Battling chronic absenteeism

A New York elementary school made great strides in reducing chronic absenteeism. Here are the ups — and downs — of its story.

By Kim Nauer

When Patricia Mitchell became principal of P.S. 48 Wordsworth in 2007, she discovered that her small elementary school in Jamaica, Queens, had one of the highest chronic absenteeism rates in the city. Serving a largely black and Hispanic community with lots of young, single parents, P.S. 48 had one-third of its students absent at least one day out of 10 that year. That attendance number was worse than in many low-income schools in the Bronx and Central Brooklyn — and almost unheard of in relatively well-off Queens.

Mitchell was taking over a school that had cycled through four leaders over the previous seven years. Her staff was demoralized. She looked at the poor attenders and wondered if her students and families were sending her a signal about the school. "I needed to get to know my kids," she recalls.

And that's what she did. A research team

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at the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School followed Mitchell from 2011 to 2013 as she took on chronic absenteeism. During that period, Mitchell and her team drove down chronic absenteeism almost 10 percentage points, from an average of 26% in June 2011 to 17% in June 2012. P.S. 48 also climbed academically from the bottom 10% of the city to a respectable place in the middle of the pack, ascending from the 9th percentile in 2010-11 to the 48th percentile in 2012-13.

Just the facts

Poor attendance can influence whether children read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade or be held back.

Read more: *Attendance in the early grades: Why it matters for reading* by Attendance Works. February 2014.

www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Attendance-in-the-Early-Grades.pdf

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The story of how Mitchell achieved those results — and what happened in the aftermath when her absentee numbers began to creep up again — offers useful lessons for those working in high-poverty schools, which often are plagued by high rates of absenteeism. The center's research focused exclusively on elementary schools, where absenteeism is more often due to family issues than to students cutting class. But the strategies Mitchell used could be helpful in any school. "Your families have to learn that you care about this, and that you'll get them the support they need," Mitchell said. "And the kids have to buy in. They need to say, 'Mommy, I have to go to school.' " This can take a lot of time, she added, "but the personal touch helps."

The real cost of absenteeism

Educators and policy makers have historically overlooked absenteeism — an irony, given how much effort goes into improving schooling on the assumption that students are actually attending regularly. Researchers tend to view attendance as a fixed student trait, such as race or family income: They may find it useful for predicting how a child might do academically, but they don't see it as a tool for improving schools. School leaders have, of course, always been aware of student attendance, but tracking it was viewed mostly as paperwork. "Many principals have traditionally looked at attendance as an operational issue, like doing their budget," said Kim Suttell, who runs the New York City Department of Education's attendance programs.

Suttell is among a growing group of administrators who would like to see attendance take a more prominent role in school accountability. She argues that attendance is a particularly important piece of data for principals to track and analyze. If too many students miss too much school, the entire school will suffer. "How many chronically absent students can a school have and still maintain momentum?" she asked.

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As Principal Mitchell discovered, absenteeism has been shown to be a strong predictor of academic success, both for individual students and the school. Our researchers at the Center for New York City Affairs analyzed student data on New York City's elementary and K-8 students over three academic years, from 2010-11 to 2012-13, looking at absenteeism and test scores. A school's rate of chronic absenteeism was more useful for predicting a school's test scores than other common measures, including the school's percentage of students in special education, English language learners, or students receiving free or reduced-price lunch.

The center's analysis also suggests that absenteeism can have a substantial effect on the school as a whole. On average, the number of students passing the New York state tests goes down by 1.3% for every percentage point increase in chronic absenteeism. In other words, if a school has 10% more chronically absent students than another similar school, it is statistically likely to have 13% fewer students who score proficient on New York's annual achievement tests. This pattern was consistent over three years, before and after the introduction of tougher tests aligned with the Common Core State Standards.

Beyond average daily attendance

By digging into poor attendance, school leaders can dramatically improve a student's school experience. "There is no one thing that is 'attendance,' " Suttell said. "Is it transportation? Is it health issues? Is it housing? Is it school climate? Is it being bullied? Is it academic performance?" Principals should take this detective work seriously, she said. It's a good way to identify students who are at risk academically. Also, finding out why students don't come to school regularly in the elementary years can help avert problems down the road. Too often, school staffers call parents to let them know about their child's absenteeism and leave it at that. Prin-

cipals could be using this opportunity to ask parents what kind of help their child might need to get to school regularly and succeed. "I think schools make the calls because they have to," Suttell said. "It's in the regulations. But the intent is to connect with the family — to learn the reasons for the absence — not just fulfill an obligation."

