Changing the Odds Thought Leader Interview: Chronic Absenteeism – Indicator and Cause of Educational Inequity
March 4, 2021

Katherine Plog-Martinez ([00:03](#)):

I am thrilled to welcome all of you to our March Readiness Projects, Changing the Odds Thought Leader interview. Today, Karen is joined by Hedy Chang and David Osher to engage in a dialogue and unscripted conversation focused on the power of attendance data. We're really pleased to have Hedy Chang, the president and executive director of Attendance Works with us. Hedy has more than two decades of experience in the fields of family support, family engagement, education and child development. We're also joined by David Osher who is the vice president and institute fellow at the American Institutes for Research. So many things I could have said in David's bio, but what I'm choosing to highlight is David is the author or co-author of more than 300 books. You can see the collection of books behind him. So with that introduction, I am going to hand it off to Karen, to begin our dialogue for today.

Karen Pittman ([01:02](#)):

Thank you, Catherine. I am so excited. We started this conversation in December, in one of our Make the Invisible Visible series, the last of the five. And we didn't have nearly enough time. So we're really glad that Hedy and David has decided to come back so we can have almost a full hour to dig into this really important topic. I don't think I need to tell any of you that before COVID hit us, one in six students was already chronically absent. And as the data has been reporting out this year, we know that we're going to see dramatic increases in absence, especially for populations who were hardest hit by COVID.

Karen Pittman ([01:38](#)):

So reconnecting with students and reengaging them in learning is a top priority for communities across the country. This is really clear. But what we want to dig into, is that the pandemic really prompted us to ask, perhaps a long overdue questions. Like what does it mean to attend? And what does it mean to be absent? And what does it mean to be chronically absent? And how does the way we think about these ideas influence our strategies for both measuring and addressing the issue? So these are the questions that really, Hedy had, and David had before the pandemic hit.

Karen Pittman ([02:14](#)):

And they were really working hard on broadening our understanding of what we really can do with this very basic data and asking, are you people showing up? Which is not just are they showing up, but are they really showing up ready to learn, because of how we've created the conditions? So I'm excited for us to jump into this. Let's first just sort of dig in first, to understand what we mean about how we utilize attendance data and the responsibility for attendance data. Hedy has multiple times talked to us about the fact that it's not just a cause of educational inequity, it's actually a leading indicator of educational inequity. So we're going to have her jump in and tell us about that.

Karen Pittman ([02:52](#)):

After we sort of get some conversation going about what it is that we're looking at, and we could be measuring and how we can be using it to support improvement strategies, we're going to then shift to one of our favorite topics. Almost seasonal, which is, how can we take some of the lessons that we learned during a pandemic, about factors that influence attendance, as well as about how we really think about attendance? How do we bring that into summer, and think about how to support what a lot of people are seeing as a critical time for young people to be transitioning back to school. But it's also a time in which attendance isn't mandatory. So

what does attendance mean? If it's really the on-ramp to learning and engagement at a time that we need to step it up, but we can't for most young people require it.

Karen Pittman (03:39):

So hopefully, we'll get through all of that. Definitely start to put your questions in the chat. Katherine will track those and we'll all try to track those. But let me just start by going to Hedy. And Hedy, thanks again for joining us. And let's just start with, this is such a basic issue. And you have been at this for so long. But what prompted you to get started on this important work of getting us to understand attendance, and how to use attendance data?

Hedy Chang (04:06):

Thank you so much. Karen is truly a pleasure to be here. And so appreciate you using your convening power to allow us to have these kinds of conversations. I actually think going back to what happened early on is helpful for, eventually as we get to it, thinking about what happens in the pandemic. Because the truth is that I started this without having any idea that this was a really critical and important issue. Raul Smith at the Annie Casey Foundation came to me and said, "Hedy, I think that kids missing too much school in kindergarten and first might be a reason they're not reading at the end of third grade. Tell me what you can find about the prevalence of this, about what are solutions that work? And what do we know about the impact of this?" And that started a whole set of work that I had no idea would become my life's work.

Hedy Chang (04:58):

But what I learned at that time... So what's not rocket science is, we were able to partner with Columbia to prove what we already suspected. Yes, indeed, if you miss a lot of kindergarten and first, you start not reading proficiently at third. And in fact, for low income kids who don't have the resources to make up for the time lost on task in the classroom, it in fact predicts even poor fifth grade outcomes. And you can now start to see a whole set of things. Kindergarten and first grade absence can even predict suspensions in the middle grades. Being held back, there's a whole host of research. What was surprising was to realize, at that time, this is what, 2006? That actually, no one was tracking this data. Missing school for any reason was not something we monitored.

Hedy Chang (05:52):

We looked at average daily attendance, and we looked at unexcused absences. And because we didn't look at kids missing too much school for any reason, we were missing out on huge numbers of kindergartners, first graders, our little ones, because the unexcused absences tend to capture on our older kids. And the other problem is it meant we would intervene too late. Because kids would already not be engaged in school. And we were noticing too late afterwards, at which time, you need to much have much more extensive remediation. What I would also say is that part of what shifted over time, was that we've put in electronic data systems. When I started this, it was paper and pencil. Electronic data systems all of a sudden started allowing us to create and look at this data much more easily. It's why it's gone to scale.

