

ATTENDANCE IS KEY

Research has shown that one of the significant drivers of student achievement is attendance. Schools are generally held accountable for their overall attendance rates and “average daily attendance” (ADA). On the surface, schools with an attendance rate higher than 90% are deemed a success. However, hidden behind these rates, is the ugly reality of chronic absenteeism. As Hedy Chang, Executive Director of Attendance Works puts it, “Daily attendance averages tell you how many students show up every day, but not how many are missing so much school that they are headed off track academically.” (NPR, December 7, 2015).

The consequences of accumulated absenteeism have an impact on student learning and missed instructional time means falling behind. For the early learners this means missing the opportunity to learn foundational skills that will help them to succeed in later grades. Putting it in perspective, one missed day of school means 6 hours of missed instructional time. **Missing 2-3 days of school a month adds up to 12-18 hours of missed instructional time.**

Recognizing the accumulation of missed school days translates into missing valuable instructional time and decreasing the momentum started early in the school year, the Corning Union Elementary School District (CUESD) Superintendent, Rick Fitzpatrick, and a team of leaders began analyzing data to structure a plan and bring attention to the issue. Knowing accumulated absences impact student learning, Superintendent Fitzpatrick looked at both attendance rates and chronic absenteeism rates, “We have about 96% attendance,” he adds, though he notes that, “Our numbers of chronically absent students are much higher than we want.” From this data, they implemented an initiative to improve attendance and ensure all students are ready to succeed in CUESD schools. As Mr. Fitzpatrick puts it, “One of our goals this year is to improve attendance across the board and, specifically, to reduce chronic absenteeism.”

Adopting this perspective, Rick and his team designed a plan to increase communication with families whose children were chronically absent in the previous academic year. His school team is monitoring these students’ daily attendance and supporting their families. **Early intervention is key.**

Studies have shown that when families feel welcome and supported, and the school culture promotes academic success, students have greater reason to show up to school on a consistent basis. Fitzpatrick believes strongly in this

model and adds, “The underlying reasons for the absences are many and varied but we’re more concerned with finding a prescription for success.”

Not only is forging positive relationships with students and families key to increase attendance rates and decreasing chronic absenteeism rates, another key component involves **strengthening a student’s positive sense of connectedness to the school community** by creating a welcoming school environment. “It’s about creating community,” says Fitzpatrick, “and being intentional with things other than academics to create it.” Teachers and staff are important assets to the success of students, Fitzpatrick understanding the importance comments, “We can only do this if we all care about the same things,” he adds.

Unlike many districts that only take a punitive approach to chronic absenteeism, CUESD schools are committed to positive, pro-active support for students and their entire families. Fitzpatrick says, “A loving and challenging school life can be transformative. We can change how we present, how we welcome, and how we reinforce.” In short, the district is making every effort to create an inviting climate that supports families and parents know that they will find support rather than judgment in difficult situations.

Fitzpatrick, in conversation with the school district staff, encourages them to speak in a supportive tone: “We want to help you. We want to come along side and help make it better.” When students make strides in their attendance, it does not go unrecognized, he adds, “We make sure we notice them and celebrate them.” Attendance awards have been modified to celebrate improvements, as well as to honor the students who attend consistently.

Olive View School Principal Joe Lodigiani is in awe of the turnaround he’s seen in some of his students, including two young students who achieved perfect attendance in the first 25 days of this school year after a prior year of up to 23 unexcused absences. “We have to think, with that dramatic turnaround, that we’re having an impact,” he says. For all students, he adds, “As they’re missing their first day of school we’re making a call that day. It’s a call of concern. It reinforces the importance of school attendance.”

When students are in class, teachers and administrators can focus on what Fitzpatrick considers the larger issue of education: “How to empower the imagination and the passion of students. That’s the challenge. Always will be.”