

Compass Care at Valor Collegiate Academies

Attendance Program Spotlight

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Justine Zimiles, Jonathan Nakamoto, and Ashley Boal

Chronic absenteeism is a significant issue nationwide that was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although chronic absenteeism rates are slowly improving from a peak of 28.5 percent in the 2021–22 school year, nearly a quarter of public school students (23.5%) experienced chronic absenteeism in the 2023–24 school year (Malkus, 2025).

Absenteeism is associated with several negative outcomes for youth, including decreased academic performance (Ginsburg et al., 2014), increased high school dropout rates (Smerillo et al., 2018), and involvement with the justice system (Robertson & Walker, 2018). Further, chronic absenteeism is associated with negative economic impacts on students, their families, and taxpayers. A report that examined California public schools found that each

chronically absent student in California results in a long-term economic burden of \$5,630 for the state. This burden stems primarily from lost human capital due to the students' reduced economic opportunities as adults and is coupled with resources spent by education professionals, opportunity costs for caregivers, and negative impacts on peers in the classroom (Belfield et al., 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified the need for innovative programming to address the myriad challenges that students and their families face, which have contributed to the recent spike in chronic absenteeism.

Born out of a desire to provide additional support for students and caregivers, [Compass Care](#) is an innovative approach to addressing chronic absenteeism. Compass Care is a family-centered wraparound program that leverages strengths-based practices to address the barriers that prevent students from attending and succeeding in school. In 2021, Compass Care was piloted by Seneca Family of Agencies in partnership with Valor Collegiate Academies, a charter school network of two middle schools and one high school in Nashville, Tennessee. In 2023, they received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Education Innovation and Research (EIR) Program to rigorously evaluate the program and expand its implementation to other regions of the country. WestEd is conducting the EIR-funded evaluation in order to analyze and document the impact of Compass Care.

This brief provides an overview of the Compass Care program and early evidence of its positive impact on students and families at Valor Collegiate Academies. Findings are informed by reflections shared by 33 students, 4 caregivers, 4 Compass Care staff members, and 6 other school staff members—such as teachers and assistant principals—who participated in interviews and focus groups with WestEd researchers during site visits held in April 2025.

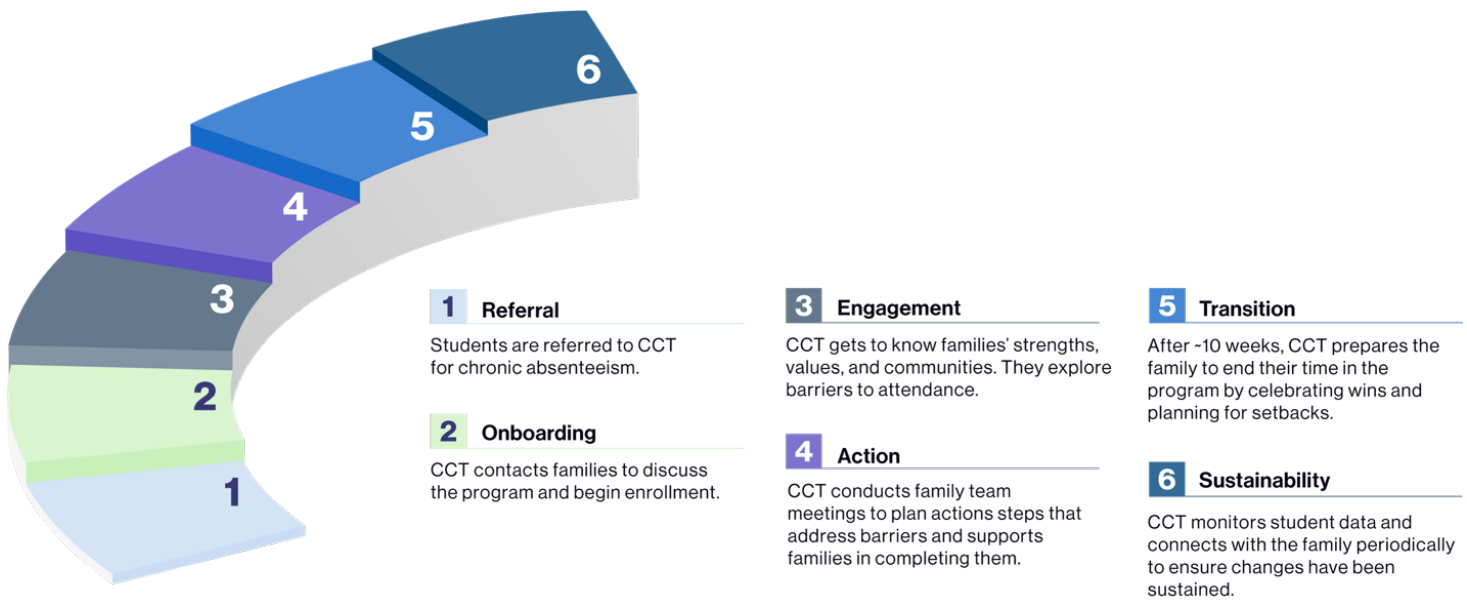
Overview of the Program

Program Goals

Compass Care is designed to support students who experience high rates of chronic absenteeism, along with their caregivers. The program offers targeted, family-centered assistance to ensure students and their caregivers overcome challenges related to attending and succeeding in school. The program aims to work with families to leverage their existing strengths and implement action steps that will produce lasting change.

