**Columbus City Schools // Transcript**

Thank you for having me as a part of the team and then for having our district be a part of the network. I want to just start off by saying one of the things, that as I was listening to all the other school districts speak you recognize, and realize I take a deep breath as I say we have over 116 buildings and there are definitely positives to that, but there are many many circumstances and navigating that can be very tricky. My co-coordinator, who is now the Interim Director, Senica Bing, she is actually out in California or she would also have joined me. I am a Family and Community Engagement Coordinator for the district and this is my seventh year.

And as I'm just kind of going through my slides I wanted to just press upon a couple things. Where Dr. Boone, you mentioned administrative changes, having superintendent changes, having many many principal changes throughout our even six/seven buildings that we had participating in the Partnership Schools presented challenges and still present them to this day. But I think when you said you know you make the work the work and so the main theme of having the two of us still try to press upon the district that good family practices are equivalent to success and overall academic success has really been what's kept us doing this work. So with all that being said, I'm going to talk a little bit about our central attendance team and how that came to be and how we use the components of NNPS to really, you know, try something different with our district. So you can go to the next slide.

You know as many other districts had mentioned, we saw significant increases in chronic absenteeism during and after COVID. Our academics, students were struggling particularly in our district with literacy and mathematics. And then there was an impact on our graduation and matriculation rights as well. And then also, you know, sadly our mental health, and when I say our mental health too, we saw it across a lot of our sub-populations, not just our students but our families and our staff. And so we've been working to tackle that as a district as well. So I say that as I talk about this next part.

So we got a significant ask from the leadership. And leadership talked to us about establishing a central attendance team at the district level. And when we were asked to be on that team, one of the first things that we asked for was family voice and family representation. And I will tell you that that was met with some hesitation. We are a little more comfortable about including families as partners at the school level. But we saw as you go up, there was different levels of discomfort. So we really had to advocate. And we showed the evidence and the benefits of having that. So there were family ambassadors that were able to sit as partners on this team. We had principal representatives on the team. We had administrators of other capacities and then various social workers, psychologist, and such.

So the cadence of the meetings were every other week. So we met twice a month and straight away at 8:30 in the morning until about, you know, 9:30. And we were hit immediately with data, where we were also exposed to the terminology of chronic absenteeism because it was important for us to speak the same language at a district level. What did it mean to be severely, chronically absent? What was, you know, sufficient attendance and such?

And then we divided up roles and responsibilities that we would all have. Because again, when you have clarity in that way. You're able to then go and do the work well. So that was established early on. And then we were given the problem that the big ask was a commitment from us as a team to work together to tackle this to go to our departments and really be the folks that would share the information with the different departments across the district. And then we would be forced to come back with evidence and data to show what we were doing and how it was impacting overall student absenteeism.

Next slide. Yep, so these are, I'll go quickly through these. This was just a little bit, slides, I like visuals. So just to show you the actual terminology that we're exposed to. So this slide, and this slide you can bypass. I do want to go to this. So the communications and ESL Department... I should say that out of our 46,000 students, 8,000 are ELL Learners. So that's about 77%. So communications and ESL work together to create, document, or communication that would go to families, talking about the importance of communication and what was expected, But we quickly found out that this approach is not always the best.

So go ahead, you can go to the next slide. So out of that's the big picture. How did we as Family Engagement fit into this work? Well we went ahead and started the development of, excuse me, some Family Engagement work groups. So we started a Family Engagement work group that had all of the folks that directly dealt with engagement in their departments. So the ESL Family Engagement Coordinator, the ECE Engagement Coordinator, folks in Career Tech, folks in Special Ed, that all came together. And we met monthly to have a convening about how could we impact this work and how could we work smarter together. For years we have been working as silos and all spinning our wheels. So we came together as a as a group, as a committee, and we started to strategically plan for how we would help to impact attendance across a lot of the subgroups. Specifically, students with special needs and ELL students.

And so you can go to the next slide. For our bit, we decided to talk about a tiered approach. And the folks that we had, the biggest impact or the biggest, you know, capacity building cap was our family ambassadors and bilingual engagement liaison. So we set a course to every month have professional development with our family ambassadors and talk to them about how they could talk to all families about attendance, and from a punitive point of view, because there comes some shame sometimes when for various reasons your family or your student cannot attend school. And if you are received with a finger pointing or you're in trouble... or oh immediately house bill this, you're going to court. That's not okay. That's not relational. It doesn't build trust. So instead we took a proactive approach and had the family ambassadors call all of the families in their school, one-by-one, in a proactive manner called, check, and connect. And they called and asked them, "Are there any barriers that you might have to attendance?" We didn't give them a list of families who were struggling with attendance. We said check in with every single family, check in and let them know what your work is, how you're there to help them, share with them community resources and supports, and connect them with that.

Then with the next tier, our Bilingual Engagement Liaison, because they have a data-sharing agreement and the Family Ambassadors do not. We gave them specific lists of families that did speak different languages in their homes and were struggling in terms of attendance. So they did home visits. They called and they met them in different community places. And the biggest thing, that I can say with this and about this, is that although we might be in this digital age, the impact of human connection and the outcomes that are yielded from that are significant.

