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CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN THE ELEMENTARY GRADES

At a Glance

Although high rates of absenteeism at the secondary school level have long been recognized as a significant problem, low attendance in elementary schools is often overlooked. Research suggests that one in 10 students younger than grade three nationwide is considered chronically absent, defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year. This Information Capsule reviews the causes and consequences of early chronic absenteeism. In addition, research-based strategies for combating early chronic absenteeism are provided. Attendance rates at Miami-Dade County Public Schools' elementary schools are summarized and a brief description of a multidisciplinary truancy prevention and intervention pilot program operating in 10 of the District's schools is provided. Suggestions for elementary schools, based on the research reviewed for this paper, include starting interventions early, addressing parental barriers and challenges that inhibit consistent school attendance, coordinating with parents and community agencies to intervene on behalf of chronically absent students, and contacting parents as soon as troubling patterns of absences begin to appear.

It has long been recognized that chronic absenteeism in middle and high school is a significant problem, but rates of absenteeism in kindergarten and first grade often equal those found in secondary schools. Although the early elementary years are a time when it is most critical for children to be in school to build the foundation of academic and social skills needed for future educational success, low attendance rates in elementary schools are often overlooked (Chang & Jordan, 2010; Education Commission of the States, 2010; Sparks, 2010a; Romero & Lee, 2007).

Since studies indicate that chronic absenteeism usually begins in the elementary grades, the start of elementary school is the critical time to shape attendance patterns. Researchers have noted that efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism become more difficult as students age, suggesting that the earlier intervention occurs, the more likely it is to succeed (Sparks, 2010a; Joseph, 2008; Nauer et al., 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008; Smink & Reimer, 2005; Railsback, 2004; Sheverbush et al., 2000). Hedy Chang, Director of Attendance Counts, suggested that interventions focused on improving attendance begin when children are in preschool (Chang, 2010a).

Incidence of Chronic Absenteeism

Studies show that one in 10 students younger than grade three nationwide is considered chronically absent, defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year (Chang & Jordan, 2010; Sparks, 2010a). Researchers from the National Center for Children in Poverty, using nationwide data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort, found that over 11 percent of children in kindergarten and almost 9 percent in

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first grade were chronically absent. Chronic absence fell to 6 percent among third graders and 5 percent among fifth graders (Chang & Romero, 2008). Similarly, the National Center for Education Statistics (2006) reported that 19 percent of fourth grade students nationwide missed three or more school days in the previous month.

Researchers have also found that rates of chronic early absence vary widely across districts. The National Center for Children in Poverty's study found that, across nine localities, chronic absenteeism ranged from five to 25 percent for students enrolled in kindergarten through grade 3 (Chang & Romero, 2008). The Education Commission of the States (2010) reported that within different schools in the same district, chronic early absenteeism can actually range from less than one percent to over 50 percent. Research also suggests that attendance during the first four to six weeks of the school year is predictive of attendance during the remainder of the year (New York City Department of Education, 2010).

The National Center for Children in Poverty's analysis of Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort, data found that in kindergarten and grades 1, 3, and 5, American Indian children had the highest absentee rates and Asian and White children had the lowest rates. For example, in kindergarten, American Indian students missed an average of 10.9 days, Hispanic students missed an average of 5.9 days, Black students missed an average of 5.3 days, and White and Asian students missed an average of 4.8 days. For all ethnic groups, attendance improved over the elementary grades. By the fifth grade, however, American Indian children continued to miss, on average, twice as many school days as their peers (Romero & Lee, 2007). Similarly, the National Center for Education Statistics (2006) found that the percentage of fourth grade students who reported missing three or more days of school in the previous month was lowest for Asian students (13 percent) and highest for American Indian students (25 percent). Eighteen percent of White fourth graders and 21 percent each of Black and Hispanic fourth graders reported missing three or more days of school in the previous month.

Causes of Chronic Absenteeism

Researchers have found that an array of factors leads to chronic absenteeism and that its causes vary from school to school. For example, some schools have high rates of asthma or a large population of unstable families. Other schools just need a better way to contact parents when children are absent. Absences are also associated with cultural issues such as language barriers and extended family vacations. Some students miss school with the active encouragement or consent of their parents (Nauer et al., 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008a; Reid, 2005; Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, n.d.). Kearney and Bensaheb (2006) estimated that as many as 80 percent of school absences are due to legitimate reasons, including poor weather conditions, observance of religious holidays, or important family functions such as funerals.

For many children, problems at home prevent them from attending school regularly. Researchers have found that chronic early absenteeism is at times a signal of much more serious problems in a family, such as poverty, high rates of mobility, inconsistent parenting, domestic violence, mental illness, or criminal justice system involvement (John W. Gardner Center, 2010; Nauer et al., 2008; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

The National Center for Children in Poverty analyzed data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort, to determine the impact of various maternal and family risk factors on elementary students' rates of chronic absenteeism. Risk factors included poverty, single-parent homes, mothers with poor health, and large families. Findings indicated that the greater the exposure to maternal and family risk, the greater the number of absences. The researchers reported that regardless of ethnicity or family income level, kindergarten students with three or more risk factors averaged almost three times more absences than their peers not exposed to any risk factors. In addition, children with three or more maternal or family risk factors were more likely to become chronic absentees. For example, 21 percent of kindergarten children with three or more risk factors were chronic absentees, compared to 5 percent of kindergarten children without any risk factors (Romero & Lee, 2008).

Chang and Romero (2008) hypothesized that when a school's rate of chronic early absenteeism is relatively low, it is most likely related to economic and social challenges affecting the ability of individual families to ensure their children attend school regularly. However, when a larger percentage of elementary school children are chronically absent (for example, more than 20 percent of the school's population), the researchers suggested that a systemic issue facing schools or communities may be causing the excessive absences.

