



RESEARCH REPORT

Improving Prekindergarten Attendance

School-Level Strategies for Messaging, Engaging Parents, and Responding to Absences in Four DC Public Schools

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Executive Summary

Over the past decade, there has been an increased focus on attendance and reducing absenteeism in schools. Driven in part by continued research on the negative impact of absenteeism on school performance, future attendance, truancy, and dropout rates, local, state, and federal education agencies have begun to take action. While much of this work has targeted the elementary years, researchers and districts alike have started to focus on curbing absenteeism before the start of kindergarten. Data suggest that early grade levels see some of the worst absenteeism rates, and early attendance issues are associated with future absenteeism and negative academic outcomes (Balfanz and Byrnes 2013; Connolly and Olson 2012; Ehrlich et al. 2014). Early grade levels can also set a family's expectations for attendance and the family-school relationship, and intervening early can help establish better attendance patterns that persist throughout children's academic careers.

Though many school districts begin their efforts in kindergarten, some forward-thinking districts, like District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), have begun to track and address chronic absenteeism in prekindergarten. This report is part of a multiphase project of the Urban Institute, working with the Early Childhood Education Division (ECED) of DCPS, examining absenteeism in their prekindergarten program and strategies to address it (Katz, Adams, and Johnson 2015; Dubay and Holla 2015). This collaboration with ECED includes the input and support of the family services team, who provide wraparound services for families with children in the universal prekindergarten program.

This study focused on four DCPS elementary schools with attendance rates that are better than expected given that they serve large proportions of children from demographic groups associated with high rates of absenteeism. Urban researchers gathered information through interviews with school staff, including principals, attendance leads, attendance committees, teachers, and support staff, and discussion groups with parents and guardians at these four schools.

Key Findings

The prevailing attitude in the four schools was that attendance work takes a proactive, school-wide effort rooted in relationships. It is important to note that these schools stood out in their ability to

integrate prekindergarten into their schoolwide approach to attendance. DCPS attendance policies and frameworks provide ample guidance for grades K–12, yet schools have considerable discretion in how they integrate prekindergarten, given that prekindergarten attendance is voluntary. The ECED family services team plays a crucial role in highlighting the importance of prekindergarten attendance and supporting the school and families.

There are several important takeaways from this work:

- Attendance work is predicated on a strong, positive, and inclusive school community that prioritizes family engagement.
- Positive interactions with families before and early in the school year create a foundation for working and communicating with families to deliver key messages, support, and feedback on academics and attendance.
- Standardized and consistent attendance policies and practices help establish expectations for regular attendance, monitoring absences, and proactively working within the school and with families to sustain strong attendance.
- Community partners, events, and activities can all help support families with small or large needs, celebrate successes, and sustain momentum on attendance.

We first describe staff and parent perspectives on the issue of attendance and causes of absenteeism in their schools. We then present key lessons learned on approaches that seemed to underlie schools' success in encouraging attendance in their prekindergarten classrooms.

Staff and Parent Views on Contributing Factors

Our earlier work with DCPS provided an overview of the factors that contribute to prekindergarten absenteeism in DCPS (Katz, Adams, and Johnson 2015). In this study, we focus on the perspectives of staff and parents in four schools and what they saw as the contributing factors. They reported two types of factors: parent perspectives on the value of prekindergarten and a set of other child and family factors. Note that when we say parent, we also include legal guardians and caregivers.

Interviews with staff and parents suggest that parent perspectives on the value of prekindergarten shape parents' approaches to attendance. Parents prioritized socialization, adjusting to the school

environment, and forming habits and routines, while school staff focused on the key reading, writing, and math skills children learn.

School staff and many parents agreed that there is a connection between how parents perceive prekindergarten and their children's attendance. Respondents agreed that many parents understand the value of prekindergarten and treat attendance as a priority, but there are parents who view it differently. Respondents highlighted a few interrelated issues causing this disconnect, including the perception of prekindergarten as child care, parents not understanding the curriculum and content, and the voluntary nature of prekindergarten.

Parents and school staff highlighted a second set of other contributing factors to absenteeism. These factors are rarely isolated and in most cases are interrelated—causing each other, occurring simultaneously, or exacerbating each other. Respondents referenced several specific factors:

- Illness of prekindergarten children, exacerbated by weaker immune systems and frequent exposure to germs among children, was the factor most frequently cited. Asthma was also a big factor at some schools.
- Respondents identified logistical barriers that included getting multiple small children ready for school in the morning, a parent being pregnant, older caregivers facing extra challenges, and employment status and work schedules (i.e., night shifts, unemployment, etc.)
- Homelessness was a factor at all schools. Respondents also highlighted some instances of disabilities, chronic conditions, mental health challenges, and addiction among parents and guardians contributing to absences.
- Transportation challenges and instances of families living out-of-boundary appear to be mitigating factors that often interact with other factors (e.g., homeless families or families with major logistical challenges living across town and unable to get to school regularly).
- Families taking vacations during the school year seems to be related to the value parents place on prekindergarten and the impact of absences.

Note that our earlier research on contributing factors to absenteeism identified additional factors at the school, district, and community level, including parent relationships with staff, school discipline, school quality, and neighborhood safety, (Katz, Adams, and Johnson 2015). While these topics were referenced in a few discussions, they were not seen as the key contributing factors to absenteeism. Some were likely less prevalent in our discussions because the school staff and parents we spoke with

often focused on their day-to-day realities and the absences of students in their classroom, which did not appear to be influenced by some of these more macro-level contributing factors. In contrast, our previous conversations with district administrators, researchers, and experts resulted in an exhaustive list of possible contributing factors.

School-Level Strategies for Improving Prekindergarten Attendance

Our interviews with staff and parents highlighted four key elements that appear essential to a proactive strategy and approach to attendance:

- Foundations of the family-school relationship
- Communication strategies and positive parent engagement throughout the school year
- Effective internal systems and practices to support attendance
- Other strategies and approaches to support attendance

Interestingly, some of these elements are not actually specific to attendance, and instead have more to do with overall school environment and parent engagement. Each of these is described more below.

FOUNDATIONS OF THE FAMILY-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP

One of the key themes that emerged was the essential nature of three underlying elements—a clear vision and goals for attendance, a warm environment at the school, and home visits to build a good relationship with parents—in laying the foundation for effective attendance strategies. Respondents suggested that these elements can affect how families view and understand key goals, interact with teachers and school staff, and participate in the school community. Recommendations for how to approach these elements include:

- Vision and goals
 - » Develop a clear and consistent vision for attendance that includes prekindergarten, makes attendance a priority on the same level as instruction, and fits the overall approach of the school.
 - » Translate the vision and goals for attendance into easily digestible points for prekindergarten parents that convey the importance of attendance and the school's approach using illustrative, concrete examples.

- » Share messages and expectations around attendance with prekindergarten parents before they enroll their children and at other points (e.g., back to school night, events, and workshops) during the first month.
- School environment
 - » Consider the approach taken to welcoming and working with families whose primary language is not English. Discuss what aspects of this approach are different from English-speaking parents and how to improve guidance to school staff on working with all parents.
 - » Create opportunities to invite parents into the classroom to see their children's learning environment or into the school to converse with other parents.
- Home visits
 - » Provide guidance and training to teachers on best practices around content, cultural awareness, and tone. Give space internally to discuss lessons learned from prior-year home visits and help flesh out examples and scenarios to help prepare teachers.
 - » Connect with children about what will take place in the classroom and get them excited for the upcoming school year.
 - » Respect the space and be careful not to ask judgmental or nosy questions.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND POSITIVE PARENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGHOUT THE SCHOOL YEAR

Our interviews made it clear that effective communication and positive relationships with prekindergarten parents can help resolve any issues or challenges that come up, including absenteeism. When there are breaks in this relationship and school staff lack access to parents, challenges can continue to grow. Several important strategies to foster and maintain relationships emerged from our interviews:

- Use positive and encouraging language to help form and maintain strong and supportive relationships.
- Find out the preferred modes of communication for parents. If necessary, explore creating a list or short survey to document preferred modes and best times to communicate.
- Identify any templates for newsletters, reminder sheets, emails, and other communication that can be shared across classrooms.

- Establish a strategy for collecting updated contact information throughout the year to overcome constantly changing phone numbers.
- Document internal bilingual resources and other strategies for bridging the language gap, such as using text messages, pictures, and videos to maintain positive contact with families who speak other languages.
- Regularly share multimedia information about what children are learning as a means to include parents and get them excited about the educational value of prekindergarten.
- Utilize parents as resources to connect with other parents to relay messages and reminders, coordinate events, and plan activities.

EFFECTIVE INTERNAL SYSTEMS AND PRACTICES TO SUPPORT ATTENDANCE

Our discussions with staff and parents demonstrated how crucial it is for schools to establish effective attendance practices and policies to ensure that the whole school gives the issue consistent attention. Our research revealed several strategies to accomplish this:

- Effective attendance lead
 - » Clearly define the role of the attendance lead and expectations for their role as it relates to their other responsibilities in the school.
 - » Focus on how the attendance lead communicates internally on a daily and longer-term basis about attendance, outlining steps to limit gaps in communication.
 - » Ensure that the attendance lead has the tools, resources, and support to work with parents daily and conduct home visits.
- Policies for recording and submitting attendance
 - » Ensure that the attendance clerk, front office staff, and teachers work together to develop a standard and consistent approach for communicating on attendance and following up on absences that fits into their hectic morning schedules.
 - » Establish strong and well-publicized policies for tardiness to set expectations and facilitate accurate attendance recording.
 - » Set a time for all attendance records to be submitted and follow it, using teachers' aides or other staff members to streamline the process.
 - » Determine which forms of recording attendance teachers prefer and are most accurate, using multiple forms of attendance tracking as backup.

- Attendance committees

Attendance committees are groups made up of school staff and sometimes community partners that focus primarily on tracking attendance and working with families on absenteeism. These groups meet regularly to review attendance reports, develop strategies to follow up with families, create messages or activities focused on attendance, and handle referrals for consequences for absences. Family services team members play a crucial role on attendance committees through their focus on prekindergarten and ability to support prekindergarten families. Respondents highlighted several strategies of effective attendance committees:

- » Promote the attendance committee as the face of attendance at the school and charge them with owning the issue, integrating attendance goals into overall school goals, and including prekindergarten in their weekly discussion and activities.
- » Consider the composition of the attendance committee and what members need to be included to cover all areas of the school. Having a nurse or medical staff member and representation from the family services team were considered essential for supporting families and integrating prekindergarten into school operations.
- » Establish consistent routines and procedures for meeting times, agenda, reviewing reports, and absence follow-up.
- » Use the committee as a working group and establish which types of activities and actions are most useful to complete during the meeting and what can be successfully accomplished outside the meeting.

