



## Education Unscripted & Xplored Transcript

### *Episode 4 | Everyday Counts: Tackling Chronic Absenteeism Through Connection and Care*

**Kari Vogelgesang (00:07):**

Welcome back to EDUcation Unscripted & Explored with Kari and Mark, where we talk honestly about what's working, what's uncertain, and what's changing across PK-12 and higher education.

**Mark McDermott (00:19):**

We blend research, practice, and lived experience to make sense of the complex systems we're all trying to navigate and improve in real time.

**Kari Vogelgesang (00:28):**

And today, we're jumping into one of my favorite topics and one that has become quite urgent since the pandemic. It's an issue that many schools are facing nationwide. It's chronic absenteeism. And we're going to approach this topic not as a compliance issue, but as a reflection of belonging, connection, and community wellbeing.

**Mark McDermott (00:54):**

And as always, the views expressed here are our own and not those of the University of Iowa or the College of Education.

**Kari Vogelgesang (01:03):**

Okay. Here we go. Okay. Are you ready? Yes,

**Mark McDermott (01:05):**

You're on. I'm ready. Let's do

**Kari Vogelgesang (01:06):**

It. Okay. So I think that we should start this conversation with just providing some context maybe in setting the stage a little bit and what maybe the numbers that we're seeing actually tell us. So in Iowa and similar to nation trends and our national trends, chronic absenteeism, as we all know, has increased dramatically following the pandemic. It's something that we also were struggling with prior to the pandemic though. It's just something that, like many things in schools and in other professions as well, the pandemic just kind of blew this crack wide open. And during the pandemic, we saw across the nation that districts were experiencing 20 to up to 30% of their students being marked as chronically absent. And what we mean by that is when a student misses 10% or more of a school year, then that's typically around 18 or more days, then they are classified as chronically absent from school.

So nationally, the numbers in some urban and rural districts were actually even higher than 30%. So it was a very serious situation during the pandemic and even coming out of it. And we're starting to see some progress in this area. We're seeing that not just here in Iowa, but districts across the nation, some serious improvement with this. And we can kind of unpack that a little bit more. But the reason why this is so serious and why we're going to address this topic is that we also know that chronic absenteeism is strongly linked to things like lower reading proficiency, poor mental health conditions, decreased graduation rates. It even has long-term economic impacts for us. So even though today those numbers are dropping and we're moving in the right directions, right direction with this, we're still a little bit concerned and we're still willing to stay on top of this and definitely create situations that really pull kids into school in situations where they're wanting to be there and stay there.

**Mark McDermott (03:22):**

So yeah. So the numbers are important, right? It's important for us to think about the numbers and statistically what we're confronted with. And so that's part of the reason we bring those up. But really when you think about this, and I think the way that Kari is going to present this, we'll talk in a second about how fortunate we are to have Kari here as an expert on this topic. But I think the way that we're going to talk a little bit about it is if you think about this maybe outside of the numbers a little bit, some of the other factors and what you find are stories of transportation barriers, school avoidance that might be linked to anxiety, unstable housing situations for students, differing levels of caregiving responsibilities on the part of the students, what they might be responsible for in terms of taking care of other members of their family, fatigue, chronic illness, and importantly, school climates that lead to students not feeling welcome, not feeling safe, not feeling like school is a place for them.

And so what we're going to try to do, I think, is think about all of those different factors that nuance and realize it's not just ... There are times where it's about being sick or it's being ill, but there's lots of other factors that are involved here.

**Kari Vogelgesang (04:41):**

Yeah. Yeah. I love that point. When we look at numbers, particularly numbers that have to do with absenteeism, then oftentimes I think people just look at the numbers and they think that it's just telling us about students not coming to school. Okay, that's the number. They missed 15 days. It's about that. So that just means the student didn't come to school 15 days, but there's much more nuance to it. It's really what we're wanting to do is get down to that root cause. Okay. Why aren't they coming to school? Because we can put in all kinds of different policies in place and policies can help us address those root causes, but they aren't going to actually ... That policy isn't directly going to necessarily improve chronic absenteeism rates. It's that that policy might lead us to a conversation that helps us address the root cause.

Yeah. Does that make sense?

**Mark McDermott (05:40):**

Love it.

