



Matching Students in Need to Supportive Services in Shelby County School District, TN

The Government Performance Lab (GPL) provided pro-bono technical assistance, with support from Results for America, to help Shelby County School District connect students to the right supportive services to set them up for academic and economic success.

The Challenge: Shelby County School District (SCS), located in Memphis, Tennessee, faced challenges supporting its students in achieving academic success. In 2018, only 19.6% of SCS students met standards for math proficiency and only 20.4% met standards for English language arts proficiency. While high-quality classroom time is critical, the district recognized that many of the students' barriers to academic achievement occurred outside the classroom. For example, over one-third of their 100,000 students were experiencing child poverty. Children living in poverty are less likely to receive proper nutrition or get appropriate medical attention, and more likely to experience disruptive home relationships and stressful environments.¹ All of these factors can make it difficult to focus during school and can disrupt attendance, negatively affecting classroom engagement and academic success.

“The unfortunate reality is that many of our students must navigate a range of barriers outside of the classroom that impact their ability to show up to school ready to learn. For some students those barriers manifest in food insecurity, for others it's housing instability or inadequate access to healthcare. But whatever the circumstance, concentrating and learning in class is hard for anyone to do under those conditions, let alone young people. The important thing to understand, though, is none of that is the fault of students. These inequities are structural and systemic, and as a result school districts have a responsibility to meet students and their families where they are.”

- Robert Fisher, SCS Director for Strategic Operations & Innovation

To address these challenges and try to ameliorate barriers to academic achievement for its students, the school district provided \$20m of community resources and contracted services that aimed to holistically support students beyond the classroom. These resources included health screenings, literacy tutoring, social and emotional learning to help children regulate their emotions and behaviors, after-school care programs to support working parents, and programs to reduce chronic absenteeism. However, the district wasn't sure if these services were being utilized to the fullest, and if they were effectively reaching the kids most in need.

¹ Eric Jensen, “How Poverty Affects Classroom Engagement,” *Faces of Poverty* 70, no. 8 (May 2013): 6. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may13/vol70/num08/How-Poverty-Affects-Classroom-Engagement.aspx>.

An Economic Mobility Motive

Academic success is a critical component of economic mobility - the ability for a child to advance his or her economic status relative to his or her parents. Succeeding academically in childhood has been linked to economic advancement and higher income as an adult.² Increasing upward economic mobility is a pervasive challenge in Memphis, as it currently ranks 93/100 on this indicator compared to other cities across the country.³ Memphis has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the country and a history of racial and income segregation, factors which greatly affect Shelby County School students. In 2011, Memphis City Schools dissolved and six affluent, predominately white suburbs of Memphis created their own school districts. As a result, Shelby County School District, composed primarily of urban, black students, was left with much less resources.⁴ These students (93% students of color, and 33% experiencing child poverty), face structural barriers to economic mobility - making it particularly important to prioritize their academic success.

The Project: In 2018, Shelby County School District, with support from the GPL, launched the Community Partnership Pilot with three schools to test strategies for matching students with the greatest need to supportive services. The pilot focused on programs delivered by three different providers: case management services to address chronic absenteeism, healthcare services for Medicaid-eligible students, and an early literacy program to help students achieve grade-level reading skills. Through their work on the pilot, project partners: **1) Conducted data analysis that revealed support services were largely not being provided to the right students**, and then **2) Developed and implemented processes for systematically identifying, matching, and referring the right students to each program**. Below are more details on the work project partners did to better connect students with the chronic absenteeism and healthcare programs included in the pilot:

1. Tackling chronic absenteeism to keep students at school

In 2018, nearly 13% of SCS students were chronically absent, missing more than 10% of school days in the academic year due to excused absences, unexcused absences, or school suspensions. Students struggle with absenteeism for a variety of factors, including: parents underestimating the number of days their child has missed and/or not realizing how much it affects academic performance, limited public transportation options to travel to school (which poses a problem particularly when the weather is bad), and behavior issues that lead to exclusionary disciplinary practices (including suspensions from school). Students who miss over 10% of school days are at the greatest risk of falling behind academically, as they miss critical instruction time and risk social disengagement. Worryingly, chronic absenteeism has been linked to increased rates of poverty in adulthood, lowering the chances of upwards economic mobility.⁵

