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Showing Up Matters: The State of Chronic Absenteeism in New Jersey, 3rd Annual Report

By Peter Chen and Cynthia Rice



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Introduction

Since the release of Advocates for Children of New Jersey's (ACNJ) first report on chronic absenteeism just two years ago, schools in our state are stepping up to tackle this silent problem. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10 percent or more of the total enrolled school days, including both excused and unexcused absences and suspensions. During the last few years, officials have been paying more attention to the number of students missing too much school and finding out the reasons for those absences. ACNJ's continuous advocacy on this topic has prompted educators and community leaders from across the state to think more intentionally and creatively about school attendance.

These efforts are making a difference. About 8,000 fewer students were identified as being "chronically absent" in the 2015-16 school year, compared with the prior year.¹ Moreover, during the same period of time, fewer districts had 10 percent or more of their students chronically absent.

This is good news for kids and their future.

Over the past few years, New Jersey educators at state, local and school-specific levels have begun to recognize the impact of absenteeism on student academic and social-emotional outcomes. At every grade, from preschool through the 12th grade, the loss of instructional time caused by absences reduces the chances of students' short- and long-term educational success. Absenteeism erodes the benefits from attending preschool, reduces the chances of reading on grade-level by third grade, increases the chances of failure in middle school, increases the high school dropout rate and widens the achievement gap.²

Thanks to increased attention on the federal and state level, New Jersey schools and communities are changing the way they think about chronic absenteeism. Working more with their communities, they are beginning to take steps to address the barriers that often make it difficult for students to regularly attend school.

But there is still plenty of work to be done. Although the overall number of chronically absent students was lower, the rates remain too high for certain groups of students, such as those with special needs, homeless students and those from economically disadvantaged families. These pockets of absent students may be "hiding in plain sight," unless schools and districts view attendance data regularly and track these specific subgroups of high-absentee students.

This third ACNJ statewide report again provides a snapshot of chronic absenteeism at the state, district, grade and demographic level. It highlights the federal and state policy changes and initiatives that are providing the frameworks for schools and communities to be more intentional in addressing chronic absenteeism. And as in past reports, it highlights positive efforts being made throughout the state to ensure that students are attending school more often.

Recapping the Differences Between Chronic Absenteeism, Average Daily Attendance and Truancy³

- **Chronic Absenteeism** counts all student absences, including excused, unexcused and suspensions.
- **Average Daily Attendance** counts the average number of students who show up to school on any given day.
- **Truancy** counts only unexcused absences.

