



Bridging The Gap Between Home And School

Preventing dropouts requires teachers and staff to get parents more involved

By: Kavitha Cardoza // March 16, 2012



A truant student faces both his schools attendance counselor, left, and his father at the same time when he's caught cutting school.

Stephen Liggon, the attendance counselor at Luke C. Moore High School in northeast D.C., is all set for the day ahead. He has a full tank of gas, a list of students who've missed a lot of school, and a map of the most fuel-efficient routes to their homes.

The students on Liggon's list have missed at least 10 days of school in unexcused absences. He's already called their parents and sent them registered letters. The home visit is the third course of action for students that are chronically absent.

"We do more visits than we have students," he says, laughing. "Last year we did over 300 visits and we had something like 250 kids."

When it comes to students dropping out of school, educators are most often held responsible. Yet, children spend most of their time outside school, and what happens there has serious implications for students' attendance and performance in the classroom. To combat this problem, many school districts, including DCPS, have stepped up efforts to combat truancy the old-fashioned way: by visiting students' homes and speaking with their parents.

Liggon's first stop on this rainy day is at the home of a student named Courtney.

"This first one has a dog so we have to be careful," Liggon says.

Courtney needs just half a credit more to graduate and has missed at least 25 days so far. She isn't home. At the next house, an exhausted mother says she'll tell her son Nathaniel he needs to go to school, "whenever he comes home next."

At the third house, Liggon has more luck. William Ford has missed 10 days of school and his father Bill, who's just back from work, is home. William comes down the stairs sleepy-eyed, and is greeted by Liggon.

"See, if you don't go to school, school will come to you," his father says to the boy, laughing.

Liggon begins rattling off the days that William missed last semester. The boy looks shocked.

"Am I the person who missed the most? I know I don't miss the most," William says. "This is not what I need right now."

Liggon is ready for his complaints. "This is what's called character building," the attendance counselor says.

Ford says he had no idea his son was truant. "How does this affect his graduation? He made honor roll," the father says.

Liggon explains that previous good performance won't matter if William misses too many days of school. "If a child misses 10 days, he fails the class, 15 days he can go to court," Liggon says. "25 days he fails the school year." Now it's Bill Ford's turn to look shocked. But he shakes Liggon's hand anyway, and promises to be more involved.

"I'm glad you'll be here. I'm really, really glad you'll be here," he says.

William slumps, looking defeated. "This is the worst day ever," says the boy.

For students and parents, attending school not the 'default'

Approximately 20 percent of all public school students in D.C. have missed 15 days of unexcused absences. That percentage jumps to 40 percent for 9th graders. But the unexcused absences are just one piece of the puzzle, according to DCPS Chancellor Kaya Henderson.

"If you look at excused absences, there's just not enough in-seat attendance in order to do the job, we are charged to do," she says.

Parents keep their children at home to go grocery shopping, get hair braided and babysit younger siblings. Henderson calls this a "value disconnect."

"You can schedule doctor's visits flexibly," she says. "Kids should be in school, and I don't think that's everyone's default. It's not a shared community value."

Yet the pressure falls on the schools to get students to graduate, which Henderson says is understandable.

"It's the one place that you can point to say, 'if you don't do something these children are destined for failure,'" she says. "That being said, there are a complex set of often non-school issues that are the reason why our kids are dropping out."

Convincing parents is a must

Getting parents involved is challenging. Kaleicia Beidi is a school counselor at Spingarn High School in Northeast D.C. through the nonprofit Communities in Schools. Before the beginning of this school year, she knocked on doors to personally invite parents to the first PTA meeting. Beidi sent out flyers, made phone calls. She even told them dinner would be served.

"We have 494 parents and only 10 showed up," Beidi says.

Deon Toon, another D.C. counselor who tries to get parents more engaged, says parents react in a variety of ways, and it's not always positive.

"You get the cussing, yelling, parents who say 'you're lying on my kid.' Or the, 'when we get home we're going to have a talk' and you know that's not going to happen," she says. "Or you get those that just give up. They don't have solutions; they don't have questions anymore. They're so tired."

Source: D.C. Deputy Mayor for Education

Don Hense, chairman of Friendship Public Charter Schools in D.C., says the best way for schools to dramatically increase graduation rates is to build a strong relationship with parents, many of whom had their own negative experiences as students.

"We have to face the fact we're working with parents who are significantly disenfranchised and we need to find a way to bring them back into the process," he says.

Sometimes, that means going significantly beyond the traditional scope of school outreach. Some of Friendship's charter schools have classes to teach parents how to be more effective. One example: reminding parents that children learn by asking questions.

"And in far too many households, you hear, 'sit down, shut up.' Well if you're telling the kids, 'sit down shut up' all the time, you are closing down the learning process," he says. "Children need to talk, they need to say, 'why is this mommy,' that's how they learn."

Social workers step in to work on solutions

Sometimes, the issues are just too complex for schools to address, and some nonprofits have stepped in to help. The Columbia Heights/Shaw Family Support Collaborative in Northwest D.C. helps families deal with problems that can affect a child's performance in school such as housing, medical help and food.

Penny Griffith, the group's facilitator, believes families have to figure out answers for themselves and that sometimes, they need some breathing room. She often hosts listening sessions with students who have dropped out or are in danger of dropping out; their parents, and sometimes coaches, pastors, or lawyers often attend.

Right now she's in her tiny office, holding a group conference with 19-year-old Josue Martinez, his 16-year-old girlfriend Jasmine Sousa, and both their families. Both Josue and Jasmine have dropped out of school, and she's now two months pregnant.

"At the end of this meeting today, no matter how long it takes, what do you want to leave here with?" Griffith says, to start the meeting off.

This five-hour session is messy, complicated and emotional.

"I'm treating her daughter good, I'm trying to get her to go back to school," Josue says of Jasmine's mother. "We're trying our best to get along with her family, but they're not trying to do the same."

Both families have a long list of grievances, including whose decision it was to get pregnant and who needed to say they were sorry.

"My mother keeps telling me, 'he forced me to go to his house,'" Jasmine says, in tears. "I keep telling her that's not true. My mother is just hard headed." Jasmine walks out of the meeting several times when things get heated.

In the end, Josue and Jasmine say they will enroll in GED programs. But it's going to be a challenge for the staff and these young people. Questions from Griffith reveal that neither Josue nor Jasmine knows how to go about getting a GED certificate.

Addressing dropouts really does take a village

It's these complicated home situations that are often too much for schools to take on, says Robert Balfanz, an expert on dropouts with Johns Hopkins University. But responsibility for these

students cannot stop at the school door. Balfanz believes each teenager who drops out represents a step backwards for the student, their family, and also the whole community.

"Schools at some level always have the next wave of students," he says. "But the community has that recurring cost of kids dropping out with really no chance of employment."

That's why the community has to be involved, Balfanz says.