Hedy Chang (06:46):

But I also want to talk about the fact that we created Attendance Works. Because what I realized in the first year of looking at this, I remember, and actually this district will come up again, I was looking at the data for Cleveland. And what I saw was they had 40% of their kindergartners who were chronically absent. And I looked in their state data report card, and it said 90% average daily attendance. And I'm like, can those two things really exist together? 90% sounds okay, and they can exist together. Because the average daily attendance masks large numbers of kids. And I realized no one was looking at it in the country. And if we couldn't start to address this issue, we were giving up on a generation. We were giving up on our commitment to ensure an equal opportunity for every child to learn.

Hedy Chang (07:41):

Because it was a whole group of kids, particularly in low income communities, kids that have been disproportionately affected by racism, bias, by our lack of investment. And they weren't even getting the chance

to be able to be there and learn. I will also say that as I started doing this work, because I'm going to come back to Cleveland, and I'm going to bring up why I started partnering with David, is I started realizing that when you have that many kids chronically absent, it's really an indicator of systemic issues. Now, some of those systemic issues are barriers in the community. Lack of transportation, lack of access to health care, unstable housing, all of those things.

Hedy Chang ([08:26](#)):

But there are also barriers that are connected to what's happening in school. I remember when I finally had a chance to really connect with David, I can't remember how many years ago. And it was because I said to David, "I'm starting to do work in Cleveland and I think they're starting to have an impact on attendance. And we talk about their attendance initiatives. But what we haven't been taking into account, is that before we started doing this work on attendance, I think you were and the district was paying attention to school climate." They were changing the conditions for learning. And if you want to motivate kids to show up to school, you have to make sure that school is a place they want to be. And what I was struggling to try to figure out was, what's a framework? We always want to make it either or. Either it's these things outside the school, or it's these things inside the school.

Hedy Chang ([09:24](#)):

If we want kids to come to school, we have to look at both of them together and see the interactions across. And so I'm going to just pull up, hopefully real quick, a slide that shows this framework. That hopefully allows us to think and see in a much clearer way how this is about in and outside of school. And what I want to do is bring my friend David Osher, my colleague, my thought partner. Because it was in our interactions that we were able to come up with this framework. And David, you're going to have to unmute.

David Osher ([10:08](#)):

Yes. Thank you-

Hedy Chang ([10:13](#)):

This is a Zoom meeting, I had to say-

David Osher ([10:14](#)):

Yeah, right. Thank you, Hedy. Hedy, not only is one of my heroes as to Karen, but she's also one of my life coaches in terms of doing things right. So thank you. I realized listening, Hedy, that I always had the good fortune of connecting in and learning about your work, almost when you were starting to do it, even though we were not close then. And it really affected the work I was doing with people, because of the fact that we were trying to monitor the young people's ability to learn. And we started to talk about the need to look at the individual data, and it really came out of what you were saying. For people listening, while we're talking about conditions for learning in school, these are conditions for engagement and learning in all settings. And because the conditions that we're talking about largely are experienced emotionally, at the same time that they're experienced cognitively. And experiencing your gut at the same time as you experience it in your sense of feeling.

David Osher ([11:22](#)):

They're really critical to young people and adults' ability to thrive. And then what are they? In terms of the biggest bucket, it is... Let's stay with that same slide for a second, I'll be happy to... okay, thank you. Because at the biggest element, before I talk just about social emotional, it is if we look at the top circle, physical and emotional safety, including health. In school as well as out of school. We used Cleveland when we first came into the Cleveland. There was no soap in the toilets, in the bathrooms. That's important in terms of young people's ability to attend. It is the ability to belong in and feel connection, and we'll talk about that in a minute. It is the competencies of the people around you. And it is the challenge that's provided. Now, let's get to the next slide. Thank you.

David Osher ([12:21](#)):

We think with other people, that there are four fundamental conditions for learning. One is the experience of safety. And that's emotional safety, it's physical safety, it's safety in terms of who you are, identity safety. It's safety alone, and safety as a member of the group. It's the experience of feeling that you belong. It's the experience of connection. It's that relational support that we all need. And we know from work that Karen and I and others are doing around the science of learning development, that this ends up playing out neuro biologically, it plays out chemically, it bonds us. But it's also how we feel about each other. It's the experience of engagement and challenge, which includes the fact that we want our young people to learn immensely, and to develop all the right skills, and they're not just cognitive.

David Osher (13:25):

At the same time, it's not just having high standards, though, it's experiencing those standards as relevant to you. And it is being engaged, which I'll talk about later in another way, in the learning process. And it is being surrounded by other people who have good social and emotional competence. Those competencies include their cultural competencies, include their ability to be culturally affirmative, it includes their ability to give... instead of to micro aggress, to micro support, in all of the moments. Together those are conditions for-

Hedy Chang (14:08):

David, I wanted to maybe mention one thing about this, I think that the thing about COVID-19, is it's meant that we now need to transform how to put this also in place-

David Osher (14:24):

[crosstalk 00:14:24]-

Hedy Chang (14:24):

... in virtual and distance learning.

