

# From Absent to Present

Reducing Teen Chronic Absenteeism in New York City

YOUTH  
JUSTICE  
BOARD



Photo credit: Christian

## This publication was written by Youth Justice Board members and staff.

The Youth Justice Board is a project of the Center for Court Innovation. It was established to give young people a voice in policies that affect their lives. Each year a team of high school students from across New York City investigates a current juvenile justice or public safety issue, formulates policy recommendations, and works to promote and implement key ideas.

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Points of view and opinions expressed in this document are the opinions of the Youth Justice Board members and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the Center for Court Innovation or the above-named entities.

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# Dear Reader

We are a group of diverse teenagers who came together to study truancy and chronic absenteeism among teenagers in New York City schools. We all had different reasons for joining the Youth Justice Board, but our common goal is to improve attendance in the New York City public school system.

We want to raise student attendance rates by improving school-student relationships throughout New York City public schools. This issue is important to us because, for some of us, we have struggled with school attendance, and for others, it has affected our friends and family members. We know people who could be doing better things with their lives, but need help reconnecting with school or other educational alternatives.

We spent several months researching this topic. We conducted interviews with stakeholders, met with the Chair of the Mayor's Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, and School Engagement, visited schools, and held focus groups with young people who have experience with truancy and chronic absenteeism. We then developed ten recommendations that we believe can improve the lives of young people by increasing attendance rates in the public school system.

We hope that our recommendations can help decrease the number of truant and chronically absent students in New York City public schools and can, in turn, improve the educational system, save money for New York City, and give young people more choices in life.

Thank you for reading our report and recommendations.

Sincerely,

THE YOUTH JUSTICE BOARD

# Acknowledgements

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# Executive Summary

This report presents the findings and recommendations of the Youth Justice Board, an after-school program that engages New York City teenagers in studying public policy issues that affect young people. Since August 2012, the Youth Justice Board has focused on reducing chronic absenteeism among teenagers in the city. This issue is important to Board members because it affects so many teens: citywide, about one in three students is considered “chronically absent,” missing 10 percent or more of the school year. This report presents ideas about how different individuals and institutions can work together to improve attendance rates citywide. In the 2013-14 program year, the Board will work to implement many of the ideas contained in this report. The Board’s ultimate goal is to improve attendance and the overall school experience for young people in New York City.

Over four months, the Youth Justice Board conducted interviews with 19 experts doing work related to the issues of school truancy and chronic absenteeism. The Board also conducted three focus groups with young people who have personal experience with these issues. The Youth Justice Board developed ten recommendations to improve school attendance in New York City:

## A. IDENTIFYING AND DEFINING THE ISSUE

1. Use “chronic absenteeism” rather than “truancy” to refer to attendance issues
2. Use individual attendance data in addition to school average daily attendance to determine more efficiently which students struggle with attendance

## B. CONNECTING ATTENDANCE TO FUTURE OUTCOMES

3. Support parents and foster parents to ensure that they are familiar with the education system and the importance of daily school attendance
4. Help teens draw connections between school attendance and their futures early in their schooling

## C. ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

5. Examine the impact of security procedures on student attendance
6. Develop clear, consistent expectations around student confidentiality
7. Offer additional supportive services to students during transition periods

## D. PROVIDING INTERVENTIONS FOR YOUTHS AFFECTED BY, OR AT-RISK FOR, CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

8. Prepare schools to support students who are returning from extended absences
9. Expand supports for over-age, under-credited students
10. Have mentoring programs available in all schools to give chronically absent students the attention and concern that will inspire commitment to attend school

# Introduction

Each year, more than 5 million students across the country are considered chronically absent, missing more than 10 percent of the school year.<sup>1</sup> In New York City more than a quarter million students — nearly one in three students in certain neighborhoods — are chronically absent each year.<sup>2</sup> Chronic absenteeism refers to all absence, including both excused and unexcused absences. Under-aged students who miss any amount of school without an excuse from a parent or guardian are considered truant, a status offense. In New York State, young people are required to attend school until the end of the school year in which they turn 16 years old. For 16 year olds without jobs, state laws provide school districts with the authority to require full-time attendance until the end of the school year in which they turn 17 years old.<sup>3</sup> This report focuses on chronically absent students, as research indicates that truancy is an expression of some of the risk factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism.

In New York City, principals at individual schools are responsible for attendance, including individual cases of truancy and chronic absence. Although the Department of Education (DOE) monitors system-wide student attendance through its computerized Atten-

dance Tracking System (ATS), the DOE lacks the authority to intervene directly in individual schools.<sup>4</sup> Outside of schools, starting in 2001, the Police Athletic League (PAL) and various city agencies worked together to operate Partnership Against City Truancy (PACT) centers to provide resources to truant youths.<sup>5</sup> The truancy centers ceased operations when PACT dissolved in 2012. Currently, the NYPD has the primary responsibility for engaging truant youths.

There can be legal ramifications for both students and families when students are labeled truant or chronically absent. In particular, chronically absent youths risk involvement with the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), New York City's child welfare agency. If a youth misses a certain amount of school (typically 10 consecutive days or 20 days over the course of a four-month period), the child's parents/guardians can be reported to the child protective system via an electronic 407 attendance alert on the charge of educational neglect.<sup>6</sup> This can lead to a case in Family Court. In addition, youths may be subject to PINS proceedings or other involvement in court. The 407 alerts, generated by the ATS, help inform schools of attendance issues, but research

<sup>1</sup> Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools, 3. Retrieved from [http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport\\_May16.pdf](http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 7 and Nauer, K., White, A., & Yerneni, R. (2008). Strengthening Schools by Strengthening Families: Community Strategies to Reverse Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades and Improve Supports for Children and Families, 7. Retrieved from <http://www.news-school.edu/milano/nycaffairs/documents/StrengtheningSchoolsReport.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Justice , Office of Justice Programs. (2013). Deinstitutionalization of Status Offenders Best practices Database. Retrieved from <http://www.ojjdp.gov/dso/dsoAboutTypesOfServices.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> Office of School and Youth Development, Mandated Responsibilities Unit. (2011). Regulation of the Chancellor: Minimum standards for attendance programs (DOE Publication No. A-210). Retrieved from <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/381F4607-7841-4D28-B7D5-OF30DDB77DFA/97051/A2101202011FINAL.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Police Athletic League, Inc. (2013). Truancy. Retrieved from <http://www.palnyc.org/800-pal-4kids/program.aspx?id=26>

<sup>6</sup> Nauer, K., White, A., & Yerneni, R. (2008). Strengthening Schools by Strengthening Families.

suggests that these alerts lack the sensitivity to present an accurate picture of how many young people are chronically absent.<sup>7</sup> Further, neither schools nor child protective services are well-equipped to resolve issues of educational neglect.<sup>8</sup> Nationally, a growing number of educational neglect cases involve young people between the ages of 15 and 16; however, the older the student, the more difficult it is to determine the extent of parental responsibility for a student's choice not to attend school.<sup>9</sup> This further complicates court efforts to address truancy and chronic absenteeism.

#### THE EFFECTS OF TRUANCY AND CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

A student's failure to attend school often has lasting negative repercussions for both the young person and his or her community.

#### Decreased attendance and reduced graduation rates

Chronic absenteeism can result in a snowball effect, in which the difficulty of catching up on missed schoolwork increases over time, which in turn increases the risk of school dropout. In effect, the earlier a student begins to miss school, the greater the chance of dropout: if a student has missed more than 37 days of school in 6th grade, the likelihood

that he or she will eventually drop out is approximately 75 percent.<sup>10</sup>

#### Higher rates of crime

Absences mean more than just empty seats: research identifies chronic absenteeism as an early warning sign for future delinquency.<sup>12</sup> It is estimated that about 80 percent of serious juvenile offenders across the country are also chronically absent.<sup>12</sup>

#### Reduced income

A high school dropout makes, on average, almost \$10,000 less per year than a high school graduate.<sup>13</sup> On average, each high school dropout costs the nation approximately \$260,000 in lost taxes, social programs, and crime-related costs over his or her lifetime.<sup>14</sup>

#### Diminished opportunities for other students

When a chronically absent student does choose to attend class, that student, often academically less advanced than the rest of the class, may divert a teacher's time and attention away from other students and their needs. Over time, such situations can motivate higher performing students to leave the school system, further exacerbating the problem.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 22. and Gunderson, J., Golden, M., & Elston, L. (2009). Rethinking Educational Neglect for Teenagers: New Strategies for New York State, 10. Retrieved from <http://www.vera.org/files/Rethinking%20Educational%20Neglect.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Balfanz, R., Herzog, L., & Mac Iver, D. J. (2007). Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: early identification and effective interventions. *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 223–235, 227. Retrieved from <http://web.jhu.edu/sebin/q/b/PreventingStudentDisengagement.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Yeide, M., Kobrin, M. (2009). Truancy Literature Review, 4. Retrieved from <http://www.ojjdp.gov/dso/Truancy%20Literature%20Review.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Gonzales, R., Richards, K., & Seeley, K. (2002). Youth Out of School: Linking Absence to Delinquency, 4. Retrieved from

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education. (2007). The High Cost of High Schools: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools, 1. Retrieved from <http://www.all4ed.org/files/archive/publications/HighCost.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

## CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

The risks that contribute to individual absences can be loosely organized into “push” and “pull” factors: push factors are located within the school and push students out of school, as opposed to pull factors, which are located outside the school and pull students away from attending. Research indicates that these risk factors not only inhibit attendance, but combine with

