

DATA BRIEF: Addressing School Absenteeism

Innovative data-sharing agreements between the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) and local school districts, as well as an increased focus — locally and nationally — on school attendance, have resulted in the exploration of more effective strategies for curbing absenteeism in schools.

Among these were the formation of the Educational Success Truancy Prevention workgroup, chaired by Judge Dwayne Woodruff, from which emerged a two-year pilot program designed to improve attendance in two schools in the Pittsburgh Public School (PPS) District, and a community-wide attendance campaign launched by the United Way of Allegheny County.

Decades of research and recent local school data support the urgency of such efforts. Both show attendance to be strongly tied to academic outcomes. Simply put, students with good attendance are much more likely to have better grades and realize future success than those who chronically miss school — even in kindergarten and the elementary grades.

Absenteeism is an important issue for DHS, which by state law plays a role in addressing school attendance. Truancy cases not resolved at the school or district magistrate levels are referred to DHS's child welfare office, which also attempts to improve a student's attendance to avoid consequences that can include out-of-home placement.

Students with involvement in human services are at particular risk of high absenteeism. An analysis of PPS data found that students active in human services accounted for 58 percent of all students absent for at least 20 percent of the school year.

WHY ATTENDANCE MATTERS

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10 percent or more of the days in a school year — usually 18 or more days in a school year.¹ The definition of chronic absenteeism includes excused absences, unexcused absences and suspensions, while legal truancy is based only on unexcused absences.

¹ Attendance Works, a national and state initiative that promotes awareness of the important role that school attendance plays in academic success

National studies suggest that students who miss 10 percent or more of the school year are at far greater risk of doing poorly in school in terms of grades, literacy and math assessments, and of not graduating on time, than students with good attendance.

Local data support such findings. An analysis of PPS data conducted by DHS found that 23 percent of all students missed at least 10 percent of 180 school days during the 2011–2012 school year. Missing that many days significantly reduces the chances of a student earning a 2.5 grade point average (GPA), which is a particularly important threshold in the city public schools, as that is the minimum eligibility for Pittsburgh Promise scholarships of up to \$40,000 for post-secondary education.

Pittsburgh Public Schools data from the 2011–2012 school year show the correlation between attendance and GPA:

- Approximately 75 percent of students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools who missed less than five percent of days met or exceeded the 2.5 GPA standard.
- A 2.5 GPA was earned by only 47 percent of those who missed 10 percent, but less than 20 percent, of the school year.
- Only 19 percent of students who missed 20 percent or more of days earned a 2.5 GPA or better.

“The data show that when young people miss more than 10 percent of days in a school year, they miss so much academic instruction that their progress toward academic success drops off and their chance of achieving a 2.5 GPA goes way down,” said Samantha Murphy, DHS educational liaison.

The data also suggest that even being absent in the early grades contributes to poor outcomes. For example, only 49 percent of chronically absent kindergarteners were proficient on their third-grade Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) reading tests, compared to 74 percent of students who attended kindergarten more often. The same trends are also seen on third-grade PSSA math tests.

HUMAN SERVICES INVOLVEMENT

PPS students receiving public benefits or mental health services, or involved in the child welfare system, were the most likely to miss at least 10 percent of school days. Almost 50 percent of middle and high school students in out-of-home placement were chronically absent.

This chronic absenteeism widens the achievement gap that already separates students involved in human services from those who have no involvement. Among students who missed at least 10 percent but less than 20 percent of school, only 38 percent of those with human services involvement achieved a 2.5 or greater GPA compared to 54 percent of those who never received services. The rate of achieving a 2.5 or greater GPA falls to a scant 14 percent among students with human services involvement when absenteeism increases to 20 percent or more.

ADDRESSING ATTENDANCE

Allegheny County's Truancy Prevention Program is the longest-running truancy initiative in the county. The coalition, coordinated by the Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU), includes DHS, local school districts and the county juvenile court. It was established more than a decade ago to address the volume of truancy cases referred to DHS.

According to policy established by DHS, the AIU and local school districts, only the most serious cases of truancy are to be referred to DHS's Office of Children, Youth & Families (CYF), and only when efforts by the schools and local magistrates have been unsuccessful. But prior to creation of the Truancy Prevention Program, cases referred to CYF didn't always meet the criteria.

"CYF used to get inundated with referrals [from schools] of varying degrees of seriousness," said the AIU's Marc Oklin, Truancy Prevention Program coordinator and case manager. "They would just be dumped in CYF's lap, and they were trying to make some sense of them."

