RESEARCH MEMO
Understanding and Addressing Chronic Absence and Habitual Truancy

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Executive Summary

Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing more than 10% of instructional time, and habitual truancy, defined as an absence "without an acceptable excuse for part or all of 5 or more days", are negatively associated with school quality and student success. In efforts to boost academic success, schools across the United States have implemented and evaluated a variety of interventions intended to increase student attendance. This report examines the student traits and experiences that have the strongest association with absenteeism, provides detailed summaries of the characteristics of some of the programs aiming to reduce absenteeism and reviews the handful of such interventions that we believe are backed by compelling evidence.

Who misses school? A recent study by Gee (2019) found that students who are habitually truant or chronically absent often have health detriments, similar approaches to learning, and a previous history of absences. Family socioeconomic status, employment status, and attitudes about education all influence a child's attendance pattern. Other studies found that chronic absenteeism and habitual truancy are associated with poor health, low parental involvement, economic disadvantages, and negative attitudes toward schooling. Students who have higher levels of conflict with teachers, don't feel a sense of belonging, safety, or respect at school, and have a harder time learning are more likely to be absent. We conclude that **low attendance is an indication of other obstacles in a student's life that keep them from attending school.**

What can MMSD do about it? We reviewed multiple strategies and programs schools implemented across the United States to reduce chronic absenteeism. Drawing data from [Attendance Works](#), an organization that aims to improve federal, state, and local practices around school attendance, we focused on interventions that pay attention to **individualized factors, address multiple dimensions in students' daily lives**, **consider the range of experiences students have**, and rely on administration and other personnel rather than individual teachers to implement. The programs we highlight fall into four categories: individualized and personal nudging, community-wide school-based truancy courts, social-emotional learning, and mentoring programs.

We find that:
- Individualized and multi-tiered programs are typically more successful than those that impose uniform sanctions on students who miss school. Successful interventions work to create a supportive network in students' lives. They require high levels of teamwork and data sharing between administrators and families, as well as an understanding of the obstacles in a student's life.
- Programs that focus on improvement rather than accountability are more successful.
- Timing of interventions matters. Preventative measures should start early in a student's school career. Transition periods, such as entry grades in elementary, middle, and high school, are favorable times of intervention.

Introduction

School absenteeism has been a subject of increased attention both nationally and in the state of Wisconsin. Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing more than 10% of instructional time, is associated with worse grades (Romero and Lee, 2007), lower levels of high school completion (Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey, 2007; Utah Education Policy Center, 2012), and lower college readiness (Allensworth et al., 2014). Furthermore, chronic absenteeism is widely used as a measure of school quality and student success. Federal ESSA guidelines require schools to adopt a minimum of five measures of school performance, with academic achievement, academic progress, English language proficiency, and high school graduation rates being mandatory. The fifth measure must assess school quality or student success in some way – and most states have selected chronic absenteeism as that measure, including Wisconsin (ESSA Accountability Overview, 2019). This increased attention on absenteeism has led to heightened efforts to find strategies to reduce absenteeism and truancy.

This report describes risk factors, trends, and correlates of higher truancy or absenteeism across elementary and high school, as well as general characteristics of evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing chronic absenteeism and habitual truancy. The aims of this report are to: 1) review the most compelling evidence on the association between school attendance and academic outcomes, 2) discuss approaches to increasing student attendance, and 3) recommend those approaches we find most promising based on scientific evidence.

In the sections below, we begin by identifying key terms. Next, we describe how attendance is associated with a host of outcomes and consider the strength of the evidence that missing school *causes* the adverse outcomes we observe. Finally, we review some promising approaches to increasing student attendance, focusing particularly on Tier 2 and 3 strategies that are evidence-based, rely more heavily on school administration than on teachers, and are replicable within the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD).

Key Terms:

Excused absences are absences "agreed on by parents and school officials as legitimate in nature and not involving detriment to the child" (Kearney, 2003). Examples of excused absences include illness, observance of religious holidays, bereavement due to death of a close family member, doctor appointments, and severe weather. Parents must report these absences for the school to consider them excused (Reporting an Absence, n.d.).

Unexcused absences, or **truancy,** are absences without an acceptable excuse, or without notification to the school or principal. **Disciplinary absences** are absences resulting from disciplinary action taken by the school, usually through out of school suspensions. While these differ in cause, they all result in instructional time missed for the student.

Chronic absenteeism makes no distinctions among excused, unexcused, and disciplinary absences and is a simple summary measure of how much instructional school time students miss (Jordan and Miller, 2017). The federal and state thresholds for classifying a student as chronically absent differ, with students missing more than 10% of possible attendance days considered chronically absent federally, while Wisconsin defines this threshold at 16% (About the Data, 2020).

Habitual truancy refers to students absent "without an acceptable excuse for part or all of 5 or more days on which school is held during a school semester" according to state and federal

definition (United States congress, 2019). Many students are both habitually truant and chronically absent.

