



MEMO

To: Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education At-Risk Work Group

From: Strong Schools Maryland

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Introduction

Black and brown children, students who live in poverty, students with disabilities, and English language learners face significant barriers to achieving academic success. The Kirwan Commission has acknowledged that Maryland must provide more resources for schools with concentrated poverty if it is to meet its charge to make recommendations that will result in a world-class education for all of Maryland's children. We applaud steps you have taken in defining those necessary resources. However, for too long Maryland's highest risk populations, those who live in concentrated poverty, black and brown children, students with disabilities, and English language learners have fallen significantly behind their peers across the state who have greater access to resources. Maryland is one of 6 states in the country that spend more on students who are not poor than on students who are. Maryland is one of the wealthiest states. We have the will-power through Kirwan and the means through our prosperity to make a difference. The At-Risk Work group must be bold in its mission to tackle the impact of institutional and structural racism, discrimination and concentrated poverty on the health, well-being, and academic success of Maryland's children.

There are three areas where we believe the work group has not adequately addressed the need.

I. Chronic Absenteeism – Strong Schools Maryland recommends that every school serving a student population characterized by the risk factors described above should have a full-time Attendance Coordinator.

The Attendance Coordinator will track data, identify students at risk of chronic absenteeism, examine the root causes for absences, and lead the School Attendance Team in working with the

students, their parents, teachers and other school staff in providing the necessary supports to eliminate chronic absenteeism.¹

Student chronic absenteeism is plaguing Maryland's schools. The United States Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights data show that 260,721 of Maryland's public school students missed 15 or more days of school in the 2015-16 school year². At 29% of the student population, nearly one out of 3 students is chronically absent-- the highest rate of chronically absent students in the country.

Chronic absence measures the percentage of days of school a student misses – for excused or unexcused reasons or due to out-of-school suspension. Eliminating chronic absenteeism is one of the most important barriers schools face in their effort to reduce the achievement gap, support grade level reading, improve school engagement and achievement, and raise high school graduation rates. Chronic absence is a proven early warning sign of academic failure, school disengagement, and other behavior leading to dropping out.

Common sense tells us that children won't learn their lessons if they are not in school. A study of Baltimore students showed that, by 6th grade, chronic absence begins to predict high school dropout.³ A similar study in Chicago found that by the ninth grade, severe chronic absence proved to be a stronger predictor of a student dropping out than eighth-grade test scores.⁴

It is also clear that chronic absence affects some children more than others. For example, researchers found that for students who live in poverty and lack the home and community resources to make up for lost school time, the impact of chronic kindergarten absence was not just felt in first grade but persisted throughout elementary school and resulted in lower 5th grade achievement.⁵

Over the last five years, researchers have begun to study the prevalence, pattern, and reasons for chronic absence. Factors include:

- Community and household barriers, such as unreliable, lengthy transportation to/from school, parent's long, inflexible work hours, unstable, unaffordable housing, unsafe communities, and child-care needs;

¹ For detailed descriptions of the Attendance Team and the tiered system of supports, see www.attendanceworks.org.

² The United States Office of Civil Rights defines chronic absence as 15 days missed for any reason rather than the more commonly recognized measure of chronic absence, missing 10% or more of a student's days on role.

³ Robert Balfanz, Lisa Herzog, Douglas J. MacIver, "[Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in Urban Middle-Grades Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions.](#)" *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 223–235: Copyright 2007, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

⁴ Allensworth, E. M., & Easton, J. Q., *What matters for staying on-track and graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A close look at course grades, failures, and attendance in the freshman year*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research: 2007.

⁵ Hedy N. Chang & Mariajose Romero, *Present, Engaged & Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*, National Center for Children in Poverty: September 2008

- Lack of rich, engaging learning experiences, extra-curricular activities and classes in the arts, physical education and music; and high quality afterschool programs;
- Non-nurturing and unsafe school climates, and the use of harsh, punitive and exclusionary school discipline practices that rely on suspensions and expulsions to maintain order; and,
- Lack of understanding about the importance of attending school regularly, especially for kindergarteners and early elementary students.

School attendance reflects the degree to which schools, communities, and families are able to adequately address the needs of students and to reduce the barriers that keep them out of school. In schools with high levels of low-income, special education, and struggling students, additional staff and resources are necessary. In particular, these schools need the “human power” to work together to identify and to understand the extent of the attendance problem among their students. A school with 30% or more of their students chronically absent needs a staff person who is dedicated to the work of leading a whole-school strategy for addressing barriers to attendance.

It is also important to note that the percentage of students not chronically absent will account for 15 points of a school’s overall school rating in Maryland’s new ESSA state standards.

II. School Climate – Strong Schools Maryland recommends that every school serving a student population characterized by the aforementioned risk factors have a full-time restorative practices trainer.

According to [Baltimore City Public Schools Restorative Practices Report](#):

Suspended students are more likely to fail courses and become chronically absent (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007). Increased disengagement and subsequent drop-out imposes significant social and economic costs (Rumberger & Losen, 2016). Receiving just one out-of-school suspension can potentially alter a student’s educational trajectory (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2013). Minority students often bear the brunt of this harm, as they are suspended at significantly higher rates than their white peers (Noltemeyer, Marie, Mcloughlin, & Vanderwood, 2015).

