The Problem with Attendance: Using Continuous Improvement to Tackle Root Causes of Chronic Absenteeism

Ali Holstein
Youth Program Consultant

Rachel Forsyth
Senior Division Director, Good Shepherd Services

April 25, 2019
Warm-Up

With a neighbor:

• Brainstorm 2-3 interventions for chronic absenteeism and write on post-its.
• Stick post-its on the wall.
Mission

Good Shepherd Services goes where children, youth, and families face the greatest challenges and builds on their strengths to help them gain skills for success. We provide quality, effective services that deepen connections between family members, within schools, and among neighbors. We work closely with community leaders to advocate, both locally and nationally, on behalf of our participants to make New York City a better place to live and work.

Good Shepherd Services leads in the development of innovative programs that make a difference in the lives of children, youth and families today.
Good Shepherd Services programs promote well-being, learning, growth, and change

**Family Support, Counseling & Foster Care**
- 6,559 participants served through 11 programs

**Supportive Housing**
- 143 participants served through 2 programs

**Educational Support**
- 8,928 participants served through 31 programs

**Afterschool & Community Programs**
- 14,322 participants served through 38 programs

**Youth Justice Services**
- 628 participants served through 10 programs

FY2018
We start with an understanding that the academic gap IS the social-emotional gap and that change is slow. In order to have impact with our students it is necessary to be patient and build trust.

Core Structures of our GSS School Model

Youth and Family Development and Trauma-Informed Approach

Primary Person

Shared Leadership

Small, Safe Environment

Targeted Population
Core Program Services

- Counseling
- Group Work
- Community Building
- Family engagement
- Future Focus
Multiple Pathways Models

Transfer High Schools

- Small, academically rigorous, full-time high schools designed to re-engage students who are behind in high school or have dropped out.
- Students are between the ages of 15 to 21 and have completed at least one year of high school.

Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCS)

- Evening academic programs designed to meet the needs of students who might be considering dropping out because they are behind or because they have adult responsibilities that make attending school in the daytime difficult.
- Students between the ages of 17.5 and 21, who are in their fifth year of high school and have earned at least 17 credits.
- Students attend part time and in the evening.
Attendance Problem

![Chart showing average daily attendance and graduation rates.]

- **80%+**: 90% Graduate, 10% Negative Discharge
- **<80%**: 40% Graduate, 60% Negative Discharge
Improvement Problem

A. DEFINE Program Planning
B. MEASURE Data Collection & Management
C. LEARN Analysis & Reporting
D. IMPROVE Using Findings and Insights

How?
Example of Variability

Program Graduation Rate 16-17
# Different Types of Measurement for Different Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASPECT</th>
<th>IMPROVEMENT</th>
<th>ACCOUNTABILITY</th>
<th>RESEARCH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Why?</strong></td>
<td>Develop and evaluate changes in practice</td>
<td>Identify exemplary or problematic performers (teachers, schools, districts)</td>
<td>Develop and test theories about the relationships between conceptual variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What?</strong></td>
<td>Outcomes and processes that are the object of change</td>
<td>End of the line outcomes</td>
<td>Latent variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How often?</strong></td>
<td>Frequently as practice occurs</td>
<td>Usually collected once a year (after the fact)</td>
<td>Typically once or twice per study (after the fact)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Testing your theory</strong></td>
<td>Sequential tests</td>
<td>No theory to test</td>
<td>One large test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sample size</strong></td>
<td>“Just enough” data, small sequential samples</td>
<td>Obtain 100% of available, relevant data</td>
<td>“Just in case” data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Conditions of Use?</strong></td>
<td>Data shared in a low-stakes, safe environment conducive to change.</td>
<td>Publically available. Formal collection process to assure appearances of neutrality and objectivity.</td>
<td>Meets scientific standards that are held in the field.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Continuous Improvement
“A focused learning journey”

DEFINITION: Particular acts of inquiry, or projects, that aim for quality improvement that involve multiple iterative cycles of activity over extended periods of time.

3 Core Improvement Questions:
• What is the specific problem I am trying to solve?
• What change might I introduce and why?
• How will I know whether the change is actually an improvement?

