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Testimony of Elayna Konstan, Chief Executive Officer
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City Council Committees on Education and General Welfare
Chronic Absenteeism

November 12, 2008

Good morning Chair Jackson and Chair De Blasio and members of the Education and General Welfare committees. I am Elayna Konstan, Chief Executive Officer of the Office of School and Youth Development at the New York City Department of Education. I am joined today by Lilian Garelick, Director of Mandated Responsibilities for the Office of School and Youth Development. Lillian has spent most of her professional career working on improving student attendance and her talents, expertise and guidance support our schools and school leaders. I know her insightful lens will add to our discussion. We are also joined here today by our colleagues at the Administration for Children's Services to discuss these important issues.

We are pleased to be here today to discuss the work that the Department of Education is doing to improve attendance. Our Children First initiatives under Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein have yielded positive gains. The good news is that attendance has been going up and, last year, our attendance rate was the highest it has been in 15 years. The aggregate citywide attendance in 2007-08 was 89.75%, up from 88.44% in the 05-06 school year and up from 86.44% in 1995-96 when we began capturing attendance data in this way. Last year, 29 of the 32 school districts showed an increase in attendance. Our attendance rate for September for the past two years has been 91.2%. And when we compare this September (September 2008) with last September, we continue to see positive trends. We see that 3.4% more students had over 90% attendance this year as compared to last September.

While we have made tremendous strides, we recognize that we still have a long way to go. A recently released study from the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School, entitled "Strengthening Schools by Strengthening Families" by Kim Nauer, Andrew White, and Rajeev Yerneni, provided analysis on chronic absenteeism in the early grades. I was invited by Kim Nauer and Andrew White to take part on the panel at the release of this study on October, 21st, which was an honor, and proved to be an excellent discussion. This study is important work and continues to remind all of us that we must remain vigilant and work each and every day for improved attendance and improved student outcomes so that every student succeeds. Every unexcused absence is an absence of concern.

The report also reminds us that we must pay attention to the early grades. And I would absolutely agree. When we look at the three-year attendance rates for early grades, we see similar patterns of increased attendance. To highlight these trends, for Kindergarten, attendance rates increased from 90.25% in 2005 - 2006 to 91.06% in 2007 - 2008. For First Grade, rates increased from 91.67% to 92.46% for the same time period. Similarly, for Second Grade rates increased from 92.48% to 93.18% and for Third Grade rates increased from 92.92% to 93.63%. Early and focused interventions are critical to long-lasting and sustained gains for improved attendance and academic achievement for all students.

I would like to walk you through the attendance support structures that the department has in place. DOE has some of the most sophisticated attendance systems in the nation. And while I may not be completely neutral in my thinking, our systems have

provided principals and school teams with incredible tools to address attendance needs and, most importantly, the safety and welfare of our students.

As our attendance systems become even more sophisticated, we continue to enhance our interventions. We have developed a number of tracking tools to support schools in this effort. The overall goal of our tracking system is to first ensure the safety and welfare of our students and at the same time to facilitate and support regular school attendance for all of our students. Each student's attendance is taken on a daily basis and scanned into our main computer system. Schools also have available to them numerous reports to monitor attendance rates, identify patterns and view the specific names of students who are absent so that early and specific interventions occur. School personnel reach out to the homes of absent students by telephone, home visits and by mail. If a student is absent for 10 consecutive or 20 aggregate days it triggers the automatic generation of what we call a "407 Attendance Follow –Up and Outreach and Referral Form". Outreach and interventions are undertaken to ascertain the reason for the absence and to facilitate the student's return to school. It is only closed upon a student's return to school or appropriate discharge. And we have good news in this area as well. We note that last year, we saw a dramatic decrease in the number of 407s that were generated. This means that far fewer students crossed this absentee threshold and more were coming to school.

We have an additional tool called the "absent alert" that ensures that all 407s are closed within a timely fashion. This is an additional measure to provide a second layer of tracking for our younger and more vulnerable population of students.

We have also put into place, in recent years, a case tracking mechanism that enables school support staff to document all interventions and follow-up that have been undertaken for individual students. It allows for the effective utilization of resources by providing an electronic and centrally located data collection system where support teams working with a student are able to review previous interventions and build upon them. It has proven to be a great way to track the various strategies that have been used and expand upon them for greater results.

This year, we developed a new report that will help schools to readily identify students who may be on the road towards becoming chronically absent. Therefore, beginning this month, schools will receive a weekly report that identifies the names of students who have reached five aggregate days of absence in the current school year; they will then receive a second report of students who reach ten aggregate days of absence. The purpose of these reports is to flag students early-on before the level of absence gets to a more serious point. It is a preventive approach that we believe will ultimately impact upon student attendance and achievement.

Under Children First, principals have the empowerment they need to lead their schools and these attendance systems mentioned above, provide them with additional tools to make informed decisions about how to support their students. Our principals are

focused on how to ensure that each and every student learns and grows in a climate that promotes growth. And we are there to support them.

Under the leadership of the principal, all school staff members have a role to play in ensuring that students are coming to school each day, engaged and ready to learn. Each school has an Inquiry Team that is part of the accountability work at the school. Teams look at data trends and also track individual student data and achievement. School staff, particularly teachers, use this information to intervene and attendance is a key factor for students to attain academic achievement. To better understand the issues and the data, schools have Pupil Personnel Teams and Attendance Teams in place that come together to discuss specific challenges for individual students. Teams are comprised of staff across disciplines, each of whom brings their own experience to the table. By delving into individual cases, teams are able to see what factors contribute to academic and attendance challenges and determine the best intervention for a student.

For the past two years, the Department has required principals and school teams to complete the School and Youth Development Consolidated Plan as required by state law and/or Chancellor's Regulations. One major component is the attendance plan that schools need to complete. Other aspects of the plan include child abuse, crisis intervention, a plan to support students living in temporary housing and bias harassment prevention. This consolidated plan is another way school leaders and school teams can document and monitor school-wide approaches.

DOE also provides training to all the school's "Designated Child Abuse Prevention Liaisons" who turn-key the information to all school personnel. This training is a requirement and each school must send a representative on an annual basis. The training provides information on protocols and state requirements for reporting child abuse and educational neglect. In addition to professional development sessions, online resources, including a webcast training, are available for all school staff and central and ISC staff are available for questions and support.

Attendance improvement crosses many divisions within the Department. School Support Organizations use attendance data to help principals identify and address school needs. Schools also have the support of a borough-based Integrated Service Center (ISC) or a network-based Children First Network team. Each ISC and CFN has an attendance expert who is part of a broader youth development team that support schools in attendance and a range of youth development services. And over 390 attendance teachers are assigned to schools and networks of schools throughout the city for more intensive attendance outreach and follow-up, including home visits.

Attendance improvement requires a variety of effective strategies – from the use of data tools to focused school interventions and on-going professional development for the staff members who do this work. My office and other offices as well, provide opportunities for schools to learn about effective strategies to improve attendance. Attendance teachers receive targeted professional development and work with borough

based attendance content experts. They are an integral part of school support teams and provide in-depth knowledge of attendance procedures and strategies and assist the school in reconnecting students and their families.

In order to maximize the level of support that we provide to borough-based teams, weekly and monthly data reports are shared with the youth development teams. These reports enable support teams to review the status of school attendance and 407 rates on a weekly basis in order to identify schools that may be in need of additional support.

My office, the Office of School and Youth Development (OSYD), supports schools to promote and maintain a positive school climate and foster student growth and learning so that students can achieve academic success. While this includes specific areas such as attendance improvement, guidance, prevention and intervention programs, social/emotional learning and safety and security, we view our work holistically as a continuum of support from prevention to intervention to the overall school culture. But our office does not do this alone. The work of improved attendance is a focus for the entire Department of Education and numerous other City agencies and external partners.

Our collaboration with other city agencies is critical to supporting our schools and students. In 2006 the Mayor's Interagency Task Force on Child Welfare and Safety was first convened, which serves as a forum where representatives from city agencies, including ACS, DOE and NYPD, meet to collaboratively address issues that affect the safety and welfare of children. Recently we have strengthened our inter-agency efforts to work even more closely with ACS so that children and families receive the support they need. For example, DOE and ACS currently exchange foster care student data on a monthly basis. This data exchange allows for DOE staff to provide any necessary additional support to students in this high-risk category and provides foster care staff with valuable student information that allows them to identify any attendance and/or educational issues that may be impacting the student. This collaborative effort enables us to partner with ACS in a manner that maximizes both agencies' ability to support this most vulnerable population of students.

The DOE also gives access to our student information system to designated ACS staff in order to enhance their ability to provide more effective services and support to students and their families. We are in frequent communication with ACS to ensure that critical cases are collaboratively addressed. We regularly train ACS field office staff in order to equip them with the necessary information they need to access and utilize our student information system.

My office also works very closely with other agencies, including the Department of Youth and Community Development, the Department of Homeless Services, the New York Police Department, and the State Education Department, just to name a few. These inter-agency efforts help to foster a more coordinated and comprehensive approach.

And I cannot talk about improving attendance, achievement and strengthening the overall climate of schools without mentioning our partnerships with community-based organizations. CBOs are an integral part of the fabric of our schools. Their work in our schools has helped schools address specific needs of students and focus on the social-emotional learning of school communities. There are countless examples of schools and CBOs working together to foster a more positive climate and culture and improve attendance. While I cannot begin to talk about all of them, I would like to highlight a few.

We currently partner with United Way to administer our Attendance Improvement and Dropout Prevention (AIDP) programs with over 40 CBOs to provide attendance improvement and dropout prevention services in over 100 schools. Our partnership with the Department of Youth and Community Development puts high quality after-school and community programs into our schools. There are over 400 Out of School Time programs in our schools and 57% of them are in elementary schools. And through our Beacon programs, there are more than 50 CBOs working in 80 of our schools. Sixteen of the Beacon programs have ACS services embedded in the program during the day to help support families in the neighborhood. Through funding from the New York State Education Department, 21st Century Programs provide services and programs for 300 schools, including academic enrichment, youth development and parent outreach.

Again, we have much more work to do to improve attendance in all of our schools and we can be encouraged that we are moving in the right direction. It is the work that our school leaders, their staffs and the larger school communities do each and every day to connect with and engage students and their families that make the difference. We all have a role to play in this work, and I am proud to be a part of this endeavor. I thank you for the opportunity to address you on these important matters.

New York City Council

Committees on Education and General Welfare

NYC Administration for Children's Services

Testimony by Jan Flory, Deputy Commissioner for Child Protection

November 12, 2008

Good morning Chair Jackson, Chair de Blasio and members of the Education and General Welfare Committees. I am Jan Flory, Deputy Commissioner for Child Protection at the New York City Administration for Children's Services (Children's Services). With me today is Marie Philippeaux, Interim Associate Commissioner for Operations in the Division of Child Protection. I would like to take this opportunity to inform the committees about Children's Services' efforts to investigate concerns of educational neglect and to update the Council on the collaborative work that is ongoing with the Department of Education (DOE) to strengthen our investigations in this area.

There are two efforts guiding this work, both of which were established in the wake of the death of Nixzmary Brown in 2006. This tragedy highlighted the need for increased collaboration between Children's Services and DOE to strengthen our efforts in protecting children whenever there are concerns about the safety or well-being of a child. First, through the Mayor's Interagency Task Force on Child Welfare and Safety, Children's Services and DOE have been working since 2006 to ensure that school absences which may indicate a level of educational neglect are being handled as effectively as possible and implementing reform initiatives to strengthen the work of

both agencies. Second, the Children's Services' Child Safety Plan, "Safeguarding Our Children," implemented a number of initiatives to emphasize our focus on child safety and to strengthen practice in all of our investigations, including those reported with allegations of educational neglect.

Child Protective Investigations

Children's Services is the City's public child welfare agency dedicated to protecting children and strengthening families. We investigate more than 60,000 reports of suspected child abuse or neglect each year. In 2007, roughly 14,000 of these reports alleged educational neglect, which is legally defined as "the failure of a person in a parental relationship to a child to ensure that child's prompt and regular attendance in school or the keeping a child out of school for impermissible reasons." In addition, school staff continues to be the most common source of child abuse and neglect reports, calling in approximately 29% of all reports in New York City. Attendance and behavior in school are often indicators of deeper challenges that a family is facing in providing for their child's safety and well-being so it is critical that a thorough child protective investigation is conducted in every case.

Investigations by Children's Services' child protective specialists are initiated when a report is received through the New York State Central Register for Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR) operated by the State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). State Law and Regulations (SSL §424 and 18 NYCRR Part 432) identify the specific responsibilities and duties of Child Protective Services concerning reports of suspected child abuse or maltreatment. These duties include the requirement to be able to receive all reports 24 hours a day, seven days a week and to initiate an investigation

within 24 hours of the receipt of a report to assess the immediate safety of the child(ren). This applies to all reports of suspected child abuse and maltreatment, including educational neglect reports.

