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As Student Absenteeism Rises, a Charter School Fights Back

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The corridors were calm and the classrooms humming at the Chicago Talent Development Charter High School, but Kirby Callam, the school's chief executive, was focused on one missing honor student. On a sunny March morning, that 15-year-old was chalking up yet another unexcused absence and falling further behind in his accelerated coursework.

As Mr. Callam looked at his laptop, which is loaded with software designed to track the attendance of each of the high school's 200 students, he said the student had only an 11 percent attendance rate during the last two weeks. Repeated phone calls to his home had not helped.

"He's a very smart kid, on the honor track, and we're not going to let go," Mr. Callam said.

The missing student is part of a worrisome trend. During the 2009-10 school year, Talent Development Charter's first year, attendance was about 90 percent. This year, it is 85 percent despite a number of anti-absenteeism initiatives — including sophisticated attendance-tracking software, encouragement from a team of young AmeriCorps members, pizza parties and twice-weekly shout-outs called power greetings that welcome students as they walk into the school.

Talent Development Charter's attendance program was developed with help from Johns Hopkins University's nationally renowned Diplomas Now initiative. While the school's attendance rate dwarfs those of others in its hardscrabble West Side neighborhood — Marshall High School recorded a 53.5 percent attendance rate for 2010 — it is still losing ground. And Talent Development Charter's mixed success raises questions about how other Chicago schools with fewer resources can attack one of the system's most serious problems.

At schools in the city and across the United States, chronic absenteeism is affecting performance, particularly among children from poor families. Absenteeism costs money for school districts, because they receive no state payments for students who are not at school. It also contributes to cycles of failure in neighborhoods already facing high rates of crime and poverty.

The connections between poverty, absenteeism and academic failure are evident, said Robert Balfanz, a research scientist at the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. A 2006 study of high schools in high poverty neighborhoods with the lowest graduation rates found that roughly two-thirds of the students missed a month or more during the

nine-month school year. A 2007 study of middle-school students in Philadelphia found that sixth graders who attended class just 80 percent of the time had only a one-in-five chance of graduating from high school.

In Chicago, the public schools system has attendance coordinators in 27 area offices and a truancy hot line, but there is no comprehensive, systemwide approach focused on high-school absenteeism. Instead, the school district is testing a program that relies on a trio of programs: one to reduce in-school violence, one to engender a calmer atmosphere in classrooms and hallways, and a third to enable safe passage from home to school. The effort to make schools feel safer has helped improve attendance even though that is not the primary aim, said Monique Bond, a spokeswoman for the schools.

In the six high schools testing the programs, attendance rose from 70 percent during a five-month period in 2009-10, to 78 percent for the same months this school year. Systemwide attendance at all public schools excluding charters during the period dropped from 88 percent to 86 percent, Ms. Bond said.

“We’ve matched kids up with these mentors who can wrap their arms around them and be there in their lives,” Ms. Bond said. “In days past, there was the good, old-fashioned truancy officer, and that may come back once again, but in a different format.”

Nonetheless, with the public schools in Chicago serving more than 400,000 students and a systemwide attendance rate of just 91.5 percent, officials find it difficult to account for the roughly 40,000 absent students on any given day. The numbers are so overwhelming that absenteeism experts suggest that Chicago and other big-city school systems should focus less on average daily attendance and more on helping chronically absent students.

“Average daily attendance rates mask chronic absenteeism,” said Hedy Chang, director of Attendance Works, which promotes attendance-improvement programs nationwide.

Absenteeism can affect children from all income levels, but Ms. Chang noted that children from poor families are chronically absent more often because of factors like frequent illnesses due to a lack of access to health care, and living in crime-ridden neighborhoods, where walking to school can be dangerous.

Unexcused absences tend to spike in middle school. That is when students develop tendencies to leave for school in the morning, only to head back home, lured by video games, TV and other attractions, after they know their parents have left for work, said Mr. Balfanz, the Johns Hopkins researcher.

Other children may be passionate about school, but may be asked to stay home to provide emergency day care for younger siblings or elderly relatives. Such absences are often documented by school officials as excused, as they are usually accompanied by a phone call from a parent.

“Many of these parents are working at jobs where if you miss a day of work, you’re fired,” Mr. Balfanz said. “A family’s need to make money to survive can become more important than sending their daughter to school.”

Even transportation can be an issue. Marquiana Rimmer, 17, won the perfect attendance award last year at Talent Development Charter.

But now that her family has moved to a suburb 10 miles away, Marquiana faces a 90-minute, twice-daily commute via two buses and a train.

“My mom wanted to get out of the city,” Marquiana said, “but I live so far away from school now, that I started missing days and being tardy all the time.”

Recent research has found that bad habits that develop from the sixth to ninth grades — absenteeism, unruly behavior and failing grades in English and math — can predict high-school dropout rates with 75 percent accuracy. That is why some attendance experts have begun encouraging school districts to get an early start on dealing with absenteeism: focusing on prevention efforts as early as preschool.

“Parents need to appreciate the importance of preschool and kindergarten attendance, and how their successful participation can determine the trajectory of their children’s education,” said Barbara Bowman, chief officer of Early Childhood Education for Chicago Public Schools.

The schools’ campaign to educate parents about the importance of preschool attendance includes efforts to enlist community members who are paid a stipend to walk children from 20 families to their neighborhood school during bad weather, which studies have found can coincide with low attendance.

For many families, the job of encouraging attendance continues until the students graduate from high school. Last week at Talent Development Charter High School, Janice Shaw arrived as she does every afternoon at 3:45 p.m. to accompany her daughter, Julia Burgess, 16, home.

“I’ve only missed one day of school this year, when I needed to get my physical to play on the basketball team,” said Julia, an honor student who hopes to attend college and major in art.

“I grew up in this neighborhood, too,” her mother said. “When I went to school, my attendance was not that good, so I want to make sure my baby gets to school every day.”