

Sustaining Improvements
and Practices in Support of
Student Attendance

2024-2025 ICAN Year in Review



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Last fall, just under 500,000 San Diego County students went to school, attending 776 schools across 43 districts. Over the course of the year, 100,000 of these students were chronically absent, missing 10% - roughly a month - or more of school.

Just shy of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools in California reported on average a 12% chronic absence rate during the 2018-2019 school year. When reporting resumed in 2021-2022, the rates across California had jumped to 30%. Chronic absence rates continue to be much higher than pre-pandemic rates, indicating that perceptions of school attendance and absence have fundamentally shifted as a result of the pandemic. The impacts of chronic absence are disproportionately felt by students experiencing poverty, students of color, English language learners, and students with disabilities (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Attendance Works & Everyone Graduates Center, 2017). During the first months of 2025, when immigration raids increased across the country, daily student absence rates in California's Central Valley increased by 22% (Dee, 2025). Attendance and chronic absence have major implications for the safety and success of San Diego County's most marginalized students.

IMPROVING CHRONIC ABSENCE NETWORK

In response to this ongoing challenge, the San Diego County Office of Education operates the Improving Chronic Absence Network (ICAN), which focuses on reducing chronic absenteeism across San Diego County. ICAN supports the school-based implementation of evidence-based interventions to address

chronic absenteeism and encourage daily attendance. Currently launching its sixth cohort, ICAN leads a yearlong improvement network that supports a cohort of up to 20 schools to decrease chronic absenteeism and improve attendance systems and structures. ICAN is guided by the principles of improvement science and uses four key drivers to inform school team inquiry and learning: relationships, communication, climate and culture, and team foundations and routines.

This report explores the extent to which former ICAN participants can sustain and scale interventions and practices learned during participation in ICAN. ICAN attempts to prepare teams to sustain attendance work once ICAN concludes, and this report explores the opportunities for and barriers preventing sustainability and scale for Cohort 4 of ICAN.



DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Nineteen schools participated in ICAN Cohort 4 during the 2023-2024 school year. In January 2025, ICAN administered a survey to all ICAN Cohort 4 participants to understand the extent to which former ICAN schools continued to implement interventions, systems, and processes. Of the 98 participants surveyed, 48 participants responded from across five districts and 19 schools in San Diego County. This portion of the survey explored the following questions:

1. To what extent are Cohort 4 schools continuing to implement ICAN interventions, systems, and practices a year after participating in ICAN, and what, if any, relationship did intervention implementation have with chronic absenteeism?
2. What, if any, relationships exist between intervention use and the continuation of ICAN systems and practices?

Additionally, we explored the potential relationship between ICAN practices and family engagement. A robust research base supports the role family engagement plays in promoting positive student outcomes (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2007; Mapp & Bergman, 2019). Recent research by Learning Heroes and TNTF on pre- and post-pandemic attendance patterns has pointed to a positive relationship between family engagement and school attendance. The following questions were additionally explored:

3. How does parent engagement vary depending on the continued implementation of ICAN strategies and practices?
4. How does parent engagement vary depending on continuation of attendance team meeting structures?

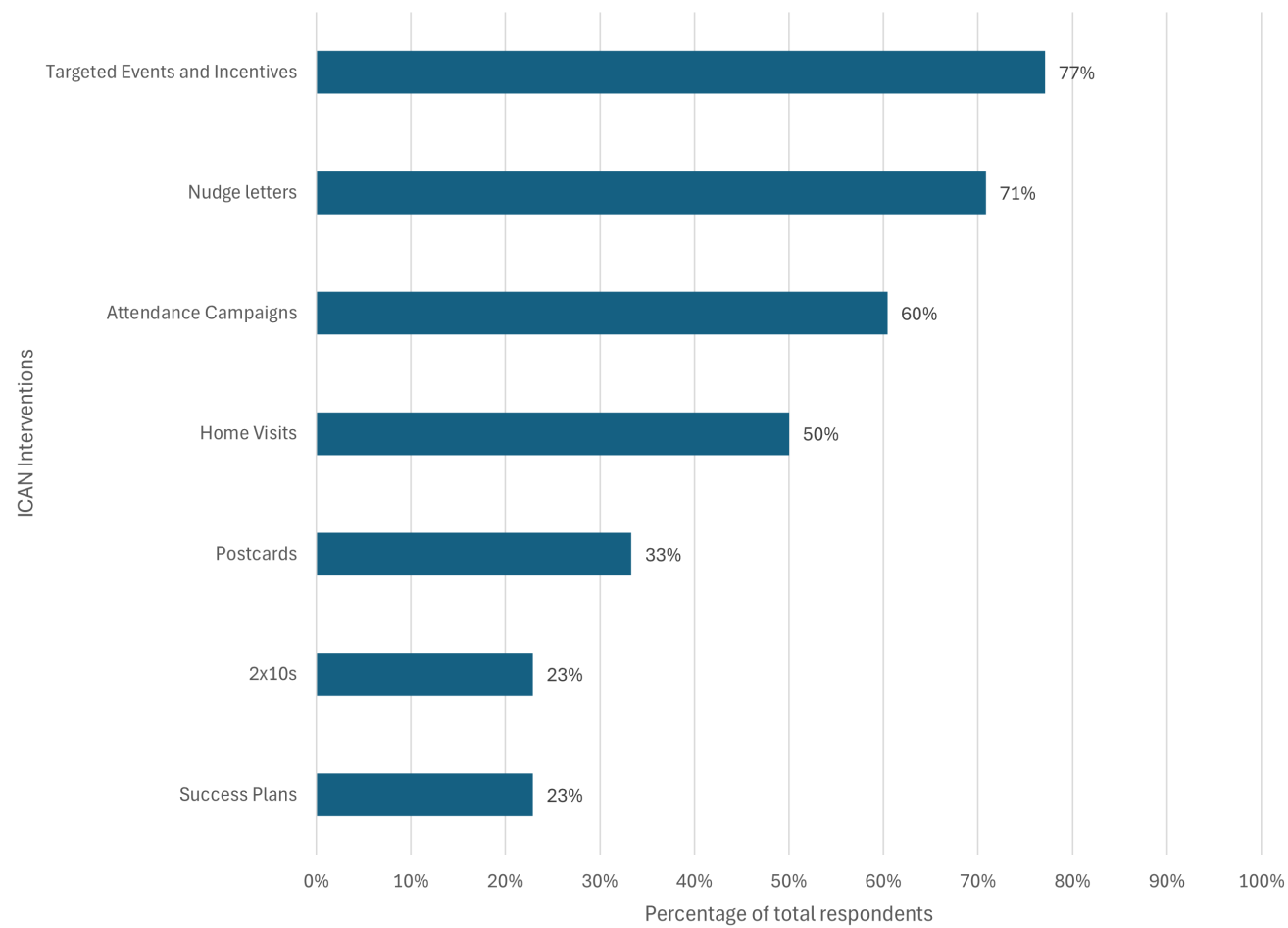
In our ICAN Cohort 4 follow up survey, we included 15 items from University of Chicago's 5Essentials survey, focusing on the essential measure Involved Families. Within Involved Families are three measures: parent influence on decision making in schools, parent involvement in school, and teacher-parent trust.

