

AUGUST 2015

Showing Up Matters: *The State of Chronic Absenteeism in New Jersey*



Advocates for Children of New Jersey

Cecilia Zalkind
Executive Director

Mary Coogan
Assistant Director

Robert Sterling
President, ACNJ Board of Trustees

Giving Every Child A Chance

35 Halsey Street, 2nd Floor, Newark, NJ 07102 • (973) 643-3876 • Fax (973) 643-9153 • advocates@acnj.org

www.acnj.org

Showing Up Matters: The State of Chronic Absenteeism in New Jersey

Advocates for Children of New Jersey

Cecilia Zalkind, *Executive Director*
Mary Coogan, *Assistant Director*

ACNJ Board of Trustees

Officers:

President: Robert Sterling
Vice President, Finance: Matthew Loncar, Esq.
Vice President, Program: Charles Venti
Treasurer: Gerard Thiers
Secretary: Louise Eagle

Members:

Darrin Anderson, Sr., MS, PhD
John Boyne, L.C.S.W.
Brenda Considine
Cynthia Crenshaw
Maurice Elias, Ph.D.
F. Lee Forrester, J.S.C.
Laurence E. Funder, Esq.,
Vito Gagliardi, Ed.D.
Stuart Grant
Gail Houlihan
Nancy Lauter, Ed.D.
Eileen Leahey
Valerie Mauriello
Nicole McGrath, D.D.S.
Margaret McLeod
Jennifer Mermans
Maria Pinho
Jennifer J. Robinson, EdD
Kendell Sprott, M.D.
Sara D. Thom
Richard Trenk, Esq.

Advocates for Children of New Jersey is the trusted, independent voice putting children's needs first for more than 30 years. Our work results in better laws and policies, more effective funding and stronger services for children and families. And it means that more children are given the chance to grow up safe, healthy and educated.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.



Advocates for Children of New Jersey would also like to thank Dr. Bari Erlichson, the New Jersey Department of Education and the staff at Attendance Works for their assistance with this project.

Lastly, special thanks to the ACNJ staff Peter Chen, Eloisa Hernandez-Ramos, Nicole Holt, Lana Lee, Nancy Parello and Sheldon Presser for their contribution to this report.

For more information, contact Cynthia Rice at crice@acnj.org.



35 Halsey Street
Newark, NJ 07102
(973) 643-3876
(973) 643-9153 (fax)

advocates@acnj.org
www.acnj.org

Connect with us!



Find us on Facebook at
[facebook.com/acnjforkids](https://www.facebook.com/acnjforkids)

Follow us on Twitter at
twitter.com/acnjforkids



View our videos at
[youtube.com/acnjforkids](https://www.youtube.com/acnjforkids)

Showing Up Matters: The State of Chronic Absenteeism in New Jersey

By Cynthia Rice

Each year, thousands of New Jersey children miss so many school days that their academic future is threatened.

In the 2013–14 school year, a staggering 125,000¹ students in kindergarten through 12th grade were “chronically absent.” This means they missed 10 percent or more of school days, which includes both excused and unexcused absences, according to statistics from the New Jersey Department of Education. These students represent about 10 percent of New Jersey’s K-12 population.

