

# STAYING POWER:

*Assessing the Impact of the be@school Program on Student Attendance Behavior*

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
+ HUMAN DEVELOPMENT  

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

The be@school Program was implemented to increase school attendance and to improve community connections across Hennepin County through a coordinated early intervention effort that provides educational and support services to school-age children and their families. The program builds on the Minneapolis schools' attendance improvement activities which include making automated calls to parents after the first unexcused absence, sending a Principal's letter to parents after three unexcused absences, and offering helpful resources to the families.

This report presents evaluation findings for the 2010-2011 school year of Hennepin County's be@school Program. The program used early intervention strategies with individual families to address children's poor school attendance. Over 6,000 children in grades K-12 and their families were referred to the program during the timeframe under study. Referrals came from 21 school districts, charter schools, and independent schools across Hennepin County.

The evaluation focused on comparing children's attendance records before and after program intervention. Additionally, analyses were completed between students whose families participated in the program and those who were referred, but did not participate (comparison group). Qualitative data analyses were also carried out to identify impediments to school attendance. Throughout this report, demographic information and program activities are described and related to the findings.

### Evaluation Results

#### 1. To what degree does the be@school Program change students' attendance behaviors?

The evaluators examined school attendance records of 836 students whose families participated in a Parent Group Meeting (PGM). A paired t-test was used to test whether differences between pre-intervention truancy rates and post-intervention truancy rates were significant. The results showed a significant reduction in unexcused absence rates for students who participated in the PGM intervention.

There were 829 students and families who attended a STAR meeting. A paired t-test was again used to test differences between the mean unexcused absence rate before and after STAR participation. The t-test revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-intervention truancy rates among these students. However, large percentages of participating students had no unexcused absences post-intervention. For example, 94% of the students at 30 days, and 69% of the students at 60 days had no unexcused absences post-STAR intervention. Additionally, there was a shift towards fewer unexcused absence rates as indicated by the lower means at 30-, 60- and 90-day markers.

There were 168 students and their families who attended both a PGM and a STAR meeting. The paired t-test revealed that there was no significant reduction in unexcused absences for students and families who received both the PGM and STAR interventions. Nevertheless, among the 168 students who participated in both a PGM and STAR interventions, only two

students (1%) had unexcused absences post-PGM at the 60-day marker, and 12 students (7%) had unexcused absences post-PGM at the 90-day marker. After the PGM, 99% of the 168 students in these interventions had no unexcused absences for the three-month period.

## **2. Does student attendance behavior after program participation (30-, 60-, and 90-day markers) differ significantly from students' attendance behavior before program participation?**

Data analysis indicated that after a PGM the students' truancy decreased notably and significantly post-intervention across all three time intervals (30, 60, and 90 days).

The STAR analysis showed that while the number of truant students increased at each of the time markers, there was a shift towards fewer unexcused absences as indicated by lower truant rates at 30, 60 and 90 days. The analysis also showed a notable reduction in truancy among these students with large percentages of students having no unexcused absences post-intervention (94% at 30 days, and 69% after 60 days).

Among the 168 students who had both a PGM and STAR only 12 students had unexcused absences after the PGM at the 90-day marker. While, there was an increase in the unexcused absence rates at 60 and 90 days, 99% of the students in the intervention had no unexcused absences post-PGM. The data showed that only 17 of 168 students were truant 30 days after the STAR intervention. At the 30 day marker there was an increase in the truancy rate, but that rate trends notably downward at 60- and 90-day markers. Unexcused absences were almost cut in half at these two timeframes when compared to 30 days after a STAR meeting.

## **3. What are the characteristics of students who are considered successful in the be@school Program?**

There was a significant correlation between truancy and grade level that showed more unexcused absences as students moved up in grade level.

Hispanic students had the fewest number of trancies ( $M = 17.68$  days) while American Indian students had the greatest number ( $M = 20.42$  days).

Students who participated in a PGM and who received agency support had significantly fewer absences than their counterparts who received no agency support.

For families and students, the most significant impediments to school attendance appeared to be transportation to school and language barriers between families and schools.

## **4. Which schools, if any, are most successful at changing the attendance behaviors of their students?**

When we compared unexcused absence rates across school districts, we found there to be a significant difference in rates. The analyses showed that the average truancy rate in Robbinsdale school district was significantly higher than all of the school districts except for Anoka-Hennepin, Westonka and Minnetonka. Additionally, Eden Prairie had a significantly

lower truancy rates when compared to Robbinsdale, Minneapolis, and Bloomington school districts.

#### **5. To what extent do PGM and STAR interventions add value to the program?**

Our evaluation showed that the Parent Group Meeting (PGM) is effective in reducing absenteeism. Students whose families attended a PGM had significantly lower unexcused absence rates post-intervention during the 2010-2011 academic year. Trend analysis also showed that absence rates, on average, were cut in half for up to 90 days after a PGM when compared to absences prior to the intervention.

The evaluation indicates mixed results on the effectiveness of the School Team Attendance Review (STAR) meeting. The students who had only a STAR intervention (no PGM) showed no significant differences in unexcused absence rates post-intervention. Similarly, students and families who participated in a PGM and progressed to a STAR meeting showed no significant differences in unexcused absence rates post-intervention (both PGM and STAR). However, large proportions of students had no unexcused absences post-intervention.

At the end of the report, seven recommendations are provided for the Hennepin County Attorney's Office and school staff.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank participating district leaders, directors of research and evaluation, and school assessment staff for their assistance during this evaluation. Their help and responsiveness was essential to the be@school evaluation.

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## Introduction

This report presents evaluation findings for the 2010-2011 school year of Hennepin County's be@school Program. The program used early intervention strategies with individual families to address children's poor school attendance. Over 6,000 children in grades K-12 and their families were referred to the program during the timeframe under study. Referrals came from 21 school districts, charter schools, and independent schools across Hennepin County.

The evaluation focused on comparing children's attendance records before and after program interventions. Additionally, analyses were completed between students whose families participated in the program and those who were referred, but did not participate (comparison group). Qualitative data analyses were also carried out to identify impediments to school attendance. Throughout this report, demographic information and program activities are described and related to the findings.

The evaluation addressed the following questions:

- To what degree does the be@school Program change students' attendance behaviors?
- Does student attendance behavior after program participation (30-, 60-, and 90-day markers) differ significantly from students' attendance behavior before program participation?
- What are the characteristics of students who are considered successful in the be@school Program?
- Which schools, if any, are most successful at changing the attendance behaviors of their students?
- To what extent do PGM and STAR interventions add value to the program?

## Background Information and Program Overview

Minnesota state law requires that children attend school from the time they are enrolled in kindergarten through 16 years of age or upon graduation from high school. In addition to state statutes, many school districts employ comprehensive attendance policies with some districts requiring students to attend at least 95% of the school year to be eligible for grade promotion. In some extreme cases, families of children failing to attend school due to unexcused absences may face legal action for educational neglect.

Even when legal and school requirements are in place, some families struggle to keep their children in school. For many families, consistent school attendance is hampered by poor transportation, chronic health issues, or changing housing situations. Other families struggle with chemical dependency, unemployment, family mobility, and issues related to physical or mental health, or domestic violence. In an attempt to serve families in Hennepin County, the Hennepin

County Attorney's Office (HCAO) initiated a collaborative effort with school systems and community agencies to support families whose children have poor school attendance.

The be@school Program was implemented to increase school attendance and to improve community connections across Hennepin County through a coordinated early intervention effort that provides educational and support services to school-age children and their families. The program builds on the Minneapolis schools' attendance improvement activities which include making automated calls to parents after the first unexcused absence, sending a Principal's letter to parents after three unexcused absences, and offering helpful resources to the families. The be@school Program adds three additional interventions to existing school-based efforts: Parent Group Meetings (PGM), School Team Attendance Review (STAR) meetings, and Court Interventions.

### **Parent Group Meeting (PGM)**

When a student receives six unexcused absences, the school makes a referral to the Hennepin County Attorney's Office (HCAO). After reviewing the family's eligibility for the be@school Program, HCAO sends a letter to parents inviting them to attend a Parent Group Meeting (PGM). A PGM is a multiple-family, lecture-style meeting usually held on a weekday night at a community-based location (school, library, etc.). At the PGM, an HCAO representative explains the compulsory school attendance laws, the consequences for continued unexcused absences, the benefits of education, and the services available to assist families.