**School issues, like poor facilities, unsupportive staff, and lack of adequate safety can also push students out of school.**

the negative effects of missed school to further detract from a young person’s ability to complete high school, leading to dropout. While there is no single factor that can be used to accurately predict who is at risk of dropping out, it is generally understood that the more risk factors a student presents, the less likely he or she is to graduate high school.<sup>16</sup>

### Push Factors

Individual issues, such as special education or mental health needs, often push students out of schools when they do not receive supports that meet those needs. School issues, like poor facilities, unsupportive staff, lack of adequate safety, inadequate guidance and advising, or even excessive bullying, can also push students out of school.<sup>17</sup>

### Pull Factors

Family issues, like homelessness, foster care, or

the responsibility of being the family’s primary caretaker, can pull a student away from attending school.<sup>18</sup> The presence of gangs can both push and pull students away from school, depending on a student’s affinity for a certain gang. Regardless, gangs contribute to an unsafe environment for many students through early exposure to drug use and violence.<sup>19</sup>

## MAYOR’S INTERAGENCY TASK FORCE ON TRUANCY, CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM & SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

To combat the high rate of absence in New York City, Mayor Michael Bloomberg launched the Mayor’s Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism & School Engagement in 2010. The Task Force initiated the “Every Child, Every Day” campaign to pilot programs at select schools around the city and operated in 100 schools during the 2012-2013 school year. The Task Force also partnered with the Ad Council to launch an advertising campaign about the dangers of chronic absenteeism. Simultaneously, the Task Force’s Wake Up! NYC campaign allows young people to schedule wake up calls to make sure that they get up in time to go to school. Finally, with the Success Mentors program, the Task Force connects young people with attendance issues to adult mentors who work with 10 to 15 students at least three times a week.<sup>20</sup>

The Mayor’s Task Force has directed much needed attention toward the issues of truancy and chronic absenteeism as they affect young people in New York City. With these issues at the forefront, the moment is ideal for youths to contribute their voices to the discussion on the best strategies for raising the attendance rates of individual students at schools across the city. This report offers young people’s perspectives on the most effective ways to engage their peers in attending school.

<sup>16</sup> Hammond, C., Linton, D., Smink, J., & Drew, S. (2007). Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs: A Technical Report, 24. Retrieved from <http://www.cisdetroit.org/research/2007/2007-DropoutRiskFactors-Full.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Advocates for Children. (2008). School Pushout: Where are we now? 2. Retrieved from [http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/school\\_pushout\\_update\\_2008.pdf?pt=1](http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/school_pushout_update_2008.pdf?pt=1)

<sup>18</sup> Lehr, C. A., Johnson, D. R., Bremer, C. D., Cosio, A., & Thompson, M. (2004). Increasing Rates of School Completion: Moving From Policy and Research to Practice, 14. Retrieved from <http://www.ncset.org/publications/essentialtools/dropout/>

<sup>19</sup> Gonzales., Victor M. (2006). The Truancy and Gang Connection: Reflections from the Mayor’s Anti-Gang Office, Houston, TX, 1. Retrieved from <http://www.schoolengagement.org/Truancyprevention-Registry/Admin/Resources/Resources/TheTruancyandGangConnectionReflectionsfromtheMayor'sAntiGangOfficeinHoustonTX.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> From <http://www.nyc.gov/html/truancy/html/home/home.shtml>

# Findings

The findings and recommendations in this report are based on four months of research conducted by the Board, including interviews, site visits, and focus groups. The members interviewed 19 policymakers and practitioners and led focus groups with 21 young people (ages 14-18) who have personal experience with chronic school absence. Through this research, the Board identified issues that cause young people to miss substantial amounts of school. The Board hopes that these findings will be valuable to education stakeholders, policymakers, youth service providers and teens across New York City. The issues the Board identified fall under four themes:

- A.** **IDENTIFYING AND DEFINING THE ISSUE** — addressing expectations around attendance and how data is recorded and utilized;
- B.** **CONNECTING ATTENDANCE TO FUTURE OUTCOMES** — focusing on helping students, parents, guardians, and foster parents understand the importance of daily school attendance;
- C.** **ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO SCHOOL ATTENDANCE** — focusing on challenges that may impede students attending school regularly and on time; and
- D.** **PROVIDING INTERVENTIONS FOR YOUTHS AFFECTED BY, OR AT RISK FOR, CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM** — examining supports for teens who already struggle with school attendance.

# A.

# Identifying and defining the issue

**STUDENTS MISS SCHOOL FOR MANY REASONS, EACH OF WHICH REQUIRES A UNIQUE SOLUTION.** Each young person has his or her own reasons for missing school, meaning there is not a “one size fits all” solution when it comes to improving student attendance. Some common reasons the Board heard that teens miss school include:

- Academic issues, including undiagnosed or untreated learning disabilities;
- Health issues, whether being physically ill, having doctor’s appointments during the day, or not having prescribed medications or supports (like prescription eyeware);
- Expectations from family, including the responsibility to watch younger siblings during the day;
- The need to complete missed school work;
- A lack of investment in school and/or feeling that school is unimportant;
- Pressure from other teens not to attend school;
- Negative relationships with school staff; and
- Worries about safety, including the threat of gangs or bullying while in school.

As this list indicates, young people are often acting in what they feel is their own best interest when missing school; at the very least, their absences may be for more complicated reasons than a lack of motivation, as can be the assumption.

## SCHOOLS REPORT ON THEIR OVERALL ATTENDANCE RATES RATHER THAN ON EACH STUDENT’S ATTENDANCE RATE.

Every day, schools are required to report their attendance rates to the Department of Educa-

tion (DOE).<sup>21</sup> While the data that are published reflect the average daily attendance rate at each school, these reports can mask individual attendance problems. For example, a school with an average daily attendance rate of 90 percent may have many of the same students missing day after day. In fact, it is possible that a school with a 90 percent average daily attendance rate could have up to 40 percent of its student body affected by chronic absenteeism, as different students are missing each day.<sup>22</sup> School attendance reports that are publicly available, which look only at average daily attendance, do not clearly show which schools have the greatest need for interventions to improve attendance.

**SCHOOL ATTENDANCE PROCEDURES AND TRACKING ARE INCONSISTENT, SOMETIMES INACCURATE, AND DIFFICULT TO CORRECT.** Attendance is generally collected in the morning for the daily report that is submitted to the DOE. These reports, however, can be incorrect for several reasons, including a young person being late to class, a teacher not seeing a young person in the room, or a young person arriving after attendance has been taken and still being marked absent for the whole day. In some cases, a young person might not know that he or she has been marked absent until his or her parent or guardian gets a call at home. Attendance records can be difficult for students to correct once they have been turned in, as it is challenging for teens to prove they were in class after the fact. In addition to affecting students’ attendance records, absences may also affect class participation grades.

<sup>21</sup> Daily attendance rates can be accessed online at <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/data/Attendance.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools, 3. Retrieved from [http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport\\_May16.pdf](http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf)

B.

## Connecting attendance to future outcomes

**DISENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOOL OFTEN OCCURS BEFORE STUDENTS ENTER HIGH SCHOOL.** In many of the Board's interviews, experts said that attendance issues often start long before a young person enters high school, which is generally when students are assumed to have more independent control over their attendance. Students who miss school regularly fall farther behind their peers and have a harder time catching up, making attending school even more difficult for them. This can occur as early as elementary school. In fact, many studies show that chronic absenteeism at any age is a strong predictor for dropping out of school.<sup>23</sup> Early established absence patterns may lead to more difficulty when students are faced with new expectations.

**PARENTS AND FOSTER FAMILIES MAY NOT HAVE THE TOOLS OR KNOWLEDGE TO ADEQUATELY SUPPORT THEIR CHILD'S EDUCATION.** A lack of parental understanding about the importance of daily school attendance can lead to higher rates of absenteeism, as parents may not fully understand the negative outcomes associated with missing school. This issue can be especially problematic for foster families, as some foster parents may be new to navigating the school system. In cases of kinship foster care, where a child lives with a grandparent or other relative, that adult may be responsible for a child in the school system for the first time in many years, if ever, and thus less familiar with the current school environment. In addition, foster youths may face longer commutes and/or school transfers based on their home placement, two factors that can lead to increased absenteeism.



Photo credit: Christian

# Addressing structural barriers to school attendance

**MANY ATTENDANCE ISSUES ARISE DURING “TRANSITION PERIODS.”** Transition periods refer to the years students move from one school to another, for example from elementary to middle school or from middle to high school. Making this leap can be daunting for students. In addition to more rigorous academic expectations, students also face new – often longer – commutes, perhaps unaccompanied by a parent for the first time. These periods can be even more difficult for students who have not developed good attendance habits. During the Board’s focus groups, many participants said that they first started having challenges with school attendance during their first year of high school.

**STUDENT CONCERN ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY CAN HINDER COMMUNICATION WITH SCHOOL STAFF ON ISSUES THAT AFFECT ATTENDANCE.** Youths in the focus groups reported that confidentiality was a concern for them when explaining their absences to school staff and administration. It is common for schools to have a system for information-sharing in place when a student is in crisis, and in some cases, reporting the issue may be a responsibility under mandated reporting laws. Many young people reported they would rather not share personal family issues with school staff if they felt that all of the adults in the building would soon know about their lives. In some cases, the physical space was part of the issue. One young woman described plywood partitions in her guidance counselor’s office that did not reach the ceiling, making it impossible for her to have a private conversation.

