

Attendance gains taper off in RCSD

Gains

Chronic absences in the city schools are down slightly

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Two full years into the Rochester City School District's assault on chronic absenteeism, the trend remains in the right direction but progress has slowed.

Figures through mid-April show small reductions in the percentage of students who are chronically absent — that is, those who have missed at least 10 percent of the school year. The rate is down half a percentage point in grades K-12, from 33.4 percent at this time last year to 32.9 percent now.

That modest improvement comes on the heels of a larger one last year, when the rate fell more than four percentage points. The gains there were concentrated in grades K-3, where the chronic absenteeism rate fell from 36.6 percent to 29.6.

Attendance tends to be higher in the spring, so it is likely the year-end attendance rates will creep upward by the end of June.

“We know this isn't a ball we're going to hit out of the park in a year or two,” said Jerome Underwood, the district's senior director of Youth Development and Family Services. “What I'm happy about is that we were able to hold onto the gains we made last year.”

While attendance has long been seen as an important factor in student success, attention has shifted in the last few years to chronic absenteeism instead of average daily attendance (that is, what percentage of the student body is in class on any given day). The latter measure masks the fact that it's often the same students missing every day.

The best attendance marks come from two sorts of

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Kindergarten teacher Rebekah Todd signals the students to quiet down as she goes over the rest of the day's lessons. The hula hoops signal personal space.

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Mark Learo, school counselor who also is in charge of attendance at School 8, starts going over the previous day's attendance. Attendance has gone up since January. Learo said some of the things he does to improve attendance at the school is home visits and tracking parents after they have moved.

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schools: those with comparatively fewer poor students, and those with higher proportions of refugees and immigrants.

World of Inquiry School 58 has the lowest chronic absence rate, followed by the Children's School of Rochester. The Rochester International Academy, a landing spot for children arriving in the United States without speaking English, also has very strong attendance, which Underwood attributed to an emphasis on

education in the home culture.

“There’s a hunger like you would not believe, where we see Somali children coming to school in 10 degree weather in flipflops,” he said.

The district’s strategy in improving attendance is to speak with families to identify and remove obstacles. Mark Learo, a counselor at Roberto Clemente School 8 on St. Paul Street, said he’s made more than 200 home visits this year.

Those visits often uncover problems with transportation, untreated mental health problems or students who are technically homeless but haven’t been identified as such.

Through Learo’s efforts, School 8 has reduced its chronic absenteeism rate by three points, to 37.4 percent.

“The first step is getting them in here as regularly as possible,” he said. “Then we have to make it somewhere they want to be and where they have successes every day, no matter how small.” One area where the school has some agency is the overlap between attendance and suspensions. Students who are suspended out of school are counted as absences, so resorting to that measure less frequently would boost the attendance statistics. It is no coincidence, for instance, that the elementary schools with the highest suspension rates, including schools 8 and 17, also have the worst attendance, particularly among their older students.

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Cayden Shelton answers the kindergarten teacher’s question about something they watched at School 8. In the background are Xael Martinez-Torregrosa and Tayvon Young.

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