



RESEARCH REPORT

# Insights into Absenteeism in DCPS Early Childhood Program

## Contributing Factors and Promising Strategies

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# Contents

Acknowledgments	iv
Executive Summary	v
Introduction	1
Section I. What Factors Contribute to Absenteeism in DCPS Early Childhood Programs?	9
Section II. Some Strategies for Common DCPS Early Childhood Attendance Challenges	21
Section III. Conclusions and Recommendations	42
Notes	49
References	50
About the Authors	52

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# Executive Summary

The past decade has seen a growing focus on chronic absenteeism in the early grades (Romero and Lee 2007). The attention to chronic absenteeism has reframed earlier concepts of average daily attendance and truancy to focus instead on how often any given child is at school on any given day, regardless of the reasons for absence. This work has shown that children who are chronically absent from school—meaning that they are absent more than 10 percent of the days—are much more likely to face educational challenges and to become truant or drop out (Applied Survey Research 2011; Chang and Romero 2008; Gottfried 2011). Much of this work has been catalyzed by Attendance Works, a national initiative that promotes better policy around school attendance.

Until recently, much of the attention in this area has been on the absenteeism patterns of and strategies for children in the K–12 school system. However, over the past few years, there has been an emerging interest in examining these issues in early childhood or prekindergarten programs in public schools. For example, research in Chicago and Baltimore has shown that chronic absenteeism is a critical issue in prekindergarten, one with important implications for future attendance, retention, and academic performance (Connolly and Olson 2012; Ehrlich et al. 2014).

The Early Childhood Education Division (ECED) of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) became interested in examining absenteeism in its early childhood Head Start program in Title 1 schools. The Head Start program examined in this report is a Head Start School-Wide Model (HSSWM), which combines local funding for prekindergarten with Head Start dollars. DCPS/ECED is one of relatively few school systems focusing on these issues for this age group and is at the forefront of this area of exploration. ECED requested that the Urban Institute explore absenteeism in its early education Head Start program by performing two analyses:

- an analysis of absence data for chronically absent DCPS prekindergarten students to identify patterns, trends, and family characteristics [presented in a companion report by Dubay and Holla (2015)]; and
- an exploratory analysis of factors contributing to absenteeism for DCPS prekindergarten students, challenges faced by ECED staff in tracking attendance and working with families, and possible strategies to address these issues.

This report presents findings from the latter analysis. The data were gathered through focus groups and interviews with ECED staff, an observation of a parent policy council meeting, interviews with

researchers and experts from other school districts across the country, a review of ECED case management notes, and an in-depth literature and resource review. Because of the project's short time line, however, the data do not include the crucial insights that need to be gathered from DCPS staff (teachers, principals, and administrators) and from families themselves. We focus particularly on insights about the prekindergarten program, and thus are unable to delve into the larger systemic questions around school system policies and practices in which the prekindergarten program is embedded. As a result, the findings in this report should be considered an initial exploration of these questions.

Before describing the key findings about contributing factors and possible strategies, it is useful to highlight some overarching lessons from this work:

- **Absenteeism is a problem, even in the very early grades.** More than one in four DCPS Head Start students were absent more than 10 percent of the days in the 2013–14 school year (Dubay and Holla 2015). This rate of absence means that these children missed the equivalent of one month of the learning opportunities offered by the early childhood program. Seven percent missed more than 20 percent of the days. These overall rates are similar to those found in Baltimore (26.5 percent) but lower than rates found in Chicago (36 percent) in 2010–11 and New York (49 percent) in 2012–13 for prekindergarten students (Balfanz and Byrnes 2013; Connolly and Olson 2012; Ehrlich et al. 2014).
- **Some children are particularly likely to miss school.** As found in other districts, such as Chicago, some children are particularly likely to be chronically absent (Ehrlich et al. 2014). In DC, African American children, homeless children, and children enrolled in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families had higher absence rates (Dubay and Holla 2015).
- **Early childhood is the right time to intervene.** Research suggests that absenteeism in the early grades is a strong predictor of later absenteeism and school failure. Early childhood programs present an important opportunity for school districts to establish lasting patterns, as they represent children's and many parents' entry into the school system. Indeed, many prekindergarten programs are designed to help children who are at risk for academic challenges to get a strong start: for these children to benefit, districts must ensure adequate attendance. The focus on younger children also highlights the critical role of the parents and family in affecting attendance, as three- and four-year-old children are not independently making decisions about attending school.
- **The factors contributing to absenteeism can be complex and interrelated.** Our initial research suggests that the factors contributing to absenteeism in DC are similar to those identified in



districts across the country. Although sometimes absenteeism issues are relatively easily fixed (e.g., helping parents understand why attendance matters and why early childhood education is important), it appears that more severe absenteeism rates are often associated with deeper problems. These problems include significant family challenges (homelessness, family instability, physical or mental health issues), community challenges (neighborhood safety), and challenges within particular classrooms or schools (school climate, quality, safety, and relationships with parents). Our research underscores the interrelation of a number of these more serious challenges.

- **Systems for identifying, tracking, and intervening around absenteeism can be challenging.** Our initial explorations suggest that DCPS, like other districts, faces challenges in ensuring that systems and processes are in place to appropriately and accurately identify, track, and address chronic absenteeism. These challenges include the standardization and implementation of attendance strategies and responses to absence policies.
- **Many of the absenteeism issues that DCPS/ECED faces are common to other districts and school systems, yet every district has unique issues that need to be explored.** This finding has two implications:
  - » On one hand, our exploration suggests that many of the challenges faced by DC prekindergarten families and programs are common across other school systems and older children (i.e., elementary school age). As a result, a wealth of knowledge has been built up—through the efforts of other school districts and initiatives like Attendance Works across the country—that can be implemented and tested. We have highlighted some of these efforts in this report.
  - » On the other hand, there was also strong consensus from the experts we spoke to that identifying solutions and strategies for any particular district requires an in-depth look at that district’s unique challenges by talking with parents, school staff, and local experts. The research presented here represents an initial step toward this effort for DC, but the time constraints did not allow for data collection from parents and school staff—both crucial perspectives that would help inform any more focused effort.
- **DCPS/ECED has unique strengths and challenges.** Our research suggests that DCPS/ECED is unusual both because of its efforts to address chronic absenteeism among prekindergarten-age children and because of its unusual prekindergarten model of having Head Start embedded in the schools. This model provides both opportunities and challenges. For example, one of its

unique strengths is that, as a Head Start program, the DC early childhood model has the resources and responsibility to work to address larger challenges facing families. However, a Head Start model embedded in the school system can also present challenges in ensuring that early childhood attendance strategies are part of a larger, coherent, school- and systemwide set of approaches.

- **Absenteeism in early childhood programs is a relatively new area of focus, and much more needs to be learned.** Finally, it is important to recognize that, although the body of work around absenteeism in schools is growing and exciting, much less work is focusing on the particular strategies used to address absenteeism in early childhood education. Many of the issues are similar, but the unique aspects of how these issues play out for younger children are just beginning to be explored.

Key findings about contributing factors and possible strategies concerning absenteeism among DCPS prekindergarten students are discussed below.

## Contributing Factors

Our research identified various factors in DCPS/ECED that were thought to contribute to absenteeism or that needed to be addressed in order to improve attendance. These factors fell into three categories: child- and family-level factors, school- and district-level factors, and community-level factors.

### CHILD- AND FAMILY-LEVEL FACTORS

There were several factors identified in this research that were at the level of the child and/or their family. These included:

- The family's relative prioritization of prekindergarten (affected by such issues as whether parents understood the value of attendance and of early childhood education and the voluntary nature of prekindergarten)
- Logistical issues (such as establishing family routines, juggling schedules and the needs of multiple children, coordinating between multiple caretakers, navigating transportation challenges and challenges created by attending an out-of-boundary school)
- Personal challenges and major family barriers (including homelessness and residential instability, family instability, and physical and mental health challenges)



- Parents' relationships with staff, schools, or teachers (including parents who were hard to reach and parents who faced challenges navigating the schools or relating to teachers).

### SCHOOL- AND DISTRICT-LEVEL FACTORS

There were several factors that had to do with issues at the level of the school, or of the school district. These included:

- School climate and culture (such as the physical conditions of the school, school safety, discipline policy and implementation, school climate and culture, attention paid to prekindergarten absenteeism from teachers and schools, and school and teacher quality)
- Internal processes (including challenges in monitoring attendance, documenting and sharing attendance policies and follow-up procedures, and inadequate tracking and attendance-recording systems).

### COMMUNITY-LEVEL FACTORS

Finally, there were community-level factors that many respondents raised. These included:

- Neighborhood safety concerns
- Issues with the DC homeless shelter system.

## Strategies That DCPS/ECED Should Consider

Experts interviewed for this project agreed that strategies to address absenteeism should be multifaceted and comprehensive. Any effort to address chronic absenteeism must recognize that not all absences are created equal, and it should be designed comprehensively to identify and address the range of contributing factors. Such strategies should also address the internal processes and systems necessary to appropriately identify the problem and take action. In many cases, effective strategies begin with a strong data system and analysis, organization, and reporting of key patterns and trends, as well as with strong leadership and commitment to addressing absenteeism.

The insights and experiences of the experts interviewed for this study and the current literature on strategies to combat absenteeism suggest that DCPS/ECED might want to consider exploring strategies in the following areas:

1. Help parents understand the importance of prekindergarten, attendance, and keeping track of attendance.

Various strategies focus on the critical importance of ensuring that parents understand the value of early education and prekindergarten, of the importance of regular attendance, and of helping parents keep track of their child's attendance.

- » Consider innovative ways to convey the importance of prekindergarten and early education including workshops, events, and resource-rich materials. (ECED has already moved in this direction by developing an attendance booklet for parents.) Help parents understand the skills that will be taught in prekindergarten and give details on the educational value of each day.
- » Focus on framing the importance of attendance and its impact on future educational outcomes. Develop and use easy-to-digest messages about the impact of absences, including relevant information on how absences affect development of key skills, performance in future grades, and remediation. Emphasize the cumulative nature of absences and how each student compares to his or her peers.
- » Be sure to reach out to parents early in the year with these messages, as well as maintain an ongoing focus throughout the year and during times when absences peak.
- » Provide parents and families information about their child's attendance and how it compares with that of other children, as well as tools that are easy to understand and use to track attendance across weeks, instructional days, and months. Help parents understand the value of tracking attendance.

2. Strengthen attendance-related activities focused on parents and children.

Respondents highlighted a broad range of strategies designed to support attendance, as well as some lessons learned about using incentives in this area.

- » Consider the pros and cons of targeted incentive-based strategies to ensure that such strategies are developed to maximize their effectiveness, minimize their negative consequences, and recognize their limitations.
- » Explore different strategies to support attendance, including strategies focused on children, on parents, on classrooms, and on the entire school.
- » Look at attendance data to determine the timing of absenteeism so that attendance strategies can be targeted to have the greatest impact.

3. Work to address common causes of absenteeism.

- » Assess the particular challenges facing parents by gathering information from them about the issues that can affect attendance; use this information to design targeted strategies.
- » Develop tools for parents to use to focus on routines and planning (e.g., attendance booklets). Think about strategies to emphasize the importance of routines and different mechanisms to convey this message on an ongoing basis (e.g., workshops, incentives, flyers, competitions).
- » Help parents understand the circumstances under which they should keep children at home, and what circumstances are not recommended. For example, help parents know when to keep their children home from illness and that it is important to not schedule long vacations when school is in session. Provide parents with constant reminders and helpful resources about getting immunizations and other important medical and dental checks that can help lift key barriers to attendance.
- » Explore and work to address transportation barriers for families who face particular challenges getting their children to school.

4. Address larger barriers that can cause absenteeism for families facing larger challenges.

- » Brainstorm ways to learn more about families with substantial needs and ways to best contact and work with those families who are hardest to reach. Strategies could include connecting with other school staff and contacts who (1) work with older siblings, (2) work with children in after-school programs, (3) belong to community groups or agencies that may work with families, or (4) belong to religious organizations that may work with families. Building these connections and this network can help in better understanding the families' needs and situations and can improve communication lines with the families.
- » Discuss the idea of hosting trainings by local groups to become better versed on key issues and identifying family needs. For example, consider having staff meet with homeless shelter staff or mental health professionals. Collegial meetings can increase the amount of information staff members have, bolster their position as resources for families on key issues, and strengthen communication lines between family services staff and community groups.
- » Continue to strengthen partnerships and create new connections with community agencies that work with families. These connections can strengthen referral processes, improve information and services for families, and help enlist partner agencies in supporting attendance.

