



Equity and Inclusion

By Director of Equity and Inclusion Dr. Tamara Uselman et al.

Attendance is an Equity Issue ... Really?

A pithy saying reads, “The world is run by people who show up.” If that is true, while some Fargo Public Schools students are preparing to run the world, some are not. Every young person deserves a bright future, and given the glut of retiring Baby Boomers, the world needs every young person to learn to show up! At Fargo Public Schools, our problem to solve is this: nearly 46% of our students missed too much school last year. Nearly one of every four were chronically absent. Yes, COVID played a role, and yet, it is unwise to assume attendance patterns will return to normal without acting to interrupt the patterns of absence.

Student absence harms everyone, particularly students. While students not in school may be learning something, somewhere, chances are, they are not learning foundational skills they need to advance to the next level – from Kinder to grade one, from ninth to grade 10. Students who miss two days the first month of school are on track to be chronically absent.

Student absences create stress for teachers who must back up to help absent students catch up, while also moving forward through the curriculum for students who attend.

Student absences strain office staff, particularly undocumented absences which absorb a tremendous amount time of office personnel and administrators who strive to connect with parents to ensure students are safe and accounted for.

Absences cost the taxpayers. Students not in school are less likely to achieve the curriculum, less likely to graduate, and students not in school are more than 2.5 times more likely to become enmeshed in the juvenile justice system. On average, a high school graduate out-earns a high school drop out by a million dollars over a working life. That’s the value of showing up: one million dollars and counting. Graduates are more likely to pay into social safety nets rather than draw from them. Income tax is paid on that million. Neighborhoods are kept up. People with room in their budget have time to invest in their communities.

So why don’t students simply show up and solve *their* attendance problem? Framing the question that way puts the blame squarely - and unfairly- on the student alone. We all have a role to play to help students, help ourselves, and help our society. When everyone attends, everyone wins. Attend to Win!



Equity and Inclusion, continued

There are two actions we can each take that will feed a “Start Strong” Fall 2022 attendance message: 1) avoid the blame game and 2) double down on creating a sense of belongingness for each child.

What’s the Blame Game? If you had the privilege of being raised by parents who experienced the life-changing power of education, your mental model may be that everyone knows education can be transformative, but some are too willfully lazy to act on it. Yet not every parent had your experience with education. Parents can’t give what they don’t possess. Avoid the Blame Game and focus instead on building an even greater sense of belongingness for all students.

Belongingness, huh? Now you have to do that AND teach reading, math, physical education, music, and more? Think of it this way: belongingness is the on-bridge to learning. So, what does a person do to build belongingness? Creating an even deeper sense of belongingness is not brain surgery; it’s just brain science.

Matthew Lieberman, a social researcher, restructured Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs by placing social belongingness ahead of food, shelter, and warmth. He found the brain lights up when human beings hear they matter, they are wanted, and they are needed. Regardless of age or ability, we humans crave to belong. Mauro Banze reports babies as young as two days old seek connections to survive. This desire never leaves us; it is our built-in default network.

In terms of how to enhance belongingness, Banze advises: “Think about your service or product” [aka, your lesson design]. “How can you make your users feel part of a community? How can you design your product [i.e., lesson] so it evokes feelings of social acceptance?”

Those of us who attended school regularly may feel students can be consequenced or punished into better attendance. However, human biology suggests the exact opposite is true. Tana Kincaid, a tech director in a former district where I worked posted this message, which I feel compelled to share with you: “Hurt people hurt people. That’s how pain patterns get passed on, generation after generation. Break the chain today. Meet anger with sympathy, contempt with compassion, cruelty with kindness. Greet grimaces with smiles. Forgive and forget about finding fault. Love is the weapon of the future.”

To operationalize Kincaid’s post, try the “Personal Greeting at the Door” (PGD) where you recognize each student by face and name along with eye contact, a fist bump, a high five, or a handshake. The PGD has shown to increase academic engagement by an hour per day without adding a single minute to the day. Further the PGD reduces behavior issues by 9.7% (Williams, 2022). See if your social research produces the same (or better) results.



Equity and Inclusion, continued

Feel free to post a “Start Strong” message, using any facts from this article. Thanks to Arati Heath, we can share the “Attend to Win” messages in a multitude of languages:

- जिन्नको लागि उपस्थित हुनुहोस् (Nepali)
- Presente para Ganar (Spanish)
- Ka qayb gal si aad u guulaysato (Somali)
- احضر حتى تفوز (Arabic)
- HUDHURIA KUSHINDA (Swahili)
- Prisustvuj da pobedis (Bosnian)
- Có mặt để thắng Tham dự ở Win (Vietnamese)

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