- Monitoring data and reports, action plans, and follow-up

- » Establish and communicate expectations and guidelines for how and when absences should be reported by parents and how school staff follow up with parents.
- » Assess internal communication between teachers and front office staff around absences and follow-up.
- » Develop tracking tools to help parents follow their child's attendance, considering what time frames and visuals to include so that parents best understand the cumulative nature and impact of absences.

OTHER STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES TO SUPPORT ATTENDANCE

Along with the foundational elements discussed above, schools can use supporting strategies to ensure they are connecting with and engaging families and raising awareness and energy around attendance:

- Partnerships
 - » Explore how to best integrate social work and case management partners into the school community so they can work with parents as an extension of school staff rather than as an outside partner.
 - » Examine gaps in the materials and resources needed to implement incentives or events, and explore how corporate or community partners could help fill these gaps.
 - » Consider how to utilize extra staff support from community partners (e.g., interns, AmeriCorps members) to bolster attendance infrastructure in terms of attendance tracking and absence follow-up, parent engagement and communication, and activities and events.
- Events, activities, or efforts tied to engagement and attendance
 - » Plan events and activities early in the school year and assess opportunities to highlight key messages and goals around attendance.
 - » Focus time and resources on outreach for different events and activities and consider how to use several forms of communication to advertise events.
 - » Highlight school days with historically low attendance and plan events or activities for these days to make children want to come to school.
 - » Brainstorm with school staff and parents about what unique events or traditions the school can start to highlight the school community and foster school pride.
- Incentive and recognition strategies
 - » Take a well-rounded and inclusive approach to incentive and recognition strategies, focusing on times of year with historically low attendance, and determining the goal, time frame, and level of recipient.
 - » Use incentives and recognition as part of a larger strategy on parent engagement and attendance to support the school's overall vision and approach to attendance.
 - » Draw on the knowledge and input of different players in the school community in developing engaging, unique, and timely incentive and recognition strategies, incorporating

feedback from parents and students about what events and activities would resonate most with them.

Conclusion

Identifying and addressing absenteeism is a complex challenge faced by schools throughout the country. Our conversations with staff and parents from schools that seem to be making inroads in supporting attendance suggest the importance of taking a proactive approach and attacking the issue before it becomes too large.

To do this, schools should focus on building the foundational elements of good attendance: a strong school vision and effective messaging, a warm and friendly school environment, and a trusting parent-teacher relationship established through home visits. Once the school year is under way, staff, especially teachers, should focus on how best to maintain parent communication and engagement and the parent-teacher relationship. To support the daily attendance routine and deal with absences, schools should establish clear and consistent attendance and absence policies and procedures spearheaded by key personnel, such as attendance leads and attendance committees. Schools should also look to partners that can help achieve key goals and use different events, activities, and incentives to sustain momentum and energy on attendance and continue to support families.

Introduction

Over the past few years, researchers, policymakers, and school district administrators have made great strides in highlighting chronic absenteeism and its impact on student success. Absenteeism in early grades (kindergarten through second grade) has been linked to negative educational outcomes, including an increased likelihood of truancy and dropping out, repeating grades, and lower academic achievement (Ginsburg, Jordan, and Chang 2014; Applied Survey Research 2011; Chang and Romero 2008). Because low-income children are more likely to be chronically absent, these findings suggest that improving attendance among low-income students early on may help narrow attendance and achievement gaps in later grades. Moreover, there is some evidence that low-income kindergarten students perform at lower levels but benefit more academically from good attendance than their higher-income peers (Ready 2010).

Because of the importance of attendance in educational outcomes, more agencies at the state and local levels are starting to collect and track attendance data as a key school- and student-level measure (Derian 2016). At the federal level, the Department of Education, in partnership with the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Health and Human Services, and Department of Justice, recently announced a national initiative focused on community action to address chronic absenteeism. This initiative includes technical assistance and guidance on identifying and supporting chronically absent students as well as a push to expand the collection and use of attendance data. Much of this work has been catalyzed by Attendance Works, a national organization that promotes and supports better policy and practice around school attendance.¹

To date, this work has broadly addressed absenteeism in grades K–12, but attention has started to focus on understanding attendance patterns in prekindergarten as well. There are several reasons for this interest. First, research on prekindergarten attendance in Chicago, Baltimore, and Washington, DC, has shown that a high percentage of 3- and 4-year-old students (between 25 and 45 percent) are chronically absent, missing 10 percent or more of school days for excused or unexcused absences (Connolly and Olson 2012; Ehrlich et al. 2014; Dubay and Holla 2015). Second, research on prekindergarten absenteeism has demonstrated an association between chronic absences and lower reading and math performance, as well as continued absenteeism, in later grades (Ehrlich et al. 2014). And finally, prekindergarten seems to be a particularly opportune time to reach out to parents. It is the beginning of their child's involvement with schools and thus presents an opportunity to lay early groundwork for good attendance. Parents are also more likely to be physically present for drop-off and pick-up than in later grades, providing more opportunities for engagement.

Although more attention is being given to prekindergarten attendance, there are still relatively few school districts systematically tracking prekindergarten absenteeism and developing strategies as they do for other grades.² District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) provides an excellent example of a district at the forefront of focusing on how to record, track, and support prekindergarten students' attendance and use research to inform policies and practices.

BOX 1

Prekindergarten in the District of Columbia Public Schools

The Council of the District of Columbia passed an act in 2008 making universal full-day prekindergarten available to all 3- and 4-year-old children in Washington, DC (Ewen 2004). Today, all DCPS schools with kindergarten classes offer prekindergarten 4 and the majority also offer prekindergarten 3. Unlike grades K–12, children entering prekindergarten do not all have guaranteed slots at their neighborhood schools. Most families of prekindergarten students select preferred schools and are assigned through a systemwide lottery, though a handful of schools are piloting guaranteed access to neighborhood schools for in-boundary students.^a

To serve more Head Start-eligible families, DCPS designed and implemented a blended Head Start prekindergarten model in 2010 (Ewen 2004). Under the Head Start School-Wide model, prekindergarten students from families of any income who attend 60 Title I elementary schools and education campuses receive services including screening and diagnostic assessment, high quality classroom settings, and family support services from the family services staff.^b The support of the family services team is a key advantage that DC prekindergarten families have compared to most standard prekindergarten models that lack this sort of embedded wrap around support.

^a “Pre-Kindergarten (PK3 and PK4),” District of Columbia Public Schools, accessed June 15, 2016, <http://dcps.dc.gov/page/prekindergarteninergarten-pk3-and-pk4>.

^b “SY 2015-2016 List of Title I and Non-Title I Schools,” District of Columbia Public Schools, accessed June 20, 2016, <http://dcps.dc.gov/publication/sy-2015-2016-list-title-i-and-non-title-i-schools>; “Find a School,” District of Columbia Public Schools, accessed June 20, 2016, <http://profiles.dcps.dc.gov/>

Our Partnership with DCPS and What We Have Learned

Over the past four years, the Early Childhood Education Division (ECED) of DCPS has partnered with the Urban Institute to study absenteeism in the prekindergarten program serving 3- and 4-year-old children in Title I schools (see box 1 for more information on prekindergarten in Washington, DC). The

DCPS 2012–13 school readiness goals included improving attendance and addressing absenteeism, and these have remained a focus of the ECED family services team’s work.

Our previous research had two components. First, we examined the incidence of prekindergarten absenteeism in Washington, DC (Dubay and Holla 2015). Our work produced several key findings:

- In the 2013–14 school year, one in four prekindergarten students was chronically absent (Dubay and Holla 2015).
- Children from families with greater needs (including homeless children and children from families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), who could benefit the most from early intervention, had significantly higher rates of chronic absenteeism than their peers (Dubay and Holla 2015).
- Along with these trends among subgroups, we found worsening patterns of absenteeism for individual students in Washington, DC. Students who were chronically absent the previous year or even the first month of the current year were more likely to be chronically absent over the whole school year (Dubay and Holla 2015), further supporting research on the predictive nature of previous absences (Sanchez 2012).

Second, we interviewed local and national stakeholders and experts to learn more about the many interconnected factors that contribute to absenteeism and the different layers of approaches and strategies that districts and schools have used to address absenteeism (Katz, Adams, and Johnson 2015). Our interviews revealed several key findings:

- Contributing factors to absenteeism occur at the family/child, school/district, and community level. These contributing factors are rarely isolated and in most cases are interrelated—causing each other, occurring simultaneously, or exacerbating each other (Katz, Adams, and Johnson 2015).
- It is important to monitor attendance patterns and absenteeism rates and trends and categorize attendance groups. Using this data, along with parent and school information, can help in developing targeted interventions (Katz, Adams, and Johnson 2015).
- Partnering with community agencies can provide much needed assistance and support to schools as they attempt to address the unique needs of families and improve attendance (Katz, Adams, and Johnson 2015).

About This Study

The current study builds upon our previous work to further explore key aspects of our earlier findings. Specifically, at the request of DCPS, we undertook two areas of additional investigation:

- A quantitative component that builds on prior work to analyze how prekindergarten attendance is associated with attendance in kindergarten, first, and second grade. These data are presented in a companion report (Dubay and Holla 2016).
- A qualitative component that synthesizes information from school staff interviews and parent discussion groups conducted in winter 2016 at four DCPS elementary schools. The results of that analysis are presented in this report. Note that when we say parent, we also include legal guardians and caregivers.

What Is in This Report

The findings of this report are presented in the following sections:

- Context of Attendance, Prekindergarten, and Factors Contributing to Absenteeism
- Foundations of the Family-School Relationship
- Communication Strategies and Positive Parent Engagement throughout the School Year
- Effective Internal Systems and Practices to Support Attendance
- Other Strategies to Support Attendance

We conclude by sharing overarching recommendations for supporting attendance among prekindergarten students and families at the school level.

Methods

The goal of this study was to explore strategies to address prekindergarten absenteeism in Washington, DC, by focusing on four schools with good attendance patterns despite serving a substantial population of children in demographic groups associated with high levels of absenteeism. We wanted to hear

directly from parents and staff in these schools about their perspectives on the issue of absenteeism in terms of its causes as well as what they perceive to be the key elements to address the problem.

