

Intro ([00:04](#)):

Thank you for tuning into the CASCW podcast channel. We wanted to give you a quick heads up about this episode. The audio for this episode is originally from a webinar series we hosted this past summer, with the partners at the Hennepin County Be@School program. We thought the content covered in this webinar series would be helpful for our podcast audience as well. So we repurposed the audio for you to listen here. We hope you enjoy the Be @School series.

Korina ([00:32](#)):

My name is Korina Barry, and I'm the director of outreach at the Center for Advanced Studies in Child welfare and we are a research and training center that's located within the school of social work at the University of Minnesota. That's a mouthful and we, um, do a lot of work and some of that work is around creating, professional development opportunities and other training resources for frontline child welfare professionals and other advocates and folks that support children and families involved in the child welfare system or at risk of involvement in the child welfare system. Each summer, we have partnered with Be @School to host an annual conference and with COVID and the pandemic this year, we're obviously doing a lot of things virtual. And so we're so thankful that you could all join us, um, and are excited to participate, via webinar today.

Korina ([01:30](#)):

And I would like to start us off by introducing Lori Whittier of Hennepin County to share a little bit more about Be @School before we get started.

Lori ([01:38](#)):

Good morning, everyone. As Korina said, my name is Lori Whittier, and I'm the managing attorney for the child protection division within the Hennepin County Attorney's Office. On behalf of Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman I want to welcome you all to our annual conference. We are very excited to be partnering again with CASCW this summer. And just to give you a little background, our Be@School Program is within the County Attorney's Office, and it's dedicated to address the in school engagement and attendance issues for students. This spring in Minnesota, our school districts finished the school year with distance learning and faced many challenges with that sudden transition, including technology issues and finding ways to support the educational needs of students and families while also tracking school attendance. Through these changes, the Be @School program has continued to respond to school referrals regarding attendance, and we are fortunate to have really good community partners to work with us, to serve students and families. We've worked with a social service agency and other community partners and schools over this summer to start to plan for the fall, even though there's a lot of unknowns for everyone. And I'm really looking forward to this webinar series, as we continue to seek innovative strategies to address the racial disparities and special education needs of students, I hope the webinar provides you with some ideas for working on school engagement in your program and your schools. Thank you for participating today.

Korina ([03:25](#)):

Thank you, Lori. And at this time I would like to introduce to you all our speakers for the day Clea McNeely and Isis West. Clea and Isis, could you introduce yourselves and share a little bit more about yourselves?

Isis ([03:39](#)):

I'm Isis West and I'm currently a graduate student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I'm receiving my Master of Public Health and Epidemiology. I received my undergrad at UT in Anthropology with a minor in Public Health.

Clea ([03:56](#)):

And my name is Clea McNeely and I have been studying this topic for about the last five years with, several colleagues. I know some of you are on the call, so, and I'll, I'll introduce you later. And my area of research, I'm a faculty member at the University of Tennessee. My training is also in public health and my area of research is on schools and health and adolescent health, which is why, even though I'm in public health and, uh, working in a college of nursing, I'm actually, uh, studying truancy and kids at school. Korina, Should I just jump in?

Korina ([04:36](#)):

Yeah, take it away.

Clea ([04:38](#)):

Okay. I need to do a little caveat because this is COVID, we're all working from home and the next door neighbor started to sand the deck at about 15 minutes before this call. Um, so I hope it's, I hope this sounds okay, but if it's not, it's not, there's nothing I can do about it.

Clea ([04:57](#)):

So anyway, we're going to talk today about absenteeism policies and a little bit more about us. This work started, uh, being led by Lynette Renner. Who's on this call, um, and it started, uh, studying a truancy intervention program and the family truancy intervention program at Ramsey County in Ramsey County, Minnesota. And, um, I want to emphasize that we studied the program that is different than student attendance matters, which is the program now. But we started a program that is similar to what, uh, I think the majority of school districts in the country, if not Minnesota are doing so, our research partners are the Ramsey County attorney's office who has the kind of public school districts and MNLink which is, um, headed by Kristy and Traci. You're also on the call. I noticed, um, our work was funded by the National Institute of Justice and Spencer Foundation.

Clea ([05:58](#)):

And we worked with an amazing set of colleagues from all over the country. I'm from Tennessee. I hope you hear my Minnesota accent. I'm a native of Minnesota. I'm a product of Ramsey County schools and the University of Minnesota. And it's these ties that brought me back to do this research. So let's jump in, I'll be stopping a few places along the way, uh, to take any questions. And at that point you can unmute yourself and please ask a question. And also if, um, you can use the chat, I don't see the chat, but Korina will be monitoring the chat and she will, uh, interject, um, at the appropriate place with any of, uh, questions or grouping questions that she starting to see come in. So today's webinar, I'm going to describe current meaning pre COVID absentee policies, um, show how disproportionately penalize students of color.

