The Children's Cabinet
Monday April 30, 2018
DOA Conference- Room A
10:00am – 11:30am
Meeting Minutes
Approved May 21, 2018

Cabinet Members in Attendance:

- Director Alexander-Scott
- Secretary Beane
- Director Boss
- Director DiBiase
- Director Hawkins
- Director Piccola
- Lisa Vura-Weis, Governor Raimondo's Designee

Secretary Beane calls the meeting to order and asks for a motion to accept the minutes from the March 26th meeting. The motion is seconded and the minutes are approved.

Children's Cabinet Operational Update – *Kayla Rosen, Policy Director, RI Children's Cabinet*

- Operational update was driven by one-on-one meetings with Cabinet members and community partners
- The Cabinet is committed to a broad vision of supporting youth from 0-24 across a number of domains
- To achieve this vision, the Cabinet is committed to collaborating across departments and in partnership with the community
- Cabinet work going forward will fall into two buckets:
  - Strategic Alignment: Coordinated Budgeting; Public Affairs; and Strategic Planning
  - Initiatives for Youth: Specific projects to support the vision, and may be high, medium, and low touch
- Secretary Beane noted that he is interested in talking further about opportunity gaps at the Children's Cabinet, particularly in light of the Annie. E Casey Foundation's Race to Results Report
- Director Alexander-Scott appreciated the structure and focus of the operational plan

Strategic Initiative Update: 3rd Grade Reading Action Plan – Focus on Chronic Absenteeism

Background on Chronic Absenteeism - *Carol Blanchette, Chief, Teaching and Learning, RIDE and Kirtley Fisher, Performance Management Executive, RIDE*

- Background: Chronic absence is defined as missing 10% of school days, which is approximately 2 days per month. Chronic absence rate includes excused and unexcused absences (and therefore differs from the attendance rate)
- Key Data:
  - KIDSCOUNT 2018 Factbook shows that 16% of Kindergarteners are chronically absent
  - Hassenfeld Study: Preliminary data from the three-year cohort study shows that youth with the highest absence rates have the lowest achievement, and have higher rates of disciplinary issues and dropouts

- o SurveyWorks data shows that 55-60% of parents and teachers think that missing 2 days of school a month can impact high school graduation
- Factors that correlate with high absenteeism include housing instability and poverty
- If youth are not in the classroom, then they cannot benefit from the resources or move forward in their education
- The new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan tracks absenteeism rates for teachers and students – RI is the only state tracking teacher absenteeism
- Feedback from the Cabinet:
  - o Secretary Beane asks, given how strong the evidence is, how is it that only 20% of teachers consider early chronic absenteeism a major problem?
    - Carol and Kirtley – it adds up quickly, and may not be noticeable until later in the year. There is a communication gap about this issue.
  - o Director Hawkins noted that there are many reasons students are absent and that we need better data to understand these reasons. For example, we know that families living in poverty have high rates of asthma and that may be why they are staying home, or they are facing housing instability and are unable to get to school. Interventions need to be tailored to those root causes. We need to understand those issues and support families.
  - o Director Alexander-Scott agreed and noted that we need to invest in the solutions. She noted that she is excited to have the Olneyville Health Equity Zone partners at the meeting as one of the strategies to approach this problem. Issues are different by community and may need to find local solutions. The Walking School Bus is a great example of addressing issues in the Olneyville community and making it safer for youth to get to school.
  - o Director DiBiase asks about whether this issue is just in Providence, or throughout the state. Other Cabinet members note that there are high rates of absenteeism everywhere, but it is much higher in communities where there is a concentration of poverty. (Further information can be found at page 154 of the 2018 KIDSCOUNT Factbook)
- Questions from the audience:
  - o An elementary school principal from Woonsocket notes that absenteeism is her school's hardest challenge. She knows why youth are not coming to school; one of the big obstacles is transportation because if kids do not live within the bus driving radius, it is harder for them to come to school. If her school could have a bus she knows the rates would increase. She also notes that going to school has become optional for many kids and does not know why that happened. It is not about asking why they are not there, it is about why they should come to school.

