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Overview

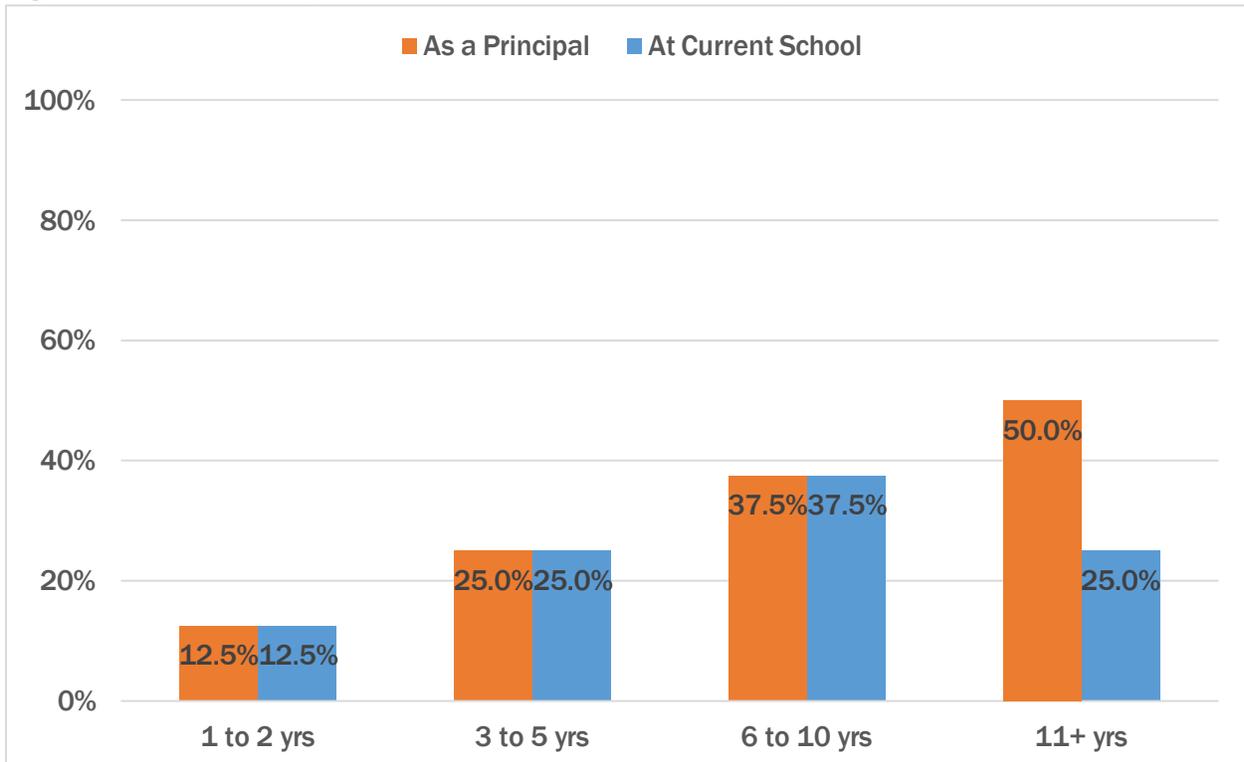
Students are considered chronically absent if they miss 10% or more of their enrolled days. Nineteen percent of students in the District were chronically absent in the 2019–20 academic year; however, some schools have shown a marked improvement in their absenteeism and chronic absenteeism rates or had innovative attendance practices. Principals from these schools completed a survey and/or participated in a focus group to share the challenges and strategies they used to successfully combat this issue.

Participants

Principals from 12 schools were invited to participate in this study (6 elementary school, 5 middle, and 1 high school). Seven principals completed the online survey and 7 participated in the focus group, 6 of whom had also completed the survey. The final list for survey participants were Brownsville Road and Jackson Elementary Schools, Geeter School, Gordan Achievement Academy, and A. Maceo Walker, American Way, and Highland Oaks Middle Schools. Focus group participants included Jackson and Treadwell Elementary Schools, Geeter School, and A. Maceo Walker, American Way, Germantown, and Highland Oaks Middle Schools.

As shown in Figure 1, most principals have been at their current school their entire tenure.

Figure 1: Years as Principal at Current School & Years as Principal Overall





What are you doing to support good attendance at your school?

As shown in Figure 2, the most frequently implemented strategy was communicating with parents. Having conversations with parents in which principals inquired about needed supports, as well as discussing the importance of attendance and potential consequences for truancy were reportedly effective. One principal also reported holding a group meeting with parents of the most chronically absent students.

Providing student incentives was another popular strategy. Recognizing and celebrating students who improved their attendance, as well as providing tangible incentives such as barbecues, movie time, and the ability to purchase items from a “student store” based on points earned for attendance are examples of effective incentives.

