Strategies for Reducing Student Absenteeism in Philadelphia

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Introduction

In Philadelphia, almost one in three (31.8%) students were chronically absent from school during the 2015-16 school year.[1] This chronic absenteeism rate was nearly twice the national average of 16%[2] and the third highest among cities with at least 500,000 residents.[3] Even higher numbers of Philadelphia's students classify as truant or habitually truant from school. Despite positive signs of improvement in recent years, far too many students do not attend school for long periods of time.

Why Absenteeism Matters

Well-documented consequences of chronic absenteeism include:

- *Low academic achievement.* Chronic absence in preschool, Kindergarten, and first grade decreases the likelihood that a student will read at grade level by third grade.[4] Attendance in high school is also a strong predictor of academic outcomes.[5]

- *School drop-out.* By sixth grade, absenteeism becomes a primary risk factor for dropping out of school.[6]

- *Adverse outcomes later in life.* Poor school attendance is associated with diminished health, poverty, and involvement in the criminal justice system.[7]

What is chronic absenteeism?

Definitions of chronic absenteeism vary. The federal government defines chronic absenteeism as missing ***at least 15 school days a year, excused or unexcused.*** The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) defines it as missing more than ***10 percent of enrolled school days***, ***excused or unexcused,*** for students enrolled at least 90 days.

What is truancy?

According to PDE, a student who is subject to compulsory school laws and has incurred ***three or more school days of unexcused absences*** during the current school year is **truant.** A student who has incurred ***six or more school days of unexcused absences*** during the current school year is **habitually truant.** Students who are habitually truant, or their legal guardian(s), may be subject to a legal citation.

These negative consequences hit already vulnerable students hardest—those from low-income families, students with disabilities, and students experiencing homelessness.[8] While chronic absenteeism is caused by an array of factors, including many outside of the school environment, schools and districts can enact strategies that will support strong school attendance.

The Need for Additional Attendance Supports in Philadelphia Schools

Over the past seven years, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP)'s efforts have yielded steadily improving rates of student attendance.[9] However, there is wide recognition of the ongoing need for additional supports. All SDP schools have set clear goals associated with improving student attendance.[10] Yet in the SDP's 2018-19 School Support Census, **nearly 90% of principals or school leaders reported that their schools need support to reach these goals**. Over a quarter of leaders in those schools ranked attendance and truancy as their school's *most critical* need.[11] Teachers echo this concern. In the 2018-19 District-Wide Survey, more than half reported that *school absenteeism* was a great or moderate challenge and half reported that *classroom absenteeism* was a great or moderate challenge.[12]

In Fall 2019, the Philadelphia Inquirer published an investigative report highlighting inconsistencies in some schools between records of school attendance and records of classroom attendance reported by individual teachers.[13] Shortly after this report, the Mayor's Office of Education and the SDP commissioned a project "to strengthen the practice of the existing attendance teams by reviewing existing activities and strategies, the roles of various partners, and to develop a system of continuous improvement to support changes and roles."[14] The contractor is expected to complete a survey of current practice, recommend improvements, and provide replicable tools and trainings for SDP staff.

Strategies to Consider

Solutions to absenteeism are not one-size-fits-all. The root causes of truancy can vary substantially, and identifying the right strategies to address them should involve input from all stakeholders. This brief provides a range of potential solutions that Philadelphia students, parents, teachers, SDP office staff, and school and community leaders can consider as they work together to reduce absenteeism. To that end, this brief:

- Outlines current attendance and truancy policies and practices in the School District of Philadelphia;
- Presents common barriers to school attendance; and
- Provides examples of strategies that show promise for reducing barriers to attendance for Philadelphia students.

The strategies we highlight are drawn from a review of both existing literature and policies and practices in twelve large, urban school districts. Many of these strategies are already being implemented to some degree in Philadelphia—either District-wide, in individual schools, and/or in individual classrooms—but could be expanded. We also describe additional strategies that could be implemented in concert with existing efforts.

