DC kids count

Attendance Counts from the Start:

How Education Leaders and Policymakers in the District of Columbia Can Decrease Chronic Early Absenteeism starting from Pre-K.

Introduction

Like many other cities, DC is facing a crisis of school absenteeism. At least one in five DC students had more than 10 unexcused absences from school in 2012-13, putting them at academic risk due to missed school days.[i] Most of DC schools' responses so far have been focused on high school students, but patterns of absenteeism begin much earlier. Both DC Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter schools have attendance challenges in their Pre-K and elementary schools, and schools in both sectors are taking positive steps to improve attendance as a vehicle to improve academic performance. **Chronic early absenteeism, missing 10% or more school days in Pre-K to third grade, widens achievement gaps and drastically reduces the likelihood that children will achieve reading and math proficiency by third grade.**[ii]

The power to overcome this challenge goes beyond schools: The Mayor, Councilmembers, and leaders of education agencies and school districts can all make important contributions to decrease chronic early absenteeism. If education leaders and policymakers work together to decrease chronic early absenteeism at both DCPS and public charter schools, the city could see long-term educational and economic benefits in the form of increased graduation rates and lifetime earnings potential.[iii]

Because of the ways in which both DCPS and public charters schools currently track absenteeism, it is difficult to assess the full scope of DC's chronic early absenteeism problem. All schools report in-seat attendance (ISA), an average of how many students attend each day, and truancy, which captures how many students in grades K-12 miss more than 10 days of school without an excuse. Neither of these measures tells us how many students are academically at-risk due to absenteeism: ISA is only an average measure that can track trends, and truancy does not include excused absences. Most schools track chronic absenteeism, which includes excused and unexcused absences, and does not average out attendance over the school year, but little of these data are publicly released. Only charter schools have released chronic absenteeism data, and there are currently no school accountability measures or performance incentives tied to chronic absenteeism.

Chronic early absenteeism is a problem DC schools and policymakers can solve through broad preventative measures and targeted interventions. Our recommendations are: 1) Improve the measures schools use to track absenteeism, 2) Identify and address broad causes of absenteeism among young students, 3) Encourage a culture of attendance starting from Pre-K to prevent absenteeism and 4) Coordinate strategies across schools and agencies to intervene with young, chronically absent students.

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Excused vs. Unexcused Absences

For a student's academic progress, it doesn't matter whether an absence is excused or unexcused. Any absence is a missed opportunity to learn. But, DC's policies differentiate between these categories.

- *Excused absences:* Absences are "excused" if a student's parent provides the school with a valid, written explanation, such as student illness.

- *Unexcused absences:* Absences are "unexcused" if a students' parent has not provided the school with a valid excuse or if there is no explanation for the absence.

Four measures of attendance

1. Average Daily Attendance (ADA): Average daily attendance is the common national standard for tracking attendance, as mandated in the No Child Left Behind Act.[i] It is the percent of enrolled students who attend school each day, on average, including excused absences. *(Total # of days present + # excused absences total) / # days enrolled.*

2. In-Seat Attendance (ISA): DCPS and charter schools have recently begun to track and report ISA as an alternative to ADA. The two are very similar, but ISA does not count excused absences as if students are present. *(Total # of days present)/ total # days enrolled.*

3. Truancy Rate: Percentage of students with more than 10 *unexcused* absences over the course of the year.

4. Chronic Absentee Rate: Percentage of children who miss more than 10% of school days *for any reason*. Research suggests this is the best measure for assessing how many students are at academic risk due to absenteeism, and targeting students for intervention, especially younger students. Using 10% as a marker is preferable to setting a certain number of days students can be absent, because a percent of days missed can be tracked from the very beginning of the year, and improved over the course of a year. *Most DC schools track chronic absenteeism internally, but only charter schools have released these data, and no attendance policies are tied to chronic absenteeism.*

Chronic Early Absenteeism Increases Achievement Gaps

Chronic absenteeism in the years from Pre-K to third grade can have a large impact on students' futures, especially for students who are already at-risk due to poverty. More than one in four DC children lives in poverty.[iv] These children are more likely to miss school because of barriers such as transportation, illness due to lack of preventative health care, parental work schedules and unstable housing. For example, of the 1,100 DCPS students who met with a student support team and had an attendance barrier noted after that meeting, student health was listed for 28% of students, academic barriers were listed for 19% of students, and transportation was listed for 17% of students.[v] Each missed day of school has a larger effect on students in poverty because their families do not have the resources to make up for lost educational opportunities outside of school. One study found that the academic consequences of chronic absenteeism in kindergarten were twice as severe for students from low-income families.[vi] In this way, chronic early absenteeism widens achievement gaps.