At the meeting, families may request assistance from community agencies. Agencies provide direct services to assist families in getting their children to school and also refer families to other services that may be used to minimize attendance barriers. Families are assigned to contracted agencies based on the family's specific needs and geographical location.

According to the HCAO director of the be@school Program, families that have children in kindergarten through second grade are specifically targeted for agency assistance. This emphasis on an early intervention was intended to promote school attendance for families of young children.

### **Educational Neglect and Truancy Report: The STAR Meeting**

If the referred child is under 12 years of age and has three additional unexcused absences after the PGM date (i.e., a total of nine unexcused absences), the school makes an educational neglect report to the county. The HCAO will review the report and refer the family to a contracted community agency, if the family is not already working with an agency. These families are also invited, by mail, to attend a School Team Attendance Review (STAR) meeting.

For children 12 and older, the school sends a truancy report to the Attorney's Office. The STAR meeting is attended by the parent, the student (if 12 or older), an HCAO representative,



the contracted community agency, and a school representative, if available. The goal of the STAR meeting is to develop a specific plan to remove obstacles that affect student attendance. After the STAR meeting, the contracted community agency monitors the child's attendance weekly and continues to provide assistance.

### **Court Intervention**

Children under 12. If the child accrues eight additional unexcused absences following the STAR report (total of 17 unexcused absences), the school submits a second education neglect report to the Attorney's Office. The HCAO reviews the report and sends it to Child Protection. A decision is then made whether to attempt additional preventive services or file A Child in Need of Help or Protection (CHIPS) petition. If a CHIPS petition is not filed, and the child subsequently accrues an additional three unexcused absences, and additional voluntary services are deemed unlikely to be effective, a CHIPS petition is filed in Juvenile Court. In court, the focus is on assisting the family in resolving the barriers to school attendance.

Children 12 and over. If the child accrues eight additional unexcused absences (total of 17 unexcused absences) following the STAR report, the school submits a truancy report to the Attorney's Office. The HCAO will decide whether to attempt additional preventive services or file a truancy petition in Juvenile Court. If a truancy petition is not filed and the child accrues an additional three unexcused absences, and additional voluntary services are deemed unlikely to be effective, a truancy petition is filed in Juvenile Court. In court, the focus is upon services and sanctions that promote attendance and educational success for the student (e.g., tutoring, credit recovery, mentoring, be@school@your library, etc.). Parent involvement is actively encouraged. If multiple interventions have been attempted and the child remains truant, services may be discontinued.

## Referral Demographic Data

During the 2010-2011 academic year, 6,026 children across 21 Hennepin County school districts were referred to the be@school Program for unexcused absences. The number of these program referrals for these 21 districts are displayed in Figure 1. The “Other” category was developed to include participating magnet, independent, and charter schools located in Hennepin County. Students from this category were also incorporated in the over 6,000 referrals.

**FIGURE 1. PROGRAM REFERRALS BY SCHOOL DISTRICT (N=6,026 STUDENTS)**

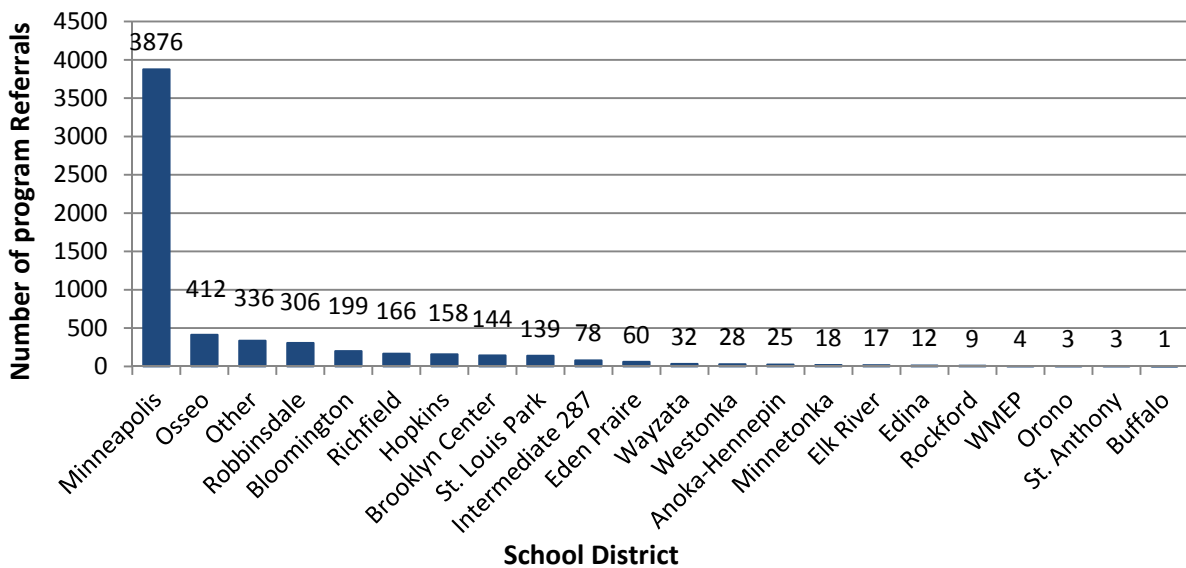


Figure 1 provides the number of referred children by school district. Over half (64%) of student referrals were made by the Minneapolis school district. Osseo school district and the “Other” category for magnet, independent and charter schools had the second and third largest referral numbers, 7% and 6% respectively. Orono, Saint Anthony, and Buffalo school districts had the fewest referrals.

**FIGURE 2. PROGRAM REFERRALS BY GRADE LEVEL AND GENDER (N=6,026)**

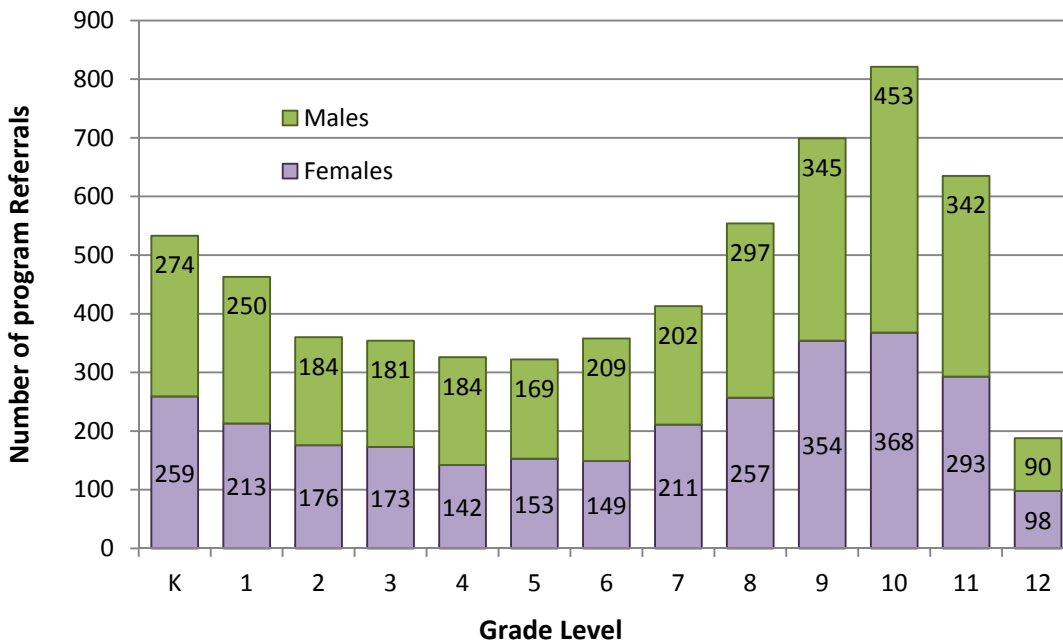


Figure 2 above, provides the grade levels and gender for the 6,026 students referred to the program. One notes slightly more than one-fourth of the referred children were in grades 10 (14%) and 9 (12%) with the lowest proportion of referrals in grade 12 (3%). Among all 6,026 students, there were more boys (53%) than girls (47%).