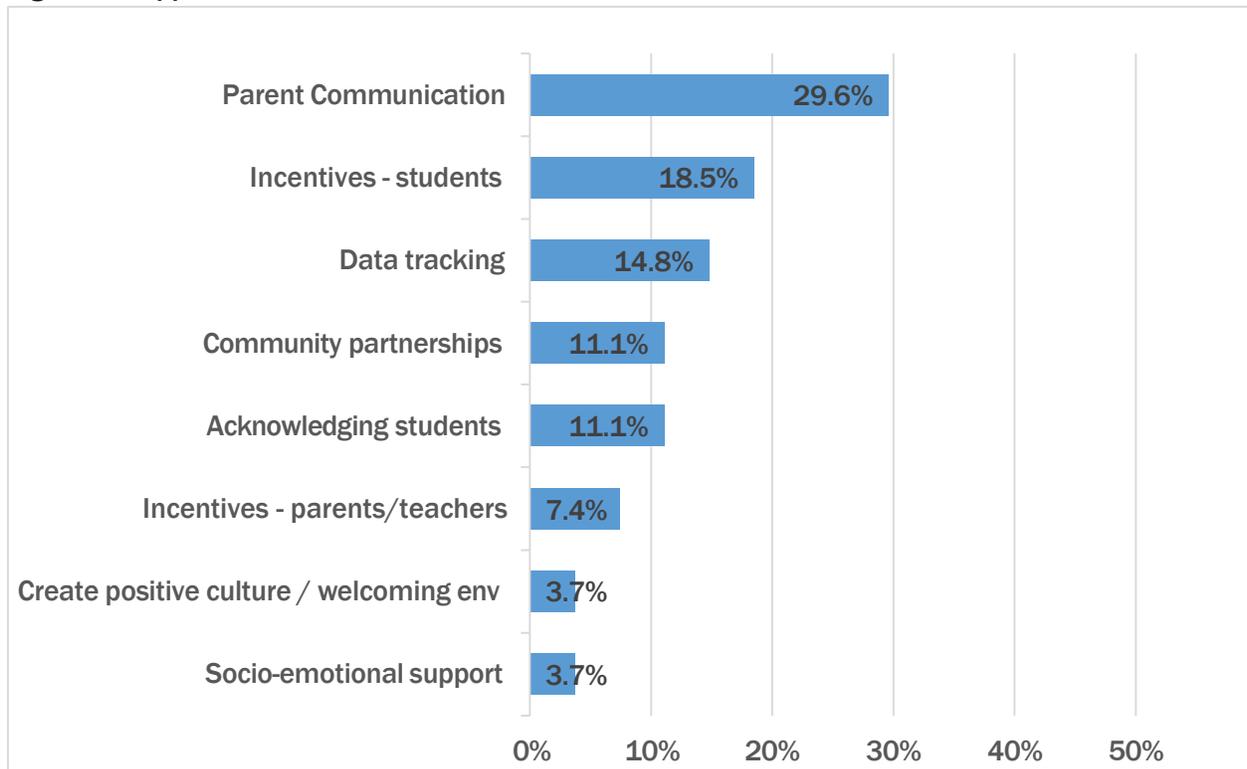
- *“As far as the student side, we have incentives...we’ll do weekly drawings, we’ll have some prizes we’ll do movies, you know, fun days in the afternoon so we have something happening for the fourth quarter every week and then at the end of the fourth quarter, if you have perfect attendance your name will be put in a hat for a drawing for like, PS4, Xbox360, Nintendo DS and things like that...just trying to build up to try to get everyone on board.”*
- *“We have a student store. Students can earn in a regular school setting, and right now they use Dojo points, and those points represent dollars...And they would use those things [school dollars] to go to a quarterly store and buy items that they liked. We had donations from corporate sponsors, we had our PTA pitch in on buying things...Students would walk through, they would make their purchases and they would check out using their [school] dollars. And we use that as an attendance incentive. Students who had good attendance got a certain amount of points each quarter.”*
- *“We celebrate the students who have improved their attendance and we also send out certificates and letters to the parents, but we also incentivize the teachers because what we have found is when teachers create environments that are warm and conducive to learn, and they make the environment inviting to students then students typically come to those classes and they come on time. So, I personally give those teachers who have increased their attendance gift cards and certificates and thank them for their attendance and celebrate those who have perfect attendance.”*

Principals reported tracking student data and contacting parents of students with high rates of absenteeism weekly.

- *“Other than incentives, I’ve started that OneDrive file this year and that’s really helped us kind of streamline when we’re calling, who we’re calling...Just having that system helps us monitor who we are calling and that seems to have helped, other than incentives; incentives have been the number one, but as far as keeping track of it and yes, we mine the data but then documenting that for our purposes have helped us a bunch.”*



Figure 2: Supports for Good Attendance





What were the key influences that led to improvements in absenteeism?

Figure 3 shows that among the strategies used, principals identified parent communication as key. Daily data tracking was also needed to identify chronically absent students for intervention.

- *“We monitor attendance literally every day in PowerBI. I have a team of folks, including the school counselor, myself, and two ladies in the front office, secretaries, and we place phone calls to students who are chronically absent.”*
- *“We have a OneDrive file that we use to document every phone call to see who we have called. It’s a live document that we are able to filter down to a specific student to see when they were last called.”*

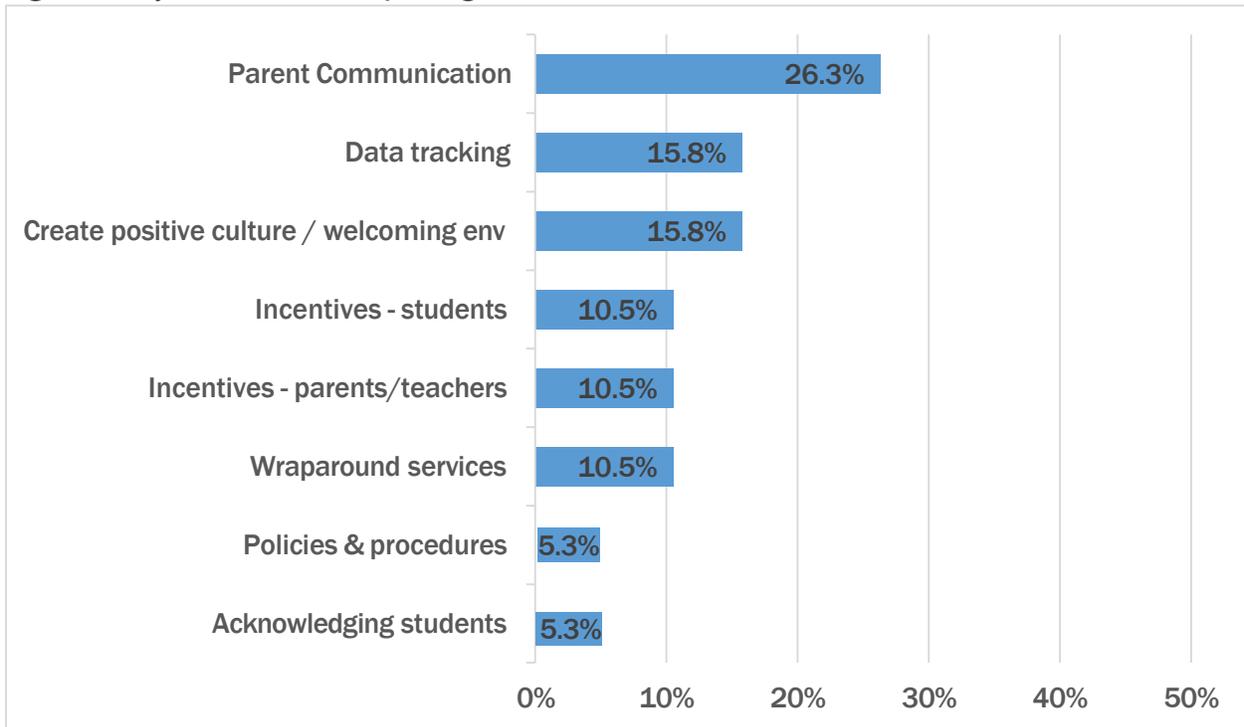
Additionally, principals reported that creating a positive school culture and welcoming environment helped improve attendance.

