Showing Up Matters:
A Look at Absenteeism Inside Newark's High Schools

By Peter Chen and Cynthia Rice

Giving Every Child A Chance

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Advocates for Children of New Jersey is the trusted, independent voice putting children's needs first for more than 35 years. Our work results in better laws and policies, more effective funding and stronger services for children and families. And it means that more children are given the chance to grow up safe, healthy and educated.

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When we began the research for this report, we knew that the data alone would not tell the full story of why so many of Newark's high school students were missing so much school. We assumed that student focus group stories would appropriately fill out the missing pieces of our report.

But from the first moment of the first focus group, we realized that we were unprepared for what the students had to tell us.

From every conversation, students described both the personal and academic problems they experienced that made coming to school so hard. Whether it was trying to deal with the all-too-regular experience of losing someone they knew and loved to violence, or being the primary morning caretaker of younger siblings or attempting to balance school and a job to help support their families, Newark's high schoolers are often saddled with adult problems far too young.

We also heard them say that schools and families make a difference in helping them navigate these adult problems. When parents were engaged in their child's education, they were more likely to come to school. When students had developed a relationship with someone at school, they were more apt to make school a priority, even when other factors were pulling them in different directions. Both the data and the students' rich and personal stories clearly demonstrate that in the world of Newark's high schoolers, there is no one answer to these very complex problems.

Yet, we also heard many students talk about a particular teacher or security guard who had a made a difference in their lives. We heard first-hand about the pockets of good work happening every day in Newark's high schools because these adults seemed to recognize what these students were up against every day.

We hope that this report does justice to the many administrators, staff, parents and most importantly, the students who trusted us to tell their stories and we recognize the tireless work of the educational professionals and families who strive on a daily basis to help Newark's high schoolers realize success.

— Peter Chen
 & Cynthia Rice

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Introduction

Newark's high schools play an essential role in building the next generation of young minds for college and career readiness. Yet, high achievement may be unattainable if students miss too much school. Reasons for student absence vary. One student stays home for a week to care for an ailing sibling. Another student feels discouraged by poor school performance and starts leaving school early. A third gets in trouble and receives a long suspension. But the end result of multiple absences is the same: when students are not in school, they are not learning.

48 percent of high school students were "chronically absent" in the 2015–16 school year

In Newark Public Schools, 48 percent of high school students were "chronically absent" in the 2015-16 school year. "Chronic absenteeism" is generally defined as missing 10 percent or more of enrolled days for any reason. Research has shown that when students miss that much school, they have lower odds of moving on to the next grade and a reduced chance of graduating on time.[1]

Chronic absenteeism rates for Newark's 9th-12th graders have remained essentially unchanged since data became available in 2010, despite multiple districtwide efforts to improve attendance.[2]

This report aims to identify the reasons why almost half of Newark high school students are chronically absent and to highlight steps educators, community members and city officials can take to help improve student attendance.

In that effort, Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) reviewed high school chronic absenteeism data from the 2015-16 school year and conducted interviews and focus groups with students, teachers, parents and administrators at high schools throughout Newark, in May and June 2017. From these conversations, ACNJ heard first-hand about the barriers causing high schoolers to miss school, as well as the factors keeping them attending regularly.

ACNJ found that while the reasons for absences varied, there were common issues identified throughout the city that played a role in the high absentee rate. Moreover, consistent and persistent implementation of pro-attendance policies, the sharing of a common language and staff buy-in can be critical in making sure that more students come to school every day.

These eye-opening conversations revealed the wide gulf between the schools' and district's stated policies and plans and the day-to-day reality of teachers, students and families.

What the Numbers Tell Us

In 2015-16, according to the New Jersey Department of Education, nearly 4,000 out of 9,000 high schoolers missed at least 10 percent of their school days, putting their academic success and high school graduation at risk. This rate has been roughly the same over time with about half of Newark's high school students chronically absent every year since 2010.[3] Many changes and reforms to improve attendance have taken place in Newark Public Schools during the last six years, but chronic absenteeism rates have remained essentially unchanged.

Chronic Absenteeism Since 2010 in Newark High Schools (grades 9-12)

A line chart showing chronic absenteeism rates from 2010-11 through 2015-16. The y-axis ranges from 0 to 60. Data points:

- 2010–11: 48%
- 2011–12: 42%
- 2012–13: 49%
- 2013–14: 51%
- 2014–15: 52%
- 2015–16: 48%
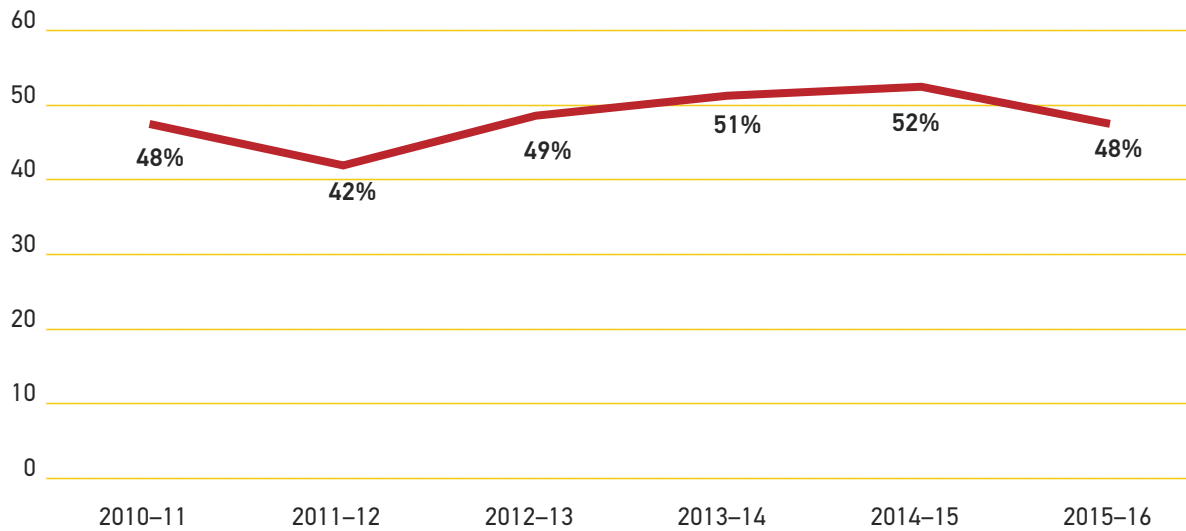
Source: Newark Public Schools