Current Policy in Pennsylvania and the School District of Philadelphia

Each public school in Pennsylvania must adopt a written attendance policy that complies with State compulsory attendance laws.[15] In Philadelphia, all children between the ages of six and 17 are required to attend school.[16] The SDP applies a three-tiered approach to combating truancy.[17] The following is a summary of how the SDP's current attendance policies comply with State law.[18]

Monitoring attendance. The SDP mandates in its attendance guidelines that schools are responsible for monitoring and maintaining accurate records of the attendance of all students. This requires schools to enter, track, and report attendance into the SDP's Student Information System (SIS) database. In elementary and middle schools, teachers must record attendance in the SIS at the start of school. In high schools, students use their ID cards to swipe into the building's ScholarChip system indicating they are present that day.

In addition, high school teachers must record *period-level* attendance in the SIS. The SIS resolves daily attendance at the end of each day. If a student swipes into the building but is then marked absent in every period by all their teachers, the SIS resolver marks the student with an unexcused absence for the day. Students who are marked absent for two hours at the start or end of the school day will be marked as half-day absent. Two half-day absences equal one full-day absence. Families of children in the SDP are notified about daily school absences. Families of high school students are also able to view period-level attendance if they register and log into the SDP's Parent Portal. However, period-level absenteeism does not trigger notice home.[19]

Excused absences. For an absence to be excused, parents/guardians must submit a written note explaining the absence within three days. The principal or school's Attendance Designee (a member of the school staff who enforces attendance requirements) then determines whether the absence will be excused. Absences should be excused if they are due to illness, quarantine, accident recovery, required court attendance, deaths in the family, approved educational trips, religious holidays, authorized school activities, or other urgent reasons approved by the principal. If a student has been absent for three days in a row or a total of eight days or more, a doctor's note is required to excuse all subsequent absences.

Pursuant to State and federal law, days missed due to a student's circumstance of experiencing homelessness should also be counted as excused absences.[20]

Process for Students With Unexcused Absences in the School District of Philadelphia

Student accumulates **three unexcused absences** in total

School sends Three Day Legal Notice (C-31) informing parents/guardians of the students' absences.

Student accumulates **six unexcused absences** in total

School holds a Student Attendance Improvement Plan (SAIP) meeting. Plan for student attendance improvement is documented.

Student accumulates **ten unexcused absences** in total

School submits truancy referral to the SDP's Office of Attendance & Truancy.

DHS-contracted Truancy Providers support the family in truancy court.

Unexcused absences. Tier 1 interventions occur after each unexcused absence, with a phone call to parents/guardians via the classroom teacher or automated message.[21] Tier 2 interventions begin after a student accumulates three unexcused absences. At this time schools are required to send the student's family a Third Day Illegal Notice (C-31) informing them of the student's absences.

By the time a student has six unexcused absences in total, SDP policy dictates that schools hold an attendance improvement meeting.

Attendance improvement meetings. These meetings are designed to address barriers to attendance. The meeting should be led by the school counselor and school's Attendance Designee and include the student; the student's guardian(s); other people that the guardian may consider to be a helpful resource; appropriate school personnel, which may, if relevant, include the child's IEP or 504 team members and the school's McKinney-Vento Homeless Liaison; and recommended service providers, such as case managers, behavioral health providers, probation officers, children and youth practitioners. The meeting should be documented and generate a Student Attendance Improvement Plan (SAIP).

Student Attendance Improvement Plan (SAIP). The SAIP should include the attendance barrier(s) affecting the student, how this plan will overcome the barrier(s), and details about the intervention such as the individual responsible for providing it and its frequency.[22]

Truancy referrals. After the attendance improvement meeting, the school's Attendance Designee and/or counselor must ensure that a student has been offered "evidence-based interventions" that are "implemented with fidelity" through their SAIP. If absenteeism persists and the student accrues ten unexcused absences in total, Tier 3 interventions require the school to submit a truancy referral to the Office of Attendance & Truancy. Referrals are then submitted to the Philadelphia Family Court, which will issue a citation for the family to appear in truancy court. If a student has an IEP, the IEP must be revisited prior to sending a referral.

