

How one Atlantic City school is curbing chronic absenteeism

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ATLANTIC CITY — Last year, Principal LaQuetta Small was presented with data showing her students were missing class at alarming rates, so over the summer she decided to fix it.

This year, students at the Pennsylvania Avenue School have cut their absenteeism by more than half thanks to a schoolwide effort that includes daily, weekly and monthly check-ins and incentives.

“Last year this time we had 119 students on the hot list. As of today, we only have 55,” said Small.

Chronic absenteeism — when a student misses 10 percent or more of the days they are enrolled during the school year — is a nationwide problem.

In August 2018, Attendance Works and the Everyone Graduates Center at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education released a new analysis of federal data on chronic absenteeism that found 1 out of 4 students nationwide attend schools with high or extreme levels of chronic absence.

“We know it affects achievement,” said Hedy Chang, executive director of Attendance Works, when the report was released. “The reason we want to look at attendance is because we know it is so strongly tied with academic success.”

Chang said for middle school students, chronic absenteeism can predict not passing courses and for high schoolers can predict graduation rates.

Eighth grader Julian Marmolejo of Atlantic City was one of the students who improved their attendance dramatically this year. Last year, he had 30 absences.

Already a grade behind because of too many absences in his younger years, Marmolejo said he decided to turn it around and so far has only four absences.

“It’s important that you have good attendance so you don’t fail,” said Marmolejo, 15, after being recognized Friday for have perfect attendance in February.

He said he used to miss school just because he didn’t feel like going, but he realized that he might be forced to repeat eighth grade and didn’t want that to happen. Marmolejo said he has learned that having good attendance is good practice for the future, especially for a job.

“It’s good to get into the habit,” he said.

How was the Pennsylvania Avenue School able to see improvement?

“Everyone has bought into the idea of ‘attendance matters,’” Small said Thursday, as she accepted a donation of 200 drawstring bags filled with school supplies to present to the students who had achieved perfect attendance.

The donation was from Mission 500, the service arm of the New Jersey Electronic Security Association, which had its annual convention in Atlantic City at Harrah’s Atlantic City last week and was looking for a way to give back.

“Their incentive program, we felt it was just wonderful,” said Kenneth Gould, the association’s board president-elect.

Last May, the governor signed a bill to curb absenteeism by requiring districts to report both the percentage and number of students chronically absent. It also required districts to come up with a plan to address chronic absenteeism, which was a recommendation in the Advocates for Children of New Jersey’s 2017 reports on the topic.

The Pennsylvania Avenue School, which serves students in preschool through eighth grade, had a chronic absenteeism rate of 19 percent in 2016-17, the most recent state data shows. Small said when she learned that figure, she began to ask students, “Why?”

While some absences are unavoidable, Small said she learned that a lot of it was weather-dependent. Atlantic City is a walking district for its elementary students, so unless there is a special need, students are not bused to school.

“Students would say, ‘Dr. Small, it’s too far, it’s too cold,’” Small explained.

She said sometimes parents would give the students the option of not going, or allow them to miss school because they didn’t have a clean uniform.

“This current school year, we started getting the parents involved, so they can understand the importance,” Small said.

She said the students also set goals for themselves and begin to hold themselves accountable, and the district is holding them accountable, too.

“We’ve maintained contact with students who aren’t present daily, they know they have to meet someone,” Small said.

She said she has a washer and dryer in the school and offers to help with washing clothes to make sure students have clean uniforms. The district has attendance displays and awards for students and for classrooms with perfect attendance weekly and monthly.

“They hearing it every day, attendance matters,” Small said.

Small’s efforts were showcased to local administrators last week at a roundtable hosted by the Atlantic County Executive Superintendent, and she has also been asked to give a presentation on the topic at a conference in Orlando in July.

Small said, in the end, the goal of improving absenteeism is to improve student performance.

“The challenge was getting the students in school,” Small said. “Once you’re in school, you can focus on academic achievement.”

