Attendance Up Close: Reflecting on School Visits
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Written by Valerie L. Marsh
Contributors: Susan Meier, Lia Festenstein, Shaun Nelms
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While studying research provides educators with ample context and examples of best practice, spending time in high schools and conversing with staff and scholars (students) allows a different kind of learning. Hence, after synthesizing research on attendance and identifying exemplar schools (Marsh, 2016), we at the Center for Urban Education Success embarked on a series of visits to a group of schools we identified as achieving above expectations with a non-select student body. This group includes: Mott Hall V, Bronx Latin, Roosevelt High School-Early College Studies, and Poughkeepsie High School. Meeting principals, staff, and scholars as well as touring buildings gave us additional insights into schools' philosophies, cultures, and practices. We were able to ask questions directly of practitioners and scholars; we heard their stories, walked their halls. As visitors, we each brought different perspectives – research, curricula, leadership – to our encounters, and these particular viewpoints focused our reflections. They are enumerated here, organized under the four categories of successful attendance practices previously established (Marsh, 2016): 1) Engaging school environment, 2) Commitment to attendance that involves personal contact with parents & families, 3) Attendance programs, 4) Record-keeping & logistics.

Engaging School Environment
These are aspects of a school's life that scholars, staff, and administrators name when attributing credit for good attendance. This category captures the majority of what we learned during our visits, and has thus expanded into two subcategories: **Relationships** and **Culture** (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Dougherty, 1999; Durán-Narucki, 2008; Sheldon, 2007).

Relationships. All the schools we visited place a high value on relationships and **treating the school like a home** and the **scholars like family.** Here is some of what we noticed about relationships during our visits:

School leaders and staff **connect personally** with individual scholars, spending a lot of time walking the building, making quick, personal contact with every scholar they see.
- o Personal touch is "everything" (Principal).
- o Principal knows all of his scholars; greets them by name every day.
- o *Every* scholar fist bumped their principal as they passed him.
- o During a meeting we had with a group of scholars, one commented, "Some people who don't have self-esteem, they find it hard to learn in a really big
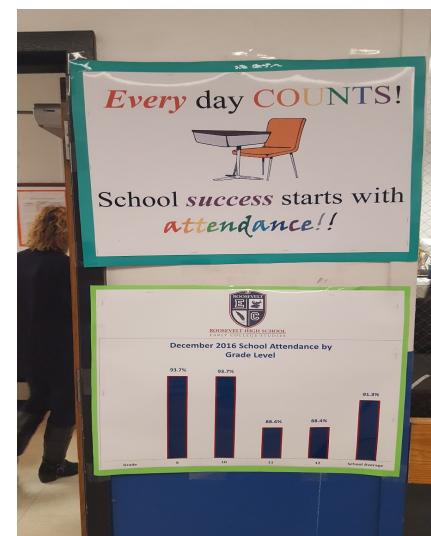
classroom. Some classes like Trig are really big, so when you come after school they can help you personally."

Relationships are **characterized by caring**.
- o Our visits convinced us that scholars in these buildings feel cared for – by their teachers, administrators, and counseling team. It's also clear that the adults in the building genuinely care about their scholars.
- o School Psychologist: "Every scholar has at least one adult who cares about them."
- o Each of the scholars we spoke to seem to feel that they understood why their teachers and their administrators did the things they did. The scholars may not always like these decisions, curricula, or policies, but they have bought in because they feel they understand the purposes behind them.
- o A belief, on the scholars' part, that the adults in the building care about them. This is important to them. They feel lucky compared to their friends at other schools.
- o Principal supervises lunch daily and does not allow any talking for the first 10 minutes. One scholar explained, "He's very strict, but you understand why, he wants you to be successful."
- o Principal: "We note who is absent 2-3 days and when they come back we make a point of asking them if they are okay and telling them we were thinking about them."
- o Principal refers to school as "home." "It's a home away from home."
- o Scholars describe their school in these ways: "They care about us." "They really get involved. It's your house. It's parent-teacher involvement."

Culture. These reflections speak to a building's environment more broadly – the sense of community at a school.

"It's **the little things**." We heard this often and at more than one school. We take it to mean that everything the principal and the other adults in the school do matters. Little things we noticed include: playing music for four minutes, instead of a bell in between classes; providing scholars who stay late bus cards; frequently seeing staff in the halls.

Music in between classes rather than bells provides something less "prison like" (scholar's words), and also the music provides a constant touch point helping scholars gauge how long they have to get to class (end of the song). Scholars reference this bell system as one of the things that they like.

Scholars were not in the halls in between classes, anywhere.

