

## TRANSCRIPT

**Panel Discussion – Shifting the Tide on Attendance:  
Policies and Views from the Field**

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ANN WHITE

It's now [my] pleasure to introduce to you Lori Van Houten. And Lori is from REL West and is here to help facilitate a very important panel that we have, and she will introduce each individual as we move forward. Thank you, Lori.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

Thanks. Good morning, everyone, and thank you for joining us here today. We've heard so much from Hedy, and from your folks from the state, about the efforts that you've put in place, or are putting in place, and now we have gathered some experts—excitable experts—from across the country, literally from coast to coast, to share with you this morning some of their work around reducing chronic absenteeism, improving attendance, and improving outcomes for kids. And I'm actually going to let them introduce themselves, and we'll have a conversation around their work. So why don't we start with Yolie.

YOLIE FLORES

Okay, great, good morning. I am Yolie Flores, and I'm a Senior Fellow with The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. As Hedy said, you'll meet our big boss in a little bit, Ralph Smith, and I'm pleased to be here representing the Campaign. I'm also a former school board member in a small district called Los Angeles, and—actually, I'm a recovering school board member. And Lori asked me to really...to bring that perspective, although I might weave in my work that I do at the Campaign, which is around the role of parents, because they're really very well connected.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

Thanks.

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McKELL WITHERS

McKell Withers, Superintendent in Salt Lake City School District. Never intended to get involved in administration; started teaching in an alternative high school. So my first introduction with attendance was trying to understand why people couldn't figure out...you see, the only thing I ever saw were the crime and the punishment were identical related to attendance in school. You miss enough school, we'll suspend you. And it was kind of like, "Seriously? Doesn't anybody get the disconnect there? Or is anybody sending thank you cards?" And so from that point on, I have kind of been looking at different ways in which to help young people that have all the capabilities to be successful, become successful. And hopefully we'll get a chance to talk about how that relates specifically to attendance, but also the nurturing that is required to have young people feel connected in that school community.

SUE FOTHERGILL

Hi, good morning. I am currently serving as Senior Policy Associate with Attendance Works, but what I'm bringing here today is my outgoing work as Director of Attendance and Related Strategies for the Family League of Baltimore, located in Baltimore City, where we've done a lot of work partnering with our school district around bringing partners—community-based partners and other advocates—to work with the school district to really help to address some of the underlying barriers and issues that keep kids and families from attending school regularly.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

And your name is Sue Fothergill.

SUE FOTHERGILL

And I'm Sue Fothergill.

GARRY MCGIBONEY

Good morning everyone. I'm Garry McGiboney. I'm from the Georgia State Department of Education, and prior to that—I have been there almost 10 years—prior to that I worked in one of the largest school districts in Georgia: we had over 100,000 students, 145 schools. And I've been a teacher, administrator—actually, started my career in administration, after having been trained as a school psychologist. And I was sort of an experiment in that school district to see if a[n] atypical-type administrator, a school psychologist, would make a different type of administrator, and so we did have some interesting times. I worked in a[n] alternative school; I've worked in a charter school; I've worked in elementary school, middle school, high school. We had the first truancy school in the state of Georgia; that was a collaboration between juvenile court and the school system. And so I've looked at it from a lot of different sides, and what's not on my resume is, I was also a high school dropout. By the way, Utah is beautiful and Salt Lake City is gorgeous.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

So thank you all for joining us. We're going to have a conversation about the work that you've done, and we'll try to leave a little bit of space at the end for questions if that works out. You come from very different roles and different contexts, and so the first thing I would like to talk about is why your district or state made reducing chronic absenteeism a policy priority. What was it that created that sense of urgency or immediacy for tackling school attendance issues?

GARRY MCGIBONEY

Well, I'll start. In Georgia we've had challenges academically, as the country well knows, and we've made a lot of different changes with standards, and curriculum, and a number of policies and laws, etcetera, etcetera. And we've moved the needle somewhat, but at some point, we had to ask, "What are we missing?" So when you have questions like that, you go to—who? You don't go to us in this audience, you go to students. So we had focus groups around the state and asked, essentially, "What are we missing?" And it was the students who pointed out, "What you are missing are students." They noticed themselves that attendance was really a major problem in our schools. So we said, "You know, that is something we need to look at," and we did. And we talked to administrators across the state, and you brought up attendance, you bring up attendance, and "Well, yeah, that's...obviously kids need to be in school. And if there're chronic truancy problems, that goes to juvenile court; that's not really important to us." Somewhat of what McKell was talking about.