David Osher (14:26):

That's right.

Hedy Chang (14:26):

And the fact that we're losing so many kids in virtual and distance learning is when, in fact, these conditions don't exist.

David Osher (14:35):

Exactly.

Hedy Chang (14:35):

And it has been such a huge... My sister is a teacher, this has been an enormous lift for everyone. But being able to know how to now do this, even if you were good at it in-person, doing it in remote has been an enormous challenge. But we still can't shy away from the fact that if kids aren't showing up, it could mean that we actually failed to provide the supports to put this in place.

David Osher (15:04):

Precisely. And there're so many examples, and you were spot on. I mean that young people who are afraid to turn on the video, because they're embarrassed in their home, are experiencing a lack of safety in terms of the ability to participate in the class. Before, we were concerned about cyber bullying and there's even more of it in some ways right now, and so forth. So I think what Hedy is saying is really important. If we can pull up the slide that relates to pushing and pulling. The way I think we can see the importance of the conditions for learning as they are realized by young people in environments that are developmentally supportive, that are engaging, as opposed to ones that are toxic. That really make them feel bad, is that when schools are rich, in terms of the support and in terms of engagement, it pulls young people in.

David Osher ([16:18](#)):

Even young people who were struggling in some ways, it makes them want to continue to come, at the same time that it makes it more likely that their struggles will also be surfaced, and hopefully be addressed. Because they feel a greater level of trust. And at the same time, when those things do not exist, schools end up pushing young people away. And so when Hedy and I first came together to start thinking about the relationship between conditions for learning and chronic absenteeism, we could both talk about it. And we did try to address it systemically, as Hedy was talking about. And in fact, as we've watched places like Cleveland do it.

David Osher ([17:00](#)):

At the same time, what it really is about is in part, trying to maximize the appropriate pull of a learning environment for students. And at the same time, minimize those pulls that pull them away, or what propels them away. Every time you see a teacher and that teacher affirms you, that's a pull in. Every time you see a teacher and that teacher has neutral affect, or is nasty or sarcastic, and it's not just the teacher, it's anybody else. Every time you have an interaction with somebody who looks like they're just surveying you, because they don't trust you because of who you are, those are the types of things that push people out.

Karen Pittman ([17:52](#)):

David, I want to jump in and just re-enforce. Can we... Well, it was there, we'll leave it up. The push-pull slide that was just up, and we will send the slides out to folks. It's so important to really pause and understand. You were talking about sort of micro supports, that this is not just an either or. Let's go into your school and decide whether you have mostly push or mostly pull. Young people are growing up in multiple settings, in multiple micro systems. Their family, their faith organization. I know several people, oh, let's call from the Boys and Girls Club, their youth organization, et cetera. As well as micro systems that we we don't acknowledge that are important, like games. And so when you look at those slides, it's one thing to say, oh, is my school or is my classroom more push or pull?

Karen Pittman ([18:50](#)):

But when we realize that young people are being pushed out of school and pulled into environments, that we would rather not have them in, but those environments are being much more effective about making them feel safe and supported and engaged, and perhaps even providing critical support to their families. That list has to be looked at in that way. And so it's really important for us to understand that it's not just a conversation about school, it's when we're saying, where are all the places young people spend their time? Which ones are pushing, which ones are pulling? And if we're going to optimize learning and development, we want the pull to be on the side where they're being pulled into pro-social things, that are going to really advance their success.

David Osher ([19:33](#)):

That's right. If I can just add, you are so right. And young people are always the experts in what they need in their lives. And together, they make sense. And either we let them know that it is the school or the Boys and Girls Club that they want to go to, and they will get support. Or it is the gang. I mean, I'm not an expert on gangs, but actually this is work that I've talked with people about, in terms of that. Because gangs meet lots of the needs that young people, that adolescents need developmentally and sometimes, they and their families need materially. And if we ignore that, and we don't provide even more of it in the places we want them to be, people are making rational choices that are not inappropriate. And they are no less antisocial than they experience toxic public environments that are not supporting them and their families.

Karen Pittman ([20:30](#)):

Absolutely. And when we put on top of that, the added responsibility, and this goes back to Hedy's point, there are not that many institutions that you're required to show up in. And so when we require you to come to a thing, and you're talking about young people, left on their own, young people will find their way in being pulled into things that support their needs. Because those are voluntary. But if I'm being told, I have to go to school. And I'm tracking attendance from the fact of, you're going to be declared truant if you don't show up in the space that actually is pushing you out, once you get there. That's why this conversation is so important.

Karen Pittman ([21:09](#)):

So Hedy, I'm going to let you wrap it up however you want, and then take us into... So we got into this pandemic, we went to virtual learning, we weren't prepared for this. There were challenges, but there probably were also opportunities to really rethink, what do we understand about what it means to attend, what it means to engage, what it means to count someone as absent? What did we learn during the pandemic that we can carry forward?

Hedy Chang ([21:36](#)):

Yeah, I'm going to just say a couple things, and then I can actually pull up slides, as is my tendency. Just to say, first of all, attendance is an initial, but not a complete indicator of engagement. If a kid is not showing up to school, it is an indication that the pull factors are being outweighed by the push factors. And that school isn't addressing those positive conditions for learning. And when that happens, and if it happens with lots of kids especially, you're going to have to talk to kids. As David said, they're the experts on their own lives, and their families, especially for our little ones. To see, what is it that we need to have in place?

