

Schools' truancy problem growing

Attendance may be worse than thought

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A City School District attempt to get a better handle on classroom attendance rates could reveal an unpleasant truth: On any given day, half of the district's students are absent.

And Superintendent Bolgen Vargas expects the new data to show that attendance is a problem not just for high schoolers, but also for some of the district's youngest students.

City school officials have been pushing the issue of attendance since Vargas took the helm at the district, last year identifying hundreds of chronically truant students and going door to door vowing to find them.

Now, district officials say that their problems with student attendance may be far greater than they thought. A flawed system for taking attendance and tracking data has given them inaccurate numbers, and in turn a poor handle on the problem.

As school officials take steps to solve these issues — and enlist community leaders to help them — a consultant working with them to fix their attendance system says their attendance rate could fall as low as 50 percent.

"If we don't know how many kids are in school, we have no idea how well our programs are working," said Rochester Mayor Thomas Richards, who is working with the school district on attendance issues. "I'm willing to get involved in whatever way I can. The first step, though, is to have this data."

Vargas and other school officials

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argue that poor attendance is one of the driving factors behind students' poor academic performance, and ultimately failure to finish high school. If students do not attend class, it stands to reason that they will not learn, in turn doing poorly on standardized tests, Regents exams and other measures of achievement.

Yet despite the importance of attendance, the district has failed to get a good handle on just how many students are showing up for class.

The state has only required school districts to report their attendance as an average rate for the whole year, and allowed districts to include high schoolers who may have showed up for just one of their classes. School officials say that method of reporting has given them an inflated rate that has consistently hit 90 percent, not a true reflection of how much time students are spending in the classroom. Also contributing to the problem: The district's computer program for tracking attendance automatically records students as being present. When a teacher did not take attendance and change the status, all students would show up as attending. That problem surfaced in attendance data the district compiled for its summer school programs. In some cases, schools reported an improbable 99.99 percent of students showing up for summer classes. The district is now taking steps to improve its data tracking system. This coming school year, teachers will have to manually record their students' attendance status. And at the high school level, students will only count as present if they attend all of their classes. The state is now requiring districts to report attendance data on a weekly basis, information the City School District plans to make publicly available on its website. But collecting accurate data is just the first step, school officials say. Their goal is to then use that data to identify the students who are missing the most school, and then work with them to figure out why they are truant. That could be anything from students staying home to watch younger siblings to parents not taking their children to school because of transportation issues.

"You can't fix the problem until you understand the causes," said Karl Bertrand, a consultant who is working with the school district to improve attendance tracking.

Schools will then work with community agencies to get families the resources and support they need to make sure their children get to school.

“There is no other area that I need more help in than getting children back to the classroom,” Vargas said.

Vargas also expects much of the district’s attention to be devoted to students in kindergarten to third grade, an age group where officials have already seen attendance issues. Last school year, about a third of the students who had not shown up at all the first month of school were in kindergarten through sixth grade.

Some schools have employed similar strategies getting their students into the classroom.

At School 9’s Boys Academy, attendance was taken every morning as administrators searched for trends that might also correlate with students’ behavior and classroom performance. Staff actively reached out to parents and families of students who were not showing up.

For the 2011-2012 school year, the program reported an attendance rate of 95 percent, something program leaders attributed to their focus and the fact that students enjoyed coming to the program.

“The truth of the matter is, we don’t know why all kids miss school,” said Anita Murphy, the district’s deputy superintendent for administration and operations. “But when we concentrate on the problem, we can address it.”

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At School 9’s Boys Academy, attendance was taken every morning as administrators searched for attendance trends.

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