Newark High Schools: How Do They Compare?

Like many high-poverty schools, Newark's high schools have high chronic absenteeism rates. Research has shown that poverty is a risk factor for chronic absenteeism.[4] Yet even when compared to other high-poverty school districts, Newark's chronic absenteeism rate is higher and almost triple the state chronic absenteeism rate.

Newark High School Absenteeism Compared to High-Poverty Districts and State Average, 2015-16

District	Percentage of high school students chronically absent
Newark Public Schools	43%*
Average of High-Poverty Districts**	28%
State Average	14%

*The NJ Department of Education reported a 43% chronic absenteeism rate for Newark in 2015-16, while Newark Public Schools reported 48% in its internal review of attendance data. The State and district used different methodologies for calculating absenteeism.

** "High-poverty districts" defined as the 31 of New Jersey's poorest school districts that needed additional state aid under the *Abbott v. Burke* New Jersey Supreme Court decision. This data collection does not include Passaic City.

Source: NJ Department of Education

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Comparing High School with Elementary Grades

In line with state and national trends, more Newark high schoolers were chronically absent than K-8 students in the 2015-16 school year. Although 23 percent of Newark K-8 students were missing too much school, for high school students, the chronic absenteeism rate was more than double at 48 percent.

Between eighth and ninth grade, when students transition from middle to high school, attendance patterns changed significantly. A quarter of eighth graders were chronically absent, compared to 38 percent of ninth graders and 47 percent of 10th graders.

Percentage of Newark Students Chronically Absent by Grade, 2015–16

Grade	Percentage
PK3	48%
PK4	42%
K	29%
1	25%
2	24%
3	20%
4	20%
5	20%
6	22%
7	21%
8	25%
9	38%
10	47%
11	49%
12	59%
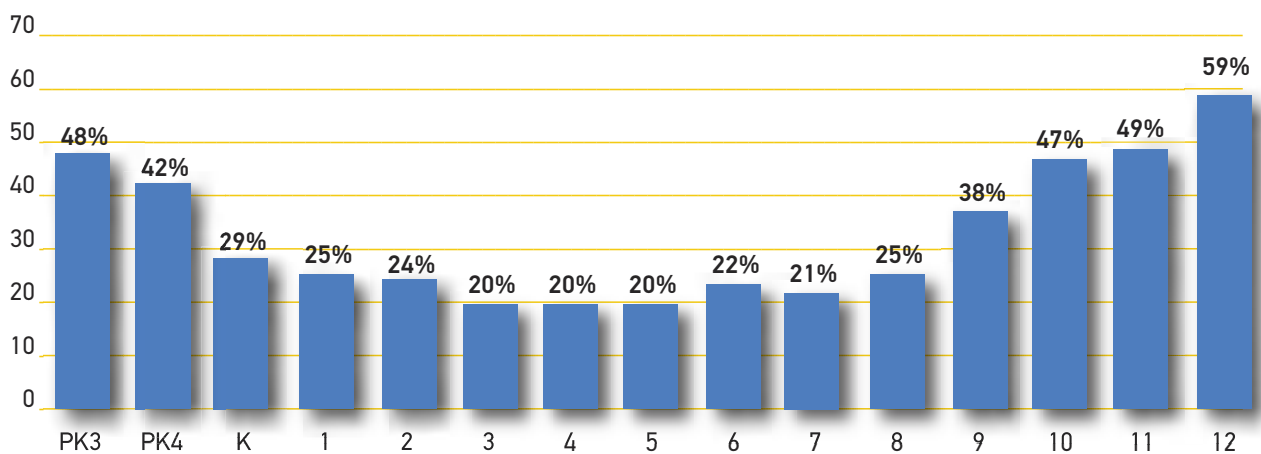
Source: Newark Public Schools

Specific Populations at High Risk for Absence

Specific groups of high school students may have issues that require particular types of support or intervention to reduce absences:

- *Students with special needs* are chronically absent at higher rates statewide and may need additional supports to meet their educational goals.

- *Students with children who need child care* face obstacles in supporting their children and finding stable child care with school-friendly hours and locations so that they can continue to attend school.

- *Students with jobs* often must choose between attending school and getting paid, with work hours stretching late into the night or starting in the afternoon.

- *Students without a parent at home or who are involved in the child welfare system* may need coordinated services between child welfare, health care and education professionals to support regular attendance.

- *Youth who are off-track from graduating from high school* described obstacles to re-engaging in school, after having been disengaged or falling behind in prior grades.