Researchers stress that educators' understanding of the situation at each particular school is the key to increasing attendance (Nauer et al., 2008; Railsback, 2004; United Way of Santa Cruz County, 2001). For example, examination of referrals to Louisiana's Truancy Assessment and Service Centers (TASC) program for elementary school children concluded that students' behavioral problems were the most common reason for absenteeism (Joseph, 2008). However, Holbert, Wu, and Stark's (2002) evaluation of Oregon's School Attendance Initiative (SAI) found that elementary children's chronic health problems were the most likely cause of excessive absenteeism.

Studies have identified the following factors as potential contributors to chronic absenteeism in elementary schools:

- **Poverty.** Schools serving large numbers of students living in poverty have been found to have significantly higher rates of chronic absenteeism than other schools. Attending school regularly is critical for these children because they are less likely to have the resources that will help them make up for lost time in the classroom (Sparks, 2010a; Chang & Romero, 2008; Hocking, 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008a; Railsback, 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

The National Center for Children in Poverty investigated how family income impacted early absenteeism. The researchers (Romero & Lee, 2008) found:

- 21 percent of kindergartners who were living below the poverty line were chronically absent, compared to less than 8 percent of kindergartners living above the poverty line;
- 25 percent of kindergarten children whose mothers were on welfare were chronic absentees, compared to 9 percent of their non-welfare peers;
- 22 percent of kindergarten children in food-insecure households were chronic absentees, compared to 9 percent of their peers in food-secure households; and
- 19 percent of kindergarten children living with unemployed mothers were chronically absent, compared to 8 percent of kindergartners living with employed mothers.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) reported that fourth grade students who were eligible for free or reduced price lunch were more likely to be absent from school three or more days during the previous month than those who were not eligible (23 percent versus 17 percent, respectively). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Health Interview Survey was administered to over 11,000 children aged 17 and under nationwide. Six percent of students with a family income of less than \$35,000 reported missing 11 or more days of school in the past year, compared to less than 5 percent of students with a family income of \$35,000 or more (Bloom et al., 2010).

- **Parents' work schedules.** Researchers have found that parents who work the night shift or hold multiple jobs contribute to chronic absenteeism when they are too exhausted to bring their children to school (Chang & Jordan, 2010; Sparks, 2010a; Chang & Romero, 2008; Hocking, 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008).
- **Lack of parental understanding.** Some parents don't understand the importance of regular school attendance, especially at the kindergarten level. They let their children stay home because they are unaware that academic expectations in the early elementary grades have increased since they were students. Many parents are simply unfamiliar with school attendance laws (Sparks, 2010b; Hocking, 2008; Nauer et al., 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008).

- **Parents' negative attitudes.** Parents may be reluctant to send their children to school if their own experiences with education were negative (Chang & Romero, 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008). Sheverbush, Smith, and DeGruson's (2000) study of the Truancy Diversion Program in Kansas found that almost all of the participating parents reported that they had negative experiences when they were students themselves and found it difficult to model positive attitudes about the educational process.
- **Inconsistent parenting.** Many absences are linked to limited or inconsistent parental involvement in school preparation routines. Parents contribute to chronic absenteeism when they fail to establish fixed bedtimes or homework times, don't encourage their children to get ready for school in the morning, don't provide their children with breakfast, or leave their children to find their own way to school (Chang, 2009a; Hocking, 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008; Railsback, 2004).
- **Teenage mothers.** The National Center for Children in Poverty found that almost 22 percent of kindergarten children born to teenage mothers missed 10 percent or more of the school year, compared to 10 percent of kindergarten children born to mothers older than 18 years of age (Romero & Lee, 2008).
- **Single mothers.** The National Center for Children in Poverty reported that almost 16 percent of kindergarten students living in mother-only households were chronic absentees, compared to 10 percent of those living in two-parent households (Romero & Lee, 2008). The Centers for Disease Control's National Health Interview Survey found that children in single-mother families were almost twice as likely to report that they had been absent from school for 11 or more days in the past year compared to children in two-parent families (7 percent versus 4 percent, respectively) (Bloom et al., 2010).
- **Low maternal education.** Hocking (2008) reported that students whose parents attended college have lower rates of absenteeism. The National Center for Children in Poverty found that 22 percent of kindergarten children whose mothers had less than a high school education were chronic absentees, compared to 9 percent of kindergarten children whose mothers had completed at least high school (Romero & Lee, 2008).
- **Four or more children at home.** Analysis conducted by the National Center for Children in Poverty found that 15 percent of kindergarten children living in homes with four or more minors were chronic absentees, compared to 9 percent of kindergarten children in smaller families (Romero & Lee, 2008).
- **High rates of mobility.** Studies have found that children who move frequently have lower attendance rates. Children who are subject to multiple moves have few if any long-term relationships with teachers or peers. They may stay home from school to avoid continual adjustments to new school buildings, new curricula, new teaching methods, and new classmates. Children who sleep at a cousin's apartment one night and their grandmother's the next may have trouble getting to school from different neighborhoods (Education Commission of the States, 2009; Chang & Romero, 2008; Nauer et al., 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008; Railsback, 2004).
- **Lack of reliable transportation.** Transportation issues such as the bus not coming or the car not starting impact students' attendance rates. Children who take school buses tend to have lower rates of attendance than those who walk to school, because when they miss their bus, they may have no other way of getting to school (Balfanz et al., 2008; Chang & Romero, 2008; Hocking, 2008; Nauer et al., 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008).
- **Language and Cultural Barriers.** Children are at risk of higher rates of absenteeism when language or cultural barriers exist in the home. When parents do not speak English, they are unable to read attendance policies or other communications sent home by the school and are less likely to be involved in their children's education (Hocking, 2008; Nauer et al., 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008; Holbert et al., 2002; United Way of Santa Cruz County, 2001). The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) reported that fourth grade students were more likely to miss three or more days of school in the previous

month if a language other than English was spoken in the home. Nauer and colleagues (2008) suggested that some immigrant children may be absent more frequently because their families return to their home countries for extended vacations.