**FIGURE 3. PROGRAM REFERRALS BY RACE/ETHNICITY (N=6,026)**

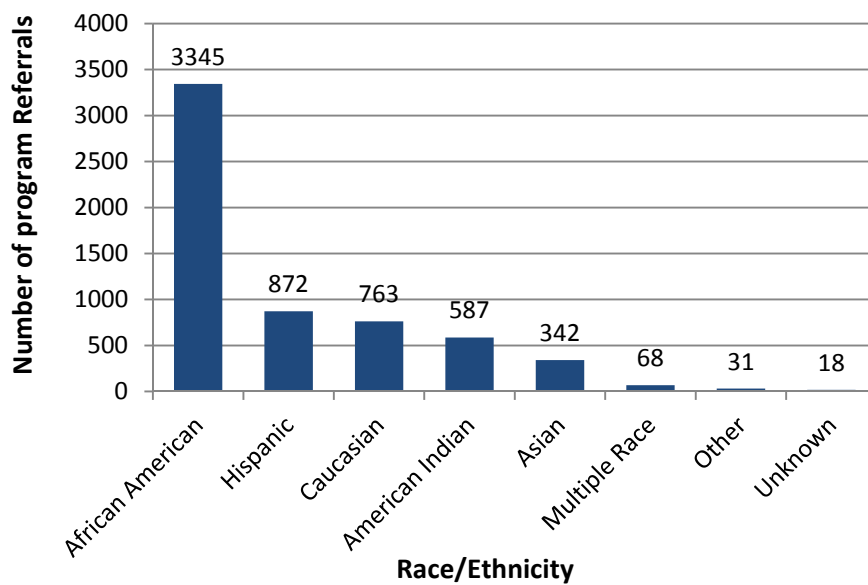


Figure 3 indicates the referral pool’s race/ethnicity distributions. The referred children reflected considerable diversity across race/ethnicity categories. The analysis revealed that 55%

of the students were African American, 14% were Hispanic, 13% were Caucasian, 10% were American Indian, and 6% were Asian American. A small percentage of the students (2%) were designated as multiple, unknown, or other. Student demographic data from Minneapolis Public Schools for 2010-2011 school year revealed that 37.1% of students were African-American, 7.4% were Hispanic, 31.9% were Caucasian, 4.2% were American Indian, and 1.4% were Asian American.

### Program Participant Demographic Data

Of the 6,026 referrals, 2,240 (37%) students and their families participated in at least one be@school Program intervention. Figure 4 presents the number of families that attended each of the three program interventions and the number who attended two program interventions.

**FIGURE 4. PARTICIPATION IN BE@SCHOOL PROGRAM INTERVENTIONS (N=6,026)**

	PGM (6 Unexcused Absences)	STAR (9 Unexcused Absences)	STAR 2 (17 Unexcused Absences)	Attended 2 Interventions (PGM, STAR or STAR2)	Total Number of PGM, STAR and STAR 2 Interventions	Total Number of Students/ Families Participating
Number and percent of students referred	1,335 22%	1,161 19%	3 <1%	259 4%	2,499 --	2,240 37%
Percent of students participating	59%	52%	<1%	11%		100%

Approximately 59% of the 2,240 families were present at a PGM meeting during the 2010/2011 school year, 52% of the families attended a STAR meeting, and about 11% were involved in both PGM and STAR meetings.

**FIGURE 5. PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS BY SCHOOL DISTRICT (N=2,240)**

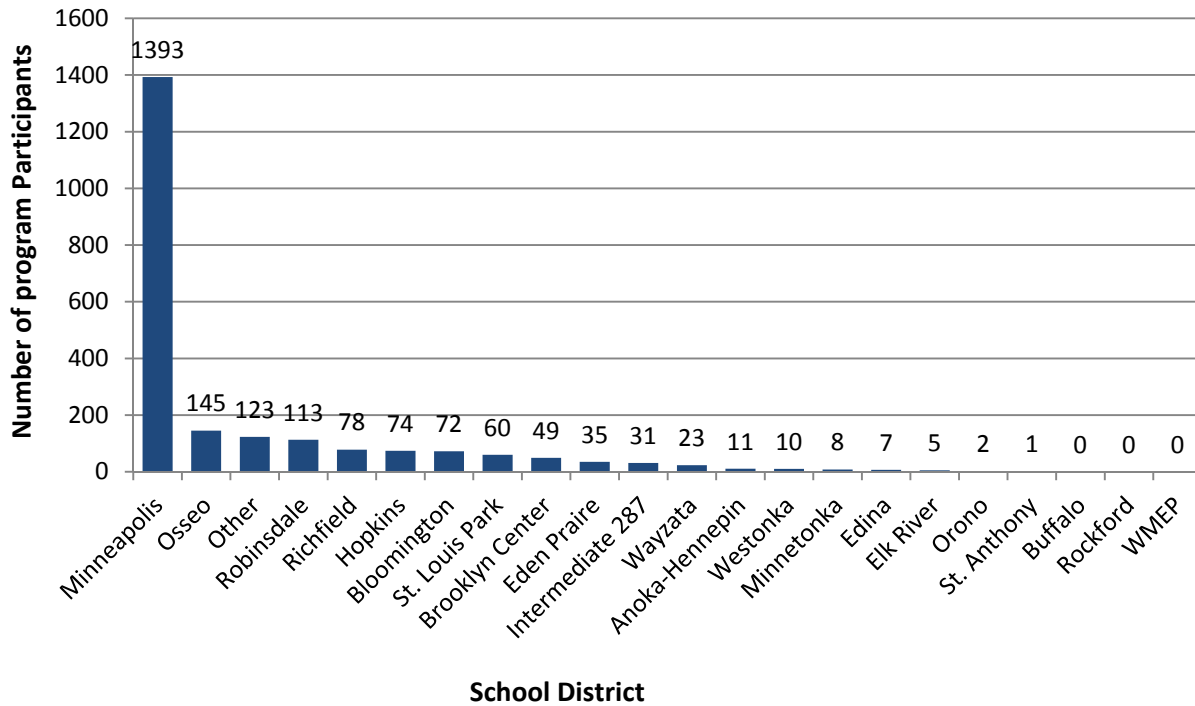


Figure 5 provides the distribution of the 2,240 students across school districts. Approximately 64% of be@school families were from Minneapolis school district. The second and third highest participation rates were Osseo school district (6%) and “Other” (magnet, independent, and charter schools) (5%). Buffalo, Rockford, and West Metro Education program (WMEP) had lower participation reflecting their low numbers of referrals.

**FIGURE 6. PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS BY GRADE LEVEL AND GENDER (N=2,240)**

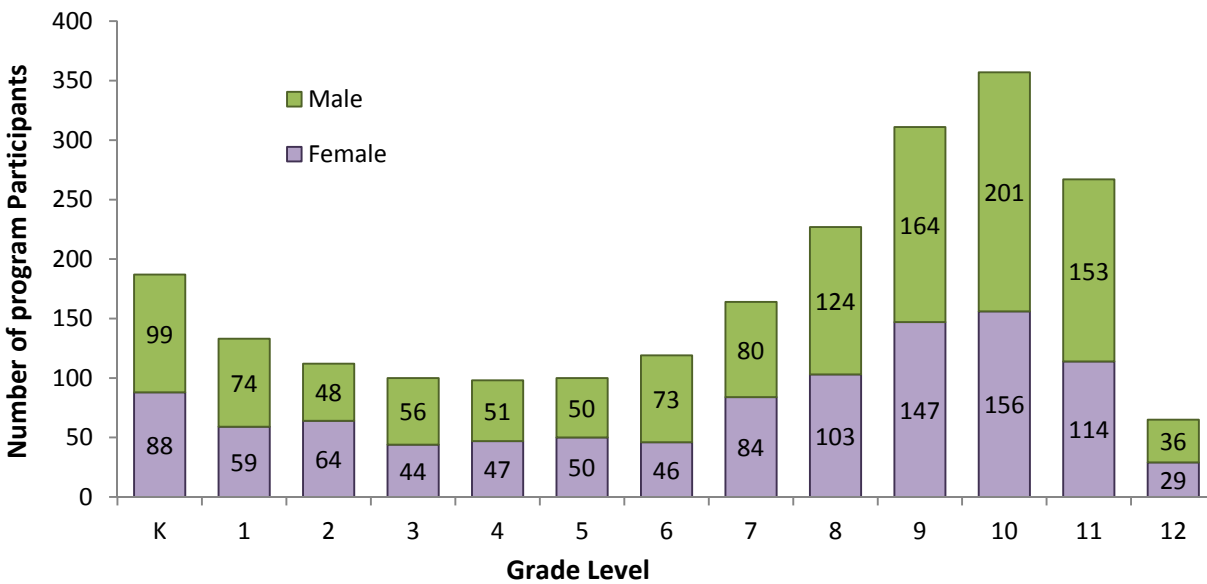


Figure 6 shows that most of the participating students were in grade 10 (16%) and grade 9 (14%). The lowest proportion of students participating was in grade 12 (3%). These grade levels were similarly represented in the referral pool. Student gender also was consistent with the referral pool. Females represented about 46% of the sample while male involvement was about 54%.

