

DME’s “Community Conversation on Attendance” Key Takeaways and Observations

Overview

The first DME Community Conversation, held on July 21, 2022, focused on attendance and reducing chronic absenteeism. Deputy Mayor for Education Paul Kihn shared the District’s vision, strategies, and investments that comprise the DME’s “Attendance Framework.” He then moderated a panel discussion with Shawn Hardnett, Founder & CEO, Statesmen College Preparatory Academy for Boys; Harold McCray, Principal, Stanton Elementary School; and Cindy Welling, Chief of Staff, EveryDay Labs – a company that uses research-based strategies to reduce absenteeism.

Core Insights:

- We need to have a systematic, multi-tiered approach to attendance to make sure that students do not slip into being chronically absent. Accurate attendance data is vital for school personnel to help students come to school.
- School culture and strong relationships are key: students will come to school when they know they are wanted there.
- We need to remove barriers to coming to school, although there is no single reason why students do not attend school and there is no single solution.
- Improving attendance is a team effort. School administrators, attendance counselors, and other staff members are vital to making sure students attend class and should be involved in the decision-making processes.

A Data-Driven and Systematic Approach to Attendance

Cindy Welling explained that EveryDay Labs uses a multi-tier and systematic approach to make sure that students do not become chronically absent by using Mail Nudges, Text Nudges, and family support. This approach must be data-driven, positive (as compared to punitive), and problem-solving. Their strategies are shown to be effective at reducing chronic absenteeism by 10-15%.

- Tier 1 – Universal Prevention: for all students;
- Tier 2 – Early Intervention: for students who have become chronically absent (missed 10-19% of school days);
- Tier 3 – Intensive Intervention: for students who have missed over 20% of school days.

EveryDay Labs uses Mail Nudges, which are short postcards sent home to families up to six times per year. These postcards show how many days of school that students have missed in comparison to other students, as many families do not realize how many days their child has missed, and/or thinks that their child has missed the same or fewer days of school than other students. The postcards also contain a message about how missing school is related to learning.

They also send out text Nudges every two weeks to the families that need more support. Families are also engaged with a Family Support team. The team provides support in the families' home language, connects families to district and community resources, and gathers information to send back to the schools.

During the EveryDay Labs presentation, a DCPS educator submitted the following question:
“The 'mail nudge' sounds great. How do we reach homeless families or families/students experiencing housing instability?”

- Ms. Welling added that EveryDay Labs has explored sending mail nudges via backpacks to reach families without active phone lines or mailing addresses.
- Mr. Hardnett works with his staff to connect families with programs that will provide them a cell phone, and also asks that family the best way to contact them for the following week.

Principal McCray noted the importance of both quantitative and qualitative data. He stressed that it is crucial to have accurate data when they are trying to triangulate and figure out what their next steps are going to be. Stanton Elementary reviews the data as a school team every week, as well as with the families.

Wendy Hamilton, an attendance counselor at Brookland Middle School and Community Conversation attendee, recommended that elementary schools provide attendance data to feeder schools so that middle schools can put in interventions and start preparing incoming families who have been chronically absent for the change in expectations.

Barriers to Attendance and Strategies for Improvement

Panelists and participants asserted that there are many reasons for students not attending school. For example, family members might work the night shift and be too tired or not available to take their kids to school. Siblings might be sick, which can impact transportation to school. Families might not have access to laundry facilities, which can make uniforms hard to keep clean. Transportation can also be an issue, as many District students travel long distances to get to school.

The District is trying to mitigate these barriers by providing free WMATA transportation through the [Kids Ride Free](#) (KRF) program and improved access to safety through the [Safe Passage Safe Blocks](#) program. DME also has partnered with the Department of For-Hire Vehicles to operate [DC School Connect](#), a free microtransit ride program that provides shuttle van rides to students at over 30 schools in Ward 7 and 8.

Both Principal McCray and Mr. Hardnett discussed how they provide uniforms to their students. At Stanton, they believe that “when scholars and families feel love and pride in their school they are more likely to show up daily, on time, and ready to learn.” Statesmen College Prep has

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laundry facility on-site and keeps extra uniforms available to students so that if that they can always change into a clean uniform once they arrive at school.