- *“They [students] hating coming to school, so I had to make school a place where the students could escape to and not from. When they come to school, I tell them for eight hours, you’re going to feel loved here. I can’t tell you about how it will be when you leave and go home, but here, you’re going to feel loved and valued.”*
- *“Once you get the kids to enjoy coming to school, attendance won’t be a problem then.”*

A novel strategy some principal employed was incentivizing parents and teachers.

- *“We started incentivizing the parents and not just the students. Of course, as an elementary school a lot of our students who are chronically absent are not absent because of their own devices. They’re absent because of parents... When we incentivized the parents that’s where we saw the biggest increase in students coming who were on that at-risk list... We would give away \$50 Kroger gift cards. We would do a raffle for every grade level.”*

Figure 3: Key Influences for Improving Attendance

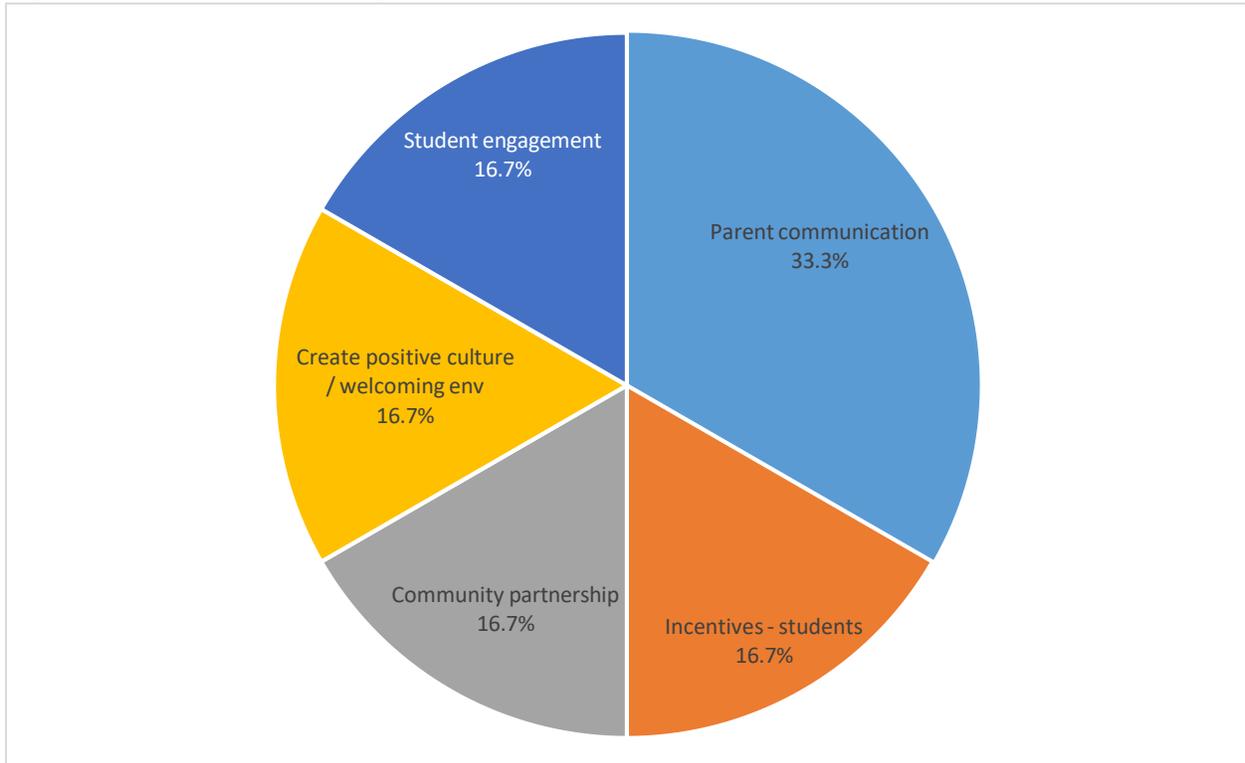




What school-specific strategies did you enact that made your school successful in improving chronic absenteeism?

Figure 4 illustrates the specific, school-based strategies principals felt were effective in addressing chronic absenteeism. Again, the most popular response was good parent communication.

Figure 4. School-Based Strategies



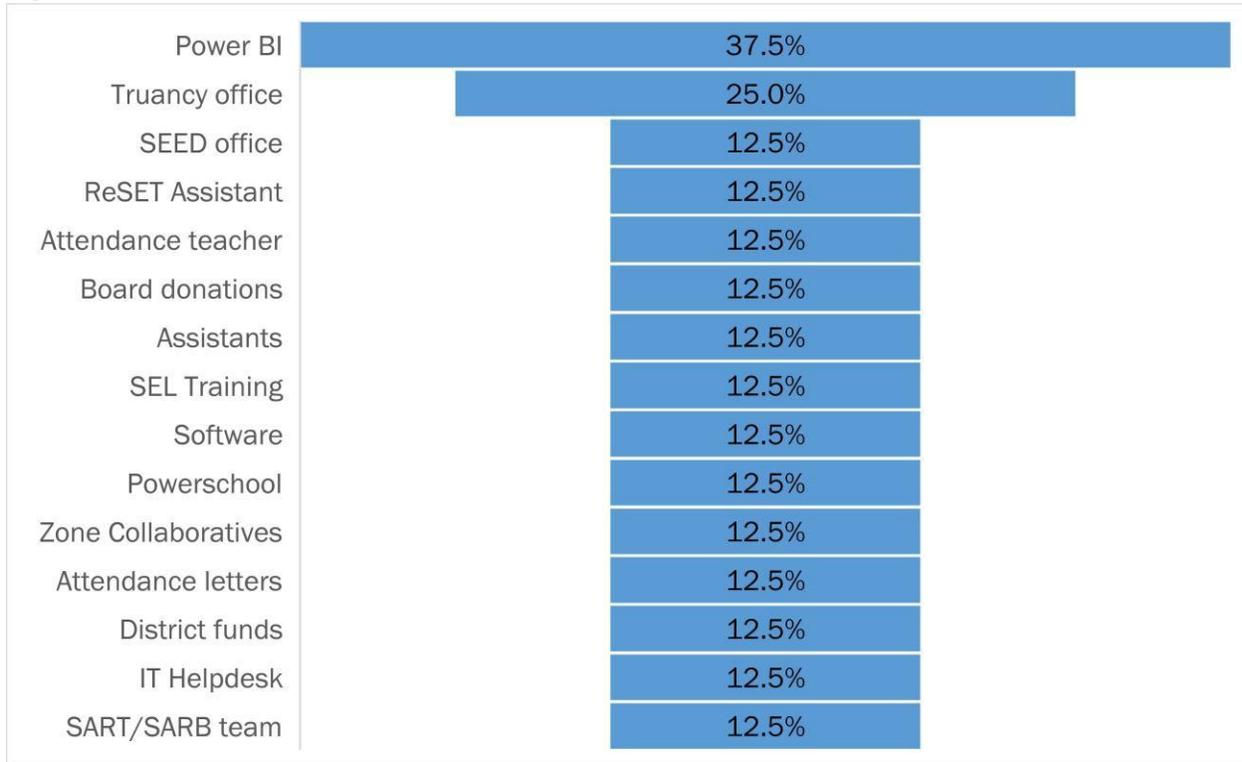


Describe any District resources you used to address absenteeism/chronic absenteeism that were central to your school's success.

