

Chronic absenteeism and the importance of relationships: Shifting school culture to remedy the problem

A new principal had taken over the reins at Waterboro Elementary School in Maine back in 2014, and Angela Madigan was among the teachers who wondered about all the changes. There she was, sitting through a presentation from administrators about another new initiative.

“Oh gosh, now I have to do another thing,” Madigan said, recalling the reaction she and other teachers had. “This isn’t my job.”

The initiative was ostensibly to call parents more often, especially parents of students who were missing school on a regular basis. To Madigan and other teachers, it sounded like a series of unpleasant confrontations. “They didn’t want to have that kind of relationship with a family,” she said.

“As it turns out, relationships are key when it comes to getting students to school each day.”

It took a second staff meeting to clear things up: administrators didn’t want teachers to go after parents about their children’s attendance, but almost the *opposite*. They wanted teachers simply to call families on a regular basis, just to see how they were doing, for the sake of building those relationships and making stronger connections.

“When [teachers heard], ‘We don’t want you to ask about attendance, we don’t want you to ask why the child wasn’t here,’ you could just see the tension kind of relax and their shoulders go down,” Madigan said.

In the ensuing three years, attendance figures markedly improved. The school’s chronic absence rate (the number

GETTING STUDENTS TO SCHOOL: WHAT TEACHERS & ADMINISTRATORS CAN DO

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Experts recommend a school-wide approach to increasing attendance, but many actions can be taken by teachers individually.

For a checklist of recommendations for family and student engagement, including community supports for implementation, turn to page 7.

of students missing 10 percent or more of the school year) dropped from 8.9 percent of students in the 2015-16 school year, to 3.1 percent in 2018-19.

On the national level, researchers and policymakers developed the term “chronic absenteeism” to show how many kids were missing at least 10 percent of days in a school year for any reason. Before the change, many administrators relied on daily attendance figures to track how many students were showing up to school every day. Often, states use daily attendance to calculate aid for schools.

But researchers found that daily attendance could be a misleading number. Most schools report better than a 90



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percent attendance rate nearly every day. Underneath that statistic, however, about eight million students miss nearly a month of school each year. That reality wouldn’t show up in daily attendance figures because chronically absent students were not all going to miss the same days.

The metric has become part of an important and growing policy shift in American schools to ensure greater equity in student outcomes.

As it turns out, relationships are key when it comes to getting students to school each day. A seminal 2007 study from the University of Chicago that investigated factors leading to high dropout rates in Chicago Public Schools made two important conclusions. First, students who graduated had high attendance. Second, students who didn’t miss school had teachers who enjoyed good relationships with them and their parents.

Since then, many studies have focused on the link between teachers’ relationships with families and improved student attendance and outcomes.

“We know that when kids show up to school, it’s because they feel physically and emotionally healthy and safe,” said Hedy Chang, executive director and president of Attendance Works, a nonprofit that has been a leading advocate in promoting policies that reduce chronic absenteeism in schools. Students with good attendance feel a sense of belonging, challenged academically, engaged in what they are doing, and supported by adults and other students, she said.

ABSENCE AS AN INDICATOR

By contrast, when students don’t show up to school, failing to graduate is one end of a continuum of negative outcomes. In 2014, Attendance Works analyzed data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress of all 50 states and 21 large cities, which included reading assessment scores and answers to a survey question that asked how many school days students had missed in the month before the test. The analysis found that the average fourth grader who missed three or more days of school in that month scored 12 points lower on reading assessments than their counterpart with no absences. Other studies have shown that chronically absent 6th graders are more likely to fail classes, which in turn affects their likelihood of taking and passing rigorous classes in high school.

For the Pittsburgh Public Schools, chronic absenteeism is a serious problem, especially in the district’s high schools. In the 2018-19 school year, 21 percent of K-5 and 6-8 students, 25 percent of K-8 students, 29 percent of 6-12 students, and a whopping 42 percent of 9-12 students missed at least 10 percent of the school year.

Traditionally, unexcused absence from school, or truancy, has been treated as an enforcement issue that carried the penalty of punishment, even by a court judge. Students could get in trouble, and of course parents can still face legal consequences if their child regularly fails to show up to school. But researchers now view chronic absenteeism as part of the wider, ongoing issue of relations

between schools and parents, a systemic problem that disproportionately affects families with low incomes and families of color.

Tammy Thompson works with many Pittsburgh families experiencing poverty, as the executive director of the nonprofit Circles of Greater Pittsburgh. Years before she was a leader in Pittsburgh’s nonprofit and business worlds, she was working two jobs while parenting five young kids. Looking back on those days, Thompson still remembers the guilt she felt when she was too exhausted to help all her children with their homework, too overwhelmed to keep up with their experiences at school.

engagement and trust can be particularly detrimental to students of color.

