

What Pittsburgh Is Doing to Ensure Every Child Has a Fighting Chance to Succeed

BY JOSHUA CHILDS

In their 2011 *National Civic Review* article, Hedy Chang and Phyllis Jordan outlined the strategies necessary for promoting public awareness and galvanizing public and nonprofit resources to address the root causes of chronic absenteeism.¹ Since that 2011 article, the conversation around chronic absenteeism has led it to be one of the most important education policy issues of today. In their 2012 *The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools*, Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Bynes provided data that indicated that 5 million to 7.5 million students are chronically absent each year.² In a 2014 issue of *Urban Education*, Michael Gottfried found that neighborhood context, particularly for urban youth, directly related to educational outcomes such as school attendance.³ In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act was signed into law with a requirement that states report chronic absenteeism rates, and that federal dollars could be used to reduce chronic absenteeism in local schools and districts.

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights released the 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection.⁴ The Civil Rights Data Collection included data on chronic absenteeism rates from nearly every public school in the country, and provided insight on who was chronically absent, what grade levels chronic absenteeism tends to occur in, and how communities and states were doing comparatively when it came to overall school attendance. Finally, recent years have seen states such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas have decriminalized truancy in hopes of finding better solutions to getting students to attend schools regularly and avoid making missing school a punishable offense by the law.

These are just a few examples of how the school attendance issue and chronic absenteeism have become a very important education policy imperatives in U.S. cities.

Hedy Chang and Phyllis Jordan also offered a brief glance at Baltimore, New York, and Oakland implementing efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism.⁵ Each of these cities were in different stages in implementation, but Chang and Jordan both highlighted how in each city local leaders were using their leverage, position, and resources to improve school attendance. The lessons and strategies implemented and learned from each of these cities helped another city, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in launching their own attendance initiative called Be There in 2013. This article will discuss how Pittsburgh's improvement network assisted in undertaking strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism. These strategies, outlined by Chang and Jordan in their 2011 article, were identified as key indicators to ensure promoting public awareness and galvanizing public and nonprofit resources to improve school attendance.

Background

Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) is one of forty-six school districts located in Allegheny County. Pittsburgh alone has ninety adjoining, yet distinct neighborhood communities. Neighborhoods that are close in proximity, can still differ significantly in regards to racial demographics, socioeconomic indicators, and cultural dynamics. In a study mapping educational opportunity zones, Peter Miller (2012) described how the neighborhoods of Homewood and Squirrel Hill, separated by only a few city blocks, have radically different racial demographics.⁶ For the past 30 years Pittsburgh has experienced a declining population, and since 2012, stalled out job growth that has failed to attract many new residents. PPS hasn't fared much better in recent years either. In its own words the PPS faces:

... continued enrollment decline, fiscal issues [resulting from] increased costs, flat revenue projections, declining funds in federal Title I and

II sources, declining state support for public education [coupled with] strong support for more school choice at the state level, inadequate funding for the retirement system, and the event of expanding technology demands in education ...⁷

Like other urban school districts across the country, PPS has had multiple district-wide reform plans over the past decade. The inherent complexity of system change, the cyclical nature of public attention to urban education in Pittsburgh, and race and class factors have made planning and implementing change in PPS an ongoing challenge. Some of these past reform efforts before the launch of Be There include:

- On February 28, 2006, PPS announced a *Right-Sizing Plan* that focused on eliminating 10,117 of the district's 13,706 empty seats and reducing the district from eighty-six schools in eighty buildings to sixty-five schools in sixty-three buildings. This plan was implemented with the goal of saving the district \$14.7 million each year in operating costs. Like other large urban districts across the country, PPS saw a need for closing school buildings as a result of declining district enrollment and overall population decline in Pittsburgh's metro area.
- On May 12, 2006, PPS released *Excellence for All*, the four-year roadmap outlining priority areas of focus for improving the academic performance of all students. *Excellence for All* aimed to improve student achievement and go beyond the required federal mandates that were within No Child Left Behind. The plan set measurable objectives for moving every student toward proficiency and also for increasing the number of children at the highest level of achievement. PPS decided to pay particular attention to the African American students by targeting incremental gains of five percentage points per year with accelerated learning supports.
- On December of 2006, PPS and the mayor's office announced the Pittsburgh Promise, a college scholarship program for students who have attended and graduated from a PPS school. The purpose of the Pittsburgh Promise was to not only provide in-state scholarship money for Promise-ready students, but also promote reforms within PPS and leverage the development of Pittsburgh's neighborhoods. Students who live in Pittsburgh, graduate from a Pittsburgh public high school or a high school chartered by PPS, maintain an average high school grade point average of 2.5 or better and an attendance rate of 90 percent are eligible for up to \$10,000 a year (\$40,000 total) toward the costs of attending any post-secondary institution in PA that awards a license, degree, diploma, certificate, or degree.
- 9th Grade Nation, started in 2009, grew out of the work of *The Plan for High School Excellence*. This program was designed to help students through the critical transition between 8th and 9th grades and place students on a path to being "Promise-ready."
- In one of the largest grants ever made directly to PPS, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation offered the district \$40 million for initiatives to maximize teacher effectiveness. The \$40 million grant went to the district's Empowering Effective Teachers program, which aims to train current teachers to play teacher-leader roles within selected schools. As part of this Gates-funded effort, the PPS created a teacher academy residency program to ensure an effective teacher in every classroom. Touted as a ground-breaking program to attract new teachers to work in PPS, the teacher academy was halted five weeks before it was to open due to financial challenges faced by the district, and the stipulations in the teachers' union contract that called for teacher layoffs based solely on seniority. Other parts of the Effective Teachers initiative have moved forward with vigor, including the design and roll out of a new teacher evaluation tool dubbed "RISE." This tool is intended not only to serve as an evaluation but also as a vehicle for increased professional dialog about instruction and differentiated professional support for teachers.
- At the state level, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), coordinated by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, were developed in collaboration with teachers, administrators, and experts to provide a clear and consistent framework to prepare students for college and future employment. Adopted by forty-seven states in the United States, these standards are seen as defining the English Language Arts and Mathematics knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12

education careers and will prepare them for college courses and professional training programs. Since it was announced that Pennsylvania would adopt the CCSS, PPS has been aligning their curriculum and standards to match the CCSS and equipping teachers and administrators with the tools and resources to effectively implement them.

- Starting with the 2012–2013 school year, secondary schools began to transition from PSSA testing to the Keystone exams. The Keystone exams serve as end-of-course assessments designed to measure proficiency in Algebra I, Literature and Biology. Future years will see tests created and administered to assess competency in other subjects. Beginning with the graduating class of 2017, proficiency on these exams will be a requirement for earning a PA high school diploma.
- In 2012, the PPS issued an RFP seeking, “bold and innovative thinking model that will build on PPSs strengths and current successes while challenging the district to transform itself into an organization that can deeply, fully, and effectively deliver the best possible outcomes for its students and families.” Collaborative partners Bellwether Education Partners and FSG were awarded a \$2.5 million contract for “Envisioning a 21st Century Educational Delivery Model,” in early 2013.

Even with all the reform efforts initiated by PPS, they still faced challenges related to student performance and meeting state and federal standards. PPS had cycled through multiple reforms to improve curriculum and instruction, school leadership quality, building facilities, assessments, and student achievement. In early 2013, PPS reported that nearly 25 percent of their students were chronically absent.⁸ Recognizing that school attendance had been an issue affecting PPS for years, local organizations have regularly convened in hopes of taking the lead on tackling chronic absenteeism.

The Be There Campaign

Launched in August 2013, the Be There Campaign (BTC) is a multifaceted initiative and improvement network designed to encourage organizations and the Pittsburgh community to make school attendance an educational priority. Led by the United Way of Allegheny County and other partners, BTC

hoped to blend a city-wide messaging campaign with data-driven approaches to reduce chronic absenteeism for students within Pittsburgh. To date, more than eighty organizations have formally partnered with the United Way of Allegheny in order to educate, support, and collaborate on addressing chronic absenteeism and reducing its affects within Pittsburgh. BTC partners span across many social sectors such as early childhood education, higher education, philanthropies and foundations, faith-based organizations, non-profits, for-profit businesses, and government agencies.

PPS had cycled through multiple reforms to improve curriculum and instruction, school leadership quality, building facilities, assessments, and student achievement.

