Disruptive Strategies for Change Making
The Grand Rapids Story of Reducing Chronic Absenteeism

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Chaná Edmond-Verley
Doug & Maria DeVos Foundation

Mel Atkins II
Grand Rapids Public Schools
For many years, the problem of chronic absenteeism went unnoticed, flying under the achievement gap radar. Historically adopted measures such as “average daily attendance,” required by the state and federal education reporting entities largely masked the problem. This gave school districts inadequate metrics and therefore a false sense of success by glossing over, in some cases, a third of the population of students missing too much school. (See Figure 1)

BACKGROUND

In 2006, Grand Rapids Public Schools, in partnership with the Kent Intermediate School District, Kent County, and local foundations, launched the Kent School Services Network in six schools. One of the goals was improving student attendance. The data showed that it worked. All of the pilot schools saw increased attendance, they met adequate yearly progress (AYP), and math and reading scores improved. This was part of early efforts within the district that paved the way for a more comprehensive district-wide approach to combating chronic absenteeism.

In 2013, as part of Grand Rapids Public Schools transformation efforts, the problem of chronic absenteeism was prioritized as a district-wide effort with the newly installed superintendent taking the lead by making improved school attendance one of her top priorities. At the principals’ Back-to-School meeting, Superintendent Teresa Weatherall Neal stated, “We can’t teach children if they are not in school, and if they are not in school, they can’t learn.” She announced, “Making sure children are in school is one of my top priorities. I am adding this metric to my own performance objectives.” Then she put Mel Atkins at the helm. Relentless in data mining efforts, he had already been exploring the issue. He partnered with Believe 2 Become (B2B), a regular thought-partner and supporter of the district, which in turn secured an engagement with Hedy Chang of Attendance Works.

Education is one of life’s greatest equalizers. It opens minds to new understanding, unveils new possibilities, and unlocks doors to new opportunity and success. Across this nation, however, more than 6.5 million children find the opportunity that education affords literally slipping away before their very eyes. The culprit is chronic absenteeism, which is defined as missing 10% or more of school (i.e., 18 or more days of a 180-day year). Each day missed is a lost opportunity to learn.
For large complex systems such as urban districts, an often under-resourced ecosystem of families, schools, and community, chronic absenteeism poses a formidable challenge that requires quick penetration. The main challenge is to sufficiently “nudge” the behavior of actors in the system in such a way that it breaks through deeply entrenched cycles, resulting in behavioral shifts over time (BOT). There is nothing more powerful than constantly keeping front and center the extent of the problem, action steps being taken, and the need for more rapid progress. This “in your face” strategy is disruptive.

The overall theory of change undergirding the Grand Rapids effort is rooted in two concepts:

**Disruption**: quickly “disrupting the status quo” and maintaining the disruption long enough to change the dynamic of business-as-usual.

**Universality**: establishing a universal and foundational expectation that coming to school is critical to student achievement, and school attendance is a leading indicator of being academically on track.

The key levers of change included: accountability, transparency, whole systems engagement, and actionable messaging.

### TIMEFRAME SYSTEMS IMPACT KEY ACTIONS

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<tr>
<th>TIMEFRAME</th>
<th>SYSTEMS IMPACT</th>
<th>KEY ACTIONS</th>
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</thead>
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| Year 1 (SY 2013-14) | Chronic absenteeism moves from 36.4% to 35.1% | • Issue introduced  
• Goal of 10% reduction set  
• Superintendent establishes accountability  
• Baseline established  
• Leaderboards were first used  
• Make Every Day Count campaign used  
• Attendance toolkit created |
| Year 2 (SY 2014-15) | Chronic absenteeism reduction from 35.1% to 27.2%; | • School leadership, parents, and community accountability in full swing  
• Data reporting expanded  
• Challenge 5 newly instituted in schools and community  
• Actionable messaging communicated |
| Year 3 (SY 2015-16) | Chronic absenteeism reduced from 27.2% to 22.5% | • Continued previous actions  
• PBIS incentives widely used |

In the three years since setting out on this journey to improve school attendance, the district has achieved significant reduction in chronic absenteeism. *(See Figures 2 and 3)*
A SUITE OF DISRUPTIVE STRATEGIES

Five key strategies believed to have disruptive power were deployed to move the needle. This suite of strategies, consistently applied, produced impact, improving school attendance and reducing chronic absenteeism by 36% over a three-year period (from school year 2013-14 to school year 2015-16). These strategies included: district and site leadership; data mining and transparency; community engagement and collective impact; family engagement; and actionable messaging. Here are a few highlights around these strategies that district and community partners believe contributed to the success.

(1) District and Site Leadership
Creating accountability at the district and school leadership level was at the core of this strategy. Specific objectives related to school attendance were included in the personal performance plans of key cabinet members, senior staff, and principals. This proved to be essential in pushing to the surface a focus on improving school attendance and reducing chronic absenteeism. Accountability, in and of itself, is a “disruptive” measure as it re-sorts, re-calibrates, and re-prioritizes efforts. And, as the old adage says, “What gets measured gets done.”