**FIGURE 7. PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS BY RACE/ETHNICITY (N=2,240)**

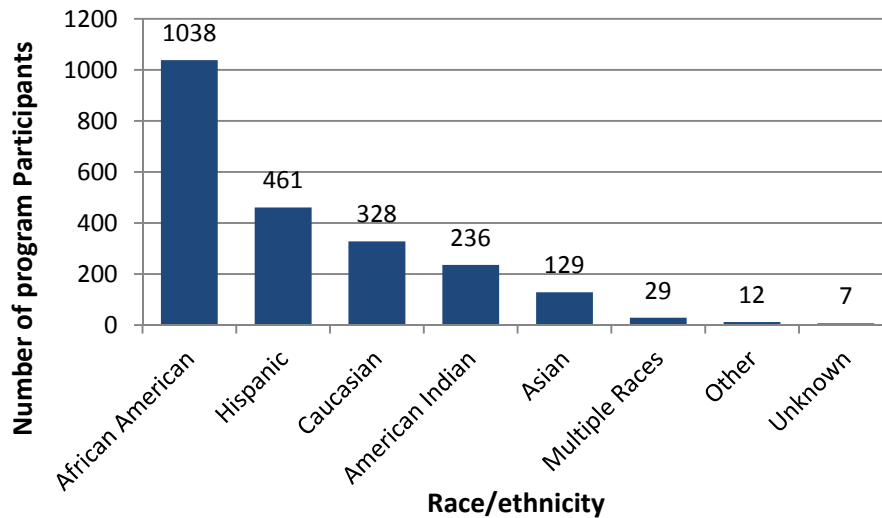
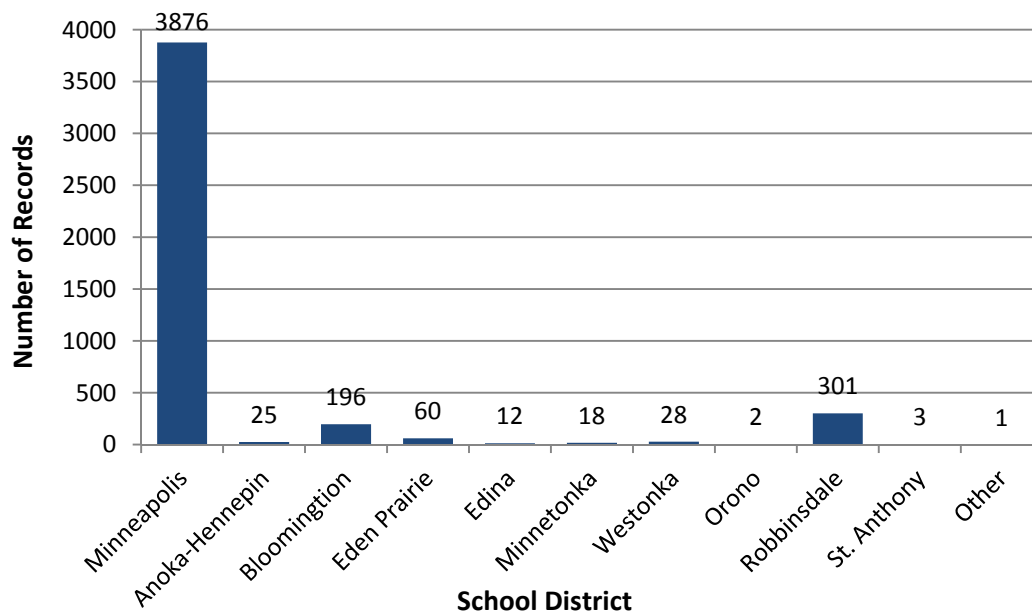


Figure 7 indicates the race/ethnicity characteristics of participating students whose parents attended the be@school interventions. Race/ethnicity of the 2,240 participating students was similar to the referral pool. One thousand-thirty-eight students (46%) were African-American, 461 students (20%) were Hispanic, 328 students (14%) were Caucasian. Smaller numbers of students were American Indian and Asian American children.

## Program Participant Evaluation Sample

Evaluators requested school absence records in October 2011 for the 6,026 students who were referred to the be@school Program during the 2010/2011 school year. School districts were reminded of the request periodically throughout the fall and once again in early January. By mid-January, ten districts and two independent schools had provided the evaluators with absence data for 4,522 of the students. These records represent approximately 78% of the total 6,026 student referral pool.

**FIGURE 8. STUDENT ABSENCE DATA BY SCHOOL DISTRICT (N=4,522)**



The figure shows that 3,876 records (86%) were supplied by the Minneapolis school district, 301 records (7%) came from the Robbinsdale school district, and 196 records (4%) were contributed by Bloomington school district. Edina, Orono and Saint Anthony contributed smaller percentages.

Of the 4,522 students, 1,654 (36%) participated in one or more of the be@school Program interventions. Specifically, 944 families attended a PGM, 912 attended a STAR meeting, and 202 families attended both a PGM and a STAR meeting. Analysis of these students' absence records showed that 108 of the PGM students, 83 of the STAR students, and 34 students involved in both a STAR and PGM had no recorded unexcused absences for the year. This lack of recorded absences may have been due to individual school's attendance tracking, a variance across school districts as to student qualifications for program attendance, or because the students left the school district at some point during the school year and truancy tracking was unavailable. These 157 records were eliminated from the data pool leaving 1,497

student absence records to analyze. The final evaluation sample consisted of 836 PGM students, 829 STAR students, and 168 students who participated in both program components.

These numbers were compared to 2010-2011 total participation in the program (PGM = 1,335, STAR = 1,161 and 259 both) to determine their similarity. The final sample represented approximately 63% PGM participation, 72% STAR participation, and 65% PGM+STAR participation. Additionally, the 1,497 students had characteristics similar to the participation group. The largest proportion of students (35%) was in grades 9, 10, or 11 and race/ethnicity characteristics were similar to the referred pool. The gender proportions were also similar with more males (53%) than females (47%). This report focuses on an analysis of truancy patterns among these 1,497 students.

## Evaluation Design and Methodology

The evaluation design was designed to assess the effectiveness of the be@school Program. The evaluators received truancy records for 4,522 students from ten school districts and two independent schools. The outcome measure of interest was unexcused absences since the program was designed to decrease this attendance behavior. Analysis of student absence rates was conducted primarily on the 1,497 students who participated in one or more of the be@school Program interventions. Some comparative analyses were conducted on the 2,870 students who were referred to the program, but did not participate.

Data analyses focused on answering five specific questions. The following describes the analysis procedures that addressed each question.

### **1. To what degree does the be@school Program change students' attendance behaviors?**

Several procedures were used to analyze the absence data and answer this question. First, evaluators calculated an individual absence rate for each of the 1,497 students by dividing the number of unexcused absences the student had by the number of days the student was enrolled prior to receiving either a PGM or STAR intervention. The same procedure was used to determine unexcused absence rate post-intervention. Similarly, these calculations were completed on students who were involved in both a PGM and STAR. Average absence rates were calculated from the individual rates and then used in a statistical comparison of unexcused absences before and after program interventions.

Second, evaluators randomly selected a sample of students from the 2,870 pool that did not participate in the program and then selected a sample from the 1,497 students that did participate. Unexcused absences for the 2010/2011 school year were totaled for individuals and a mean (average) number of trancies were computed for each group. The mean unexcused absences of the two groups were compared. This procedure was conducted to contrast absences



between those students who received be@school interventions to students who were referred but did not choose to participate.

