

Dr. Martin Karp, Board Member

SUBJECT: CLEAN AND BE SEEN: THE CONNECTION BETWEEN HYGIENE AND ATTENDANCE

COMMITTEE: ACADEMICS, INNOVATION, EVALUATION AND TECHNOLOGY

LINK TO STRATEGIC

BLUEPRINT: SAFE, HEALTHY AND SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Today, nearly 6 million students can be classified as chronically absent, which is defined as missing 10 percent or more of a school year. This is especially significant as one recent study showed that only 17 percent of students who were chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade were proficient readers by the end of the third grade.

A former principal of Gibson Elementary School in St. Louis, Missouri was deeply concerned with high levels of absenteeism and decided to investigate the underlying cause of low student attendance at her school during the time of her employment. The school provided increased access to transportation and free or reduced priced lunches, yet the problem of low attendance remained unresolved. The principal discovered a different factor contributing to this problem, which was that many of the school's children lacked clean laundry and access to laundry appliances.

The principal contacted a laundry appliance company and received donated equipment, which was installed at the school site. Students who missed 10 or more days of school were invited to launder clothes at school, which resulted in improved attendance rates for chronically absent students.

Building upon the success at Gibson, washers and dryers were installed at 16 more schools in both St. Louis and the district of Fairfield, California in a program called Care Counts. In the first year, 93 percent of participating students increased their attendance by an average of nearly two weeks. Meanwhile, teachers reported that 95 percent of participants showed more motivation in class and greater interest in extracurricular activities. At Benjamin Banneker Elementary in Kansas City, Missouri only 46 percent of students were meeting the requirement to attend school 90 percent of the time. Once the school received funding from the United Way to install a washing machine, the number of students meeting the requirement jumped to 84 percent.

In addition to Missouri and California, schools in Kentucky, New Jersey and Colorado have provided opportunities where students can bring their clothes to be washed, and receive donated hygiene-related items. It appears that students would rather stay home and avoid embarrassment than go to school in dirty clothes or with poor hygiene.

One school in Colorado received a \$10,000 grant to install a washing machine through a program organized by Whirlpool and Teach for America, where the program is now working in more than 10 cities and 72 schools. Another school in New Jersey received a \$20,000 grant from a local utility company. Beyond the results of improved attendance, unintended outcomes have occurred such as a reduction in bullying and evidence that students are learning measurement skills.

If there is a Miami-Dade school where absenteeism is a challenge, the District could explore installing donated laundry equipment, which may ultimately lead to higher attendance figures. It should also be noted that better hygiene may result in healthier student populations, which also relates to attendance. Clearly, other factors cause attendance problems, but any measure that has led to improvements which comes at little or no cost should be considered. Students with special needs can learn the skills associated with doing laundry, and participate in the stocking and distribution of hygiene-related products.

This item has been reviewed and approved by the School Board Attorney's office as to form and legal sufficiency.

**ACTION PROPOSED BY
DR. MARTIN KARP:**

That The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida, authorize the Superintendent to:

1. Explore through a partnership, donation or grant the possibility of an installing laundry appliances at one elementary school site where chronic absenteeism persists; and
2. Compare data on absenteeism prior to the installation of such machines to that of attendance rates after installation; and
3. Following a review of the data, determine whether a limited number of schools should experiment in this effort to lower chronic absenteeism; and
4. Consider a program where students with special needs learn the skills associated with doing laundry, and participate in the stocking and distribution of hygiene-related products using school store models that currently exist at some school sites in the District; and
5. Provide a response by the October 2020 School Board meeting.