

What Motivates Students to Turn Around Attendance?

A Report based on Interviews with 10 Students at a NYC Transfer School

For students at transfer schools, students who arrive with a record of truancy in the past, attendance often remains a constant challenge. Students who show up to school regularly are far more likely to engage, to learn, and to succeed. Those who don't are more likely to return to their old habits and never earn a high school diploma. While the challenge of improving attendance applies to all, in some cases interesting lessons may lurk in the success of individuals. Those few students who show dramatic turnarounds—not the ones who have stayed strong, nor the ones who have dropped off, but the ones who had low attendance at the transfer school then brought it back to levels that signify true engagement—would seem to represent exactly what the school wants to achieve with all its students. What happened to these students, and how can we learn from it? In interviews with students, we found seven notable experiences that stood out as often motivating re-engagement. Attendance began to turn around when:

1. Counselors helped students realize they would never graduate unless they changed.
2. Counselors helped students see specific patterns and convinced them that they could change.
3. A visit home was effective, but only if a positive parental relationship already existed.
4. Future-oriented tasks and experiences helped make college and career feel real.
5. Teachers broke learning down to build students' confidence.
6. Teachers challenged students' thinking in class.
7. Extracurricular activities and other structures helped students feel a part of new peer groups.

To learn about the school factors that can help students improve their attendance, Eskolta School Developer Jessica Coffrin-St. Julien interviewed ten students in individual interviews held on-site at the school in December, 2011. For all of these students, attendance had improved dramatically this year. To identify this group, we had compared individual students' attendance in the last two months of the 2010-11 school year to their attendance in the first two months of this academic year. After isolating a pool of students whose attendance had increased significantly (over 20 percentage points), school leaders selected a subset of these students to interview. While there was, of course, no silver bullet discovered through these interviews, the seven notable items highlighted above came up in different ways in several conversations and are discussed in further detail below.

1. Attendance turned around when counselors helped students realize that they would never graduate unless they changed. Several students described interventions (home visits, phone calls, letters, Facebook messages, etc.) in which their counselors made the consequences of poor attendance clear. According to the students interviewed, many of these experiences helped them become aware of the need to change their attendance patterns. One student said that her counselor and a school secretary had supported her in improving attendance through calling her and sending letters home. The significance of these calls and letters was driven home when the student was told she could be expelled for her poor attendance. She said that she then realized she wanted her diploma, and that she would have to start taking school more seriously to get it.

In the same vein, another student noted that her counselor sends her messages asking if she wants to graduate, a reminder of the implications of not coming to school. Similarly, another student's

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counselor reminds her, “If you don’t come, you’re not going to graduate on time.” For both students, these messages helped reinforce the importance of consistent attendance. Finally, a student described how, in August, when he was thinking of dropping out, his counselor reminded him that he only needed two Regents to graduate and told him not to give up. Taken as a whole, these comments suggest that when contact from school staff highlighted that students would not graduate unless they changed their behavior, students became more aware of the importance of coming to school regularly.

2. Attendance turned around when counselors helped students see specific patterns and convinced them that they could change. Several students described getting feedback on their grades, whether in the form of progress reports or comments from staff, as moments where they were forced to acknowledge the impact of poor attendance on their academic performance. One student noted that his counselor pointed out that he tends to start each cycle strong and then “start slacking.” He said that this insight helped him realize he needed to “step it up.” Another student described sitting down with Shirley to review his grades at the end of the previous school year as a turning point; he recalled feeling badly about how low his grades were, and said that his counselor “told him what he needed to do” to improve. Two other students, similarly, said that seeing their progress reports made them re-think their approach to school. These comments suggest that regularly providing feedback on academic progress to students is a helpful practice at the school: several students framed seeing their grades as a “moment of truth” where they realized the negative effects of their attendance on their grades.

In the same vein, several students identified breaking with an old peer group as a crucial factor in their improved attendance. One student described how, last year, he would come to school but then leave with friends. He said that support from teachers and counselors made him realize he needed to “put himself first,” especially as he got closer to aging out of the system. Interestingly, he noted that, now, the only part of the day he does not look forward to is lunch: because he wants to stay focused, he “tries to sit by himself,” suggesting that his improved attendance has required a conscious decision to isolate himself socially. Similarly, another student said that, the previous year, she had been caught up with “people who weren’t really her friends.” She said she now “tries not to socialize” when she is at school.

3. Attendance turned around when a visit home pulled the parent into the conversation, but only if a positive parental relationship already existed. Especially when students reported strong relationships with their parents, parental outreach seemed particularly helpful in prompting students to change their attendance patterns. One student described his counselor’s repeated phone calls to his mother as “triggering it in my brain that I needed to come to school more.” She said that a home visit from her counselor “made her feel bad” because she did not want to disappoint her counselor, ultimately encouraging her to improve her attendance.

However, one student described parental outreach as unhelpful: She called the experience “humiliating” and said that she had felt that her mother, who was then going through a divorce and financial problems, was unduly stressed by hearing that she was doing poorly in school. (Notably, her brother spoke positively of his counselor’s calls to his mother. However, when the counselor had threatened him with a home visit if he did not come to school the next day, he came to school, suggesting that the prospect of such a visit was enough to change his short-term attendance patterns.)