The basic steps to a child protective investigation are the same regardless of the allegation. These include:

- Contact with the family within 48 hours.
- A thorough safety assessment of the home.
- Interviews with all family members.
- Interviews with the source of the report.
- Interviews with other individuals with a relationship to the child or family who can provide further information about the allegations, including neighbors, family, friends, teachers, doctors, etc.
- A review of the family's prior child welfare contacts.
- Constant assessment of safety and risk to a child throughout the investigation.

Children's Services' policy and practice states that during any investigation involving school age children, teachers and other school staff are critical collateral contacts to help child protective staff learn more about the child's attendance and progress in school and help ascertain whether school personnel has identified any safety concerns.

At any point during an investigation, Children's Services may take action or put services in place to assist the family in providing a safe environment for their child.

These services are intended to address safety issues identified during the investigation

and should target the family's specific needs. These may include domestic violence counseling, parenting classes, substance abuse treatment, mental health services, child care assistance, homemaking services, etc. In cases where more intensive supervision is needed, Children's Services may file a child protective case in Family Court to request Court Ordered Supervision. The court can authorize Children's Services to monitor interventions that the agency prescribes to address the issues that brought the family to Children's Services' attention.

When Children's Services finds a child is in imminent danger, Child Protective Services can petition the court to remove the child from his or her parent's care and place the child in foster care. Removal of a child from a parent occurs when other options to protect the child are not possible. In many cases Children's Services works with the family organizing services and supports so that the child can remain safely with his or her family. At the conclusion of an investigation a determination is made as to whether the reported allegations are "indicated," meaning there is some credible evidence that the allegations are true, or "unfounded," meaning that no credible evidence exists.

Strengthening Practice

As the Council is aware, one of the key initiatives launched as part of Children's Services' Safety Plan is ChildStat, our accountability initiative to engage in discussions about practice and trends so that we may better understand the challenges faced by child protective staff. This key tool also provides a forum where we work together toward addressing practice issues and making the best decisions possible to protect children. ChildStat is carried out through weekly meetings at which executive staff at Children's Services' central office, including Commissioner Mattingly, Associate

Commissioner Philippeaux and myself, meet with managers and administrators in child protective borough offices on a rotating basis to review performance data and case practice. We have recently included supervisors among ChildStat attendees. This allows us to ensure that the lessons we are learning through these meetings and steps we are taking to address issues are reaching our frontline staff. Children's Services' work with schools is consistently a part of the discussion at ChildStat meetings and we have the opportunity through these sessions to identify practice issues related to our work with families experiencing educational neglect, reinforce policy and best practice, and strengthen our decision making in these cases.

Through ChildStat and other initiatives to strengthen practice we are emphasizing the importance of obtaining relevant and substantive information from a variety of sources so that we can best determine what the appropriate services or interventions are in order to keep the children safe. Contact with the source of the report, particularly in educational neglect cases, is a key element of this work and we have focused our attention in ChildStat meetings, qualitative reviews and policy development to reinforce the importance of making contact with the source. Through ChildStat we are also monitoring the types of services provided to a family and the success of our interventions in preventing repeat reports to the SCR.

As a result of our partnership through the Interagency Task Force, we have taken a number of steps to enhance the education-related information and supports available to child protective staff as well as casework staff at our agencies providing preventive and foster care services.

In 2006, we ensured that each borough office has a child protective unit specializing in investigations of Educational Neglect. These units are designed to handle all cases where educational neglect is the primary concern that is reported to the SCR.

Depending on the volume of reports in a particular borough office, these units may handle general protective cases as well. Child protective staff in Educational Neglect Units undergoes the same training curriculum as all of our child protective staff and all staff is trained in the use of DOE's information system, which includes attendance and other information relevant to a child's progress in school. Because the majority of the caseloads for these staff involve education related issues, these units are familiar with the schools in the communities they serve, have a deeper understanding of DOE policies and practices, and in many cases have relationships with school staff enabling them to obtain thorough information about the reasons that a report is called in and to better assist the family in working with the school. In 2008, Children's Services and DOE rolled out the "School Success Initiative" through which many foster care agencies established education liaisons – staff designated to access DOE's system as well.

In 2007, Children's Services updated the case practice guide for child protective investigations, which highlights the responsibilities of child protective staff to contact schools and assess the school progress of children as part of their investigations. In September 2006, Children's Services issued a Child Safety Alert on investigating allegations of educational neglect and coordinating with DOE during child protective investigations.

As the Council may be aware, OCFS recently developed, in collaboration with the State Education Department, a model for practice and procedures regarding the investigation and reporting of educational neglect for all social service and education agencies in

New York State in response to a law passed in 2006. The model outlines the guidelines for reporting educational neglect cases to the SCR, as defined by State law. The model also mandates social service and education agencies to establish a system for regular review and updates of their policies and procedures, as well as informing staff of any changes. Children's Services and DOE are meeting bi-weekly to review existing policy and procedures to ensure that we are in compliance with the State model, building on the work underway since 2006.

A critical need for all child welfare workers is the ability to help a family or a child access the appropriate educational resource. This summer, Children's Services launched a web-based education resource tool to make information available to all child protective staff as well as staff at our contracted agencies providing foster care and preventive services. The education web site includes links to the DOE web site on regulations and policies, information about the structure of DOE, and critical contact information for various resources at DOE and ACS. The home page of the web site is updated on a regular basis to feature timely highlights such as updated processes and policies, trainings and registration periods so that staff can easily access information relevant to families throughout the year. Our intent is to provide easy access to educational information throughout the life of a child's involvement with us – from investigation through the provision of preventive and foster care services, if required.

Children's Services has expanded the role of our Education Unit to consult with child protective staff as well as staff at our preventive and foster care agencies. The goal is to build capacity and expertise among our staff when working with families and the DOE on education related issues. Educational Advocates in this unit are well versed in education regulations and laws and provide training and support to child welfare staff.

The advocates troubleshoot cases, advise on DOE policies and regulations, and help staff and families make connections to the appropriate offices in DOE to resolve issues that arise during a child welfare case. Last month we added two additional educational advocates to the Education Unit and we anticipate a supervisor for the unit will begin in December. Currently, the unit is headed by Regina Schaefer, the Director who helps to facilitate much of the collaborative work with the DOE that we are reporting on today.

Collaboration with DOE

Through the collaborative work of the Mayor's Interagency Task Force, each borough office at Children's Services is now assigned an Education Liaison who is responsible for facilitating communication with the DOE, working with ACS liaisons at schools and at the DOE Integrated Services Centers. These liaisons help to strengthen relationships between ACS and DOE on the local level. In each borough, ACS and DOE are meeting on a regular basis to troubleshoot specific cases, highlight areas of concern in case practice, and inform about changes to policies and procedures. These meetings build relationships between the two systems and pave the way for collaborative work on individual cases.

Children's Services and the Department of Education are also collaborating to provide trainings and information to Children's Services staff. In August of this year, we hosted an enhanced "Back to School Summit" that not only provided child protective staff with information on policies and processes in order to support families. Staff also had the opportunity to network with staff from various areas of DOE to better understand their roles so that Children's Services child protective staff can address issues that arise during child protective investigations. In the Spring and Fall of this year, the two

agencies conducted the “ABCs of DOE,” enabling staff to receive information and ask questions regarding DOE’s reporting procedures and structure so that they are better equipped to assist families in need of assistance with school related issues, such as enrollment, attendance and transportation issues.

As the Council is aware, Children’s Services created the Office of Safety First in 2006 to serve as an ombudsman for mandated reporters to assist them in addressing concerns about the safety of a child after they have made a report to the SCR. Fifty two percent of the calls received by Safety First come from staff at DOE, averaging between 300 and 400 calls a month when school is in session. Safety First ensures that someone is available during business hours, when child protective staff may be in the field, to answer questions about the process of child protective investigations and help connect callers to field office staff to follow up on concerns that arise once an investigation is underway. At times, when a situation arises that presents immediate danger for a child, Safety First helps to make contact with child protective staff to ensure that Children’s Services is able to locate the child and take appropriate action as quickly as possible.

Because educational personnel make up a significant percentage of the reporters served by Safety First, the Office has expanded its outreach and training to DOE Integrated Service Centers and schools to explain the role of Safety First and educate on the responsibilities of mandated reporters. We have received very positive feedback from the community, particularly from school staff, about the support provided by Safety First in facilitating communication and collaboration between Children’s Services child protective staff and mandated reporters.

Conclusion

When we talk about the work of Children's Services and DOE, we are looking at two complex systems, each charged with safeguarding children and supporting them in growing to become healthy, successful adults. For this reason, there are a number of critical initiatives underway between the two agencies to strengthen our decision making and collaboration to ensure that children do not fall through the cracks. Today I have highlighted our efforts to strengthen practice in child protective investigations, to increase collaboration and information sharing between schools and child protective field offices, and to provide child protective staff with information so that they can partner with schools to help New York City's families address the complex challenges they face. I hope that my testimony has demonstrated our mutual commitment toward building upon the progress that has been made, so that together we can help families get the assistance they need to provide for the safety and well-being of their children.

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FOR THE RECORD

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Testimony of Jackie Sherman
Director, Center for Courts and the Community
Before the New York City Council
Committees on Education and General Welfare
Oversight - Chronic Absenteeism in City Schools
November 12, 2008

Good morning, I am Jackie Sherman, director of the Center for Courts and the Community at the Center for Court Innovation. I'm here with Susanna Osorno, the coordinator of our Attendance Court program, a pilot program designed to provide schools with a new tool to leverage existing community resources that help address chronic absenteeism in a positive manner.

Thank you to Chairs de Blasio and Jackson and members of the Committees on Education and General Welfare for holding this important hearing. Your commitment to exploring the findings of *Strengthening Schools by Strengthening Families* and addressing chronic absenteeism provides a strong signal about the importance of providing students and families crucial supports that help ensure consistent school attendance that is essential to academic success. I would also like to thank Council Members Mark Viverito and Gonzalez, who represent the districts in which our current pilot sites operate, for the support they have provided for our program and the entire City Council for its support of the Attendance Court program in FY 2009. We are also grateful to have had the opportunity to share details of the program with representatives of the Mayor's Interagency Taskforce on Child Welfare and Safety over the past several months, which is considering attendance court as a potential program model as it strategizes about the most effective ways to address chronic absenteeism. The program also has received crucial support from the New York State Department of Criminal Justice Services.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today, to provide a brief description of our program. In fall 2007, the Center for Courts and the Community (the "Center") launched pilot programs to address chronic, unexcused absenteeism among students in two New York City schools: P.S. 27 in Red Hook, Brooklyn and Isaac Newton Middle School for Science and Math in East Harlem. The program provides a new tool to address chronic lateness and unexcused absences before they rise to the level where school officials must file a formal report alleging educational neglect. Initially piloted in New York State in Buffalo, the program aims to provide all of the supports students and their families need to improve school attendance and to ease burdens on the family courts, child welfare authorities and the juvenile justice system. The program uses a positive approach to identify obstacles to consistent attendance and build on students' strengths and interests that deepen their connections to school.

Participating schools conduct initial outreach by sending basic program information to families of students who develop patterns of unexcused absences and offering them an opportunity to learn more about the program. Participation is voluntary and families may decline the offer or elect to discontinue participation at any time. All families that express interest in the program receive a comprehensive assessment designed to identify unmet service needs of the eligible student and family that create barriers to consistent attendance. Through the assessment, program staff begin to develop rapport with potential clients and to identify the range of challenges they face. Based on information obtained during the assessment, program staff develop a proposed service plan to support the entire family.

Service plans are designed to help families overcome obstacles to consistent attendance by connecting them with existing programs, services and supports in their community. The specifics of plans vary depending on the particular circumstances faced by participants, but typically include tutoring, after-school programming, assistance accessing health care, counseling, assistance accessing and understanding school records and procedures, assistance accessing public benefits, housing assistance and education, training and job search assistance for adult members of the household. Program staff strive to identify and capitalize on students' strengths and interests. The individualized service plan includes setting goals with students and their families to help improve attendance as well as referrals to service providers within the community.

