Attendance Practices That Work: What Research Says, What Practitioners Say
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Since the beginning of compulsory education in this country, absenteeism has been an issue, one that many educators identify as the most persistent problem schools face (Dougherty, 1999). Yet, it wasn't until this year that the U.S. Department of Education (2016) released "Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools: An Unprecedented Look at a Hidden Educational Crisis," signifying a shift in awareness of chronic absenteeism as a serious problem. According to the report based on the 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection survey of 95,000 schools across the nation, more than 6 million students are missing 15 days or more of school a year, the defining criterion of *chronic absenteeism*. These 15 days are the equivalent of missing three weeks of school; the 6 million students equate to 14 percent of the U.S. student population, approximately one out of every seven students. Chronic absenteeism is different from *truancy* or *daily average attendance* – the more common measures in our nation's schools (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2016). Unlike daily average attendance, which measures how many students show up on a specific day, or truancy, which is a measure of unexcused absences, chronic absenteeism identifies individual students who are regularly missing significant numbers of school days. With the signing of President Obama's 2015 *Every Student Succeeds Act*, schools now need to shift to a measure of chronic absenteeism in order to be in compliance. Many believe this is a good thing, as following absenteeism by student is a more specific and useful data point to properly address school attendance and the myriad risk factors tied to absenteeism.

Who Is Absent Most?
Both race and poverty are predictors of absenteeism; Pacific Islander and American Indian, Black, and Latina/o students have the highest rates of absenteeism. English Language Learners (ELL) and children with disabilities are also more likely than their peers to be chronically absent. Poverty, often tied to minority status, is also indicative of greater risk of missing school in significant percentages (Wood, 2007). And since urban schools comprise more minority and low-income students of color, we know that absenteeism is a pressing issue in urban schools and more severe in larger schools than smaller ones (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

Why Kids Are Missing School
Students miss school for various reasons, and for students who are members of racial and ethnic minorities, ELL, students with disabilities, and students who live in poverty, those reasons multiply (Ready, 2010). One of the primary deterrents to attendance is an inhospitable school culture. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) report that students often refuse to attend school "to avoid

bullying, unsafe conditions, harassment and embarrassment" (p. 4). Such reasons correspond to a chaotic school atmosphere (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002) and a dilapidated school facility (Durán-Narucki, 2008) that discourage attendance.

In the Campaign for Fiscal Equity's 1993 case against New York State, the state's Supreme Court identified the connection between the condition of New York City's school facilities and low academic performance of students. In this relationship between school facilities and achievement, Durán-Narucki (2008) found attendance to be a full mediator. Illustrating how run-down schools affect students who attend them, they explain, "A broken toilet that is not fixed speaks of the level of concern and care of those responsible for the school facilities" (p. 284). Thus, signs of building neglect can send messages that discourage a feeling of being cared for, affecting students' feelings of belonging and their desire to spend time in such a place.

Student mobility (families moving out of or into school districts) also lowers attendance. Incidents of student mobility are more common in low-income areas, where low wage earners tend to move more often for work or for different neighborhoods (Parke & Kanyongo, 2012). Other challenges families (especially disadvantaged families) are confronting that contribute to chronic absenteeism include illness, family responsibilities, limited transportation, and a perception of school as unnecessary or invaluable (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; DOE 2016).

How Absenteeism Relates to Other Negative Student Outcomes

Research has documented a link between absenteeism and **low achievement** in urban districts (Durán-Narucki, 2008; Parke & Kanyongo, 2012; Roby, 2004; Steward, Steward, Blair, Jo, & Hill, 2008). This trend begins in the early grades when students who are chronically absent are much less likely to read at grade level by third grade (DOE, 2016), making them four times more likely to **drop out** of high school compared to their peers who were reading on grade level in third grade – another negative outcome of absenteeism (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). When students lose instructional time, they fare poorly academically, usually documented by their performance on state assessments, a common measure of academic achievement (Roby, 2004).

