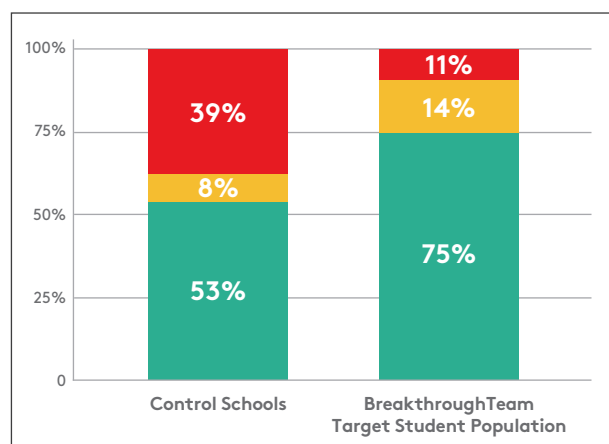
Defining the SMART Goal

Guided by the DMBreakthroughTeam coach, the team studied the list of students and chose to focus on those

Exhibit 1 RATE OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

3x lower chronic absenteeism rate

Control Schools: 39%
BreakthroughTeam Target Student Population: 11%
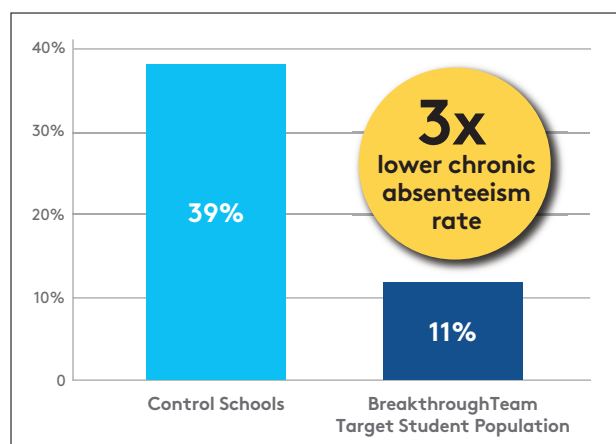
Note: Six schools were chosen to serve as a control group, with a foster care/homeless population of 379 students, including Dymally HS, Banning HS, San Pedro HS, Peary MS, Drew MS, White MS.

Exhibit 2 DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS BY ATTENDANCE BAND

Control Schools: 39% Chronic, 8% Basic, 53% Proficient/Advanced
BreakthroughTeam Target Student Population: 11% Chronic, 14% Basic, 75% Proficient/Advanced

■ Chronic (Attendance of 91% and below)
■ Basic (92% – 95% attendance)
■ Proficient/Advanced (96% – 100% attendance)

with six or fewer existing absences — a total of 58 students, which is 80% of the current total foster and homeless students at the school. The team set and committed to a SMART (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ggressive yet Achievable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime-bound) goal for eight weeks, expressed as follows:

> *By December 18, 2020, 80% (47) of the 58 students in specialized populations with fewer than six absences will have no more than an additional two absences.*

This was the team's guiding light. Every Tuesday, the team and the DMBreakthroughTeam coach came together to review the attendance data for the 58 students. The specificity of the SMART goal — the goal of having no more than two absences over eight weeks — kept the team highly focused.

Upon examining the data, they prioritized those students who had accrued an absence the previous week and iterated on strategies to ensure attendance. Because the team was reviewing the data on a weekly basis, they were able to intervene quickly.

Lora Caudill
Equity Director and DMBreakthroughTeam Sponsor

> " *This strategy not only supported the work with the target group, but was helpful in raising attendance even among non-targeted students.*

Iterating to Develop Successful Strategies

Weeks 1 and 2: Piloting an Idea

In the first two weeks, the team decided to take an incentive-based approach. With the support of the team, the SSS counselor worked to organize a fun "attendance assembly" on Zoom for students where they would have raffles and other activities. But when it came time for the assembly, few students showed up. Disappointed, the SSS counselor started to call students in real time to remind them about the assembly. This resulted in a couple of students joining the Zoom line.