- **Academic problems.** When the curriculum is too challenging for students, it may lead to frustration and eventually increased rates of absenteeism (John W. Gardner Center, 2010; Hocking, 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008a). Reid (2005) reported that a higher proportion of chronic absentees underachieve in a range of subjects and have lower academic self-concepts compared to the general school-age population.
- **Transitions to new schools or grade levels.** Periods of transition can also increase school attendance problems. Examples of transition periods include entry into school at kindergarten; entry into a new school after moving into a new home; and beginning a new year in a new class. Transitions from preschool to kindergarten and from kindergarten to first grade can be especially stressful times for students, accompanied by reluctance or refusal to attend school (John W. Gardner Center, 2010; Education Commission of the States, 2009; Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008; Chang & Romero, 2008; United Way of Santa Cruz County, 2001).
- **Social and emotional immaturity.** Studies have found that children have lower attendance rates when they are less socially or emotionally mature. These children are more likely to exhibit low self-esteem, antisocial behavior, separation anxiety, or fear of school. Some emotionally immature students refuse to go to school because they are anxious or depressed about attending school or about socializing with classmates and teachers (Kearney, 2008; Romero & Lee, 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008; Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Reid, 2005; United Way of Santa Cruz County, 2001). Kearney and Bensaheb (2006) stated that between 5 and 28 percent of young students are likely to display school refusal behavior at some point in their lives.
- **Conflicts at school.** Students who have poor or conflicting relationships with teachers or other students are more likely to miss school (John W. Gardner Center, 2010; Hocking, 2008). Children who are bullied also report avoiding school more frequently (John W. Gardner Center, 2010; Chang & Romero, 2008; Hocking, 2008; Joseph, 2008; Kearney, 2008; Reid, 2005; United Way of Santa Cruz County, 2001).
- **Children's health problems.** Chronic early absence can be a sign that children are not receiving needed medical care. When families lack access to health care, their children may not be immunized or they may spend all night in the emergency room for an illness that could have been treated in a doctor's office. The presence of a chronic disease, such as asthma, makes it even more difficult for children to attend school regularly (Balfanz et al., 2008; Chang & Romero, 2008; Hocking, 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008). Sundius and Farneth (2008a) reported that children with asthma are three times more likely to miss school than those without asthma. Data collected from the Centers for Disease Control's National Health Interview Survey indicated that 5 percent of children reported missing 11 or more days of school in the past 12 months due to illness or injury (Bloom et al., 2010).
- **Parents' health issues.** Researchers agree that when parents have serious medical or mental health issues, their children are less likely to attend school regularly (Chang, 2009a; Balfanz et al., 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008). The National Center for Children in Poverty found that kindergarten children whose mothers reported experiencing poor health were more than twice as likely as their counterparts to be chronic absentees (Romero & Lee, 2008). Excessive school absenteeism may also be related to parents' alcohol or other drug use (Mac Iver, 2010; Kearney, 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008).
- **Community violence.** Living in severely distressed neighborhoods can lead to increased student absenteeism. A community is considered severely distressed when its population shares at least three of the following four characteristics: high poverty rate; large percentage of single mothers; high concentration of high school dropouts; and high percentage of unemployed working age males. These neighborhoods

also suffer from a lack of strong community institutions that help to support children and their families, a shortage of positive role models, and a lack of community programs that encourage school attendance. High rates of violence and community crime may also affect the ability of families to find safe routes to get their children to and from school (John W. Gardner Center, 2010; Education Commission of the States, 2009; Balfanz et al., 2008; Chang & Romero, 2008; Hocking, 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008a).

The National Center for Children in Poverty did, however, find some evidence that when school quality was high, children living in high-risk communities were less likely to be chronically absent in the early grades. The researchers hypothesized that the families were more inclined to ensure that their children attended school regularly since it served as a safe haven from community violence (Chang & Romero, 2008).

Consequences of Chronic Absenteeism

When students are not in school, they miss critical academic and social learning opportunities (Chang, 2010b; John W. Gardner Center, 2010; Balfanz et al., 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008b; Chang & Romero, 2008; Romero & Lee, 2007; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Research shows that consistent elementary school attendance ensures that students gain a strong foundation for subsequent learning and that chronic absenteeism has a negative impact on children, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, or income level (Gottfried, 2010; Sparks 2010b; Education Commission of the States, 2009; Chang & Romero, 2008). Studies have concluded that excessive absenteeism has the following negative consequences:

- **Lower levels of academic achievement.** Numerous studies have concluded that chronic absenteeism in kindergarten or first grade leads to lower levels of academic achievement in later grades (Chang & Jordan, 2010; John W. Gardner Center, 2010; Gottfried, 2010; Sparks, 2010b; Chang & Romero, 2008; Nauer et al., 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008b; Roby, 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

Analyses conducted by the National Center for Children in Poverty found that greater absenteeism in kindergarten was associated with lower achievement by the end of first grade. Children who missed 10 percent or more of the school year in kindergarten scored five points lower, on average, on first grade tests of reading, mathematics, and general knowledge than students who were absent up to 3 percent of the school year. The impact of chronic absence on test performance was most pronounced for low-income and Hispanic children. For example, the first grade reading scores of Hispanic children who were chronically absent in kindergarten were significantly lower than the scores of chronic absentees of other ethnicities (Chang & Romero, 2008; Romero & Lee, 2007).