A Snapshot of K-12 Chronic Absenteeism

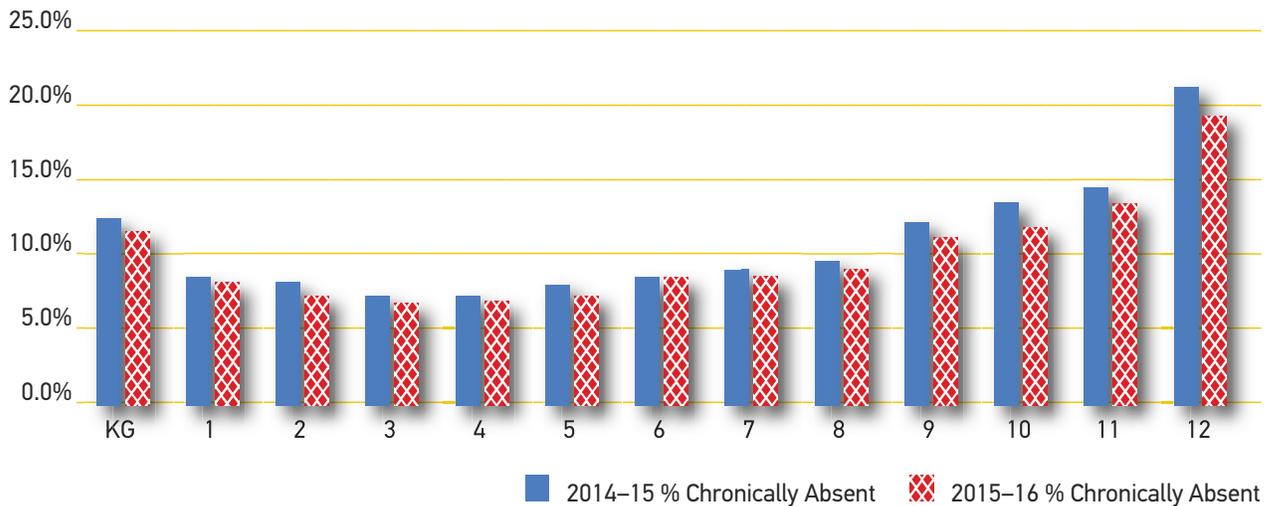
Overall

In the 2015-16 school year, of the more than 1.3 million New Jersey K-12 students, nearly 129,000 or 9.7 percent were identified as being chronically absent. This percentage declined slightly from 2014-15, when the rate was 10.3 percent or approximately 137,000 students. The overall rate decrease from 2014-15 to 2015-16 was 6 percent.

By Grade

This slight decline in the absenteeism rate also occurred at all grade levels, except for sixth grade, which remained the same at 7.5 percent. The declines ranged from 0.1 percent in eighth grade to 1.6 percent in 12th grade, a grade which historically has the highest percentages of chronically absent students. The rate of chronic absenteeism in kindergarten also declined from 12.1 percent in 2014-15 to 11.4 percent in 2015-16. This is good news for young learners, as chronic absenteeism during the early years is often linked with reading difficulties and poor attendance patterns in future years.⁴

Chronic Absenteeism Rate by Grade, 2014–15 and 2015–16



The number of districts with high absenteeism (10 percent or more of their K-12 students chronically absent) also declined slightly, from 216 to 192. Although these 192 districts represented only 40 percent of the total student enrollment, they accounted for about 65 percent of the state's chronically absent students.

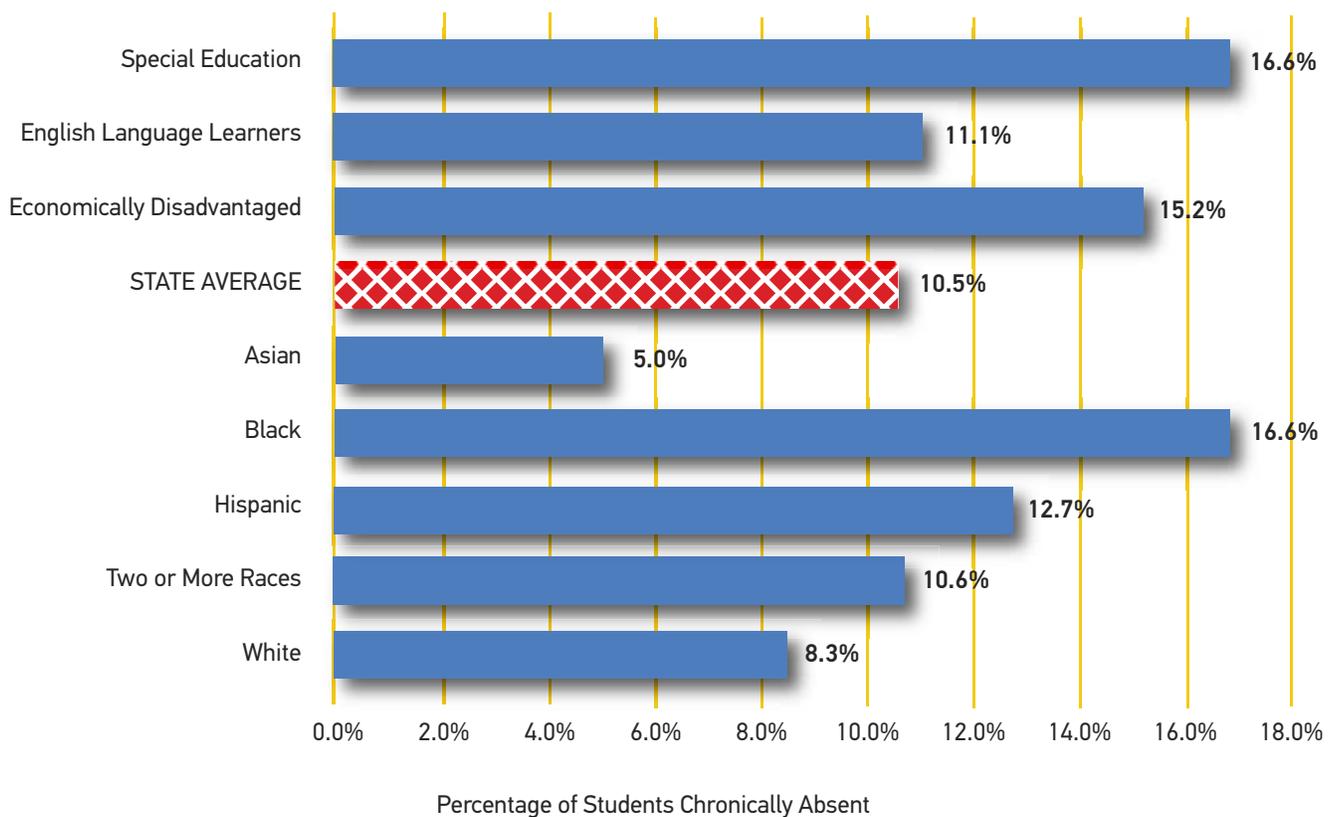
The rates of chronic absenteeism and the reasons behind those absences varied among students. Absences from school often stem from causes inside and outside the school, including health issues, transportation, family responsibilities, community safety and school discipline.⁵