Once a family has agreed to participate in the program and approved a proposed service plan, they begin to attend bi-weekly hearings to review achievements and setbacks and to adapt service plans as necessary. These informal hearings are held at participating schools and led by a retired judge or other justice system professional. They typically include a hearing officer, attendance court staff, the student and his or her parent(s), and a school representative. The group discusses unexcused absences or late arrivals, considers proposed modifications to service plans designed to help families address persistent barriers to consistent attendance, and sets goals for the next hearing. By requiring both the student and his or her parent(s) to take responsibility for school attendance on a regular basis, hearings enforce accountability for program participants and offer an opportunity to provide positive feedback to participants for achievements or address setbacks at an early stage. Further, by requiring parents to visit their children's schools regularly and to actively engage in identifying and overcoming obstacles to their children's consistent attendance, hearings help to strengthen understanding and build relationships between schools and parents. Attendance Court staff work closely with participating families to follow through with referrals, monitor changes in attendance and school performance, and conduct continuous outreach to community-based service providers.

Midway through the program, all participating students and their families attend a gathering designed to commend students for positive strides they have made and to encourage further progress. Graduation ceremonies held for each program site, which in 2007 featured judges and elected officials and their representatives, recognize the importance of the accomplishments of successful participants and provide further motivation to strive for academic success.

The program showed promising results in its first year, during which it served 26 families. Ninety-six percent of participants successfully completed the program. On average, unexcused absences among participants dropped by 40% during program participation. Further, 96% of program participants were promoted to the next grade. Based on reports from school administrators, there was a 12% decrease in school-related discipline incidents among participants. In the year ahead, the Center for Courts and the Community seeks to build on its success and expand the Attendance Court program citywide.

They couldn't miss school today, but nothing conveys the power of the program better than the words of participants themselves. Shanaisa, a fifth grader who graduated from the program in June, put it well:

. . . What I have learned [from the program] is that being on time and attending school everyday is very important. The people in the program also helped me and my mom with other programs to help me with my education. I hope this program stays around to help other families as well as mine. Thank you to my mom for enrolling me in the program and also to Susanna, [and hearing officers] Leroy and Brett for being there for me. . .

Last year, Shanaisa was an 11-year old fourth grader whose attendance rate had been 80.6% during the 2006-07 academic year. An initial assessment revealed that Shanaisa missed school due to chronic, unresolved medical issues and had fallen behind on her school work. Shanaisa's mother expressed concerns regarding her daughter's academic performance and requested assistance accessing tutoring to help Shanaisa catch up. The mother also expressed interest in an after-school program for Shanaisa and her younger brother, as well as a GED program for herself. Program staff recommended that Shanaisa's mother seek additional medical advice regarding the condition that kept Shanaisa out of school. A physician recommended dietary modifications; program staff regularly checked in to ensure that Shanaisa adhered to the recommended modifications. Further, program staff helped find a tutor for Shanaisa and identified an after-school program in which both Shanaisa and her younger brother enrolled. The program also referred Shanaisa's mother to the Red Hook Community Justice Center's GED program, which offers day care for participants with children. From her enrollment to program graduation, Shanaisa maintained a 92% attendance rate. Further, Shanaisa's confidence increased and her academic performance improved. In the first two months of the 2008-09 academic year, Shanaisa's attendance rate has been 94%.

The reflections of parents also offer insight into the impact the program has had on its participants. As one parent explained:

. . . Attendance Court helped EJ take school more seriously -- he's a smart kid and Attendance Court helped him get his grades up to reflect that. Through the recommendation of the program I enrolled EJ in an after-school program which he enjoyed and where he got help with his homework. Before he enrolled in Attendance Court, EJ had a hard time managing his anger and had many of absences due to suspension. Attendance Court referred him to an anger management program where he learned to manage his anger; he has not been suspended since. Thanks to the program I became more involved in my son's school; I even joined the School Leadership Team. I

found myself at my son's school more than ever. When I was scheduled for hearing it gave me an opportunity to also check- in with teachers. EJ's overall improvement has helped our relationship . . .

Thank you very much for your time.



ATTENDANCE COURT PILOT PROGRAM

BACKGROUND:

In fall 2007, the Center for Courts and the Community (the “Center”) launched pilot programs to fight truancy in two New York City schools: P.S. 27 in Red Hook, Brooklyn and Isaac Newton Middle School in East Harlem. Attendance court provides schools with a new tool to address chronic lateness and unexcused absences before they rise to the level where school officials must file a formal report alleging educational neglect. Initially piloted in New York State in Buffalo, the program aims to support students and their families in improving school attendance and to ease burdens on the juvenile justice system, family courts and child welfare authorities.¹ The pilot has a goal of working with a total of 40 families annually.

HOW IT WORKS:

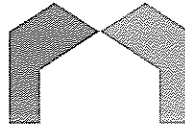
Partner schools conduct initial outreach by sending basic program information to families of students with attendance problems and offering them an opportunity to learn more. The program has developed the following recommended program referral criteria:

- A student has at least 3 consecutive unexcused absences in a month; or
- A student has at least 6 unexcused absences in a quarter; or
- A student has 10 or more unexcused late arrivals in two months.

The program features a flexible and comprehensive approach to identifying and serving the needs of the entire family. Participation is voluntary; families may elect to participate or discontinue participation at anytime. The program coordinator conducts a detailed assessment of every participating family, which is used to develop an individualized service plan. Plans typically include referrals for services such as counseling, tutoring, mentoring, parenting skills, and after-school programs. Attendance court staff work closely with participating families to assess follow through with referrals and changes in attendance, attitudes and school performance; conduct continuous outreach to community-based service providers and convene regular hearings to review achievements and setbacks and to adapt service plans as necessary. A hearing officer (a retired judge or justice system professional) presides at these hearings, which are held at the schools. Typically, the program coordinator, school administrators and families attend the hearings. Prior to each hearing, the program team, including the hearing officer, reviews each student’s progress in meeting established goals and objectives.

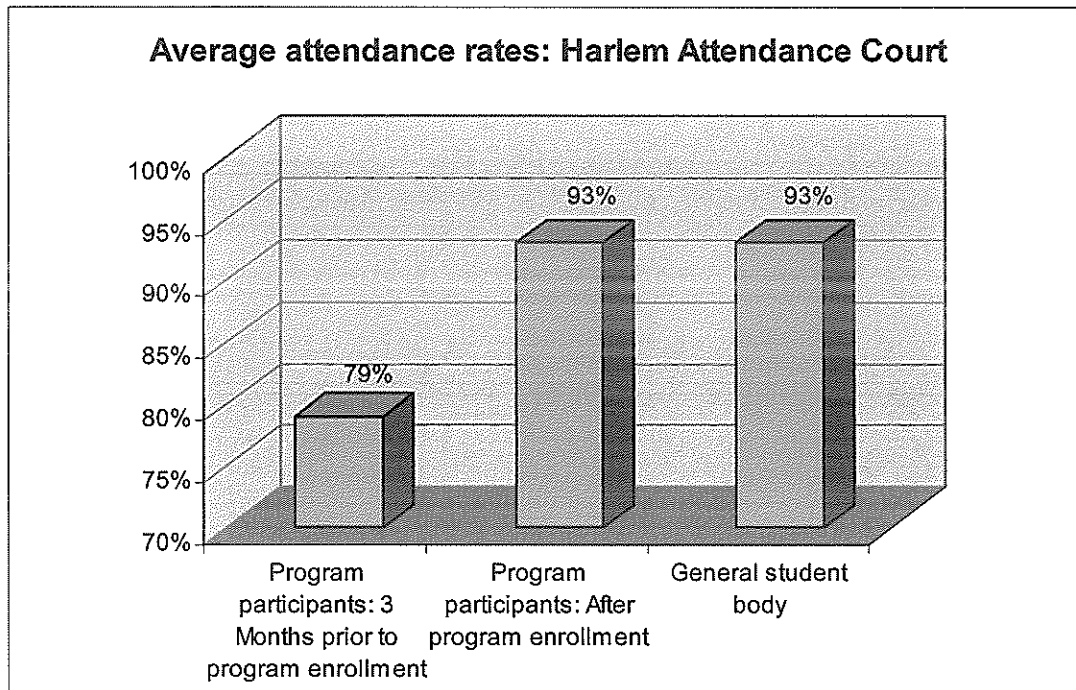
The program also features periodic gatherings that bring together all participating students and their families. At a mid-program gathering, judges from local community justice centers address students and their families. Program graduations will be held at local courthouses. These sessions build a sense of community among program participants, commend students for their accomplishments in the program, acknowledge the important work of family members, and encourage further progress.

¹ Similar programs have been tested in a handful of other jurisdictions with promising results. A recent evaluation of a program in Warren County, KY, found a considerable decrease in unexcused absences among 74 participants and suggested improvements in academic performance. An evaluation of nearly 1500 participants in a St. Louis, MO, program also demonstrated significant improvement in school attendance.



ATTENDANCE COURT PILOT PROGRAM 2007-2008
PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Isaac Newton Middle School for Math and Science:



Of the Harlem Attendance Court participants:

- 31% improved their attendance rate by up to 5%;
- 31% improved their attendance rate by 5-10%;
- 19% improved their attendance rate by 11-15%;
- 19% improved their attendance rate by 16% or more; and
- The average increase in attendance rate was 13%.

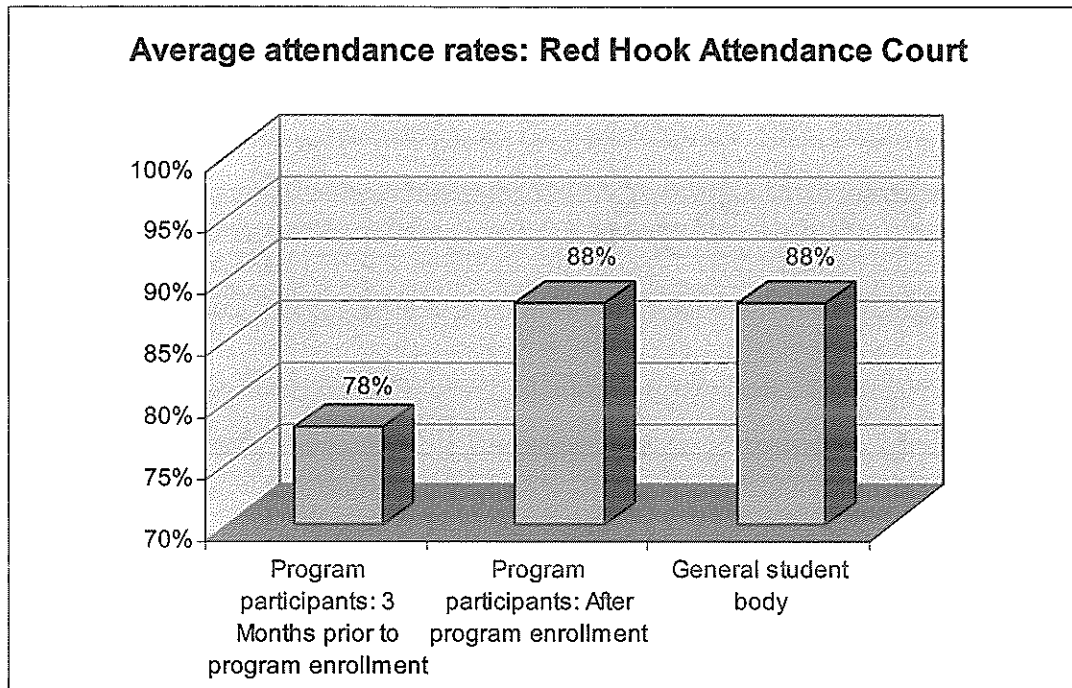
Attendance Court referral process outcome:

- Number of referral letters: 71
- Responses to referral letters: 18 (25% of letters sent)
- Assessments: 16 (89% of consents received)
- Number of students enrolled in program: 16 (100% of assessments conducted)
- Number of students who completed program: 15 (94% of students enrolled)

Harlem Program participants:

- 8 girls, 8 boys;
- 7 sixth grade students, 9 seventh grade students; and
- Primary language spoken in students' homes: 11 English, 5 Spanish.