To help address chronic absenteeism, SCS district offers a supplementary case management service to support chronically absent students and their parents. Using a 'Check and Connect' model⁶, the case manager meets regularly with students and parents to increase engagement with school and develops personalized interventions to build students' self-efficacy. With a two-generation approach, the case manager works on engaging both parents and students simultaneously. With parents, the focus is on making sure they know the

2 J Lawrence Aber et al., "Middle Childhood Success and Economic Mobility," *Brookings Center on Children and Families*, 2013.

3 "The Geography of Upward Mobility in America," The Equality of Opportunity Project, <http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/neighborhoods/>.

4 Dwyer Gunn, "Seceding School Districts Leave Vulnerable Kids Behind," *Pacific Standard*, June 21, 2017, <https://psmag.com/education/seceding-school-districts-leave-vulnerable-kids-behind>.

5 "Chronic Absenteeism and Its Impact on Achievement" (Center for Research in Education and Social Policy: University of Delaware, June 2018), https://www.cresp.udel.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/P18-002.5_final.pdf.

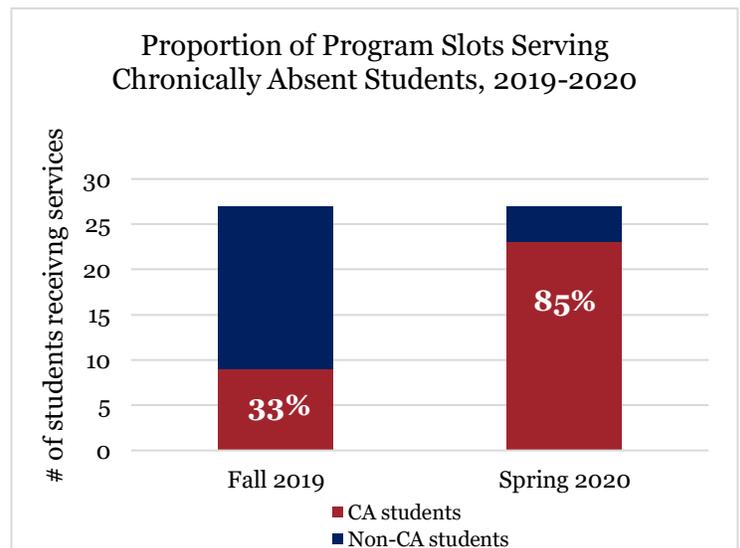
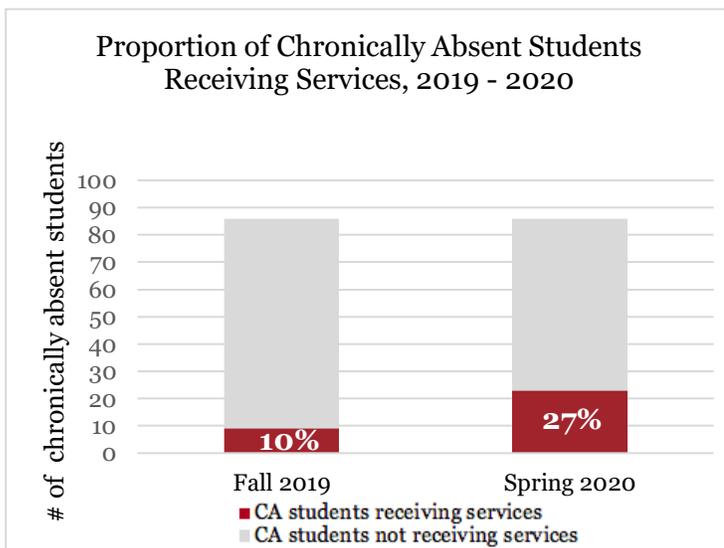
6 Jonathan Guryan et al., "The Effect of Mentoring on School Attendance and Academic Outcomes: A Randomized Evaluation of the Check & Connect Program" (Northwestern Institute for Policy Research, November 30, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.3386/w27661>.

importance of attendance and troubleshooting any barriers parents have for getting their kids to school. For example, the service can help connect students and families to transportation support. With students, the case manager focuses on individualized engagement, that (when appropriate) includes behavior moderation strategies to prevent school suspensions. The case manager plays an important role in communicating the value of classroom learning, and helps students work through any issues that may prevent them from wanting to attend school.

