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**It's a Family Affair: Fostering Belonging by Addressing Chronic Absenteeism
Among Black Students**

The Highbridge Green School
200 W 167th St
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Cahn Fellowship Cohort 2022-2023

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ABSTRACT

The return to in-person learning saw a dramatic increase in chronic absenteeism rates across our district, city and state. This increase was not proportional by race. In fact, New York State saw a dramatic increase in chronic absenteeism rates for Black students. This project uses a disproportionality root cause analysis to reduce chronic absenteeism rates for Black students over two years at The Highbridge Green School, a school located in a high poverty district in the Bronx. As a result of implementing research-based interventions, the school reduced chronic absenteeism rates among all students well below the district average, and reduced chronic absenteeism rates for Black students by ten percent. Thus, this project proposes possibilities for reconsidering what belonging and inclusion mean for our school and our Black students, and in so doing, offers possibilities for a new district attendance program that centers Black students and their families.

INTRODUCTION

The return to in-person learning saw a dramatic increase in chronic absenteeism rates across our district, a high poverty area located in the Bronx, New York. This project uses a disproportionality root cause analysis, based on the research by Dr. Edward Fergus, to reduce chronic absenteeism rates for Black students over two years at The Highbridge Green School. It proposes possibilities for reconsidering what belonging and inclusion mean for our school and our Black students, and in so doing, offers methods for a new district attendance program that centers Black students and their families.

The Highbridge Green School is a Title 1, public middle school located in the Highbridge neighborhood in New York City Public School District 9, in the South Bronx. It is part of Community Council District 4 and one of 18 schools that serve over 20,000 students in grades 6-8th. There are nearly 400 students that are enrolled – 77% identify as Hispanic and 22% identify as Black, non-Hispanic. Of our students who identify as Hispanic – 42% identify as Hispanic and White, 20% as Hispanic and Black and 16% as Hispanic and Native American. Approximately 50% of students were assigned male at birth, and 50%, female at birth. In the 2023-2024 school year, 40% of all students qualified for multilingual language services, meaning that they had varying degrees of English language proficiency. Students with disabilities make up over one quarter of the school population with a variety of classifications, including emotionally disturbed, speech/ language/other health impairment and learning disabled. The school has various special education service models in place, including ICT or inclusion classes and self-contained or smaller classes. There are no self-contained or smaller classes in grades 7th and 8th in order to support students with the transition to high school. Historically underreported, the students in temporary housing population rate, the current designation for students who are unhoused or are in unstable housing, is 20%.

The school has a strong history of activism and family involvement. It was founded in 2013 to serve students graduating from four elementary schools in the Highbridge area after a decade-long advocacy program by family and community members for a new school. In 2012, family and community activists composed of the United Parents of Highbridge and New Settlement Parent Action Committee raised over two million dollars to ensure the building, approved by the then known Department of Education, was designed to be environmentally friendly with a green roof, including a greenhouse and roof garden.

The school is known for its literacy work and partnerships with the Literacy Collaborative and former city council funded program, Middle School Quality Initiative. This means the school follows a disciplinary literacy model, which means that science and social studies

are literacy subjects that work to support grade-level reading comprehension for all students. All students participate in a daily intervention block and daily advisory block. The intervention block is taught by all teachers, regardless of their content license, to support students in small group reading or math tier 2 intervention programs. The advisory program is the hallmark of the school, providing students with at least one adult that students know well. The school is one of eight public schools in the city to receive the prestigious Expanded Learning Time Grant from New York State, implementing an after school program for 75% of students in which they “extend” their day by two and a half hours. Students in this program receive homework support and additional arts/sports enrichment. Students at the school have access to a variety of arts and athletic opportunities, including but not limited to, lacrosse, basketball, volleyball, soccer, swimming, tennis, bicycle riding, archery, vocal music, digital music, classical ballet dance, Afro-Caribbean dance, and gardening. Last but not least, the school supports a beautiful roof garden and hydroponic system where students grow organic food that they eat in the cafeteria.

Located in the South Bronx, the school was extremely impacted by Covid-19 epidemic and shutdown. Many caregivers died or lost their jobs. When we returned to in-person schooling, chronic absenteeism, defined as missing more than two days per month or 18 days in one school year, soared. This trend was not isolated to our neighborhood as a recent article in The New York Times reveals: “About one quarter of U.S. students qualified as chronically absent” (Leonhardt). During the 2022 school year, 42% of all New York City students were chronically absent (Zimmerman, p.1). That number dropped slightly to 36% last school year. The trend is similar at the New York state level: chronic absenteeism rates hovered around 40% for 2021 and were nearly 30% last school year. Kids are not coming to school, and we know that different kinds of kids are absent at different rates.