P.S. 27:



Of the Red Hook Attendance Court participants:

- 30% improved their attendance rate by up to 5%;
- 10% improved their attendance rate by 5-10%;
- 50% improved their attendance rate by 11-15%;
- 10% improved their attendance rate by 16% or more; and
- The average increase in attendance rate was 9.8%

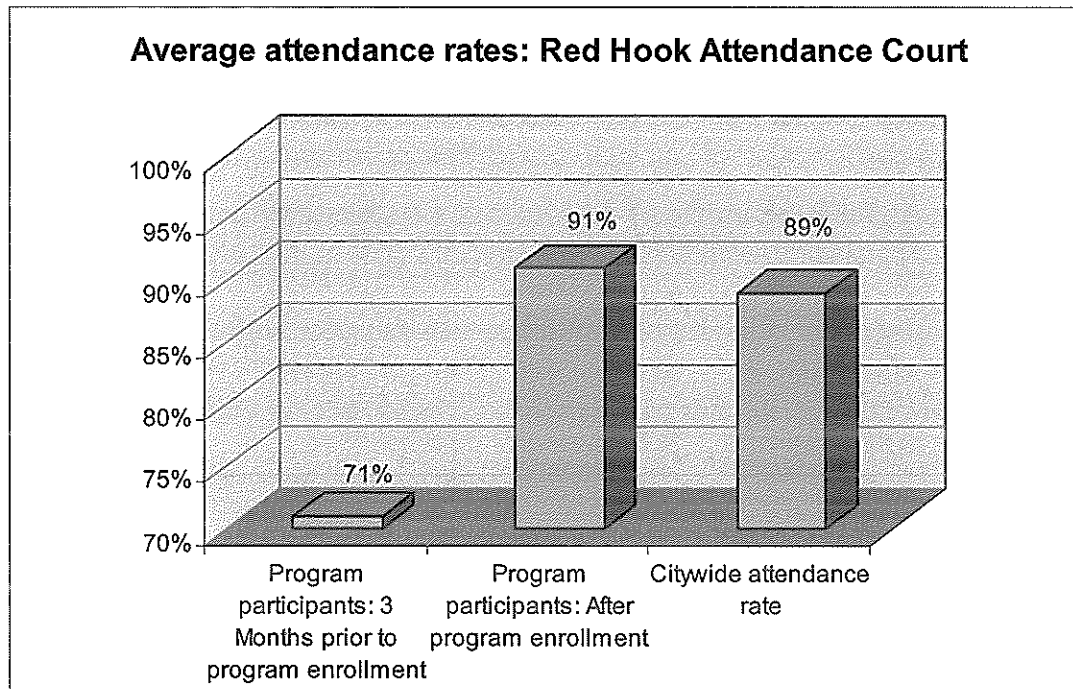
Attendance Court referral process outcome:

- Number of referral letters: 45
- Responses to referral letters: 19 (42% of letters sent)
- Assessments: 13 (68% of consents received)
- Number of students enrolled in program: 10 (77% of assessments conducted)
- Number of students who completed program: 10 (100% of students enrolled)

Red Hook Program participants:

- 4 girls, 6 boys;
- 4 fourth grade students, 2 fifth grade students, 2 sixth grade students, 2 seventh grade students; and
- Primary language spoken in students' homes: 6 English, 4 Spanish.

Program statistics (Harlem and Red Hook):



Attendance Court pilot program preliminary outcomes:

- 31% participants improved their attendance by up to 5 %;
- 23% participants improved their attendance rate by 5-10%;
- 31% participants improved their attendance rate by 11-15%;
- 15% participants improved their attendance rate by 16% or more; and
- Average increase in attendance rate: 11.5%

Attendance Court referral process outcome:

- Total number of students referrals sent by school: 116
- Total number of families that consented to participate: 37 (32% of letters sent)
- Total number of families assessed for participation: 29 (78% of consents received)
- Total number of students enrolled in program: 26 (89% of students assessed)
- Total number of students who successfully completed program: 25 (96% of students enrolled)

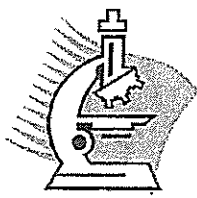
Program participants:

- 12 girls, 14 boys;
- 4 fourth grade students, 2 fifth grade students, 9 sixth grade students, 11 seventh grade students; and
- Primary language spoken in students' homes: 17 English, 9 Spanish.

Referrals to other programs (students and parents):

- Mentoring: 20
- Employment services: 5
- Special education services/advocacy: 4
- Tutoring: 13
- Housing resources: 3
- Preventive services: 2
- After school programs: 8

- Food pantries: 3
- Legal services: 2
- School based programs: 10
- Anger management: 1
- Counseling: 4



Isaac Newton Middle School
for Math and Science
280 Pleasant Avenue
New York, NY 10029
(212) 860-6006
(212) 987-4197 (fax)

Lisa Nelson, Principal

Nadine Kellogg, Assistant Principal

June 5, 2008

Susanna Osorno, Attendance Court Program Coordinator
Jacqueline Sherman, Director
Center for Courts and the Community
520 8th Avenue, 18th Floor
New York, NY 10018

Dear Susanna and Jackie:

As we approach the end of the first year of our collaboration, I want to thank you for your commitment to students at Isaac Newton Middle School for Math and Science who have developed patterns of unexcused latenesses or absences that threaten to undermine their academic advancement. Isaac Newton always seeks opportunities to partner with agencies able to assist us in our effort to provide a sound education for all of our students, particularly groups that respect and support all members of our school's community. Your pilot Attendance Court program has upheld Isaac Newton's core values and played an important role in our efforts to help struggling students improve their attendance this year.

With your help during the 2007-2008 academic year, we have seen many of our once troubled students improve not only their attendance, but also their conduct and academic performance. Beyond that, these students are changing their attitudes towards school and learning, which is fundamental to their continued academic progress.

As you know, schools often struggle to engage families as active partners in their children's education and members of the school community. Thanks to the Attendance Court Program, many more families visit Isaac Newton on a regular basis, talk with teachers and actively monitor their children's academic progress. Families who have participated in the Attendance Court Program have become more engaged in the school community as well; one parent has joined the School Leadership Team and others have expressed interest in joining the PTA.

Each child in the program has benefited from his or her participation. There are so many illustrations of this. For example, throughout the months I've witnessed students who were disenfranchised by school becoming enthusiastic participants their education and students who struggled with managing their anger take responsibility for their own self-control. These are just a few of the many perfect examples of how the Attendance Court program has helped to make a difference.

Again, thank you for your dedication to promoting a sound education for our students and for working with our school community to better engage students and their families. We look forward to working with you to provide crucial supports for even more families in the 2008-2009 academic year.

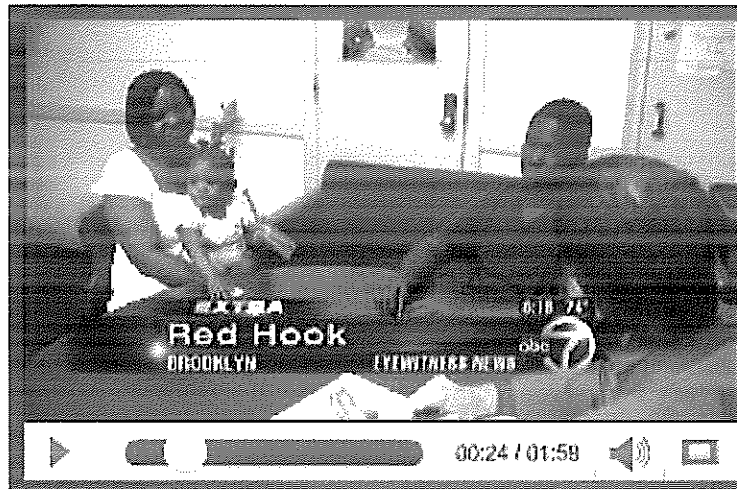
Sincerely,

Lisa Nelson, Principal



New program tackles student attendance

Friday, June 20, 2008 | 7:28 PM
By Art McFarland



To view the story, visit:
<http://abclocal.go.com/wabc/story?section=news/education&id=621822>

BROOKLYN -- (WABC) -- For some students, the most challenging part of school is showing up every day and on time.

A new program called attendance court is designed to help these children and their families.

Eyewitness News visited attendance court at P.S. 27 in Red Hook. During the last school year, Jeremiah was absent 25 days. With attendance court in session this year, he has only missed 11 days. "I want to become a businessman and they influenced me to do that, to come to school every day and learn and not fool around," said Jeremiah.

"It helped him with his math. It helped him to reason with other children, like if they pick a fight with him," said his mother.

Jeremiah is one of 26 students in this pilot program, which aims to figure out what causes attendance problems and find solutions. The program involves bi-weekly meetings between the students, their parents and a justice system professional.

The parents sign a contract promising to cooperate, and then they get services tailored to their families, which may include tutoring, mentoring, after-school care, and parenting classes.

Attendance court was started by family court judges to help struggling families. The idea is to assist them early, so they'll never end up in the court system.

Sixteen students recently graduated from the program at Isaac Newton Middle School in East Harlem.

The Center for Courts and the Community is running the pilot funded by a state grant. "We've seen the attendance of all of our students improve," said Jackie Sherman of the Center for Courts and the Community. "The program is a voluntary program and I think it works because we provide the resources that families need."

Sarah Belcher Barnes is principal of P.S. 27.

"It's often working with parents to help them organize their lives and see the importance of school," she said. "When a student has strong attendance, it has a strong correlation to student success."

One student, Shanaisa, wrote a speech for her attendance court graduation.

"What I learned is being on time and attending every day is very important," said Shanaisa.

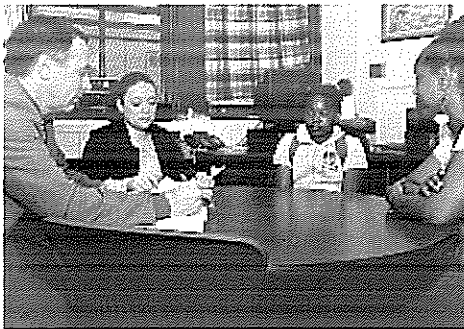
The sponsors hope to expand the program.

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New program at Public School 27 aims to reduce truancy and lateness

BY RACHEL MONAHAN
DAILY NEWS WRITER

Friday, June 20th 2008, 6:10 PM



From left: Center for Court Innovation's Brett Taylor, program coordinator Susanna Osorno, 11-year-old Shanaisa and her mom Eunice, at an Attendance Court session. (Bachner for News)

Red Hook fourth-grader Shanaisa hated math so much she avoided school and was often late.

There were 36 days the girl didn't show up at Public School 27 last year.

But Shanaisa only missed 13 days this school year and hasn't been absent at all in the last two months - because of a new program designed to reduce student absences.

Piloted at PS 27 and an East Harlem middle school, Attendance Court has begun to make a big difference in the lives of the 26 children and their parents mandated to attend biweekly sessions.

Shanaisa, 11, was given a math tutor. Program officials got her to agree not to stop off for a snack on the way to school - the cause of her lateness.

"She was fearful of math," said Shanaisa's mother, Eunice, who didn't want their last name used. "She was scared of the work....[The program] gave me guidance on helping her."

But it's not just Shanaisa. The program has increased attendance among participants by 12% and improved their grades and behavior, said officials.

At a friendly round table in a PS 27 office, fourth- through eighth-graders and their parents sat every other week across from "court officials" to account for absences or lateness - and hammer out solutions.

"It's simple stuff," said Brett Taylor, of the nonprofit Center for Court Innovation, who served as a judge, jury and cheerleader, during a "court" appearance last week.

"Some people would say 'duh.' But if you haven't been exposed to [it], you don't know."

Modeled on programs in Buffalo and Kentucky, Attendance Court at PS 27 and Isaac Newton Middle School is being run by Center for Courts and the Community.

The program, funded by the state Division of Criminal Justice Services, cost \$100,000 in its first year, with program organizers hoping to expand to other schools.

"In my 30 years in education, they're very few things that are clear-cut. Attendance is one of those things....You can't learn what's going on in school if you're not here," said PS/MS 27 Principal Sara Belcher-Barnes, who has asked that younger students be included in the program because they miss more days of school than the older children.

"The younger the students, the worse their attendance," said Belcher-Barnes, "because they don't have control over their lives."

But the program isn't just about helping the kids - it aims to support the whole family. Program officials helped Eunice find information on food pantry locations and look for schools so she can return to college, she said.

