

Every Student, Every Day.
The NYC
Success Mentor
Corps Guide

2012-2013 ACADEMIC YEAR

NEWLY UPDATED



Mayor's Interagency Task Force
on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism
& School Engagement

THE NYC SUCCESS MENTOR CORPS GUIDE

Connecting at-risk students with caring adults through a carefully developed infrastructure—enabling them to be positive role models, encourage regular attendance, and identify and begin to address underlying causes of chronic absenteeism in a personalized way—is a key initiative of the Mayor’s Task Force.

Roughly one in five students in New York City is chronically absent each year – meaning that over 200,000 students each year miss a month or more of school. Even a student with a 90% attendance rate can still be chronically absent – and missing out on the opportunity to gain the skills they need to succeed in school and in life. Students don’t show up to school for a variety of reasons, such as health issues, lack of transportation, family dysfunction, bullying, or lack of interest in school. Many students are absent simply because they don’t think anyone notices or cares.

In the summer of 2010, Mayor Bloomberg launched the Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism and School Engagement – the first-ever multiagency effort to reduce truancy and chronic absenteeism in public schools. In the fall of 2010, the Task Force initiated the Every Student, Every Day campaign – a comprehensive set of initiatives in 25 schools and 15 family homeless shelters in all five boroughs. For the 2011-2012 school year, the campaign expanded to 50 schools, and in its third year, the campaign has expanded once again to include 100 schools. The Success Mentor Corps is one of the campaign’s key initiatives.

The agencies primarily responsible for implementing the Task Force’s initiatives, along with the Department of Education, include: the Administration for Children’s Services, the

Department for the Aging, NYC Service, the Department of Homeless Services, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, the New York City Police Department, the Department of Youth and Community Development, the New York City Housing Authority, the Human Resources Administration, and the NYC Health and Hospitals Corporation.

Success Mentors

“Success Mentors” work with chronically absent students to address the barriers keeping them from going to school every day – and to help them reach their potential educational outcomes. Success Mentors may come into the school through “external partnerships” or they may already work in the school as teachers, guidance counselors, and more. They may also be high school seniors or juniors who are peer mentoring 9th graders. Success Mentors primarily target chronically absent students, who are at elevated risk of poor school outcomes, and ultimately of dropping out. The mentoring relationship can be intensive, involving counseling and prolonged interaction. It can also be a more advocate-like connection — one that lets students know that someone is there at school to support them.

Success Mentors have two main goals: to personalize and enrich the school experience for their mentees so that they become more successful at school through increased engagement and attendance, and to identify the underlying causes of absenteeism and begin to address them through a range of interventions and support services. Mentors come into school in a leadership position; they have direct, regular contact with the principal and other school leadership, and have access to data about their mentees through a special confidentiality agreement.

Success Mentors....

- + Have a caseload of 15-20 students, and are matched with their mentees for a full year.
- + Meet and greet matched students each morning when they arrive at school; make early morning phone calls home to absent students.
- + Track attendance and celebrate improvements.
- + Meet with mentees regularly, both one-on-one and in small groups, to check in on how school is going and listen to students’ needs.
- + Work with school and community based organizations’ (CBOs) leadership to identify appropriate interventions to support and engage the mentee.
- + Seek advice and identify targeted sources of student or family supports from appropriate school staff and community-based school partners.
- + Keep notes about student attendance patterns, needs and interventions—make sure monitoring of data is strategic!

- + Attend (or be represented at) weekly Principals’ Student Success Summit meetings to share any best practices or challenges and to present a summary of how students are doing.
- + Each external Success Mentor team has a Platoon Leader who is a Success Mentor. The Platoon Leader functions as the liaison between the team of Success Mentors, the school administration and the Mayor’s Task Force.

Mentors can...

- + Create a special sense of belonging.
- + Connect students and families to school and community resources.
- + Be advocates for students.
- + Work with school leadership to improve school climate and student engagement.