(2) Data and Transparency
Historically, schools have had at their disposal a wealth of data ripe for mining. To mine that data, the district instituted Attendance Works’ District Attendance Tracking Tool (DATT) and School Attendance Tracking Tool (SATT). These tools took district data and provided a focused look at attendance in every school. The tool told the story of chronic absenteeism at the school and district level, revealing key patterns by grade level, gender, PEB, and zip code. The SATT also helped identify specific students who were chronically absent.

Figure 3

Percentage of Students Chronically Absent By Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Grades K-5</th>
<th>Grades 6-8</th>
<th>Grades 9-12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013-14</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-15</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-16</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>10%</td>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013-14</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-15</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-16</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
absent. These data and other reports developed by the Office of Data and Evaluation were instructive guides for school principals and attendance teams, highlighting where chronic absenteeism was most pronounced. The disruption that data brings was then ramped up through the use of eight-foot-tall leader boards, strategically placed at the entrances of schools. These towering boards, rich with grade-level data, displayed monthly figures and progress on attendance and chronic absenteeism for the entire school community to see and own. The disruptive communication strategy was designed by Creative Change Mission, a Grand Rapids-based public interest communications firm.

(3) Community Engagement and Collective Impact

Communities are made up of people and people by nature want to help. Astutely, the superintendent along with community leaders continued to inspire community members around the notion that “our children” are “all of our responsibility.” At its core, this thinking embraces the concept of mutuality and symbiotic intentionality—an underlying belief in the oneness of humanity—that reminds us that what affects one affects the other. In fact, collective impact has as one of its tenets “mutual reinforcement,” an essential element of systems change that is closely tied to exponential impact. Mutual reinforcement goes deeper than alignment and coordination. It communicates a message of being “all in,” “fully engaged,” and “wholly interdependent.” In this manner, mutual reinforcement serves disruption.

This level of mutuality played out in two ways. One was the implicit agreement that reducing chronic absenteeism was important. The other, more explicit way, was in community partner accountability metrics. For example, Believe 2 Become (B2B) mobilized more than 150 community- and faith-based organizations by means of grants that embedded school attendance and chronic absenteeism metrics into each agreement. Forging an unprecedented Master Data Sharing Agreement (MDSA) with the district, Believe 2 Become was able to support community partners in tracking and supporting families directly. As a result, community organizing entities on the ground had access to geo-coded maps highlighting neighborhood hot spots of chronically absent students for door-to-door engagement.

When schools use actionable messaging and provide families with actionable information, families are honored and act in profound ways, largely supportive to the performance objectives we all are trying to achieve. Information really is power.
Family Empowerment and Actionable Messaging

If you really want to flip a system on its side and accelerate change efforts, the key is to activate parents, perhaps the most under-leveraged actors in the system. (See Figure 4) An important lever in the change arsenal are strategies that nurture parent and family agency. These strategies are inherently empowering and asset-based. Actionable information embedded in messaging is among the most empowering levers for change.

Giving parents and families what they need to know in order to “act” on their own actually works. When expectations are clearly communicated as concrete benchmarks, a large percentage of families meet the targets that are set.

To this end, Believe 2 Become and its communications partner, Creative Change Mission, developed an actionable messaging campaign called Challenge 5™. Challenge 5 communicates a catchy, easy to remember, and kinesthetically powerful rhyming message: “Strive for Less than Five,” expressed with an outstretched hand. Steeped in the emerging genius of behavioral economics, the tagline and gesture communicates clearly and succinctly the mid-range target for “satisfactory attendance.” (This benchmark is defined as less than 5% or nine or fewer days of school days absent.) In this manner, the campaign message is portable across environments, multiple districts, and locales. Various collateral were created and deployed in Challenge 5 campaign kits to further disrupt the system, including yards signs, stickers, bumper stickers, razor fish flags, posters, and other large-format outdoor signage to keep the messaging front and center, and in folks’ faces.

Parent Partnership Model

The nature of parent partnerships matter. The deeper and focused the partnership, the greater impact on child outcomes.

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(5) Investment Over Time

There are not any silver bullets in the Grand Rapids story. Rather, there are a few important buck shots that served as the impetus for the results that have been achieved. Moving a needle this much required an intentional and concerted effort over time. The work of disruption is appropriate at the start, but it must be maintained. Continued forward progress requires the transformation of mindsets, new and embedded processes, and supporting practices to keep the momentum going.

Banners, billboards, and yard signs in locations throughout the community, plus leader boards in schools, reinforced the Challenge 5 message and data.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Chaná Edmond-Verley, a strategist and results-oriented change-maker in catalytic philanthropy, leads as the senior program officer for Believe 2 Become, an initiative of the Doug & Maria DeVos Foundation.

Mel Atkins II is the executive director of student and community affairs at the Grand Rapids Public Schools. He is a data enthusiast and educational veteran with several years of teaching, school administration, and district administration experience in the district.