Despite the importance of chronic absenteeism, it's too easy for school staff to miss the problem entirely. Elementary school students may be missing two or three days a month, which, on any given day, doesn't feel like a lot. And for at-risk students who are on the principal's radar, "there's this idea that if you got the kids to come to school more, it still wouldn't matter," said Robert Balfanz, a research professor at Johns Hopkins University and one of the field's leading researchers. Educators need to be convinced that this is a problem worthy of their limited time, he said. "People have not really understood the magnitude of the issue."

But things have begun to change, in part because school districts are learning to monitor absenteeism more precisely. Most, including New York City, still use a figure called "average daily attendance" to monitor how well a school is keeping absenteeism under control. This figure enables administrators to see what percentage of students are present on any given day but offers no information on which students — or how many students — are racking up too many absences. Another common issue is that a 90% attendance rate may sound OK to people — "90% is an A," said one principal — but it's actually an atrocious figure. It means that one in every 10 students was out of school on that particular day.

Students are considered "chronically absent" if they've missed 10% or more of their school year on any given date. In New York City, the Department of Education produces lists of students each week who have crossed this threshold — or who are at risk of crossing it. Officials like Suttell hope principals look at this list each week and figure out a plan for helping these students. The education department also posts chronic absenteeism numbers on each school's online principal portal, making the daily report all but impossible to miss.

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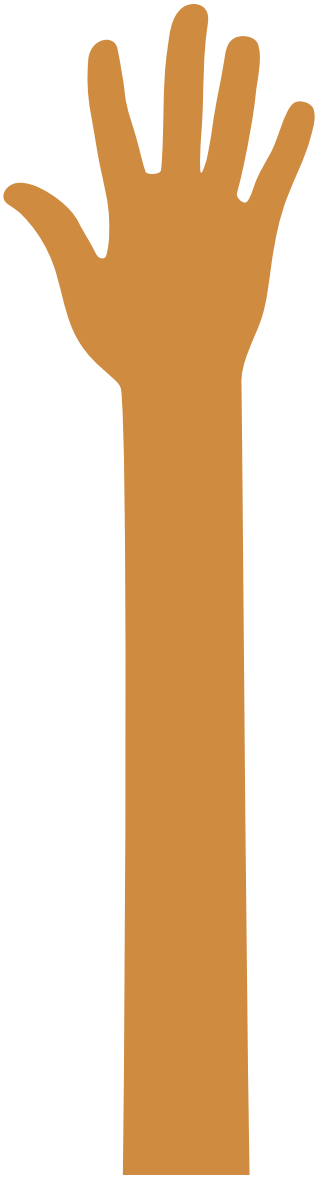

Suttell argues that the chronic absenteeism measure provides a far more accurate picture of attendance than the traditional average daily attendance. It's also an important tool for school leaders to use to help their students — if they are aware of it. Unfortunately, too many principals still remain confused by what the numbers mean and how they could be helpful. "I'm happy when a principal calls, asking about the school's chronic absenteeism numbers. That shows me the word is getting out," Suttell said.

The hard-won successes of P.S. 48

Principal Mitchell's P.S. 48 in Queens was among 13 schools the Center for New York City Affairs looked at closely in 2011-12. Unlike the others, however, P.S. 48 was part of a three-year attendance pilot project launched by former mayor Michael Bloomberg. The Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, and School Engagement assigned outside "success mentors" to work with students who were having attendance issues and experimented with a variety of citywide initiatives to reduce problems associated with big issues like asthma and homelessness.

When the center first visited P.S. 48 in 2011, Mitchell had a substantial team of people meeting weekly on attendance, actively working down a list of 160 kids who had missed too much school the previous year. The team included a friendly mix of administrators, members of the school support network, and two volunteer success mentors, including a former social worker who had a lot of experience working with New York City families.