The AIU now serves as the coordinating agency, screening referrals from school districts of students age 14 or younger with at least five unexcused absences during the year. One role of the Truancy Prevention Program is to make sure that schools exhaust their available remedies for improving a student's attendance (i.e., following a school board's policy of filing a citation with a district magistrate before a referral can be made to child welfare). Program staff also contact the parents of chronically absent students to discuss the student's attendance; in certain cases, the AIU may schedule a hearing, before a hearing officer from the juvenile justice system, to reinforce the seriousness of the situation and the importance of regular school attendance.

The Truancy Prevention Program handles about 250 cases a year. Even with such a program in place, however, there are gaps in the system for addressing truancy. Truancy referrals made late in the school year are of particular concern; referrals filed after April leave little time to try and resolve attendance problems before the student is dismissed for the summer. Late truancy referrals are a significant issue. A DHS review of approximately 1,800 truancy referrals to CYF over a recent two-year period revealed that more than half of them were received in May or later, too late in the school year to attempt meaningful intervention.

The Truancy Prevention Program attempts to address this issue by putting on the fast track for referral early in the next school year those students whose truancy referrals were filed late. If, for example, a student had 10 unexcused absences but was not referred in time for intervention to take place, those absences will carry over to the following year, allowing the district to make a truancy referral at the first unexcused absence of the new year.

CYF contracts with two agencies to work with students referred for truancy to improve their school attendance: Youth Advocates Programs, Inc., which is based in Pittsburgh's South Side neighborhood, and Community Empowerment Association in Homewood. A DHS-conducted analysis of these programs is available at <http://www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/research.aspx>.

JUDICIAL LEADERSHIP

Several years ago, a local collaborative associated with the Commonwealth's Office of Children, Youth and Families, and the courts, established an Education Success Truancy Prevention workgroup to explore ways to curb absenteeism and improve school attendance. The workgroup, chaired by Children's Court Judge Dwayne Woodruff, includes partners ranging from DHS and the AIU to Children's Court, district magistrates and nonprofits that work with school-aged children.

The workgroup identified several elements of an effective strategy for curbing absenteeism, including collaboration among community stakeholders, creation of a positive school climate, a focus on prevention and early intervention, tracking and sharing of data, and building a sustainable base of funding.

COMMUNITY MOMENTUM

More recently, the United Way of Allegheny County started "Be There," a community awareness campaign for improving school attendance by recruiting hundreds of volunteers to spread the message that attending school matters. Since the campaign began, in 2013, several organizations have joined as partners, including the Pittsburgh Public Schools, University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, the Pittsburgh Promise, A+ Schools, Allegheny Intermediate Unit and DHS.

FOCUS ON ATTENDANCE

Another strategy that emerged from Judge Woodruff's Education Success Truancy Prevention workgroup was Focus on Attendance, a pilot program that began in the fall of 2012 to reduce chronic absenteeism and truancy in two K-8 schools (Pittsburgh King and Pittsburgh Manchester) in the PPS system. Modeled after a similar initiative in Lycoming County, Pa., the program was designed to prevent chronic absenteeism by focusing on younger students, identifying attendance problems early, and responding with services to address the issues that put the students at risk of missing school. When both school and CYF staff were involved with a student, the program emphasized coordinating their efforts and increasing their focus on attendance.

When the program began, the rates of students who were chronically absent ranged from 16 percent to 38 percent. A review of the data also found high rates of student involvement in human services. At King, 56 percent of the 116 students referred to the program had received human services. In Manchester, the rate was 41 percent. Involvement in the child welfare system was the most common (44 percent of King students and 36 percent of Manchester students referred to the program).

A key feature of Focus on Attendance is that staff intervene much earlier with students at risk of becoming chronically absent. "We are getting involved after the third absence," said DHS School Outreach Specialist Carlena Jenkins. "We want to know what's happening and reach out to them. If there is something they need, something we can help them with, the earlier we get them services the better."

Coordinating services for students and their families was the type of support most frequently provided. Housing supports and mental health services were the most commonly accessed services by the 25 families with whom program staff intervened.

The data show that 46 to 52 percent of students improved their attendance; the percentage of those who improved was highest among students referred in September, when the school year started. Staff emphasize the importance of connecting children and families to school and community resources that can help them to identify and address the reasons for school absenteeism.

REFERENCES

Balfanz, R., and Byrnes, V. (2012). *Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know From Nationally Available Data*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.