With each successive year of chronic absenteeism, consequences accumulate. Students who are chronically absent in kindergarten perform worse in first grade reading and math[vii] and there is a strong negative association between early chronic absenteeism and third grade reading proficiency.[viii] A Baltimore study found that 25% of students who were chronically absent in Pre-K and kindergarten were held back in third grade, compared to 9% of non-chronically absent students.[ix] In Chicago, 41% of four year old Pre-K students were chronically absent, and with each successive year of chronic absenteeism, students' academic performance in second grade decreased.[x] Even small improvements in attendance can have a large impact: A study in Georgia found that an average 3% improvement in attendance would have allowed 55,000 additional students in grades three through eight to pass their end-of-year tests in reading and math.[xi]

Achieving early proficiency in reading and math matter because scores in third grade are a strong predictor of high school graduation, and DC third grade scores are far from where they should be: In 2013 over 55% of DC third grade students were not proficient in reading and math.[xii] DC schools could substantially improve those scores by decreasing early absenteeism, which in turn would improve the high school graduation outlook for DC students.

Chronic Early Absenteeism in DC is Likely Very High – But the Actual Numbers Are Unknown

The percentage of chronically absent students in Pre-K and elementary school in DC is likely very high, but currently we cannot reliably measure

the scope of the problem across DC schools through publicly reported information. The three measures that all schools currently report are average daily attendance (ADA), in-seat attendance (ISA), and truancy. But, ISA and ADA can mask high percentages of chronic absenteeism: Research suggests that schools with less than 97% ADA may have a chronic absenteeism problem, while schools with an ADA below 93% almost certainly have high chronic absenteeism.[xiii] Additionally, truancy does not capture excused absences, which are more common among young children.

While the Public Charter School Board (PCSB) has released some data on chronic absenteeism, it is suppressed when a school has under 10 chronically absent students at a grade level, and is not comparable with DCPS. The available data suggest room for substantial improvement in attendance in both DCPS and charter schools:

DCPS[xiv]:

- 17% of Pre-K - Kindergarten students have more than 10 unexcused absences
- 7% of grades 1-5 students had more than 10 unexcused absences
- The average ISA for PK-5 schools is 95%

Charter Schools[xv]:

- 8% of Pre-K – Kindergarten students had more than 10 unexcused absences, and 31% missed more than 10% of school dates for any reason.
- 23% of grades 1-5 students had more than 10 unexcused absences.
- The average ISA for a charter school measured by the Early Childhood Performance Management Framework[i] is 90%

How can ISA mask high rates of absenteeism or truancy? In DCPS elementary schools (Pre-K to fifth grade), the ISA is 95%, but the average truancy rate is 11%. Different students miss school on different days, but it all averages out in the ISA. Imagine a kindergarten class of 20 students. In a

week, three students miss three days, and three more students miss two days. The ISA for that week is 85%, which may seem high, but the percentage of chronically absent students is 30%.

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[i]The grade arrangements of schools measured by the Early Childhood PMF varies, but generally focuses on Pre-K to third grade.

DC Needs to Identify and Address Common Causes of Early Absenteeism

Early absenteeism tends to have different causes than absenteeism during middle or high school, and as such it requires a different response strategy. Students in Pre-K and elementary school are rarely choosing to miss school, and their absences are more likely to be excused.

While we do not have good data on the causes of early absenteeism in DC schools, studies of young students in other jurisdictions can give us some insights. One Chicago study found that more than half of Pre-K absences are due to illness. Other frequent reasons include unreliable transportation and family-related problems, such as a sick family member.[xvi] The Chicago study also found that when parents were surveyed about the importance of attendance, parents' attitudes about the importance of school

correlated strongly with their children's absenteeism rates.