The center visited the school several times during the 2011-12 school

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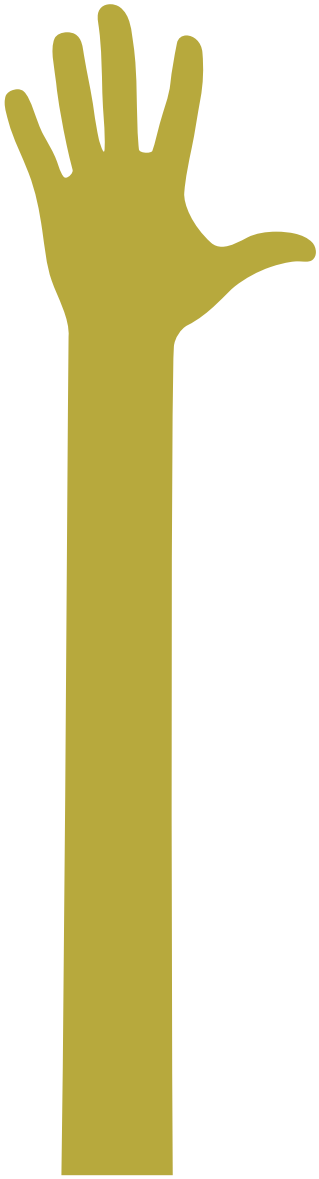
year. The activity of this team during that year offers a useful picture of how one school can drive down absenteeism by simply talking to kids and their families — and focusing on the effort.

Until his recent retirement, Cleveland Freeman was P.S. 48's attendance teacher, a position that is half teacher, half cop. As an attendance teacher, Freeman had both a teacher's license and knowledge of the neighborhood, enabling him to make serious-minded home visits to errant parents. Technically, it was Freeman's job to help deal with the school's chronic absenteeism problems, but he also was responsible for eight other schools and could only provide support for the toughest cases. The driving force behind P.S. 48's attendance team was Charline Yorke, a paraprofessional who knew the students well and who enthusiastically took on the position of attendance team leader. Yorke worked the school like a no-nonsense mom; she was a loud and vivid presence in the lunchroom, herding students through their school day.

Yorke kept a binder listing the year-to-date attendance of every student in the school. Adults were assigned to each grade: Vice Principal Vanessa Christensen, for example, followed the at-risk 3rd graders; the social worker volunteer Ray Avila was responsible for the 5th graders; and Yorke worked on her list of 2nd graders. More than a half-dozen adults divvied up the school's students, touching base with their kids at least twice a week and organizing monthly attendance events and prizes for kids who showed improvement.

And many students improved. One 4th grader had missed 73 days in 2010-11. By the middle of the 2011-12 school year, he had missed only four. Another 1st grader missed 45 days in 2010-11; by the middle of 2011-12, he had missed only one. Yorke had more than a dozen stories to report — including one about three students who had missed 20 to 30 days in 2010-11 and who had become perfect attenders. By the end of the 2011-12 school year, the team had managed to bring P.S. 48's chronic absenteeism rate down to 17%, a big improvement over the 33% Mitchell saw when she took over the school and a major coup in any high-poverty community.

Doing this well, year in and year out, has proven tough for principals in high-needs schools.



There were many explanations for the dramatic improvements. The winter had been mild, giving families a break from weather-related issues and illnesses like asthma attacks. P.S. 48 also moved to a new school building with sun-streamed classrooms and gleaming hallways, and attendance spiked up almost immediately. The neighborhood also was becoming more working class as a new merchant class of immigrants arrived. Because of this demographic roiling, however, P.S. 48 was dealing with a large number of departing families, causing stress on parents who were willing to travel to keep their kids at P.S. 48. Staff kept in touch with these vulnerable kids and rewarded them both immediately and monthly when they were able to keep their attendance up.

Yorke and other mentors also reached out to families that were overwhelmed. One of Yorke's 2nd-grade moms was sick and homebound, making it impossible for her to walk her children to school. "I suggested getting a group together," Yorke said. "If they live around the area, the kids could pair up with one another and come to school as a group." Yorke wasn't sure if the mom took her advice, but she did know the children's attendance has improved. "They're here," she said.

Battles won — and lost

Patricia Mitchell's school was among 100 schools participating in Bloomberg's three-year pilot tasked with bringing down chronic absenteeism in New York City public schools. The pilot was launched in September 2010 and wrapped up in June 2013. Overall, the project was viewed as a success, with 58 of the 100 schools posting reductions in chronic absenteeism. An evaluation conducted by Balfanz and

Average daily attendance vs. chronic absenteeism

Average daily attendance is the measure used nationwide to evaluate attendance for school funding and accountability. Daily attendance measures the percent of students who show up on any given day, and average daily attendance offers a picture of how well schools do over time.

Unfortunately, the number offers no insight on individual student attendance — and how many students may be at risk of missing too much school. Indeed, it actually masks the problem since schools with very poor attendance may still have 90% of their students attending on any given day. In the education world, 90% feels like an A. But it really means that one out of every 10 students failed to come to school that day.