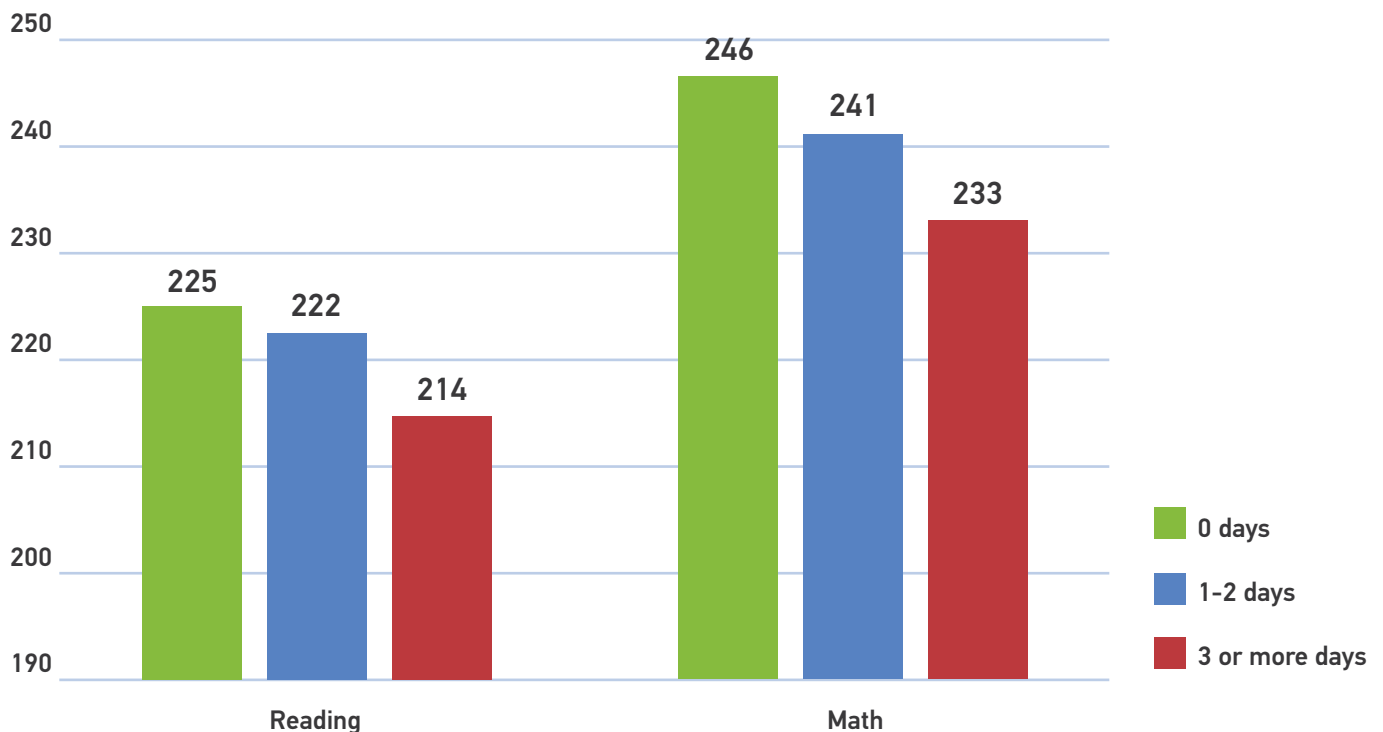
Based on a 180-day school year, any student who misses 18 days or more per year — or about two days every month — is considered chronically absent. Districts with 10 percent or more of their students

identified as chronically absent are considered “high-absenteeism” districts.

Young students and high schoolers typically have the highest rates of absenteeism. For example, 23 percent of kindergartners and 27 percent of 12th graders in high-absenteeism districts fall into this category.

Regardless of age, when students miss too much school they are less likely to succeed academically.² For example, New Jersey 4th grade students who missed three or more school days in the month before national reading and math exams were administered, scored significantly lower than students who did not miss any days. Students with good attendance scored 11 points higher on reading tests and 13 points higher on math tests than those chronically absent, according to the New Jersey Department of Education.

NAEP scores for reading and math, grade 4, by days absent from school in the prior month: 2013



Source: New Jersey Department of Education

School absences not only affect individual students, but can impact all students in the classroom. As teachers work to provide additional help to those missing too many school days, other students receive less attention and the educational pace can slow down.³

Historically, New Jersey school administrators viewed absenteeism primarily through their districts' and schools' "average daily attendance" — not through absentee numbers by individual grades or specific students. This average, however, can mask the scope of the problem because it fails to identify the population of students who are chronically absent.

The good news is that the problems brought on by poor attendance can be reversed. Changes in policies, school practices and effective parent engagement can ensure students attend school regularly, boosting their chances for school success.

This policy brief provides an overview of the state of student attendance in New Jersey, with a focus on kindergarten through 3rd grade and the high school years, and provides information on what schools and parents can do to make sure that students regularly attend school.