Chronic absenteeism and habitual truancy are associated with many negative outcomes. Romero and Lee (2007) found that first-graders who missed more than 10% of the school year scored an average of 8% lower in reading and 10% lower in math at the end of the year than those absent 0-3.3% of the year. This result was independent of race, age, income, kindergarten socioemotional development, educational experiences prior to kindergarten, and type of kindergarten program attended. In the longer term, Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey (1997) found that absences in 1st grade significantly predict high school dropout, with future dropouts averaging 16 days of absence in the 1st grade compared to 10 days of absence for non-dropouts. They conclude that "each additional day absent is estimated to increase the likelihood of dropout by about 5%, so this six-day difference implies an increase in the odds of dropout of about 30%" (95). Consistent with Alexander, Entwisle and Horsey's study in Baltimore, a study of Utah Public Schools found that chronic absenteeism in a single year between grades 8-12 was associated with a seven-fold increase in the likelihood of dropping out of high school (Utah Education Policy Center, 2012). Allensworth et al. (2014) found that chronic absence in any grade between 5th and 8th places students at very high risk (50-75%) of being off-track for graduation in 9th grade, with increased risk of eventually dropping out. They conclude "all high school outcomes [grades, test scores, graduation, college readiness] are substantially better among student who improve their attendance in the middle grades, compared to students with the same achievement in fifth grade who do not improve their attendance." Taken together, chronic absenteeism from kindergarten through high school is associated with worse grades, lower knowledge, and increased odds of high school dropout. These associations extend to higher education, as lower grades and high school dropout decrease the chances of attending college and earning a degree.

However, chronic absenteeism and habitual truancy are not homogenous. One can further differentiate school attendance problems as school refusal, truancy, school withdrawal, and school exclusion (Heyne, Gren-Landell, Melvin, and Gentle-Genitty, 2019). **School refusal** is characterized by a students' reluctance to attend school in connection with emotional distress caused by attendance or chronic emotional distress that hinders the ability to attend school. **Truancy** is marked by being absent without permission from school authorities and follows the definition of an unexcused absence above. **School withdrawal** is characterized by parents' active efforts to keep the student at home or little to no parental effort to get the student to attend school. **School exclusion** is absenteeism caused by the school levying disciplinary action unlawfully such as corporal punishment, failing to accommodate the needs of the young person, or discouraging the student to attend school beyond the realm of legally acceptable behavior. Each of these school attendance problems can contribute to chronic absenteeism or habitual truancy through missed instructional time.

Who misses school?

Individuals who are chronically absent and habitually truant share many of the same attributes and experiences. Gee (2019) attempted to quantify how various factors in a student's experience contributed to variation in absenteeism, separating the factors contributing to chronic absenteeism into between-school factors, between-classroom factors, and between-child factors. Using models incorporating these factors and a nationally representative kindergarten through 2nd grade sample, he was able to account for 12% of the variation in kindergarten chronic absenteeism, 20% of first grade chronic absenteeism variation, and 16%

of second grade variation. His study showed that most variation in chronic absenteeism is due to variation among children in traits such as health and approaches to learning. Parental factors, such as socioeconomic status, employment status, and attitudes about education also contribute to variability in chronic absenteeism. Furthermore, the most explained variation in first and second grade was accounted for by absenteeism in previous years. Between-school and between-classroom variation only accounted for approximately 2-3% of variation in kindergarten through 2nd grade chronic absenteeism.

Habitual truancy is further associated with poor health (Leone and Weinburg, 2010), low parental involvement, and negative attitudes towards schooling (Gee, 2019). Additionally, students of color (Gee, 2019; Eklund et al., 2019), those who have lower levels of closeness with teachers (Gee, 2019), higher levels of conflict with teachers (Gee, 2019), lower feelings of belonging, safety, or respect (Eklund et al., 2019), experience economic disadvantage or poverty (Jordan and Miller, 2017; Dougherty and Childs ,2019; Eklund et al., 2019; Mallett, 2015), and have academic learning problems (Mallett, 2015) are more likely to be chronically absent and habitually truant. Additionally, habitual truancy and chronic absenteeism are higher in later grades or kindergarten (Jordan and Miller, 2017; Eklund et al., 2019) on average. This is illustrated in Figure 1 below, comparing the habitual truancy rates between MMSD and Wisconsin overall by grade-level.