Special Populations: Absenteeism Hiding in Plain Sight

Although chronic absenteeism rates reveal the number of students missing too much school, reviewing the data solely from a district or school level may not be enough to identify which groups of students are struggling with attendance. Two schools may have the same chronic absenteeism rate but require different solutions to help improve attendance. Interventions to reduce absenteeism must begin with a deeper dive into the data, including a review of that data within specific groups.

Certain populations, such as children from low-income families, children of color and children with special needs are more likely to have higher rates of chronic absenteeism than students not included in those populations.⁶

Chronic Absenteeism Rate by Demographic Pre-K-12 (2015-16 School Year)



In the 2015-16 school year, chronic absenteeism rates among black students (17 percent) and Hispanic students (13 percent) remained higher than white students (8 percent). Students from economically disadvantaged families were nearly twice as likely (15 percent) to miss too much school, compared with students from non-economically disadvantaged families (8 percent).

Children with special needs were chronically absent at a rate of 17 percent, far higher than the 9 percent of their non-disabled peers. Besides the broader reasons why students become chronically absent such as transportation, health and safety issues, students with special needs experience a higher rate of suspension than their non-disabled peers.⁷ According to a U.S. Department of Education report from 2014, approximately 10 percent of New Jersey students with disabilities received out-of-school suspensions, compared to 4 percent for students without disabilities.⁸ Lastly, while homeless students represent a small percentage of the overall student population, nearly 30 percent were identified as being chronically absent.

Because these groups of students are at higher risk of missing school, districts with relatively low overall rates of chronic absenteeism may nonetheless have pockets of high absenteeism in one or more specific student populations.

High Chronic Absenteeism Among Special Populations in Low-Absenteeism Districts

District	All Students	Economically Disadvantaged Students	Students with Special Needs	English Language Learners
District A	8%	6%	22%	8%
District B	8%	12%	11%	16%
District C	8%	20%	12%	16%

Combatting high absenteeism requires targeted approaches tailored for the population of each school and district.

A sample of three New Jersey districts highlighted in the above chart show similar overall rates of chronic absenteeism, but their absenteeism is concentrated in different areas. A school aiming to improve attendance for its special needs population may require a different intervention than a school with high absenteeism in its English learning population. District A did well among its economically disadvantaged students but had high absenteeism among students with special needs, so its investigation into the causes of its absenteeism might start with its special education department. District B might instead focus on the obstacles facing its English learning population.