So, as you well know, any effective change starts with changing the conversation. We had to change the conversation. And the only way we could change the conversation was through research. So we did our own research in Georgia—1.7 million students; we have a very robust longitudinal data system, so we have a lot of data to pull from. And I won't tell you all of it; but some of it's in the article that's on the table outside. But what we found really surprised even us—that a student who misses 15 days or more of school, the dropout rate, or the graduation rate, drops from 80% to around 50% for eighth graders. In other words, if an eighth grader misses 15 days or more of school, that's the best predictor of graduation than anything else we have. But what really surprised us more than that was, the graduation rate for those students who missed 6 to 11 days, it dropped 15%. So we really changed the conversation with, not only educators, but also with parents. And then we flipped it to see if we improved attendance by just 3%, which is about 5 school days a year out of 108 days of school, 30,000 more of our students would have passed the math part of our state assessment—30,000. So if you're in front of a group of educators and parents about attendance, the research changes the conversation. So that's what changed the conversation; and then I'll come back and talk about what we did with the data.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

Sue, you had a lot of data work backing your changing the conversation as well.

SUE FOTHERGILL

Absolutely. So the work really started for us in Baltimore with the Open Society Institute of Baltimore, which is part of Open Society Foundations. And they started their work initially around suspensions, and with a goal of reducing suspensions. And so at the point in time where they started their work, there were 26,000 individual suspensions for a student body of 85,000. And on average, kids missed about four days of school with each individual suspension. But when they started digging into the data, they also saw that there were a whole lot of other absences that were happening outside of the suspensions. And so, pretty quickly the work to reduce suspensions and to introduce tiered levels of interventions and supports around kids who were having challenges around behavior also began to focus on this issue of, well, what are these other absences we're noticing, and how severe is the problem? And we partnered with our local university, Johns Hopkins University, to dig into the data more. And we found that one out of three of our kids in Baltimore were chronically absent. And when we looked at the relationship to the outcomes, we found that the kids who were missing school in pre-K and K were less likely to read on grade level, more likely to be retained, more likely to be identified for special education services. And, likewise, around the high school graduation rate, we found that if a student was chronically absent in ninth grade, only 36% of them went on to graduate from high school. So the data was alarming, and it opened up a lot of eyes around the relationship between the absenteeism and then the great outcomes we actually all want for our kids.

McKELL WITHERS

Looking at our journey, I want to talk a little bit about the personal journey related to understanding attendance, and how that became a priority for our school district, and for trying to deal with our Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction, and how that made a big difference. But as I mentioned, starting in an alternative school, it was in that point in time where schools across the country were struggling with attendance standards—how many days could you miss and still pass a class or get credit. And schools struggled with whether that should be kept track of in a citizenship model, or a disciplinary model, or whatever it might be. The reason for that background is, I believe that policy matters, and then that people that develop those policies need to understand how they can be enacted in thoughtful ways to actually serve kids.

So what I observed was, prior to that standard—because some court cases right along and so forth, and in Utah, the way that played out was some block schedules and so forth—was that you could miss X number of days. Well, before that X number of days was determined, attendance was better. At the point you articulated you can miss that many days before failing a class, it all of a sudden gave kids permission to miss that many days. And it was just fascinating that people who were concerned about the disruptions of tardiness and absences had made this fatal error of trying to determine how many absences was okay, rather than articulating, “We’d like to see you here every day.”

Now jump ahead, in terms of some of the experiences that we went through, and in this role of superintendent in Salt Lake, I’ve lived through the whole journey of adequate yearly progress and No Child Left Behind. And as you know, one of the secondary indicators is on attendance.

And so we worked hard to make sure that a school had attendance that seemed to be on track, because it was...between 95-97% seemed to be what you would hope to have happen, and that you were improving attendance if it was below 95%, as that secondary indicator under No Child Left Behind. Then we did in our county, Salt Lake County, but did it in a couple of our schools, NEST days—No Empty Seats Today. So it's an event to try and educate the community how important it is to be at school. So a feel-good activity; everybody at that school is given a t-shirt to wear on that day. That day was a little bit of a celebration; people came to the school that aren't normally there, congratulating kids for being there, wearing their NEST t-shirts, and it was a way to communicate that it's important to have you here every day.