The pilot school had 86 chronically absent students, approximately 15% of the total student population. With only 28 slots in the absenteeism program, it was important to make sure the program was effectively reaching chronically absent students in need of additional support. However, after reviewing school and provider data, the GPL discovered that most of the program slots were filled by students without any absence-related issues at all. In fact, in 2018 only 13% of the students served by the program were chronically absent. As project partners sought to determine why this mismatch was occurring, they realized there was no established protocol for referring chronically absent students to the service provider. Referrals were made on an ad-hoc basis, and were largely based on self-referrals from a community event hosted by the provider. The resulting caseload was mostly students who attended school regularly and did not have any academic issues - not the priority target population for this service.

To address this problem, project partners clarified and implemented new referral and enrollment protocols to focus on serving students who are chronically absent. The participating school started by creating a list of all students who were chronically absent in the preceding year. Then, they handed this list to the service provider with student contact information, to ensure that the provider knew 1) who the target students were and 2) how to contact them. School administrators also formalized protocols for following-up with the provider and holding them accountable for reaching out and enrolling students on the list.

Project partners applied these strategies to rebalance the program’s caseload. Now, nearly three times as many chronically absent (CA) students are receiving services, from 10% of all chronically absent students to 27% (see figure - bottom left). In addition, nearly all program slots (85%) are devoted to chronically absent students (see figure - bottom right).



As a result of this work, there has been a 10 percentage point reduction (from 30% to 20%) in chronic absenteeism for students receiving services compared to similarly situated students in five neighboring schools.

2. Increasing preventative screenings to keep children healthy

Shelby County School District is attempting to make services available in schools that will improve the health and wellbeing of children that it serves. The district is able to provide a range of health services to Medicaid-eligible students, including preventative health screenings, vision tests, fluoride treatments, and immunizations. Preventative health screenings are a key component of keeping children healthy; occasionally these screenings can uncover serious health issues and these services ensure that children are connected to the appropriate medical services. More commonly, preventative screenings for children uncover issues with vision, dental health, or incomplete immunizations. Vision screenings (combined with fitting for glasses) can have direct effects on students' academic success,⁷ dental hygiene is important for overall health, and increased immunization coverage helps protect students from disease.

Upon analyzing program data, project partners discovered that the provider of these health services faced challenges connecting with eligible students and getting signed consent forms back from parents. In 2018, out of 600 students in the school, only 108 had returned consent forms allowing them to participate in preventative screenings. Return rates were so low partly because no one (in the school or provider organization) was explicitly tasked with keeping track of consent forms or following up with students to get them back. Poor rates of return for consent forms meant that a very small number of students actually went on to receive preventative health screenings and get connected to health services.

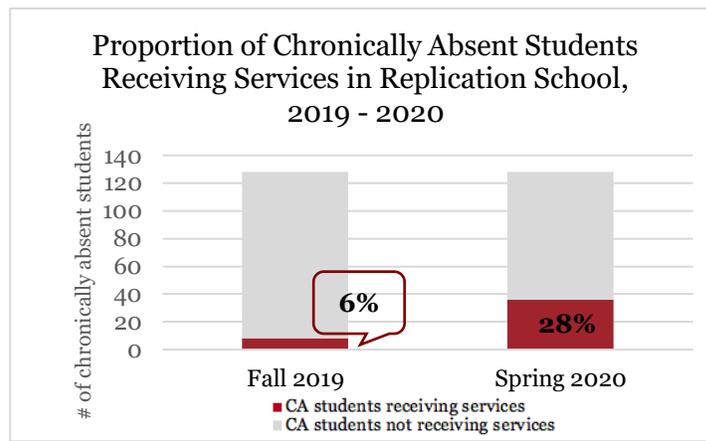
The school and provider aimed to increase the number of students returning consent forms in order to better connect students with available health services. Project partners began by clarifying the respective roles of both school administrators and provider staff: school administrators needed to distribute consent forms strategically and incentivize students to bring them back signed, and the provider needed to keep detailed track of which consent forms had already been submitted and who was eligible for services. Project partners tested new strategies to increase the number of returned consent forms, such as offering prizes (like free tickets to the school dance) as incentives for middle school students to bring back their forms. The number of consent forms received jumped from 108 to 491, which resulted in an over 350% increase in screenings in the first year of the initiative (from 30 screenings to 136 screenings). In the second year, there was a further 40% increase in the number of students receiving preventative health screenings (193 screenings).