<u>RIDE Chronic Absenteeism "Nudge" Tool</u> -- ***Derick Ariyam,*** *Senior Web Applications Developer, RIDE*

- Developed a tool that can help with chronic absenteeism – not the full solution, but a helpful tool for schools' toolkits. There has been some demonstrated success with similar projects around the country.
- The tool was developed in the Innovation League, a bold idea from the Governor's Office to allow employees from state agencies to spend 20% of their time pursuing projects they were passionate about that served their agency's mission.
- The tool is based on the behavioral science theory of a "nudge" – a light touch can have a huge impact. The tool includes:

- - Data summary and visualization for the principals: School dashboard that shows daily information about student absenteeism and is very user-friendly. Before the tool, it was difficult for principals to calculate the absenteeism rates on a daily basis.
    - Direct outreach to families regarding absenteeism: Nudges to families are direct text messages or letters to families, and show parents how students are doing in comparison to their peers.
    - Comparison to other schools: State leaderboard that shows where schools stand among their peers around the district and the state
- The principal can select which students to reach out to, and then the tool will send a text directly to the family.
- The tool can help determine if a student is on track to be chronically absent, helping to prevent chronic absenteeism before they have missed 10% or more school days.
- The next steps include expanding to the East Providence district, and then to other districts throughout the state.

School Level Implementation **- Lindsey Reilly,** *Principal at Hennessey Elementary School*

- This school year was her first year as principal at Hennessey Elementary, which is a turnaround school
- Chronic absenteeism has been a persistent problem for Hennessey but no concerted effort to address the issue had occurred in the past
- Over the summer, Lindsey pulled together a team of teachers to set targets for lowering absenteeism, look at the data, and establish decision rules about how to support students. During that time, she was introduced to the tool and decided to partner with RIDE to pilot the idea.
- Hennessey first used the tool to look at trends and to identify youth who were absent two days in the first month of school
- From there, the team would reach out to the family directly (Decision Rule 1) and ask how they could help
- The "nudge" tool – with the text message and backpack letter comparing students with their peers' attendance rates -- was Decision Rule 3 in the process
- The tool was very user friendly and required a total of 15 minutes a month to manage
- This year, Hennessey's numbers are going in the right direction, having moved from 17% to 8% chronically absent
- A big part of the success has been the schoolwide messaging about chronic absenteeism, so when families received outreach or a nudge on this topic, they were not surprised and were accustomed to the messaging about chronic absenteeism
- Overall, Lindsey believes that it was less important what the decision rules were and more that it was consistent. It takes a village to support families in reducing chronic absenteeism.

Summary **- Carol Blanchette**, *Chief, Teaching and Learning, RIDE and* **Kirtley Fisher**, *Performance Management Executive, RIDE*

- The tool is one strategy, but not the only one. However, it can be used universally to help inform schools and support them in taking action.
- Next steps include building a website for the tool with the toolkit and finding next schools to implement the tool
- Feedback from the Cabinet:

- o Secretary Beane – Thanks Lindsey, and notes that the average rate of chronic absenteeism in East Providence is 13%, and you went from 17% to 8%, that is a remarkable rate of improvement in such a short time. This is very exciting
- o Director DiBiase – Comments that this is terrific work. He asks Lindsey to talk more about the culture change aspect of the work.
    - ▪ Principal Reilly comments that it took the whole school to make it possible. The attendance team was across many different functions – teachers, administrators, support staff. It was a schoolwide effort. From experiences, we learned how phone calls and other outreach had helped in the past with increasing attendance. It was important to start early – perhaps at 2 absences – rather than later.
- o Director Boss asks whether this information could be included in the EOHHS data Ecosystem in the future, as it would be helpful information.
    - ▪ Secretary Beane notes that RIDE data is not currently in the Ecosystem but there is a path forward.
- o Lisa Vura-Weis notes that this is fantastic work, and that the Governor is very excited about the Innovation League. She would like to bring a copy of this to her to demonstrate one of the ways we are using technology and creativity to serve our communities. She notes that as the website is built it out, it would work well to include the lessons learned about the larger culture change work that helped Hennessey succeed.

Secretary Beane introduces the Health Equity Zone and thanks Dr. Alexander-Scott for her leadership in the HEZ initiative.