**COMMUNICATION BETWEEN STUDENTS, PARENTS OR GUARDIANS, AND SCHOOLS AROUND ATTENDANCE IS**

**INCONSISTENT.** In interviews, the Board heard that in many cases, parents or guardians may not be aware of their child’s absences. This is most commonly the case with high school-aged students who are usually responsible for getting themselves to school. In other situations, parents or guardians may know that their child is missing school, but fail to fully understand the importance of daily attendance. Sometimes, school absence occurs because of family responsibilities. For example, a young person may be put in charge of watching younger siblings while his or her parents work. These absences can quickly add up: missing just two days of school per month is enough to make a student chronically absent. Finally, many schools do not have a consistent or effective way of confirming absences with parents. The Board heard that some schools — generally smaller high schools — call parents to report an absence the same day, but other schools wait up to three days to call. In both cases, it is unclear whether parents ever actually receive these calls or messages.

**SCHOOL SECURITY PROCEDURES CAN CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENT LATENESS.** Many young people in New York City are required to go through security metal detectors every morning. Some of the experts that the Board interviewed said that lines for these machines can stretch down the block. Some students reported that security procedures inside the school are also a problem, as teens will be stopped by school security officers for being in the hall on their way to class. Police patrols outside of the school can be an additional factor in lateness if students are stopped and questioned on their way to class.

D.

# Providing interventions for youths affected by, or at risk for, chronic absenteeism

**STUDENTS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADULTS AFFECT THEIR CHOICES ABOUT ATTENDING SCHOOL.** During the focus groups, participants indicated that feeling like their attendance mattered was a motivating factor in helping them attend school. When students have teachers who ask them about absences, they are more likely to attend that class. Focus group participants said they were more likely to feel guilty about absences when their teachers asked where they had been and demonstrated that they cared.

**RETURNING TO SCHOOL FROM AN EXTENDED ABSENCE IS A CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS.** In addition to being behind on academic work, young people in the focus groups reported feeling judged by their peers and staff at the school. Many said that teachers and other school staff seemed to assume that the young person had missed school because he or she didn't care, when the actual causes of absence were far more complicated. Beyond that, many staff did not talk to students about realistic opportunities for them to complete school credits, including alternative education programs, as well as options for the future such as attending community colleges.

**RELEVANT ELECTIVES, EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES, AND OTHER INCENTIVES CAN MOTIVATE STUDENTS TO ATTEND SCHOOL.** Young people in the focus groups said that having some control over their schedules and the classes that they take in school would help motivate them to go. Many said that they did not attend school because they did not feel challenged by the classes offered, and one young woman said

that she was able to do the work at home without even attending class. Young people said that partnerships with local colleges, vocational training credit for work, and a wide variety of classes and extracurricular activities relevant to their interests would help to keep them interested in school. Students could also benefit from considering schools' curricular and extra-curricular offerings when selecting their high school.

**YOUNG PEOPLE CAN BENEFIT FROM CONFIDING IN UNDERSTANDING ADULTS ABOUT THE UNDERLYING CAUSES OF THEIR SCHOOL ABSENCE.** While many teens expressed a reluctance to share personal information with school staff, the Board heard that there can be benefits for young people when they feel comfortable sharing what is going on in their lives. For example, one youth who missed more than a week of school due to mental health issues was given an excuse by her guidance counselor for her absences and missed work. This made it easier for the young woman to return to school without feeling overwhelmed by the process of catching up on work.

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When students have teachers who ask them about absences, they are more likely to attend that class.

# Recommendations

The Board hopes its recommendations will spark conversations with community-based organizations, schools, the Department of Education, and other partners. Over the next year, the Youth Justice Board will work with these stakeholders in an effort to encourage the implementation of the ideas contained in this report.

The Board's recommendations fall under four themes:

## A. IDENTIFYING AND DEFINING THE ISSUE

1. Use “chronic absenteeism” rather than “truancy” to refer to attendance issues
2. Use individual attendance data in addition to school average daily attendance to determine more efficiently which students struggle with attendance

## B. CONNECTING ATTENDANCE TO FUTURE OUTCOMES

3. Support parents and foster parents to ensure that they are familiar with the education system and the importance of daily school attendance
4. Help teens draw connections between school attendance and their futures early in their schooling

## C. ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

5. Examine the impact of security procedures on student attendance
6. Develop clear, consistent expectations around student confidentiality
7. Offer additional supportive services to students during transition periods

## D. PROVIDING INTERVENTIONS FOR YOUTHS AFFECTED BY, OR AT RISK FOR, CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

8. Prepare schools to support students who are returning from extended absences
9. Expand supports for overage, under-credited students
10. Have mentoring programs available in all schools to give chronically absent students the attention and concern that will inspire commitment to attend school

# 1.

## Use “chronic absenteeism” rather than “truancy” to refer to attendance issues

We learned that the term “truancy” can imply a sense of criminal responsibility. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention defines truancy as a status offense, which is an act that would not be a crime if committed by an adult.<sup>24</sup> It is unlawful for a young person under the age of 16 to skip school without being excused, which indicates that the term “truancy” is associated as much with the juvenile justice system as it is with education.<sup>25</sup> The New York City Police Department’s practice of picking up truant students and bringing them to truancy centers, often in lieu of returning them to school, further reinforces that association. Many of our interviewees agreed that the term “truancy” frames the issue in a negative way by blaming the student rather than focusing on a solution. On the other hand, the term “chronic absenteeism” encompasses the many reasons a young person might miss school and helps to define which students most need interventions: those who miss at least 10 percent of the school year, or who are at risk of doing so.

Sarah Jonas, Director of Regional Initiatives at the National Center for Community Schools, explained that “Attendance is a symptom of what else is going on [in a young person’s life].” Labeling a student’s unexcused absence as “truancy” may obscure the underlying issues by dismissing

the absence as simply misbehavior. While it’s true that some students may choose not to attend school, the issue is often more complicated. For example, young people who miss school for health and safety issues may simply appear to be “skipping school,” when the explanation is far more nuanced.

**USE THE TERM “CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM” TO REFER TO ALL PROBLEMATIC SCHOOL ABSENCE.** Evan Elkin from the Vera Institute of Justice said that we should shift our thinking away from “kid-blaming” and toward “solution-oriented” language. After all, once a young person feels judged for his or her absence, it may be even more difficult for that student to return to school. According to Hedy Chang, Director of Attendance Works, young people suffer negative outcomes when they miss too much school for any reason, whether the absences are unexcused, excused, or due to school suspension. By looking at absences through the lens of chronic absenteeism and preparing school staff to support students returning to school regardless of circumstance, schools can target interventions to students who are most in need of them. By enabling the early identification of at-risk youth, students who have missed less than 10 percent of the school year will be able to benefit from additional supports and services as well.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. (2013). Deinstitutionalization of Status Offenders Best practices Database. Retrieved from <http://www.ojjdp.gov/dso/dsoAboutTypesOfServices.aspx>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

## 2.

# Use individual attendance data in addition to school average daily attendance to determine more efficiently which students struggle with attendance

Public schools in New York City take student attendance daily and submit this information to the Department of Education (DOE). The information is aggregated and made available to the general public.<sup>26</sup> For example, a school might share, through the DOE website and elsewhere, that it currently has a 90% attendance rate among its students, which is to say that on any given day nine out of every ten young people registered as students at that school are actually there. Leslie Cornfeld, chair of the Mayor's Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism & School Engagement, pointed out that, "A school with 90 percent attendance could still have one out of ten students missing a month or

more of school." The aggregate data, in other words, might not be telling the whole story when it comes to student attendance at a particular school. There may be serious repercussions for this limited picture to the extent that it affects whether schools think they have a chronic absentee problem, and how they identify which students need help.

**SCHOOLS SHOULD MAKE USE OF ATTENDANCE DATA THAT ALLOWS THEM TO IDENTIFY WHICH YOUNG PEOPLE ARE STRUGGLING WITH CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.** It is important that schools and other institutions considering attendance data focus on the statistics that paint the clearest picture of attendance patterns. "People think they're looking at the right data, and they aren't," said Hedy Chang, Director of Attendance Works, a national and state-level initiative aimed at advancing student success by addressing chronic absence. She emphasized that schools need to pay attention to chronic absenteeism, not average daily attendance of the student body. In particular, increased attention should be given to monitoring chronic absence starting at the beginning of each school year to make sure that students and their families are alerted as soon as possible when students might be at risk due to poor attendance, and to identify if



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there are systemic barriers that may be causing large numbers of students to miss school. She also recommended that schools establish a team of staff responsible for monitoring student attendance rates to ensure that students who are chronically absent — or at risk of becoming so — are being identified and offered support and encouragement in coming to school each day. While some schools in New York City may already be doing this, we propose that all schools implement this practice. Since DOE data looks only at the aggregate and the Administration for Children's Services isn't notified about attendance issues until a student has missed 10 consecutive days, schools are in the best position to support students at risk of chronic absenteeism before it becomes a problem.

