

TRANSCRIPT

Reducing Chronic Absence: What Will It Take?

SPEAKER Hedy Chang, Attendance Works

EVENT TITLE Every Day Counts: Increasing Attendance to Improve Student Outcomes

EVENT DATE September 26, 2013

KARL WILSON

We are now going to move to our keynote today. We're very pleased to welcome Hedy Chang. She is the director of Attendance Works. Many of you are already aware of the work she has done in Utah around improving attendance. She is a national leader on the issue of chronic absenteeism. She is the author of the report *Present, Engaged, and Accounted For*. You have a copy of that in your folder, and we hope that you have a chance to review that. She has spent more than two decades working on the issues around attendance and absenteeism. She has been named by the White House as a "Champion for Change." She is also a mother of the two school-aged children who attend school regularly. And Hedy? Hedy, welcome. Let's give her a hand.

[Applause]

HEDY CHANG

Thank you. It is such a pleasure to be here, and it's a pleasure that it's not my first time to come to Utah. There are a lot of allies here in the room. I have to say, Attendance Works, which was launched about three years ago, and I started the work a number of years before that, this is a ... our effort is really trying to make sure, nationally, we understand that chronic absence is an issue that matters. That it's a data point we're not monitoring, but if we did, we could really be turning around achievement; and it's a solvable problem. But what's most important is when you start to think about solvable problems is you need examples of what makes a difference; you need examples on the ground; you need examples in states.

Attendance Works is, on a good day, about four people, and we are mostly living on the internet. What makes us live, what has allowed us to launch nationwide Attendance Awareness Month with hundreds of communities literally participating with us, is the fact that we have allies who are working with us throughout the country. And here in Utah, you all have done some spectacular work. Kristin will be talking about the work that you've done with your data. Karen [Crompton of Voices for Utah Children] has been helping, Representative Brisco—there's lots ... and there's people on the ground in school districts who are starting to move this, in Ogden, in Salt Lake City. I so appreciate that, because it's when we can leverage and make sure that no one has to reinvent the wheel, but it's when champions like you take this work and move it every day that this will turn the needle, and we can turn this needle in our country.

So, this is the issue that I have been talking about, and I mean, actually, what's wonderful is you can clearly, in your state department of education, your superintendent, your leadership there, you guys get this issue. This isn't rocket science, and I know that everyone, all of you in this room, this is not—this is sort of like the DUH research part of the work. Yesterday, I heard someone tell me that “duh” was actually a technical science term (laughs). But seriously, what we know from common sense, and what research over and over will prove, is that in order to benefit from classroom instruction, you need to be there. That's not the part of this work that's surprising. The part of this work that is surprising is that people are not monitoring when students are missing too much school for any reason.

And so I am going to start with something that's not so exciting. It's a little more mundane, but I want to unpack attendance terms because one of the challenges I find going from every place in this country, because lately that seems to be my norm, is that we actually all think about attendance differently, and we use different attendance terms. So when you say, “Do you care about attendance? Are you monitoring attendance?” everyone will say, “Yes.” But unless you unpack what they are monitoring, you actually don't know whether we are talking about the same thing.

So there is average daily attendance, and your superintendent mentioned ADM, average daily membership. Average daily attendance; that's one way to kind of think about attendance. And average daily attendance is usually what I see most schools tracking. It's a percent of kids, whether or not you are allocating funding by it or not, a lot of times schools track this measure, because it's the percent of kids who attend school each day. And it's helpful because you actually do want to know, okay, if I have 200 kids and 190 show up, that's 95% attendance. It gives you a feel for the number of desks you need in that room or in that school so that you have the supplies for the number of kids who are typically going to show up, right? That's different from truancy. Now, truancy in most places refers to *unexcused* absences. Under No Child Left Behind in 2006, it said everyone—all states—shall start to track truancy, but we will leave that definition of what *is* truancy up to states.

So how states handle this, because we are a democratic country that—and there are a lot—I do, believe me, I love the rugged individualism of our country—but there are some things where it gets a little more challenging, which means that everyone will define everything the way they want it. And in that case that applies to a lot of, education in this country for lots of very good reasons is locally driven, but it means when we say “truancy,” we actually don't mean the same thing, depending on where you are. So some states actually have defined state definitions. In California, a truant child is anyone who has missed three days unexcused or three times late to class is truant. That's what we report up to the feds, is our truancy rate. If you go to Texas, it's 10—not Texas, Indiana—it's 10 unexcused absences. If you go to the state of Maryland, it's missing 20% of the school year due to unexcused absences.

So depending on where you are, it can mean something different, and I believe, okay, I am going to look here to make sure what I was—Kristin was just whispering in my ear because I have to make sure I am knowing this right—is that in Utah, and there are a few other states that do this as well, you all don't have a standard definition of truancy across the state? It's actually left to local school districts to define when is a child truant, is that right? Okay. So,

you know, states that really, really prize local control, you have that. Now there are some benefits. The challenge is, it's really hard to know what's the trigger for action based on truancy because you have ... I mean, it just completely varies by every single school district.