To begin the project, the Urban team worked with the ECED family services team to refine the research strategy, deciding on a strengths-based approach to selecting schools using a mix of quantitative and qualitative criteria. We analyzed absenteeism data over the past four years to identify counterintuitive schools with strong attendance or improvement in attendance despite serving a large percentage of students from these demographic groups prone to chronic absenteeism. In addition to this analysis, we conducted group interviews with 25 family services staff members to get a sense of specific schools' approaches to attendance, school leadership and environment, parent communication, and systems and policies. Based on this combination of attendance data and school information, we worked with ECED to select four schools located in different areas of the city.

We began outreach and recruitment by meeting with each school principal to brief them on the study and ask for their participation. After this meeting, we developed tailored interview protocols for each school staff member based on context about the school's operations, key personnel, and approach on attendance. These protocols focused on contributing factors to absenteeism, recording and tracking attendance, school environment and leadership, parent engagement and communication, partnerships, and school-level strategies.

In each school, we interviewed all staff members that play a role in parent engagement and communication, student attendance, and prekindergarten class environment. Exact positions differed by school, but interviewees included principals, attendance leads, prekindergarten teachers, attendance committees, front office staff, and other relevant support staff. Through a mix of individual and group interviews, we conducted 18 interviews with about 40 staff members.

In addition, we conducted parent discussion groups at all four schools. To introduce the study to parents, we attended Parent Teacher Organization meetings or parent workshops. We worked with family services staff and school staff to recruit parents face to face or through flyers, emails, and calls. In total, we conducted seven parent discussion groups with about 40 parents and guardians.

Limitations

Although our research includes information from many sources, there were notable limitations. By using a strengths-based approach to selecting schools, we did not receive a complete picture of barriers to improving attendance at schools struggling the most with absenteeism. We also did not witness weak

parent communication, parent engagement, or school environments firsthand. To counteract this limitation, we devoted a few questions in each subsection of protocols to challenges and areas for improvement to draw out examples of how schools struggle with this work.

Our research was also limited by sample size. Working in only four schools does not allow us to draw conclusions about how similar schools in the district are approaching and focusing on attendance. To address this limitation, we met with diverse school staff members to gain different perspectives. We focused on best practices and common themes from school staff and parents rather than highlighting case studies that reflect isolated circumstances.

Finally, our sample of parents was subject to selection bias. We attempted to attract diverse parent participants, but focus groups did not necessarily reflect the DCPS parent population as a whole. In general, parent sessions focused on attendance were likely to attract more parents whose children have stronger attendance or who are most engaged in the school. To address this limitation, we asked parents and school staff questions intended to tell us more about all families, including those hardest to reach.

Context of Attendance, Prekindergarten, and Factors Contributing to Absenteeism

Before exploring different strategies schools use to approach attendance, it is important to establish the different system-level structures and key contextual factors that influence attendance, absence follow-up, and parent engagement. We first outline the DCPS attendance policies, integration of prekindergarten, and the work of the ECED family services team in supporting attendance. We then share perspectives from school staff and parents on the importance of prekindergarten and the factors that contribute to absenteeism.

DCPS Attendance Policies and Efforts

Current DCPS attendance policies and efforts provide important context for understanding specific efforts to improve prekindergarten attendance. Attendance is required by law for DCPS students ages 5 to 17, and the Council of the District of Columbia legislates attendance rules, last updated fully in 2013.³

DCPS has laid out a protocol for how schools should follow up on absences. It is important to note that this protocol is relevant to all ages, but the consequences only apply to children ages 5 to 17. Furthermore, only a few steps in the protocol are mandated by law. We have noted these below:

- After **one or two** excused or unexcused absences, teachers call parents.
- After **three** unexcused absences, a notification letter regarding absences is sent along with a robocall—a prerecorded and automatically generated phone call—from the chancellor's designee.
- After **five** unexcused absences, another notification letter is sent and parents must attend a student support meeting. This is required by law.
- After **seven** unexcused absences, a Metropolitan Police Department/DCPS notification letter is sent. This is required by law.

- After **10** total absences, excused and unexcused, families are asked to participate in an attendance conference and referred to the Office of the State Superintendent of Education.
- After **10** unexcused absences, students ages 5 to 13 will be referred to the Child and Family Services Agency, a public child welfare agency, for suspected educational neglect. This is required by law.

To facilitate this process and other attendance work, Washington, DC, regulations require that all schools have an attendance strategy or plan; procedures for monitoring, reporting, and addressing student-level attendance; and an absence intervention and referral process led by a student support team that produces action plans.⁴ These regulations also outline the role of an attendance monitor responsible for collecting, maintaining, and reporting attendance data.⁵

These regulations hold all schools to the same standards, but it is important to note that, like any new policy, there are barriers to implementation. Performance oversight reports from 2014 reveal that schools have struggled with the volume of referred cases generated by the new policies, stretching their staffing and resources. Midway through the 2013–14 school year, only 35 percent of the student support team meetings required after five unexcused absences had actually been held (District of Columbia Public Schools 2014).

Incorporating Prekindergarten into Attendance Protocol

Because the structures and policies described above only apply to grades K–12, schools have considerable discretion in incorporating prekindergarten into their attendance procedures. Schools are not required to hold student support meetings after 5 absences and cannot refer students with 10 unexcused absences to the Child and Family Services Agency. That schools are struggling with required caseloads suggests that many schools may not have enough resources to follow protocol for prekindergarten students as well. At the same time, prekindergarten students count toward the school's overall in-seat attendance rate, which serves as an incentive for schools to improve prekindergarten attendance.

We heard from respondents that some schools spend considerably less time and effort on prekindergarten attendance. Therefore, the extent to which schools incorporate prekindergarten into their overall attendance approach, and not just whether they do so at all, is an important factor to consider in improving prekindergarten attendance at the school level. In this report, we study the work

of four schools that have taken a systematic approach to including prekindergarten in all school activities and efforts, including attendance.

ECED's Prekindergarten Attendance Efforts

A key driver of the focus on prekindergarten attendance in Title I schools has been the family services team within ECED. The family services team includes a staff of team leads, case management specialists, and community parent outreach Coordinators who provide wraparound services for families with children attending prekindergarten in Title I schools. This team works in the school and in the community, monitoring prekindergarten attendance and otherwise supporting families (box 1). As described in Dubay and Holla (2015), the ECED team recently implemented a new rule for attendance follow-up and intervention. Outreach coordinators, who monitor attendance regularly, will contact families of children that have missed three days overall (excused or unexcused), rather than three days consecutively under the previous policy. If outreach coordinators are unable to reach the family or if the problem persists, they refer the case to their case management specialists, who try to engage families and work around their needs (e.g., employment, housing, adult education) through meetings and home visits. Case management specialists may also play an integral role in schools by holding attendance workshops, sitting on attendance committees, and following up with school staff on absence interventions.

While the primary focus of this report is on school efforts targeting prekindergarten attendance, these efforts include the essential work of the family services team. At the schools we worked in, case management specialists were seen as the lead on prekindergarten attendance.

Perceptions of Attendance and Contributing Factors to Absenteeism

Given this framework of attendance structures and policies, it is important to understand the factors that contribute to absenteeism before exploring strategies to eliminate it. Our earlier work (Katz, Adams, and Johnson 2015) provides insights into the range of factors that contribute to prekindergarten absenteeism nationwide and specifically in DCPS. However, this study focuses on four schools within DCPS, so it is useful to start by describing what our respondents perceived as some of the issues affecting attendance in these schools. Respondents focused on two areas:

- Parents' perspectives on the value of prekindergarten
- Other child and family characteristics and challenges

Perspectives on the Value of Prekindergarten and Attendance

One of the consistent questions that surfaces is the extent to which parents understand the value of prekindergarten and the importance of attendance. This is especially prudent given the voluntary nature of the DCPS prekindergarten program. Our conversations with school staff and parents in our four target schools revealed that the value of prekindergarten is an important underpinning for discussions of attendance in these schools. Below we outline the key topics that emerged in our discussions about the value of prekindergarten and the subsequent value of regular attendance for prekindergarten students.

SOCIALIZATION AND BUILDING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS AND HABITS

Parents in our discussion groups overwhelmingly considered socialization the most important aspect of prekindergarten. Parents repeatedly mentioned the importance of their children being around other children daily and adjusting to the school environment. Additionally, parents valued that their children were able to interact with other adults on a day-to-day basis. Parents were excited that their children would develop social skills like patience and communication with other children and adults.

Parents also valued how prekindergarten helps children form habits and routines. Parents believed that the structure and consistency helped acclimatize their children to school and other important routines and drew comparisons to their own lives to highlight the importance. One parent noted, “For us, the expectation that you go to school every day is important, just like we go to work every day.”

EDUCATIONAL VALUE, LEARNING, AND BUILDING TOWARD ACADEMIC SUCCESS

When speaking about the value of prekindergarten, school staff focused first and foremost on the importance of learning. Staff spoke about the key reading, writing, and math lessons that make up the prekindergarten curriculum and how they help build the academic foundation for kindergarten, later grades, and adult life. All school staff discussed prekindergarten as part of elementary school, not just in terms of location, but in terms of learning and expectations.

Educational value was not often the top priority for parents, but a few did mention the value of learning key skills and preparing for kindergarten. These parents focused on the day-to-day learning and opportunities that their children would miss by not being at school.

CONNECTION BETWEEN ATTENDANCE AND PARENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE VALUE OF PREKINDERGARTEN

Staff at all four schools and many parents mentioned a connection between how parents perceive prekindergarten and how often their children are absent. Respondents noted that some parents seem to understand the value of prekindergarten and place more importance on regular attendance than other parents. The suggestion that parents' understanding of the importance of prekindergarten can affect their children's attendance is in line with a Chicago study that finds parents' relative valuation of preschool versus third grade correlates with their children's attendance in those grades (Ehrlich et al. 2014). In discussing this topic, respondents highlighted a few interrelated issues: prekindergarten as child care, understanding of curriculum and content, and the voluntary nature of prekindergarten.

- School staff felt there are still many parents who think of prekindergarten as child care. They shared that some parents drop off their children when convenient with little concern for tardiness or absence. Some parents might not take their children to school if they had other child care options (like a visiting relative), were off work, or if a vacation conflicted with school but better fit their professional schedule. According to staff, these parents paid greater attention to their older children's attendance.
- Another key theme that emerged was how parents' lack of knowledge of prekindergarten curriculum and learning activities impacts their attitudes about the value of daily attendance. "It's just prekindergarten" was a commonly heard statement. Respondents believed that some parents do not grasp that their child will fall behind if they miss several days of school. Others focused on the negative impact this has on the absent child falling behind his or her classmates as well as the burden placed on teachers. As one parent described:

If it's a "come as you want," that's an unfair burden on the teachers. When there are kids absent, they have to keep track of, "Okay, you missed this thing and they missed this thing." If they are trying to have a curriculum that spans a couple weeks, it's impossible if you don't have kids that are coming every day.