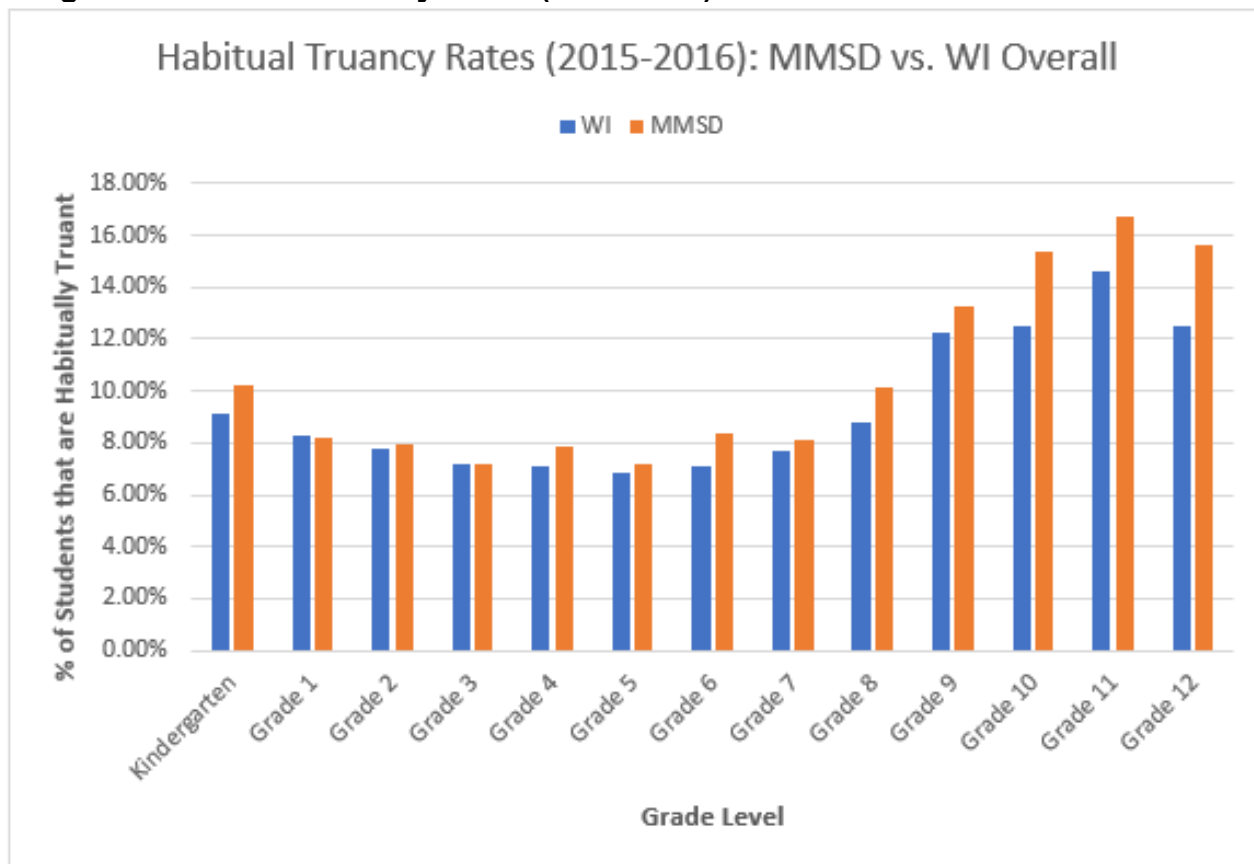**Figure 1: Habitual Truancy Rates (2015-2016): MMSD vs. Wisconsin Overall**

Figure 1: data sourced from Department of Public Instruction (DPI)

Students who identify as LGBTQ+ (Mallett, 2016) or experience violence in or near the home or school (Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent, 2001) have higher rates of habitual truancy on

average. Given the definitional overlap, risk factors associated with habitual truancy could increase chronic absenteeism through unexcused absences. These risk factors work in tandem, and presence of more than one risk factor increases odds of both habitual truancy and chronic absenteeism (Suh, 2007).

General Characteristics of Programs Reducing Chronic Absenteeism and Habitual Truancy:

Many general characteristics are commonplace in interventions that seek to reduce chronic absenteeism and habitual truancy. Attendance Works, an organization that aims to improve federal, state, and local practices around school attendance, recommends splitting interventions into multiple tiers that emphasize individualized needs and challenges of students who struggle to attend school regularly (Attendance Works Figure 1). They separate interventions into three tiers; Tier 1 focuses on universal interventions seeking to prevent absenteeism, Tier 2 focuses on individuals with moderate chronic absenteeism (10-19% of school missed), and Tier 3 focuses on those missing more than 20% of school, considered as severe chronic absence. Tier 1 consists of universal interventions that are generally low-cost, while Tier 3 focuses on intense, expensive interventions aimed at students with severe chronic absenteeism (20+%).
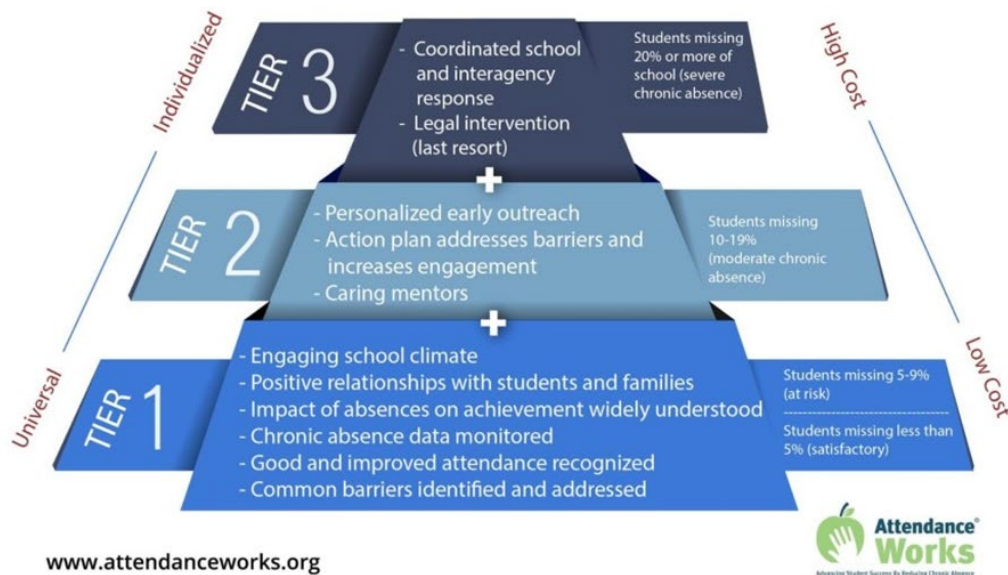
Figure 2: Intervention Tiers (Attendance Works)