Absenteeism and Graduation

Absenteeism is a strong indicator of on-time graduation,[5] and nowhere is that clearer than in Newark's own data. Students with good attendance in ninth grade had a graduation rate of 86 percent, close to the state average of 90 percent. However, students who attended school less frequently saw lower graduation rates.

4-year Graduation Rate by 9th Grade Attendance (2015 Cohort)

- Good Attendance <5.0%: 86%
- Approaching Chronic Absense 5.0%–9.9%: 77%
- Chronically Absent 10.0%–19.9%: 58%
- Severely Chronically Absent >20.0%: 25%

Source: Newark Public Schools
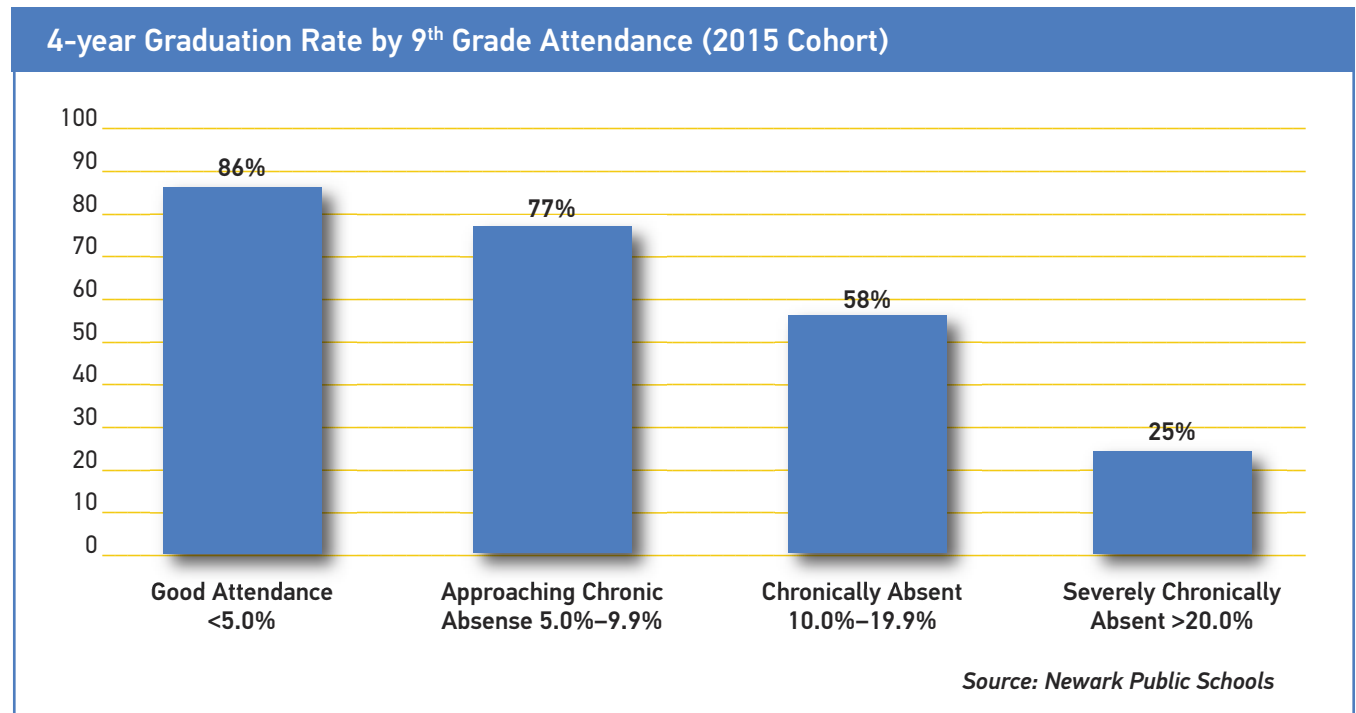
Newark Public Schools has a goal of improving its graduation rate,[6] but the seeds are sown early. Once a Newark ninth-grader misses 10 percent or more of school days, he or she has more than a 40 percent chance of failing to graduate on time.

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To better understand the reasons behind these high chronic absenteeism rates, ACNJ conducted focus groups with students, teachers and parents. During May and June 2017, ACNJ conducted

- 6 focus groups with 5-12 high school students each (59 total) at 4 schools,
- 1 focus group with 14 teachers from 1 school, and
- 1 focus group with 5 parents from 1 school.

These conversations gave insight into the realities on the ground in Newark's high schools and neighborhoods. To give context to school-level issues, ACNJ also interviewed 4 administrators from 4 schools to discuss attendance and other policies at the schoolwide level. Note that all of ACNJ's work focused on high schools operated by Newark Public Schools. Newark's charter schools were not within the scope of this report.

What's Causing Chronic Absenteeism?

The focus groups and interviews pointed to multiple factors that create the conditions for chronic absenteeism to take hold. Many of these factors overlap to make absences more likely. Unsurprisingly, because the focus groups were looking at absenteeism in the high school setting, most reasons were school-based, but community and family factors were also routinely mentioned.

■ **School Disengagement.** Focus group participants reported that students either felt disengaged from the curriculum in school, which they considered irrelevant, or were discouraged because of their own lack of preparation for more rigorous material. Participants noted that rigor varied widely, with some students lacking a sufficient academic foundation for high-level coursework and others complaining of unchallenging repetitive material. Students once excited to attend high school in eighth grade indicated that they became disillusioned by ninth grade as they watched older students and peers miss school with few or inconsistent school consequences.