Hedy Chang ([22:24](#)):

I also want to acknowledge that one of the biggest challenges we have with the pandemic, is we closed schools to keep kids safe and healthy. So if you're going to reopen schools and expect they're going to show up physically, and I can't tell you how many people I know. The push to reopen schools is across the country. But in order for kids and families to show up to school, they have to feel that school is physically healthy and safe. And if they're not showing up, rather than condemning families, you have to question what are we not putting in place in our schools and communities? Now the question is, given limited resources, where do we target our resources, so we can make sure those positive conditions for learning are in place?

Hedy Chang ([23:28](#)):

And I've heard this before, the pandemic, we're all sitting in the same storm. But the boat, we're on the waves, we're trying to ride it out. And some of us have a yacht, and some of us have a raft, and some of us are swimming on our own without anything to help buoy us up. And the question is, what kind of information or data can you use to figure out who's struggling to stay afloat in the midst of this storm? Because for that group of families, to experience positive enough conditions of learning, so that they want to come back to school, will take more than the families like mine. Who are sitting comfortably in our homes, distance learning hasn't been a big deal. And so this is why we need to look at the prior data on chronic absence.

Hedy Chang ([24:19](#)):

And we produced a report, because data is usually a little bit more like an autopsy than it is a diagnostic in our world. We get it late. But there are still some uses. Because the issues and the challenges that cause kids to miss school before the pandemic are likely to be affecting them even now. So we knew prior, as you said, started this off Karen, it was about eight million kids who were chronically absent. But we knew certain kids were more likely to be chronically absent. Kids with special ed, African Americans, Native American kids, kids who were living in poverty. And we also knew that that chronic absence data was concentrated. About half of all the kids who were chronically absent in the country were concentrated in a quarter of schools.

Hedy Chang ([25:15](#)):

I am going to bet that that same quarter of schools who were experiencing high levels, systemic barriers to kids, are also the same quarter of schools who were really struggling to respond when the pandemic hit. We also know, again, that this is very connected to poverty. But I also want to talk something about data. Data is useful for both figuring out who has challenge and who has solutions. Because even if you look, this bar graph shows the schools that had over three quarters of their kids, who were living in poverty. But what are their levels of chronic absence, right? And 5% of those schools had less than 5% chronic absence, even though they had most of their kids living in poverty. That's worth finding out about. What are they doing? Who are the community partnerships? What are they putting in place?

Hedy Chang ([26:16](#)):

And I continue to find, the people who were doing innovative, smart, collaborative relationships before the pandemic, tended to be better equipped to then respond to the pandemic. And when I go and look for best practices during the pandemic, I will say, I go to the best practices that were before the pandemic and said, what are you doing now? How are you addressing it? And then the question is, how do we scale them out? We also know, by the way, that from this data, the issue isn't just an urban issue, it's not just a rural issue. Every school, every community is affected by chronic absence, has this present. So this is worth all of us thinking about, how do we create those positive conditions for learning?

Hedy Chang ([27:03](#)):

Now, I'm going to point to one other use of good data. So the green arrow here points to the state of Connecticut. The state of Connecticut, over a period of time, moved levels in terms of relative chronic absence. They are now the third least highest level of chronic absence, or lowest level in the country. And I actually have some questions about what's happening with data in the two other states, because there's something that I need to understand. And by the way, it is important to always look at data and know whether... Your first question is, does the data seem accurate? If not, there might be an issue. But what I know about Connecticut, is they're a state that had been addressing chronic absence for years. We've been working with them for almost a decade. They have invested in data quality, they have user data. And they give us an insight about what can happen.

Hedy Chang ([27:57](#)):

So first of all, usually, as I said, data is used as an autopsy. You collect chronic absence data during the year, and then the following year, after everything's done, you publish it. And you look at which schools did worse or better and which populations were most affected. Connecticut said, That's not helpful. We're going to collect data every single month, and we're going to produce it now. So we can see who's most affected. And even if it's got data that we don't like to see, we need to know what's happening. And you see really troubling trends, almost doubling of the rates. We also see a new group coming up in the Connecticut data. So prior to the pandemic, English language learners, young English language learners tended to actually show up to school more often than English speakers.

Hedy Chang ([28:49](#)):

I have a whole set of theories, might have some biases growing up as an immigrant kid, which is your parents are like, we came to this country for a reason. I know how to get you to school. You will go to school. And it's about that hope and faith and belief in school, that's a strong pull factor. But in the pandemic, you now have English language learner families who are going into distance learning. They may not have computers, but they may not even... The directions to how to help your kids, they're not in their home language. They don't know how to navigate the support. And it's very challenging.

Hedy Chang ([29:25](#)):

So you're seeing huge numbers of English language learners. Whereas before, you didn't see that in the early grades, you're seeing this in the early grades. We're losing our little ones who are from immigrant families. And that is a serious issue to contend with, and it's going to take real investment to address it. Now, the other thing that Connecticut did, talk about making things accountable, they geo mapped all this data, and they put this out there for every one to see. So you can see what's happening in my community, what's the rate, how are the challenges? And they coordinated. They coordinated with Department of Children's Services, they coordinated with the Health Department, so they could take a look at this.