Figure 2: Attendance Works. Chart of Intervention Tiers

Attendance Works identifies five key ingredients for systematic change illustrated in Figure 3: positive engagement, actionable data, capacity building, strategic partnerships, and shared accountability. **Positive engagement** refers to caring relationships, effective messaging, and a positive school climate to motivate daily attendance. **Actionable data** is data that is accurate, accessible, and reported in a way that can be understood easily. **Capacity building** refers to the ability to work together to interpret data and solve problems related to attendance. **Strategic partnerships** are partnerships between district and community organizations to address specific barriers to attendance and motivate individuals to use the resources available

to them. Finally, **shared accountability** ensures absences are monitored and constantly addressed through policy.

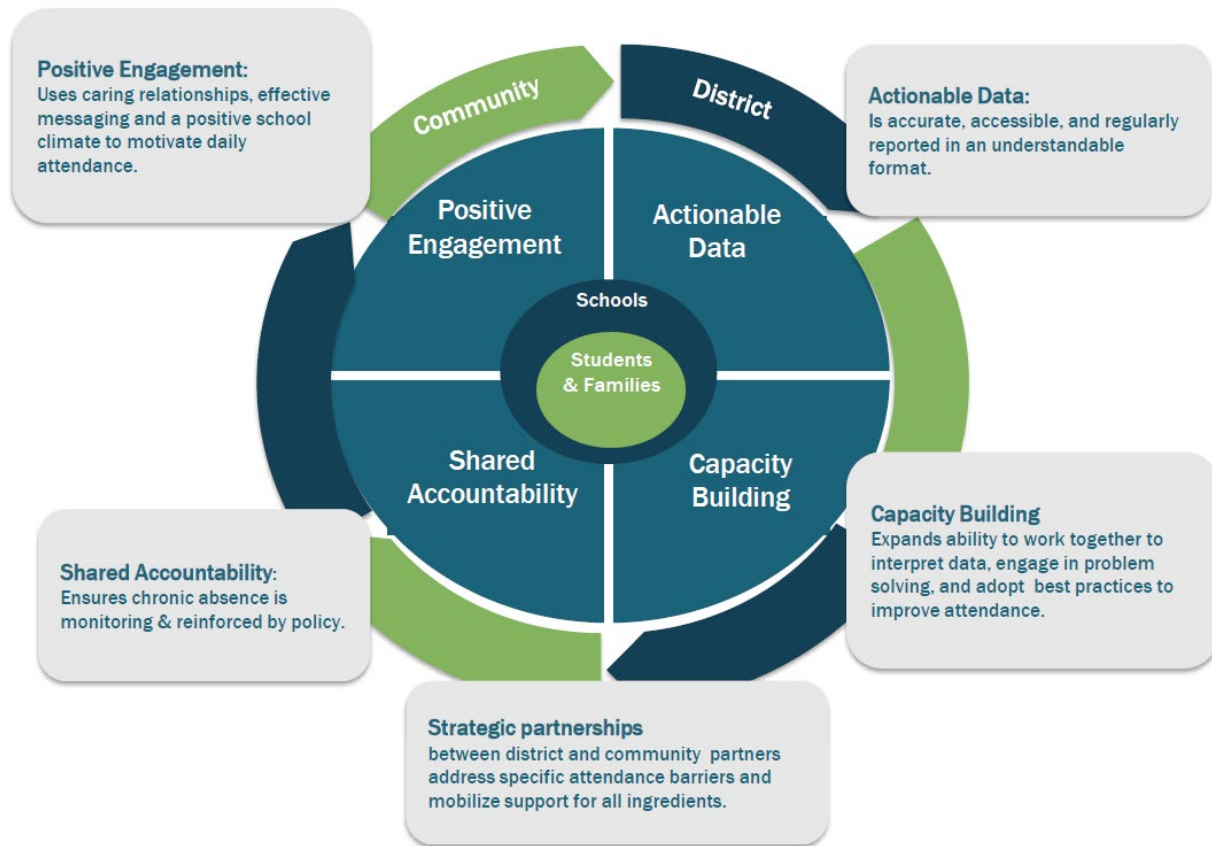*Figure 3: Key Ingredients for Systematic Change (Attendance Works)*