DC should do a similar survey of parents, so that broader preventative solutions can be proposed. Schools can intervene one-on-one with each student who is already at-risk from chronic absenteeism, but it would be much more effective for DC agencies, community organizations and schools to work together to prevent early absenteeism through health outreach campaigns, proactive parent engagement and improved transportation services.

Current Policies Leave Out Chronic Early Absenteeism

Several DC policies mandate standards and consequences for absenteeism and truancy. These policies, summarized in the box below, shape our recommendations for how policymakers should proceed. The laws and regulations currently in effect focus on truancy, and occasionally attendance rate, but the rate of chronic absenteeism has not been used for accountability or written into regulations with the recommended 10% definition. The District's compulsory attendance statute applies to children ages five to 13, but leaves out Pre-K and does not account for excused absences. Additionally, mandating accountability tied to ISA, ADA and truancy discourages schools from placing chronic absenteeism at the center of their absenteeism response strategy.

Summary of DC Absenteeism Policies

- **Current regulations from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE)**[1] explain that schools must track every absence, its reason, and the school response and referrals if required. Designated attendance monitors in each school must ensure that attendance policies are followed, and student support teams must respond to absenteeism. Aggregated absence data (ADA, unexcused absence counts and truancy) are reported to OSSE at the end of each school year.

- **Attendance Accountability Amendment Act of 2013 (Straight A Act)**[1] for parents of students 14 and older, the Act requires after the 10th unexcused absence that parents are sent the truancy resource guide created by South Capitol Street Act and a letter from D.C. Police notifying of legal consequences

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should the absences continue. After 15 unexcused absences, the Office of the Attorney General is required to send a letter stating that the matter has been referred to their office as well as court social services. Codifies CFSA referral for 5-13 year olds.

- **South Capitol Street Amendment Act of 2012**[1] Mandates that schools intervene with students ages 5 -13 with more than five unexcused absences. The act expands behavioral health services to include universal behavioral health screening for children from kindergarten to eighth grade. Students are given customized intervention plans by Student Support Teams to help reduce absences. Parents and guardians must be given resources and guidance to help resolve their student's attendance issues. Requires LEAs to submit a report on student attendance data to OSSE within 60 days of the end of the school year with which OSSE will issue an annual report. SY13-14 will be the first such report.

- **Safe Children and Safe Neighborhoods Educational Neglect Mandatory Reporting Amendment Act of 2010**[1] requires compulsory school attendance starting from age five and mandates that schools refer students under age 13 with more than ten unexcused absences to the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) for a home visit and educational neglect assessment.

Bright Spots in DC Schools

Great things are already happening to improve attendance in DC schools, in both traditional and charter schools. By highlighting two of these bright spots, Simon Elementary School and Eagle Academy Public Charter School, we hope to show that they, along with many other DC schools, already recognize the impact of absenteeism starting from Pre-K and are responding with preventative strategies beyond what is required by DC regulations. By putting attendance front-and-center both schools are seeing rapid improvements in their attendance results. As each school's array of attendance improvement tactics show, it will take citywide coordination and support to create a culture of attendance across DC.

Simon Elementary School, a DCPS school in Ward 8, which serves students from Pre-K to fifth grade, has seen impressive attendance results: In April 2014, it had an above-average ISA of 95% in 2013-14 to-date, up from 93.9% in 2012-13, while truancy rates so far are cut in half, to only 2%.[xvii] Principal Dr. Adelaide Flamer says it is difficult to credit just two or three strategies out of a long list of attendance-related

incentives and awareness strategies she and her staff use every day to cultivate a culture of attendance among students, teachers and families.

High attendance is positively rewarded at Simon: The school displays photographs of students with perfect attendance on a monthly basis and a weekly posting of attendance charts outside each classroom. Students, teachers and families are reminded of the value of attendance on a daily basis by these public postings.

Family engagement strategies at Simon include home visits and phone calls to the families of frequently absent students starting in Pre-K. In parent-teacher conferences, teachers review each students' attendance and equate absences to missed instructional time. According to Dr. Flamer, Simon's first attendance commitment is that, "every teacher takes personal and professional ownership regarding attendance of each student on his or her class roster."

Simon has also seen dramatic improvements in DC-CAS performance in third grade recently: The percentage of students scoring proficient in

third grade reading increased by 21 percentage points from 2011-12 to 2012-13, with far fewer students scoring "below basic." We cannot attribute this progress directly to the focus on attendance, but they are certainly both signs of overall school improvements.