Many families revealed that at first during COVID, it wasn't that they didn't want their families to log on, they didn't know how to take attendance because they had never used a mouse. They, some of them, revealed that they didn't have Wi-Fi. Some of them revealed they didn't have Chromebooks. Some of them didn't even know that they took attendance and that attendance was a responsibility of theirs. So we learned a lot from those interactions with our Bilingual Engagement Liaison and Family Ambassadors.

And I'll share share a little bit more about the other findings too. I kind of talked a little bit about this, but just for reference sake. We have 125 Family Ambassadors in schools, essentially they are home school and community liaison. And they do the good work of the district. They honestly should be full-time, but as you know with 125, it's quite a juggernaut of a budget. And ESSR is being cut next year here. So we're looking to see how we can still continue this program.

But the methodology that they use, I talked a little bit about check and connect. More newsletters was another way to proactively help families and to inform them about the importance of attendance, the share evidence. And then we were also able to pull out barriers for attendance. And the top three or four barriers to attendance for the families that we spoke with - we spoke with over 29,000 families last year - were reliable transportation. - I know, I know Dr. Boone, I know - housing. and then the increased demands on finances. Many people specifically revealed that some of their older children were being asked to stay home because child care was no longer affordable, which is again it's not going to be new to anyone on here. But that's in my mind criminal in this country at this time, but that's...

I won't make any other comments there, but if you go to the next slide, excuse me, I saw I think someone else had a magnet and this is some of the things that we also did... was you know, we used a lot of our principles. And as champions and influencers of their work, that peer-to-peer role model, is really significant not just for student-to-student or parent-to-parent but principal-to-principle. Some principles, that when we would go to their meetings, were looking at like us like this. They definitely listen to their peers, so we sought out those influential principles. And we had a few of them talk about these methods.

So at World Language Middle School, their building actually created this magnet, the one in the purple there, that would link directly to an attendance log that would go directly to the school secretary. So it removed all those barriers for families of...Oh I need to find the paper, I need to write this. I put this on your fridge, scan it, click click click, goes directly to the secretary. And it was translated, clear with it being world a language, they had it translated. Also in its top five languages the fridge, that needs me, is just an example at Eastgate Elementary... One of the Family Ambassadors there went a step beyond attendance and put all important links to, you know, their newsletters, community resources, and other things. I thought that was just a clever way to use a magnet and QR codes. Just kind of thinking about what are the most efficient ways to communicate.

And then, for time sake I think, I'll just mention the Bilingual Liaison. Here they have been really critical in the work. We have 12 of them, but as as you heard me mention there are 8,000 ELL students. And those students are paired with families. So they're not barely enough for what we need, but we have the top languages there, and then beyond. But they helped to translate documents. They interpreted in person and, you know, virtual events, home visits. Again those were really key, because again being a person that is originally from East Africa, when they would go into people's homes, you know, there is this sense of trust that's built when someone from your own community is telling you something. And they can help build the bridge to connect you to the other parts of the school, because what we didn't want to have happen is just families build bridges with these  BELLS. We wanted them to then be able to have a connection with the school. So we challenged the  BELLS to teach essentially people to fish and not just give them fish right.

And then I think, the next slide, we took all of this information that we documented and we had just the middle. If you lean into the middle slide, or the middle portion, the English Language Learners at the beginning of COVID when this first started. Our English Language, ELL, Learners had the highest rates or incidences of severe, chronic attendance. But with the intentional, strategic, personal touches they now outdo their non-ELL counterparts, as you can see there. And so I specifically hone in on this practice.

And I'm also encouraging us to do this with our other subgroups because, great. We have technology, but guess what people can do, right. Look what people can do. So we have this, also into a fun dashboard that, hopefully one day we'll be able to share with you. We have a live dashboard that is documenting our check and connect calls and our events, and then the work that our BELLS do.

So I'll leave it at that, because I I don't want to go over my time.

Wow! You know Columbus, you go big, right. You're doing it in a big way but in a very personal way, you know, 29,000 calls. You know, that blows my mind. But then home visits, personal touch, knowing that for some families that trust has got to be built. And we've got to be relational in this. And I think that's an example of that, the phone calls, the visits, and, you know there's magnets, there's information. You got to have a website, you set out all sorts of information, but you also chose to make that personal touch. And that data speaks loudly for what you did. That's really, that's really terrific to be able point to that.

Yeah, we can't wait to see this data dashboard that you're working on too. So thank you so much for that. Does anyone else have a question about what Columbus is doing? Any thoughts?

This is Keith from Shaker Heights. Absolutely amazing work, absolutely amazing, especially in a district your size, right. We're starting to find some similarities with home visits, wellness checks. They're proven to be very successful, but you guys have just taken it to a whole another level. So thank you for sharing this information, and you better believe we'll be using some of it.

Yeah we love to share thank you so much. And I just say, you know there, these are, those highlights, There's definitely been ups and downs and in between, But I think the thing, I have a poster in my office, this I'm at home today, because it's records day, but I have one that says, you know, keep doing the real work. You know, and the real work is to work in partnership with our families. And so we will keep doing the real work. It's not been easy, but it's heart work and hard work.

Well kudos to Columbus City! And thank you for that presentation and for everyone who shared about your districts and your work today!