

## Attendance Commission

Meeting Minutes

July 28, 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  
Stephanie Bernoteit – Springfield  
Christina Campos – Chicago  
Emily Carroll - telephone  
Lori Fanello - telephone  
Karen Fox - telephone  
Tiffany Gholson – Chicago  
Heidi Grove - telephone  
Madelyn James - Chicago  
Elizabeth Malik – Chicago  
Melissa Mitchell - telephone  
Matthew Rodriguez - Chicago  
Diane Rutledge- telephone  
Deanna Sullivan - Springfield  
Harold Sweeney - telephone  
Antoinette Taylor – Chicago  
Crysta Weitekamp - telephone  
Kevin Westall - telephone

#### Not Present

Jeff Aranowski  
Jennifer Gill  
Diane Grigsby-Jackson – sent proxy  
Victoria Jackson  
Hosanna Jones  
Joseph McMahon – sent proxy  
Scott Wakeley

### II. Approval of Minutes from June 23, 2016

A motion to approve the minutes was made by Matthew Rodriguez and seconded by Madelyn James. A voice vote indicated unanimous approval of the minutes.

### III. Amendment to Section 4.4 of the Rules of Procedures for the Attendance Commission

The motion to amend the Rules of Procedures, as proposed by Jeff Aranowski at the June 23 meeting, was approved by more than the required two-thirds majority (72%, 18/25) via a roll call vote. Section 4.4 was changed from –

*Section 4.4 Proxy votes shall not be permitted. A Commission member must be present to record his or her vote and to present a motion or motions. Commission members, when unable to attend, may present signed and dated written communications which may be distributed or read to Commission members by the Chairperson; a motion or motions may be made by other members concerning the contents of such communications.*

***Section 4.4 (Amended) Attendance by proxy shall be permitted. Proxies representing commission members may vote and their attendance shall be counted for purposes of a quorum.***

The following members were present and voted in favor of the amended change to the Rules of Procedures to allow full representation at future Commission meetings by proxy designees: Karen Hunter Anderson, Stephanie Bernoteit, Christina Campos, Emily Carroll, Lori Fanello, Karen Fox, Tiffany Gholson, Heidi Grove, Madelyn James, Elizabeth Malik, Melissa Mitchell, Matthew Rodriguez, Diane Rutledge, Deanna Sullivan, Harold Sweeney, Antoinette Taylor, Crysta Weitekamp, and Kevin Westall

The following members were not present and therefore unable to vote: Jeff Aranowski, Jennifer Gill, Diane Grigsby-Jackson, Victoria Jackson, Hosanna Jones, Joseph McMahon, and Scott Wakeley.

#### **IV. Every Student, Every Day Initiative – Toolkit Debrief**

Ms. Taylor said the commission has to analyze the *Every Student, Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism* so it can incorporate federal plans and resources into local efforts. Three commission members presented summaries of portions of the toolkit (Community Action Guide) which involved their particular areas of expertise:

- Madelyn James - Early Learning Providers
- Beth Malik - Homeless Service Providers
- Matthew Rodriguez - Mentors and Volunteers

##### Early Learning Providers

Ms. James explained that early childhood is one of those age ranges where there is a significant spike in chronic absenteeism primarily because of health issues but also because of family logistics involving transportation and child care during non-program times. Ms. James pointed out further that missing as little as two days a month creates a chronic absence pattern over the course of a school year as eighteen missed days constitute chronic absence.

She explained there were four action steps that were proposed to alleviate absences at the earliest grade levels:

1. *Communicate with parents and students that attendance matters and that good preschool through third grade attendance contributes to later school success.*
2. *Monitor the attendance patterns of individual students to identify children and families who may need support.*
3. *Acknowledge children and families who demonstrate good or improved attendance.*
4. *Create partnerships with community organizations to ensure that families have the supports they need to ensure good attendance, such as healthcare, reliable transportation, child care, and stable housing.*

Ms. James concurred that parents and students need to be informed about the importance of regular school attendance but added a cautionary note about the third action step. She feels school administrators and staffs have to be very careful about awarding incentives to early learners and their families because the stakes keep getting higher. It would be more advantageous to figure out how parents and students can internalize the benefits of regular school attendance.

The community partnership piece, the fourth action step, is the one Ms. James considers a key element. There are several early learning funding streams with different infrastructures insofar as funding, monitoring, and compliance are concerned: Head Start, state-based preschool, state-based child care, and programs at public elementary schools. Only one of them requires developing relationships with community groups. The commission has to consider what strategies to suggest

for those other three funding streams to encourage collaboration within the early learning community.

