

Schools Crack Down as More Students Cut Class

New approaches aim to reverse rise in chronic absenteeism, from prizes for good attendance to laundry rooms for students who lack clean clothes

The growing problem of children skipping school has districts across the country experimenting with solutions, from punishments to rewards.

Educators are divided about what approach works. Students who miss school are more likely to fall behind and are at greater risk of dropping out. Paterson Public Schools in New Jersey and other districts are sending specialists into homes to determine if hardships—such as not having clean clothes—are keeping students from showing up.

Districts in Washington state and Arkansas have set up truancy boards with students, parents, community members and mental-health professionals who interview students to find out why they are no-shows. Dothan City Schools in Alabama is withdrawing habitually truant students and charging their parents a re-enrollment fee.

For perks, districts in Texas, Florida and elsewhere are raffling off cars, televisions and gift cards for perfect attendance. Students in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District get robocall reminders to wake up and go to school by members of the Cleveland Browns football team.

For the first time this school year, some states will use chronic absences to help identify schools in need of improvement under the Every Student Succeeds Act, enacted in 2015.

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High absentee rates could result in lower ratings for schools and districts—and less funding based on attendance.

Photo: Maddie McGarvey for The Wall Street Journal

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on attendance. Thirty-six states and the District of Columbia included chronic absenteeism as a measure—ment in the new accountability standards under the law, according to FutureEd, a think tank at Georgetown University.

About 16% of students, or nearly 8 million, were considered chronically absent for missing at least 15 days for any reason in the 2015–16 school year, the latest available data from the U.S. Education Department shows. That's up 12% from about 7 million in 2013–14, while the student population rose only 1.1% over that period. Some education officials say an upward trend continues in their states.

D.C. and Maryland had the highest percentages of students considered chronically absent, at about 31% and 29%, respectively. North Dakota had the lowest rate at 9.5%.

In Dothan City Schools in Alabama, students with 10 unexcused absences will be withdrawn from school, starting this school year. Their parents will need to pay \$25 to re-enroll them.

“We've got to get their attention somehow,” said Scott Faulk, director of safety, security and attendance for Dothan schools.

At West Side High School in Newark, N.J., Principal Akbar Cook sought to build a laundry room for students. “Kids were being bullied because they didn't have clean clothes,” he said.

Continued on page 2

Mr. Cook got a \$20,000 grant from a foundation affiliated with energy company Public Service Enterprise Group Inc. in Newark and the laundry opens this fall. Mr. Cook got the idea after a girl was combative when security tried to check her bag as she came into the school. She was homeless and didn't want anyone to see dirty clothes in her bag, he said.

Dozens of other schools also have laundry rooms to help improve attendance. Whirlpool Corp. provides washers and dryers in 58 schools.

States typically fund school districts based on attendance, so school officials worry about losing money due to absent students.

The Fort Worth Independent School District in Texas is trying to grab the attention of chronically absent students with a \$1.5 million "student attendance incentive fund" to be shared among schools. Schools determine how to use it to improve attendance, which Texas factors into funding for school districts. One school uses the incentive fund for weekly drawings for students with perfect attendance, for prizes such as Beats headphones, televisions, mini refrigerators, school gear and cases of Cheetos. District officials say it's too early to tell if the incentive fund will pay off.

Greene County Career Center, a high school in Xenia, Ohio, dispatches a truancy interventionist to meet with students at home or in school to determine why they are missing classes. "She has gone to work sites before, if she knows a kid is working," said Jenny Adkins, the school's supervisor of student services.

In Washoe County School District in Reno, Nev., students with perfect attendance and good behavior can enter a drawing to win a 2019 Honda Fit at the end of the school year.

Studies are mixed on the effectiveness of incentives. Some researchers found they were more likely to work when schools addressed underlying barriers contributing to absences. Others found that incentives could result in students relying on them as a motivation to attend school, and backsliding when they aren't in place.

Magda Karina Vargas has donated pizza and gifts to her daughter's fourth grade class at Ellen Ochoa Learning Center in Cudahy, Calif., and believes such incentives help. Ms. Vargas, whose daughter has had perfect attendance since kindergarten, is part of a parent group advising parents on getting their children to school. "They should be here learning," she said in Spanish through a translator at the school.

Todd Rogers, a professor of public policy at Harvard University who has studied chronic absenteeism in schools, said "there is no single solution."

Mailing personalized letters to parents to let them know how many absences their children have accumulated, and how they stack up to peers, has worked, according to research by Mr. Rogers and Avi Feller, an assistant professor of public policy and statistics at the University of California, Berkeley. The children of targeted parents reduced chronic absenteeism by 10%, as compared with a control group that didn't get such letters.

Hedy Chang, executive director of Attendance Works, an advocacy group focused on improving attendance, said attendance milestones should be celebrated more frequently, not just at the end of the school year.

"You want small increments, to motivate," Ms. Chang said.

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