

The Key to Getting Students Back in Classrooms? Establishing Connections.

School districts are using federal money and personal outreach to encourage attendance among those who drifted away during the pandemic.

By Phyllis W. Jordan

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This article is part of our Learning special report about how the pandemic has continued to change how we approach education.

The numbers reported are staggering: About 41 percent of New York City’s public school students missed nearly a month of school last year. In Oakland, Calif., the chronic absenteeism rate reached 44 percent, and in Detroit, it was 77 percent.

Nationwide, polled parents estimate that their children missed an average of 26 days of school last year, much of that because of quarantine requirements. And 73 percent of schools reported that student absenteeism disrupted learning in the 2020-21 school year, according to a survey conducted by the U.S. Education Department.



Torrington Elementary School is part of the Torrington school district, which saw its chronic absenteeism rate more than double to 32 percent of its students in the 2020-21 school year from 14 percent before the pandemic, according to district records. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

“Everybody thought last year was going to be a return to normal,” said Hedy Chang, executive director of the nonprofit Attendance Works. “And last year was chaos.”

To get students back into the classroom this year, school districts are abandoning the punitive, truancy-based approaches deployed in the past and instead turning to innovative programs that engage students and families.

They are using federal Covid-19 relief money to reach out to families in texts and letters, to recruit mentors to connect with chronically absent students and to invest in the data systems needed to track who is missing and how much school they’ve missed.

In Torrington, Conn., that takes the form of visiting families at home to find out why students aren’t showing up. In Fulton County, Ga., it means creating connections and flexible schedules at schools to hold on to students with “one foot out the door.”

Without quick action, the absenteeism could lead to dire academic consequences. Already schools have witnessed an unprecedented drop in national fourth-grade reading and math scores, higher dropout rates and hundreds of thousands of students disconnected from school, from teachers and from friends.

Torrington, a mill town in Connecticut's northwestern corner, saw its chronic absenteeism rate more than double to 32 percent of its students in the 2020-21 school year from 14 percent before the pandemic, according to district records. Progress came with a widespread effort to visit families in their homes and persuade students to return to school.

The 4,000-student district is part of a new state initiative putting \$10.7 million in American Rescue Plan funding toward home visiting.

"When the pandemic hit, we realized that everyone was having engagement and attendance issues because of all of the trauma families were facing," said Kari Sullivan Custer, who oversees attendance efforts for the Connecticut State Department of Education. "It hit the high-need communities the most where the disparities already were, so we put a lot of resources there."

Starting last year, 65 Torrington teachers and other staffers fanned out to visit 350 families whose children had become chronically absent. The home visitors focused on middle and high school students, many of whom had been in remote learning longer.

Claudia Ocasio, a family engagement liaison with the district, said she was careful to avoid blaming parents or students for absences. Instead she and others worked to find out what was keeping students from coming to school, whether health, transportation or housing challenges. The biggest reason, she said: "They all were scared."



Ms. Ocasio, left, during a home visit with Blanca Ortega, center, and her daughter, Julissa Jadan Ortega, right. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

She told them she, too, was scared of Covid and helped coax families to send their children back to school. When she came down with the virus last winter, one of the families she visits made her chicken soup and delivered it to her doorstep.

The home visits turned into sessions where staff members helped families sign up for school information systems or fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid forms needed for college financial aid. The district also opened a teen center in partnership with the city and worked to make students feel safe and welcome back at school, said Susan Fergusson, assistant superintendent of Torrington Public Schools. By the end of the year, the chronic absenteeism rate had dropped to 23 percent, a number Ms. Fergusson hopes to reduce further this year.

Researchers from Connecticut higher education institutions are evaluating the program's effect on attendance and other results. But interviews with families and staff members suggest a lasting impact.

"We're hearing about students who wouldn't have graduated unless they had this relationship with the home visitor, students who wouldn't have passed and gone on to the next level," said Jacob Werblow, professor of educational leadership at Central Connecticut State University. "And then we've also heard there's cases where the student, once they're re-engaged with school, are also having an influence on their peers."

He attributes the impact to the connections that home visitors created. "If the connection isn't there, all the resources, and all the Common Core, and all the testing, and all the standardization is literally meaningless," he said.

In Fulton County, Ga., administrators are working to re-establish those connections with high school students at risk of dropping out. Many of these teens not only became chronically absent during the pandemic, but some found jobs that seemed more relevant to their lives than math and English courses.

“It’s hard to make school relevant when you’re Door Dashing and Ubering all over town,” said Chelsea Montgomery, executive director of the Office of Student Supports for the 90,000-student, Atlanta-area district. Ms. Montgomery said she and her colleagues spent years reducing the district’s dropout rate, only to see that progress cut in half by the pandemic.

In response, Fulton is spending \$1 million of its federal Covid relief money on “in-school academies” at five of its 20 high schools where the need is greatest. With 30 to 50 students and three dedicated staff members in each academy, the program offers flexible hours, credit recovery and extra support for students who are off track for graduation.

For students who found full-time jobs during the pandemic, the school district is coordinating with the employers to create work-based learning programs that can yield high school credits.

The staff members — two teachers and a school counselor for each academy — use Check & Connect, an engagement program run by the University of Minnesota that the district pays for, which connects students with an in-school mentor who meets with them regularly and calls when they don’t show up. The staff also tracks attendance, student disciplinary incidents, as well as the credits earned and the rate of accruing those credits toward graduation.

“It’s about creating a caring and engaging climate,” Ms. Montgomery said. “It’s a flexible environment for everyone who has one foot out the door.”

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