Figure 3: [Attendance Works](). Key Ingredients for Systematic Change

Districtwide efforts require administrators to pay attention to differences among schools in student populations and the constraints those students and their families face. The effectiveness of interventions relies on reducing students' barriers to attendance and those barriers may vary across schools. Given the wide range of school absenteeism problems (Heyne et al., 2019), Tier 2 and 3 interventions must **pay attention to individualized factors, hit multiple dimensions in students' daily lives, and consider the range of experiences students have** (Dougherty and Childs, 2019).

Supportive and encouraging relationships between at-risk students and school staff can foster a more positive school climate. High schools in which students report strong, trusting relationships with teachers and in which teachers report a general sense of collective responsibility have stronger student attendance (Allensworth and Easton, 2007). Additionally, individualized teacher support makes a big difference in the effort to attend class for 9th grade students (Rosenkranz et al., 2014).

Specific Programs to Reduce Absenteeism:
In our search for evidence-based attendance interventions, we gave priority to Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions and interventions that relied primarily on school administrators or other personnel besides teachers. We sought out causally rigorous evidence for established

interventions rather than theoretical interventions in need of pilot research. By 'causally rigorous' we mean that the methods compared individuals who received the intervention and those who didn't and employed a design that adequately addressed concerns that differences among students or schools, rather than the treatment *per se*, led to differences in outcomes. Few studies employ random assignment in education research, but the studies we reviewed relied on quasi-experimental designs that we believe make it likely that their results are causally valid.

We discuss the following types of interventions:

- passive information
- automated text messages
- individualized and personal text messages
- case management
- school + community + family partnerships
- mentoring
- truancy courts
- social + emotional learning
- multidimensional programs

There are different programs in each of these categories that emphasize different aspects of interventions and barriers to attendance, and the success of one program within a category doesn't guarantee the success for another program in the same category. Finally, we gave further priority to interventions that had information on fidelity, implementation, and spillover effects.

This report highlights individualized and personal nudging, community-wide school-based truancy courts, social and emotional learning, and mentoring programs. This selection offers a breadth of strategies with varying intensities, ease of implementation, and costs. We summarize the programs explored in detail in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Specific Interventions to Address Chronic Absenteeism and Habitual Truancy

Name and Description of Intervention	Category of Intervention	Personnel	Costs	Range of Effect Sizes
Postcards	Individualized and Personal Nudging	Administrative support staff	$0.22/postcard + time	2.4% (-.13 days) reduction in absenteeism over 2-month span
Two-Way Text Messaging System	Individualized and Personal Nudging	AmeriCorps employee	Salary of AmeriCorps employee	11.1% reduction in incidence of chronic absence
Project START	Community-Wide School-Based Truancy Courts	Parents, educators, law enforcement personnel, juvenile and family court judges, and representatives from social service, community, and religious organizations	N/a	Thirty days after court: • Project START: from 23% to 13% truancy rate (10% reduction) • Standard family court: from 24% to 14% in unexcused absences (10% reduction) One year after court: • Project START back to 23% truancy rate (equal to initial truancy rate) • Traditional court and non-referred samples 32% (8% increase from initial truancy rate)
Positive Action	Social and Emotional Learning	Administrative support staff and teachers	Approx.$1,048/student/year (Washington State Institute for Public Policy)	13% reduction (0.9%) in rates of absenteeism over the 3rd-8th grade period
Check and Connect	Mentoring	Administrative support staff and mentors	$1700/student/year Approx. $500/ incremental day of attendance	20.2% reduction (3.4 less absent days/year) in absenteeism over 2 years for those receiving Check and Connect
Big Brothers Big Sisters	Mentoring	Administrative support staff and mentors	Approx. $1,512/student/year (Laura and John Arnold Association)	13% reduction in truancy for those with adult mentors, 2% for those with high school mentors

Individualized and Personal Nudging

Nudging uses nonintrusive, targeted information sharing to promote a desired trait or behavior. The interventions we highlight implemented nudging through mailed postcards emphasizing the importance of attendance and text messages seeking to remove barriers to attendance. Rogers et al. (2017) tested this approach on 51,000 students at 217 different schools in the Philadelphia School District. They sent **postcards** to homes of elementary, middle, and high school students' who had "higher than typical absenteeism rates", encouraging parents or guardians to improve their students' attendance. The majority of these students were African American (53%), eligible for free or reduced lunch (69%), and were chronically absent. The postcard stressed the importance of attendance and highlighted the number of absences the student had in the previous school year. A single postcard reduced absences in a two-month span by 0.13 days, or roughly 2.4% at a cost of $0.22 postage.

