



Teacher Absenteeism: Engaging a District to Understand Why It Happens and What It Means

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Teacher Absenteeism: Engaging a District to Understand
Why It Happens and What It Means

Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.)
Capstone

Submitted by

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To Mom and Dad, my first and finest teachers

Abstract

A teacher being absent more than 10 days in a school year has been demonstrated to negatively impact student achievement (Miller, Murnane, & Willett, 2008), and the U.S. Department of Education calls teacher attendance a “leading indicator” of school improvement and educational equity (“U.S. Department of Education,” 2013). Miller reports that in Rhode Island, 50.2% of teachers are absent more than 10 days in a school year, which is the highest rate in the U.S. (2012). In the 2015-16 school year, 58% of teachers in the Providence Public School District (PPSD) were absent more than 10 days, a rate which has been consistent over the last three school years (LaRocca, 2016). In PPSD, this rate of absence impacts student achievement, creates operational challenges, and suggests employee disengagement.

The strategic project that is the focus of this Capstone was to lead a diagnostic process to understand the root causes of teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism in PPSD by engaging those who are part of the problem in defining the problem. In this project, I hypothesized that absenteeism was a sign of disengagement and that, therefore, engaging teachers, teacher assistants, and principals in determining the root causes of absenteeism would be a critical first step in addressing absenteeism. This project also represented PPSD taking a more multifaceted diagnostic approach to problem definition than the District typically has in the past.

Throughout this Capstone, I argue that diagnosis of the root causes of absenteeism and the engagement of those who are part of absenteeism in that diagnosis are necessary first steps to addressing absenteeism in a school district. We discovered multiple root causes for teacher absenteeism in PPSD, many of which compound each other and represent complex cultural challenges that cannot be solved by technical solutions alone. Viewing these causes through motivation theory additionally allowed for prioritization, and analyzing what was learned about the process yielded equally vital information about root causes. With this framing in mind, the most critical root causes for PPSD to address are a lack of trust and weak relationships between teachers and the administration, a lack of recognition for teachers, and teachers feeling overwhelmed and under-supported. These issues can be addressed at both the technical level and at the more complex, cultural level; technical intervention can begin to create behavioral change and traction for the complex, cultural interventions that will lead to more sustainable change around absenteeism.

Based on our experiences in PPSD, I recommend other school districts engage in diagnostic work when addressing teacher absenteeism and consider what is learned through the process and means of engagement as much as what is learned through information gathered about root causes. The diagnostic work that I led in PPSD was a critical step in defining the problem and has created the conditions and initial buy-in necessary to address teacher absenteeism further and to create more widespread ownership of the problem.

Introduction

Picture what happens when many teachers in a school district are absent. Teachers use an online system to report their absences, all the way up to just before the start of the school day, and there are so many teachers out across the school district that there are not enough qualified or available substitutes to cover the absences. An elementary school has four absent teachers and substitute coverage for only one class, so students from the three uncovered classes are split amongst other classrooms. A fifth-grade teacher ends up with six second-grade students in his 29-student fifth-grade class, while 20 more second-grade students are split into other classes across the school. In this fifth-grade classroom, the second graders spend the day doing some worksheets left behind by their teacher and silently reading; two students who have nothing to read get into a fight halfway through the morning. The teacher tries to give time and energy to the extra students, some of whom he notices seem uncomfortable to be in the same room as fifth graders, but he is also preparing his own students for the upcoming high-stakes PARCC exam. Next door, another teacher is also teaching with extra students in her English Language Learner class. The principal is moving throughout the school, checking that the students from the four split classes are where they are supposed to be and that the teachers have what they need.

The following day, the fifth-grade teacher and two other teachers in that same school are absent, as are other teachers throughout the district. Again, not enough substitutes are available, so these teachers' students are similarly split into small groups and spread throughout the school. The cycle of teacher absenteeism is a significant and

poignant challenge for education systems, whether from the perspective of teacher, administrator, district, or, especially, students.

Indeed, teacher absenteeism has been demonstrated to negatively impact student achievement (Miller, Murnane, & Willett, 2008) and is a concern in PK-12 public education that has received significantly more attention in the last decade. The U.S. Department of Education now cites teacher attendance as a “leading indicator” of school improvement and educational equity (“U.S. Department of Education,” 2013). There has also been increasing press around the number of school districts with problematic teacher attendance—called teacher absenteeism. Moreover, research on how to strategically address the issue is scarce, and best practices for improving teacher attendance have not been codified. As described above, teacher absence impacts schools, districts, staff, and students and compounds the negative effects of other systemic problems, like the national shortage of substitute teachers. The trend also raises critical questions about teacher engagement and the teaching profession in the U.S.

In the last five years, several reports have compared states’ and school districts’ rates of teacher attendance, and Rhode Island has received attention for having a high rate of teacher absenteeism. Miller (2012) reported that 50.2% of teachers in Rhode Island are absent more than 10 days in a school year, the highest absence rate among all states. My residency site, Providence Public School District (PPSD), is the largest school district in Rhode Island, and in the 2015-16 school year (SY15-16), 58% of teachers were absent more than 10 days and 87% of teacher assistants were absent more than 10 days (LaRocca, 2016). In PPSD, these rates of teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism negatively impact students’ achievement and experience. On any given day, students may

not have a qualified teacher in front of them, and those students who require a teacher assistant (including students with Individualized Educational Plans and 504s) may not receive the services they require—and which the District is legally obligated to provide. Furthermore, while some schools in PPSD have slightly better rates of attendance than others, the problem is District-wide.

Given this challenge, the question naturally emerges: What can PPSD do as a public school district to improve teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism? This Capstone focuses on the work I led in PPSD to answer this question. Specifically, my work centered on understanding and defining the problem through multiple measures and including teachers, teacher assistants, and principals in this process. In what follows, I will share my journey engaging schools and the District to unearth root causes of the teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism phenomenon. Throughout this Capstone, I argue that taking a diagnostic approach that includes those whom the problem affects most directly is a necessary first step in addressing the problem; doing so provides a nuanced understanding and engagement of the felt experiences and perspectives of stakeholders, which then can serve as the basis for creating effective interventions.

Providence Public School District

PPSD is an urban public school district of approximately 24,000 students and 41¹ schools, located in Providence, Rhode Island. The district is ethnically diverse: 64% of PPSD students are Hispanic, 17% are black, 9% are white, 5% are Asian, 3% are

¹ PPSD has two in-district charter schools, Times² STEM Academy and the Academy for Career Explorations. For most purposes, these schools lie outside PPSD oversight and policies, so this Capstone focuses on the 39 public schools in PPSD.

multiracial, and 1% are Native American (“About Us,” 2016). The District employs approximately 3,600 people, roughly 2,100 of whom are teachers and 600 of whom are teacher assistants. At the start of SY16-17, 21% of PPSD teachers identified as minority, and 35% of PPSD staff overall identified as minority (Human Resources, personal communication, November 2016). Like many urban districts, PPSD has had significant superintendent turnover, with four superintendents at the helm in the last decade. The current superintendent was appointed in April 2016 after serving one year as interim superintendent.

Rhode Island is also historically a pro-labor state with strong unions. In PPSD, there are three active and strong unions, and the vast majority (over 90%) of employees in PPSD are part of one of these three unions. The teachers are represented by the Providence Teachers Union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, while teacher assistants are part of Local 1033 of the Laborers’ International Union of North America, which represents public employees in multiple sectors across Rhode Island.

In accordance with metrics in the No Child Left Behind legislation, the federal government identified PPSD as an underperforming school district, and 21, or slightly more than half, of its schools were identified as in need of transformation. According to the Rhode Island Department of Education District Report Cards (2016), fewer than 25% of students in PPSD are proficient in English Language Arts and math at all levels of school. Subgroups within that total number of students have disparate levels of achievement, and overall, PPSD has a 76% graduation rate, which is the lowest graduation rate in the state of Rhode Island (*Rhode Island District Report Card: Providence*, 2016).

My role

I began my residency in PPSD in the summer of 2016 with a strategic project assignment of finding out what causes high rates of staff absenteeism across the District. This project was a first step in a larger, five-year strategic initiative around staff engagement. My work was housed in the Division of Human Resources, which is led by the Chief of Human Capital, who was hired to that position from outside the District in January 2015. In 2011, a former Human Resources director commissioned a report about teacher absenteeism and presented the findings to the Providence School Board. The Board posed many questions about the data sources and dismissed the issue in light of the District's uncertainty about how to calculate absence rates. Since then, absenteeism has been an issue that occasionally surfaced in PPSD at the Human Resources or school level, particularly regarding questions of substitute coverage and individual employee discipline, but the resources and attention given to the issue have been sporadic. Under the new Chief of Human Capital's leadership, a small committee of Human Resources and the Office of Research, Planning, and Accountability staff members was convened and charged with developing an understanding of the useable metrics for staff absenteeism in SY15-16.

Thus, when I began my residency at PPSD, the Chief of Human Capital had already identified staff absenteeism as an issue. She tasked me with leading the work to understand why people were absent and how it connected to the larger strategic initiative of staff engagement. As will be described, we quickly narrowed the initial focus of the project to teacher and teacher assistants, as these groups most directly impact students. Teacher assistants have the highest rate of absenteeism in PPSD; as a result, there was

particular urgency to address the issue with this group of employees in addition to teachers. Because the work was high-stakes and public-facing, I worked closely with the Chief of Human Capital throughout the project. This Capstone describes my efforts to lead and support PPSD in unearthing and understanding the root causes of teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism in a highly visible and politicized context.

Review of Knowledge for Action

Teachers are the most influential in-school factor for students, and personnel-related expenditures account for approximately 80% of costs incurred in PK-12 public education in the U.S. Given the importance of teachers, teacher absenteeism presents serious concerns for schools' ability to function effectively and efficiently and is a critical issue that is receiving increasing attention in districts across the country. The national average daily teacher absenteeism rate is 5.3% (Miller, 2012); in comparison, PPSD has significantly higher teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism.² In SY15-16, PPSD had an average daily teacher absenteeism rate of 11% and an average daily teacher assistant absenteeism rate of 18% (LaRocca, 2016). These rates have been consistent over the last three school years (LaRocca, 2016).

As noted in the Introduction, measuring and addressing teacher absenteeism is a nascent practice in U.S. public education and is a complicated issue. Thus, this Review of Knowledge for Action (RKA) asks the questions: *What is known about teacher absenteeism and employee engagement, and how might PPSD use the research to understand and address teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism?* This RKA reviews the research about teacher absenteeism, the current state of teacher absenteeism in the U.S., policies that impact teacher absenteeism, motivation and employee engagement theories, and possible frameworks whereby to make use of the research.

² Average daily absenteeism rate refers to the average percent of teachers who are absent in a school or district on any given day in a school year. The rate is calculated by dividing the total number of teacher absences in a year by the total number of teachers and total number of school days.

Teacher absenteeism

While many people make a “common sense” correlation between teacher absenteeism and its impact on students, there is little research on teacher absenteeism in education in the U.S. The existing research and reports about absenteeism in education in the U.S. do several things: demonstrate the effect of teacher absenteeism on student achievement and equity, describe the state of teacher absenteeism in the U.S., and/or analyze attendance or absenteeism policies. The studies provide insight, but there are few rigorous research studies and most of the studies have high internal but low external validity, meaning the results from the studies should not be generalized to other locations and situations. Still, the research base shows the impact of teacher absenteeism and raises ideas and questions about how practitioners have addressed absenteeism.

The impact of teacher absenteeism on student achievement and equity. Two prominent studies demonstrate that teacher absenteeism is an issue because of its impact on student achievement and on educational equity. Miller, Murnane, and Willett (2008) ask the fundamental question in the title of their article in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*: “Do Teacher Absences Impact Student Achievement?” The study analyzes longitudinal data on teacher attendance in Ormondale School District, an urban district in the U.S., and concludes, “10 additional days of teacher absence reduce student achievement in fourth-grade mathematics by at least 2.3% of a standard deviation” (p. 196). This impact is equivalent to the difference of having a novice teacher with one to two years of experience as opposed to having a teacher with three to five years of experience (Miller, Murnane, & Willett, 2008).

Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor (2007) ask a similar question in their National Bureau of Economic Research paper: “Are Teacher Absences Worth Worrying About in the U.S.?” They analyze statewide data for North Carolina regarding the frequency and impact of teacher absences, as well as policies that incentivize teacher attendance. The study descriptively shows that teachers with high rates of absence are more likely to serve low-income than high-income students. The article concludes that teacher absences are worthy of great concern specifically because of their correlation with equity in educational settings. The authors reinforce Miller, Murnane, and Willett’s (2008) findings that student achievement is negatively impacted by teacher absence.

Information from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR), whose purpose is to report data on public schools’ fulfillment of their obligation to provide equal educational opportunity, supports the conclusions of these studies and codifies them in a practitioner measure. The OCR included teacher absences in their Civil Rights Data Collection survey for the first time in 2009 and now collects this data annually from districts. The *2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look* (2016) is the original OCR report of teacher absence data and sets what is now a generally accepted, yet still novel, measure of teacher absence to be the percentage of teachers who are absent more than 10 days in a school year, following Miller, Murnane, and Willett’s (2008) conclusion. *A First Look* also concludes that students of color are more likely to attend schools where 50% of teachers are absent for more than 10 days (pp. 8-9) and raises questions about the correlation between students who are chronically absent and teachers who are absent more than 10 days. Based on this analysis and the negative impact that teacher absenteeism has on student achievement, the U.S. Department of

Education now calls teacher attendance a “leading indicator” of school improvement and educational equity (“U.S. Department of Education,” 2013).

The current state of teacher absenteeism in the U.S. With the established importance of teacher absenteeism in education, more recent reports compare states’ and school districts’ levels of teacher absence. A Center for American Progress paper (Miller, 2012) uses the OCR dataset to compare the rates of teacher absenteeism in different states. As previously noted, this reports concludes that 50.2% of teachers are absent more than 10 days in a school year in Rhode Island, which is the highest percentage in the U.S. (the lowest is Utah at 20.9%). Miller examines the data across the 50 states to determine patterns and trends and finds the majority of variation is between districts but within states (p. 7), meaning that the largest differences occur between districts in the same state. A third of the variation also happens within districts and Miller notes there are outstanding questions about why this occurs: “more research is needed, especially on within-district factors that shape absence behavior, including school leadership and professional norms. Such inquiry ... requires fine-grained absence data tied carefully to other information” (p. 3).

A recent National Council of Teacher Quality (NCTQ) report, *Roll Call: The Importance of Teacher Attendance* (2014), is also notable in its breadth: it compares absence data from 40 of the largest urban school districts in the U.S. for SY12-13. The report looks at patterns and trends across teacher attendance in these districts as well as policies around sick days, attendance incentives (such as a monetary bonus for perfect attendance), and absences. Instead of reporting the percent of teachers absent more than 10 days, the NCTQ report looks at the average number of days teachers in a district are

absent. According to the report, PPSD teachers are absent an average of 12.89 days each year, which is the eighth highest out of the 40 cities in the study and is the highest in New England (Joseph et al, 2014).

These two reports paint a picture of the current state of teacher absenteeism in the U.S., illustrate inconsistent definitions of absence, and raise (mostly unanswered) questions about what causes the absenteeism. That the reports define absenteeism slightly differently—as the percentage of teachers absent more than 10 days versus the average days a teacher in a district is absent in a year—shows a lack of sector standard for how teacher absenteeism is measured and discussed. The studies also make different decisions about what days are included in the absence total (e.g., whether professional development days count as absences), which again complicates comparison.

Policies that impact teacher absenteeism. There are also studies that demonstrate how district policies can have a statistically significant impact on teacher absenteeism. For example, one analyzes the success of an incentive plan in upstate New York that paid teachers an amount of money for each day they were absent less than the average number of the absences from the previous school year (Jacobson, 1989). The study shows the incentive policy had a positive impact, and “in one year, the average number of absences for teachers declined by almost two full days ... while the number of teachers with perfect attendance increased four-fold” (p. 285). Jacobson acknowledges several questions left unanswered, however, and notes that “while the study suggested that teachers were very responsive to the money offered by the plan, it didn’t explain *why* teachers responded as they did” (p. 286).

In her dissertation, Kristy Shockley (2012) collects data from Title I schools in a rural Tennessee district to determine whether “teachers’ gender, age, degree level, number of years’ experience, school level assignments, and the school’s Title I designation make a difference in the number of days teachers are absent” (p. 4). Shockley finds that female teachers are absent at a statistically significant higher rate than male teachers, but none of the other measured factors had a statistically significant impact.