Restorative Practices reduce suspensions and chronic absenteeism. It blunts disengagement and dropping out. It reduces classroom, lunchroom, and hallway disorder. It alters school climate because it is a whole-school change strategy. It is not punitive. It is not market driven. Instead, the basic relationships between teacher/student, parent/teacher, principal/parent/teacher/student are changed. The school is managed through “restored” relationships. Perhaps the value of Restorative Practices is captured by the testimony of a principal of a high poverty middle school where Restorative Practices has been in operation for ten years,

“Restorative practices is our ‘secret sauce’ to maximize high quality teaching and learning. Great things happen when students, parents, and teachers feel welcome, respected, seen, and heard. A quality implementation of restorative practices makes that

possible. Over the last decade, RP has dramatically reduced our office referrals, detentions, and suspensions. More importantly, restorative practices has been essential to building and strengthening our community. Every student in the school participates in at least three community-building circles every week. I (the principal) model best practice by leading circles at every faculty meeting. We use the restorative conference protocol to solve problems both big and small. With 800 students, 100 staff, and nearly 2,000 family members connected to the school, restorative practices is essential to building the relationships we need to motivate and engage our students to achieve at the highest levels.”

A restorative practices trainer provides professional development, support, and ongoing coaching to all in the school community. To sustain practice over time and to shift the attitudes and sensibilities of the entire community on student behavior strategies require taking a whole-school approach and having a dedicated staff person to manage the process.

There is a recognition in Maryland that educators must change how we approach student misbehavior and student discipline. Most researchers have concluded that years of punitive discipline measures have produced harmful consequences for students. Restorative practices minimize punitive disciplinary measures.

Restorative practices model relies on creating healthy relationships that take a problem-solving approach to addressing student misbehavior. The Restorative Practices model also provides a preventive framework by deepening community through practices such as morning meeting and circles.

Fundamentally, restorative practices require participants to make a mindset shift from one that is punitive and blaming to one that is more reflective and inclusive, which separates the “deed from the doer.” Restorative practices involve a set of concepts and techniques that, when applied consistently, improve the climate of a school community, leading to improved student outcomes.

It is also important to note that school climate will account for 10 points of a school’s overall school rating in Maryland’s new ESSA state standards.

III. Tutoring

We are concerned that the resource estimate, specifically for tutoring, for students who have not met academic standards is insufficient. In determining adequate support, we urge you to use the following principles:

1. A specific standard of achievement should be used to determine the intensity of support a given student would receive. Proficiency or whatever is used by the state at a given moment as the standard of satisfactory performance should be the reference point. Currently proficiency on the PARCC is that standard. Key data include: about 60% of Maryland students fail to reach the proficient standard (over 500,000 students); about

90% of ELL students fail to reach the proficient standard; about 83% of low-income students fail to reach that standard. The further a student is from proficient, the greater the intensity of the tutoring intervention that is necessary. The dimensions of this challenge in terms of numbers is large.

2. Early detection and projection of intensity required cannot wait until after finding out a student's test scores in a given year. For example, if a teacher determines that a student is falling behind one week, the intervention is required no later than the following week, not the following summer.
3. The question of duration of special support keys off two competing considerations: the first is that one wants to move the student's performance as quickly as possible to at least the norm to enable the student to take full advantage of his classroom experience and enrichment opportunities. That said, it is also important that a student continues to receive appropriate support until a sustained appropriate performance level is achieved.
4. Recognizing that behavior and academic struggle are often intertwined, our call elsewhere in this document for a full-time Restorative Practices staff person is related to our RTI comments.
5. All tutoring should be delivered by a trained professional whose primary responsibility is to deliver evidence-based interventions and instruction.

Against these standards, one tutor for 250 students is wholly inadequate. We are unable to imagine a model that matches the principles above with a 1:250 student/tutor ratio when we currently have 500,000 students requiring support, many of them for several days a week.

Depending on the intensity of need, we believe the work group should consider a model in which students considered to be among the students furthest behind (an analysis of PARCC data provides the basis for projections) should receive 1-on-1 tutoring; those in a middle group could benefit from a ratio of 1:3 or 1:4 while the group nearest proficiency could likely achieve the necessary support at a ratio of 1:8 or even 1:10. It is, of course, quite reasonable to expect that student will be regularly re-assessed (largely by the tutors, not by testing) with adjustments made in the intensity of the supports they receive.

We share the work group's view that tutoring should be transitional. Six years, however, is not adequate when we are also introducing much higher standards of performance. Under the very best circumstances, the benefits of the Kirwan recommendations will not begin to be enjoyed, at the very earliest, by anyone until the fall of 2019. To illustrate the point, that means that the proportion of students entering that fall who have missed Family Network Support, Judy Center support and prekindergarten will be basically the same as those who entered last fall and this September. The biggest drop in need for tutoring support in the first grade will occur when the first cohort of students receiving supports at ages 0-2 hit the first grade. That's a minimum of six years in itself, but support will be needed for a number of years following, though diminishing each ensuing year. It would involve the majority of students until about year 12 of implementation and will be students not having had the benefit of the early years anticipated by the Commission. Many will be the students captured by the proverbial, "once behind, they will

never catch up.” Thus, while entirely appropriate to project a decline in need year by year, it will remain substantial for at least those first 10-12 years.