Gottfried's (2010) analysis of third and fourth grade students in Philadelphia elementary schools concluded that there was a significant relationship between attendance and achievement. His study found that attendance predicted both grade point averages and reading and mathematics performance on the Stanford Achievement Test.

- **Chronic absenteeism in later grades.** Studies suggest that chronic absence as early as kindergarten is predictive of chronic absence in later grades (The Baltimore City Student Attendance Work Group, 2010; Sparks, 2010a; Chang, 2009b; Romero & Lee, 2007; United Way of Santa Cruz County, 2001).
- **Student disengagement.** Chronic absenteeism is a strong indicator of student disengagement. Students who miss a substantial number of school days have less opportunities to develop social skills and meaningful relationships with classmates and teachers (Gottfried, 2010; Sparks, 2010b; Hocking, 2008; Sheverbush et al., 2000).
- **Dropout.** Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have found that students who drop out of school were absent more often than other students beginning as early as first grade (The Baltimore City Student Attendance Work Group, 2010; Chang, 2010a; John W. Gardner Center, 2010; Gottfried, 2010; Sparks,

2010b; Education Commission of the States, 2009; Kearney, 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008b; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Allensworth and Easton (2007) reported that missing 20 percent of school is often a better predictor of dropout than eighth grade test scores. Sheldon and Epstein (2004) concluded: "Studies of dropout show that leaving school is merely the culminating act of a long withdrawal process from school forecast by absenteeism in the early grades."

Neild, Balfanz, and Herzog (2007) followed cohorts of Philadelphia students and found that sixth graders who missed more than 20 percent of the school year had a 75 percent chance of dropping out of school some time before graduation. In Baltimore, poor attendance also predicted high school dropout: 65 percent of sixth grade students who consistently attended school graduated, compared to only 7 percent of chronically absent students (Chang, 2009b).

- **Future risk-taking behaviors.** Studies have found that excessive absences in the early grades are correlated with future risk-taking behaviors, such as tobacco, alcohol, and drug use, and involvement with the criminal justice system (John W. Gardner Center, 2010; Gottfried, 2010; Sundius & Farneth, 2008b; Smink & Reimer, 2005).
- **Disruption of classroom instruction.** When chronic absenteeism is widespread, it impacts students who are not absent. If substantial numbers of students in a class miss a great deal of instructional time, teachers are required to slow down the pace of instruction for the entire class to help absent students catch up when they return. The only other alternative is for teachers to maintain their normal instructional pace, which usually results in a large number of chronically absent students who are unable to master the daily lessons, complete their homework, or pass classroom tests and quizzes (Chang & Jordan, 2010; Education Commission of the States, 2009; Balfanz et al., 2008; Nauer et al., 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008b).
- **Reduced school funding.** Chronic absenteeism decreases the educational resources available to all students by reducing state funding, which is usually based on school attendance (Chang & Jordan, 2010; Smink & Reimer, 2005).

Strategies for Combating Chronic Absenteeism

Interventions to reduce chronic absenteeism are most effective when schools are joined by parents, community agencies, employers, and youth service organizations to keep children in school every day. Researchers recommend that schools identify specific strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism based on their unique strengths and weaknesses. They also point out that it is essential for schools to establish ongoing interventions that emphasize the importance of regular attendance, rather than short-term, one-shot efforts that target only high-risk students (John W. Gardner Center, 2010; Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008; Chang & Romero, 2008; Joseph, 2008; Nauer et al., 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008a; Smink & Reimer, 2005; Railsback, 2004; Gerrard et al., 2003; Williams, 2002). Given the variety of factors that play a role in school attendance problems, the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (2008) stated that "it is essential to avoid lumping all youngsters together" when designing interventions.

Researchers have identified the following school-based strategies designed to promote consistent elementary school attendance:

- **Strong attendance policies.** School attendance policies must be strong and clear. Student Advocacy (2008) recommends that attendance policies:
 - ensure that all families provide telephone numbers where they can be reached during the day, to be kept on file at the school;
 - indicate that a staff member will contact the family whenever the parent fails to call the school about their child's absence;

- describe the steps, including actions and time frames, that will be taken if the family fails to respond to the school's telephone calls (for example, a letter from the principal is sent after three unexcused absences or a home visit is scheduled);
 - indicate what actions will be taken if no family member responds to the school's efforts (for example, information on community-based organizations will be provided to the family or the local police will be asked to verify the family's residence); and
 - document all efforts to contact families.
- **Attendance monitoring.** Researchers emphasize that it is important for staff to understand why students are not attending school before they can implement effective strategies. By tracking absences, schools can identify these children early and start to intervene and districts, in turn, can identify entire schools or communities that have attendance difficulties. Social workers have been found to play a critical role in identifying students at-risk for chronic absenteeism, as well as parents who lack effective parenting skills. Some schools even track the attendance of students living in homeless shelters (Chang & Jordan, 2010; The New York City Department of Education, 2010; Partnership for Children and Youth, 2010; Sparks, 2010b; Education Commission of the States, 2009; Chang & Romero, 2008; Joseph, 2008; Nauer et al., 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008; Railsback, 2004; Gerrard et al., 2003; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; United Way of Santa Cruz County, 2001; Sheverbush et al., 2000).