Principals felt that various District resources were helpful; however, as shown in Figure 5, PowerBI for data tracking was cited most often. Principals also credited truancy staff as being instrumental.

- *“I would have to really talk about the help that we get from Gail Cotton who is our truancy supervisor for our school. It’s great to work with her, especially in some very difficult situations...Ms. Cotton and her team do a really good job of speaking with parents and trying to get them on the right track before we have to do anything else.”*
- *“Cotton’s group has been great; her and her team have been very supportive with our conferences and reaching out to parents.”*

Figure 5: Essential District Resources

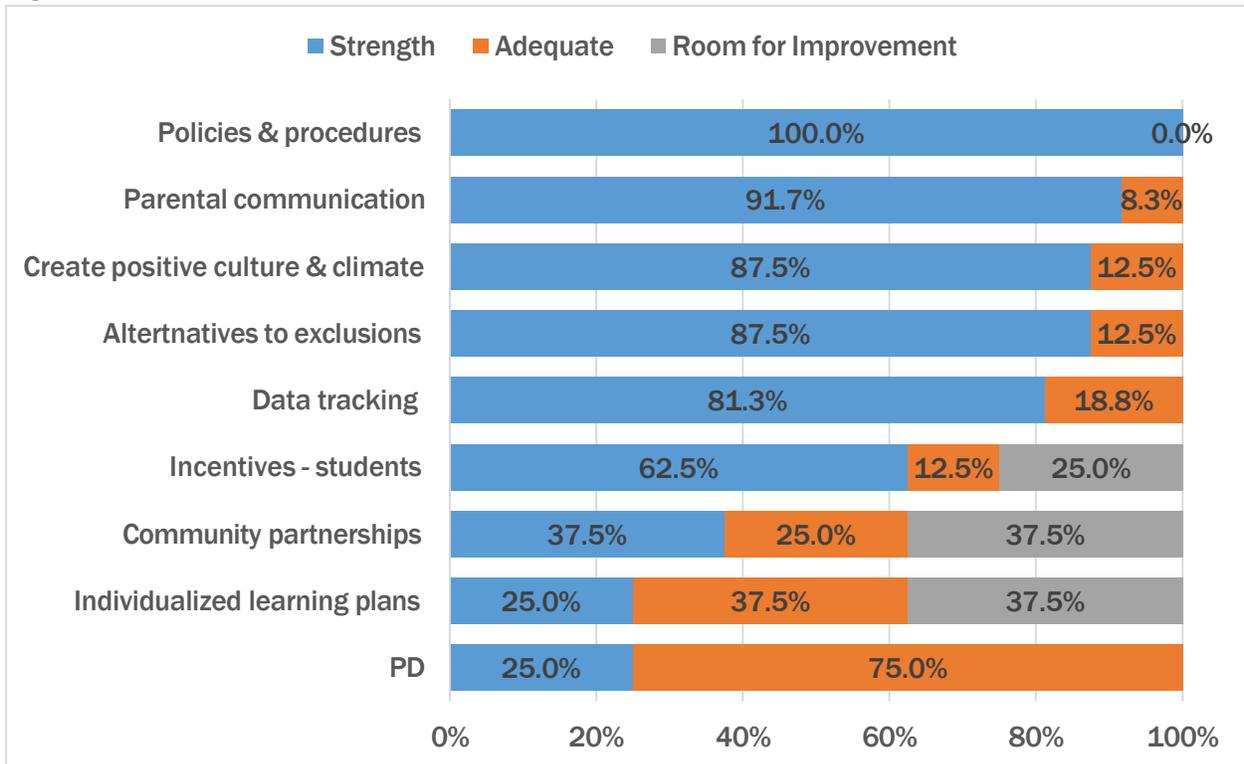




Which elements of practice were helpful for improving attendance?

Among the elements of effective practice identified in Figure 6, principals cited having policies and procedures in place to address absenteeism, parent communication, creating a positive culture and climate, providing alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices, and data tracking as the strongest strategies in their schools. Principals reported needing improvement in developing individualized learning plans for high-risk students and cultivating community partnerships. Although some principals reported that there was room for improving student incentives, most felt that it was a strong strategy utilized in their schools.