**SCHOOLS SHOULD ASSIST STUDENTS IDENTIFIED AS STRUGGLING WITH ATTENDANCE WITH PROGRAMMING AND OTHER SERVICES AND SUPPORTS.** If schools more effectively use their records to identify the students struggling the most with attendance, they can target services and support to those students. The Center for Court Innovation's Attendance Achievement Program (AAP), for example, provides attendance support to students who have been identified as having serious attendance issues. Participation in the AAP is voluntary; families may elect to participate or discontinue participation at any time. The program is designed to serve students who are chronically late or absent. The Attendance Achievement Program has been implemented in two Harlem middle schools and a high school in the Bronx. During the 2010-11 school year, participants in the program improved their attendance by an average of 14 percent. Schools should look for programs that provide similar site-based interventions to support student efforts to come to school regularly and succeed in the classroom. Community-based organizations are often a valuable resource in this respect, since they are familiar with neighborhood challenges and resources.

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# 3.

## Support parents and foster parents to ensure that they are familiar with the education system and the importance of daily school attendance

We learned from focus groups with teens and interviews with city officials that parents and guardians do not routinely have sufficient information to help them understand the importance of student attendance and education, or the policies and practices at their children's schools. "City agencies should continue to partner in their efforts to keep parents informed because they are not as informed as they should be to be able to make good educational decisions for their families," said Kathleen Hoskins, Director of the Education Unit at the Administration for Children's Services. This issue is particularly relevant where teenagers are concerned. Teens in our focus groups said that parents or guardians sometimes kept them home from school to help with younger siblings or other household responsibilities. Parents may not realize that missing even a day of school can affect their children's academic performance. Without fully understanding the importance of attending school every day, parents or guardians may not be able to adequately support their children's daily attendance.

Foster families in particular are challenged by a lack of knowledge about the educational system and the importance of consistent school attendance. Ms. Hoskins pointed out that when kinship providers like grandparents or aunts and uncles provide foster care to a

young person, they are sometimes unable to support youth educationally because they simply don't know enough about the school system. She stressed the need "to engage foster parents and get them to adopt the view that education isn't just from 9:00 to 3:00." Foster children, who Ms. Hoskins pointed out have a higher rate of absence than children who live with their biological families, especially need parents or guardians who understand how the educational system works, what is expected of young people, and what can happen if these expectations are not met.

**PARENTS AND FOSTER PARENTS NEED ACCESS TO MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ATTENDANCE AND OTHER SCHOOL EXPECTATIONS FOR THEIR CHILDREN.** One of the simplest things that schools can do to keep adults informed about their children is to make school attendance, grades, and other educational updates about students readily accessible, and make concerted efforts to share that information with parents on a timely basis. In many cases, particularly for teens, students are the vehicles for schools to share information with parents, an arrangement that requires more effort on the part of students. If this information were more directly available to parents, they would be in a better position to support their children in both going to school and taking school seriously.

Schools can help get more information to par-

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**“City agencies should continue to partner in their efforts to keep parents informed because they are not as informed as they should be to be able to make good educational decisions for their families.”**

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— Kathleen Hoskins, Administration for Children’s Services

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ents about the importance of daily attendance by communicating regularly, through newsletters, parent-teacher conferences, and Parent-Teacher Association meetings, as appropriate. Teachers and school administrators should reach out to parents and families of young people with attendance issues to alert them to the problems and discuss solutions.

Students, particularly teens, also have a role to play in making sure that they get to school every day. As teens often take on the role of the

primary communicator, they should inform their parents immediately if attendance issues are affecting their academic performance, especially if they are missing school due to family responsibilities. Students can also take initiative to bring personal problems that affect their attendance to school staff so that they can work together to find a solution. Finally, students can support one another in daily attendance, for example through peer-to-peer mentoring; including information about the importance of attendance in student-published newspapers or newsletters; or even simply by serving as good examples for their peers by attending school every day and asking after absent friends.

**PARENTS AND FOSTER PARENTS NEED ACCESS TO INFORMATION ABOUT THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AS A WHOLE TO BETTER SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN.** We were excited to hear that Ms. Hoskins’s office is in the process of creating an education guide for foster parents and guardians that includes information about the educational system, the expectations for students to continue their education, and how best to advocate educationally for the children and youth in their care. Similar pamphlets, aimed at parents and students, could be used to provide essential information about going to public school in New York City. The goal is to support parents and families and to promote a greater appreciation for the importance of daily school attendance.

# 4.

# Help teens draw connections between school attendance and their futures early in their schooling

Through our interviews and focus groups, we learned the importance of motivating students to attend school. As Evan Elkin, Director of the Department of Planning and Government Innovation at the Vera Institute of Justice, suggests, “For some kids, high school is not an engaging place.” The young people we spoke to said they sometimes don’t connect school attendance to their futures. “People cut school,” explained one focus group participant, “because they see it as a waste of time.” Though the young people we spoke to claimed to understand the importance of school, they reported that it wasn’t until they were approaching the end of high school that they were able to make explicit connections between attendance and their plans for work or continued education. As grade point average (GPA) is affected by school attendance and in turn affects college eligibility, one student stated, “I wish I had gone to school more. Maybe my GPA wouldn’t have been that bad.”

Such opinions suggest a need to expand the variety of educational offerings at schools across the city, to help teens understand how school fits into their long-term goals. Just as a “one size fits all” approach to improving student attendance might pass over certain issues and populations, a school with a stan-

dard set of electives and after-school programs might fail to sufficiently engage many students.

**CONNECT STUDENTS WITH VOCATIONAL TRAINING, AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS, AND OTHER OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT THAT CATER TO THEIR INTERESTS.** Students have expressed enthusiasm for a variety of opportunities to apply school to their future goals. As Lisa Nelson, Principal of the Issac Newton Middle School of Math and Science in Harlem, said, “When kids are engaged in [after-school programs], they are most likely to come to school.” Programs that capture students’ interests can motivate them to focus on improving school attendance and help them take responsibility for their own educational development. By participating in these programs, young people who have difficulty connecting schooling to their professional goals will be better able to see both the short and long-term benefits of attending school. Research shows that by integrating such programs into existing curricula, schools have the opportunity to raise student attendance, as well as student achievement.<sup>27</sup> “Kids shouldn’t serve schools; schools should serve kids,” said Principal Nelson.

Schools can also integrate career-oriented

<sup>27</sup> Viadero, D. (2007, November 28). High-Quality After-School Programs Tied to Test-Score Gains. Education Week. Retrieved from <http://www.nyc.gov/html/truancy/html/smc/smc.shtml>

programming into the school day, from applied math or writing courses to vocational training. As one focus group participant said, “On-the-job training would be great. Students could take courses in the morning then leave for a job where they would gain valuable, practical experience in a field they were interested in.” Schools that integrate a half-day of hands-on vocational training already exist: Co Op Tech and the Skills Training for Employment Program (STEP) are two programs that require academic coursework in the morning followed by participation in vocational training in the afternoon. Although these schools work primarily with students that have already experienced some level of disengagement from school, other schools throughout the city can look to Co Op Tech and STEP as models that can be adapted to proactively prevent absenteeism.

Given that adding specialized programs is contingent upon increased funding, it is unlikely that schools will be able to expand enrichment offerings on their own, especially in a time of relative economic austerity. However, schools can partner with, or even simply direct students to, non-profit organizations or local universities. In addition, students would benefit from receiving a list of resources identifying organizations and programs that

provide enrichment opportunities for them. The previously proposed pamphlet designed to help parents and foster parents navigate the education system in New York City could be a resource for students as well by mapping out the educational pathways to later success and helping them appreciate the role of schooling in achieving professional goals.

**MAKE ATTENDANCE AT EACH CLASS A PREREQUISITE FOR PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIVES, VOCATIONAL TRAINING, OR AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS.** While offering a variety of enrichment opportunities has the potential to pique student interest and engage them in the educational process, young people from our focus groups readily admitted that some students might skip required courses during the day, yet still expect to participate in their favorite electives. We suggest that schools make attendance at each class a prerequisite for participation in electives, vocational training, or after-school programs. In this way, these programs will serve as incentives, spurring improved attendance.

# 5.

## Examine the impact of security procedures on student attendance

New York City Police Department (NYPD) school safety agents provide security in city high schools. Safety agents are responsible for overseeing school security, including patrolling school hallways, entrances and exits; operating security technology; checking student and staff IDs; and making arrests when appropriate.<sup>28</sup> Although every public high school has safety agents performing these roles, responsibilities may vary from school to school (for example, school safety agents run metal detectors, but not all schools have them). The NYPD also monitors the area around many schools before, during, and after school hours to make sure students are in the building when they are supposed to be.

Students reported that security procedures sometimes affected their attendance. In particular, students complained of being late to class due to security procedures. While it is certainly important to keep schools safe, it is worth considering ways of doing so without compromising students' ability to get to class on time.

### **CONSIDER WAYS TO MAKE SECURITY PROCEDURES MORE EFFICIENT.**

Young people in the focus groups who attended schools with metal detectors complained that long lines to get into the building often made them late for class. One student said she regularly arrived at school at 7:30 AM—well before class—but generally would get to class late, sometimes

50 minutes after arriving, due to the lengthy security line. While the principal told her teacher that she should not be academically penalized for being late due to security, she was nevertheless missing out on instruction and had a strained relationship with her teacher because of her persistent lateness. Schools with metal detectors should work with safety agents to determine the proper balance of student safety and efficiency, for example randomly scanning students instead of making everyone go through security daily, similar to the process used for bag searches in the subway. For schools with ID cards, which require students to swipe into the building, delays are caused by youths forgetting their cards, as each student must share his or her name and have a computer print a pass for the day. While young people should be responsible for carrying ID, schools might be able to expedite the procedure for forgotten ID, as it is a common problem that affects students' ability to get to class on time.