Program Structure

The Compass Care program is provided to students and their caregivers over the course of a 10-week cycle during the school year. Typically, one staff member from the Compass Care Team (CCT) is assigned to each school and implements three to four cycles per school year, serving 10 to 15 families per cycle. Although the program can be adapted to align with the unique school context, Compass Care is consistently composed of six phases: referral, onboarding, engagement, action, transition, and sustainability.



Referral Phase

At the beginning of each cycle, Compass Care identifies a group of chronically absent students and their families. First, Compass Care staff review a list of students who meet the school's definition of *chronically absent*: having missed at least 10 percent of school days. Next, they solicit input from school staff for additional context about potential program participants.

Onboarding Phase

Compass Care staff conduct outreach to potential participants via email and by phone to offer the program to the caregiver and their student as a means of support and request permission for program enrollment. During the recruitment phase in prior school years, Compass Care staff let families know that students were referred to the program because of chronic absenteeism. However, staff found that caregivers were more receptive to participation when they adjusted their language to focus on Compass Care as an opportunity for extra support more broadly.

Engagement Phase

Once a student and their caregiver agree to participate, Compass Care staff schedule an initial meeting, which may include students and caregivers together or separately, depending on the family dynamic and caregiver availability. During the first few meetings after that, Compass Care staff aim to build rapport with participants through nonjudgmental communication and active listening. Compass Care staff use specialized tools and activities to learn about the values, strengths, social support, and aspirations of the student and caregiver.

Compass Care staff get to know the people who make up a family's circle of support, helping to connect them with those who can walk alongside them in their journey through the program. In addition, Compass Care staff help caregivers reframe their narratives in a positive way, highlighting their unique

capacities and skills rather than focusing on the challenges they have faced. The use of a strengths-based approach aims to empower families to feel confident and hopeful that they can succeed.

Action Phase

Over the course of the program, Compass Care staff meet with students on a weekly basis and with caregivers every other week. Compass Care staff work collaboratively with students and families to develop goals across various areas, such as attendance, grades, homework, behavior, and mental health. To facilitate this process, Compass Care staff are trained in the development of SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) goals.

Compass Care staff also work with participants to outline action steps for caregivers, students, and the staff themselves that facilitate goal achievement and accountability. To support these goals, Compass Care staff complete activities such as creating safety plans for students who have concerns about their safety while attending school and providing transportation support (e.g., access to metro cards or information about carpooling in the area). Compass Care staff check in regularly with participants about progress toward goals and make adjustments to goals and action steps as needed. Compass Care staff offer incentives to encourage and celebrate goal progress.

Throughout this phase, Compass Care staff maintain flexibility regarding the method of communication with caregivers. Check-ins are held in person, through video calls, over the phone, or via text message, depending on the caregiver's preference. Compass Care staff are also flexible in their communication with students.

Transition Phase

At the end of the 10-week cycle, Compass Care staff celebrate the culmination of the program with the students and their families by reflecting on student achievement and growth during the program. Additionally, they walk through

the next steps necessary to maintain positive changes and foster continued progress. In some cases, students are reenrolled in an additional cycle to further address continuing challenges to student attendance.

Sustainability Phase

Within the 3 months that follow the end of the cycle, Compass Care staff check in periodically with students regarding their attendance, academic progress, mental health, and behavior. Staff stay up to date by monitoring students' records, relay positive outcomes to caregivers, and inquire about student needs.

Program Impact and Successes

Based on information learned during WestEd site visits at Valor Collegiate Academies in spring 2025, the Compass Care program was viewed positively by Valor students, caregivers, and staff. This section describes early evidence of the program's impact on student social and emotional well-being and students' successes related to school achievement and attendance.

Social and Emotional Well-Being

Overall, students described feeling cared for by Compass Care staff, with whom they developed close, trusting relationships. Their connection to a trusted adult at school helped them feel more comfortable and safer coming to school. To encourage the development of these trusting relationships, Compass Care staff sought to make themselves accessible to students, sitting in common spaces that students frequent and ensuring they were available for informal conversation throughout the day.

Through these trusting relationships, students shared that they learned how to express their feelings and emotions. School staff noticed that students participating in Compass Care appeared happier and demonstrated an

improved attitude toward school. One student shared the value of “knowing that you have somebody there for you who will be proud of you when you reach your goal.” They appreciated that Compass Care staff wanted the best for them and looked at their problems from the students’ perspective.

Caregivers also felt supported by Compass Care staff. To cultivate positive relationships, Compass Care staff were intentional about making time to get to know program participants. For example, one caregiver positively recalled that the Compass Care staff spent most of their initial meeting listening to them.

The Valor schools are located on the same campus, so Compass Care staff were able to work with students across the three schools. Whenever possible, students are assigned to a Compass Care staff member who has the appropriate knowledge and skills needed to empathize and form a strong connection with the students and their caregivers. One school staff member explained, “The families feel comfortable sharing things [with Compass Care staff] that they don’t want to tell the school.”