FINDINGS

● ICAN Interventions, Systems, and Processes

ICAN introduces multiple interventions that, with disciplined implementation and tracking, can support schools to increase attendance and decrease chronic absenteeism. Figure 1 illustrates the extent to which Cohort 4 schools continue to implement the 7 interventions that were a focus of ICAN: targeted events and incentives, nudge letters, attendance campaigns, home visits, postcards, 2x10 check ins, and success plans.

FIGURE 1: RATE OF ICAN INTERVENTION USE YEAR AFTER ICAN PARTICIPATION



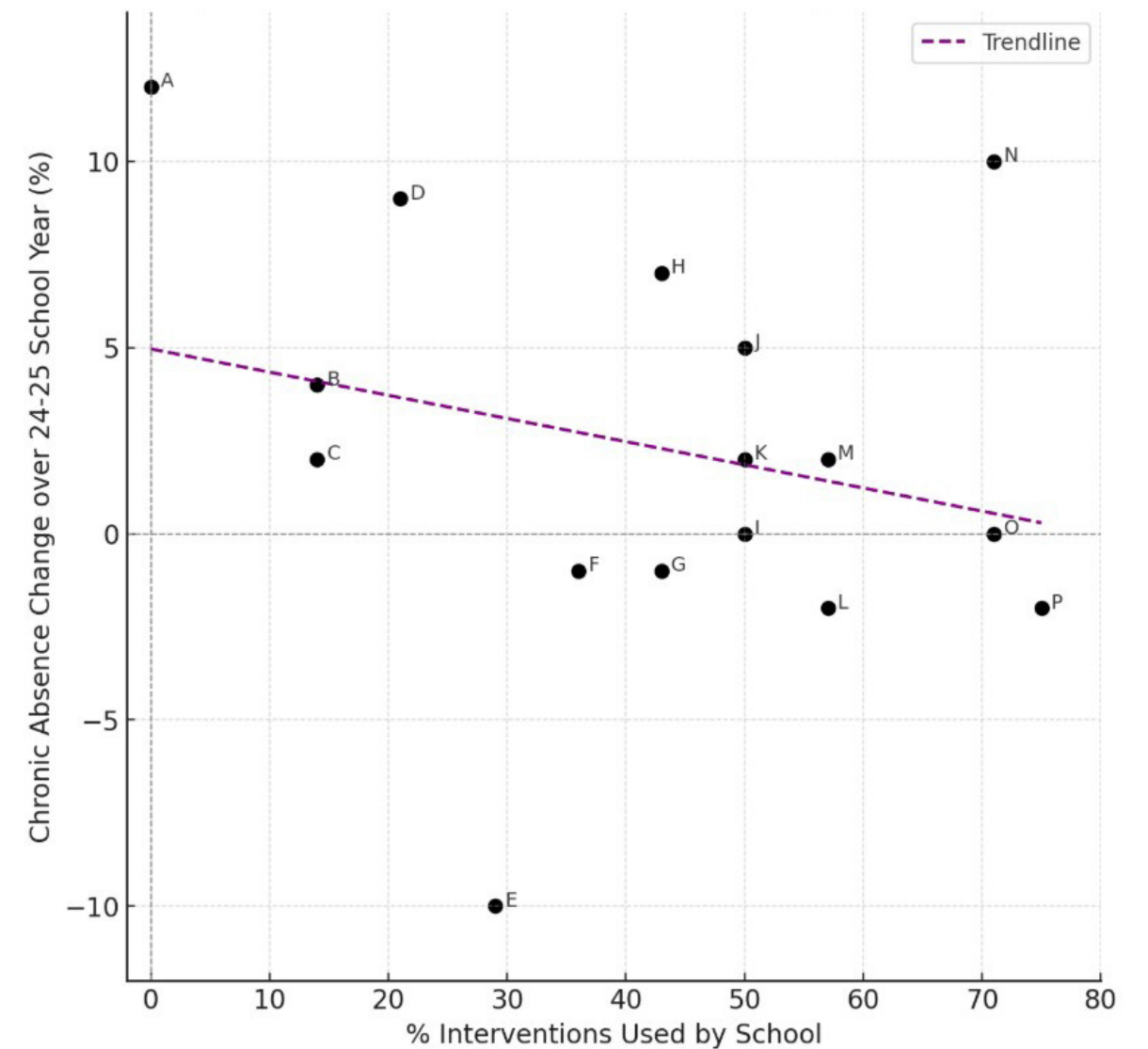
Of the seven ICAN interventions, attendance campaigns, nudge letters, and targeted events and incentives represented the most frequently used strategies one year post-ICAN. Of the 48 total respondents, 60% reported continuing to plan attendance campaigns, 71% reported sending nudge letters, and 77% reported planning targeted events and incentives. Targeted events and incentives represent the ICAN intervention used most frequently by respondents across Cohort 4. 2x10s, home visits, postcards, and success plans represented a smaller percentage of ICAN interventions used by Cohort 4 participants a year after participating in ICAN. 23% of respondents reported conducting 2x10s, 50% reported practicing home visits, 33% reported sending postcards, and 23% reported creating success plans.