Researchers caution that most elementary schools focus on daily attendance figures and don't track individual student absences. However, daily attendance counts can mask chronic absenteeism. For example, an elementary school with 400 students and 95 percent average daily attendance can still have 60 chronically absent students (15 percent of the student population) (Chang, 2010b; Education Commission of the States, 2009; Balfanz et al., 2008).

- **Removal of family barriers.** While parents are responsible for getting their children to school every day, schools must recognize and address the barriers and challenges that may inhibit them from doing so. Family issues that may prevent regular attendance include poverty, high rates of mobility, violence in the home, and health, mental health, or substance abuse problems (Chang & Romero, 2008; Holbert et al., 2002; United Way of Santa Cruz County, 2001). Social workers, provided by the school district or a collaborating public agency, can help families identify and secure needed social, medical, mental health, and economic resources (Chang & Romero, 2008; Nauer et al., 2008). Sundius and Farneth (2008a) also pointed out that community agencies must assist schools by identifying and removing transportation, health, and safety barriers to regular attendance.

Cultural and language differences can also result in reduced attendance rates. To engage all parents in their children's education, many schools send information regarding attendance and other school policies home in multiple languages. Some schools have even hired caseworkers to communicate with parents and help overcome cultural misunderstandings (Nauer et al., 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008).

- **Parental involvement.** Studies have found that attendance is higher when schools actively engage parents in their children's education. Uninvolved parents have a harder time understanding how their children are adversely affected when they miss school (John W. Gardner Center, 2010; Sparks, 2010b; Chang & Romero, 2008). Researchers have suggested that schools take the following actions to involve parents:
 - Provide information on school attendance policies to all parents, in languages other than English, in a low-literacy style, and in multiple formats, including letters, posters, pamphlets, and presentations. Schools can send a summary of the attendance policy by mail at the start of each school year and ask parents to sign and return a statement indicating that the policy has been read and is understood. In addition, parents should be encouraged to seek clarification from school officials regarding any aspect of the school's attendance policy that is unclear. Parents should be provided with the name and telephone number of a school contact person to call about their child's absences (Student Advocacy, 2008; Gandy & Schultz, 2007).

- Communicate the importance of regular attendance to parents in their home language and in culturally appropriate ways. In the early elementary grades, parents often let their children stay home because they don't understand that academic expectations have increased in those grades since they were students. Schools must communicate to parents that coming to school, especially in the early years, is important to children's academic success. Parent orientations should be held to explain school expectations and attendance policies. Schools can incorporate attendance into parent workshops, for example, by offering strategies for getting children to school every day. Some schools ask parents to sign a contract stipulating that their child will attend school on a regular basis (Sparks, 2010b; Chang & Romero, 2008; Nauer et al., 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008b; Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).
- Contact families when children miss extended periods of time. Researchers have found that timely telephone calls to the parents of absent students, rather than impersonal letters, are associated with improved student attendance. Parents should be called as soon as troubling patterns of absences begin to appear and staff should make every effort to speak with parents personally instead of leaving messages on their answering machines (The Baltimore City Student Attendance Work Group, 2010; Chang & Romero, 2008; Hocking, 2008; Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Railsback, 2004; Gerrard et al., 2003; Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, n.d.). The National Center for Children in Poverty's analysis of nine urban locations found that the school district that contacted parents as soon as students missed three days of school and conducted home visits after five days had the lowest level of chronic absenteeism (Chang & Romero, 2008).
- Provide frequent feedback to parents about their children's attendance, including access to their children's attendance information on the school's Web site (Kearney, 2008; Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).
- Welcome families into their children's schools. Ultimately, parents are the school's main source of support for getting children to school. Sharing ideas with parents and making them feel like valuable team members, rather than team problems, increases parents' positive perceptions of the school. Research has found that parents of poor attenders are less positive about school and more likely to keep their children out of school (Reid, 2005; Railsback, 2004; Sheverbush et al., 2000; Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, n.d.).
- Conduct focus groups with parents to learn what resources schools can provide to support families. Results from focus groups can be used to develop parent surveys that solicit input from a broad array of parents (Sparks, 2010a; Chang & Romero, 2008).
- Provide support programs that address families' social, medical, and economic needs. Schools can help to enroll children in school, alleviate child care and transportation problems, and screen for speech, medical, or other disorders (Chang & Romero, 2008; Kearney, 2008).
- Conduct family counseling sessions. Studies have found that counseling sessions that build on families' strengths and resources can be an effective strategy for reducing rates of chronic absenteeism. For example, school counselors can establish morning routines for parents that will make it easier for them to get their children to school every morning (Railsback, 2004; Gerrard et al., 2003; Sheverbush et al., 2000).
- Do not inadvertently create attendance problems by asking parents to pick up misbehaving students before the school day ends or prohibiting misbehaving children from going on field trips. Student Advocacy (2008) maintains that these actions send the wrong message to parents and may encourage them to keep their children home from school if they are afraid the children will just be sent home anyway.

- **Campaign to educate the public.** Schools should launch a public education campaign that emphasizes the importance of daily attendance; reminds parents about their legal responsibility to enroll their children in school and ensure that they attend daily; and informs parents about school- and community-based resources that are available to address any barriers to attendance they may face. Parents and community members may be unaware of the importance of regular school attendance, especially at the early grades (Education Commission of the States, 2009; Sundius & Farneth, 2008a; Kearney, 2008).
- **Coordination with community agencies.** Research has consistently found that schools can improve attendance through strong school and community partnerships that provide comprehensive services for families (Chang, 2010a; New York City Department of Education, 2010; Education Commission of the States, 2009; Chang & Romero, 2008; Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Railsback, 2004). Partnerships to consider include:
 - charitable agencies that donate food or clothing;
 - health clinics that offer low-income services, as well as asthma and head lice management;
 - services offered by lawyers and consumer credit counselors;
 - youth organizations that provide child care, mentoring, tutoring, and after-school programs;
 - agencies that offer mental health services and suicide or other hot lines; and
 - organizations that provide family-oriented social services that range from housing assistance to drug and alcohol treatment (The Baltimore City Student Attendance Work Group, 2010; Sparks, 2010a; Chang, 2009b; Hocking, 2008; Nauer et al., 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008a).