But we then looked at the data, and there was improved attendance on No Empty Seat day. So what does that tell you? Does that tell you that it's okay to miss every other day, and it only matters on No Empty Seat day? No, what it told me was, we're not paying attention to helping kids understand "We would really like to have you here every day. And sorry we didn't pay attention to the fact you weren't here on the other days." We still do NEST days, because you are trying to build that culture, build that education; inform people about how important attendance is. But noticing that change, I then, within two or three months of our NEST day, I ran into Hedy for the first time...where did you go, Hedy, after picking on me earlier? Okay.

So my first interaction with Hedy was, she says, "Well, yeah, 95-97% attendance at a school might be okay; have you looked deeper?" Well, for our district we looked deeper at everything, but we hadn't done that. And so we disaggregated; we started looking at the individual level and how that tied in with our own experiences. We just hadn't put it together. We had done some work with our elementary teachers a few years previous to this event with Tier 2 instruction. And most of that was to help teachers understand their efficacy—that if you recognize young people need a little bit more help, you spend that five to ten minutes a week; I mean, that's pretty minimal, isn't it, but pretty powerful. That you spend that additional time over the course of a year, you see the difference you can make in the life of a child from that Tier 2 instruction, committing to that relationship with that child.

So we had all these experiences of what was taking place, but we didn't have the data to inform which kids to get at earlier. And so once we got the mindset that it's 10% of the first day—you missed 15 minutes of the first day, something is going on. I mean, it's that mindset of not waiting until you send the letters, because the only exception, I would say, to Hedy's comments earlier, court only works as a threat—and you know those kids immediately—it does not work as a consequence. And so, why does it work as a threat is because the student was informed that they were missed, and we're going to tell other people you missed until you come back, and we'll talk about that more later.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

Yolie.

YOLIE FLORES

Well, the urgency for me and for the school district in Los Angeles is a little bit different than what you have heard. I came on to the school board between 2007 and 2011, and it was in the

beginning and throughout the economic meltdown across the nation. So that was one thing that was happening at the time. The other thing is that, early on while I was running for school, and in my role as a school board member, I was deeply, deeply troubled—focused and troubled—at the third-grade reading proficiency rates in Los Angeles. And at the time, only 29% of all of our students were reading at grade level by the end of third grade. And we have a 700,000 student population, so that’s a lot of kids not reading at grade level by third grade. And when we disaggregated that data for English learners, that was actually 9%. So that was the second thing going on. The third thing going on for me at the time was that Los Angeles was under a court order to reduce overcrowding in our schools. And so we were building new schools across the city and other cities that are part of LA Unified, and I remember going into some of the construction areas for some of the schools we were building, and we were building elementary, middle, and high school.

And I remember thinking, given the data and given what I was concerned about, how magnificent it was that we were building these beautiful high-tech schools. And that we would finally be getting rid of overcrowding that we had had for over 40 years in LA. And thinking what a magnificent investment for children. But if nothing changes on the inside, that investment of billions of public dollars to build schools will not yield the kind of outcomes we want. It won’t address the issue of reading. And so all of this was happening, and it really...the conversation around attendance—although I was focused on grade-level reading, I was focused on the opportunity in these schools—really was the financial issue, because we were losing out. California is one of seven states in the nation that uses average daily attendance, so we have to take attendance every single day and to know how many kids are attending in order for the revenues to come in for schools.

Well, every year—and we discovered this because we had to ask these questions as school board members—we were out over \$300 million a year just because of our attendance issues. And these were not deeply yet viewed attendance data issues, they were really surface issues, and it wasn’t until I met Hedy that we were starting to look at data a little bit differently. And so it really started as a financial crisis issue; if we were going to recoup some of the dollars that we desperately needed during this economic, challenging time, we had to pay attention to attendance. And so in conversation with Hedy—who I have known for over 25 years, was starting to begin her work; it was ramping up quite rapidly around attendance—who came to me and said, “Well, you know, you’re right. Attendance matters for the financial reasons; attendance matters for the third-grade reading reasons. But you guys are only looking at attendance in high school, and did you know that attendance rates in kinder are actually...” So you saw the data. And then it just occurred to me, “Well, no wonder our kids aren’t reading at grade level. It’s not just a teaching and learning inside the classroom issue, but if kids are not showing up...”—exactly the message that Hedy shared earlier. If kids are not in their seat, how on earth are we going to get from 29% to a 100% reading? So that was the beginning of the conversation in Los Angeles and the sense of urgency that began around attendance, and we’ll talk about what we did later on.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