Across all 19 Cohort 4 schools, varying levels of continued implementation of interventions exist. Success plans represent the intervention used by the fewest schools post-ICAN, with only seven schools reporting continued use. Nudge letters represent the most widely used intervention, with only two schools reporting no use. While targeted events and incentives represents the most frequently used intervention across respondents, four schools report no use of this intervention. Nudge letters continue to have the widest reaching influence across Cohort 4 schools.

ICAN Intervention Use and Chronic Absence Reduction

Sixteen of 19 Cohort 4 schools continued to share attendance data during the 2024-2025 school year after participating in ICAN. Figure 2 below illustrates the relationship between chronic absence rate change during the 2024-2025 school year and the percentage of ICAN interventions reported implemented by survey respondents. School names are masked and are randomly assigned a letter in the figure below. Across the 16 Cohort 4 schools that continued to share attendance data, there was a relationship between the percentage of ICAN interventions reported in use and changes to chronic absence during the 2024-2025 school year. As respondents reported using a higher percentage of ICAN interventions in their schools, those schools were more likely to reduce their chronic absence rates during the 2024-2025 school year. Conversely, schools reporting lower percentages of ICAN intervention implementation were more likely to experience increases in chronic absence rates during the 2024-2025 school year.

FIGURE 2: OVER 2024-2025, CHRONIC ABSENCE RATES DECREASED AS TEAMS IMPLEMENTED HIGHER RATES OF ICAN INTERVENTIONS

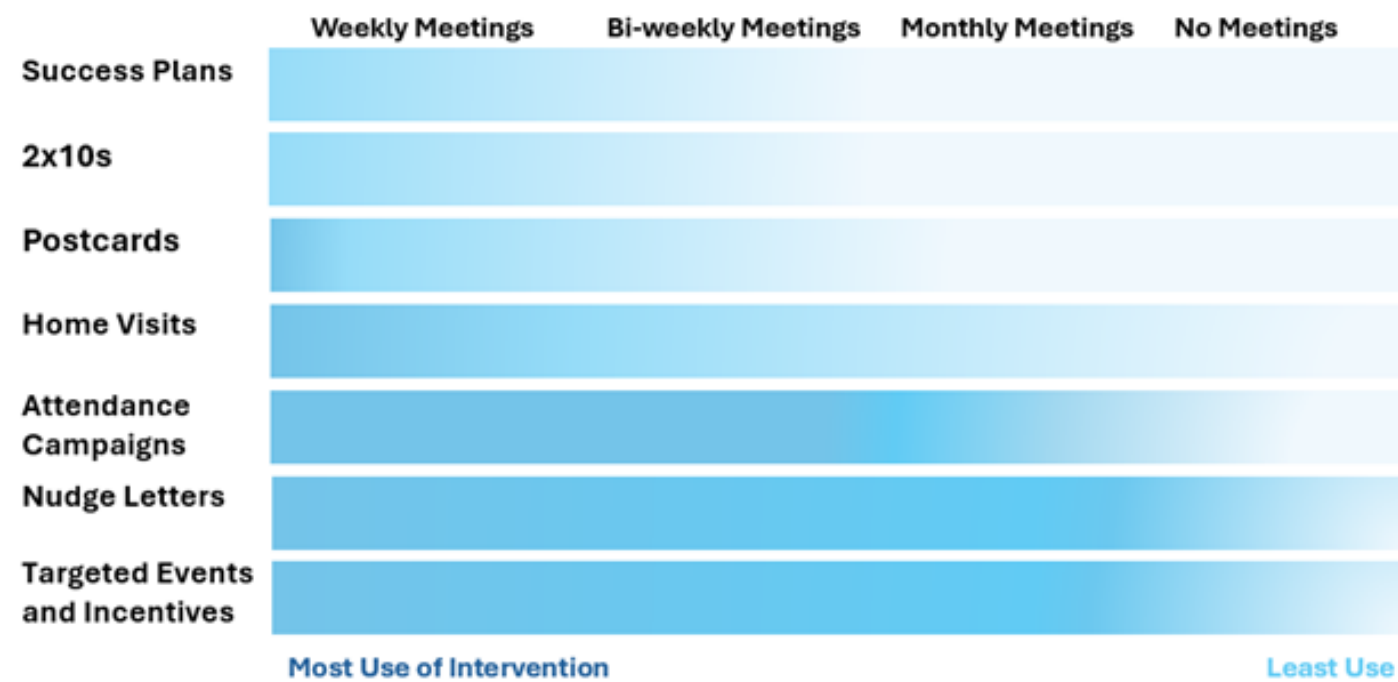


● Sustaining ICAN Interventions

During ICAN, attendance teams are expected to meet for 60 minutes weekly. Of the 19 schools represented across survey responses, varying levels of attendance team meeting structures have been maintained a year after participation in ICAN. Nine respondents reported no longer having an attendance team. 37 respondents reported having some attendance team.

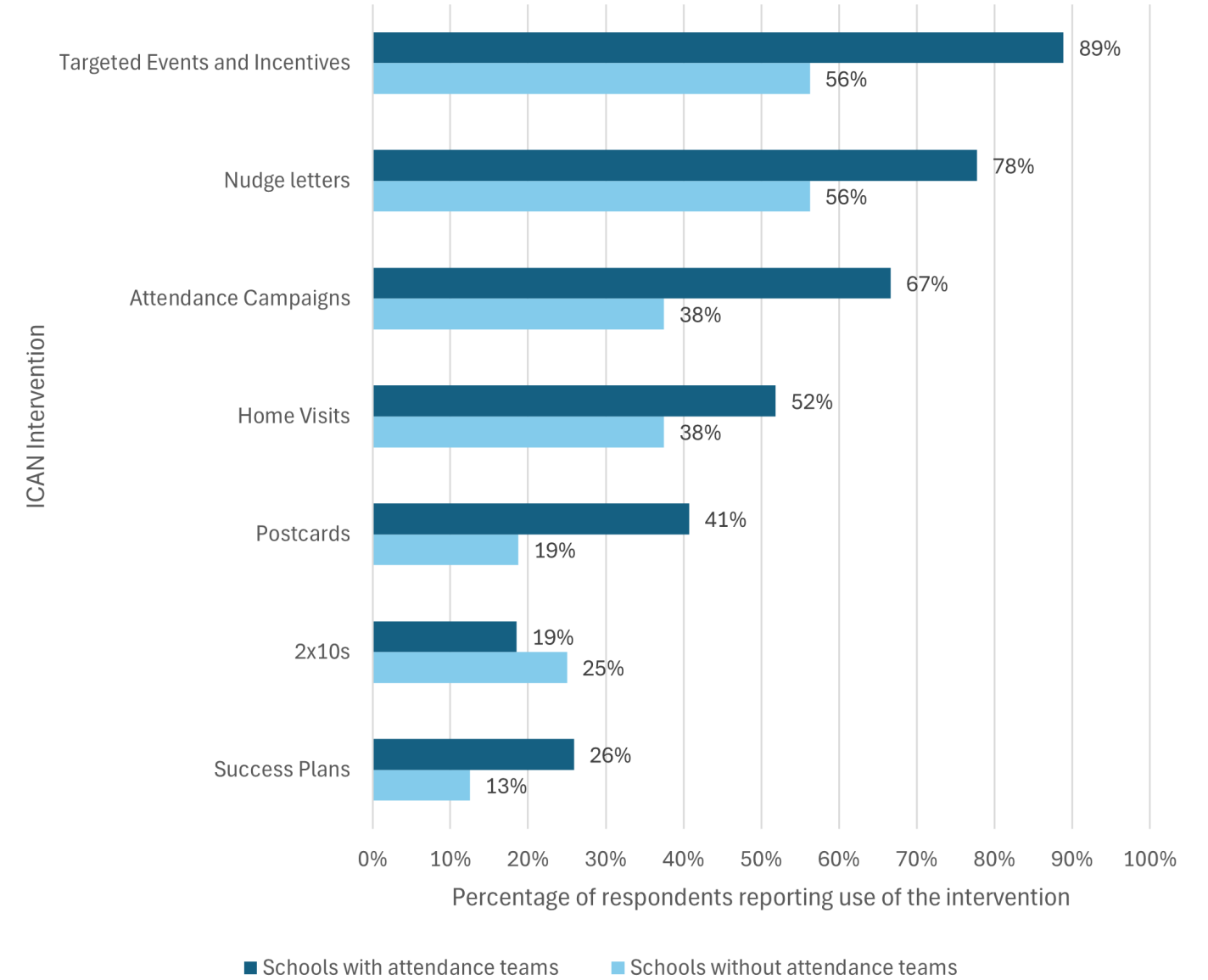
Schools without attendance teams continued to apply ICAN interventions, though to a lesser extent than schools that maintained a regular meeting structure. In Figure 3, schools that held weekly meetings were more likely to report also using the seven ICAN interventions a year after their participation in the network. Biweekly meetings also led to implementation of interventions, though fewer. Schools meeting monthly or not at all reported lower use of all seven ICAN interventions. Attendance campaigns, nudge letters, and targeted events and incentives were the most heavily used interventions across schools irrespective of meeting cadences.