A 2016 study analyzed survey data of 10,000 high school sophomores, their parents and teachers, collected by the U.S. Department of Education. It found that teachers were more likely to call home regarding disruptive behavior of a Black or Latinx student than a white student’s disruptive behavior.

The same study found teachers were less likely to call the parents of Asian immigrant students if they were struggling in school, and less likely overall to call home about the accomplishments of minority students.

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Her kids’ teachers and school administrators didn’t really make her feel any better. In fact, they often made her feel worse, she said.

“I remember what the teachers made me feel like,” said Thompson. “They made me feel inadequate.” She dreaded getting a call from a staff person at school or the prospect of trying to attend five teacher conferences. “They made me feel like a terrible parent, even though I was doing my best.”

Today, Thompson said she hears similar fears and frustrations from young mothers. “It has a severe impact on people,” she said. “I love educators, but I do believe there’s a disconnect between a lot of educators and what is happening in people’s lives.” Teachers should remember that “these children and these parents have lives once they leave school—that there are other things they have to deal with every single day.”

Research on the national level has shown a lack of

METHODS THAT WORK

Efforts to improve student outcomes by boosting attendance and engaging families in more trusting, communicative relationships have grown in recent years, including in Pittsburgh.

Last year, two public schools in Pittsburgh stuck out when it came to attendance figures. At Pittsburgh Schiller 6-8 and Manchester Academic Charter School (MACS) less than one percent of students were chronically absent. Both Schiller and MACS also had high rates of economically disadvantaged students, 75 percent and 80 percent respectively. Both schools have taken relationships with parents seriously. School staff reinforce the importance of kids getting to school before resorting to threats of suspension or lawsuits.

Schiller, located on the North Side, participates in an initiative of the United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania

called “Be There.” Each student with problem attendance is assigned to a school staff member, called a “Be There Buddy,” who keeps tabs on them and reaches out to parents if they aren’t at school. The buddies also pay special attention to their assigned students, reinforcing that their presence is important and they’re missed when they’re not at school.

“Data screams volumes on how a program like that works, and our teachers love data,” said Paula Heinzman, Schiller’s principal. So when Heinzman showed teachers how much impact a Be There Buddy program could have, “they bought into it,” she said.

Schiller is a partial magnet program. Shaftic estimated about 70 percent of students are enrolled through the magnet program, and the remaining students came from the school’s neighborhood boundaries. It’s unclear if Schiller’s status as a partial magnet school makes the school’s attendance strategy any easier or harder. Teachers don’t receive information on which student came from which program, Shaftic said. In the past, students from the magnet program have at times posed a greater challenge to get to school every day because they rely so much on bus transportation.

“Magnet kids, if they miss the bus, how are they getting to school?” Shaftic said. They live further away.

MACS, also on Pittsburgh’s North Side, doesn’t have an initiative to address chronic absenteeism, but it apparently doesn’t need one. Engaging parents and gaining their trust has been baked into the school’s culture for years, according to MACS CEO Vas Scoumis.

“Clearly, nobody wakes up and says, ‘I don’t want my kid to go to school,’” Scoumis said. “Instead of kind of trying to pound this nail in, saying ‘Get your kid to school,’ ‘We’re suing you’—you have to work with parents [and ask], ‘How can we help you?’”

Scoumis said it was simply a continuation of the school’s culture to create a welcoming environment for parents and deploy staff social workers and counselors to work through families’ issues as much as possible.

When restrictions on social gatherings aren’t in place, MACS uses a monthly Family Night, when teachers

and staff engage families in activities in a carnival-type atmosphere. Part of Family Night, Scoumis said, is about “making sure parents and teachers are meeting in a way that is not combative in any way. You’re not talking about behavior, you’re not talking about grades, you’re just talking and smiling and having fun.”

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Family Nights are on hold at MACS, but school leaders have kept up frequent contact with parents virtually. Administrators have offered gift cards and other incentives to attend monthly virtual parent-teacher organization meetings, and used the phone app ClassDojo to send bulletins to all parents about panels on educating at home, clothes drives, and home workout videos, to name a few.

METHODS THAT WORK: UNITED WAY’S “BE THERE” & ATTENDANCE WORKS TOOLKITS

United Way “Be There Buddy” Project Toolkit
uwsdpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Be-There-Buddy-Project-Toolkit.pdf

**Attendance Works Strategies to help educators
infuse attendance into everyday activities**
attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Teaching-Attendance2.0-Summary_final.pdf

When engaging families in positive ways has not been part of a school’s culture, calling parents may sound like a simple first step. But teachers may hang back, feeling unsure about how parents will react.