Sample Success Mentor Activities

Elementary School

- + Make a point to personalize your morning greeting by complimenting your mentee on anything new or different about them. You can make a student feel special if you notice the little things—like a new haircut.
- + Make arriving to school fun. Celebrate their attendance with high fives, blowing bubbles or a fun phrase.
- + Create a bulletin board featuring most improved students each month, with a photo of both the mentor and the mentee.
- + Create breakfast clubs for mentees and their parents.
- + Start lunch clubs for your mentees, such as art clubs or tutoring clubs. Invite mentees who have improved their attendance to a special lunch with you.
- + Send a postcard or note home to families congratulating them on any improvements their child has made.
- + Spend time building relationships with family members so you can give them support to get their children to school every day. Call families to let them know when their students are doing well or to thank them for getting their children to school more often.
- + Meet with older siblings who attend the same school to strategize about how to get their younger sibling to school each day. Getting the older siblings’ support can go a long way to getting their younger siblings to school on time.
- + Create before school activities like a basketball game or chess club meeting.

Middle School

- + Have M & M meetings (“mentor and mentee”) every Friday.
- + Have students “check-in” with you each morning.
- + Celebrate improvements! Call or send a “good news” postcard home when students make improvements – no matter how small.
- + Create gender-based groups during lunch to build students’ connectedness to school and feelings of belonging.
- + Use lunchtime to organize fun events for students who are improving their attendance, such as games, computer time, movies, and more.
- + Help students and parents look ahead to high school. Last year, Success Mentors from one middle school reviewed the high school choice book with 7th graders and sent letters to parents emphasizing how critical 7th grade attendance is for high school admissions. Some parents hadn’t known that attendance was part of the admissions decision.
- + Offer academic support to students. Work with their teachers, sit in on their classes, help them with homework, or develop academic-based lunch clubs.
- + Compliment your students’ appearance during morning meet-and-greets.
- + Organize peer-to-peer mentoring or tutoring groups to create a sense of belonging.
- + Create individual charts on which the students color in each day and/or each month that they come to school. Set goals with each student, and use the charts to track their progress.

High School

- + Offer mentees “life skills” workshops on topics such as time management and personal goal setting.
- + Joan Seergy and others were able to create a “student lounge”. This “lounge” is for the use of students who have at least a 95% attendance for a month, with no tardiness. They get access for one week, and can utilize the space before school, during lunch, and after school. Mentors move in and out of the room as well, as this helps to strengthen their relationships with the students.
- + Age appropriate activities such as the Day of Love, a full day program promoting healthy relationships or Youth Empowerment Day with motivational speakers and workshops on how youth can make a difference in their community.
- + Create gender-based groups during lunch to build students’ connectedness to school and feelings of belonging.

- + Learn about students’ academic standing (how many credits they have, what they need to do to graduate), and help them create individual academic plans to get them back on track.
- + Create small, achievable goals for your mentees – and celebrate their success when they meet them. Last year, a mentor challenged her mentee to arrive at 7:55. The student came to school at 7:54 “because he didn’t want to let me down.”
- + Have an “open door policy.” Get to school early and tell students to drop in to the Success Mentor meeting place before school for any reason – whether they want to chat, get help with homework, or tell you about a problem they are having.
- + Start peer groups for students facing particular challenges, such as pregnant or parenting teenagers. Or, develop clubs, like a Gay-Straight Alliance, for example, that promote acceptance and create a sense of belonging.
- + Offer tutoring or other academic support to students.
- + Develop community service activities for students to connect and engage them at school, such as tutoring students in neighboring elementary and middle schools.

All Grade Levels

- + Offer social and emotional support to students. Ask their teacher if you can sit in on a class to help them manage their behavior, and take a walk to help students having trouble behaving in class cool down.
- + Host special events for mentees the week before or after a school break to encourage them to come to school
- + Partner with classroom teachers and school staff like guidance counselors and parent coordinators to get your mentees on the track to school success.
- + Share clear guidelines. Be sure students and parents know the rules and consequences for lateness and absences.
- + Connect students to existing programs/offerings in school (arts, band, after school, sports. . .). Work with school staff to ensure every student has a “hook” in school.
- + Offer frequent recognition for kids who are improving since these kids (and their families) need constant reinforcement to sustain improvements. Celebrate and reward gains in attendance on a regular basis.

