Should daily attendance be a measure of success?

Prioritizing community building and student engagement

CASE STUDIES IN HIGH SCHOOL REDESIGN

Abstract

Nowell Academy in Providence, Rhode Island primarily serves pregnant and parenting, overaged, and undercredited high school students, 96% of whom have had past difficulties with consistent attendance. Nowell provides incentives for students to come to school by offering daycare services, learning experiences that connect curriculum to the real world, and resources like gas cards and gift cards for school supplies. Administrators noted they have "moved mountains'' in attendance, with rates rising to roughly 68% in recent school years. However, the extensive challenges young adults face outside of the classroom continue to make consistent attendance difficult, and because average attendance is a factor in Rhode Island's school performance ratings, Nowell is often compared to higher state averages for high school attendance. This has led some staff to want to continue working to raise attendance rates, both for accountability purposes and because of the importance of students engaging steadily in learning. Other staff feel it's more important to continue prioritizing relationship-building and engaging, real-world learning, since purely targeting improvements in attendance may not best serve the school's unique population. This case concludes with discussion questions for high school leaders working to boost students' engagement and ownership of their educational journeys, in addition to increasing attendance.

Teaching note

Leaders and design teams engaged in high school redesign are hungry for relevant learning materials that build our collective capacity for innovation. This document is part of a series of teaching cases featuring real-life scenarios from high schools grappling with design dilemmas. The cases were researched and developed by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), part of Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, and the Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University to generate a grounded, in-depth discussion of key issues related to innovation and equity in high school education. Common approaches to using teaching cases include:

- Asking participants to read the teaching case in advance.

- Using group time for discussion or presentations that focus on the questions at the end of the document. One set of questions invites participants to advise the school featured in the case, and a second set broadens the discussion to high school education.

- Concluding by asking participants to align themes in the discussion to the broader learning objectives they have as a group.

By Lisa Chu and Heather Casimere

KEYWORDS

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Introduction

Nowell Academy has effectively quadrupled its attendance rates since it opened in 2013. Staff described extremely low daily rates of attendance—in the teens—seven years ago, whereas recently, rates have hovered in the sixties.[1] This is a notable accomplishment, considering 96% of the school's population has a history of chronic absence prior to attending Nowell. Executing a vision spearheaded by its Executive Director, the school's leadership and staff have spent the last three years reimagining the school environment to be more welcoming by building relationships with students and prioritizing student wellness.

> "We're not just a regular school. We're a community. We're there for one another." - *Student*

Despite their accomplishments in student attendance and relationship-building, Nowell's staff continue to wrestle with getting some students to come to school. The extensive responsibilities young adults face outside of the classroom–like working to financially support their families and parenting their own children–can make it difficult for them to consistently attend classes. Challenges like students' past traumatic experiences with education systems, financial or housing insecurity, and mental health can create additional barriers.

The problem of student absenteeism extends beyond the Nowell community, especially since the onset of the pandemic. Nationwide, many students have faced additional barriers to attendance, such as decreased motivation due to lost connections to their teachers and peers, increased mental and physical health crises and concerns, transportation challenges, and economic challenges.[2] Before the pandemic, around 8 million students in the United States were considered chronically absent (i.e., they missed at least 10% of the school year). By spring 2022, that number doubled to around 16 million students.[3] This high number is alarming, as students who are chronically absent are at higher risk of lower academic achievement and dropping out of school.[4]

Nowell staff knows the risks of low attendance on future outcomes—after all, coming to school for classes and support is the main way students make progress. But staff feel conflicted about the possible unintended consequences of focusing most of their energy on raising daily attendance rates, which have begun to plateau around 65%. On the one hand, continuing to push for better attendance could mean more students have a chance to be better prepared for graduation and life after high school. On the other hand, exclusively focusing on daily attendance could require the school to take energy away from other ways of supporting students, such as designing more rigorous courses that help students build college- and career-ready skills. In the worst case, a narrow focus on attendance could actually undermine the school's mission if students show up at school but don't engage in learning, or drop out because they can't show up consistently.

