

Gateway Housing

Independent Evaluation Determines Gateway Housing’s *Attendance Matters* Pilot Effective at Improving Homeless Children’s School Attendance

September 30th, 2021: An independent evaluation of the first year of Gateway Housing’s *Attendance Matters* initiative to improve the school attendance of children in New York City homeless shelters measured “significant improvements in absenteeism.”

This is an exciting step forward in the effort to address persistently low rates of school attendance among homeless students in temporary housing, a problem that has resisted most previous attempts to improve it. The report describes the initiative’s improvement in school attendance as “a promising result for a small program in its initial year” and notes that they “expect that other large cities can learn from NYC’s experience.”

The Challenge: Students in temporary housing have higher rates of absenteeism than their stably-housed peers. Within this cohort, homeless students living in shelter are particularly challenged, having absences *almost twice as often* as those living doubled-up in other unstable housing. According to a 2016 analysis of DOE data by the NYC IBO:

- Approximately 27 percent of students in permanent housing missed 10% of school days or more (defined as “chronic absenteeism”);
- Over one-third of students living double up had chronic absenteeism;
- Almost *two-thirds* of students residing in shelter had chronic absenteeism.

The Study: Funding for the implementation and independent evaluation of *Attendance Matters* was provided by the Robin Hood Foundation and the JPMorgan Chase Foundation. Led by Dr. Dan Treglia from University of Pennsylvania, with Dr. Mike Cassidy of Princeton University and Dr. Jay Bainbridge of Marist College, the evaluation found that *Attendance Matters* was associated with:

- Fewer missed school days for K-8 students
- Lower absence rates for K-8 students
- Notable drops in chronic absenteeism for K-8 students
- Increased school stability for high school students

According to the evaluators, the attendance improvements achieved by *Attendance Matters* were both significant and likely understated, for two reasons:

1. The evaluation reviewed only the first year of implementation, when the program was ramping up and there was meaningful variation in capacity, operators, consistency in staffing, leadership and organizational cultures that required the tweaking of program elements to suit each facility and participating agency.
2. The evaluation used an “Intent to Treat” analysis that measured the impact of Attendance Matters on the *entire* population of school-aged children in an AM shelter site, regardless of whether residents actually interacted with the AM team members. The researchers note that this inherently “dilutes results.”

An evaluation of the second year of the Attendance Matters initiative will be conducted as soon as data for the 2019-2020 school year is made available.

The Attendance Matters Program: Gateway Housing contracted with Dr. Judith Samuels of The Samuels Group (TSG) to design and oversee implementation of *Attendance Matters*. The program created by TSG employed a pragmatic, problem-solving approach utilizing three components to address barriers to school attendance:

1. Coordination through a Multi-Agency Team Approach
2. Use of Data to Identify Students and Track Progress
3. Training in Evidence-Based Practices.

The *Attendance Matters* model was designed to rely predominantly on existing resources, adding only one staff person who works across multiple shelter sites, and has access to flexible funds for incidental spending. These minimal additional resources improve coordination between DOE and DHS-contracted shelter provider staff, with interagency teams of multidisciplinary professionals at each shelter that held weekly meetings to review resident students’ attendance data in a user-friendly format.

With a diverse range of expertise, experience, skills and knowledge, AM team members collaboratively assessed the situation of each child identified as having poor school attendance. The teams then assigned tasks, tracked progress and employed a holistic approach to identify ground-level solutions across agencies and systems, to address familial challenges related to poor school attendance. Team members were given additional, advanced training as a group in evidence-based practices, such as motivational interviewing, trauma-informed care, and navigating the DOE system.

Program Implementation: The *Attendance Matters* program was implemented during the 2018-19 and 2019-20 school years, beginning with four shelters serving approximately 800 homeless children, operated by three nonprofit shelter providers: BronxWorks, Win, Inc. and HELP USA. A second shelter operated by BronxWorks and a large shelter operated by CAMBA were added to the initiative before the beginning of the second school year. Government partners participating in the initiative included NYC DHS, DOE, HRA/DSS and the Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence (CIDI). Each of these stakeholders sat on an interagency workgroup monitoring the program’s implementation at meetings held throughout the year.

During the first year, the AM Leader was hired, teams were formed and trained at each shelter, staff roles were defined, information and celebratory events were held at the shelters, and the initiative experimented with different prioritization, engagement and service strategies. In addition to expected start-up challenges, the initiative encountered issues that had impacts on program performance, including: shelter and DOE staffing vacancies; seasonal challenges and inconsistent access to healthcare services.

Conclusion: The successful implementation and independent evaluation of *Attendance Matters* confirm that improvements to homeless children’s school attendance are achievable with a pragmatic, cross-agency intervention that prioritizes this goal. The *Attendance Matters* pilot has already led to other new efforts to improve homeless children’s school attendance by shelter providers funded by the New York Community Trust, and an initiative by the DOE and DHS to improve educational data usage at shelters. These actions build on the forward progress initiated by Gateway Housing’s *Attendance Matters* pilot.

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