**2. Does student attendance behavior after program participation (30-, 60-, and 90-day markers) differ significantly from students' attendance behavior before program participation?**

Using the same procedure mentioned above, an average rate of absences prior to each intervention was calculated for those students participating in the intervention. This mean was used in a comparison of unexcused absence rates for the same students at 20 days, 40 days and 60 days after their individual program intervention. The evaluators used these time markers (20, 40, and 60 days) since attendance records reflected school days rather than calendar weeks. These time intervals best represented the post-intervention periods of 30, 60, and 90 days. This analysis was done to examine trends in school attendance both before and after a program intervention at specific time intervals.

The analysis required subsets of students since not all students had absences at each of the post markers or their individual program intervention occurred too late in the school year to track absences for 30, 60, or 90 follow-up days. For the PGM analysis, there were eight students who qualified (had truancies) for the 30 day follow-up, 175 students for the 60-day marker and 325 students for the 90-day marker. For the STAR analysis, there were 49 students who had truancies at the 30-day marker after the STAR meeting, 254 students for the 60-day marker and 423 students for the 90-day post-intervention marker.

Trends were examined for students who received both a PGM and STAR intervention. There were no PGM students who had truancies at the 30-day marker, two students who qualified at the 60-day marker and 12 students included in the 90-day marker. For the second intervention, a STAR meeting, there were 17 who had unexcused absences at the 30-day marker, 64 students at the 60-day marker, and 103 students at the 90-day marker.

**3. What are the characteristics of students associated with students who are considered successful in the be@school Program?**

To answer this question, participant characteristics (gender, grade level, race/ethnicity), their absence records, school district affiliation, and community agency type and support were examined for any significant relationships. A test for the strength of association was applied to test whether any variables were significantly related to truancy rates (i.e., program success).

Additionally, the evaluators were asked to examine if agency support for families impacted truancy rates among the children. To answer this question, a random sample of PGM students that received agency support were compared to a random sample of PGM students who received no agency assistance. The outcome measure was each group's unexcused absences for

the 2010-2011 school year. The same comparative analysis was conducted on the unexcused absences of students who had a STAR intervention.

The evaluators also examined and qualitatively analyzed documentations by school and agency representatives on impediments to school attendance. The findings are presented to aid in the interpretation of factors that may impact student success.

#### **4. Which schools, if any, are most successful at changing the attendance behaviors of their students?**

To shed light on this question, individual students' unexcused absences were calculated separately for the 2010-2011 school year in each school district. The individual absences were averaged and compared across school districts.

### **Evaluation Results**

The evaluation results focus on the specific questions and the data analysis and their findings.

#### **1. To what degree does the be@school Program change students' attendance behaviors?**

**FIRST ANALYSIS.** The first analysis conducted to answer this question was a comparison of the mean rate of unexcused absences pre- intervention to the mean rate of unexcused absences post-intervention.

**Parent Group Meeting (PGM).** A total of 836 students and their families participated in a PGM. A paired t-test was used to compare pre-intervention truancy rates with post-intervention truancy rates. The mean average percent of unexcused absences for this group prior to the PGM was 10.57, SD = 9.173. The mean rate of unexcused absences after the PGM was 9.00, SD = 11.330. The t-test revealed a statistically significant difference between pre- and post-intervention truanities [ $t(df) = 4.014, p < .05$ ]. This test shows that truancy rate decreased significantly post-intervention.

**School Team Attendance Review (STAR).** There were 829 students and their families that attended a STAR meeting. A paired t-test was again used to test for significance between the rate of unexcused absences before and after the STAR intervention. The mean rate of unexcused absences for this group pre-intervention was 13.57, SD = 9.299. The mean rate post-intervention was 14.18, SD = 14.158. In this case, the t-test revealed that there was no significant difference between pre- and post-intervention absence rates [ $t(df) = -1.235, p = .217$ ].

**Parent Group Meeting (PGM) and School Team Attendance Review (STAR).** There were 168 students and their families who attended both a PGM and a STAR meeting. Two paired t-tests were used to examine any significant differences in truancy before and after these interventions. The first t-test compared the students' truancy before and after the PGM. The

average absence rate post-intervention was calculated for absences that were incurred during the remainder of the school year. The mean percent of unexcused absences prior to the PGM was 15.93, SD = 10.566. The mean percent after the PGM was 15.62, SD = 13.025. The t-test for this analysis showed no statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-intervention measures [ $t(df) = .316, p = .752$ ]. The second t-test examined pre- and post-intervention rates of the STAR intervention using the same procedures as the PGM analysis. The students' mean prior to STAR was 14.86, SD = 10.006, while the post-intervention mean was 16.63, SD = 16.113. Again, there was no significant difference between pre- and post-intervention unexcused absence rates in the STAR analysis.

**SECOND ANALYSIS.** The second analysis involved comparing total unexcused absences for the 2010-2011 academic year of a random sample of students who participated in a be@school Program intervention to a random sample of students who were referred, but did not participate.

For the second analysis, 600 of the 1,497 students who participated in the program and 600 of the 2,870 students who were referred but did not participate, were randomly selected for comparative purposes. An independent samples t-test was used to determine if there was a significant difference between the total unexcused absences for the year of the two groups. The mean unexcused absences in the intervention group was 21.47, SD = 15.259. The mean for the nonintervention group was 16.91, SD = 12.709. The t-test showed that there was a significant difference between the groups [ $t(df) = 5.586, p < .05$ ]. The students that did not attend any of the be@school Programs had a significantly lower truancy rate than those who did participate.

These results should be interpreted cautiously for two reasons. First, when examining the total group differences (Intervention = 1,497 and Nonintervention group = 2,870), there was a substantial difference in the two group's yearly summed unexcused absences. Those who did not participate in the program had a yearly truancy mean of 15.06, SD = 13.450, while those who did participate had a truancy mean of 21.38, SD = 15.259. This finding may indicate that those who did participate in the program had more truancy problems than those that did not participate. As a result, the two groups may not be comparable.

Secondly, there were differences in the racial/ethnic composition of the two groups and these cultural or normative differences may affect student behaviors. Of the 1,497 students who attended at least one be@school Program, 47% were African-American and 22% were Hispanic. However, among the 2,870 who elected not to participate 62% were African-American and 11% were Hispanic students.

These two findings may indicate that the two groups differed too much to be compared appropriately. It is important that the make-up of groups be similar for the results to be valid. These two groups differed substantially on two attributes: ethnicity and truancy rate. Therefore, the results, again, should be interpreted cautiously.

**2. Does student attendance behavior after program participation (30-, 60-, and 90-day markers) differ significantly from students' attendance behavior before program participation?**

The analysis for this question consisted of comparing the mean rate of unexcused absences pre-intervention to the mean rate of unexcused absence rates for students at 20 days, 40 days, and 60 days post-intervention. These time periods simulated 30-, 60-, and 90-day intervals post-intervention. At each of the time intervals, only those students who had unexcused absences were included in the calculation of the mean absence rates. This analysis was done to examine trends in school attendance pre- and post-intervention at the designated time intervals.