FIGURE 3: FREQUENCY OF INTERVENTION USE AND CADENCE OF ATTENDANCE TEAM MEETINGS



Respondents who report maintaining an attendance team the year after ICAN report more consistent use of ICAN interventions than respondents who report no longer having an attendance team, as illustrated in Figure 4. Across respondents maintaining meetings, targeted events and incentives, nudge letters, and attendance campaigns are more consistently used. Across respondents no longer meeting, targeted events and incentives and nudge letters are more consistently used. Attendance campaigns and postcards are used around 50% less by respondents no longer meeting than respondents maintaining meetings.

FIGURE 4: USE OF ICAN INTERVENTIONS ACROSS SCHOOLS WITH AND WITHOUT ATTENDANCE TEAMS



● Sustaining ICAN Practices

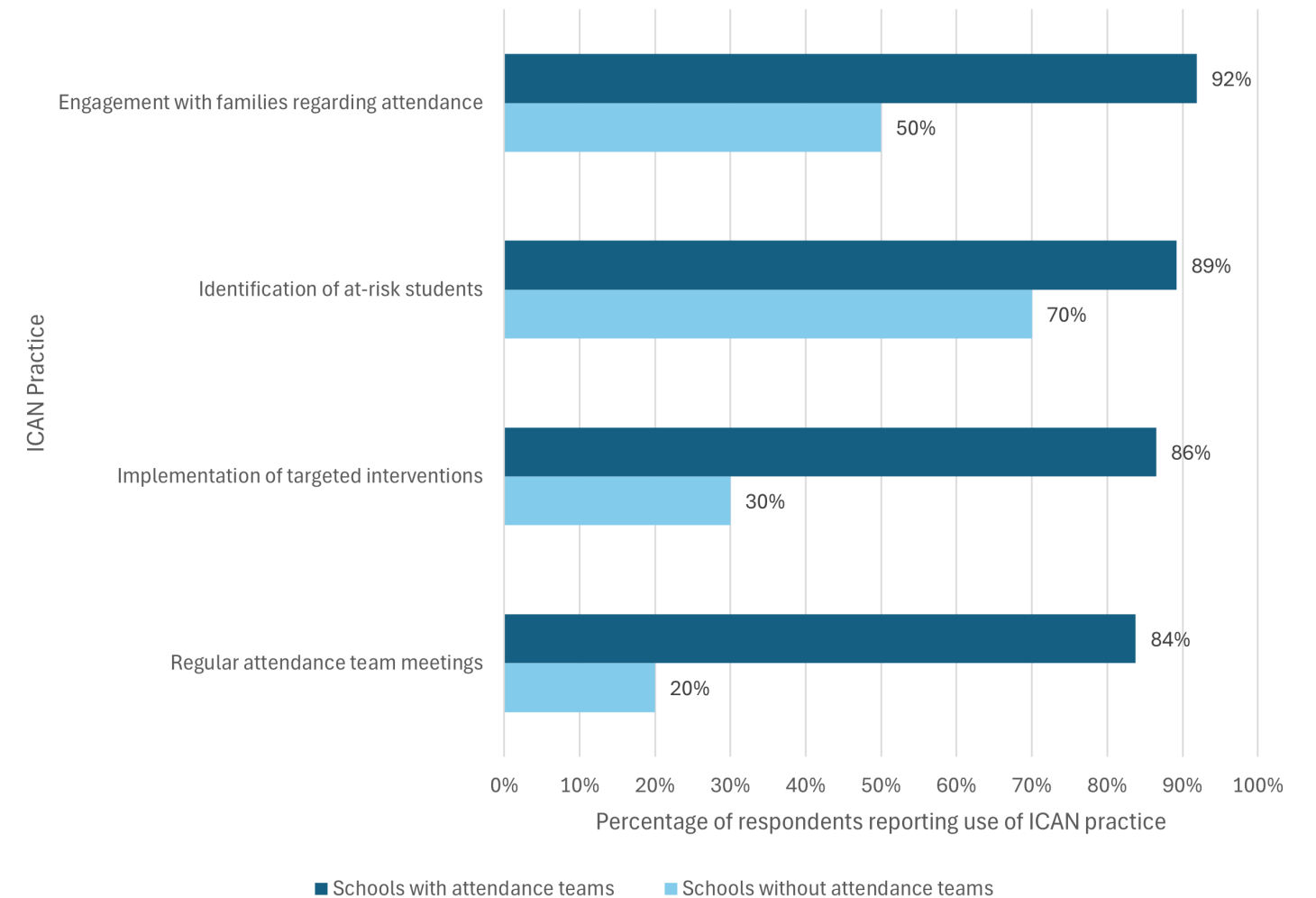
ICAN supports schools to build systems and processes that will allow teams to sustain attendance practices after participating in ICAN and scale this work across their schools and districts. Four practices are a focus of ICAN: engagement with families regarding attendance, identification of at-risk students, implementation of targeted interventions, and regular attendance team meetings. Schools that no longer have an attendance team reported less consistent use of ICAN these practices. Schools that held both weekly and biweekly meetings reported more consistent use of these practices a year after their participation in ICAN. Figure 5 illustrates the percentage of participants with and without attendance teams reporting sustained use of ICAN practices post-ICAN.

