

ACCESS Initiative 2009-2010 Summary: Dropout Prevention at Mendez Middle School

SS/HS Focus Area: *Student behavioral, social, and emotional supports*

ACCESS Goal: *Decrease rate of unexcused absences*

Cost (2009-2010): \$46,571

Program Overview

Dropout prevention specialists work with students and their families to identify and overcome barriers to attendance and decrease the likelihood that a student will drop out. Typical activities include monitoring absences and the grades and behavior of at-risk students; visiting students' homes to discuss progress; and working with students individually and in group settings to focus on achievement, attendance, self-concept development, and behavior improvement.

At the time the ACCESS grant was developed, the district had 17 middle schools, but only three with a dedicated campus-based dropout prevention specialist working on campus.¹ Of the 14 middle schools lacking this resource, Mendez was identified as having the highest rate of Texas Educational Administration (TEA) attendance policy violations. The grant development team determined that hiring an individual to serve in this role at Mendez Middle School would align with the third focus area of the SSHS grant: student behavioral, social, and emotion supports.

What is ACCESS?

Funded through a 4-year federal Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant, the Austin Community Collaboration to Enhance Student Success (ACCESS) is an AISD-led community collaboration of public and nonprofit agencies working together to address the emotional, behavioral, and social needs of students.

Program Implementation

In September 2007, ACCESS hired a campus-based dropout prevention specialist to work with students, families, and staff at Mendez. The specialist had worked previously with Mendez students, families, and staff as a program manager for Communities in Schools.

First Year (2007-2008)

During the first year of the grant, the specialist facilitated three student support groups, with a total of 25 participants. She conducted more than 150 home visits to inform parents or guardians that their child was missing school, explain the legal requirements and consequences regarding truancy, and

¹ As of 2009-2010, 10 of the District's 18 Middle Schools had a dropout prevention specialist on staff. These schools were Burnet, Dobie, Fulmore, Garcia, Kealing, Martin, Mendez, Paredes, Pearce, and Webb.



provide the family with a list of available supports. The specialist made 202 case-specific appearances at the campus-based truancy court as a representative for the school.

Second Year (2008–2009)

During the second year of program implementation, the specialist had 392 direct contacts with students and 81 in-person meetings with parents or guardians, 26 of which were home visits. On 175 occasions, the specialist appeared in truancy court. In addition, the specialist facilitated three student groups in the fall and three in the spring, involving an average of 18 students per month.

During the second year of program implementation, the specialist collaborated with two other Mendez staff members to implement an incentive program called the PRIDE Point System (Pnctual, Respectful, I’m Prepared, Doing My Work, Enthusiastic).² Students exhibiting the PRIDE characteristics were eligible to receive points toward rewards, such as dress down days, lunch in the courtyard, or special snacks.

Third Year (2009–2010)

During the 2009–2010 school year, the activities performed by the dropout prevention specialist were similar in type to those of prior years but greater in intensity. The number of student contacts increased by 43.4% to 562 for the year. The number of parent or guardian contacts increased 168.5% from 286 in 2008–2009 to 768 in 2009–2010. Much of the increase in parent contacts can be attributed to growth in the number of phone calls made to parents or guardians (i.e., a 206.8% increase from 205 to 629) however, in-person contacts also increased strongly (i.e., a 71.6% increase from 81 to 139). The number of court appearances made by the specialist was relatively stable at 179.

During 2009–2010, the Mendez dropout prevention specialist held 139 in-person meetings with the parents or guardians of students at risk of dropping out.

The specialist facilitated three student groups during the school year. The first two groups, held during the fall semester, focused on team building through the use of a low ropes course; 22 students participated in the groups. In the spring semester, a new group was formed with 16 students and focused on academic goal setting and testing strategies.

In addition to the activities described above, the dropout prevention specialist served as an academic mentor to eight 6th-grade and two 8th-grade students as part of a campus program to prepare academically at-risk students for Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) testing.

Program Outcomes

Methodology

The ultimate goal of the dropout prevention specialist is to decrease the incidence of students dropping out of school; however, most of the activities performed by the specialist were focused on reducing a key risk factor: truancy (i.e., unexcused absences). For this reason, the outcome analysis that follows focuses on student attendance. Additionally, assessing the specialist’s impact on truancy allows

² The PRIDE Point System at Mendez was adapted from a program implemented at Webb Middle School.