Hedy Chang ([30:13](#)):

What I know, as I was talking to one of the districts just the other day, it's a district. It's called East Haven. I was talking to the superintendent and she brought all the elementary school principals together. They've actually had been running in school attendance, in person, along with a remote option all year long. And what was so interesting to me is how they strategized on this. What they felt, from all their information, was they needed to use last summer to prove to families that they could open school. And I'll stop sharing for a second, I just want to tell a story. But they could open school and keep it safe, and not have COVID. And they needed to prove it to the teachers, the administrators, and the kids and families.

Hedy Chang ([31:03](#)):

So they decided, last summer, that they would start with their four-year-old classrooms and do this, because they have four-year-old classrooms. And they were able to run classrooms during the summer, in a summer program where there were no COVID cases. Then they brought all the principals together and said, what do we learn from that? What do we have put in place to keep teachers safe? And the superintendent talks about how hard this was, because she didn't know that they could definite... teachers were nervous. This isn't just about making sure kids feel comfortable coming back, this is teachers feeling that they are willing to show up.

Hedy Chang ([31:43](#)):

They then opened up schools, and they talked about... So this is the interesting thing, this school district. We are having a challenge across the country, where kindergartners 'red-shirted' and decided, I'll pass on this year of kindergarten, I'll wait. This district had no decline in their kindergarten enrollment. And that is because they reached out in February before the pandemic, because they have a pre K through three, to reach out to families and connect to them. Then they did this summer program. And then they opened up in the fall. And they used their chronic absence data to figure out which families needed more personalized support, either on distant learning, but in their [inaudible 00:32:28], they wanted to keep them showing up to school.

Hedy Chang ([32:31](#)):

And because they felt that for their youngest learners, in person learning was going to be better. And they did it really heavily individualized approach. Talking to families, using their data to know which families they need to talk to. And ask them well, what would make you feel comfortable? Or found ways to bring them to school. They would say, come for a week, try it and see if you feel comfortable. They didn't negate their concerns. They heard their concerns. But they used their everything, including their expanded and their summer learning efforts, so that they could convince families that they had that sense of belonging, had that sense of connection. And would feel safe physically coming back to school, because they felt that was the best way they could keep those kids academically challenged and engaged. That's an example of using data and making a difference.

Karen Pittman ([33:30](#)):

It's an incredibly powerful example. I am trying to both listen hard to you and watch what's happening in the chat. But you've used that example to make some important connections between just the intentionality of recognizing that relationships are at the center of this. So this wasn't just, hey, we're open, show up. It's, we're open, show up, come in, have those relationships. Have those relationships with the school, with their teachers, with other folks. So I'll just ask one of the questions that's come in from Ken [Pekal 00:34:03] from a research institute. He's wondering if you've examined associations between the quality and intensity of young people's relationships with teachers or OST staff and their attendance. David, I know this is one of the things you want to think about, and how do we push up from basic showing up attendance data, to what it really means to help us get from attendance to real engagement. Is there anything out there right-

Hedy Chang ([34:27](#)):

I don't know that I can show about the intensity, but this is why I think we know that mentoring improves attendance. You success mentoring, it's because you're creating a relationship when you put kids in connection to an adult, particularly at the school, who then cares about them. And they connect with them three to five times a week. It reduces their chronic absence. I don't know, David, if you've seen other research, but I do think that [inaudible 00:34:54] relationship in attendance makes sense.

David Osher ([34:57](#)):

Yeah. I mean, first of all, the best research we've done on mentoring is what Hedy is talking about. And it's really important, given the current debates about tutoring and so forth, that we need to understand that there is a relational component that is extraordinarily special and accelerating. Yes, I have seen some of the impact, we can't get it totally at dosage level, it actually is in the same place that Hedy's talking about, that about Cleveland. Because of the fact that we've collected conditions from learning data in Cleveland since 2008. And

we've looked at the relationship between conditions for learning as experienced by different subgroups and attendance as well.

David Osher ([35:45](#)):

Now that doesn't get to dosage, but it is very, very consistent with this. And in the book that Tony Bryk and other people did on the lessons of school reform in Chicago, what they ended up saying is, the schools that had the worst attendance were the schools that combined being totally unsafe and being totally academically unproductive. And they basically said, I'm paraphrasing badly, why would someone want to walk through unsafe streets to end up going to a place that makes you feel unsafe, and doesn't give you anything back? That's about the push out of school. And at the same time, to go back to what Karen was saying, and maybe other environments, good or bad will make people feel safe and more fulfilled. And we're in competition with them until we replace it. So that's the answer. Actually, should I go into what I wanted to here, Karen, or go back to you about the importance of different types of engagement?

Karen Pittman ([36:51](#)):

You should go wherever you want, David. We've got about 20 minutes left, as long as we 10 minutes to focus on summer [crosstalk 00:36:56].