**ALLOW FOR “GRACE PERIODS” WHEN STUDENTS ARE LATE, BUT ON THEIR WAY TO CLASS.** In some schools, security officers within the building stop students on their way to class after the bell, making them even later. In this situation, many young people who are on their way to class can be taken to a classroom for late students, where they often spend the whole period, in their own words, “doing nothing”

<sup>28</sup> Center for Court Innovation. (2006). One Step At a Time: Recommendations to the School Safety Community to Improve Safety. New York City, NY: Youth Justice Board.

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**“Hall sweeps should occur 10 minutes after the late bell, not 10 seconds.”**

—New York City high school student

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when they could be in class. As one student said, “Hall sweeps should occur 10 minutes after the late bell, not 10 seconds.”

Police officers patrolling outside of a school building may pick up students who are late but on their way to school, taking them around the block multiple times while they look for other students before dropping them at school. Anyone picked up by an officer gets marked as truant and goes into the school database as getting picked up for truancy. Automatic phone messages go to parents as well.

We think it's important for truancy and school safety officers to focus on the young people that are at the highest risk of chronic absence, not those that are well-intentioned but a little bit behind. Teachers can help by providing hall passes if students are late leaving class for any reason. Schools should also work with security guards to determine the best strategy for hall-sweeps. While

there may be concerns about grace periods being taken advantage of by students, we think that if students feel respected, they will not come to school or go to class late on purpose. If schools keep careful track of individual attendance, it will be easier to know which students may be taking advantage of grace periods and to deal with those students directly.

# 6.

# Develop clear, consistent expectations around student confidentiality

We learned that many students are concerned about confidentiality when speaking with adults, and this can hinder their communication with school staff. While young people in our focus groups credited caring teachers and guidance counselors for making their schools feel more welcome, many students felt uncomfortable discussing the reasons behind their absences due to a perceived lack of confidentiality. One student said that information she shared with individual adults in perceived confidence was sometimes shared with deans and assistant principals. She felt afterwards that staff's knowledge of this information affected the way she was treated. While mandated reporting practices obligate teachers and school staff to pass on information about abuse or maltreatment, in addition to internal school protocols that may require staff to share other information, these procedures are not always transparent to students. In some cases, the physical space exacerbates the issue. One focus group participant stated that people could hear her talking through the walls of the guidance office.

**SUPPORT STUDENTS' CONFIDENCE IN SCHOOL STAFF BY PROMOTING TRANSPARENCY ABOUT MANDATED REPORTING PRACTICES.** Students may not be familiar with mandated reporting practices or guidelines for internal information sharing that extend beyond the requirements of mandated reporting. As a result, staff may share personal information about students that may lead to young people feeling uncomfortable about approaching staff with their personal prob-

lems again. While mandated reporting laws and a sense of professional obligation to share information can preclude complete confidentiality, sharing these limitations upfront can facilitate stronger communication between students and school staff.

#### **SCHOOLS SHOULD PROVIDE SAFE, PRIVATE ROOMS WHERE STUDENTS CAN DISCUSS POTENTIAL PROBLEMS.**

Our interviews and focus groups suggest that mental and physical health-related problems are strong predictors of truancy and chronic absence. Although such problems are best addressed by health professionals and other support networks, many students who may not have access to such care can benefit from knowing that their school staff understand and care about their problems. Hon. Judge Drinane of Bronx Family Court suggested that, "We are losing so many kids... because they don't have the support around them they need for success." Since daily attendance is crucial to suc-



Photo credit: Christian

cess, any additional support that school staff can provide to address personal problems will help students feel emotionally engaged at school. By ensuring private spaces are available in schools to discuss personal problems, students will be able to speak openly to counselors, teachers, or other school staff without worrying about being overheard. A safe, private space does not need to be built from scratch – it can be a classroom or an office, as long as it is an enclosed space where conversations cannot be overheard.

When students feel comfortable sharing problems, schools can respond and assist students more effectively, supporting their attendance. The combination of private spaces and clear communication on what information staff may share has the potential to make students feel more comfortable about sharing personal issues, contributing to the development of a school environment in which students can confidently look to teachers and other school staff for both emotional and educational support.

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**When students feel comfortable sharing problems, schools can respond and assist students more effectively, supporting their attendance.**

# 7.

# Offer additional supportive services to students during transition periods

We learned that issues with school attendance often increase during transition periods, when students move from elementary to middle school or from middle to high school. An unfamiliar school environment, separation from friends made at other schools, and a new — often longer — commute, are all factors that may contribute to this.

**INCREASE THE AMOUNT OF GUIDANCE, INSTRUCTION, AND SUPPORT AVAILABLE TO STUDENTS GOING THROUGH TRANSITION PERIODS.** To prepare young people for the transition from middle school to high school, middle schools should consider opening a “high school office” in their building with a dedicated staff member, such as a guidance counselor, modeled after the college offices that operate in many high schools. This would help students consider all of their options when selecting a high school and factor in issues including daily commuting time that they might not think about when ranking their choices. Kathleen Hoskins, Director of the Office of Education Support and Policy Planning at the Administration for Children’s Services, said that the confusing high school selection process can contribute to students feeling overwhelmed, which can then lead to poor high school choices that can ultimately translate to chronic absenteeism.

Many high schools offer a summer orientation program for new students to give them a sense of what to expect when they start school. However, these programs vary significantly from school to school, with some lasting a day,

and others allowing students to take classes for up to six weeks over the summer. In order to best support the transition, we recommend that these programs should last for at least a week, while allowing students to take interesting classes and participate in icebreakers to get to know their new classmates. To incentivize youth attendance, schools can use this time to offer early opportunities for students to sign up for clubs, sports and extracurricular activities. Another advantage of these programs is that they give freshmen the chance to meet older students at the school and build positive relationships. When possible, summer orientation should involve other members of the student body in addition to incoming students.

Many schools also allow prepared students to take high school level classes in middle school, which puts students ahead on credits and prepares them for the transition to high school. Expanding these opportunities, particularly for students who excel in some subjects but struggle in others, would help more young people prepare for high school work. Currently, many schools only allow high-achieving students to take these classes, which may exclude a young person who, for example, struggles in English but excels in math. This is one way schools can better serve the students who are not the highest achievers and who may be more at risk for challenges down the road.

# 8.

# Prepare schools to support students who are returning from extended absences

We learned that returning to school from extended periods of absence is often difficult for students. This is true no matter what the cause of absence; whether for a health/medical issue, personal or family problems, school suspension, or the student's choice not to come to school, it can be daunting for students to come back and catch up on missed schoolwork. As one student from the focus group stated, "The more school you miss, the harder it is to return."

In addition, students can feel ostracized by their peers and school staff when returning from an extended absence. In fact, participants in the focus groups shared that they often felt they were used as a negative example to other students, instead of receiving positive support from teachers and school staff when they returned to school. One young person said of the experience, "Some teachers make a spectacle out of you. You dug yourself into a hole and now they're not going to help you get out of it." The period of returning to school is a vulnerable time for young people; in the short term, they are making decisions about whether or not they will commit to their education, which, in the long term, affects their ability to complete school.

**SUPPORT STUDENTS IN MAKING UP MISSED WORK AND IN RETURNING TO SCHOOL.** When young people return from extended periods of absence, they face the pressure of making up missed school work. In some cases, this can affect their ability to earn credit for the class. In

order for students to be able to complete the work required, teachers, guidance counselors and school administrative staff can all play a role in supporting students. Youth in the focus groups said they felt supported when teachers and school staff took the time to meet with them upon their return to school. This also allows for one-on-one communication about the reasons behind the absence; if teachers understand that students are not missing simply because they dislike the class, teachers may be more flexible with deadlines. One young person in the focus group said, "I had a teacher who pulled me aside after I missed a month. He said, 'Don't worry about it. We'll see what we can do next marking period.'" Increased communication and understanding around absences can help avoid situations in which students feel they are treated unfairly for missing school.

It is important to note that we think leniency and other support from teachers in making up work should only be offered if students can demonstrate a legitimate reason for the extended absence. Students need to take responsibility for their absence; as part of this, students should explain to teachers the extenuating circumstances, and if there are none, accept the consequences of their choice to miss school. Students who attend class regularly will not find the additional support offered to chronically absent students unfair as long as the absences are the result of circumstances beyond the student's control.

School administrators can also support students returning from a long absence through communication with teachers and flexibility around grade reporting and other deadlines so that students get appropriate credit for work completed late. Some schools will send students' work over the internet to allow them to keep up while they are away. We feel that this is a fair option; schools that are not doing this already should consider doing so as long as they can ensure this privilege is only available to students who are missing school for legitimate reasons.

Guidance counselors can also help students feel supported upon their return to school. In the case of personal issues, counselors can be an ally. One youth in the focus group reported that her counselor requested that teachers not ask her questions about her extended absence and that this support went a long way toward making her feel more comfortable returning to school. Another student said her counselor requested a weekly meeting with her to ensure she was attending school regularly. This extra level of support made the young person feel more accountable and helped her to attend her classes as required.

