**Giving New Britain Students a Great Start**

Eric bounds off the school bus and flashes a smile at Vance Village principal Sarah Harris. “I’m here today!” Eric announces. Going into the Thanksgiving break, the New Britain second grader has perfect attendance. That’s quite an accomplishment for a boy who missed a combined 77 days in kindergarten and first grade. Eric’s mother was not waking him up for school in the morning, so the staff at Vance got him his own alarm clock – and an incentive to set it. Eric now has a job helping his teacher set up in the morning, a source of great pride to him.

Traditionally, attendance improvement programs focused on high school students. But New Britain found that 30 percent of its kindergarteners were chronically absent, defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year. New Britain third graders also had the lowest reading scores in the state. For the city’s attendance director, Joseph Vaverchak, the connection was clear. He believed that boosting attendance in early grades would help get children reading on grade level, as Eric now is.

The Office of Policy and Management provided funding for a Kindergarten Counts program aimed at improving attendance among the youngest students. Kindergarten does indeed count. Chronic absenteeism in kindergarten is associated with lower reading achievement in first grade, particularly for Latino students, according to the non-profit Attendance Works. This poor performance can be extended to fifth grade. By sixth grade, chronic absenteeism is a clear risk factor for dropout.

Under Kindergarten Counts, attendance teams located in each elementary school track attendance closely and reach out to families to find out why kids weren’t in school and offer support to get them attending. That might mean assistance with transportation, getting a family connected to healthcare or arranging babysitting, says Vaverchak.

The approach focuses on offering help, not passing judgment, Vaverchak says, noting that many families in the city are living in poverty and face enormous challenges. “You can’t go in with a hammer and say: Listen, this is what’s going to happen,” he says.

In the first two years of the program, the city saw chronic absenteeism among kindergarteners go from 30 to 13 percent.

At Vance, Eric enters a school that is constantly marketing itself to parents and students. There is a kindergarten attendance song, gold stars for attendance, monthly raffles for students with good attendance, and morning announcements where administrators say over the loudspeaker: “I’m glad you came to school today!”

Teachers in the K-5 school place autodialer calls to families where they talk about projects and happenings coming up. They also call families – not just to report an unexplained absence – but to share something good that a child achieved in class.

“It’s the whole culture of everything that we’re doing as a school,” says Principal Harris. “The kids definitely want to be here.”