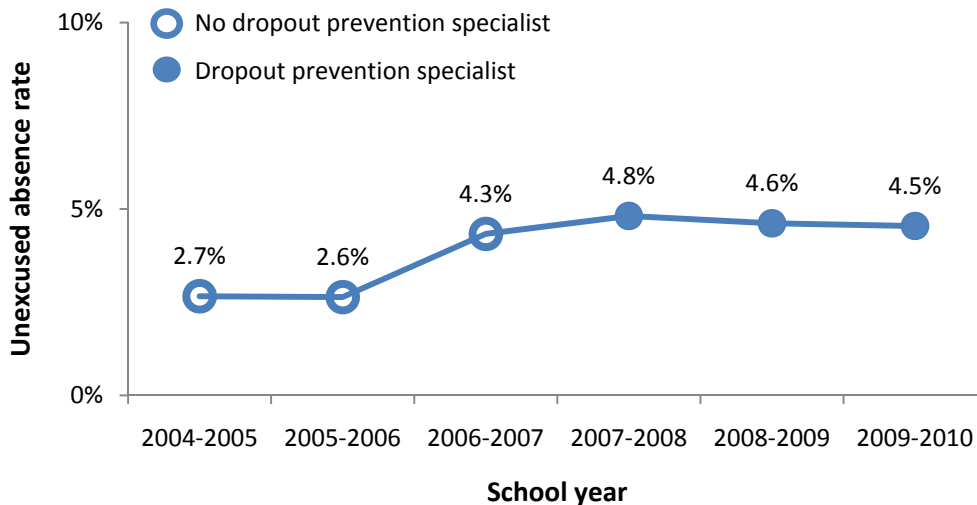


an early assessment of program effects that may take several years to be fully observable as a reduced dropout rate. Unexcused absence rate was calculated as the percentage of enrolled days for which a student was unexcused during the daily attendance period.³ Student enrollment totals reflect all students enrolled during all or part of the school year. Complete data tables for the analyses presented here are provided as an Appendix.

Results

Figure 1 shows the average unexcused absence rate for Mendez Middle School students for three school years *before* (2004–2005 through 2006–2007) and *after* (2007–2008 through 2009–2010) the dropout prevention specialist began her work. During 2004–2005 and 2005–2006, the unexcused absence rate at Mendez remained relatively stable, at 2.7% and 2.6%, respectively. In 2006–2007, the enrollment at Mendez expanded dramatically, increasing from 977 students to 1301 students. During this same year the average unexcused absence rate for the school increased by 1.7 percentage points to 4.3%. The average number of unexcused days increased from 3.3 to 5.1 per student. The increase in student population coupled with the increased absence rate resulted in an increase of school-wide unexcused absence days from 3,257 in 2006–2007 to 6,613 in 2007–2008.⁴

Figure 1. Mendez Middle School Unexcused Absence Rate, 2004–2005 through 2009–2010



Source. AISD Attendance and Enrollment Data (PEIMSSUB400 and AATG, 2004–2009)

Note. Unexcused absence rate is calculated as # of unexcused absence days/# of enrolled days

In 2007–2008, the first year with the dropout prevention specialist, the unexcused absence rate increased slightly by an additional 0.5 percentage points to 4.8%. Over the following 2 years, the overall rate decreased slightly by 0.2 percentage points (2008–2009) and 0.1 percentage points (2009–2010) to