- Many school staff and parents felt that the voluntary nature of prekindergarten detracts from the seriousness of the program and the importance of daily attendance. Participants shared

that some parents question why absences matter if attendance is not mandatory. This policy was often juxtaposed with the escalating consequences for absenteeism in grades K–12. The voluntary nature of prekindergarten was sometimes discussed as an underlying factor that interacted with other contributing factors to justify or make light of absences.

Other Contributing Factors to Absenteeism

Attendance issues can be caused by many factors of varying significance. Research indicates that common factors exist at the child and family level (e.g., illness, logistical challenges, housing instability, family instability, employment circumstances), community level (e.g., neighborhood safety, homeless shelters, availability of transportation), or school level (e.g., school climate and culture, internal processes) (Katz, Adams, and Johnson 2015). These factors are rarely isolated and in most cases are interrelated—causing each other, occurring simultaneously, or exacerbating each other. Among parents facing multiple challenges such as unemployment and poor health, each additional challenge contributes to a higher rate of absence (Ehrlich et al. 2014).

Contributing factors to absenteeism are usually similar across schools but can play out differently based on the context of a school or neighborhood. Two schools in Washington, DC, might differ in the predominant working and housing status of families, accessibility of the school, or neighborhood health or safety factors, all factors that combine to impact attendance patterns. Understanding the different factors at the family and school levels is necessary to develop and implement targeted interventions.

As discussed above, respondents said the voluntary nature of prekindergarten adversely affects attendance. In many cases, we heard that this interacted with other contributing factors and, therefore, was seen not as the root cause of an absence but as one factor of many that result in an absence.

To better understand how schools perceive other causes of the attendance problem, we asked respondents about the key factors they saw as contributing to prekindergarten absenteeism at their school. Below, we outline the factors that respondents touched on, which provide important context for the subsequent discussion of school efforts and strategies to overcome absenteeism.

ILLNESS AND HEALTH

The top contributing factor to absenteeism our respondents mentioned was child health. Many highlighted that prekindergarten children’s health issues are exacerbated by how easily little children

spread germs and their weaker immune systems. This is particularly troublesome during flu season and the cold winter months. Another serious health concern mentioned was the number of children with asthma, especially in schools where many children live in public housing facilities.

LOGISTICS

Many respondents touched on how the logistics of daily attendance are particularly taxing for parents of prekindergarten children compared to other elementary school children, given the time and energy needed to get little children ready. Adding to this, many spoke about the challenges created by having other small children or being pregnant. These can result in very complicated routines that could be affected by other mitigating factors, resulting in tardiness or absence. Others spoke of the challenges of placing older relatives that might be less mobile in charge of getting children ready and to school on time.

The employment status and work schedules of parents were also discussed. Parents that were working regularly felt that having prekindergarten built into their daily routine helped their children's attendance. But for parents working the night shift, it was difficult to get home and get their children to school. On the other hand, parents who are out of work or have certain weekday days off might prefer to have their children at home.

MAJOR FAMILY CHALLENGES

Homelessness was a major family challenge discussed at every school. Because children in families experiencing homelessness in Washington, DC, have the right, under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, to remain in their original school or be placed in "a school that is in the best interest of the student," many of these children attend schools far from their shelter or temporary residence.⁶ This can further exacerbate logistical challenges for homeless families, although the district does subsidize public transportation for homeless children. Respondents remarked on the high levels of absenteeism among homeless children, anecdotal evidence supported by our previous analysis of attendance data (Dubay and Holla 2015). The issue of homelessness has become more prevalent as the population of homeless families in Washington, DC, has been on the rise for the past six years (Davis 2016). School staff also described having a hard time connecting with or reaching families experiencing homelessness, and issues of privacy and pride further complicated their efforts.

Some respondents discussed how parents or children with mental health issues can affect attendance. In other cases, we heard about parents with physical disabilities or chronic illnesses that seriously impeded their ability to get their children to school every day.

TRANSPORTATION AND LIVING OUT-OF-BOUNDARY

Unlike some large, urban districts, DCPS students, except those with certain special needs, do not receive transportation services, and most families walk, drive, or rely on the bus or subway. Because of this, transportation has become a contributing factor to absenteeism. Much like the voluntary nature of prekindergarten, transportation and living outside of the school's neighborhood boundary (referred to as living out-of-boundary) appeared to be mitigating factors that often interacted with other factors. Living out-of-boundary and needing to ride multiple buses to get to school were, together, more likely to lead to absences among families with other challenges, like homelessness or poor health. Living out-of-boundary and/or depending on public transportation also magnified the effect of inclement weather. Many school staff said that out-of-boundary children in their classrooms were often absent on snowy days or days after snow-related school closings.

VACATION

Discussions related to family vacations often tied into parents' perceived value of prekindergarten attendance. A few parents mentioned that they take vacations during the school year, with some stating that missing prekindergarten was not a big deal and they would rather take extended vacations now and not in later grades, when attendance "counted." Multiple parents shared that they value family time with their children at this young age and would sacrifice a few days of prekindergarten so their children could spend time with immediate and extended family. However, another group of parents said they had changed their stance on vacations during the first year of prekindergarten because they realized the implications of absences compared to their previous child care arrangement

Foundations of the Family-School Relationship

A key theme that emerged through our work was the importance of laying a foundation for efforts to improve attendance. As we listened to our respondents, it became clear that three core elements could play an important role if implemented well:

- Vision and goals on attendance
- School environment
- Home visits

All of these affect how families view and interact with a school and, ultimately, how they feel about bringing their children to school every day. Below, we outline a foundation for prioritizing attendance, engagement, and positive environment in these key areas.

Vision and Goals on Attendance

Articulating a school vision and goals for attendance helps establish the importance of attendance to the entire school community. These objectives are often part of a larger school vision, so respondents suggested that it is best if the focus on attendance is linked to other academic or engagement areas as well. School staff spoke about developing a vision and goals that are clear, consistent, and effective, and described using this vision to focus on the content of the message for parents. Staff said that the attendance vision and goals were often led by strong principals that prioritized the issue and set the tone for the focus on attendance.

Developing Clear, Consistent, and Effective Vision and Goals

Respondents stressed that attendance must be given similar priority as instruction. Creating a parallel between instruction and attendance establishes expectations and helps parents make the connection between absences and lost instruction time. As one school administrator emphasized:

[Attendance] has to be a top priority. [It] has to be as important as a state test. It's going to be difficult to reach academic goals if attendance is not a priority. [The principal] needs to establish a culture of getting kids to come to school every day.

School staff said goals need to be understood, spread, and shared consistently by all staff members, from the principal down to support staff. While DCPS shares districtwide goals on attendance, school staff often focus on how they uniquely package their goals and delivered messages. This emphasis comes from principals who “own the issue” and share this message with staff early and often. In a few schools, administrators keep on top of their attendance goals and keep the pressure on this issue by monitoring attendance data and meeting with staff to discuss progress on goals, celebrate successes, and develop strategies to improve. Describing this consistent emphasis, one school administrator shared:

We make sure when we meet with staff that attendance is always something that is a top priority to discuss. Every staff meeting, we're always discussing attendance, but on the teacher side—what teachers need to do and can do.

In many cases, it helps to have a clear-cut and tangible goal (e.g., 97 percent in-seat attendance) along with other goals that support progress toward that goal.

Staff also highlighted the specific inclusion of prekindergarten. Despite prekindergarten attendance being voluntary, staff discussed the need to underline that prekindergarten should be considered as important as other grade levels and that 3- and 4-year-olds are involved in the same activities, events, and learning with the same standards and goals in all areas, including attendance. Again, this effort is often led by the principal, who makes this message clear to school staff.

While schools make internal subgoals on attendance, they also find it helpful to have an overarching vision or motto that captures the essence of their message. One school came up with the motto “Present to educate” after a schoolwide competition. Schools distribute such messages on bracelets, handouts, and posters in classrooms and along hallways as reminders of the importance of attendance in all grade levels.

Messaging Parents about Attendance

School staff said messages about the importance of attendance should lay out clear expectations for parents. Messages should explain that attendance in prekindergarten matters as much as in older grades and set out what ideal attendance looks like for students. Details on valid reasons for absences, who to contact at the school about attendance or to excuse an absence, and what communication to

expect from the school when children reach a certain number of unexcused absences should also be included.

Messaging should also convey information on the prekindergarten curriculum and the short- and long-term effects of absences. School staff said it helps to discuss the specifics of the curriculum and the nonacademic skills they teach as well as the structure of the school day. Teachers highlight the importance of their morning sessions, the materials taught, and what students miss when they are tardy. There is also an emphasis on how prekindergarten skills are essential for kindergarten readiness and future academic success and how absences affect learning development. Some school staff find it helpful to show parents how developing bad habits on attendance could be detrimental down the road. One school staff member spoke about how this message resonated with parents:

I think the biggest thing—and this is where parents buy in most—is understanding the educational impact of attendance, not looking at it short term, but do you want your kids to go to college? When you present it that way, it allows parents to see that what they do today, it has an impact on their long-term goals for their children.

School staff also provide concrete examples of how absences add up and the cumulative effect of being 15–30 minutes late every day or missing one day a month in terms of missed learning time over the school year.

Part of the messaging on expectations aims to change the mentality that prekindergarten is child care. Many prekindergarten parents are transitioning from using child care to taking their children to school, and staff emphasized that messages must outline how prekindergarten is different from child care and how parents will need to adjust accordingly. One school administrator said:

I just talk to them, saying this will be a shift in the family because it's not day care. I talk about attendance. I say you're used to day care, where you can drop them off whenever, but now you have to shift your family priorities, because [prekindergarten] is important. You are now responsible for making sure your child comes to school. The patterns you practice now teach your child what is important.

Transitioning from child care to prekindergarten also has implications for parents planning vacations and days off. Parents are told to look at their calendars and plan around the school year. Some parents said the school's messaging on the importance of attendance changed their approach to taking vacations during the school year.

Timing, Modes, and Frequency of Messaging

School administrators stressed that messaging on attendance should reach parents before the school year to set expectations. Many said that open houses for prospective families are a prime opportunity to share this message and be transparent about what the school offers and expects. Schools considered it important for the principal to play a leading role in sharing this message and connecting with families at the open house to help messaging stick. When sharing advice about messaging in general, one school administrator focused on the open house:

Message it in the open house. Let them know that this is your expectation, so that if they come here, that is the expectation. Give fair warning. I went over the reasons why it's important. You don't want your kid in a class where kids don't come. If you come, I need you to come every day.