Students and caregivers alike emphasized the nonpunitive nature of the program. They deeply appreciated that Compass Care staff showed genuine care for their well-being. Caregivers reported communicating on an as-needed basis with staff apart from the regular check-ins to share student updates. Caregivers described staff as “on their team,” working *with* them, not simply for them. By getting to know participants, staff were able to leverage the existing assets and interests of both the students and caregivers to help motivate them and enable them to thrive. For example, Compass Care staff often asked about students’ favorite snacks and drinks, which staff brought in to recognize students’ positive behaviors or simply lift their spirits when they were having a bad day. Finally, students described the program as both helpful and fun.

Compass Care was very much a part of [my student's] success in coming to school and making it through her high school career. ... Just having this extra support really meant the world to me, and it made me feel so much less alone—and the same for [my student].

—Caregiver

Connections to Resources

Caregivers viewed Compass Care staff as family advocates and liaisons. Both staff and caregivers talked about Compass Care bridging the communication gap between families and their schools. Caregivers found it helpful to have a point person to talk to at their school to help them navigate the school system so that they could better support their students academically.

We've seen kids and families who have been getting Compass Care move from struggling to thriving within a few months when they are connected to those resources.

—Assistant principal

Compass Care staff accompanied caregivers to court appointments and assisted them in applying for government benefits. Other examples of support included talking to a caregiver's apartment complex manager and delivering groceries to a single parent when they were sick. Compass Care staff

highlighted successes in connecting participating families to mental health and addiction support in the community. School staff noted that Compass Care helped reduce the stigma in the school community of reaching out for help, particularly related to mental health resources.

Confidence Building

Although Compass Care staff advocated for students and families, perhaps more importantly, students learned to advocate for themselves. Staff taught students the value of asking for help and worked to inspire student confidence. Students expressed that Compass Care staff empowered them to reach out to teachers, for example, when they needed help with understanding the curriculum or asking for makeup assignments. One student shared that, without the program, “I would probably have a lot of bad grades and be scared of teachers. I wouldn’t be able to advocate for myself.” Students described feeling less fearful and anxious in school. Students shared that they became more aware of their needs and more comfortable standing up for themselves and asking for support.

Achievement

Students, caregivers, and school staff described noticeable improvements in grades and achievement as a result of participating in Compass Care. Students felt motivated and challenged to do well in school. Caregivers appreciated that staff held students accountable for their progress toward goals. Students described the check-ins as helpful in keeping them on track and focused on their goals and assignments. Compass Care staff provided students with strategies for studying and encouraged the use of resources such as Valor’s homework hotline and online tools such as Gauth. Compass Care helped students feel more organized and made school easier for them. A student described the program as “giving us goals, and [the Compass Care staff] kept pushing us. They made it so we strived for more.” Students found it helpful that staff worked with them to identify small, concrete steps they could

take to make progress. Students also described feeling proud of their achievements.

I'm about to graduate. If you were to go back to 10th grade, you would see all Fs on my report card. I overcame that. ... Compass Care changed me in a dramatic way. It helped me become better as a person and focus on school.

—Student

Attendance

Participation in Compass Care helped students improve their attendance and reduce tardiness. Throughout the program, Compass Care staff emphasized the importance and impact of attendance. As a result of Compass Care, some students realized how missing school impacted their grades or future goals negatively. Caregivers and school staff spoke about how Compass Care staff were successful in developing achievable goals and action steps in order to address barriers to attendance. One caregiver explained the impact on their child:

There were definitely times when she went to school [that] she wouldn't have otherwise because she knew she could reach out to the [Compass Care staff member] or [that] I had reached out to them already. ... [Compass Care] created a safe space that she knew she could have and [use to] get some calmness in her day.

Students also shared that their attendance improved because the Compass Care program helped reduce their anxiety about coming to school.

The relationships built between Compass Care staff and participants stood out as a reason for students wanting to come to school. One student explained, “Compass Care helped me attend school more [because the Compass Care staff member] was being very supportive. I didn’t want to let her down.” School staff described noticeable improvements in participating students’ attendance and positive impacts on students’ behavior in the classroom.

Kids are coming to school. Our absentee rate has gone down. When [Compass Care staff] interact with scholars and scholars get to build that trust with an adult, they feel supported. And it shows up in the classroom because they’re not acting out behaviorally.

—School staff member

Future Directions

This brief summarizes WestEd’s initial findings regarding the implementation and early impact of the Compass Care program as part of our EIR-funded evaluation. In future years, we will conduct additional site visits to examine the Compass Care program at schools in two other local education agencies that are participating in the project: Alliance College-Ready Public Schools in Los Angeles, California, and Highline Public Schools in Washington state.

In addition, WestEd is using a quasi-experimental design in the 2025–26 and 2026–27 school years to rigorously evaluate the impact of Compass Care. The design will include a comparison group of students who did not participate in Compass Care. It will use school records to examine the program’s impact on attendance, grades, and credit accumulation. The findings from the quasi-experimental design will be available in 2028.

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