Clea ([06:58](#)):

We're going to talk about just some ideas for potential reforms, all of which are untested. Um, we don't know if they might work. And then at the end, if there's time, we'll go into breakout sessions to talk

about how this applies. Um, now during COVID a crisis is also an opportunity and I bet you're, you're, uh, vomit worthy in terms of hearing that phrase come at you. But it's true in terms of, this is an opportunity to think about resetting some attendance policies, how we're taking attendance, um, and how maybe we can set it up. So equities are reduced. So I'm wanting to start with talking about, um, not just what the policies are, but where they came from, because all of our decisions and policies, no matter what it's about, come from our values and assumptions about the way the world works. And that is true also for attendance policies and they're based on values, widely shared, um, quote unquote, American values.

Clea ([08:04](#)):

So the first is individualism, right? That it is a personal choice, whether or not to follow the rules. And since it's a personal choice, whether to follow the rules, the responsibility for that, again, falls to the individual child or family. We also really value, um, we want our policies to be moral and we equate good behaviors with good character so that if you show up on time, you are civil, um, you are hygienic, that's all assigned for us as a society of good character. Conversely, if you are not uncivil or do not show up on time, we consider that a lack of character. We also, as in America, are in love with the concept of deterrence, which is a whole nother topic as to whether it works, but it is a value that we hold dear, that the threat of punishment prevents rule-breaking and it starts very early.

Clea ([09:06](#)):

You know, if you don't tie your shoes, you get a time out. And so this idea that if you don't attend school, there are punitive consequences is very much a value that undergirds, um, our absenteeism policies and equal opportunity, meaning that rules should be applied evenly and fairly. And I'm using the say with the words we, and I'm saying using the words, our, and it's because we've looked at policies across the entire country. And I wanted to say, I forgot to say on the last slide that this research is, uh, had, that we're going to present today is coming from two arms. One is that Isis and I did a review of about a hundred and a random selection of about 125 school districts across the country, including all of Hennepin County school districts. We looked at your attendance policies and, um, they all look very similar.

Clea ([10:06](#)):

And so we have that work that we're presenting from today. And then we also have the, the, the evaluation I mentioned earlier was done on data from 2006 to 2015. And MinnLink just is this amazing group to work with that keeps that data super clean and super secure. So we could never identify any child in that data and no one else could get access to it. So absenteeism policies going back to the talk, reflect these values. So very fundamentally we distinguish excused and unexcused absences. And in fact, this is entrenched in state laws around education in 43 States, um, where you were required by law to distinguish between excused and unexcused absenteeism. We also punished students and families only for unexcused absences. Those that were a choice that reflect poor character or poor behavioral choices. And our policies are intentionally colorblind. They're not based on race, ethnicity, or income. And now Isis is going to present the next, uh, few slides. Um, and then I'll pick it up. But at this point, are there any questions Korina that are coming from the chat room? Anything we should address?

Korina ([11:32](#)):

We just have one, um, kind of comment/question at some point, um, and maybe an email later, could you provide the resources you're using that show deterrence works, um, that a threat of punishment actually prevents rule-breaking. So,

Clea ([11:46](#)):

Um, that is, I'm so glad that came up. Actually, there's very little evidence of that deterrence doesn't really work, but it's a value that we hold dear. Um, it's, it's, I'm overstating it saying it doesn't work. Um, it's more nuanced than that, but I can provide, if you email me my, my, uh, contact is at the end of the slide, I can provide you more information about that. Okay. Isis,

Isis ([12:12](#)):

Thank you, Dr. McNeilly. Um, so I researched focused on experience versus unexcused absences, and I think it's important to note that students are referred to the truancy prevention program based on the number of unexcused absences they accumulate. And I want to put an emphasis on unexcused absences because this is where we've found a lot of disparities that penalizes students of color specifically. But these are some of the reasons why a student may receive an unexcused absence within the districts that we research. So they fall under the category of poverty. So starting with fatigue things like oversleeping, missing your alarm, studying or working late, it's considered unexcused transportation issues; missing the bus, no ride, or my car wouldn't start is considered an unexcused absence, family care, taking care of your siblings, illness of a family member is considered an unexcused absence. And last but not least, no warm clothes or hygiene supplies is considered unexcused.

Isis ([13:22](#)):

We find that for 98% of the schools visiting an incarcerated parent is unexcused. Despite the fact that one in nine black kids have an incarcerated parent versus one in 51 and 57 white kids and one in 28 Hispanic kids. So the issue with these policies is that they lack empathy for students that face socioeconomic disparities and social inequalities that are deeply rooted in American system. These policies don't take into account the struggles, lower income families face and penalizes the students for it, rather more, anything not listed as excused is unexcused, which brings me to excused absences and how they benefit white students. So starting with illness with a medical note, most districts require a medical note after three consecutive days of being ill, the requirement of a medical note privileges students that who have better access to healthcare. In fact, research shows that students of color are more likely to miss school due to illness than whites, but less likely to have health insurance, this results in more unexcused absences for students of color in this one policy alone.