Smythe-Leistico and Page (2019) tested a more intensive form of individualized and personal nudging by implementing a **two-way text messaging system** in which the school sent parents of kindergarteners preprogrammed and personalized messages approximately once a week. There were general messages providing families with important school information, messages that focused on positive affirmations regarding the importance of the current school year, and individualized messages providing feedback on their students' attendance. The individualized messages, sent only when a child missed school, always expressed concern, offered assistance, and were positive in tone. Parents could communicate with the school by responding to the texts with questions, concerns, or to ask for help. The researchers employed a bilingual AmeriCorps employee to work on the texting initiative as well as other classroom and administrative tasks, and the staff member reported needing less than 30 minutes per week to manage and respond to parent messages. Most messages were about student schedules or requests to share information with teachers.

Smythe-Leistico and Page did not randomly assign children to treatment and control groups in this study; all kindergarteners at the school they studied participated in the treatment group. They instead used statistical methods to simulate outcomes in a synthetic control school, weighting schools based on their similarity to the school that participated in the study. By the end of the intervention year, kindergarteners in the study school were 11 percentage points less likely to be chronically absent (13.3%) than kindergarteners in the synthetic comparison school (1 in 5 of whom were chronically absent). Additionally, after texting began, participating parents rated the school-parent communication at the school at a 10 out of 10, compared to prior to the texting program of 5 out of 10. The sample size for this study was fairly small as it included kindergarteners from one public school in the Pittsburgh Public School District.

Researchers implemented another nudging intervention in twelve high schools in New York City, sending text messages to provide real-time alerts and weekly attendance summaries to parents of all students without providing links to additional resources or offering support. The texts were not actionable and did not feel personable. As a result, there was no effect on overall attendance rates or chronic absenteeism in either group (Balu, 2019) The contrast between this intervention and the ones discussed above shows the importance of offering support and actions to reduce absenteeism and suggests that simply offering information is unlikely to yield a reduction in absenteeism.

Given the ease and cost of nudges, these studies suggest that contacting parents by text message or mail may be a cost-effective strategy to reduce chronic absenteeism, at least in

the younger grades. The nudges employed in the successful studies were individualized, actionable, and offered additional support, all key ingredients that contribute to their efficacy (Smyth-Leistico, 2019). By making the information personal and providing parents with relevant and useful information, the postcards and texts pertained to the particular students' unique situation. Furthermore, by offering support for reducing barriers that keep students from attending school, the successful nudging interventions stress an improvement mindset and cultivate a supportive relationship with the family.

Community-Wide School-Based Truancy Courts

Truancy courts are one of the strategies currently employed by MMSD. According to the district, "[a]ll students who are classified as being Habitually Truant are in violation of Wisconsin law, and as such the student, and their parent(s)/guardian(s), may be required to appear in court. Depending upon the age of the student and circumstances related to the absences, the court may levy sanctions and require that the parent/guardian cause the child to attend school. In addition, the court may order sanctions requiring that the student receive counseling and/or perform community service" (Habitual Truancy, n.d.).[1]

Currently, personnel at MMSD use four broad steps in the truancy process. First, they send a notification when the child becomes habitually truant. Next, they arrange a conference with parents where they discuss attendance and solutions to address truancy. Next, an Attendance Improvement Plan is developed, with attendance monitored for improvement over a 30-day span, after which another review conference is arranged. The goal is to "identify the cause(s) of attendance problems and identify supports within the school and community that can assist your student and family" (Habitual Truancy, n.d.). This is a start, as the focus is on improvement and school personnel attempts to work with individual families to remove barriers, but it could be more effective if accompanied by a greater focus on connecting families to resources within the community and encouraging families to utilize them.

Fantuzzo, Grim, and Hazan (2005) tested a community-wide school-based truancy court known as Project START, which brought family court proceedings into designated schools located throughout a large urban school district and had personnel from local community-based service organizations present during all phases of the intervention process. Their project followed recommendations from the U.S. Department of Education that schools and other agencies decide how to combat truancy in neighborhoods, with participation of "parents, educators, law enforcement personnel, juvenile and family court judges, and representatives from social service, community, and religious organizations" (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Project START included representatives from the city school district, judicial system, Department of Health Services, and community social service organizations to reach multiple dimensions of the child and parents' lives that could contribute to truancy. Caseworkers from service organizations were present during all meetings to promote utilization of services, and the court proceedings took place at the school to reduce transportation barriers.

Fantuzzo, Grim, and Hazan randomly assigned 576 students with a history of 25+ unexcused absences and a pattern of attendance problems to one of three treatments: 1) Project START,

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[1] Emphasis added

2) standard family court, and 3) a control group in which students were not referred to court. In the first 30-days after the court proceedings, truancy levels were unchanged for non-referred truants, with both court-referred groups showing significant drops in their rates of unexcused absences (Project START: 23% to 13%, standard family court: 24% to 14%). However, during the next thirty-day period the Project START group maintained the reduced truancy rates (13%), while the traditional family court rose to a significantly higher rate (18%) than the Project START courts. Non-referred groups remained higher than both (23%). The follow-up after the end of the next academic year showed the most significant results -- the Project START groups had significantly lower truancy rates (23%) than both the family court and non-referred samples (32%). The standard family court sample returned to their baseline truancy rates over this time, while the Project START group sustained their reduced truancy rates.