At another school, prospective parents were invited during their open house to attend and participate in monthly schoolwide attendance assemblies celebrating student and class attendance through recognition and awards for parents, children, and teachers. Respondents focus on messaging during the enrollment process to communicate to parents the importance of attendance before families even begin school.

Other key events for messaging include meetings and workshops early in the year, sometimes facilitated by ECED family services team members, when a family is still forming its patterns and impressions of a school. Again, a key aspect of this messaging is one consistent message with concrete examples. In general, school staff felt that it is important to use any and all opportunities to share this message on attendance early in the school year.

School Environment

A cornerstone of parent engagement is a welcoming, safe, and exciting school environment. This strengthens the family's connection to the school, which increases parents' willingness to listen to school goals, participate in activities, and adhere to school rules.

Two essential, interconnected factors arose as most important to building a strong school environment: friendliness and helpfulness of staff and the sense of a safe and supportive community.

Staff Friendliness and Helpfulness

Respondents spoke about school staff going out of their way to welcome and connect with children and parents. Parents highlighted that school staff at all levels, from the principal to the security and custodial staff, routinely interact with their children. Staff show an openness and willingness to connect with students from different grade levels and their parents. As one parent noted:

This is our first year here, and when we walk down the hall, the principal [and others], they all know the names of all the students. All the kids walking down the hall. I think the kids like it. It's not just *their* teacher, it's the music teacher, the custodial staff, other teachers in other grades. It makes it welcoming for the students. They enjoy that other adults are taking an interest in them.

This sort of environment helps assuage parents' concerns and the initial nervousness of sending their children to school for the first time. One parent spoke about the peace of mind gained from this type of environment:

It's the overall environment, comfort of sending your kid somewhere where they are well cared for by people who care about them. There is a whole staff of people who know their names and care about their day and are willing to take their time to talk to you about anything you have questions about. That comfort level is hard to overestimate.

A few parents connected the friendliness and helpfulness of staff to attendance, explaining that it creates a safe space for parents to come to if they need help or support. Others shared that they were impressed by the dedication and commitment of school staff, especially teachers. This level of care helps parents feel trust and accountability to school staff, which is especially important for prekindergarten parents forming their first impressions of a school.

A few parents and school staff shared challenges to maintaining a positive school environment for families. At three of the four schools, at least some parents speak English as a second language or do not speak English. Some felt that school staff do not always know how to approach these parents and therefore do not show them the same level of warmth as English-speaking parents. Parents said that just because some families do not speak English as a first language, that does not mean they should be ignored or not given a proper salutation in English.

Sense of Community

Respondents considered a sense of community to be particularly important for prekindergarten families. Parent participation is highest when children are youngest, and classrooms aim for a family environment where parents feel welcome to connect with school staff and other parents. Teachers

invite parents into the classroom or set up activities outside of the classroom to support these connections. As one school staff member mentioned:

Our preschool environments are very home-like, very peaceful, calm. I think that's something really positive for families. When they walk into our classrooms, they're relaxed. I think that's really helpful, a home away from home. Also we always invite parents for celebrations in our classroom and morning meetings.

School staff, often led by principals or other school leaders, provide additional spaces for parents to feel at home outside of the prekindergarten classroom. One school has a parent resource room where parents congregate after dropping their children off. Another regularly holds breakfast events and celebrations to bring families together.

Parents felt that the energy and excitement of the classroom and focus on parent engagement are beneficial inside and outside of school. One parent said:

We have created some of our own bonds. The forming of the PTO [Parent Teacher Organization] has strengthened some of our relationships. We see children engaged, so we attend each other's birthday parties, talk about having get-togethers. We talk and laugh, like a family. When I think about I'm going to do something with the kids, I think about who I should invite from the school.

School staff and parents said these elements of parent engagement foster school pride, and parents repeatedly spoke about the school as a home away from home or an important community space. As one parent noted:

It takes a village to raise a child, and this is a village, a loving community. Their motto is "Success isn't an option, it's a must." Each and every child here is successful.

Home Visits

Home visits have become a focus in DCPS efforts to improve family engagement over the past few years. Through different trainings and partnerships with outside organizations focused on family engagement, DCPS has encouraged schools to integrate home visits into their practices. This has been driven in part by research in Washington, DC, that tied home visits to better attendance and academic performance (Sheldon and Jung 2015). In Washington, DC, home visits occur during the summer and typically involve two teachers visiting the home or an agreed-upon public space to become acquainted with the parents and children. These visits have become commonplace at many schools, especially for prekindergarten teachers.

Throughout our conversations, there was near consensus that home visits are an invaluable practice to establish expectations for the school year and build a strong and trusting relationship with parents. All four schools have a home visit policy, and two schools partner with the Flamboyant Foundation for home visit training and support. This work to engage families and connect with them on a personal level has paid dividends in attendance work during the year. Additionally, given that they are a family's first introduction to a school, home visits were seen as particularly beneficial for families of prekindergarten children compared to children in later grades.

Respondents stressed that home visits should have an informal structure to create a warm first impression and should not follow a set agenda or force any specific themes. Teachers should use the home visit as a time to answer questions and get to know the child and parent, not to detail curriculum or rules. Some teachers said they discuss expectations during home visits but in an organic way with no strict or rule-based focus. One parent remarked on this approach to the home visit:

They didn't have an agenda when they came, which I thought was great. It was just coming to make sure Johnny would recognize a face when he came to school. It gave him some things to look forward to, he picked out the symbol he would have, saw pictures of field trips from the past, things he could get excited about. It was no more than that, introductions and that. I thought that was great, because they weren't trying to sell anything or start saying, "Okay, attendance, these are the rules." I thought it was successful.

Home visits were seen as a critical opportunity to establish open lines of communication, the start to a positive and trusting relationship. Having a positive first impression of teachers as regular people and hosting them in their own homes (or in a public space) allows parents a certain level of comfort that could not be easily replicated in the classroom. School staff and parents felt this helps establish teachers as an important resource and ally and fosters accountability between both parties. As one school staff member remarked:

When you visit, parents don't want to let you down. They know the teachers here care. I had a parent call me to say, "I'm bringing him to school. I overslept. I overslept." It was like, "I know school is beneficial to him. I have a relationship with his teachers.

Home visits also lessen apprehension parents might have about sending their young children to school for the first time because they know and trust who they are handing their children off to. Parents said their children grew more comfortable and excited once they were able to meet the teacher, show them their home and/or toys, and hear about the upcoming year. During home visits, teachers speak directly to children about what they will learn and what to expect. As one parent reported:

I liked during the home visit, when the teacher came. I liked how she explained [school]. It was like, "You get to come and sit with me every day. You get to come and we'll play together every day. Every day mommy and daddy go here, they go to work, and you'll come here every day." I

liked how she talked directly to her and included her in the discussion because it's her new big thing. She was part of the conversation. It empowered her a little bit.

Home visits allow teachers to better understand family dynamics, situations, routines, and preferences. This does not always relate to major family challenges. Teachers may gain insight into smaller matters like where a child does their homework, their relationship and interaction with siblings, and the types of games and toys they play with. Teachers felt the greater knowledge of a family's circumstances allows them to better target instruction and support children. Similarly, greater understanding of the personal situations of parents helps teachers improve their communication and ability to provide support and resources when needed.

Most feedback regarding home visits was positive, but a few parents disagreed. In these cases, parents said teachers were too judgmental or nosy.

Communication Strategies and Positive Parent Engagement throughout the School Year

Maintaining constant communication and supportive relationships with parents is perhaps the biggest challenge in attendance work. Positive relationships with parents open the door to resolving any issues, including major family challenges that come up. When there are breaks in communication and school staff lack access to parents, issues can continue to grow.

Effective communication between school staff and parents is essential for relaying information about curriculum, activities, expectations, and children's development. This information builds excitement and enthusiasm about what children are learning and how parents can be involved in their child's education and the school community. Again, this is crucial in prekindergarten, when the level of communication between teachers and parents is often higher than in other grades because of the needs and dependency of 3- and 4-year-olds and their families.

Teachers and schools no longer rely solely on face-to-face meetings and phone calls for parent communication. Below, we explore the different modes of communication teachers use, then address the challenges and strengths in communication between school staff and parents.

Modes of Communication

Respondents discussed many forms of communication schools use to communicate with parents:

- **Face-to-face meetings.** Most respondents felt the most effective form of communication was still a face-to-face meeting, which is easier for parents who drop off and pick up students in the classroom. Unlike some other modes of communication, feelings towards face-to-face contact did not appear to vary by the age of parents.
- **Paper communications.** All of the schools use a folder of printed materials that is sent home on the same day every week. The consistency of when the folder is issued and the types of materials it includes was said to help parents track information without feeling overwhelmed. Another important paper communication is the weekly newsletter. Some teachers create a

colorful and exciting newsletter that showcases what children learned the previous week through simple language and pictures.

- **Phone and email.** A few school staff remarked that older parents and grandparents prefer phone calls and face-to-face meetings. Some parents prefer e-mail, especially for class announcements or to report absences. E-mails and phone calls were said to be especially useful when trying to cover a lot of material.
- **Texting and phone applications.** Most parents reported texting as the preferred form of electronic contact, and teachers said they had given out their personal numbers to parents. Texting gives parents easy access to teachers and allows teachers to check in quickly even during the school day, resulting in more frequent contact with parents. Teachers and parents also spoke highly about using phone applications for communication. The two most cited applications were Class Dojo and Remind. Class Dojo provides parents and teachers a platform to connect, share content, track attendance and academic progress, and provide feedback for individual students and the class as a whole. The Remind app was used mostly for class announcements as a quick and easy way to simultaneously touch base with many parents.

Challenges to Communication

Parents and teachers emphasized the importance of communication but highlighted some challenges or areas for improvement.

The biggest issue facing school staff was constantly changing or incorrect phone numbers. Some teachers expressed frustration that parents' phone numbers would be out of service or change as frequently as a couple of times a month.

Another challenge was the sheer volume of information sent through multiple modes of communication. Some parents felt that, at times, there was too much communication from schools and that it was not always consistent. As one parent noted:

The problem is that we get voice mail messages from the administration at the schools, we get materials in take-home folders, things posted in classrooms, e-mail messages sometimes, and I think there are so many different mediums. PTO [Parent Teacher Organization] meetings are another thing. But it doesn't always cover the same things, so if you're not putting them all together. ...There is not a whole lot of consistency there.