**FIGURE 9. PGM: MEAN PERCENT OF UNEXCUSED ABSENCES AT 30-, 60-, AND 90-DAY MARKERS**

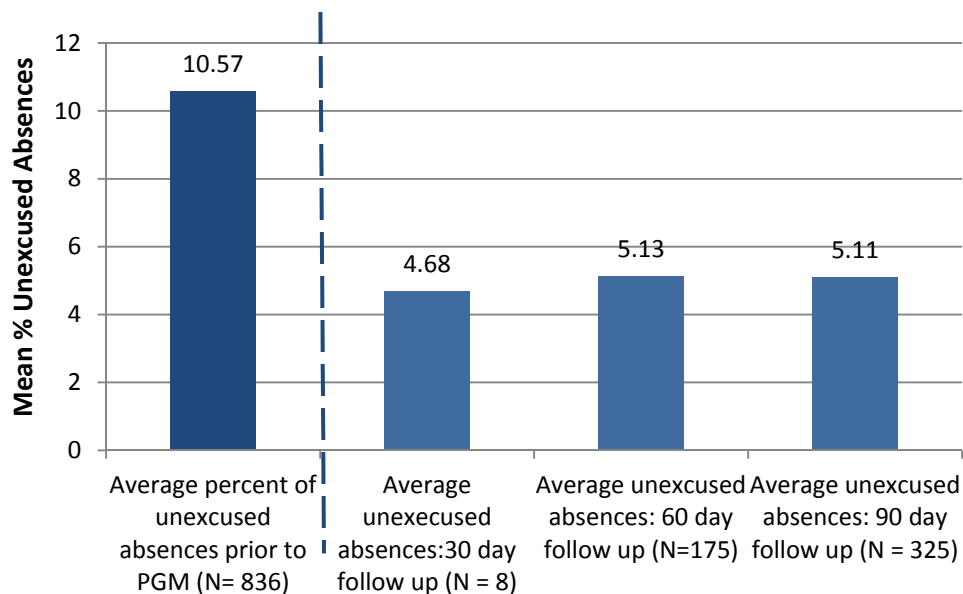


Figure 9 compares truancy rates of students before and after the PGM intervention. The figure shows that the average absence rate for the 836 PGM students was 10.57 days prior to the PGM occurrence. At 30 days post-intervention, only 8 students (10%) had unexcused absences in this group with a mean absence rate of 4.68 days. There were 175 students (21%) that had unexcused absences at 60 days after their PGM with a mean absence rate of 5.13 days. At the 90-day marker, 325 students (39%) had truancies with mean rate of 5.11 days. The figure indicates that after a PGM, truancy rates decreased notably across all three follow up time intervals. Moreover, the figure shows that one month after the intervention 99% of the students had no recorded unexcused absences and 79% had no unexcused absences at the 60-day marker.

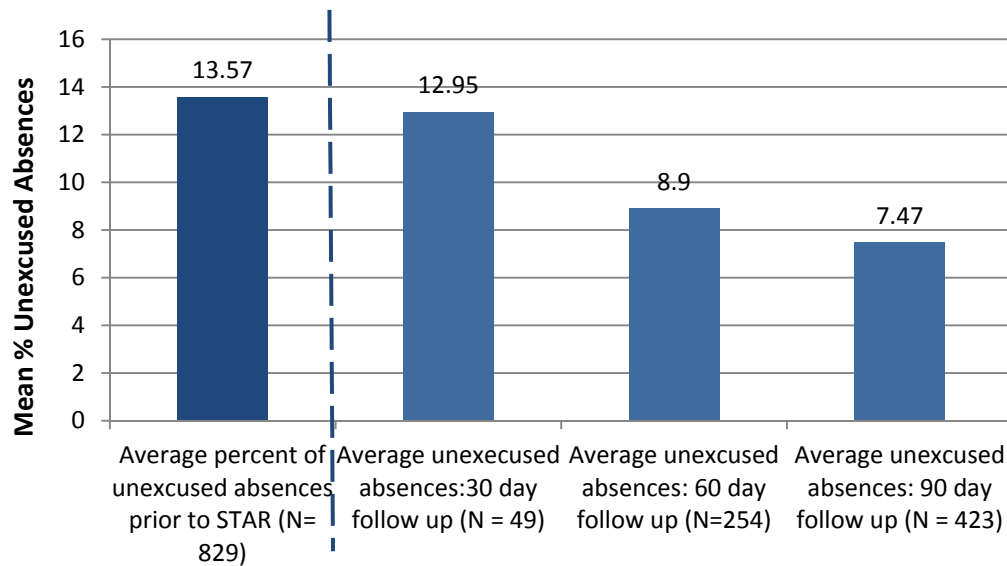
**FIGURE 10. STAR: MEAN UNEXCUSED ABSENCES AT 30, 60 & 90 DAY FOLLOW UP**

Figure 10 shows the follow up data on students who participated in a STAR intervention. The mean absence rate for all STAR students (N=829) pre-intervention was 13.47 days. At the 30-day marker, 49 students (6%) had a mean unexcused absence rate of 12.95 days. Sixty days, post-intervention, 254 students (31%) had a mean unexcused absence rate of 8.9 days. At 90 days, 423 students (51%) had a mean unexcused absence rate of 7.47 days. The analysis indicates that the number of truant students steadily increased over the three month period. However, large percentages of students had no unexcused absences post-intervention. For example, 94% of students had no recorded unexcused absences at 30 days, and 69% had no unexcused absences after 60 days. Additionally, there was a shift towards fewer unexcused attendance rates as indicated by the lower means at 30-, 60- and 90-day markers.

There were 168 students who participated in both a PGM and STAR intervention.

**FIGURE 11. TWO ELEMENT INTERVENTION-PGM: MEAN UNEXCUSED ABSENCES AT 30, 60, & 90 DAY FOLLOW UP**

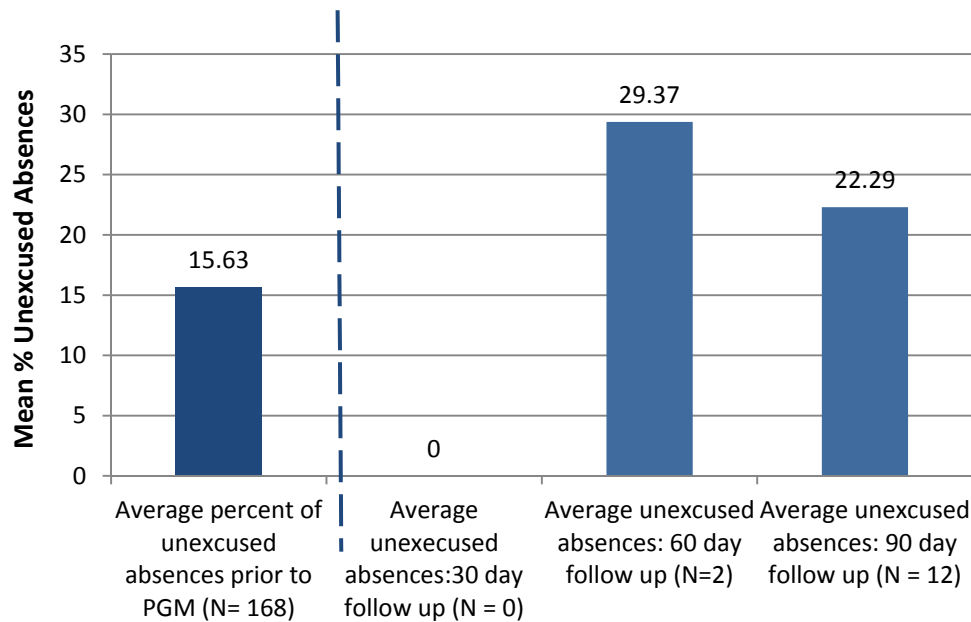


Figure 11 shows the trend analysis of unexcused absences for their first participation, the PGM. Among the 168 students who had both a PGM and STAR, two students (1%) had unexcused absences post-PGM at the 60-day marker, and 12 students (7%) had unexcused absences post-PGM at the 90-day marker. After the PGM, 99% of the students in the intervention had no unexcused absences for the three-month period following the intervention.