A Snapshot of K-12 Chronic Absenteeism

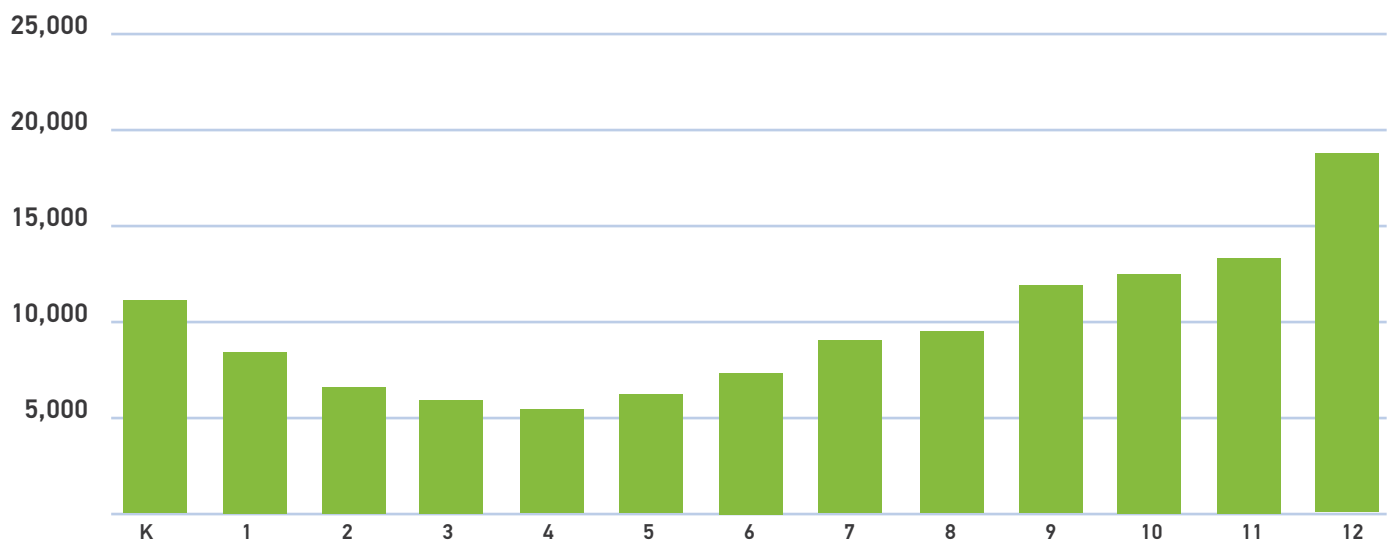
Overall

Of the nearly 1.3 million K-12 students attending New Jersey's public schools in the 2013-14 school year, more than 125,000 or 10 percent missed too much school.⁴

The problem was worse in 177 school districts that had 10 percent or more of their K-12 students chronically absent. In these high-absenteeism districts, which educate more than 470,000 students, the average rate of chronic absenteeism was 16 percent. That translates to about 76,000 students in these districts alone.



Chronic Absenteeism, by Grade, 2013–2014



Source: New Jersey Department of Education, 2014

This set of districts represents about 30 percent of total New Jersey school districts, yet they are responsible for educating more than 61 percent of the state’s chronically-absent students.

By Grade

Chronic absenteeism is most prevalent at the beginning and end of students’ formal education. The data indicate that the problem is “U shaped,” (see p. 2) with high percentages of students missing school in the early elementary years, particularly in kindergarten and in high school, culminating with the highest percentages in 12th grade.

By Race and Family Socio-Economics

While the negative effects of chronic absenteeism hold true for all socio-economic groups, students from low-income families and children of color are more likely to become chronically absent. Their absences are often attributed to the challenges of everyday life, such as unreliable transportation to and from school, unstable

housing and inadequate access to health care. Research also indicates that community violence plays a role.⁵

Students from low-income families are also at a disadvantage because they lack the resources to help make up important class-time missed while absent. Poor attendance is a contributing factor to the achievement gap of students living in poverty and/or communities of color.⁶

New Jersey’s preschool through 12th (PreK–12) grade data below mirror national findings.

In the 2013–14 school year, black students made up about 16 percent of New Jersey’s student population, but they represented 24 percent of the state’s chronically-absent students. Similarly, Hispanic students comprised approximately 25 percent of the total state enrollment, but represented about 30 percent of the total absentee rate.