**CREATE ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE TRANSITIONING BACK TO SCHOOL FROM DETENTION OR PLACEMENT, OR RETURNING TO SCHOOL AFTER AN EXTENDED ABSENCE.** Teens who are returning to school after time in detention, jail, or placement face additional challenges. As many teens are chronically absent in the period lead-

ing up to their arrests, they find themselves in a difficult situation. Not only have they likely fallen behind due to missed work prior to their arrests, but according to Amy Breglio, staff attorney at Advocates for Children, it is possible that students who productively spend their time in classes while in a court-ordered setting may not have their credits transfer upon return to their home schools, as the decision to grant credit is made at the discretion of the home school. This can leave these young people in the position of being overage, under-credited, and behind their peers. Deputy Commissioner Ana Bermudez of the Department of Probation noted that most schools do not have transition plans to support students returning from confinement. Some principals, under pressure to improve student test scores, may feel additional stress in having unprepared young people return to school for standardized tests that affect their school rankings, Evan Elkin of the Vera Institute suggested.

While this is an issue that many organizations, including Advocates for Children, are already working on, there is more work to be done. Creating specific attendance and academic support plans for students who are returning to school from detention or placement can help students feel supported and prepared for success. Another model to examine is the Success Mentors, particularly the transition coaches who are assigned to work with youths returning from juvenile justice facilities, suspension, homeless shelters, and foster care.<sup>29</sup> Finally, this is an opportunity for students who

<sup>29</sup> New York City Department of Education. (2013). New York Success Mentor Corps. Retrieved from <http://www.nyc.gov/html/truancy/html/smcsmc.shtml>

are returning to school to demonstrate their commitment by taking responsibility for their attendance. Simply asking teachers for help when they need it might go a long way toward getting support in returning to school. Online peer-to-peer and teacher-student academic forums such as Schoology<sup>30</sup> can also be utilized by students to catch up on missed coursework.

**USE SUSPENSION ONLY AS A LAST RESORT FOR DEALING WITH DISCIPLINARY INFRACTIONS.** Hedy Chang, Director of Attendance Works, said that missing too much school for any reason, including suspension, can be a problem causing students to fall behind because they have lost out on crucial opportunities to learn in the classroom. The New York City Department of Education Discipline Code provides a comprehensive list of disciplinary infractions and recommended responses while leaving schools broad authority to make decisions about individual students. For higher level infractions, suspension is an option. Suspension can take two forms: a principal's suspension, which is an in-school suspension lasting one to five days, during which the student is required to receive instruction and complete work; and longer superintendent suspensions, which are out-of-school suspensions that can last from six days up to one year.<sup>31</sup>

While suspension may sometimes be unavoidable due to the severity of the offense or the

student's record, given the disruption that time out of the classroom causes for students, schools should consider ways to use suspension only as a last resort. We heard from Judge Monica Drinane, Supervising Judge of the Bronx County Family Court, that school suspensions, especially for youth who are suspended multiple times in a school year, are a predictor for justice system involvement. In our experience, even an in-school suspension can cause students to fall behind on work. In some cases, young people who know they face an in-school suspension may elect not to go to school at all. When they do attend, they face reduced instruction time, as many schools have them show up later and leave earlier than the rest of the student body.

A good alternative to suspension would be to allow students to give back to the school through volunteer work. There is a movement nationally to integrate restorative justice practices into school disciplinary procedures.<sup>32</sup> One model we learned about is school-based youth court programs, which offer students the opportunity to share their side of the story with a group of peers who are trained to listen and ask questions. Then, the youth court issues a sanction, often including school-based community service, which allows young people to repair the harm done to the school community through positive actions.

<sup>30</sup> More information at [www.schoology.com](http://www.schoology.com)

<sup>31</sup> Sgarro, C. (2012). Grade 6-12 Level 5. In Citywide Standards of Intervention and Discipline Measures (Infractions B Grades 6-12), 29. Retrieved from <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/F7DA5E8D-C065-44FF-A16F-55F491C0B9E7/0/DiscCode20122013FINAL.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Brown, P., L. (2013, April 4). Restorative justice programs take root in schools. New York Times. Retrieved from [www.nytimes.com/2013/04/04/education/restorative-justice-programs-take-root-in-schools.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/04/education/restorative-justice-programs-take-root-in-schools.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

# 9.

## Expand supports for overage, under-credited students

Many of the experts that we interviewed noted that young people who are overage and under-credited, meaning that they do not have the expected number of school credits for someone their age and may be a grade level or more behind their age group, are at an especially high risk of dropping out of school. In a 2005 analysis of students who had dropped out of school in New York City, 93 percent had been at least two years behind in school before withdrawing.<sup>33</sup> Students who miss school regularly are at a greater risk of falling behind their peers and needing to repeat a grade.<sup>34</sup>

Young people who are overage and under-credited may face unique challenges, including having spent time in a juvenile facility, or being a parent and needing to both watch and support a child. Further, these teens may face a stigma about their age that is difficult to overcome. As Judge Monica Drinane said, “It’s discouraging to be in the 6th grade for the third time.”

The New York City Department of Education (DOE) offers many options for young people

who are overage and under-credited. Transfer schools are small schools designed to re-engage students who are behind in credits or who want to return to school after dropping out. Young Adult Borough Centers offer evening classes and allow students to earn credits that transfer to their home high schools. Accelerated Achievement schools can help overage students during the transition from middle to high school. Learn to Work (LTW) programs offer students job-readiness and career exploration opportunities.<sup>35</sup> In addition, District 79 schools, which support students who have experienced significant educational obstacles, offer other options designed to support student achievement by addressing some of the unique issues that overage students may face.<sup>36</sup> For example, the Living for the Young Family through Education program, offered in 37 schools across the five boroughs, provides free childcare for young parents.<sup>37</sup> These programs offer young people flexible opportunities to complete their education. Yet, with only 61 percent of New York City high school students graduating on time,<sup>38</sup> and a statewide dropout rate of 23 percent,<sup>39</sup> it is clear that many young people still have unmet educational needs.

<sup>33</sup> Our Piece of the Pie. (2012). Helping Over-Age, Under-Credited Youth Succeed: Making the Case for Innovative Education Strategies. Retrieved from <http://www.opp.org/docs/Helping%20Over-Age%20Under-Credited%20Youth%20Succeed%20-%20OPP,%20July%202012.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> National Association of School Psychologists. (2005). Alternatives to Grade Retention. Retrieved from <http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/Retention%20WEB.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> 2012-2013 Additional Ways to Graduate: High School Diploma and GED Programs. Retrieved April 17, 2013 from <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/287B38D6-CC92-414A-BA47-BBBC52BCEFA3/0/aaa00876.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> New York City Department of Education. (2013). Help For Students Exploring Other Ways to Graduate. Retrieved from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/District79/SchoolsProgramsServices/default.htm>

<sup>37</sup> New York City Department of Education. (2013). Help For Students Exploring Other Ways to Graduate. Retrieved from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/District79/SchoolsProgramsServices/default.htm>

<sup>38</sup> Decker, G. (2012, June 11). New York City's graduation rates flatten after six years of growth. Gotham Schools. Retrieved from <http://gotham-schools.org/2012/06/11/new-york-citys-graduation-rates-flatten-after-six-years-of-growth/>

<sup>39</sup> Boost Up. (2011). The Facts: Rate Not Graduating. Retrieved from <http://boostup.org/en/facts/statistics#ny>

**EXPAND THE AVAILABILITY OF PROGRAMS FOR OVERAGE, UNDER-CREDITED YOUNG PEOPLE AND STUDENTS WITH UNIQUE EDUCATION NEEDS.** Many young people who are overage, under-credited and/or no longer engaged in school may have negative associations with school, which can hinder their return. Programs like LTW are a good starting point, as they provide education and jobs or internships, something youth in the focus groups said would be helpful for re-engaging them in school. Alternative education programs should consider how to reach out to teens who are disengaged with school to let them know about their options. Additionally, whenever possible, schools should provide information about alternative education programs to students at-risk for dropping out and their families. While schools should do their best to encourage

and support students in attending class and working towards graduation, in cases where this seems unlikely, students would be best served if also offered information about education options outside of school. This way, if they do indeed drop out, they will already have access to information about alternatives.

We also suggest advertising about the DOE's Office of Postsecondary Readiness (OPSR) on the subway and other public spaces in order to reach youths who are no longer in school. The OSPR was established in 2005 to develop a range of educational models to meet the differing needs of the young people who are overage and under-credited to ensure that they reach graduation prepared for success in college and/or a career.<sup>40</sup>



Creative Commons image courtesy of PCHS-NJROTC on Wikipedia

# 10.

# Have mentoring programs available in all schools to give chronically absent students the attention and concern that will inspire commitment to attend school

"I never knew anyone noticed before, or that anyone cared."

Sarah Jonas, the Director of Regional Initiatives for the National Center for Community Schools at the Children's Aid Society, shared this quote from a young person reflecting on how having a mentor had inspired the child to start attending school more regularly. As she explained, "Attendance is a sign of what else is going on [in a young person's life]." This sentiment was echoed by many young people in our focus groups, who themselves struggled at some point with chronic absenteeism. One young man said he stopped going to school because he felt that no one cared about his being there, even though his school was only five minutes from his house. Mentors provide students with the personal attention that they might not receive from other school staff. Leslie Cornfeld, Chair of the Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism and School Engagement, explained that she has found mentoring to be one of the most effective strategies for reducing school absence. The Task Force launched and oversees

the Success Mentor Corps, the largest, most comprehensive in-school mentoring program in the country, currently serving over 9000 students in 100 schools in New York City.<sup>41</sup>

**THE CITY SHOULD MAKE A SYSTEM-WIDE COMMITMENT TO PROVIDING MENTORS TO YOUNG PEOPLE STRUGGLING WITH ATTENDANCE, WITH AN EMPHASIS ON COMMUNITY-BASED MENTORS.** The Success Mentor Corps includes three types of mentors: peer mentors, school staff mentors, and mentors from community-based partners. Mentors are recruited, trained, and then assigned ten to fifteen young people with whom they meet at least three times a week during the school day. Mentors also make phone calls home when students are absent, greet students in the hallway, and connect students and their families with services to help them overcome challenges to their educational success. In some cases, mentors provide tutoring and other academic support to students. Additionally, the Corps includes transition coaches: individuals trained to help young people return to schools from suspensions, foster care, homeless shelters, and juvenile detention facilities.