Walking School Bus – *Olneyville Health Equity Zone*

Allegra Scharff, *Community Manager, ONE Neighborhood Builders* Focus is on comprehensive community development

- ▪ Walking School Bus has been a great program with strong success
- ▪ Parents want their parents to be safe while they walk to school
- ▪ Many students within a mile of a school – those who do not have a bus – were not going to school because parents were worried about their safety and could not take them themselves
- ▪ WSB started in 2015 and provides a safe way to walk to school, and includes four residents who were hired part time to walk the students
- ▪ The WSB has other benefits, including increasing physical activity, walking about 1.5 miles a day

Brent Kerman, *Principal, D'Abate Elementary School*

- • Imagine walking to school where there is a lot of crime, trash, broken sidewalks, blood stains, barking dogs, and more. Young students have to make that trip to get to school -- and they would like to because they trust to school -- but it does not feel safe.
- • Example: Last year, a 3rd grader had been absent for 90 days. The student had decided to stay home with his mom to keep her safe while his dad was in prison. Two months ago, after the dad came home, the student came back to school and is student of the month.
- • D'Abate has the second highest daily attendance rate and the lowest chronic absenteeism rate in the district (and also has the second highest poverty rate in city)
- • Students are facing immense challenges – difficult home lives, adverse poverty, and more. When a student is not in school, the school calls and tries to connect families with the right resources

such as food, clothing, funds for heating, and more. Youth are in horrible situations in our community. That needs to be clear.

- WSB has been in effect for 3 years and has developed multiple routes to help students.
- Health Equity Zone has made WSB possibility, and the relationships matter. When Directors and the Mayor and others join the WSB, they can see the challenges of the route and helping to clear up the issues like broken sidewalks and overgrown bushes that force little kids into the street as they way. It takes everyone to get to a success and requires everyone to keep going.
- School is a place that is safe, that provides warm meals and is a loving environment. It also is a place that students and families can have pride in for absenteeism rates and achievement.
- Currently, D'Abate Elementary is approximately 16%, which is 10% the district average for chronic absenteeism. Goal is to have every student every day.

Public Comment and Discussion

- Stephanie from RI KIDSCOUNT: Appreciated the last presentation because chronic early absence can be a canary in the coal mine – it can be an early indicator of something going wrong. If we do not address the underlying reason for absence it may impact achievement and development in another way. We need to work collaboratively to address those challenges.
- David: One question on the attendance tool: are there plans to allow ECE centers to access the tool? According to KIDSCOUNT data, it shows that K-3 chronic absenteeism went up over the last few years.
  - o Kirtley Fisher: that is something we would love to look at.
- Bother Michael Reis: We need to discuss how fragile some of these families are – they are terribly fragile – and it is so easy for them to be misjudged and put down. When are we going to get to the heart and soul of this issue. The budget is horrendous this year for DCYF and will hurt children.
  - o Secretary Beane: We need to make sure DCYF has adequate funding. We have been closely monitoring caseloads at DCYF and have been seeing caseload increase. For everyone who has shown up to testify, thank you so much. We have another month or two to make sure Director Piccola has the resources she needs to support youth.
- Ailis Kline, RIDOH: We should find opportunities to loop in other professionals who could be part of the messaging about attendance; for example, healthcare providers could help and promote the message about the importance of education and chronic absenteeism.
- Steve Buka, Brown University, School of Public Health:
  - o Kudos to Derek and the others who creatively developed the Nudge app; the team may want to keep track of how many times a family has been 'nudged' because at some point a nudge may turn into an unwelcome 'nag'; and the Principals might want to keep track of that info;
  - o In behavioral science, "motivational interviewing" theory suggests that people often know the behaviors that they'd like to change, are ambivalent about them and sometimes bringing them to their attention can further their resistance to making the change and make a nudge feel like a nag.
  - o It would be worthwhile to consider how to integrate data across various systems in real-time from DCYF, Ecosystem, Nudge, KIDSNET, etc (addressing confidentiality concerns). This information could help the various people involved with the family (doctors, teachers, social workers, and others) be better able to meet the family's needs in a comprehensive, holistic manner.

- Allegra Scharff: The WSB may not be high tech, but it has been a convening point for the community and a catalyst.
- Director Alexander Scott appreciated Allegra's comment and celebrated the focus on the data in this discussion, and also on the action steps to show successful strategies that are supporting communities. This is particularly important as we focus on DCYF's pivot to prevention.