I was in Michigan yesterday, last night, and they have the exact same situation, and one of the challenges is that truancy is both what you are defining—No Child Left Behind is one point—but a more important point for truancy is, usually, it's a measure for helping you think about when are kids or families in violation of state compulsory ed laws, and therefore when might you, at some point, start to use legal intervention to make sure kids are abiding by compulsory ed laws—students and their families. So, for example, in California, we actually have a fairly standard process. If a kid is truant, the parent gets a notice. If you have three times of a notice, and there is no response, then the school is supposed to have a meeting with that kid and the family to figure out what's going on. If there is still no response, and you go to a district level, and then if ... you are only supposed to take legal action if you have done all of those things. And because it's statewide, you can actually create materials, resources, professional development that every district in the state of California, of which there are a thousand, can use them. So I am just saying when you have it as an individual district approach, it means that anyone working in a district who wants to work on truancy, you are going to have to first figure out what's the process locally. That's just your local ... your reality here in Utah. And so I'm not sure when in Utah, you say the word "truancy," exactly what that means.

Then there is the term "chronic absence," and this is a term that I will admit to coining. Yeah? [Audience comment.] So there are the 10 days unexcused that's in state law. Thank you. I am sorry, I go from state to state, and it's a little challenging. So I think it sounds like you do have something in the state law. So this may be, again I am a little unsure. In any case, that is different from "chronic absence," which is missing 10% or more of school for *any* reason, which right now is not a part of state law. This is a definition that Attendance Works has been proposing, and I know we were informing the research that University of Utah did, and it's based on when we worked with the Columbia University to produce the report, *Present, Engaged, and Accounted For*, it was at this level, missing 10% or more, that's 18 days over a 180-day school year, or just two or three days every single month, but if it added up to 18 days over the entire school year, that's what we found was associated with poor academic performance.

Part of the reason why we advocate for a 10% measure is, I want people to be sort of taking an early warning approach, because you can use 10% at any point during a kid's career to see if they are at risk for poor attendance. You can look at 10% at the end of one month, the end of two months, and that way, you can see who might be on track for missing so much school that they are academically at risk. In some states where they have like a 15- or a 20-day absences for any reason, sometimes what I have seen is people wait till kids have missed that much school before there's a trigger for action. And my worry is that then you are waiting too late because the kids miss so much school, you're actually having to engage in remediation.

So this is just something to understand. And part of why this is important to also understand is that if you look at average daily attendance, for example, it can mask significantly high levels

of chronic absence. So this is actual data from Oakland Unified and New York City schools. So a school with 95% attendance—all these are six schools in Oakland Unified in California that had 95% attendance, but they had hugely varying levels of chronic absence, between 7% and 16%. So let's go back to that example. You've got 200 kids in a school; 190 show up, 10 don't, right? Ten empty seats. It's not the same 10 kids in those empty seats all year long; they would be disenrolled by the end of the year.

The question is, who's in those empty seats? Is it all 200 kids all missing exactly nine days each? Probably not. Usually, kids vary, right? You've got some kids with great attendance, some kids with poor attendance. What's the distribution? Is it 60 kids who are all missing about a month of school, or 18 days, 20 days? And then there are still absences left over for other kids. So who is in those empty seats, and how is it distributed? When we ... so in New York, when they looked at it, and they had a 90%—so the other thing, that I think gets a little in the way of this, is we are also trained that anything that's 90% is an A, right? Ninety percent is an A! It's not in average daily attendance land! In New York City schools, they were seeing that if you had a 90% attendance, there was at least 20% of your kids chronically absent.

And also, this is something you all probably know as teachers. When you have one out of five kids in your classroom chronically absent, and believe me, the kids who are chronically absent are not all absent on the same day; they are absent different days of the week, right? When you have that much classroom churn, I think even the best teachers have a challenge delivering effective instruction, because you're trying to figure out whose educational need do I meet, right? It's such a tough job. My sister is a teacher. I have been schooled to appreciate all of this. And so high chronic absence isn't just a problem for the kids who are chronically absent; it slows down the pace of instruction for an entire class.

And when we looked at districts—three different districts—we found that at 98% average daily attendance, usually there was only a handful of kids who were chronically absent. There are still some, but not huge. At 93%, which a lot of people think is not bad average daily attendance, we were seeing on average 15% to 20% of the kids at least chronically absent. At 95%, I actually don't know. You have to calculate up; you have to move it up. And part of why I think this is happening is ... I don't know where in Utah you started having electronic student information systems. My experience is it was sort of 2007ish, 2008ish, '09ish, when people really started to implement this. But before, a lot of attendance was being taken by hand. And if your attendance is being taken by hand, of course you track average daily attendance, because it's really hard to do it by individual kid; you are just counting in.

But these student information systems that we now have—I liken it to my iPhone. It's really powerful. I should be able to do lots of things with it, and I barely use 10% of the capacity of my iPhone. And even though my kids tell me, “Mommy, there is an app you can download, and it will help you do this.” Do I download the app? We can use our data, and you actually have to usually tweak with data systems to start calculating chronic absence, but we don't use it. We have the technology, but we haven't really made the technology so that it allows us to be actionable.