Isis ([14:37](#)):

Next I wanted to touch on prearranged family, vacations, prearranged, family trips, privileged students who can afford to have time off for self care. Yeah, as we've seen before, then my care such as being needed home or babysitting is considered unexcused. And so taking care of your family, such as needing to be home to babysit is considered unexcused. These policies are supposed to benefit all student situations. Yet college visits are not a universal benefit for every student. For one, every student does not wish to go to college and to some students don't have the resources to seek this out as an opportunity. Why does this disproportionality matter? The students who receive excused absences often get help with their homework. They get to make up exams. And in some cases, home tutoring is provided students who receive unexcused absences, get denial of help with homework, no makeup homework or exams, denial of class credit. And at worst case scenario suspension or court diversion programs. So these policies are considered colorblind because they're not explicitly mentioned race or income in them yet they affect white students and students of color very differently. And now I'm going to pass it back to Dr. McNeely.

Clea ([16:04](#)):

So what Isis talked about was just logically looking at these policies, how they could disadvantage kids of color. So then we actually looked at the data and what we found is that indeed white students are much more likely to have any given absence excused. So what this graph shows you is that in students, in grades seven through 10, with 15 or more absences, which is the definition of chronic absenteeism, that 82% of those absences are excused for white students compared to between 62 and 65% for American Indian, Black, and Hispanic students, and 70% for Asian students. So if you think that 80, you know, when a white student has an absence and they have a lot of them, these are chronically absent kids, 82% of the time, they're going to get a supportive response compared to between 62 and 65% of the time kids of color, or I should say now kids of color, American, Indian, Black, and Hispanic kids are not getting a positive response.

Clea ([17:19](#)):

So getting a punitive response and the language I'm using here for race and ethnicity is the language of the Minnesota Department of Education, which is why I'm using these terms for the younger kids. We see the same pattern, and this is students in grades two through five with who are chronically absent. So this disparity starts really young as early as sex, probably first grade, but we don't have that data. Uh, but certainly in second grade where white families with chronically absent kids are much more likely to get a supportive response in terms of reaction to that absence than other children and their families. And one of the punitive responses that happen, which it's not entirely punitive, it's carrot and stick court diversion is designed to bring in both supports and, and punitive consequences as a deterrence in case those supports don't work. But we also know that system involvement is disproportionate for kids of color.

Clea ([18:27](#)):

And this is one mechanism to which that happens. So as probably most of you know, the court diversion programs generally consist of three steps. They sometimes have slightly different names, but after a certain number of unexcused absences say five to seven to 10, a parent meeting happens, which in these days is a video on-line video, usually that they need to participate in. And then more, uh, unexcused absences becomes step two, which is sometimes called STAR sometimes called SART. But it's where you have a student attendance contract in place. And in some school districts, that's where child welfare is brought in for the younger children, with the educational neglect concern. And if the absences do not subside, if there's more absences, then the family or the child can go to juvenile or family court. And what we found when we looked at truancy petitions, this is the older kids with similar pattern for a referral to educational neglect for the younger kids, but in the interest of time, and we're just presenting the findings for the older kids, we find that black students are 2.2 times more likely to be petitioned to court than white students who miss the same number of days of school.

Clea ([19:53](#)):

Now, I want to be really clear. I'm not making a comment on whether being petitioned to court is good or bad, right? We have other research commenting on that. What I'm saying here is that there's inequity in it happening. We also found that this disparity is due entirely to the coding of excused and unexcused absences. And that's really critical because for two reasons, one, we identify the source of the disparity. It's the policy. And the second is you don't do, implicit bias doesn't have to happen here. I'm not saying it's not happening, but if you administer these policies, these definitions of absences completely without implicit bias, you will get these inequities. It's not an interpersonal racism issue for Hispanic, Latin X

students. 1.6 times more likely to be petitioned to court than whites who missed the same number of days of school. This is also due entirely to the coding of excused and unexcused absences, um, which has the same implications.

Clea ([21:05](#)):

As I just mentioned, the story is, uh, different for American Indian and Asian students. So American Indian students are four times more likely to be petitioned to court than white students who miss the same number of days of school. And these percentages are really struggling. So this again is back in 2006 to 2015, things have really changed, uh, in Ramsey County, but not, so this doesn't apply now, but my guess is it probably applies elsewhere, but we don't know. But by the end of 10th grade, 16% of American Indian students were petitioned to court for truancy compared to 3% for white students. And here the, uh, the coding of the excused and unexcused absences only partially explains this disparity and, and our data. We can't get to the rest of the reason. It may be due to implicit bias. That's a good guess, but we can't speak to that.