Yes, like almost *now*. So I heard each one of you talking about the data piece, and how critical that is to have consistent common data and also ways of digging down underneath that data. The robust data system kept surfacing in that, so that you could really identify the systemic issues that were making a difference. Let's move now to what new or strengthened policies helped reduce chronic absenteeism. What were those policies that you helped put in place? How did they improve attendance? How did you enact them? And, you know, one thing that we talked about when we all talked earlier was getting that message out, so you did all mention how you identified chronic absenteeism, but part of creating that urgency is also about making sure that that message gets out to everyone in the community. So when you talk about your policies, also talk about the importance of sharing that message and how you got that out. Maybe if we just do little pieces of that and we can...

YOLIE FLORES

Okay, I'll just pick...follow up with my comment.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

Please.

YOLIE FLORES

So the first thing that I did as a board member—and what we do is policy as board members, primarily—was to then call for our data system to begin collecting the data early on, or to accelerate beginning to collect data, look at data, monitor data, understand the data, starting in kinder rather than waiting until ninth grade. So by then it's a little late to begin to think about those interventions, whether they're Tier 1, Tier 2, or Tier 3. And, actually, LA Unified has a very, very robust infrastructure in terms of collecting data. It just wasn't paying attention to the need to collect data in the early years. And so one of the contributions that I and another colleague on the school board, Steve Zimmer, who had been my partner on pushing for some of these policies, was to accelerate the collection of the data for kinder.

The second thing that we did was begin—this is less of a policy issue, but it's connected to the policy issue—was to begin to identify how we would build the capacity of leadership to understand that the collection of the data was not just an exercise to put on a shelf, but that that data then had to begin to come to life. And so we quietly recruited a phenomenal individual who now heads up the Department of Health and Human Services for the district, to really begin to lead the work that she did for Health and Human Services, but we knew that was deeply connected because of her own story as a high school dropout, to not just take the data but to begin to look at it and train folks throughout the district and her social workers, and just begin to develop what is now called the Attendance Improvement Plan. So we can talk about that when we get to the program.

McKELL WITHERS

So for us, the biggest systemic change that we made was going from the system that essentially collected, in different ways at different schools, the number of attendance, or absences, to the point that you then send consequential or informational letters that you need to change your behavior or something else will happen to you, to changing that to systemically pushing out information that talked about chronic absences in a preventative way—ways to identify kids before you reached these benchmarks where you were doing compliance activities, rather than engaging activities, with the kids. But sometimes you'd also need to have a conversation with what's going on at the school. Found out that there are some schools that believe if you're more than 15 minutes late—this is elementary example for a minute—more than 15, 20 minutes late, maybe we're going to count you as absent all day because we're mad that you were late. And so how good is your attendance data in the first place? How is the school actually reporting and recording that, so that when you are then systemically, at a district level, pushing out data that should be helpful and useful, it's uniformly understood. I am confident that across the state we don't have a uniform definition of whether you were in attendance or not, particularly at high schools. If you went to three or four classes, or seven of your eight, were you in attendance or were you absent? Well, you missed part of the day, but how do you talk about those differences?

So those disconnects—because I think part of the reason I am on the panel today is to give you heads up about Utah disconnects—kindergarten is not required in the state of Utah. So, good luck with compulsory attendance on kindergarten. But you should at least inform, and help educate, why it's important to be there. What else has just changed in Utah in the last couple of years? And it's a disconnect where schools—well-intended, trying to find out whether a student was absent and that absence needed to be addressed, or whether there was a health issue going on—schools would get to a point where we'd say, “We really want a note from a doctor.” Well, that irritated enough policymakers that now the seminal note is from the parent—any time, for any reason—and it's excused without question. That's a disconnect, because you no longer have a way to...what was intended was to engage a third-party conversation on what was going on with the absence to help get the student actually in school. And the most recent interesting disconnect in the state of Utah is that if you're 14 or older—and the language is hilarious, because it reads in the code that if you are habitually truant, 14 or older, you can't be sent the letter that tells you you're habitually truant if you have a 3.5 GPA or higher.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

So what you did, your policy piece, was insofar as possible given the constraints of statute and...was to put in real data...

McKELL WITHERS

Informing at the teacher and school level, who are the kids you should be looking for, reaching out to make sure they're there. And then, specifically with ninth graders, adding all the other factors in addition to attendance to make sure the trajectory has changed so that they're likely to graduate.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

So the real data, real-time, and the processes for looking at those at the sites.