So the other reason is that when you look at truancy ... and so, if truancy is only unexcused absences, and in fact, this data here is actually 10 ... this is from my own school district in San Francisco. When they finally started looking at this data, and they looked at the number of kids who were missing 10 days unexcused—we have an early school year, so May 16th is pretty close to the end of the school year—they identified, look at the kindergarten lines: half the kids who you would consider at risk for being chronically at risk due to poor attendance, 600 versus 300 kindergarteners in my school district. And that's because five-year-olds aren't, like, absent thinking, "Oh, today, I think I am going to skip school, and I won't tell mom." That is just not how ... what's happening.

Young kids—five, six-year-olds, they miss school for a lot of reasons. Think about the kids who are coming to kindergarten, and this is their very first experience in kindergarten, and they are really anxious, right? And they are nervous; they've never had this happen. What happens when kids are anxious about coming to school? OK, how many of you are parents? Okay, you can answer this question. When your kid is nervous about going to school the next day, what do they tell you? "I've got a stomachache," right? And when we are five, we go, "Oh, poor thing, you probably ate something wrong," whatever. "Stay home today, we'll be okay," right? Often that happens. And for families who don't get separation anxiety, believe me, I had kids who were cling-on kids, I was so thankful for having small classroom ratios in preschool because I had to unlock their legs. It was horrible. I thought I was a terrible mother.

But what you realized was after three times of doing that, they stopped doing it, because they got over it, they realized, you know ... but if families don't get that, you can get a lot of excused absences among young kids. And they could have been in school, but they all come out as excused. The other challenge around this is, it's also that we tend to think and notice, and people will say this to me, "Oh, come on, all the teachers know which kids are chronically absent, because they see them every day." I think teachers and families notice *consecutive* absence. I would notice if Karen was gone three days in a row, but if Karen is only gone one day every two weeks, would I notice? Harder to notice, especially if you have relatively large numbers of kids in a classroom.

In New York City, they actually have a law, the 407 alert; it's a practice, because they had a really tragic case of a young girl being found in the basement dead—Nixzmary Brown. And when that happened, they said, "Didn't anyone notice?" So they instituted a law that schools had to figure out and find out when kids were missing 10 consecutive days, or 20 days out of a 40-day period, someone from the school had to go and just make sure that everything was okay, that there wasn't a child abuse situation going on here. That's the red line on the bottom of this chart.

The top chart is when we got them to look at—this is actually looking at 20 days at the end of the school year—it's almost 10%; how many kids were chronically absent. And it identified so many more kids, and that's because they're not consecutive; they are sporadic. And literally, when my colleague Kim Nauer showed this to principals who were in the schools—because in some of the schools that were low income, it was one out of three kids—they had no idea their chronic absence levels were so high. We don't see the sporadic absences. This is where our data should be our friend; we just have haven't made it yet.

So nationwide, as many as 10% to 15% of students—Utah is right in the middle there— are chronically absent. And we know that in some states ... cities, it's as many as one out of four. I will tell you that I have been in a number of cities where it's even higher. Chronic absence is a red alert that kids are headed for academic trouble and dropping out for high school. You know, dropout isn't something ... and again, I think about your superintendent and your comments and Karl's comments, which are that dropout doesn't happen overnight. For many kids, it's a slow process of, sort of, disengagement that builds over time, and the surefire earliest sign we have is that kids stop showing up.

So this is new data that's been released by the University of Chicago. It's some amazing research starting at looking at what happens with kids in pre-K. And one of the things that they found is that chronic absence, and it actually affects everything—letter recognition, math scores, social and emotional development. Any time a kid was chronically absent, the more they were chronically absent, the lower their scores. But the other thing that was so challenging about this is, what they found is that attendance matters most for the kids who entered the farthest behind. Kids enter farther behind because their parents themselves often don't quite have the skills; they may be low-income parents who are working multiple jobs or low-income parents who are low income because they are not literate themselves.

So those kids are even more dependent on school, on preschool, to be able to gain. So look at the steepness of the curve here. So if you show up, it doesn't close the gap, but at least it doesn't widen the gap. If you don't show up, you lose out the most. And this is an example, this is what they saw. This is using DIBELS. It's like a stair step. Every single day, or year, of absence, you got lower scores. And if you were chronically absent in pre-K, K, first, and second, you needed intensive intervention; by second grade, you're needing intensive intervention.

What we also know from California data ... you always have to do this in cohorts, you have to follow the kids over time. It's a little bit insidious. I don't know if you ... just to go back one quick sec, look at this—New York City or San Francisco—the curve's always the same. Chronic absence is higher in kindergarten, because this is a snapshot in time, and attendance usually improves in second, third, fourth grade, right? That's when kids can get to school more easily; that's when sometimes they engage in after-school stuff. I think there is a number ... the illness issues aren't as severe as kids get a little older. The challenge, I think, though, is that you could have a kid chronically absent in kindergarten and first, and by third grade, their attendance has improved; they are not chronically absent, right? But their reading may still be affected, because now the kid is so far behind; they can't keep up with what's being taught in the classroom.

So we found when kids were chronically absent in kindergarten and first, only 17% of them were reading at grade level by the end of third grade. This is data from the Bay Area in San Francisco; 64% of the kids who were in school and 95% of the time, or missed less than nine days of school and had no attendance risks, were actually reading at grade level. I am not saying, by the way, that if you show up to school, you will end up reading. There is more to that; that's why we invest in effective instruction. That's why we ... but I am fairly sure that if you do *not* show up to school, you are not set on the right path for learning how to read, right?