North Brunswick: Nurses As Leaders On Absenteeism

School nurses are an essential part of any school attendance strategy especially because chronic absenteeism in the early grades so often stems from health-related issues. Elementary schools in North Brunswick are piloting a new initiative to provide case management for first graders with chronic absences. Spearheaded by three school nurses, Anna Tupe, Mary Ellen Engel and Mary Blackborow, who noticed that students with chronic illnesses were often absent, the effort aims to provide support to families to better manage their child's health. Under the initiative, the nurses act as "navigators" for families to access supports and services in order to keep them in school regularly.

The idea had its roots in ACNJ's reports on chronic absenteeism and the inclusion of absenteeism as a performance measure in New Jersey's *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* plan. The three nurses in North Brunswick's school district, explained that colleagues should be playing a leadership role in reducing absenteeism. "We are already seeing these students when they miss school due to doctors' visits, chronic diseases like asthma or mental health issues. We see the way social determinants of health impact students every day," Engel said.

Engel noticed that the existing model didn't give a full picture of what was causing student absences. "We need to identify what is the issue causing absence, but the information visible on the outside may be very different than what's going on in the home." As a result, North Brunswick's school nurses applied for a grant from the New Jersey Collaborating Center for Nurses to provide care coordination for a targeted group of students who were chronically absent the year before, to identify the causes of absences and coordinate existing services to support them. Based on district data, they focused on kindergarten and first grade students, who had high levels of absenteeism relative to other grades.

Key to North Brunswick's new model is one-on-one parent contact to identify causes of student absences. Recognizing that North Brunswick's population is racially and culturally diverse, the one-on-one approach avoids "one-size-fits-all" solutions and often reveals family needs beyond just health care. Engel identified both before/after-school child care and transportation as issues keeping families from sending their children to school regularly. "We need to raise awareness for

everyone that's involved, so we're not alienating families and putting roadblocks to accessing school," said Blackborow.

Beyond this pilot, nurses in North Brunswick are shifting the conversation across the town to focus on absenteeism. Their efforts included:

- presentations on chronic absenteeism and attendance at Back-to-School nights,
- inclusion of attendance messaging in all newsletters to parents and in-school television displays,
- meeting with the Mayor and the Town Council to issue a proclamation on the importance of attendance,
- traditional messaging such as banners and lawn signs at every school,
- videos and messaging from the town and district on local access television and social media,
- data presentations to elementary teachers on chronically absent students,
- regular messages from *Attendance Works* to teachers about how to engage students and families on attendance, and
- sending chronic absenteeism messaging to hospitals, physicians and medical professionals providing sports physicals.

This broad approach is designed to take the lessons of the pilot and create a culture change throughout the district. Joseph Schmidt, Principal of North Brunswick's Arthur M. Judd Elementary School, stated his support for the attendance campaign: "The entire Judd school staff is very

excited about this initiative. We believe that decreasing absences and tardiness in school will greatly help to boost overall student achievement and will establish a lifelong school and work ethic." Although the data indicators are focused on attendance, the district's goal is to "create a healthy learning community."

"The one piece of advice I would offer to other districts is that we need to be open to different cultures and

backgrounds to help them get the resources they need," Blackborow said. "There isn't a family that doesn't want their child to be successful." ■



Recent Developments in Battling Absenteeism

Since the release of ACNJ's second report on chronic absenteeism in September 2016, steps to address this issue have been taking place at all levels. Below are a few of the major highlights:

- **The inclusion of chronic absenteeism as an indicator in New Jersey's ESSA plan.** The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) — the federal government's most recent reauthorization of the law that provides funds for schools that educate high percentages of low-income students — requires states to choose at least one indicator to measure school quality or student success.⁹ After significant input from all facets of the educational community, the New Jersey Department of Education joined 33 states and the District of Columbia by using chronic absenteeism as the accountability indicator to measure school quality and success.¹⁰ As a result, chronic absenteeism will be part of the rating system used to identify those schools needing either comprehensive or targeted support and improvement. School-level chronic absenteeism is also now required to be included in each district's annual K-12 School Performance Reports.¹¹
- **The chronic absenteeism bill continues to move forward.** With support from many state and local organizations, the New Jersey Senate unanimously passed the chronic absenteeism bill (S-447/A-2352) in June 2017. The proposed legislation would require schools to include chronic absenteeism in their school performance reports. It would also require that schools that have 10 percent or more of their student body identified as being chronically absent develop plans on how they will address the issue in the future.¹² The bill is currently before the State Assembly and its passage must take place before the end of 2017.
- **Organizations and schools are stepping up and taking on chronic absenteeism.** In the last year, ACNJ has seen an increase in the number of organizations, including educational and health-related associations, that have recognized the role their groups play in battling chronic absenteeism. By offering their members more professional development opportunities that focus on chronic absenteeism, these stakeholders are becoming better prepared to help students and families when help is needed. Moreover, districts and schools throughout the state have made chronic absenteeism a core part of their annual professional development. Whether it is individual groups such as early childhood family workers or the entire district staff, more districts throughout the state are arming their employees with the tools necessary for improving attendance.



Understanding the Data and Taking Action: A Pemberton Update

Since ACNJ's last statewide report,¹³ the Pemberton Township School District has remained committed to reducing chronic absenteeism — but that does not mean it has been easy. The district has addressed the problem on multiple fronts: strengthening parent outreach and communication, developing school-specific strategies and targeting interventions at root causes of student absence. Recognizing that domestic violence affected a high number of students, Pemberton has taken steps to provide support for this vulnerable population to make sure they remain in school on track for success.

Pemberton's efforts are getting results but absenteeism rates for some students have been difficult to change. In two years, the district has reduced its kindergarten through eighth grade chronic absenteeism from 16 percent to 12 percent and from 25 percent to 19 percent for its economically disadvantaged population. But the percentages have remained stagnant for high school students and for students with special needs, with approximately a quarter of both populations continuing to miss too much school. Pemberton's preschool program also continues to have a high rate of absenteeism, despite spearheading multiple measures to address this population including community home visits.

■ Parent Outreach and Knowing the Data

The district's approach to improving attendance is multifaceted, including both conventional and unconventional approaches. Letters home explaining the importance of attendance were sent over the summer and "nudge" letters will be sent to parents of students who have begun to miss too many days, comparing their child's attendance with

averages from the child's school and the overall district. Research has shown that parents often do not know the total number of days of school their child has missed and consequently are unaware that their child may be chronically absent.¹⁴ "By using a visual graph to show parents where their child is in relation to other students' absences, we hope to both educate parents and have the comparative data be the catalyst for improved attendance," said Adelina Giannetti, Pemberton's Assistant Superintendent of Secondary and Special Services.

■ Building Staff and School Capacity

Over the summer, district professional development focused on chronic absenteeism using *Attendance Works: Five Actions to Improve Attendance*, a series of strategies which provides a framework for encouraging students to attend school regularly.¹⁵ With a district goal of reducing the number of students that are chronically absent by 10 percent, teachers will work in teams to develop action plans and principals will develop school-wide plans that focus on periodic attendance data review, increased parent involvement and positive reinforcement.

Understanding that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach, the district strives to first find out individual student hurdles, such as jobs making it difficult for high school students to attend school or apathy issues, and then address the problem specific to the student's needs. "We work hard on finding the barrier to attendance, and then coming up with an individualized results-oriented solution," said Giannetti.

■ A Hidden Risk Factor: Domestic Violence

But it was data from another source that moved Assistant Superintendent Giannetti to take on a different approach to battling chronic absenteeism in her district. Anecdotally, she had been hearing about students not coming to school because of issues taking place in their homes. But she had no idea of the extent of the problem.