Truancy court. A case referred to truancy court in Philadelphia can last up to 120 days depending on the severity of the case. Throughout the case, Department of Human Services-contracted truancy providers arrange a meeting with the family to extend services to help reduce or remove any barriers that persist in contributing to truancy. In Pennsylvania, parents/guardians may be charged a fine of up to $300 for the first offense brought before truancy court and may be sentenced to jail for up to three days if they do not pay the fine. A child who does not satisfy the penalties or interventions imposed may be determined delinquent under the Juvenile Act and may face probation, rehabilitative programs, or even out-of-home placement. If the child is found to be delinquent under these circumstances, judges may send the conviction record to the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, which would then take action against the child's driving and operating privileges.[23]

Non-punitive measures. The Pennsylvania Department of Education urges schools to "exercise caution and reason when utilizing punitive measures and initiating compulsory attendance proceedings."[24] This is consistent with best practice, as legal intervention should be the final resort for addressing issues of chronic absenteeism and used only after other interventions have been implemented, documented, and found to be ineffective.[25]

Zero-tolerance punitive policies have been found to be ineffective at improving attendance. Moreover, policies that criminalize absenteeism in adolescent years have been linked to criminality in later adult life.[26] Focusing on solutions and supports is more effective than fines and court appearances.[27] Importantly, involvement in truancy court may have acute implications for youth of color, who receive more delinquency petitions following truancy court compared to their white peers when controlling for other risk factors.[28]

The most promising truancy court programs also focus on non-punitive measures that seek to connect families to appropriate services to mitigate barriers to attendance. Truancy court diversion programs, like Philadelphia's Truancy Intervention and Prevention Services, have been developed to address student attendance issues before cases reach the court and to ideally avoid formal court processes.[29]

Special Circumstances in Charter Schools. Over one-third of public school students in Philadelphia (approximately 70,000 students) attend a charter school. State laws generally apply equally to charter schools, which are individually responsible for enforcing compulsory attendance laws "as they relate to students enrolled in the charter school."[30] State law also requires all public schools, including charter schools, to drop from their enrollment any students absent from school for 10 consecutive days without excuse. School districts remain responsible for enforcing attendance and district students who are dropped due to absenteeism may reenroll and return to school if they maintain district residence. In contrast, many charter schools do not allow such dropped students to reenroll.[31] As these students are no longer "enrolled in the charter school," charter schools are not responsible to enforce compulsory attendance in these circumstances. Rather, the charter school must inform the local district school, which is then responsible for enforcing compulsory attendance for that student.

Barriers to School Attendance

Identifying the underlying barriers to consistent attendance can inform appropriate prevention and intervention strategies. Barriers to attendance can be related to the individual child, the child's parent/family, the child's peers, the school, and the larger community: [32]

- *Child factors* include physical and mental health, grade retention, extensive work hours outside of school, and trauma.

- *Parent/family factors* include family mental health and substance use disorders, homelessness, poverty, family responsibilities, family conflict, family transitions, and family relationships with school and school personnel.

- *Peer factors* include bullying, peer pressure, and low levels of participation in extracurricular activities.

- *School factors* include safe and healthy facilities;[33] school climate, teacher attendance; attendance monitoring, policies, and consequences; inadequate, irrelevant, or tedious curricula; student-teacher relationships; and school-based racism and discrimination.