5. Develop schoolwide strategies, internal processes, and support structures to support attendance.
  - » Consider how to improve and standardize attendance-taking practices, absence recording, and absence follow-up at schools.
  - » Consider how to help schools develop schoolwide strategies to support attendance and reduce absenteeism, and explore ways to help attendance support become a priority for staff at all levels.
  - » Think about what strategies schools can put in place to be more welcoming to parents, to understand their needs, and to emphasize the importance of parental engagement in order to support attendance.
  - » Identify strategies to strengthen the relationship between family services staff and teachers and principals. Make the expectations and the role of each actor clear when it comes to attendance and following up on absences. Outline the different ways that the family services staff can add value to the work of teachers in focusing on attendance and the many ways family services staff can be resources and supports.
6. Create effective internal systems for collecting and analyzing data and tracking attendance patterns.
  - » Use data about absences to quickly identify problematic patterns, and develop appropriate policies to address them. These data should identify children with particular problems and the timing of higher absence rates.
  - » Analyze data before the school year and think about ways to flag students who should be contacted before the beginning of school, or at least be closely monitored in the first few weeks (or month) of school (i.e., those with prior absenteeism and those in eligibility categories associated with high rates of absenteeism).
  - » Focus resources on analyzing data regularly in the first month of school. In DC, as in other sites, chronic absenteeism in the early part of the school year is associated with absenteeism throughout the year (Dubay and Holla 2015), so it is important to identify and address this concern as soon as possible.
  - » Consider the best policy for flagging attendance issues that triggers some sort of intervention. Many districts with improved data systems have thresholds at which attendance intervention is considered, but they look at data daily or weekly to decide proactively who should be flagged and how to target follow-up strategies.

- » Consider different strategies for categorizing absenteeism at the district level and at the school level. This categorization can be done before the school year based on previous years' data and on an ongoing basis throughout the year.
- » Use attendance categories strategically to focus resources, and consider creating a tiered intervention system that has a different strategy for working with different levels of schools or students. With limited resources, it is important to understand where, when, and how intervention strategies should be coordinated by school and by student.
- » Focus on creating different diagnostic tools to identify schools' attendance patterns. One district created attendance readiness profiles that used attendance data across multiple years and teacher surveys to better understand each school's status on attendance issues. This practice helped focus resources more efficiently throughout the district, with particular emphasis on some schools.

In conclusion, this paper summarizes the key factors that were identified as contributing to absenteeism in the DCPS early childhood program and discusses strategies that other systems have implemented to address these factors. Although there are no evaluation data showing the efficacy of these strategies, this summary provides initial insights into strategies that may be promising for the DCPS early childhood program to consider putting into place, and it lays the foundation for a deeper look at these issues. This analysis also suggests that, although significant steps could be taken within the ECED early childhood program, a deeper effort to address these issues will require a broader systemic focus across the DCPS system and a much deeper look at how these issues play out for particular families and in particular schools.





# Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been a growing focus on chronic absenteeism in the early grades (Romero and Lee 2007). The attention to chronic absenteeism has reframed earlier concepts of average daily attendance (ADA) and truancy to focus instead on the extent to which any given child is at school on any given day, regardless of the reasons for absence. This work has shown that children who are chronically absent from school—meaning that they are absent more than 10 percent of the days—are much more likely to face educational challenges and to become truant or drop out (Applied Survey Research 2011; Chang and Romero 2008; Gottfried 2011). Much of this work has been catalyzed by Attendance Works, a national initiative that promotes better policy around school attendance.

Until recently, much of the attention in this area has been on the absenteeism patterns of and strategies for children in the K–12 school system, especially the elementary grades. However, over the past few years, there has been an emerging interest in examining these issues in early childhood or pre-kindergarten programs in public schools. For example, research in Chicago and Baltimore has proved that chronic absenteeism is a crucial issue in prekindergarten, one with important implications for future attendance, retention, and academic performance (Connolly and Olson 2012; Ehrlich et al. 2014).

Over the past two years, the District of Columbia Public Schools' (DCPS) Early Childhood Education Division (ECED) has partnered with the Urban Institute to explore issues of absenteeism in the prekindergarten Head Start program in DC. The prekindergarten Head Start program in DC is located in 68 schools and serves about 5,000 children. The Head Start program is a Head Start School-Wide Model (HSSWM), which combines local funding for prekindergarten with Head Start dollars (see box 1 for more information on the ECED early childhood model). This work has revolved around improving attendance and addressing absenteeism, which were specifically outlined in the DCPS 2012–13 school readiness goals and have remained an integral focus of the ECED family services staff's work. Research has shown that high rates of absenteeism in early grades are associated with many negative educational outcomes, including increased likelihood of truancy and dropping out, being held back, and lower academic achievement (Applied Survey Research 2011; Chang and Romero 2008). Although school systems across the country have been increasingly aware of chronic absenteeism, DCPS is one of relatively few districts that has started to focus on these issues in early childhood. DCPS is at the forefront of a growing understanding of the importance of attendance for prekindergarten and Head Start.

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## BOX 1

### **An Overview of the Early Childhood Program in District of Columbia Public Schools**

In 2008, the District of Columbia passed the Pre-K Act, mandating universal prekindergarten for 3- and 4-year-olds. The implementation of the act allowed District of Columbia Public Schools to become both the largest single provider of services for 3- and 4-year-old children and of Head Start–eligible children in the District of Columbia. The school district accomplishes this mission through the Head Start School-Wide Model (HSSWM), which combines local funding through the Uniform per Student Funding Formula with Head Start dollars to serve nearly 5,000 children each day in their neighborhood schools. Every child in HSSWM receives the full range of services that meet Head Start standards, including screening and diagnostic assessment, high-quality early childhood classroom settings for the full school day and school year, and access to family support services.

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The most recent phase of this study, begun in May 2014, builds on prior work done in partnership with ECED. In this phase, the Urban Institute undertook two study components:

- A quantitative component that builds on prior analysis to look at attendance and intervention data to examine patterns, trends, and characteristics of families of children who are chronically absent across the district’s prekindergarten population. These data are presented in a companion report (Dubay and Holla 2015).
- A qualitative component involving an exploratory analysis of some of the key contributing factors of absenteeism in DCPS preschool and prekindergarten classrooms and schools; the process used to record, monitor, and engage families on attendance issues; and potential strategies to address barriers to attendance. The results of that analysis are presented in this report.

### **What Is in This Report?**

The information in this report is laid out in the following structure. The introduction defines absenteeism, outlines the frequency of absenteeism in DCPS early childhood programs, and describes our research approach. In section I we discuss the family and child level, school and district level, and community level factors that contribute to absenteeism in DCPS early childhood programs. In section II we discuss strategies to address common early childhood attendance challenges. In this section, we

focus on strategies related to parents' understanding of the importance of prekindergarten and attendance, developing attendance-related activities, designing approaches to address common and larger family barriers to attendance, and improving internal processes and data tracking systems and techniques. We conclude by laying out important insight from the research and recommendations for strategies that DCPS/ECED could consider to help limit absenteeism in prekindergarten.

## What Is Absenteeism?

Traditionally, attendance has been defined and monitored in schools and districts by using ADA and truancy. To calculate ADA schools consider the average number of students that attend school over a given period of time. For example, if a school with 100 students and five classrooms has an average of 90 students attend in a 20-day school month, its monthly ADA would be 90 percent. Truancy is defined as any absence without an excuse.

Although ADA and truancy have value in tracking attendance and forecasting spending, districts and states (including DC) have recently begun to look beyond these two measures to focus on absenteeism. Defining absenteeism differently fills two notable gaps caused by traditional attendance tracking. First, school-level ADA may not capture significant attendance issues by classroom or, more important, by student. For example, the same school referenced above that has a 90 percent ADA rate and five classrooms could have four classrooms with perfect attendance (20 students present each day of that month), but one classroom with much worse attendance at 50 percent (just 10 students present each day). In a different scenario, a school may have a class with 90 percent ADA, but the same three or four students could be missing half of the instructional days. Second, using a strict definition of truancy would not help detect a student who may be absent 10 days in a month, if all days are excused.

To more carefully analyze student- and school-level attendance and absenteeism, researchers and districts have begun to measure and monitor chronic absenteeism, which is commonly defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason (including excused or unexcused absences) (Bruner, Discher, and Chang 2011).<sup>1</sup> Although districts differ on the percentage or number of days they use for specific levels of chronic absenteeism, Attendance Works suggests defining attendance levels as follows:

- Satisfactory attendance: total absences of 5 percent or less
- “At risk”/warning: total absences of more than 5 percent but less than 10 percent

- Chronic absence: total absences of 10 percent or more
- Severe chronic absence: total absences of 20 percent or more

This newer measure of chronic absenteeism has not only proved valuable for tracking attendance, but also has further exposed flaws in using only ADA to track attendance. Research of attendance data from three urban districts highlighted the importance of this new measure by demonstrating that using ADA failed to uncover issues of chronic absenteeism in seemingly high-attendance schools, including those with 97 percent ADA (Bruner, Discher, and Chang 2011).

## Why Attendance Matters

As districts and researchers have begun to focus more on chronic absenteeism, there has been particular attention paid to school attendance patterns and absenteeism in early grades. Research shows that children who are absent in early grades are far more likely to end up truant, drop out, or have lower school achievement (Applied Survey Research 2011; Chang and Romero 2008; Gottfried 2011). Research on the impact of chronic absenteeism in the early grades shows the gravity of the issue and the compounding challenges that arise:

- Nationally 1 out of 10 kindergarteners and first-grade students are chronically absent, with higher rates in particular localities (Balfanz and Byrnes 2012; Chang and Romero 2008).
- Children who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are much less likely to read proficiently in third grade—64 percent of children with no attendance risk in the early grades are reading proficiently, contrasted to only 17 percent of those missing 10 percent or more in the early grades (Applied Survey Research 2011).
- Poor children particularly benefit from schooling (Ready 2010), yet they are significantly more likely to be chronically absent in kindergarten than their higher-income peers. Among poor children, chronic absence in kindergarten predicts lower educational achievement at the end of fifth grade (Chang and Romero 2008).
- Although other factors are associated with absenteeism, multiple studies have found the strongest predictor of absenteeism to be prior year attendance, demonstrating the particular importance of focusing on attendance issues in the early grades (Connolly and Olson 2012;; Ehrlich et al. 2014; Sanchez 2012).

## FOCUSING ON ATTENDANCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Over the past few years, there has been an emerging interest in examining chronic absenteeism in early childhood programs. The most recent research out of Baltimore and Chicago has shown prekindergarten impacts on future attendance, retention, and academic performance. In Baltimore, researchers found that 26.5 percent of prekindergarten students were chronically absent in school year (SY) 2010–11 (Connolly and Olson 2012). Of the students who were chronically absent in prekindergarten in SY 2006–07, over 40 percent continued to be chronically absent through first grade or longer. In Chicago, a similar study revealed that students who are chronically absent in prekindergarten are five times as likely to be chronically absent in second grade (Ehrlich et al. 2014). In both these studies, absenteeism in prekindergarten was also related to disturbing later patterns. In Chicago, researchers found that chronic absence in prekindergarten was related to lower scores of kindergartener readiness in math, letter recognition, pre-literacy, and social-emotional development (Ehrlich et al. 2014). In both Baltimore and Chicago, researchers found that second-grade test scores were lower for students who were chronically absent in prekindergarten and that these students were more likely to be at risk for intervention (either educational supports or retention) by third grade (Connolly and Olson 2012; Ehrlich et al. 2014).

Throughout our work, we read and heard about prekindergarten playing a crucial role as families' first introduction to school and the first chance for children to begin a pattern of regular attendance. The research above demonstrates the myriad issues that arise when students are chronically absent in their first educational experience. Although it was not a main focus of the study and only represents the experience of one district, an interesting and potentially promising aspect of the Baltimore study is its findings on Head Start. Researchers found that students who were previously in Head Start had higher attendance rates in third grade than their peers who were in other preschool settings, which can be attributed at least in part to the extra support of the family services staff (Connolly and Olson 2012). Although the research above demonstrates the work that has been done on this topic, to date no one has done an in-depth analysis of prekindergarten absenteeism in DC in-depth or looked at best practices and lessons learned on improving prekindergarten attendance nationwide.

## What Do We Know about the Extent of Absenteeism in DCPS Early Childhood Programs?

Through our analysis of prekindergarten absenteeism data and trends of students enrolled in DCPS Head Start programs for SY 2013–14, we found patterns of chronic absenteeism similar to those in

Baltimore and Chicago. Although 44 percent of DCPS Head Start students had satisfactory attendance (using the 5 percent threshold described above), 27 percent were either chronically absent or severely chronically absent. Despite these significant attendance concerns, it is important to note that the rate of satisfactory attendance was up by 8 percent from SY 2012–13. In DC, students who were chronically absent the previous year or even the first month of the current year were very likely to be chronically absent for the whole school year, further supporting research on the predictive nature of previous absences (Sanchez 2012). Research in other districts, such as Chicago, has found that certain populations of children face higher absence rates (Ehrlich et al. 2014). In DC, for example, African American children, homeless children, and children enrolled in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) had worse attendance than their peers (Dubay and Holla 2015).