In another recent dissertation, Sean Croft (2013) finds that Absence Feedback Interventions, which are letters that update a teacher on the amount of absences he/she has taken at different time intervals, had a statistically significant positive impact on reducing teacher absence in a school district, with the historically highest-level absence group showing the most impact. Croft says this “no-cost intervention to reduce teacher absences can save school districts a considerable amount of money, recover instructional days provided by the regular classroom teacher, and significantly alter the attendance behavior of historically high absence teachers” (p. viii). Similarly, Miller (2008) reports, “Another previously reported finding is particularly salient. Teachers who are required to report absences directly to their principal by telephone are absent less often than teachers who can report their absences indirectly via a centralized reporting center or a school-based message machine” (p. 196).³ Miller also notes that district-wide automated reporting systems might undercut school-level policies of principals asking employees to call them.

³ PPSD currently uses an online absence reporting system called Absence Management, hosted by Frontline Education.

Finally, the NCTQ study (2014) looks at the impact of policies across the 40 districts intended to incentivize attendance. While the report is primarily a compilation of data rather than a rigorous examination of the data, it concludes:

The common attendance incentives examined in this study did not have a significant impact on teacher attendance rates. Moving forward, therefore, union and district leaders may want to reexamine the time and money spent on current attendance incentives and to explore new, possibly more effective, efforts to support and improve teacher attendance. (p.14)⁴

As cited in Sparks (2016), Nithya Joseph, the Director for State and District Policy at NCTQ, additionally noted, “We just didn’t find any correlation between those policies and teacher absences. It sounded like it was more something related to school culture; it was anecdotal, but pretty consistent in the people we talked to.”

As a group, these studies highlight some district policies that can reduce teacher absenteeism. However, why these policies affect attendance rates is not clear; additionally, all of the studies have low external validity and their results should therefore not be generalized. They provide some ideas for addressing absenteeism in education and raise important questions about practitioner application, but as seen in the NCTQ study that looks across districts and does not find a pattern of policies that work, there is not a policy that is proven to consistently impact attendance throughout the sector.

As Joseph suggests, this inconsistency of impact may be attributable to school culture (Sparks, 2016). Although no studies directly link school culture and teacher attendance, Susan Moore Johnson has done significant research on a school

⁴ The incentive policies that the NCTQ study looked at include: carry over policy around sick leave, payment for unused sick leave at retirement, payment for unused sick leave at the end of the school year, rewarding excellent attendance with additional leave or compensation, restricting leave on specific dates, requiring medical certification for sick leave, and including teacher attendance as a measure in teacher evaluations.

environment's impact on teachers and their engagement. In a 2012 study, Johnson, Kraft, and Paypay find that work environment explains nearly 20% of the variation in teacher satisfaction and that it is a stronger predictor of job satisfaction than other factors. They also find that more supportive professional environments lead to greater student achievement. These results suggest that culture and the individual aspects of a school also contribute to engagement and to attendance as a byproduct of engagement.

Employee engagement: how absenteeism becomes an organizational culture

Jacobson, Gibson, and Ramming (1993) view teacher absenteeism from a sociological lens to investigate “how workplace norms are established through social interactions at individual schools, and how these norms come to influence individual and collective patterns of attendance” (p. 21) in four elementary schools in Western New York. They make the observation that “employee absenteeism is not inherently ‘hardwired’ into individuals ... but is rather socially invented in regard to organizational expectations” (p. 4). In other words, they argue, absenteeism is an outcome of the norms and culture of an organization.

This study suggests that absenteeism, in education and otherwise, is a subset of a larger construct, employee engagement, which is defined as “the emotional commitment the employee has to the organization and its goals” (Kruse, 2012). When employees are engaged, they use discretionary effort: they go the extra mile because they care about the work and achievement of the organization. Understanding how organizations engage employees overall and how absenteeism relates to engagement is therefore another helpful lens, particularly since there are no clear policy fixes for teacher absenteeism.

In their seminal book *Social Psychology of Absenteeism*, Chadwick-Jones, Nicholson, and Brown (1982) review the research on absenteeism in the overall workforce and provide a framework to explain the way the collective influences individual behavior and engagement. In particular, they focus on how absence is not just “an individual act of choice” (p. 1), and how “absenteeism levels reflect the social exchange within an organization” and absence is determined by “a normative frequency level within the group” (p. 11). Chadwick-Jones, Nicholson, and Brown’s research articulates the psychological contract workers make with their employers: “we must include the social context of norms or ideas shared by employees, and often by employers, about how many days an employee can reasonably be absent ... thus, we recognize some consensus between employees and collusion between employees and employers” (p. 55). Stated plainly, absenteeism is not just an individual or a one-way phenomenon; rather, it is a norm that is created and reinforced by the behavior and culture of an organization as a whole.

Motivation

Underlying employee engagement is motivation, which is why people do or do not want to do a work task. Fredrick Herzberg (2002) proposes the Motivator-Hygiene Theory, arguing “the things that make people satisfied and motivated on the job are different in kind for them than things that make them dissatisfied” (p. 2). For example, while a noisy office might make employees dissatisfied with their jobs, a quiet office environment will not make employees motivated in their work. Herzberg suggests “hygiene” factors of security, status, relationships with subordinates, personal life, relationships with peers, salary, work conditions, relationships with supervisor, and

supervision can make employees dissatisfied with their jobs. He differentiates these from “intrinsic motivators” that motivate employees and allow them to become more efficacious and invested in their work: company policy and administration, growth, advancement, responsibility, work itself, recognition, and achievement. These factors are described in more detail in Figure 1, below.

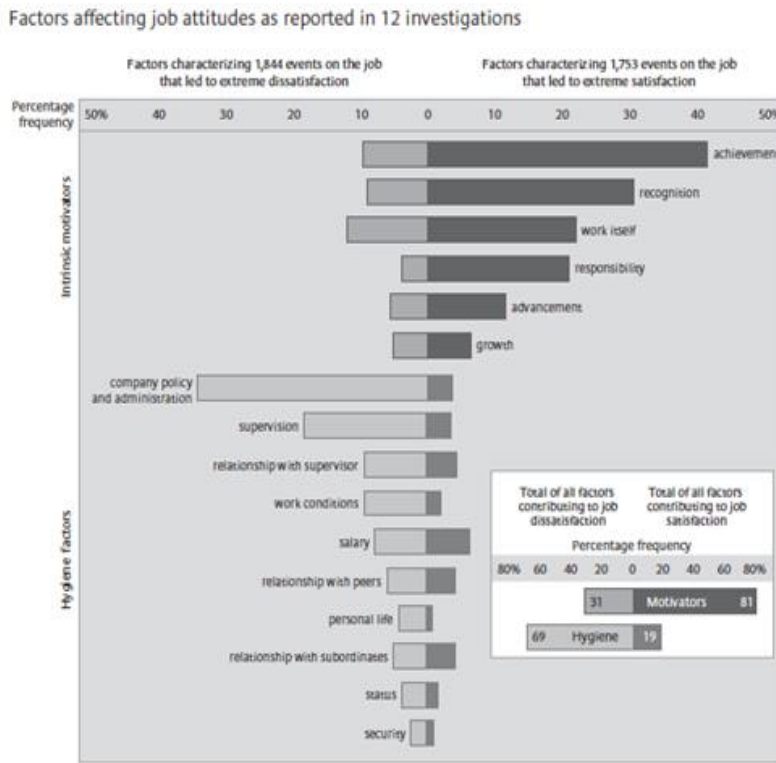


Figure 1. Herzberg’s proposed factors that affect job attitudes. The figure shows hygiene factors that lead to job dissatisfaction versus intrinsic motivators that lead to job satisfaction and motivation. (2002)

According to Herzberg, the only way to foster growth and engagement is to focus on the intrinsic motivators because, “People are motivated ... by interesting work, challenge, and increasing responsibility. These intrinsic factors answer people’s deep-seated need for growth and achievement” (p. 2). Incentives related to hygiene factors therefore do not stimulate motivation or growth; interventions should instead focus on the

factors of intrinsic motivation. This research calls into question whether previously-described policies that incentivize attendance through external rewards lead to sustained impact on absenteeism.

Other studies similarly indicate that autonomy (being able to make decisions about your work and time), mastery (being able to grow and develop), and purpose (doing meaningful work), rather than traditional “carrot and stick” compensation, motivate the 21st-century worker (Pink, 2009). In the *Oxford Book of Human Motivation*, which compiles the most recent research on motivation for employees, Grant and Shin (2012) describe the self-determination theory for employees. According to this, “employees have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the feeling of choice and discretion, competence refers to feeling capable and efficacious, and relatedness refers to feelings of connectedness and belongingness with others” (p. 511). The description of competence overlaps with Herzberg’s descriptions of the intrinsic motivators of growth and achievement, while the ideas of autonomy and relatedness extend the theory to suggest additional dimensions to how employees may be motivated.

Yale Law School professor Dan Kahan (2002) applies these ideas of motivation to public sector work and proposes a theory called the logic of reciprocity. He describes how individuals who are part of a collective are motivated to act either in their individual interests or in the interests of the collective, based on the group dynamics—on the perception of the collective and on how related people feel to each other. He says:

If ... individuals conclude that those around them are inclined to contribute, they’ll respond by contributing in kind, prompting still others to contribute, and so forth and so on until a highly cooperative state of affairs takes root. But if some individuals conclude that others are free-riding, then they will respond by free-

riding, too, spurring others to do the same, and so forth and so on until a condition of mass noncooperation becomes the norm. (pp. 5-6)

In other words, individual motivation is impacted by perception of collective motivation.

How to apply this research: what should PPSD do?

Kahan's description shows both how a collective can become entrenched in a negative interpersonal dynamic and also how people-centered and people-created the issue of teacher absenteeism is. Harvard Kennedy School professor Ronald Heifetz (1994) focuses on exactly this kind of problem, calling it an adaptive problem whose solution requires people to change their hearts and minds and to act differently as a result. Heifetz argues that in such circumstances, the true issue is likely not immediately evident, and careful diagnosis is a critical step: "the problem causing the distress frequently will not be on the surface" (1994, p. 254). To unearth the root cause, Heifetz proffers, "if one can get on the balcony instead of getting caught up in recreating the problem, one can seize the opportunity of using the organization as a case-in-point—a laboratory—for identifying challenges and inventing options for taking action outside, which is its aim." (p. 256).

Heifetz's perspective suggests that the first step to addressing a complex problem like teacher absenteeism—in which the causes and solutions are not immediately evident, there are many potential underlying motivations, and there is significant interaction between an individual and the collective—is to better understand it. He suggests focusing on the following diagnostic questions to define the problem more clearly:

1. What's causing the distress?
2. What contradictions or conflicts does the distress represent?
3. What are the histories of these contradictions and conflicts?

4. What perspectives and interests have I and others come to represent to various segments of the community that are now in conflict?
5. In what ways are we in the organization or working group mirroring the problem dynamics in the community? (p. 258)

Truly engaging in this kind of diagnostic process will yield vital information that allows an organization to understand the hearts and minds aspect of an issue and therefore address change at the root cause level.

Heifetz's approach makes particular sense in relation to teacher absenteeism. In a recent article in *The Washington Post* (Matos, 2016), Randi Weingarten, the current President of the American Federation of Teachers, said about teacher absenteeism: "The data also doesn't address some other basic conditions faced by teachers—the stress, the need to work beyond the school day and the juggling of work and home that interferes more with their family life than most professions. To better address absenteeism, we need to understand root causes." Heifetz's diagnostic process is a way of unearthing root causes and engaging both individuals and the organization in understanding them.

Anthony Bryk from the Carnegie Foundation similarly advocates for an approach called improvement science and suggests that understanding the system will provide a critical view into how the system produces that problem. He says:

To move forward, we must step back; we must try to understand how the system actually works to produce the problematic outcomes we currently see. Such critical analysis can provoke the kinds of difficult conversations that people tend to avoid. The desire to jump ahead to discuss new ideas and possible solutions is understandable. In fact, we have seen a number of groups' first attempts at articulating a problem statement phrased as the absence of some favored solution! These solution-centered conversations provide at best only a partial view of the system in operation, leaving critical features of the system unexamined. (2010, Kindle Location 2730)

Focusing on defining the problem before solutions should therefore yield more authentic solutions.

Finally, a recent study by Reed, Goolsby, and Johnston (2016) shows that “employees who perceive work environments as being facilitative of interactive communication between and among employees respond with heightened attachments to organizations” (p. 326). Reed, Goolsby, and Johnston (2016) conclude that “nurturing positive listening environments, and facilitating employee perceptions of being heard and valued, contributes to a subsequent willingness to attach to an organization” (p. 337). Therefore, utilizing Heifetz’s diagnostic process in a way that seeks to truly listen and understand employees also can impact employee engagement and make those employees feel both more valued by, and more attached to, the organization. Based on the underlying research around motivation and employee engagement, this listening and diagnostic approach can serve a twofold goal in addressing absenteeism: understanding the causes and simultaneously beginning to address a potential cause.

Theory of Action

While this research shows there are potential policies or structures to address teacher absenteeism in education, it is also clear there are outstanding questions about what causes absenteeism in the first place and therefore why interventions do not consistently work. In addition, the research about employee engagement and motivation suggests there are complex and multi-faceted root causes of teacher absenteeism and that various parties—the individual and the collective, as well as the employees and the employer—contribute to the norm of accepted absenteeism in organizations. Other frameworks, namely adaptive change by Heifetz (1994), suggest that PPSD’s first step should be to truly understand the problem. My theory of action for leading PPSD in understanding and addressing its teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism is as follows:

If I

- Collaborate with the Research, Planning, and Accountability Office to look at the data of the past three years of teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism in PPSD,
- Gather data about the root causes of teacher and teacher assistance absenteeism through multiple means that promote individual and collective input and measure hygiene and intrinsic motivator factors,
- Triangulate this qualitative and quantitative data to identify the patterns and trends around root causes of absenteeism,
- Communicate what was heard back to teachers and teacher assistants, and
- Work closely with the Chief of Human Capital and the Superintendent's Cabinet to make sense of this data through the lens of Heifetz and to determine solutions to address teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism based on this diagnosis,

Then I and PPSD leadership

- Will begin to engage teachers and teacher assistants in a different way,
- Will learn the root causes of absenteeism in PPSD and therefore be able to determine the most authentic and efficacious next steps to address teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism, and
- Will know whether teachers and teacher assistants feel more engaged by being part of this diagnostic process, thereby pressure testing this approach for future District use, especially in relation to staff engagement.

Description, Evidence, and Analysis of the Strategic Project

The What and How

As described in the Theory of Action, this project was designed to unearth and understand the root causes of teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism and to engage stakeholders in defining the problem. The following section describes what happened and how I led the project.

Quantitative data work with Research, Planning, and Accountability Office.

During the third week in July, I met with the Research, Planning, and Accountability Office (RPA), which is the office in PPSD that compiles and analyzes data and then provides that data to schools and the District. As a result of that meeting, I convened a committee of RPA and Human Resources staff that met biweekly. I decided it was important to include those who had previously worked on absenteeism in PPSD as they held critical knowledge about how the work had previously been done and could continue the work past my residency. The cross-divisional group could also provide multiple perspectives on the work. The group included the Executive Director of Systemwide Performance, who was a part of the Human Resources-commissioned report on teacher absenteeism in 2011 and who was part of the committee on teacher absenteeism during SY15-16; the Human Resources Manager, who was also involved in the SY15-16 teacher absenteeism committee; a Data Specialist; and a Data Coach. I facilitated our biweekly meetings and used the time to review the data work that had previously been done around teacher absenteeism, to workshop current data questions around absenteeism, and to source multiple perspectives on the teacher absenteeism work.

As part of the quantitative work, I also spent significant time working with Absence Management, PPSD's attendance management system and vendor partner. I used Absence Management to look at the data in different ways to see if doing so yielded different insights. For example, I calculated the average daily absence rates for different schools as well as the percentage of different absence reasons for each school year (e.g., sick versus personal days).

Multiple source data gathering. Because there are several outstanding questions about what causes absenteeism issues in education, we made the foundational leadership decision to slow the work down and understand the issue before acting on it. I advocated for a process that involved teachers, teacher assistants, and principals in defining the problem since they are stakeholders in the problem. I then led the design and execution of multiple data collections. In doing so, I increased the range of modalities by and circumstances in which someone might give information, with the intent that this flexibility would increase respondents' psychological safety and would lead to high-quality data. The data collection focused on collective and individual norms and hygiene and motivation factors, as defined by Herzberg (2002), that I hypothesized as impactful. We also focused and revised the data collection over time based on the early results. Below, I describe my leadership in relation to each data source.