In 2016, she was invited to become a member of Burlington County's Juvenile Crime Prevention Board. At her first meeting, the group was provided with data on the number of reported domestic violence incidents that took place in each town in 2014.

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The community numbers were shocking. With nearly 600 incidents in Pemberton alone — the highest in the county — it was estimated that Pemberton youth were present at approximately 40 percent of those incidents. District members of this Prevention Board such as Holly Corsanico, Supervisor of the Child Study Team, realized that what was going on in students' homes had a direct impact on whether or not they came to school and their ability to learn. Armed with this information, Corsanico began to compare the external data of reported domestic violence with information from within the school community. She asked school staff what they were hearing, and what they told her confirmed similar stories of domestic violence described by community partners.

■ Taking Trauma Into Account

Once informed of this information, Superintendent Tony Trongone agreed to take action. The students needed to know that their schools were a safe haven and consequently, the district made every school in Pemberton Township "trauma-sensitive." If students knew that there were adults in the building who were there for them, they were more likely to come. But to get to that point, the staff had to become trauma-informed.

After receiving training by Melissa Sadin, a consultant from the Attachment and Trauma Network, Corsanico brought

together the district experts, school psychologists, guidance counselors and social workers to develop a research-based training that would educate every district staff member on trauma, children of domestic violence and its impact on their learning. After a school board presentation, Giannetti said that "we took this message on the road, filled with real life visuals so that our staff felt the impact," and trained every staff member from administrators to security monitors to classroom aides to community members.

The trainings were so successful in educating the staff, they started asking, "Now what?"

To answer this question, during this school year, Pemberton is working on monthly activities for administrators that will focus on different issues of student trauma and how best to respond. The goal is for them to take ownership of this work and implement these new strategies with their staff so that regardless of who the adults are in the building, they will be better informed to help students dealing with violence in the home.

"In our district, chronic absenteeism is always in the forefront of our minds. We know that our students will not be successful if they are not here. We just have to better understand their problems, and help solve them so that they can get here," said Giannetti. ■

Conclusion

Last year's chronic absenteeism data is cause for cautious celebration. The number of students missing too much school has improved from the prior year, on the state, district and grade levels. This is good news. The declining numbers are proof that the chronic absenteeism problem is not insurmountable. The New Jersey Legislature has acknowledged the need to focus on chronic absenteeism with a bill that will require schools struggling with high rates of absenteeism to be more intentional about how they plan to improve attendance. The bill already passed unanimously in the Senate and is headed to the Assembly later this fall.

There is, however, still plenty of work to be done. The gaps between certain groups such as students with disabilities, homeless students or students from low-income families and their peers remain significant and require different ways of understanding the causes of high absences and addressing the specific needs of these particular populations.

But New Jersey's educators have accomplished so much in a very short period of time. With leadership, commitment and a laser focus on the issue, schools and communities throughout the state are showing that when it comes to school, every day does matter.

Making a Difference from the Beginning: Improving Preschool Attendance



Because of the importance of young students attaining a strong foundation early on, preschool should be included when the state, school districts and individual schools develop strategies to battle chronic absenteeism. Historically, preschool has not been a major focus in New Jersey's conversation about chronic absenteeism, with the attention largely on K-12 education. But a mindset shift is beginning at the state and local levels, as preschool providers throughout the state rethink and improve their approaches to reduce chronic absences.

New Jersey's high-quality state-funded preschool has been one of the state's greatest educational success stories. The research is clear that providing quality programs to 3- and 4-year-olds gives these young children the foundation necessary for improved educational outcomes for years afterwards.¹⁶ But these benefits are not nearly as effective when students do not regularly attend.¹⁷ There is a strong link between preschoolers who miss too much school and poor academic performance in later grades.¹⁸

In New Jersey, preschoolers missed school at a rate higher than any other individual grade, including high school seniors. More than one in four preschoolers (26.5 percent) were chronically absent in the 2015-16 school year, more than two and a half times the rate for K-12 students (9.7 percent). That's more than 18,000 preschoolers who missed out on the daily benefits of a high-quality early education.