The patterns of absenteeism in DC prekindergarten are worrisome and mirror the patterns in many other urban districts. This report presents findings from our exploration of the contributing factors to prekindergarten absenteeism in DC and promising solutions gathered from focus groups, interviews, and materials from other school districts.

## Methods

The qualitative component of the DCPS/ECED absenteeism study was structured to build on information gathered from earlier quantitative work focused on patterns in attendance and intervention data and characteristics of families whose children are chronically absent. The goal of this component was to do a quick exploration of the key factors contributing to absenteeism in DCPS early childhood programs and to gather insights from experts and existing research to help identify some initial strategies for DCPS to address these problems. Although our work spanned only five months, it had several phases:

- *Refining research questions with DCPS early childhood lead staff.* To conduct our research in DC for this component, we began by meeting with lead staff at ECED. In our first sessions we discussed the focus of our study and refined the scope of our work and data collection.
- *Getting insights from DCPS family services staff and the parent policy council.* In this phase of our study, we focused on gathering and analyzing information about the barriers to attendance in DC, structures in place to intervene, and opportunities for improvement in focusing on strategies. During this phase, we sat in on a parent policy council meeting to hear the perspectives of Head Start parents, and we held four focus groups with 24 family services staff



including community parent outreach coordinators (CPOCs), case management specialists (CMS), and family services leads. The information gained allowed us to identify the specific issues of concern to the DCPS early childhood program.

- *Diving deeper into the issues.* After collecting and analyzing data from the focus groups, we began the next phase of our study, which involved gathering insights into the specific issues of concern for DC in three ways:
  - » We developed protocols for **stakeholder interviews** based on the information we gathered from the first phase and key feedback and topics that the ECED and family services staff were most interested in. We focused on three key stakeholder groups: researchers and experts on absenteeism from across the country, district- and program-level administrators in sites across the country focusing on these issues, and local stakeholders. In all, we conducted 16 interviews with 10 district representatives, 4 local stakeholders, and 10 experts and researchers.
  - » We conducted a **literature and resources review** focusing on the relevant research in the field in four key areas: (1) attendance practices and strategies to monitor absenteeism, (2) the short- and long-term impacts of absenteeism, (3) contributing factors most tied to absenteeism, and (4) strategies that have been used to improve attendance and limit absenteeism.
  - » We also analyzed **case management notes** from ECED staff for SY 2013–14, which were helpful in understanding key factors causing absenteeism, the complexity of the challenges facing some families, and difficulties in connecting with families. The utility of the data extracted from the analysis of ECED staff case management notes for SY 2013–14 was limited due to lack of response from many families to initial outreach, which made it difficult to identify the causes of many students' absences, and the sample size was too small to draw any larger inferences about the student population.

## Limitations

Although our research includes multiple components and data from a variety of sources, there are notable limitations to our work. The largest limitation has to do with timing—the short time frame of the study (five months) meant that we were unable to speak directly with parents or school staff. Speaking with parents about their situations and the challenges they face that may lead to absenteeism is a critical component of this work. We heard from other researchers and stakeholders that speaking with

parents helped them unearth new concerns and perspectives on absenteeism. Timing also prevented us from meeting with school teachers and principals. As we mention throughout this report, school staff play a crucial role in tracking attendance, engaging students and families, and working to limit absenteeism and thus would provide important perspectives on this topic. We attempted to make up for these limitations by sitting in on a policy council meeting to gather some, albeit a very small, sample of the parent perspective. We also asked about the role of teachers and school staff throughout our focus groups and interviews. Despite these efforts, the limitations of not receiving direct input from parents or school staff should be kept in mind when reading through the report and considering our key findings.

It is also important to recognize that although many interesting strategies are being tried across the country to support absenteeism, few of those strategies have been evaluated. As a result, the strategies discussed in section II of this report should be considered as a set of strategies to consider rather than as recommendations.

Finally, the insights gathered from our research only skim the surface of very large and complex issues. Attendance challenges are related to a broad set of larger societal challenges facing public education systems across the country, including poverty, the social safety net, and family functioning. For example, many respondents highlighted a wide range of other essential elements around schools that are necessary to support good attendance, including high-quality teachers and schools, responsive staff and leadership, and high-performing schools. It is beyond the scope of this project to address these larger issues in depth; instead we simply report some of the relevant insights shared by our respondents. As such, this report should not be considered a comprehensive review of all these issues.

# Section I. What Factors Contribute to Absenteeism in DCPS Early Childhood Programs?

A key to identifying attendance issues and attempting to solve them is gaining a better understanding of the specific barriers to attendance or factors that contribute to absenteeism, which are often complex and multileveled. In this section, we present the key contributing factors to prekindergarten absenteeism in DC, along with important insights learned from other respondents. Although the contributing factors can be categorized in various ways, we have grouped them into three levels:

- Family and child level
- School and district level
- Community level

Before presenting the factors in each of these categories, it is useful to highlight a few overarching “takeaways” that emerged from this analysis:

- Although many of the contributing factors to absenteeism are the same between prekindergarten and K–12, important differences can sometimes shape the best response or strategy to counteract the challenge. These differences are manifested not only at the district and school level, but also in the ways that families interact with the prekindergarten system.
- Although our research focused on prekindergarten, it was often not possible to separate the issues affecting prekindergarten children and classes from larger issues affecting other grades or affecting schools and communities overall. Examining these larger issues systematically was beyond the scope of our study, but the information gathered provides important insights for DCPS/ECED.
- Contributing factors rarely occur in a vacuum and are often interrelated—causing each other, occurring simultaneously, or exacerbating each other. Research in Chicago confirmed this last point in finding that the absence rates of children from families with challenging circumstances (i.e., unemployment, single parent, parent aged 25 or younger, poor parent health) rose with each additional factor (Ehrlich et al. 2014). Based on our analysis of case management notes

and conversations with family services staff, it appears likely that this pattern may hold true in DC. This point further demonstrates the complexity of these challenges and the difficulty in carefully planning targeted strategies.

- Barriers are often similar across districts and schools, but they can play out differently based on factors including district or school structure, program design, or demographics. This distinction highlights the importance of learning from other districts while working to ensure a strong focus on gathering information from parents and staff and local stakeholders before designing specific intervention strategies.

## Family and Child Level

This section focuses on family and child characteristics that contribute to chronic absence. Although attendance in older grades is often discussed with a truancy lens based on the student's responsibility, in prekindergarten the parents are the main actors and hold the power in improving their children's attendance. At the same time, there are child characteristics such as health or special needs that can play a role in absenteeism. The information on family and child level factors is presented in four areas:

- Prioritization of prekindergarten education and attendance
- Logistical challenges
- Personal challenges and major family barriers
- Relationships with staff, school, or teachers

### PRIORITIZATION OF PREKINDERGARTEN EDUCATION AND ATTENDANCE

Through our research and discussions with respondents, we found three important interrelated issues concerning the prioritization of prekindergarten: the impacts of valuing early childhood education, understanding the importance of attendance, and the voluntary nature of the program. Although the first issue is unique to early childhood education, understanding the importance of attendance is an issue across prekindergarten and K–12, and the voluntary nature of the program arose as an issue at different levels across districts (i.e., kindergarten is voluntary in some districts).

A key issue discussed in our conversations about valuing attendance was whether parents understand the educational value of prekindergarten and early childhood education. This question played out in many ways. One common perception was that some families don't understand that

prekindergarten is more than child care, dropping off their children when convenient rather than practicing good attendance. Another perception was that some parents see prekindergarten as merely play and do not understand that children are learning. Other factors related to whether parents prioritize prekindergarten include negative experiences that some parents may have had with the education system, whether they dropped out early on, or where prekindergarten falls on the priority list relative to the competing needs of low-income families (such as housing, employment, and health). Respondents noted that this undervaluation or under prioritization of prekindergarten was often associated with poor attendance habits and absenteeism. Others respondents spoke about a lack of understanding of the additive nature of absences and the impact of poor attendance.

The link between absenteeism and parents' understanding the importance of prekindergarten attendance is suggested by work in one district that found that parents for the most part said attendance was important, but that there was variation in the level of importance they placed on prekindergarten attendance relative to older grades (Ehrlich et al. 2014). Parents who said that prekindergarten attendance was as important third grade attendance had better attendance than those that did not rate prekindergarten attendance as equally important as third grade attendance (Ehrlich et al. 2014). This research and related work points to the value of clearly outlining for parents the curriculum in prekindergarten and the skills that will be learned throughout the year.

Through discussions about the prioritization of education and attendance, a key issue that arose was the voluntary nature of prekindergarten in DC. Some respondents felt that prekindergarten's non-mandatory status was a key factor that shaped families' prioritization of attendance. Respondents felt that DC's nonmandatory prekindergarten, especially as juxtaposed to policies in K–12, created a system with less accountability for parents. They viewed the lack of consequence in prekindergarten as a challenge to getting families to improve attendance and to working with families on this issue in general.

However, our research suggests that the issue may be more complex than this; the voluntary nature of prekindergarten may instead function as an overlay for almost all the key issues that surfaced, making it easier for barriers or challenges that families face to result in a child missing school. For example, if a family is struggling to get two children to different schools, they may prioritize getting their elementary school-age child to school because it is mandatory for K–12. If parents have a negative relationship with a teacher or feel the school environment is unsafe, they may choose not to take their child to school, knowing that it is not mandatory and there are no punitive repercussions. This idea of prekindergarten being voluntary as an overlay for other factors was corroborated in our discussions with other districts. One common perspective that arose in these conversations was that, while relevant, the voluntary nature of prekindergarten is not the real reason behind parents' prioritization of

attendance. One representative saw the voluntary nature argument as more of an excuse that often overshadows or masks other factors. She noted that as these families' children move into older grades, "the excuse changes but the underlying barrier is the same."

## LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES

A key takeaway from our meetings related to prekindergarten in DC was the daunting logistical challenges that families face that often lead to attendance issues. Some challenges involve family routines or parental preferences. More difficult challenges involve the everyday realities for low-income parents who are often juggling multiple children and responsibilities in a sometimes chaotic environment, including having parents and other caregivers living in separate locations. A third type of challenge is related to transportation.

In some cases, the logistical challenges we heard were rooted in family routines that were not conducive to strong attendance. For example, we heard about families who had challenges getting children to go to bed, or waking up their children and getting them ready for school, or waking up on time themselves. Some families struggled with handling children's anxiety about school or unwillingness to go to school due to other discomforts. The importance of family routines was noted by stakeholders in other districts and education organizations, some of whom have developed exercises and resources to aid families in improving and organizing their routines. Long family vacations were a second manifestation of family routine or parental preference that interfered with attendance. Experts we spoke with in DC and other cities highlighted challenges related to family vacations. We heard that some immigrant families travel to their home country for two to four weeks during the year, accumulating many absences.

Another key issue around logistics was juggling the schedules and needs of multiple children, especially for single parents and those who were working or in school themselves. Research in Chicago highlighted this pattern, showing that prekindergarten children in single-parent families missed about a week more of school than children in families with multiple adults (Ehrlich et al. 2014). Romero and Lee (2008) found that children in homes with four or more children missed on average one more day of school than their peers. In DC, we heard that parents struggled with getting multiple children prepared and to school on time, a finding that was also mentioned when speaking with an administrator from a different district. Mothers who were pregnant or had children younger than prekindergarten were said to have a particularly hard time with regular attendance due to their own struggle with pregnancy, child care, and other parenting demands related to younger children.



Other insights were related to the logistical challenges of prekindergarten parents who also had older children in DCPS. Some respondents felt that families with older children in the K–12 system prioritized their attendance at the expense of their 3- and 4-year-olds, largely in response to the truancy policies for those students and the perceived educational value of older grades versus prekindergarten. In addition, some families based attendance of the prekindergarten child on the older child, so that if the older child was sick, neither would go to school. This practice also played out in families in which younger children relied on older children to take them to school. Yet another challenge came from children with multiple caretakers or separated parents who lived in multiple locations. Living arrangements could create logistical challenges, whether because one caretaker lived further away or because differences between parents in prioritization of attendance or ability to deal with challenges led to inconsistent attendance patterns.

Transportation was also highlighted as a key issue affecting attendance in DC and other districts, including Chicago and New York City. This issue arose as a key factor in multiple contexts. First, we heard about transportation challenges that families faced in locations where public transportation was hard to access or unreliable. In some cases, families also had issues in getting the necessary transportation passes from the school.