**FIGURE 12. TWO ELEMENT INTERVENTION-STAR: AVERAGE UNEXCUSED ABSENCES AT 30-, 60-, & 90-DAY MARKERS**

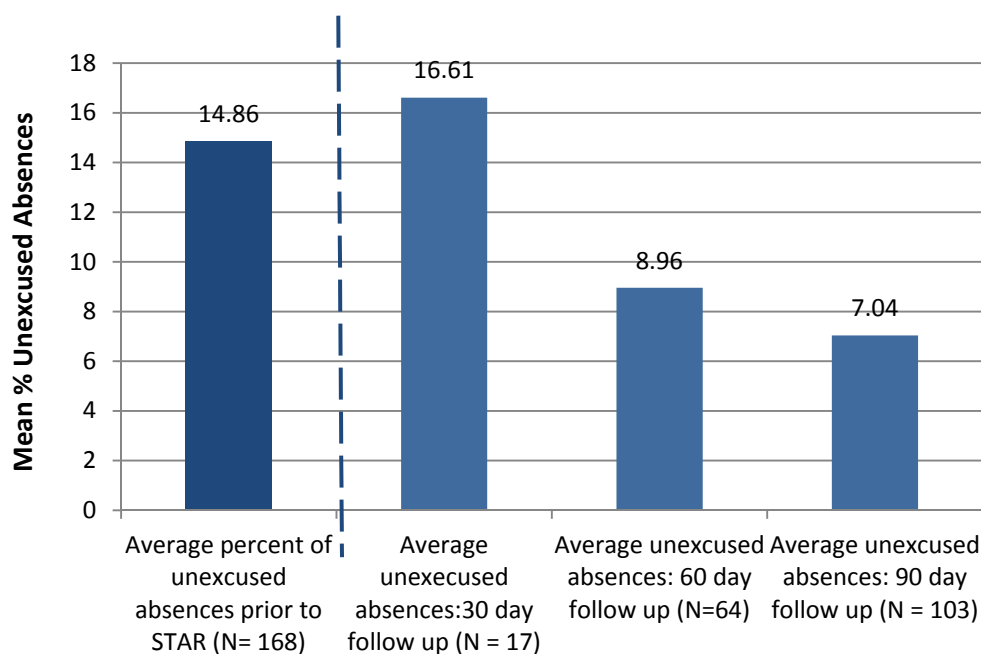


Figure 12 presents truancy follow up after the second intervention, the STAR meeting for these students. Seventeen students (10%) had a higher rate of unexcused absences 30 days after the STAR intervention. Their mean absence rate was 16.61 days. At this marker, the rate of unexcused absences increased when compared to all 168 students who received both PGM and STAR interventions. However, 90% of the students had no recorded unexcused absences at the 30-day marker. At the 60- and 90-day markers unexcused absence rates trend substantially downward. Unexcused absences are almost cut in half at these two timeframes when compared to 30 days after a STAR meeting.

The rates of unexcused absences for the 168 students who participated in both a PGM and STAR intervention dropped most after the PGM intervention.

### **3. What are the characteristics of students who are considered successful in the be@school Program?**

To help understand what characteristics might impact school unexcused absence rates, the evaluators examined three specific factors. They were: 1) demographic characteristics of students; 2) which agencies support for students and families; and, 3) impediments to school attendance.

**Student characteristics and unexcused absences.** For this analysis, the number of unexcused absences in 2010-2011 was summed for each of the 1,497 student-participants in the be@school Program. The unexcused absences summed were then statistically related to

characteristics such as students' school district, gender, ethnicity and grade level. The purpose of the analysis was to identify any variables that may be associated with school attendance. The strength of association was tested for all three characteristics and all were significantly linked to increased truancy. Grade level, ethnicity and school district all showed a significant positive relationship with unexcused absences.

The significant correlation between truancy and grade level showed that unexcused absence rates increased as students moved up in grade level. This finding was supported by examining the average truancy rates at each grade level. The highest truancy rates occurred in grade 12 (M = 29.29 days), grade 11 (M = 26.81 days) and grade 10 (M = 22.92 days). The lowest unexcused absence rates occurred in grade 5 (M = 12.41 days) and grade 4 (M = 13.01 days). While kindergarten (M = 14.41 days) and first grade (M = 15.26 days) had slightly higher absent rates than the mid-grade levels, their average truant record was still substantially lower than the upper grades.

When examining the significant correlation between truancy and ethnicity, it was noted that Hispanic students had the lowest rate of truancy (M = 17.68 days) while American Indian students had the highest truancy rate (M = 20.42 days). However, all ethnicity groups had similar truancy rates. For example, African American students had a mean truancy rate of 19.78 days, Asian American students' mean was 19.01 days, and Caucasian students' mean was 19.20 days.

The significant correlation among unexcused absence rates and school district should be interpreted with caution since 1,253 of the 1,497 students came from the Minneapolis school district. However, the students in this district did not have the highest average truancy rate. The 110 students from the Robbinsdale school district had a mean unexcused absence rate of 35.25 school days while Minneapolis had an average of 18.62 days. The lowest average occurred among the 32 students from the Eden Prairie school district with a mean truancy rate of 5.46 days. Again, due to the vast difference among the number of students from each school district, the significant relationship between unexcused absences and school district should be viewed cautiously.

**Agency Support.** Families may request assistance from community agencies when they participate in be@school Programs. Families with children in kindergarten through grade 2 are specifically targeted for agency assistance. A major goal of this agency support is to foster among families the importance of school attendance as children begin their schooling.

Four hundred forty-nine (449) families of the 836 families in the PGM group were affiliated with one or more community agencies. For STAR students, 700 out of 829 students and their families received agency assistance. The most frequently used agency for both groups (PGM = 176, STAR = 260) was the Pillsbury United Community. Other agencies such as the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center (PGM = 59) and the Link (STAR = 63) also had high levels of family contact.



To assess the effectiveness of agency support, a random sample of PGM and STAR students who were receiving agency help were compared on school year truancies to PGM and STAR students who were not linked to agencies. For the PGM analysis, 73 students with no agency support were compared to the 74 families receiving support. An independent samples t-test was used to test differences in unexcused absences between the groups. The mean absence rate for the students with agency support was 17.06, SD = 12.67 while the average truancy for the student group receiving no support from agencies was 27.08, SD = 17.60. The t-test revealed a significant difference among the groups [ $t(df) = 3.72, p < .05$ ]. Those students receiving agency help had significantly fewer absences.

The same procedures were used to study the impact of agency influence on the truancy rates of 74 STAR students whose families had community links to 73 students whose families did not. The mean unexcused absence rate for those students with agency support was 27.83, SD = 19.43 while the average unexcused absences for the student group receiving no support from agencies was 27.08, SD = 17.61. There was no significant difference between the truancy rates of these two groups.

The analysis showed that PGM students may benefit more from the intervention if they receive agency support. However, the results of this analysis must be viewed with caution. There may be many variables impacting truancy rates as this report has indicated. Agency support may be one factor, but with this current analysis it is difficult to determine the interaction and their magnitude among the many variables. It is interesting to note that students and families participating in the PGM seem to benefit the most from agency assistance.

**Barriers.** For this report, the evaluators were provided with meeting notes and progress reports on students who participated in the be@school Program and students who were referred but did not participate. Both agency representatives and school officials documented some of the problems these students were having that impacted their ability to attend school. Each problem was coded under a specific category and, in some cases, notes were written to describe the problem in more detail. There were entry notes on 693 students among the records. The evaluators did a frequency count of the coded problems and qualitatively analyzed the written comments. The analysis was completed to identify specific barriers related to school attendance. Figure 13 identifies the barriers and the number of times they were cited in the records.

**FIGURE 13. BARRIERS TO SCHOOL ATTENDANCE**

BARRIER	NUMBER
1. Transportation	199
2. Child Behavior	149
3. Mental Health (Child)	99
4. Housing	95
5. Health Care	91
6. Employment	82
7. Physical Health (Child)	68
8. Public Assistance	44
9. Mental Health (Parent)	38
10. Conflict with School	38
11. Child Learning	35
12. Conflict with Other Students	32
13. Food	31
14. Physical Health (Parent)	24
15. Clothing	21
16. Chemical Dependency (Parent)	14
17. Domestic Violence	7
18. Other	231

The most significant issue (199) for families and students was transportation to school. For example, some students consistently missed the school bus and had no alternative for getting their child to school. Parents were also unable to attend be@school Programs due to a lack of transportation. The second most cited problem (149) was coded under child behavior. The most common entries in this category dealt with students skipping classes or students consistently coming late to class and, as a consequence, they were marked truant. The barrier, “Other” was listed 231 times as impacting school attendance. According to written comments, the problems most frequently cited in this code generally related to problems associated with English language proficiency. We surmise that communication between school and family was hindered. Another common entry involved families continually moving from one school district to another. Written comments showed that family mobility rates were high. Other issues related to contacting parents. For example, some families did not have a telephone or their mailing address had changed and the school was unable to contact them. These barriers often interfered with the agency and school representatives’ capacity to work effectively with both students and their families.

To summarize, student success in the program may be dependent on a number of variables. Children in lower grades exhibit fewer unexcused absences than students in higher grades. We also observed that students and families who participated in a PGM and received agency support had significantly fewer unexcused absences when compared to PGM students who received no support from a community agency. Finally, a number of barriers can limit the

progress of students toward better school attendance. These barriers include transportation, language differences, family mobility, and imperfect communication between school and family.

#### 4. Which schools, if any, are most successful at changing the attendance behaviors of their students?

The evaluators examined total truancy for the 2010-2011 academic year among students who participated in be@school Programs across school districts. The unexcused absence means were calculated for each of the ten districts that provided truancy records. Saint Anthony school district was subsequently eliminated from the analysis because only one student was enrolled in the program.