There were also some complaints from parents about too many robocalls, which led parents to ignore calls from the school altogether. From a school's perspective, sending out so much information through multiple modes of communication is time consuming, and it is challenging to cater to different preferences and needs. As one school administrator explained:

We have a lot of families that—they want paper communication and face to face. We have a lot of grandmothers. That's why communication at the school is very tiring; it's such a diverse community. So I have to do everything. Some people felt like it was too much communication, but that's because they have one reliable way, and they use it all the time. You have to do papers in folders, because some grandmothers don't get on the phone or e-mail. But I have a whole other crew. You have to be able to send your messages a lot of ways.

Other barriers to communication include children being in before- or after-school care, resulting in less face-to-face communication. This is particularly an issue when challenges arise that could benefit from a face-to-face meeting. However, schools are quick to hold conferences with parents if these types of incidents escalate, regardless of scheduling difficulty.

As mentioned earlier, language barriers pose a challenge to parent communication. Some parents felt they do not receive the same constant communication, attention, or respect as English-speaking parents. School staff said they struggle to translate documents and messages for parents accurately using online translating services.

Most parents shared positive feedback about communication with teachers, but a few felt that negative tones had adversely affected their relationship. These parents noted that a specific teacher had a negative tone or was overly strict, which made them less comfortable communicating with the teacher.

Tips for Effective Communication Strategies

School staff and parents shared tips for communication, focusing on tone and content, and ways to overcome the challenges of language barriers and changing phone numbers. Teachers especially emphasized opportunities to communicate with parents of prekindergarten children through multimedia and the importance of treating parents as partners in education.

Seeing parents as partners. To ensure that parents feel they are valuable partners in their children's learning, teachers use any opportunities or resources at their disposal to connect with and include parents. This may be as simple as talking with parents for just a few minutes at the beginning or

end of the day. It is important to know how to deliver helpful and well-toned feedback, reminders, and nudges in these moments.

Staying positive. Respondents noted the power of using positive and encouraging language, such as regular feedback about what children did in class, to facilitate a strong relationship. Parents said they appreciate receiving pictures and videos of their children, which strengthen their feelings of education as a partnership. Text messages and phone apps allow teachers to send this content easily and concisely. One teacher touched on the effectiveness of the Class Dojo app:

I think also what Class Dojo provides is—historically, teachers call parents when something is wrong. But Class Dojo provides us opportunity to send out all the positives. Everything that's good and positive. So that provides the parent with opportunity to pick up the phone if we call. They're not feeling like, "Oh my God, my kid did something wrong" all the time.

School staff said they maintain this positive tone when following up on absences. Instead of sending home punitive notes, they follow up by saying that they missed the child and want to make sure that everything is okay. Maintaining a positive approach facilitates honesty and accountability between parents and teachers.

Using classroom parents as liaisons for other parents. Room parents, volunteers tasked with maintaining lists of e-mails or phone numbers and relaying reminders and messages from the teacher, are an important conduit to connect with other parents in the classroom. Some schools have a more informal approach but still include parents in planning school activities or in groups such as the attendance committee. Parent-to-parent communication helps school staff coordinate activities in the classroom and school while also leading parents and families to connect outside of school, fostering the sense of community that makes school a fun and inviting place. Parents could relate to each other's challenges and provide motivation or assistance when needed. Speaking about this support, one parent mentioned:

I talk to the parents, saying, "You can do this if I can do it." I work at night. Some live close to me, in the same building or next building. I talk to them and help them out when I can. I'll catch them in the morning—some I know from classes too—to ask, "Is everything okay?"

Effective Internal Systems and Practices to Support Attendance

Developing internal attendance systems, policies, and practices is an essential component of addressing absenteeism. According to the National Center for School Engagement, tracking attendance can be a nightmare for schools (Finlay 2005). To combat inconsistent, missing, or inaccurate attendance data, schools need systems for tracking attendance that connect to procedures for absence intervention and clarify responsibilities across staff.

As discussed earlier, improving internal systems and practices has been a key focus of DCPS over the past few years. Using this guidance, each school highlighted in this study took a unique and dedicated approach to developing their own internal attendance systems that effectively integrate prekindergarten. At all schools, the ECED family services team plays a crucial role in working with school staff and families to ensure prekindergarten is included in all attendance practices and efforts. Our interviews highlighted four areas that emerged as important to school efforts:

- While schoolwide attention and support are necessary for recording attendance and following up on absences, it is also beneficial to have a specific attendance lead or champion of attendance to focus on these efforts.
- An effective system requires that daily operations for recording and submitting classroom attendance be clear and standardized for parents, teachers, and all other school staff.
- Schools also benefit from having attendance committees that own the issue and can provide a space to share information on student attendance, develop strategies, and take action. This is especially important for proactively working with families facing major challenges and linking them to the support and resources they need.
- To keep on top of attendance, schools need a standardized process to analyze data, flag issues, and reach out to parents.

Below, we outline the lessons gleaned from our four target schools for each of these components.

Characteristics of an Effective Attendance Lead

All schools we studied have an attendance lead, though it is not an official, full-time role. Nonetheless, each school has one person (e.g., a social worker or assistant principal) take on this role in addition to their other duties. Attendance leads are often tasked with monitoring daily attendance operations, leading the attendance committee, outlining and implementing absence follow-up strategies, helping develop attendance activities, and providing the principal and other school administrators with important information about progress toward goals. The attendance lead is the face of attendance at the school. School staff described some of the specific characteristics of successful attendance leads.

Strong communication and collaboration skills. Internal communication is a key aspect of attendance efforts as the majority of school staff are involved in attendance on a daily basis. Attendance leads must be strong communicators and have good rapport with teachers and other school staff. Attendance leads are constantly talking to teachers about student tardiness and absences, family challenges, and how to tackle attendance-related issues. Effective attendance leads develop a collaborative and open relationship with school staff that encourages proactive communication on attendance. Attendance leads also routinely report to the principal on attendance and progress toward attendance goals and to develop strategies for maintaining momentum and messaging the school's goals and vision.

Development and implementation of internal practices. Attendance leads, working with teachers, help establish the best modes of communication for daily and weekly updates to ensure nothing falls through the cracks. At one school, the attendance lead calls teachers every afternoon to verify their daily attendance and check if any students came in late or parents contacted the teacher with an absence excuse.

Effective at working with parents. Attendance leads must also be able to work with and supportively engage parents on a daily basis, and should be approachable and empathetic. As one school staff member noted:

They would have to have a strong sense of empathy for parents, because sometimes it is hard to get up here. You don't know everything a parent is going through, and [you need] sympathy depending on if you have experienced it or not. They need to be very approachable, pretty much whatever I have—a two-way communication with parents. You have to be a good listener.

Actively involved in outreach. School staff said their attendance leads are open to “getting their hands dirty” by going out into the community, doing home visits, and being proactive instead of waiting

for parents to come to them with an issue. Staff were impressed with their attendance lead's ability to connect with so many families and know what types of communication resonate with them.

Detail-oriented and organized. Effective attendance leads were said to be diligent, detail-oriented, and organized—necessary characteristics for understanding attendance data systems and for monitoring and following processes for attendance, absence reporting, and absence follow-up.

Staff at all four schools said the greatest obstacles for attendance leads are the time and resources to handle their many responsibilities, and some suggested that attendance leads should be a half- or even full-time position.

Recording and Submitting Attendance

School staff provided insights into best practices for recording daily attendance. Some focused on personnel and internal communication, and others focused on school wide policies.

Effective staff for inputting absence data. In terms of personnel, staff stressed the need for a strong attendance clerk or other front office staff responsible for inputting data. This person usually works closely with the attendance lead and shares many of the same qualities of good rapport with parents and teachers and meticulousness in inputting and tracking data. The attendance clerk is often the main point of contact for teachers and classroom aides.

Clearly defined roles and responsibilities for attendance recording. The attendance clerk, along with the attendance lead if they are not the same person, is often tasked with overseeing attendance recording. In some cases, four to five people (e.g., the teacher, teacher's aide, attendance clerk, and attendance lead) might be helping record, submit, and input the attendance of one child on a given day, which can require a lot of back and forth. Staff felt that clearly defined roles and follow-up procedures help ensure that everyone plays their part. Regarding potential areas for improvement, some staff mentioned cases of disconnect between teachers and the front office that led to inaccurate data.

Strong and clear tardiness policy. Staff at all schools agreed that strong tardiness policies help ensure that recording is accurate and absences are correctly filed. An essential component of this approach is having one morning entry point. Schools have multiple entrances and exits around the building, but they established one entryway for students in the morning. After a certain cutoff time, schools enforce their tardiness policy, though policies differed from school to school. At one school, all tardy students must check into the office and receive a colored tardy slip to hand to their teachers. At

another school, late students are escorted to their classrooms by a front office staff member or security guard. One parent told us how this policy helped change their habits:

One thing that's helped us is this policy that kids have to get here at 8:40 so he can walk with me to the classroom. ...We haven't been late. It took us about a month to get in the groove.

Established policies for timing of attendance reporting and accuracy checks. Schools vary in their exact policies for recording and inputting daily attendance, but they shared commonalities in terms of timing and accuracy checks. All schools have a set time when attendance must be submitted, which helps front office staff monitor tardiness and know when to follow up on absences. Most school staff appreciated the use of multiple options, such as a sign-in sheet, morning activity, Class Dojo, and so on, to check the accuracy of attendance and resolve discrepancies.

While most staff mentioned the value of having a set time for reporting attendance, prekindergarten teachers said this can pose a challenge if they are busy teaching a lesson or helping a child. This is unique to prekindergarten teachers, as other elementary school teachers often use students to send down attendance to the office, something not possible with 3- and 4-year-olds. A couple of schools address this by having a teacher's aide report attendance, having a staff member or older student collect attendance from classrooms, or allowing teachers to report attendance from their classrooms.

Attendance Committee

DCPS policies require schools to have a student support team to “serve as an early-warning system to identify struggling students and provide them with additional support.”⁷ These teams help schools intervene with students and families who face academic, behavior, attendance challenges, and so on. In terms of DCPS attendance protocol, these teams are charged with absence follow-up, referrals, and parent meetings. Some student support teams have subteams, including, in some cases, a group focused solely on attendance known as an attendance committee.

Attendance committees meet regularly to review attendance reports, develop strategies to follow up with families, create messages or activities focused on attendance, and handle referrals for consequences for absences. Family services team members play a crucial role on the attendance committee through their focus on prekindergarten attendance and family support. Attendance committees can help identify which community and support organizations, including ECED staff, can help families with challenges, such as homelessness, unemployment, and mental health issues.