McKELL WITHERS

Yes.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

Great, thank you.

SUE FOTHERGILL

I want to talk about three areas of work, starting with the district area, around attendance data collection and reporting. So in the state of Maryland, we collect absences and report to the state when a student has missed 20 or more days. But what we weren't doing at the district level was doing anything with that data other than collecting it and then sending it off to the state. So when I first started my work in 2008, if you looked at the district reports, we had average daily attendance, and then we had truancy, which in Maryland is missing 36 days of unexcused absences if you're enrolled for at least 90 days. So we would also have no truant kids until January, and then we had about 6,000, 7,000 truant kids. So early intervention, paying attention when absences first start to occur—none of this was happening in the district. And then the way the district was organized was to have an Office of Attendance and Truancy that would then work to connect with those 6,000 to 7,000 children in January through to the end of the year, and a lot around punitive responses and court referrals.

And so one of the biggest shifts was to bring chronic absence in as a data point that would be reported internally and used by the district and schools to manage their own attendance practices. And then to shift the district from working with 6,000 truant kids to focusing on the 200 schools that it serves, and building the capacity of those schools to leverage and use their data in a different way, which is a cultural shift that's still happening to this day. But it was a really important shift that I wanted to highlight.

The other thing we did is, because it was one out of three kids who were chronically absent, we really wanted to understand the systemic barriers around why kids are missing school. So we established a work group and brought in agency representatives from the Department of Health, Department of Human Resources, the Department of Social Services, the Department of Juvenile Services, the Mayor's Office, city schools, and then public partners like the Family League, Maryland Disability Law Center, to name a few. But the idea is, we had about 100 different organizations partner with us over about a year and half worth of work, where we took each issue area—transportation, parent engagement, youth voice, health—and really dug into those issue areas and spent time on them. We had about 30 core partners working with us for the entire duration of the work group, and then other folks would come when we were talking about their specific issue area, lend their expertise, and then back out again. And we issued a set of recommendations around each issue area that we looked at.

And then lastly, I want to mention the suspensions work. And so the main piece of work there was to go through our code of conduct—with principals and teachers and district administrators and community-based partners—and really walk through that code of conduct and say, “Does this make sense?” And so to your point [to McKell Withers], one of the things we stopped doing pretty quickly was suspending kids who were truant or cutting classes, because that makes absolutely no sense. Other types of infractions—if kids came to school out of uniform, they could have been suspended under the old code—so we removed those kinds of infractions, and said, “Where does it actually not make sense to suspend a kid, and what are the other types of interventions and supports do we need to put in place?”

The other important thing I want to share about the suspensions work is we started differentiating between younger children and older children in regard to the kinds of responses and support that we would give to the kids. And then we also required tiered levels of responses, so certain infractions—the first time it happens, it can’t result in a suspension; other things have to be put in place first. But then, eventually, if it continues to happen, then a suspension can be put on the table. But we wanted to create a space where we had other kinds of interventions happening before we get to suspension. And I will share with you—the good news is, we’ve gone from 26,000 individual suspensions to less than 8,000 over the course of about five years. And the biggest impact in chronic absence has been mostly at the middle school level, with a reduction of chronic absence by 15%. So those are the three policy areas I wanted to share.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

Thanks. Thanks for being so patient, Garry; you have the floor.

GARRY MCGIBONEY

I’m just trying to relax. Well, we looked at the data and, you know, data is not really any good unless it provides information. And it’s really not that effective unless the information tells you a story; otherwise, you’ll just find yourself circling the wagons with your data. So we said, “Let’s just be thoughtful about what is the data telling us—what is the story that the data’s telling us?—and not run off and change a policy; not run off and identify a project, because a project is usually short-term, and usually a project has a goal instead of an expectation.” We wanted school attendance and discipline; you can’t separate the two. To become an expectation, and not just a goal; so how do you do that?

And in Georgia we have 181 school districts, so how do you do that in a state that size, with that many school districts? So we looked outside of education, and we looked at epidemiology, and so how do they approach a population-based problem? That’s one of the problems we’ve had with discipline and attendance, and many others in education and other fields, is that we approach those problems with a program or a project, and not look at them as a population-based challenge. So we took that approach, and looked at other types of data, and found out that a lot of problems with attendance and discipline are related to the school’s climate.

