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Dramatically Improving Attendance

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A data-driven, multitiered approach helped this district tackle chronic absenteeism.

We knew we had an attendance problem at Barnes Elementary. Occasionally, a teacher or diligent attendance clerk would raise a red flag, but as a staff, we didn't think we could effectively address what we saw as primarily a home-based problem. But in March 2014, the aha moment came when, after a presentation by Safe and Civil Schools, our teachers roughly tabulated the number of students who were chronically absent in their classrooms. We were blown away by how much school our students were missing.

Barnes Elementary is a suburban school in Kelso, Washington, with a student body of 350 students; the student population is 70.1 percent white and 19.8 percent Latino, with a mix of other races. In the 2013–14 school year, 26 percent of Barnes students were chronically absent (that is, absent 10 percent or more of the year); and only 46 percent had regular attendance (absent 5 percent or less of the year).

After changing our approach to absenteeism, we were able to decrease chronic absenteeism by 10 percent (from 25.7 percent to 15.65 percent) while improving regular attendance by 16 percent (from 45.62 percent to 61.79 percent) in just one year. Although we've made great strides, we continue to work toward the goal of *all* students having regular attendance. We're energized by data showing we can bring about positive change by following these five steps.

Step 1. Define chronic absenteeism.

Attendance problems are common, but many schools fail to systematically address absenteeism for the majority of students who are chronically absent. Students with obviously excessive absences (50 or more days) may receive intervention services, and students who violate truancy laws with excessive unexcused absences may be sent through truancy court. But those interventions miss many students.

A growing body of research indicates that missing 10 percent of the year or more for any reason—including unexcused absence, excused absence, and suspension—places students at significant risk of negative outcomes, including academic difficulty and failure, increased involvement in the juvenile justice system, and dropping out.¹ To reduce these negative outcomes, it's important to address attendance for all students who miss 10 percent of the year or more.

Step 2. Mine attendance data.

The two most common attendance metrics are average daily attendance (ADA) and truancy. *Average daily attendance* represents the average number of days of attendance for all students during the school year. Even with a relatively good ADA (95 percent or above), a school may have many individual students with poor attendance. When ADA is the only metric analyzed, these individuals may fall through the cracks. For example, in a school of 400 students, the ADA may be 95 percent if 300 students have good attendance, but that leaves 100 students chronically absent.

Truancy refers to *unexcused* absences of individual students. Truancy is a red flag; however, it typically identifies students only when they reach middle and high school and fails to identify students with excessive excused absences.

For schools to develop effective systems, looking at the right attendance data is key. There are two metrics that are far more sensitive than ADA and truancy: chronic absenteeism and regular attendance. *Chronic absenteeism* combines unexcused absences, excused absences, and suspensions. The rationale for including all three categories is simple: For students to be successful in school, they need to be in school. Any time students are not present, they risk falling behind. The goal for every student is *regular attendance*—missing no more than 5 percent of school days, the equivalent of missing one day or fewer per

month.

When teachers at Barnes looked at their individual class attendance rates, the rough data indicated that not even 50 percent of our students were attending school regularly. This realization inspired our whole staff to immediate action. We put aside our excuses and decided that all Barnes students could achieve 95 percent attendance. This meant that every student would attend at least 171 days of school, averaging no more than one missed day a month. We also began thinking about attendance not as an issue mostly controlled by parents but as an issue influenced by the school.

As we moved forward, we found that we needed more robust and accurate attendance data. It was baffling that we had good data systems for math, reading, behavior, and so on, but not for attendance! After some digging, we discovered that our current data systems gave us access to a wealth of attendance data. We just needed to know where to look.

Now that we've discovered what our data systems offer, we can examine these items:

- Percentage of students attending school regularly.

- Percentage of students with chronic absences.

- Individual students who have regular attendance, are at risk of chronic absenteeism, or are chronically absent.

- Attendance rates by month and day of the week.

- Attendance rates by grade level.

Step 3. Develop a multitiered approach.

In many schools, attendance data and intervention efforts fall to one or two individuals who can be quickly overwhelmed by too many students and not enough resources. You need a multitiered system of support that effectively allocates resources and personnel. An existing team or attendance task force can drive an overarching attendance initiative. This team looks at absenteeism data regularly, works on schoolwide prevention, and ensures that secondary and tertiary support systems are functioning effectively.

Given the magnitude of the attendance problem at Barnes, we knew that a one-time newsletter or assembly would not be enough. We had to invest significant support and resources to make truly systemic changes. We now address attendance with three levels of support:

Schoolwide. Our positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS) team reviews data every two to four weeks. The team monitors the attendance "health" of the whole school and adjusts approaches accordingly.

Classroom. Each month, teachers receive updated data listing students in their classes by attendance category: regular, at-risk, and chronic absence. Teachers also receive ADA reports for the month and year.

Individual student. Students with attendance below 95 percent are monitored by our attendance team—principal Kim Yore, school psychologist Jake Alabiso, and school counselor Rebecca Viscuso. This team meets briefly each week to look at individual student data, identify supports, and provide ongoing monitoring.

Step 4. Implement universal prevention strategies.

