

# Improving Family Engagement Through Culturally Responsive School-Based Outreach

## A Case Study of Community Health & Education Workers/Promotores de Salud

### MAKING LIFE-CHANGING CONNECTIONS

How do you reach students and families that are disengaged from school and the community? School-based health worker outreach programs can help bridge the gap with trusted messengers.

Over the past century, Community Health Workers (CHW) and, in Spanish-speaking communities, Promotores de Salud have devised grassroots outreach and connection strategies to build relationships with residents in underserved communities. Through consistent engagement with families, they play an integral role in promoting positive health outcomes and connections to high-quality health and social resources. Further, CHW programs provide employment for residents who can connect with disadvantaged populations as trusted messengers. As employed resident leaders, CHWs play a significant role in devising innovative solutions to address community challenges.

Early community health worker programs were documented in China during the 1920s through Farmer Scholars and Barefoot Doctors (Perry, 2013). These movements demonstrated the effectiveness of training community members to administer basic medical assistance, such as checking vital signs and providing vaccinations and health education. In the 1960s and 1970s, CHW programs emerged in various regions, including Latin America, where the Promotores de Salud name originates. In the United States, CHWs have worked in a variety of settings for the past 70 years, beginning in the 1950s with grassroots outreach and education initiatives conducted by indigenous workers (Knowles et al., 2023). In more recent years, and in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, a larger movement has emerged to integrate the CHW model into a variety of settings, including government, health care plans, hospitals, and schools.

CHW programs foster equitable engagement strategies and boost access to resources for vulnerable populations. This engagement model also provides a workforce development opportunity for community members. One of the greatest advantages of Community Health Workers is their unique ability to understand local challenges and cultural norms since they typically live and work in the communities they serve. This knowledge is invaluable in responding to community needs and addressing the social determinants of health and education impacting a neighborhood.

**Community Health Workers can help address roots of absenteeism**



In school settings, CHW/Promotores can help bridge gaps between vulnerable students, their families, and schools. Existing CHW programs in schools have helped link students and their families with needed community resources to keep youth engaged in their academic endeavors. In San Bernardino, California, CHW/Promotores have been vital community partners in helping school administrators address high rates of absenteeism and youth indifference in school. Research has identified a variety of reasons that students miss school, including physical and behavioral health, school climate, parental challenges, community safety, and transportation challenges (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Allison et al., 2019; Chang & Romero, 2008; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2016). There are many negative impacts associated with missed school, including an increased risk for lower reading levels, high dropout risk, and increased risk of interaction with the justice system (Ewert et al., 2014; Henderson et al., 2014; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2016). These negative impacts disproportionately affect racially and ethnically diverse students as well as students in poverty (Gottfried, 2014a, 2014b; Kevin Gee, 2019). Therefore, declining student attendance is a key indicator for schools and creates an opportunity for districts to provide an early response to engage those students and families to change their educational and health trajectories.

**Community Health Workers boost school attendance and engagement in San Bernardino**



## Connecting students with trusted health education workers

Knowing these impacts, the San Bernardino City Unified School District (SBCUSD) partnered with El Sol Neighborhood Educational Center (El Sol NEC) and Loma Linda University Health to implement a CHW model in school settings. Their aim was specifically to re-engage and support students showing indicators of becoming chronically absent. The partnership between the school district, an academic partner, and a local community-based service provider allowed for the deployment of up to seven (7) Community Health Education Workers (CHEWs) districtwide to support students who were chronically absent from school.

To implement the program, the SBCUSD Family Engagement Office regularly works with Loma Linda University Health's Institute for Community Partnerships (LLUH-ICP) to make student/family referrals. LLUH-ICP then oversees the development, assessment, and evaluation of the CHEW program while partnering with El Sol NEC for implementation and to track engagement. The CHEW partnership in San Bernardino is rooted in the premise that CHEWs' life experiences mirror those of students. Being a part of the same community allows CHEWs to understand and connect to cultural and social norms shared by students and their families. This gives CHEWs a greater ability to connect in ways that are deeply impactful with at risk students and their caretakers. This also allows CHEWs to serve as messengers in relaying systems change recommendations to the district.

One of CHEWs' primary engagement methods is home visits, which allow CHEWs to meet students and their parents or caretakers where they are. Home visits were instrumental in the identification of chronic absenteeism as a widespread local barrier to academic achievement in San Bernardino. CHEWs' close and unique understanding of their community, along with their technical training, resulted in studying and addressing chronic absenteeism through a social determinants of health lens. It revealed the complexity of chronic absenteeism and its association to barriers preventing the student from attending school. Over the past five years, the CHEW program has proven to be a meaningful way of engaging with students and creating opportunities to inform families about local resources, the importance of attendance and how to encourage students in their household to do well in school.

## What results has the School District observed?

Data from the first five years of the CHEW program clarifies some of the barriers that result in recurring absences. Those barriers often include poverty, student behavior, and parental factors, confirming the findings from academic literature. It is important to note, however, that reasons for absences can shift with time. The 2022-2023 programmatic data identified health-related barriers as a top reason for missed days of school. Most importantly, an evaluation of students who received interventions by CHEWs during the 2018-2019 school year showed a 5 percent reduction in the number of missed school days.

Parents who received support from CHEWs reported great appreciation for them and trusted that their CHEWs acted in good faith to connect the family with resources such as health insurance enrollment, child/youth services, local community organizations/agencies, food resources, and health clinics. Surveys conducted by Loma Linda University Health also show that between 2019-2020, there was an increase in CHEW home visits to families from 366

## Results, continued

to over 2,000. This significant increase demonstrates the growing willingness of families to engage with CHEWs, especially after an initial endeavor. Further, focus group outcomes show how positively families view CHEWs. One parent commented, “She got us food. She helped me with my daughter in regards to her school. She convinced her to continue finishing school. Thanks to that conversation, my girl was able to graduate. Truly, this is something that was very important.” Another parent stated, “I think any connection that you have with your CHEW, whether it be a home visit or a text message, it makes you feel important and makes you feel valued.”

As a result of extended engagement opportunities with high-need students and their families, CHEWs have demonstrated a keen ability to work closely with parents and caretakers to identify barriers in the home that may be impeding their child’s ability to regularly attend school. This community-academic partnership highlights a few of the ways in which San Bernardino City Unified School District has made meaningful progress in engaging with high-need students to deploy culturally sound interventions that can positively influence community health and education.

School districts interested in understanding disparities in attendance within their catchment population can model interventions after the Community Health and Education Worker Program. Two elements are critical to the success of such programs. First, they must be rooted in the local community. Second, school districts must integrate credible, trusted community partners into their systems to effectively capture data on the social determinants of health and education that might be preventing students from attending school. A healthier community starts with local schools.

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## What is the CYVP Program?

The Comprehensive School-Based Approach to Youth Violence and Victimization (CYVP) grant program supports a comprehensive effort to address youth violence and victimization through the implementation of evidence-based prevention, intervention, and accountability efforts in a school-based setting. This includes opportunities for schools to partner with community-based organizations to create or build upon strategies that increase safety in schools and throughout the community.

## Resources and Contacts

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# LISC

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