A school’s climate is ubiquitous, and yet is something almost like attendance that we take for granted. This room has a climate; you can’t get away from climate. If you read the books

written by successful executives—CEOs and businesses that turned a company around—what did they change first? They changed the climate. Businesses have known this for years; epidemiologists have known this for years. We’re slowly coming around to realize, unless you change the school’s climate, a lot of your other things are not going to work. So we got together over 100 people representing every walk of life in Georgia—business, nonprofit, parents, students, universities, school systems—to develop a statewide school climate improvement project. Attendance was always there. And we do have a statewide school improvement...school climate improvement project, that centers a lot on PBIS—Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports. That’s the foundation; that’s the key strategy. That’s the nexus of school improvement, and student attendance, and parent engagement. But also we know, being as we are, that what gets measured is more likely to get done. So Georgia, we have a school climate rating; every school in Georgia—all 2,275 schools in Georgia—receives a school climate rating on a scale of 1 to 5—1 being not so good and 5 being okay.

The metrics include student attendance; it also includes student discipline. But also, one real important part of that survey—one important part of the climate—is a survey that students take. And last year 900,000 students took the survey; 900,000 took the survey, and it includes elements related to a lot of things including school climate, as well as other things. That’s part of the school climate rating. Parents have a participation on the parent survey; we had over 200,000 parents take the survey. Teachers; close to 300,000 teachers took the survey. It’s an anonymous survey, and that’s part of the school’s climate rating. We have found that once we share that information with schools, and not create another policy—I mean, in Georgia we have 28 state laws related to student discipline and attendance; 28 state laws. And I guarantee not any of those have changed behavior, so why add a 29th? But what really has changed the conversation, and systemically the approach, has been the school climate rating, and the focus on changing the school climate. Attendance has improved; suspensions have dropped dramatically in some school systems and statewide, out-of-school suspensions have dropped 20% in four years. And that’s for a state where the trajectory was just the opposite, increasing about 20% every four years.

And also, believe it or not, student achievement is starting to improve. Our graduation rate is improving, has improved in the last four years. Now, you know, colligation and relation is a tricky thing, but we really feel like if you want to improve something like attendance, and change the message that attendance every day counts—I mean, a perfect title for today’s conference—is you can’t have that discussion without talking about school climate. You cannot.

And what we have found interesting, too, I may add—because I can talk on and on about it—when you improve the school climate, guess what else changes? And we didn’t really count on this, we really didn’t know this: guess what else changes when you improve the school climate? The community climate starts changing. We have evidence to show that arrests start going down, things like vandalism start going down, business improves; those things that you would measure the health of a community improve, because the school climate improved first. You know, some of those programs that we have to go in and to improve the community—community improvement projects, empowerment projects, things like that—some of those have not worked that well, because they have not included the school. School in most communities

is the center of the community. You make school the center of the community...and teacher retention has also improved dramatically. When you talk to our teachers in schools across the state, they'll tell you, "Yeah, we'd like more money, but give me a safer, more secure, positive climate in which to work." And that's what the business people, those CEOs, recognized first when they did the company turnarounds; they had to change the climate.

SUE FOTHERGILL

Can I just add that I agree with Garry, and a lot of the work around reducing suspensions in Baltimore has been focused on improving school climate. And there is a comprehensive strategy around engaging principals and school leadership in training in school climate and informative walks, so we similarly have focused in that way.

GARRY MCGIBONEY

There's something else we did, too, but I'll tell you that in a minute.

YOLIE FLORES

Just two other things that I failed to mention, and Garry, you helped me think about them. One is the policy around parents that we put in place around the same time that we were asking for the data to start being collected, starting in kinder, on attendance. And we passed a resolution called *Parents as Equal Partners in the Education of their Children*. And our goal was to change the climate—the practices and behavior and the culture—of the relationship between schools and parents, and in particular, the power relationship. And then the second thing is one around accountability. So the board at the same time worked with the superintendent, John Deasey, who had just joined us as the superintendent, to put into his contract a couple of things that I think is what has led to the improvement of third-grade reading, and I'll say what it is in a minute. But that said, he put on his own performance meter a percentage of increase of the number of students reading proficiently at grade level by third grade. So I think it was the combination of the tracking of the data, changing the school climate, in particular for parents, even though we were doing that for teachers and for students as well. And then the superintendent wanting to hold himself accountable for that, and understanding that attendance was related to third-grade reading proficiency. So I mentioned to you when I started that we were at 29% of third graders reading at third-grade level. Today, that number—I'm still not satisfied—but it's at 44%. So we are trying to understand the causality of it all; and it's probably not one thing, but all of these different pieces that we put in place to get the traction that we needed.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