Principal focus groups and visits. I participated in kick-off meetings with four previously established principal cohorts at the end of the summer. The meetings lasted two hours, and their purpose was for central office staff to introduce SY16-17 initiatives, one of which was reducing teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism, to principals. Human Resources was allotted 40 minutes per cohort to preview the SY16-17 work most

relevant to principals and schools, including the focus on staff engagement. As part of this time, I conducted a focus group with each principal cohort. See Appendix A for the focus group questions.

Nearly all principals attended their respective cohort meeting. The focus group questions concentrated on staff absenteeism overall (subsequently, we narrowed the focus of the project to teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism, in part because of the principals' points about the importance of teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism). Depending on how principals directed the conversation, I prioritized asking questions around the causes of teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism.

Following these cohort focus groups, I reached out to all principals to set up a time for the Chief of Human Capital and I to visit each of the 39 schools and spend an hour with each principal. These meetings spanned September through November, and their primary purpose was for the Chief of Human Capital to holistically understand the ways principals use and would like to use the Division of Human Resources. In total, we met with 37 out of the 39 principals. We did not meet with two principals due to multiple scheduling conflicts. During each visit, I asked the principal to reflect on what he/she perceived to impact and cause teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism in his/her school. The intent was to give principals a second chance to respond to the prompts from the focus group and to allow principals the opportunity to talk about individual instances and/or management of absenteeism in their schools.

School-based and District-wide focus groups. Additionally, we asked each principal to lead a focus group at his/her school around teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism. As part of each school visit, we previewed the focus group with individual

principals and discussed the purpose of involving multiple stakeholders in defining the problem of absence and doing this at the school level to allow as much voice as possible. In early October, I emailed principals facilitation guidelines that I wrote (see Appendix B) and average daily attendance by school for SY15-16, as well as individual data around their respective school's attendance, which I calculated with the support of RPA. Principals had approximately one month to complete the focus group and return their notes. I tried to strike a critical balance between providing materials for principals, both to ensure similar implementation across the District and in acknowledgement of their workload, and allowing autonomy in implementation. For example, I asked principals to choose the venue that made the most sense for them to conduct the focus group so as to allow them a degree of psychological safety and to not repeat work. Principals chose a variety of venues through which to conduct the focus group: some did it with their entire faculty, some used their Instructional Leadership Teams, and some created a group specifically for this work. As part of the focus group work, we asked each school to pick a representative to attend a round of District-wide focus groups.

As discussed further below, completion of the templates was variable, and 15 of 39 schools nominated a representative to the District-wide meetings. Some principals told me their teachers were overcommitted and did not have bandwidth to be part of another committee. I heard this feedback as an important signal from the principals that forcing participation would not yield more engagement. As a result, I communicated my concern to the Chief of Human Capital, and we revised the process to be one District-wide focus group for those nominated representatives. I invited the 15 representatives to a District-

wide focus group in December, and four of those representatives attended the session, which I facilitated.

Teacher and teacher assistant survey. In early November, I sent out a survey to teacher and teacher assistants that focused on how they experience teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism in schools. I created the survey (see Appendix C) in collaboration with RPA and the Chief of Human Capital, and we spent several weeks refining it. The Chief of Human Capital also shared the survey with the President of the Providence Teachers Union (PTU) and the Business Manager of Local 1033 (the teacher assistant union) before we sent it out to teachers and teacher assistants. PTU suggested no changes to the questions on the survey and thought it was a good idea; 1033 similarly agreed the survey was acceptable. We sent the survey to approximately 2,100 teachers and approximately 600 teacher assistants, and it remained open for 10 days. All responses were anonymous.

To provide a baseline for current engagement, the survey included a question that asked respondents to rate their level of hope that PPSD could improve attendance. Using the research noted in the RKA about how both the individual and the collective contribute to the norms around absenteeism, the survey also asked both teachers and teacher assistants to comment on the reasons for their own attendance and on their perceptions of the reasons for others' attendance. The questions were intentionally phrased to capture how teachers and teacher assistants perceive the collective norms around attendance. The survey then asked four open-ended questions around how teacher and teacher assistant attendance might be improved and asked respondents to imagine themselves in the role of

being in charge of improving attendance and asked what they might do (again using RKA research about autonomy and motivation factors to drive question formation).

Interviews. The end of the survey included an ask for teachers and teacher assistants who were interested in participating in an interview to reach out to me. While this method of identifying interview candidates limited the pool of possible interviewees to people who participated in the survey and further to people who were willing to self-identify as interested in an interview, we decided it was the most authentic way to solicit volunteers. We discussed the possible pitfalls of otherwise identifying individuals (particularly those who may have poor attendance) for interviews and decided that self-identification was the best engagement strategy. I scheduled and conducted individual interviews with the 10 teachers (out of a possible 829 who completed the survey) who volunteered. No teacher assistants volunteered. See Appendix D for the interview protocol.

Triangulation of data. By the middle of December, I completed all of the above described methods of quantitative and qualitative data collection. The different modes produced significant data, both in relation to the content of the questions and the process itself. To make sense of the qualitative data in the survey, I determined data codes (with the assistance of RPA as a checkpoint for my biases), which are a way of distilling qualitative information. One code for example, was “causes of absence” and included different reasons that survey respondents ascribed to absences, such as the poor conditions of buildings or that students are frequently sick (see Appendix E for the list of codes). Using the qualitative data analysis software Dedoose, I coded the survey data. I then triangulated these results with data from the focus groups and the interviews to

determine patterns and trends, particularly in relation to the research question of the root causes of absenteeism and what PPSD might do about it. I also triangulated the data about how people engaged in the different modes of data collection.

Communication of data back to teacher and teacher assistants. In early January, I wrote an email that we sent from the Chief of Human Capital to all staff thanking them for their participation in the diagnostic process and informing them that the District was taking time to understand and analyze the data. As of early February, we have determined two dates in March where the Chief of Human Capital will share the information back with principals in the same cohorts in which we conducted the focus groups. We also have two dates scheduled in late March when the Chief of Human Capital will share the information back to teachers.

The Chief of Human Capital and I regularly talked about how to best communicate the information that we learned in the diagnostic process. Although the sharing of this information is happening slightly later than originally envisioned, we decided that communicating the findings in an interactive manner (as opposed to writing an email or utilizing another traditional communication mode) is vital, for it encompasses and demonstrates some of the District's learning that happened during the project. This decision represents how the District is refining and pivoting its approach based on the information gathered through this process.

Working with the Chief of Human Capital and PPSD leadership to make sense of the data. Throughout the entirety of the project, I provided regular updates to both the Chief of Human Capital and the Superintendent about the project's progress and what we were hearing in the data. The Chief of Human Capital and I also worked

collaboratively on several of the facilitation and communication elements as she has a greater understanding of the context of PPSD. For instance, I revised the draft of the survey to incorporate the Chief of Human Capital’s feedback. I also produced several deliverables for the Chief of Human Capital; for example, I wrote a memo summarizing the research behind absenteeism so that the Chief was informed and could reference this data whenever absenteeism came up in her work. In early February, I presented the findings and next steps of the absenteeism work to the Cabinet and facilitated a discussion about the meaning of the results and the implications for PPSD.⁵

Evidence to Date

Figure 2 illustrates the different phases of the strategic project and how the work unfolded.

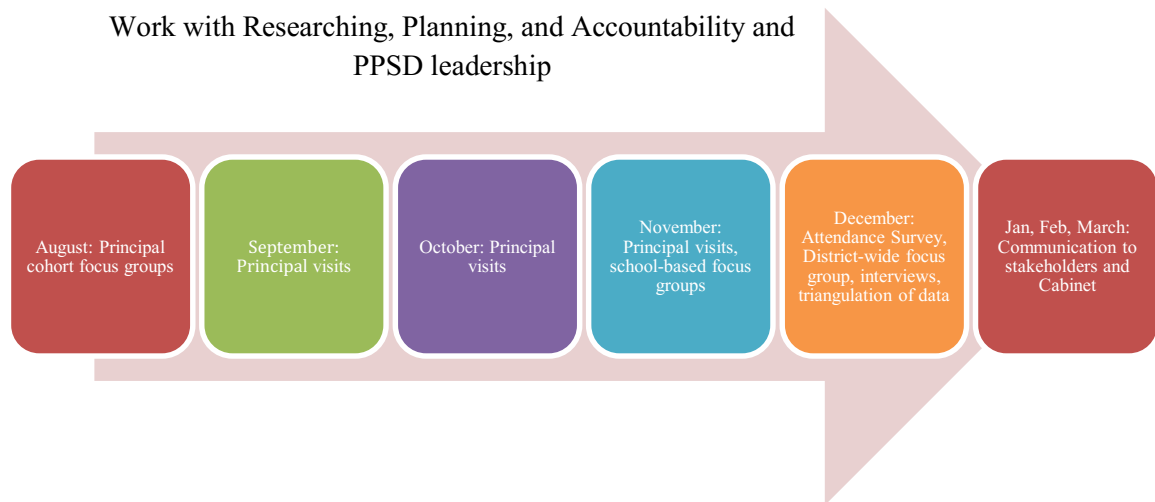







Figure 2. Timeline of attendance strategic project. This timeline shows the chronological sequence and phases of the different pieces of work in my strategic project.

⁵ The Superintendent’s Cabinet is the leadership team that advises on and makes decisions for the District. It is composed of the Superintendent, the four Chiefs in the District (Chief of Human Capital, Chief Transformation Officer, Chief Academic Officer, and Chief of Administration), and the Financial Manager.

Figure 3 summarizes the success rate and major results of my theory of action to date. As will be discussed, the diagnostic process produced a wealth of information about both the root causes of attendance issues and the current level of engagement in PPSD, and there are promising indications that our work to date is creating conditions in which the District can successfully address absenteeism and implement authentic solutions. As noted, however, further data that will be gathered during the communication back to stakeholders will also be critical to determining the success of the “then” statements.

Theory of action “If” statements	Success to date	Major results
Collaborate with the Research, Planning, and Accountability Office to look at the data of the past three years of teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism in PPSD		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyzed average daily attendance rates for all groups for SY13-14, SY14-15, and SY15-16 Codified business rules for how attendance is calculated in PPSD Analyzed the range of absence in PPSD, including a comparison to national absence breakdowns Designed and analyzed Attendance Survey Designed and piloting an Attendance Tracking Tool for principals
Gather data about the root causes of teacher and teacher assistance absenteeism through multiple means that promote individual and collective input and measure hygiene and intrinsic motivator factors		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus groups with 36 of 39 PPSD principals One-on-one discussions with 37 of 39 PPSD principals around attendance 35 school-based focus groups District-wide focus group with four participants 40% teacher and 16% teacher assistant response to survey 10 teacher interviews
Triangulate this qualitative and quantitative data to identify the patterns and trends around root causes of absenteeism		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Used qualitative data software, Dedoose, to code qualitative questions from survey and produce reports about patterns and trends Triangulated all data sources and identified patterns and trends from all data sources
Communicate what was heard back to teachers and teacher assistants, and		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emailed staff thanking them for their engagement in data gathering and sharing next steps for District Scheduled dates for sharing information back with principals, teachers, and teacher assistants; delay in original timeline

<p>Work closely with the Chief of Human Capital and the Superintendent’s Cabinet to make sense of this data through the lens of Heifetz and to determine solutions to address teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism based on this diagnosis,</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularly updated the Chief of Human Capital and Superintendent on the results of the project • Presented and facilitated discussions with Chief of Human Capital, Superintendent, and Cabinet to share data patterns and make decisions about PPSD next steps • Commitment to teacher absenteeism interventions and metrics through five-year strategic plan
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Theory of action “Then” statements:	Success to date	Major results
<p>Will begin to engage teachers and teacher assistants in a different way,</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variable but meaningful response rates and engagement across data sources • No feedback mechanisms built in around processes of data gathering/listening • Follow through from District on all aspects of the project, including communication back to stakeholders
<p>Will learn the root causes of absenteeism in PPSD and therefore be able to determine the most authentic and efficacious next steps to address teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism,</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple qualitative and quantitative data points that overlap to show root causes of absenteeism from multiple stakeholder perspectives • Chief of Human Capital and Cabinet receptive to recommendations for addressing root causes
<p>Will know whether teachers and teacher assistants will feel more engaged by being part of this diagnostic process, thereby pressure testing their approach for future District use, especially in relation to staff engagement</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main feedback mechanism of reporting back to principals, teachers, and teacher assistants delayed until after the completion of this Capstone so success not yet clear • Variable but meaningful response rates and engagement across data sources (see Figure 5 for more details about engagement levels) • Metrics not established at outset of project to measure engagement

Figure 3. Success of theory of action to date. This table shows the different parts of my Theory of Action for this strategic project, rates the level of success to date, and notes specific pieces of evidence that uphold that assessment.

Quantitative work with RPA. The quantitative work with RPA yielded many different and useful views of the data on teacher and teacher assistant attendance. For example, our work produced business rules for calculating and understanding absenteeism in PPSD for use by current and future staff so that PPSD is consistently defining and measuring absenteeism in the same way. In specific reference to the question for what PPSD might do about teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism, my work with RPA also produced a histogram of teacher absences for SY15-16 (see Appendix F). I found there is a concentration of teachers with 10-19 days of absence in PPSD. Since my RKA summarizes the research that teacher absence greater than 10 days impacts student achievement, the teachers with 10-19 days may be one high-leverage area where PPSD can target interventions.

Similarly, the data work with RPA allowed us to understand what data was available regarding absenteeism and to consider how to make that data more useful for principals in PPSD. For example, with the guidance of our working group, RPA built a tool through Tableau, a data visualization program, which shows staff absence information for a school in a much more user-friendly way than was previously available. This Attendance Tracking Tool allows principals to more easily identify patterns and trends in the data and to see these at the individual and school level. We are piloting this tool in the spring to refine it for roll-out in SY17-18, with the hope that it will better equip principals to have data-informed conversations about attendance with their staffs.

Multiple source data gathering. *Principal focus groups and visits.* The principal focus groups and one-on-one visits showed a wide range of building-level practices around and experiences with attendance. Some principals noted they do not see

attendance as a problem in their building (often with the exception of one or a few employees), while others noted that it is a constant concern.⁶ Some principals reported that they have practices to track attendance and have regular individual staff conversations about it, but the vast majority noted they would like data and guidance from Human Resources around how to have attendance-related conversations. Principals also identified a range of reasons as the root causes of absenteeism, captured in Figure 4 below.

In relation to the process, several principals specifically noted that Human Resources staff have never visited their school before, nor engaged principals on questions of how they can best be supported by the Division of Human Resources on issues like absenteeism. One principal said, “I have been in the District for over 20 years and I have not seen HR [Human Resources] in this kind of supportive role before” (personal communication, November 1, 2016). A few principals also expressed reticence about convening their staff for a focus group on absenteeism and cited a range of reasons, including the time commitment, the challenge of discussing a difficult topic, and fear of not creating the right atmosphere.

School-based and District-wide focus groups. The school-based focus groups had mixed implementation. By the submission deadline, only 15 schools had sent their results in. After I prompted all principals by email and then some stragglers individually, a final total of 35 of 39 schools turned in completed templates for the focus group results.

⁶ The principal’s perception of whether attendance was a widespread problem in his/her school was generally accurate. As noted, some schools in PPSD do have better attendance than other schools, and 16 schools have average daily attendance rates better than the District average. However, all schools in PPSD also have a higher rate of absence than the national average, and the RPA data analysis completed thus far has not shown a clear pattern of why some schools have higher rates of absence than others.

While this is a high percentage of final completion, the fidelity with which each principal/school completed the template varied. Some included a range of faculty opinions; other templates were only half completed. Even with email prompting, only 15 of the 39 schools nominated a person to attend the second-round focus group. Most who nominated a representative also submitted their template on time. Overall, the school-based focus groups yielded similar information to the principal focus group, with the additional question of what counted as absences (e.g., whether professional development or long-term sick leave counted as absences).

Our original plan was to convene two additional rounds of focus groups in which we would ask what we thought would be the 39 representatives to share their school's results. However, given the low number of nominated representatives and the feedback from principals about staff being overcommitted, I interpreted these signals as signs of either potential disinterest in doing a focus group or potential disengagement from the process and concluded that forcing a tiered focus group approach would not yield more engagement.⁷ I advocated to the Chief of Human Capital for doing one District-wide focus group instead.

I invited the 15 representatives chosen to an afternoon focus group in early December. In total, four female teachers showed up for the focus group. I led the focus group in a discussion of the similarities and differences across their school results and shared the findings from the school-based focus groups, the survey, and the data analysis. After the group reacted to these findings, I allowed the group to direct the conversation

⁷ Teachers and teacher assistants may also have felt they have sufficient opportunity to respond to the issue of absenteeism through the survey and/or may have had poor experiences of volunteering for input opportunities in the past. The exact reason for the low number of representatives is unclear because I did not include feedback mechanisms on the process itself, as I will discuss further.

and I asked clarifying and probing questions when necessary. The conversation quickly moved to the feelings of teachers being underappreciated and disrespected. One focus group participant noted the synthesis of the information as, “What I’m hearing tonight is a lot of different examples of teachers feeling unappreciated, and it explodes from there.”