Another key transportation issue had to do with out-of-boundary students. Multiple respondents mentioned that families had real challenges in getting their children to schools outside their neighborhoods, a more common occurrence with the school-choice model in DC. [Note, however, that the companion report released as part of this project did not find absence rates to be higher among out-of-boundary students when controlling for key characteristics (Dubay and Holla 2015).] One respondent explained that attendance suffers when a family chooses an out-of-boundary school that has perceived higher quality but is much harder for the family to get to. On the issue of out-of-boundary transportation, an added concern was that homeless families struggle with transportation as they are often moving constantly and living in shelters throughout the city, a concern that was shared in New York City (Nauer, White, and Yerneni 2008). In New York City, the district also found that special education transportation challenges affected attendance, a concern raised in DC as well (Nauer et al. 2008).

## PERSONAL CHALLENGES AND MAJOR FAMILY BARRIERS

We heard repeatedly about the cumulative nature of larger personal and family challenges contributing to absences, which has been well-documented in multiple studies (Ehrlich et al. 2014; Romero and Lee 2008). The most commonly noted personal barriers that arose for DC families in this initial exploration were homelessness and residential instability, family instability, and physical and mental health.

One prevalent issue in DC related to attendance is homelessness and residential instability. An analysis of DCPS attendance data from SY 2011–12 demonstrated that 52 percent of homeless children were either chronically or severely chronically absent, a troubling trend that continued in SY 2013–14 (Dubay and Holla 2015).<sup>2</sup> Case management notes from SY 2011–12 also showed that homelessness was the most common reason for attendance problems, as almost 20 percent of identified children lived in a transient or unstable housing situation that detracted from the parents' ability to ensure on-time and consistent attendance.<sup>3</sup> Much like DC, in New York City homelessness was noted as a key factor of absenteeism and was a large focus of a citywide strategic effort to improve attendance (Balfanz and Byrnes 2012). Families who are homeless or between homes are often juggling many obstacles and living in crisis mode so that attendance can be a challenge or fall on the list of priorities. Multiple interviewees also discussed how homelessness and mobility can affect the mental and emotional well-being of the family, making attendance that much more difficult. Other families who are constantly mobile may end up in locations that are inconvenient for transporting their children to school. Yet another factor related to this topic is the embarrassment families and children may face based on their housing situation and conspicuous lack of clean clothing, uniforms, or school supplies.

Other key factors that arose in DC and were also mentioned across other districts were related to family instability at home (parental divorce, domestic violence or conflict, neglect, and substance abuse). We heard that these issues often contributed to family chaos and trauma and affected attendance. For example, in one case from this year, attendance issues were tied to a custody battle in which a mother was afraid to send children to school because the father had come looking for them at school in the past. This type of situation also contributes to the logistical challenges of multiple caretakers noted earlier.

Yet another challenge that arose was the health and well-being (physical and mental) of both children and parents. In DC, like many urban districts including Baltimore, asthma was highlighted as one of the most prevalent health issues impacting attendance (Baltimore Student Attendance Campaign 2012). We also heard issues with extended illnesses that were undocumented. Much like the findings in Chicago, in DC many health-related absences were said to be associated with inadequate health care or undiagnosed illnesses. Following a national pattern documented by the US Surgeon General of the high impact that dental problems have on attendance (US Department of Health and Human Services 2000), in DC we heard that dental concerns were a recurring issue along with general hygiene concerns (e.g., rashes, not toilet trained). Along with child health, multiple respondents in DC spoke about the effects of parents' mental and physical health on absenteeism; this concern was also noted in Chicago (Ehrlich et al. 2014). Finally, qualitative data in DC suggest that families whose

children have special needs can face particular challenges to attendance. The accompanying report that examines DCPS data shows that children with either autism or developmental delay had significantly higher total rates of absence and were less likely to have satisfactory attendance compared to those without any special needs. However, their rates of unexcused absences were not different from the rates of nondisabled students. This inconsistency may be due to excused medical absences largely contributing to the disabled children's absentee rate (Dubay and Holla 2015).

As described above, many of these challenges can interact and exacerbate each other to contribute to chronic absenteeism.

## RELATIONSHIPS WITH STAFF, SCHOOL, OR TEACHERS

One key factor that arose in looking at causes of absenteeism in DC prekindergarten was families' relationships with the staff, school, or teachers. In the next section, we describe the school side of this barrier, but here we discuss the family side of the relationships, focusing on challenges in contacting families and families' issues with navigating the schools and relationships with teachers.

Difficulty contacting parents because of mobility, constantly changing contact information, and other factors was cited as an issue that made working with families very challenging. We also heard that family services staff sometimes experience difficulty reaching out in a positive way to families about absenteeism, and doing so without triggering resistance. Such difficulties can result in parents not being interested or willing to engage with school or family services staff around receiving supports.

Respondents also mentioned that families may have issues navigating the schools or relating to teachers, especially if there are language barriers or previous inexperience or bad experiences with schools. The same issues might play out at the classroom level if the parents (or sometimes the child) do not have a good relationship with the teacher.

## School and District Level

This section focuses on the role of the district and schools in potentially creating or exacerbating factors that contribute to poor attendance. The factors in this section are broadly defined as characteristics of the school and district atmosphere, services, or structure that may play a role in higher absence rates. Many of these factors were also identified in our discussions with other districts and reflect common challenges faced by many large urban districts or school districts overall. Although some of the solutions to these issues are beyond the scope of this study, it seems pertinent to outline these barriers

as some can be at least partially alleviated by more practical solutions. As part of this discussion we focus on some key areas pertaining to school climate and quality and internal processes.

## SCHOOL CLIMATE AND QUALITY

The issues raised by DCPS and other districts concerning school climate and quality included the physical conditions of the school, school safety, discipline policy and implementation, school climate and culture, teacher's perspectives on absenteeism, and school and teacher quality. Each of these is described briefly below.

We heard from some respondents in DC of a few cases in which the physical conditions of the school had been raised as an issue or concern by parents and a potential cause of absenteeism. This issue arose in a few cases where there was a reported gas or carbon monoxide leak, issues with building temperatures, and general lack of hygiene (or hygiene protocol) within the school that were believed to contribute to illnesses. A concern in this discussion was also around some schools' timeliness in sharing information about building issues. Research on this topic has further highlighted that the conditions of the school facility in large urban districts (especially as they relate to ventilation systems) can indeed affect attendance, especially in the younger grades (Branham 2004; Shendell et al. 2004).

A few key issues were raised concerning the social environment of the school. First, we heard that concerns of school safety, including fights or lockdowns, potentially affected attendance, which was corroborated in two Chicago studies in which researchers found higher attendance in prekindergarten at safer schools (Ehrlich et al. 2014) and that school safety was the most important factor associated with improving attendance in elementary grades (Bryk et al. 2010). In the cases discussed in DC, it was assumed that these issues of safety were tied to students in older elementary and middle school grades, a challenge that is specific to having prekindergarten housed within elementary schools.

Discipline policy and implementation was also presented as a key school-level factor contributing to absenteeism in our analysis. Respondents spoke about this factor mainly in light of informal suspensions (though also with some references to formal suspensions)—an issue that we understand is currently under review.<sup>4</sup> In most cases, we heard that the problem was largely informal suspensions issued by the school, with respondents suggesting that some schools and teachers used informal suspensions to avoid addressing disruptive behavior. Using informal suspensions, teachers would either ask parents to keep children home or call them during the day to pick up their child. In the latter case, we heard of instances in which a pattern of informal suspensions dissuaded parents from continuing to bring their children to school.

This trend of formal and informal suspensions is cause for concern for a few reasons. First, research shows that in DC the most disadvantaged students (homeless, protective services) are suspended at higher rates than their peers (Office of the State Superintendent of Education 2014). Moreover, researchers have shown that suspensions negatively affect long-term academic outcomes and do not necessarily teach young students appropriate conduct (Losen and Skiba 2010).<sup>5</sup>

Another common theme was the issue of general school climate and culture. A few respondents shared a concern that some schools' administrative staff and teachers were less supportive or welcoming than at other schools. The belief shared in these instances was that improving relationships between parents and school staff could help improve attendance, a belief backed by research on how school climate and family involvement can affect daily attendance (Epstein and Sheldon 2002). Other respondents shared a concern for teachers' attitudes in some schools, because at times some teachers could appear defeated. Despite some of these concerns, other respondents in DC detailed the welcoming and energetic environment created by school staff and leadership in multiple schools.

An additional concern related to school climate was related to teachers' perspectives on absenteeism and working with parents to improve attendance. Respondents in DCPS and other districts shared a belief that some teachers placed the blame of attendance issues largely on the parents. The root of our conversations on this topic with multiple respondents was a concern that in some schools there tended to be a deficit-based approach to working with families on attendance rather than the recommended strengths-based approach that is in line with the Head Start philosophy.

Another concern around teachers' and schools' attitudes was a feeling that at some schools, prekindergarten absenteeism received little attention and few resources because of a focus on truancy in higher grades. This concern was shared by administrators in another large urban district and was said to affect teachers' connection with promising attendance strategies, school vision, and other supports at the school level. Finally, there was a sense that the focus on truancy in the older grades made it challenging to focus on a more positive and supportive relationship with parents to support attendance in prekindergarten.

One of the key issues we heard throughout our research on causes of absenteeism was the variability between schools, especially as it pertained to school and teacher quality and focus on attendance. Respondents shared a concern that in some cases the school's overall quality and classroom quality affected attendance, a concern substantiated in prekindergarten research in Chicago that demonstrated that high instructional quality was associated with higher attendance rates (Ehrlich et al. 2014). Another notable issue in our conversations and corroborated by research was the negative

impact that teacher turnover and absenteeism have on the engagement of families and their view on the importance of regular attendance and on the impact of these issues on attendance (Joseph, Waymack, and Zielaski 2014; Musser 2011). Although we did hear about this concern, it is important to highlight that recent research on teacher attendance shows that DC teachers are ranked second in a list of 40 urban districts showing average teacher absences, with the third lowest rate of chronically absent teachers (Joseph et al. 2014).

## INTERNAL PROCESSES

A key school- and district-level barrier to attendance that was highlighted in DC is the policies and processes for attendance recording and tracking in prekindergarten programs. In some cases this issue was attributed to lack of a clear policy at the school level, and in other cases the issue was tied to inconsistent implementation. A related topic that arose in our discussion was the challenges of family services staff in working with but not being part of schools. Some of these challenges were unique to DCPS because of Head Start's location in the schools, but conversations with other districts elicited similar difficulties. Some of the important issues that were noted are laid out below.

A key topic that emerged from our research in DC was the challenges around developing systems for consistent attendance tracking. These issues are being tackled in large urban districts across the country, including Baltimore, Los Angeles, and New York City. One main challenge that continually surfaced was achieving consistency across schools in recording and sharing attendance information. Although it was clear in some schools who was responsible for taking attendance, what procedures were required to record an absence, and who was looking at attendance rates across the school, other schools lacked consistency in these areas. For example, we heard that some schools require a hand-written doctor's note for an excused absence related to illness, but others do not. Some schools have a concrete system for recording and submitting attendance to the front office, and others have a more ad hoc process susceptible to inaccuracies. There were concerns about large variability between classrooms in some schools, in that some classrooms were better than others in following up on absences.

Along with this issue, concerns were raised about how attendance policies and follow-up procedures are documented or shared in a digestible manner with parents so they know what to expect. Although we heard of some schools that have excelled at tracking attendance and positive outreach to parents, respondents suggested that some schools potentially alienated families by "blaming" parents for absences and sometimes issuing informal suspensions (discussed above). These issues appeared to spill over into the family services staff's relationship with the school and family and therefore their ability to perform their jobs effectively. In some cases, we heard that a potential solution to some of



these issues could be further integrating the family services staff into schools as a resource to discuss attendance and share regular information on the needs of students and families.

A related topic that had parallels in other districts concerned challenges that the tracking and recording attendance system created for family service staff. We heard in our focus groups that the new policy of flagging children after three overall absences rather than three consecutive absences posed challenges. This new policy translated into a huge jump in caseload for family services staff that was often hard to manage (80% of children missed three days or more throughout the school year and 56% had attendance that was not considered satisfactory; Dubay and Holla 2015). A representative from another Head Start program shared the same challenge when explaining that a change in defining attendance problems has led to an overwhelming number of students on attendance improvement plans. We heard that another factor in DC that compounded the tracking issues was a system interface that was cumbersome to efficiently search, filter, and input for specific absence criteria. Other districts mentioned similar issues with data systems that have been overcome through improved data tracking systems, attendance categories, and reporting mechanisms, as discussed in the solutions section below.

