

Attendance Commission

Meeting Minutes

December 15, 2016

10:00 a.m.

James R. Thompson Center
100 West Randolph Street
Fourteenth Floor, V-Tel Room
Chicago, Illinois 60601



Alzina Building
100 North First Street
Third Floor, V-Tel Room
Springfield, Illinois 62777

I. Roll Call

Present

Karen Hunter Anderson - Springfield
(via proxy Mackenzie Montgomery)
Jeff Aranowski – Springfield
Stephanie Bernoteit – Chicago
Christina Campos - telephone
Lori Fanello - telephone
Karen Fox – telephone
Tiffany Gholson - Chicago
Jennifer Gill – telephone
Heidi Grove - telephone
Victoria Jackson – telephone
Madelyn James - Chicago
Shenita Johnson - Chicago
Ryan Mann – Chicago
(via proxy Rochelle Davis)
Melissa Mitchell – Chicago
Matthew Rodriguez - telephone
Diane Rutledge - telephone
Deanna Sullivan - Springfield
Harold Sweeney – telephone
Antoinette Taylor – Chicago

Not Present

Diane Grigsby-Jackson
Beth Malik
Joseph McMahon
Scott Wakeley
Crysta Weitekamp
Kevin Westall

II. Welcome and Opening Remarks

The meeting began at 10:05 a.m.

III. Approval of Minutes from November 18, 2016

Madelyn James's move to adopt the minutes was seconded by Lori Fanello. A voice vote indicated unanimous approval.

IV. Presentations by University of Chicago Urban Labs

Emma Shirey and Maitreyi Sistla, research managers from the University of Chicago (UC) Urban Labs Crime and Education divisions (policy research), were present to inform commission members on the following initiatives:

- a) *Check and Connect* – reducing truancy and improving outcomes
- b) *Becoming a Man* – decrease in crime/increase in graduation rates
- c) *Online Educational Enhancement* – increased credit accrual in juvenile justice facilities

Ms. Sistla explained the world is becoming extremely urbanized; in fact, it is predicted that by 2050, the global urban population will nearly double to 6.4 billion. Urban life presents many possibilities for social innovation and progress, but is not without its challenges such as crime, poverty, environmental factors, and the adequate delivery of services on a grand scale in the realms of education and health care. She said their challenge is to maximize opportunity and minimize the challenges. UC launched these labs in response to mounting murder rates in the city, including the murder of a UC student on campus after defending his dissertation. The university sought to match their research capabilities with the initiatives of the city's civic and community leaders and on-the-ground practitioners to target resources effectively. These partnerships enable them to identify promising solutions to urban challenges, test them, and advise the most effective and cost-efficient policies and programs.

The theory of transformative social change has four components:

- Partner - Work closely with policymakers and frontline practitioners to identify urban challenges and focus research on key policy problems.
- Leverage - Leverage philanthropic dollars to identify and test promising solutions.
- Disseminate - Broadly disseminate what works, for whom, and why to academic, policymaker, and practitioner audiences.
- Impact - Use rigorous scientific evidence to steer public sector dollars to the most socially productive uses.

In areas like education and crime, the government (particularly local government and to some extent state government) is where the money is, so we need to leverage private foundation dollars to help steer public sector dollars to the most socially productive uses. To do that, they said, they need to partner closely with government agencies and focus research on helping them solve community problems. Philanthropy cannot be the answer for supporting effective programs in perpetuity.

The UC researchers explained how the Urban Labs became involved in the **Becoming a Man** (BAM) program. Gun homicide rates occur in Chicago at a rate of 12.74% for white males, 15% for Latino males, and 53.2% for black males, all per 100,000 males between the ages of 15 and 24. The labs did a social autopsy of all the shooting deaths in 2008 and found that most shootings were driven by small altercations that quickly got out of hand. This theory is backed up by Chicago Police Department records and analysis. The perception is that many of these shootings occur because of gang activity or the drug trade, but those were actually not factors in many shootings. The Urban Labs thought there might be a way to intervene before young men react.