These data include all districts with reported preschool enrollment and may include districts that have only half-day programs, tuition-based programs or programs only for students with special

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needs. But regardless of program type, it is clear that the high number of young students who miss preschool are missing out on key foundational skills for their long-term educational success.

In the past year, the New Jersey Department of Education's (NJDOE) Division of Early Childhood Education has made targeting preschool absenteeism a top priority by providing professional development to early childhood administrators in districts with state-funded preschool. Organizations such as ACNJ and Attendance Works, a national group focused on improving school attendance, are working to provide supports and technical assistance to educational stakeholders including school nurses, family workers and school administrators who serve preschool students.

But it is individual district leadership that is working hard to turn the curve on preschool chronic absenteeism.

Sending the Message Early and Often

Many of the school districts that have improved their preschool chronic absenteeism numbers state that they are sending the message early on that attendance matters in preschool.

But relying only on one set of messengers and messages is insufficient. Instead, early childhood programs in districts such as Plainfield, Long Branch and Jersey City are recognizing the importance of a multifaceted approach to parent and family engagement.

- **All hands on deck approach.** Districts are using multiple messengers and engaging all staff in attendance communications. "We surveyed our preschool parents and saw that many lacked the knowledge of just how important preschool is to the success of their children," said Evelyn Motley, Plainfield's Director of Early Childhood. Using an "All Stakeholder Approach," Motley and her team, which included directors, master teachers, family workers and Preschool Intervention and Referral Team (PIRT) members, took every opportunity to talk about the importance of good attendance. These opportunities include parent intervention meetings and monthly child care director meetings. Long Branch took a similar approach, engaging parents at every opportunity. "No matter what your job is in Long Branch, we are all talking about attendance. We talk about it at every single family event, but it goes beyond those meetings. No one is forgetting to mention it, including our principals, student advisors and secretaries. It has become a habit for us all," said the district's Director of Early Childhood, Renee Whelan.
- **Taking every opportunity to communicate.** Multiple messengers also mean multiple opportunities for contact, starting at preschool registration and continuing through each school meeting and event. When students enter and exit a building in Plainfield, they see a banner reading "Attendance Matters." Districts are also using creative video and social media approaches to spread the word. Long Branch is regularly posting different attendance-based slogans and vignettes on Facebook and Twitter for parents. Many of the short pieces include students, which they find draws more parents to the district's various social media outlets. Similarly, Jersey City is in the process of developing a parent webinar, "Understanding Your Preschooler's Day," which will include information on the importance of preschool attendance. Upon completion, the webinar will be on the district's homepage, so that families can access it at their convenience.

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Districts are also finding that regular communication on chronic absenteeism must extend beyond families and include community private providers implementing public preschool. In Hoboken, a district with a robust “mixed delivery system” in which public preschool is operated through a collaboration between the school district and private providers, ensuring that all preschool providers are on board is key. “I have made attendance a constant topic at my monthly director meetings with our providers. In this way, regardless of where the classrooms are located, the message is the same,” said the district’s Director of Early Childhood, Sandra Rodriguez.

Using Data to Improve Attendance

District early childhood leaders are recognizing the importance of reviewing and understanding their absentee data. “We look at our data every day,” said Long Branch’s Renee Whelan. When the data indicate that a preschooler is missing too much school, one prevention strategy is referring the child to the Intervention and Referral Services (I & RS) Teams, so that team members can engage the family early on to find out why the child is not regularly attending school. “There may be things going on in the family that the district may not be aware of, and we may be able to help come up with ways to help get the child to school,” said Whelan.