Much like declining achievement, a pattern of absenteeism can be traced back to students' early days of schooling. Students are more likely to be absent in secondary school if they were absent chronically in elementary school (Wood, 2007). This trend culminates during the high school years when nearly 20% of students are chronically absent compared to 12% in middle school and 11% in elementary school (DOE, 2016). Ninth grade is a particularly vulnerable year for low attendance, and it correlates strongly with achievement for students at urban schools (Roby, 2004). Steward and colleagues (2008) found that African American ninth grade students at urban high schools who attended school more regularly did better academically than their absent counterparts, but they also used mechanisms such as caffeine, alcohol, smoking, and food to cope with being in school more regularly, a finding that suggests the myriad challenges and pressures ninth graders in urban schools face.

While the connections between low-attendance and low achievement and dropping out are well-supported in research literature, such outcomes are indicative of other factors that relate to a child's well-being and belong at the top of our priority list as educators. Therefore, when schools and districts look to increase attendance, they expect that achievement will improve, but more importantly, an effort to systematically improve attendance can influence positive changes in school culture and student well-being.

On-the-Ground: Approaches that Work
Based on research of the problem, several strategies and philosophies have been developed and suggested as effective practices to address chronic absenteeism, increase attendance, and thus contribute to the healthy school experiences of children and youth. As important, and perhaps even more intriguing, are the effective practices that school administrators describe in their on-the-ground experiences of working to improve attendance. The Center for Urban Education Success (urcues.org) – borne out of the University of Rochester's initiative to turn around East Upper and Lower Schools (UR-East EPO) – has been having conversations with several secondary schools in New York State that are notable for their high percentage of minority students (at least 85%), high percentage of economically disadvantaged students (at least 80%), and high attendance figures (90% or higher). It is their attendance figures that make these schools unique. Our conversations with these exemplar schools were spurred by a desire to contribute to the field but also to improve attendance at East. These schools are all located in and

around the urban centers of Rochester, Poughkeepsie, and New York City. The following table shows specific information about each school, according to the New York State Education Department (2014-15). During the 2014-15 academic year, Integrated Arts & Technology was still a start up high school, without a 12th grade; hence, they were unable to report a graduation rate. Also, Poughkeepsie High School's graduation rate, while lower than comparison schools, has projected higher rates and, in fact, their graduation rate rose to 63% last year.

Table 1
Exemplar Schools for Attendance

School	City	Enrollment	Grades	Economically Disadvantaged	Minority	Graduation	Attendance
Bronx Latin	Bronx	549	6-12	94%	99%	89%	91%
Integrated Arts & Technology	Rochester	513	7-11	91%	85%	N/A	90%
Mott Hall V	Bronx	662	6-12	88%	99%	80%	91%
Poughkeepsie HS	Poughkeepsie	1137	9-12	84%	89%	58%	93%
Roosevelt Early College Studies	Yonkers	831	9-12	86%	89%	71%	91%

We've spoken to administrators at these exemplars – mostly principals – whose stories reveal an insider's perspective on what works and how to make schools places where students show up and learn. Characterized by broad themes, these schools provide students:

- An engaging school environment
- A commitment to attendance that involves frequent, regular, personal contact with parents and families
- Programs to address and improve attendance
- Systems and practices that measure and improve record-keeping and logistics

These characteristics are not only supported by research, which will be cited in the following sections, but also by the practical experiences of people who are in the business of running schools that are committed to their students.

Engaging school environment
The majority of our exemplar schools' administrators credit a welcoming school culture as the biggest factor in their success with attendance. More specifically, they describe an environment where curricula and activities are engaging, a building that feels safe, and students who have ample opportunities to build relationships with staff, teachers, and peers. This approach to school

culture is supported by research that suggests that a combination of "high quality teaching, positive student-teacher relationships, and a safe and engaging school climate" (Sheldon, 2007, p. 274) offers schools a solid path to improving and maintaining good attendance. Schools looking to improve their attendance must communicate not only to students, but to staff, that every day, "something important happens" at their school (Dougherty, 1999).

With regard to **engaging curricula**, Principal Kevin Klein of Integrated Arts High School in Rochester describes a shift he and his staff have made around his school's teaching and learning: "We've tried to increase our engagement in instruction and make things interesting for the kids to be here. You know if we create an engaging environment and also a friendly environment and a supportive environment, they want to be here and they feel more comfortable being here than any place else." One way Integrated Arts has improved student engagement is by revamping their CREW period, which is like an advisory period, where students and teachers meet daily in classrooms to receive support on such topics as college and career readiness. But this year, two days a week, CREW is dedicated to student interests or hobbies (like arts & crafts or fantasy sports), led by teachers who volunteer to lead groups based upon their own interest in a given hobby. CREW meets before first period, so it is also a good time for what Klein calls 'community meetings' (assemblies), which he explains have shifted from being adult run to student run.