One program they found that offered great potential was the BAM program that was initiated by Youth Guidance. This organization provides weekly cognitive behavioral therapy sessions in CPS schools to 10-15 boys per session in a mentoring program that tries to teach the boys to think before they act. UC joined forces with Youth Guidance and provided the program to about 1,000 boys over a 27-week period in 2009-2010 in a randomized control trial. At the end of the sessions, they examined data from the Chicago Police Department to see if the program had had an effect on the number of shootings. It was found that among the students in the program, their involvement in incidents of violent crime was 45% less than their same-aged neighborhood peers who did not participate in the program. The program reduced the overall violent crime rate by 30%, and it also increased school engagement. They were surprised by the results because the program was not intensive as it offered only one -hour-long meeting once a week.

They looked at the statistics again a year after the program ended and found the results were not lasting, so they decided to launch a two-year program in 2013 to see if the results would have

more of a permanent impact on the young men involved (2,034 ninth and tenth graders from six CPS schools). They found the crime rate for participating students was 50% less than their neighborhood peers and overall arrest rates were reduced by 35-40%. A long term examination of program results has not been completed yet since the program ended in 2015. There is suggested evidence that this program has also had a positive effect on the graduation rates of program participants (+19%). They found that cognitive behavioral therapy is an intervention that works among kids who are still in school.

So the question was asked if a program like this would work with young men who were not in school, so they launched a program at the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center in the wake of an ACLU lawsuit filed against the Center. An area that housed 500 beds was transformed into 10 units where reforms were introduced, unit by unit. One such reform was daily cognitive behavioral therapy sessions. Partway through this process, another lawsuit was filed that prohibited full implementation of the changes about halfway through, so the UC Urban Labs opted to study the differences between the detainees who received the cognitive behavioral therapy and those who did not. They found that the young men who participated in the program had a reduced rate of recidivism (-21%).

In the BAM program, most of the counselors were social workers, but in the correctional center program, the therapy providers were center employees operating out of a manual. Coupled with the fact that the therapy was provided over a short term basis as most young men are detained at the center for only our weeks, the reduced recidivism rate is impressive.

Youth Guidance also has a program for female teens called WOW (Working on Womanhood) which is more clinical in scope and is something the UC Urban Labs is investigating for future collaboration. WOW focuses more on self-efficacy and healthy relationships.

The UC Urban Labs initiated discussions with the Chicago Public Schools in 2011 about issues their students were facing, and absence was mentioned. Patterns of disengagement and absenteeism are present throughout the United States, and high school students are much more likely to be chronically absent. Disengagement and dropping out are not the solitary events they are perceived to be but rather the result of years of missing school and developing poor attendance habits. So the UC Urban Labs looked for an intervention that could be used early in that process to stem the development of the disengagement. **Check and Connect** is a structured mentoring program that was developed by researchers at the University of Minnesota and it pairs adult mentors with about thirty youths who are at risk for disengagement. The mentors *check* or monitor student attendance and schoolwork and regularly meet with their students, individually and in groups. They also *connect* or intervene more intensely when needed to break down the barriers that are keeping youths from engaging at school and connect youth to community organizations, to social workers, and to other school staff. Mentors also meet with the parents or guardians of the children to determine the families' needs to make sure everyone is getting to school.

UC then conducted a study for two years with two cohorts of elementary school students (grades 1-8) from the south and west sides of Chicago who had 10-27 absences during the previous school year. The study revealed that benefits were concentrated among older students (6th – 8th grade) who reduced the number of absences by 3.8 school days as opposed to the lower grades where the reductions were negligible. There is the suggestion that older children make up their own minds about attending school as opposed to parental decisions among younger youth. The effects were found to be strengthened during the second year of the study, when the decrease in the days of absence grew to 5.2 days. Because it is a mentor-based program, it gives the participating students a chance to develop relationships with the adults which the researchers envisioned as a likely beneficial outcome.