Week 3: Finding Success in Failure

Moving into week three, the team acknowledged that the attendance assembly had not achieved the results they wanted. But the SSS counselor remarked that students actually started to join the assembly once he called to remind them about it. He proposed to the group that

instead of organizing another attendance assembly, the team members could go to students' Zoom classrooms to check if they were there. If students were not in class, someone from the team would immediately call them to get them to attend. In this way, before a student could even accrue an absence, a team member would intervene.

The team came together to sort through all of the logistics that this approach would require. They gathered class schedules, obtained class Zoom links, and informed teachers, among other things. Each team member was then made responsible for a specific group of students who had accrued absences since the start of the challenge. Team members would log in to the Zoom classrooms of these students, check if they were in attendance, and if not, would immediately call the student or guardian to have the student join the classroom. The results were incredible.

During week three, there were only *two* full-day absences among the 58 students, compared to 15 the week before.

Week 4: Celebrating the Win

The team came back together at the start of week four and celebrated how well this intervention had worked. They had spent the first three weeks iterating and innovating on an idea and had found something that worked. They decided to focus on this strategy and build on their success.

Justin Cole
Specialized Student Support Counselor and DMBreakthroughTeam Lead

Weeks 5 to 8: Building on Success and Iterating Further

For the remainder of the challenge, team members focused on making this intervention even stronger with the following enhancements:

- **Building Connections:** The team reviewed research that found that a large contributor to student attendance is connection to an adult on campus. Team members then explored ways to build that connection in the virtual setting. They chatted privately with students via Zoom and increased

their calls to families and guardians to get a better sense of some of the unique challenges students were facing because of COVID.

- **Attendance Assemblies – Version 2.0:** Team members decided to reinstate the attendance assemblies, but after making more connections with families and guardians, they decided to include family members and guardians in the assemblies. At these assemblies, they raffled off gift cards to stores where families could buy essentials like food and clothing; in so doing, they helped to address some of the challenges students and families were facing.

Success was seen beyond the target group of students. The school recognized a need to organize all Zoom links into one central location so leaders could easily "walk into" a classroom. This strategy not only supported the work with the target group, but was helpful in raising attendance even among non-targeted students. Teachers started reporting that attendance for all students was improving.
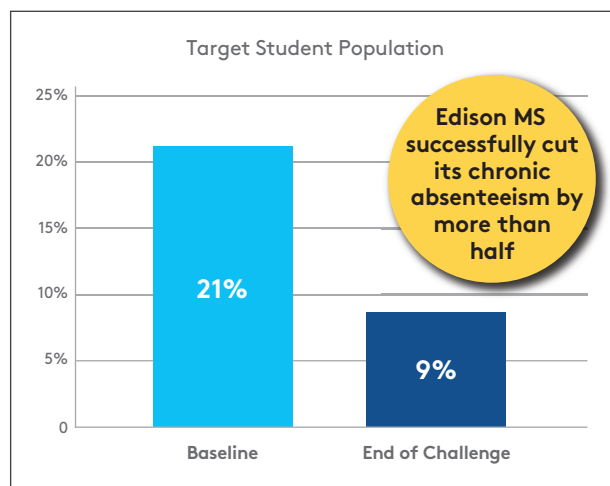
Getting Results

By the end of the challenge, 90% of the targeted students missed no more than two additional full days of school, exceeding the initial goal of 80% of the students. This meant only 6 of the 58 students missed more than two days of school over the course of eight weeks (*Exhibit 3*).