Our school is no exception to the recent rise in chronic absenteeism. Though our chronic absenteeism rates are lower than the district and city average, we were alarmed at the increase and how that increase affected different groups of kids disproportionately. In 2019, our chronic absenteeism rate was 18.2% as compared to 35% in our district and 26.5% in the city. In 2022, our chronic absenteeism rate jumped to 30.4% as compared to 47.3% in the district and 42% in the city.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As stated above, our school is no exception to the recent rise in chronic absenteeism nationally. Though our chronic absenteeism rates are lower than the district and city average, we were alarmed at the increase and how that increase affected different groups of kids disproportionately. Though our school is majority Hispanic, the majority of our students that are chronically absent are Black. In other words, the proportion of our students that are chronically absent is disproportionately Black. See the data below:

School year	District Chronic Absenteeism Rate	School Chronic Absenteeism Rate	Black Student Chronic Absenteeism Rate (at School)
2018-2019	35.3%	18.2%	22.5%
2021-2022	47.3%	30.4%	36.8%

This is concerning to us because we have an explicit anti-racist vision. It is also concerning because research tells us that chronic absenteeism is a predictor of future dropout and failure rates. What might we be doing (or not doing) that could be causing our Black students to be absent? How might we better align our state values with our practice? After three years of interrupted formal education, what can we do to reconnect and welcome back our families? In the wake of racial justice protests across the country, what can our school do to better serve our most vulnerable students? These are just some of the few questions we attempted to address in our project.

Merely reducing chronic absenteeism is not enough, especially if our Black students are overrepresented in this rate. How can we conduct inquiry to determine what may be keeping our Black kids from coming to school, and more importantly, if we are able to do that, do we have the resources and the ability to address the causes? To that end, reducing our Black chronic absenteeism rate, gathering more information about what might be causing those kids to be absent, and increasing Black students' sense of belonging to our school community, are the goals of this project.

As a white school leader with an explicitly anti-racist vision and mission, this project provides us a unique opportunity to examine whether our vision is meeting the needs of all stakeholders, especially our Black families and students. How can we say that Black lives matter when over a third of our Black students miss a month of school or more? As a result, I can specifically grow my anti-racist leadership by learning to interrogate the gap that may exist between my stated beliefs, my actions and the lived experience of my students.

METHODS

To gain more clarity about the depth of this project, we conducted several activities. The activities were as follows: focus interviews with Black chronically absent students and their families, focus interviews with Black educators at the school, home visits, incentives, partnerships with community based organizations, student-adult mentorships. In addition, we also read relevant literature, including research conducted by Karen Mapp and chronic absenteeism research conducted by the state of Connecticut.

In the winter of 2023, we interviewed Black students that were chronically absent to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences at our school. We also hoped to understand the causes of their absences. The information we gathered led us to implement new systems to support them and their peers. Many students had different feelings about school. Some, as to be expected, were not used to attending school daily because of the Covid-19 shutdowns. Some were struggling with mental health issues related to in-school and out-of-school issues. Some had exhibited anti-Black comments. We implemented an incentive lunch program that paired them with an adult mentor. The adult mentor was either a member of City Year or a local community-based organization called The Community Initiatives of New York. Each mentor met weekly with our students and developed incentives related to trips and food to emphasize decreased attendance. Adult mentors from The Community Initiatives of New York organization also supported all families with outside resources, including housing, food and childcare assistance. Lastly, we conducted 25 home visits over the summer and fall of 2023 to build stronger relationships with families.

Reducing chronic absenteeism is hard work. No one family or child is the same and no one solution or silver bullet exists. The work of relationship building is important; our students overwhelmingly expressed how valued they felt after we took the time to interview them and validate their experiences. Completing home visits over the summer for students identified as at risk and students who were identified as chronically absent the previous year was surprisingly successful. We built relationships with families and identified barriers to attending school and worked to problem-solve them. Home visits were so successful that every child that received a home visit was present on the first day of school.

RESULTS

The impact of our efforts substantially reduced chronic absenteeism overall for our school and within our target subgroup, Black students, as noted in the chart below:

School year	District Chronic Absenteeism Rate	School Chronic Absenteeism Rate	Black Student Chronic Absenteeism Rate (at School)
2018-2019	35.3%	18.2%	22.5%
2021-2022	47.3%	30.4%	36.8%
2022-2023	42%	22%	29%
Percent Change (2022-2023)	11.2% decrease	27.6% decrease	21.1% decrease

Additionally, we enthusiastically can report that EVERY SINGLE FAMILY that received a home visit reported to school on the first day of school. That bears repeating: every single family that was visited over the summer sent their child to school on the first day of school.

The impact of our efforts have helped to increase belonging felt by Black students by reducing their chronic absenteeism rates. Additionally, the leadership impact is also that we have modeled how to use a disproportionality analysis to narrow the gap between our stated values and our actions. We built the capacity of the attendance team to analyze data very closely and in innovative ways. On the surface, our school was doing well – we had high attendance rates and low chronic absenteeism rates in comparison with our district and city peers; however, upon closer examination, we created a system in which nearly 40% of our Black students missed more than a month of school. We said no to that system and envisioned a different model in which we took an active role to build relationships with students and families to support their sense of belonging and connection with our school community.