Identification of at-risk students is sustained across all schools at high rates, irrespective of attendance team meeting cadences. Without a regular attendance team meeting, the implementation of targeted interventions is less sustained. Only 30% of respondents without attendance teams reported sustaining this practice, whereas 86% of respondents with attendance teams were able to sustain implementation of targeted interventions post-ICAN. Similarly, engaging with families regarding attendance was reported at much higher rates across respondents with attendance teams than across respondents without attendance teams.

As with the ICAN interventions, the practices that require more outreach and interaction with students, staff, and families were not sustained as regularly at schools without attendance team meetings. The identification of at-risk students was still possible without attendance team meetings, but the ability to consistently act on that information was not.



FIGURE 5: SUSTAINED ICAN PRACTICES ACROSS SCHOOLS WITH AND WITHOUT ATTENDANCE TEAMS



● Intervention Efficacy and Impact

Schools holding weekly meetings reported that interventions were very effective at much higher rates than schools that met biweekly, monthly, or no longer met. Forty-seven percent of respondents who met weekly with teams reported that ICAN interventions were either very or extremely effective a year after their participation in ICAN, compared to 21% of respondents meeting biweekly, 22% of respondents meeting monthly, and 33% of respondents who no longer meet.

Respondents frequently cited the impact that participation in ICAN had on their understanding of chronic absenteeism, on their knowledge of high-impact strategies, and on their teaming structures. Across the responses it was clear that respondents felt more confident in their ability to solve attendance-related problems as a result of participation in ICAN. They discussed specific strategies, new data routines, and focal student groups. Respondents also reported shifts in their beliefs about absenteeism and families.

ICAN AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

In addition to surveying past ICAN participants on the strategies and practices they learned while in the network, we also investigated the strength of family engagement at their sites, which recent research has tied to lower chronic absence rates. To explore the relationship between family engagement and chronic absenteeism across former ICAN sites, we included 15 survey items from the University of Chicago's 5Essentials survey, focusing on the essential measure Involved Families. Within Involved Families are three measures: parent influence on decision making in schools, parent involvement in school, and teacher-parent trust. The 5Essentials survey is a trusted and validated measure of the strength of family engagement in school.

Scores on the 5Essentials survey are reported on a 1-99 scale. Scores from 1-20 are considered very weak, from 21-40 weak, from 41-60 neutral, from 61-80 strong, and from 81-99 very strong. Scores were calculated for groups of respondents depending on their implementation of strategies and continuation of practices. Our analysis revealed little variation between respondents based on their implementation of ICAN strategies. Differences, for example, between respondents who reported continuing home visits and no longer conducting home visits was minimal. Similarly, differences were minimal between respondents who reported implementing interventions like 2x10s, success plans, and home visits and those who reported only implementing targeted events, nudge letters, and campaigns.

"ICAN has taught me that attendance clerks aren't just staff members who answer calls and report absences on a computer. It's also being part of the community and checking in on students and families, being relatable and showing support to our families."

The exception to this was the continuation of attendance team meetings, which was correlated with strength of family engagement. Differences between respondents who reported continuing attendance team meetings and those who reported their school no longer had an attendance team were substantial and statistically significant.