Clea ([22:07](#)):

Uh, and I think that's a really important area for further investigation. Asian students were no more likely to be petitioned to court than white students who missed the same number of days of school. So even though they had more unexcused absences, a greater percentage of their absences coded as excused, they were not more likely to be petitioned to court than white students, which suggests there's might be some implicit bias in the other direction, right? That they're quote unquote under referred compared to how many unexcused absences they have. So I'd like to stop here and see if there's any questions.

Korina ([22:50](#)):

Clea I can share a couple from the chat box.

Clea ([22:54](#)):

That'd be great.

Korina ([22:55](#)):

One person is wondering, is some of the disparity also based on poverty, parents working multiple jobs, so hard to call in lack in phone services, et cetera.

Clea ([23:07](#)):

Yes. I think that is the point precisely the point, and because of structural systemic racism in society, it's not random who is poor. So these racial, these racial and ethnic disparities are very much linked to poverty, but it would be a mistake to say, it's poverty, not race because you can't, you can't separate because of our systems of, of, of, um, systematic, structural racism. You can't separate race and poverty like that. Does that make sense? I'm asking 250 people if it makes sense, but I hope that answers your question.

Korina ([23:54](#)):

And another question is, uh, does the research account for families not self-reporting their exact reason for an absence, such as saying the child is sick versus the child woke up late or had to babysit.

Clea ([24:09](#)):

So We have data from the schools, um, and just on whether the absence was excused or unexcused. So you, people from schools, you know, much more than I do about all the complexity that goes into those decisions and that there's certainly, so-so, there is some, certainly some decision-making and potentially bias in that I have a favorite student I'm going to really help them get those absences in, and I'm going to coach them and how, what the absent, what the excuses need to look like versus other students. Um, so what goes into creating those absences? Absolutely. That's part of it is getting a reason that's excused or unexcused and supporting families in doing that. And I've spoken to a lot of school, people who say, you know, I know it's for an excused reason, but I can't get documentation. So it ends up having to be unexcused. And that can be really frustrating for folks.

Korina: ([25:22](#)):

Another question is how do school bureaucracies impact the policies for truancy and absenteeism?

Clea ([25:30](#)):

I think I need more clarification on what is meant by school bureaucracy. If you want to clarify that in the chat and then we can come back to it. Or speak or, or say something that would be

Attendee (Rachel) ([25:49](#)):

It might be easier if I just, um, speak.

Clea ([25:52](#)):

Yes, that'd be great.

Attendee (Rachel) ([25:53](#)):

Um, but what I meant by that is, um, at least like I know with Philadelphia, um, looking at some of those different bureaucratic structures within education versus, um, like different things with the school district and different confines that may be placed on principals that want to do certain initiatives for their students that could decrease absenteeism, but maybe the school district doesn't really give the, go ahead due to different funding constraints and stuff like that. Or there are certain policies at the federal and state levels that are hindering different capacities at the local levels and things like that, if that makes any sense.

Clea ([26:50](#)):

And the answer of course is of course it makes a difference. Right. And, and what, and when, and when in speaking specifically about absenteeism policies, when we did this review, one of the things that was really interesting is how much discretion the policies would give the principal and his, or her, or their, I should say, the principal and their, or their appointee in making the decision whether somethings excused. Right? So some, some schools, um, they had, it was completely discretionary up to the school staff and other school districts gave the staff absolutely no discretion. So in those situations there's, and we had, we don't know, we don't know if that makes a difference. Like I would love to look across school districts, contact me if you have any interest in this and see if this kind of discretion on average makes any, reduces inequities, or it makes them worse because you could see it going either way. Right. Um, but I think it's something we need to look at. Does that help Rachel? Does that answer your question? Okay. Um, anything else before we move into the next step?

Korina ([28:05](#)):

Yeah. I mean, there's some com.. There are comments, like folks are eager and looking forward to getting into solutions and kind of where do we go..

Clea ([28:17](#)):

Let's do it! So many people want to start with exploring their own data. And, uh, I've gotten kind of used to looking at school data, excused and unexcused absences. This is I'm passionate about this topic. If it doesn't come through, let me just emphasize that with a big orange happy, I would be happy to help anyone look at their data. But I think since these are embedded, these disparities are embedded in the policies. So there's stuff we can look at in the margins that'll get at in a minute. But I think this really calls for an re-imagining absenteeism policies. And the reason I brought in, uh, the values at the beginning is that do our policies actually honor those values. And it's really interesting because if you look at the state laws, they assume that truancy is voluntary and many of them use the term willful or willful deviance or willful truancy.