**Kari Vogelgesang (05:41):**

Yep. Yeah. Okay. So maybe what we can do is start talking about some of those.

**Mark McDermott (05:48):**

Like I said, I wasn't joking when I said this. Kari kind of laughed, but it was the truth. We're very fortunate here. We don't have an external expert today or an external guest. We have an internal expert, an internal guest, if we can call it that. Kari's done a lot of work in this area and she's done a lot of statewide policy work. She's had lots of conversations with our partner districts, with different community providers. And so we're going to lean into that expertise.

**Kari Vogelgesang (06:15):**

Oh, I appreciate that. It's an interesting topic. And I have to be really honest with you. I always thought that absenteeism was interesting, period, even when I was in the classroom and figuring out, working with families to kind of figure out, okay, why is this child missing so much school and then working with different school partners to help those families. So I've always found it interesting, but I can tell you that I was very humbled once my own children started to not like school and not want to go to school. And here I was, this educator who also had some level at that point in time of expertise with school absenteeism, and I had struggled getting my kids to go to school. And even when I could get them to go to school, they didn't necessarily always go to class. And that's when I started to really do a deep dive and get involved with some expertise, some experts in the field and professional organizations and get involved with some policy work because I have to be ... I mean, it's kind of selfish.

I was like, "I want to figure this out. What is going on here?" Because the more I looked into it, the more I started having honest conversations with parents and our school district and other school districts across the state and nation. And it was embarrassing for all of us, especially those of us who were tied to education or we saw ourselves as people who really valued education, we read to our kids, right? I mean, I didn't even let my kids play with plastic choice. I was like, "I did all the right things and still my children do not want to go. What is the problem?"

**Mark McDermott (08:00):**

"Yeah. It's interesting. I mean, so the way we'll kind of, I think, facilitate this is I'll do more of the asking of the questions and we'll hear from Kari in terms of her experience. But I like what you brought up there. I think there's, even for the both of us, we've experienced this on one level as parents. We've had children that had differing feelings about whether or not attendance was that important and those sorts of things. So there's a personal connection in some ways. We've also been teachers, we've been K-12 teachers. And I think one of the things as I was sort of thinking about this, when I was teaching high school students, on one hand, yes, I was concerned because if I had a student that was consistently not showing up, and I hope, you think back, I hope that I was concerned about their wellbeing, but in a lot of ways, I was very concerned about kind of the practical aspects of that.

How am I going to get them caught up? How am I going to get them to get their assignments done? And you don't always feel like as the teacher in the room that I have time to delve into some of the underlying factors. And I think it's important for us to have this conversation to help teachers. Now we both deal with trying to help people who are going to become teachers. What is it that they need to be thinking about as they go in and maybe some of the things that we should have been thinking about, but when we were doing it, we can help this kind of next generation of teachers. So let's just start out with a very basic question, maybe Kari. When people hear chronic absenteeism, they often think it's just about attendance offices and are the attendance people keeping track of what they need to be, or parents maybe aren't prioritizing school.

What are we getting wrong maybe about chronic absenteeism?

**Kari Vogelgesang (09:48):**

Yeah. I think the first thing is that chronic people always think of it as a behavior problem, and it's not. It's a context problem. It's figuring out the why, the root cause, and that can be tricky. And there's lots of reasons why a child doesn't want to come to school. Sometimes it's academic. Sometimes they've struggled with reading or with math or a certain content area and they just really want to avoid it. It's avoiding it. And as you and I both know, when you avoid something, it just gets worse and worse and worse. And you have more and more anxiety and stress that builds up around whatever that thing is that you're avoiding. And so sometimes it has to do with an academic piece. Sometimes it's bullying. Sometimes they're avoiding going to that environment because they're fearful of their safety or of embarrassment for some reason.

Sometimes it's transportation issues. Sometimes it's truly is like mental health challenges. They have severe depression, severe anxiety that it's not been diagnosed or isn't being treated. There are all different kinds of factors that play into why students don't come to school. Another big one is they don't see the need. They don't think it's important. I went through the pandemic. I barely showed up for online learning. I still passed my classes. I want to be a farmer and I don't really think that this is relevant to what I want to do with the rest of my life. And honestly, I think when you're 16 years old, that's legit. I hear you. I understand what you're saying. I get where you're coming from. But then it's trying to work with that family to get them to understand that education, having a well-rounded education can help you as a farmer.