The most important information the focus group yielded, however, was around the engagement of PPSD teachers in District initiatives overall, including but not exclusive to absenteeism. One focus group participant asked whether the focus group was open to all staff in the District, and I confirmed that each school had the opportunity to nominate a representative and be part of the group. The focus group participant noted that the fact that there were only four people there showed that, “People don’t give a sh*t. They know that nothing is going to get done and are thinking, I don’t want to waste my time.” This comment sparked a conversation in which the focus group participants noted how many initiatives they and their colleagues have seen from PPSD and how little follow-through or support there has been for any initiative. While the sample size of this group was very small, the small sample size itself served as an important data point that instigated this observation.

Survey. In total, 926 individuals completed the survey; 829 respondents were teachers and 97 were teacher assistants. This represents approximately a 40% response rate from teachers and a 16% response rate from teacher assistants. See Appendix H for full survey results.⁸

⁸ There are clear limitations of the sample overall. As noted, while 40% of teachers responded, the sample may be biased for those who are already engaged enough to have chosen to respond or for those who have strong opinions, either negative or positive. In addition, we discovered after closing the survey that teacher assistants have less regular access to computers than teachers, which may be why they responded at a lower rate than teachers. While these are important caveats, the sample size is significantly larger than most responses to internal PPSD surveys, and because this is a practice-informing project rather than a research study, the limitations of the data are less significant than the overall engagement the survey showed.

Most informative were the responses and trends gleaned from the open-ended questions. Teachers' responses to question 10 about teacher assistants (If you were put in charge of improving teacher assistant attendance in PPSD, what would you do?) and teacher assistants' responses overall stood out as distinctly different. A significant number of teachers reported that they do not know anything about teacher assistants and questioned why they were being asked about others' attendance. Of those who did offer responses, many noted that teacher assistants need to be paid more and/or that their role is unclear and requires further definition, none of which were factors reported regarding teacher attendance. Additionally, many of the teacher assistant responses were noticeably shorter than teacher responses—several responded to the open ended questions with simply an X instead of an elaborated answer. Due to these differences and to the low sample size of teacher assistants, I chose to separate this information from teacher responses and to draw separate conclusions about teacher assistants as result.

In reviewing the data from the other three open-ended questions, I observed that respondents frequently did not discern between the questions 8, 9, and 11, which were:

8. Please explain the factors that contribute to the answer you chose about how supported you feel in your job.

9. If you were put in charge of improving teacher attendance in PPSD, what would you do?

11. Is there anything else you would like the District to know about attendance and/or how it can be improved?

Responses were similar across these three questions. As a result, I clustered the responses to these three questions and looked at the patterns and trends that emerged through coding the open-ended responses in Dedoose. Respondents frequently attempted to

explain the causal mechanism between issues and articulated various emotions, including stress and frustration. The following quote exemplifies such complexity:

As a 30+ year veteran, I know that my job is challenging, but the amount of paperwork, computer work and data entry, coupled with the stresses put on us by a much more challenging population is making my job impossible this year. Coming in early, staying late, often until 5:30 and bringing work home, I have yet to “catch up” this year. It is the first time I have honestly thought of taking a mental health day because I am so overwhelmed. Good teachers don’t have enough hours in the day to effectively teach, manage and run small group differentiated learning, keep up on data, give and score assessments, reflect and rewrite lessons, and function. Until you provide more planning time, or cut down on our workload, the problem will only worsen. Coupled with the fact that you have some teachers who are constantly out without good reason, causing splits or having us miss breaks (also a stress, one more period to not get work done). And the other end, colleagues who are terminally ill, and we are coping with that stress too.

The two most frequently identified root causes of absenteeism were the relationship to administration (defined as the principal and/or the District) and problematic student behavior. Equally important, however, several survey respondents noted that attendance is not a problem in their school and instead noted that the relationship with administration and collegial support positively impacted their attendance.

The open-ended responses also included many ideas for solutions, particularly as one question asked for solution ideas for teacher attendance. While these solutions were offered as such, the solution ideas also offer insight into the problem itself. Suggestions to improve working conditions, such as allowing more flexibility in the daily schedule, in turn suggest a possible root cause for why absenteeism is a problem: there is not enough flexibility in the daily schedule. The two most frequently cited ideas for improving attendance were improving working conditions and incentivizing attendance.

Finally, the survey’s open-ended questions included comments about the process and/or the survey itself that are useful in understanding the leadership around this project.

Some respondents noted that they felt they should not be asked about other employees' attendance, that the survey was disheartening or insulting, and/or questioned what was included in the attendance data. Figure 4 pictorially represents the major themes that emerged from the survey. The larger the text, the more often the word appeared in responses.

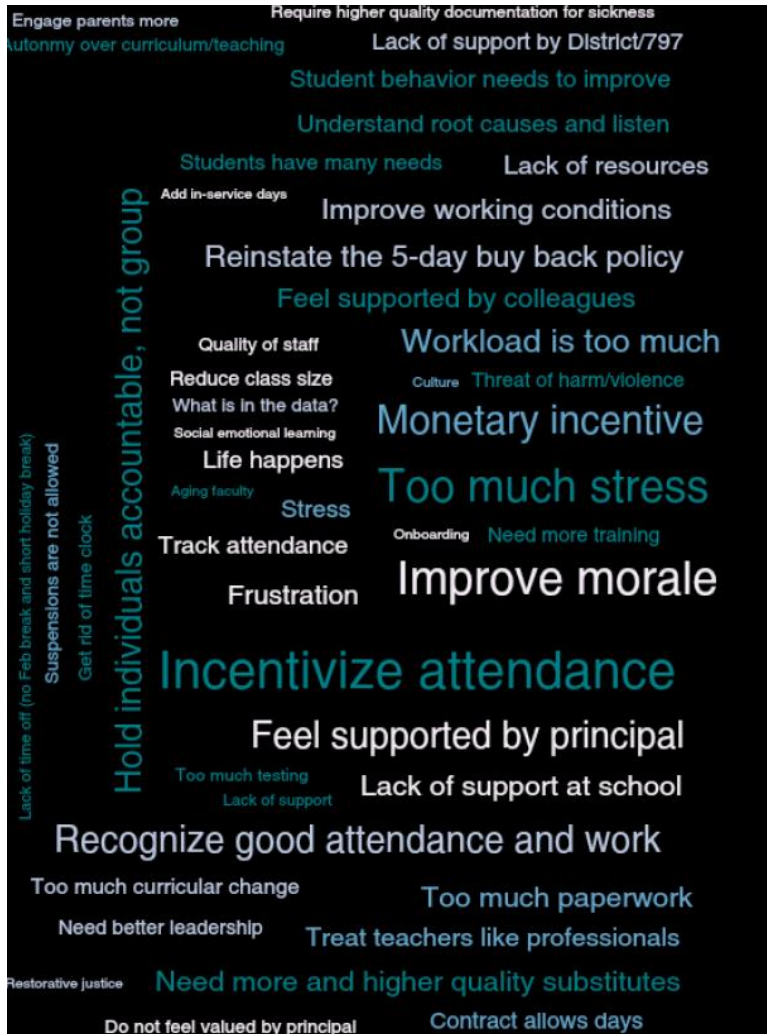


Figure 4. Word cloud of teacher responses to the Attendance Survey. The larger the words appear in this word cloud, the more frequently the words appeared in all teachers' answers to the open-ended questions in the Attendance Survey.

Interviews. I conducted 10 teacher interviews. Three of these interviews were with Consulting Teachers, who are identified master teachers who work with other teachers across PPSD. The other six were with teachers spanning elementary to high school. No teacher assistants volunteered or were interviewed.

Eight of the 10 interviewees spoke about the workload of teachers in PPSD and how this stresses and drains teachers to the point of illness and exhaustion or to the point of having to take time off of work to catch up on the work itself. Six of the 10 also described the lack of support for teachers around working with students who have special needs, English Language Learner needs, and/or social emotional needs. Finally, seven of the 10 spoke about the lack of substitutes in PPSD and how this exacerbates absences because it creates a self-perpetuating absence cycle. In an illustrative example, one teacher was called to cover a classroom for an absent teacher while I was interviewing him during his free period. In another interview, a teacher was on the brink of tears twice, as she talked about how overwhelmed and under-supported she felt. While these interviewees were a self-selected group, they were willing to engage in self- and systemic reflection and to talk about what can be a challenging topic.

Triangulation of data. There was a difference between the types of data that we gathered through the principal discussions, the school-based focus groups, District-wide focus group, and interviews versus the survey, as well as how people engaged through these different modes. The survey stands out for its high level of engagement and apparent candor about relationships in the District, while the other modes showed some measures of compliance and the responses focused on structures around attendance in the

District. Figure 5 summarizes the engagement levels, and Figure 6 summarizes the root causes identified through the various data collections, in order of frequency.

Data source	Engagement level
Focus groups with PPSD principals	Four focus groups with 36 of 39 PPSD principals
1:1 discussion with principals around attendance	37 of 39 PPSD principals
School-based focus groups	35 school-based focus groups completed; 15 by initial deadline; 15 nominated district-wide representative Variable completion of template
District-wide focus group	4 out of 15 nominated participants
Survey	40% teacher response rate with long open-ended responses Anonymous
1:1 teacher interviews	10 out of 829 survey respondents

Figure 5. Summary of engagement in attendance strategic project data collection. This figure shows the engagement level in the six different data-gathering modalities.

Data source	Root Causes of Absenteeism
Principal cohort focus groups and interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lenient collective bargaining agreement • Entitlement mindset • Not the same incentive with the change in the buyback scheme • Lack of substitutes • No accountability • Poor building conditions • No recognition for good attendance • Staff get injured and are out with on-the-job injury or workers' compensation • Easy to report absence • Cyclical nature of absence • Individuals, not entire faculty • Aging staff with health needs
School-based focus groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of substitutes • Not the same incentive with the change in the buyback scheme; “use them or lose them” aspect of contract • Paperwork and overall workload; burn out • Student behavior • Poor building conditions • No recognition • No accountability for people who have attendance problems

Data source	Root Causes of Absenteeism
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life happens (people and/or family members get sick) • Professional development/continuing education require time out of school • Cyclical nature of absence
District-wide focus group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No follow through from PPSD Central Office on initiatives • Lack of respect and recognition in schools and from District • Overworked and under-supported; overall workload • Poor building conditions
Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administration relationship • Lack of recognition or incentive • Poor building conditions • Student behavior • Paperwork and overall workload; burn out • Culture • Life happens (people and/or family members get sick) • Students get sick and spread germs • Collective bargaining agreement allows for high number of sick days • Lack of time off (no February break and short holiday break) • Aging faculty
1:1 interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administration relationship • Lack of substitutes • Paperwork and overall workload; burn out • Students have many needs that are not met • Cyclical pattern of absence

Figure 6. Summary of root causes for absenteeism by data source. This figure lists the root causes identified for absenteeism in each data source by descending order of frequency.

Communication of data back to teacher and teacher assistants. As noted, the communication back was the most emergent part of the project, and we decided to schedule this communication after the completion of this Capstone. This decision means we do not yet have conclusive information about how engaged teachers and teacher assistants felt by the process. However, the design and form of this communication is informed by what we heard both about the root causes and about the process in the diagnostic work of this project and therefore represents the District being responsive to and reflective on the learning.

Working with Chief of Human Capital and PPSD leadership to make sense of the data. As noted previously, I worked closely with the Chief of Human Capital in planning all aspects of this project because it was public-facing and high-stakes. I also provided project updates to the Superintendent and Chief of Human Capital in my regular meetings with each. Throughout the course of the project, the Chief of Human Capital was particularly interested in knowing the root causes of why staff were absent, and the Superintendent was focused on the political nature of the problem. In early January, I presented the findings of the triangulated data of the entire project to the Chief of Human Capital and made recommendations, based on the data and the research, for next steps. In particular, I highlighted both the pattern of root causes and the *way* teachers, teacher assistants, and principals engaged in the different aspects of the diagnostic process and what questions and learnings emerged as a result.

At a Cabinet meeting in early February, I similarly presented the total results of the attendance work, highlighting why the issue matters, what we did, what we heard, and what the next steps are based on that. The Cabinet was receptive to the data and resulting Division of Human Resources initiatives, which include a recognition program, management training for principals, more relevant professional development, recruitment and training of substitute teachers, and ideas for the collective bargaining agreement negotiations. The results did not seem to surprise the Cabinet members and rather reinforced previous experiences and findings. One Chief noted, “This raises the question of the deeper stuff on how we are valuing educators each and every day and why we need to scaffold the work” (personal communication, February 13, 2017).

After the discussion around attendance, the Chief of Transformation presented findings from the District-wide Gallup Q12 Engagement Survey, which is part of the larger strategy around staff engagement and was administered for the first time in PPSD in SY16-17. The results dovetail with the attendance findings, and as recognition emerged from both as a key lever for change, the Cabinet briefly brainstormed about possible recognition strategies. The Chief of Human Capital and the Chief of Transformation were the most receptive to owning the work around attendance and staff engagement and understanding the role that PPSD plays in directing it.

The Why

This analysis section will focus on making sense of the diagnostic work around teacher absenteeism in PPSD and on how my leadership contributed to the successes and the shortcomings of the strategic project.⁹ In particular, I will discuss how and why the process of problem diagnosis worked and did not work in an organization that is not used to taking the time to diagnose a problem so thoroughly. Throughout the analysis, I will utilize and connect different frameworks and concepts—including adaptive leadership, motivation theory, single and double loop learning, and teaming—to provide insight into the way the work unfolded. My analysis shows that the diagnostic work I led in PPSD was a critical step in defining the problem and has created the conditions and initial buy-in necessary to further address teacher absenteeism and to create more widespread ownership of the problem in PPSD.

⁹As noted, I have drawn separate conclusions about teacher assistant absenteeism and teacher absenteeism, given the data gathered. This section focuses on making sense of the teacher absenteeism diagnosis, which was the bulk of this project, and then on the leadership of the project overall.

The diagnostic work: the root causes of teacher absenteeism in PPSD and what they mean. This strategic project was shaped by the foundational assumption that absenteeism is an observable manifestation of larger issues in the system. The Heifetz (1994) framework of adaptive leadership and Bryk (2010) framework of improvement science reviewed in the RKA provided the rationale for engaging in a diagnostic process and understanding the causes and circumstances of this problem, with the intent that doing so would ultimately help PPSD address the problem of absenteeism in its adaptive form and begin to engage stakeholders in the problem at this level. The Iceberg Model of systems thinking (Donella Meadows Project Academy for Systems Change, 2017; see Figure 7) furthers this theory by showing that the visible event—in this case, teacher absenteeism—is underlain by patterns of behavior, systems and structures, and ultimately mental models (beliefs about how the world works) that add up to the problem's existence. As the leader of this project, I attempted to enter through the problem of absenteeism and used Heifetz's diagnostic approach as a way to dig deeper into the iceberg and find the root causes of absenteeism in PPSD. Ultimately, this project unearthed implications for absenteeism at all levels of the iceberg that PPSD may tackle. Though there is increasing leverage in addressing mental models that contribute to absenteeism, this work is also the more challenging adaptive change.