Clea ([29:15](#)):

Right. And I think from our policy review and what Isis talked about, I think it's a fair question as to whether how many of these are truly voluntary and, and efforts in fact, efforts that you can do to try to further your child's education. So for example, if you are going to a school that's further away through open enrollment, but then you miss the bus, there's an unexcused absence, right? Cause it's harder to get there or something like that. So how much is voluntary versus involuntary? And if we can, if we flip the frame to look at it that way versus excused versus unexcused, which has much more of a morality component behind it, what would that look like? And I'm not saying to take away any of the excused reasons, right? We're talking about equity, we're not talking about sacrifice or anything being anything that currently is happening for white students has to go away, but the benefits need to be extended is what we're talking about.

Clea ([30:21](#)):

A lot of districts and this would be another thing that's re would be really interesting to look at is, uh, in our review, we found that that several, I wouldn't say many, but several districts kind of have a adult workplace policy. So you get a certain number of excused absences 10 or five or whatever. No questions asked that was just happened. And then after that, most absences are unexcused. You need a pretty darn good justification after that vacation doesn't count after that, does that reduce equity? Does that reduce overall absenteeism? We don't know, but I think it's something to really think about. So there's also some easy changes to current policy and I put easy in quotation marks, I think in respect of what, like what Rachel was saying about bureaucracies and it's can be hard to change policies, but one of the things that could happen pretty easily, it's just move things from the unexcused column, into the excused column without fundamentally changing the paradigm.

Clea ([31:28](#)):

Right? So some, one thing that's really obvious is visiting an incarcerated parent. In our review, we found that 56% of schools allowed up to four or five days a year for visiting a military parent that could be extended to visiting an incarcerated parent. It can be verified. It can be documented excusing more days around the death, uh, for the death of the family. You could also document the need to care for an ill sibling when a parent's called into work and they don't have a childcare option. And all of these can



have limits right. Three days for that one day for that, the point is these absences are happening anyway.

Clea ([32:14](#)):

It would just give a supportive reaction to help them be in school versus a punitive reaction. And there's this whole movement and the whole chronic absenteeism movement, that all absences count. And we need to focus on all absences and that's really positive, but it's being laid on top of this punitive system of truancy, um, that is creating some inequities. So unfortunately that's, we don't have a lot of data on, on what needs to happen and that really is up to you. And I'm a data geek. I'm not a policy person. I would so love to partner with you anywhere in the country. I'm looking at this stuff. Um, so how are we doing on time Korina?

Korina ([33:05](#)):

We are doing good. It's 11:36.

Clea ([33:06](#)):

Okay. Korina: So we could, um, yeah, I think whatever we could do the breakout sessions, or if you'd like to push forward and have a group discussion, we could do either.

Clea ([33:21](#)):

Okay. We should have had a poll, but I think I'm going to go ahead and go with the breakout sessions and we're going to be really, really efficient. Um, because this, what does it look like now? And so in the breakout session, I want, to look at three questions and if you want to skip right to question number three, that's the meaty one. That's the important one, one and two are kind of prompts to help you get to question number three, a lot of you don't know and in Minnesota, I know, uh, the governor just came out with a policy recommendation, which is do whatever you want or you as best for your community. So you're still figuring out what fall even looks like. Um, but what are your attendance policies for the fall? How might they be creating or worsening racial and ethnic disparities?

Clea ([34:12](#)):

How might they be making them better than what was before? I mean, that's a possibility and what could you do in thinking through those policies right now to make them more equitable. So I will leave these questions up. What I'd like is when you join the breakout very quickly, introduce yourself, uh, name and organization, select a reporter who will report back via the chat. Just by question one, two, three, just, just type one and your answer, two and your answer three and your answer. And then I, uh, I will work with Korina to collate all of this and send it back to you along with these slides, um, as a report too. So you can share ideas more broadly that way. Um, so why don't we go ahead and get in the breakout session. Um, and I'd love to have time at the end. So we're going to do about 10 minutes and then I'd love to have a few minutes at the end to go ahead and give feedback or answer additional questions that have come in on the chat. Okay.

Clea ([35:26](#)):

Well, while you do that, I just see a question that came up and about the tech divide and equal access. And I think this is a huge issue. I live in Knoxville, Tennessee. I live in Appalachia. You don't even have to get out of the city to have absolutely no internet. You just get behind a little holler and there's no

internet. So how can you, there's the tech divide affects so much, but this is going to be a big one in terms of attendance, what options are there? Um, the other thing I think to come to think about is illness in quarantine. And how is that counted? And how is that counted in terms of needing testing for verification, or who's doing the testing and who is counting, what is an illness? So why don't we just open it up for a group discussion at this point? I don't have the answers. If you were coming here for answers, I'm really sorry to disappoint you because this is really tough stuff. I'm looking to us as a group to come up with answers and then offering my services to help. I use data-driven methods to see how we're working. Anyone want to make any comments? There's a comment here. I would love to hear positive interventions that you all have utilized that have been successful ones that have a partnering approach rather than punitive can people share on that one?