Family services staff also had difficulty obtaining the most up-to-date information on student attendance and the situation of families. We heard that, in some schools, family services staff had issues getting relevant information from, or communicating with, teachers. Despite this challenge, we heard that some schools in DC have been successful in implementing attendance teams to help communicate the details of students' absences. A related issue was the complicated dual role that family services staff play as the "first line of defense" on attendance, which can cause them to be viewed as enforcement rather than as a support to help families connect with key resources.

## **Community Level**

Although many of the key factors documented above can be at least partially addressed by a combination of school, district, and family services staff strategies, there are larger community-level issues that pose significant challenges. In this section, we identify some elements of the neighborhood or specific community context that were identified as contributing to chronic absenteeism. Although large in scope, these factors are important for school, teachers, and staff to have in mind as context for working with families and strategizing solutions to improve attendance. In section II, we discuss steps that can be taken to help lessen the impact of some of these factors on absenteeism.

One area of concern was neighborhood safety and violence, including gang activity, that contributed to poor attendance. A few respondents in DC mentioned that in the neighborhoods they live or work in, they would not feel comfortable allowing their child walk to school alone because of dangerous conditions. Respondents from other urban districts including Chicago shared similar struggles with the effect of neighborhood safety on attendance and had turned to options including using walking school buses (documented in solutions section) (Ehrlich 2014).

Another issue raised was the quality of some DC homeless shelters and the services they provide for families. Although some shelters provided ample resources, helped encourage school attendance, and had connections with schools, other shelters were described as uninterested in school attendance or children's educational needs and were hard for schools and family services staff to reach. This problem is clearly a larger issue that is not likely in the purview of DCPS, but it is important to note that improved communication and perhaps training on the importance of attendance and prekindergarten could start to address this issue (more strategies on this issue are discussed below).

# Section II. Some Strategies for Common DCPS Early Childhood Attendance Challenges

This section provides an overview of strategies gathered from focus groups, interviews, and the literature review that DCPS may want to consider to support better attendance in its early childhood programs. In many cases, the strategies outlined specifically address contributing factors to absenteeism that were discussed earlier. However, in this section, we are not able to provide more in-depth evaluation of the pros and cons of each strategy, or their efficacy, as such data are not available. This list should be considered illustrative of the kinds of efforts that sites are trying rather than as a list of recommendations. Several strategies identified by our respondents were part of broader educational efforts around improving schools and public education. Although these larger efforts are beyond the scope of this project, we do report some of the relevant insights shared by our respondents.

The strategies (discussed below) are in the following six areas:

1. Helping parents understand the importance of prekindergarten and early education, attendance, and keeping track of attendance
  - Conveying the importance of prekindergarten and early education
  - Helping parents understand the importance of regular attendance
  - Helping parents keep track of attendance
2. Attendance-related activities focused on parents and children
  - Considering incentives
  - Activities and strategies
  - Considering timing
3. Working to address common causes of absenteeism
  - Assessing the issues
  - Routines and planning
  - Understanding when to keep a child at home
  - Vacations
  - Immunizations
  - Transportation and safety

4. Addressing larger barriers that can cause absenteeism for families facing larger challenges
  - Sharing information and identifying family needs
  - Developing partnerships with community agencies
5. Schoolwide strategies, internal processes, and support structures to support attendance
  - Schoolwide strategies to engage parents and support attendance
  - Supporting relationships between family services staff and schools
6. Strengthening internal systems for collecting and analyzing data and tracking attendance patterns
  - Using data diagnostically to target services
  - Identifying the correct trigger for flagging and intervention
  - Responding when a chronic absence case is flagged

## **1. Helping Parents Understand the Importance of Prekindergarten and Early Education, Attendance, and Keeping Track of Attendance**

As noted earlier, there is concern that parents with young children may be less likely to ensure regular attendance because they may not fully understand the value of early education and the importance of attendance. Parents may also underestimate how often their children are absent. Respondents discussed strategies to address each of these areas of concern.

### **CONVEYING THE IMPORTANCE OF PREKINDERGARTEN AND EARLY EDUCATION**

A common thread throughout our work was the need to underscore the educational value of prekindergarten. As discussed earlier, many respondents suggested that parents did not see prekindergarten as educational, and instead saw it as play or as a work support to be used when convenient. Both of these beliefs could be related to parents not understanding the value of early education, contributing to the sense that attendance is not important. These respondents stressed that it is essential to emphasize the skills that the child will learn and enriching experiences they will partake in throughout the year.

The link between parental attitudes and understanding the value of prekindergarten is shown by research in one district that found that parents with high-attending children could articulate specific skills learned in prekindergarten, but parents with low-attending children spoke more abstractly.

One interesting aspect of this specific topic was whether parents valued education in general. Several respondents discussed their concern about the perception that some families “just don’t value

education,” suggesting that this perception was not true and was a damaging attitude that hindered partnership with parents.

The respondents suggested emphasizing strategies that highlight the extent to which prekindergarten supports the development of foundational skills for future schooling, focus on parents’ aspirations for their child’s development, and demonstrate how prekindergarten education supports those aspirations. They also suggested that these messages could be built into the parent meetings that Head Start staff have with parents around goals, as well as into parent workshops throughout the year. Finally, some districts are messaging the importance of prekindergarten as a conduit to the conversation on the importance of attendance.

### HELPING PARENTS UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF REGULAR ATTENDANCE

Another common concern was whether parents understood the importance of regular attendance. As discussed earlier, absenteeism can be an issue for families regardless of the age of their children, although the voluntary nature of prekindergarten can exacerbate it. Although different respondents had a variety of views about the relative importance of the voluntary nature of prekindergarten, a common theme was that districts and schools must approach the issue by thoughtfully communicating the importance of prekindergarten and regular attendance. The key message was that even if prekindergarten is voluntary, attendance in prekindergarten is important for academic success in the short and long term, and absences add up.

We heard a variety of strategies to communicate the importance of regular attendance in prekindergarten that generally focused on framing the issue, including setting clear expectations and procedures, and increasing the visibility and reach of the issue.

***Framing of the issue.*** An essential component of helping parents understand the importance of regular attendance is framing the issue. Some of the suggested strategies include demonstrating the additive nature of absences, how even excused absences are problematic, the link between attendance and school success or graduation, the investment or cost of public prekindergarten, the importance of the family’s role in supporting attendance, and laying out clear expectations for attendance and school procedures for dealing with absences. Respondents also suggested caution around how absence rates are described—for example, although in many aspects of life 90 percent is a good score, 90 percent attendance means children are missing almost a month of school. One respondent also expressed concern about the practice of threatening parents with losing their slot, as it may alienate at-risk families.

**Visibility and messaging.** Respondents also discussed the importance of developing a broader, district-level message to help get the word out. One common strategy was to develop a slogan to support attendance and attach the slogan to all district and school materials, billboards, city buses, TV commercials, and so on. Examples of such slogans from other districts include *Make Every Day Count* (Baltimore) and *Every Student, Every Day* (New York City).

Another strategy highlighted by several respondents was the importance of reaching parents early in the year with messages about attendance. Early contact was seen as essential to having the attention of families and setting the tone to keep them engaged throughout the school year. Examples of early strategies include having workshops early on and reaching out to families whose children were chronically absent in the preceding year. Although some proportion of the children attending prekindergarten will not have preceding year data, schools may be able to identify families with challenges if they have older children in the school. Finally, respondents discussed the importance of ensuring that messages are positive, making it clear that the district and school have “positive perceptions” of parents and want to work with them to set high expectations on all sides. This helps send a message of working as a team and breaks down the “authority versus parents” relationship that can exist in some schools.

## HELPING PARENTS KEEP TRACK OF ATTENDANCE

We heard from multiple respondents that often parents don’t know how many days their child has missed. One study in a large urban district showed that parents overestimate their child’s attendance (Bonilla et al. 2005), which suggests that it may be helpful to show attendance patterns in a more comparative format. Parents may respond when they see that their child is missing more than other children. Some strategies we heard included sending home a tracking tool with allowable attendance levels by instructional days and month that parents can use to track attendance and absences; sending home frequent updates about attendance to families so they hear immediately if there are problems and receive positive feedback for good attendance; and helping parents understand what lessons children are missing when absent.

## 2. Attendance-Related Activities Focused on Parents and Children

A host of strategies to support attendance was found in the related literature and gleaned from our interviews. Before describing these activities, however, it is important to briefly discuss the debate

around strategies based on incentives. In particular, we describe the pros and cons of incentives, as well as some suggestions for using them, from our respondents.

## CONSIDERING INCENTIVES

Throughout this project we heard differing opinions on the use of incentives for both children and parents. Although some respondents were in favor of incentives and used them consistently, others were skeptical of their impact and sustainability. Through these conversations, we heard advice on how to structure incentives to have the most impact and achieve specific goals.

**Concerns.** A number of respondents had important concerns about incentives:

- *Incentives do not deal with the real causes of absenteeism.* For example, one respondent questioned how a pizza party for a class would help if the main cause of absenteeism was asthma resulting from the living conditions in housing developments. On a related point, some respondents suggested that incentives may be more effective for families who face fewer challenges, though others disagreed. Those that disagreed suggested that these differences and complexities of reasons for absenteeism be carefully considered when developing attendance strategies.
- *Incentives set expectations for future incentives.* One respondent questioned what happens the next year when families and children are so used to getting incentives that their behavior depends on them. She referenced research that shows that using incentives can actually be harmful in the long run.
- *Incentive strategies could harm students by shaming or excluding them for a problem that is out of their control.* This issue was raised as an area of particular concern by DCPS staff, given that children in prekindergarten have relatively little ability to control their attendance, which is largely dependent on their parents. They were concerned that the most vulnerable children—for example, children who are homeless or facing major instability in their home lives—should not be penalized.

**Benefits.** Other respondents were clear that incentives, if structured carefully, could be very beneficial. In particular, some respondents felt that incentive strategies can create an important platform to talk about attendance and to prioritize the issue. Such strategies allow for positive messaging rather than a more reactive and therefore punitive response to attendance. Respondents also mentioned that giving incentives to children helped get them excited about attendance and in turn could get them to push their parents to get them to school. Finally, incentive strategies can build

excitement across a school for the idea of attendance. We heard examples of schoolwide efforts resulting in a buzz around attendance.

**Keys to administering incentives.** To address these concerns about incentives, districts and respondents from education organizations spoke about guidelines for their effective administration:

- *Only use incentives as part of a larger strategy.* First, we heard that it is important not to look at incentives in a vacuum. They won't be effective if done in isolation; incentives must be part of a larger strategy and culture of prioritizing attendance.
- *Focus on improved attendance, not perfect attendance.* Avoid only recognizing *perfect* attendance and instead focus on *improved* attendance as something everyone can achieve.
- *Use short time frames.* Incentives for students should be structured in short time frames that allow children to demonstrate progress. For example, it is useful to focus on one month or even one week and recognize those children who improved attendance from one period to the next.
- *Do not use incentives that allow opportunities for children to be shamed for absences when they may have no control over the situation.* Two strategies to avoid this problem include
  - » Focusing on incentives or strategies for parents instead of children.
  - » Recognizing children and families for attendance along with other positive behaviors (e.g., kindness, responsibility) to allow children multiple ways to be recognized. This practice reduces the likelihood that children will be shamed or penalized for issues they cannot control, while continuing to send the message about the importance of attendance.
- *Use the power of recognition for parents and children rather than only material incentives.* It is important to recognize the power of recognition as an incentive. Respondents mentioned that both parents and children want recognition and acknowledgment for their efforts. Although material incentives are often what come to mind first, we heard from multiple respondents that nonmaterial recognition has been very effective. This was confirmed by DCPS parents at the policy council meeting, who spoke about their desire to be recognized for consistent efforts to get their students to school regularly.

## ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES

Many of the respondents we interviewed and materials we reviewed highlighted specific activities and strategies that had been implemented to help reduce absenteeism. Some of these strategies are directed toward children, some toward adults, and a number involve incentives. Below we highlight



many strategies mentioned during the course of our review that may be useful for DCPS to consider, focusing on those aimed at individual children, classrooms, all students within a school, and parents.

***Strategies that focus on highlighting attendance of individual children.*** When considering strategies that highlight the attendance of individual children, it is important to note the cautions above about shaming children inadvertently. The strategies included simple recognition awards (such as certificates, announcing names, extra recess, special privileges, posting names on school bulletin boards), entering children's names into a raffle each day they are present and drawing names at the end of the week, or other strategies that provide small rewards for attendance. Some respondents spoke about having a school- or attendance-themed mascot visit classrooms, which could be built into an incentive strategy for younger students.