THE ICEBERG MODEL

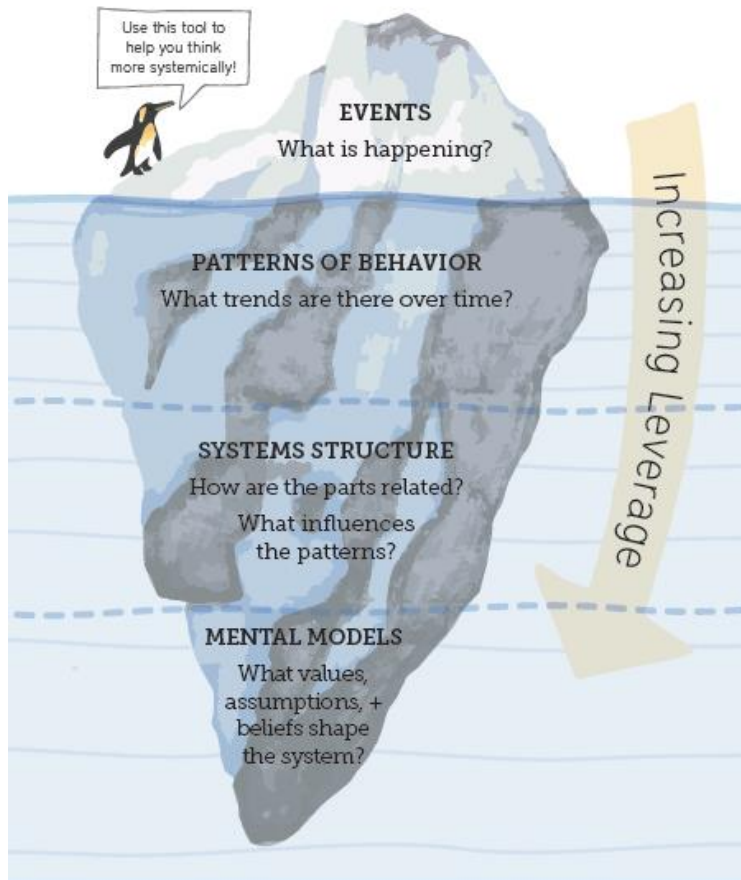


Figure 7. The Iceberg Model of systems thinking. This figure shows how patterns of behavior, systems and structures, and mental models underlie visible events such as absenteeism. (Donella Meadows Project Academy for Systems Change, 2017)

To make sense of the data that emerged from this diagnostic approach, I will revisit Heifetz's diagnostic questions:

1. What's causing the distress?
2. What contradictions or conflicts does the distress represent?
3. What are the histories of these contradictions and conflicts?
4. What perspectives and interests have I and others come to represent to various segments of the community that are now in conflict?
5. In what ways are we in the organization or working group mirroring the problem dynamics in the community? (1994, p. 258)

These questions show that when delving into diagnosis of an adaptive challenge, there is inherent struggle and messiness that creates significant and often uncomfortable learning, both in relation to the problem and for the leader and organization trying to understand the problem. Part of the work was therefore locating myself, as the leader, and PPSD, as the organization, in the problem and understanding how we contribute to the problem.

The causes and meaning of the distress. The data from the principal visits, focus groups, interviews, and survey suggest a wide range of issues are causing distress in PPSD, particularly for teachers. As Appendix E shows, the number of codes needed to capture all the root causes and solutions identified demonstrates the expanse of the distress and how absenteeism as a presenting issue tapped into a wide range of experiences and emotions. Herzberg's theory of motivation (2002) helps to make sense of these different identified reasons for distress. Herzberg says, "Motivators were the primary cause of satisfaction, and hygiene factors were the primary cause of unhappiness on the job" (2002, p. 8). Thus, the absence of motivators creates no satisfaction, while the absence of hygiene factors creates unhappiness. That means, however, that the absence of hygiene factors and the absence of intrinsic motivators may *both* cause the distress about which Heifetz talks. Figure 8 categorizes the most frequently cited root causes of absenteeism across data sources into hygiene factors and intrinsic motivators, as per Herzberg's definition. This data includes reasons as perceived and cited by teachers and principals.

Hygiene factors	Intrinsic motivation factors
<i>Company policy and administration:</i> a lack of consequences at the school and/or District level around high levels of absence, current collective bargaining agreement allows for teachers to take many absence days	<i>Growth:</i> need for more training, need for options around addressing student behavior, need for cultural competence and sensitivity
<i>Supervision:</i> relationship with administration (principal or PPSD central office), frequently changing leadership at central office	<i>Responsibility:</i> need for more support in addressing students who have many needs (Special Education, English Language Learners, Social Emotional Learning), increase in paperwork and testing
<i>Work conditions:</i> poor facilities, lack of resources, lack of flexibility in daily schedule, class size, lack of substitutes	<i>Work itself:</i> the job demands have increased and teachers do not feel like they have the support or tools to do the work, a changing population of students that demands different skillsets from teachers
<i>Salary:</i> monetary incentive/5 day buy back policy	<i>Recognition:</i> a lack of recognition regarding good attendance and work well done, frustration with continually changing initiatives
<i>Relationship with peers and/or subordinates:</i> feeling supported by colleagues, unclear relationship between teacher and teacher assistants, problematic student behavior	
<i>Personal life:</i> sickness and life happens, balancing personal and professional needs, aging staff	

Figure 8. Hygiene and intrinsic motivator root causes identified in the data gathering. This figure shows the different root causes identified in the data gathering about attendance in PPSD and sorts them in hygiene and intrinsic motivators, as identified by Herzberg (2002).

Significant hygiene factor and intrinsic motivator issues emerged as root causes of teacher absenteeism. However, I suggest that it is **the sum of these hygiene factors and their unchecked persistence plus the lack of intrinsic motivators that is the real source of distress for teachers in PPSD.** It is a source of unhappiness to work in a school known as a “sick building,” and when that is compounded by the lack of recognition that teachers feel regarding the work they do and the lack of intrinsic

motivation that results from this, a perfect storm of distress-causing absence occurs. As one teacher said in the survey, “We are all dragging.” Similarly, the Attendance Survey found that 55% of respondents were only somewhat or not at all hopeful that PPSD could improve attendance.

Loyalty also magnifies the distress felt in PPSD. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) say, “Our deeply held loyalties serve as a keystone in the structure of our identities. Loyalty is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it represents loving attachments ... and staying true to these attachments is a great virtue. On the other hand, our loyalties and attachments also represent our bondage and limitations” (p. 28). The Providence Teachers Union (PTU) is strong in PPSD, and there is a history of conflict between PTU and PPSD. Throughout the project, PPSD principals, teachers, and staff frequently referenced that it was not too long ago that PPSD laid off all its teachers.¹⁰ As the participant in the District-wide focus group noted to me, many teachers have had numerous negative interactions with the District, which create strong mental models for teachers about District administration and has increased loyalty to PTU rather than PPSD. In the course of this project, one way this loyalty was visibly expressed is through teachers’ reaction to the survey. As described, we received some feedback in the survey itself that teachers were frustrated with being asked about others’ absence behavior; however, the Chief of Human Capital was told by the PTU President that union members were posting prolifically on the PTU Facebook page about their frustrations with the survey. Many teachers saw PTU as being an outlet for this feedback, rather than the District.

¹⁰ In 2011, the PPSD Superintendent laid off teachers in PPSD, with the support of the mayor, due to financial troubles. After public outcry, he hired the teachers back soon after.

Furthermore, the average age of a PPSD teacher is 46.8 with over 20 years of teaching experience in PPSD (Human Resources, personal communication, February 7, 2017), yet there has been significant turnover at the central office level. One survey respondent wrote, “Remember that some of us have been through 8-15 administrations at the top level, and another 3-10 at the building level.” Coupled with these leadership changes are the curricular changes of the last decade, marked notably by No Child Left Behind legislation, Common Core, PARCC testing, and the spread of blended learning. At the same time, PTU has continued to advocate strongly for teachers and to craft a narrative about the District’s failure to appreciate and support its teachers. Thus, PTU has framed itself as a bastion of consistency for teachers in a world of significant change. As a result of these dynamics, teachers have been loyal to PTU and to each other, and, in at least some cases, have used absences to assert what they see as their rights under the collective bargaining agreement, in part because they perceive much having been taken away from them over time. Principals and teachers referenced this loyalty and its impact on attendance in various ways (e.g., referring to an “entitlement mindset” among teachers or the contractual ability of individuals to be absent for many days), and it emerged in some of the ways people interacted with the process (e.g., few participants in the District-wide focus group). One survey respondent described how the allotment of sick days in the collective bargaining agreement can create a “use it or lose it” mindset: “Sadly, I’m at 150 days and have been for many years.¹¹ Others like me, who are conscientious and dedicated, come to work every day...but honestly some days, I feel like I’m a ‘sucker’ for not taking days off. My days are just sitting there. I’m working!”

¹¹ According to the current PTU collective bargaining agreement, 150 days is the total amount of sick days a teacher may accrue.

The diagnostic work around absenteeism shows the confluence of root causes that cause distress and how loyalty exacerbates these root causes. At the bottom of the iceberg, the adaptive challenge and mental model that these data points add up to is a **lack of trust between teachers and PPSD as an organization**. I both heard about this lack of trust and saw it in how people engaged with the process itself. For example, the Attendance Survey had a 40% response rate from teachers—an excellent response rate for an internal survey—and teachers shared a great deal and to a great depth in the open-ended questions of the survey. *They engaged*. It is important to note, however, that the survey was anonymous. Other data sources—principal visits, school-based and District-wide focus groups, and interviews—also yielded information but showed a lower level of engagement; these were data-collection methods that did not allow for anonymity. Similarly, the District-wide focus group consisted of only four teachers, and those teachers discussed how little follow-through there was from the District and how demoralizing it was to see initiatives come and go. One teacher said to me in an interview, “I have no faith anything will change.”

As noted previously, the Gallup Q12 Engagement survey, which measures employee engagement, was also administered in PPSD in SY16-17 as part of larger work related to staff engagement. The data from the survey reinforces my findings in the attendance work; staff answered at a higher rate and with more dissatisfaction when answers were anonymous. Additionally, my observations of the often contentious relationships between the unions and the District; the comments that I heard in the interviews, focus groups, and principals conversations and the informal conversations that I had with principals; and the many comments in the survey itself about the

relationship between the District and teachers demonstrate similar sentiment. These data points show what I argue is a root adaptive challenge in PPSD: a lack of trust and the resulting disbelief that anything will change.

I, as leader, and PPSD as a representative mirror. Although this problem diagnosis was a different approach than PPSD has previously taken, the way the Chief of Human Capital and I chose to structure the work still unintentionally reinforced and represented some aspects of the distress described above. For example, the variability with which principals completed the focus groups suggests it added to their workload and the stressors that already exist for them and their teachers and that it was not perceived, at least by some, as a genuine listening exercise. Alternatively, principals themselves may not have had the psychological safety within their schools to ask the focus group questions or may not have felt enough psychological safety towards central office to share the honest answers to the focus group questions. While I was intentionally trying to slow the work down and include others, beyond the Division of Human Resources, in the problem diagnosis, I also now understand that some teachers, teacher assistants, and school leaders perceived this project as yet another example of PPSD setting an agenda from the top down. To illustrate, one survey respondent said, “Make teachers feel as if they are valued, as opposed to always putting them under the gun. This survey is a perfect example of how the district is pointing fingers at faculty members.”

At different points in the project, I realized how we, PPSD, were representing and reinforcing the distress, and I tried to course-correct my leadership. For example, when we were creating the guidance for the school-based focus groups, the Chief of Human Capital wanted to move forward with sharing the guidance with principals before we

completed our school visits, but I perceived from the first few visits that it would be necessary to preview the work with principals and generate some buy-in before asking them to engage around what was a time-consuming process and, for many, challenging topic. I brought my concerns to the Chief of Human Capital, and we agreed to slow down the timeline for the school-based focus groups. Still, the completion evidence of the focus groups shows that we did not have authentic engagement from all principals around this issue. **PPSD as the organization and I, as the leader of this project, contributed to the distress and at times unwittingly mirrored it in our actions.**

The most challenging moment for me as a leader was during my analysis of the survey. The response to the survey was far greater than I expected, and as a result, the analysis of it took me significantly longer than planned. During that time, I was immersed in the poignant, felt struggles of teachers in PPSD, as described above. Heifetz notes that when leaders are provoking distress, “they have to stomach the repercussions of that distress at the same time that they provoke it” (1994, p. 252). I empathized so strongly with the teachers’ voices that I at first overemphasized the survey data in my analysis—I was mirroring the distress to a point that was unproductive and did not own my part in it. I was *embodying* the feelings rather than holding them. In presenting my initial analysis to the Human Resources and RPA working group and answering their probing questions, however, I was able to step back up to the balcony and situate the survey as one data point in the many we had collected, from teachers, teacher assistants, principals, and District staff. In that moment, I understood Heifetz’s point: “those who lead take responsibility for the holding environment of the enterprise. They themselves do not expect to be held” (1994, p. 250).

Pacing and locating the work. Heifetz notes that, “Leadership often requires pacing the work in an effort to prepare people to undertake a hard task at a rate they can stand” (1994, p. 39-40). Thus, the ways in which PPSD leadership, teachers, and principals responded throughout the process are also critical data points. Heifetz proposes there is a productive range of distress in which people are able to learn (see Figure 9). If something is beyond their limit of tolerance, however, it may push them into work avoidance, which includes: “Holding onto past assumptions, blaming authority, scapegoating, externalizing the enemy, denying the problem, jumping to conclusions, or finding a distracting issue may restore stability and feel less stressful than facing and taking responsibility for a complex challenge” (1994, p. 37).

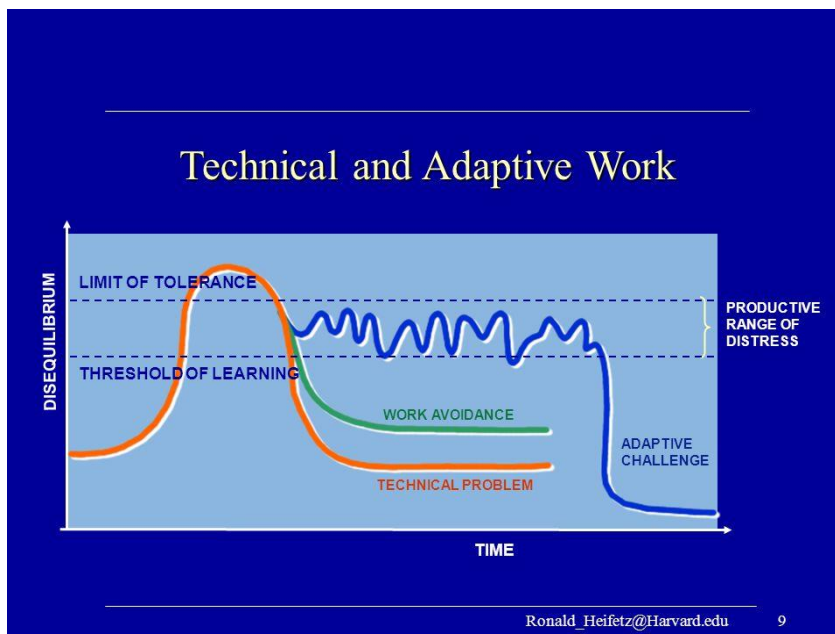


Figure 9. Heifetz’s productive range of district. This figure shows what Heifetz terms the productive range of distress when doing technical and adaptive work. (1994)

One particular issue is illustrative of how we may have pushed teachers and principals beyond the productive range of distress and into work avoidance at points in this project. Because ownership of the project will lie with PPSD beyond my residency, I

shared my opinion about what absence types should be counted in my analysis but ultimately agreed with the Chief of Human Capital’s view that all absences should be included in absence totals since those are all the times that teachers are not in front of students.¹² During the course of my residency, I raised this issue for the Chief of Human Capital to reconsider, as I was concerned that including all absences would alienate people from engaging in the conversation (e.g., that a teacher would feel they were being “blamed” for being absent when attending professional development mandated by the District). However, the Chief of Human Capital felt strongly that we needed to consider all instructional time lost. Some of the survey and focus group reactions show that teachers did interpret all absences being included as a chance to blame teachers. This red herring caused some people to avoid the work of thinking deeply about absence and why it happens and instead to focus on the relational dynamic. One principal said to me, “When you see these numbers but you know you are not taking advantage, it’s disheartening. All it does is put us on the defensive” (personal communication, October 25, 2016). It was also an instance of the District—and myself—playing a contributing role to work avoidance, instead of helping people to genuinely engage in questioning their own behavior.

Conversely, I frequently helped us better pace the work and played a critical role in this project as a tempered radical, which is a term coined by Debra E. Meyerson (2001) to describe leaders who “work to effect significant changes in moderate ways” (p. 93). Because the project was a high-stakes and public-facing project, I was not able—

¹² As part of the work with RPA, we categorized the 37 absence reasons that PPSD has in Absence Management into the following 10 bigger buckets: sick, personal, civic, discipline, injury, Family Medical Leave Act, job-related, legal, no show, and union.

appropriately, given my transient status as a resident—to be the one who was out front leading the project at every moment. Instead, it was critical that I worked closely with the Chief of the Human Capital in this work. My vantage point as a relative outsider meant I was able to “work quietly to challenge prevailing wisdom and gently provoke their organizational cultures to adapt” (Meyerson, p. 93). In debriefing about the project afterward, the Chief of Human Capital told me that I “ebbed and flowed well in the role of being a leader out front and being a leader who sits back.” She also noted that I reflected critical pieces of information back to her and slowed her down so that she could hear in the fast-paced work (personal communication, February 14, 2017). Similarly, I included a question in the focus group guidance around intrinsic motivation to push schools to consider different aspects of attendance, and I talked with the Superintendent about the underlying adaptive challenges in the work to generate buy-in around the interventions focused on culture. While I struggled at times to find my role, I also understood that, particularly given how high-stakes and public-facing this project was, leadership meant strategically considering the many elements of the project more than it did being the mouthpiece of the project. In this tempered radical mode, I was able to help PPSD represent the distress less frequently in this project.