Super high expectations for hallway behavior and orderly environment.

10 minute silent lunch – effective in settling in. Just for middle school scholars.

Psychologist described her work with scholars this way: "We get kids little moments of success."

Building was SPOTLESS – including bathrooms.

No metal detectors.

"Family Engagement Mondays" – when a team of staff sets expectations that include everyone making three notations in the record, either attendance calls or report card calls, and that all grades are updated on Monday, expecting at least three assessments per week. Scholars feel like they're taken seriously, given responsibility.

Scholars here do not think of going to school as a hardship.

All of the schools we've visited definitely have an "All in" approach, emphasizing caring/love.

Friendly atmosphere.

Rigor motivates attendance. Scholars derive pride and a sense of identity with their school's rigorous academic program.

Providing courses that earn college credit: "They understand you are a high school student, but they teach it as a college course" (Scholar).

Pride in school motivates attendance – scholars are very proud that their school, formerly a receivership school, is now "in good standing" and that they are in a rigorous program. They don't want to miss any instructional time because it will be tough to fall behind.

Every teacher stays after at least one day a week and posts this information. So scholars know when they can get help, and kids can get bus passes for that. Scholars report that knowing that their teachers are willing to stay late helps them to remain motivated: they feel the support as a demonstration of teacher commitment to their learning.

"Teachers don't expect you to fail. They don't expect you to be violent" (Scholar).

"They really get involved in your house. So I force myself to come" (Scholar).

All teachers are at their door at the start of every class, that's the expectation. They also have something for scholars to do when they come in. Bell to bell instruction.

Counselor mentioned how they had "a million boot camps" for tests. Used receivership money to buy pizza for kids that came to do extra prep.

Scholars know that they **will be held accountable** for every little thing – everybody's watching them and will not look the other way if they do something out of line. But they also believe that their teachers genuinely care about them.

"If you do something you shouldn't, they will know, the principal will know – that's how people stay out of trouble. Like play fighting? You'd get suspended" (Scholar).

Not hats, no hoods, no ripped jeans. Scholars are flagged upon entry into the building and sent to the office.

If you try to open any doors, an alarm will go off.

Principal attributes success first and foremost to **safety**.

Schools help scholars **envision their futures**: "They invite former seniors who went to college to come back and tell us about their experiences" (Scholar).

"This year we went to an insurance company…high paying jobs… there were kids working there who said in high school they didn't know what to do with themselves. They are working there now and being very successful and they talked to us" (Scholar).

Featuring portraits of every scholar on the walls.

Commitment to Attendance Involving Personal Contact with Parents & Families (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Parke & Kanyongo, 2012).

As the majority of our time was spent observing and talking with scholars and school staff, we had less opportunity to observe this category; therefore, these reflections supplement the more fully developed section already established (Marsh, 2016).

> Family worker as a key reason why attendance at this school is successful: "I love my job!" She goes into houses and pulls kids out of bed sometimes.
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> Parents also call her and ask her for help – we noticed that this happens at other schools, where the school is receiving calls, and it's more of a two-way communication, rather than just the school calling home.
>
> Parents are called in often for attendance issues, behavior issues. The meetings are brief but serious and required before scholar can return to school.
>
> A Spanish interpreter present for parent meetings.

Commitment to Improve Attendance through Programs & Systems (Dougherty, 1999; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Roby, 2004).

Whether they use incentive programs, a specific policy on how to process late scholars, or a broader philosophy on counseling scholars, the schools we visited implemented such systems with a committed, comprehensive approach.

> Weekly counseling/psych meetings include attendance issues. School psychologist and counselors look at attendance or 10 or more days absent (and also chronic tardiness) as an indicator – often of mental health issues.
>
> School psychologist stays very focused on her scholars' **rights and options** and making them aware of those rights/options, which also seems to empower them.
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> School psychologist believes in "talking to kids about alternatives before the alternative is not to come" – the idea that scholars have options that they can choose from to be successful, like programming (transfer schools in NYC) or scheduling (ie: expanded courses for Algebra).
>
> School psychologist did mandated counseling.
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> Community involvement with legal aide for non-documented families.
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> Conversation around **how we discuss college** – a realization that some scholars do not have documentation and discussion of college alienates them.

Focusing on the majority of scholars who are showing up, rather than the percentage of scholars who are not. A philosophy that putting more resources into these scholars helps bring the others along.

Personally checking every scholar in every room first period.

Scholars have the freedom to stay after school as often as they want, because they can catch a later bus…monthly metro pass. Receivership funds paid for: purchasing metro cards, providing pizza for scholars who go to test prep.