Meanwhile, the Nowell team is grappling with meeting the state's narrow accountability metrics, which don't fully capture the story of Nowell's unique student body and the school's successes in attendance and learning experiences. Nowell staff acknowledge that they may not be able to show further progress on the state's current accountability metrics, given the

1   "RIDE Data Center," Rhode Island Department of Education, https://ride.ri.gov/information-accountability/ri-education-data/ride-data-center.
2   Jonaki Mehta, "3 years since the pandemic wrecked attendance, kids still aren't showing up to school," *NPR*, https://www.npr.org/2023/03/02/1160358099/school-attendance-chronic-absenteeism-covid.
3   Attendance Works, "Pandemic Causes Alarming Increase in Chronic Absence and Reveals Need for Better Data," *Attendance Works*, https://www.attendanceworks.org/pandemic-causes-alarming-increase-in-chronic-absence-and-reveals-need-for-better-data/.
4   "Why Does Attendance Matter?," IES NCES, https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/attendancedata/chapter1a.asp.

barriers to attendance that are outside of their control, and are beginning to reimagine what metrics might fully capture the story Nowell teachers and students are writing together.

The team at Nowell Academy raises the question: how can high schools struggling with student attendance nevertheless ensure student learning, and is daily attendance the most important metric of success?

The context: Nowell Academy

As one of the few statewide charter schools in Rhode Island, Nowell Academy was founded to serve pregnant and parenting, overaged, and undercredited high school students. Students' ages range from fourteen to their early twenties, with 89% of students off-track for graduating high school in four years.[5] Approximately 30% of students are pregnant or parenting, and upwards of 53% are categorized as English learners. Nearly all students attending Nowell are economically disadvantaged based on free and reduced-price lunch eligibility; the two largest racial demographic groups are Hispanic/Latino (63%) and Black (18%).

Nowell's students come from different areas of the state, which creates a vibrant and diverse school environment. Most have had disrupted learning trajectories. On average, students have attended three high schools prior to Nowell, and 96% have a history of chronic absenteeism. To support their students, Nowell has prioritized relationships between students and staff and designed other incentives to boost student attendance.

> "We [decided] to make it so people cared about one another instead of only caring about getting your credit and leaving." - *Student support administrator*

Three years ago, school leaders decided to strategically build relationships between students and teachers via a "Primary Person" model. The primary person serves as a mentor who checks in with students daily, ensuring that each student is paired with an adult in the building who operates as their frontline connection. Students and mentors often choose to talk about academics as well as navigating challenging life experiences. These supports are in addition to the restorative practices and social-emotional learning components incorporated into Nowell's education model, all of which help students manage challenges as they arise.

> "We text our students every single morning. I check in with them in the middle of the day if they're not here. We try to remove as many obstacles as we can." - *Teacher*

The school also has "pods" instead of traditional homeroom periods, where teachers serve as mentors and meet weekly, one on one, with each student. During these check-ins, teachers and students discuss emotional and academic progress, identify extra services students may need, and set goals for the next week. Students are required to reflect on their weekly goals and to practice verbalizing what resources or help they need to learn effectively.

Among the supports offered to foster attendance, Nowell provides students in-house daycare services exclusively for its pregnant and parenting students and a maternity project that allows students to earn credit while on maternity leave. Nowell also provides students with diapers and baby clothes. The school nurse offers home visits if students' children are sick. Given the robust services for pregnant and parenting students, the school sees full attendance for them.

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5   "Our Data," Nowell Academy, https://www.nowellacademy.org/our-data.

> "Our daycare is beyond full. Our students that have kids in daycare are here every day."
> - *School administrator*

Nowell is also working on more engaging courses or "Transformative Learning Experiences" that connect curriculum to the real world and engage students in meaningful ways. For example, students may earn credit toward graduation by completing an end-of-unit project that combines material from multiple subjects to show mastery of standards. In Food History, students develop geography skills to locate food deserts and writing skills to produce a newsletter with other students that highlights nearby food resources. Students may earn history credits by visiting court proceedings to observe a moot trial and applying their learnings in the classroom. As they complete their projects, they also engage with community members.

> "It's nice to have a guided curriculum that is more fun than teaching a chapter out of a book."
> - *Student support administrator*

The school also offers attendance incentives such as "Nowell bucks" that students can cash at the student store for restaurant and rideshare gift cards. Nowell staff also text students each morning and order rideshares if students lack transportation.