Madelyn James asked why the focus was on Chicago schools on the south and west sides when many suburban and rural areas are plagued with chronic absence problems. The presenters explained that the study was done in conjunction with CPS, and that agency selected the schools for the study.

The UC researchers cited the work of Amy Claessens of UC and Mimi Engel of Vanderbilt University who are conducting a study around the two following questions:

- What do students and their families say about missing school?
- What are the home, school, and neighborhood contextual factors that may influence their attendance?

Madelyn James wondered if this study reflected a challenge to the usual narratives about student absence, specifically that parents are at fault. Ms. James said parents are often blamed when the reality is parents of very young students face logistical challenges in getting children to school (transportation and mobility issues).

The presenters agreed in part and said contributing factors, according to the study, include childhood illnesses, parental schedules, and chaotic family lives due to precarious housing situations, mental illness, and violence in the home.

Rochelle Davis, proxy representative for Ryan Mann of the Healthy Schools Campaign, said the work of her organization has brought her into contact with school personnel who work closely with children and families and are able to relate anecdotes about the reasons some children miss school. She said she hopes the Attendance Commission changes the narrative on why children are absent so people will quit blaming parents and criminalizing teens. She said many of these parents have no control over the circumstances in their lives.

Ms. James said this is not just a problem in Chicago; in fact, transportation is a problem for many students in downstate Illinois. If a child misses a school bus, the parent may have insufficient gas in his or her vehicle to drive the child to school. We have to focus on how to support the families. For older children, she explained, we have to consider the school climate and culture that created a sense of disengagement for the student. Ms. James explained further that it is counterproductive to be punitive with families.

Ms. Taylor emphasized that the anecdotal information that can be gleaned from bus drivers, school security guards, and other related staff can be mined for details that reveal families' struggles.

Emma Shirey reminded the commission of the importance of the "connect" portion of their Check and Connect program because of the connections the adult mentors make with parents and guardians and are sources of information that can help break down barriers.

Melissa Mitchell explained that many schools/districts in Michigan have resource coordinators who direct families to necessary resources and help resolve logistical challenges. Ms. Taylor said you have to help others help themselves to build sustainability.

The final portion of the presentation by the UC researchers focused on the educational opportunities being provided to students involved with the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ) in Illinois through an Online Education Enhancement Program. IDJJ officials were concerned about the most effective way to educate youth in juvenile justice facilities due to the fact these incarcerated students face many barriers to success in education such as the following:

- Disengaged from traditional school

- Achievement below grade level
- Varying level of skill in the classroom, little opportunity for individual help
- High mobility in and out of facilities

Through the UC Urban Labs, IDJJ opted to provide educational opportunities on an individualized basis through GradPoint, a Pearson online educational program that is self-paced at each student's individual level under the guidance of a teacher who monitors student progress and assists when needed.

GradPoint was introduced on a randomized controlled trial basis in four of six IDJJ facilities from 2012-2013 to learn about its potential impact on education and recidivism. Youth were randomized into a status quo classroom or GradPoint classroom at entry. Quantitative findings at the end of the controlled trial found that GradPoint students had earned almost double the number of credits than the IDJJ students who were in the status quo classrooms. The graduation rate, however, remained small for both groups of students: 7% for the status quo students and 11% for the GradPoint students. There was also no effect on students' rates of recidivism.

Ms. Taylor acknowledged the contributions of Ms. Shirey and Ms. Sistla to the commission by sharing information about programs that have been initiated to address problems among youth that affect school attendance and educational achievement. She explained the P-20 Council had been looking at individualized educational programming such as GradPoint although there was some pushback about program costs and teacher training.

V. Public Comment

There was no public comment.