Another way to build an engaging school environment is to **instill in students a sense of identity with and pride in their school**. Peter Oroszlany, principal of Mott Hall V in the Bronx, has found that by focusing on their youngest sixth grade students, they have found a way to foster a sense of connection to the school culture, and he credits his high attendance numbers to this effort. "We really do a lot of work with the kids in sixth grade with what it means to be a Mott Hall V student. We're creating a community… Then a lot of them stay with us in high school. We don't have to do a lot of the work once they get to high school and they want to be here." In fostering a sense of connection to the school community, Mott Hall V has created incentive programs and team building activities that reward students with "Mott Dollars" when they exhibit aspects of the school's mission statement (i.e. being focused, being accountable). Students can then use these dollars to buy items from the school store, or in the higher grades, to enter into raffles to win gift cards to Dunkin Donuts, for example, or to contribute, thus alleviate, part of the cost of a class trip. "We just do corny little things with the kids to make them feel a part of the school," says Oroszlany.

Ed DeChent, Principal of Roosevelt High School Early College in Yonkers, believes that relationships are the "biggest component" of his attendance philosophy, explaining that the teachers and assistant principals in his school understand that "if the kids don't like you they don't want to learn from you, so you'll see our teachers have great rapport with kids, and even

the ones who traditionally, you know the old-timers, the lecturers, they've adjusted their practices to meet the expectations of the administration." In this comment, DeChent indicates the overlap between an engaging school environment and **relationship-building with students**. The CREW periods described previously by Principal Klein are another example of how to provide opportunities for students to connect more informally with the adults in the building and with each other, while still in a learning environment.

While Poughkeepsie High School does not include an advisory period, Principal Simpson describes a mentoring program, Adopt-A-Senior, focused on those students who are behind but not necessarily those who are unlikely to recover enough credits to advance. She explains the strategy: "A lot of times what I've found that working in high poverty areas is that we spend a lot of time on the red [failing] students and we neglect those middle students where we could really make a difference. So my goal was to switch the thinking and to put more time in on those middle students where we can have the bigger effect and hope that some of the [failing] ones come along, which has been happening." In the Adopt-A-Senior program, teachers will mentor a senior who is at risk for not graduating, and work with them to support their success. Encouraging attendance in a close, one-on-one relationship is a crucial part of the program, one that Principal Simpson attributes to Poughkeepsie's improved attendance.

The next component to a welcoming school culture involves cultivating an environment that **feels safe**. As Principal DeChent says, "the biggest thing I've found is you make the school safe the kids show up." Safety is fostered not only through maintaining the physical condition of the school building and facilities (Durán-Narucki, 2008), but as exemplar schools describe, relationships. Several principals, including Simpson, DeChent, and Oroszlany greet students at the front of the school every morning, believing this gesture sends an important message – that their students are welcome and that the school is safe. "They're my children," declares Oroszlany, who will also flag down the ice cream truck for a group of kids after school and orders pizzas every Thursday evening for older students who attend open library nights to study. DeChent credits his morning greeting practice as one that has discouraged gang activity at his school "We don't have too much [gang activity] anymore because the kids that come here to

cause disruptions know that I stand at the front door every day, and I don't allow them in unless they have a parent or unless they signed a contract…So we have some [gang members] in here, definitely, but when they come in the building they respect it." These examples of a passionate, high visibility, intensely involved principal are also characteristic of several of our exemplar schools that all have principals who have made attendance a top priority. The next section details the ways in which principals and staff prioritize attendance at their schools.

A Commitment to Attendance
The vital **role of a principal in setting the tone and vision** for a school to increase attendance is not only supported in research (Dougherty, 1999), but also in the stories our exemplar schools tell about their attendance philosophies. According to Anna Nelson, Assistant Principal at Bronx Latin,

> Attendance is a struggle but I feel like our principal makes it a big priority to make sure that she gets all the kids in the building. When a kid has been absent my principal thinks that it's really important that their absence is addressed. So they can't just be absent for like three days and then come back like nothing happened. She wants teachers to make sure that they've addressed the attendance.