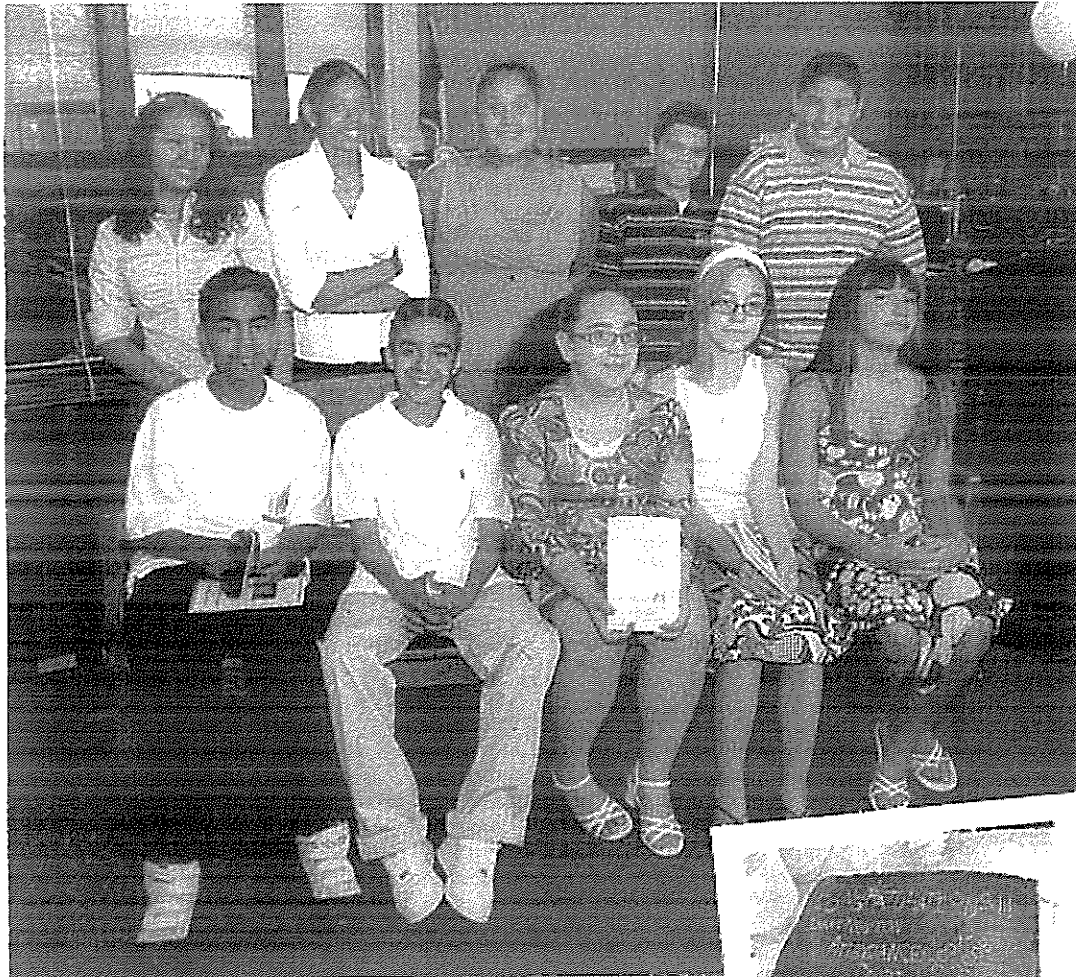
Taylor said he often needs to provide students with more structure. He gave one student a checklist of what to do each night that included doing homework before play - and laying out clothes the night before.

"They put something in me to [make me] come to school every day," said fifth-grader Jeremiah, 12, relating how organizers talked to him about his dream to become businessman. "That's what I really want to do in my life....If I don't come to school I can't become a businessman."

"At first I was like, Why do we have to go to this thing?" said Katina, Jeremiah's mother. "Now I'm so glad....I've seen a change in his attitude and a desire to do well."

New York Law Journal

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, JUNE 20, 2008

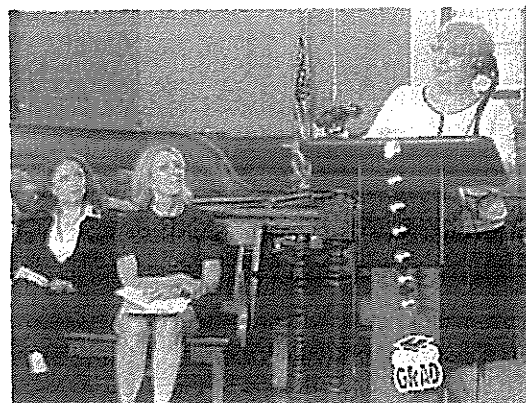


NYLJ PHOTOS/RICK KOPSTEIN

Students Present for Graduation From Pilot Attendance Court

Students from the Isaac Newton Middle School in East Harlem, above, graduated last week from the "Attendance Court" at the Harlem Community Justice Center. The program is one of two pilot programs run by the Center for Courts and the Community; the other program, at P.S. 27 in Red Hook, Brooklyn, is scheduled to hold its graduation next week. Under the experiment, modeled on a successful effort in Buffalo, students with chronic attendance problems volunteered to participate and signed a contract. A service plan was developed for each student, and the court's hearing officer—a retired judge or justice system professional—met regularly with the student, parents, teachers, school administrators and others to monitor progress and discuss ways to resolve attendance issues. Organizers say the programs improved attendance among 26 students by 12 percent. Below, Susanna

Osorno, East Harlem program coordinator, left, and retired Criminal Court Judge Eileen Koretz, hearing officer, listen to Lisa Nelson, school principal at the graduation ceremonies.



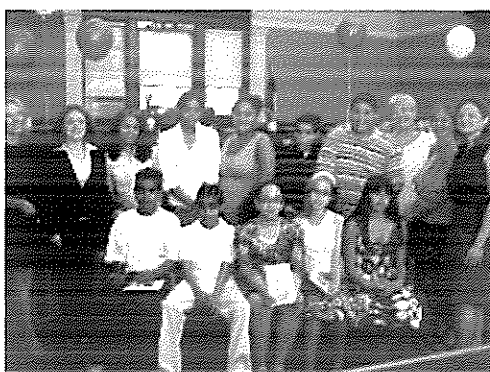
Estudiantes se gradúan de programa contra absentismo

JOSE ACOSTA/EDLP

2008-06-14

El Diario NY

NUEVA YORK



En la foto aparecen con algunos de los estudiantes graduados del programa piloto 'Attendance Court' de Nueva York la honorable Eileen Koretz, Susanna Osorno, directora de ciencias y matemáticas de la 'Isaac Newton Middle School for Math and Science', la directora de la escuela Lisa Nelson, la asistente de la directora Nadine Kellogg y la concejal Melissa Mark-Viverito. (FOTO: Cortesía Gene Sorkin)

— Por la deportación de su padre de los Estados Unidos, la estudiante de sexto grado de la escuela intermedia Isaac Newton de Harlem, Normaris Mejía, de 12 años, pasó un momento muy difícil que afectó sus calificaciones y su asistencia a su centro de estudios.

De acuerdo con la madre de la estudiante, Emily Ferrer, para solucionar el problema, la escuela le propuso que la inscribiera en un programa contra el absentismo escolar crónico, llamado Attendance Court, del Center for Courts and the Community, dirigido por Jacqueline Sherman.

Normaris Mejía participó durante el año escolar y gracias al programa mejoró sus calificaciones y su absentismo y el pasado miércoles 11 de junio fue una de los 15 estudiantes que se graduaron durante una ceremonia realizada en el Harlem Community Justice Center, con la presencia de sus profesores.

“A mí me gusta el programa porque ellos me ayudaron durante todo el año. Nosotros estamos pasando por un momento bien difícil. Mi esposo fue deportado y ellos me dieron consejería a mí y a mi hija, lo que ayudó a mi hija a no faltar a la escuela y a mejorar sus calificaciones”, dijo Ferrer.

Jacqueline Sherman, directora del Center for Courts and the Community, explicó que el programa es una colaboración entre familias, escuelas y funcionarios de cortes para ayudar a estudiantes a mejorar su asistencia y actitud hacia la escuela en un ambiente que les ofrece respeto y estímulo.

“Nos emociona ver que el programa piloto de la ciudad de Nueva York, muestra que el absentismo en nuestras escuela puede superarse si se les da a los estudiantes y a sus familias las herramientas para salir adelante”, dijo Sherman.

El programa piloto Attendance Court de Nueva York empezó en noviembre de 2007, trabajando con cerca de 30 estudiantes y familias en dos escuelas de la ciudad (Isaac Newton Middle School en East Harlem y P.S. 27 en Red Hook). Pasado un año, los estudiantes participantes de ambas escuelas lograron una mejoría en su asistencia en más de un 12%. Muchos estudiantes que faltaban a la escuela o llegaban tarde de manera regular ahora tienen cerca de una asistencia perfecta, informó el Centro a través de un comunicado.

jose.acosta@eldiariony.com

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Brooklyn Daily Eagle

FORMERLY AT-RISK STUDENTS Celebrate Turnaround at Red Hook Community Court.

Today at the Red Hook Community Justice Center in Brooklyn, teachers and administrators at P.S. 27, the Agnes Y. Humphrey School for Leadership, will be joined by family members, City Council Member Sara Gonzalez and Assemblyman Felix Ortiz to honor the first graduates of a new experiment to fight chronic absenteeism in NYC Schools: Attendance Court.

Attendance court provides schools with new tools to address chronic lateness and unexcused absences before they rise to the level where school officials must file a formal report alleging educational neglect. Initially piloted in New York State in Buffalo, the program came out of the Family Court system and aims to support students and their families in improving school attendance and to ease burdens on the juvenile justice system, family courts and child welfare authorities.

At the end of its pilot year, NYC's first Attendance Court turned Harlem and Red Hook youth who routinely missed school into near-perfect attendees, improving average attendance by over 12 percent.

Red Hook Community Justice Center is located at 88 Visitation Pl., Red Hook.

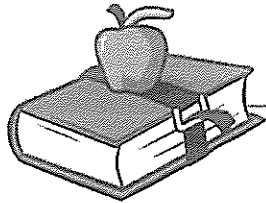
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JURY POOL

NEWS

A NEW YORK STATE UNIFIED COURT SYSTEM PUBLICATION HIGHLIGHTING THE LATEST COURT INITIATIVES AND RELATED NEWS



PILOT "ATTENDANCE COURTS" HELP YOUNGSTERS MAKE THE GRADE

Eleven-year-old Anthony* was absent from school some 25 percent of the time during this fall semester. By mid-December, though, his attendance rate jumped to 97 percent, with the seventh-grader making up most of the school work he missed in those first three months. Anthony's accomplishments can be traced to his recent participation in "attendance court," a pilot program run by the Center for Courts and the Community, which seeks to expand the judiciary's outreach to youth and educators, in partnership with the Harlem Community Justice Center and Anthony's nearby middle school.

Services Tailored to Each Student and Family

"We were looking for a way to expand the toolbox schools have to respond when students develop patterns of unexcused absences," says Jacqueline Sherman, director of the Center for Courts and the Community, discussing the program's origins. "Our aim is to help struggling students and their families by providing support in situations where unexcused absences have begun to raise serious concerns, but before they rise to a level that requires formal court action."

The East Harlem pilot, launched along with a similar one in Red Hook, Brooklyn, is based on a model first introduced to New York State in Buffalo. These courts examine the root causes of a student's truancy. In Anthony's case, his family was facing the possibility of eviction, having fallen six months behind on their rent. Anthony missed school several times to accompany his mother to housing court. According to Anthony's mom, her son lacked a strong relationship with his father and was in need of a positive male role model. The attendance court staff referred the family to the Harlem Community Justice Center's housing resource center, where they received assistance in developing a plan to pay the overdue rent, also introducing Anthony to a local Big Brothers program in his search for a mentor.

Here's how these pilot courts work: students identified by their school as having a chronic attendance problem receive basic information and an opportunity to learn more about the program. While the program is voluntary, students and their parents must sign a contract when they agree to participate. A service plan is developed and the court's hearing officer—a retired judge or justice system professional—meets at the school regularly with the student, parent, teachers, school administrators and other key players to monitor the student's progress and discuss ways to resolve

attendance problems and enhance school performance. Service plans are tailored to each family and can incorporate a range of assistance, from parenting skills classes and mediation to tutoring and mentor programs.

Christopher Watler, the project director of the Harlem Community Justice Center, has served as the hearing officer in the East Harlem pilot since November. "We get teacher reports, so if kids miss homework or are misbehaving we address those issues. I'll see the teachers' observations, talk with the families. Sometimes these youngsters are unaware of how many absences or instances of lateness have actually accrued," says Mr. Watler, describing the hearings. "Most of the parents want their children to attend school and succeed but are overwhelmed by their life responsibilities. A lot of this is about poverty and how it robs families of the ability to have a middle-class existence."

Boosting Spirits and Self-Confidence

Beyond teaching these youngsters how to stick to a routine and attend school regularly, the program looks to inspire and otherwise motivate students to succeed. In this vein, Harlem Community Justice Center Judge Ruben Martino recently addressed the students and their families. "I told them how poor attendance can lead to other things, about the link between juvenile delinquency and poor school attitude and performance, and how they have control over their destiny and can turn things around," recounts the judge.

Since enrolling in the Harlem attendance court, E.J.* has come to realize he has the ability to carve out a better future for himself, with the seventh-grader adopting a more positive attitude, in turn improving both his attendance and grades. "They give you things to do, get you involved in activities," says this now-aspiring chef, describing how attendance court helped get him get on the right track.

While participants of the court like E.J. and Anthony are making great strides, the program also seems to benefit their classmates, notes Christopher Watler, reporting that the principal recently told him overall attendance is up at the school. Adds Mr. Watler, "You can't talk to every student about getting to school on time but if they can get that message from their peers, I think it's very important." ■

* Student's name has been changed to protect privacy

Online requests for additional information about attendance courts may be sent to info@courtsandcommunity.org.