Children from economically-disadvantaged families also made up a significant portion of New Jersey’s absent students. Although children in low-income families comprised 38 percent of the state’s PreK–12 population, they reflected approximately 55 percent of the number

PreK–12 Demographic Data, 2013–2014

Demographic	Total Enrolled	Enrollment Percentage	Students Chronically Absent	Percentage of Demographic Chronically Absent	Percentage of State’s Absenteeism Rate	Median # of School Days Missed
Asian/Pacific Islander	131,800	9.5	6,554	5.0	4.7	23
Black	226,006	16.2	33,523	14.8	24.0	24
Hispanic	346,473	24.9	41,990	12.1	30.1	23
Multiracial	16,263	1.2	1,543	9.5	1.1	22
White	670,799	48.2	55,658	8.3	39.9	22
STATE TOTAL	1,393,120	-	139,534	10.0	-	23
Economically Disadvantaged	528,040	37.9	77,295	14.6	55.4	23
Limited English Proficiency	73,491	5.3	7,545	10.3	5.4	24
Homeless	8,005	0.6	2,219	27.7	1.6	24
Immigrant	28,297	2.0	2,705	9.6	1.9	21
Migrant	841	0.1	84	10.0	0.1	21
Special Education	216,290	15.5	33,281	15.4	23.9	24
Female	677,498	48.6	67,895	10.0	48.7	23
Male	715,621	51.4	71,740	10.0	51.4	23

Source: New Jersey Department of Education, 2014

of children missing school. Lastly, although homeless students made up only 0.6 percent of the total student population, nearly 28 percent of these students were chronically absent.⁷

The Early Years

National research indicates that chronic absenteeism in the early years can have a significant impact on how successful a child is in school. During the first few school years, young students are learning basic social and academic skills necessary for future academic success. When they miss too much school early on, the negative impact on their learning can be long-term. Early absences are linked with long-term reading problems, lower test scores, poor attendance in future school years and weaker social-emotional skills.⁸

According to *Attendance Works*, a national and state initiative that promotes better policies and practices

around school attendance, over half of chronically-absent kindergartners become chronically-absent first graders and demonstrate lower gains in math, reading and general knowledge in first grade. And the problem continues to escalate. If those important skills are not achieved by third grade, students will require additional supports to catch up. They also are at high risk of eventually dropping out of school.⁹ Findings from a 2012 national report indicate that when third grade students weren't reading on grade-level, they were four times more likely to drop out of high school.¹⁰

New Jersey's data mirror this research.

According to New Jersey Department of Education data, in 2013-14, 9 percent of roughly 387,000 New Jersey kindergarten through third grade students were chronically absent, with kindergartners having the highest rate of chronic absenteeism at 12 percent.

NJ Chronically-Absent Students, in Grades K-3, 2013-2014

GRADE	Total # students	Total # students chronically absent	Average percentage of chronically-absent students
Kindergarten	93,380	11,603	12
First Grade	99,701	8,621	9
Second Grade	97,546	6,832	7
Third Grade	96,660	6,017	6
Total/Average K-3	387,287	33,073	9

Source: New Jersey Department of Education. Specific district data from: Clinton Twp., Haddon Heights, Lower Alloways Creek, Newark and Wharton Public Schools.

DOE data from certain charter schools was unavailable at the time of printing.

The problem was worse in districts that have high chronic absenteeism rates in Kindergarten through third grade. In the 109 districts with 10 percent or more

chronically-absent students, 17 percent of K-3 grade students missed too much school. This ranged from 13 percent of third graders to 23 percent of kindergartners.

NJ Students in Districts with High Absenteeism (10 percent or More Chronically-Absent Students) in Grades K-3, 2013-2014

GRADE	Total # students	Total # students chronically absent	Average percentage of chronically-absent students
Kindergarten	27,948	6,380	23
First Grade	28,010	4,837	17
Second Grade	26,129	3,701	14
Third Grade	24,747	3,170	13
Total/Average K-3	106,834	18,088	17

Source: New Jersey Department of Education. Specific district data from Newark Public Schools.

DOE data from certain charter schools was unavailable at the time of printing.

