

Trevyan Rowe anniversary: What has changed at RCSD?

Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

In the days after the death of 14-year-old Trevyan Rowe, the Rochester City School District pledged a complete review of its policies around attendance, wandering and elopement and building security, among other things, to ensure the same thing would never happen again.

One year later, the district points to a number of areas where it has changed policy or added staff.

Attendance

On the day Trevyan went missing, three of his teachers at James P.B. Duffy School 12 erroneously marked him present. It was embarrassing and tragic evidence of a porous record-keeping system.

Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams quickly announced that if school officials could not reach an absent student's family on the phone, they would physically visit the home within several hours. That immediately proved unfeasible.

Instead the district has added 25 attendance aides whose job it is to call absent students' parents and, after a certain number of absences, visit the house. Those aides make about 8,300 phone calls and 1,000 home visits a month, in addition to automated phone calls.

"Parents are very appreciative of that live person calling; no one wants to hear from a machine," Chief of Schools Itonia Owens said. "That live, one-on-one — 'How are you doing, is everything OK, can we help you? — is making a big difference to our families."

Despite the added attention, chronic absenteeism — students missing more than 10 percent of school days — is down only slightly for grades K-12, to about 38 percent, Associate Director of Attendance Betsy Hoffer said.

Teachers are required to submit attendance within 15 minutes of the start of the day, or the start of the period in secondary school. The central attendance office gets weekly reports on compliance with those deadlines and

Trevyan who have run off in the past. They must wear identification at all times, and the school is required to ensure a recent photograph is readily available in case it is needed for distribution.

Crisis response

More generally, the district now follows a clear order of operations when it appears a student may be missing or otherwise in crisis.

First, a thorough sweep of the building and grounds, ideally within minutes of noticing the absence. If the child is still not there, the school calls the police and key central office staff.

They then go through a written list of steps — contacting relatives, reviewing bus records and available footage, canvassing the neighborhood — until the child has found.

Chief Operations Officer Mike Schmidt said that procedure gets activated a few times a month. It usually ends up being a miscommunication, such as one parent picking a child up from school and not notifying the other one, he said.

"We've really formalized our response to incidents," he said. "The bottom line is — we do not stop until we have eyes on a child."

JMURPHY7@Gannett.com



schools hold weekly meetings with their attendance teams.

Wandering and elopement

The district has also updated its policies on what to do when a child wanders out of the classroom or out of the building, or intentionally runs away.

Principals must “strategically assign staff around the school during arrival, dismissal, recess, lunch and transition time.” Each building must have a written protocol for what to do when a student goes missing, including how staff are deployed throughout the building and how the school communicates with police, if necessary.

Special attention is given to students like

RCSD Chief Operations Officer Mike Schmidt and former superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams at a 2018 press conference after the death of Trevyan Rowe. MAX SCHULTE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE