

REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM



Reality Changers

San Diego, CA

450

Average number of students served

90%

Students from low-income families

Main funding sources:

- ▶ Foundations
- ▶ Businesses
- ▶ Individual donors

Providing a culture of care through supportive adults and mentors

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

Guided by a whole-student, whole-family approach, **Reality Changers** is a San Diego-based college access program focused on getting low-income and first-generation college students "to, through, and beyond" higher education. To do this, Reality Changers offers afterschool and summer programs for 8th-12th grade students, mentorship and career support for their alumni network, and monthly workshops for families of first-generation college students. Reality Changers has a mission to inspire historically overlooked and underrepresented students to reach new heights by cultivating support systems among students' peers and the program's adults.

A typical day for students

During a typical day, students engage in a vocabulary-boosting activity, participate in a 30-minute lesson where they develop study skills and college knowledge, and receive dinner. During the evening, students work closely with their mentors and tutors. Reality Changers deliberately integrates grade levels with joint programming, making weekly programming similar whether students are in the 8th or 12th grade — with one exception. While 8th-11th grade students work with tutors to strengthen their understanding of school material, 12th grade students have independent work time (supported by mentors) to build strong college applications, including refining their essays and applying for scholarships and financial aid. During programming, all students may also participate in community service, have one-on-one check-ins with program staff and volunteers, attend community and career events, or visit local college campuses.

Program characteristics

Reality Changers employs a whole-student, whole-family approach to ensure traditionally overlooked and underserved students have what they need academically, financially, and emotionally, for a successful postsecondary transition. Beginning in 8th grade, the program intentionally recruits students with a 2.0 GPA or below to alter the trajectory of students who are tracked into low-level courses throughout high school. When 8th grade students enter Reality Changers, they are purposefully integrated into programming with high schoolers, encouraging “near-peer” role models, where the program’s older youth serve as positive mentors and motivators. This approach helps 8th grade students struggling academically and behaviorally envision themselves as high-achievers and develop confidence in their ability to attend and persist through college.

Reality Changers’ programs focus on creating communities rooted in love and support to help all students grow their confidence. Often recruited from the same communities students live in, the program’s caring adults are trained to use an asset-based and student-centered approach that focuses on student strengths while encouraging them to think outside of their comfort zones. One way this is reflected is through Reality Changers’ Speech Night. Working with mentors, all students develop and present a speech about themselves to their peers, families, and communities. Although students may be nervous at first, Reality Changers’ welcoming and supportive environment allows students to feel assured in owning their narrative, while also honing their public speaking skills.

In addition, Reality Changer’s high-touch point of caring adults ensures that staff stay abreast of what’s going on in their students’ lives, including challenges and successes in and beyond the classroom. Through regular check-ins with students, families, and partner schools, staff build rapport with students that extends to the personal level. As a result, students begin to feel more engaged in school and accountable for their performance, knowing they have a network of adults actively rooting for their success.

Outcomes

Alumni of Reality Changers consistently attribute their postsecondary and career success to the support and individualized attention they received from caring adults within the programs. Sal, a 2020 graduate of the program, began his journey with Reality Changers in 8th grade with a GPA of less than 2.0. Although he was skilled at reading lips, his mentor, who worked closely with him, discovered that he had a hearing impairment and connected his family with the resources for him to be evaluated,



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.



which revealed he was deaf in both ears. After receiving cochlear implants, Sal began to excel in Reality Changers and school, eventually leading to his acceptance at University of California, Berkeley, where he majored in engineering and participated in competitive internships at companies such as Clorox. Now working as a software engineer at Dell, Sal credits the care and support he received at Reality Changers as the catalyst that shifted his trajectory and helped him believe that he could achieve academic and career success despite being unable to hear in the traditional way.

Program history

Reality Changers was founded in 2001 by Christopher Yanov, an 8th grade teacher, who realized he spent more time attending 8th grade funerals than graduations. Starting as a gang-prevention program with only \$300 and four students, Reality Changers grew exponentially within the next decade as its community and government officials recognized its positive impact on students' academic trajectories. Now a full-fledged college access program, Reality Changers has helped more than 3,500 students graduate high school and complete postsecondary education. Currently, the program offers afterschool, summer, college, and family programs for its ever-growing community.

Recommendations

for more intentionally incorporating mentorship and adult support into afterschool programming:

- ▶ **Position mentorship as a way to expand students' networks and open doors to new possibilities.**
Low-income and first-generation students may not have readily available networks to help them navigate high school, college, and their careers. Programs must recruit caring adults (especially those who reflect their students' backgrounds) who can expose young people to possibilities they may have never considered, while broadening their support networks.
- ▶ **Practice mentorship with an asset-based lens.**
Instead of focusing on the barriers students face, mentors can support low-income and first-generation students by helping them discover their strengths, passions, and aspirations, while empowering them to be the experts of their own stories.