Our interviews with school staff revealed several common elements of effective attendance committees.

Focused on concrete vision and goals. Staff repeatedly mentioned the value of having a group that embodies the focus on attendance and champions the effort. Attendance committees help shape and are ultimately driven by the schoolwide vision and goals on attendance. Having a group that owns the issue gives teachers and school staff a place to turn with attendance questions or issues.

Careful attention to roles and staff represented on attendance committee. School staff emphasized the importance of carefully selecting committee members with the knowledge, expertise, and passion to excel in their work. There was agreement that the committee should include, in addition to the attendance lead, a representative from the front office, a representative from school administration, the school social worker, the school nurse, an ECED team member, and community partners. At one school, the committee includes a parent and a fifth grader for additional perspective. Many respondents stressed the importance of having the nurse on the committee to provide information about student health, the main reason for absences.

In general, a committee should collectively cover all facets of the school in terms of knowledge and connections. As one staff member said of this well-rounded composition:

These people are all connected to everything that's happening. Those members are rooted in every place in the building. If there is something that is a health concern, the nurse can say, "Oh, okay, this is what I need to do on my end." The instructional coach, teacher, and aide is there to say "Oh, we'll do this [on academics]."

Cohesion and team spirit. No matter the makeup of the committee, school staff highlighted the need for the group to be cohesive and composed of team players. One committee member noted:

I would add making sure that the committee is cohesive. We want everyone in there who can support attendance concerns. Not a huge group of 10 people, but a core group that can impact attendance.

Consistency and structure of meetings. An essential component of an effective attendance committee is the consistency and organization of the group. The committee should meet weekly and have a well-prepared plan, including who will create the agenda, lead the meeting, and what reports will be shared. The committee should carefully review reports and attendance data as a guide to where they focus their efforts.

Following up on absences and family challenges with a positive touch. Committee members noted the benefit of having set plans for absence follow-up and working with families. The content of each

follow-up varies based on the needs of the family, but it is important to have standard processes in place to connect with families using a positive approach. Committee members discussed the importance of involving the ECED team member and community partners when planning the right approach and level of support for families with major challenges, such as homelessness, mental health issues, and so on. Schools also found that placing one representative in charge of follow-up for an entire grade level increased accountability.

Take action during meetings. Given the busy schedules of all school staff and their many responsibilities, it is important for the attendance committee to take action during meetings. This could mean writing out action plans, calling parents, or sending out letters during meetings. Others might use the time to develop and plan different incentives, recognition strategies, and attendance-focused events.

Several schools could improve how they communicate, especially to teachers, what is discussed and achieved by the attendance committee. Some school staff members noted a disconnect between the committee and other school staff that inhibited collective attendance work and consistency in follow-up.

Monitoring Data and Reports, Action Plans, and Follow-Up

Schools emphasized the need to develop procedures for absences just as they have processes for attendance. Schools reported several processes for monitoring absences, following up with families, and developing internal tools to help parents track absences:

Create and communicate clear expectations to staff and parents for reporting absences. To catch absence issues when they occur, schools should communicate clear expectations and processes for reporting absences and following up to both parents and staff. Schools took different approaches to this, but all highlighted the importance of consistency. At one school, the attendance lead calls the parents of any absent children every afternoon if she had not yet learned the reason for absence. At another school, one teacher tells parents they should inform her of any reasons for absences by 9 a.m. To track and monitor absence follow-up, one school uses a shared Google document to track teacher-parent communication about absences.

One key challenge related to absence follow-up is the link between teachers and front office staff. Parents sometimes text or call teachers about their absences, but schools also require parents to provide documentation to the front office. Communicating this expectation helps maintain an accurate record of absences. School staff also noted the challenge in making sure everyone follows absence protocols and follows up with families correctly.

Start with system benchmarks to flag which children need attention. In almost all cases, school processes for when to reach out to families about recurring absences are driven by the 3-, 5-, 7-, and 10-day benchmarks and action items from DCPS official attendance protocol. Though prekindergarten absences do not have the same mandated consequences, schools still use these system flags to determine which children to focus on for follow-up in attendance committee meetings. A few school staff members mentioned monitoring this system daily to identify any students nearing these benchmarks. School staff also spoke of internal weekly and monthly reports and summaries that show attendance data by child to monitor absences.

Clarify tracking of excused absences and their place in absence monitoring. One area for improvement in absence tracking is clarification of excused versus unexcused absences. Since the three- and five-day letters and flags are based on unexcused absences, schools seem to be driven by a focus on unexcused absences. School staff track excused absences as well, but it was often unclear how they played into follow-up with families. At least one school produces its own internal tracking documents, and others rely on documentation from the ECED family services team that covers both excused and unexcused absences for prekindergarten children.

Develop tools to help parents track absences. There was near consensus among staff members that most parents do not track absences without the help of school staff. Some staff believed that reminders in the form of report cards, robocalls, and system-generated letters were too infrequent or ineffective. To overcome this challenge, schools developed their own internal tools to inform parents about absences. One school sends home monthly letters documenting days tardy and excused and unexcused absences for any student that missed a day or more that month. At another school, staff members ask parents how many days they think their child has missed and then show them a calendar with absences marked to display the accumulation of absences. Members of the family services team also developed and utilized tools to help parents track attendance.

Other Strategies to Support Attendance

In previous sections, we focused on the foundational elements of working on attendance and the importance of strong internal procedures for tracking attendance and absences. Schools also use several other strategies throughout the school year to support these efforts and maintain momentum on attendance. A key element of these strategies is finding ways to connect with families with different circumstances and challenges, some small and some much larger (e.g., homelessness, mental health issues, etc.). Below, we discuss partnerships that can support schools' visions and goals for attendance and engaging parents; attendance-focused events, activities, and efforts; and lessons on using incentive and recognition strategies to acknowledge and reward attendance.

Partnerships

Community-based organizations, religious institutions, private organizations, and academic institutions can all provide crucial support to schools and bolster their parent engagement and attendance efforts. School staff described how to identify, collaborate with, and get the most value from supporting partnerships.

Identify partners for case management or to meet families' broader needs. School staff spoke about the value of partnering with local community agencies and other organizations that work with families in need in areas such as housing, employment, and mental health. With prekindergarten families, staff rely heavily on the support and expertise of ECED family services team case managers, who work with families on major issues. Family services team case managers and other partners conduct home visits during the school year to help families work through specific challenges. School staff mentioned the benefit of having representatives from the family services team and other partners on the attendance committee to provide information about family challenges and help plan targeted interventions.

Consider colocation of partnerships. The more school partnerships are integrated into the school, the greater their ability to work with families. Having members of a partner community organization located at the school changes the dynamic of how they are viewed. As one staff member noted:

Having it in the building makes that transition a little easier and smoother for the parent. They see it as, this is a family domain, it's my school, I know everyone here. ...Here, they don't feel judged here, because they've been working with us. Having that in-house makes a world of difference in that aspect.

Schools felt that the integration of family services team case managers into the school provides a similar benefit.

Identify ways to get manpower or support for daily operations. School staff spoke about the value of partnering with local educational institutions or national service organizations to receive support for everyday attendance operations. At one school, a City Year corps member is on the attendance committee and organizes his fellow corps members to run different attendance events or implement certain initiatives. At another school, social work interns help track attendance and work with families.

Explore community supports, funding, and resources. Financial and resource support are necessary to stage activities and provide incentives to all grades, including prekindergarten. To that end, school leaders discussed their work with corporate sponsors to provide gift cards and materials to families. One school received gift cards from McDonald's, and another school partnered with the Washington Redskins. School leaders felt that this support allows them to provide rewards that engage families without having to dip into school budgets. Schools also partnered with local churches and nonprofit organizations to stage clothing drives and farmers markets.

Events, Activities or Efforts Tied to Engagement and Attendance

School staff highlighted how variety in events and activities engages parents and creates an exciting and vibrant school community. Events contribute to attendance by providing a platform for messaging, keeping parents involved in their children's school experiences, and celebrating good attendance. Respondents identified several common types of events.

Events focused on attendance or academics. Schools use attendance-related events to build excitement around the topic and underline its importance. Often facilitated by the ECED family services team, schools hold periodic attendance workshops to talk about expectations, policies, and procedures. Schools also plan different activities or special privileges for students (e.g., dress down day, wacky hat day, etc.) on days with historically low attendance, such as Fridays, half days, days before holidays or breaks, or after snowstorms.

Events that support parent relationships and engagement. School staff also plan informal events, including breakfasts or “chat and chews,” for parents to chat with the principal or school administrators about specific topics and ask their own questions. These events are an opportunity to enhance parent communication and relationships with school administration. Schools also hold other parent-focused events like family literacy nights and “the ABCs of school” (attendance, behavior, curriculum) that bring parents together and invite them to play an active role in their children’s learning.

Events that foster school pride and a positive school environment. Schools were also creative in planning unique events that became school traditions. Perhaps the most illustrative example is a school’s weekly Friday morning pep rally that includes the band, cheerleaders, and school staff and families. As part of the pep rally, staff discuss and celebrate attendance. This event showcases school pride and an energetic, family-like school environment.

Another school holds a celebration for staff, students, and families every spring with games, prizes, and food. Schools also spoke about holding smaller functions, like grandparent days and parent appreciation dinners and breakfasts, to celebrate families and bring the school community together.

Incentive and Recognition Strategies

All schools use incentives and recognition of some form to acknowledge and reward good and improved attendance. School staff and parents held a variety of opinions about the use of incentives and their ability to support attendance efforts, mirroring the pros and cons we laid out in our previous work (Katz, Adams, and Johnson 2015).⁸ Our previous work showed that incentives can exclude and shame children, do not address major family challenges, and set expectations for future incentives (Katz, Adams, and Johnson 2015). Below, we first outline the concerns and challenges around incentive and recognition strategies and then share how schools implemented their strategies, often directly addressing these challenges.

Concerns and Challenges around Incentive and Recognition Strategies

There is some debate around the pros and cons of recognition and incentive strategies. Our respondents provided their perspectives on these issues.

Staff felt their approaches do not exclude any children. Generally, school staff did not express concerns about excluding or shaming certain students. School staff said the different goals and time frames, and the focus on celebrating not just attendance but academics and behavior, allow all children to feel included. Schools were certainly attuned to this issue but were confident their approaches are inclusive. As one staff member noted:

There are so many opportunities for incentives. If you come to school on a half day, if you come every day during a week where there is a day off. ...There are shorter- and longer-term goals, so you might not be able to get monthly perfect attendance, but you will get something else.