Eagle Academy PCS, Wheeler Road Campus, is a public charter school also in Ward 8, which serves students from Pre-K to third grade, has seen their attendance improve dramatically over the past year: ISA increased from 83% in 2012-13 to 92% in 2013-14 to-date, and with a reduction in truancy as well.[xviii] Public Charter School Board leaders noted Eagle has the most attendance improvement of any charter school serving Pre-K and elementary students this year. Principal Jeffrey Cline says that he and his team have taken a much more aggressive approach to improving attendance from a positive angle, centered on family engagement and family education. The school's expectation is that students be "at school, every day, on time for the full time."

Eagle overhauled the structure of parent/teacher conferences, introducing evening-long "parent academies" where parents can learn about a variety of topics, including the importance of attendance. For example, parents are taught when an illness might warrant an absence, and when it is better to bring their child to school, reducing the number of excused absences due to illness. An attendance officer and a parent liaison contact families of absent students through multiple channels: phone, mail, email and text, and conduct attendance conferences with parents and teachers to get to the root causes of any recurring attendance problems. With students coming to Eagle from every Ward, transportation is the most frequent barrier for Eagle families. Attendance conferences are held down to the Pre-K level, although DC policies don't require it, because according to Cline, "Age three and four is the foundation for the rest of your education." In part, they are encouraging the best behavior patterns early for students and families. Cline gets

creative: He and his staff have bought alarm clocks, set phone alarms and made daily wake-up calls to a few families with frequent absences or lateness.

As with Simon ES, families and students interact with attendance data daily: they see an attendance leader board when they drop off their children, and soon they will see attendance data posted outside every classroom. Grades, classrooms and individual students are recognized and rewarded for excellent attendance.

Eagle Academy, which only had a third grade class for the first time in 2012, saw the percentage of students scoring proficient in third grade reading increase by 15 percentage points from 2011-12 to 2012-13, and the percentage of students scoring "below basic" cut in half. But, Principal Cline is quick to point out that the full effects of these recent attendance initiatives will be felt most in several years, and that the most important aspects of his students' success are high-quality teachers in high-quality classrooms.

Promising Programs in Other Jurisdictions

Some cities, states and school districts have initiated comprehensive programs that target chronic early absenteeism. DC's long-term plan to improve chronic early absenteeism should be informed by lessons learned among those states and school districts that are further along in the process.

Many States including Connecticut, Indiana, Iowa, and New Jersey have increased transparency of chronic absenteeism data in every grade, and included chronic absenteeism as a metric in academic achievement improvement plans for schools and districts.[xix] **Impact: Schools have an incentive to take chronic early absenteeism seriously for all students from a preventative perspective, and accountability measures around attendance use the highest-quality metrics.**

Los Angeles, CA Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) incorporated chronic absenteeism into their Performance Meter Accountability System, started an attendance awareness campaign that focused on incentives for absenteeism prevention and implemented an Attendance Improvement Program (AIP) that placed extra child welfare and attendance-focused professionals in targeted schools. AIP schools also received a toolkit for comprehensively addressing chronic absenteeism with detailed, month-by-month intervention plans.[xx] **Impact: Kindergarten chronic absenteeism in AIP schools decreased by half, and the school system met its 2011-12 attendance goal of ensuring two-thirds of students missed fewer than seven days of school.**[xxi]

Tulsa, OK Community Action Project found that 64% of their 2,000 Head Start and early learning program students were chronically absent from school. In response, they began a broad outreach effort to educate parents on the importance of attendance, and asked all parents to make sure students attended at least 85%of school days. The students with the most severe rates of absenteeism received personalized response plans and extra attention, and each school posted their rates of absenteeism publicly to keep parents engaged. **Impact: 25% fewer Head Start and early learning students were chronically absent.**[xxii]

Recommendations

Curbing chronic early absenteeism has the potential to reduce the achievement gap, increase high school completion rates and improve lifetime prospects for all DC students.[xxiii] DC education leaders and policymakers can take several steps to ensure schools are monitoring chronic absenteeism, and implementing successful absenteeism prevention and intervention strategies for young students:

- **Redefine chronic absenteeism to align with national standards**

The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) currently defines chronic absenteeism as 10 or more school days absent in a year for any reason.[xxiv] OSSE should change this definition to 10% of school days absent throughout the school year, to align with nationally understood definitions and enable ongoing responses to chronic absenteeism, not just end-of-year data collection.