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Another student rather jokingly recalled a home visit from his counselor, noting that, even after the visit, his attendance had remained fairly low. These comments indicate that, for some students, particularly those experiencing stress at home, a visit might alienate rather than re-engage them.

4. Attendance turned around when future-oriented tasks and experiences helped make college and career feel real. Some seniors nearing graduation spoke appreciatively about their senior advisory course, framing it as a source of valuable information that enhanced their sense of self-efficacy. One student described CUNY Advisory as extremely helpful in encouraging her to plan for a clear, tangible future. She highlighted completing the CUNY application, as well as writing an essay about college, as especially engaging class activities. The essay, in particular, seemed to be a turning point: “That’s when I really sat down and started thinking about college,” she said. Similarly, another student described how a visit from the Navy helped him realize that financial aid opportunities were available for him to go to school, which shifted his focus from “going straight to working” to finding “funding for college” so he can study to be an engineer. One student described Senior Advisory as “very helpful,” speaking with ease about the difference between community colleges and four-year colleges as she described her post-graduation plans.

Similarly, a student enthusiastically described attending a trip to Herkimer College in upstate New York the previous year. She said she had liked learning about the school’s course offerings, especially in the area of criminal justice. Interestingly, she noted that the trip was targeted to seniors (she was not a senior at the time), and that she had been allowed to attend because some seniors did not want to go. In the same vein, another student, who had not yet started her CUNY Advisory course, spoke at length about her goals of becoming a physical therapist and then said, rather bemusedly, that she still “doesn’t understand anything about college.” This suggests that beginning college outreach prior to senior year might help begin to focus some students’ thinking about school and encourage them to improve their high school performance. In sum, the students’ insights suggest that creating opportunities to set goals and plan for the future gives some students a sense of purpose and ultimately encourages improved attendance.

5. Teachers who break learning down build students’ confidence to turn around attendance. One student praised his teachers, saying that “if you don’t understand something, they’ll sit with you before moving along.” Several students identified three specific teachers as ones who particularly excel at doing this. One student, for example, praised the ability of these teachers to tailor work to individual students, noting that they create ample opportunities to complete make-up work. In addition, several students highlighted the ability of these teachers to provide help with schoolwork and explain work step-by-step. Taken as a whole, these comments suggest that teachers who scaffolded their material well helped students build a sense of self-efficacy and experience classroom success.

Several students described how support from teachers encouraged their turnaround. “When I first came here,” one student said, “I didn’t know the teachers and staff. Now, they know me and they’re pushing me.” The same student said that, with this teacher support, “it’s easier to stay and do work because I know I have people behind me.” Similarly, one student described how building relationships with teachers helped build her confidence: last year, she was “scared to raise her hand,” while, this year, she knows she can ask teachers for help if she needs it. All of these comments indicate

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the importance of positive relationships with teachers in promoting a sense of belonging and support at the transfer school.

6. Teachers who students felt challenged their thinking helped turn around attendance.

Students described how engaging, rigorous instruction built their excitement about school. While several teachers were mentioned, five received particular recognition as teachers who excel in this area. Students' comments suggest that the quality of instruction in these teachers' courses helped students engage with the material and feel excited about being at school. Some comments also acknowledged the importance of rigor: one teacher, in particular, was praised for teaching "challenging courses."

In contrast, several students described their attitudes towards classes the previous year as negative, saying that they had not liked their classes and that school was "too long." Interestingly, two students noted that she had always thought the teachers were nice; they had just found school boring. These sentiments suggest that, once their improved attendance allowed them to engage more fully in their classes, they were better able to appreciate their classroom experiences. They also illustrate the importance of high-quality instruction in encouraging students to come to school and do well.

Notably, some students described their current course load in a negative light. One student said adamantly, "I don't like school, and I never will." Another reported that he "honestly" hated his classes during Cycle 1. Other students described feeling bored or unchallenged: One said that, other than her college prep courses (discussed below), she felt that she was not learning anything new. Similarly, another student described feeling bored in her classes, claiming that she was already familiar with much of the material. However, all of these students were able to improve in spite of these sentiments.

7. Attendance improved when extracurricular activities and other structures helped students feel a part of new peer groups.

Several students described how involvement in extracurricular activities encouraged them to keep their grades up and, as a corollary, to come to school regularly. Two students described how much they enjoy being on the school's cheerleading team; one noted that she can't fail any courses if she wants to be on the team. Similarly, one student described how important the basketball team was to him. Another spoke fondly of his involvement in the school's Chess Club, which two teachers had encouraged him to join, suggesting that teacher relationships can be a key bridge to extracurricular involvement.

In addition, a few students mentioned peers they had met through extracurricular activities as supporting them in improving their attendance. One student highlighted how a new group of friends at the school influenced her attendance patterns. Another student similarly described seeing her friends as one of the main things she looks forward to each day at the school, noting that her best friends even gives her a wake-up call for school every day.