



COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS PACESETTER

SPRINGFIELD, MASS.

Category: Attendance

Every morning, dozens of elementary school students in Springfield wait on street corners for the Walking School Bus to arrive. Led by teachers and parents, the organized walk provides a safe and healthy way for children to get to school. Not only are students more likely to attend school, the morning exercise means they often settle down faster when they get there.

The Walking School bus is one of several strategies that the mid-sized western Massachusetts city has used to reduce chronic absence.

Springfield Public Schools began implementing a district-wide Attendance Improvement Initiative beginning in the 2009-2010 school year. Since then, the percentage of kindergartners who are chronically absent has dropped from 28 to 14 percent. For first graders, the rate dropped from 22 to 14 percent in the same time period. The school district is encouraged by these gains, but is still not satisfied with student attendance and is deploying several strategies to improve it.

At the elementary level, an articulated process of communication with parents, using a structured protocol, begins when a child has a first unexcused absence. The protocol includes a mix of strategies: phone calls and home visits, referrals to community agencies, letters of concern and warning and ultimately referrals to child welfare agencies. In addition, schools have implemented attendance incentive and reward programs.

Each principal has an attendance performance goal that is tied to annual evaluations and raises. There is an increased awareness among principals at the elementary level that children's attendance patterns begin in early grades, so they are taking steps to increase attendance levels for their students.

The city's Level 4 schools, identified by the state as chronically low performing, are partnering with City Connects to intervene with students and families. Teachers identify the strengths and needs of every child and create a unique set of intervention, prevention and enrichment services drawn from the community. This approach is intended to overcome the obstacles that prevent families from successfully getting their children to school every day.

The Walking School Bus was piloted at a school where 75 percent of the student population walks to school daily and 30 percent of kindergartners and 28 percent of first graders were chronically absent. About 50 children and parents now participate. One student who was tardy or absent 22 days during 2010-11 has not been late or absent once since joining the program for the 2011-12 school year.

STRATEGIES

- Tied principal evaluation and raises to attendance performance goals
- Developed clear guidelines for communicating with parents about absences
- Offered incentives and rewards for good attendance
- Targeted interventions at chronically low-performing schools
- Deployed the Walking School Bus