FIGURE 6: OVERALL INVOLVED FAMILIES SCORE FOR COHORT 4 SCHOOLS WITH AND WITHOUT REGULARLY MEETING ATTENDANCE TEAMS

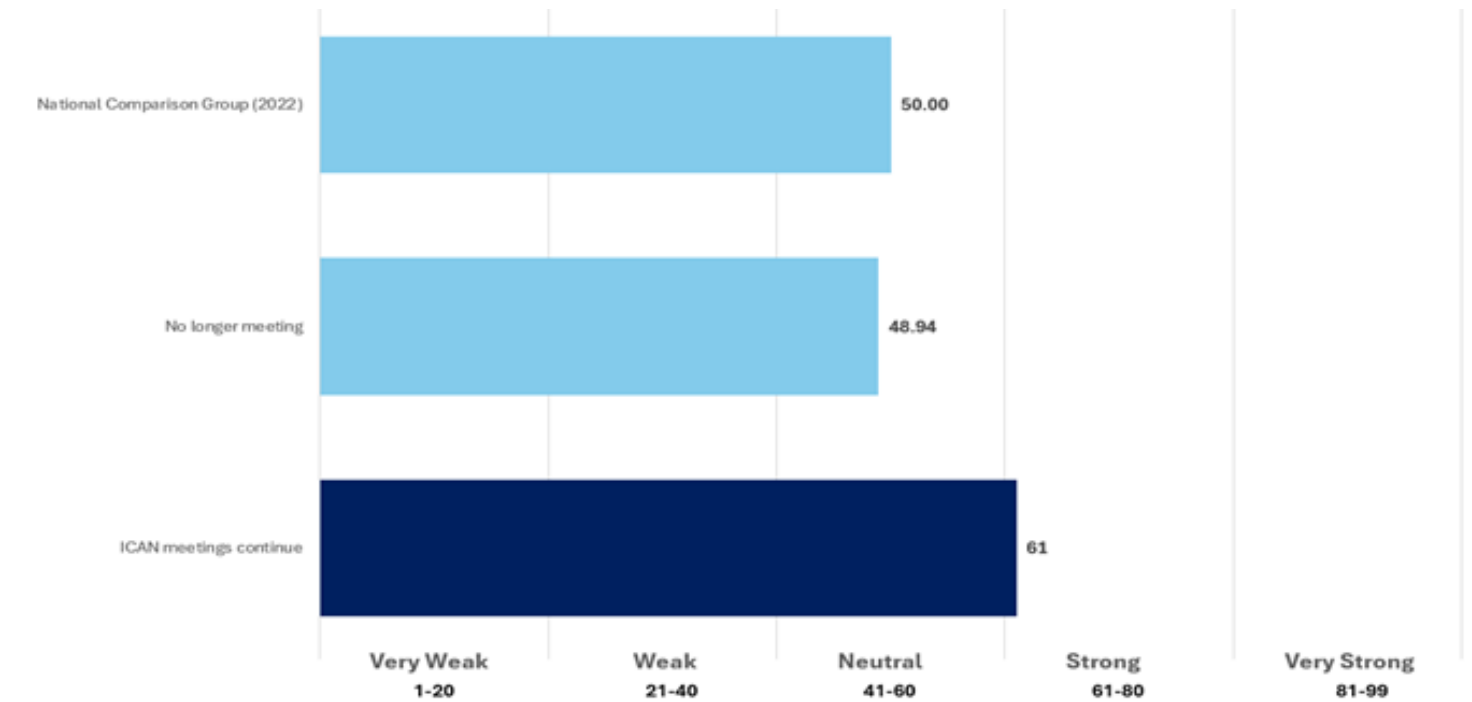


Figure 6 illustrates the score on the Involved Families essential measure for three groups: a national comparison group, ICAN respondents reporting their school no longer has an attendance team that meets, and ICAN respondents reporting their school continues to meet. Respondents reporting that they continue to meet average a strong score on the Involved Families essential measure.

These responses reflect only a small portion of the entire school community and should not represent the school as a whole. That these individuals continue to meet as a part of their continued ICAN work, though, speaks to the potential that ICAN has to maintain and strengthen the relationships between schools and families. Weekly attendance team meetings are sites for conversations about children and their families, with family-facing action items often resulting from meetings and aligned to ICAN interventions like phone calls, home visits, success plans, and postcards. Conversely, for teams that no longer meet, those individuals seem most in need of opportunities to build positive relationships with families. Weekly attendance team meetings predict a more consistent use of ICAN interventions and practices, many of which should strengthen family-school partnerships. Individuals without teams report weaker family engagement and less sustained implementation of ICAN interventions and practices, indicating that regular attendance team meetings have the potential to play a role in not only maintaining ICAN practices but strengthening family-school partnerships.

ICAN “[c]hanged our approach of feeling like we needed to police our families to now working gently as a partner that reaches out to solicit assistance on attendance.”

IMPLICATIONS

These responses may not fully capture the experiences of all schools or individuals who participated in ICAN. Therefore, conclusions should be viewed as indicative rather than representative of broader trends across the full cohort. Nonetheless, the consistency of key patterns—particularly around meeting structures and sustainability—provides useful direction for program refinement and future research.

1. Regular attendance team meetings support continued implementation of ICAN interventions and practices.

Across all survey items, regular meeting structure emerged as an essential component of ICAN sustainability. Schools without regular team meetings did continue to implement ICAN interventions, but with much less efficacy and regularity. Schools meeting either biweekly or weekly sustained ICAN practices at comparable rates. Schools meeting weekly experienced the highest rates of intervention efficacy and implemented the widest range of strategies post-ICAN. Additionally, schools implementing a higher percentage

of ICAN interventions were more likely to see decreases in chronic absenteeism during the year. Weekly or biweekly team meeting structures should be an essential component of an effective attendance strategy post-ICAN.