- *Community factors* include neighborhood safety, available transportation and walking routes, economic factors, social and educational support services, and structural and environmental barriers (e.g., unemployment rate, poverty rate, racial segregation index, and population change). [34]
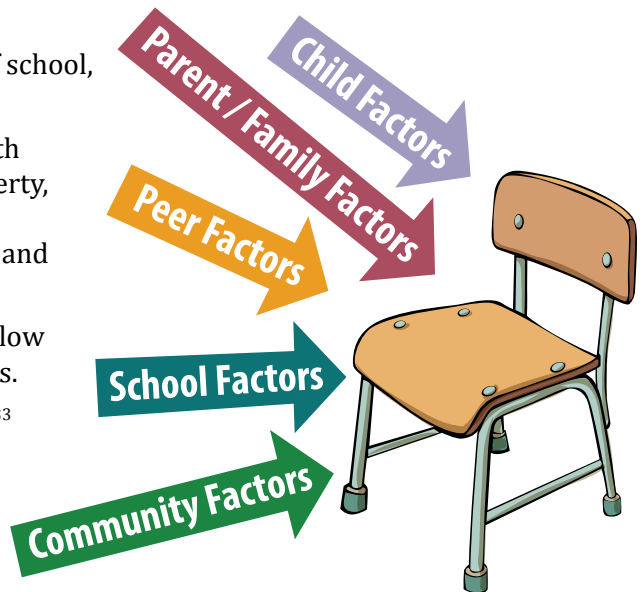
Absenteeism varies by grade. High absenteeism rates are common in Kindergarten and decline over elementary grades. Absenteeism rises again in middle grades, followed by substantial increases in high school. The highest chronic absenteeism rate is often observed in 12th grade.[35] SDP has invested in research on twelfth grade attendance trends over the last two school years. In both years, about 15% of all twelfth-grade students attended less than 80% of school days.[36]

Because absenteeism can be caused by a range of factors and varies by grade, individual schools can tailor attendance supports to overcome specific attendance barriers to effectively reduce absenteeism.

Strategies for Reducing Student Absenteeism

To contribute to discussions throughout the SDP community about how to reduce school and class absenteeism, we offer examples of strategies worth consideration. In general, more research is required to determine the effectiveness of these strategies (See call-out box: "A Call for Further Research").[37] Different strategies may be more or less appropriate for different school settings or students. The examples we offer have been used by other schools and districts to remove barriers to attendance; some have already been implemented to an extent in Philadelphia.

Strategies for reducing absenteeism fall into six overarching strategies: (1) Community Awareness Campaigns; (2) Robust Attendance Monitoring and Data Use; (3) Family Engagement; (4) Relationship-Building; (5) Reliable and Safe School Transportation; and (6) Community-Wide Coordination.

A Call for Further Research. In Table A1 in the Appendix, we provide a summary of available evidence for initiatives that use many of the strategies discussed below. Several initiatives combine strategies, suggesting the promise of a multi-faceted approach to reducing absenteeism.

Regular evaluation of absenteeism reduction interventions would support the field at large and improve the evidence base on effective attendance strategies. Interventions are often designed without input or feedback from the target population, and few studies examine student experience or elicit suggestions on how to improve these efforts. [38] Promising interventions collect feedback and/or analyze program effects to strengthen, refine, replicate and expand effective programs.[39]

1. Community Awareness Campaigns

Attendance campaigns have demonstrated promise in supporting a culture of attendance. These campaigns often include public service announcements, publicly posted advertisements, and distribution of informational materials that highlight the benefits of attendance and consequences of absenteeism.[40]

During the 2017-18 school year, Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenny and the SDP launched an #AttendanceHero campaign. The initiative included public service radio announcements and robo-calls from the Mayor and a Philadelphia Eagles player.[41] In addition, Read by 4th launched an awareness campaign in partnership with SDP to build a culture of strong attendance in elementary schools. The Read by 4th campaign provides school leaders with an Attendance Toolkit that includes daily, weekly, and monthly school-wide attendance trackers, monthly attendance target flyers, and guidance for creating a school attendance campaign and incentivizing attendance.[42] In 2018-19, more than half of SDP teachers reported that their school emphasizes the importance of student attendance.[43]

Examples of public awareness campaigns in other communities include:

- **New York City Mayor's Interagency Task Force for Chronic Absenteeism:** In New York City, a task force launched a campaign to inform educators, families, and students about the consequences of chronic absenteeism. Their efforts included posters throughout the community, advertisements on public transportation, wake-up calls from celebrities, and a text message hotline for families to find out about their students' attendance record and connect with free resources in the community.[44]

- **Be There Campaign:** The United Way of Allegheny County developed a citywide messaging campaign in Pittsburgh, which involved posting information materials on billboards, city buses, and at schools, community organizations, local business, and sporting events to raise awareness of the importance of attendance and to bring the campaign to the attention of potential partners. [45]

2. Robust Attendance Monitoring and Data Use

Research has noted the importance of consistent and effective attendance monitoring practices at the school level that seek to understand barriers to attendance, connect students and families to necessary services, and ensure that students understand that presence or absence is noticed.[46]