The broad range of partners has ensured that efforts on reducing chronic absenteeism go beyond just schools, but also includes areas such as transportation, housing, public health, technology, industry, and food security. Momentum is growing around educational improvement networks as a strategy for improving educational outcomes. In a recent *Educational Researcher* article, Donald J. Peurach discusses how “enthusiasm for network-based educational improvement has emerged in interaction with policy, philanthropy, and speculative investment...”⁹ (p. 422). The StriveTogether Impact & Improvement Network, Hive Learning Networks, Success for All, the National Writing Project, and Diplomas Now are examples of networks that feature beneficial relationships among members and organizations involved in school and educational improvement efforts. Improvement networks are incubators for innovation, a source for learning and knowledge sharing, resource generation and dissemination, and a conduit for achieving collective impact.¹⁰

The Strategies

Chang and Jordan outlined five strategies necessary to addressing chronic absenteeism.¹¹ Each of these strategies were seen as a way to promote public awareness and galvanizing public and nonprofit

resources to address the root causes of chronic absenteeism. These strategies were:

- Get, share, and monitor chronic absence data
- Make attendance a community priority
- Partner with school and city-funded agencies to nurture a “culture of attendance”
- Identify and address barriers to attendance
- Advocate for stronger policies and public interest

In the sections that follow, I will outline how Pittsburgh and the BTC is tackling each of these strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism.

Get, Share, and Monitor Chronic Absence Data

In 2011, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) entered into an innovative data-sharing agreement with PPS in order to explore more effective strategies for curbing chronic absenteeism. The memorandum of understanding provides the opportunity for PPS and DHS to gain information on a population of students who are involved in human services (e.g. mental health services), and are also likely to be struggling in school. The memorandum of understanding calls for PPS to share with DHS student attendance records, enrollment information, and academic outcome data. Then, DHS matches student information with data from their Data Warehouse, a human services data repository that receives and integrates data from nearly thirty data sources, including neighborhood indicators. Pittsburgh is one of the first cities to use an integrated data system to understand how individual and neighborhood factors influence chronic absenteeism. Data from the integrated data system is used to provide information on where a student lives, explain why a student is absent, show the challenges students face in attending school, and reveal to BTC partners what interventions might be appropriate to improve attendance.

Make Attendance a Community Priority

The primary goal of BTC is to raise community awareness on the importance of students regularly attending school and to provide the community with information on the effects of chronic absenteeism on student learning and achievement. When the United Way launched BTC they wanted the conversation about school attendance to coalesce around a simple message: *Be There*. The message serves as a

way to enlist organizations that serve youth to make attendance a priority, “be there” for youth in the city, and ensure that the students that they are working with or know are “there” at school. The idea behind the BTC was to present a positive message to students throughout Pittsburgh without using threatening language or the risk of punishment(s) for not attending school that were inherent to more traditional approaches to handling chronic absenteeism. One of the ways in which the United Way promoted awareness was by developing various materials that would help to spread the BTCs message throughout Pittsburgh. Figure 1 shows a postcard that gives information about the BTC and some of the main partners involved in its efforts. BTC messages have been posted on city buses, billboards, schools, community organizations, local businesses, and sporting events. The purpose of these messages is to not only show the importance of regular school attendance, but to also get other possible stakeholders aware of BTC and possibly signing on to be a partner with the campaign.

Data from the integrated data system is used to provide information on where a student lives, explain why a student is absent, show the challenges students face in attending school, and reveal to BTC partners what interventions might be appropriate to improve attendance.

Partner with School and City-Funded Agencies to Nurture a “Culture of Attendance”

BTC partners with the University of Pittsburgh’s Office of Child Development and PPS on their Ready Freddy Program. The program, started in 2006, is an effort to improve school readiness in low-income neighborhoods around Pittsburgh. Recognizing that positive adult relationships is an important element in improving school attendance and school readiness, the partnership focuses on removing the barriers to enrolling and transitioning to kindergarten. The partnership shares similar messaging strategies, data, and stakeholders to ensure that interventions are created for early-age children.

To further foster a culture of attendance, the United Way of Allegheny County provides two toolkits

Figure 1. Be There Postcard



Reprinted with permission from the United Way of Allegheny County.

(Color photo can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com.)

for schools and partners. The Attendance Challenge toolkit is a step-by-step guide to planning and executing a challenge to students to come to school every day for a set period of time and reward them for achieving attendance goals. The Be There Buddy Project toolkit provides a comprehensive program to establish positive and caring relationships between students and school staff to increase student attendance.

Recognizing that positive adult relationships is an important element in improving school attendance and school readiness, the partnership focuses on removing the barriers to enrolling and transitioning to kindergarten.