TESTIMONY OF
THE UNITED FEDERATION
OF TEACHERS (UFT)

RANDI WEINGARTEN, PRESIDENT

TO THE CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEES ON
EDUCATION & GENERAL WELFARE

NOVEMBER 12, 2008

Good morning Chairman deBlasio, Chairman Jackson and distinguished members of these two committees. My name is Michael Mulgrew and I am the Vice President of Career and Technical High Schools for the United Federation of Teachers (UFT).

As evidenced in the recent report by the Center for New York City Affairs, there is a crisis of chronic absenteeism in all too many of our public schools. That absenteeism is a major problem that drastically limits a child's opportunities to learn. On behalf of New York City teachers, I want to thank you for holding this hearing on this important issue.

New York City educators have always known that there were individual schools beset by extensive student absenteeism. But until the publication of the "Strengthening Schools by Strengthening Families" report authored by the New School's Center for New York City Affairs, most people had no idea how widespread this problem was in the lower grades. It was a problem that teachers, but few others, were talking about.

That was then; This is now.

Using the DoE's own data, "Strengthening Schools" demonstrates that chronic absenteeism has reached epidemic proportions, especially in those schools serving communities of high economic need. The lead finding of this study – that more than 90,000 children in grades K through 5 had missed at least a month of school last year – must be a clarion call for action. Absenteeism during those formative years often leads to bigger problems in middle school and high school, and is a precursor of dropping out.

Chronic absenteeism is one of the strongest predictors of academic failure, and it is symptomatic of larger issues at play in a child's life. Some common personal or health-related reasons include chronic illness, caring for siblings or learning difficulties. Socio-economic factors can include a lack of transportation or proper clothing, language barriers, extended family travel, sometimes to countries from which families have emigrated, or deeper problems within the home. There can be school-related factors as well, such as harassment and bullying.

While the causes may differ, however, the net affects of chronic absenteeism are very clear: children begin to see gaps in their learning and as a result become more frustrated with school and more likely to drop out. They also become socially isolated and insecure, and more likely to exhibit bad behavior, or worse.

This is a challenging and complex issue, and a “business as usual” approach is not going to properly address it. As illustrated in the Center for New York City Affairs report, there is clearly much more work that can be done, and the DoE’s answer cannot simply be to say this is one more obligation a principal must fulfill. A workable solution is going to require collaboration between the city and the community to make sure that proper services and supports are available to every school and every student that needs access to them. Needs and resources must be aligned.

I also want to note that chronic absenteeism is likely to get worse in a faltering economy as families become destabilized and are forced to face many challenges, including problems with housing, job security and child care. We are very concerned about the safety net services that families depend on in. That safety net, which the ONE NY coalition is fighting so hard to preserve, is in many ways the only thing keeping some families afloat during these tough economic times.

The organizations that provide safety net services are in an exceptional position to help tackle the absenteeism problem. That’s why this is the time for a collaboration and partnership between the community and the city to make sure those services and supports get to students and families who need them. In this effort, we need to employ every possible resource. We need a new level of coordination among city and state agencies, and we also need to involve other groups and organizations, as the New School report states. Only by strengthening communities will we strengthen schools. Perhaps nowhere is the logic of UFT and AFT president Randi Weingarten’s call for the creation of ‘community schools’ which bring wraparound services such as health care programs to students and their families, more compelling than in this instance.

The UFT is in the process of organizing a summit on absenteeism in hopes that working with educators and elected officials, various community groups, advocates, unions and city agencies, we can develop strategies that will address the issue with the urgency it deserves. The conversation can begin right where the New School report left off, by discussing how to establish closer relationships between schools and community organizations that both strengthen families and improve student achievement. Attendance is higher in schools where parents and communities are actively engaged. It's been suggested by the New School and others that our efforts should first focus on the early grades, when going to school is especially critical and habits are established. We agree. We will talk more about this summit in the weeks ahead.

As we delve deeper into this topic and search for solutions, it's important to understand what's being done at a school level and what obstacles our personnel are experiencing. I want to introduce you to the three experts who are here with me today. Each of them will tell you a little about what they do and how their roles fit into today's topic.

Ann Englesbe is head of our Social Workers & Psychologists chapter; Angela Reformato is head of our Guidance Counselors chapter; and Steve Grossman heads our Attendance Teachers chapter.

SOCIAL WORKERS

Good morning. My name is Ann Englesbe, and as Michael said, I head our chapter of Social Workers & Psychologists.

There are currently 1560 social workers and 1295 psychologists in our schools, and I want to stress that they are a very talented, highly-qualified group who play an important role in the lives of children.

Social workers and psychologists are in schools to help children cope with and actively address their social and psychological problems by targeting behavioral and mental health issues. Their work includes counseling, crisis intervention, conflict resolution and anger management, as well as developing programs or facilitating services. They will directly intervene with students and their families if there are at-risk issues.

Our work can be daunting. For example, some of our chapter members work exclusively with at-risk children and those that need Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), while others work with pregnant teens.

It's important to note, however, that we serve ALL children. Some of our chapter members work with pre-k programs, for example.

We try to understand what is triggering the attendance problem and work with the student, their family and school staff to help resolve the issue. You never know what you are going to find when you investigate the situation. I dealt with a case recently where a girl was staying home regularly because her mother had seizures, and she was afraid to leave her alone in the house. Another case I dealt with recently involved a mentally ill child who had not been treated properly. It can really run the gamut – from bullying to child abuse to dealing with the death of a sibling or parent.

We are trained to probe and investigate these issues, to work with teachers, and then to work with children once we've done that legwork.

GUIDANCE COUNSELORS

Good morning. My name is Angela Reformato, and I am the chapter leader for Guidance Counselors.

There are currently 3150 guidance counselors in NYC schools. To build on what Ann was saying, you just never know what types of issues children are dealing with. One of my recent cases had to do with a girl who had signed up for the military, but then thought better of it. She stopped coming to school regularly because she realized that if she failed out, she wouldn't have to go.

Like social workers, guidance counselors have extensive training. Many people view the primary role of guidance counselors as having to steer students through the college application process. That's just the tip of the iceberg in many respects.

We help students navigate through their school years and provide support and counseling for their academic needs and life choices. In elementary schools, we work to anticipate issues that may become obstacles in a child's life and then prevent those problems from happening. In secondary schools, students go through the many emotional and physical changes that require special attention from guidance counselors. In high school, we help prepare them for adult life by guiding them in course selection and activities that will help them prepare for their future. Along the way, guidance counselors also meet with parents, teachers, and other school personnel to discuss important issues.

We also spend a lot of time doing IEP counseling because we are among the few that can do that sort of work.

There is at least one guidance counselor at each secondary school and each student is supposed to have a yearly guidance meeting. Elementary schools are unfortunately not staffed properly. Some elementary schools have full or part-time guidance counselors, but some do not. Even where there are guidance counselors, caseloads far exceed state guidelines, often by double, and a lot of that is a function of budgets.

ATTENDANCE TEACHERS

Good morning. My name is Steve Grossman, and I am the chapter leader for Attendance Teachers.

Over 100 years ago, the pioneering New York State Legislature led the nation by writing some of the first child protective legislation. These laws took the form of Compulsory Education laws and other statutes designed to end the exploitation of child labor. It was at this progressive juncture in time that the mission of Attendance Teachers was joined. The New York State Education Department requires Attendance teachers to have a Masters Degree in Social Work, Psychology, or Counseling, as well as hundreds of hours of experience to be licensed.

Today there are almost 1.1 million students in New York City Public Schools and less than 400 Attendance Teachers to serve them (*as well as* children in state, private, and parochial schools). Many of these students are immigrants, impoverished, transitory, with all of the endemic ills of the poor. Attendance Teachers cover up to 20 schools scattered all over a borough, which is a vast improvement over last year's modality. Some Attendance Teachers are assigned to one large High School.

Beyond mere risk factors for eventual academic and economic success, absenteeism in the early grades can be an indicator of outright harm or abuse. Every day Attendance Teachers make a difference in the lives of children in this city. There is no way to quantify how many children have been saved from harm by the timely intervention of an Attendance Teacher—a trained professional, knocking at the door of an absent student. It is all too often a wake-up call to a parent. When Attendance Teachers meet they often discuss strategies to improve student outcomes. Despite inadequate facilities we remain committed to getting the job done.

When I was last here we discussed aspects of the horrific Nixmary Brown case. With adequate staffing our interventions can be faster and more sustained. Everyone likes special plans, projects, or programs. Adequate staffing amounts to more feet on the street doing the very tedious and unglamorous, labor intensive casework. Case by case on an

individual basis. There is no substitute for this. A computer program does not intervene with children, a robocaller does not return a kid to school, a fancy program does not identify the basic needs a family might lack to enable a child to return to school.

With the continuous unfolding of more dismal economic news every day, it is apparent that there will be more and more stressed-out adults in this city. This type of environment can lead to some disastrous situations for our youngest students. This is a real concern that we hope will be taken seriously and will lead to some ameliorative hiring.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to thank Ann, Angela and Steve for coming and again thank the Council for holding this hearing. If we all work together, we can make a difference on this issue.

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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2008

I'm Kim Nauer, Education Project Director for the Center for New York City Affairs, a think tank based at The New School focused on advancing innovative public policies that strengthen neighborhoods, support families and reduce urban poverty. We published the report "Strengthening Schools by Strengthening Families" being discussed here today, which reveals alarming levels of chronic absenteeism in the early grades. I thank the City Council for its attention to the report and am happy to take any questions you have.

Analyzing data from the Department of Education, we found that a total of 90,000 children, or one in every five elementary school students, is chronically absent in New York City . That number is as high as one in every three students in some neighborhoods. We found that there were many different reasons underlying chronic absenteeism, ranging from issues of poverty, health care and inadequate housing to bureaucratic foul ups and cultural issues. We also looked at the impact of chronic absenteeism on achievement. Some studies have found that attendance problems in the early grades are a clear, early warning sign that a child is likely to drop out of school later on.

Finally, our report explores ways in which schools can work more closely with families, community-based organizations and other government agencies to reduce chronic absenteeism. It is critical that we all work together on this. If children aren't in school, they cannot learn – and, for those children, all of the other efforts of the school system are for naught.

Today, I want to focus on one of the report's most important conclusions: That the Department of Education *can* fix this problem with the help of talented, committed principals and with renewed dedication to working with families and collaborating with community organizations and other institutions.

Principals *will* certainly need help from the DOE and from City Hall . Reducing chronic absenteeism can be a huge challenge, particularly in the high poverty neighborhoods where the problem is most severe. But elementary school absenteeism also presents an opportunity. Principals can use existing tracking systems to quickly spot families who, for whatever reasons, are having problems getting their kids to school. With proper planning and modest resources, school leaders can determine the reasons behind their school's absenteeism problem, reach out to parents and steer them to help when they need it. This kind of outreach can make a dramatic, early difference in children's lives and their long-term educational success.

Conversely, by doing nothing, we risk that these chronically absent youngsters will fall behind, jeopardizing their educational careers – and ultimately costing the system far more in remedial education dollars and last-chance programs designed to keep kids from dropping out.

So how *do* we help principals overcome chronic absenteeism in their schools? We talked to dozens of people throughout the school system, including the principal of P.S. 55, a school that was once considered one of the worst in the South Bronx. Today, he has one of the best attendance records in his neighborhood, one that could rival suburban schools. We learned that the solution comes down to three things:

- Making attendance a **PRIORITY**.
- Devising a smart **PLAN** to deal with it.
- And employing **PARTNERSHIPS** to tackle the toughest problems.

First, it is critical that top administrators at the Department of Education actively require schools with high chronic absenteeism to do something about the problem. Both the DOE and the principals themselves need to make this issue a priority. For now, the effort can be targeted. Our report identified 123 elementary schools where at least 30 percent of the children were chronically absent.

Second, each targeted school must develop a plan, tailored to particular challenges of the families in the school. I visited a cluster of schools in the Morrisania section of the South Bronx. I was astounded at how different each school's attendance problem was, despite the fact that the schools were often only blocks apart from each other. Typically, schools have three or four major challenges that drive up absenteeism. They range from health problems like asthma, to cultural challenges found in new immigrant communities, to bureaucratic problems brought on by poor busing services or a homeless shelter system that inexplicably keeps moving families around. Families *do* often need coaching on the importance of elementary education. And school leaders may find they need to improve their own offerings, making the building a destination that children will seek out, no matter what. Whatever the reasons, principals must do the detective work to find what is happening. It is only then that they can hope to smartly attack the problem.

