

# Absent pupils

The Jefferson County Teachers Association is right to express alarm at the high rate of student absenteeism at some of the community's most troubled schools.

Indeed, some of the numbers are jaw-dropping. Overall, about one-fourth of students attending 13 schools identified by the state as persistently low-achieving missed at least 20 days of classes during the 2010-11 school year. On the academic calendar, that equates to being absent for an entire month or longer. The percentage of students with 20 or more missed days ranged from 38 at Valley High School to 13 at Western Middle School.

The figures, which reflect JCPS data, probably shouldn't come as a surprise. Students at persistently low-achieving schools often come from households that are struggling with problems such as financial stress, troubled relationships and low educational attainment. Such circumstances can be significant obstacles to student achievement, which in turn may discourage attendance.

Predictably, there is some grumbling on the Internet that the JCTA is building an excuse in case the next round of student testing results show slippage. But that isn't fair —

actually, many teachers and staff believe the results will show improvement — and in any case it's irrelevant. How can teachers be expected to help students who aren't in school? Moreover, as JCTA president Brent McKim notes, students who are frequently absent often hold the rest of their class back as they struggle to catch up.

Both student achievement and attendance are complex issues. Obviously, if there were simple answers, they would have been adopted long ago.

What is needed is an intense effort by the district and the community to better understand the reasons for high absenteeism and to adopt ideas to mitigate the problem.

In that vein, while it is good that the new JCPS superintendent, Donna Hargens, says she is "open to hearing about different strategies" to improve attendance, she will need to be more than a good listener. The district needs a superintendent who devises and implements creative approaches.

There is clearly also a role for the courts and law-enforcement to enforce truancy laws.

Even in a district that is deeply divided on many school issues, there should be agreement that a healthy child should be in class every day.