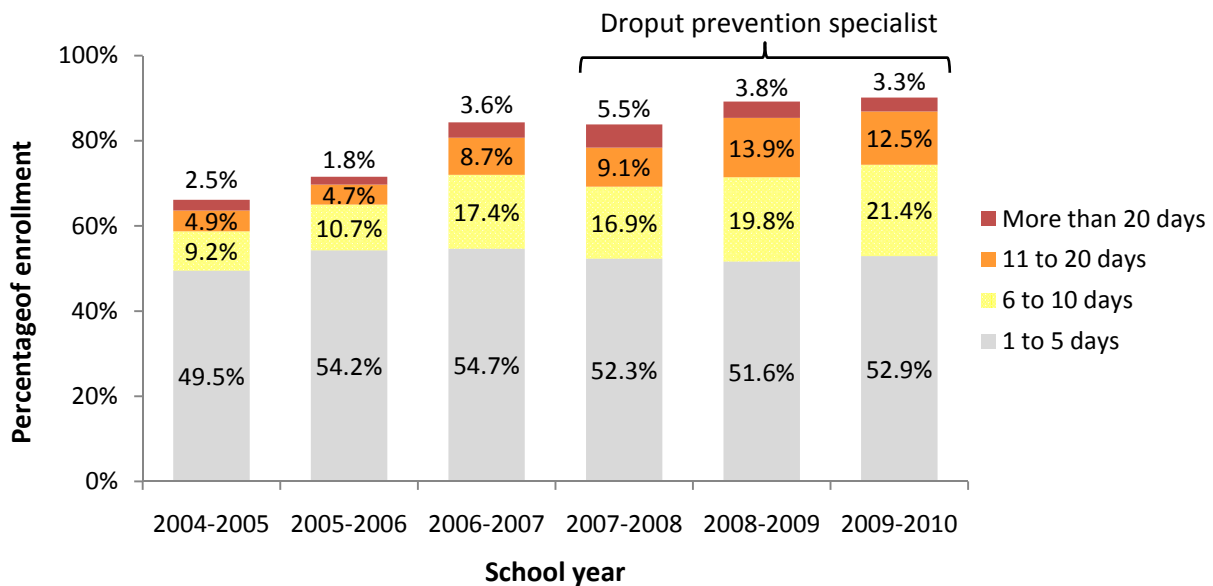
³ Students may also be marked as absent during class periods throughout the day. Students present during the attendance period but absent during other periods were counted as present for the analysis.

⁴ Holding the school population constant at the 2005–2006 level, an increase in average days of unexcused absence of this magnitude would account for an additional 1,709 days of unexcused absence.

reach 4.5% at the close of the 2009–2010 school year; however, the 2009–2010 average individual unexcused absence rate remained slightly higher than the 2006–2007 pre-intervention baseline of 4.3%.

Although the impact of the dropout prevention specialist in decreasing the overall individual unexcused absence rate appears to have been limited, we explored whether the impact might have been stronger among those students with higher-than-average unexcused absence rates. To accomplish this, the Mendez student population was categorized in terms of the percentage of students with 1 to 5, 6 to 10, 11 to 20, and more than 20 unexcused days absent.⁵ As Figure 2 shows, the percentage of students with 1 to 5 unexcused absences remained fairly stable across the 6-year study period, ranging from a low of 49.5% (2004–2005) to a high of 54.7% (2006–2007). However, the percentage of students with six or more unexcused absences grew steadily, increasing 20.6 percentage points (i.e., more than doubling) from 2004–2005 to 2009–2010. Among students with the highest number of unexcused absences (i.e., more than 20 days) the current year (2009–2010) percentage (3.3%) is slightly lower than the year immediately prior to the intervention (3.6%; 2006–2007).

Figure 2. Mendez Middle School Percentage of Enrollment, by Number of Unexcused Absence Days, 2004–2005 through 2009–2010



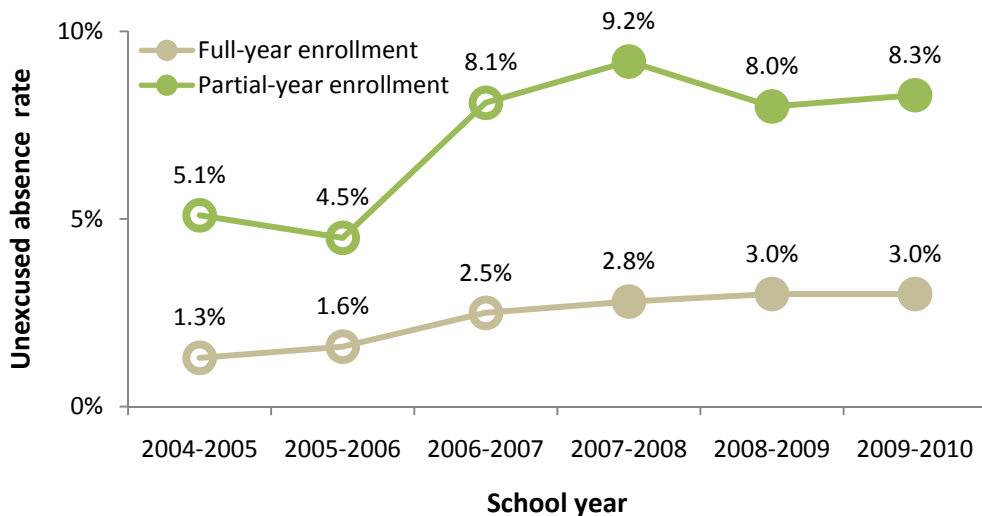
Source. AISD attendance data (PEIMSSUB400 and AATG, 2004–2010)