Third, principals need help. The family issues that drive absenteeism are often complicated and can require more effort than any school can offer. At the same time, New York City is home to many well-respected non-profit organizations that already serve children and families. It makes sense to create more high-level partnerships with these groups to offer the help that school personnel cannot. The principal of P.S. 55 partnered with the Montefiore Medical Center to dramatically reduce the number of absences he had due to asthma. Groups like the Children's Aid Society, Good Shepherd Services and Harlem Children's Zone can bring in years of school-based social service expertise. And there are scores of other specialized local players out there with the potential to help.

We know that this is a lot to ask of principals who are already dealing with enormous pressures. In an ideal world, these principals could focus on academics and rely on a well-trained, executive-level partner to manage the social needs of a school. These "community school leaders" could work to drive down chronic absenteeism and improve student supports at the school. This person could also steer the school away from expensive crutches often used to manage student behavior -- like reflexive special education referrals, unnecessary ambulance calls and premature calls to the state child abuse and neglect hotline. Such a position, whether funded by the DOE or outside community partners, could easily pay for itself in costs saved to other systems that serve families in these schools.

We are asking the Department of Education and the City Council to collaborate with us and other organizations to develop an initiative to target a few clusters of schools that have high rates of chronic absenteeism and other poverty-related challenges. In this time of fiscal austerity, we need to test new ideas that have the potential to save money, strengthen families -- and keep more students in school. We think this is an idea with great potential. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

For More Information Contact:

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A PDF of the report is available at www.centrernyc.org.

Please contact the Center for New York City Affairs for a print copy of the report.

TESTIMONY
VERONICA MONTGOMERY-COSTA
PRESIDENT, LOCAL 372
NEW YORK CITY BOARD OF EDUCATION EMPLOYEES
AND
DISTRICT COUNCIL 37
AMERICAN FEDERATION OF STATE,
COUNTY AND MUNICIPAL EMPLOYEES
AFLCIO

JOINT HEARING
CITY COUNCIL EDUCATION COMMITTEE
CITY COUNCIL WELFARE COMMITTEE
CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN CITY SCHOOLS

NOVEMBER 12, 2008

TESTIMONY SUBMITTED BY
VERONICA MONTGOMERY-COSTA
PRESIDENT - LOCAL 372 AND DC 37, AFSCME, AFL-CIO

November 12, 2008

Chairman Jackson, Chairman DeBlasio and Committee Members:

Local 372 thanks you for this opportunity to comment upon the current crisis in student attendance in New York City's elementary and secondary schools.

The high incidence of absenteeism in both our elementary and secondary schools is just another collapse in the domino effect which was precipitated by the New York City Education and Reform Accountability Act of 2002.

This legislation, promoted by the Mayor, entrusted our city schools to a Mayor and a Chancellor who were titans in the business world, but had no expertise whatsoever in the field of education.

Local 372 employees live by the credo "Children are our life's work."

You have not heard that kind of declaration of commitment from the corporate giants, now self-proclaimed reformers, who have changed the design and intent of the Department of Education.

The reformed DOE has put test scores and rankings before the basic needs of students, and their families, an increasing number of whom are at risk in this time of economic crisis.

All of our 1.1 million school children require the vital school life support services provided by Local 372 members.

New York City students and parents know they can depend upon the Local 372 members in their schools, because they live in their school community and are parents, grandparents and guardians of other children in their schools.

One of the Chancellor's first fiscal initiatives was to lay off Local 372 Family Paraprofessionals as a quick fix to budgetary shortfalls. Our Family Paras actually made home visits to follow up on student absences.

All public schools must be places where children are missed when they do not attend for a single school day, not a month or most of a school year.

Why didn't the senseless murder in 2006 of Nixmary Brown, a child invisible in the system, wake the DOE from its comatose state regarding school support services?

Schools must be places where someone who actually cares, calls home to find out why a child is absent from school that same day.

Even the reformers' sophisticated computer program costing tens of millions of dollars cannot replace the diligence of community members who are also school support service employees, when it comes to tracking our precious school children.

Schools must be places which provide an effective plan to follow up on absences for which the call home has produced no satisfactory explanation.

The reformed DOE encourages contracting out to community based organizations for services already provided by Local 372 school support service employees.

Local 372 Family Paraprofessionals in each school site could make those phone calls, follow up with home visits as needed and assist attendance teachers with required paper work — a long-term fix that would not cost the taxpayers tens of millions of dollars.

School Support services also provide incentive for at-risk children to attend our schools.

Children who know there are adults, like our Local 372 SAPIS in whom they can confide, are more likely to come to school when there are problems at home. At-risk students who know there are Peer Leadership or Conflict Resolution and Drug Abuse prevention programs in which they can participate are also more likely to attend school on a regular basis. That is why we need a SAPIS in every school site.

Parents with family issues causing their child's absence, or parents who are simply unable to navigate the maze of the reformed DOE, can rely on our Local 372 Parent Coordinators, because they are fellow community members who can get them the help they need.

In Conclusion:

In times such as this, it is even more critical that our schools become places where children can feel safe and protected from indifference. Children must never become anonymous or invisible in a system that has taken the community out of the schools and parents out of the loop.

Our old system of a Central Board and Community School Boards, with all of its flaws, was a system of villages designed to raise each child.

The reformed DOE has made each school an island, some are made into attractive resort destinations, competing with Charter schools for high performing students. Others have become like desert islands, losing vital support services that would help attract at-risk children to school, send them to their classrooms learning-ready and give them a chance at academic success.

Council members, if we are looking for reasons for the poor attendance in our schools we must first examine the flaws in the reformed, DOE.



ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN

Helping children succeed in school

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**Testimony to be delivered to the
New York City Council Education and General Welfare Committees
Re: Oversight-Chronic Absenteeism in New York City Public Schools
By Jennifer Pringle, Advocates for Children of New York
November 12, 2008**

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Good morning. My name is Jennifer Pringle, and I am the Director of the New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students, a project funded by the New York State Education Department and housed at Advocates for Children of New York. I thank you for this opportunity to discuss the issue of chronic absenteeism in New York Public Schools.

For more than 35 years, Advocates for Children has been advocating for quality education in the New York City public schools. Our efforts focus on students most at risk of academic failure or discrimination based on factors such as poverty, race, disability, English Language Learner status, homelessness, or involvement in the foster care or juvenile justice system. We provide a comprehensive array of services, ranging from direct legal advice and representation to public education to systemic advocacy.

Although Advocates for Children is concerned with attendance problems in the city overall, I am going to focus my testimony today on issues pertaining to children and youth who are homeless. Not surprisingly, these students have more excessive rates of absenteeism than the student body as a whole. **This problem is especially acute for homeless students who transfer schools.** As you may know, students who are homeless may remain in their same school or transfer to the local



school close to where they are temporarily housed. And at every grade level, the students who transfer schools are chronically absent, meaning they missed a month or more of school, at roughly twice the rate of the students who remain in their same school.

In grades K-5, for example, over 50% of homeless students who transferred were chronically absent, compared with 24% of these students who stayed in the same school (still a disturbingly high number). And as the students age, the problem gets worse. **Over 60% of homeless students in grades 6-8 were chronically absent where the student transferred schools,** versus 31% where the student stayed in the same school. And **for 9-12 graders, 80% were chronically absent where the student transferred schools,** versus 40% where the student stayed in the same school. These figures are from 2004-05 data, the most recent we have, but based on what we see in our work, we have no reason to believe that attendance rates have improved since that time.

The increased rate of chronic absenteeism for homeless students who transfer schools is likely due, at least in part, to enrollment delays. Indeed, anecdotal information we have received in our role as the state-wide technical assistance center on homeless education has confirmed this theory. For example, a parent in a domestic violence shelter sought a school transfer for her son who had special needs, and it took well over two months for the transfer to be completed. During that entire time, the student was out of school. Enrollment also can be difficult for students attempting to stay in their same schools: recently, a high-school age student who was living in temporary housing attempted to re-enroll in her school of origin on at least




four separate occasions, and each time was turned away by either school-based staff or staff from the Office of Student Enrollment. As a result, the student missed over six weeks of school. Both cases violated the Chancellor's Regulations as well as state and federal law.

The problem persists because the New York City Department of Education has failed to adequately address the needs of this population over the course of its many reorganizations. As a part of the DOE's Children First Reforms, the number of staff appointed to help children and youth in temporary housing in the Office of Youth Development was cut by two thirds. And there are troubling signs that this trend may continue: one of the remaining 13 Content Experts for Students in Temporary Housing recently left her position, and the DOE does not intend to fill it. The Students in Temporary Housing Content Experts are responsible, among other things, for making sure that all students experiencing homelessness are identified and their parents told about their children's right to stay in the same school and receive transportation to that school, or immediately enroll in the local school. They help such students with enrollment and arrange for transportation, and provide them and their families with much needed support both in and outside of school.

We strongly urge implementation of the following recommendations to increase support for students experiencing homelessness to better their attendance rates and thereby their academic success:

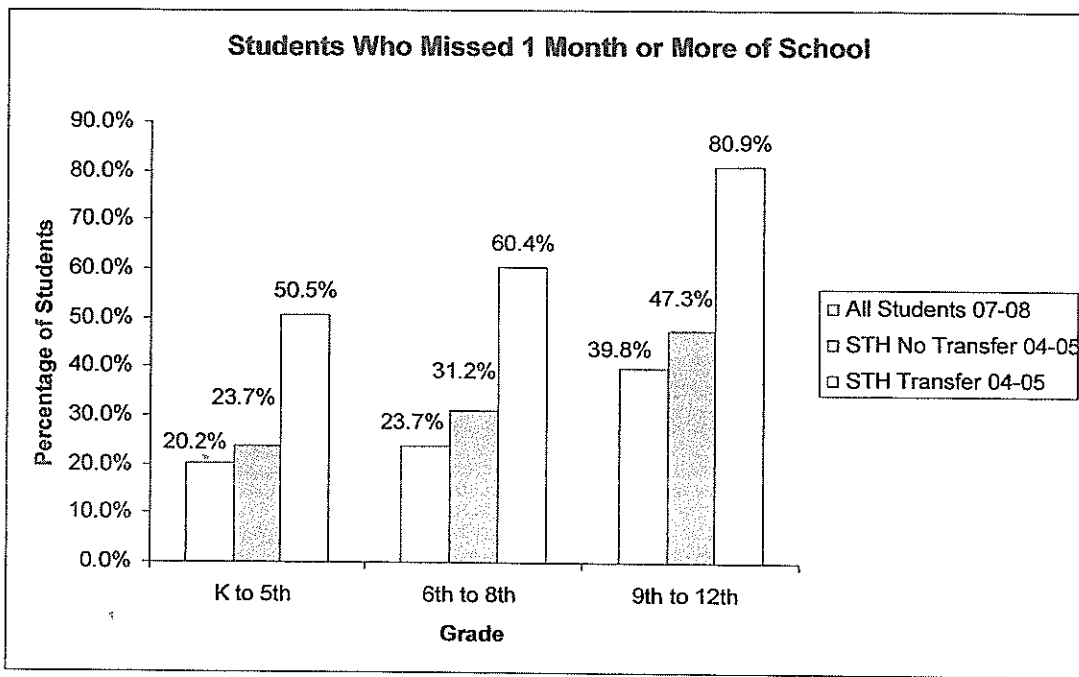
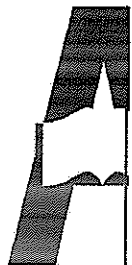
- Increased support for the Students in Temporary Housing Program or at the very least the filling of any vacancies. This is crucial as the STH staff are the primary support for students experiencing



homelessness and are instrumental in carrying out any of these recommendations;

- Greater outreach to and counseling of parents by Students in Temporary Housing staff and school-based staff to encourage them to keep their children in the same school. As previously mentioned, higher rates of school mobility (i.e. school transfers) are correlated with higher rates of absenteeism; and
- Training of staff from schools, the Office of School Enrollment and the Office of Pupil Transportation about the rights of students in temporary housing including immediate enrollment and prompt provision of transportation.

Thank you.





**Testimony of Katherine Eckstein, Policy and Advocacy Specialist,
The Children's Aid Society
Prepared for the New York City Council's Hearing on Chronic Absenteeism in New York
City Public Schools, Education and General Welfare Committees
November 12, 2008**

Good morning. Chairman Jackson, Chairman de Blasio and honorable committee members, thank you for holding this hearing on this very important issue and for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Katherine Eckstein and I am the Policy and Advocacy Specialist at The Children's Aid Society. The Children's Aid Society, founded in 1853, provides comprehensive services for 150,000 of New York City's children and families each year. Our goal is to ensure the physical and emotional well-being of children and families, and to provide every child with the supports and opportunities needed to become a happy, healthy and successful adult.

