

TESTIMONY

Governor Andrew Cuomo's
New York Education Reform Commission

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Presented by:

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Good afternoon Commissioners. Welcome to Buffalo and Western New York. And, thank you for accepting the Governor's charge to recommend reforms in student achievement and management efficiency. The process designed for your work has the potential to engage the entire State through the seven well-considered areas of inquiry that will frame your work.

Hopefully not, but I can understand following the disruptions to the status quo which have taken place in the last three years, a consequence of the so-called great recession, that you may hear familiar concerns and issues rather than new thinking and actionable solutions, which our circumstances now require.

Spokespersons may focus first on the restoration of resources that are not likely to be found; or proposals for policy that reflect criteria that may not recognize the diversity and often competitive nature of the needs and interests across our State; or, reveal limited awareness of the complexity of New York's multi-tiered system of public education with its many moving parts.

It is my intent in the next few minutes to focus on one solution that research and our experience have shown can have a positive effect on several of your (and our) priorities: improved student performance, increased parent and family engagement, and the problems faced by high-need and low-wealth school communities: student attendance, actually, chronic absenteeism. Focusing attention on strategies and practices which improve student attendance will not necessarily require restoration or allocation of significant new financial aid, rather it is becoming apparent that we can achieve a greater return from existing resources.

I'd like to share some startling notions which reveal not only the important relationship of attendance to student success but at the same suggest that current practices prevent us from fully recognizing that the measure we now use, average daily attendance, can appear acceptable but nevertheless mask serious if not alarming chronic absenteeism.

Most would agree that 95% average daily attendance is acceptable and when we find that to be the case we look no further. However, in schools with 95% ADA you can find chronic absenteeism affects as many as 20% of their students. Chronic absenteeism is defined as being absent more than 10% of the time (18 days per 180 day school year).

To go further, in a number of the Buffalo Public Schools with 90% ADA you could find chronic absenteeism rates a year ago in the range of 33-45%. The Buffalo Public Schools found from analyzing their 2010-11 data that 43% of kindergarteners were chronically absent.

The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) analyzed 5th grade math and reading performance using kindergarten attendance and concluded that the long-term impact of chronic absenteeism in kindergarten is most troubling for poor children who lack the resources to make up for time spent learning in the classroom.

The Buffalo Public Schools found that 56% their 9th graders were chronically absent. (Note that in the same year the graduation rate was 52%.) In studies conducted by the University of Chicago it became apparent that in the Chicago Public Schools 9th grade attendance was a better predictor of high school graduation than 8th achievement test scores. Similarly, in Baltimore, it was found that chronically absent 6th graders have lower graduation rates.

Nationwide, as many as 7.5 million students miss nearly a month of school every year. Chronic absenteeism is a red alert that students are headed for academic trouble and eventually for dropping out of school. Poor attendance is not merely a high school problem. It begins as early as kindergarten.

No one is to blame, per se, unless we fail to do something now that we know that the existing metrics don't tell the entire story. The status quo in public education manifests itself in many ways. In the matter of student attendance, once we look, we can see the interconnectedness of policy and practice at State, school district, building and classroom levels.

I urge the Commission to listen carefully to testimony that relates to recommendations concerning student performance, especially in poor urban districts. But, before you frame your final recommendations it would be wise to assess the role of chronic absenteeism in low academic performance, drop-out rates, and graduation rates.

The importance of attendance was first recognized in New York City when Mayor Bloomberg instituted his student attendance initiative, *Every Student, Every Day* with the support of the NYC Children's Aid Society. Buffalo's interest came about through its partnership with the school support division of the Erie 1 BOCES. As a result of actions taken in the last school year in Buffalo, chronic absenteeism decreased by 36%.

There are at least six other school districts in New York State who have begun to examine attendance by digging deeper than average daily attendance to monitor chronic absenteeism, since it is a proven predictor of later problems.

Directed by Hedy Chang, Attendance Works (a national initiative launched with the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation) has been an invaluable resource to school districts throughout New York state.

We believe we're on to something that addresses the Governor's priorities. We also believe that far more schools than presently do must collect additional data and analyze the results. The Governor's Commission would do well to advance in its final recommendations the following:

1. The State should at a minimum go beyond the existing reporting requirement of ADA and require districts to calculate and report chronic absenteeism;
2. Chronic absenteeism should be a requirement in all SQR, Focus, and Priority School corrective action plans;

In order to support schools which have yet to assess chronic absenteeism; or who have done so and need assistance with next steps, I further recommend:

1. Creation of two Attendance Improvement Technical Assistance Centers: in New York City and Buffalo (Erie 1 BOCES) where early interventions have resulted in significant improvement in overall attendance by bringing focus to chronic absenteeism;
2. Utilize existing research models and available field expertise to promote needed changes in school cultures and practice;
3. Utilize the most valuable dissemination network the State possesses: the 37 BOCES.

Attendance improvement may be the most critical component of data-driven instruction that has not been widely recognized nor utilized.

As the Commission continues its investigation leading to recommendations that will improve academic achievement and management efficiencies I would ask finally that you use these additional criteria for evaluating proposals:

1. Will the best ideas for instructional improvement achieve what is intended for the students who need them the most, if the students aren't in school?
2. Further, will the return on the investment of scarce resources be sufficient if the students who most need supplemental supports are not in school?
3. Finally, will other reform strategies have the potential enjoyed by attendance improvement initiatives to leverage additional systemic changes?

We are beginning to discover the effect of absenteeism on children, their long-term success, and the effectiveness of our system of schools. We know the long-term negative impact of chronic absenteeism and now we must take action. The Governor's Commission possesses the attention and timing to make a difference.

Thank you.

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