Tips for Getting Started

- + Introduce yourself: set up an introductory meeting with the Success Mentors and the school leadership team; let the teachers know you are there for their students.
- + Help each other: meet with other Success Mentors to share ideas and develop tar-

geted interventions.

- + Get organized: create binders with key information on school personnel, community resources, and mentees.
- + Make it a team effort: talk to teachers and other staff at your school to gain new insights and information about your mentees.
- + Get the phone numbers of your mentees, and set up your Google “office” number so mentees or family members can call you back easily. If sending letters home to parents, be sure to have all correspondence approved by the principal.

School-Wide Attendance Interventions

About 20% of the Success Mentor’s Time

- + Help your school organize a perfect attendance assembly or an improved attendance awards ceremony for parents and students. Consider having a hot meal or refreshments to encourage attendance.
- + Help organize a weekly 15 minute lunchtime rally for attendance, or ask your principal if you can talk about attendance at school-wide assemblies. Give shout outs to students who have improved their attendance that week.
- + Hold attendance parties every month for students who have improved their attendance
- + Organize a “Spring Fling” dance for students with improved attendance for March.
- + Enter the names of students with perfect attendance into a drawing for gift cards, movie tickets, or other prizes.
- + Organize and promote class competitions to get the best attendance. Give the best class a special prize or party. You can also give out incentives to improve class attendance.
- + Set up a morning basketball program on a neighborhood court to engage kids before school.
- + Stand outside the school and greet students at arrival.
- + Reach out to local merchants to see if they can donate items to use as attendance incentives
- + Implement school-wide initiatives and policies to address bullying, so that all students feel safe and welcome in school. For older students, include activities that ensure school is a safe and supportive place for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) youth. In one high school, a Success Mentor worked with school staff to create a Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) group. Other schools have used the Safe Schools program from PFLAG NYC (<http://www.pflagnyc.org/safe->

schools).

- + To counteract Spring Slump, organize special activities such as a Spring Dance or Spirit Week. To keep up motivation, offer weekly, exciting incentives for perfect and improved attendance, such as an extra gym period, movie time during lunch, gift cards, or a cookout in the school yard

Using Data & Weekly Principals’ Student Success Summits

Strategic Intervention

Start with the ABCs to form a complete picture of student strengths and needs.

- A. Attendance: Compare to last year, trends year-to-date.
 - B. Behavior: Suspensions, acting out, engagement in school.
 - C. Coursework: Previous year’s exam scores, report card grades, feedback from the teachers.
- + Prepare for morning attendance calls: Have data about attendance trends; know what you want to say to parents; and be persuasive, positive, and strategic. Learn what the challenges are – and act.
 - + Collect evidence of intervention work done so it can be studied, shared and replicated: Copies of outreach information to students and families, agendas and handouts, sample attendance reports.

Mayor’s Task Force “Data Dashboards” are a special way of viewing a student profile, specifically to be shared with Success Mentors and others who have signed confidentiality agreements. They are generated for students matched to Success Mentors or for students flagged by schools for other interventions. The Dashboards allow you to view and print student profiles, accessed through a secure internet site and updated each week. The profiles provide basic demographic information (grade, age), as well as information on suspensions and attendance patterns for the past three years. The Dashboards are also a place to log the work you do with your mentees. You will receive an email with a password and login instructions, and be provided with training on how to use the Dashboards.

In addition to the Dashboard, keep your own notes on your mentees. Even a simple calendar drawn on a notebook page where you track your students’ daily attendance is a helpful tool, and often more immediate than what a school can share with you.

Remember: Data is not just numbers on a page – it is a way to figure out why your students are missing school and develop targeted interventions to get them back on track.

For example...

Data	Suggested approach/action
Multiple suspensions?	Engage in peer mediation, service learning or other positive school activity.
Special pattern of days missed?	Look for special family circumstances, for example babysitting responsibilities.
High exam scores but low attendance rate this year?	Check programming: Is student fully engaged in class work? Is there another “hook?”
How old? What grade?	If a student is overage and under credited, look into alternative programs or transfer schools that can help them get the credits they need to graduate.