As described above, in Philadelphia, all District middle and high schools are required to set attendance goals. Principals are expected to monitor attendance each week and ensure that all teachers take classroom attendance each period.[47]

Effective attendance monitoring practices in other cities have included the development of early warning systems and an analysis of the root causes of absenteeism. These practices allow school leadership to respond more swiftly, identify areas of greater need, and target resources and interventions to improve student attendance.[48] The following examples demonstrate a variety of ways attendance data can be used to strengthen attendance:

Share data with teachers. The Early Truancy Prevention Program has been implemented in elementary schools in a public school system in North Carolina. This intervention includes an online attendance information system that provides teachers with weekly attendance data, guides teachers in assessing barriers to attendance for students with emerging attendance issues, provides information on interventions to address barriers, and helps them track progress of target students.[49]

Share data with relevant partners. Pittsburgh Public Schools and some Pittsburgh charter schools have entered a data sharing agreement with Allegheny County's Department of Human Services to develop an integrated data system to understand how individual and neighborhood factors are associated with student absenteeism and provide insights on which interventions may be most appropriate.[50] In New York City, principals lead weekly convenings with school partners to review attendance data and collaboratively plan and assess interventions. [51]

Develop early warning flags. In New York, student attendance data is used at the beginning of the year to identify students who had attendance issues in the prior year and develop early warning flags.[52] Student attendance is included as an indicator of academic risk in the Early Warning Indicator Systems in Hawaii, Massachusetts, and Virginia.[53]

Use data to match students and families with needed services. In Oregon, the Linn Benton Lincoln Education Service District (ESD) combined an attendance audit process with follow-up services (such as attendance officers, family liaisons, and social workers) for students in need. Expert teams from the ESD visit schools, interview staff and students, and evaluate attendance policies and practices to determine why students are absent from school and what can be done to increase attendance. Audits are strictly voluntary. ESD attendance audit teams do not see attendance as isolated from other schoolwide issues.[54]

Communicate with parents early and often. Providing families with a swift response when students are absent is key.[55] Read by 4th's Attendance Toolkit includes resources for publicizing school-wide attendance rates and guidance for incentivizing attendance.[56]

In Chicago, as in Philadelphia, an automated telephone system calls absent students' families.[57] Chicago Public Schools also recommends that schools should place personal phone calls to absent students' homes. In Cleveland, if a parent or guardian does not call to excuse a students' absence, the school is responsible for contacting the guardian.[58] In Pittsburgh, families can track their students' attendance via an app and data dashboard that also provides resources to support student attendance.[59]

Acknowledge and reward good attendance.[60] Boston Public Schools encourages School Site Councils to develop attendance incentives and awards in their board policies and regulations. Suggested incentives include prizes such as T-shirts, movie passes, free prom tickets, and field trips.[61] Attendance incentives such as sporting event tickets are also included in the universal attendance supports provided by the Los Angeles Unified School District to both students and staff.[62]

3. Family Engagement

Schools can also engage with families to understand factors that may challenge attendance.

A variety of factors related to Philadelphia students' homes and families influence school attendance. For example, in the 2018-19 District-Wide Survey, 37% of SDP parents reported that family responsibilities such as providing care for a family member were at least a slight challenge to attendance.[63] Over 80% of SDP teachers reported that cultural differences between home and school were at least a slight challenge to student learning at their school.[64] Developing and sustaining positive relationships with students and their families by partnering with families early and often is key to many interventions for improving student attendance.[65]

Facilitate family-school connections. A strong family-school connection can help identify and address barriers to attendance. Establishing clear modes of communication and encouraging teachers to learn more about students' home lives is crucial.[66]

Developing family-school connections is a challenge in Philadelphia: nearly one in ten SDP parents reported in the 2018-19 District-Wide Survey that they did not know how to contact their child's teachers.[67] The elementary school-based Early Truancy Prevention Program includes teachers conducting home visits and provides teachers with smartphones to facilitate frequent communication with families.[68]