The Mendez student population was segmented by full- or partial-year enrollment to examine whether the attendance patterns for the two groups differed over time and may have responded

⁵ During the 2004–2009 time period the average student enrollment period remained relatively stable, as did the percentage of students enrolled for the full year. See Appendix for exact figures.

differently to the intervention.⁶ As Figure 3 shows, the unexcused absence rate for students enrolled at Mendez for the full school year was, on average, 4.8 percentage points lower than for those enrolled for a partial year. Both student populations experienced an increase in unexcused absence during the 2006-2007 school year; however, the increase for those with partial-year attendance was four times as large (full year, 0.9 percentage point increase; partial year, 3.6 percentage point increase). Both groups rose slightly during the first year of the intervention (2007-2008), with the full-year group leveling off at 2.8% unexcused absence rate for 2008-2009 and 2009-2010, and the partial-year group dropping to slightly below the 2006-2007 benchmark level in 2008-2009 and increasing slightly above it in 2009-2010.

Figure 3. Mendez Middle School Unexcused Attendance Rate by Enrollment Duration, 2004-2009



Source. AISD Attendance and Enrollment Data (PEIMSSUB400 and AATG, 2004-2009)

Note. Unexcused absence rate is calculated as # of unexcused absence days/# of enrolled days

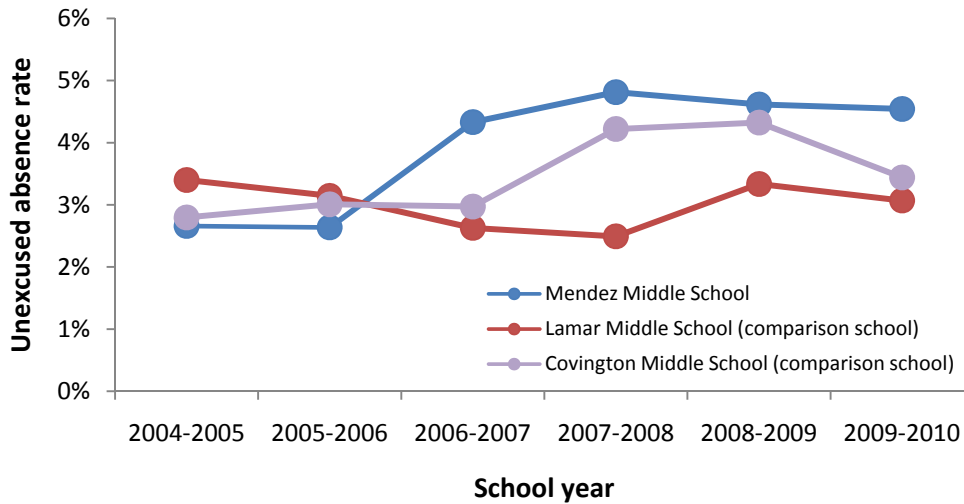
Comparison with Other Middle Schools

The unexcused absence rate for Mendez Middle School was compared with those for two other middle schools to better understand whether the relatively stable unexcused absence rate at Mendez from 2007-2008 through 2009-2010 might reflect improvement relative to the other schools. Covington Middle School and Lamar Middle School were selected as comparison schools because of their similar attendance rates during 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 and because they did not have a dropout prevention specialist on staff during the full study period (2004-2005 through 2009-2010). As Figure 4a shows, Covington experienced a relatively stable rate of unexcused absence from 2004-2005 to 2006-2007, followed by an increase in 2007-2008; Lamar's unexcused absence rate experienced a moderate decline from 2004-2005 through 2007-2008, followed by an increase in 2008-2009. Comparing these trends with the enrollment data shown in Figure 4b illustrates that the increases in unexcused absence for Covington and Lamar corresponded to increases in enrollment, a similar pattern to that described for