Deputy Mayor Kihn asked the panelists what they think the city could do to help support attendance and how they would advise city leaders. Principal McCray suggested that the District should put together resources that school personnel can use to mitigate some of these barriers to attendance, such as health services, social services, and transportation information. Mr. Hardnett recommended that the District ask individual schools what specific resources they need to help improve attendance and show families that they care. Every school has unique challenges, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to improvement. Ms. Welling stressed the importance of using data to identify systemic barriers.

A DCPS educator who attended the meeting raised the issue of students working jobs during school hours or late at night as a barrier to attendance: **“In high schools, we are finding that student who reach working age are obtaining jobs (not the issue), but employers are allowing students to work during school hours or students are working late into the night and early morning. Student miss school because they are working, or late to school or tired because they were working at night or overnight. Is there a plan to combat this issue? Students working during school hours or late at night?”**

- Deputy Mayor Kihn agreed with recognizing and addressing this important conflict for many of our students:
 - “One of the significant pieces of work that we are at collectively across the city is the idea of reimagining our high schools and doing that in a way that better meets the needs of some of our students. And so, if we have students who need to work, and who are going to work, who have jobs, we’re trying to integrate the idea of that work experience in part of their high school [experience].”
 - “If we think of employers are behaving badly in the sense that they’re giving school students daytime hours, then we’ll need to reach out to them and specifically work on addressing that.”

Another attendee asked, **“What can we do to support our young parents, particularly males, in balancing their parental obligations and attendance?”** Deputy Mayor Kihn said that it is important that we work to provide individualized supports and wrap around supports that are specific and tailored to our students’ needs.

School Culture and Strong Family Relationships

Both Principal McCray and Mr. Hardnett have worked hard to set a positive culture at their respective schools. Mr. Hardnett asserted that kids go to school when they know that they are wanted there; likewise, parents send their kids to school when they know that their children are wanted there. When a student arrives at Statesmen, he is never admonished for arriving late, missing school, or arriving without his uniform. Rather, he is celebrated for coming to school and received positively. Furthermore, the school sets a positive tone for all students by hiring a

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DJ and having students dance down the red carpet and into the school building. When students feel like they are wanted and feel good in the school building, absenteeism declines.

Principal McCray makes families feel welcome by having a quarterly “Breakfast with the Principal” and having family Zoom chats to keep parents engaged with what is going on at school. The school welcomes families with math and literacy nights. These family engagement and academic events are set up to show parents how they can help their kids at home and providing gift cards and prizes for the students. Stanton Elementary has an inventive program called Attendance Stars for students who have missed a significant amount of school, in which students are given prizes for improving their attendance.

Team Effort and Incorporating the Voices of School-Based Staff

All of the panelists agreed that improving attendance involves a wholistic approach that involves educators, other school staff, and community partners.

Principal McCray shared that Stanton Elementary is a Flamboyant Family Engagement Partnership School, and that they have all teachers do home visits to their students before school year begins. During these home visits, teachers and families talk about the hopes and dreams for their children, iron out expectations, and discuss the importance of attendance and how it correlates with academic success. This is used as a preventative measure to ensure parents feel comfortable with the children’s teachers, and therefore, teachers are the ones to contact their students’ families after they are absent for three days.

Statesmen College Prep deploys engaging and friendly staff to make phone calls home to parents to ensure that the school is always equated to a place of good feelings. The team does not stop calling until they have reached a person with whom they can speak. The school sets high expectations for families in regard to attendance: the phone team doesn’t ask *if* a student is coming to school, but rather *when* a student will arrive. Statesmen College Prep uses ride-share services like Uber/Lyft for students who are chronically absent to show families their strong commitment to attendance.

Ms. Hamilton emphasized that DME must involve attendance counselors and other front-line school staff in conversations regarding chronic absenteeism and in the decision-making processes, and that more education is needed for parents to emphasize the importance of attendance.

The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education welcomes all feedback, ideas, and comments from the community on this important topic. Feedback can be submitted [here](#).