Definition adapted from Learning to Improve by Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, LeMahieu
GSS Improves Fellowship (IF) Theory of Change

Bring together a network of program experts

Equip them with research-backed tools and methods for continuous improvement

Develop the will and skill to test new solutions

Make a difference on the identified problem (Severe Chronic Absenteeism)

Document and spread effective practices

Adapt successful continuous improvement strategies to more problems

Cultivate a culture and practice of improvement across the agency

Participants receive high-quality supports

Participants receive high-quality supports
Introduction to Continuous Improvement [August]
Fellowship Overview
Understand Problem and System

Student Input
Coaching

Review Student Input
Explore Research & Solutions

Coaching; Finalize Plans

Network Progress Meeting [November]
Plan for Measurement

Reflection

Progress share-out; Iteration brainstorm [December]
Reflection
Planning for share out

Coaching and Documentation
GSS Share Out [April 2019]
Hear From GSS IF Fellows

Research and Service High School:
David Gray, Program Director
Sequoia Worrell, Advocate Counselor

Click here to view
**ACT**
- Next steps: Adapt, adopt, abandon

**PLAN**
- What's your change?
- What's your prediction?
- Plan to conduct test

**STUDY**
- Compare results to prediction
- What did you learn?

**DO**
- Execute test
- Collect data, document observations
GSS Improves Fellowship Severe Chronic Absenteeism Fishbone

**Mental Health**
- Depressed
- Bipolar
- Anxiety

**Medical Issues**
- Stress and health
- Addiction / substance abuse

**Trauma**
- Loss of a parent/family member
- Suicide

**Incarceration & Court**

**Commuter**
- Used up fare
- Distance from school (foster care)
- Safety concerns

**Unstable Housing**
- (Homeless; runaway)

**Language Barrier**

**Violence**
- (Gang, teen dating, domestic)

**Hunger**

**Peer Influence / Pressure**
- Friends aren’t going to school
- Unhealthy friendships lead to unhealthy choices

**Lack of Support**
- Caregivers with chronic illness/addiction
- Lack of home support and positive role model
- Living independently

**Academic frustration**
- Does not understand classwork, feels too far behind
- Struggling with passing Regents
- Lack of teaching

**Cultural Expectations**
- (e.g. marriage, work)

**Lack of Support**
- (fixed mindset)

**Mindset**
- Motivation
- Seeking immediate reward, money
- Doesn’t see future; no pathway/plan
- Lacks confidence they can finish
- Feels stupid – school’s not for me

**Lack Engagement**
- Lacks interest (e.g. End of a sports season)

**Lack of Sleep**

**Adult Responsibilities**
- Student is head of household
- Pregnancy
- Work & financial responsibilities
- Caregiver in family
- Parenting: Childcare issues

**Employment**
- Work schedule

**Incarceration & Court**

**Too many of our students are severely chronically absent (<80%)**

**Lack of Safety/Belonging in School**
- Disrespect by staff, school safety; unhealthy relationships with staff
- Lack connection in the building
- Lack of trust in school/program
- School not inclusive (e.g. LGBTQ)
- Oppressive classroom environment / racist ed system
- History of bad interactions with schools
- Problems with other students
- Feels too old for HS

**Unstable Housing**
- (Homeless; runaway)

**Violence**
- (Gang, teen dating, domestic)

**Hunger**

**Peer Influence / Pressure**
- Friends aren’t going to school
- Unhealthy friendships lead to unhealthy choices

**Lack of Support**
- Caregivers with chronic illness/addiction
- Lack of home support and positive role model
- Living independently

**Academic frustration**
- Does not understand classwork, feels too far behind
- Struggling with passing Regents
- Lack of teaching

**Cultural Expectations**
- (e.g. marriage, work)

**Lack of Support**
- (fixed mindset)

**Mindset**
- Motivation
- Seeking immediate reward, money
- Doesn’t see future; no pathway/plan
- Lacks confidence they can finish
- Feels stupid – school’s not for me

**Lack of Sleep**

**Adult Responsibilities**
- Student is head of household
- Pregnancy
- Work & financial responsibilities
- Caregiver in family
- Parenting: Childcare issues

**Employment**
- Work schedule

**Incarceration & Court**

**Too many of our students are severely chronically absent (<80%)**

**Lack of Safety/Belonging in School**
- Disrespect by staff, school safety; unhealthy relationships with staff
- Lack connection in the building
- Lack of trust in school/program
- School not inclusive (e.g. LGBTQ)
- Oppressive classroom environment / racist ed system
- History of bad interactions with schools
- Problems with other students
- Feels too old for HS