- **Increase transparency of chronic absenteeism through inclusion in the equity reports and school performance plans.**

Chronic absenteeism data should be transparent and actionable. None of DC's attendance accountability measures track chronic absenteeism, and schools are not required to report on these data, but many schools already know that chronic absenteeism is an especially useful measure for identifying and intervening early with Pre-K and elementary school-aged students. Truancy rates, ISA and chronic absenteeism rates are all useful metrics that help identify attendance problems and trends in different populations of students. Thus, in addition to publicly reporting metrics around ISA, truancy, and school discipline, the equity reports published by OSSE, DCPS, and PCSB should include a metric for chronic absenteeism in future years. Additionally, school districts, including DCPS and charter school districts, should strongly consider incorporating chronic absenteeism as a piece of their school performance plans for improving academic performance in schools serving Pre-K to third grade students.

- **Launch a Pre-K Attendance Family Engagement Campaign**

Access to Pre-K for three and four year olds is a relatively new development in DC, and many parents may not understand the value of attending school every day at this young age. Truancy rates in DC are actually higher in Pre-K than in middle school. To get parents and children off to the right start with attendance, and make sure children get the full benefits of Pre-K, DC school districts (DCPS and charter) should

start proactive family engagement around Pre-K attendance as soon as families enroll. Schools should create a welcoming environment for families and show them that Pre-K benefits their children every day. As soon as a pattern of absenteeism emerges, schools should reach out to families to work through any barriers that may be keeping their children from school. Similar parent outreach is mandated starting with five unexcused absences in kindergarten, but not Pre-K. Because it is not mandated, schools have the flexibility to choose an engagement campaign strategy that works for their populations. These campaigns could be part of school

districts' plans to close achievement gaps and better serve children from low income families, who benefit the most from Pre-K attendance.

- DC Leaders Should Help Build Capacity in Schools to Create a Culture of Early Attendance

Schools should not be alone in their efforts to improve chronic early absenteeism and create a culture of attendance. With several new recent accountability measures around truancy, schools have been focused on policy compliance instead of continuous improvement. The DC

Council should encourage proactive, preventative chronic early absenteeism measures during the oversight and the budget process, and by refining current compliance policies. There is little evidence that recently proposed ideas such as lowering the compulsory schooling age or enacting punitive measures against parents will reduce early absenteeism. OSSE should help build capacity for schools to reduce chronic early absenteeism through targeted planning grants or professional development for teachers and school leaders.

[i]Equity Report 2013, students >10 unex. Absences, Attendance Works

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[iv]DC KIDS COUNT, ACS 2012

[v]DCPS (2014). Performance Oversight Responses 2012-13. DC Council Budget Office. http://dccouncil.us/files/performance_oversight/DCPS_2013_Performance_Oversight_Responses_020714_FINAL.pdf

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[xi]Balfanz (2012)

[xii]DC Action for Children (2013). Test Score Progress In Third Grade Disappoints. http://www.dcactionforchildren.org/blog/test-score-progress-third-grade-disappoints

[xiii]Bruner, C., Discher, A., and Change, H. (2011). Chronic Early Absenteeism: A Problem Hidden in Plain Sight. Attendance Works. http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/ChronicAbsence.pdf

[xiv]DCPS Attendance Data for School Year 2012-13 obtained via DC Council Committee on Education

[xv]DC Public Charter School Attendance Data for School Year 2012-13 compiled by DC Public Charter School Board and obtained via DC Council Committee on Education

[xvi]Ehrlich (2013).

[xvii]DCPS Attendance Data April 2013 and April 2014 provided by DCPS Office of School Attendance.

[xviii]Eagle Academy Attendance Data provided by DC Public Charter School Board

[xix]Attendance Works. (2013). The Attendance Imperative: How States Can Advance Achievement by Reducing Chronic Absenteeism. http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/AAM-Policy-Brief-Final-9.18.pdf

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[xxi]http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/los-angeles-systemic-approach/

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