Hocking (2008) cautioned that there have been some difficulties with school and community collaborations. Reasons for these problems include:

- workloads for service agencies are extremely high, often delaying the start of interventions;
- some agencies are very large and small cases may be overlooked;
- families sometimes cannot be located (for example, they become homeless or they move but don't want their children to change schools);
- some parents are unwilling to participate in interventions; and
- school interventions can't be implemented if the student is absent.

Researchers recommend that schools assign a case manager to families who are receiving a variety of community services. The case manager, who may be a school staff member or an individual working at a reputable non-profit agency, is responsible for coordinating the in-school and community services received by each family (Student Advocacy, 2008). The Children's Aid Society's Katherine Eckstein stated: "Part of the problem is that schools often have 15 different programs in a building and no one is thinking about the coordination and integration between them. That's the role that this director plays." She added: "We need to better coordinate the existing systems that are supporting children and families" (Nauer et al., 2008).

- **Engaging curriculum.** Studies have found that attendance is higher when schools provide a rich and engaging learning experience with stable, experienced, and skilled teachers. Some researchers have suggested that the emphasis on standardized tests under NCLB depresses attendance. As schools narrow the curriculum in an attempt to raise reading and math test scores, they may cut or reduce the time spent on art, music, physical education, recess, and other activities that many children enjoy most. Without these activities, children's attachment to school and motivation to attend decrease (Nauer et al., 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008a). Research has also indicated that excessive absences may be a response to ineffective teaching, high rates of staff turnover or teacher absenteeism, or disorder in the classroom (Chang & Romero, 2008; Nauer et al., 2008; Reid, 2005; Smink & Reimer, 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Gerrard et al., 2003).

- **Preschool.** Researchers have concluded that children are more prepared for entry into elementary school when they have attended high-quality preschool programs (Chang & Romero, 2008; United Way of Santa Cruz County, 2001). According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, children who spent the year prior to kindergarten in the care of family members were absent more often than their peers who attended preschool, regardless of ethnicity and family income. One possible explanation for this finding is that families of children attending preschool centers have already developed the routine of getting to school on a regular basis (Chang & Romero, 2008).
- **After-school programs.** Studies show that after-school programs and activities reduce the likelihood that students will miss school. These programs strengthen students' feelings of belonging, give them the opportunity to make new friends, and allow them to feel a sense of accomplishment, which in turn increases their engagement in school (The Baltimore City Student Attendance Work Group, 2010; Sundius & Farneth, 2008a; Reid, 2005; Smink & Reimer, 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Gerrard et al., 2003). Epstein and Sheldon (2002) found that schools with after-school programs reported a larger increase in average daily student attendance than schools with no after-school programs. In addition, schools with after-school programs reported a decrease in chronic absences, while schools with no-after school programs reported an increase in the percentage of students who were chronically absent.
- **Early morning child care.** Researchers have found that the establishment of early morning child care programs increases student attendance. Several studies have discovered that parents' overnight work schedules contribute to their children's chronic absenteeism because some of these parents fall asleep before they can bring their children to school. One elementary school in Rhode Island saw its rate of chronic absenteeism decrease from 21 percent to 10 percent after opening an early morning program that allowed parents to drop their children off after their night shift ended but before they went to sleep. The early morning program also provided transportation to children when necessary and offered services to address social and economic problems (Chang & Jordan, 2010; Sparks, 2010a).
- **Positive school climate.** Studies have found that attendance is higher when schools are perceived by students and parents as welcoming, cheerful, and safe (The Baltimore City Student Attendance Work Group, 2010; Balfanz et al., 2008; Chang & Romero, 2008; Kearney, 2008; Nauer et al., 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008a; Reid, 2005; Railsback, 2004; Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, n.d.).

Children who are bullied on school premises are more likely to be chronic absentees. School-wide programs designed to reduce bullying have been found to increase attendance rates (Chang & Romero, 2008; Kearney, 2008; Student Advocacy, 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008a; Reid, 2005; Smink & Reimer, 2005).

Several studies have found that large schools have more attendance problems than smaller schools. Conditions present in small schools that appear to be linked to lower levels of absenteeism include teachers' greater familiarity with individual students and student feelings of greater safety in their schools (Railsback, 2004; Roby, 2004; Gerrard et al., 2003; Wasley et al., 2000). Sheldon and Epstein's (2004) study of 39 schools found that rates of chronic absenteeism were equivalent among students attending urban and suburban schools (5.1 percent and 5.6 percent, respectively); however, chronic absenteeism was more prevalent (7.2 percent) when urban schools were larger (schools in the study ranged in size from 135 to 1,753 students).

- **Positive relationships between students and school staff.** Researchers agree that students need strong, positive relationships with teachers and other adults at school. Studies have found that attendance rates are higher when students believe staff at their school are genuinely concerned about their absences and want to help. When students are absent, experts recommend that school staff talk with them immediately about why they were gone and convey that they are aware of their absence and care that they are at school (Student Advocacy, 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008a; Reid, 2005; Smink & Reimer, 2005; Railsback, 2004; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheverbush et al., 2000; Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, n.d.).