**Unstable Housing**
- (Homeless; runaway)

**Violence**
- (Gang, teen dating, domestic)

**Hunger**

**Peer Influence / Pressure**
- Friends aren’t going to school
- Unhealthy friendships lead to unhealthy choices

**Lack of Support**
- Caregivers with chronic illness/addiction
- Lack of home support and positive role model
- Living independently

**Academic frustration**
- Does not understand classwork, feels too far behind
- Struggling with passing Regents
- Lack of teaching

**Cultural Expectations**
- (e.g. marriage, work)

**Lack of Support**
- (fixed mindset)

**Mindset**
- Motivation
- Seeking immediate reward, money
- Doesn’t see future; no pathway/plan
- Lacks confidence they can finish
- Feels stupid – school’s not for me

**Lack of Sleep**

**Adult Responsibilities**
- Student is head of household
- Pregnancy
- Work & financial responsibilities
- Caregiver in family
- Parenting: Childcare issues

**Employment**
- Work schedule

**Incarceration & Court**

**Too many of our students are severely chronically absent (<80%)**

**Lack of Safety/Belonging in School**
- Disrespect by staff, school safety; unhealthy relationships with staff
- Lack connection in the building
- Lack of trust in school/program
- School not inclusive (e.g. LGBTQ)
- Oppressive classroom environment / racist ed system
- History of bad interactions with schools
- Problems with other students
- Feels too old for HS

**Unstable Housing**
- (Homeless; runaway)

**Violence**
- (Gang, teen dating, domestic)

**Hunger**

**Peer Influence / Pressure**
- Friends aren’t going to school
- Unhealthy friendships lead to unhealthy choices

**Lack of Support**
- Caregivers with chronic illness/addiction
- Lack of home support and positive role model
- Living independently

**Academic frustration**
- Does not understand classwork, feels too far behind
- Struggling with passing Regents
- Lack of teaching

**Cultural Expectations**
- (e.g. marriage, work)

**Lack of Support**
- (fixed mindset)

**Mindset**
- Motivation
- Seeking immediate reward, money
- Doesn’t see future; no pathway/plan
- Lacks confidence they can finish
- Feels stupid – school’s not for me
## Our Theory of Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If we... [CHANGE IDEA]</th>
<th>...we will address ... [ROOT CAUSE]</th>
<th>...and then students will... [PRIMARY DRIVER]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South Brooklyn</td>
<td>...engage students in an 8-week fashion and technology program, supported by counselor and teacher</td>
<td>...lack of connections in the building and negative peer pressure and unhealthy friendships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>...offer peer groups with ACs who focus on peer support, self-love, and self-care</td>
<td>...social anxiety and strengthen coping strategies for mental health issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research &amp; Service</td>
<td>...map students’ paths to graduation, and have caring adult check in regularly on progress</td>
<td>...academic fatigue and fixed mindset</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...leading to attendance of 80% or greater
Takeaways

Reflections on fellowship:
- Pick a good problem. And understand it from a young person’s perspective.
- Make space and time for improvement.
- Be explicit and intentional about building skills.
- Take a leap and get started.
- Celebrate and learn from failure.
- Focus data conversations on practices, not just programs.
- Testing small changes doesn’t mean small impact.

Reflections on chronic absenteeism:
- Attendance is not the problem. Young people are not the problem.
- Helping students build connections to multiple people and fostering belonging are key strategies.
Questions?
Brainwrite Exercise
Stay Connected

• Presentation materials will be posted online at http://www.readyby21.org/nmagenda
• Tweet about your session! #rb21
• Find resources and tools at the new forumfyi.org!
• E-mail Ali (aliholstein@gmail.com) or Rachel (Rachel_Forsyth@goodshepherds.org)

Learn More About Continuous Improvement

• Good Shepherd Services Improves Fellowship Google Site: https://sites.google.com/view/gss-improves-fellowship/home
• Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better by Bryk, Gomez, et al.
• The Improvement Guide: A Practical Approach to Enhancing Organizational Performance by Langley et al.
• Free EdX Courses in Continuous Improvement, led by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

#rb21