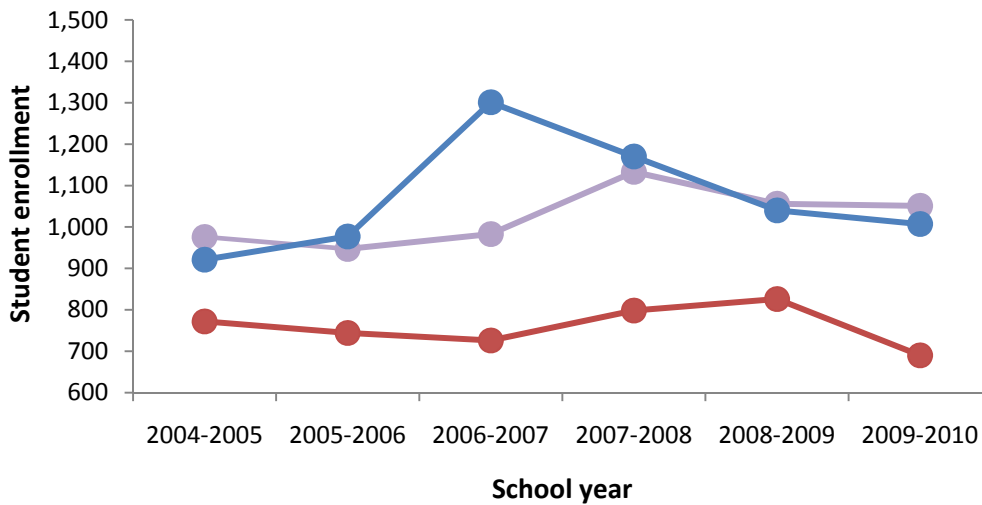
⁶ Over the 6-year study period, on average, approximately two-thirds of Mendez students were enrolled for the full school year.

Mendez. Following the increases in unexcused absence rate described above, both Covington and Lamar’s unexcused absence rates remained stable or decreased, suggesting that Mendez’s relatively flat unexcused absence rates do not reflect superior performance relative to increasing unexcused absence rates at comparable schools.

**Figure 4a. Mendez, Covington, and Lamar Middle Schools
Unexcused Absence Rates, 2004–2005 through 2009–2010**



**Figure 4b. Mendez, Covington, and Lamar Middle School
Student Enrollment, 2004–2005 through 2009–2010**



Source. AISD Attendance and Enrollment Data (PEIMSSUB400 and AATG, 2004–2005 through 2009–2010)

Note. Enrollment reflects all students with active enrollment at campus for full or partial school year.

Discussion and Conclusions

Mendez Middle School experienced a sharp increase in unexcused absence during the 2006–2007 school year. This increase coincided with a sharp increase in student enrollment. The following year, ACCESS funded a dropout prevention specialist to work with Mendez students to decrease the unexcused absence rate and decrease future dropouts. Program implementation records indicate that the specialist worked extensively with students and their families over the duration of the intervention. In 2009–2010, the efforts of the specialist intensified, with increases in the numbers of student and family contacts. Despite these efforts, overall unexcused absence rates at Mendez remained at a level slightly above that of the 2006–2007 baseline year. The same pattern was found for full- as well as partial-year enrollees. A slight improvement was seen with respect to the proportion of enrollees with the highest number of unexcused absences (greater than 20); in 2009–2010 the percentage of students in this group was 0.3 percentage points lower than in 2006-2007.

During the third year of the ACCESS grant, the expenditure per enrolled student (1007) equaled \$46; the expenditure per student receiving attendance warning letter (635) equaled \$73.

Recommendations

- Investigate the impact of the addition of a dropout prevention specialist at other middle schools to assess the generalizability of the results reported for Mendez.
- Focus services more heavily on students transferring into the campus after the school year has begun.