Figure 6: Elements of Effective Practice

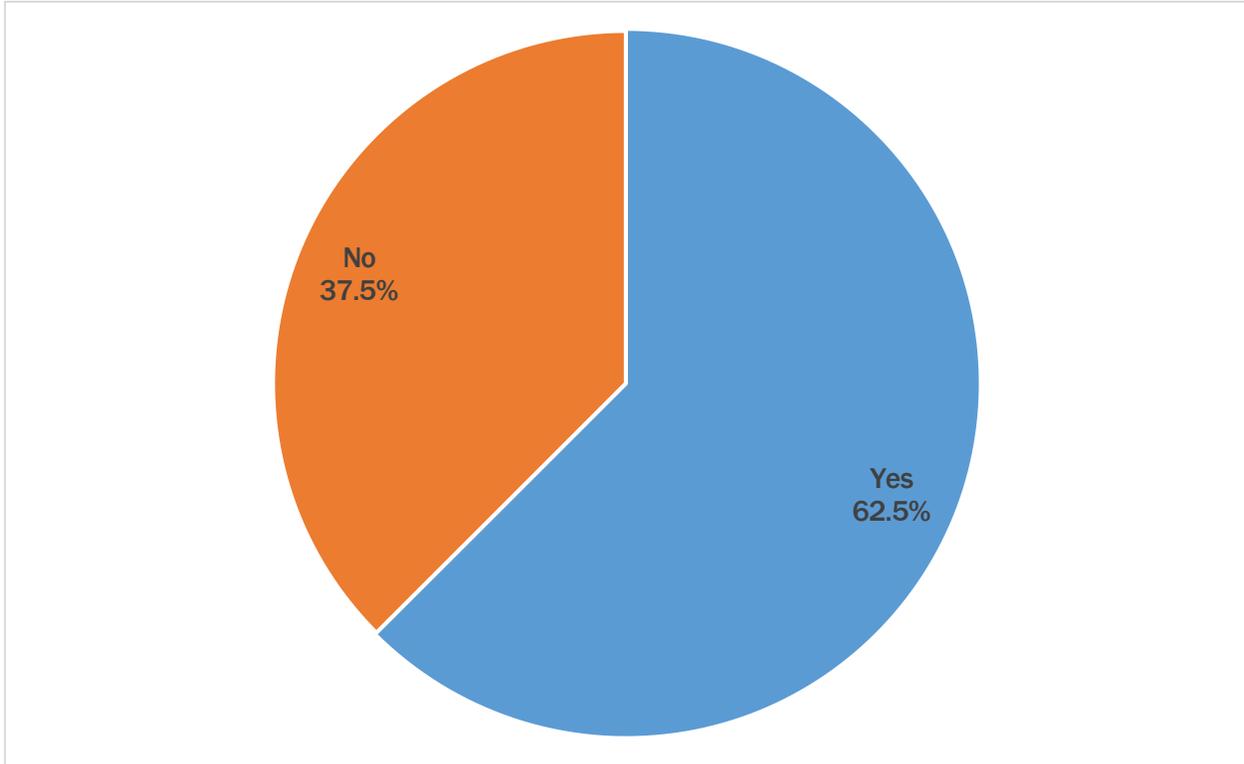




Over the last few years, did you or other school leaders add or reallocate resources in your school budget to focus on reducing chronic absenteeism?

Most principals reported reallocating budget resources to focus on reducing chronic absenteeism.

Figure 7: Budget Reallocation





What do you think are the biggest barriers to students attending school?

As shown in Figure 8, the attendance barrier most-often cited by principals was adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Examples of ACEs include transiency and unstable housing, students being responsible for caring for a sick family member, and fear of walking to and from school because their homes, schools, or routes taken to get there are situated in dangerous neighborhoods. This is especially a concern when, due to time change, students are walking while it is dark outside. Another notable issue is that some walkers are required to cross dangerous intersections along their route.

The second-most popular response was a lack of parental support.

- *“It seems there is no recourse for parents that continue to have students chronically absent and/or truant. Parents that have been through this process before know there is only so much that can happen such as meeting with the truancy officer and going to court.”*

Middle school principals described some parents’ reluctance to clear 1-day suspensions as causing students to miss more days than necessary.

- *“Some of our students have had issues just because their clothes are not clean, or their hair is not cut... Sometimes the parents won’t come to the school to clear a suspension. You may issue a one-day suspension and then it takes the parent five- or six-days to come to the school to clear it. It was not a five- day suspension, but now you have students missing because the parent won’t come to the school.”*

Elementary school principals noted that parents oversleep and that in some situations, such as a student’s doctor’s appointment or having a sick sibling, parents feel it is more convenient to keep their child(ren) home. Specifically, when older siblings who are usually responsible for walking their younger siblings to and from school are sick, some parents keep all children home.

Poverty, weather, and transportation were interrelated issues. Principals reported that some parents can’t afford school uniforms, which contributes to absenteeism early in the school year. Rain and extremely cold weather have kept students who walk to school away. If students had reliable transportation, climate-based issues would no longer be a hindrance. Transportation was also cited as a problem when students spend the night with a relative who lives in a different part of town, which has made walking no longer a viable option.

- *“I know why we have school uniforms...I hope that when we come back that this is something that the District looks at. Because I have a lot of students at the beginning of the year who end up on the chronically absent list because they’ll miss an entire week or two of school until they can get the right school uniform just to enter the building...It takes a lot of money to get school uniforms, especially for multiple kids. There has got to be a way to ease off that restriction especially for an elementary school where it just doesn’t make a lot of sense anyway...That is one thing I would love to see go away; that we have to have a uniform policy... If the parents aren’t able to get the uniforms clean, we are putting such a huge obstacle in the way of the parents who need school for their kids the most.”*
- *“When it’s raining and the kids have to walk to school, they just won’t. I’ve often wondered how we could provide umbrellas to 100% of my students. When it’s too cold outside and students don’t have jackets.”*
- *“We have had very real conversations about umbrellas. There were so many parents when we were back in traditional school that would not come, and it is solely weather related.” “[Our*



school] does not have buses, the middle school next door does have three buses because their zone is larger but us on the elementary side do not.”

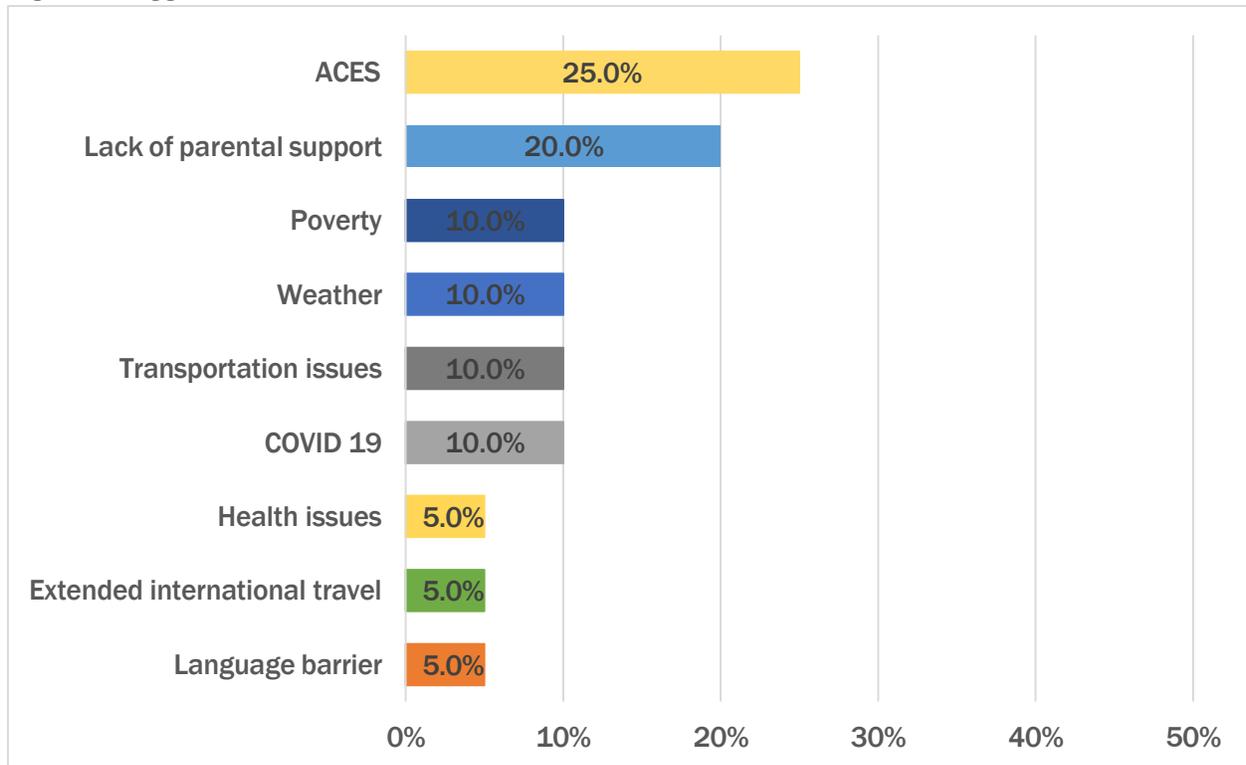
- “Transportation is a major problem, mainly on those tough weather days, that’s when we see our attendance really dip.”
- “Even if I live in this zone normally but tonight, I have to go stay at my aunt’s house, but she doesn’t live in the zone and she may not have transportation herself and so we do run into a lot of issues like that as well.”