Project START has similarities to the process MMSD uses but takes the extra step of placing community personnel at all stages. This will likely increase the utilization of outside supports and increase the chances of the intervention affecting multiple dimensions of the students' lives. This intervention focuses on students who were truant more than 25 days in the previous school year and showed signs of attendance problems in the beginning of the intervened school year, and relied primarily on school administration rather than teachers. While the truancy rates remain high in all groups, a 9% reduction in truancy for Project START referrals compared to traditional court proceedings and non-referred students is notable.

Given that the truancy court process used by MMSD already focuses on removing barriers to attendance and connecting students to social services that can help address truancy, the cost of bringing these community service personnel into the proceedings should be minimal. The program's goal must be to improve attendance and reduce truancy, not to punish students or parents for the missed days. This intervention touches on multiple dimensions in the students' lives, focuses on improvement rather than accountability, seeks to remove barriers to attendance, and produces lasting changes compared to the traditional family court. By bringing representatives of the services into the court proceedings, the chance that families will take up services increases.

Social and Emotional Learning
Social and emotional learning (SEL) is "the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others" (Zins and Elias, 2006). These skills reduce barriers to attendance by promoting a more positive school climate and closeness with the school community, as well as through teaching individuals how to manage emotions and improve themselves. Bavarian et al., (2013) implemented a social emotional learning curriculum studying the longitudinal effects on 3rd-8th grade students at Chicago Public Schools. The sample consisted of 48% African American students and 27% Hispanic students, and sought to evaluate attendance at the school level through eight waves of attendance data collection from 3rd to 8th grade, as well as student and teacher subjective evaluations.

The Positive Action curriculum (PA) includes six units: self-concept, positive actions for the mind and body, positive social emotional actions focused on getting along with others, managing oneself, being honest with oneself, and continually improving oneself. There are more than 140 15-20-minute age-appropriate lessons, taught four days a week for

kindergarten through 6th graders, and 70 20-minute lessons taught two days a week for 7th and 8th graders. Bavarian et al. (2013) compared the average daily absenteeism rates of students attending schools randomly assigned to implement the Positive Action curriculum with students attending similar control schools without Positive Action and found that Positive Action schools had decreased their absenteeism rates from 6.33% to 5.58% over the 3rd-8th grade period, while control schools had an increase in their daily absenteeism rate from 6.76% to 6.95%. Teachers at the Positive Action schools rated their students as experiencing greater growth in both academic motivation and ability as compared to control schools with no social-emotional learning curriculum.[2]

Participation in the PA curriculum is associated with a reduction absenteeism through 8th grade, an important indicator of chronic absenteeism, grades, and chances of dropout in high school (Rosenkranz et al., 2014; Utah Education Policy Center, 2012; Ehrlich et al., 2019). Social and emotional learning is an effective strategy in reducing absenteeism and promoting healthy, positive behaviors in students. Student perceptions of belonging, safety, and respect from adults at the school are positively associated with attendance (Eklund et al., 2019), and since social and emotional learning would increase positive feelings of each of these as well as academic motivation, it could result in higher attendance. Additionally, through conflict resolution and curriculum based on getting along with others, the PA curriculum may reduce violence in the school, another risk factor for habitual truancy (Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent, 2001). This curriculum could additionally help with controlling negative emotions and mental health difficulties, both of which have associations with chronic absenteeism and habitual truancy (Mallett, 2015).

Mentoring

Mentoring can be an effective way of connecting Tier 2 and Tier 3 students to positive adult role models. Check and Connect, a program piloted by the University of Minnesota, seeks to connect mentors with individual students and their families. Mentors monitor their assigned students' attendance and behavior in school, as well as provide personalized interventions to help establish student connection to school. The mentors forge a personal relationship with the student and their family, engaging in home visits and frequent communication to reduce barriers to attendance. Guryan et al. (2017) tested this program in 23 public school in Chicago on 765 students in grades 1-8 at who missed over 10 days in the previous school year. All of the schools selected had over 70% of their student body be eligible for free/reduced lunch, and approximately 90% of the sample was Hispanic or Black. Mentors were assigned 30-35 students to track the attendance of and worked with them over the course of two years. Researchers randomized at the student, grade, and school levels, selecting 5 of the 7 grades in each school to offer the program with the two other grades as control groups.

Guryan et al. (2017) found that "participation in Check and Connect decreased student absences among students who began the program in grades 5-7 by a statistically significant

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[2] Given the turnover of students in this intervention, only 131 of the original 623 students present in Grade 3 remained in 8th grade. There are questions regarding how much the change in student population contributed to the decrease in absenteeism. However, since treatment and control schools experienced similar levels of student turnover there is no reason to expect that student attrition biased these results.