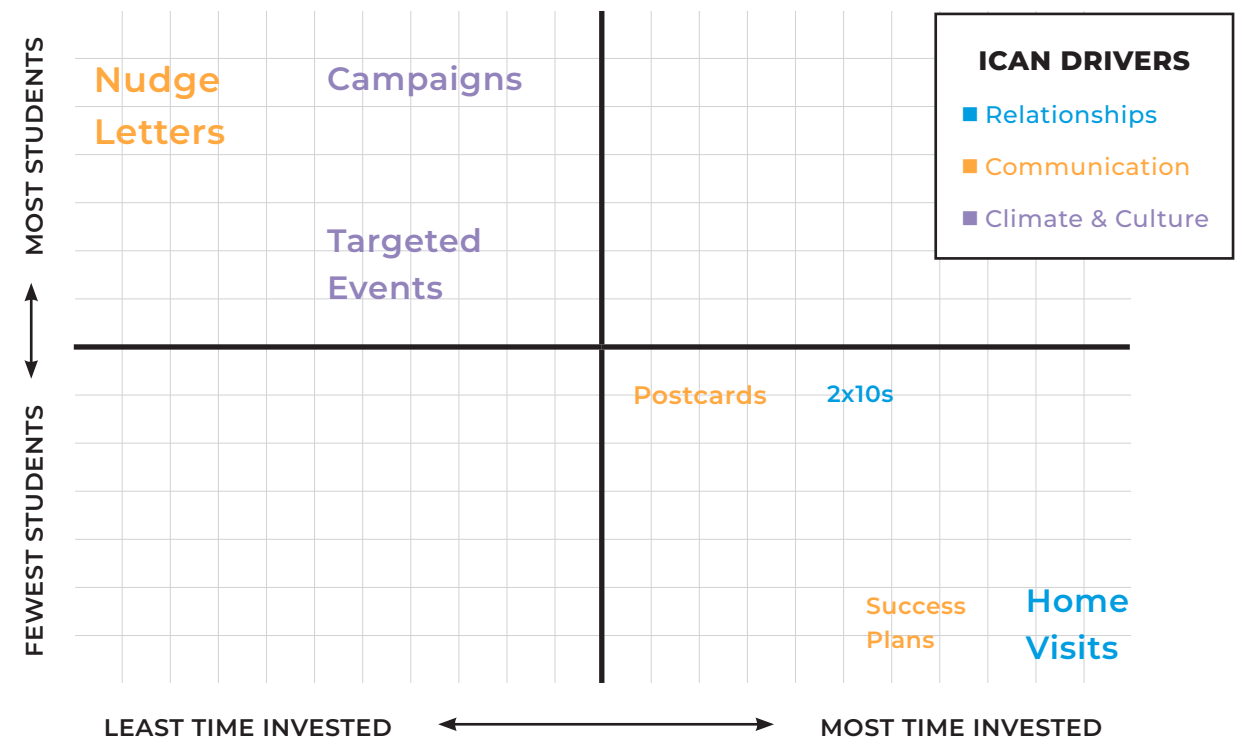
Cohort 4 respondents that continue to meet have significantly higher family engagement scores than respondents that no longer meet. Whether teams employ relationship-building strategies or not, their family engagement scores are not significantly different, indicating that the varied use of strategies doesn’t seem to reflect different team beliefs about families. The only ICAN practice or strategy that produces a significant difference in family engagement scores is the continuation of attendance team meetings.

2. Relational, individualized interventions are more difficult to sustain than universal and school-wide interventions.

Teams most often implemented strategies that could be applied broadly to many students and involved less effort and individualization, often at a Tier 1 or 2 level. Strategies most frequently sustained post-ICAN tend to fall outside of the relationship-building driver. Relationship-building strategies are the most resource-intensive and are less frequently sustained post-ICAN.

In the matrix in Figure 7, ICAN interventions are organized by their level of time and impact. Intervention use by Cohort 4 is organized by font size. Interventions with the greatest use by Cohort 4 are listed in the largest font, while interventions with the least use are in the smallest font. The ICAN drivers and interventions are color-coded according to the ICAN Driver key.

FIGURE 7: SCOPE AND SCALE MATRIX COMPARING TIME INVESTED TO STUDENTS IMPACTED



Teams more frequently implement interventions that require less time and impact the most students, prioritizing per pupil efficiency of the intervention. Considering the limited time teams have to meet and plan their work, this choice to prioritize efficiency makes sense. Interventions that require a greater per student time investment do not get as much use. No ICAN interventions fall within the least time-fewest students quadrant and the most time-most students quadrant, presenting a clear choice for teams between depth or breadth. As the color-coding of the ICAN drivers illustrates, relationship-building strategies require the most time to implement and can be done with the fewest students per application. Often these are individualized interventions.



NEXT STEPS

- ICAN leadership will continue to support teams to implement individualized relationship-building strategies while participating in ICAN.
- ICAN leadership will support previous ICAN cohorts to sustain and scale interventions and practices through a community of practice open to past cohorts.
- Additional qualitative research will focus on the relationship between ICAN interventions and practices and the strength of family engagement, particularly exploring the role of the attendance team meeting in strengthening family engagement.
- Further qualitative research will explore the use of Nudge Letters as the most widely implemented strategy by school teams, as well as the impact of Nudge Letters on recipients.



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LEARN MORE

School teams and districts are invited to join ICAN information sessions, beginning in January 2026, to learn more about the ICAN network for the 2026-2027 school year.

To learn more, please contact:

Janet Medrano
Administrative Assistant I
ICAN@sdcoe.net

Julia Bridi
Executive Leadership Coach
julia.bridi@sdcoe.net

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Improving Chronic Absence Network

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San Diego County Office of Education
6401 Linda Vista Drive, San Diego, CA 92111