Teacher, administrator and student voices on how curriculum and culture feed into absenteeism:

"Rigor is low in this school. I get pushback from students saying 'You're the only class I'm failing.' I tell them, 'You have 40 absences,' and they show me [their report card with] Bs and Cs." —Teacher

"If we don't make curriculum relevant for students, they have their own plans of where they want to be and what's relevant to them." —Administrator

"In middle school you knew everybody. Now you don't know people and maybe you start getting into the wrong crowds and before you know it, [you] get influenced by upperclassmen to stop going." —Student

■ **Inconsistent policies and practices.** Among and within schools, attendance policies and implementation of those policies varied widely. How and when attendance is taken, how often phone calls home take place, and what happens academically when students are absent could vary from school to school and even teacher to teacher. Inconsistent practices let students slip through the cracks and undermine schoolwide attendance initiatives.

Students had a wide range of responses for what happens when they miss a day of school:

"Nothing."

"A robo-call home from the school."

"Sometimes my teacher will text me and ask where I am."

"Say I missed a day in December no one would call. Now [in June] they start calling."

"You can skip one day and another student skips the same day and only one of you gets called."

■ **Social and emotional health.** Although students reported a variety of health issues affecting attendance, the need for social and emotional health care in the high schools stood out. When students experience community violence, abuse or neglect, depression or anxiety, schools have limited resources to support them and their families in addressing these issues. Teachers and students noted a lack of training and capacity among staff to respond to students' social and emotional health.

A teacher explains the need for social-emotional support:

"Students experience such drastic changes at this time because they are coming into adulthood. And adults around them recognize that. But they don't get the guidance that they need. And I would love to be that person for all 120 of my students, but I can't. And it kills me when I can't, because maybe if that kid had that conversation, maybe if I could have taken more time to talk to them, I could have done something." — *Teacher*

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■ **Distance from school.** Because high school students do not receive bus tickets unless they live 2.5 miles away from school, many must walk long distances or arrange their own transportation.[7] Students reported walking up to 45 minutes to get to school. Those relying on public transport face unreliable and infrequent buses, and they reported that if they know they have to wait 30 minutes for the next bus, they may not go at all. Student bus ticket distribution varies widely, often without any clear system in place. Staff members may even distribute bus tickets two-at-a-time on a daily basis, with students who miss ticket distribution left without a way to get home or to come back the next day.

A parent explains how distance can cause absences:

"I can't even afford rent; I can't pay for bus tickets. My son travels 2 miles to get to school. I tried to get some assistance but they say he lives too close. Then you go down to Cedar Street [Newark Public Schools central office] to get the application for bus tickets for people with hardship, which takes forever. One year I got approved and I didn't know until the end of the school year and couldn't get it rolled over to the next year. When I call and ask if they have extra funds or bus tickets, they say no. So you talk about absences, my son may be absent tomorrow if I can't get bus tickets."

■ **Personal safety.** Students often walk through high-crime areas to and from school, leading many to fear for their safety. Some students also reported bullying behavior at school that kept them from attending. All participants noted the trauma left by neighborhood violence on students and communities.

One student describes the impact of community violence:

"It's like every time I turn around somebody's being killed. And it's either someone in my family or a close friend of mine. And it's like, how can we focus on school when someone got killed yesterday? It's hard. I can't balance the two. I can't focus. How am I supposed to feel safe walking to school when at night in that area there [are] shootings?"

■ **Parental support.** High schoolers attending school regularly reported high parent involvement in their education. However, students, teachers and parents stated that some parents were less strict in monitoring their children's attendance in high school compared to elementary school. Focus group participants indicated that some parents viewed teenagers as more independent and gave them the choice of whether or not to attend. Staff reported frustration with lack of parental contact, while parents noted little communication from schools.

Participants noted the importance of parents in school attendance:

"My mom reacts when I miss school because she expects more from me, so when I miss school it's a big deal for her." —*Student*

> *"Parents are what drive the kids to come every day. But some parents might say, 'They're 16. Where I come from 16 is an adult, so they do their own thing.'"* —Teacher

> *"Increased absenteeism in high school may happen because high school students are starting to understand there is a greater independence. And some parents tend to say 'OK you're in high school now.' They no longer do those checks on their kids."* —Parent

■ **Student responsibilities.** Focus group participants noted that many students have responsibilities outside of school ranging from child care for younger siblings or their own children to jobs to help support their families. These students often felt forced to choose between immediate family responsibilities and longer-term educational goals. Several students, for example, stated that they were responsible for getting younger siblings to school, often causing them to be late for their own classes.

One student on the impact of employment and family responsibilities on attendance:

> *"I know that I should come to school and get my education because it will help get real money later on. But for students right now [who are] taking care of our families or our kids, money is a big factor in our lives. I've gotta go out and make money. I'll worry about school tomorrow, I gotta live today."*

What's Working and What's Not

ACNJ's interviews and focus groups revealed some promising practices in schools around the district. The stories showed that many dedicated administrators and teachers are trying to make attendance a high priority for their schools.

Before the start of the 2016-17 school year, Newark Public Schools required each principal to review their absenteeism numbers from the year before and develop a plan to reduce absences and encourage attendance. Regular data updates were sent from the district to principals. Schools began implementing policies from perfect attendance rewards to more frequent parent contacts when students were absent. The district and city collaboration on the South Ward Community Schools has begun to focus on additional services for mental and behavioral health, which is often a factor in student attendance.

Additionally, many focus group participants noted that there were pockets of successful practices occurring in Newark high schools. Students noted how a single adult in the school could make an impact on their attendance. Students appreciated when teachers took extra steps to connect with them, such as texting them to check on them when absent, asking about their families, and providing academic and social-emotional support. Similarly, staff and parents both noted that certain teachers had a strong classroom culture and engaged regularly with families.