David Osher ([36:56](#)):

Okay, just to give you another example of how people are doing, and this comes out of the leadership of communities and schools and head of the [inaudible 00:37:05] who did not know that I was going to mention her. But who is, I noticed, signed in. Which means the schools who use the conditions for learning survey asked us to work with them to really try to help them deeply get a handle on how young people are engaging and re-engaging in this new setting. And when we talked about it, based on what we know from the research, including Ken [Pekal's 00:37:37] work, what we know is that, if we can go back to that slide that was just there.

Hedy Chang ([37:41](#)):

Yeah, sorry.

David Osher ([37:42](#)):

No problem, okay.

Hedy Chang ([37:46](#)):

Technological challenges, just forgive me.

David Osher ([37:47](#)):

Right, yeah. That wild behavioral engagement, as Hedy mentioned, if we just use attendance as one example of behavioral engagement, but it could also be, have I turned on my computer, is not unimportant. You ought to be there, in order to participate. It isn't everything. And key elements, and we know this from listening to young people, we know this from research with young people, is that there are three other elements that are critical. And we can think about them in the push and pull the domain. It is whether or not I am cognitively engaged. At a deep end, is what my granddaughter talks about, [inaudible 00:38:30] being engulfed in learning. At a deeper end, it's been involved in flow. But it is where the learning experience grabs you. It is emotional engagement. How do I feel when I'm learning? And sometimes it's not that you always have to be happy, you can learn in struggle. But on the other hand, there also has to be joy.

David Osher ([38:50](#)):

If anybody knows the work that Nick Hobbs did a long time ago, in terms of trying to help kids who people experience as been troubling, there has to be joy in a child's life. And that's the whole notion of child-friendly schools, is to ultimately make young people want to be happy. There is what we keep on hearing in focus groups that we have been doing with young people across the country and other people now, there is a social

element to engagement. And young people feel that absence right now. And to go back to Karen's call to thinking about the entire ecology, oftentimes, still other parts of the ecology can provide these different elements of engagement. Whether it's the opportunity to be socially engaged with others, because of the fact that we can do things that enable us to come together, but it's also to be emotionally engaged in activities that really we find meaningful and pleasurable. And cognitively engaged, learning a craft, or learning something that is important. And I pass this back to Hedy or to Karen.

Hedy Chang ([39:58](#)):

Karen, I just keep thinking, I'll help maybe with the segue to summer. That what the pandemic has forced us to do, is think outside the box, of whose responsibility it is on youth engagement? And to think that engagement happens, either in school or outside, but it's not the combination of the two working together to make sure a child continues to be engaged in learning. I think that the needs are huge. Both the numbers of kids, like, one of the things I'm clear about, if we are talking, let's say, doubling of the number of kids who are chronically absent. So we go from one out of six to one out of three. This isn't a case management approach, we have to take solutions to scale. If we think relationships are at the heart of anything we do, we're going to have to figure out every single possible person in a school community that can have relationships. The expanded learning folks are key to that, the volunteers... because we're going to have to make sure some kid and family feels connected to someone who can help them navigate that.

Hedy Chang ([41:19](#)):

And I think that how we think outside the box, so we work as a much broader collaborative team. And then my thinking is, so how do we use the summer, and maybe even some of the things happening this spring, to pilot what needs to then go to scale? Because you don't want to go to scale with stuff when you don't know how it'll work. You want to think about, how do I take things and make sure that we have a process, professional development, whatever it needs, monitoring, so that by the fall, we can really take it to scale. And maybe we're starting by using chronic absence data, for example, because we don't have a whole lot of other data that's easily accessible.

Hedy Chang ([42:10](#)):

And I will say, by the way, the chronic absence data this year is not... it is a little bit of a mess, but it's better than what, nothing. Okay? We used to know before COVID, attendance was pretty clear. Karen showed up to the classroom, I saw her there, I'm marking Karen there. Now under COVID, there's a lot of ways Karen could show up. And I'm not even sure in some places, it's pretty minimal. On the other hand, if Karen didn't show up in any of those ways, I'm truly losing her. So the chronic absence data isn't all of the kids you need to reach, but it is possibly the most challenged group of kids. And we could be using that data now.

David Osher ([42:54](#)):

Let me build, or add another addition to what you're saying, Hedy. I fully agree. I want to play off your East Haven example, of what happened in terms of why you had full attendance, after people had experienced something that worked, where it was safe. That this summer is also an opportunity for young people to experience engagement in different ways, and to re-engage. And not only for them to bring it back, but if we then can enable our schools to listen more to the voices of young people, which I think is what community school is trying to do in terms of their monitoring, the way in which they do the work. But I know what I should say. But schools can do it in different ways, it can feed into the fall. And I just want to add, and I know Hedy believes this, that school community that supports young people include their peers. Young people-

Hedy Chang ([43:58](#)):

Absolutely-

David Osher ([43:59](#)):

... can support each other, they need to both feel engaged to support each other, as well as to know how important it is to be engaged. So that they too can support each other. Because young people thrive collectively, they don't just thrive alone.

