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March 2014 | Volume 56 | Number 3
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What If They Don't Show?

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Each year, as many as 7.5 million students miss at least one month of school. Yet districts struggle to identify chronically absent students, who are often missing from the data.

In most education circles, a 93–95 average is considered excellent. But in Joe Vaverchak's world, that figure has come to represent a path to failure for a significant number of students.

“Like every district, we looked at average daily attendance,” says Vaverchak, attendance director for the Consolidated School District of New Britain, Conn. “Over the years, we've been at 90, 92, 93 percent, and we have some schools at 95 to 97 percent. You think that's great, until you start looking at data.”

Two years ago, Vaverchak did just that, examining attendance data from the district's 10 elementary schools and breaking the numbers down by individual students. What he saw was shocking: 30 percent of kindergarteners were “chronically absent,” which meant they missed at least 10 percent of the school year. Among 1st graders, 24 percent were absent for at least 18 of the 180 days on New Britain's calendar.

Chronic absenteeism has long been a predictor of dropouts. According to Attendance Works, a national advocacy group based in San Francisco, by 9th grade, being absent 20 percent of the school year is a more accurate dropout predictor than test scores.

This is especially alarming considering the statistics. *The Importance of Being in School*, a 2012 study by Johns Hopkins University, reports that as many as 7.5 million of the nation's 55 million students miss a month or more of school each year.

Although absenteeism at the secondary level is linked to a high dropout rate, the problem cuts across all grades. A growing body of research points to the need for early intervention. In the same Johns Hopkins study, researchers Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes found

that students who miss an average of two days a month in kindergarten and 1st grade are more likely to struggle with reading and other academic subjects. *Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools*, a study released by the University of Chicago, showed that students who miss 10 percent of preschool face academic, social, and emotional delays and are five times more likely to be chronically absent in 2nd grade.

“Part of the challenge, particularly for low-income kids, is that we're waiting too long to look at this,” says Hedy Chang, director of Attendance Works. “By the time they're in middle school, they're three years behind, and that's too late.”

Turning the Tide

The good news is that, with some creative thinking and diligent work by administrators, teachers, and student services staff, districts can turn the tide. After focusing on the problem, Vaverchak's district has; and another report released by Balfanz and Byrnes reveals promising results from an effort undertaken in New York City. *Meeting the Challenge of Combating Chronic Absenteeism* showed that tracking individual student attendance, along with establishing a large network of mentors, support services, staff training, and community outreach helped curb chronic absenteeism in a cohort of high-need schools.

“It seems so simplistic, but we have to track how many kids attend school regularly,” says Balfanz, codirector of the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins. “It's not part of the DNA of schools right now, but average daily attendance (ADA) doesn't tell you how many kids are coming regularly or not. You can be in the 90s on ADA and still have 20 percent of kids missing more than a month of school.”

Relentless tracking has helped New Britain's 10,500-student district. Every 10 days, Vaverchak says, the district's elementary school principals receive a detailed attendance report that notes when students are missing significant time in class. Additionally, two family intervention specialists have been hired to work with principals and staff on lowering absenteeism in the early grades.

“We want them to look at [absenteeism] and discuss what they can do about it,” Vaverchak says. “Should they go to classrooms and talk to the teachers? If it's age appropriate, should they talk to the kids? Do you go meet with the parents in the homes? Every case is individualized.”

Many districts engage local law enforcement and the court system in their truancy programs, but some schools resort to what could be considered extreme measures. At Learning Works, a charter school that serves 400 at-risk youth in Pasadena, Calif., founder Mikala Rahn developed the concept of “chasers,” a group of 12 former dropouts who track down students who miss school. The chasers, who include several Learning Works graduates, develop relationships with the kids and help them find what they need to get back into class.

“In our school, you're really at the end of your rope,” says Rahn, whose independent charter accepts students who have dropped out or face expulsion elsewhere. “We are reengaging students who have dropped out and come back. The chasers are on 24/7. If you have an emergency at 8:00 a.m. or midnight, you call them and they jump in.”