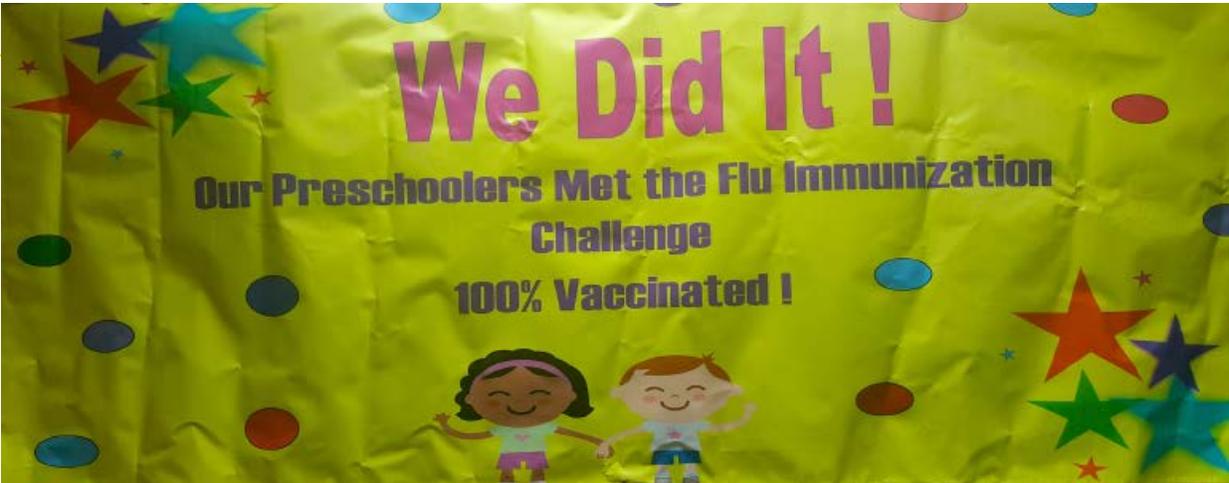
Tracking data by preschool provider also helps target supports and interventions. In East Orange, director meetings include highlighting which programs have high attendance rates, using competition to reduce chronic absenteeism. In Plainfield, monitoring provider-specific data adds a measure of sustainability and accountability for continuous improvement in chronic absenteeism. When Plainfield’s Evelyn Motley does not see such improvements, programs are required to develop corrective action plans that provide her with a vision of how they plan to improve attendance. “Once I held the programs accountable for their efforts, I began to see improvements,” she said.



Addressing Young Children’s Health Issues

Making sure that preschoolers remain healthy and able to regularly attend school can be challenging. Preschool programs throughout New Jersey are tackling this problem by addressing it head-on. The most common strategy is to immediately engage the school nurses. For example, many of the districts indicated that their nurses have become more proactive in ensuring that preschoolers are

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immunized in a timely manner. Jersey City's nurses collaborate with child care providers to stress the importance of immunizations. Thanks to the nurses' advocacy, the district awards those child care centers in which 100 percent of the students receive their flu shots by December 31st with a banner highlighting this accomplishment.

Plainfield's Director of Early Childhood, Evelyn Motley, looked beyond her absentee data to address health-related absences: "I wanted to know if there was a correlation between the 'personal care routine' subgroup on our classroom assessment scores¹⁹ and children's attendance." Low marks in this subgroup—which includes inadequate handwashing—meant that children might be more susceptible to becoming sick. Motley reviewed the data and focused on improving practices in those classrooms with low marks.

Other Steps Being Taken to Support Improved Preschool Attendance

- **Providing professional development for all staff.** In Plainfield, whether it was the family workers, center directors, master teachers or members of the PIRT team, everyone was trained on the importance of attendance so that the district message was the same.
- **Addressing family issues leading to increased absences.** When families were taking out their preschoolers for vacation during the school year, Hoboken included language in their "onboarding packets" that stated that the preschools' calendar was the same as the district calendar, and that they should consult it prior to making vacation plans. "The message was not popular, but it was effective," said Sandra Rodriguez, the district's Director of Early Childhood.
- **Implementing attendance incentives.** Hoboken just added "The Attendance Challenge" so that classes with the best attendance each month will be honored in the same way as the "Students of the Month" are honored. In Long Branch, Whelan is looking for ways to use federal education funding for incentives to help improve attendance.



Data Sources and Technical Notes:

- ¹ Unless otherwise noted, the New Jersey Department of Education provided all raw data for this report.
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