Nowell's school model has been carefully designed to engage and meet the needs of students, many of whom have a history of attendance challenges. Through a combination of relationship- and community-building, rigorous and engaging learning experiences, and services and supports, the Nowell team has built an environment that gives students a reason to come to school.

> "It's rigor, community, and love all wrapped in one." - *Student support administrator*

According to the school's leadership team, Nowell has "moved mountains" in regards to student attendance, given most students' history of truancy. Compared to other schools, the scale and creativity behind the strategies to get students to come to school are notable.

> "In 2016, [our attendance rate] was fifteen percent. [Now] classrooms are full. When you're a young person and you walk into a school that is a ghost town, you'll walk right back out. Now it feels like, 'I'm supposed to be here. Other people are here, this is what we do.'" - *School leader*

The challenge: Ensuring that students with histories of chronic absenteeism make progress in their learning

Despite all the school's progress toward landing attendance rates in the high sixties—where they've "plateaued," according to the school's Executive Director—many Nowell students are still struggling to show up consistently. For some staff members, the question of daily attendance keeps them up at night because they believe daily access to and engagement in learning is critical for their students to achieve success after high school. Students who have low daily attendance risk falling behind with class content and materials, thus potentially earning less credit and preventing them from graduating high school. Two staff members named attendance as "our number one challenge all the time," despite throwing every resource they can afford at the pervasive challenge.

> "How do we support all our different students? Getting some students here is no problem. But for a whole other group of students, it's a really big problem. We're constantly thinking about how to support the needs of all of these different groups of students." - *Teacher*

Conventional thinking about truancy would suggest that students don't show up to school because they don't feel comfortable or welcomed, or even don't care about school. But Nowell reveals a more complicated story. Even in a school community with lower daily attendance rates than many peer schools, many students with prior histories of chronic absenteeism cite their relationships with staff members as a key reason for re-engaging in school.

> "When I first came to this school, I was worried about what I was capable of and whether or not I was capable of even graduating. The teachers gave me motivation, and they supported me to the point where I'll graduate with high honors." - *Student*

The key reason why some of Nowell's student population continues to face attendance issues is due to outside-of-school factors that make it difficult for them to attend on a daily basis or a traditional schedule. Many students have reported facing mental health challenges during the pandemic, some of which make it difficult for them to climb out of bed in the morning.

> "There are students who can't come because they don't have childcare [options they prefer for their families]. We have a lot of students who work full-time. There is also the mental health aspect; we've had students tell us they were absent because they couldn't get out of bed due to severe depression. There are students where this is their fourth high school, and they've been out of three different high schools for various reasons. There are a lot of challenges that students are facing, and that's a lot harder for us to address." - *Board member*

Additionally, a majority of Nowell students developed longtime negative patterns–reflected in many students' records of high truancy rates–in schools prior to Nowell. Those habits are difficult to reverse quickly.

> "We did a study that tracked one student cohort, and more than 80% had chronic absenteeism that started in kindergarten. So these are long-term habits that developed over time. It takes time to make new habits." - *School leader*

One complicating factor is that some students' extremely low attendance rates mean that staff don't have reliable ways to get insight into their experiences, apart from what they understand more generally about barriers to attendance in their student population. This makes it harder for Nowell to design solutions that specifically help frequently absent students to come to school.

The team is doing whatever it takes and considering out-of-the-box solutions to make attending school easier. However, they know there isn't a silver bullet solution to dramatically boost attendance when students' lives and histories with conventional schools are so complex. Even within the different categories of attendance barriers, each student faces their own individual problems. For example, students with children face a variety of barriers that make it difficult to attend school, even though Nowell provides daycare services.

> "The solution to [attendance barriers is] not the same for every kid. For example, childcare is a barrier. We have the daycare and students have the Department of Human Services, but one student may have medical appointments for their child or they don't want to put their baby in childcare. They might have a family member who's not stable. And that's a different story than somebody who is undocumented and unable to get childcare. They're all living in that same barrier...but [their needs] are so individualized." - *Executive director*

One school leader reflected that getting much higher attendance rates than the ones the school already sees may not be realistic. Because the root causes of the school's attendance challenges are outside its control, continuing to problem-solve could have diminishing returns.

> "I don't have any more tricks up my sleeve to try. I have nothing to throw against the wall."
> - *School leader*

Additionally, focusing exclusively on raising attendance rates takes staff time and creative energy away from other mission-critical work that Nowell believes will be transformative for their students' high school and life outcomes.