COVID-19 anxiety contributed to absenteeism before schools became virtual. An elementary school principal cited legitimate health problems as a major issue, stating:

- “We need a school nurse here every day.”

An interesting contributing factor cited by one elementary school principal was the prevalence of absenteeism among Latinx students, especially newcomers, after a long school break. Reportedly, some families often leave the U.S. to return to their country of origin or to visit family there, resulting in extended time away from school. Last, language barriers among English Learner parents make it difficult to communicate truancy issues, policies and procedures related to truancy, and the importance of attendance.

Figure 8. Biggest Attendance Barriers





Briefly explain how your school addressed these challenges.

Figure 9 illustrates the strategies principals employ to address challenges. Communicating with parents was again the most popular response.

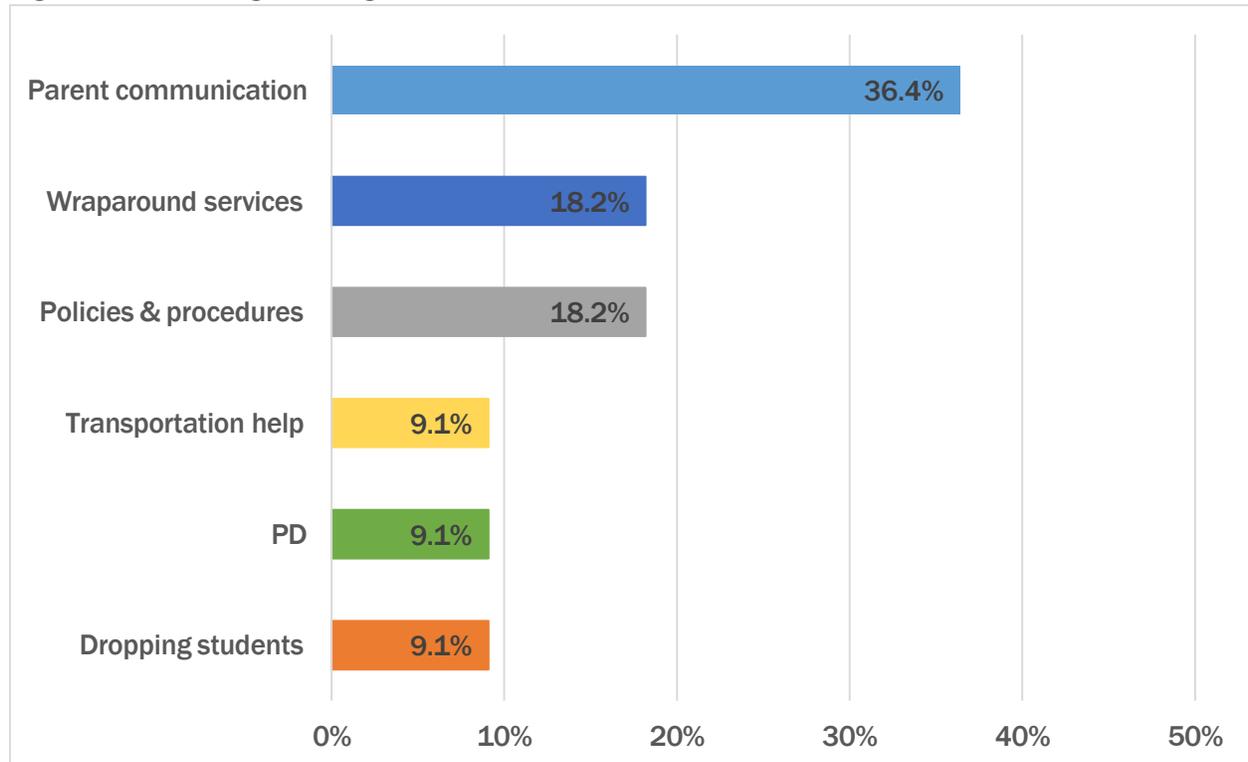
- *“By regularly contacting parents and following up with truancy letters as well as submitting to SEED.”*
- *“We communicate with parents letting them know students who are not sick need to be at school if one of their siblings is sick.”*

Regarding wraparound services, one principal identified recently hiring another ESL bilingual mentor to support English Learner students, while another has partnered with a local dry cleaner to provide students with clean clothes. As a more recent strategy, principals cited having policies and procedures in place to address parents’ COVID concerns.

- *“We consistently inform parents of all of our safety guidelines and procedures for students attending in-person.”*
- *“New safety and PPE protocols.”*

A middle school principal reported assisting with transportation issues by providing MATA bus card for their students. One principal also noted the importance of providing extensive faculty and staff PD so that students receive, “trauma-informed instruction or socio-emotional learning.” Last, one principal reported dropping students, “We drop students if they have been out for 10 days and/or try to withdraw them if parents let us know they are leaving the country.”

Figure 9. Addressing Challenges





Anything you wish you would have known and any resources/supports you would have liked to have had sooner that you believe would have strengthened your success in reducing chronic absenteeism?

When asked about additional resources/supports, half of all principal responses were related to funding needs. Principals cited needing additional funding to provide students and teachers with incentives, provide students with MATA passes to address transportation issues, and purchase umbrellas and coats to circumvent the weather issue.