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Yet these efforts have largely been driven by individual teachers or staff, rather than a systemic effort to reduce chronic absenteeism. Moreover, these efforts have been hampered by obstacles within schools and communities resulting in continued high chronic absenteeism rates.

■ **Consistency and persistence.** School staff and administrators reported starting the school year with plans for addressing school climate and student attendance. But many proposed policies eroded as the year went on. For example, incentives and rewards for perfect or improved attendance at one school went from weekly to monthly to bimonthly. Students and teachers reported that phone calls home became irregular. According to students, school interventions for attendance spiked at the beginning and end of year. As one administrator noted, "I can make you a beautiful plan, but if there's no follow-through, that plan is just a piece of paper."

Three perspectives on policies requiring phone calls home after an absence:

"It was a struggle making calls to the parents. Maybe 15-20 percent of teachers were doing it regularly. When the leadership got busy at the top, the phone calls were easily forgotten." —Administrator

"Parent contact is usually not regular. We'll do more calls at the beginning of the year than the end because there is so much chaos." —Teacher

"If you miss a day, you get a call once in a blue moon, so it's not persistent at all." —Student

■ **Staff buy-in.** Many promising practices occurred in isolation because of individual staff initiatives. But without a consistent vision and commitment to reduce chronic absenteeism from administrators, attendance-encouraging behavior seemed restricted to those staff directly responsible for attendance, rather than generating schoolwide culture change. Student attitudes towards attendance were influenced by almost all adults in school especially those in direct contact with students, including teachers, security guards, cafeteria staff, counselors, nurses, coaches and disciplinarians.

A teacher on why isolated promising practices need broad buy-in:

"We had a meeting about attendance a few weeks ago, and the focus was on classroom engagement and other things we can do individually in the classroom. But I think it's more powerful what a whole school can buy into. I've had better results with the kids who come to my class, but what is more powerful is multiple teachers teaching the same students to all buy into a strategy together."

■ **Support.** Even a well-designed plan can only go so far without support and training. Teachers reported lacking both the time and training necessary to effectively assist students with social-emotional issues. Administrators noted a lack of social workers and support staff. Students felt that staff were unprepared to deal with their problems and unable to follow through with solutions.

Teachers and students expressed frustration about insufficient supports and referrals to services:

> *"I hear a bunch of 'I can see if I can help you' from the principal, the counselor, the vice principal, but no one has actually helped me yet."* —Student

> *"We have one social worker for more than a thousand kids. We have a child study team that doesn't know kids' names."* —Teacher

■ **Alignment of policies and attendance.** District or school policies to achieve other goals may have unanticipated effects on attendance. Policies that encourage attendance may be undermined by other unrelated policies that create additional absences. Following are a few significant conflicts gleaned from the focus groups:

Scheduling. The Newark Public Schools' final exams were scheduled two weeks before the end of the year, leaving a gap between the last day of testing and the last day of school. Administrators took a variety of approaches to this schedule, ranging from organizing special field trips to holding all students in the cafeteria unless teachers called for the students. Some students reported being asked by teachers or staff, "Why are you still coming?" Regardless of the reasons behind its design, the message of holding school days after grades had been finalized was clear: "After finals, [teachers] tell us not to come or they let us leave. They tell us there is no point." (For the 2017-18 year, the number of school days after finals has been reduced.)

Response to tardiness. In some schools, after a certain number of tardies, students were required to stay home from school until a parent could sign them back in. Though well-intentioned, these policies sent the message that even students who wanted to come to school were not welcome. Linking a student's return to school with a parent's schedule could be counter-productive if the school's goal is getting the student in school as much as possible. Students noted that sending tardy students out into the street simply for coming to school late was potentially dangerous: "When they try to come back, [the school] send[s] them away and they could end up getting killed. Give people the chance. They're trying to come to school." Administrators also noted the incoherence of punishing chronically absent students by forcing them to miss even more school. Indeed, Newark Public Schools' own attendance policy states: "No student shall be denied admission to school or 'locked out' if arriving late."[8]

Disciplinary practices. Out-of-school suspensions count towards chronic absenteeism, but discipline procedures hurt attendance in other ways. Similar to some tardiness practices, multiple schools had policies barring a student from returning to school without a mandatory parent conference to discuss the student's behavior. If a parent was unavailable, the student would simply stay out of school in the meantime. High schoolers also noted that inconsistent and punitive disciplinary policies led to school disengagement: "I believe why kids sometimes don't come to school is because we're constantly being suspended over the littlest things."

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Promising Practice: Using "Advisories" to Take on Chronic Absenteeism

Strong relationships between students and school staff can be the foundation for improved student attendance. One effective strategy in cultivating those relationships—and consequently changing the culture of a school—is for schools to implement *Advisories*. *Advisories* are regularly scheduled school periods when teachers, counselors or other staff members meet with small groups of students to advise them on academic, social, personal or career-oriented issues.

Well-designed advisories can foster a strong sense of community and student belonging, making their fellow advisory participants feel like family. They also allow students to have an environment to talk about life experiences with the same group of people in a safe environment. Advisors may serve as a direct link to home for high schoolers who may have six or seven different teachers throughout the day.

As ACNJ's focus groups revealed, many students, teachers and administrators reported a need for more focus on personal development and relationship-building outside of formal academic subjects. Many Newark high schools already implement advisory periods, but the content, curriculum and support for these advisories ranged widely from school to school and teacher to teacher. Uses for advisories spanned from silent reading to study hall to watching videos.

