

Stopping Absenteeism at the Age of 5

By

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Two years ago, a woman I'll call Lillian (instead of her real name) had grown used to the phone calls from her daughter's school. At first, they were automated messages notifying her that her daughter — I'll call her Annabelle — had been absent. Then came personal calls from a teacher, then from the principal himself.

Each time, Lillian tried to explain why it was hard to get Annabelle to school: Lillian was a single mother, unemployed, and under great stress. Then, one winter morning, there was a knock at her door. It was the school's social worker and attendance counselor. They wanted to make sure Lillian understood that her daughter was in danger of falling so far behind in learning it could jeopardize her future. At the time, Annabelle was in kindergarten.

Annabelle is fortunate to attend Frank J. DiLoreto Magnet School in New Britain, Conn., where home visits like this are a standard part of the school's efforts to improve attendance in kindergarten and first grade. This is unusual: 35 states don't even require kindergarten attendance. In fact, nationwide, one in 10 kindergartners and first graders miss nearly a month of school, a common threshold for what is known as "chronic absenteeism."

A growing body of research suggests that chronic absenteeism is a serious problem — so much so that last week the United States Department of Education announced an initiative to address it.

Poor attendance, especially early on, can delay social and emotional learning — the development of skills like working in teams and resolving conflict that are crucial to succeeding in school — and set a pattern of behavior for future years. It's also correlated with lower reading and math proficiency in third grade and beyond. These students, 5 and 6 years old, are more likely to struggle academically, be held back, and eventually drop out of high school.

"It has a tremendous impact on learning," said Joe Vaverchak, supervisor of attendance for the Consolidated School District of New Britain, of which DiLoreto is a part. "Academically, but also socially and psychologically. A lot of these kids — even if they miss one day in a week — they feel like they're behind. Some of them get embarrassed because now the class is moving on. Other kids will say 'you missed this.' It really sets these kids up for failure." One study concludes that attendance trends starting in first grade are a good predictor of graduation rates.

Vaverchak discovered the problem in his district more than three years ago, when he sifted through 2011-2012 attendance data to investigate why his school system had among the lowest third grade reading scores in the state. He was startled to find that nearly one-third of kindergartners and a quarter of first graders were missing at least 10 percent of the school year.

The district hired outreach workers to convey to parents the importance of attendance and to connect families with needed social services.

Those efforts have since cut early chronic absenteeism almost in half — a change that has been accompanied by a substantial improvement in the children’s reading levels. In the fall of 2013, 35 percent of kindergartners and 36 percent of first graders were at or above average in reading. This past spring, those numbers were 52 and 48 percent, respectively.

What sets the New Britain school district apart isn’t only its deliberate response to the attendance problem; it’s that district officials discovered the problem in the first place. Unlike other school systems, New Britain closely monitors *chronic* absenteeism, which doesn’t distinguish between excused and unexcused absences. Most school districts focus narrowly on students at risk of becoming “truant” for repeat unexcused absences (the precise definition of truancy varies by state).

In general, efforts to improve attendance are almost exclusively focused on high school students. (Kindergartners, as you might expect, have more interest in skipping rope than skipping class.)

But by high school, addressing habitual absenteeism may be too late. Focusing on truancy instead of chronic absenteeism misses vital early warning signs about the youngest students, whose absences are almost always excused. Not surprisingly, students from low income families tend to have the worst attendance. Often the root causes include lack of access to housing, transportation and health care, combined with the misconception that regular attendance in early childhood is not particularly important. For example, the summer before Annabelle started kindergarten, Lillian had left her husband, Annabelle’s father, whom she says had been violent toward Lillian. The family had moved several times, including briefly to a women’s shelter. Lillian was suffering from depression and Annabelle was receiving therapy to help her cope with the upheaval.

The progress in New Britain is noteworthy because it’s one of the poorest school districts in Connecticut. The key, according to Vaverchak, is catching the problem early. He runs chronic absenteeism reports every 10 days to identify students who have missed 10 percent of classes at any point in the school year. (A student who has missed just one of the first 10 days of school will show up on Vaverchak’s report). Attendance review teams made up of teachers, administrators, social workers, guidance counselors and the school nurse meet weekly to discuss each case and put together an action plan. Interventions can be as simple as talking to parents about the importance of regular attendance or as complicated as helping families find permanent housing. With grant funding from the state and a local nonprofit, the district also hired two outreach workers specifically to engage with parents of kindergartners.

At the district level, an attendance review committee meets twice monthly to review the worst cases. This all-volunteer committee was created nearly two decades ago (before chronic absenteeism became a priority in the state — more on that below) when Vaverchak cold-called representatives from social service agencies and community organizations, introduced himself and asked them to join. For added incentive, he says, he had his mother bake banana bread for them. Now he has a network of people he can count on for support, from the police down to the

local Boys and Girls Club.

Connecticut is one of the few states that look systematically at chronic absenteeism (California, Rhode Island, Maryland, Hawaii, Oregon, New Jersey, Ohio and Georgia do as well, to varying degrees). Recent state legislation requires schools to track data on chronic absenteeism and establish teams where necessary. It also requires that the state board of education have a chronic absenteeism prevention and intervention plan by early next year.

Legislation like that in Connecticut isn't a necessity for tackling chronic absenteeism; most schools could readily set up an attendance review team to evaluate data they already collect. But in the absence of state reporting requirements, they don't have to look at it analytically. That makes legislation the key to getting serious about the problem.

For example, the distinction often made between unexcused and excused absences has little rationale behind it, except that monitoring truancy is required by the No Child Left Behind system. So unexcused absences are the one type that is widely tracked, even though the detrimental effects of missing school are similar whether a student skips class to go shopping or is kept home to care for a younger sibling. Another commonly used measure of attendance is "average daily attendance" (A.D.A.), which looks at how many students are in school each day and is used by some states to allocate funding. Like truancy, A.D.A. masks the severity of attendance issues. A school can have 95 percent A.D.A. and still have almost 20 percent of students chronically absent because on different days, different students make up the 95 percent.

"When you create student information systems, you only generate the reports that you're mandated to produce," said Hedy Chang, director of Attendance Works, an initiative to call attention to chronic absenteeism and co-author of one of the earliest studies of the problem. "It just never occurred to anyone to look at how much kids were missing school for any reason."

That's changing. Alongside the federal Department of Education's new initiative to combat it, which was announced last week, more and more school districts are adopting chronic absenteeism as their primary measure of attendance. That, in turn, is prompting a shift from punitive to preventive interventions. Truancy is largely handled through the court system, where stories abound of truant older students having their driver's licenses suspended and parents being fined and even serving jail time. Because chronic absenteeism often begins at an early age, early interventions can be a major step toward stopping it before it becomes habitual and subject to punishment.

It's an approach that many feel is long overdue and, at least in Annabelle's case, seems to have worked. Now in second grade, she has a perfect attendance record so far this year.

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