***Strategies that focus on classroom incentives.*** Another set of strategies focused on rewarding classrooms with good attendance. The concern for this kind of strategy is having individual children identified as the cause of a classroom falling short. As noted earlier, it might be helpful to allow children multiple ways to "win" for their classroom, with some of the mechanisms being behaviors that they can control, such as showing respect and kindness. Activities that respondents mentioned include rewarding classrooms with good attendance by recognizing them over the loudspeaker or with a pizza party or other kind of celebration.

***Schoolwide strategies.*** Multiple respondents reported success with schoolwide approaches. One strategy was to give students some sort of currency for various "good" behaviors, including attendance and punctuality. In each of these schools, all the staff had this currency and could give it out (including teachers, aides, administrative staff, janitors, and parent volunteers) to students. Students could use this currency to shop at the school store for specific prizes or rewards either daily or weekly. This strategy could also be used for classrooms. This schoolwide approach was seen as effective because it got the whole school behind improving attendance and behavior, created positive energy and buzz, and gave everyone a role in the effort. A few respondents spoke about working with local businesses and community organizations to receive donations that could be used for incentives (for parents and children), such as field trips to baseball games, aquariums, theme parks, and raffles for material goods like iPods, bikes, and cars.

***Strategies for parents.*** Respondents suggested that attendance-related incentives for parents can be valuable for parents and create opportunities for positive recognition. The strategies include contacting parents personally (phone calls or letters) when children have improved their attendance and recognizing parents publicly at assemblies, workshops, or other events. Multiple people spoke

about the importance of having food at specific events or workshops for parents. Others spoke about having gift cards, food baskets, or transportation passes (often distributed through raffles) to reward good attendance or to incentivize coming to specific attendance-related events. One respondent highlighted that families facing serious challenges are particularly responsive to and appreciative of rewards that involve gift cards, food, or other essential items.

## CONSIDERING TIMING

A key element of working with families and highlighting attendance as a priority is keeping them engaged throughout the school year, as well as targeting times when the message can be particularly important, such as early in the school year and during times when attendance is poor.

- *Begin early in the school year.* Respondents highlighted the importance of reaching families with information about attendance early in the school year. Some respondents also discussed the particular value of early contact for prekindergarten as the beginning of the child's school career. Some points made about this initial contact included the importance of making the first contact positive (i.e., not about absences) and following up with handwritten notes. A number of respondents also highlighted the importance of home visits to build understanding of the family's situation.
- *Keep up the focus on attendance throughout the year.* Some respondents pointed out the importance of keeping up the energy on attendance throughout the school year. Given the findings in DCPS regarding declining attendance rates each month between September and January (Dubay and Holla 2015), this point is particularly pertinent. One respondent discussed the importance of appropriate planning and the significance of variety. Another respondent mentioned a school whose principal had one teacher do a robo-call every week, sharing with families what children would be learning.
- *Strategically target additional efforts around times when attendance is poor.* Respondents highlighted focusing attendance efforts around times when attendance is poor—whether specific times of day, days of the week, or months of the year. For example, use strategically timed lesson plans to support punctuality, use themed days or special events to support attendance on days of the week that have lower attendance, and target special activities and events around times of year when attendance is particularly poor (more details on identifying trends are presented in section 5). Data from the companion report by Dubay and Holla (2015) suggest that there are clear patterns in DC, such as higher rates of absence on Mondays and Fridays, that could be used to strategically target activities.

### 3. Working to Address Common Causes of Absenteeism

As discussed earlier in this report, many respondents highlighted logistical challenges that parents could face, such as morning routines, transportation, and juggling multiple children. For some families, these challenges are in addition to more extreme challenges (e.g., housing, employment, and mental health, which are examined in the next section). With so many different logistical demands, families may lose sight of how their child's absences are adding up. To address these issues, many schools and districts have put forth strategies and tips to help families with routines and planning.

#### ASSESSING THE ISSUES

Before addressing specific concerns or implementing strategies to help families get their children to school, many respondents spoke about the importance of diagnosing problems of absenteeism by better understanding contributing factors for families. An interesting strategy identified by one respondent is to conduct a parent (and child) attitude survey, before school starts, which has multiple purposes. One purpose is to get parents to think about their routines and logistical challenges. For example, the survey asks the families how many children they have, how their children get to school, and the primary reason that their children would be late to school. The survey also provides teachers (and support staff) with information on what challenges the family may face and what targeted supports might be helpful. This kind of effort could be built into the early contacts that DCPS early childhood family service workers have with families.

#### ROUTINES AND PLANNING

We heard from many respondents that an essential step that schools and districts can take to help families is providing information and guidance on routines. Some of the strategies included sending parents information about how to prepare for school the night before, developing a backup plan for how to get their children to school, and providing materials on how to help children establish a regular routine for getting out of the house each day. Speaking specifically about homeless families, one respondent mentioned that it is important to help families think of planning as a skill. She highlighted that families often jump from crisis to crisis each day, and that appropriate outreach might help them understand that it would be easier to deal with crises if their child was in school each day, and that good attendance could help “stabilize your family.”

## UNDERSTANDING WHEN TO KEEP A CHILD AT HOME

One important piece of information that district representatives spoke about is materials on student illness and helping parents understand when to keep their child at home. They also talked about the transition parents face when moving from licensed child care (which can have strong requirements not to bring children with minor illnesses) to the different expectations at school. Respondents did note, however, that there is a fine line between not wanting to have sick children at school and also not wanting families to keep their children home if they are not actually sick.

## VACATIONS

Although we didn't hear a clear strategy to deal with families taking extended vacations, one district created an extended vacation letter that they encouraged schools to send home to families. The letter highlighted how absences affect academic performance: "It takes an average of three days for a student to catch up for each day of school missed." The letter also outlined the attendance policy in the district and reasons that students were permitted to miss school. It mentioned when the school vacation officially started and when students were expected back at school, advising families to schedule vacations accordingly. Districts such as Los Angeles have developed materials to highlight the detriment of long absences due to family vacations.

## IMMUNIZATIONS

One district representative said that students sometimes miss school in the beginning of the year due to not having the correct immunizations. She recommended that districts communicate with families early about getting children all of their health checks so they can start school on time.

## TRANSPORTATION AND SAFETY

One strategy addressing the challenges posed by transportation concerns and unsafe neighborhoods was walking school buses. Using walking school buses, groups of volunteers (parents, local college students, teachers, members of nonprofits) walk with students to and from school to ensure a safe commute. The walking school bus serves multiple purposes. It gets students to school safely, bolsters attendance by having the volunteer come to the children's homes, and lifts the transportation barrier that is often challenging for families. A similar strategy focused on safety calls for asking neighborhood watch programs and community police to increase their focus on the school and surrounding area before and after school hours.

#### 4. Addressing Larger Barriers That Can Cause Absenteeism for Families Facing Larger Challenges

As discussed earlier, our conversations with DCPS staff and experts from across the country made it clear that some families face significant personal challenges that can make it difficult for them to get their children to school. Common problems contributing to absenteeism include homelessness and housing instability, mental and physical health challenges of parents and children, and instability in employment and family structure. Data from the companion report provide some insights into the links between some of these issues and attendance patterns in DC; in particular, based on categorical eligibility, homeless children had the highest absence rates among Head Start children (Dubay and Holla 2015).

Respondents discussed two related sets of strategies for helping families with these challenges: first, working to correctly identify the subset of families with these larger needs, and second, building partnerships with other community agencies to help address the larger problems.

##### SHARING INFORMATION AND IDENTIFYING FAMILY NEEDS

One of the key themes we heard around helping families address broader barriers was working to identify specific issues facing particular families and the best methods of gathering this information. Strategies included

- Having schools share information with family services staff about attendance patterns for families who have older children in the same school.
- Including school counseling teams in attendance team meetings to share their knowledge of the students and details of family challenges.
- Meeting with community organizations that may be working with the same families to share information.
- Identifying other individuals working with families in the schools and partnering around attendance issues.
- Recruiting “success mentors” to work with students and support attendance.
- Using community health profiles to identify problems that are particularly common in certain neighborhoods.

- Creating a panel of homeless families to meet with school staff to help them understand the challenges they face—this strategy may be of value for family services staff. For example, in DC there was a case in which homeless families were in need of uniforms.
- Clearly identifying staff who will be responsible for working with partners and community organizations.

## DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY AGENCIES

Through our work we heard about a range of strategies to address specific family and community needs by using partnerships with local community organizations, other city agencies, and volunteers. These strategies included

- *Helping link families to needed services.* One respondent spoke about holding a summit of community partners and agencies or providing information through brochures or referrals. Another strategy involved using district funds to place education counselors at family and youth resource centers to work with families around needed services—the district paid for half of the counselor salaries, and the city paid for the other half.
- *Focusing on particular areas, such as health.* One administrator described building a relationship between the early childhood department and wellness centers in the city to help families access health services and break down administrative silos; another district focused on targeting schools and neighborhoods with a high incidence of asthma and worked with the Department of Health.
- *Building connections with outside agencies.* After asking them to sign confidentiality agreements, one school district invited mentors and representatives from relevant outside organizations to weekly meetings with school staff to look at school- and student-level attendance data and strategize ways to improve attendance.
- *Reaching out to community partners to help them understand the importance of attendance.* One district had content experts who worked with staff in homeless shelters to educate them on attendance and academic services and to help advise them on working with families on these topics.
- *Forming a partnership and data-sharing agreement with local social services agencies.* After forming a data-sharing agreement, one district was able to share attendance data with these agencies, including the Department of Homeless Services, which allowed the shelters to see

which students had significant attendance issues. The Department of Homeless Services made an effort to place students in shelters that were closer to their schools to help with transportation concerns, a strategy that could also be helpful for compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act.

- *Focusing on staffing structures within schools to help foster and maintain partnerships.* One district was able to bring in a resource coordinator at specific schools to connect families and the school with resources in the community from myriad agencies and partners. Another respondent mentioned that, when having a resource coordinator or partner at the school was not possible, it was helpful to have at least someone at the school who was well versed in community services and had connections and contacts to facilitate a “warm hand-off” during referrals.

## **5. Schoolwide Strategies, Internal Processes, and Support Structures to Support Attendance**

A number of the issues raised in DCPS that were common across other school districts concerned the role of schools, principals, and teachers. Some of these issues had to do with the culture of the school and whether it was focused on positively engaging with parents; some had to do with the extent to which the school and staff were focused on attendance; and some had to do with the particular roles of family services staff trying to work with teachers and schools.

### **SCHOOLWIDE STRATEGIES TO ENGAGE PARENTS AND SUPPORT ATTENDANCE**

When looking at the role that schools can play in creating a supportive environment, we consistently heard the need for a strong school culture, focused and supportive leadership, a shared vision throughout the school, and a strengths-based approach. In descriptions of strong schools, respondents continually touched on a team effort and an attitude of prioritizing attendance and strong relationships with families. We heard multiple versions of this same positive approach of focusing on the strengths of the community, the school, and families rather than deficits. As one district administrator explained, blaming entrenched problems associated with poverty on the students and families gets you nowhere; those are not going to change, but the school can change.

Schoolwide efforts to engage parents can help to address a number of contributing factors to absenteeism, including helping families have a positive relationship with DCPS staff rather than a negative one focused on enforcing attendance, helping counteract negative experiences parents may

have had with schools in the past, supporting connections with parents who have little engagement with the school, and building trust in schools.

We heard that effective schools have leadership that owns the issue of attendance and makes it a clear priority. This prioritization is demonstrated not just through sharing a vision of improving parent engagement and attendance, but actually implementing strategies and taking action to show this commitment. Although we heard repeatedly that sometimes strategies require a culture shift at the school level, one respondent emphasized that sometimes this shift can be small.

***Focus on attendance at every level.*** Respondents talked about the importance of creating a school culture focused on attendance at every level, from the principal to administrators, teachers, other staff, and parents. Some ideas include using strategies to help everyone in the school know they play a role in supporting good attendance; emphasizing attendance as an outcome, not a measure; developing a common checklist of steps to take for supporting attendance and making sure all teachers follow this checklist; creating incentives for teachers to improve attendance; and ensuring that principals are at the table when attendance issues are being discussed. Finally, it is important to include prekindergarten in any overarching schoolwide strategies around attendance and to ensure strong communication between the different parts of the school about particular children and their families.

***Try to understand and meet the needs of parents.*** A number of the strategies highlighted by respondents focused on working to understand the experiences and perspectives of parents. In one strategy, staff participated in an exercise that works to consider the school and interactions from the parent's perspective and to identify ways to rework school policies and structures to make it easier for parents to have successful encounters with school personnel. Another strategy sought to create opportunities to hear from parents about their experiences and barriers around attendance, which has the dual benefit of making parents feel welcome and respected and of identifying particular problems that the school can work to address. Respondents also discussed the importance of reaching out to parents overall, not just about attendance. Outreach can include supporting volunteers, creating opportunities for parents to connect with and support each other, or thinking about other ways the school might be able to support parents (e.g., one school opened the gym up to parents before school for physical activity and social interaction, and another school sponsored a weekly produce market).