Advisories are not one-size-fits-all, but a few key factors unite successful advisory programs from schools across the nation.

■ What Do Advisories Need to Succeed?

Clear structure and intentional design. As the focus groups suggest, building relationships with students requires intentional design of programs tailored to student needs. The role of an advisory and the advisor must be carefully designed to focus on building relationships with students. A successful advisory should be geared towards student interests and needs, rather than teacher-directed. Students should help decide if, for example, it should focus on career goal-setting or managing emotions.

Another key factor in advisory design is building regular rituals, a process that can take years. At Fast Track Academy, an alternative school in Newark, administrators and teachers recognized that students often walk in the door with emotional baggage. Each morning, students participate in morning circle, during which students "check in" with each other to celebrate their success and vent their frustrations before the day begins.

Strong supports and training. A strong advisory period needs strong supports and high-quality training for advisors. Being an advisor requires skills and planning different from being a teacher of an academic subject. At City Neighbors High School in Baltimore, Administrator Mike Chalupa said that advisory effectiveness stems from good training and professional development.[9] At City Neighbors, advisory groups of 15 students meet daily over all four years of high school to form the foundation of the school's strategy to battle student absences. Advisories act as the common thread through a student's high school career. Teachers and advisors participate in extensive training on trauma-informed care, mindfulness and restorative practices to support the social-emotional health of students.

Consistency and persistence. The concept of advisory periods has been around for a century, but successful implementation is as difficult now as it was when they were developed. Success requires consistency and persistence over a long time period, as well as a feedback mechanism to adjust the program to meet student needs. All relationships take time to develop and instant results are rare. Schools need to be committed to regular advisory time and allow teachers and students time to plan and provide suggested activities for advisory periods, with consistent feedback on what is working and what is not. Many schools with advisory periods designate one person as an advisory coordinator, responsible for checking in with staff and administrators. Successful advisory models often keep the same students together over multiple years, a plan that requires advance planning and commitment. Advisories can only succeed when school leaders are committed to consistently using them.

Advisories can be a helpful tool to build relationships with students and provide a setting for schools to address social-emotional and personal growth. Because strong relationships with adults in school bear on student engagement and attendance, many schools use advisories as part of their overall attendance strategy.

For more information on successful strategies, see Jeffrey Benson and Rachel E. Poliner's *Educational Leadership* article, "Designing Advisories" (Sept. 2013) available at http://www.studentachievement.org/wp-content/uploads/Designing_Advisories_A.pdf.

What's Next?

Several factors are galvanizing the district, city and community to look carefully at absenteeism. First, the New Jersey Department of Education will begin evaluating schools based on their chronic absenteeism rates under the Every Student Succeeds Act and will require improvement plans from high-absenteeism schools.[10] Second, improving attendance is part of the district's strategic plan, listing key milestones for an attendance improvement initiative.[11] Third, a series of Newark community advisory groups, such as the Children's Cabinet and the Newark Youth Policy Board, have identified chronic absenteeism as a key metric that will be targeted with additional policy changes at the city level.

> **Follow-through, buy-in and support are essential for improving attendance.**

Looking forward, it's clear that this effort will require more than piecemeal support, but rather broad culture changes within the district, individual schools and communities. As prior reform efforts demonstrate, follow-through, buy-in and support are essential for improving attendance. This applies to district and school leaders but also to a broader community of support to address problems that the school alone cannot. Work on absenteeism across the nation shows that although many factors outside school can impact attendance, what school leaders and staff do matters enormously in improving attendance.

As such, ACNJ's recommendations focus primarily on changes in schools, building on national research and best practices. The recommendations also respond to the concerns raised by students, parents, teachers and administrators.

■ Recommendations for Newark Public Schools

Foster supportive leadership. School leaders are the key to culture change in attendance. Without leadership that views encouraging attendance as a core part of a school's mission, attendance easily falls to the wayside as other urgent issues arise through the year. Principals must keep attendance as a school priority throughout the year, with short- and long-term goal-setting and regular data review to identify students at risk for chronic absenteeism and evaluate whether programs are improving attendance.

Review attendance data early and regularly. Only looking at attendance data on a quarterly or yearly basis may identify chronic absenteeism problems too late, leaving schools and students playing catch-up. Weekly and even daily check-ins of school absenteeism levels can help administrators and staff adjust their messaging and programs, and communicate up-to-date data and attendance information to families and the community. If schools are implementing programs to address attendance, reviewing the data is the only way to know if their programs are working.

Support trusting relationships between students and staff. High schoolers stressed the importance of strong adult relationships within their schools, but only about half stated they had an adult in the school who they trusted. Whether through strong well-organized advisory periods, mentorship programs or non-academic programming, schools need to cultivate relationships between staff and students in order to respond to and prevent absences.

Provide professional development and support for social-emotional learning. Staff and students reported limited training on how to address social-emotional health issues, with social workers and support staff spread thin. Better professional development supports a staff's ability to assist students while developing stronger relationships with them.

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Apply policies consistently. Regardless of how well-intentioned a policy or practice is, inconsistent application dulls the policy's effectiveness. Rather than address every possible cause of absenteeism, schools should focus on a few policy changes and encourage consistency and persistence throughout the year. Consistent implementation by all staff reduces the student and parent perception of unpredictable school policies and makes clear the expectations to staff, students and parents.