So this is only half the battle, but it's a pretty important first half of the battle, and all our investments in instruction and improvement—they don't help if kids aren't there.

And again, for low-income kids, where there is research that shows that every absence for a low-income kid affects them 75% more than a middle-income kid. And we found K attendance—this is using the ECLS-K database; it's 20,000 kids across the country—you could predict lower fifth grade outcomes. And part of that is because low income-kids are both ... one of the challenges is, low-income kids, we found, were four times more likely to be chronically absent. I think your data in Utah may be very different than that. But the other challenge is they are also more likely to face the kind of barriers that mean you are chronically absent more than one year in a row: unaffordable housing; unstable; bad, poor transportation; lack of access to health care.

And what we saw in Oakland—we wanted to know, well, how does this affect middle school outcomes? So we tracked, went actually backwards to kids in sixth grade and said, "What happened to them? How did this connect to their earlier attendance?" If you had been ... if a child had been chronically absent in first grade, they had 5.9 times—and it turned out any year in elementary school if they were chronically absent—they had about six times higher likelihood of being chronically absent in sixth grade. But the kids chronically absent in first grade, also by the time you tracked them to the sixth grade, had lower test scores and higher suspension rates. And every year that got worse. If you were three years of chronic absence in elementary school, you were 18 times more likely to be chronically absent in sixth grade.

Chronic absence is one of those things that you have to do it early and often. There are kids in middle school who become chronically absent after having done all right in elementary school. Something happens to them in the middle school or in ninth grade. The transition years are often tough. But the hardest-to-serve kids, I believe, are those kids we lost in kindergarten and first. And by the time they get to middle school, it is the ABCs—I so appreciate the work of Bob Balfanz and the University of Chicago—attendance, behavior, course failure. Because by sixth grade, if you've got a child who has poor attendance, but they're also two or three years behind and they're a behavior issue, you can't just deal with the attendance issue, you've got to deal with the whole thing, otherwise it's not going to work.

But what if we could have prevented some of that by making sure those kids were on track from the very beginning in kindergarten, where maybe all we had to do was deal with attendance. And this is data—I won't go into much more detail, this is a version of what Kristin will present. Your Utah data ... so you guys actually are one of my national examples because, seriously, you guys have used your state data system in a way that is exemplary, so that you can start to look at the scope and scale of this problem in a state. But what your Utah data shows is that every single year of absence starting in eighth grade ... and by the time you are in middle and high school, this is not connected with poverty. It matters for every single kid. Middle class kids drop out, too. The surest sign that a kid is at risk of dropping out is they stop showing up to class, and it's the first thing we will see.

And what we have seen is that this is a huge achievement gap issue. So this is Oakland data again, and you see the top line there is African-American kids. Now I want to point out a couple

of things with this data. One is, even though ... I mean, it's just challenging that one out of four, almost, African American kids in Oakland are chronically absent in kindergarten. It's like, did they even get the opportunity to learn? But I also want to make the point that 75% of those kids showed up. So one thing I just want to make sure people think about. It's not your income, it's not your race that predicts chronic absence in future years; you can't make assumptions. Do guys know what the best predictor of chronic absence is? Oh, come on.

[brief audience conversation]

HEDY CHANG

Earlier chronic absence, yay Kenwyn! Seriously, this is a data-driven strategy; your best predictor. And if you are starting to look at pre-K, you can look at this throughout a kid's career: were they chronically absent, are they starting to be chronically absent? Just use data, don't make assumptions. And then you can target resources, because not every kid is chronically absent. It's a small minority; it's a subset of your kids. So you want to know which kids those are. And when you get there, the key question is asking, "Well, why? Why are you chronically absent?" Don't make assumptions, because in order to come up with good solutions, you need to be able to understand what might have led to your chronic absence in the first place.

Is it the problem of myths; that absences only matter if they are unexcused? Because we kind of think about attendance as compliance. Attendance is compliance with state compulsory ed laws. Or even for teenagers. I have a 15-year-old. If Neil skips school and didn't tell me, he is in trouble. My teenager just disobeyed me, right? But if I said to Neil, "You're on the baseball team; you had a lot of tests. Ah, take a mental health day on Monday. You are really tired, honey." Is that okay? Well, if you are not thinking about it, is it okay that you extend your family vacation three or four days because you are looking for the inexpensive flight? And I am not saying that sometimes there aren't reasons why you, you know, shift around days. But the problem is absences can add up. And if families think that the only absences that matter are the ones that kids take without permission and are skipping school, we are missing the boat on how much absenteeism might actually be affecting kids' achievement.

If teachers think they are just taking attendance because they are supposed to, because it's paperwork, we are missing the boat on making sure that we are engaging kids as soon as they walk in the classroom. We are finding out, are kids really taking advantage of the opportunity to learn that we are offering every single day. Every day of absence truly does equal one day of lost instruction. But we don't think about it that way, because I think we have always thought about attendance as these kind of boring paperwork legal requirements, as opposed to a fundamental part of our strategy for making sure kids get the opportunity to learn and to be educated.