It can help you as a parent. It can help you as a citizen. So it's very complex. It's not just a behavior issue.

**Mark McDermott (11:57):**

Yeah. Yeah. You started, I think, talking a little bit about talking with the families, thinking about the community, thinking about ... I think I've heard you talk about the ecosystem that the student is a part of. So talk a little bit about that, maybe talk a little bit about that idea of relationships and how relationships are involved in this idea of what might be at the root cause of the chronic absenteeism, or maybe framing it more positively, what might be a strategy for us to help with a student who isn't feeling as safe or comfortable at school?

**Kari Vogelgesang (12:31):**

Yeah. So one of the things that I do like that the state of Iowa has done, and we're seeing states across the nation do this, is they really did ... I think people were very upset at the beginning and nervous about some policies that were put in place around chronic absenteeism because when you think about missing 10% of the school year, 18 days, honestly, that adds up quickly. A child, I was just talking to Kat Wilson here, the person who supports our child- And other experts. Her child was just really, really sick. We're talking like influenza B, right, cat and strep throat. And it's easy to miss a week of school and just about of something like that. You might then go on vacation or have a grandparent who's ill or whatever. And so I think that was really concerning. But what I can tell you is that what these policies are meant to do and should do is strike up conversations.

So, and again, it's bringing people to the table to start to understand like, okay, is this really serious where we need to intervene and help the family with transportation, help the family locate, help them with finding like some more secure food sources or whatever the issues that they're experiencing and that they're having is creating some absenteeism issues for them. How can we really help be a support? It could be that, no, really the child was just really severely ill for a while and so we really don't need to step in here. It's going to be okay. But it just really does push us to have some more in depth conversations.

**Mark McDermott (14:22):**

Yeah. And I hope we didn't just commit a HIPAA violation there by talking about Kat's children's health situations to be-

**Kari Vogelgesang (14:30):**

Oh gosh, you are so right. I shouldn't have done that. We can edit that out.

**Mark McDermott (14:35):**

This podcast...yeah, this is new for us.

**Kari Vogelgesang (14:36):**

Gracie, I'm sorry that I told the world you had the flu. I really am. I hope she forgives me.

**Mark McDermott (14:40):**

We're learning. We're learning. Yeah, no. But what I was going to say was even with ... I can remember, I vividly remember when I had chickenpox when I was in third grade, right? And I actually, my mom listens to the podcast, so I'm going to shout out to Linda McDermott.

**Kari Vogelgesang (14:59):**

Hi, Mrs. McDermott.

**Mark McDermott (14:59):**

Well, she's going to get in trouble because I'm pretty sure the first time I ever saw an R-rated movie was because I was up in the middle of the night and my mom just let me watch TV because I was miserable.

**Kari Vogelgesang (15:05):**

What was it?

**Mark McDermott (15:09):**

I think it was Fast Times at Ridgemont High.

**Kari Vogelgesang (15:13):**

Great.

**Mark McDermott (15:14):**

I don't know.

**Kari Vogelgesang (15:15):**

Great movie, worth it. It's fine, Mrs. McDermott.

**Mark McDermott (15:18):**

But no, I mean, even with that, you're gone. When you're in third grade, and you miss a week of school, what goes through your third-grade mind is, "Do they realize I'm gone? Do they miss me?"... You know what I mean? And I think that idea, that's one of the things we're talking about here, is this idea of whatever the maybe initial reason is that I'm not able to be in school, what's going through my head as the student is another factor that we have to consider maybe.

**Kari Vogelgesang (15:50):**

Yeah. That is such a great example. And it is true. Students will start to think, "They don't miss me. They don't really want me there. I mean, who cares if I don't show up?" And so that is one strategy that we teach, that's something that educators can do. That's pretty simple. Let them know how much you really want them there. I noticed you were gone yesterday. These are the things that were missed and I'm here to help you catch up in any way that you might need,

But make sure you also welcome them back. Shaming them for being gone is just going to exasperate the problem. Even if you feel annoyed and frustrated, which totally valid too. I get it. You said that at the beginning. It can be really frustrating as a teacher when you are tasked to keep all of them moving forward at a certain pace and now you're having to take five steps back for a student. I get that, but it's just going to create more problems if we don't welcome them back and let them know that we really want them in our classroom and that you're there to help. So that's one strategy. I do want to circle back to this ecosystem thing that you said too, because I do think teachers can get overwhelmed in thinking that all of this is my responsibility. That's also a systems problem that we have and making sure that teachers know it isn't just their responsibility.