Exhibit 3 **ADDITIONAL FULL-DAY ABSENCES**

Target Student Population

Only **6 of 58** students had more than two absences
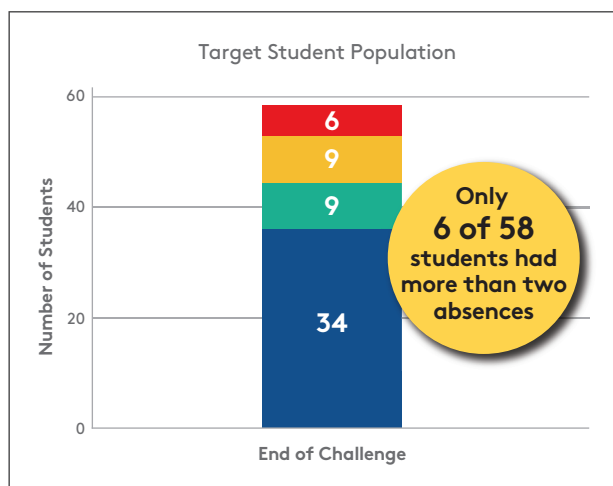
Legend:
- More than two additional days
- Two additional days
- One additional days
- Zero additional days

Exhibit 4 **RATE OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM**

Target Student Population

Edison MS successfully cut its chronic absenteeism by more than half

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> **"** *By the end of the challenge, 90% of the targeted students missed no more than two additional full days of school, exceeding the initial goal of 80% of the students.*

Because of the team's focus on getting students to class, the team also successfully cut the chronic absenteeism rate by more than half, moving 7 of 12 students out of the chronic band (*Exhibit 4*). This would give students a better chance of remaining in the basic or proficient/advanced band throughout the remainder of the school year.

Sustaining Change

During the last meeting, the team reflected on what had worked well. They attributed their success to the weekly review of data, their work to innovate and refine strategies based on the data, and the consistent communication and coordination among team members. "Communication was key to success. Constant coordination among each of the team members to support students made all the difference," noted Justin Cole, SSS counselor and team lead. The team was excited to continue the work and to continue to collaborate with one another.

Michael Romero and the Equity Team reflected on the strategic plan they had put down on paper over the summer and were energized by the tangible progress they were making. These results are only a starting point for their work to better support these specialized student populations. ◆

DJ Cervantes, DMBreakthroughTeams performance coach, contributed to this article.

DMBreakthroughTeams

Building Leadership Capacity and Getting Results

How the DMBreakthroughTeams approach works:

▶ **Districts or schools typically launch multiple teams simultaneously, with each team composed of a cross-functional group of five to seven members.**

▶ **Each Breakthrough Team identifies a performance objective to achieve with a short time frame – usually 10 weeks.**

▶ **Based on the performance objective, teams formulate SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Aggressive yet Attainable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) that are highly specific and relevant to the team members.**

▶ **With the support of a dedicated DMBreakthroughTeams performance coach, teams test innovative strategies, track weekly progress, learn quickly from successes and failures, and iterate in rapid cycles to achieve results.**

▶ **Just-in-time performance coaching and targeted professional development help team members develop the skills needed to address challenges and overcome obstacles.**

Source: DMGroup.
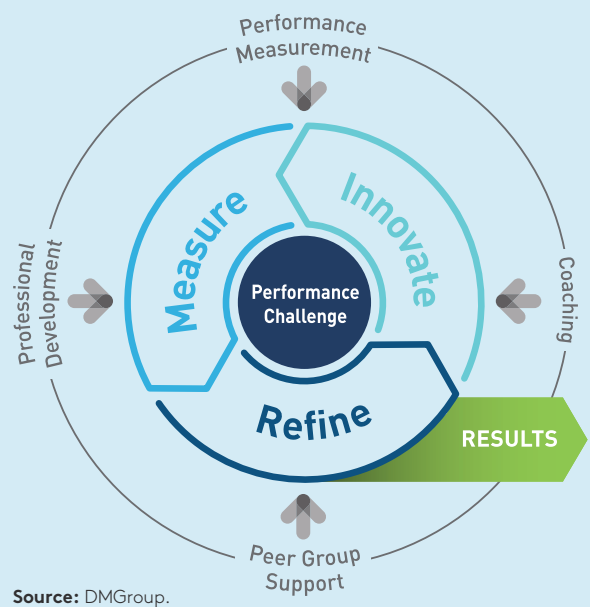
The DMBreakthroughTeams approach achieves measurable results for the district while building team members' skills and leadership capacity. This approach provides on-the-job experience, targeted professional development, and coaching to build meaningful and enduring skills.