And then there is this sporadic, you know, attendance only matters. So there is a whole set of myths. And I will say, I do think we can move the needle in part, not fully, by these myths, and this is why there's September Attendance Awareness Month, the Every Day Counts stuff. It's our low-hanging fruit, because we can make some difference. It's very rare you can find some

low-hanging fruit. You know, messaging will make a difference. But then we also have issues of barriers, which, you know, the example that Karl gave, even if that mom might know that attendance matters, but that wouldn't have changed the trajectory for that young girl. You then need to know if there are these other barriers, because then you have to support with deeper or more intensive supports, whether that's lack of access to health care, poor transportation, no safe path to school.

But I will also tell you, data can help you figure this out. You can talk to families; that will help you figure it out. But you can also look at data. In Oakland, where the African American kids ... the chronic absence is the highest? It's actually in West Oakland, one particular neighborhood in a swath that goes down right between the freeways. And when you look at the asthma rates in this county, they correlate exactly. If you look at West Oakland, which has incredibly high levels of violence, they don't even have a decent low-cost grocery store within walking distance from families. There are reasons, and it actually requires a community solution. But when you look at the data, it starts to help you unpack what are the barriers.

But then I also think you can use the data to start looking at issues of aversion, and I want to point this out, too. I mean, sometimes kids' chronic absence is connected to the lack of the effective instruction. This is one of those chicken/egg things. So when your kids, particularly middle and high school kids more so than the younger kids, when the teacher ... although you can see it even in the early grades because parents will vote with their feet. You know how you have that one teacher who is really not doing ... they should have been retired a long time ago, and I am not saying—most teachers are great, but there are a few that are kind of challenging; you know, the kids are really bored. And you know what, they walk with their feet. They don't show up to that class, and you will know it because their chronic absence rates are different from the other teachers in their school building.

You can use the data to help you figure that out. I actually did it one time. I have seen this three different times. We calculated chronic absence levels; we looked at it by grade level. One time, it really was ... half the kids in kindergarten. Kindergarten chronic absence was the highest. It was all concentrated in one out of five teachers, and the parents all said, "That's the teacher we dread sending our kids to." Another time chronic absence was higher in a classroom and the parent told me, "My daughter is in that classroom, and there is a bully who is uncontrolled, and all the other kids in the classroom keep showing up with stomach aches." Another time I shared a principal with this data, and the principal told me, "Oh, I think we have mold in the classroom." And I said, "Hmm, well, there is a solution!"

So it's not, again, with this data, and I have asked teachers' unions, "Well, what would make you comfortable with us looking at this data? Because you get harmed, too, by chronic absence; it's harder to teach." They said, "As long as you use it as inquiry, not making immediate judgment. Do I need support; what's going on?" They were fine with having chronic absence data. It's not the data. It's how we use it; do we use it to ask questions and come up with solutions. And then I will say in a number of places, we have seen chronic absence, and you have got to look at the data, you have got to look at, is it excused, unexcused. And I don't know how suspensions are calculated here in Utah, but suspensions in California are considered a part of the excused absences. But you can look at data and see what percentage of absences

are due to suspensions, because I have seen where you have so much suspension that you're actually pushing kids out.

I was just in Michigan, in Grand Rapids, where they talked about the fact that because of some of the challenges of implementation around the zero tolerance laws, kids are getting pushed out at really young ages. The superintendent gave me this awful example of a kindergartener who was pushed ... who missed 180 days of school for hurting a teacher. What does a five-year-old do to merit being pushed out of school for 180 days? So this is really ... if that's the case, then you've got to look at it, because I guarantee you if kids or families think they are pushed out of school for unfair reasons, they may not show up the days that they're *not* suspended. So, we have to look at that issue. If parents have had a negative experience in school, they will sometimes pull their kids out.

We think about attendance as a reflection of hope, faith, and capacity. It's when parents ... and I believe most parents start off with hope; your hope that your kids will have a better future than you. But then it's faith that the institution that you are entrusting your children to can help you realize that hope, that has your best interest of your kid at hand, and then the capacity to get your kids to school so they have that opportunity to learn. And when we are working with families, and we are working with communities, we have to look at where this might be breaking down. So I am going to keep picking on this example that Karl had. In that case, that parent may have had hope; she may have even had faith; but she might not have had capacity, right?

I have seen ... and if you get this wrong, so let's say the parent who has chosen to send their kid across town, is trying to wake up every morning really early, three buses to school because there is no direct transportation line, but the kid doesn't make it there all the time or sometimes is late. If the first response of that school to that parent is, "You don't care enough to have your kid come to school, do you," you will break their faith. They had hope, but you have got to keep faith with them. So rather than start with this assumption of, "I know the reason you don't come is because you don't care," we have to start with, "I think you care; I believe you have hope; you have a dream for your child. So what is it that's keeping your child from coming to school every day so you can realize that hope?"