- **Mentors.** Research indicates that children who are mentored have higher attendance rates. Mentoring ensures that children have a sustained and caring relationship with a trusted adult. As part of attendance interventions, mentors can meet with students and parents to discuss absences, identify problems that lead to absences, and connect students to existing school resources and community-based organizations (New York City Department of Education, 2010; Smink & Reimer, 2005; Railsback, 2004).
- **Access to health care.** In order to prevent avoidable illnesses from becoming a cause of extended absence, many schools offer access to preventative health care. Children are provided with immunizations and comprehensive vision, dental, and hearing screenings. Some schools operate in partnership with public health departments, community clinics, medical facilities, and even local medical or dental schools (Chang & Romero, 2008; Kearney, 2008). The United Way of Santa Cruz County in California (2001) recommended that schools also assist parents with their health insurance enrollment.

Health-based programs designed to reduce the spread of communicable disease within schools have been found to lower the number of absences due to illness. For example, some schools have lowered absenteeism by emphasizing hand washing and use of hand sanitizer and providing flu immunizations (Kearney, 2008). According to Kearney and Bensaheb (2006), several studies have found that school-based asthma interventions, including student access to peak flow meters and the provision of an emergency call telephone number, reduce absences due to illness by up to 67 percent. Kearney and Bensaheb (2006) also reported that lice management programs, including active surveillance, education, and the provision of lice combs to families, have been related to reduced absenteeism in some but not all cases.

- **Provision of needed supplies to families.** Many schools provide families with alarm clocks to ensure they will wake up to take their children to school. Others keep a stockroom of supplies, such as uniforms, books, pencils, and pens, that are made available to students who need them. Programs addressing chronic absenteeism have found that some children are embarrassed to go to school when they lack the needed supplies or clean, suitable clothing (Sparks, 2010a; Chang & Romero, 2008; Nauer et al., 2008).
- **Universal meal programs.** Studies have found that universal free lunch and in-classroom breakfasts in high-poverty and high-absence schools increase student attendance. The all-student feature of meal programs is crucial because it reduces the stigma associated with participation in these programs (Nauer et al., 2008; Sundius & Farneth, 2008a).
- **Incentives.** Studies have produced mixed results on the practice of offering incentives for good student attendance. Some researchers have found that incentives motivate attendance and advocate that schools offer either material rewards (such as pencils, toys, or financial stipends to parents) or emotional rewards (such as extra recess time or the opportunity to dress casually one day) for excellent attendance records. Other researchers have concluded that external rewards do not produce long-term behavioral changes and therefore should not be used to increase attendance (Attendance Counts, 2010; The Baltimore City Student Attendance Work Group, 2010; Chang & Romero, 2008; Hocking, 2008; Kearney, 2008; Railsback, 2004; Gerrard et al., 2003; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; United Way of Santa Cruz County, 2001). More research is needed to determine the impact of incentives on student attendance.
- **Publication of good attendance.** Many schools post and announce daily, weekly, and monthly attendance rates. Research suggests that the publication of good attendance has the greatest impact on students with occasional attendance problems. Studies have not confirmed that it has an effect on students with chronic absentee problems (Railsback, 2004; Gerrard et al., 2003).
- **Referral to court officers.** When all else fails, some schools refer chronically absent elementary students and their parents to court officers. Early referrals to the court system address chronic absenteeism before students get older and irregular attendance patterns become more deeply entrenched (Cart, 2010; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

Epstein and Sheldon (2002) and Sheldon and Epstein (2004) conducted studies to determine which school-based interventions were most effective at reducing absenteeism. Their studies are summarized below.

- Epstein and Sheldon (2002) analyzed the relationship between attendance rates and school practices designed to reduce absenteeism at 12 elementary schools. The practices found to have the strongest positive associations with both daily attendance and reduced chronic absenteeism included:
 - awards to students for improved attendance, including parties, gift certificates, and recognition at assemblies;
 - telephone calls to parents when students were absent;
 - providing families with the name and telephone number of a school contact person with whom to discuss attendance issues;
 - workshops to educate parents about attendance policies, procedures, and consequences; and
 - after-school programs, which appeared to motivate students to attend school in order to participate in activities that were organized as part of the after-school programs.

- As a follow-up to their 2002 study, Sheldon and Epstein (2004) analyzed the effects of family and community involvement activities on rates of chronic absenteeism at 39 schools (29 elementary and 10 secondary schools). They examined each school’s rate of chronic absenteeism and administered surveys to school staff to determine if schools had implemented 14 attendance-focused activities. Ten of the activities represented schools’ efforts to involve families and community members in ways that supported student attendance. The other four activities focused mainly on students to encourage good attendance or correct chronic absence. The researchers found that a history of chronic absenteeism was the strongest predictor of current chronic absenteeism; that is, schools with attendance problems one year tended to have problems the next year as well. On average, schools reported implementing over eight practices to help reduce the percentage of students missing 20 or more days of school each year. Analyses indicated that schools implementing more of the 14 practices reported lower levels of chronic absenteeism. In particular, even after controlling for the strong effects of prior absenteeism, communicating with students and families about attendance, celebrating good attendance with students and families, and connecting chronically absent students with community mentors measurably reduced students’ chronic absenteeism from one year to the next.

On a Local Note

During the 2009-10 school year student attendance at the District’s elementary schools averaged 95.67 percent. As can be seen in Table 1 below, student attendance at Miami-Dade County Public Schools’ (M-DCPS) elementary schools remained relatively stable from 2005-06 to 2009-10, ranging from a low of 94.86 percent in 2005-06 to a high of 96.26 percent in 2007-08.