<sup>41</sup> New York City Department of Education. (2013). New York Success Mentor Corps. Retrieved from <http://www.nyc.gov/html/truancy/html/smcsmc.shtml>

The young people who participated in our focus groups indicated that while they appreciated the opportunity to have a mentor of any type, they would prefer a mentor coming from a community-based organization. We heard in our focus groups that some young people may be hesitant to open up to a mentor who is part of the school staff since there is concern that he or she might share personal information with other teachers and administrators. Peer mentors could be helpful, but would need training and support to be able to serve in this important role. Community-based mentors, on the other hand, would teach students new and different material, could give advice about future ambitions, and introduce students to cultural and other opportunities in the community, while having a relationship with students that differs from their other teachers.

With the New York City mayoral election occurring in the fall of 2013, we want to underscore the importance of providing mentors to students who struggle with attendance. We hope that the next mayor will sustain and expand the Success Mentor Corps to provide

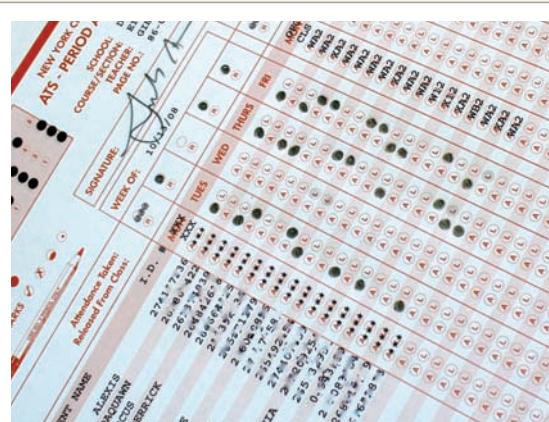
mentors to as many chronically absent young people in New York City as possible.

# Conclusion

We would like to thank you for taking the time to read our report. This report is important to us because we have worked very hard throughout the year to fulfill our goal of creating recommendations to raise school attendance rates by improving the relationship between students and schools throughout New York City. This report reflects our ideas and committed investment to young people across New York City.

As a result of our recommendations, we hope to see more programs and stronger supports for those students most at risk for chronic absenteeism, as well as a welcoming school environment that helps students and their families understand the importance of attendance. We also want young people to feel involved in the processing of reducing chronic absenteeism in schools across New York City. In the 2013-14 program year, the Youth Jus-

tice Board will work on implementing some of the ideas expressed in the recommendations. As young people, we know how challenging it can be to attend school every day. But we are also starting to experience the benefits that come with a good education, including the opportunity to participate in programs such as the Youth Justice Board and summer internship programs. Some of us received college acceptance letters this year, demonstrating that our work was worth it. Ultimately, we hope our recommendations and the work of the Board next year will help reduce chronic absenteeism in New York City and improve the educational experiences of all students throughout the city.



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# Youth Justice Board Member and Staff Biographies

## AALIYAH

Hi, my name is Aaliyah, and I attend Long Island City High School. My hobbies include tennis, lacrosse, and writing. After high school, I plan on getting my bachelor's degree in criminal justice and then going for my master's to become a Homeland Security Officer. I joined the Youth Justice Board because I felt it would lead me on my path to my future.

## AMETHYST

Hi, my name is Amethyst, and I am 17 years old. I'm currently a senior at James Madison High School. I like to sing and perform in shows. I also like to ice skate and play tennis during my free time. I was interested in joining the Youth Justice Board because I plan on becoming a lawyer when I finish college. I have been interested in law for as long as I can remember. I like to solve problems and help people; the Board helps me to do this for New York City teens.

## ANNETTE

Hello, my name is Annette. I'm 18 years old and from Brooklyn. I'm a student at City University of New York - Baruch College. In my spare time, I like to make short films, read novels, and play basketball. I joined the Youth Justice Board because I have an interest in public policy and change, and I feel that the Board gives me the proper platform to let my voice be heard.

## CHEYENNE

Hi, my name is Cheyenne. I am 17 years old. I am a senior at James Madison High School in Brooklyn. I enjoy the performing arts, especially choreographing for dance shows. I like

to engage myself in many school activities because it fits my outgoing personality. I joined the Youth Justice Board because I like to help people and I intend on becoming a lawyer. The Board has provided me with skills, such as public speaking and proper interviewing, to thrive in the corporate world.

## CHRISTIAN

My name is Christian, and I'm 17 years old. I am currently a high school senior at Francis Lewis High School, located in Fresh Meadows, Queens. I joined the Youth Justice Board to give my opinion. I feel all students should have a voice in government. We are the future so why not have a say with everything going on? My goal in life is to work in Congress to assist in creating the new world, to create a good country where dreams come true. I'm also a soccer fanatic. I love the Spanish team FC Barcelona, and I hope to see them play live one day. I hope to have a great future. The road might be tough but never impossible.

## DAGMAR

My name is Dagmar. I am 17 years old and a senior at the High School for Environmental Studies. My favorite thing to do is play piano; it is the one thing I can do for hours and never get bored. I joined the Youth Justice Board because I really believe that young people can, and should, make a difference. This program is our middle man in getting our message out, especially on a topic we are directly involved in.

## DAKOTA

Hey! My name is Dakota. I'm 16, and I'm a junior

at Hostos Lincoln Academy of Science. I'm still deciding what college I want to attend when I graduate from high school, but I plan on majoring in computer science and computer engineering. When I'm not studying for my college and high school classes, I'm usually teaching myself Java for application development. The Youth Justice Board interested me because of the leadership skills I would learn, like becoming more assertive.

#### **ELIZABETH**

Hey, my name is Elizabeth. I am currently a senior at Hostos Lincoln Academy of Science, and I am looking forward to starting college in fall 2013. I have participated in various programs over the course of my high school career, and I have gained many wonderful experiences from them. I believe that as a teen living in the South Bronx, the best thing for me to do is take advantage of the endless opportunities out there, and that is exactly what I have done. When I joined the Youth Justice Board, I did not expect to learn as much as I know now. I am glad for all the experiences I have gained so far, and I like how I am given the opportunity to have a say in something that will affect youth in New York City.

#### **JAEI**

Hey, I'm Jael. I'm from Far Rockaway, and I'm a sophomore at the Brooklyn Latin School. I love writing and reading in my spare time. I like to watch a variety of TV shows and create different artistic projects. I'm also a dancer and obsessed with fashion. I hope one day to start my own line, but until then, I'm pursuing a ca-

reer in law, journalism, or anthropology. I joined the Youth Justice Board because I love being a strong advocate for those who are often under-represented. I think that being a voice in society for people my age was one of the greatest opportunities I could ever ask for. I hope that I can make a change in the world for the better.

#### **LEVI**

Hello, my name is Levi, and I'm 15 years old. I attend Hunter College High School and study politics, international relations, science, and Spanish. My favorite sports are tennis and track, specifically short distances, relays, and hurdles. I don't like studying, obviously, but I do it anyway because I know what's best for me. Right now, I'm not exactly sure of what I want to be but I know I'm ready to start preparing for the future.

#### **MALIK**

Hi, my name is Malik. I am 15 years old, and I attend the Urban Assembly School for Law and Justice. I'm in 10th grade. I love to exercise, take photographs, explore, watch television, and relax for fun. I joined the Youth Justice Board because I want to be able to help and speak for those who can't for themselves. In terms of career aspirations, I want to be a federal prosecutor and work my way up the ranks to eventually become the President of the United States.

#### **MELISSA**

Hi! My name is Melissa, and I am a senior at New York City LAB High School. I'm not sure what I'll be studying in college, but I have an interest in social issues and believe in individual voice. I think it's very important to stay up to

date and involved with issues in your community, both locally and globally. Following my involvement in Youth Organizing to Save Our Streets (YO S.O.S.), a Center for Court Innovation youth organizing program based in Brooklyn, I joined the Youth Justice Board to pursue my interest in youth justice. As the program progressed, I came to realize that much like my experience in YO S.O.S., I was becoming a part of something bigger, making a difference in people's lives.

#### **OBOERHURU**

My name is Oboerhuru (I'm also known as Rhuru) and I am 18 years old. This fall, I will either be attending City College or New York Institute of Technology. Currently, I attend Queens Gateway to Health Sciences Secondary School. I joined the Youth Justice Board to learn what actually goes on in the New York City public school system, especially when it comes to how the system deals with its students. I plan on becoming a successful businesswoman, a social activist, and a fashion designer.

#### **SHAJEDA**

Hi! My name is Shajeda. I am 18 years old and a senior at the Bronx High School of Science. I love environmental and social science and hope to major in it one day, with a minor in anthropology. I have always been interested in law and the Youth Justice Board has made me consider law as a possible career.