***Focus on welcoming parents.*** Various respondents discussed focusing on the school as a welcoming environment as opposed to a bureaucratic environment. This shift starts with the front office approach and attitude, as well as practical issues of signage and ease of access. Some specific strategies



respondents mentioned include having teachers or parent-child teams welcome children each day to school or to the classroom.

***Strategies to strengthen internal communication and staffing around attendance.*** Throughout our research, we heard about the value of having a committed team or group that regularly looks at and analyzes attendance data. Different districts had views on who participated in these conversations. We also heard from multiple respondents who used innovative ways to connect with the hardest to reach families.

Some strategies that respondents highlighted

- Regularly sharing information and data with teachers about student attendance patterns and ensuring that the data were clear, usable, and actionable.
- Identifying a staff person to take the lead attendance role and be responsible for facilitating meetings and activities and collecting attendance tracking sheets (the respondent suggesting this strategy also suggested that there was some recognition-e.g. a small honorarium- to acknowledge their work).
- Using the attendance team to identify who within the school staff had the best relationship with (and knowledge of) the family so as to maximize the effectiveness of outreach and supports.
- Including individuals from community-based organizations in attendance meetings to identify possible resources for chronically absent students (this could be especially helpful in DC if staff from the homeless shelters or homeless advocacy community could take part in these meetings at schools with high populations of homeless students).
- Using home visits to build strong relationships with students, including finding staff who can visit homes on weekends rather than on school days.

## **SUPPORTING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN FAMILY SERVICES STAFF AND SCHOOLS**

The role of the family services staff is clearly crucial in the process of improving attendance. One of the key themes that we heard throughout our analysis was the success of Head Start (and other support organizations) in providing families with extra help and promoting attendance. In one study, the district reported that Head Start students had higher attendance rates in subsequent years compared to their non-Head Start counterparts (Connolly and Olson 2012). Another respondent mentioned that they had heard from families that Head Start staff provided them with a sense of support in knowing that if they

ran into issues (unemployment, housing challenges) they knew where to turn and they had the resources to help them.

As described earlier, issues were raised during the interviews and focus groups that concerned some particular challenges faced by family services staff. In particular, there was interest in understanding how this staff could develop stronger relationships with teachers and schools. Although it was not easy to obtain a lot of information on this issue, as this staffing issue is related to DC's relatively uncommon Head Start/prekindergarten model, we did glean some insights:

- *Seek innovative ideas from Head Start staff and teachers.* In one district, the attendance office held a competition for teachers in which they were asked to create an innovative workshop or orientation. Prizes were awarded to 10 of the 100 teachers who submitted plans. The district saw the competition as a success in its fostering of creative and engaging strategies to help connect with parents. One interesting idea would be to hold a similar competition that focused on an orientation that family services staff hold with teachers. This orientation could help develop the relationship between Head Start staff and teachers and promote a strong partnership focused on attendance.
- *Help teachers understand the role and value of family services staff.* A representative from an education organization stressed the importance of non-school-based support staff (like family services staff) gaining credibility with teachers. Although these staff members may not be educators, they can connect with teachers by further understanding their role and empathizing with them. By doing so, family services staff are not just seen as another accountability check. The representative also described the need for the staff to demonstrate the value they can add at the beginning of the year. She emphasized that her staff looked at class- and student-level data and were able to feed this information back to teachers in real time, allowing them to benefit from a timely and nuanced look at data. They also presented these data in a digestible manner (including bar graphs). The representative mentioned that demonstrating this ability to support the teacher and add value from the outset was helpful in being seen as an important ally rather than an outsider. In addition, this relationship building helped with reciprocity of information sharing about the child between the teacher and support staff member.
- *Help build relationships with school leadership.* One respondent mentioned that the key reason why two area schools where Head Start workers and teachers were working well together was the school leadership placing importance on this relationship. She felt that one component of

establishing a strong relationship with principals was providing them with all the materials that the family services staff would use.

- *Work to include family services staff in regular attendance meetings.* Another key element in improving the relationship between the schools and family services staff was conducting a monthly (or more frequent) meeting that included school leadership, teachers, and family services staff whenever possible to look specifically at attendance.

## 6. Strengthening Internal Systems for Collecting and Analyzing Data and Tracking Attendance Patterns

During the interviews and focus groups, respondents raised concerns about internal processes and support systems around attendance. Some of the specific issues they raised included lack of consistency on attendance tracking, challenges with large caseloads, difficulty in categorizing and choosing cases, and needing time and resources to look at data collectively with teams. Although respondents did not necessarily have insights to share on all these issues, they did provide some useful suggestions.

### USING DATA DIAGNOSTICALLY TO TARGET SERVICES

One of the key lessons learned through our research was the power of having and using good data and systems to help drive strategic intervention. The majority of the districts that we researched or spoke with have begun using attendance categories (or bands) to group schools and outline a clear plan for intervention. Most of these districts have started to use this categorizing strategy within schools as well. An underlying theme was to closely analyze data and also train teachers and staff on how to use data to help increase attendance. Some of the strategies identified by respondents included the following:

- *Creating attendance readiness profiles.* One district worked to create attendance readiness profiles to help organize schools and identify specific problem areas. To create these profiles, the school looked at three years of attendance data, specifically focusing on chronic absence. They also looked at the number of students at risk of chronic absence in each school over the last two years. To supplement this information, the district created surveys for administration and staff around attendance. They analyzed the survey data and quantified the responses to add them to the attendance data and create scores for school-level attendance readiness profiles. Although this process began as a pilot, the district soon saw the feasibility and usefulness of the profiles and rolled the strategy out for the whole district. A district

administrator noted that this strategy was particularly helpful because the district has serious attendance concerns, and the profiles were able to highlight the schools with the biggest issues (as well as those with strong attendance) and adapt strategies and shift resources accordingly.

- *Using attendance readiness profiles to drive diagnosis of absenteeism issues and targeted intervention strategies.* Using the attendance readiness profiles and supplemental resources, the district mentioned above has been able to empower schools and work in an oversight role. Along with the profiles, the district shared a tiered system of strategies, with students grouped into four levels of attendance from best to worst. Specific strategies are suggested for each tier and broken up by quarter. The idea is that the strategies build on each other, so that school leaders may choose a different focus every quarter by tier. For example, in quarter one a school may be focusing on tier 3 and 4 students, monitoring their progress and trying to get as many touches as possible. In quarter two, the school may shift more resources to tier 2 students. In this system, schools decide how they want to use the tools and work with the resources provided. Schools are asked to report the strategies they implement by month and quarter, and the overall goal is that each child will see a 20 percent reduction in absences.
- *Using attendance bands.* Another district has structured all of their monitoring and intervention around attendance bands (far below basic, below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced). The attendance bands are based on the number of days missed and are tracked in real time so an issue of chronic absence can be flagged within the first week or two. The attendance bands are used in all of the district's attendance-related materials, such as strategies, tracking, and notifications. For example, the district has calendars and charts that show how the attendance bands unfold through the school year by instructional day and month. The district also uses this language with parents, which helps make the chronic absence issue more clear and emphasizes the importance of tracking. The district has a 70-page toolkit on attendance for schools with myriad resources including planning and tracking tools, school and community assessment tools, month-specific strategies, intervention letters and memos, and incentive ideas.
- *Using data to examine timing of absenteeism.* As noted earlier, it is useful to use absence data to identify particular times when attendance is worst, both within weeks and across the year. If possible, it makes sense to analyze this type of data both within and before the school year in order to prepare strategies to counteract these trends. [The companion analysis conducted for this project identified that attendance was lowest on Mondays and Fridays, before and after snow days, and the day before long weekends and holiday breaks and progressively worsened

throughout the first part of the school year until the peak of absences in January (Dubay and Holla 2015).]

- *Implementing other important data strategies.* A host of other important data strategies were suggested that could support initiatives to improve attendance. These strategies included making sure that school personnel know what is happening in their schools around attendance by sending frequent updates, making sure that staff and partners have access to information about trends, ensuring that analyses are done at the school and classroom level to identify patterns that may be unique to particular schools or classrooms, and strengthening data capacity to provide real-time attendance data tools for teachers.

## IDENTIFYING THE CORRECT TRIGGER FOR FLAGGING AND INTERVENTION

Throughout our analysis, we heard different strategies on how to flag attendance issues. Although we heard many respondents talk about using a 90 percent attendance rate as a lower limit before a student is flagged, other districts were aiming for 96 percent and using that figure as a benchmark. For the most part, the types of triggers established were tied to the data systems in place. For example, districts that were looking at daily and weekly attendance data were categorizing students based on their attendance and monitoring for at-risk students and intervening accordingly. In many cases, we heard that missing two days or more in the first two weeks of school would warrant an intervention. Below are some strategies for flagging attendance issues or at-risk students before and throughout the school year.

- *Flagging children before the school year.* Respondents had a number of good suggestions around proactively identifying children before the start of the school year. One strategy was to use previous year's attendance data to flag children or families with attendance problems, reach out to families at the highest level of chronic absenteeism (20+ days) during the summer or first week, and carefully monitor those who were at-risk for the upcoming school year. This strategy would make most sense for those children who were in Head Start programs at age 3 and were entering their second year of prekindergarten. For children that are attending for the first time this technique could also be used by identifying families who may have older children in the school with attendance problems.

A couple of district representatives talked about using early warning signs to flag students. Although care needs to be taken not to label children and families, one district spoke of using low scores on the incoming assessment for Head Start to flag children as they found an association between low incoming skills and absenteeism. Another district found that late enrollment was associated with absenteeism. In both cases they reached out to families in late

summer and monitored their attendance in the first couple of weeks carefully. Based on case management notes in DC it seems that missing health and dental forms for 3-year-olds or even siblings could potentially be explored as a variable to flag children as at risk. The high incidence of chronic absences among homeless children and children whose families are on TANF suggest that attention could be paid to these families as well, though caution must be taken to ensure that children and families are not labeled.

- *Creating triggers during the school year.* Respondents also described the approaches they took to identifying emerging problems during the year. Respondents established triggers in different ways, including
  - » *Three days' absence within the first 25 instructional days.* As mentioned above, one district uses attendance bands with a goal of 96 percent. Using these bands they show that missing 3 days within the first 25 instructional days is “below basic.” Because schools and teachers have access to real-time data, they can decide at what point they are intervening on this scale. For example, the district administrator noted that students who miss a day in the first two weeks are chronically absent and raise a red flag. In this district, counselors and school social workers are “the safety net”; they look at attendance daily and monitor outreach to parents.
  - » *Examining data every 10 days of school.* Another school district analyzes data after the first 10 days of school, looking at who is chronically absent and at risk and intervening accordingly. They then look at the attendance data every subsequent 10 days to see who is at risk or chronically absent and intervene accordingly, as they have acknowledged that they need to attack the issue quickly.
  - » *Five aggregate absences.* One district administrator spoke about using five aggregate absences as a flag. Staff generate a weekly report that shows each student who has hit or gone over that five-day threshold by the end of that week. This respondent mentioned that using three days would be too much for the staff to handle. The district also uses a scale on which 10 percent is red and 7 to 10 percent is yellow (at-risk) and should be monitored. Because they are using real-time data, they can track these levels throughout the school year.

## RESPONDING WHEN A CHRONIC ABSENCE CASE IS FLAGGED

Through our analysis, we heard about many similar strategies of how to reach out to families and intervene. All these strategies used a tiered approach beginning with a lighter touch (such as a phone call or note) and moving up toward intervention meetings, attendance plans, and home visits. Many of

the intervention strategies and the process are dependent on the structures in place to discuss students and student attendance (i.e., attendance committees and teams).

Respondents had some additional suggestions about implementing these tiered approaches, including working to have a good balance of positive and corrective actions, such as four positive interactions for every corrective action; working with parents to create an attendance improvement action plan, signed by staff and parents, that outlines the attendance goal (by week), actions needed to achieve goal (e.g., repairing car, leaving for work early, and so on), and the date the goal will be accomplished by; and sending parents a letter with targeted information on the child's attendance, how the child's attendance compares to other children, and supports that are available.

Respondents highlighted the critical importance of establishing positive relationships with parents early and talking about attendance before the issue arises. One suggestion was that family services staff *not* be the ones to do the initial outreach to families about attendance problems so as to protect their role as a resource rather than an enforcer. One district also recommended being consistent in the timing of reaching out to parents, such as choosing a particular day of the week, and letting parents know the outreach schedule ahead of time.