Melissa Mitchell asked about the level of emphasis that is placed on regular school attendance as well as the provision of attendance-related supports in any of the programs in any of the four funding streams. Ms. James replied that she knows that Head Start requires 85% attendance levels, but she does not know if that is a group or an individual standard. She said most programs focus on getting the slots filled and are not necessarily following through to determine who may need some supports in order to attend school regularly. Kevin Westall concurred and said the emphasis is on getting the slots filled and not day-to-day attendance.

Ms. Taylor recalled that at several of the public hearings that were held as part of the mission of the Truancy in Chicago Public Schools Task Force, parents and teachers both reported that once the attendance count was completed for the purpose of state funding, regular attendance was not emphasized. On every level there was a perceptible lack of effort in the monitoring process to determine which children and families need supports. The commission has to figure out a way to keep the momentum going after the official attendance days pass.

Kevin Westall said in his district they tell parents whose children are not attending their early education programs regularly that they will bump them out so they can let families who are willing to have their children attend on a regular basis register their children. Sometimes this gets the parents motivated and other times repeated conversations take place during the year. He thinks preschool should be mandated, so parents don't think they have the option of keeping their children home.

Stephanie Bernoteit stated that she thought the commission might want to do a crosswalk with the Illinois Early Learning Council as attendance and participation issues are an important conversation within this group. One area of interest in this group is the assortment of different funding streams and the array of programs families have to navigate and the capacity of those programs to provide service for the full length of time that is helpful for families. Sometimes attendance issues are related to family life needs such as work schedules. Some preschool schedules do not fully enable a family to participate.

Ms. Taylor said that through the Early Learning Council and ISBE, the commission might have the opportunity to write some language into the preschool grant programs around attendance and systems of support so people will know how to respond when they see children's attendance trailing off.

Ms. James decried the lack of a statewide system for collecting attendance data. Most of the data that is cited in reference to preschool absenteeism is from a study that was done in Chicago two years ago. Chicago is not an anomaly, but it is difficult to say if there is a chronic, acute issue of absenteeism in the early childhood field. She said the state needs to collect data across these four funding streams to get a clearer picture of what is happening in in state preschool programs, childcare, and educational programming for preschoolers. The Chicago report said 54 percent of the absences among preschoolers was related to issues of health, and the remaining 46 percent were absent because of family situations related to transportation, childcare schedules, etc. Early childhood principals and teachers need professional development regarding chronic absence, both the causes and the solutions.

Matthew Rodriguez referred to his recent involvement with an Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) committee and he said the subject of school chronic absenteeism was referenced in every discussion and was the content of every recommendation for action.

Ms. Taylor said the unfortunate fact is that it does not matter what law is passed, what reform is out there, or what initiative is launched, if the teachers do not have the children sitting in front of them, they cannot help children succeed. Children need to be present to learn, so she is gratified by the growing spotlight that is focused on this problem. Everyone knows this so we have to do fidelity checks to determine who is not being faithful to the goal of school attendance. Sometimes we have to figure out what people do not know.

### Homeless Service Providers

Beth Malik of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless presented her summary of the Every Student, Every Day toolkit for homeless service providers. Ms. Malik wanted to point out that the vast majority of Illinois schoolchildren who are “homeless” are actually doubled up with relatives or friends and have no contact with homeless service providers who can assist them with their housing and related problems; consequently, they suffer from the lack of supportive services. For this reason, it is not enough to train homeless providers; there must be training on the school level also. Children in doubled-up situations are not considered to be homeless under the HUD definition, but they are considered homeless under the McKinney-Vento definition. She said the toolkit explains how homelessness affects children’s school attendance patterns and why these children have such high rates of chronic absence and truancy. It addresses the importance of school stability for homeless children.

She explained further that Illinois students benefit from the provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act which was recently renewed in ESSA and Educational Rights for Homeless Students, but also have the benefit of an Illinois law under the Education for Homeless Children Act which reflects the requirements under the McKinney-Vento Act. Illinois also has a state policy for the education of homeless students as well. She said her agency works very closely with CPS crunching numbers to determine rates of attendance and talking with their attendance teams to see how they are intervening. These activities are very important because they are reaching students who might otherwise not be considered truly homeless and therefore would not be on the receiving end of services specified in the toolkit for homeless service providers.

The toolkit recommends the following actions:

1. Learn about chronic absenteeism and how it affects the education and life outcomes of homeless children and youth.
2. Determine who the local liaison for homeless children and youth is in your community by contacting the local school district or the State Coordinator for Homeless Education in your State. Please visit the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) for State coordinator contact information at [www.serve.org/nche/downloads/sccontact.pdf](http://www.serve.org/nche/downloads/sccontact.pdf)
3. Establish contact with the local liaison for the school district in their area, who can help identify homeless students who are chronically absent from school.
4. Discuss and act on possibilities for school district/service provider collaboration to support school attendance for homeless children and youth.