I worry that right now, in our schools today, by definition, the kids who are low income in our schools are almost by definition different from the faculty and the staff who are in those schools. Because, I hope—this is where teachers' unions have hopefully done their job—teachers are middle class in this country, right? That is a goal! Teachers should be paid for their wonderful efforts, but that means the kids who are low income in your schools often come from a different class background, if not a different race background. And often, teachers don't live in those same tough neighborhoods that their kids are from. So then the challenge is, as a teacher, when something happens, you don't know about it. You didn't run into the parent. You weren't there when the shooting happened. So when kids don't show up, teachers sometimes, if they go into judgment—or not just teachers; staff, anyone who is there—if we judge, versus ask the question, we may not understand and unearth what's really happening for kids, so we can really find the solutions.

One of my learning edges—I am always at learning edges in this work—is in my own school district. We have about an 8% chronic absence level, not bad. In our public housing projects, it's 50%. And I'm trying—this is my challenge of the year, my learning edge—what does it mean to turn around chronic absence for the kids in those housing projects? Now, I think part of it is connected to hope, because these are kids who have seen kids like themselves killed. And so we have to find people from those projects who have made it, who can give hope, who can say, “Your destiny is not necessarily that of lying, you know, shot on the street.” And then we have got to give them faith. We have got to make sure that we have trauma-informed systems of schools. We know which schools those kids go to, so folks can have the right response when kids are absent or when kids are acting out.

But what are those issues, what's going on, what causes chronic absence? People ask me all the time, what are the big issues? Well, I know buckets, and those are sort of the buckets I represented earlier. And certainly, for young kids, a lot of times, there is health-connected issues. But the truth is—and this is why you have to have local champions like you—coming up with the solutions and understanding what takes it to turn around has to be locally driven, because only you can unpack, really, what's happening. But we do think there are some key strategies, and you can do this in ways that are tailored to your own school community.

We need to recognize good and improved attendance, and I want to build off something the superintendent said, which is, it is not just recognizing perfect attendance. If you always recognize perfect attendance, you will probably always recognize the same kids, and they might have been perfectly attending even without your recognition, to be honest. And you can recognize perfect attendance; it's fine. It's just, it's not enough. You need to look at, how do we recognize good and *improved* attendance? So how do you ... for example, and sometimes you can do it, it's by the increments. Can you recognize perfect attendance so you are recognizing every child, every time they come five days in a row, one week of full attendance? Because then the next week they get to start all over again, because what you want to do is motivate the worst attenders to attend more, that's where ... and you've got to recognize it.

And sometimes recognition, by the way, can be simple as breakfast in the classroom; because you're having someone greet them, you're making sure you are addressing a nutritional need. It's not a, that kind of ... sometimes recognition ... one of the things that I am trying in my own community is, we have these things called “kindergarten accounts”—college savings accounts that we open up for every kindergartener, and kids who are in free and reduced-price lunch get 100 bucks, every other kid gets 50. We are going to pilot in three schools that every complete week, every week they have complete attendance, they get another dollar in their kindergarten account. Because I know with kindergarteners, is that a dollar means a lot to a kindergartener.

And then being able to see ... and then we can send a message. It's the “I have a dream”; I have a dream you will go to college. You know how you get to college? You show up every day. But I need that to be combined with both engaging their parents, making sure they know this matters, seeing *why* we think daily attendance matters. Because parents aren't aware of these myths; they don't recognize how absences add up, and they also could be thinking about how to help each other. Frankly, as a parent, especially given my travel schedule these days,

carpooling is pretty important for me, you know? You have got to find people who will help you out; you have got to have parents who also problem solve. If I can't get my kid to school that day, who can help me, because raising a kid is really hard on your own.

But then we also need to provide personalized outreach to those kids who still, despite the recognition, aren't getting there. Someone is going out and finding out, what is it that can help you get to school, and making sure they are noticed. And that personalized early outreach can be done by a lot of different people. Sometimes it's a school staff. In New York City, they have these things called Success Mentors. Some of them are school staff connected to ... they are all connected to kids who were chronically absent the prior year. That's how you target the resources. Some of them are AmeriCorps volunteers; some of them are teachers who have agreed to take on two or three kids. And they said ... the teachers who took this on said, "This is why I got into teaching. It allows me to engage directly with a few kids, which sometimes is hard when I am teaching large classrooms." Sometimes they are experienced board members; sometimes they are social work interns from local universities, who could do this personalized outreach, and who then also knew if a kid's problems were more challenging they could handle, they could refer them to someone else. Because what gets kids to come to school often is the fact that someone noticed. And then you have to have a team, so that if when kids are missing school, you see a pattern: "Oh it's these kids who all have asthma, and their parents don't trust that the school knows what to do; it's these kids who can't find a safe path."