> "Teachers would have to think about an attendance strategy versus thinking about lesson planning and high quality instruction. They can't do both." - *School leader*

The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) defines chronic absenteeism as "the percentage of students who miss ten percent or more school days during the year (or 2 days per month).[6]" Given its student population's history of truancy, Nowell has made progress at reducing chronic absenteeism among its student population, but that progress hasn't been reflected in how the school gets evaluated. On paper, Nowell has appeared like it often has–persistently low attendance rates.

> "The state's metrics don't look at any of the positive things that we are doing. It continuously points out where we're failing, even if we're not really failing. We get all of the chronically absent students in the State of Rhode Island. And if you picked out any one of those individual students, they would've had a hundred absences at their old school and maybe only thirty here. But that would never be reflected as a metric for the State of Rhode Island." - *Student support administrator*

The state temporarily removed using attendance rates as a measure of school performance during the pandemic. But when the metric is once again evaluated, Nowell staff fear the school's overall rating will drop. If the state could consider attendance growth rates and take into account Nowell's unique student population, the school could stand to benefit.

> "What will [the state] consider? We have students who have been chronically absent since second grade. We take all the students who have had attendance problems and we're putting them in one space, and what does that look like? What is our real goal to get to, realistically? Because we don't drop students. We could make our attendance look really great by just dropping all the kids who don't have good attendance, right? And then our attendance drastically goes up, but we don't drop kids. So is there a way to look at who is engaged and what is their attendance? You have a group of students who have dropped off, but you haven't dropped out of your school because we're still trying to engage them. Do we look at those different cohorts?" - *School leader*

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6   "Reducing Chronic Absence," Rhode Island Department of Education, https://ride.ri.gov/information-accountability/accountability/reducing-chronic-absence.

But is attendance really the metric that matters? The team has begun talking about what it means to look beyond simply increasing daily attendance rates. Staff feel more eager to optimize the school's design to boost student engagement and create an environment that students feel motivated to be in.

> "I've been thinking a lot about building that intrinsic motivation to come to school and to be part of a community, and understand the effects that you have on the community when you're not being your best self." - *School leader*

After all, Nowell wants students to make progress in their learning and commit to their education—and showing up every day doesn't always guarantee that.

> "There are some students who come every day and don't always complete work. They engage, but they don't always complete their work. And so we're trying to figure out what's going on with those guys. Obviously, they love being here and they want to be here, but we need to make the connection for [them] to get work done and succeed." - *School administrator*

> "The way that I've looked at it is we have engaged students who have disengaged from other schools." - *School leader*

The school is focused on helping students learn and achieve mastery of key skills needed for success in their college or career, attendance aside. A new night school program is opening up options for students who have day jobs, and the school is reimagining its fall 2023 schedule. Nowell is evaluating whether its Transformative Learning Experiences can help boost students' learning progress and credit attainment.

These efforts won't all necessarily deliver "good" attendance rates according to state metrics, which don't reflect the reality that for some students, regular attendance may not be achievable. The experiences of Nowell students begs the question: is daily attendance an important factor if students are engaged and invested in their education and school communities? If Nowell can ensure its students are learning and developing skills for college, career, and life, then daily attendance may not be as meaningful a measure of success.

Discussion

On Nowell Academy

1. Are there any other ways you would advise Nowell Academy to remove barriers to attendance, especially for students who are consistently absent from school?

2. How would you advise Nowell Academy to describe the impact it has on students? How is this different from what traditional metrics, like attendance, show?

3. What steps can the school take to enhance student engagement in their classes? What about outside of classes, such as during lunch period or through extracurriculars?

4. Which metrics should the state consider when designing accountability standards for schools like Nowell Academy?

On high schools in general

5. What is the end goal of daily attendance at school? Can this goal be achieved in any other ways?

6. What does it mean for students to be engaged in learning, and how can high schools measure engagement apart from metrics like attendance?

7. Are there potential unintended consequences that can result from designing solutions that exclusively aim to raise daily attendance rates?

8. What role can state leaders play in affording seat time flexibility for students that experience significant barriers to attending school?

9. What case would you make for prioritizing daily attendance as an indicator of school performance? What case would you make against it?