The High School Years

Similarly, excessive absences at the end of a student's education, during the high school years, are a risk to graduation, attending college, a future career and employability as an adult. As students transition to high school, their grades, attendance and school engagement significantly decline.¹¹

A student's excessive absences in ninth grade are a more accurate predictor of whether that student will drop out of high school than his/her 8th grade test scores.¹²

In New Jersey, slightly less than 50,000 high school students — or 14 percent — were chronically absent in the 2013–2014 school year and more than 17,000 — or 20 percent — of seniors missed too much school.



NJ Chronically Absent Students in Grades 9-12, 2013–2014

GRADE	Total # students	Total # students chronically absent	Percentage of students chronically absent
9th Grade	96,749	10,250	11
10th Grade	93,217	10,838	12
11th Grade	89,329	11,476	13
12th Grade	88,656	17,381	20
Total/Average 9-12	367,951	49,945	14

Source: New Jersey Department of Education. Data was not available from Newark Public Schools. DOE data from certain charter schools was unavailable at the time of printing.

Again, the problem was even more significant in districts in which 10 percent or more of the high school students were chronically absent. In those 164 districts, 19 percent

of their student body was missing too many days of school, including 27 percent of seniors.

NJ Students in Districts with High Absenteeism (10 Percent or More Chronically-Absent Students) in Grades 9-12, 2013–2014

GRADE	Total # students	Total # students chronically absent	Percentage of students chronically absent
9th Grade	60,009	8,854	15
10th Grade	57,057	9,232	16
11th Grade	54,135	9,571	18
12th Grade	53,828	14,448	27
Total/Average 9-12	225,029	42,105	19

Source: New Jersey Department of Education. Data was not available from Newark Public Schools. DOE data from certain charter schools was unavailable at the time of printing.

How to “Turn the Curve” on Chronic Absenteeism

Children’s school attendance is linked to how their environments — families, school and community — address their needs. Although parents are responsible for making sure their children attend school every day, schools must be mindful of the challenges that may be barriers to that end. This is particularly true for students living in poverty.¹³

Improving chronic absenteeism must be a team effort, which includes school leaders, teachers and parents. Each can play an important role in making a difference in reducing absences — and ultimately making a difference in students’ overall school success.

What follows are some steps that schools and parents can use to improve attendance. Research has documented the success of the following recommendations primarily in the younger years, but most can be used successfully throughout K–12.

Schools

■ Send the message to parents “early and often.”

The best way of addressing chronic absenteeism is to prevent it before it becomes a problem. Schools play an important role in promoting attendance by helping parents understand, particularly in the early years, that coming to school every day is critical to their child’s educational success.¹⁴ This same message, sent as often as possible, should be conveyed by all key players in a school community — teachers, principals and superintendents — in order to develop a culture of attendance from day one to the end of the school year.

- #### ■ Identify problems at the beginning of the school year.
- If a student misses two or more days during the first month of school, it is likely that absences will continue throughout the year.¹⁵ It is critical, then, that school leaders analyze the absentee data from the first weeks of the school year to identify students who may be at-risk and intervene early.



- #### ■ Contact parents immediately when children begin to show a pattern of absences.
- Making connections with family members as soon as a problem is identified is very important. Equally important, however, is the tone of that contact. When schools contact families in a supportive and personal way, they send a message that the staff is concerned about their children, beyond the schoolhouse doors.¹⁶ Establishing an absentee team or linking one staff member with each family of a chronically-absent student is an effective way of improving attendance.
- #### ■ Determine the reasons why students are missing school.
- While making those individual connections are important, identifying and understanding the broader barriers are also critical. These problems can include health-related issues, housing instability and inadequate transportation. Once the problems are understood, schools are better positioned to help address them.
- #### ■ Foster positive relationships with families.
- School leaders, teachers and other staff can improve attendance by taking steps to strengthen connections between school and home. This helps school staff to more effectively address issues that may arise for children and families.

■ **Assign Success Mentors.** Assigning a “success mentor” to all chronically absent students, particularly those in high school, can make a difference. Connecting students with caring adults has led to positive outcomes in New York City.¹⁷

■ **Recognize the positive and reward students for excellent or improved attendance.** When classrooms or students demonstrate good or improved attendance, make sure that those accomplishments are celebrated. Individual or class recognitions, such as an attendance certificate, a small prize or even a class celebration, are positive reinforcements that mean a lot to students. These incentives provide additional impetus for improving attendance.