Incentives for attendance and academics: "Last year we went to Six Flags. Every student who had a 90 in math got to go, and I was like, I am doing it."

Also regarding the Six Flags trip, one scholar remarked: "Best time I ever had."

BATTLE of the CLASSES!!!

	Class of 2017	Class of 2018	Class of 2019	Class of 2020
Most students at College Awareness Event	+4 (42%!)	+2 (29%)		
MP1 - Highest Percentage of students passing all classes	+4 (63%!)			+2 (49%)
Most Falcons with Perfect Attendance MP1	+2 (35%)			+4 (44%)
Most attendees to the Dance!			+2 (19%)	+4 (60%!)
Most Falcons at the Annex Volleyball Game	+2 (11)			+4 (13)
Most students to donate a can at the Can Drive	+4 (41)			+2 (39)
MP2 - Highest Percentage of students passing all classes	+4 (65%!)		+2 (53%)	
Most Falcons with Perfect Attendance MP2		+2 (29%)		+4(43%!)
Most Falcons at the Annex B-Ball Game (12/12/16)	+2(14)		+4 (17)	
Most Falcons at the Snow Glow	+4 (41)		+2(39)	
Spirit Week Representation!	+4	+2		
Totals to date:	30	6	10	20

A motivational principal. "We had 220 kids on honor roll and he said if we get 300 we'll have food at the assembly…honor roll assembly" (Scholar).

Record-keeping & Logistics.

Some schools used technology effectively in monitoring scholars within and outside of the building; others used old-fashioned manpower.

A morning screening process that doesn't involve metal detectors. There are a number of security officers at the front door that pull out kids for random searches. Traffic moves smoothly and they are able to flag kids that they feel are a concern as well as randomly select some scholars. Feels less prison like. Also, there was a scholar playing piano as the kids walked in. Felt very welcoming.

A machine that scholars can scan through and receive an automatic pass from.

Kids swiped in – can do it at classroom door too!

Principal supervises lunch daily; cross-references
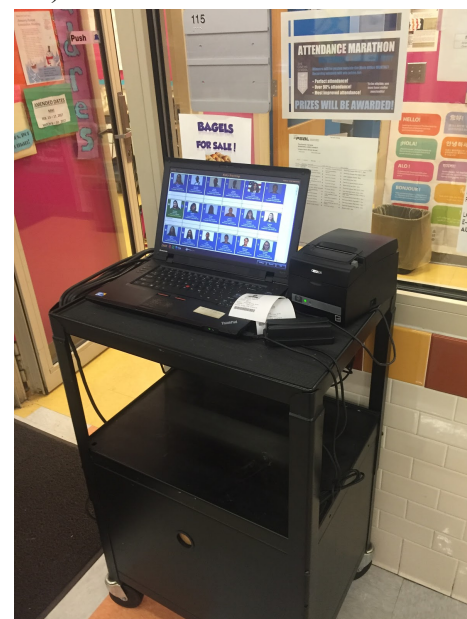
attendance list throughout the day.

Principal spends a lot of time walking the building checking engagement/attendance by sight and comparing what he observes to his computer-generated attendance reports.

Principal used an app that showed him period-to-period attendance with photos of kids.

Lots of posters and messages around school about attendance and graduation goals.

School aide: [in charge of lateness] "If you're caught in the hall and the bell goes off, scholars go to a specific location. There is a sweep every period after the music stops; always. All teachers get the list."

If scholars are late to class they get a late pass. School aide records late student and checks to see if they have five tardies. Aide: "If five, then I put them on a suspension list. Then I give them a letter. I tell them they need to have a guardian come in the next day." Aide calls the parent, tells them it's mandatory. "I give them the details if they want it." Aide puts the appointment letter in the administrator mailbox (paper system). Administrator has the meeting with scholar and parent.

If scholar comes in when not supposed to, the school calls home, gets parent permission, sends scholar home or scholar sits in the office all day. Scholar is not allowed back in classes until the parent comes in to meet with principal and scholar. School aide says: "I've never seen so much team work, admin, safety officers, they're all one; they back each other up."

Entire staff responsible for attendance – school aides, counselors, psychologists, teachers, assistant principals, principals.

Counselor handles full day absences.

Summary

At the Center for Urban Education Success, we seek to learn and share best practices in urban education through an approach that integrates the academic and the practical, with an understanding and respect for the idiosyncrasies and context-dependent features of school success. The reflections presented here, while less formal in their accounting, provide a useful compliment to research-based analysis of successful attendance practices. They also animate the stories principals have been telling us about their schools, as they illustrate our face-to-face observations and interactions with school culture, facilities, staff, and scholars.

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