**FIGURE 14. AVERAGE TRUANCY BY SCHOOL DISTRICT**

District	N	Mean	SD
Minneapolis	1253	18.62	14.41
Anoka-Hennepin	11	17.91	12.33
Bloomington	62	15.03	15.82
Eden Prairie	32	5.46	7.6
Edina	7	6.43	8.46
Minnetonka	9	22.22	16.53
Westonka	10	25.4	18.18
Orono	2	9	7.07
Robbinsdale	110	35.25	20.38

Figure 14 shows, for each of the nine districts, the number of students who participated in a be@school Program and the students' mean truancy rates. Robbinsdale school district had the highest mean truancy rate of 35.25 days while Eden Prairie had the lowest at 5.46 days. Robbinsdale school district also had the most variability in truancy rates with a standard deviation of 20.38.

An analysis of variance was applied to test for any significant differences in truancy rates across the nine school districts.

**FIGURE 15. ANALYSES OF VARIANCE (ANOVA) RESULTS**

<b>ANOVA</b>					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	39041.381	8	5577.340	25.257	.000
Within Groups	362589.797	1496	220.822		
Total	401631.178	1496			

Figure 15 indicates that there was a significant difference in students' unexcused absences when comparing school districts. An additional analysis was performed to explore these differences. The Games-Howell multiple comparison statistical procedure was used to conduct pair-wise comparisons among the district means. These analyses showed that Robbinsdale district's average truancy was significantly higher than all of the school districts except for Anoka-Hennepin, Westonka and Minnetonka. Additionally, Eden Prairie had a significantly lower average when compared to Robbinsdale, Minneapolis, and Bloomington school districts.

There are several considerations to be made when interpreting the results, especially in light of previous findings already presented. First, the analysis includes all program participants. To parcel out PGM, STAR and PGM/STAR combination students and do a separate analysis across districts on truancy was not possible. Some districts had too few students to conduct a separate analysis on program interventions. Second, the evaluators could not meaningfully assess the effects of other factors, such as race/ethnicity, agency support, and grade level, on unexcused absence rates. These variables have already been shown to relate to truancy in this report. Finally, although the statistical procedure took into account differences in group numbers, it may not adequately address such a wide difference in group sizes. The Minneapolis school district was comprised of 84% of all the program students. Comparing this district with Anoka-Hennepin's 11 students, Edina's seven (7) students and Minnetonka's nine (9) students may not be a realistic contrast.

### **5. To what extent do PGM and STAR interventions add value to the program?**

Our evaluation shows that the Parent Group Meeting (PGM) is effective in reducing absenteeism. The evaluation sample had 836 students who participated in a PGM only. Students/families who attended a PGM had significantly fewer unexcused absence percentages after this intervention during the 2010-2011 academic year. Trend analysis also showed that absence rates, on average, were cut in half for up to 90 days after a PGM when compared to absences prior to program participation. Additionally, PGM students that had agency support for

their families had a significant reduction in truancy rates when compared to PGM students who did not receive support.

The evaluation indicates mixed results on the effectiveness of the School Team Attendance Review (STAR) meeting. The students that had only a STAR intervention (no PGM) showed no significant difference in unexcused absence rates post-intervention. Further, students who had a PGM and progressed to a STAR meeting due to more truancy showed a similar pattern. Their unexcused absence rates did not decrease significantly after both interventions. STAR students and families that had agency support also did not show a significant decrease in unexcused absences when compared to STAR students that did not agency affiliations. However, trend analysis showed that unexcused absence rates decreased, although not significantly, among STAR students after participation. Students that were engaged in only the STAR program and those who participated in both a PGM and a STAR had reductions in unexcused absences through 90 days after their interventions. In nearly all cases, post-intervention absence rates dropped substantially at all three time intervals.

It is important to keep in mind that the evaluation sample had only 168 students that had both a PGM and STAR intervention. Over 800 students had a STAR meeting without having a PGM. A larger number of students/parents who participated in both interventions may be required for a meaningful analysis of the STAR intervention.

## Recommendations

Evaluators saw inconsistencies in some of the raw data received from the districts and schools. For example, we saw students who were referred to the program with very few unexcused absences and a few students who had no unexcused absences at all. Similarly, attendance data from some districts recorded suspended students as having unexcused absences while in other districts recorded these absences as excused. We eliminated cases like these from our analyses, but the lack of uniform definitions, codes, and record-keeping practices at the school level makes the data more difficult to analyze and less reliable and valid overall.

*RECOMMENDATION 1. The program and participating sites would benefit from standard definitions for what constitutes excused and unexcused absences as well as tardiness. Evaluators recommend that schools and districts participating in the program be encouraged to seek agreement and adopt standard definitions, codes, and record-keeping practices for student attendance.*

The structures of the attendance records evaluators received were almost as numerous as the schools and districts that provided them. Multiple formats and structure are cumbersome and time-intensive for data analysts. For example, databases differed from one to another by the inclusion or exclusion of Saturdays, Sundays, and Holidays; listing attendance days in columns or rows; and, displaying attendance data in daily or weekly formats.

RECOMMENDATION 2. *Evaluators strongly recommend that HCAO staff develop or continue to sign memoranda of understandings or other agreements that seek to streamline the data collection process in the following ways: by eliminating unnecessary policies and practices that hinder data sharing; by naming the evaluator in data sharing agreements; and, by urging the adoption of a common database structure that will facilitate data analysis.*

Evaluators observed that 449 families out of the 836 PGM group that were affiliated with one or more community agencies. For STAR students, 700 out of 829 students and their families were receiving agency assistance. These agencies have been given the responsibility to support families so that students will not continue to miss school once attendance problems have been identified. For this reason, the role of these agencies is vital to the success of the be@school Program.

RECOMMENDATION 3. *The evaluators recommend that HCAO staff implement mechanisms between families, schools, and agencies that will serve as feedback loops to ensure the support and services are being provided. In addition, ongoing comparisons of the gains made by students receiving services from the agencies should be a component of future evaluations of the be@school Program.*

The analysis revealed that families of students who participated in the Parent Group Meeting (PGM) resulted in improved school attendance that was statistically significant. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that the School Team Attendance Review (STAR) also resulted in improved school attendance. Evaluators observed that many students were not identified for the program until they reached the STAR level (9 unexcused absences).

RECOMMENDATION 4. *Therefore, evaluators strongly recommend that the early identification of truant students be the first priority for be@school staff. We also recommend that be@school staff continue to use the PGMs as a method of reaching out to families and informing them of the legal requirements based on Minnesota statutes. We also note that STARs did have a positive impact, but less so. We recommend that HCAO staff consider the costs of implementing the STAR compared to the costs of expanding the use of PGMs. We respectively suggest that there may be less value in pursuing a goal of having students attend both PGM and STAR.*

Our analysis revealed that African American students make up 55 percent of all referrals to the program, yet their participation rates in the program are the lowest of all race/ethnicity groups (31%).

RECOMMENDATION 5. *Therefore, evaluators recommend that the be@school staff consider ways to reach out to African American high school students and their families in particular.*

Evaluators suspect that, overtime, certain student attendance patterns that we have not determined (i.e., students most likely to benefit from interventions) will likely emerge through continued analyses of this large population of students. Further, we cannot yet be sure which

barriers (student characteristics, family situation, cultural factors, agency assistance, intervention timing, etc.) are the most critical factors in combating truancy.

*RECOMMENDATION 6. For this reason, the evaluators recommend the continued analysis of attendance records of student referred to the be@school Program.*

Of the 6,026 referrals, 2,240 (37%) students and their families participated in at least one be@school Program intervention. Earlier evaluative work conducted by Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare mentioned that they faced significant challenges (e.g., language problems, mobility, lack of current addresses, etc.) reaching families. Knowing the important role the family plays in supporting student attendance, we believe maintaining a connection with families is an essential element of program success.

*RECOMMENDATION 7. Evaluators recommend early identification of truant students and that be@school staff work with school representatives to identify the best methods for reaching parents and guardians. One strategy that has worked well in other circumstances is to develop multiple ways to reach families and determine their preferred methods to be reached, at the school level before the students have been referred to the program.*

In this, the first extensive analysis of student attendance data, we see the promise that the be@school Program offers families of students at risk of high truancy or dropping out. The evaluators view the be@school Program as a complex, multifaceted program that is in the early phases of implementation. We believe that the program could realize even higher levels of success by implementing the recommendations above.