Like this is the team of people that you need to connect with, the social worker, the school counselor, the admin office. And we need to work together as a team when we start to notice, when we look at data and we start to notice certain students are missing a lot of school. It's not just your problem.

**Mark McDermott (17:26):**

Yeah. Yeah. I think a great point. And obviously we've lived that to some extent of having to make those decisions and you want to, because the rest of the class is still there that has been there and you have to keep that moving and there's questions there. So we've kind of hit on this in different ways. You talked a little bit about policy, compliance, those sorts of things, and some of the things that are happening, maybe that are positive in that regard and that are making some differences, but maybe some other things that in your experience you'd say we want to keep working on. You've mentioned some of these.

**Kari Vogelgesang (18:00):**

I think a big one that I'm really interested in right now is working, thinking about this as a community issue. This is not just a school issue. We say this a lot about everything that we talk about that work, right? So I- So it must be true, right?

Mark McDermott (18:19):

Absolutely. Yeah.

**Kari Vogelgesang (18:21):**

No. But it really is. I mean, these students that we have in all of our school districts, a lot of them will stay in that district. They're going to create a life in that area, even if it's not in that specific district, probably somewhere around, statistically speaking, around that area. So they are going to be community members. And so this is something that I think everybody needs to be paying attention to. And when I say a community needs to pay attention to it and help out with it, I'm talking pediatricians. I'm talking about mental healthcare providers. I'm talking about law enforcement. And when I say law enforcement, I don't mean like law enforcement locking people up.

I just mean, "Hey, I see you're walking around like, what's up? Do you go to school? What school do you go to?" Getting to know community members, not in a punitive way. And I think the Iowa City police officers, by the way, do this in my experience really, really well is a good model of this. Getting to know people and understanding their story, again, not in a punitive way, just curious to try to help understand the kinds of struggles that people are having in that community and then coming together as a community through the city council and other organizations to try to shore up some of the areas that are creating some challenges and some issues for people. That's what I mean about community. This is a community problem. Again, people that don't go to school, they're inevitably going to end up living in our communities.

We should all care about this.

**Mark McDermott (19:59):**

Yeah. Well, and that's, I mean, I think two things there. One, it adds another layer of nuance to the conversation because I think about, again, we will often talk about our own experience because that's

the experience we're aware of. But in my own experience, I taught at three different high schools, three different situations, different sizes of communities, sort of different geographic location relative to urban areas and all those sorts of things. One was very rural, one was a little bit more suburban, one was a little bit more in a larger ... And so the community makeup is different. And the way that as maybe a teacher or administrator working with students in these scenarios, that can be another factor to consider is what is the specific community makeup. I think the other thing, and you touched on this and I like this idea of, it's kind of the idea of assuming positive intent.

The people in the community want to help, right? The teachers want to help. And having this attitude of, we're not blaming by saying, "This is a community issue. It's not just a school issue." We're saying all of the people in this ecosystem, I really like that. There we go. The science part of me, that ecosystem term. I like that. So that ecosystem of all of the people, all of the relationships, all of the factors for these students is important, but assuming we can all work together, it's not about trying to figure out whose fault it was. It's about how are we working together to help this scenario?

**Kari Vogelgesang (21:33):**

100%. There's no fault in this. Every community has their strengths and their areas of growth, and it's all different. Like you said, in rural communities to urban communities, to suburban communities, to Midwest, to out in the Northeast, it's different, but also we have some similarities too. And it's just working together as a community, like you said, just to try to help figure out how can we get kids into schools and get them to want to be in those schools and learn as much as possible so when they get out, they can make the most out of their lives because we benefit. We all benefit from that.