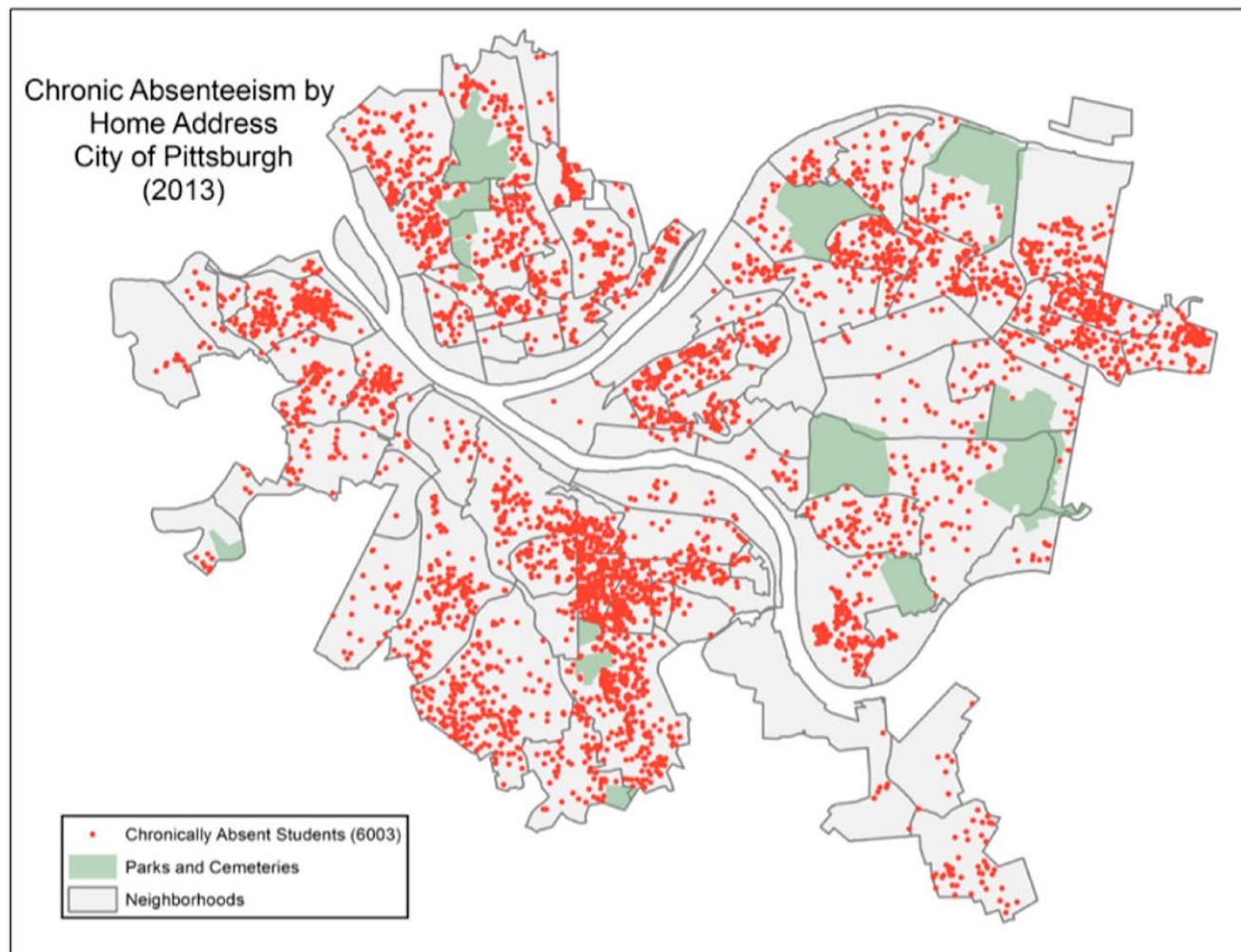
Identify and Address Barriers to Attendance

Pittsburgh is interested in improving the experience and safety for students as they make their way to and from school every day. Recognizing that route safety was an important indicator of chronic absence, in 2014 several partners affiliated with BTC engaged in a collaborative study on understanding how crossing guards can play a positive role when it comes to regular school attendance.