At Waterboro Elementary in Maine, to help teachers feel comfortable starting a conversation, administrators and staff developed a protocol for them to use during phone calls, one that’s now available at Attendance Works’ website.

For example, they could say, “We missed your child here at school,” and “I am calling to just say we missed him/her and hope to see him/her tomorrow.” If they were afraid that it might not go well, teachers could request that a school counselor join them on the call.

“Experts say that a school-wide approach, when teachers, staff, and administrators all collaborate and fill in cracks together, is the best strategy.”



Administrators listened to teachers about what they would need in order to get the calls done, such as allocating time. “Rather than the administration trying to fix everything, it was, ‘Let’s all problem-solve on how we can find time to do this,’” Madigan said.

Teachers are crucial to a strong system regarding attendance, but they don’t have to be the ones making calls and talking directly to families. At Beechwood PreK-5 in Pittsburgh, School Counselor Rebecca Konarski receives attendance information from teachers and then calls the homes of any absent students that day.

“Even now in this virtual setting, teachers text me, email me, send me a message on ClassDojo, saying who in the morning was missing,” Konarski said. Then, she calls the home of each absent student, and if she doesn’t get an answer, she visits their home.

Attendance Works has developed a toolkit for teachers that breaks down how to improve attendance in three steps, each with a set of different strategy options.

For instance, to build positive relationships around attendance, teachers can welcome each child by name when they take the roll and welcome back students returning from an absence. At the beginning of the year, they can invite parents to visit the classroom. With social gathering restrictions in place, school leaders have used messaging apps like ClassDojo to get the word out on virtual gatherings and information to keep parents informed and engaged. They can use various opportunities to be clear about how important attendance is to both students and families, and how even a few days missed here and there add up quickly.

Teachers and administrators can also use their own attendance data to be strategic about how they lay out lesson plans and schedule classroom time. For instance, if many students miss the day after Halloween, they can plan accordingly.

A school-wide approach, when teachers, staff, and administrators all collaborate and fill in cracks together, is the best strategy, according to Attendance Works. Waterboro set up an attendance committee that includes members of staff, faculty, and administration who meet regularly. Along with providing a way to handle any issues that arise, the body serves as a source of accountability.

Konarski said she first focused all her efforts on the families of students who missed the most school. She offered them gift cards and special rewards if their attendance improved. But it didn’t work, she said, until she expanded the rewards and sense of competition to the entire school.

“What really worked was kind of normalizing it across the whole school,” Konarski said. In three years, Beechwood’s chronic absenteeism rate fell from 21 percent to 13.8 percent, according to Konarski.

Attendance Works encourages schools to monitor attendance closely, and celebrate the wins. The organization recommends a set of incentives and positive reinforcement when students show up to class. The United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania’s Be There initiative has a digital toolkit that 40 schools in the area are already using that includes different materials and prizes for students showing good attendance.

Any plan to shift a school's culture can be daunting and include growing pains. But at Waterboro, teachers saw their own attitudes change about reaching out to families as they gained experience in it. Eventually, teachers found themselves sharing with each other the good conversations they were having with parents and some of the positive outcomes they were seeing in class, Madigan said.

"We get feedback all the time from teachers who just [made a call] by themselves for the first time, or just reached out to a family they were really hesitant to reach out to," she said. "They would say, 'You wouldn't believe I had the most amazing conversation with this family.'" It might have included helpful information about an incident at home, or the discovery that the teacher and the parent had something in common.

The home-call strategy also encouraged teachers to assume parents really did want to know more about their child's life in school.

It's a practice that could help break down teachers' potentially biased behavior, according to Diana Suarez, managing director of national partnerships at the Flamboyant Foundation, a nonprofit organization that supports programming to improve parent-teacher relationships in school communities.

The assumptions a teacher might make about a family can vary, Suarez said, from "Oh, they're just too stressed for me to be pushing information on them," to the other extreme of, "These families just don't care."

"If you have sat down with someone and just had a real conversation where you've been vulnerable and they've been vulnerable, later on when you need to have a talk about [high expectations], or how you could help them monitor their child's performance—any of those things—it's just so much easier," Suarez said. "It makes it so the person can really trust your intention."

PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Now schools like Schiller and Waterboro can't imagine how they would have managed in 2020 without a strong line of communication with parents.

At Schiller, School Counselor Lana Shaftic and other staff used the phone numbers and relationships with parents on a daily basis to keep classwork going.

With the practice already in place before the pandemic, "A lot of our teachers were already in contact with families," Shaftic said. "So I feel like with the culture that we have at Schiller, we were able to move from brick-and-mortar to remote learning as smoothly as we possibly could."