Weekly Meetings: The Principals’ Student Success Summit

The Principals’ Student Success Summit is a weekly meeting for school leadership — including the principal and select school staff like the school counselor, parent coordinator, Assistant Principals, and community partners working with your school. You or your Platoon Leader will also be expected to attend every week. Together, the team reviews school-wide attendance data, early warning cases (5 to 10 absences), and cases of students with 10 absences or more. Facilitated by the principal, the team develops interventions and monitors for effectiveness by tracking attendance for targeted students and watching for changes.

The meeting is not only a good chance to examine data on your mentees. It will also give you the opportunity to share success stories or challenges with your school team at the weekly meeting. Together with other members of the school team, you can think about what’s working and what’s not – and develop effective interventions for your mentees.

Parent Engagement

Parents are crucial partners for improving students’ attendance. Engaging them in your efforts to get their children to school every day is essential to making gains for your mentees

– especially in the younger grades. Below are tips for building strong, positive relationships with families early in the year.

Building Positive Relationships with Parents

- + Be a familiar face! Send a photo of yourself along with a letter of introduction home with your mentees during the first week of school.
- + Call home thanking parents when children have been at school. Call or write parents with any good news about their children.
- + Make phone calls home in families’ native language. Try to find staff members or other mentors who can speak in parents’ home language. Mentors may also utilize the services of the DOE’s Translation and Interpretation Unit, available online at: <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/Translation/default.htm>.
- + Hold improved attendance awards ceremonies for parents and students. Give awards to parents of students who have improved their attendance.
- + Have high expectations for parents. Expect them to be accountable for their children’s attendance – and remember, they want their children to succeed as much as you do.

Engaging Parents in Improving Attendance

- + Share individual student attendance data with parents through letters and phone calls.
- + Specifically address the issue of families taking long vacations from their countries of origin by educating families on attendance laws and reminding them of the impact of extended absences on school performance.
- + Provide early morning activities for parents (such as breakfast workshops, series to provide resources for job hunting, or fitness classes) to encourage them to bring their children to school every morning.
- + Encourage parents to attend their parent-teacher conference; offer to join them for the conference.

Calling Home

Research shows that – when coupled with other interventions – phone calls to absent students’ homes can help break patterns of truancy. That is why making daily phone calls home is such a critical part of your job as a Success Mentor.

What is the purpose of the same-day call?

Although schools may be using automated systems to make phone calls home on the day of a student's absence, a personal call can help:

- + Alert the parent to the student's absence
- + Get information on the reason for the student's absence
- + Build a relationship with the parent/engage the parent as a partner in working to ensure good student attendance
- + Alert the parent about a strength or success of the student's to encourage engagement
- + Connect the parent with needed services to increase the likelihood of the student arriving to school on time, every day

Tips for making calls home effective

- + Develop data and procedures to ensure that every absent student gets a call that day. The plan should include how to log calls and who parents can contact for more information.
- + Let parents know to expect calls home regarding their children's attendance.
- + Prepare for morning attendance calls: have data about attendance trends for the student; make sure you've set aside enough time to discuss with the parent why the child was absent and to begin to explore a solution.
- + Set a positive tone, at the beginning of the call, by saying something positive about the child. (This does not have to be attendance-related. It could be a school project they did a good job on, improved behavior, or simply telling them: "You have a great kid.")
- + Identify yourself and explain that you are calling as part of the Mayor's initiative.
- + Be available to listen if the parent wants to talk about challenges they are facing and be ready with some suggestions on how to work together to address these challenges.
- + Create a free Google Voice work phone number so parents can return messages. Calls will be directed to your personal phone and you can control when you want to receive them.
- + Thank parents for their (expected) effort in helping their child come to school, on time, every day.
- + Encourage parents to introduce themselves to the Success Mentor team during morning greeting and to let their children know to do the same.
- + Thank parents for the call and let them know you are looking forward to seeing their child back at school tomorrow.
- + Be prepared to respond to the type of answers parents may give for the child's absence, such as "He's sick," or "She was getting her hair done." Talk to your school leadership team about what follow-up questions to ask (e.g. bringing a doctor's note)

and what suggestions to make for these common excuses.

- + Try working as a team to make calls home most effective. At one school last year, Success Mentors worked as a group to make calls home every day. Each day at a set time, three to four Success Mentors met in the school office to make the calls (the school gave them four phones to use). It took the team about 45 minutes to make all the calls. Because the Success Mentors worked together and rotated the job every day, all absent students got called every day and the mentors were "known" by the various families they called.

Tips for getting correct contact information for students & families

You will struggle throughout the year with getting accurate contact information for your mentees. Not only is the information in the school's files often out of date, but contact numbers can change throughout the year as many families use pre-paid cell phones.

You will have to be creative and tenacious to get the up-to-date contact information that you need to communicate with families throughout the year. Think about using the following strategies:

- + Talk to your school about setting up a home visit to obtain accurate contact information.
- + Ask students for their home phone number.
- + Ask student's siblings for the right address/phone number.
- + Get phone numbers from the free and reduced lunch forms (since families are more likely to put accurate information on these forms).

Parent Success Summits & Resource Fairs

The Parent Success Summit & Resource Fair takes place during the first eight weeks of the school year. It is designed to engage, educate and provide resources to the families of chronically absent students about the importance of good attendance (including the laws around attendance and the link between attendance and school performance); help families understand how they can support their children's good attendance; and begin to connect families with local services and community agencies that can address the barriers they face in getting their children to school, on time, each day.

Talk to your principal about helping to organize and speak at the Summit so that families at your school can get to know you better. Getting parents to attend is a challenge. Be creative. Think about ...

- + Having an "awards ceremony" at the Summit where targeted students are given

awards for improved attendance, or other early year “achievements”; invite parents/guardians/siblings to the ceremony.

- + Having food (always a draw!) for all who come.
- + Performing a fun skit of parent-child morning get-to-school conflicts to give parents ideas about how to get their kids to school on time every day.
- + Helping to distribute a parent survey about attendance barriers and student interests. Completed surveys can be submitted for a door prize drawing.
- + Create a Parent Summit Passport, and have the different resource booths stamp it after their visit. Not only will this make the Summit fun for parents, but it will also help them realize the wealth of resources available—and which they haven’t learned about yet.
- + Give parents Tip Sheet featuring important and concise information.

Connecting Students & Families to Resources

Attendance issues are often a symptom of underlying challenges that students and their families are facing. These challenges range from being overage and under credited, to dealing with chronic asthma, to coping with homelessness. In many cases of chronic absenteeism, students and their families may be dealing with multiple challenges that are negatively impacting attendance.

Schools partner with a wide variety of community-based organizations (CBOs) that provide programs and services to students (and their families) both on and off-site. These community resources include afterschool programs, parent workshops, mental-health services, asthma awareness and management assistance, and school-based health clinics. By ~~working with your school team to connect your mentees and their families with these and~~ other community resources, you can go a long way toward helping them overcome the barriers that are keeping them from school.

Tip: Use your CPP Liaison. Through the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), each school in the Every Student, Every Day campaign is connected to a Community Partnership Program (CPP) liaison to help access local community resources. When one of your students is dealing with issues outside of the school, you should talk to your attendance team about contacting the CPP liaison to address these problems.

Research & Tools on Attendance and Reducing Chronic Absenteeism

Visit the Success Mentors Resource Page on the Mayor’s Task Force website at www.nyc.gov/everystudent/successmentors. On this page, you will be able to access research on chronic absenteeism as well as a range of other resources to help you succeed, such as sample letters home, student surveys, attendance tracking sheets, and more. We will update the website throughout the year with additional resources so be sure to check back periodically for more resources.

Questions? Suggestions? Email Sarah Jonas, our technical advisor from the Children’s Aid Society, at sarahj@childrensaidsociety.org.

Thank you for touching a student’s life!

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www.nyc.gov/EveryStudent