In both cases, the efforts have proven successful. In the Pasadena school district, the dropout rate has fallen from 24.6 percent to less than 13 percent since Learning Works opened in 2008. Meanwhile, in the first year of its new program, New Britain saw its chronic absenteeism drop by double-digit percentage points in kindergarten and 1st grade.

This year, New Britain moved to a neighborhood schools program, cutting back on busing students across the district. Vaverchak believes that making it easier for students to walk to school will help reduce absenteeism.

“There are so many roots to the problem, and every case is different,” Vaverchak admits. “So far, we're ahead of last year's [attendance] numbers, and a big part of that is that schools are so aware of all the things we're trying to do. We just have to remain consistent in our efforts.”

What Can You Do?

Maintain a consistent approach. Use data to drive decisions. Look at each case individually. All three principles apply in a variety of education situations, as do tried-and-true measures such as community engagement and working with local partners, including civic and business groups and nonprofits.

In New Britain, for example, schools host biweekly meetings with parents to address their child's excessive absences. Where appropriate, the meetings also include representatives from organizations that address sexual abuse, domestic violence, health, and mental wellness. The district also partners with the Truancy Intervention Project, in which attorneys provide pro bono assistance to families to make sure students stay in school and out of the court system. At the middle school level, the district works with outside groups such as the Boys and Girls Club to keep at-risk children involved in school-related activities.

What else can be done to reduce chronic absenteeism?

Talk to parents early and often: “Regular school attendance really matters in the early grades, but many parents still view it as daycare,” Balfanz says. “It's important to let them know that students are learning foundational skills that build off each other, and you have to ask families, 'What can we do together to make that happen?’”

In San Francisco, Chang says chronic absenteeism affects 8.5 percent of the district as a whole, but 53 percent of students who live in low-income housing. Reaching and educating parents is critical in that type of environment, she says.

“You have to give people a sense of hope, and you really have to make sure schools don't screw up their sense of faith,” she says. “You have to get it right, and that only comes by asking questions and knowing what the family's hopes and dreams are for their kids.”

Make school relevant: “Schools are boring,” Rahn remarks. “I don't care what anyone says. We don't look for students' passions. If you can connect them to what they like, you have relevance. You have something to connect them to school.”

Sheila Cahill, director of the Foundation School in Montgomery County, Md., says relevance extends to families, too. “What often drives absenteeism at our school is that our kids come from family systems that don't see the value of an education,” she says. “A lot of our families are on public assistance and on food stamps. They don't understand the difference that an education can make.”

Balfanz says schools must do more to create a welcoming environment. “You've got to have someone who can talk to the student in a supportive and not punishing way and figure out what is going on,” he explains. “Kids live in the moment. They don't know that missing a couple of days of school a month is a problem, but it adds up.”

Think outside the box: Nancy Rappaport, a Harvard University psychologist, says schools must work on “adaptive response”—identifying what motivates students and addressing the issues on the fly. In many cases, she believes, teachers and administrators move to “all or nothing thinking,” which drives students into shutdown mode.

In one instance, she says, a 1st grader started avoiding school after being physically restrained four times over a two-month period. The child was fine once inside the building, but fought entering the front door. A behavioral intervention specialist said the child identified arriving at school with being restrained, and recommended using another entrance. That solved the problem.

Find out why a student is trying to avoid school: “Kids avoid school for any number of reasons, whether it's math homework or bullying or some relationship issue, and getting to the heart of it early is critical,” Rappaport says. “Once you get a pattern of avoidance, it's very hard to intervene. Kids who are determined to avoid something will do it.”

Chang likens chronic absenteeism to a car's check-engine light. “When it goes off, I don't know what it means,” she says. “It could mean huge problems. It could mean little problems. But if you ignore it, it probably will become a bigger problem. We too often ignore chronic absenteeism. We have a ready indicator that we could be using to determine whether we need to intervene. We just have to use it.” **EU**