Diagnosis and single-loop learning instead of conversation. While this project demonstrates a significant change in PPSD behavior and engaged teachers, teacher assistants, and principals in defining the problem, I did not engage those stakeholders in deciding *the process* of how that problem was defined. One of the most illustrative data points on the issue was a comment from a teacher in the survey that read, “This is Providence.” As an outsider, I initially dismissed the comment as vague to the point of

meaninglessness. Yet as time went on, I realized the comment signaled a deeper issue that may be an expression of futility based on the District's history.

This example demonstrates my main critique of my leadership: **leading diagnosis is not the same as leading a conversation**. I, as a leader, may speculate for pages about what this quote means, and as evidenced above, it connotes to me a range of meanings based on my own experiences and perceptions. *Yet that may not be what the respondent intended at all*. Without the opportunity to converse with the individual and clarify the meaning of the quote, the diagnosis is therefore influenced by my own mental models and interpretations, as well as those with whom I worked on this project.

Chris Argyris, a professor who focuses on organizational behavior, raises the need for getting the best from employees but notes that the traditional communication tools (like the ones I used in this strategic project) are not the way to produce learning: "Tools like employee surveys can produce useful information about routine issues like cafeteria service and parking privileges, but they cannot get people to reflect on their work and behavior" (1994, p. 4). Argyris describes the difference between single-loop learning, which focuses on learning about a content issue, versus double-loop learning, which includes learning about learning and about the process around an issue. He says:

In the name of positive thinking ... managers often censor what everyone needs to say and hear. For the sake of "morale" and "considerateness," they deprive employees and themselves of the opportunity to take responsibility for their own behavior by learning to understand it. Because double-loop learning depends on questioning one's own assumptions and behavior, this apparently benevolent strategy is actually *antilearning*. Admittedly, being considerate and positive can contribute to the solution of single-loop problems like cutting costs. But it will never help people figure out why they lived with problems for years on end, why they covered up those problems, why they covered up the cover-up, why they were so good at pointing to the responsibility of others and so slow to focus on their own. (1994, p. 4)

I chose tools and led a diagnostic process that privileged single-loop learning and, therefore, did not genuinely ask teachers to own their assumptions and behaviors. Nor did the process ask PPSD to do so in a meaningful way.

However, the problem diagnosis I led in this project was also a step forward for PPSD, that the District, particularly in the daily urgency of school district work, does not frequently undertake. Engaging immediately in double-loop learning would likely have been beyond the limit of tolerance that Heifetz (1994) describes and that is shown in Figure 9 above. Indeed, as I described above, there was evidence that engaging in the single-loop learning around the problem of attendance was imperfect and beyond the productive range of distress—to some extent because of the project design but also in large part because of an adaptive issue of lack of trust that we unearthed. Two examples illustrate why **pacing the diagnostic work was necessary** and why the project unfolded as it did.

First, the variable engagement in the school-based focus groups suggests a range of points, including that PPSD principals may not have the psychological safety at each school to authentically engage in learning conversations and that there may not be psychological safety between schools and the District. Second, the number of times “frustration” came up in the survey responses suggests that asking teachers to immediately own that frustration without PPSD first understanding that frustration would be futile. One survey response demonstrates this:

I have zero faith that PPSD will change in my career. They never learn from their mistakes, create a hostile and divisive environment with the teachers, and make pedagogically ignorant decisions. Morale has never been so low. Expect teacher absences to increase rather than decrease.

This quote may be interpreted as work avoidance, yet it also gives critical insight to one of the adaptive challenges—lack of trust—that faces PPSD leadership. Further conversation is valuable and ultimately needed to change behavior, but hearing this perspective also allowed for problem definition that did not exist before and helped us, as the Division of Human Resources, define the threshold of learning for staff engagement work. The commitment from both the Chief of Human Capital and the Chief of Transformation, as well as the inclusion of staff engagement in the newly written strategic plan for PPSD, suggest that the District will persist in its commitment to developing trust.

The Chief of Human Capital and I also chose to engage in a diagnostic process in a very public way on a high-stakes issue. Part of this intent was that in doing so, we would demonstrate PPSD's genuine desire to do the work differently and hear from teachers. However, the high-stakes nature of the project created an added pressure on the holding environment and likely dampened the limit of tolerance and raised the threshold for learning, which ultimately yielded a more limited productive range of distress for both PPSD leadership and teachers and principals.

Organizing to learn versus organizing to execute. An additional challenge that I did not clearly foresee is that PPSD as a school district is almost exclusively set up to execute, to provide education for its students on a daily basis. Leading a strategic project focused on learning in the midst of the daily demands was often difficult. For example, in the last week of classes in December before the holiday break, 286 teachers were absent on a single day, a nearly 14% absence rate that meant schools were in operational crisis throughout the District as they struggled to cover classes without enough substitutes.

While the urgency of the problem in the moment highlighted the need to address its root causes in the long-term, it was also more important for PPSD to execute in the moments of crisis than it was to learn. This tension was particularly true in the Division of Human Resources, where there are daily emergencies that, more often than not, have consequences for the people in PPSD and require the time and resources of the division.

In this context, I also did not “organize” within PPSD in a way that would have best helped learning. Christensen and Kaufman (2008) propose four different team formations that allow companies to innovate, depending on the purpose and meaning of the innovation: functional teams, lightweight teams, heavyweight teams, and autonomous teams (see Figure 10).

(Circles in the diagrams represent members of the team; solid lines represent lines of authority and responsibility. Dotted lines represent lines of communication.)

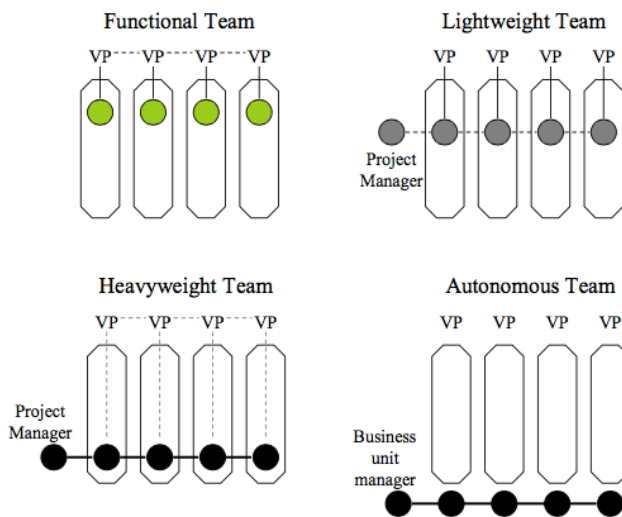


Figure 10. Four types of teams to do work. This figure shows the four types of teams that Christensen and Kaufman (2008) propose as different ways to organize for innovation.

Because this was a strategic extension of Human Resources work, we set up the strategic project as a lightweight team, which means I, as the leader, was communicating across groups involved in the project. Even the Human Resources and RPA working group that I

convened was a group across which I communicated. However, Christensen and Kaufman note that lightweight teams make sense when “there is predictable interdependence among the people or groups involved in the project” (2008, p. 6). The genuine lack of knowledge and need to innovate that spurred this project means there were, in fact, unpredictable interdependencies. The diagnostic work would have been better served by a heavyweight team because such teams “allow members to interact differently than they habitually could across the boundaries of functional organizations. Members bring their functional expertise ... but their mindset must never be to ‘represent’ the interests of their functional group during the teams’ deliberations. Rather, it is to collectively figure out a better way to knit things together so that the overall project is successful” (2008, p. 7). As PPSD moves forward in this work, **including all stakeholders at the table in a heavyweight team will likely allow for more learning about the problem of absenteeism.** Doing so will help PPSD navigate the tension of executing and learning.

The conditions for change. There are promising signs that using multiple methods of data collection and slowing down the process overall means that the conditions in which to further address absenteeism now exist in a way that they previously did not. The overall high level of engagement around the issue of absenteeism, as well as the fact that the people with whom I spoke did want to share their thoughts and opinions on absenteeism, suggest there is now an opportunity for PPSD to leverage the engagement and trust built through the process. Furthermore, there is buy-in from two key Cabinet members and overall receptiveness from the rest of the Cabinet, as well as commitment in the strategic plan to move this work forward. Given the causes of distress,

the negotiation of loyalties, and PPSD's own contribution to the problem (my contribution as leader included), the landscape is fragile. One priority initiative that emerged from the diagnostic work for the Division of Human Resources is recognition; points about a lack of recognition and incentives came up with high frequency in all of the data sources, and recognition can impact several of the hygiene and motivator factors that were identified as root causes. One survey respondent said, "Show us value, get more from us." As will be discussed further in Implications for Site, implementing a program of recognition is low-hanging fruit for the Division of Human Resources that may create more traction for other initiatives around absenteeism and build a foundation of trust for the larger cultural change that this work represents.

Implications for Self

Leading a project focused on the diagnosis of a complex issue required me to use a range of leadership tools, including: the abilities to quickly discern context, to communicate complex information, to facilitate learning, and to engage with and, above all, listen to a range of stakeholders. My leadership experience in this project and the daily learning of being part of PPSD have implications for how I will lead in the future.

Listen deeply to lead better. While I argue that diagnosis is a necessary first step for school districts to understand complex, adaptive problems like teacher absenteeism, I learned that it is as important to think about the *way* we listen as much it is to think about what we hear. Through this project, it became clearer to me that the way I ask a question determines how it is answered. In one of my Ed.L.D. courses, Practicing Leadership, I practiced deep listening and learned that the act of deep listening requires actively inquiring into others' thoughts and perspectives and trying to understand their internal logic. I now realize the challenge—and danger—of listening from a position of leadership where I am setting the agenda and asking the questions without a feedback mechanism. For example, the research in the RKA informed the questions that we asked in the Attendance Survey, and the questions may well have constrained the information we received in response, as suggested by some of the feedback that we got on the survey itself. I created a question about perceptions of others' attendance because of the research on collective norms around attendance but heard from respondents that they found it intrusive to be asked about others' attendance.

Given this dynamic, I reflected that I found the most value in the interviews and District-wide focus group where I could inquire into perspectives and experiences and be

part of a conversation. Doing so allowed for more understanding and feedback about the process itself. However, I also appreciate how the daily needs and urgency of running a school district make it challenging to listen deeply and with multiple feedback loops on a regular basis. Deep listening is a practice that I hope and intend to build regular mechanisms for in my future leadership roles since I do not think it will naturally happen otherwise. Single and double loop listening and learning must be intentional.

Transform myself as part of transforming the sector. As noted previously, although this project focused on teacher and teacher assistant absenteeism, attendance is a larger issue in PPSD for all staff. As a Doctoral Fellow in the PPSD Central Office, I was a staff member, and I quickly realized that I contributed to the norms of the organization just as much as I perceived those norms. Ed.L.D. has a maxim of transforming yourself before transforming the sector, and it rang true to me in my strategic project. My own attendance and, more importantly, my engagement and attitude contributed to the collective norms of PPSD and specifically to the Division of Human Resources.

In September of my residency, I felt this keenly when I found out I had to have my wisdom tooth removed (certainly a harbinger of my growth during residency!). It was the first time that I would be absent from my residency. I engaged in a meta-reflection of how it felt to have a true illness that meant I needed to be absent from work, what I felt the expectations and perceptions of my absence were, and how I should behave in relation to the absence. I also reflected on how valuable it was to be able to sit in the problem around which I was leading and to consider my own behavior in relation to it, albeit under different circumstances than a teacher absence. As Heifetz says, “What one observes from the balcony has to take into account one’s own placement on the dance

floor in terms of formal and informal authority” (1994, p. 262). Being on the dance floor allowed me to appreciate what it meant to be there and to better discern patterns from the balcony perspective.

In frequent self-reflection during my time at PPSD, I considered how I could and should model the work that I was leading. At times, I think I did this well; as one small example, I deliberately wrote thank you notes to teachers who engaged in the focus groups and interviews with me as I wanted to be sure to recognize their contribution, given that I heard the lack of recognition was a felt cause of absenteeism. At other times, I do not think I did this as well. For example, I got stuck on the dance floor while analyzing the survey and mirrored some of the distress of the problem. I took the maxim of transforming myself before transforming the sector to heart, however, and realize that, now and in the future, transforming my behavior and myself as a leader is *part of* transforming the sector.

And cultivate relationships. People often joke that Rhode Island is the country’s biggest town, not its smallest state. The truth in that statement is that relationships are highly valued in Rhode Island, perhaps even more they are in many places and organizations because there are so many interconnections between centers of power in the state and because, as the Superintendent said to me, “change here is highly personal” (personal communication, November 29, 2016). I came into my residency as a leader and person who values relationships, yet I learned even more how fundamental they are to the work. In an early meeting when the Chief of Human Capital introduced the attendance work to the unions, I realized relationships were vital to addressing the high-stakes, adaptive challenge of this strategic project and I did not yet have strong relationships in

the District. In reflecting on this and on the timeline of my residency, I recognized the value of the tempered radical approach and realized leading quietly also meant truly valuing relationships and collaboration in the work. I also therefore understood Heifetz's inclusion of the leader as part of the community far more than I did before. Heifetz says, "Leadership means influencing the community to face its problems" (1994, p. 14). My value was not to bring solutions but rather to facilitate the conversation and circumstances for PPSD to address its high rates of absenteeism. I will continue to cultivate relationships in my future work as a leader.

Implications for Site

As part of this project, I shared specific recommendations with PPSD about how to continue the work around teacher absenteeism and how to measurably improve teacher absenteeism (see Appendix H). The following four recommendations are reflective of the project-specific recommendations but are lessons that I believe PPSD may apply both in the continued work on absenteeism and in other future projects.

Recognize and celebrate the good. As described in my analysis, PPSD has a history of conflict and a lack of trust that means people often enter conversations prepared to defend themselves or their work. The data suggests this lack of trust is one of the adaptive root causes of absenteeism in the District, and it is a palpable collective norm that I was able to perceive and feel frequently during my 10 months in PPSD. Yet PPSD is also a place that is full of dedicated, smart, and hard-working staff who are doing their best for students and who fiercely love Providence. By recognizing the good things that teachers and staff do and creating systems and structures around this practice, PPSD as an entire organization can begin to feel and behave differently. The technical work of changing behavior allows people to disrupt their mental models and provides traction for the adaptive change of building trust.

In a recent article called “The Neuroscience of Trust,” Paul J. Zak says, “In my research, I’ve found that building a culture of trust is what makes a meaningful difference. Employees in high-trust organizations are more productive, have more energy at work, collaborate better with their colleagues, and stay with their employers longer than people working at low-trust companies. They also suffer less chronic stress and are happier with their lives” (2017, p. 2). Zak’s first recommendation for building trust is to recognize excellence: “The neuroscience shows that recognition has the largest effect on

trust when it occurs immediately after a goal has been met, when it comes from peers, and when it's tangible, unexpected, personal, and public" (2017, p. 4). I specifically recommend that PPSD embrace a practice for celebrating the good that I learned from the technology organization NextJump that has a strong developmental culture (personal communication, February 9, 2017). NextJump celebrates "servant leadership" and regularly asks their employees to share how someone helped them succeed. Focusing on contribution and process on a small scale throughout PPSD, at both the District and school levels, can add up to a big change in the trust that people feel towards one another.

Continue to consider how to work with teachers and school-based staff in a thoughtful, reflective, and iterative way. While I have critiqued the diagnostic process that I led in this project, it also represents a significant and positive shift in PPSD's behavior. The Chief of Human Capital embraced the chance to include more voices in defining the problem, and while it was often challenging to make the time to do this strategic and messy work, it also is a critical step toward PPSD owning their part of the work, as Heifetz describes in adaptive change (1994). The entrenched relationships and problems that are part of PPSD are emblematic of those found in school districts throughout the U.S., and it is only through the kind of thoughtful, reflective, and iterative leadership that PPSD—and, by extension, other districts—will improve in these areas. As my analysis shows, I recommend future consideration of the *process* of how to work with staff differently as much as I recommend overall openness to a different approach. For example, one of my specific recommendations around the absenteeism work is creating a cross-functional advisory group of teachers, principals, and central office staff to look at the problem and propose solutions and how to implement them. Continued experiences

that demonstrate trust and collaboration can begin to disrupt mental models and change behavior and mindsets in the District.