VI. New Business and Open Discussion

Ms. Taylor informed the members of the commission that the annual report had been submitted to the Governor and the General Assembly. Recalling the past year of meetings, Ms. Taylor reminded commission members of the review of legislation related to school attendance that had taken place and the fact that the concept of chronic absence had never been defined in statute. The Illinois Balanced Accountability Measure (IBAM) Committee had recently contacted Ms. Taylor to enquire about the status of efforts to seek a legislated definition of chronic absence and would defer to the Attendance Commission on this matter.

Melissa Mitchell explained that the implementation of the Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA) in Illinois will include attendance measures around chronic absence: ninth grade on-track, a K-2 indicator of school quality, and somewhere within the accountability framework. She recommends we advance a state definition of chronic absence soon, preferably one in alignment with the states that Attendance Works had identified as best practice/industry standard. Ms. Mitchell said our state plan for ESSA implementation should include a definition. This plan is to be sent to the governor in January. It then goes to the ISBE board for approval before it is sent to the federal government. The General Assembly will also require an opportunity for review of this plan, and ISBE has been including representatives from the General Assembly in all the ESSA work groups as has the P-20 Council. She explained further we do not want to put anything in place that would be too stringent that it would be difficult for districts to implement or one that unduly penalizes students with legitimate reasons for absence. She said much research into this issue has preceded the commission's efforts and we need not reinvent the wheel.

Deanna Sullivan said ESSA groups and IBAM are working together. She said this is an exciting time because of the emphasis that is being placed on school attendance issues, particularly in the

early grades. Ms. Taylor said it is especially important to note that three commission members are also on the P-20 Council: Deanna Sullivan, Melissa Mitchell, and Matthew Rodriguez.

Ms. James said there is a matter of urgency on the matter of a definition for chronic absence as the comment period for the proposed ESSA plan in Illinois ends on December 27. She said that she heard that the definition for chronic absence that is being bandied about is the one the federal government is currently using (missing fifteen or more school days per year), a definition that was scheduled to change to align with the Attendance Works' definition (*Attendance Works encourages states and districts to define chronic absence as missing 10 percent or more of school days [eighteen school days] including all absences, excused or unexcused or even suspensions*). With a change in national leadership, she was unsure if the Department of Education was still going to adopt the Attendance Works definition. Since some people want to align the definition with the one used by the federal government, a definition that has not been changed to conform with Attendance Works, there is some confusion about the choice.

Stephanie Bernoteit asked if commission members should submit proposals around the definition of chronic absence to be used to formulate a commission recommendation for adoption of a state definition. Ms. Mitchell said that Attendance Works has resources available for that purpose.

Deanna Sullivan said some districts have asked if the chronic absence measurement would be ten percent of a semester or of the entire year in total.

Ms. Taylor said the problem with counting ten percent of the last 180 school days is the problem of knowing when one would start counting those days. She wondered if the measurement should be applied to the last completed school year to avoid a moving target.

Ms. Mitchell proposed looking at ten percent of the school days completed in the current school year. Student records would be flagged when absences reach that level. A student who missed ten percent of the last school year would receive interventions.

Ms. Sullivan wondered how the home-bound or hospitalized would be counted.

Harold Sweeney said the homebound receive half a day of instruction, and no one would charge such a child with a half day absence for each day. There are many factors that have to be considered and incorporated within the legislation to cover all situations, including for students with IEPs and other special provisions.

Commission members had a conversation about considering a date to meet earlier in January due to concerns some members raised about meeting the state's ESSA deadline submission. To those concerns, Ms. Taylor stated that she and the commission administrator would look into what, if any, day was available for the commission to meet via v-tel before January 26. In the event it would not be possible to meet earlier in January, commission members were asked to submit their suggestions regarding a definition for chronic absence to the commission administrator via e-mail by December 21.

VII. Adjournment

Ms. James moved to adjourn, and this motion was seconded by Ms. Mitchell. There were no objections. The meeting ended at 11:58 a.m.