The established lines of communications between staff and parents has even allowed for a sense of mutual support during the pandemic, Shaftic said. "I feel like also sharing with parents my struggle, like 'what I'm struggling with, you're struggling [with], let's work together.'"

In Pittsburgh, Arsenal Middle School is in the beginning stages of a new effort to combat chronic absenteeism, and virtual learning has only added challenges.

Arsenal Principal Patti Camper said her school is reinforcing its own Be There Buddy program with more formal protocols. Prior to the 2020-2021 school year, Be There buddies had no formal protocols about when and why to call parents and students at home. Now, for instance, buddies are trained to call each time their student doesn't log in or show up for school.

Five years after Madigan's initial doubts over the call-home initiative, she's now the same school's principal with the ultimate responsibility for the culture of her school.

"Families are reaching out to us," she said. "And especially the ones that have difficulty. They've heard that we will help them, and we will get them what they need."

The reputation of Waterboro Elementary has also changed in the community. In turn, parents are "spreading the news that we're responsive and we're a great school."

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Start with some questions

The thought of tackling a school-wide reduction of chronically absent students can be very daunting. Rather than focusing on the whole big picture, we encourage you to pause and ask yourself these few questions first:

1. What are the chronic absenteeism numbers at my school? Which grade levels are affected the most?

2. How many of my students are chronically absent?

3. What are the reasons or barriers behind why my students are missing school?

4. What is our administrative policy or game plan for reaching out to a family when their child misses school?

5. What is working? What isn't working? Why?



Reflection and Action

As you reflect on your school's data and on each of the students you know who are chronically absent, a good next step is to review this list of recommendations from schools where staff have had success in reducing their absenteeism numbers.

COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS

- **Welcome families to your classroom at the beginning of the school year, and make positive phone calls.** A positive, welcoming call can go a long way with parents, especially those who have only heard from teachers when there's a problem.
- **Call the parent of a child who has been absent before it becomes a serious issue.** Using a friendly tone, say that you care about the child's well-being and miss the child when he/she isn't at school. Ask for the parent's preferred way to keep in touch. If you're nervous about a particular call, ask a colleague to join you. At Waterboro Elementary School in Maine, some teachers felt more comfortable when they used a protocol. If a student's absences increase, ask, "What can we do to make it better?" If you can, link parents with resources.
- **Keep in mind that you don't know what parents are facing in their daily lives, or what negative experiences they may have already had with schools.** Be persistent with messages of support and care. At Pittsburgh Schiller 6-8, Principal Paula Heinzman saw parents' attitudes turn around when they realized school staff truly wanted to see their children every day.
- **Use any opportunity to stress the importance of attendance—parent conferences, kindergarten registration, open house.** Parents may not realize that missing as few as two days a month can negatively affect their children.
- **Schools can bring parents and teachers together for positive, non-confrontational events.** A great example are the "family nights" held at Manchester Academic Charter School.



Reflection and Action, continued

WELCOMING STUDENTS

1. Welcome students by name when you take roll, and acknowledge students returning from an absence: "We're glad to see you back!"
2. Participate in the "Be There Buddy Project" of the United Way of Southwestern PA. School staff become buddies for each student with problem attendance, greeting them each day, tracking their attendance, and calling home when they're not at school.
3. Celebrate wins and provide incentives to "be there." Heinzman said that for some students, it might be an extra recess period or a snack. Others "just need that greeting in the morning, and when they leave, a little reminder" that their presence will be valued the next day.
4. Show students their attendance data and discuss possible solutions. "Did you know that you've already missed five days this year? What can we do about that?"
5. Administrators can enlist support staff, such as bus drivers, custodians, secretaries, and security guards, to reinforce positive messages about attendance and show students that everyone wants them to come to school.

**These recommendations are based on information from the United Way of Southwestern PA, Attendance Works, and Pittsburgh Schiller 6-8, Manchester Academic Charter School, and Waterboro Elementary School.*



Developing a game plan

As you think through what an appropriate plan of action will be for your classroom or your school, there is good news - you do not need to reinvent the wheel! In addition to the United Way's Be There program and Attendance Works, there are school leaders and regional organizations who are ready and willing to share best practices.

Let's get started!

- Contact A+ Schools to schedule a free workshop centered on helping identify steps to take and partners who can help along the way.

Email info@aplusschools.org, or call (412) 697-1298 to get started.

- Download a copy of the United Way "Be There Buddy" Project Toolkit, and reach out to United Way representatives to learn more about implementing their program at your school.

Head to uwsdpa.org/be-there/ to get started.

- Review the Attendance Works Strategies, designed to help educators infuse the importance of attendance into everyday activities.

Read the full report here: attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Teaching-Attendance2.0-Summary_final.pdf

Head to attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/the-problem/ to learn more!

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