So we've heard from all of you about how important it is to understand the systemic issues, the underlying issues, and to develop those policies that address those. We also heard clearly from McKell some of the obstacles that you have specifically here in Utah in terms of mixed messages that you're giving families or educators around attendance and the importance of it—coming every day. As we talk and we move a little bit to the challenges that you face in implementing this, I wonder if we can focus very specifically on what I also heard from all of

you, which was the importance of shifting the culture, and getting that message out. So, how did you convince people that a school climate was not the stick with which to beat them, but the carrot for improvement? How did it shift that culture from, “Oh, truancy, yeah, that’s something the court system handles,” as opposed to “We as a community need to address that, including our parents”?

GARRY MCGIBONEY

Well, in Georgia it’s still a work in progress. I don’t have the ...I hope I didn’t give the impression that we are where we need to be. We’ve just started that journey, and it’s taken at least five years just to get to the point where we’re now beginning that journey. The school climate rating is not really the...it’s prescriptive. And it’s something that schools have paid attention to because they have to, because they’re going to be rated. And we have already heard from parents that they look for the school climate rating before they look at the academic. Because they know that the school climate rating is going to eventually drive and determine the academic. For those schools we’ve told they’re doing very well academically, but their school climate rating is low, guess what’s coming, folks? That’s the canary in the cage. So it’s been...the conversation shift has been one of very practical; it hasn’t been policy level, which Georgia has been very good at developing policy and state board rule and state laws that don’t really change anything, as I said earlier. So the conversation is really...the school systems expect, at the state level, to hear another policy, another state law. To change the conversation to make it more practical for them, with something that they can implement, and get results from, and have control over, has been a game changer, because some felt like we can’t change discipline, we can’t change attendance. There are certain things that we just can’t change. We’re the victim of what walks in the door. And I think we’ve turned the corner in changing that belief that, you know, you really are in charge of your school, and you can determine the climate in your school. And culture is what you have, climate is why you have it.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

Sue, you’ve brought in a lot of community partners as part of your work; do you want to talk about that as part of messaging...or briefly, folks?

SUE FOTHERGILL

There’s so much to talk about, and I agree with Garry, you know, this is work in progress. I want to hit on a few points; I can bring in the community partners piece. But I think that part of the work really, for us, has been to move this conversation about who’s responsible for attendance—from a person in one office, right, the attendance and truancy, to the entire district, and then to the schools, and sort of...and then the partnering agencies, and the partnering community partners. So we’re all in this together, but we all have a unique role to play. So I just want to mention for a minute the silos piece, right? For a while there, our work was siloed into one piece of the district. And so part of the work was advocacy around really helping folks to understand how all these different parts of the district play a role, whether it’s the operations, right—and food and nutrition, and transportation plays a role whether or not kids get to school every day. And then the Office of Teaching and Learning, and then within the Office of Teaching and Learning, the Office of Early Education. And so I bring that out to say

that for us, we had to have a champion, someone on the ground who was working every angle constantly, making partnerships and building relationships with folks within the system, because sometimes they weren't talking to each other necessarily. And I'll share one example where I was partnering with the Office of Networks, which are the staff that go and support schools, and they were calling me to find out how they can solve a transportation problem in their district versus calling their transportation office. So you've got to get folks talking to each other within the district, and then with their community partners.

And so, one of the things we did was we made sure that out-of-school time partners knew about this issue, were trained on it, and to the extent possible, were paying attention to the attendance of the kids that they served in the school day and checking in with them. And we did a lot of training and building of practices and norms around that. And the other opportunity that we identified was bright spots; we looked within the district, we used our data to identify schools— elementary, middle, and high—that were successfully reversing the trends of chronic absence and have pretty high attendance rates, controlled for demographic data. We looked at high-poverty schools and high-poverty neighborhoods, and found schools that were doing great work. And we lifted those schools up as examples and champions of change to help to make it known and understood, that this is something that could get done in our city with the right set of practices in place.

But the other types of partners that I'll just mention—Experience Corps; they do...in Baltimore, they have 300 seniors who come in and read and do literacy work with children K to 3. Well, that's a natural ally; they can do literacy work, they can also pay attention to the attendance of the kids that they serve. So we looked for those kinds of folks in our community who were already in schools, already doing work, and we said, "How can you add an attendance lens to the work that you're doing?"