Attendee (Rennie) ([36:57](#)):

So, my name is Rennie I'm in the Robbinsdale district in Minnesota. When we went into the distance learning, we had a, the principal, assistant principal; I'm the social worker we met, and we talked about how to do the attendance with all those factors in place. And what we did is if a student didn't, if there was no connection made by the teacher, EAs anyone working with the student for a week, then we kind of set up a protocol of steps to take. And so we would have the teacher, um, try to make a contact via phone and email, um, and through Seesaw or whatever aspects they used. We would have the, whoever the point person was, um, everyone was assigned to calling a certain amount of students each week. So we would try that first then, I, if there was no response, I would send an email to the families and often I'd get a response back.

Attendee (Rennie) ([38:04](#)):

Um, and if not, then, um, we did, we made a letter that the principal, sent out, well nope, first the principal then would make a call, try to contact. Then we'd send a letter. If there's still no communication then we went and did a home visit. Um, before we did anything with trying to get, Be@School to try to help us make some connection. So we put in like five or six different steps prior to going to that because of all the things going on. Um, and just wanting to make sure they're okay. I mean, we made sure in our letters and emails, everything, that this is just to make, we just want to make sure everyone's okay, what can we do to help. It wasn't um, even the letter was much more positive than the attendance letters we send out during the school year, days missed, you know, you need to do this, this, this, so we kind of established all those protocols before we went to the Be @School rule.

Clea ([39:08](#)):

And what's your experience with that? Has it been useful and helpful?

Attendee (Rennie) ([39:14](#)):

Yes. Um, so I probably, we probably had, and I mean, our numbers were low. We probably had 12 students. We had to do this with only. And, the one that we did have to ask, Be@School for help, there's kind of underlining pieces there, um, with involvement already from the County. So it, but it was only, like I said, that one family that we had to ask them to help just to make sure that the kids were okay. Um, so usually, um, I actually, when I emailed them, I'm sure, cause I'm the social worker, I got a response, but it was all very positive. Um, or if the principal had to call, then usually she'd get back. So we probably, I probably only sent five letters out of those 12.

Clea ([40:09](#)):

You we're getting requests for that protocol. If you have that protocol written out at all, or if you could write it out and send it, uh, to Korina or myself, my emails on there, we can circulate it to everybody. And if you would allow us to circulate it to everybody, I think people would appreciate that.

Attendee (Rennie) ([40:27](#)):

I know I have it somewhere in my Google drive, so I will look for it after this.

Clea ([40:32](#)):

Ok, Yeah. There's no, it's not urgent, but it would be really wonderful. We're getting a lot of curiosity and interest about this idea of having a certain number of days. And I hope it's okay if I call on Carolyn Farrell. Cause she said you do five activity days. You offered that. Could you speak at all to how that is working to give, people, you know, families, a certain number or anyone who's doing this as give families, a certain number of days, does that increase a positive communication with families? Does that reduce workload? Does it, how does it affect equity? How does it blow up your absenteeism? These are all questions I think are unanswered. So if you, if anyone who's doing this kind of thing could speak to how the model works. It'd be great.

Attendee (Carolyn) ([41:22](#)):

Hi, can you hear me?

Clea ([41:25](#)):

Yes.

Attendee (Carolyn) ([41:27](#)):

Wonderful. So I am an administrator, I'm a principal at a charter school in Richfield and, and when I was the assistant principal, nine years ago, we didn't really have an attendance policy. So I really took it over and developed it. And what I learned is when it was so strict, there was no flexibility. And so I ended up recommending these family activities days as a way for families, if they need to take a day off to tour another school, if they need to go to Arizona, for whatever reason, these any really there was, there's no discretion. And it has created so much flexibilities for our families. Not everybody uses them. I would say, not even a third use them, but if they call us the day of, and they're embarrassed and I'll say to our office manager, just let them know they can take a family activity day, no questions asked. It's fine. Don't feel like you have to be embarrassed that you shouldn't have to feel that they have to explain themselves away to us. And that has created so much flexibility and it's not being abused at all I actually think it's really our best, system that we put in place for flexibility for families.

Clea ([42:31](#)):

And then after those days are used up, you go back to the normal, excused and unexcused, right?

Clea ([42:43](#)):

Yep. Yep, correct, yep.

Clea ([42:43](#)):

Any other comments that people want to jump in about this, uh, PTO days idea?