Inform families about attendance policies and issues. Families must be aware of attendance issues and school policies.[69] Schools can connect with families by providing informational materials and parent workshops, following up on the same day students are absent, and alerting families to early indications of attendance issues.[70]

Pittsburgh Public Schools requires schools to describe the consequences of habitual truancy when contacting families following a student's third absence.[71] In Philadelphia, researchers found that postcards encouraging families to improve students' attendance reduced absences by about 2.4%.[72]

Simply inviting guardians to an in-school meeting to identify and mitigate barriers to attendance is a promising school-based intervention.[73] Philadelphia's attendance improvement meetings, mandated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, are an example of this practice.[74]

4. Relationship-Building

Ensuring that students have strong, trusting relationships with adults and with other students is an important strategy for improving school attendance.[75]

Many students in SDP schools report feeling disconnected from school. In the 2018-19 District-Wide Survey, 23% of students reported that they rarely or never feel welcome in their school. Twenty-eight percent said that when they are in school, they rarely or never feel like they belong.[76] Students struggle to identify adults within their schools with whom they have supportive relationships. For example, 23% reported rarely or never having at least one adult at school they trust.[77] Similarly, nearly one in four SDP students reported that they could rarely or never talk to teachers or other school staff about problems.[78]

SDP requires K-5 and K-8 principals to ensure that their schools utilize strategies that "prioritize building positive relationships with students."[79] This section offers practices that may build positive student-staff and student-student relationships.

Strengthen student-staff relationships. Improving student-staff relationships is one component of Pittsburgh Public School's Be There Campaign. The campaign's Be There Buddy Project provides a toolkit

for schools and partners with a comprehensive program for fostering positive and caring relationships between students and school staff. This multi-faceted attendance initiative seeks to encourage Pittsburgh parents, local organizations, and the community at large to reduce school absenteeism. The Be There Campaign uses accurate, up-to-date attendance information to drive incentives and positive messaging strategies between students and staff.[80]

▸ ***Hiring more teachers of color*** may improve student-staff relationships in Philadelphia. Research has found that both students of color and white students report feeling cared for and academically challenged by teachers of color.[81] Students of color who have teachers of color have been found to experience fewer unexcused absences and a lower likelihood of chronic absenteeism. Philadelphia currently enrolls students of color at 2.32 times the rate at which it employs teachers of color.[82] In conjunction with the Pennsylvania Department of Education, several local universities, and the Center for Black Educator Development, the SDP is currently piloting Aspiring to Educate, a program that seeks to strengthen recruitment of teachers of color by identifying potential recruits as early as ninth grade and offering those individuals financial support for their postsecondary education.[83]

▸ ***School- or community-based mentoring programs*** also focus on reducing student absenteeism by improving student-adult relationships.[84] In the 2018-19 School Support Census, almost 90% of principals or school designees—some of whom reported that existing mentoring programs were responsible for a positive change in their school—reported that their school needs mentoring support.[85]

Mentors can be internal (including teachers, coaches, and older students) and external (staff from nonprofit school partners, social work students, and retired professionals).[86] Baltimore City Public Schools include buddy teachers and mentoring in the suite of interventions its schools can use to respond to student absenteeism.[87]

Mentoring programs can take many forms, including regular one-on-one check-ins, after-school tutoring sessions, mentor monitoring of student performance, and follow-ups with families and teachers.[88] Mentors may also participate in support group meetings to encourage program sustainability.[89]

Big Brothers Big Sisters is a community-based mentoring program[90] currently present in about 20 Philadelphia schools.[91] Examples of other promising mentoring programs include:

- **Check & Connect,** a mentoring program that was evaluated and found to be effective for students in grades 5-7 in Chicago Public Schools, involves mentors tracking data to monitor the attendance and academic progress of the students on their caseload. Mentors also meet regularly with students and deliver personalized interventions designed to increase students' attendance and engagement with school.[92]

- **Success Mentors** is a mentoring program used as a part of the New York City Mayor's Interagency Task Force on Chronic Absenteeism and School Attendance. The program provides personalized support for students and families through external, internal, and peer mentors. Mentors greet their mentees and express enthusiasm to see them in school, call homes if mentees are not in school, identify and celebrate students' strengths, identify the underlying causes of a students' absenteeism, and connect students with necessary supports. In addition to working with mentees one-on-one and in groups, mentors focus on whole-school attendance and culture efforts.[93]