Table 1. M-DCPS Elementary School Attendance, 2005-06 to 2008-09

Data obtained from Attendance Services on individual schools for the 2009-10 school year indicate that

School Year	Student Attendance
2009-10	95.67%
2008-09	95.97%
2007-08	96.26%
2006-07	95.61%
2005-06	94.86%

student attendance at the District's elementary schools ranged from 87.49 percent to 98.21 percent.

As a part of the Education Compact with the City of Miami, the Miami Partnership of the Truancy Reduction Plan / Truancy Court Pilot Program was established during the 2007-08 school year. The program is a partnership between the City of Miami Mayor's Office, Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS), Eleventh Judicial Circuit Court, Miami-Dade Schools Police Department, Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, the Department of Children and Families, and other community agencies. The program has been operating in 10 schools and recently received funding to expand to 15 schools within the City of Miami. The existing 10 schools are within two feeder patterns, for a total of five elementary schools, three middle schools, and two high schools. The program will expand to a third feeder pattern, which will include three additional elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school later this year. The program is a truancy prevention, truancy intervention, and truancy court program that uses a multidisciplinary approach to improve student attendance and academic performance.

Students exhibiting a pattern of absenteeism are provided with a school site or community mentor and receive comprehensive services catered to the specific needs of their families. Teacher-counselors are assigned to schools and act as care coordinators for students who exhibit attendance problems. Program staff conduct home visits, coordinate parent and student conferences, and make referrals to appropriate community agencies. Truancy child study team meetings are conducted with students, parents, teacher-counselors, school resource officers, principals, and district staff; only when absenteeism continues after all resources have been exhausted through a series of three escalating meetings is a truancy petition filed by the Superintendent of Schools.

Community organizations that have participated in the program include Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Switchboard of Miami, Connect Familias, Regis House, University of Miami School of Nursing Culturally Informed Family Therapy for Adolescents (CIFTA) Program, PsychSolutions, Inc., Fresh Start, Department of Juvenile Justice, Department of Children and Families, Belafonte Tacolcy, Inc., and New Horizons Mental Health.

Program staff estimate that about 10,000 students have been served by the program to date. Analysis conducted by program staff on outcomes at the middle and senior high school level indicate that attendance rates improved at schools after the program was implemented. Program staff also reported that student achievement levels increased after they participated in the program.

Additional information regarding the Miami Partnership of the Truancy Reduction Plan / Truancy Court Pilot Program can be obtained by calling District/School Operations at (305) 995-2710.

Summary

It has long been recognized that high rates of absenteeism in middle and high school are significant problems, but low attendance rates in elementary schools are often overlooked. Studies have found that chronic absenteeism usually begins in the elementary grades and that efforts to change attendance patterns become more difficult as students age. Early chronic absenteeism disrupts classroom instruction, reduces the amount of funding schools receive from the state, and is associated with lower levels of academic achievement in later grades, chronic absenteeism in later grades, and higher dropout rates. Experts have concluded that the earlier intervention occurs, the more likely it is to succeed.

Research suggests that one in 10 students younger than grade three nationwide is considered chronically absent, defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year; however, rates of chronic early absence vary widely across districts and schools. Causes of chronic absenteeism include a variety of family risk factors, including poverty, inconsistent parenting, single-parent homes, high rates of mobility, and parent health problems. One study found that elementary students typified by three or more maternal or family risk factors averaged almost three times more absences than their peers not exposed to any family risk factors. Many students are absent from school because of their own health problems, academic difficulties, or conflicts

that cause them to actively avoid school. Severely distressed neighborhoods that lack strong community institutions and positive role models and are characterized by high rates of violence can also contribute to chronic absenteeism.

Early interventions that create partnerships between the school, students, families, and the community have been found to be most effective for reducing chronic absenteeism. School-based strategies designed to promote consistent elementary school attendance include identifying chronic absentees as soon as troubling attendance patterns begin to develop, communicating with parents about absences and the importance of regular school attendance, and coordinating with community agencies to provide student and family services. Schools have also reduced chronic absenteeism by providing before-school and after-school programs, offering an engaging curriculum taught by skilled teachers, creating a positive school climate, and providing children opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with school staff. In addition, effective school-based interventions establish support programs that address families' social, medical, and economic needs, such as access to preventative health care and universal student meal programs.

Student attendance at M-DCPS' elementary schools averaged 95.97 percent during the 2008-09 school year. The District operates the Miami Partnership of the Truancy Reduction Plan / Truancy Court Pilot Program in 10 City of Miami schools, using a multidisciplinary approach to improve student attendance and academic performance. Funding was recently received to expand the program to 15 schools within the City of Miami. Students exhibiting a pattern of absenteeism are provided with a mentor and receive comprehensive services catered to the specific needs of their families. Program staff conduct home visits, coordinate parent and student conferences, and make referrals to appropriate community agencies. Analyses conducted by program staff on outcomes at the middle and senior high school level indicate that attendance rates improved at schools after the program was implemented. Program staff also reported that the grade point averages of participating students increased and that the majority of participants made learning gains on the FCAT reading and mathematics.

Suggestions for elementary schools, gleaned from the research reviewed for this Information Capsule, include:

- Begin interventions to reduce chronic absenteeism early. Programs started at the beginning of elementary school are most likely to succeed.
- Design interventions that address the barriers and challenges that inhibit parents from getting their children to school every day.
- Parents should be contacted as soon as students miss three days of school and home visits conducted after five missed school days.
- Enlist the help of parents, community agencies, and youth service organizations to keep children in school every day. Interventions that collaborate with all stakeholders are most effective.

All reports distributed by Research Services can be accessed at <http://drs.dadeschools.net>.

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