

REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM



Jamestown Community Center

San Francisco, CA

1,346

Average number of students served annually

86%

Students from low-income families

Main funding sources:

- ▶ After School Education and Safety Program (ASES)
- ▶ Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELO-P)
- ▶ 21st Century Community Learning Centers
- ▶ San Francisco Department of Children, Youth and their Families
- ▶ Foundations
- ▶ Individual donors

Inspiring learning and providing opportunities for young people to explore their passions and find what they excel in

In a survey of school districts during the 2023-2024 school year, nearly 9 in 10 district leaders reported at least a modest level of chronic absenteeism in their schools. Chronic absenteeism — generally defined as students missing 10% or more days of school — is a pervasive issue affecting students across grade levels. From its effect on students' academic performance to disproportionately affecting systemically disadvantaged students, chronic absenteeism has raised the alarm of many and is not an issue that schools should be left alone to solve. Afterschool programs are an opportune partner to strengthen students' connection to school, improve school-day attendance levels, and keep young people on track toward a bright and promising future.

Overview

Rooted in the principles of youth development, **Jamestown Community Center** (Jamestown) is a nonprofit organization in San Francisco's Mission District working to ensure that the young people they serve receive the support needed to realize their full potential. Jamestown offers a host of programming, before-school, after school, and during the summer, to students in grades TK-12 in a culturally relevant manner, led by staff from the community — many of whom are alums of the organization. Jamestown engages students at every stage of their schooling with academically enriching activities that are fun, build life skills, and reflect students' interests.

A typical day for students

A typical day in Jamestown's afterschool program depends on students' grade, with the level of youth choice and voice in the program growing as students develop. For example, while the youngest participants in the program — in transitional kindergarten through 2nd grade — have enrichment activities brought in, students in grades 6-8 are expected to develop, plan, and pitch the enrichment programming they would like to participate in. This includes mapping out the scope of the project, creating a budget for the activities, and collaborating with staff to help execute the activity. Programming has included cooking, soccer, photography, and skateboarding.

High schoolers in Jamestown’s afterschool program take part in workforce programming, which has a community and life skills component. Students select a community issue of interest to them, conduct research, and practice public speaking skills by presenting their findings to the public, which has included city hall staff. Teens also gain financial literacy skills — learning how to budget, save money, and set up a bank account — while also exploring and planning the steps they would like to take after high school.

Program characteristics

A strong youth development framework guides Jamestown Community Center’s approach to ensure that their students can thrive in and out of school and that their staff have the appropriate support to best meet the needs of the young people they serve.

For their students, this approach means that youth know they have staff around them who they can talk to and trust, who look like them, and who often come from their community. Student voice is also embraced by Jamestown, which helps the organization align school-day lessons with fun, hands-on activities. For example, when kids expressed an interest in cooking, the program infused literacy lessons into a cooking class, with students reading recipes, writing cookbooks, and making culinary creations for their peers.

The staff training in youth development principles begins with intensive onboarding, which includes learning the foundations of youth development, understanding the different stages of student learning, and gaining insights on how to build positive, authentic relationships with their students. Staff are also encouraged to “push in” and shadow school-day teachers to observe what their kids are learning in the classroom. Jamestown has found that this approach has created “lightbulb moments” for their staff, helping them discover new strategies to explain a topic better, capture students’ attention, or approach a subject from an angle. Jamestown provides professional development opportunities for staff throughout the year on topics such as lesson plan development and social emotional learning. Each staff position includes contract paid time for professional development. The underlying intention is for staff to understand that continuous growth and development is integral to the organization’s culture.

Outcomes

Jamestown has made a positive impact on students in their programming, with Jamestown participants more likely to attend school than their peers not in the program, and most students reporting that they have a friend in the program (89%) and that they’ve been able to experience new activities in the program (80%). All teens in Jamestown’s Youth Apprenticeship Program and Youth In Charge programs have graduated from high school and applied to a two- or four-year college. Additionally, nearly all caregivers of students in the program say that they feel their child is safe while in the program and that the program holds high expectations for their child.

Challenges

Estimates for the 2023-2024 school year show that 9.4 million students, or nearly 1 in 5 students, are chronically absent.

States’ chronic absenteeism levels remain higher than pre-pandemic. Every state, including Washington, D.C., has experienced a substantial rise in chronic absenteeism rates when comparing the 2021-2022 school year to four years prior.

Adverse effects on students’ educational trajectory. Chronic absenteeism in the early grades puts students at risk for delays in social skills, increased absenteeism in later grades, and grade retention. In middle and high school, academic consequences include negative impacts on high school graduation and enrolling in and persisting through college.

Consequences reaching into adulthood. Adverse academic outcomes — such as poor educational achievement and dropping out of school — that are associated with chronically absent students are also linked to long-term financial instability and limited social mobility, which are associated with poor mental and physical health.

Chronic absenteeism affects all students, but there are students who are more likely to be chronically absent. Due to root causes that intersect with the experiences of students with marginalized identities — including barriers to get to school, an aversion to and disengagement from school, and misconceptions about the impact of absences — students experiencing poverty, students of color, and students with disabilities are disproportionately more likely to be chronically absent.

Read [How Afterschool Programs are Building School-Day Engagement and Improving Attendance](#) to learn more.



Program history

After seeing a group of young people without a place to go or things to do after school in an area with a high level of gang violence, a group of neighbors came together to create Jamestown Community Center — a safe space for young people to gather and access mentorship opportunities. Since its conception in 1971, the organization has grown from a single classroom to a vast network of intentional and structured support for more than 4,000 K-12th graders today. Programs now include before-school, afterschool, and summer programming, youth workforce development, dual-generation, and prevention programming.

Recommendations

for inspiring learning and providing opportunities for young people to explore their passions and find what they excel in:

- ▶ **Invest in your staff — it's worth it.** Whether it's connecting your staff with in-school shadowing opportunities or building paid time for professional development into staff contracts, this investment will benefit your staff, your kids, and your organization.
- ▶ **Afterschool programs have their own flavor.** While they complement what takes place during the school day, they don't, and shouldn't, look the same as the school day. Feel confident and empowered that you have the opportunity and flexibility to provide the activities and programming you know your kids need and will respond to.