- **The Truancy Intervention Pilot Project** provided students with responsive advocates, improved students' orientation toward school, improved attendance, and increased students' probability of remaining in school.[94]

Strengthen student relationships. Interventions that improve relationships between students can help overcome a variety of causes of absenteeism.[95] Some mentoring programs, like Success Mentors, include peer mentoring components that may strengthen student relationships.[96] The **People Helping People**

Freshman Transition Program at Wilson High School in Tacoma, WA matches freshmen with a student leader. That leader initially supports them with their class schedule, touring the school, introducing them to teachers, and answering questions. The student leader continues to meet with students to provide encouragement, tutoring, and advice throughout the year.[97]

One in three SDP students report that they experience bullying in school.[98] The **Olweus Bullying Prevention Program**, based at Clemson University's Safe and Humane Schools, is designed to reduce and prevent bullying when sustained over time. The program begins with a student questionnaire to assess bullying at the school. A leadership team receives ongoing support and training to implement the program. This team includes a school administrator, teacher from every grade, non-teaching member of the staff, school counselor or other mental health professional, parent, and community representative. The team establishes school rules and policies related to bullying. Students are included in bullying prevention efforts through regular class meetings and sometimes a student advisory committee. The program also requires family engagement efforts.[99]

> ### Note to Policymakers: The Importance of High-Quality Teachers and Schools
>
> As Philadelphians consider the strategies described in this brief, policymakers at the state and local level should also focus on removing barriers to attendance that are related to school and teacher quality. One study found that students were less likely to miss school if they were taught by more experienced teachers. Higher-risk, chronically absent students reaped the greatest benefits.[100]
>
> In addition, RFA recently documented that Pennsylvania suffers from some of the most disparate race and income-based gaps in the country with regard to providing schools that offer quality educational opportunities, including access to experienced teachers.[101] These results reflect fewer educational opportunities afforded to Philadelphia students. Improving these opportunities, many of which depend on State and local resources, can reduce school-based barriers to student absenteeism.

5. Reliable and Safe School Transportation

In Philadelphia, students who live within 1.5 miles of their school are not provided transportation to school. Students living more than 1.5 miles from school are typically offered yellow bus transportation in first through sixth grade and are eligible for free Student TransPasses in seventh through twelfth grade.[102] One in ten SDP students take a school bus to school. More than a quarter take public transportation; another 30% walk to school.[103] Students with reliable and safe methods of getting to school have been found to have higher attendance. For example, Kindergarten students in Philadelphia who were provided a school bus had fewer total missed days of school and were less likely to be chronically absent. [104]

Research has also identified route safety as a barrier to student attendance.[105] One in five students in SDP schools reported that they rarely or never feel safe going to and from school and 32% of parents reported that the safety of walking routes to school was at least a slight challenge for their child's school attendance.[106] Strategies to address route safety can include investments of public funds to improve public transportation, the condition of sidewalks and roads, and to provide crossing guards with training around leaderships and mentorship.[107] Safe Routes Philly is a school- and community-based program of the City of Philadelphia that provides pedestrian and bicycle safety curriculum, teacher training, and walking and biking program support to Philadelphia schools.[108]

6. Community-Wide Coordination

A multi-sector community response is a common thread across many promising strategies to address the various and complex barriers to attendance.[109] Community-based organizations, local government agencies, and individual schools can all play a role in a community-wide effort to mitigate complex variety of barriers to attendance. Partners can support the development of intervention strategies, facilitate service referral and delivery, provide resources and staff to facilitate implementation of intervention strategies, and advocate for stronger public investments in addressing absenteeism. Evaluations of community school interventions have found improvements in reducing absenteeism.[110]

Philadelphia's current response to absenteeism involves multiple agencies' efforts to reduce or remove barriers to attendance for students: the SDP, school staff, the Department of Human Services' ten contracted truancy providers, and Family Court.[111] Philadelphia also has a community schools initiative that serves nearly 10,000 students.[112] Improving student attendance is one of the long-term goals of the initiative.[113]

