

School goes to great lengths to combat chronic absenteeism

Baltimore school officials collaborate to get students to class

Deborah Weiner

News Anchor, I-Team Reporter

BALTIMORE —

There's a vast number of Maryland public school students who are missing school, and as a result, missing out.

Maryland is one of a few states that requires schools to report how many children are chronically absent because the consequences can be so enormous.

A report from Johns Hopkins University said chronic absenteeism functions much like bacteria in a hospital; it's an unseen force that wreaks havoc on efforts to improve life outcomes, and that is why there is such a desperate effort to keep kids in school.

Getting students like Genevive to school

It was 7:30 a.m. in Brooklyn when Genevive Scott's ride to school arrived. But this is not the average carpool. The driver is Genevive's English teacher, Constance Lindsey, who picks up the sixth grader at a moment's notice in an effort to keep Genevive going to school.

"Sometimes, if I feel like I'm going to have a bad day, I don't come," Genevive said.

Franklin Square Elementary-Middle School has declared an all-out war on chronic absenteeism, which involves students who miss more than 20 days of school a year. At Franklin Square, they call students scholars, and as in Genevive's case, the school goes to great lengths to keep classrooms full of them.

"There are a lot of reasons that scholars don't come to school, but we try to take that out of the mix, so they will want to come," said Terry Patton, the school's principal.

Patton said the school washes clothes for the scholars, cuts hair and feeds them.

"It takes a village, and we are the village," Patton said.

Chronically absent students less likely to graduate

While Baltimore City tackles the highest absentee rate in Maryland, the district is certainly not alone. Last year, 12 percent of public school students in the state -- more than 91,000 -- missed more than 20 days, according to the Maryland state Department of Education.

Studies have shown students who are chronically absent are less likely to read proficiently and less likely to graduate.

"The majority of kids that are chronically absent are not chronically absent just because they don't feel like coming to school today," Baltimore City schools CEO Sonja Santelises said.

Educators said the reasons include the burden of caring for younger siblings, addiction in the family, housing instability and, in many cases, problems just getting to school.

"We can't just say that's a home issue, because it's our issue, too," Santelises said.

Schools working to reduce chronic absenteeism

The University of Baltimore School of Law runs a truancy court in five schools, including Mount Royal Elementary School. Retired Judge David Young works with student Samara Owens, who missed 18 days of school last year, but with weekly sessions like this, her attendance is now perfect.

"It's letting me know that people really want to help me, and make sure I'm doing what I have to do," Owens said.

"If we don't help them to get it here, the courtroom will do it," Young said.

At Franklin Square, Genevive's school year is off to a good start.

"I love the love, the careness (sic), and the kindness," Genevive said.

Added Patton: "They have many issues to worry about, so why not help them to get to school and make this side of the door sill a better place for them?"

A national analysis found that half of the students who are chronically absent are concentrated in 4 percent of school districts, and tend to follow poverty.

Educators know that attending school matters the most for the most vulnerable students, which is why they are working so hard to keep them coming back every day.

Article Source: <http://amp.wbalTV.com/article/school-goes-to-great-lengths-to-combat-chronic-absenteeism/13439919>