Finally, respondents highlighted the importance of accurate contact information, which is an issue that appears to be challenging for DCPS family services staff. One district recommended having parents fill out their address, email, phone number, and an emergency contact on all (or most) forms they fill out for the school, whether for field trips, afterschool programs, free/reduced lunch, and so on. They also have parents fill out this information at any event they attend at school. The district also recommended using Twitter or Facebook if phone, mail, and email have not worked.

# Section III. Conclusions and Recommendations

Over the past decade, there has been a growing focus on chronic absenteeism in the early grades (Romero and Lee 2007) and its implications for children's school success. Although much of this work has focused on the absenteeism patterns and strategies for children in the K–12 school system, there is an emerging interest in examining these issues in early childhood and prekindergarten programs in public schools. This report presents findings from a preliminary exploration of absenteeism issues in DCPS early childhood and prekindergarten programs. DCPS is one of relatively few school systems focusing on these issues for this age group and is at the forefront of this area of exploration.

This report provides an initial exploration into two key issues—first, factors contributing to absenteeism in the DCPS early childhood program, and second, strategies that might be used to address them. These issues are laid out in detail in the preceding pages. However, the report also provides some larger insights that are worth highlighting.

## Important Insights

- **Absenteeism is a problem, even in the very early grades.** More than one out of four DCPS prekindergarten students were absent more than 10 percent of the days in SY 2013–14 (Dubay and Holla 2015). This rate of absence means that these children missed the equivalent of one month, or one-tenth of the learning opportunities offered by the early childhood program. Seven percent missed more than 20 percent of the days. These rates are similar to those found in Baltimore (26.5 percent) but lower than rates found in Chicago (36 percent) in SY 2010–11 and New York (49 percent) in SY 2012–13 for prekindergarten students (Balfanz and Byrnes 2013; Connolly and Olson 2012; Ehrlich et al. 2014).
- **Some children are particularly likely to miss school.** Like research in other districts, such as Chicago, the DCPS research found that some children are particularly likely to be chronically absent (Ehrlich et al. 2014). In DC, African American children, children who were homeless, and children enrolled in TANF had higher absence rates (Dubay and Holla 2015).
- **Early childhood is the right time to intervene.** Research suggests that absenteeism in the early grades is a strong predictor of later absenteeism and school failure. Early childhood programs



present an important opportunity for school districts to establish lasting patterns, as they represent children's and many parents' entry into the school system. Indeed, many pre-kindergarten programs are designed to help children who are at risk for academic challenges to get a strong start—for these children to benefit, districts must ensure adequate attendance.

- **The factors contributing to absenteeism can be complex and interrelated.** Our initial research suggests that the factors contributing to absenteeism in DC are very similar to those identified in districts across the country. Although sometimes absenteeism issues are relatively easily fixed (e.g., helping parents understand why attendance matters), it appears that more severe absenteeism rates are often associated with deeper problems. These problems include significant family challenges (homelessness, family instability, physical or mental health issues), community challenges (such as neighborhood safety), and challenges within particular classrooms or schools (school climate, quality, safety, and relationships with parents). Our research underscores the interrelated nature of a number of these more serious challenges.
- **Systems for identifying, tracking, and intervening around absenteeism can be challenging.** Our initial explorations suggest that DCPS, like other districts, faces challenges in ensuring that systems and processes are in place to appropriately and accurately identify, track, and address chronic absenteeism. These challenges include the standardization and implementation of attendance strategies and response to absence policies.
- **Many of the issues that DCPS/ECED faces around absenteeism are common to other districts and school systems, yet every district has unique issues that need to be explored.** This finding has two implications.
  - » On one hand, our exploration suggests that many of the challenges faced by DC prekindergarten families and programs are common across other schools systems and older children (i.e., elementary school age). As a result, there is a wealth of knowledge that has been built up through the efforts of other school districts and initiatives like Attendance Works across the country that can be implemented and tested. We have highlighted some of these in this paper.
  - » On the other hand, there was also strong consensus from the experts we spoke to that identifying solutions and strategies for any particular district requires an in-depth look at that district's unique challenges by talking with parents, school staff, and experts. The research presented here represents an initial step toward this effort for DCPS, but the time

constraints did not allow for data collection from parents and school staff—both crucial perspectives that would help inform any more focused effort.

- **DCPS/ECED has some unique strengths and challenges.** Our research suggests that DCPS/ECED is unusual both because of its efforts to address chronic absenteeism among prekindergarten-age children and because of the DC prekindergarten model of having Head Start embedded in the schools. This model provides both opportunities and challenges. For example, one of the unique strengths of the DC early childhood model is that, as a Head Start program, it has the resources and responsibility to work to address larger challenges facing families. However, a Head Start model embedded in the school system can also present some challenges in ensuring that early childhood attendance strategies are part of a larger, coherent, school- and systemwide set of approaches.
- **Absenteeism in early childhood programs is a relatively new area of focus, and much more needs to be learned.** Finally, it is important to recognize that, although there is a growing and exciting body of work around absenteeism in schools, there is much less work focusing on the particular strategies used to address absenteeism in early childhood education. Many of the issues are similar, but the unique aspects of how these issues play out for younger children are just beginning to be explored.

## What Strategies Should DCPS/ECED Consider?

Experts interviewed for this project agreed that strategies to address absenteeism should be multifaceted and comprehensive. Any effort to address chronic absenteeism must recognize that not all absences are created equal and should be designed comprehensively to identify and address the range of contributing factors. Such strategies should also address the internal processes and systems that are necessary to identify the problem and take appropriate action. In many cases, effective strategies begin with a strong data system and analysis, organization, and reporting of key patterns and trends.

The insights and experiences of the experts interviewed for this study and the current literature on strategies to combat absenteeism suggest that DCPS/ECED might want to consider exploring strategies in the following areas:

1. Help parents understand the importance of prekindergarten, attendance, and keeping track of attendance.

Various strategies focus on the critical importance of ensuring that parents understand the value of early education and prekindergarten, of the importance of regular attendance, and of helping parents keep track of their child's attendance.

- » Consider innovative ways to convey the importance of prekindergarten and early education including workshops, events, and resource-rich materials. (ECED has already moved in this direction by developing an attendance booklet for parents.) Help parents understand the skills that will be taught in prekindergarten and give details on the educational value of each day.
- » Focus on framing the importance of attendance and its impact on future educational outcomes. Develop and use easy-to-digest messages about the impact of absences, including relevant information on how absences affect development of key skills, performance in future grades, and remediation. Also focus on framing of the cumulative nature of absences and how each student compares to his or her peers.
- » Be sure to reach out to parents early in the year with these messages, as well as maintain an ongoing focus throughout the year and when absences peak.
- » Provide parents and families tools that are easy to understand and use to track attendance across weeks, instructional days, and months. Help parents understand the value of tracking attendance.

## 2. Strengthen attendance-related activities focused on parents and children.

Respondents highlighted a broad range of strategies designed to support attendance, as well as some of the lessons learned about using incentives in this area.

- » Consider the pros and cons of targeted incentive-based strategies to ensure that such strategies are developed in ways that maximize their effectiveness, minimize their negative consequences, and recognize their limitations.
- » Explore different strategies to support attendance, including strategies focused on children, on parents, on classrooms, and on the entire school.
- » Look at attendance data to determine the timing of absenteeism so that attendance strategies can be targeted to have the greatest impact.

## 3. Work to address common causes of absenteeism.

- » Assess the particular challenges facing parents by gathering information from parents about the issues that can affect attendance, and use this information to design targeted strategies.

- » Develop tools for parents to use to focus on routines and planning (e.g., attendance booklets). Think about strategies to emphasize the importance of routines and different mechanisms to convey this message on an ongoing basis (e.g., workshops, incentives, flyers, competitions).
  - » Help parents understand the circumstances under which they should keep children at home, and what circumstances are not recommended. For example, help parents know when to keep their children home from illness and that it is important to not schedule long vacations during times when school is in session. Provide parents with constant reminders and helpful resources about getting immunizations and other important medical and dental checks that can help lift key barriers to attendance.
  - » Explore and work to address transportation barriers for families who face particular challenges getting their children to school.
4. Address larger barriers that can cause absenteeism for families facing larger challenges.
- » Brainstorm ways to learn more about families with substantial needs and ways to best contact and work with those families who are hardest to reach. Strategies could include connecting with other school staff and contacts who (1) work with older siblings, (2) work with children in after-school programs, (3) belong to community groups or agencies that may work with families, or (4) belong to religious organizations that may work with families. Building these connections and this network can help in better understanding the families' needs and situations and can improve communication lines with the families.
  - » Discuss the idea of hosting trainings by local groups to become better versed on key issues and identifying family needs. For example, consider having staff meet with homeless shelter staff or mental health professionals. Collegial meetings can aid the amount of information staff has, bolster their position as a resource for families on key issues, and strengthen communication lines between family services staff and community groups.
  - » Continue to strengthen partnerships and create new connections with community agencies who work with families in a range of ways. These connections can strengthen referral processes, improve information and services for families, and help enlist partner agencies in supporting attendance.

5. Develop schoolwide strategies, internal processes, and support structures to support attendance.
  - » Consider how to improve and standardize attendance-taking practices, absence recording, and absence follow-up at schools.
  - » Consider ways to help schools develop schoolwide strategies to support attendance and reduce absenteeism, and explore strategies to help supporting attendance be a priority of every level of staff.
  - » Think about what strategies schools can put in place to be more welcoming to parents, to understand their needs, and to emphasize the importance of parent engagement to support attendance.
  - » Identify strategies to strengthen the relationship between family services staff and teachers and principals. Make the expectations and the role of each actor clear when it comes to attendance and following up on absences. Outline the different ways that the family services staff can add value to the work of teachers in focusing on attendance and the many ways family services staff can serve as a resource and support.
6. Create effective internal systems for collecting and analyzing data and tracking attendance patterns.
  - » Use data about absences to quickly identify problematic patterns, and develop appropriate policies to address them. These data should identify children with particular problems and the timing of higher absence rates.
  - » Analyze data before the school year and think about ways to flag students who should be contacted before the beginning of school, or at least be closely monitored in the first couple of weeks (or month) of school (i.e., those with prior absenteeism and those in eligibility categories that are associated with high rates of absenteeism).
  - » Focus resources on analyzing data regularly in the first month of school. In DC, as in other sites, chronic absenteeism in the early part of the school year is associated with absenteeism throughout the year (Dubay and Holla 2015), so it is important to address this concern as soon as possible.
  - » Consider the best policy for flagging attendance issues that triggers some sort of intervention. Many districts with improved data systems have thresholds for attendance intervention in consideration, but they look at data daily or weekly to decide who should be flagged and who to follow up with in a proactive manner.

- » Consider different strategies for categorizing levels of absenteeism at the district level and at the school level. This categorization can be done before the school year based on previous years' data and on an ongoing basis throughout the year.
- » Use attendance categories strategically to focus resources, and consider creating a tiered intervention system that has a different strategy for working with different levels of schools or students. With limited resources, it is important to understand where, when, and how intervention strategies should be coordinated at the school and student level.
- » Focus on creating different diagnostic tools to identify schools' attendance patterns. One district created attendance readiness profiles that used attendance data across multiple years and teacher surveys to better understand the status of each school on attendance issues. This practice helped focus resources more efficiently throughout the district, with particular emphasis on some schools.

In conclusion, this paper summarizes the key factors that were identified as contributing to absenteeism in the DCPS early childhood program, discusses strategies that other systems have implemented to address these factors, and recommends steps that ECED could take to consider and develop strategies. Although there are no evaluation data showing the efficacy of these strategies, this summary provides initial insights into some of the strategies that may be promising for the DCPS early childhood program to consider putting into place and lays the foundation for a deeper look at these issues. However, this analysis also suggests that, although significant steps could be taken within the ECED early childhood program, a deeper effort to address these issues will require a broader systemic focus across the DCPS system and a much deeper look at how these issues play out for particular families and in particular schools.

# Notes

1. To date, 21 states report collecting data on chronic absenteeism. Although the definitions these states use vary significantly, 11 of the 21 base reports on total number of days missed, regardless of whether absences were excused or unexcused. Seventeen of these states publicly report chronic absenteeism figures. See <http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/DQCChronicAbsenceFeb26.pdf>.
2. See also Lisa Dubay, Elena Zarabozo, Heather Sandstrom, and Gina Adams, *Absenteeism in DC Public School Head Start Programs* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2013), unpublished paper.
3. Dubay et al., *Absenteeism in DC Public School Head Start Programs*.
4. Emma Brown, "DC Bill Would Ban School Suspensions for City's Pre-K Students," *Washington Post*, July 13, 2014.
5. See also Laura Bornfreund, "Why Suspension Makes No Sense in the Early Grades," *Huffington Post*, March 22, 2012.

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