Parents

■ **Talk to children about why going to school is important.** Parents have the ultimate responsibility in making sure that their children attend school every day. When parents stress early on the importance of attending school, good habits are set from kindergarten to graduation.

■ **Establish a home climate that leads to good school attendance.** Parents can set up simple routines that make it easier for children to attend school every day, including regular bed times, a consistent morning routine, laying out clothes and packing the backpack the night before and avoiding medical appointments or long trips/vacations when school is in session.

■ **Get to the bottom of the problem when a child is reluctant to go to school.** If a child does not want to go to school, parents should talk to their child and work collaboratively with the child’s teacher and principal in addressing any issues.

■ **Develop a back-up plan.** For example, having a relative or neighbor lined up to transport a child to or from school when unforeseen circumstances arise is a good strategy that can be reciprocated among parents with children in the same school.¹⁸

■ **Reach out for help.** If a parent is having difficulties that are affecting their ability to get their children to school, they should contact the child’s teacher or principal.

■ **Missing school happens, but...** If it is necessary for a child to miss school, parents should contact their child’s teacher to make up the missed classwork.

Chronic absences matter. To change the course for many students, schools, families and communities will need to think differently. Using data to drive decisions and practices is a critical part of addressing this important issue. This can help school leaders to identify chronically-absent students and those at risk of missing too much school. In addition to addressing the needs of individual students, school leaders can create a school environment that promotes regular attendance.

Implementing preventive, supportive strategies — instead of punitive responses — can turn the curve in improving absentee rates and putting students on the right path to school success.

For information about best practices and strategies for improving attendance, visit

www.attendanceworks.org

Paterson Tackles Chronic Absenteeism Head-On

Tackling chronic absenteeism in Paterson has been a citywide undertaking. Members of the community, including the Paterson Education Fund, wanted to develop a community-based solution to improve their students' third grade proficiency scores. A community action plan was developed beginning in the 2012–13 school year, with "increasing attendance" as one of the plan's top goals.

The results of that undertaking are most evident in School 5, a K-6 school with more than 95 percent of its students considered "economically disadvantaged." School 5's former principal, Sandra Diodonet, embraced the opportunity to improve attendance by implementing a series of "best practices" made available through *Attendance Works*, a national and state initiative that promotes better policies and practices around school attendance.

School 5 implemented the following successful practices:

- **Success mentors.** Individual staff members work directly with students who are at-risk of being chronically absent. The mentors' support includes personalized welcomes to school and calls home when students are missing school, among other steps.
- **A walking school bus.** School 5 addressed family safety concerns by organizing a community walk-to-school program for students and families.
- **Incentives.** Perfect and improved individual student and classroom attendance was rewarded in a variety of ways, including pizza parties and recognition at school assemblies.

"We needed to change the mind-frame in our school around the importance of coming to school every day—and that included my staff, our parents and even the students," Diodonet said.

That hard work has paid off. In just one year, chronic absenteeism declined from 152 students in 2012–13 to just 36 in 2013–14 — a 76 percent decrease.

In just one year, chronic absenteeism declined from 152 students in 2012–13 to just 36 in 2013–14 — a 76 percent decrease.

"We have more work to do, but our kids are definitely on the right track and that increases their chance for success," says Diodonet.

The "Personal Touch" Works in Woodbine

Woodbine Superintendent Lynda Anderson-Towns knew absenteeism was a problem in her Cape May County school district. She set out to change the way staff, parents and students viewed attendance.

"Paying attention to absenteeism at Woodbine Elementary is making a true difference in it becoming a better school," Dr. Anderson-Towns said.

To achieve better attendance in Woodbine, where 81 percent of the students were eligible for free- and reduced-price lunch in 2014-15, Anderson-Towns started with research from *Attendance Works*.

Then, armed with information and best practices, Anderson-Towns began educating faculty and parents, as well as developing a proactive district approach to use absentee data to address students who were missing too much school.

Now, from the moment parents and students enter the school, attendance is front and center.