Attendee ([42:51](#)):

I was just curious what the best format or the format they use to explain the change in policy to families, if it was done in person or via a letter home or in the handbook or all three. I'm just curious how that change went out to families .

Attendee (Carolyn) ([43:07](#)):

For the family activity days?

Attendee ([43:09](#)):

Yeah

Attendee (Carolyn) ([43:11](#)):

Sure. So it was, um, so we share the handbooks in August with the principal newsletters and we post them to the website and then we'll do any highlights. So we have uniforms at our school. So we'll say, Hey, this year you can wear Navy blue. That's an addition to the, to the tan color. Um, please note in the attendance, this was updated and then it's just word of mouth, you know? And then reminding families when they call school to really make sure we're telling them that they can use it so that they, because many of them aren't even aware of it. So it's the receptionist being, reminding them, Hey, you can use family activity days for this event.

Clea ([43:50](#)):

And I would say looking at the policies, the way we did schools are all over the map or districts are all, all over the map in terms of how they're communicating these policies. Some of them say, excused, absences and excused and unexcused are awarded and, you know, are, are given in term consistent with district policy, you know, a 42.12, and then you go to that. And it says, we will do things consistent with statute X, Y, Z, right? And this stuff is so buried that parents could never find it. And other other districts put it in three languages in their parent family handbook. And I think communication is a really important issue attendance is, uh, as you, many of you probably already know attendance in the early grades kindergarten and first grade low attendance there is an issue with parents not knowing how critical school is in those early grades. So better communication is always, is always good. And that also, I think, speaks to someone's question about, are there differences in absenteeism by age and yes, there are, uh, 11th and 12th grade it starts spiking up a lot. And in the very early years, it's actually higher in the elementary years than in the older kids. People jump in. If there's something you really want attended to, because there's a lot in the chat to go through.

Attendee ([45:22](#)):

I have a question. So, um, I work in Robinsdale, school district and work at Armstrong high school, which has roughly 2000 students. So, you know, truancy is a big, gnarly mess anytime. And during COVID we just said gig over, um, with distance learning. But so my question is, and maybe if there's a County person a Hennepin County person here could address this. Um, if the research shows that deter or that punishment does not really change things, I think everybody has antidotal data that especially for chronic truancy, by the time they hit high school, they have gotten those letters, the STAR meetings, the PGMs, they just, it goes from right into the recycle. And, um, I'm wondering if the County would ever consider getting away from a punitive model altogether and instead providing, um, resources at the

schools for you know, helping them line up community services, uh, I guess, you know, going from away from a punitive model to a complete support model and a variety of different ways

Clea ([46:47](#)):

I would, I'm going to jump in before Hennepin County does, if you don't mind. I, I think that's a really important question. And I don't know that I don't think we know the answer to that because in our research we showed that court diversion did not improve attendance over a direct referral to court, but because all laws have all States have these laws that you have to do something about truancy, there is no group for which there is no punitive action, right? And I think that that is a really important question and it could blow up absenteeism or it could actually really turn things around. And honestly, I'm a program evaluator. Uh, so many programs that I thought were fabulous don't work that I no longer will take a stand and say, I think, you know, I just don't know. We just don't know.

Clea ([47:39](#)):

But if anyone wants to be brave and play around with these ideas, um, there's money to do it. And we could do a little experiment, um, with some schools doing one policy to other schools doing another policy. And we could just see what happens and that I think would be really powerful, important work. So I'm putting in a plug for calling me and working with me and I hope people would like to do that. Um, and then let me let your question be answered by the person you wanted to answer it, which was Hennepin County,

Korina ([48:13](#)):

Um, Lori or Kim or Linda, any Hennepin folks

Korina ([48:18](#)):

You can chime in.

Lori ([48:20](#)):

I can start that conversation and I'm happy for someone else to jump in. This is Lori Whittier. Uh, what I would say is that as far as I understand, Be@School really has moved away from the punitive model as far as truancy for older kids. And we really are petitioning very, very few students into court because honestly we haven't found that to be an effective intervention over the years. Uh, but we are referring students at some point to the community agency. And there's a specific review of each student's situation to determine, uh, when and which agency they would be referred to. And the idea is that community agency is going to look at the family situation and provide whatever supports are needed, whether it's communication with the school issues, whether it's, um, any issues regarding poverty, you know, needs that the family has, just them not understanding the policy or rules involved.

Lori ([49:27](#)):

So I, I think that we are really trying to be as supportive as we can, but also, you know, help address the issue because we know that students who miss too many days are going to fall behind and, um, you know, the opportunities down the road for them, you know, can be somewhat limited too if they missed too many days, year after year. So we do want to try to get them in school so they have an opportunity to learn or figure out a plan with the school system to get the work at home where they can do the work at home as well.

