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Delaware County school districts battle chronic absenteeism

“It’s as if the parents have lowered the threshold of sending their kids to school.”



Classroom webstock. Administrators have been battling truancy with the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. The numbers in many district are two to three times higher than pre-pandemic and school officials are working to bring kids back to school. (TNS)



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Chronic student absenteeism, much of it as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, is still impacting school districts, both nationally and in Delaware County.

Kelli Mullany, the director of pupil services for Ridley School District who has been handling student attendance for the past 30 years, said there has always been attendance issues for some students but since the pandemic, things have changed.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Kelli Mullany is director of pupil services for the Ridley School District. Above, in 2020 (DAILY TIMES)

“Before COVID it was basic needs such as transportation ... since the pandemic it’s as if the parents have lowered the threshold of sending their kids to school. They rationalize keeping them home,” Mullany said. “A cough keeps them home.”

Chronic absenteeism is a student who misses 10% or more of the school year. In Pennsylvania the school year is 180 days. By mid-February and many schools have already been in session 100 days.

According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, chronic school absence nationally nearly doubled, rising from 16% before the pandemic to nearly 30% in 2021-22 school year, the latest year for which the data is available.

‘Negative outcomes’

Dr. Brian Ursone who holds the same position in Upper Darby School District agreed, and said the pandemic effects attendance in his district in a number of ways.

He noted that students are still getting the virus, and when they do, the required days a student has to stay home after contacting the virus stretches the absence.

Ursone said over 1 million students’ nationwide lost grandparents to the virus and more than 200,000 lost a primary caregiver. These are the people who would get the kids out the door to school.



Dr. Brian Ursone, director of Pupil Services in the Upper Darby School District.
(YOUTUBE SCREENSHOT)

He also cited an increase in student anxiety along with a decrease in some students to connect with peers and some kids struggles to connect with learning.

Ursone noted both Upper Darby and the state as a whole had a 2% decrease in attendance from the 2018-19 school year to the 2021-22 year for average daily attendance.

“Children that miss more than 10% of the school year have negative outcomes. That is what the data suggests They fall behind their peers academically in math and reading and writing and socially,” Ursone said. “It doesn’t matter if they are getting notes for it or not.”

When compared to similar school districts in counties surrounding Philadelphia who have economically disadvantaged populations in excess of 50% of the total student population, Upper Darby is outperforming others in that group, Ursone said.



MEDIANEWS GROUP FILE PHOTO

Upper Darby High School.

Chronic absence rates in Delaware County districts for 2020-22 range from a high of 57.7% in the Chester Upland School District to a low of 3.6% in Marple Newtown School District. Upper Darby had 22.8%.

Those statistics were gathered by the nonprofit Attendance Works from the Department of Education and census records.

Celebrating attendance

One way Upper Darby has addressed the problem is by making January attendance awareness month.

September is Attendance Awareness Month nationally but officials in Upper Darby felt January was a good time to remind students and parents halfway through the school year about the importance of attending school.

At weekly attendance meetings in each building, staff look at student data, reviews and discusses specific students to determine strategies.

An important part of the districts efforts is engaging parents through emails, phone calls, letters in which they stress the importance of attending schools to parents.

They also ask teams to conduct home visits. Those teams include a social worker.

Ridley also utilizes teams of social workers and administrators to track absenteeism. Every Ridley school has an attendance team that includes the principal, social workers and Mullany. They meet every week and run reports to see who has missed more than 10%.



MEDIANEWS GROUP FILE PHOTO,

Ridley High School.

For students with high absenteeism, they hold a youth aid panel where the school principal, social workers and Mullany work to engage and communicate with the parents and students to find the issue that is keeping them out of school.

She said this is often when they learn of mental health and anxiety issues. At that point she calls a counselor rather than throwing out fines.

They set up an attendance improvement plan and work with parents to find problem and work as a team to solve a problem.

It may be transportation or day care or evening clothing issues.

At the high school level the students are brought into the meetings.

“Those meetings are really helpful,” Mullany said.

Mullany said another problem they encounter is families taking vacation during school year. She said one school just received word that one child would be out for two weeks for a trip to New York City.

Upper Darby Superintendent Dr. Dan McGarry said the pandemic created a comfort level not to go to school and one way they are trying to change this attitude is a grassroots effort and home visits.

“Trying to encourage grassroots efforts to get kids to come back into schools,” he said.



MEDIANEWS GROUP FILE PHOTO

Dr. Dan McGarry, Upper Darby School District superintendent. (COURTESY PHOTO)

Upper Darby is also attacking the issue with both mental health supports and academic supports.

Every building has a school counselor and social worker and at the middle school level they have converted most lead teacher positions into student specialists and have increased the number of counselors at the high school.

In addition one social worker has the sole job is to focus on students who are experiencing housing instability or are in the foster care system.

Much help available

Both districts partner with the nonprofit Child Guidance Resource Center for one on one, small group counseling and conflict resolution.

In Upper Darby, one social worker's sole job is to focus on students who are experiencing housing instability or are in the foster care system.

They also offer student assistance programs for students who may need mental health, drug or alcohol support.

Ursone said the district is offering academic supports, including tutoring homework help line, math and reading support, after school homework club, software program and the three different learning programs: in-person, synchronous and asynchronous for students who may have special issues.

McGarry said there has been a recent change in the use of data in evaluating schools. A key requirement is attendance from day 1 to 90 in evaluating schools, which increases the need to have kids in school.

McGarry said much of the problem is high school students who don't want to come to school but are still of the compulsory age, which is now 18.

"We're trying to support and bring those kids in," he said.

He also said the district has hundreds of students changing their status in the district each year, many of them moving out of the area often to other countries.

He noted it is important to form relationships with the families that address the issue.

The truant officers

Ursone confirmed Upper Darby School District, as well as other nearby districts, rely on truant officers to require parents and guardians to get their children in school.

He did not have a current number of citations issued, however a recent review of the county court record system confirmed numerous school districts have cited guardians for violation of compulsory school attendance requirements by students of compulsory age.

In Ridley, they also have a truant officer who visits homes.

Mullany said the district also works closely with District Judge George Dawson, and once a month schedule cases before him. The number of cases varies month to month.



Students struggle when the absentee rate is 10% and higher, and Delaware County district have instituted programs and hired counselors to turn the tide of rampant absenteeism. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)

Mullany said for those who do reach court, Dawson works with high-school age students to mentor them and track their progress.

One tactic he also resorts to for those over 16 is to suspend the driver's licenses if they are missing school.

That gets their attention, Mullany said, but the best solution is solving the issues before they reach court.

"We have learned punitive is not the way to go," Mullany said. "If we can engage them in the classroom, we have found doing more positive is more effective."

They also help parents learn how the use of incentives can be effective.

She said the problem at Ridley is in all grades but the issues may vary.

In the lower grades, parents may be keeping students home. At the high school level, the students are making the decision themselves. Again, they work to have the student connect with multiple adults in the building.

For incoming kindergarten students, Ridley stresses to the parents the importance of attending school.

Mullany said every family is unique, but the bottom line is kids need to be in school.

“They need to get kids to school,” she said. “We’re constantly stressing the importance of being in school.”

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