McKELL WITHERS

I'm going to say way too many things too fast that are complex, but hopefully you can pull them together, because there is nothing more powerful about that cultural change. But it is a mindset change. One simple example—a teen parent program I worked with was focusing just on respect as a value for that group. Over the course of the next couple of weeks, they started to bring back things they'd stole from each other or from the school. I mean, once you communicate an expectation and build a relationship, things change. And so we start talking about expectations for kids; why are some young people able to excel and others not, when they seem to have the capability? What is the achievement gap all about? And there are...because your question's about what takes place in that classroom at that school. And there are some kids that are viewed as disruptive, that teachers are glad are not there today. And the kid picks up on that, and so what's the change that needs to take place? I know in my early years in the alternative school, I saw young people, I thought it was miraculous that they were attending school. All the things that were stacked against them, and they still physically got there. So because they were there, I thought, "Well, I'm not going to push them real hard; I am so glad they're there." There is nothing more loving than having high expectations for every kid, and that's the mindset change that has to take place. There's nothing more loving than afterschool and summer school being an invitation to participate in a community, not a

consequence because maybe your parents work longer or you're behind in school. That's the change that has to take place at a school and in the community that is absolutely to school culture. Garry hit right on it; that's the right framework to think about—what are the values that bring people together. Because what you're trying to say is that every day counts; it's not because it counts in compliance, it's not because it counts for money, it's because I missed an opportunity to help you learn something you didn't know. And because we lose some of those connections, everything's at risk at some level in a democracy, in a great country like ours, because it's dependent upon us recognizing that communities have lots of kids and lots of families with different needs and backgrounds. And so once you get disconnected policies, like parents that can choose their teacher—that would work great if teachers could also pick their kids, and then those two groups would just be real happy, right? They would be happy with each other, but that wouldn't be...that's not the purpose behind free public education, which is to empower, change the trajectory, stop intergenerational poverty, open doors that weren't there before. That's why every day counts, and why every day with a kid matters.

SUE FOTHERGILL

I'll just add a little bit more about the parent piece, just to keep that in front of us, because I personally believe that it's so critical, whether it's about the climate, or specifically about reading or attendance or any part of education—the parent component is absolutely essential. And it is about relationships; it's not about compliance. But it's also not about blaming and judging. And one of the things that Hedy talked about this morning that...both at the Campaign and Attendance Works talks a lot about, and we are in conversation with districts across the country, is very specifically how the relationship with parents is so key to the issue of attendance. And when we begin to move from blaming and judging, to really understanding the hopes and aspirations and dreams of every parent and what they want for their child, and starting the conversation about that, it's a conversation changer. And so I think that we have to pay so much more attention and be much more intentional about what we're doing when we communicate with parents that either shuts them out or brings them in. And when we bring them in, we see the climate changing for students as well.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

It was just so fascinating to hear all four of you talking about how the fundamental shift that you hope, the culture change that you expect, and then how that plays out in strategies, policies, being intentional, developing those kinds of conversations, or making sure that people communicate differently, so we can see how those obstacles of shifting the culture can be overcome with some really practical strategies, or policies for that matter.

We are what's standing between people and lunch, and so I would like to wrap up our conversation by very quickly going and saying, "What is the one piece of advice that you would have for the Utah educators as they dig deeper in this work?"

SUE FOTHERGILL

I will start by saying that this takes time, and it's not something that gets done in a year. Hedy pointed out, you can start to see the outcomes in your strategy shifts pretty quickly, but the

systemic changes that we're talking about, that takes time. We have been at it in Baltimore since 2008; we're nowhere near done. We've got so much work to do, despite the fact that we have over 30 community partners, and a district, and a Mayor's Office, and public agencies totally on board. And I will say that community partners sometimes can be the assisting voice in those relationship building with parents; sometimes they are your trusted ally.

McKELL WITHERS

I'd say, have fun; as you know your kids better, you'll find ways to change their trajectory sooner, which is the efficacy of the work that's the most powerful.

GARRY McGIBONEY

Do what it takes to change the conversation, because change is not going to take place without a change of that conversation.

YOLIE FLORES

And I would say, use your data to know your kids. It's not until you know your kids that you can actually have the appropriate responses for what kids need, and what their families may need, to solve the attendance issue.

LORI VAN HOUTEN

Thank you so much for sharing your expertise with us today. Please join me in thanking the panelists.

**[Applause]**