- *“It would be really helpful if there was a way through our financial processes if we could purchase those gift cards for parents. That’s something we aren’t able to do with school funds and any funds that we collect that go into school funds can’t be used for that so it’s really difficult to come about that, and after a while sponsors aren’t as willing to give anymore, especially coming out of a pandemic we found it’s very hard to get donations so if there was some way for that to be done whether that’s through a District wide pool or an account in the school or whatever, that would be a great way to help because those incentives do work.”*
- *“They are hard to come by, but...MATA passes have helped with some of our parents in the past.”*

One-quarter of principals reported that they needed no additional resources or supports at this time. One principal expressed a desire to return to the procedure of referring parents of truant students to the Attorney General. Another identified having Behavioral Specialists as a benefit. And knowledge of best practices was another requested resource.

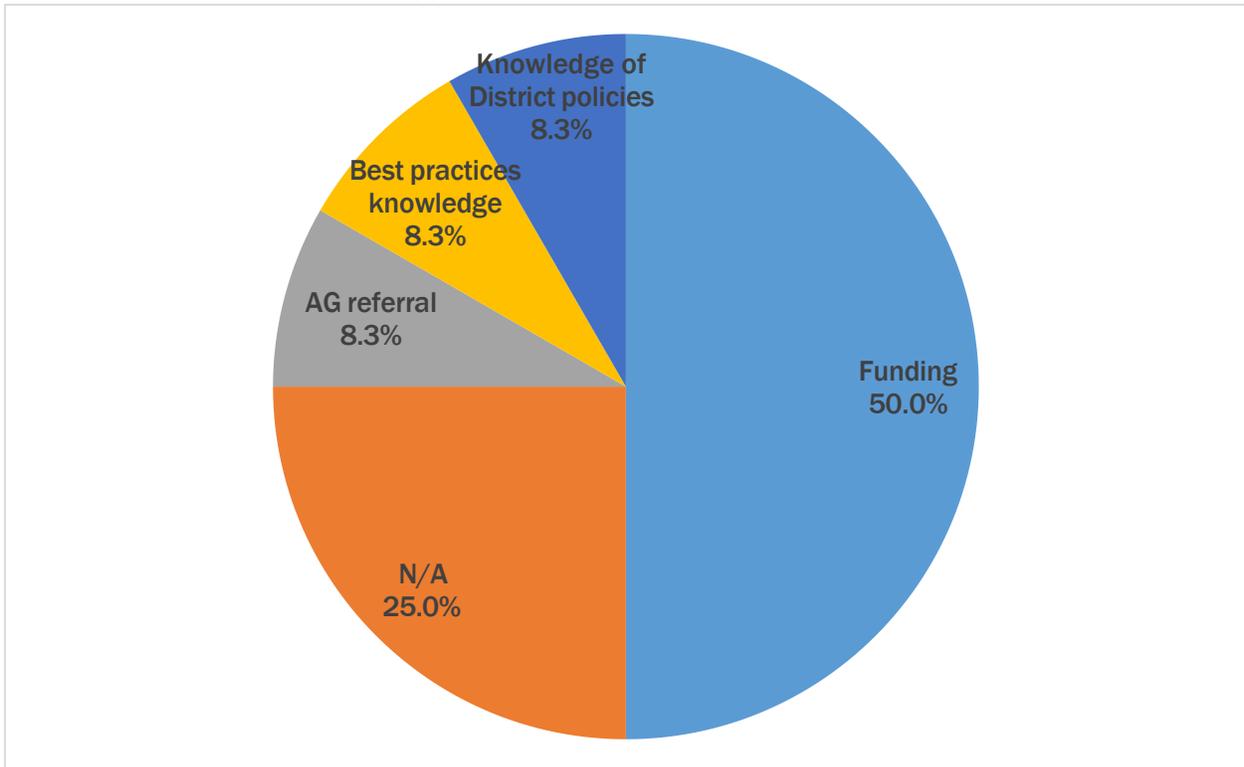
- *“A toolkit of strategies that other schools use to help their attendance is a good idea. Best practices are always welcomed.”*

Last, one principal expressed the need for clarity in District policies,

- *“What are the exact steps a parent goes through when their child is truant. Things seem to change over the years and sometimes we are lost in transition with what we need to communicate to parents.”*



