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Jefferson County teachers union questions high student absences at failing schools

The Jefferson County Teachers Association is calling on the Louisville mayor and school district to jointly investigate the high student-absentee rate at some of the district's most troubled schools.

One-fourth of students attending 13 persistently low-achieving schools missed more than 20 days of class during the 2010-11 academic year, according to figures released by Jefferson County Public Schools.

The schools, labeled by the state as persistently low achieving, have been forced to undergo staffing overhauls because of chronically low math and reading scores on statewide tests.

The teacher's union has asked Mayor Greg Fischer to form a joint task force with the district to examine why those schools' absence rates are so high.

"These numbers are staggering," association president Brent McKim said. "While student attendance is the not the sole reason for low test scores at the PLA schools, it certainly is a major contributing factor. Students that are absent for more

than a month of class are behind in their studies, and often hold the rest of the class back while they try to catch up."

McKim said his organization is "calling on the mayor to work with Superintendent Donna Hargens to convene to understand the problem and come up with recommendations or solutions."

"This is a communitywide crisis that calls for a communitywide task force," he said.

Hargens said she is "open to hearing about different strategies" on how the district can help improve student attendance.

District officials acknowledge the schools have absence problems, but they say absentee rates have improved for many over the past three years.

McKim said according to data provided by the district, 38.2 percent of students at Valley High School missed more than 20 days — or about one month — of class during the 2010-11 school year.

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At Western High School, 34.1 percent of students missed more than 20 days, and at Waggener High School, 26.4 percent of students missed at least that much time.

Valley High principal Gary Hurt said Wednesday he is "well aware" of the program and that he and his staff have been working on ways to improve.

"We implemented a truancy-diversion program where an actual judge comes in here and meets with parents and students with truancy issues," Hurt said. "We are trying to expand the number of programs we offer so we can better connect our kids to school. We've expanded the number of after-school clubs, and we are encouraging participation in extracurricular activities."

Hurt said he also welcomes the idea of getting the community involved in helping combat the problem.

"It takes more than a school to address the many needs of children," he said. "We can't do it alone."

Fischer said the city is "willing and ready" to work with JCPS on "any improvement ideas."

"Every child deserves a world-class education," Fischer said in a statement. "Attendance is but one of many complex issues that affect student achievement. It's up to the entire community to build a world-class school system."

The district works with Jefferson County

Attorney Mike O'Connell to address truancy issues at the elementary level, said Bill Patteson, a spokesman for O'Connell.

"Our effort is aimed on elem students because we are trying to disrupt the formation of a bad habit and to hold parents accountable for their child's attendance," he said. "At that young age, children rely on their parents or guardians to make sure they are in school."

Patteson said Jefferson Family Court Judge Joan Byer has a truancy program for older students. Byer could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

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Chronic absences

Jefferson County's persistently low-achieving schools have a higher percentages of students who missed 20 or more days of school during the 2010-11 school year, according to data from Jefferson County Public Schools.

School	% students with 20+ absences
Frost Middle	22%
Knight Middle	14%
Western Middle	13%
Fern Creek High	16%
Southern High	20%
Valley High	38%
Waggener High	26%
Fairdale High	26%
Seneca High	21%
Western High	34%
Doss High	25%
Iroquois High	28%
Shawnee High	28%
All PLA schools	24%
All JCPS middle/high	15%

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