#### **STEVEN**

Hello, my name is Steven, and I am a senior at Benjamin Banneker High School. I consider myself a leader because I don't like to follow what everyone else likes to do. With my free time, I listen to music, including TDE and G.O.O.D. music. I enjoy being around my friends and having a good time. I joined the Youth Justice Board because everyone in my family says that I will have a good career as a lawyer. I truly enjoyed my time with the Board and have made friendships that will last a long time.

self a leader because I don't like to follow what everyone else likes to do. With my free time, I listen to music, including TDE and G.O.O.D. music. I enjoy being around my friends and having a good time. I joined the Youth Justice Board because everyone in my family says that I will have a good career as a lawyer. I truly enjoyed my time with the Board and have made friendships that will last a long time.

#### **SYEDA**

Hello, my name is Syeda. I am 16 years old and attend Academy of American Studies High School as a junior. Junior year is the most rigorous year in high school and although time for me is scarce, I enjoy volunteering and taking long walks when I get the chance. I joined the Youth Justice Board primarily because the concept of participating in an organization that addresses issues I am familiar with was captivating enough for me to fill out an application. I look forward to witnessing the recommendations we put so much effort into creating go into effect, to drastically reduce chronic absenteeism among students throughout public schools.

#### **TERRY-ANN**

Hello! My name is Terry-Ann. I am a 17-year-old student at Benjamin Cardozo High school in Queens. As a student in the Law and Humanities program, I wish to pursue a future in the criminal justice and law fields. A member of the Girls Varsity Basketball Team, I enjoy playing basketball. I also enjoy watching law-related shows in my spare time. I joined the Youth Justice Board in order to gain knowledge of the

juvenile justice system as well as be involved in a movement that gives me hands-on experiences in the policies that affect my peers.

#### LINDA BAIRD

##### ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF YOUTH JUSTICE PROGRAMS

Linda Baird is the Associate Director of Youth Justice Programs. Ms. Baird manages the Center's Youth Justice Board program, including curriculum design, lesson planning, outreach to program partners, facilitating Board sessions, and supervising program staff. Ms. Baird led the development of the Board's 2009 curriculum and operations toolkit, and supports technical assistance initiatives related to youth program development. She also oversees the Center's Police-Youth Dialogue Project, funded by the federal office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS). Ms. Baird earned a B.A. from Sarah Lawrence College and a M.Ed. from Lesley University.

#### NICHOLAS CHUNG

##### YOUTH JUSTICE PROGRAMS ASSOCIATE

Nicholas Chung is the Youth Justice Programs Associate. He works on the Youth Justice Board and the Adolescent Diversion Program at the Staten Island Youth Justice Center. He is interested in innovative approaches to education and juvenile justice policy design. Previously, he was a junior fellow at the Center for an Urban Future. He earned his B.A. from Brown University and his M.A. in Education Policy and Social Analysis from Teachers College, Columbia University.

#### JANAE GIBSON

##### YOUTH JUSTICE BOARD AMERICORPS ASSOCIATE

Janae Gibson is the Youth Justice Board AmeriCorps Associate and a 2008-2009 Youth Justice Board alumna. In this position, she works closely with the Youth Justice Board as a facilitator and program planner. She joined the Board as a senior in high school when the Board was studying Alternative to Detention programs. Janae obtained a B.S. in Criminal Justice in August 2012 at Monroe College in New Rochelle, New York. She always had a passion for law and young people and is thrilled to be returning to work with the Board! After completing the AmeriCorps program, Janae intends to go to law school, obtain her J.D. and become a juvenile defense attorney.

#### COLIN LENTZ

##### COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR FOR YOUTH JUSTICE PROGRAMS

Colin Lentz is the Communications Coordinator for Youth Justice Programs at the Center for Court Innovation. He is responsible for managing social media, including the Youth@Center blog, for the Youth Justice Programs project. He is also currently working on a project to create a best practices toolkit about using dialogue to build stronger relationships between police officers and young people. Previously, he was a Program Associate with the Development department and with the Youth Justice Board. He is a 2009 graduate of Brown University.

# Appendix 1: Research Design

Prior to conducting their fieldwork, Youth Justice Board members learned about the issue of school absence and the juvenile justice system in New York City. Members also received training in skills such as interviewing, note-taking, teamwork, and focus group facilitation.

## INTERVIEWS

The Youth Justice Board met with a wide range of stakeholders and community leaders to understand the factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism and the policies that have been put in place to counteract these factors in New York City. Members, working in small groups, conducted 17 interviews with 19 participants, including:

### Administration for Children's Services

- Kathleen Hoskins, Director, Education Unit

### Advocates for Children

- Amy Breglio, Staff Attorney, Juvenile Justice Project

### Attendance Works

- Hedy N. Chang, Director

### Bronx Family Court

- Hon. Monica Drinane, Supervising Judge

### Center for Court Innovation

- Beth Broderick, Director, Staten Island Youth Justice Center
- Karina Pantoja, Harlem Achievement Counselor, Attendance Achievement Program
- Luisana Victorica, Program Coordinator,

### Attendance Achievement Program

- Nancy Fishman, Director, Youth Justice Programs

### Center for New York City Affairs

- Kim Nauer, Education Project Director

### Children's Aid Society

- Sarah Jonas, Director of Regional Initiatives, National Center for Community Schools

### Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism & School Engagement

- Leslie Cornfeld, Chair

### Isaac Newton Middle School for Math and Science

- Lisa Nelson, Principal

### New York City Department of Education

- Joshua Laub, Director of Youth Development, District 88
- Kim Suttell, Director of Attendance Policy and Planning

### New York City Department of Probation

- Ana Bermudez, Deputy Commissioner, Juvenile Operations

### New York City Police Department

- Joseph Notaro, Lieutenant of Special Operations, 120th Precinct

### Police Athletic League

- Bobby Ferazi, Director of Juvenile Justice & Re-Entry Services

### **Teachers Unite**

- Anna Bean, Campaign Coordinator

### **Vera Institute of Justice**

- Evan Elkin, Director, Department of Planning and Government Innovation

### **FOCUS GROUPS**

The Board conducted focus groups with 21 young people. Board members recruited participants through New York City high schools, youth programs, youth leaders, and their own social networks. Members planned and facilitated the focus groups. They asked participants a range of questions about their experiences going to school in New York City, about services and supports within schools, and for suggestions about how to reduce truancy and chronic absenteeism. The members also sought feedback from focus group participants on the Board's ideas for policy recommendations.

### **SYNTHESIS AND ANALYSIS**

After each interview, site visit, and focus group, members identified key information learned and presented this information to the entire group. Members then discussed how each interview fit into the larger context of raising attendance rates in schools across New York City. As their body of knowledge grew, members reviewed common challenges and recurrent issues and themes. The Board then prioritized areas where they, as young

people, could contribute meaningful insights and ideas. With these priorities, members researched approaches other communities have used to address similar issues and what city leaders and educators in New York City are currently doing to combat these challenges, eventually developing their own ideas to address these issues. Finally, staff at the Center for Court Innovation advised the Board on which ideas were strongest and would be most consistent with the goals of city agencies and educators. The recommendations presented in this report are the Board's final product for the 2012-2013 year.

# Appendix 2: The Youth Justice Board Program

## THE YOUTH JUSTICE BOARD

Launched by the Center for Court Innovation in 2004, the Youth Justice Board is an after-school program that gives young people a voice in policies that affect their lives. Each year, a team of youth from across New York City investigates a current juvenile justice or public safety issue, formulates policy recommendations and works to implement its recommendations. The program has two primary goals: first, to help members develop leadership, knowledge and civic engagement skills that will benefit their communities, their families and their futures; and second, to contribute young people's perspectives to public policy discussions. The project aims to foster ongoing dialogue between policymakers and informed youth leaders.

In the first year of the program's two-year cycle, Board members conduct extensive research on a selected issue, develop and publish informed policy recommendations, and present them to policymakers and key stakeholders. During the second year of the program, members work to implement the recommendations. Each year, new teens are selected to join the program based on their experiences with the topic of study, personal interest in the issue, and commitment to working on a long-term project. After completion of the project, many alumni stay engaged with the program and pursue other civic engagement activities in their neighborhoods or at school.

## HOW IT WORKS

Each program cycle, a topic of study is selected after surveying youth and policymakers about relevant and timely issues. Topics that the Board has studied include: juvenile re-entry; school safety; the permanency planning process for youth in foster care; juvenile alternative to detention programs; youth crime; and school truancy. A four-phase curriculum builds Board members' teamwork, research and presentation skills and helps members develop substantive and actionable policy recommendations.

**Training:** During the first weeks of the program, members receive intensive training on research strategies, consensus building, listening, interviewing and public speaking. Members also learn how local government works. The training phase includes a kick-off weekend retreat that provides members with background information on the topic and lays a foundation for teamwork.

**Fieldwork:** The Board designs and implements a research plan that includes interviews, focus groups, and site visits with a wide range of stakeholders. During this stage, members meet with professionals in the field, community stakeholders, and public officials. Members design and lead focus groups of young people affected by the issue under investigation to learn how this issue affects their peers.

**Policy Development:** The Board's research culminates in the development of targeted policy proposals. The Board issues a final report and presents its policy recommendations directly to government officials and policymakers. In past years, the Board has presented to the New York City Department of Education, the Mayor's Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator, the New York City Council, New York City Family Court, the New York State Assembly, the New York State Per-

manent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children, the New York State Office of Children and Families, and the New York State Judicial Training Institute.

**Implementation:** The Board works to influence practice in the field by convincing decision-makers to implement its recommendations. Strategies include campaigning directly to officials at key agencies, piloting initiatives and collaborating with stakeholder organizations.

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