Concerns about the message sent by creating extrinsic reward structures. School staff and parents shared concerns about the extrinsic nature of incentives and the message they sent to children and families. Some parents said that other families should want to come to school and do what they are supposed to without the need for a reward. As one parent noted:

For me, I think the expectation should be you come to school every day and participate and put your best foot forward. I understand you're not going to get that from everybody. But something as small as showing up every day, it's disheartening to pay the kids to have them want to come [or] to get their parents on board with getting their kids to school.

Others were concerned that constantly providing extrinsic motivation would set the precedent that completing any task, big or small, should be rewarded.

Addressing root causes of absenteeism. Respondents expressed concern that incentives do not really solve root issues, especially larger issues such as homelessness, mental health, and unemployment, and therefore should not be considered a strategy for improving attendance.

Understanding Value and Approaches to Incentives

With these challenges and concerns in mind, respondents described the value they place on incentive and recognition strategies and the issues they considered while designing their efforts.

Explore the purposes and goals of specific incentive and recognition strategies. School staff and parents believed that when planned and implemented correctly, incentive and recognition strategies could help motivate families, keep focus on attendance, and celebrate good performance. Speaking about the effect of a day-of surprise raffle for on-time attendance, one parent noted:

I like the raffle in the morning because I don't know if they announce it...but I like that it's spontaneous, motivates them every day. You never know...

Staff said using these rewards or acknowledgements of attendance and other academic and behavioral achievements highlights a broader supportive approach of lifting children up through positive reinforcement.

Carefully consider the structure of incentives and recognition. One important decision respondents considered was whether to reward attendance at the class, student, or family level. Respondents also considered what time frame to assess (e.g., a day, week, month, or quarter) and the goals to be rewarded (e.g., perfect attendance, improved attendance, on-time arrival, and so on). There was general consensus that rewarding attendance at several levels, over different time frames, and for several goals ensures that all students are included in incentive and recognition strategies.

Reward efforts of teachers and parents. Respondents highlighted the importance of showing appreciation for the work of parents and teachers. Strategies to include parents and teachers included gift cards, certificates for children and families, bulletin boards with class and student pictures, and attendance assemblies and celebrations for all parties.

Consider timing of incentives. Planning incentive and recognition activities for days with historically low attendance is shown to improve attendance.

Mix strategies to capitalize on both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Acknowledgement and recognition strategies were seen as an effective way to quell some concerns about incentives and extrinsic motivation while still keeping focus on attendance, engagement, and appreciation. Many spoke of the buzz these events created and the effect that simple acknowledgement of effort had on parents. One school staff member noted:

It lets the students know they're being recognized and they can work to receive that. It involves the parents, who are invited to the rewards presentation, or they see the certificate for the effort of getting here. In those respects, it engages the family.

Conclusion

Prekindergarten attendance sets key patterns for future attendance and family routines and is strongly associated with attendance and academic outcomes in grades K–3. With this knowledge, some forward-thinking districts, including DCPS, have begun to track and address chronic absenteeism in prekindergarten.

This report presents lessons learned from four Washington, DC, elementary schools with lower levels of prekindergarten absenteeism than expected from their demographic profiles. Interviews with school staff and parent discussion groups provided rich insights into the contributing factors of absenteeism and how these schools approach parent engagement and communication.

Key Findings

The overarching theme in the four schools was that attendance work requires a proactive, school wide effort rooted in relationships. Our study reached four key conclusions:

- Attendance work is predicated on a strong, positive, and inclusive school community that prioritizes family engagement.
- Positive interactions with families before and early in the school year create a foundation for working and communicating with families to deliver key messages, support, and feedback on academics and attendance.
- Standardized and consistent attendance policies and practices help establish expectations the tone for regular attendance, monitoring absences, and proactively working within the school and with families to sustain strong attendance.
- Community partners, events, and activities can all help support families with small or large needs, celebrate successes, and sustain momentum on attendance.

Below, we provide additional takeaways and recommendations from these conclusions.

Foundations of the Family-School Relationship

One of the key themes that emerged was the essential nature of establishing key goals on attendance and relationships with families before and early in the school year. To focus on this relationship, we provide several recommendations for school staff.

- Vision and goals
 - » Develop a clear and consistent vision for attendance that includes prekindergarten, makes attendance a priority on the same level as instruction, and fits the overall approach of the school.
 - » Translate the vision and goals for attendance into easily digestible points for prekindergarten parents that convey the importance of attendance and the school's approach using illustrative, concrete examples.
 - » Share messages and expectations around attendance with prekindergarten parents before they enroll their children and at other points (e.g., back to school night, events, and workshops) during the first month.
- School environment
 - » Consider the approach taken to welcoming and working with families whose primary language is not English. Discuss what aspects of this approach are different from English-speaking parents and how to improve guidance to school staff on working with all parents.
 - » Create opportunities to invite parents into the classroom to see their children's learning environment or into the school to converse with other parents.
- Home visits
 - » Provide guidance and training to teachers on best practices around content, cultural awareness, and tone. Give space internally to discuss lessons learned from prior-year home visits and help flesh out examples and scenarios to help prepare teachers.
 - » Connect with children about what will take place in the classroom and get them excited for the upcoming school year.
 - » Respect the space and be careful not to ask judgmental or nosy questions.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND POSITIVE PARENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGHOUT THE SCHOOL YEAR

Effective, ongoing communication between parents and school staff, especially teachers, is essential to connecting with families and supporting them in all aspects of their child's education, including attendance. Our respondents identified several strategies to achieve this:

- Use positive and encouraging language to form strong and supportive relationships.
- Find out the preferred modes of communication for parents. If necessary, explore creating a list or short survey to document preferred modes and best times to communicate.
- Identify any templates for newsletters, reminder sheets, emails, and other communication that can be shared across classrooms.
- Establish a strategy for collecting updated contact information throughout the year to overcome constantly changing phone numbers.
- Document internal bilingual resources and other strategies for bridging the language gap, such as using text messages, pictures, and videos to maintain positive contact with families who speak other languages.
- Regularly share multimedia information about what children are learning as a means to include parents and get them excited about the educational value of prekindergarten.
- Utilize parents as resources to connect with other parents to relay messages and reminders, coordinate events, and plan activities.

EFFECTIVE INTERNAL SYSTEMS AND PRACTICES TO SUPPORT ATTENDANCE

Discussions with staff and parents demonstrated how crucial it is for schools to establish effective attendance practices and policies to ensure that the whole school, including prekindergarten, has a consistent approach. Below, we share recommendations for these different elements of internal systems and practices:

- Effective attendance lead
 - » Clearly define the role of the attendance lead and expectations for their role as it relates to their other responsibilities in the school.
 - » Focus on how the attendance lead communicates internally on a daily and longer-term basis about attendance, outlining steps to limit gaps in communication.

- » Ensure that the attendance lead has the tools, resources, and support to work with parents daily and conduct home visits.
- Policies for recording and submitting attendance
 - » Ensure that the attendance clerk, front office staff, and teachers work together to develop a standard and consistent approach for communicating on attendance and following up on absences that fits into their hectic morning schedules.
 - » Establish strong and well-publicized policies for tardiness to establish expectations and facilitate accurate attendance recording.
 - » Set a time for all attendance records to be submitted and follow it, using teachers' aides or other staff members to streamline the process.
 - » Determine which forms of recording attendance teachers prefer and are most accurate, using multiple forms of attendance tracking as backup.
- Attendance committees
 - » Promote the attendance committee as the face of attendance at the school and charge them with owning the issue, integrating attendance goals into overall school goals, and including prekindergarten in their weekly discussion and activities.
 - » Consider the composition of the attendance committee and what members need to be included to cover all areas of the school. Having a nurse or medical staff member and representation from the family services team were considered essential for supporting families and integrating prekindergarten into school operations.
 - » Establish consistent routines and procedures for meeting times, agenda, reviewing reports, and absence follow-up.
 - » Use the committee as a working group and establish which types of activities and actions are most useful to complete during the meeting and what can be successfully accomplished outside the meeting.
 - » Assess internal processes for communicating the committee's work to teachers.
- Monitoring data and reports, action plans, and follow-up
 - » Establish and communicate expectations and guidelines for how and when absences should be reported by parents and how school staff follow up with parents.
 - » Assess internal communication between teachers and front office staff around absences and follow-up.

- » Develop tracking tools to help parents follow their child's attendance, considering what time frames and visuals to include so that parents best understand the cumulative nature and impact of absences.

OTHER STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES TO SUPPORT ATTENDANCE

Along with the foundational elements discussed above, schools can use supporting strategies to ensure they are connecting with and engaging families and raising awareness and energy around attendance:

- Partnerships
 - » Explore how to best integrate social work and case management partners into the school community so they can work with parents as an extension of school staff rather than as an outside partner.
 - » Examine gaps in the materials and resources needed to implement incentives or events, and explore how corporate or community partners could help fill these gaps.
 - » Consider how to utilize extra staff support from community partners (e.g., interns, AmeriCorps members) to bolster attendance infrastructure in terms of attendance tracking and absence follow-up, parent engagement and communication, and activities and events.
- Events, activities, or efforts tied to engagement and attendance
 - » Plan events and activities early in the school year and assess opportunities to highlight key messages and goals around attendance.
 - » Focus time and resources on outreach for different events and activities and consider how to use several forms of communication to advertise events.
 - » Highlight school days with historically low attendance and plan events or activities for these days to make children want to come to school.
 - » Brainstorm with school staff and parents about what unique events or traditions the school can start to highlight the school community and foster school pride.
- Incentive and recognition strategies
 - » Take a well-rounded and inclusive approach to incentive and recognition strategies, focusing on times of year with historically low attendance, and determining the goal, time frame, and level of recipient.

- » Use incentives as part of a larger strategy on parent engagement and attendance to support the school's overall vision and approach to attendance.
- » Draw on the knowledge and input of different players in the school community in developing engaging, unique, and timely incentive and recognition strategies, incorporating feedback from parents and students about what events and activities would resonate most with them.

This analysis provides insights from school staff and parents in Washington, DC, schools as well as recommendations on how schools can take a proactive approach to attendance. Taking a comprehensive look at not just attendance practices and policies but also school vision and goals, school environment, parent communication and engagement, events, and incentive and recognition strategies can help schools get ahead of absenteeism. While this report details attendance strategies schools have used or are using, there is still a gap in the research evaluating the effectiveness of these approaches and strategies. Future research should look at elements of this comprehensive approach and subsequent attendance data to determine the effects of such strategies, their cost, and how they can be replicated at the school and system level.

Notes

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