Time and again, our exemplar schools describe a principal who has communicated clearly to her/his staff the importance of attendance (as Assistant Principal Nelson described above) and who **understands and leverages relationships with families**.

Most of the schools we spoke with describe a team, or sometimes one extremely dedicated person, whose job it is to work with chronically absent students' families. These schools recognize families as a resource to improving attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002) and work in varying ways, to strengthen these relationships (Park & Kanyongo, 2012), a research documented successful approach. "We do call home every single day for every single kid that is missing school so that parents are really aware of it," says AP Nelson. Our exemplar schools also have a regular, specific practice of home visits for chronically absent students (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). At most schools, there is a team of staff including social workers, guidance counselors, principals, assistant principals, and parent liaisons, who share the responsibility of calling home, visiting families, and building relationships with families. At both Roosevelt and Poughkeepsie, the members of the team go in pairs to the homes of absent students; one of their aims is to communicate why attendance is important. Principal DeChent, who grew up in his school's district and knows most of the families of his students, also goes on home visits with his staff, or sometimes by himself.

At Mott Hall V, Principal Oroszlany is the primary person responsible for home visits and meetings with parents. He explains that if a student is regularly missing school, "I'm coming to

your house and finding out why." He feels it's important to hold parents accountable, but he also tries to meet them on their terms, explaining:

> I try to figure out why the parent needs our help. Too many times parents get very nervous if the school is calling. [I'll say]: *Okay, when can you meet me? Well, I know you're working so many hours. Do you want to meet at night? Do you want to meet in the morning? Do you want to meet on a Saturday? Do you want to meet on a Sunday?* Does that mean I have to open up my building on a Sunday? Yes. Does that mean sometimes I meet a parent outside the building with a cup of coffee? Yeah. I bring them a cup of coffee. That parent will now support the school no matter what we need because I respect them as a person.

Oroszlany's approach underscores the role of mutual respect in relationship building with families.

And at Bronx Latin, the designated attendance person is Ms. Rosso, the school's family worker and a member of the community, who like Principal DeChent, has lived among the families of the students for many years. Dedicating a parent liaison who is focused intently on monitoring and encouraging attendance is a research-supported component of a comprehensive attendance program (Parke & Kanyongo, 2012) that works toward another effective strategy, to strengthen home-school connections (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Assistant Principal Nelson describes Ms. Rosso like this:

> She lives in the neighborhood and she worked for the school before we were even a school in this building…she's someone from the community, maybe even 20 years, and she's also bilingual, so she speaks English and Spanish, and her main job is attendance. So immediately when she sees who's here and who's not here, she calls home. She finds out where the kids are. Sometimes if the parents say they left and she thinks that the kids may be out hanging out at a nearby park or something, she'll actually go and get in her car – I know as crazy as it sounds – and patrol the streets looking for our kids and like, 'Get to school!' Whatever it takes to get kids in the building. But she does have a

connection with a lot of parents, like if someone doesn't have a phone number or needs to visit someone, usually we go to Ms. Rosso and she has great contact with parents.

In the experience of these exemplar schools, a consistent – even dogged – personal approach to communicating with families of chronically absent students is a hallmark of their attendance programs. People like Ms. Rosso, Principal DeChent, and Principal Oroszlany "give a human quality to corrective action" (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, p. 317).

What about teachers? Often, their role in improving attendance has been limited to counting present and absent students each period, but schools that are successful at improving attendance, distribute the responsibility of reaching out to students and families beyond the attendance team to teachers as well (Dougherty, 1999). The teachers at Roosevelt High for example have made the transition from taking attendance to calling home within 24 hours for each student who misses their class. While teacher involvement in outreach to families is suggested by research, it has also been noted that teachers need support and training in order to successfully take on this added responsibility (Dougherty, 1999; Sheldon, 2007). At Mott Hall V, Principal Oroszlany describes a system that begins with teachers:

> The first step is the teacher will tell us if there is a pattern [of nonattendance]. If there is a pattern, then the grade leader reaches out to the parent. If the grade leader doesn't have any success, then the guidance counselor for that grade reaches out.