Clea ([50:06](#)):

And I also want to say that those of you working in attendance have done an amazing job back in 2000, you had average daily attendance rates of like 65%. You know, they were really low in the twin cities and all the easy stuff's been solved, right? You guys are working with tough issues. There's question here that really got my attention. Uh, I want to address. Um, and that is from Brooke Davis. Uh, Clea and Isis, What are your thoughts on Attendance Works? Do you feel it's aligned with the equitable attendance practices we want to strive for? Um, no, I don't. Uh, Attendance Works is, uh, really advocating colorblind attendance policies, they are or saying we need to move away from unexcused absenteeism from measuring unexcused absenteeism and unless there's data on excused and unexcused absences and which schools by law are needing to do, unless there's data on that that can become visible.

Clea ([51:17](#)):

These policies will not, the negative inequitable effects of these policies cannot be seen. So, first of all, they're they're, I'm not saying any of this is intentional. If you read their website, they're burying and advocating for the burying of measuring and publishing and making available unexcused absenteeism data, because they don't want to focus on that. If you also read the language of the policies is very colorblind there. Say they say that the problem with the attendance, is parents not being aware of the value of education. That's pretty, uh, ethnocentric. And I think that's the polite word you could say to looking at that. So I think they really, uh, I love their portrait on all absences count. I love their approach advocating for chronic absenteeism. I love their approach for making data available, but, I'm concerned about how colorblind they are in their advocacy.

Clea ([52:17](#)):

And if you look at the chronic absenteeism research, which we've looked at very carefully, they don't disaggregate by race, ethnicity in terms of effects. But in one paper I found buried in the appendix showing that these, these interventions are about making parents aware of the importance of school, which is necessary and is needed, but that they're more effective for white students than they are for kids of color. Because we also know that families, all families value education for their children. They're not racial disparities and the value of education, there's racial disparities, and parents' ability to access that education for their children and there's disparities in the system that hinder your efforts to help those families access education, there's barriers on both sides, right? So I have mixed feelings about Attendance Works and sorry, I saw that question. Obviously it's a hot button issue for me. And, um, I never thought I'd have a floor of 250 people to say this to.

Clea ([53:24](#)):

And if there's someone from Attendance Works here, my apologies, but I really encourage advocacy on your part for, for not burying this issue of excused and unexcused. And for tackling some of these legal mandates to continue, these are 150 year old laws, right? How do we need to legislate this differently? And that's a great role for Attendance Works that I would love for them to see I've sent them my research, right. Um, then that, and I've sent them our research and we didn't get actually, we got no answer. So, um, I don't know what they think about it. So that's that we have three minutes, I'd like to end with, uh, people are asking other people who are doing some of this creative stuff, how well it's working. So I would like to end with a couple of really one minute each please success stories about things that are really working during COVID to support families and accessing education. Cause that's really what attendance is about is supporting families in accessing education.

Korina ([54:37](#)):

Are you asking folks to type that into the chat or share verbally?

Clea ([54:43](#)):

I'd love to end on a positive, uh, share, please type it in, and then we can share it. But if anyone wants to do a positive share, like we made kind of like what we've heard a little bit of, we've made this policy change. And anecdotally we have seen, families being, receiving a positively, it improving, uh, engagement with education and not, and not increasing absenteeism. And from the comments, what I'm seeing is it's just a lot of hard work. It's a lot of hard work act, you know, contacting these parents, supporting families, um, and, and that you were doing it while your own kids are having to, to learn in alternative ways and your own lives are disrupted and you do have job loss in your families. And this is really, really hard times. And, uh, I guess I will conclude by saying that I'm just finding your comments and your commitment to this really inspirational. Um, and it makes me very, very proud to be a Minnesotan because I don't get this reaction to this work and this commitment to move forward and, and make progress on this issue in audiences everywhere. So thank you so so much.

Korina ([56:16](#)):

Thank you Clea, thank you, Isis and our Hennepin partners. Um, I will, feel free to keep adding comments, um, to the chat box about your experiences. I also thought it was really helpful to see just from my perspective of folks talking about how they're doing in-home, their schools are collaborating with the County to do in-home kind of voluntary services. Um, and just everything that we're seeing with mutual aid during COVID and the uprising and how, um, critical that is for families right now. And so I think ongoing discussion about what that partnership, um, how we re-imagine that partnership with, um, I think child welfare or human services through the County and through our schools as well. And, so that was just my comment. And I'm also going to share in the chat box, many of you are already registered for the second session of this series, serving students with disabilities during COVID-19 and then the third, a webinar in this series will be available soon as well. So thank you all for tuning in and for joining us. Thank you so much for inviting me to do this.

Isis ([57:32](#)):

Yes. Thank you all.

Denise McKizzie Cooper ([57:33](#)):

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