Be transparent in the District's learning. As exemplified by this project, the solutions to complex, adaptive problems in school districts require input and ownership from all parties, not just the perceived positional authority of “central office.” PPSD may increase the potential for ownership by being transparent in its learning as the absenteeism project continues and as they address other complex problems. Sharing, for example, that PPSD noted the lack of recognition throughout the District through a range of data sources can be framed in a way that shares the problem itself. When I presented the data collected and what we heard as root causes to the Cabinet, for example, I engaged the Cabinet in a discussion about how to understand and use this data. This kind of transparency invites people into the problem and into Heifetz's range of productive distress. Furthermore, being transparent about where PPSD is implicated in the problem—e.g., that PPSD as a district does not have a common practice of recognizing its employees—allows people in central office to be vulnerable and build trust with each other and with teachers.

Consider the entire District staff and then differentiate. Throughout the course of this project, the Chief of Human Capital frequently elevated the need to improve attendance and engagement for all staff in the District. Conversely, I was biased towards focusing on teachers because of their direct impact on students and because of the limitations of this project. We had a healthy push-pull around this topic during my residency, and it was part of changing the way the District thinks and acts overall. Our two views represent a critical polarity that PPSD should consider going forward.

First, school districts are composed of many staff other than just teachers and school-based staff. In PPSD, nearly a fourth of all District staff are not regularly in schools; indeed, during my residency, I was more often at central office than in schools. In particular, PPSD has a significant population of clerks who perform administrative tasks. After one District-wide communication that spoke about how we all work in support of classroom learning, I received an email from a clerk who works in central office asking how her role connects to schools. It is critical for PPSD to consider the entire staff, including those who do not see their connection to schools, when implementing initiatives. If the mission of the District is to support students and what happens in the classroom, all staff need to see themselves impacting that mission; for staff who do not see how their roles can have this impact, the District must help them make the connections.

However, it is also necessary to recognize the differences between staff and to differentiate policies and approaches accordingly, particularly as there are separate collective bargaining agreements that necessitate different management approaches with different groups of employees. As we found in this strategic project, the reasons that teachers and teacher assistants have high rates of absenteeism are different at the structural level and therefore can benefit from different solutions. Like a classroom teacher who must differentiate, PPSD must consider the staff as a whole *and* individuals' unique roles.

Implications for Sector

Most importantly, the sector should consider the engagement approach that this project represents. PPSD deliberately slowed down to diagnose and understand the complexity of teacher absence *from the perspective of teachers*, and as discussed, there are lessons to be learned both from the successes and shortcomings of this project. In particular, I urge the sector to **look more deeply into problems like teacher absenteeism and address root causes in addition to the presenting problem.**

Attendance is illustrative of how the sector currently approaches problems. The NCTQ study (2014) about teacher attendance specifically looked at: carry over policy around sick leave, payment for unused sick leave at retirement, payment for unused sick leave at the end of the school year, rewarding excellent attendance with additional leave or compensation, restricting leave on specific dates, requiring medical certification for sick leave, and including teacher attendance as a measure in teacher evaluations. All of these are technical solutions to what is both a technical *and* adaptive problem, and it is therefore not surprising that the study finds no clear patterns for what works and what does not in relation to reducing teacher absenteeism. Instead, I argue that the sector should consider the underlying causes of teacher absenteeism and should craft policies and actions that address *both* the technical and adaptive causes. As shown in this analysis, PPSD may improve attendance by technically addressing hygiene factors like management but can bolster the impact of this work by also focusing on recognition that addresses a root cause of lack of trust. School districts can maximize impact through diagnosing absenteeism and other complex problems in ways that create systemic

understanding and then crafting thoughtful interventions that are complementary in their leverage.

Additionally, the sector can benefit **by viewing teacher attendance as both a leading indicator of educational equity and a lagging indicator of engagement.**

While the U.S. Department of Education defines teacher attendance as a leading indicator of school improvement and educational equity, my analysis shows that teacher attendance can also be viewed as a lagging indicator of teacher engagement. From a student-achievement perspective, it is no doubt helpful to consider teacher attendance as a leading indicator. For districts struggling with high teacher absenteeism and considering how to address it, however, it is likely more productive to view it as an outcome measure that reflects teachers' engagement, or lack thereof, with their work. Hence, technical solutions may have a small and/or short-term impact on teacher attendance, but such change will likely not be sustainable unless it is complemented with a focus on the adaptive issues that underlie the problem. By talking about teacher attendance as a lagging indicator, the sector will acknowledge the complexity of changing the behavior and mindset of people. The PPSD Strategic Plan, in which teacher attendance is a specific strategy, includes metrics around improving attendance on a five-year timeline. This horizon allows for the technical and adaptive changes to work together on behalf of both equity *and* engagement.

Finally, this process was also an exercise in a district learning how to discuss educator attendance. While several of the articles noted in the RKA reference the importance of language regarding attendance, they lack the practical perspective on what talking about attendance with and for educators means. As part of this project, we

changed language from absenteeism to attendance and from average daily absence rate to average daily attendance rate and debated what it meant to look at the data—and more importantly, the human beings that the data represent—from each angle. Wrestling with these questions was a learning experience for PPSD, but given the prevalence of teacher absenteeism in the sector, it is clear that school districts generally would benefit from **sector guidance around how to talk about and calculate teacher attendance.**

Guidance would help school districts to focus on the work, rather than on the academic discussions around it. The two most noteworthy reports so far—the Center for American Progress (2012) and the NCTQ (2014) reports—differ in how they calculate absence and the conversations therefore becomes about the right way to *calculate* teacher absence, rather than about how to *reduce* teacher absence. The Civil Rights Data Collection collects the data in a way—teachers who are absent for more than 10 days and including all absences except professional development—that I urge the sector to fully adopt. Both practical guidance and additional research about the outstanding questions of absenteeism and what it means in education will greatly serve the sector.

Conclusion

As this Capstone shows, teacher absenteeism is a challenge that creates daily urgency and small crises for teachers, administrators, districts, and students. It is also an opportunity to take on the adaptive work that we need to do together to improve the public education system in the U.S. In PPSD, the District has taken a significant step forward in seeking to understand the root causes of high teacher absenteeism. But understanding is only a first step. To now truly address the root causes, the District must include more stakeholders in making decisions about absenteeism, must shift some of its own behavior, and must enable and support the behavior and mindset shift of teachers and principals through complimentary initiatives. The work is hard and undoubtedly messy, but the rewards can be great, both for educators and the students we serve.

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Appendix A

Principal attendance focus group questions

As you know, absenteeism in schools has been in the news lately. This is an issue across our district, for teachers as well as for staff. The national absenteeism rate for teachers is 5.3%; the average daily absenteeism rate in Providence is 11% for teachers and 18% for teacher assistants. We want to engage leaders, teachers, and staff across the district to understand the causes and impact of absenteeism in the district and to consider how we as an entire district can work together to reduce absenteeism and better support each other in the work.

We have 25 minutes this morning, which we'd like to use as a focus group to hear about how, you, as school leaders, view and experience absenteeism in your school. 25 minutes is quick for such a conversation, so we'll ask that you abide by a few norms:

- Be as concise as you can and do not repeat what someone else has said (do give a silent thumbs up if you agree or have had a similar experience!)
 - Treat this as a safe space
 - We want to focus on the issue rather than on individuals so please refrain from sharing specific names.
1. What do you think causes teachers and staff to be absent?
 2. What are your biggest concerns about staff absences in your school?
 3. Have you talked to staff about absenteeism, and if so, what have you heard during those conversations?
 4. As a principal, how do you monitor staff absenteeism?
 5. In a perfect world, how do you think absence would be addressed at the school level? District level?
 6. Is there anything else you want to say about absence or culture in your school or at PPSD?

Appendix B

Facilitation guide for school focus groups

Please choose the venue (ILT, staff meeting, voluntary group, etc.) that you feel is most productive to have this discussion, but include as many different voices across the school as possible. The focus group should be approximately 1 hour, and the intent is to gather as much information as possible. Because of that, please make sure you ask all of the following questions and keep the group on task. Please also have someone take notes in the template (see the Excel sheet) that you will return to Andrea LaRocca by November 10, 2016. Include in these notes (see tab 2 in the Excel sheet) a synthesis of root causes and recommended solutions and the name of one person from the group who will act as a representative to a larger focus group for your cohort.

Thank you for being part of this focus group! Our task for the next hour is to better understand and capture the reasons for staff attendance in our building. We know both from research and from practice that educator attendance impacts student achievement and students' educational experience. As school-based staff, we are all educators, whether we directly work with students or support those who work with students. As a result, our attendance impacts students.

PPSD recognizes the complexity of the issues that contribute to staff attendance and wants to hear from us how we experience this in our school. Every school in PPSD is doing a similar focus group. This is one means through which PPSD is collecting data, and it will be triangulated with other data sources of surveys and interviews. PPSD will share the data back to see what resonates and what the best possible solutions could be.

1. What do you notice about staff attendance in our school?
2. What do you think causes staff to be absent in our school?
3. What are your biggest concerns about staff attendance in our school?
4. What do you think is working and not working about how we address staff attendance in our school?
5. *Share the data around staff attendance in specific school compared to the district.* What do you notice about this data? What do you wonder about this data?
6. What do you think would most improve staff attendance in our school?
7. The research shows that people are motivated in work by intrinsic factors – by having autonomy, interesting work, challenge, opportunity for growth, and being recognized – rather than extrinsic factors like money or performance-based incentives. Do you have any additional or different thoughts on what would improve staff attendance in our school?
8. What could PPSD do that would most impact staff attendance and engagement?
9. Is there anything else you want to add about this for PPSD to consider?

Appendix C

Attendance survey

Thank you for agreeing to take this survey! We greatly appreciate your input in understanding teacher and teacher assistant (TA) attendance in PPSD. **All responses are anonymous and will only be reported at the aggregate level.**

PPSD wants to provide the best service possible to students yet also recognizes the complexity of the issues that contribute to staff attendance. We understand there are many reasons that teachers and TAs are absent, and we want to hear from you about how you experience attendance and what PPSD can do to better support you. This survey is one means through which PPSD is collecting data; early in 2017, PPSD will share the collected information with you to see what most resonates and should be included in the strategic plan.

1. Are you a teacher or a TA?
 - Teacher
 - TA

2. To what extent do you think teacher attendance is a concern in PPSD?
 - Not at all a concern
 - Somewhat a concern
 - Moderately a concern
 - Very much a concern

3. To what extent do you think TA attendance is a concern in PPSD?
 - Not at all a concern
 - Somewhat a concern
 - Moderately a concern
 - Very much a concern

4. How hopeful are you that PPSD can improve attendance amongst teachers and TAs?
 - Very hopeful
 - Moderately hopeful
 - Somewhat hopeful
 - Not at all hopeful

5. In the past 12 months, how frequently were you absent for the following reasons?
(Answers: Frequently, occasionally, rarely, never)
 - Personal sickness
 - Family sickness

- Injury (any injury, whether sustained at work or away from work)
- Personal days
- Professional development
- External commitments (union meetings, jury duty, etc.)
- Stress
- Working conditions
- Didn't want to come to work

6. How frequently do you think teachers are absent for the following reasons? (Answers: Frequently, occasionally, rarely, never)

- Personal sickness
- Family sickness
- Injury (any injury, whether sustained at work or away from work)
- Personal days
- Professional development
- External commitments (union meetings, jury duty, etc.)
- Stress
- Working conditions
- Didn't want to come to work

7. How frequently do you think TAs are absent for the following reasons? (Answers: Frequently, occasionally, rarely, never)

- Personal sickness
- Family sickness
- Injury (any injury, whether sustained at work or away from work)
- Personal days
- Professional development
- External commitments (union meetings, jury duty, etc.)
- Stress
- Working conditions
- Didn't want to come to work

8. How supported do you feel in your job?

- Very supported
- Moderately supported
- Somewhat supported
- Not at all supported

Comment box: Please explain the factors that contribute to the answer you chose above.

9. If you were put in charge of improving teacher attendance in PPSD, what would you do?

10. If you were put in charge of improving TA attendance in PPSD, what would you do?

11. Is there anything else you would like the District to know about attendance and/or how it can be improved?

Thank you for taking this survey! Your opinions matter, and we greatly appreciate your time.

If you are interested in participating further in our work on attendance, please email Andrea LaRocca at Andrea.LaRocca@ppsd.org to schedule a 1-on-1 interview. Please note that your survey responses will remain anonymous even if you choose to participate in an interview and that your participation in an interview will be confidential.

Appendix D

Interview protocol

While the way I worded questions and their order changed from interview to interview, the following are the general questions that I used as a roadmap for each interview.

(Introduce self – name and thank you for doing the interview) I'm working as a Doctoral Fellow in PPSD for the year, and one of the projects I'm working on is supporting the District in its initiative around staff engagement. We're trying to understand the root causes of attendance issues in PPSD and hear from different people how they experience attendance at the school level and what might make a difference. I'd love to talk to you today about your experience as a teacher. I'm going to take notes and would like to record the interview today, if that's okay – the recording is just so that if I miss something while taking notes, I can refer back to it. Do you have any questions about that?

1. Tell me about yourself. What's your role, and how long have you been teaching in Providence?
2. What do you like about your job? What do you struggle with?
3. Do you feel supported?
4. When you've been absent in the past, what do you think about, and how do you make the decision?
5. How do you think absence impacts the school? Staff? Students?
6. Through the survey and the focus, we heard a lot from different teachers and teacher assistants about attendance. In terms of root causes, we heard: illness, stress, family emergencies, "use them or lose them" aspect of contract, building conditions, paperwork and curriculum expectations, building culture, frustration with the lack of discipline. What resonates with you about this, and what doesn't resonate?
7. We also heard in terms of solutions: time to work together, old buyback program, recognition for good attendance, school-based events and support, wellness supports (like quiet place to take a break or yoga program), more and higher quality substitutes, recognition, supports and resources needed to do work better at school level, more social workers and psychologists at school level, more around student discipline. What resonates with you about this and what doesn't resonate?
8. Where do you think this ranks in terms of issues that PPSD should be thinking about?
9. Is there anything I haven't asked about that you want to add?

Appendix E

Code list for survey analysis

Accountability for individuals

- Have consequences for individuals who have high levels of absence
- Hold individuals accountable, not group
- Require higher quality documentation for sickness
- Track attendance

Administration relationship

- Administrator and/or District are not visible in schools and do not know real needs
- District puts too much stress on principal
- Feel supported by principal
- Lack of engagement by principal
 - Do not feel valued by principal
 - Do not get feedback about job performance
- Lack of support
 - Lack of support at school
 - Lack of support by District/797
- Principal does not model good behavior
- Understand root causes and listen

Causes of absence

- Aging faculty
- Contract allows days
- Lack of time off (no Feb break and short holiday break)
- Life happens
- People do not understand importance of attendance
- Poor facilities, air quality, or mold
 - Classroom and equipment are dirty
 - No access to hand sanitizer/soap
 - Students get sick and spread germs

Culture

- Colleagues are not here for the right reasons
- Improve morale
- Increase understanding

Do not think attendance is a problem

Don't ask about others

Emotional disposition

- Frustration

- Stress

Engage parents more

Fiscal/policy issues

- Add more personal days instead of sick days
- No Temporary Disability Insurance
- Spend more money on schools instead of administration

Improve working conditions

- Allow more flexibility in daily schedule
- Autonomy over curriculum/teaching
- Ensure equitable technology access in classrooms
- Get rid of time clock
- Increase and improve use of collaboration and/or Common Planning Time
- Lack of resources
- Negativity around PPSD teachers
- Reduce class size
- Threat of harm/violence
- Too much curricular change
- Too much paperwork
- Too much stress
- Too much testing
- Treat teachers like professionals
- Working conditions vary by school
- Workload is too much

Incentivize attendance

- Include attendance on teacher evaluation
- Monetary incentive
- Recognize good attendance and work
- Reinstate the 5-day buy back policy

Need more training

- Add in-service days
- English language learners
- Onboarding
- Physical/mental health opportunities
- Restorative justice
- Social emotional learning

Quality of staff

- Need better leadership
- Need more and higher quality substitutes

- Consistent substitute at schools
- Need more qualified and better trained teacher assistants
- Need more social emotional support staff
- Need more staff to address specific student needs (special education, ELL, behavior)
- New teachers: improve process for hiring and improve retention

Student behavior

- Lack of consequences/discipline for students who misbehave
- Student behavior needs to improve
- Student social emotional needs are not addressed or supported
- Students have many needs
- Suspensions are not allowed

Survey quality

- Survey is disheartening
- Survey is insulting
- Thank you for focusing on attendance