We still have more work to do. But we have sent an explicit message to our students, teachers and families that – working together, with a variety of stakeholders – we do not have to accept that data as reality. It was and is not okay that 4/10 Black students - a near majority – miss more than a month of school. Unfortunately, that is still the current average in New York State – data released this fall indicate that 42% of Black students across the state are chronically absent. At The Highbridge Green School, we are optimistic that we will cut that rate to half – less than 20% – this school year because of our efforts to build stronger relationships with students and families.

REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE PLANS- Fellow

My participation in the Cahn Fellowship positively impacted my leadership ability and professional learning.

I am a public school principal in New York City, where there are over 1,000,000 students and 1859 schools in 32 districts. I have the opportunity to work with so many colleagues, in my district in the South Bronx, my borough, and throughout the city. While I have the advantage of such a large community of colleagues, they, like me, are part of New York City Public Schools. We are assessed by common measures and governed by the same regulations. Many of us share experiences and challenges - poverty, trauma, immigration and new arrivals and interrupted formal education in students and families. At the same time, in a city as large as New York, where the districts and schools mirror local racial and economic demographics, who we teach and what they need can be as different as it would be if they were in different states or countries. Emerging from the Covid19 shut-down, we are grappling with adaptive challenges: high absenteeism, large gaps in student achievement, dysregulated student behavior, and high turnover and burnout among staff. For the past three years I have learned about how different communities and schools, in NYC and beyond, are facing these challenges. For the first time in my career, schools across the globe are united in a common experience: how to respond to the same adaptive challenges, school in the post pandemic-era shut-downs.

The professional relationships I have built outside of New York City are among the most valuable resources from this experience. Close relationships with colleagues in Denver and Chicago helped to validate my experience as a Covid-19 school leader and provided me professional support in tackling the adaptive challenges of school leadership. Working alongside them to problem-solve and share strategies for addressing chronic absenteeism enhanced my thinking. Professional development sessions led by Dr. Ellie Drag-Severson also helped me to think about how I could build an attendance team committed to disrupting inequitable outcomes for students, especially our most vulnerable students. I have strengthened my equity lens and I have demonstrated a heightened awareness and ability about how to disrupt and tackle seemingly intractable issues, especially across lines of difference. As a result of this experience, I feel uplifted and rejuvenated about my commitment to school leadership.

I am proud to have partnered with my ally, Kehmay Khahaifa to work on reducing chronic absenteeism for our Black students. As a result of this experience, I have seen Kehmay grow significantly in her ability to work with colleagues of different backgrounds and experiences levels. I believe she benefited greatly from the sessions with Dr. Ellie

Drag-Severson because they helped her to think critically and differently about meeting people where they are – not where we want them to be. In the future, it is my hope to support Kehmay on her leadership journey to obtain her school building leadership license, and continue to develop her capacity to lead teams of adults that continuously improve their ability to positively impact the students and families.

REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE PLANS- Ally

Participating in the Cahn Fellows Program has been a transformative experience for me as an ally, and it has profoundly impacted my growth as a leader and my work within my school community. I am a math teacher in the South Bronx, specifically in the vibrant Highbridge neighborhood. This neighborhood is diverse and rich in culture, but also faces various challenges related to poverty and trauma. Through the Cahn Fellows Program, I gained a deeper understanding of the educational landscape across New York City, and across the country. One of the key takeaways from this experience has been the importance of building professional relationships beyond the confines of our immediate community. Collaborating with educational leaders from across the city and country provided me with a fresh perspective on the common challenges we all faced, especially after COVID-19. These connections have been inspirational and invaluable resources, setting an example of school leadership in a post-pandemic era.

“A Developmental Approach to Effective Feedback,” led by Dr. Ellie Drag-Severson, had a great impact on my leadership journey. It encouraged me to develop a deeper understanding of how people learn and receive feedback. This changed the way I interact with other staff members in my school community, including new teachers that I mentor and coach. I also found Dr. Perkins' session regarding Culture and Climate to be useful, as it provided me with the opportunity to reflect on the culture within my school, in which I both participate and play a role in creating.

Through this fellowship, I've been inspired and motivated to be a change-maker and pursue my school building leader certification. However, I've also been reminded during our sessions that my well-being and health must be prioritized to best serve the community. My relationship with my principal, Kyle Brillante, has evolved from that of just my supervisor to more of a mentor. Our time engaged in our project and conversations with community members has provided me with new and deeper insights into the intricacies of school leadership. Overall, the Cahn Fellows Program has not only expanded my horizons as an educator but has also empowered me to make a lasting impact on my school community and beyond.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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APPENDIX

Appendix A (From New York State Education Public Data, <https://data.nysed.gov/>).

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