Appendix

Mendez Middles School Enrollment and Unexcused Absence Data, 2004-2005 Through 2009-2010

Student Population	Measures	School Year		
		2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007
All Enrolled Students	# of Students Enrolled	921	977	1301
	Average Attendance	97.3%	97.4%	95.7%
	Average # of Unexcused Days	3.2	3.3	5.1
	Average # of Days Enrolled	149.3	151.9	149.0
	% with # of Unexcused Absences			
	0	33.9% (n=312)	28.5% (n=278)	15.7% (n=204)
	1 to 5	49.5% (n=456)	54.2% (n=530)	54.7% (n=711)
	6 to 10	9.2% (n=85)	10.7% (n=105)	17.4% (n=226)
	11 to 20	4.9% (n=45)	4.7% (n=46)	8.7% (n=113)
> 20	2.5% (n=23)	1.8% (n=18)	3.6% (n=47)	
Students Enrolled Full Year	# of Students Enrolled	599	632	881
	Average Attendance	98.7%	98.4%	97.5%
	Average # of Unexcused Days	2.3	2.8	4.4
	Average # of Days Enrolled	175.0	175.0	175.0
	% with # of Unexcused Absences			
	0	35.6% (n=213)	29.7% (n=188)	15.4% (n=136)
	1 to 5	52.1% (n=312)	56.8% (n=359)	59.3% (n=522)
	6 to 10	8.8% (n=53)	8.4% (n=53)	16.5% (n=145)
	11 to 20	2.7% (n=16)	3.8% (n=24)	7.2% (n=63)
> 20	.8% (n=5)	1.3% (n=8)	1.7% (n=15)	
Students Enrolled Partial Year	# of Students Enrolled	322	345	420
	Average Attendance	94.9%	95.5%	91.9%
	Average # of Unexcused Days	4.8	4.3	6.5
	# of Days Enrolled	101.5	109.5	94.5
	% with # of Unexcused Absences			
	0	30.7% (n=99)	26.1% (n=90)	16.2% (n=68)
	1 to 5	44.7% (n=144)	49.6% (n=171)	45.0% (n=189)
	6 to 10	9.9% (n=32)	15.1% (n=52)	19.3% (n=81)
	11 to 20	9.0% (n=29)	6.4% (n=22)	11.9% (n=50)
> 20	5.6% (n=18)	2.9% (n=10)	7.6% (n=32)	

Source. AISD Attendance and Enrollment Data (PEIMSSUB400 and AATG, 2004-2009)



Mendez Enrollment and Absence (continued)

Student Population	Measures	School Year		
		2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010
All Enrolled Students	# of Students Enrolled	1170	1040	1007
	Average Attendance	95.2%	95.4%	95.5%
	Average # of Unexcused Days	5.9	6.0	5.9
	Average # of Days Enrolled	149.8	151.7	152.4
	% with # of Unexcused Absences			
	0	16.2% (n=189)	10.8% (n=112)	9.8% (n=99)
	1 to 5	52.3% (n=612)	51.6% (n=537)	52.9% (n=533)
	6 to 10	16.9% (n=198)	19.8% (n=206)	21.4% (n=216)
11 to 20	9.1% (n=107)	13.9% (n=145)	12.5% (n=126)	
> 20	5.5% (n=64)	3.8% (n=40)	3.3% (n=33)	
Students Enrolled Full Year	# of Students Enrolled	803	706	719
	Average Attendance	97.2%	97.0%	97.0%
	Average # of Unexcused Days	4.9	5.3	5.3
	Average # of Days Enrolled	175.0	175.0	175.0
	% with # of Unexcused Absences			
	0	14.9% (n=120)	9.6% (n=68)	8.5% (n=61)
	1 to 5	57.0% (n=458)	56.1% (n=396)	56.6% (n=407)
	6 to 10	17.4% (n=140)	19.5% (n=138)	22.3% (n=160)
11 to 20	7.5% (n=60)	12.6% (n=89)	10.4% (n=75)	
> 20	3.1% (n=25)	2.1% (n=15)	2.2% (n=16)	
Students Enrolled Partial Year	# of Students Enrolled	367	334	288
	Average Attendance	90.8%	92.0%	91.7%
	Average # of Unexcused Days	8.2	7.5	7.5
	# of Days Enrolled	94.7	102.4	96.1
	% with # of Unexcused Absences			
	0	18.8% (n=69)	13.2% (n=44)	13.2% (n=38)
	1 to 5	42.0% (n=154)	42.2% (n=141)	43.8% (n=126)
	6 to 10	15.8% (n=58)	20.4% (n=68)	19.4% (n=56)
11 to 20	12.8% (n=47)	16.8% (n=56)	17.7% (n=51)	
> 20	10.6% (n=39)	7.5% (n=25)	5.9% (n=17)	

Source: AISD Attendance and Enrollment Data (PEIMSSUB400 and AATG, 2004-2009)



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