Figure 10. Needed Resources/Supports

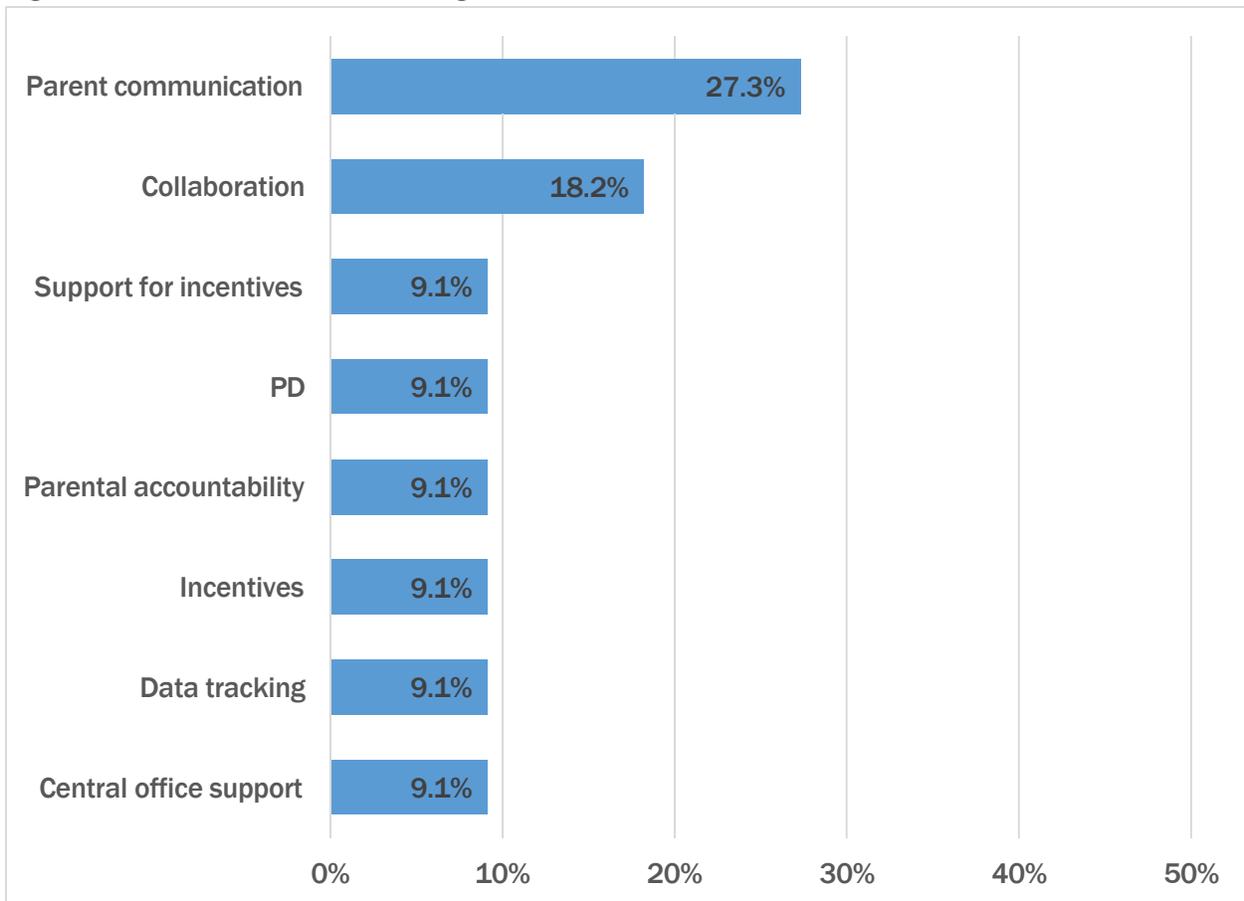




What do you think is most helpful for ensuring that other schools in the District are also taking steps to improve student attendance and taking steps to reduce or prevent chronic absence?

Figure 11 shows that the most popular recommendations for improving chronic absenteeism principals would give to other schools are ensuring effective parent communication and collaborating with other schools to communicate best practices.

Figure 11. Best Practices in Reducing Chronic Absenteeism



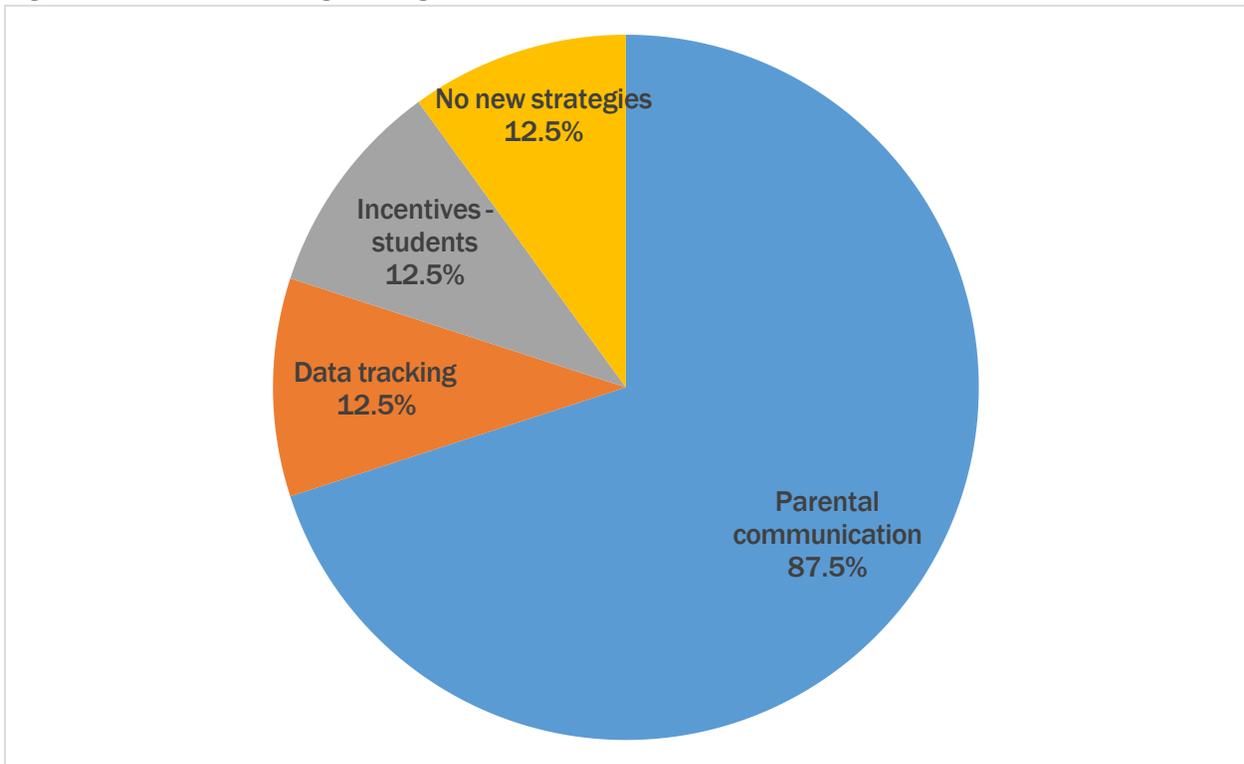


What specific strategies have you used to address absenteeism problems since students have transitioned to virtual learning?

Figure 12 illustrates the emphasis principals place on good communication with parents, which they cite as needed during both in-person and virtual learning environments.

- *“CONSTANT communication with parents. Students can appear as if they are engaged to an unknowing parent. Informing parent of students' lack of engagement and receiving assistance to ensure a student is on track is of great benefit.”*
- *“All teachers are making additional calls to parents when students are absent to ensure that technology is not a barrier for students to attend class.”*
- *“I follow up immediately with students when I complete my morning check in with students/teachers.”*

Figure 12. Virtual Learning Strategies





What do you think are the biggest barriers to student attendance in a virtual environment?

Last, Figure 13 illustrates principals' perceptions of the major barriers to attendance in the virtual learning environment. The issue most often cited was technology problems

- *"Technology is the biggest barrier. Even with the PNC (present, no [internet] connectivity) code we have a much larger amount of students missing classes than normal. Many of these issues are with students that have parents who are not in the home and it is left up to the student to attend classes on their own. We also notice that with certain families the parent is in the home while the child is in class however the parent does not check in on the child. When they do the child is not in class and is on another site doing something else."*
- *"Technology continues to be a problem for students that are virtual. Communication seems to break down when a student needs to be coded as PNC instead of [absent]."*

Additionally, principals reported that virtual learning is un motivating for some students and that some parents are not supporting and monitoring student learning online.

- *"Student dependability and accountability; ownership as to logging in daily and consistently."*
- *"In my estimation, the biggest barrier is parent work schedules. Students whose parents have to work and they are left unattended have a tendency to miss school."*

One principal cited ACEs as a problem, even in the virtual learning environment.

- *"Problems occurring in the home. Students that are homeless/ transient. Lack of Wi-Fi and broken devices."*

Last, one principal reported that distractions within the home as a barrier.

- *"We cannot control the students' external stimuli at their home. This stimuli is what fuels the lack of engagement."*



Figure 13. Virtual Learning Barriers

