

FIRST STEP:

GETTING KIDS TO SCHOOL

Attendance is up in some buildings amid push by district

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The smell of fresh buttered popcorn is wafting down the hall at the Early Childhood School of Rochester — but you'd better be in class if you want a taste.

Principal Roshon Bradley has made popcorn, pizza and ice cream parties the prizes for the classes with the best weekly attendance. Taking a tactic from the hot pretzel store at the mall, he serves it in a conspicuous place, where a stray whiff might make other students hungry and motivated.

"When the kids smell the popcorn and they're not part of the winning class, they're like, 'Oh, man, we gotta get to class,'" he said. Play time on a bounce house and giveaway bicycles work on the same principle.

Those incentives are part of a strategy that has far more students in class compared with a year ago at the K-2 school near Edgerton Park. Through the first three quarters of the 2014-15 school year, average daily attendance is at 92.1 percent, up 2.7 percentage points from the same time last year, and chronic absenteeism is down starkly as well. Improving attendance and attendance record-keeping have been a crusade for Superintendent Bolgen Vargas since the day he assumed control. Many of his other initiatives, such as increasing extracurricular and non-core subject offerings, were chosen in part because they make kids want to come to school.

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Rochester School District Superintendent Bolgen Vargas approaches an apartment building during an attendance blitz last week, where he and others visited the homes of chronically absent students to alert families of resources that may help prevent kids from missing school.

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School

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The returns at this point are encouraging but mixed.

Year-over-year numbers provided by the district show incremental gains in some areas. Students in K-6 elementary schools have gained half a percentage point, up from 91.5 percent to 92 percent average daily attendance through April 17. And the number of students in grades K-3 who are chronically absent — those who miss more than 10 percent of school days — has decreased from 33.8 percent to 27.3 percent, a difference of about 1,300 children, through May 27.

The district has concentrated in particular on its youngest students, making Early Childhood School of Rochester a logical target.

Besides incentives for students, the school and its parent liaison, Donita Cummings, have spent more time and energy working with parents. She analyzes student attendance patterns, then meets in person with parents to identify and overcome obstacles.

“If you can get to the parent, you can turn it around,” she said. “Once you let people know you’re going beyond your normal job description to help them, they’ll walk a mile with you.”

Even the school’s improved numbers, however, fall short of the district’s ultimate goal. Only three city schools — World of Inquiry, the Children’s School of Rochester and the Rochester International Academy — are at the 95 percent mark that Vargas says is necessary to ensure students are learning.

And while the district has concentrated on students in grades K-3, the attendance numbers in high schools are atrocious. Nearly one in three ninth-graders is absent on any given day.

East, Charlotte, Northeast College Prep, Robert Brown and STEM high schools are all below 80 percent average daily attendance. A student with 80 percent attendance is only in school four out of five days a week, making graduation unlikely.

All City High, which is meant as an alternate for students who struggled elsewhere, is at 46 percent. Across the district, the incidence rate of chronically absent high-schoolers has actually increased slightly. The lone secondary bright spot is the P-TECH Rochester Pathways to Technology program at the Edison campus, where students stay for six years and get an associate’s degree along with their diploma. Its attendance rate is 93.6 percent; the district is restructuring the Edison campus on its model beginning in the fall.

Last week, Vargas and a platoon of district employees and volunteers fanned out across the city on one of their periodic “attendance blitzes,” knocking on the doors of chronically absent students to try to get them back on track.

Sometimes there’s evidence the student has moved and can be taken off the books. Other times the parent or guardian gets a chance to explain the problem — homelessness, illness, crime — and possibly find help.

“There are multiple challenges. We have 1,100 students who are homeless,” Vargas said while navigating from one house to the next. “In order to solve a problem, you have to acknowledge it and work on it.”

Bradley, the Early Childhood School of Rochester principal, is finishing a doctoral dissertation on the correlation of attendance and performance. His research and his day job confirm that a varied approach, persistence and compassion are the pillars of improvement.

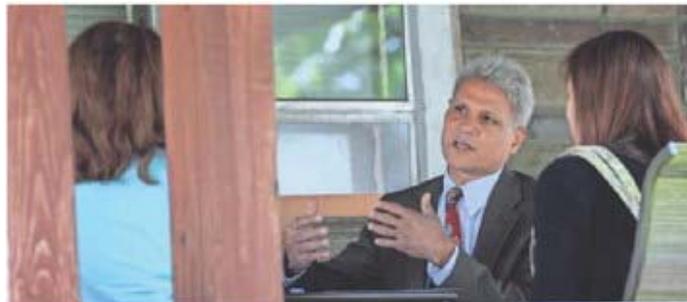
“I always say, closed mouths don’t get fed,” he said. “Rochester is rich in resources; we just need to make the connections.”

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'If you can get to the parent, you can turn it around.'

DONITA CUMMINGS

PARENT LIASON



Rochester School District Superintendent Bolgen Vargas talks to the grandmother of a student during an attendance blitz last week.

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