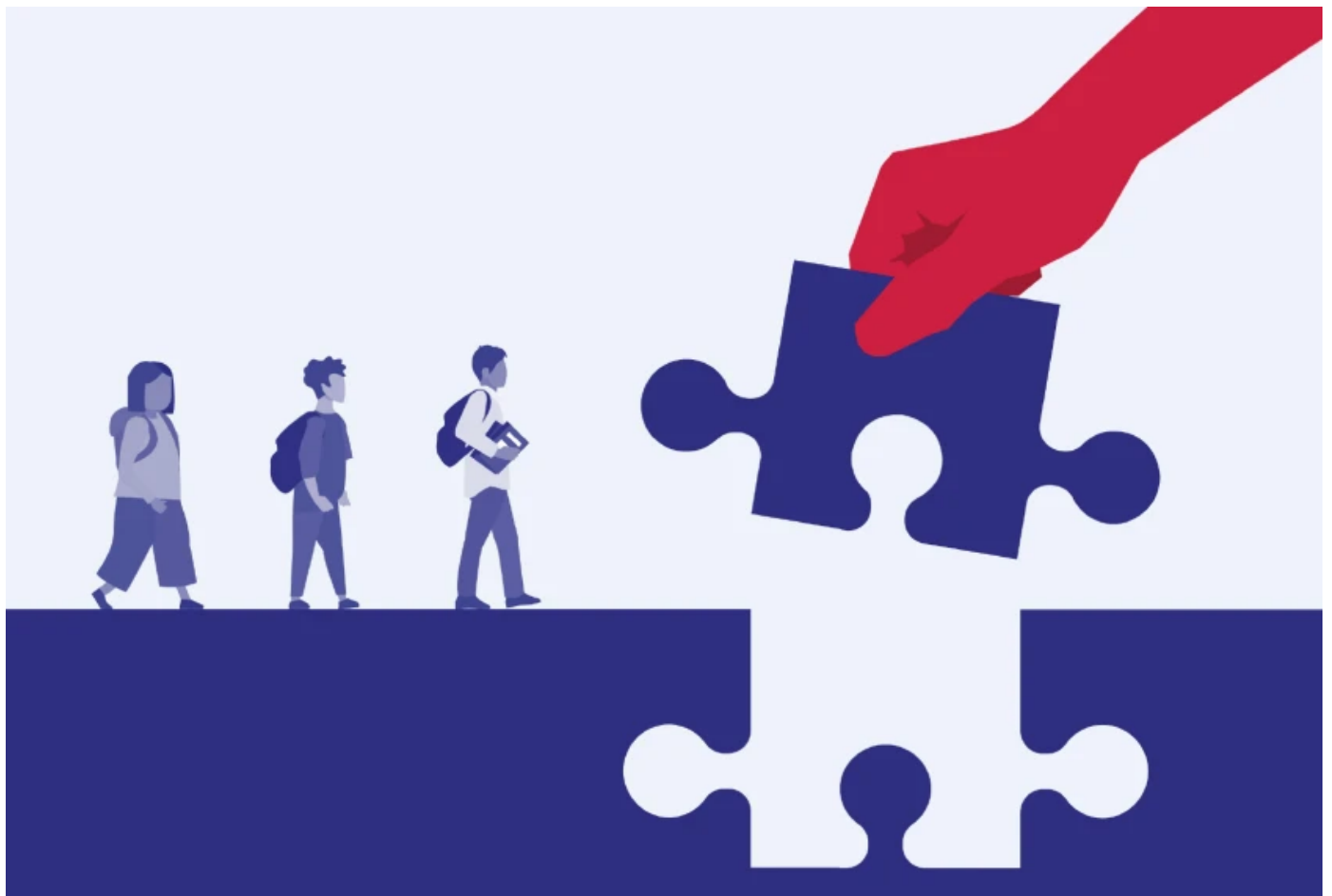


How an Elementary School Principal Slashed Chronic Absenteeism



By Denisa R. Superville — May 22, 2023

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West Seaford Elementary School in Seaford, Del., had struggled with moderate chronic absenteeism leading up to the pandemic. Then, in 2020-21, fueled by the pandemic and remote learning, the rate of chronic absenteeism at the K-2 school shot up to 22 percent.