Karen Pittman ([44:18](#)):

I knew this was going to happen, because our conversations go like this all the time, when we have them. But I want to pull apart, because I think summer is a chance for us to be flexible about this. Some of the things that you said. You've repeatedly come back to relationships, it was in the center of all your pictures. And if there is any reason not to, that pull did not show up someplace where you don't feel that you belong, is huge. So we need a way to actually get to that. But if we do have, in the summer, an opportunity as most people were saying, an opportunity to not just go out and find the kids that didn't show up. And we acknowledge some of the things in the chat about, some families didn't know until they showed up and found their kid was failing. That they weren't logging in. Or they were logging in and walking away. If you're not there, how do you know what's going on?

Karen Pittman ([45:11](#)):

So we know that all of those barriers are showing up, but we've got different modalities. We've got, what are you showing up in? Are you showing up virtually? Are you showing up in person? Are you showing up asynchronously? I got an assignment, I did it in the evening when it was quieter, I turned it in. You've got all of those ways to think about how showing up happens, that get pulled apart. When you'd walk into a building, all of those things were together. But now that you're not in a building, all of those things are separate. So we have to really think about the modality of how I am showing up. And does showing up in all those ways count as attending? Even if it's not meaningful, do I get more credit for turning my computer on at 9:00 in the morning, than I get credit for doing my work at 10:00 at night? Because at 9:00 in the morning, I had to share the computer with somebody else. So you have to ask those questions.

Karen Pittman ([46:02](#)):

But now we've also got, when we come into the summer, you've got the big question of, why am I showing up? That goes to your point, David. If I don't have to show up, give me some reason to be excited and engaged. Give me a purpose for showing up. Now, we know schools can do that. And we know that, in some ways, someone asked about teachers burning out. I was just on a call yesterday, I think, with 150 building level administrators in a city. And they were basically asking, if our teachers are burnt out, what do we do? And I said, well, if summer is a time in which teachers really just need to go rest, they should go rest. But if it's a time in which they could engage differently, when they're not feeling pressured to just get on the screen and start going through the content, but they're able to connect with their kids in a different way. They're able to bring their own interest into this space, they may want to have an opportunity to engage differently.

Karen Pittman ([46:57](#)):

And we have other adults in the community, in our organizations, in our youth organizations or our faith organizations who want to engage. So we can broaden the who, we can broaden the how and when and where kids show up and give them credit for all that. We can broaden the who. And then again, I just go back to your big why, and why starts by being driven with relationships. But it's got to come out the other end, and in terms of real engagement in things that are exciting, that you actually want to learn. So if summer is that possibility, then I'll put on the table, the example, and Katherine may drop a click into the chat.

Karen Pittman ([47:37](#)):

You all are talking about Cleveland, we've been working in Tulsa. And the Tulsa Superintendent, either today or sometime this week, is going to make an announcement that they are committed on their journey towards being a city of learning. They are committed to having a summer of learning in which they want every young person to 'plug in' to an exciting learning experience. They want their schools to be open all day. But then the strict instruction is, school is open all day, but this is not summer school. It is not summer school. The only thing we want you to do is to make sure whatever activities you're doing and doing with your community partners, you're paying attention to the fundamentals. Kids need to be reading. Kids need to be reading and writing and communicating. If you can keep that going, we don't care what the academic content is.

Karen Pittman ([48:30](#)):

And the thing for me that gets back to the attendance point is, when asked the question of, okay, that's fine. But summer is usually voluntary. So what are you going to do? Are you just going to hope kids show up? And no, we're going to help. We're going to take attendance. Wherever the kids are showing up, we're going to come up with... Hedy, this is a chance to broaden that, what does attendance look like, and how do you do it? And their trust in their kids was evident by the fact that they said, if we do this right, young people, and in particular, the young people that were most concerned about who got disconnected, they will show up and they will persist. So they're not going to look for changes in test scores, they're going to look for persistent rates. In attendance, just in attendance, wherever that kid decides to show up, as a way to make sure that they reduce the barriers to learning and they increase the conditions. In whatever kind of a setting a young person found themselves in. So that's one example of what folks are thinking about to be bold in summer.

Hedy Chang ([49:30](#)):

So Karen, first of all, I think the most important thing is back to David's word of engagement. We want kids to be engaged in learning. And how we want to use data, is to help us understand which kinds of learning are actually engaging kids? And which kids might need more support to deepen their engagement? And one of the things, we used to not have easy to use chronic... Chronic absence wasn't even something people were calculating 10 years ago. Just before COVID, we were at the point where everyone had figured out pretty much how to use their data systems to calculate and produce chronic absence data. We are now in a different situation where a lot of the information about engaging is in your learning management system. Whereas the attendance data is in your student information system, or some of it is actually in your virtual platforms.

Hedy Chang ([50:33](#)):

We can use technological solutions, and we have to invest in them. So that we can say, and monitor easily, and see reports to say, oh, much more kids showed up to in person, or much more persons showed up asynchronous. And it's these kinds of asynchronous assignments that worked. And when we take that data, it allows us to morph more quickly. So we both have to adapt our data systems. Even while we're adapting, we can use it however we're... Excel spreadsheets to figure this out too, to understand what will maximize engagement through the year? And in some cases, like I noticed a little point about how with high school kids, we've also got a reality. A bunch of high school kids have other responsibilities. They're working and trying to stay in school. So how do you make it that it's not an either or between, I'm going to help support my family that's struggling economically, and I'm going to go to school. Because we know school is going to be essential to them having the income over the long term.