I'd like to begin by sharing a story:

A 1st grader gets sick. In fact, he gets sick a lot. His mom works two jobs, neither of which offers health insurance. So, this 1st grader doesn't have health insurance and doesn't see a doctor. The mom can't send the child to school because he's sick, so she has to choose between leaving him with a neighbor she barely knows or missing work. The mom doesn't know what to do. What happens? The child misses school *and* he doesn't receive healthcare to figure out why he keeps getting sick.

Through our extensive experience in child welfare, health, juvenile justice, education, and youth development, we have learned that a holistic approach to working with children and their families yields the best results for them. And we believe that a holistic approach is necessary to address the startling early chronic absence statistics that our City faces.

I want to thank the New York City Department of Education (DOE) and the Center for New York City Affairs for working together to release this data. Unlike many other school districts in the country, New York City has a sophisticated and high quality data system. And while we knew that there were large numbers of children who were consistently missing school, we didn't know the extent of the problem until the Center for New York City Affairs did its analysis in its report "Strengthening Schools by Strengthening Families: Community Strategies to Reverse Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades and Improve Supports for Children and Families."¹

What are the implications if we know that²:

¹ Nauer, White and Yerneni, "Strengthening Schools by Strengthening Families: Community Strategies to Reverse Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades and Improve Supports for Children and Families," Center for New York City Affairs, Milano The New School, October 2008.

² Chang and Romero, "Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades," National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University, September 2008 and Op cit., "Strengthening Schools by Strengthening Families: Community Strategies to Reverse Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades and Improve Supports for Children and Families."

- attendance is a predictor for future success in school;
- children with a history of poor attendance in the early elementary grades have lower levels of academic achievement throughout their school years;
- multiple factors lead to children missing large amounts of school; and
- 90,000 children in grades K-5 were absent in New York City for 20% or more of the 2007-2008 school year?

If we know all of this, we cannot afford to ignore it and we must have a systemic response to address it. My remarks today will focus on community schools, one comprehensive, strategic solution to address the shocking number of young children who are chronically absent.

Children miss extended periods of school for myriad reasons. There is a tendency to oversimplify the causal factors and blame parents for not getting their children to school. However, we must fight against this. Research has shown that three spheres influence whether or not children attend school regularly: family, community and school. As Hedy Chang and Mariajosé Romero say in their report, “Present, Engaged and Accounted For – The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grade:”

Since conditions can vary substantially across schools, communities, and families, examining the extent to which any or all of these factors are relevant is critical. While parents are responsible for getting their children to school every day, schools and communities need to recognize and address the barriers and challenges that may inhibit them from doing so, especially when they are living in poverty.³

The Children’s Aid Society and many other organizations and school districts throughout the country use the community schools strategy to address all of these spheres.

What are Community Schools?

Community schools are both places and partnerships that bring together the school and community to provide an engaging academic experience, enriched opportunities to help students see positive futures, and services designed to remove barriers to learning.⁴ Community schools are not formulaic and community schools are not a program. Instead they are a strategic response to the specific needs of the children in a particular school and an organizing framework to coordinate and integrate existing and new resources.

In the late 1980s, The Children's Aid Society became a partner with the DOE to form community schools – currently we partner in 19 schools. Our schools offer mental health, medical and dental services. We enroll children in health insurance. Our schools provide high quality, enriching after-school, holiday and summer programs built upon what happens during the school day. Our schools offer classes for parents that might include learning English or starting a business and our schools hold immigration clinics for the neighborhood. In every one of our schools is a Community Schools Director, who works in close partnership with the principal and whose responsibility it is to integrate and align the non-academic programs and services offered in the school.

³ Op cit., “Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades.

⁴ Community Schools for All: A Case Statement and Strategic Plan | 2007-2014, Coalition for Community Schools, <http://communityschools.org>.

And while no two community schools look alike, they all respond to the specific needs of the students in the school with interventions or programs that seek to address their particular challenges – whether that means implementing an asthma prevention and management program or working with a family to fight eviction. Through a partnership with Helen Keller International and the SUNY State College of Optometry, for example, we have done vision screening in our schools. In a group of elementary schools, 35% of children in grades PreK-4 failed vision screenings. When we screened children in grades 5-8, 17% failed the screening and after the follow-up work, 60% (559 children) were provided with glasses, many of them on the same day of the screening.

Our results have shown that there is value-add to children if they attend a community school: Of our five elementary schools, four received an A and one received a B on their progress reports from the 2007-2008 school year. Outcomes from 16 years of research on Children's Aid community schools include:

- Increased academic achievement⁵
- Improvement in student attendance⁶
- Improvement in youths' social and emotional development and community engagement⁷
- Increased parent involvement⁸
- Improvement in mental and physical health⁹

Sixty-eight percent of our funding for community schools comes from existing public funding sources, many of which schools by themselves could not otherwise access, such as Medicaid.

Early Chronic Absenteeism and the Case for Community Schools

We recommend adopting a community schools strategy as an important piece of New York City's response to early chronic absenteeism. Our experience has taught us that a child who is depressed, hungry, scared of walking to and from school, has chronic asthma, is homeless, or whose parents are abusive, neglectful or mentally ill – all reasons why a child might miss school – will not be able to take advantage of all that schools have to offer, even if schools have the best leadership, innovative teachers, small class sizes and state-of-the-art resources.

In most schools, attendance is tracked and when a child is absent someone calls the child's home. Too often this is as far as it goes. More of the same won't work. Principals and teachers tell us that schools can't do it alone. Community schools help address the barriers to learning, factors that can contribute to children missing school. Organizing and mobilizing existing and new resources around schools through partnerships can help to address the dire situations that too

⁵ *21st Century Community Learning Centers at Six New York City Middle Schools Year One Findings*, prepared by Kira Krenichyn, Hélène Clark, Nicole Schaefer-McDaniel and Lyman Benitez of ActKnowledge, September 2005. See also *Summary of Fordham University Research Findings 1992-1999*, prepared by ActKnowledge.

⁶ *Op cit.*, *Fordham University Research Findings 1992-1999*. See also *Op cit.*, *21st Century Community Learning Centers at Six New York City Middle Schools Year One Findings*.

⁷ *Op cit.*, *21st Century Community Learning Centers at Six New York City Middle Schools Year One Findings*. See also *op cit.*, *Fordham University Research Findings 1992-1999*.

⁸ *Op cit.*, *Fordham University Research Findings 1992-1999*.

⁹ The Children's Aid Society's Community School Mental Health Services Analysis of Progress in 4th Year of the New York State Education Department's VESID – Effective Practices Contract. Evaluation conducted by Hélène Clark and Robert Engle of ActKnowledge, November 2003. See also PS 50 Evaluation of the Health Component in its First Year. Evaluation conducted by Hélène Clark, Melissa Extein, and Robert Engle of ActKnowledge, September 2003.

many of our young people and their families face and that impact how successful a child will be in school.

We know that during tough economic times families who are already vulnerable suffer the most. This is why we must look at cost-effective strategies that we know will yield positive results. And because we know that there isn't just one factor that contributes to early chronic absenteeism, this problem demands a multi-sector, cross-agency, coordinated response. New York City has an opportunity to marshal its human and financial resources to help the children and families who need it the most. We have an opportunity to promote the integration and coordination of the efforts of city agencies and community organizations.

Because of the budget challenges we are facing, we must ensure that we leverage human and financial resources across sectors and agencies wisely. Perhaps this means redeploying housing workers into schools with particularly high family mobilization rates. Perhaps this means locating child welfare preventive services personnel into a school – like we do at one of our elementary schools. Perhaps this means offering incentives for deeper and stronger partnerships with community-based organizations to locate a health clinic in a school or work on improving school climate. However just putting these services in schools is not enough. We know that these services must be coordinated within schools if they are to be effective.

The Children's Aid Society supports the Center for New York City Affairs' recommendations in its report and we would like to partner with the Center, the DOE and the City to develop a plan that will significantly reduce the number of children who are chronically absent. Our National Technical Assistance Center for Community Schools has helped districts around the country begin and sustain community schools initiatives and we would like to do the same in New York City.

The Children's Aid Society belongs to a group made up of urban community schools initiatives – including such cities as Chicago, Baltimore and Portland – that are grappling with this issue as well. New York City has the great opportunity to model a systemic response, based on local needs, to early chronic absenteeism. The rest of the country is looking to see how we respond. Let's do the right thing. Let's respond boldly and broadly. Let's ensure that children are in school and prepared to receive an equitable education. Our children deserve nothing less.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this morning.



Testimony of Juanita Ayala-Vargas Vice President of Programs

New York City Council Hearing on Chronic Absenteeism November 12, 2008

Good morning, my name is Juanita Ayala-Vargas and I am the Vice President of Programs at United Way of NYC. I want to begin by thanking the City Council Education and General Welfare Committees for their leadership in convening this hearing on chronic absenteeism. This is a critical issue facing our educational system and that impacts the ability of thousands of students to succeed in school. Additionally, I want to thank the Center for New York City Affairs for their report ***Strengthening Schools by Strengthening Families***. The report not only provides us with a clear picture of the absenteeism crisis, but also with valuable recommendations to reverse current trends.

I am here today to testify about the importance of:

- effective community-school partnerships in addressing poor school attendance, and;
- strengthening families as a leading strategy to improving school attendance.

As part of our work at United Way, we know that poor school attendance in the early grades is a leading indicator of potential future academic failure. We also know that school disengagement is a gradual process that often begins in elementary school and is a primary cause in the national dropout epidemic. Currently, nearly half of African American and Latino children do not graduate from high school.

United Way of New York City has partnered with the NYC Department of Education for over 15 years to manage Attendance Improvement Dropout Prevention (AIDP) funding. These funds are intended to enable Community Based Organizations (CBO) to provide vital services in NYC schools that currently do not meet the NYS DOE attendance standards.

Our work in dropout prevention has led to the development of the Community Achievement Project in the Schools (CAPS) program where we partner with over 40 CBOs and 92 schools to address poor attendance among over 10,000 students.

Our 15 plus years of experience working with schools and CBOs has taught us that successful community-school collaborations require two fundamental pillars: first, a supportive school leadership; and second, CBOs that understand the school culture and their role within the school. With this in mind, UWNYP supports and encourages the expansion of professional development opportunities that train school leaders to implement strategies that result in effective community-school collaborations. Beyond pedagogical staff, we think that such training would be invaluable to CBO leaders as well. Too often line staff are knowledgeable about mitigating the issues impacting families, but lack the sophistication to navigate effective collaborations.

One of the most important lessons cited by the Center in its report is that "Schools in high-poverty districts benefit from strong relationships with community based organizations that provide parent outreach and assistance to families." This

fundamental concept is at the core of the three vital services offered through the CAPS program. Our CBO partners provide family social services that include:

- Home visits – during the weekend, at night, and before school start to ensure that we are reaching families when they are home
- Referral services - to support services beyond what the CBO can provide through CAPS. Referrals include, but are not limited to, referrals for assistance in meeting basic needs of the family including housing assistance, accessing benefits they may be eligible for, physical and mental health related services
- Family counseling – for the guardians, children and extended family living in the home. CBOs provide families with a safe haven to express their feelings, share the challenges they are facing and an opportunity to develop trusting relationships that allows them to seek the support they may need.

It is our experience that students with poor school attendance often have families with multiple barriers to financial stability including unemployment, homelessness, language, immigration status and health related issues. CBOs that are effective at working with families holistically and work collaboratively with schools have greater success at improving students' school attendance. We know from an independent evaluation of the CAPS program that at the end of the 2006-07 program year, CAPS elementary/middle school students experienced significant gains in their Average Daily Attendance compared to the previous year, showing that they *improved* their attendance relative to the citywide norm.

In closing, I want to echo and support the virtually universal consensus regarding the critical need for holistic and intensive interventions for children and families facing the greatest barriers to academic success.

Once again, I want to thank the City Council for its leadership on this critical issue and would be happy to answer any questions the member might have.

Juanita Ayala-Vargas

Vice President, Programs

United Way of New York City

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I represent: UNITED WAY of NYC

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Name: Jennifer Pringle

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I represent: Advocates for Children

Address: same as above

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I represent: NYC Dept of Education

Address: 52 Chambers Street NYC NY

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I represent: 263 W 86 St HURGER

Address: NEW YORK NY 10024

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Address: UFT - 52 Broadway

I represent: UFT

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I represent: ACS

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Name: Kim Nauer

Address: 601 W. 57th St, NYC

I represent: Center For NYC Affairs

Address: 72 Fifth Ave, NYC

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Name: Katherine Eckstein

Address: 105 E. 22nd Street

I represent: The Children's Aid Society

Address: 105 E. 22nd street

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Address: 150 William street NY NY

I represent: Children's Services (ACS)

Address: 150 William street

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