Ms. Malik said these recommendations are very basic and have been in federal and state law for a long time. She said there is a lot more that can be done such as the mandate in federal law for schools to review policies in order to remove barriers to attendance. It is critical for school districts to work with community providers and parents to identify what those barriers are such as

residential instability, poor living conditions, loss of community, and transportation. Schools and communities need to take a deeper dive to figure out why students who are experiencing housing instability are also experiencing chronic absenteeism. Look and see what schools and communities can do to provide supports for those students.

The resources listed in the toolkit go into the requirements of McKinney-Vento for immediate enrollment no matter what time of year it is and regardless of what records the family can produce. Homeless students are allowed immediate enrollment even without immunization records, birth certificates, or previous school records. Homeless students have the additional right to attend either their school of origin or the area school within the community of their temporary residence. They are entitled to transportation to their school of origin so students' basic rights are listed. There is a National Center for Homeless Education that has some really good issue briefs and resources and guidelines for best practices for school districts and community providers about how to implement the federal law.

In terms of financial support, the toolkit references McKinney-Vento subgrant funding although very few districts are able to get this money as it goes to the ROEs and larger districts like Chicago or Aurora. There is mention that homeless students can be supported through Title I funding, and most schools are unaware they can support homeless students for such items as transportation, medical and dental services, school supplies, clothing, and food with Title I funds. She thinks there should be more information out there about how districts can use Title I funds this way.

The final directive was about collaboration between school districts and service providers, but the reality is that many service providers lack the capacity to do as much as they would like given current funding levels and economic realities. There has to be a lot of work performed at the school level to support homeless students because that is really the only place it can happen. She thinks the information in the toolkit is brief, but there is so much more than can and should be done. There should be a deeper look into what the barriers are and what resources exist to remove barriers to school attendance for homeless students.

Ms. Malik said her organization looked at data for the recent school year and noticed there was a 25-30% decline in the identification of homeless preschool students. Data revealed the presence of 500 homeless students within CPS, a number that is known to be wrong. There are many homeless students who are not counted as such who are not able to access the transportation they need to get to school and others who are denied admission at the schools near the shelters where they may be making a temporary home, despite the mandates of existing laws. School staffs must be made aware of students' legal rights and remove the barriers for homeless families.

Diane Rutledge said she knew of some large districts in the state that receive McKinney-Vento funding for homeless students and have hired coordinators to work with the homeless. Ms. Rutledge said many larger districts and ROEs are trying to connect with HUD programs. She said we have to be thinking of linkages so that students in smaller districts have access to programming.

Ms. Taylor said we have to find the exemplary programs and replicate them to the benefit of homeless children in Illinois. We have to determine if everyone knows what should be occurring according to current statute in the state of Illinois as well as federal law.

Matthew Rodriguez said that parents do not know what is available and what is required by law. He said some families are not willing to declare themselves homeless. He said Little Village

Elementary School is bursting at the seams because of the number of families who are doubled up, but they do not consider themselves homeless.

Ms. Malik said it is incumbent upon school districts according to the mandates of state and federal law, to sensitively identify homeless students. If people cannot produce proof of ownership or a lease, that should trigger a response from school officials. The family should not have to say, ‘Hey, I’m homeless.’ Many doubled-up families simply do not realize they are technically homeless and have disdain for the term. Clerks and other school-based staff should be trained to know that if families are likely in a doubled-up housing situation, they should be identified to receive the right supports. Identification is a huge issue.

Ms. Taylor said the phrasing should refer to people in temporary living situations. Ms. Malik said that term is enjoying greater usage as people tend to not want to be identified as “homeless” as it is stigmatizing. For its part, the Chicago Public School system refers to homeless students as students in temporary living situations. She also said every Chicago school has a homeless liaison but federal and state law only require one per district. She wondered how much information is trickling down to the staffs at smaller districts throughout the state.

Ms. Taylor said our baseline area of need is the parent level, and what parents need to know to find supports for their children. Each step will inform the next. Most people have no idea what is available to them through the various agencies and programs. She said the average school clerk/secretary is trying to do justice to a large number of tasks and does not know the answers to these questions. There is something to be said for simple awareness. This has to be the first part of our campaign.

#### Mentors and Volunteers

Mr. Rodriguez provided a summary of the Community Action Guide for Mentors and Volunteers. He reminded everyone that the Parent Teacher Association has been in existence for 117 years, and is present in every school; nevertheless, there are people who do not know who they are and what they do. He said he understands how people are unaware of the supports available to them and overlook the community-based organizations.