And you brought up something else that made me think a little bit about my first example of the kid who wants to be a farmer, right? So like, this isn't relevant. I don't need this information. I do think another thing we could do, and I know that there's been effort in this area. It's just hard when we're working with school systems that are very structured for different reasons. And a lot of that comes down to, and we'll talk about this and probably some of our later podcasts comes down to like credits and tests that are then tied to college admissions and trade programs and so on and so forth. So it's hard to like deconstruct systems that also talk to other systems, but I do think we need to put a lot more time, effort, and resources into creating alternative types of educational environments for students who just, the traditional going to school and being in a class for 43 minutes, having the bell ring, moving to the next class, that just simply doesn't work for everyone.

And it's not that that's not revolutionary. Every educator is like, "Yeah, Kari, duh, we know this. " Right? But it's hard for communities, especially when we don't have a lot of resources to completely recreate something else, an alternative for students. I know Iowa City has invested millions of dollars in doing this and they just had an open house recently, which I'm so excited about, but I do think this would help with a certain population of students who just don't feel like any of what a traditional school day is, makes sense for them.

**Mark McDermott (24:13):**

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So I think that's a good ... Maybe to frame this big picture wise, on one hand, maybe talk a little bit about, if we don't think about some of the ways that we can work to combat chronic absenteeism, what are some of the factors, what are some of the things that we would worry about a

little bit because students are going to be faced with if we don't help with this. On the other hand, then what are some of those solutions? What are some of those things you would suggest? What would you hope to see moving forward?

**Kari Vogelgesang (24:50):**

Yeah. So moving forward, one of them is just we've already spent a lot of time talking on, but it's just like a community approach. We just really need to think, come together collectively and be honest about ... Sometimes we're not always fully honest about the severity of the situation and then thinking how can we connect as an ecosystem to tackle this problem. The other thing is just relationships. You really need to tackle this by really helping educators build the kind of healthy relationships that they need with students in order to get them to come to class and to trust them that they're not going to be embarrassed or shamed for not getting to class on a regular basis. And I do think our educators in general do a really good job of this. There are other things that happen within the school that just really need to be addressed.

If you have a climate and culture issue that's happening in your school, again, that's not something that we need to be ashamed about or embarrassed about. This happens in school systems periodically for whatever reasons and coming together and addressing it is something that's really important. And then oftentimes we see that attendance improves once we address those climate and culture issues as well. And then these like more flexible modern school designs is something that I'm really interested in as well in thinking about how they might help improve chronic absenteeism. But really when you want to improve it, you just really need to start thinking about the nuance to absenteeism and like what the real root cause is.

**Mark McDermott (26:29):**

Yeah. I love it. I think that I was just having a conversation with one of our classes with our young teachers here at Iowa about that balance between what we do as educators is there's always a part of it that is working with an individual. There's always a part of it that is trying the best we can to understand the background, experiences, perspectives, identity, worldview, all those things about an individual human being that we're working with. But at the same time, we're always working in some sort of a system, right? It's either a classroom, it's a school, it's a community, it's a state, it's a nation, it's a ... All of the ... And so on one hand, that makes it tough, right? That's a challenge that we have to, as educators, think about both of those. We don't have the opportunity to think only about the individual student or only about the system.

We have to think about both of them. I think this is a great example of an issue where we need to take that perspective as we're thinking about different ways that we can look at this as not a compliance issue, these are the requirements, but a community, an ecosystem, those sorts of things.

**Kari Vogelgesang (27:42):**

Yeah. I love the way that you just said that and framed that. And I think a lot of times, like I said, going all the way back to the beginning, people do think of it as just a compliance issue. And I wish it was that easy actually. If it was just that, we can approach just that, but it's way more complicated than that. And so you have to go into it understanding that you just don't know what is going to unfold and then be flexible with the solution.

**Mark McDermott (28:10):**

Yeah. Love it. That's a good last word on it, or ... You're the expert.

**Kari Vogelgesang (28:16):**

No, I think that's good.

**Mark McDermott (28:17):**

Well, we do. I mean that in all seriousness, I appreciate Kari and her expertise and experience here. I think this is great for us to hear from somebody who's worked with this in lots of different areas, and so we appreciate that. If today's conversation sparks some ideas or questions for any of you that are listening, follow the podcast, share it with your colleagues, reach out. We would love to hear from you. I'd love to hear your stories too.

**Kari Vogelgesang (28:38):**

Absolutely. And as always, we're forever cheering you on.