Sometimes, we can't individually solve everything; we have to have a programmatic solution. That's the more cost-effective approach. But unless you have a group talking about what you are seeing, looking at the data, you can't figure out where those programmatic solutions are needed. We had a middle school in Oakland; they had 15% chronic absence. In a single year, by adopting this, they reduced their chronic absence to 7%. They had the highest increase in their test scores they've had in 10 years. Because you know what ... and this is by middle school. So in the early grades, I think the impact a lot is on learning and is around reading. By middle school—and this is as a parent—the thing that really made me excited was when I read this one piece of research which told me that as a parent, if I wanted to help my kid in math, it wasn't because I had to tutor them in math; that what really helped them was if I created a space, I supported them, I helped see their goals. Because, guess what, I don't remember algebra anymore. When my kids tell me and ask me, "Is this a distributive property? Is this the associative property?" I am like, "Oh, my goodness; please, it's been a long time. I know I took that. I got pretty far in math, but it's just been a long time." When you get to scaffolded subjects like algebra, if kids miss one day every two weeks ... and we depend on instruction to teach our kids those concepts; you know, they get far behind really quickly. And there is data from Stanford that even shows, kids who are proficient and advanced the prior year in whatever their math was, if they are chronically absent the next year, their math scores are really affected. It may not get them to an F, but it may go from an A to a C, because scaffolded subjects, you have got to be in class in order to benefit from the instruction.

This is about having a three-tiered approach. We need to have universal prevention, intervention, and recovery. And one of my worries is that as a country, because we are so focused on truancy, because we think of this as a legal issue, we have been too focused on the

top end of this pyramid, and we haven't invested enough in the universal prevention and the early intervention, which is what I see those five strategies as being about. And the good thing ... and I know you guys have this data by school district and within school district; you can calculate this data. You can use your data to see who needs the most help to put this in place. Chronic absence is not an issue everywhere; it's more of an issue in some districts than others. And even within the same district, it's more of an issue within some schools than others.

We don't have that many resources. The question is how to target and maximize your efficiency. And if you know where chronic absence is high, you can also use it to figure out how you want to allocate your other community resources. Guess what? Going to preschool *does* help improve attendance in kindergarten. Guess what? Enriched afterschool programs can help improve attendance during the school day, because it engages kids and helps them want to come to school. That was the work with your afterschool network that really helped pilot what I know around afterschool, and the kind of difference that they can make.

These are these kinds of successful mentors I was mentioning, in New York City; I'll also mention Baltimore. One of the things that they did was, because where their biggest success was in middle school, when they looked at the programmatic data and realized that they had to change the suspension and school discipline practice. But they are now moving in incredible ways to looking at preschool and elementary school.

We have on our website something called *What Works*. Please take advantage of it. Some of the stuff ... you have to tailor the solutions, but some of the ideas you can pick and choose from all across the country, because there is innovation happening everywhere on this.

But what we know across these different systems, or across these successful examples, is that when they are sustainable—I have seen, by the way, good practice happen in a single school because of a really exemplary ... usually it's a principal. And they have been able to bring in partnerships; they have been able to do a lot of stuff. But if you want to sustain it over time, you have to have systems of support, both at the district and ideally the state, helping districts to put this in place. We need to have actionable data, data both that happens, you know, once every two weeks, who are the kids who are chronically absent, so people can act on it. We need positive messaging, where we are saying to families, "This isn't about going to school, otherwise we will arrest you. This is about going to school because it helps you achieve your hopes and dreams."

We need to have capacity building so people in schools, community partners; they know how to use this data. We need to have shared accountability, and a lot of that is what I am seeing as why you want chronic absence in, let's say, school report cards. Because at the end of the year—and I don't view a school report card as just a reflection of how the school is doing; it's a reflection of how we are *all* doing in investing in our schools. This is a ... you know, attendance is not a ... poor attendance is not just about what happens in schools, and solutions are not just about what happens in schools. We have to see this as a shared accountability, because guess what, when kids aren't in school, crime rates go up, and we have a less prepared workforce, because we all pay. But it's also community conditions that contribute to chronic absence. So we have to make sure that all of us, together, are having in place these key elements.

We, by the way, do have, and you have a number of superintendents here, I am happy to say, who signed on to our call to action. I would say for you, this is two reasons to sign on if your superintendent hasn't signed on, and you can go look up on our website and see who has from Utah. But it allows us to give superintendents tailored tools that help them, in their key leadership role, do work on this. But I also am using this, because I want to show state governments and the federal government that this call around chronic absence, the need to create materials and supports, is not something that we are imposing on school districts. This is something that school districts across the country are seeing is really important to achieving our shared goal of making sure every kid has a chance to learn and succeed.

I kind of liken this chronic absence to a warning light on a car dashboard. OK, so I'll admit this, this is one of those things which I am so thankful that my marriage survived it, but I have ignored the check engine light before on my car. In fact, we should have checked it out *before* we tried to drive from San Francisco to San Diego to my parents for Thanksgiving, but we didn't. And then while I was driving, I didn't really monitor it. So we broke down on the freeway. Actually, I think we made it off the freeway, and then we were in deep trouble. And I will admit, I managed to really screw up our car. Chronic absence is kind of like that. If you ... we all tend to ignore it, but if you ignore it, you could pay pretty serious consequences later. And the thing about a check engine light is, you have no idea whether it's a simple little problem or it's a big problem, but you should always check it out.

So again, I know September is almost over, but I have been so excited—again, kudos to Voices for Utah Children, and all the partners who have helped to make this happen, your governor—this is the part that's the messaging part that is our easy win, and I am so excited that Utah has been a partner in this. But it's important to do this in September because it's when expectations and norms are set for the year, when we can really start to nip this in the bud. I will also say, though, that it doesn't have to stop with September. I never intended it to be a September-only month. It just is, it was a good rallying point to get this on the radar screen.

