



COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS PACESETTER

GRAND RAPIDS

Category: Attendance

Each week, the staff at Burton Elementary School gathers to review the latest data trends and discuss students who are missing too many days of school. The attendance team also brainstorms the best ways to encourage kids to come to school, whether by explaining the importance of attendance to parents, offering incentives to students or tapping community resources to help families.

Burton is one of 15 schools in Michigan's Kent County (which includes Grand Rapids) that are tackling chronic early absence through a community schools approach sponsored by the Kent School Services Network (KSSN).

The network began as a collaborative effort involving the Grand Rapids Public School District, the Kent Intermediate School District, county government agencies representing health, mental health and social services, Spectrum Health, and a number of foundations with which KSSN currently partners.

KSSN provides support to track, analyze and intervene with students, schools and communities showing high absentee rates. The attendance teams, which meet weekly, include a worker from the local department of social services and a community school coordinator in addition to the school principal, nurse, attendance secretary and district family support specialist.

A 2012 report found that chronic early absenteeism is widespread in Kent County's urban areas, where the percentage of the population living at or below the poverty line is high, and is especially prevalent among African-American and Hispanic youth. It also showed that students who are chronically absent in the second and third grades record lower scores on standardized tests.

Over the years, the network has found that some schools are more successful than others at reducing chronic absence. KSSN has identified the key ingredients for success as strong leadership from the principal, a clear attendance policy at the district and school levels, buy-in from teachers and staff, regular attendance meetings, parent outreach, attendance incentives and case management involving multiple agencies.

A recent \$1.2 million grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation will fund a five-year evaluation and additional nursing support. A \$6 million federal grant received by partner network180 has allowed the program to expand and will provide mental health professionals in all schools.

STRATEGIES

- Reported on chronic absence rates at schools in the early grades at the 20 school districts in Kent County
- Created attendance teams to monitor and intervene with students who are chronically absent or headed off track
- Helped participating schools offer incentives for students and education sessions for parents
- Used a community schools model to provide added support to students and families