

- We started the session by attempting to understand what it means to be chronically absent and what perspectives students have on this topic. Often times, both older students and families of younger students do not have a clear understanding of how quickly a student can become chronically absent. Missing 10% or more of instructional days in a year, an average of about two days per month, will cause a student to be chronically absent. During 10 instructional years, missing two days per month leads to being absent for a full year of instruction.
- Furthering the understanding of chronic absenteeism, we learned that only unexcused absences are contribute to the chronic absenteeism counts. Excused absences include doctors note absences, religious observances and court appearances. Students who receive suspensions are counted as having an unexcused absence in data collection. A distinction was drawn between students being truant and chronically absent. A truant student receives a more punitive correction - they are engaging in activities that eventually lead to the juvenile justice system. There is no policy distinction between a chronically absent student and a truant student - chronic absenteeism leads to truant behavior.
- Chronic absenteeism occurs most often at transitional times in a student's academic career. Pre - Kindergarten to Kindergarten and into 1st grade are grades where many students are chronically absent. It is believed that many families do not understand the importance of these years to later learning. Absenteeism also spikes in the transition from 5th to 6th grade, 8th to 9th grade, and finally in the senior year of high school.
- Best practices are beginning to emerge on how to address chronic absenteeism. The University of Minnesota has developed a program called Check and Connect, which is currently being piloted at Rivera Middle School. This program focuses on intensive one to one mentorship. The White House has also adopted a focus on chronic absenteeism that is based on the proliferation of this model.
- The Trenton Public School District has also been working diligently to reduce absenteeism through its own activities. The school district is working on the development of an attendance policy, improving the performance of attendance teams, and working on a peer mentor model that will connect students who are in a major transition year to slightly older students who will work to ensure they are attending school regularly among other things.
- Improved data collection has been a significant boost to the school district in addressing chronic absenteeism. There is still much work to be done in determining how other programs and services connect to and influence chronic absenteeism, specifically after school programs. After school programs in and of themselves were not seen as relevant or impactful for absenteeism, but after school programs that provide skill based learning and positive peer interaction should be assessed for their impact.
- Other observations:
  - Discussion about chronic absenteeism connects closely with achievement in early literacy, and employability later in life. This is important to keep in mind as action steps are being taken. There is still a perception that Kindergarten, and school in general, is a daycare provider.

- There are several challenges that need to be addressed in order to reduce chronic absenteeism. Significant issues include access to healthcare services, transportation, “parentified” children
- Action items from our discussion are:
  - Determine how the Mercer Street Friends partnership with Rivera Community School can be expanded/scaled up more quickly in coordination with the White House focus on chronic absenteeism.
  - Recruit organizations providing Early Head Start, Head Start, and Pre - Kindergarten to track data in an appropriate manner per the school districts instructions to determine how participation in these programs affect attendance in the next program or grade sequence.
  - Explore opportunities for increasing access to Head Start programs, specifically on existing capacity, space, and how to increase Head Start program participation.
  - Inventory, assess, and analyze after school programs to determine their strengths and weaknesses in the improvement of attendance rates. This analysis will be used to proliferate best practices on after school programs and their development.