⁷ Paul Glewwe, Kristine L. West, and Jongwok Lee, "The Impact of Providing Vision Screening and Free Eyeglasses on Academic Outcomes: Evidence from a Randomized Trial in Title I Elementary Schools in Florida," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*: [The Journal of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management] 37, no. 2 (2018): 265–300, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam>.

The Results: The Community Partnership Pilot served as a proof of concept for testing strategies to better match students to the right supportive services across Shelby County School District. As part of this, the pilot has:

1. Decreased student absenteeism, increased the number of students receiving health screenings, and improved the share of supportive services targeted to students most in need

The pilot schools in Shelby County School District have experienced better student outcomes, including a 10 percentage point reduction in chronic absenteeism. Based on these results, project partners replicated the caseload rebalancing process in an additional school and were able to increase the proportion of chronically absent students receiving services from 6% to 28% (see figure below).



The pilot school working on healthcare access saw a 540% increase in the number of students receiving preventative health screenings over two years (from 30 screenings to 193).

As a result of this work, the pilot schools have implemented processes for systematically identifying, matching, and enrolling priority students in to appropriate services. Now, more students in need are accessing extra support to help them overcome out-of-classroom barriers to set them up for academic success. In turn, this academic success will help enable SCS students to improve their rates of upward economic mobility in the future.

2. Developed a new model for collaborative and data-driven relationships between the school district and providers of supportive services

The school district and service providers have developed new ways to work together to determine which students are the best fit for the array of supportive programs offered, and then systematically connect these students to those services. This has involved the implementation of active contract management strategies: frequent, data-driven meetings between school administrators and providers to address barriers to referral, enrollment, and service delivery in real-time. Based on this work, the school district is better positioned to make systematic changes (by expanding the model they piloted) to ensure that providers across the district are in the right schools and serving the right students.

The Origin Story: Coordinating Government Action with Community-Driven Goals

In 2017 StriveTogether, a national collective impact organization, invited the GPL to test a collaboration with one of its flagship collective backbone organizations. The question StriveTogether and the GPL were interested in addressing was how to amplify the important work being done by community organizations by increasing government's participation in high impact collective impact initiatives. StriveTogether and the GPL had both noted a pattern of strong collective impact organizations successfully coordinating key stakeholders, amalgamating data, and facilitating community leaders in generating data-driven goals, but then struggling to coordinate significant action and resources among stakeholders, particularly government.

StriveTogether proposed that the GPL collaborate closely with Seeding Success, Memphis' collective impact backbone organization, to explore ways in which the GPL's technical assistance could be used to facilitate helping government entities shift resources and processes to accelerate progress towards shared cradle-to-career goals. Cradle-to-career refers to an approach of supporting young people throughout their entire development (i.e. from cradle at birth to career in young adulthood). Seeding Success had tested an approach of placing technical assistance within government entities to help increase their capacity to engage in collective impact initiatives, and found that these entities were more able to take concrete action steps. After exploring several placement options, Seeding Success facilitated the GPL's placement with Shelby County Schools, and continued as a strong project collaborator throughout the project, using its integrated database and capacity to support the analytics work underpinning the project's key insights about the mismatch between services and students.

The project with Shelby County School District tests a model for technical assistance, collective impact, and government partners to successfully collaborate to produce tangible, impactful changes in government behavior and resource allocation that advance collective impact cradle-to-career goals.