Knowing how many students are chronically absent is far more useful. The chronic absenteeism measure reveals how many students have missed 10% or more of the school year at any point in that year, giving school staff a clear picture of how many students are missing too much school.

TABLE 1.
ADA vs chronic absenteeism

This sampling of nine elementary schools in New York City shows how high average daily attendance can mask high rates of chronic absenteeism. The chronic absenteeism figure is also a good tool for measuring the number of students at-risk in a school.

	Average daily attendance	Rate of chronic absenteeism
School A	95%	6%
School B	95%	12%
School C	95%	16%
School D	93%	16%
School E	93%	24%
School F	93%	28%
School G	90%	36%
School H	90%	42%
School I	90%	48%

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Counting chronically absent students is far more precise, as the snapshot illustrates. Having an average daily attendance of 90% is a serious problem, no matter what, but the degree can vary a great deal. At School I, almost half of the students are chronically absent, whereas the number is closer to one-third at School F. We see similar, though less dramatic, variation for elementary schools with 93% and 95% attendance.

In 2008, the New York City Department of Education developed systems to calculate the percentage of students who were chronically absent or at risk of becoming so. Principals also can easily see a list of students who need help with attendance, offering useful information for teachers, guidance counselors or others who are in a position to talk to students and work with families on whatever issues are keeping students from attending regularly. New York state also recently embraced the figure, requiring all districts to collect the information and launching an expansive new web site, Every Student Present, to give educators new tools for tackling absenteeism in their schools. Other states and large cities are following suit with aggressive attendance campaigns of their own.

— Kim Nauer

his team at Johns Hopkins University gave the project high marks, especially for using success mentors to connect with students and their families. A student's success mentor was charged with checking in with the student frequently and working with school staff to resolve problems that were keeping kids from coming to school regularly. The success mentors, especially for junior high and high school students, also could be a helpful ear. "These kids just really want someone to hear them," said Jennifer Palacio, a success mentor at the time.

Most schools in the pilot program tried to get everyone who was working on attendance — the principals, mentors, guidance staff, social workers, and others — in the same room on a regular basis to review progress and assess problems. Some schools like Mitchell's managed to make this happen; others didn't. Ideally, there was a weekly, principal-led meeting of the attendance team, which enabled everyone to check in and make plans for the roster of students they were working on. The pilot project's director at the time, Leslie Cornfeld, felt this was a crucial part of the project. Those who were able to schedule the meetings led the effort in a "much more methodical, higher impact way," she noted.

The battle continues

A lot has happened since Bloomberg's pilot ended in 2013. President Barack Obama incorporated many aspects of the work — most notably the success mentors — into My Brother's Keeper, a White House-led initiative to address educational opportunity gaps facing young men of color. In addition, the idea of tracking and responding to chronic absenteeism is gaining traction across the United States, with both the federal government and many states now demanding that school districts count the number of chronically absent students and, ideally, respond in some productive way.

But doing this well, year in and year out, has proven tough for principals in high-needs schools. Researchers at the Center for New York City Affairs observed repeated instances of backsliding, in which principals made tremendous headway among their chronically absent students, only to see their gains slide with the arrival of the next cohort of young absentees. It's also hard to sustain passion for dealing with absenteeism when, inevitably, other priorities or crises arise.

Principals should take this detective work seriously. It's a good way to identify students who are at risk academically.

Principal Mitchell knows this all too well. At the end of that successful 2011-12 school year, some 17% of students were chronically absent. In the years that followed, that number climbed, dipped, and climbed again, ultimately landing at 26% by the end of the 2014-15 school year.

Mitchell reflects on possible reasons. The frequent attendance meetings she used to host went to the wayside as she focused on other priorities, like helping her staff master the state's new Common Core learning standards. (As a result of that focus, P.S. 48's test scores have continued to climb, from a 25% pass rate in English language arts in 2013-14 to a 45% pass rate in 2015-16, and from a 23% pass rate in math in 2013-14 to a 37% pass rate in 2015-16.)

New York City also has stopped providing outside success mentors to Mitchell's school. She could use her own staff, which powered much of the improvement in the 2012 school year. Unfortunately, the school has doubled in size — jumping from 330 kids to 620 over the last four years — greatly reducing Mitchell's ability to use her staff for anything but mission-critical work.

Mitchell plans to aggressively take on absenteeism once again this coming school year. She advises other principals with the same challenges to keep their eyes on their absenteeism numbers, to not let their vision slip. "Once you have those numbers, what you do with them is a whole other thing. You have to use your school community to really take this on," she says. "It's a constant battle, and it starts anew every year." K