Hedy Chang ([51:40](#)):

Then you want to be able to figure out, this is where the blended learning has maybe value that we could be testing out. How could we use blended learning to allow kids to balance that, stay engaged in school, but still meet their other obligations? So we have to look for, who are those populations that are challenged? How do we invest in them with relationships, but then using our data to understand the summer? What's working to engage them? What's working to remove barriers? And how do we then scale that out more in the fall, when we'll have even larger numbers of kids?

David Osher ([52:19](#)):

If I may add to what you're saying. And it's also, again, it's a different level a little bit, it's not inconsistent, Hedy. Is I think we can also, because of what we can do with easy data collection, capture much more from individual young people and groups of young people, what it is that is working for them to support their engagement, and engage them. So we're not just drawing inferences from data. So we want real, concrete data, and at the same time, what we want is that the experiential data from those experts about what works for them and engages them.

Karen Pittman ([53:03](#)):

And watching, as is always the case as we get to the last five minutes, the chat is exploding even more than it was before. But we, again, can come back again. When we zoom in on those adolescents, on those high school students, when we talk about what we're going to measure, in terms of attendance, there are things you learn on the job. Again, if we're looking at summer as an opportunity to broaden the definition of where, when, how

and [inaudible 00:53:30] learning [inaudible 00:53:30] happens. And frankly, just test up, as somebody said, the idea that if the overall purpose is to build young people's broader set of competencies, to increase their levels of engagement and learning, period, to build their identity and help them have a sense of agency, maybe having a summer job is the best thing they could do this summer. And so how do they get credit for that? Is this a way for us to both think differently about where we count young people showing up for learning, and how we give them credit for showing up for learning?

Karen Pittman ([54:03](#)):

I mean, where do we go with that? And I know, Hedy, you've been playing with different ways. Someone asked, do we have dashboards? I know you've been playing with the idea dashboards. So what advice, in our last minutes, do you have for communities that are really ready to try something bold this summer? What advice do you have for them?

Hedy Chang ([54:24](#)):

I would say, first, figure out three or four populations that you care about most. Because I think you have to be able to take tailored interventions to scale. When you look at your data, is it your kindergartners? Is it your high school kids? Is it African American kids? Is it the kids in public housing? Figure out who are the partners. Starting right now actually, think about towards the end of the school year, how do I engage and maintain their engagement? And connect with these kids and families. And figure out, who are the community organizations that they trust? You can do that through the end of the year. In the summer, think about, and involve youth and families, what would make you want to show up in the summer? What would be interesting? What would be supportive? How would you engage it? And then how do you make sure there's a warm welcome back into school? And then how you're going to support, monitor, throughout the school year, whether they're staying engaged, supporting and showing up.

Hedy Chang ([55:23](#)):

So you either pick populations, or maybe a few schools. We have to start with a doable group, that then you can scale out. If you try to do all of it at once, it gets overwhelming. Find a doable starting place.

David Osher ([55:40](#)):

Yeah. And I would just add, as someone who's had to work on dashboards and think about them, the right dashboard is the dashboard from Model T. It's keeping it simple. It is not the dashboard in the fancy cars we have right now. Because you want to be able to hone in on what really matters.

Karen Pittman ([56:00](#)):

And I will add to that wise advice that, again, I think in that keep it simple, keep it close to where the young people and-

David Osher ([56:07](#)):

Yes-

Karen Pittman ([56:08](#)):

... adults are coming together. So yes, we may not be able to get system level data. But if we really have a way to find out what we know, when those young people are engaging with adults, teachers, other school personnel, youth personnel, community, when they are engaging with folks and increasing that level of engagement and trust, that's going to have a ripple effect that moves them out. And if we're really just asking, could we even trust young people to say, where do you think you are now, in terms of engagement? And where do you want to be at the end of the summer? And pick a path that you think is going to help you get there, and maybe we can help you over the summer. Whether that's a summer job, it's learning to play the guitar, it's catching up on courses that you didn't take during the school year, pick a path, we'll try to help you get there.

Karen Pittman ([56:55](#)):

And again, for my money, the Tulsa commitment that says, if we trust kids, and we create the right conditions for learning, they'll show up, wonderful example in the chat about how young people in a teen court program are showing up. Because the conditions were built there, that were not in the school where they dropped out. So wonderful, thank you as always for an incredible conversation. Katherine, I'm going to give it back to you for the last minute.

Katherine Plog-Martinez ([57:24](#)):

Wonderful. My apologies for my camera not being on. Thank you all so much for joining us. Thank you Hedy, David and Karen for the engaging conversation. I'm really excited and hope that everyone on this call will share with us the bold innovations you try this summer, around how you're using attendance data to drive your innovations. Or how you're innovating and how you track attendance the summer. The Readiness Projects will follow up with you soon on our next Changing the Odds Thought Leader Interview and Making the Invisible Visible series. In the meantime, we hope you will join the forum at Every Hour Counts next week on March 11th for our Stability and Change, an After School System session. Thank you all so much for joining us today.