"We have big banners displayed in Spanish and English highlighting how important it is for students to come to school every day," said Anderson-Towns. This message is repeated throughout the year in school newsletters, parent meetings and communications, which often include the district's most recent chronic absenteeism data.

School leaders also realized that low-cost student incentives can improve chronic absenteeism.

“Every marking period, we focus on perfect attendance,” Anderson-Towns said. “One of the ways we track attendance is by homeroom and we celebrate with special certificates and rewards when attendance improves. The kids love it!”

Improving attendance is the goal of the entire faculty. Data are shared at every faculty meeting, which has led to important conversations on how, as a team, the staff can do better at addressing the issue.

For example, the staff recently reviewed the data and noticed that absenteeism spiked when it rained. Because the district has no busing, getting students to school on rainy days was a problem. After discussions with parents, the staff realized that many parents could not afford slickers for their children. Anderson-Towns addressed this

by writing a grant proposal for funding to help pay for slickers. The proposal was accepted, slickers were bought and distributed and attendance improved.

Anderson-Towns also recognizes that the “personal touch” matters to her families. “Every day, I review the attendance list. If I see a student has missed two days in a row, I personally call the parent to see if there is a problem.”



In Woodbine, these efforts are making a difference.

“There is an academic slide when children are not in school, and we are doing everything we can to make sure that doesn’t happen,” said Anderson-Towns. “We are even seeing a direct correlation between improved attendance and a reduction in the discipline referral rate. That is good for all kids and their ability to be successful in school!”

Data Sources and Technical Notes:

- 1 4th-12th grade chronically absent data was unavailable from the Newark Public Schools.
- 2 Ginsburg, A., Jordan, P., Chang, H. (2014) Absences Add Up: How School Attendance Influences Student Success. Attendance Works. Retrieved March 30, 2015 from http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/AbsencesAddUp_09011411.pdf
- 3 Chang, H., Guy, C. (2010) Being There is Half the Battle: Chronic Absenteeism in Early Grades. Grantmakers for Children, Youth & Families.
- 4 New Jersey Department of Education. Received March 1, 2015.
- 5 Ginsburg, A., Jordan, P., Chang, H.
- 6 Ginsburg, A., Jordan, P., Chang, H.
- 7 Erlichson, Bari. “Chronic Absenteeism” PowerPoint presentation. New Jersey State Board of Education, Trenton, NJ. 1 Oct 2014.
- 8 Attendance in the Early Grades: Why it Matters for Reading (2014) Attendance Works.
- 9 Chang, H., Guy, C.
- 10 Hernandez, D. (2012) Double Jeopardy: How Third Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Retrieved June 16, 2015 from <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECFDoubleJeopardy2012-Full.pdf>
- 11 Roderick, M., Kelley Kemple, T., Johnson, D., Beechum, N. (2014) Preventable Failure: Improvement in Long Term Outcomes when High Schools Focused on the 9th Grade Year. Retrieved June 16, 2015 from <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/PreventableFailureCCSRApril2014.pdf>.
- 12 Chang, H., Guy, C.
- 13 Chang, H., Romero, M. (2008) Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades. National Center for Children in Poverty.
- 14 Chang, H., Romero, M.
- 15 The Power of Positive Connections. Reducing Chronic Absence through PEOPLE: Priority Early Outreach for Positive Linkages and Engagement. (2014) Retrieved June 16, 2015 from http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/PositivePriorityOutreachToolkit_081914.pdf
- 16 Chang, H., Romero, M.
- 17 NYC Expands Mentorship Program to Combat Chronic Absenteeism. (2011) Retrieved August 11, 2015 from <http://www.mikebloomberg.com/news/nyc-expands-mentorship-program-to-combat-chronic-absenteeism/>
- 18 Help Your Child Succeed in School: Build the Habit of Good Attendance Early. (2011) Attendance Works.

Connect with us!



Find us on Facebook at facebook.com/acnjforkids

Follow us on Twitter at twitter.com/acnjforkids



View our videos at youtube.com/acnjforkids



Giving Every Child A Chance

35 Halsey Street, 2nd Floor, Newark, NJ 07102 • (973) 643-3876 • Fax (973) 643-9153 • advocates@acnj.org •

www.acnj.org