Feel supported by colleagues

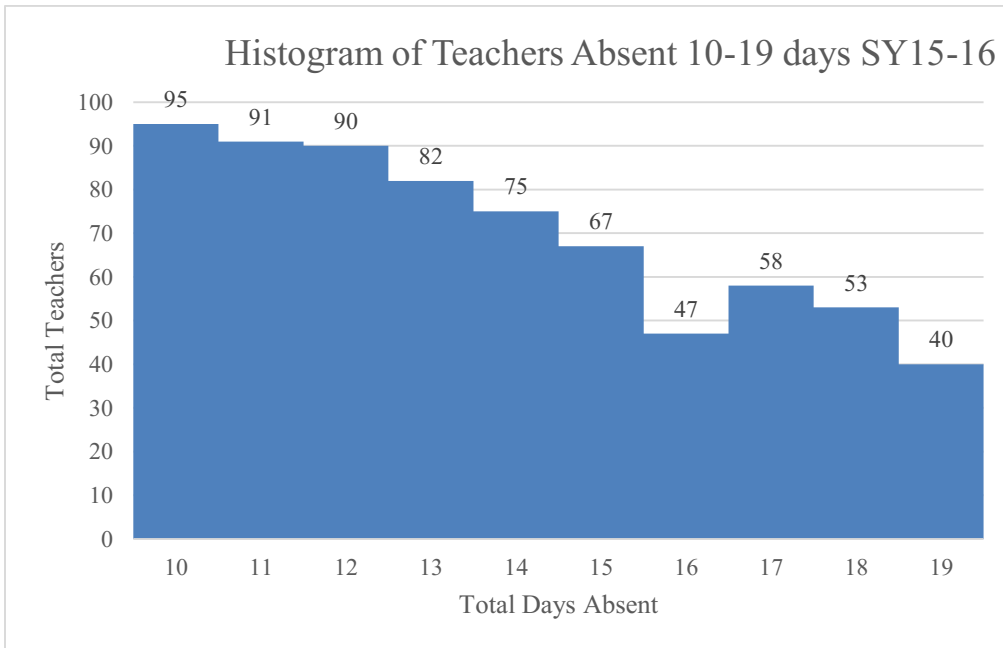
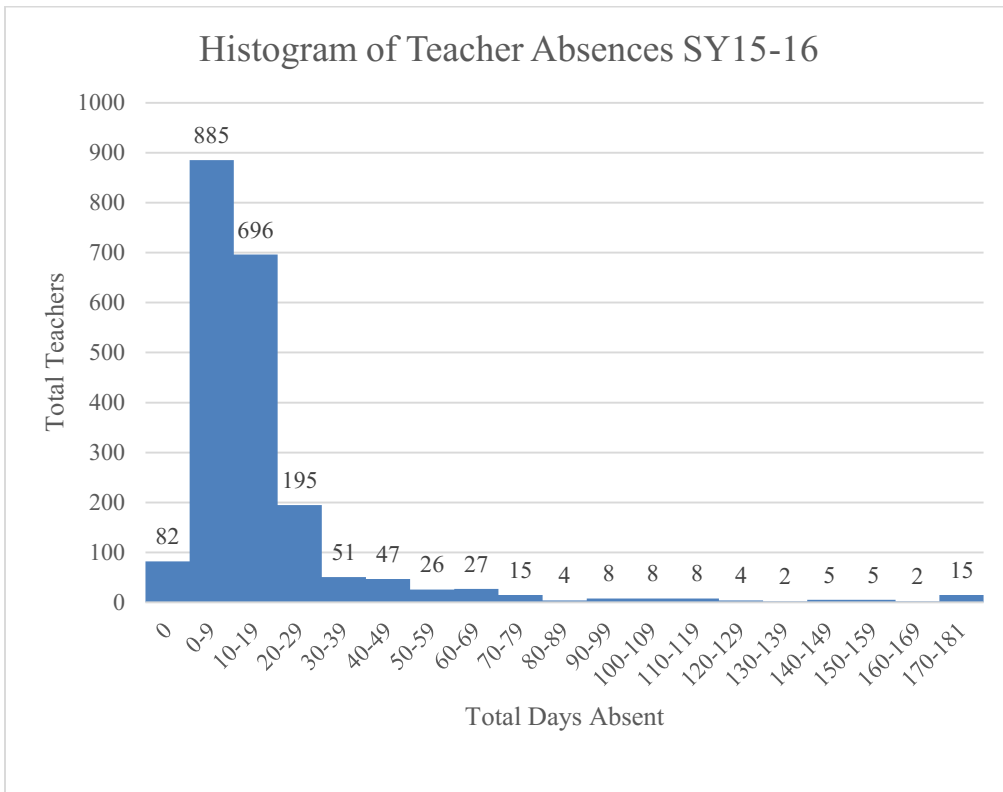
What is in the data?

Teacher assistant issues

- Administration needs to value role of TA
- Create a TA to BA career ladder
- Have consistent relationship between teacher and TA
- I know nothing about TAs
- Clarify role of TA's
- TA's should have more responsibility

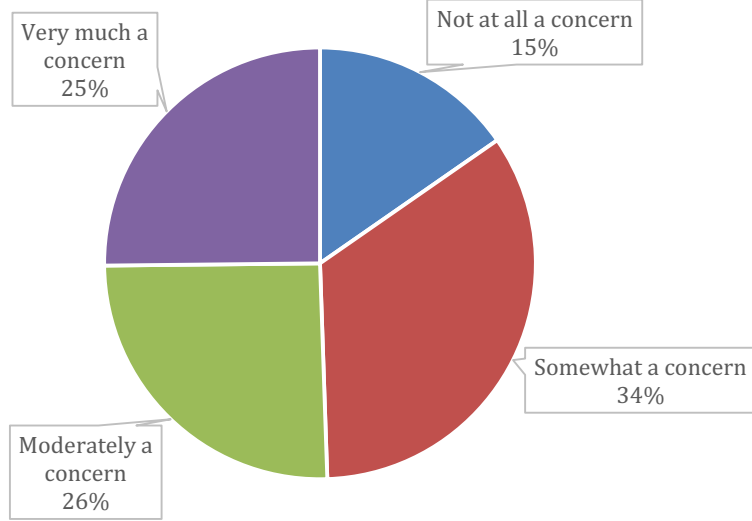
Appendix F

Histogram of teacher absence SY15-16

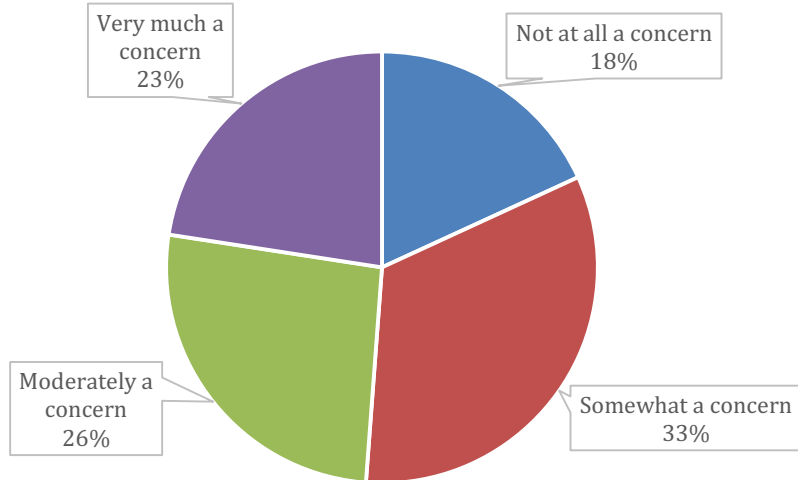


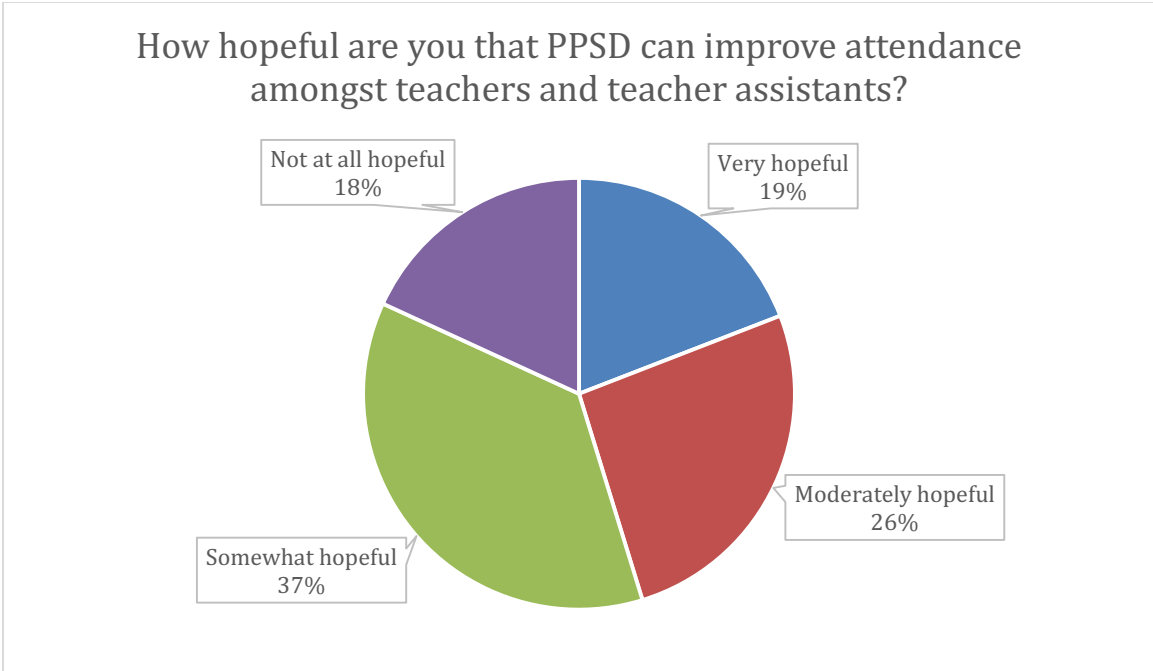
Appendix G
Attendance Survey results

To what extent do you think teacher attendance is a concern in PPSD?



To what extent do you think teacher assistant attendance is a concern in PPSD?





Questions 8, 9, and 11:

Figure 1: Root causes identified in the survey

Root cause	Instances mentioned
Administration relationship	409
• Administrator and/or District are not visible in schools and do not know real needs	32
• District puts too much stress on principal	13
• Lack of engagement by principal	36
○ Do not feel valued by principal	30
○ Do not get feedback about job performance from principal	143
• Lack of support by principal and/or District	83
○ Lack of support by principal	48
○ Lack of support by District	5
• Principal does not model good behavior	
Aging faculty	4
Contract allows for high number of sick days	53
Lack of time off (no February break and short holiday break)	10
Life happens (people and/or family members get sick)	56
People do not understand the importance of attendance	8
Poor facilities, air quality, or mold	245
Students get sick and spread germs	44
Culture	200
• Colleagues are not here for the right reasons	7
• Morale is poor	175

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a lack of understanding between people in the District 	17
Emotional disposition	132
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frustration • Stress 	72 60
Student behavior	329
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of consequences/discipline for students who misbehave • Student behavior needs to improve • Student social emotional needs are not addressed or supported • Students have many needs • Suspensions are not allowed 	178 56 27 44 24

Figure 2: Solutions for attendance identified in the survey

Solution	Instances mentioned
Accountability for individuals	381
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have consequences for individuals who have high levels of absence • Hold individuals accountable, not group • Require higher quality documentation for sickness • Track attendance 	184 109 23 61
Fiscal/policy issues	50
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add more personal days instead of sick days • Spend more money on schools instead of administration 	31 19
Engage parents more	20
Improve working conditions	862
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow more flexibility in daily schedule • Allow more autonomy over curriculum/teaching • Ensure equitable technology access in classrooms • Get rid of time clock • Increase and improve use of collaboration and/or Common Planning Time • Lack of resources • Negativity around PPSD teachers • Reduce class size • Threat of harm/violence • Too much curricular change • Too much paperwork • Too much stress • Too much testing • Treat teachers like professionals • Working conditions vary by school • Workload is too much 	32 31 12 27 24 66 16 35 35 40 80 164 22 69 24 107 111
Incentivize attendance	553
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include attendance on teacher evaluation • Include monetary incentive • Recognize good attendance and work 	6 135 122

Solution	Instances mentioned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reinstate the 5-day buy back policy 	87
Need more training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add in-service days Offer training for supporting English language learners Offer onboarding Offer physical/mental health opportunities Offer restorative justice training Offer social emotional learning training 	84 7 3 3 27 3 2
Improve quality of staff <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need better leadership Need more and higher quality substitutes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistent substitute at schools Need more qualified and better trained teacher assistants Need more social emotional support staff Need more staff to address specific student needs (special education, ELL, behavior) New teachers: improve process for hiring and improve retention 	292 36 89 8 33 39 59 11
Understand root causes and listen	61

Figure 3: Reactions to the issue or survey

Reactions to issue or survey	Instances mentioned
Don't ask about others	19
Survey quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey is disheartening Survey is insulting 	18 1 11
Thank you for focusing on attendance	6
What is in the data?	31

Appendix H

Recommendations to Providence Public School District

The diagnostic phase of the strategic initiative around attendance and engagement yielded significant data about what factors impact teacher attendance in PPSD. Human Resources, with the support of RPA, may continue to lead in this initiative, but attendance is also impacted by District-wide and individual school initiatives and culture and should therefore be supported at these levels as well.

1. **Teacher assistants as a separate issue:** Teacher and teacher assistant attendance are distinctly different issues. Going forward, I recommend that PPSD looks specifically at the role of the teacher assistant, both in terms of attendance and the role overall. Issues that were specifically raised in both the focus groups and the survey include their role in the classroom is, the lack of respect, compensation, and how teacher assistants bid for and are assigned to positions.
2. **Attendance specific initiatives:** The data suggests there are specific initiatives that will impact teacher attendance and will set the stage for larger engagement work.
 - a. **Advisory group of teachers, principals, Human Resources, and RPA:** There are many school and District stakeholders who are impacted by teacher attendance, and they are impacted in different ways. To allow for more conversation around critical issues and increase buy-in and trust, I suggest creating a working group with representation from all parties. One of the outstanding questions raised throughout the process was what is included in the data (e.g., why are professional development absences included), and this would be a productive first question for the group to tackle.
 - b. **Recognition and accountability.** What is shown to motivate employees is recognition for a job well done and going the extra mile (Herzberg, 2002). This is also shown to build trust, which the variable engagement response rates suggest is a concern. “Recognition has the largest effect on trust when it occurs immediately after a goal has been met, when it comes from peers, and when it’s tangible, unexpected, personal, and public” (Zak 2017, p. 4). By recognizing individuals for positive attendance behavior, as well as other positive contributions, and holding individuals accountable for problematic behavior, PPSD can change the narrative around attendance.
 - i. **Recognition:**
 1. Superintendent reception/barbeque at the end of each semester for teachers who are absent two or fewer days in the semester.
 2. At the school and district level, develop a weekly recognition of “How did ____ help me succeed this week?”
 - ii. **Accountability:**
 1. Analyze workers’ compensation data to understand why PPSD has such high absence rates.
 2. Provide principals with tools and guidance for addressing individual attendance. Also provide management training for principals overall, as this is both a positive and negative cause of behavior.

- c. **Incentives:** Teachers and principals frequently cited the former 5-day buyback policy, as opposed to the current sliding scale buyback policy, as being a greater attendance incentive. I recommend that PPSD look closely at the financial impact of a more generous buy-back policy than the current sliding scale and consider whether it would be possible to add contingencies to it (e.g., a teacher may only take advantage of the policy if he/she is absent no more than 3 days in any given month).
 - d. **Hire more and higher quality substitutes:** The substitute shortage was a cyclical factor that came up in all of the data gathering instances and that was noted as a factor that exacerbates attendance issues.
3. **Greater PPSD initiatives:** While attendance is an issue in and of itself that may be addressed, it is also a symptom of other issues that are more adaptive, including teachers feeling tired from ongoing curricular and leadership change and the challenge of changing student demographics. Providing support in the pain points for teachers will allow help them feel more efficacious in their jobs and will increase their feelings of motivation and engagement, which should ultimately also improve attendance. Such initiatives will also build trust in the District.
- a. Provide more training for teachers, including:
 - i. Cultural responsiveness and sensitivity
 - ii. Social emotional learning and support, school-based system of restorative practice
 - iii. Classroom management and what to do instead of suspending students, de-escalation training
 - b. Provide more time and support for teachers to complete paperwork and to understand curricular changes (e.g., add in-service days)
 - c. Consider the working conditions in schools (particularly facilities) and how they impact students and teachers
 - d. Consider the calendar and how meaningful time off may be ensured for both staff and students (e.g., the SY16-17 holiday break was only one week, as compared to the SY15-16 holiday break being two weeks).