The United Way has led promising community partnership initiatives in Pittsburgh and Detroit:

- In Pittsburgh, the **Be There Campaign** includes over eighty partnering organizations transportation, housing, public health, technology, industry, and food security to address the range of out-of-school factors that can act as barriers to attendance.[114]
- In Detroit, **Every School Day Counts** is a partnership of several community groups that convenes attendance agents and deans from 27 schools to create a community of schools that strategize to resolve attendance issues. The effort also brings weekly attendance meetings and staff training sessions to ten charter schools.[115]

Local government agencies can also lead attendance improvement initiatives.

- In New York City, the mayor developed **the New York City Mayor's Interagency Task Force on Chronic Absenteeism**. The task force created an opportunity for convenings across sectors to address the complex barriers to attendance.[116]
- In Los Angeles, the County Board of Supervisors created the Education Coordinating Council which then established a **School Attendance Task Force** to convene juvenile courts, county agencies, school districts, and community organizations to review attendance issues, examine local approaches, and develop strategies to enhance school attendance.[117]

School districts and schools can also lead community partnerships to combat absenteeism. Through a federal Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant, the Alhambra Unified School District in Los Angeles County implements the **Gateway to Success Program**, which brings mental health and wellness services directly to school sites to help students mitigate barriers to attendance and academic achievement.[118]

Conclusion

The School District of Philadelphia has made improving attendance a high priority and the SDP, schools, classrooms, and the community have implemented a variety of promising strategies to increase attendance. However, SDP and community leaders have flagged the ongoing need to reduce persistently high rates of absenteeism. Due to the complex barriers to attendance and the scale of the challenge, improving attendance will require additional investments throughout the community; a consistent, system-wide strategy; and rigorous evaluation to monitor, modify, and refine efforts. Consideration of the strategies highlighted in this brief can inform these efforts.

Appendix

Table A1. Summary of Evidence

This table provides a summary of evidence for initiatives that use some of the strategies outlined in this brief.

INITIATIVE	STRATEGIES INVOLVED	SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE	LOCATION
The Early Truancy Prevention Program	Robust Attendance Monitoring, Family Engagement, Community-Wide Coordination	A pilot evaluation found a 10% reduction in students who had more than 4, more than 6, and more than 10 absences over the school year.	Five public schools in North Carolina
New York City Mayor's Interagency Task Force on Chronic Absenteeism	Awareness Campaigns, Robust Attendance Monitoring, Relationship-Building, Community-Wide Coordination	The program reduced chronic absence rates by 1.5% in participating schools. Mentoring (Success Mentors) was identified as the most effective component of the initiative.	New York, New York
Truancy Intervention Pilot Project	Family Engagement, Relationship-Building	A small pilot study of high school students found that students who received the intervention had significantly fewer absences from class than students in the control group or students who were unable to enroll.	Rochester, New York
Big Brothers Big Sisters	Relationship-Building	After 18 months in the mentoring program, children were 52% less likely to skip school and 37% less likely to skip class than their peers.	Nationwide
Check and Connect	Relationship-Building	A large-scale randomized control trial found a 3.4 day, or 20.2%, reduction in absences among students in grades 5-7 and no distinguishable effects on attendance for students in grades 1-4.	Nationwide (evaluated in Chicago, Illinois)
Success Mentors	Relationship-Building	In New York City, students who were previously chronically absent and had mentors gained an additional nine days of attendance per year.	Nationwide (evaluated in New York, New York)
Gateway to Success	Community-Wide Coordination	The number of students labeled as truant declined by 42% in the first year of the task force and over 61% in the second year.	Los Angeles, California

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About Research for Action

Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit education research organization. We seek to use research as the basis for the improvement of educational opportunities and outcomes for traditionally underserved children and students. Our work is designed to strengthen early education, public schools and postsecondary institutions; provide research-based recommendations to policymakers, practitioners, and the public; and enrich civic and community dialogue. For more information, please visit our website at www.researchforaction.org.

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