Build in routine communications to students and parents. Communications between Newark school staff and families in high school are often limited and piecemeal. A schoolwide strategy of regularly communicating attendance expectations and school resources on a variety of platforms with parents and students throughout the year is key to a successful attendance strategy.

Align and re-evaluate other policies to encourage attendance. Policies that may seem unrelated to attendance may have large effects on absenteeism. School start and end dates and times, school discipline procedures, attendance-taking policies, uniform policies and curriculum design all influence attendance and attitudes towards school, and must be designed to take those issues into account. Notably, Newark Public Schools will end earlier in the 2017-18 school year than in prior years to reduce the number of school days after grades have been locked in. One area of focus should be transportation and distribution of bus tickets, where inconsistency can lead to unnecessary student absences.

■ Recommendations for the City

Improve public safety near schools. Newark's public safety department should coordinate with high schools to ensure regular patrols of crime "hot spots" near Newark's high schools during school arrival and dismissal hours.

Coordinate attendance data sharing with schools. The City of Newark interacts with high schoolers through its employment programs, recreation and wellness programs and other city-operated functions such as health clinics. Coordinating with school attendance data can allow these programs to target services and provide an additional trusting adult to students at risk of chronic absenteeism, as well as reinforce messaging about the importance of school attendance.

Develop and launch a community campaign around chronic absenteeism. Cities such as Grand Rapids, Michigan and Pittsburgh have launched citywide campaigns to increase knowledge of chronic absenteeism and drive community involvement in efforts to improve attendance.

■ Recommendations for Community Organizations

Provide supports for students with social-emotional health needs. Schools and students reported a lack of adequate supports for social-emotional health. Behaviorists, social workers and trained staff who can help students cope with and address their responses to traumatic or stressful situations can improve attendance for those students.

Engage parents on the importance of regular attendance in high school and earlier. Parent engagement at the high school level is often difficult, as parents, school staff and students frequently described a parent's role as receding in high school. Parent groups in community

settings can help build a stronger culture of parental engagement and attendance encouragement in the community, starting in elementary and middle school when engagement may be higher.

Track student attendance at school. As community organizations develop and operate programs for high schoolers, they should track school attendance regularly in order to design programming to encourage attendance and check in with chronically absent students.

■ **Recommendations for Outside Funders**

Track attendance data as a performance measure. Just as schools need to track student attendance data in order to evaluate program effectiveness, grantmakers should consider school attendance as a leading indicator of other longer-term performance measures such as graduation rate and college attainment.

Fund grants for training of teachers and school staff on practices to encourage attendance. School staff reported a lack of training in encouraging attendance, instead falling back on old instincts or traditional punitive attendance measures. Grantmakers should consider additional training and professional development for school administrators and staff on how to tackle absenteeism.

Conclusion

While the findings of this report reflect the hard work that needs to take place to improve attendance in Newark's high schools, that struggle is not insurmountable. Schools can succeed at turning the curve on absenteeism with a commitment to consistency and persistence in everything from how programs and policies are implemented, to providing much-needed supports and technical assistance to staff, to improving staff buy-in.

However, what ACNJ heard time and time again is that the two greatest measures to address this issue head-on are strong leaders and strong relationships.

Strong leaders at every level need to make improving attendance the priority in helping students realize educational success. They will never achieve their full potential in school if they are not there. This is no easy feat. But without prioritizing attendance at the top, there is no indication that Newark's high school chronic absenteeism numbers will improve.

And most importantly, stronger relationships between school staff and students are fundamental to preventing chronic absences. During every focus group—whether with students, teachers or parents— this message was heard loud and clear.

Changing the mind-frame of how to battle against chronic absenteeism will not be easy, but it is at the core of what schools do best—to teach students so that they can be successful in school and in their futures.

Giving Every Child A Chance

One School's Story: How Barringer High Is Fighting Absenteeism

As Principal Angela Mincy prepared to begin her third year leading Newark's Barringer High School, she was floored by the attendance data being presented at the district's principal professional development in August 2016. "The absenteeism data was alarming. Only 18 percent of students were in the good attendance range."

Like many administrators, Principal Mincy had long used "average daily attendance" — the total days of student attendance divided by total days of instruction — as her measure of student achievement. "Sometimes as an administrator, you think 80 percent average daily attendance is okay, but we needed to learn what that 80 percent really represented." In fact, nearly two out of every three Barringer students were chronically absent in the 2015–16 school year.

> *Student reflections provided an opportunity to "talk **with** kids, not talk **at** them."*

In September 2016, Newark Public Schools required principals to develop a strategic plan to address absenteeism and attendance, establishing a schoolwide goal and evaluating the principals based on their goal.

To begin the year, Principal Mincy assembled an attendance team including: vice principals, the dean, the staff member assisting bilingual students and a data analyst. They were just as stunned by the data and quickly developed a series of plans. "I remember they said, 'Oh my god, you mean 67 percent of my kids are chronically absent?'" she recalled.

After some brainstorming sessions, Principal Mincy's ideas were overflowing. Some were ultimately more successful than others but the message was clear: something had to change if the school's attendance was to improve.

■ What Worked

Regular and specific data updates helped track everything from which teachers made the most calls to families about absent students to the absenteeism rates in each grade. The data-heavy approach to attendance differed from prior years: "[In the prior years] I was not doing anything until the end of the year. This year we checked our data regularly and communicated the data to the staff and faculty."