With effective data and clearly defined systems of support in place, what remains is meaningful action. The following strategies have been helpful at Barnes.

Engage All Stakeholders

We used multiple channels to share our new approach to attendance with the Barnes community. We spread the message about the importance of attendance through regular classroom meetings, schoolwide assemblies, letters home, back-to-school

nights, and social media.

To engage the community, we got an article about school attendance published in the local paper, and we presented to the school board about our attendance initiative. The PBIS team put posters in local businesses and contacted local sports clubs, churches, physicians, and other key influencers in the community.

Use Motivational Systems

To motivate students and families to prioritize school attendance, we focused on recognizing regular attendance at four different levels.

To engage families and the community, we organized a Big Bear BBQ for students who achieved 95 percent attendance and their families. The celebration included hot dogs and hamburgers, recess games for all, and certificates and prize drawings for students with regular attendance. We invited all Barnes families and influential community members (such as the mayor, police officers, church officials, and physicians).

At the schoolwide level, we display a BEAR Attendance Path at the front of our school. Our bear (the school mascot) needs 56,700 days of attendance (representing 90 percent attendance) to reach his cave at the end of the path. (We intentionally set the number low to guarantee success and build momentum.) Each month, we total the number of days all students attend and add the days to the path. We also graph ADA by month and display it prominently in the front hall.

In classrooms, each class earns a tally every time 90 percent of students are in attendance. When the class obtains 10 tallies, students get to create a piece to dress their class bear. Some classes choose a theme like the Seattle Seahawks or *Frozen*, while others take a more eclectic approach.

To recognize individual students, we created the ROAR program (Recognizing Outstanding Attendance Recipients). Students who miss one or fewer days in a month sign a grade-level recognition book and receive a ROAR paw to place in the hallway "honey pot" that serves as a motivational display and is used in drawings for some schoolwide incentives.

In addition, two students from each class with regular attendance for the month are selected through a drawing to have lunch and treats with the principal. Students who miss no more than nine days for the entire year get to attend ROAR Stock, a one-hour celebration with their teachers featuring pizza, ice cream, and games.

Tailor Prevention Strategies

Educators need to consider the specific needs of the school and community when working to prevent low attendance. For example, if large numbers of students miss school because of asthma or respiratory illnesses, the school may work to improve environmental conditions at school. If students are worried about school climate and safety, the school needs to deal with these concerns.

Tailored strategies typically require data collection through surveys, focus groups, discussions with students and families, and so on. Use the data to identify and then address factors that contribute to large numbers of student absences. At Barnes, our data indicated that December is the worst month for student attendance. In 2013–14, December ADA was only 88.1 percent. In 2014–15, the December ADA increased to 93.0 percent without any targeted efforts.

We want to do even better, so this year, we plan to implement tailored efforts to improve attendance in December. We are exploring ways to communicate the importance of attending school the week prior to winter vacation, with a strong message that meaningful instruction *will* continue until the very last day before the break. Other strategies include offering additional incentives for individuals and classes with regular attendance in December and starting hand-washing campaigns and preventing food sharing to reduce the spread of colds and flu.

Support Students with Low Attendance

Causes of individual student absenteeism vary greatly and may include chronic illness; transportation problems; academic, social, or coping deficits; and conflict with staff or students. Meaningful support involves identifying and addressing the causes of students' chronic absenteeism. Our support system at Barnes involves three phases:

1. The classroom teacher makes supportive, problem-solving contact with the family of any student whose attendance dips below 95 percent for the year.
2. If the child's attendance remains below 95 percent, a member of the attendance team contacts the family again to express concern and offer assistance.
3. If the child continues to struggle, the classroom teacher, family, and a member of the attendance team meet to decide on next steps and interventions. For example, if the student has an academic deficit that is making him or her not want to attend school, the attendance team would put academic interventions and supports in place. Or, in the case of a chronic illness, the school may work with nursing staff, outside medical systems, and the family to determine the best course of action. For something like asthma, this may involve increased training for teachers and other staff on how to help the student manage asthma triggers, inspections of environments at school to reduce pollutants, and partnering with health organizations to ensure that the student has adequate care outside school.

This year, we're stepping up intensive supports by incorporating a functional behavior assessment (FBA) and intervention approach.² An FBA approach involves using checklists, interviews, observations, and records reviews to assess the reasons the student is absent and then implementing interventions specific to those causes, thus addressing the root of the absenteeism. We hope this approach will help us support individuals with more resistant problems.

Applying What Works

Our approach to attendance follows the same steps many schools use to make any meaningful change in student behavior and academics. What's new at our school is the application of these research-based approaches to attendance.

Our experience has shown that when schools and districts apply these methods, the potential for positive schoolwide improvement is huge. For the individual student who experiences greater academic success, stronger peer and adult connections, and increased engagement and pride in school, the positive effect is life changing.

Endnotes

¹ Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). *Chronic absenteeism: Summarizing what we know from nationally available data*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.

² Jenson, W. R., Sprick, J., Sprick, R., Majszak, H., Phosaly, L., Evans, C., et al. (2013). *Functional behavior assessment of absenteeism and truancy (FBAAT)*. Eugene, OR: Pacific Northwest Publishing.

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