Lead by Allies for Children, a nonprofit engaged in policy and practice changes for children and youth in Pittsburgh, the study highlighted how safe routes to school encouraged regular school attendance, and how improving relationships between public safety officials and children can help to decrease chronic absence. The study found that crossing guards interact daily or even multiple times daily with community members, and that crossing guards have mentoring interactions with children and their families. The City of Pittsburgh, a local foundation, and federal funding through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention have invested money into professional development and training for the city's crossing guards around mentoring and leadership.

In 2014 researchers from the University of Pittsburgh, another BTC partner, conducted a study to understand how neighborhood effects and residential conditions can serve as indicators for chronic absenteeism. Figure 2 is a map from that research study highlighting 2013-2014 SY chronic absenteeism by home address in Pittsburgh. Findings brought attention to PPS practice regarding bus transportation, where it can take a week or longer for students who live in particular neighborhoods to receive bus transportation assignments. Also,

Figure 2. Chronic absenteeism by home address



(Color photo can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com.)

a strong indicator of chronic absenteeism can be the housing conditions of families. A large number of parcel addresses labeled in Figure 2 represent older or dilapidated houses, environments where air or environmental quality is low, or transportation issues exist that are barriers for school attendance for students. BTC has invested in providing information and materials to residents in certain neighborhoods with high chronic absenteeism rates. This information offers strategies on how children can attend school regularly, how organizations located within the neighborhood or the greater Pittsburgh community can become partners in increasing attendance, and how parents can support their children in making school a priority.

Advocate for Stronger Policies and Public Investments

Local city governments in the Pittsburgh area have recognized the need to build stronger relationships with school districts. Through the Congress of Neighboring Communities, one of the BTC partners, local government agencies have become more involved on education issues and in reducing chronic absenteeism. The City of Pittsburgh has invested public funds to improve housing and public transportation, and the city has allocated more resources to make sure roads and sidewalks are clear on days it snows to enable students to make it to school. More PPS schools are doing weekly and monthly attendance meetings, and using the data from DHS to inform the strategies and interventions they implement for

their chronically absent students. An app and data dashboard is available for parents to be able to view their children's attendance in real-time and also provides resources to help students improve their attendance.

The study found that crossing guards interact daily or even multiple times daily with community members, and that crossing guards have mentoring interactions with children and their families.

Conclusion

The efforts in Pittsburgh are helping to produce more consistent approaches, interventions, and policies to improve school attendance. As a community, Pittsburgh has identified the systemic barriers preventing students from attending school regularly and engaged a range of stakeholders and partners in strategies to remove them. The BTC can serve as an example for other communities around the country, on how a community-led improvement network can focus on addressing an important educational issue. City officials and staff, as well as those working in other agencies and organizations not officially involved in school districts can lead efforts to improve educational outcomes for all students, as they have in Pittsburgh.

Notes

- 1 Hedy Chang and Phyllis Jordan. 2011. "Tackling Chronic Absence Starting in the Early Grades: What Cities Can Do to Ensure Every Child Has a Fighting Chance to Succeed." *National Civic Review* 100(4):6–12.

- 2 Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes, *The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools* (Baltimore, MD: Everyone Graduates Center, 2012).
- 3 Michael Gottfried. 2014. "Can Neighbor Attributes Predict School Absences?" *Urban Education* 49(2): 216–250.
- 4 *2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Retrieved from: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>.
- 5 Chang and Jordan. "Tackling Chronic Absence."
- 6 Peter M. Miller. 2012. "Mapping Educational Opportunity Zones: A Geospatial Analysis of Neighborhood Block Groups," *Urban Review* 44(2):189–218.
- 7 *The School District of Pittsburgh Request for Proposal (RFP): Envisioning a 21st Century Educational Delivery Model* (Pittsburgh Public Schools, September 28, 2012), 2. Retrieved from: <http://www.pps.k12.pa.us/domain/302>.
- 8 D. W. Allen and P. Lovorini, "Be There! Education of the Board" (Presented to the Education Committee for Pittsburgh Public Schools, Pittsburgh, PA, September 2013).
- 9 Donald J. Peurach. 2016. "Innovating at the Nexus of Impact and Improvement: Leading Educational Improvement Networks," *Educational Researcher* 45(7):422.
- 10 J. Kania, J. and M. Kramer. 2011. "Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (1):36–41.
- 11 Chang and Jordan, "Tackling Chronic Absence."

Joshua Childs is an assistant professor of education at the University of Texas at Austin.
