Seven Interventions Lead to Improved Attendance Rates

Chronic absenteeism fell at nine schools between SY2017-18 and SY2018-19.

Four elementary schools, four middle schools, and one high school reduced chronic absenteeism by at least 5 percentage points between SY2017-18 and SY2018-19. In deep structured interviews, the schools, both DCPS and charter, identified seven interventions they used to address attendance challenges.

Seven Essential Attendance Interventions

- Consistently review attendance and academic data to inform strategies
- Establish proactive attendance goals
- Establish attendance teams
- Increase family, student, and teacher engagement
- Leverage community partnerships, services, and resources
- Identify and address barriers to routine attendance
- Provide life skills and social emotional supports

Findings

"Attendance is something we look at all [of] the time. We look at [it] on a student-by-student level and [ask ourselves], how can we help this student get to school everyday?" said one attendance counselor.

All nine schools review school-wide and student-level **attendance data** on a daily or weekly basis. Regular data reviews with families, students, and teachers allow for all parties to take responsibility in improving attendance. "We allow the data to direct our approach. We identified the students with the most attendance issues, split the list of 80 to 100 students among the attendance team, met one-on-one with students and families to understand why they were having issues, and developed targeted approaches," said another attendance counselor. Additionally, over the summer, attendance teams examine trend data to identify students who may need more intensive support in the upcoming year.

Schools also say it is important to set rigorous, yet attainable, **attendance goals** based on data from prior years and establish **attendance teams** to ensure faithful implementation of their interventions. For instance, attendance teams may include principals, attendance counselors, deans, social workers, lead teachers, and community based organizations. Schools state the importance of strong leadership amongst these teams, primarily from principals who have prioritized attendance outcomes.

The schools also affirm that establishing a culture of meaningful **engagement** with families, students, and teachers improves attendance. The nine schools specifically identified the following family engagement strategies:

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◊ Acknowledging parents and guardians whose youth demonstrated excellent attendance,

◊ Hosting family breakfasts and new parent orientations, and

◊ Maintaining consistent contact with families through phone calls, in-person conferences, text messages, letters, and home visits.

The schools also plan engaging events around holidays and spring and winter breaks, when attendance historically decreases, to prevent attendance drops. "We plan fun events like Picture Day around Thanksgiving break and other breaks, so the students will want to come [to school]," said an attendance counselor.

Schools reward teacher buy-in and engage-ment. One attendance counselor shared that teachers who submit timely and accurate daily attendance counts receive a free planning period or are entered into a raffle to receive Amazon or Massage Envy gift cards.

Improved Attendance Outcomes

School	% Chronically Absent, SY17-18 (Baseline)	% Point Decrease from SY17-18 to SY18-19
Friendship Collegiate PCS	46.4%	-20.1
Moten ES	53.2%	-11.9
Stuart-Hobson MS	28.0%	-11.1
Sousa MS	44.7%	-10.0
Nalle ES	18.8%	-9.2
Burroughs ES	27.4%	-8.9
Paul PCS MS	21.8%	-8.6
Jefferson MS	40.3%	-6.1
Two Rivers PCS - Young	16.8%	-5.5

SOURCE: https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2018-19%20School%20Year%20Attendance%20Report.pdf

By **leveraging partnerships** with high-quality community organizations, schools provide students and families with services and resources they need to ensure student attendance. For instance, one school provides a change of clothes for students and a washer and dryer on campus. A local non-profit organization funded the appliances.

Schools and community partners also recognize **barriers to student attendance** and, in turn, address each family's unique set of challenges by making home visits and morning calls, gifting alarm clocks, and identifying safe routes to school.

The schools reveal that many students need **life skills and social emotional support** assistance. For example, many students attend schools outside of their neighborhoods and have difficulty traveling on their own. Accordingly, schools regularly assist students develop a clear, easily accessible route to school. Some integrate life skills into their advisory periods and throughout their curriculum. Additionally, other schools host mental health groups as a safe space for chronically absent students to discuss challenges they face at home.

Conclusion

The school leaders intend to sustain their improved attendance outcomes by including attendance goals in their comprehensive school plans, ensuring dedicated staff are assigned to attendance teams, and fostering an environment where every stakeholder — including school staff and families — values improved attendance.

Note: The interviews and research occurred prior to COVID-19, yet many of the insights still apply in our current circumstance.