3.4 days, or 20.2% relative to the control complier mean." Check and Connect reduced absences of participating students by 2.8 days in the first year of participation and 4.1 days in the second year of participation. Yet, it was only effective for those in 5th-7th grade; there were no statistically significant effects for those who began in grades 1-4. Check and Connect is additionally associated with a reduction in chances of school dropout in 9th grade (Sinclair et al., 1998), and through high school (Sinclair et al., 2005).

Check and Connect costs about $1,700 per student per year, which is equivalent to approximately $500 per incremental day of attendance for 5th-7th grade students. This is a costly intervention as it is individualized and directed at students experiencing attendance problems, but the reduction in absences is noteworthy. The program is built with a focus on improvement and reduction of barriers to attendance and seeks to involve the students' community and family to help. It focuses on individual needs and addresses multiple dimensions of students' lives, all while building and maintaining a supportive relationship between students and adults at the school.

Other mentoring interventions have shown promise as well. Big Brothers Big Sisters has significant impacts on decreasing unexcused absences through adult volunteer mentors (Herrera et al., 2008). Using a randomized control study on 1,139 4th-9th graders in 71 schools nationwide, Herrera and co-authors compared students with no mentors, high school mentors, and adult mentors, on various outcomes of schooling. They found that students with adult mentors benefitted far more than those with high school mentors. Unexcused absences declined by 13% for students with adult mentors and only 2% for those with high school mentors compared to control groups. While high school mentors involved their mentees in decision-making at a higher rate and had similar relationships to those present in the adult mentors, they were less consistent in attending meetings and had higher turnover in the following years. That said, the high school mentors that received two hours of training had higher quality and closer relationships with the students compared to those who received less training, and were more likely to carry over their match into the second school year. These mentors could be crucial for decreasing unexcused absences in a more cost-effective way, keeping in mind that the evidence for statistically significant changes with high school mentors is still uncertain.

Conclusion:

Among interventions intended to increase school attendance, those that are most effective "invoke a change in attitudes and behavior for both parents and their children, but do so in a way that provides support" (Hutt and Gottfried, 2019). A program will likely be more successful in reducing absenteeism and habitual truancy if it is individualized and multitiered; there are high levels of teamwork and data sharing between administrators and teachers are present; a focus on improvement rather than accountability; substantive data collection that takes account of the reasons for missing school; promotion of supportive relationships between school staff and students; and an increased focus on times when absenteeism and barriers to school attendance are higher, such as transition periods.

There can be some practical implementation challenges for these interventions, including difficulty motivating school leaders to take a preventative approach instead of a reactive

approach, difficulty making attendance a top priority for school leaders, and difficulty getting families to opt in to different programming or receiving messages (Mac Iver and Sheldon, 2019). Any intervention relying on technology must face the issue of getting families to opt in, especially for lower-income families, given the costs of technology and messaging. Thus, focusing on finding ways to implement technology solutions for families in need, so they can benefit from the interventions as well, is necessary. An intervention seeking to reduce chronic absenteeism or habitual truancy will succeed only when implementation and reinforcement of the messages and goals of the program are given careful attention.

Recommendations:

Several recommendations follow from this report. First, **programs would benefit from comprehensive, individualized, and frequent data collection that seeks out specific reasons for missing school.** Knowing the causes of truancy or absenteeism allows for crafting more specific interventions for the individual student. The worksheet in Appendix A, taken from (Heyne et al., 2019), distinguishes different school attendance problems, is free to implement, and can help track common issues arising for students. This allows for greater specificity in assignment of individuals to different interventions and social supports. Furthermore, school administration and teachers should have access to the data to allow for greater coordination at multiple levels of the students' experience in school (Dougherty and Childs, 2019; Ehrlich and Johnson, 2019).

Second, we must conceptualize attendance problems as a signal of other problems in a students' life, thus, plans to encourage greater attendance must be individualized. This includes helping individuals close to the student understand the importance of regular attendance, focusing on improvement and identification of solutions rather than accountability of the parents and gaming of the data (Ehrlich and Johnson, 2019; Weiss, 2012; Hough, Byun, and Mulfinger, 2018), and leveling school supports that best reduce individual barriers to consistent school attendance. We also encourage leaders to take a preventative approach of reducing absenteeism in early years rather than a reactive approach, as it will likely be more cost effective and lead to lower absenteeism in the future. For example, **focusing on transition periods**, including the transition into kindergarten and the transition from middle into high school, is beneficial (Ehrlich and Johnson, 2019), as these are often challenging times for parents and children and there are generally higher absence rates during these periods (Ehrlich, Gwynne, and Allensworth, 2018; Rosenkranz et al., 2014). These are also critical moments to establish connections with students and families, creating a sense of belonging that encourages more attendance and better school climate (Sheldon and Epstein, 2004).

Third, we recognize that some programs currently used by MMSD fit some elements of programs outlined above. We recommend that MMSD review the alignment between current programs and best practices above to see where programs can be improved. This includes examining programs at the school level, as schools will vary in the level of supports they receive.

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