The toolkit recommends the following actions:

1. Learn the facts about chronic absenteeism, its causes and effects, and why every absence from school matters in the life of a young person.
2. Check every day, or as much as possible, to see if the young people you work with are in school, and talk about the importance of being in school every day and what it means for their future.
3. As necessary, create a safe space for mentees to share what’s keeping them from participating in school on a regular basis.
4. Help inform the places where you volunteer to understand what chronic absenteeism is and explore the role they can play in eliminating chronic absenteeism within their community.

Mr. Rodriguez stressed the importance of the first and second tips and the need for mentors and volunteers to communicate the facts about the benefits of regular class attendance and the effects of chronic absenteeism to families as they are unaware of what constitutes chronic absence. The third suggestion for action prompted Mr. Rodriguez to say he concurred with Ms. Malik about the hesitancy of people to identify as homeless and cited another factor families are slow to report – that children are being raised by grandparents and great-grandparents who are unfamiliar with resources. He added that the concept of a safe space for children is important also for children who

are victims of abuse which can also be a trigger for frequent absences from school. Building trust with these students is a delicate endeavor.

Mr. Rodriguez would like to see additional resources provided to aid children who are involved in the criminal justice system, either as victims or offspring of the incarcerated. He closed by citing the inclusion of Attendance Works as a resource because of their expertise in the field and AARP for its volunteer tutoring program, but he felt there should have been some resources for volunteer efforts such as Generations Serving Generations.

Ms. Malik expressed her support for Mr. Rodriguez's comments on the importance of the school climate and said the commission cannot emphasize enough the importance of welcoming, safe, and supportive environments for promoting school attendance for at-risk students.

Ms. Rutledge said it would be helpful if a reference and support list was provided to districts for the start of the new school year.

Ms. Taylor asked commission members to provide resources with which they are familiar which other commission members can share with partner organizations, school districts, and governmental agencies and boards.

#### **V. Public Comment**

Patricia Graczyk, a University of Illinois (Chicago) faculty member, addressed the commission and said she has worked for years with LEAs to improve attendance statistics. She acknowledged that the toolkit summaries have been very instructive and informative. She advised the commission of the need to prioritize activities around various goals. She said many people in the districts are very unfamiliar with the Every Student, Every Day initiative but are quite familiar with ESSA. She said what everyone really needs is a definition for chronic absenteeism since it is in ESSA. She said the commission should also define what is meant by an 'at-risk student.' She said inter-agency collaboration is necessary because schools cannot do it alone.

#### **VI. Ethics and Open Meetings Act Requirements**

Sixteen of the commission's twenty-five members have not submitted certification of completion of training on the Open Meetings Act. Another sixteen commission members have not submitted evidence of completion of the ethics training for 2016.

#### **VII. New Business and Open Discussion**

There will be no meeting in August.

Members will be sent the Attendance Works pre-conference state survey via Survey Monkey.

Federal comment period on ESSA ends August 1. Ms. Taylor will provide a link. Any comments on the Federal Register are made by individuals and do not represent the opinion of the Commission.

Attendance Works has provided some guidance on chronic absence in ESSA which mandates the reporting of chronic absence. The U. S. Department of Education's proposed ESSA regulations mention chronic absence very infrequently and do not require its use in state or district plans for interventions. Chronic absence is only one of a few measures that meet all the requirements for ESSA's school quality indicator. They are looking at the concern that the states have the freedom to determine their own quality measure, one of the most flexible provisions of ESSA and they feel

this is unlikely to change. Attendance Works has some ideas on their website about this issue, so Ms. Taylor suggested everyone read their ESSA comments as this will soon become law.

Attendance Works is also about to begin its annual attendance awareness campaign, and there are four superintendents from Illinois who have actively been engaged: Deerfield Public School District 109 and Leyden High School District 212 (both from last year) and Rock Island /Milan School District 41 and Reavis High School District 220 (both new this year). Ms. Taylor informed the commission she has a 'Call to Action' template which every district can retrofit for use in each system and asked Deanna Sullivan if the Illinois Association of School Boards could distribute it to member districts.

Emily Carroll mentioned that Healthy Schools Campaign has developed a toolkit for addressing the health-related causes of chronic absenteeism and thinks it should be a good resource to the rest of the commission.

[https://healthyschoolscampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Overview-Addressing\\_Health-Related\\_Chronic\\_Absenteeism\\_Toolkit\\_for\\_Action.pdf](https://healthyschoolscampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Overview-Addressing_Health-Related_Chronic_Absenteeism_Toolkit_for_Action.pdf)

### **VIII. Adjourn**

There was a motion to adjourn by Mr. Rodriguez, seconded by Ms. James. The motion was carried by unanimous voice vote.