Portfolio assessments were required for students who missed more than 18 days of school in order to determine whether they would be allowed to move on to the next grade. These students had to complete a grade-level assessment or packet, as well as present a reflection of their short-term and long-term goals, addressing why their attendance was important to achieve those goals. Principal Mincy reported that these reflections were helpful for students to better understand the importance of regular attendance to their school success and to see that staff and faculty were there to support and nurture them. It was an opportunity to "talk *with* kids, not talk *at* them." During the next school year, staff and faculty will be "hypervigilant" in monitoring those students who completed a portfolio appeal.

A focus on school connectedness made building relationships with students and families an explicit priority. Principal Mincy observed that high schoolers who struggled the most with absenteeism were often the students most disconnected from adults in school. She wanted to make sure all students felt there was an adult in the school they could go to when facing a problem, even ranking staff in the school based on who was most frequently identified as a "trusted adult" in a student school climate survey.

Routine and improved attendance rewards encouraged students to view attendance positively. The school instituted monthly raffles of gift cards, a pizza party and dress-down day for students with high attendance. The rewards were encouraging: "Kids at the end of the month would challenge us to make sure they got credit for perfect attendance." Rather than simply allowing good attendance to "go by without a word," rewards brought an awareness to attendance.

■ Lessons Learned

Persistence and consistency. When Principal Mincy wanted to encourage teachers to make calls home for every student absence, she had a hard time getting buy-in. She estimated only 20 percent of teachers regularly made calls home. Although she would occasionally push for more calls, she acknowledged that more consistency was needed in administering the policy.

Revising curriculum. In talking with students with high absenteeism, Principal Mincy saw their difficulty in connecting long-term goals to daily lessons that felt irrelevant or outdated to them. Principal Mincy echoed other teachers and principals that schools must do a better job of teaching subjects in a way that are relevant and engaging: "Students at Barringer cannot just sit and be receptacles of information."

Stronger advisory periods. Principal Mincy saw that connecting with an adult in school was key for student success in attendance, but her vision of advisory periods required more change than was possible in a single year. She hopes that each student will eventually have an "advisor" teacher who will serve as the point of contact for their parent on all matters attendance-related.

Building parent engagement. Even with a community engagement specialist ramping up efforts to engage families, Principal Mincy highlighted parent engagement as one area needing improvement. Principal Mincy attempted to re-engage parents and bring parents back into the school for any reason, encouraging routine parent meetings. She hopes in the next year to focus on parent engagement in a positive and preventive way, rather than as a response to a student's disciplinary, academic or attendance problems.

APPENDIX: Percentage of Students Chronically Absent by School, 2014-15 and 2015-16, as reported by Newark Public Schools

Magnet Schools: District magnet schools have admission criteria. Students are ranked and matched based on academic and talent criteria established by each school.

School	2014-15	2015-16	Grade Range
American History High	35%	30%	7-12
Arts H.S.	26%	29%	7-12
Bard Early College High School	27%	25%	9-12
Science H.S.	21%	22%	7-12
Technology H.S.	24%	15%	9-12
University H.S.	25%	33%	7-12

Comprehensive Schools:

School	2014-15	2015-16	Grade Range
Barringer Academy of S.T.E.A.M.	68%	68%	9-12
Barringer Academy of Arts & Humanities	70%	67%	9-12
Central H.S.	59%	57%	9-12
East Side H.S.	49%	43%	9-12
Early College High School (West Side)	41%	44%	9-12
Malcolm Shabazz H.S.	79%	76%	9-12
Newark Vocational High School (West Side)	76%	57%	9-12
Weequahic H.S.	73%	68%	9-12

Transfer Schools: The following schools enroll students ages 16-20 who are over-age and under-credited to be on track to graduate from high school on time.

School	2014-15	2015-16	Grade Range
Fast Track Success Academy	88%	83%	9-12
Newark Leadership Academy	82%	97%	9-12

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Data Sources and Technical Notes:

[1] Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know From Nationally Available Data, at 24-25. Available at http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf.

[2] Press Release, NPS Attendance Campaign Captures the Imagination of Principals, Teachers and Parents (Nov. 18, 2013). Available at http://www.nps.k12.nj.us/press-releases/nps-attendance-campaign-captures-imagination-principals-teachers-parents/

[3] Unless otherwise noted, all data in this section comes from the Superintendent's monthly report to the Newark Educational Success Board in October 2016. The presentation is available at http://www.nps.k12.nj.us/mdocs-posts/superintendent-monthly-report-october-2016/

[4] One report from researchers at Johns Hopkins University showed that chronic absenteeism was three times higher among economically disadvantaged students in high school. Balfanz & Byrnes (2012) at 20. http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf

[5] Elaine M. Allensworth & John Q. Easton. What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools (July 2007), https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/07%20What%20Matters%20Final.pdf

[6] Newark Public Schools. The Next Three Years: Strategic Plan 2016-19 (2016), at 13. Available at http://www.nps.k12.nj.us/mdocs-posts/2016-19-strategic-plan/

[7] State law places restrictions on how state funds may be used for transportation of high school students living less than 2.5 miles away from school. See N.J.S.A. 18A:39-1 to -1.1 (2016).

[8] Newark Public Schools Policy, "Absences and Excuses" at 4 (2014). Available at http://content.nps.k12.nj.us/wp-content/uploads/sites/58/2014/08/absence_and_excuses.pdf

[9] Phone interview with Michael Chalupa (July 6, 2017).

[10] New Jersey Department of Education, "Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in New Jersey: State Plan Overview," at 38. Available at http://www.state.nj.us/education/ESSA/plan/Overview.pdf.

[11] Newark Public Schools. The Next Three Years: Strategic Plan 2016-19 (2016) at p. 32.

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