We have lots of resources, and if you didn't do this that much September, there is always next September; it comes around once a year. And these are the kinds of key messages—good attendance helps kids do well in school and eventually in the workplace—that we can all send. We have to help people see how absences add up. It doesn't matter whether they are excused or unexcused; if they add up to too many, it's a problem. That this is about all our kids,

because chronic absence creates churn that really can affect the education of every child. We have got to monitor. We have to be looking at which kids are most affected.

And this is a solvable problem. In this day and age, we need solvable problems, which help us use and unify our resources to turn things around. But we know this is about relationship building, and we know it can help us reduce the achievement gaps. So can I just ask you, turn to one person next to you, say, “Does this resonate? Any questions?” And then I will take a couple of questions before we end.

KARL WILSON

I believe we had a question right up here, up front, with Representative Brisco. We will start with your question.

JOEL BRISCO

Hedy, I spoke to a legislator who is pretty involved in the intergenerational poverty. I told him about this research. They said, “Oh, yeah, kids need to be in school. That’s why we are going to go after them with truancy if they aren’t there.” So in my discussion with principals, with policymakers, they go from this jump—we have this mindset that you are not in school, we are going to use a law to get you. So when I spoke to the principal at Dee Elementary School, she told me last year they only had to send out five letters to parents saying, “We need ... we may have to use legal action.” In every instance, those five letters brought the parents in to help explain, and they could finally have a dialogue about why their children weren’t attending. But that’s a last resort for them. We have to love kids into school, and we have to give them positive experience. But without the compulsory educational requirement, that’s very difficult to do; but that’s the backstop. But everyone jumps immediately; we have got truancy, we see—you say chronic absence, and it’s overwritten with truancy, because that’s what’s been ingrained in us. Do you have strategies for getting people to frame this differently?

HEDY CHANG

Absolutely, you are completely right, and I think this is actually why sometimes you have to precede legislation with a lot of education, because people are confusing truancy and chronic absence. And I don’t think people realize that we haven’t been investing. This is as a country; Utah is no exception in the bottom parts of these pyramids. And part of my argument is: look, it’s much more costly, anything; once you bring in the lawyers, it costs a lot. What our benefits are is when we can really take this early prevention, and because we have been using the wrong measure, which is I think just unexcused absences, we are also not identifying the kids early enough so that we can actually really maximize the impact of prevention. So I couldn’t agree with you more.

PARTICIPANT

Hi Hedy, thanks for being in Utah. Just in a bulleted fashion, assuming your chronic absence definition, I would like you to summarize one or two key evidence-based strategies to decrease chronic absence, again.

HEDY CHANG

So for me, those evidence-based strategies are really on the slide, but what I would also say is, when you look at the work of Joyce Epstein and Steve Sheldon, they find it's not just one thing; it's multiple things. The more things you do, the more benefit. So if you just did improved attendance awards, by the way, I am not sure you'd move the needle. It's when you combine it with providing early personalized outreach, with engaging students, and then looking at these more systemic issues. So I feel like for me, this really represents my frame. When I have seen schools reduce ... there is a district, New Britain; we helped them to implement this—the principals really took ownership of this—they reduced their chronic absence levels from K through eighth grade from 20% to 18% in a single year. So I have seen this work.

PARTICIPANT

Hedy, have you done any research looking at students, like, self-actualization, or setting their own goals and tracking their own progress, and if that has any affect on increasing their attendance, so teaching the children themselves how to set their own attendance goals and how to track it?

HEDY CHANG

Why don't we do the two questions, and then I will end?

PARTICIPANT

Well, mine is more of a ... to tell you something about Ogden. We do bring juvenile court in; we do bring the police department; we do bring in all the support agencies, because Michelle Heward is leading the march with all of our juvenile court judges. They don't want those kids locked up; they don't want the parents locked up. They want us to resolve the problem, but it's a whole community. I have never seen such a positive attitude. So I don't think that the courts are a hammer at all. I think we have really not taken any parents. Our elementary children, they go after the parents. I haven't seen one end up being charged, because like this other gentleman said, it gets that far, and they just realize they have got to do something.

HEDY CHANG

Yeah. So two things, the self-actualization data is a great question. I don't think I have that yet. This is a partnership. Let's look at this together. I think there is ... I am increasingly seeing the benefits of getting kids to monitor their own data, even starting at really early ages, but I don't know if we have good research on it yet.

And I would just clarify, thank you, I am not saying don't bring the courts into your coalition. Legal strategy with parents is different from, do you engage the courts as part of your community collaborative? Absolutely, they should be there from the very beginning, and they absolutely ... my closest partner in Alameda County is the deputy DA who doesn't want to see ... and she does both the very really skilled use of legal strategy at the top end, but it was her courts that helped us produce an attendance toolkit that we have given out to every principal in Oakland.

So it's not ... there is a difference between role and sector, and when you use legal strategy, and absolutely, the courts ... and on Monday, I am at a meeting with my ... in California with Kamala Harris [Attorney General] and with my state superintendent, because they are coming together to say, "We need to do this together." So, absolutely, courts as a key leader in our community, our judiciary, that's essential.