If the guidance counselor cannot reach anyone from the family, Principal Oroszlany will do a home visit – or as he says, "go knocking on doors." He also explains that by focusing on this practice in September and October, the school sets the tone for good attendance for the rest of the year.

Programs to Address & Improve Attendance
Schools that are successful in improving attendance translate this priority into concrete programs adopted by the school. **Positively oriented incentive programs (**rather than punishments), for example, are supported in research literature as an effective means by which to improve attendance (Dougherty, 1999; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Roby, 2004). The aforementioned incentive program at Mott Hall V, while focused more generally on building community rather than specifically on attendance, is an example of a positively focused program. Counter to some research that suggests positive involvement activities are more effective than punishing activities, Principal DeChent's policy involves requiring students' parents to come into the school in order for the student to start attending again. If a student who had been absent for several days shows up again at school, staff will find him and send him back home. DeChent admits it may seem "contradictory," but:

We'll send them home and say, *Well, okay, you're not coming in tomorrow unless you come in with your parent*. We'll call the parent, we'll send the letter home with the student, and we require the parents to come in. We hold everybody accountable, the parents included…it's another way of getting the parents into the building, and we've found that when the parents come into the building things change, you know, the kids start coming.

Similar to Oraszlany at Mott Hall V, DeChent focuses on accountability, rather than punishment, although he admits that holding parents and students accountable can be uncomfortable, especially at first.

Systems & Practices that Measure and Improve Record-Keeping & Logistics
The fourth characteristic common to urban high schools that have exemplary attendance is a committed, systematic approach to the logistics and the recording of attendance. Some schools have instituted electronic systems that involve students swiping a card as they enter the building. This arrangement gives the school immediate information on who is in the building at the start of the day. The system can also create letters to parents at specific intervals. Poughkeepsie High School uses such a system, which generates letters home after 5, 15, and 20 days of absence. Other schools, like Mott Hall V, are diligent about checking to see whether the students who were marked absent at the start of the day are actually still absent as the day ensues. Bronx Latin has just started using an app that tracks attendance and facilitates communication with families. As AP Nelson describes, "that app has helped because teachers are able to send out a quick message on attendance at the beginning of the day (that goes to the parent's text or email) and some parents are surprised their kid hasn't made it in yet and then typically 30 minutes to an hour after, the kid will show up." After checking period attendance against the morning attendance report, Principal Oroszlany goes to the cafeteria during the two lunch periods to see if any students who were marked absent

are actually present. He explains that this is an effective, if not tedious, way to improve attendance. "I guarantee that I find ten kids that are marked absent that were actually late. That's half a percent right there," says Oroszlany, who enlists the help of a school aide to track discrepancies in daily attendance numbers. Similarly, exemplar schools are careful to identify students who are officially on their enrollment rosters, but who have moved out of their district, and therefore should not be included in their absent figures.

Sometimes, schools make changes to their master schedules in order to improve attendance. Poughkeepsie High School, for example, changed the start of their school day once they realized that many of their students took the city bus, which ran on a schedule incongruent with the school schedule, arriving 25 minutes after the start of the school day. "So we changed it so we could be in sync with that bus coming in at 8:05 and that would give our kids the opportunity to get to class on time," explains Principal Simpson. Poughkeepsie also "compressed" their master schedule, which they have found has cut down on students skipping the later periods in the day.

Conclusion
No matter how thoughtful and research-based the curricula, no matter how dedicated, talented and well-trained the staff, no matter the overall mission of the school, if students are not present, the school remains in the doldrums of low attendance, low achievement, and a school culture that only benefits some, not all. Schools need practices marshaled to specifically address, improve, and maintain good attendance. Academic research offers guidance, but these data come to life when paired with the experiences of school staff, teachers, and administrators. Our exemplar schools' stories illuminate research-documented characteristics of a successful attendance practice, specifically 1) an engaging school environment 2) a commitment to attendance that emphasizes family relationships 3) programs to address and improve attendance and 4) systems and practices that measure and improve record-keeping and logistics. These are all research-supported strategies and philosophies that have been particularly effective at secondary schools in urban settings. They offer practical, specific, authentic examples to those interested in best practices in attendance.

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