By last year, chronic absenteeism—typically defined as a student missing school for at least 10 percent of the school year—had plummeted to 9 percent, just below pre-pandemic levels.

There was a significant drop among Black students, who comprise nearly 40 percent of those enrolled, and whose rate fell to 7 percent in 2022 from 30 percent the previous year. A similar trend held for Hispanic students, whose chronic absenteeism rate declined from 26 percent to 10 percent.

How did the school make it happen?

Laura Schneider, West Seaford's principal since 2017, developed a multi-pronged approach that included looking for warning signs as early as September, creating attendance teams to work with select students, developing a strong communication plan for parents, and removing barriers students faced getting to school.



Laura Schneider, principal, West Seaford Elementary School in Seaford, Del.

Here's how Schneider and her staff approached the problem.

1. Communicate consistently with parents across several forums

Schneider and her team knew it was critical to enlist parents, so they started talking to them about the importance of daily attendance at registration—even before their children started kindergarten.

Parents also received important reminders and facts about all things related to kindergarten—including what the research said about the connection between attendance and academic performance—at orientation.

The school signed up the parents of incoming students for West Seaford’s ClassDojo, the social media platform the school uses, to give them an inside look at teaching and learning that was taking place. Teachers posted lessons and classroom activities on the platform. About 90 percent of the school’s parents use ClassDojo.

Parents were able to see “that learning happens every day and it keeps moving. Whether your kid is here or not, that curriculum keeps moving,” said Jordan Forston, the school’s counselor.

School staff also sent “myth busters” home to parents—bite-size facts about attendance and how frequent absences affect learning—to dispel commonly held beliefs about attendance. A big myth to be busted: that attendance only matters in the older grades.

Attendance discussions were also added to parent-teacher conferences last year.

“Parent-teacher conference is not just, ‘Here is how your kid is doing academically;’ we also connect it to absences,” Forston said. “They see it as, ‘Oh, it’s just one day.’ But when you look at a calendar view of their attendance for the whole year, it would be littered with early dismissals, and tardiness, and days off. A lot of it is showing the parents that so that they can see the holes.”

Parents don’t always get the full picture without this communication, he said.

“It catches up with them eventually, where those holes create huge gaps in their education and they can’t keep up with the rest of their class,” Forston said.

2. Review data for early-warning signs:

Schneider and her team knew that students who were absent in September were likely to continue that pattern throughout the year. They didn’t wait for that to happen. They started looking for trends in absences that month and then followed up with parents.

The seven-member attendance team's data meetings focused on school-level attendance, as well as subgroup and grade-level attendance. Twice a month, they looked for students who are near, at, or past the number of absences that would put them in the chronically absent bucket. Students were placed in tiers based on how often they were absent. The school then deployed support.

Teachers reached out to parents and families the day the child missed school, "Just to say, 'Hey, I noticed that so and so isn't here today. Is everything OK?'" and let them know that we're looking out for them," Schneider said.

Early check-ins allowed staff to find the students who needed just a little bit of help to get to school.

Forston gave the example of a student whose older sibling had attended West Seaford and had had a good attendance record. So alarm bells started to go off when the younger student missed one day, then another.

Teachers reached out to the family and discovered that the family had been living in a hotel and that the children's mother had been unable to get them to school in the morning.

For the rest of that week, Forston and a counselor brought the family breakfast and took the children to school in the mornings, while their mother picked them up in the afternoons. By the next week, the district had set up alternative transportation through the federally funded McKinney-Vento program for homeless students.

"Typically a problem like that might go unnoticed for a much longer period of time," Schneider said. "But because we are reaching out right away, we were able to address that quickly and get the child support, where otherwise it could have been weeks before someone even noticed that there was an issue."

3. Create a multi-tiered system of support

Like schools do for academics, Schneider developed a multi-tiered system of support for students who were missing school.

Students at the highest risk of being absent, beginning in Tier 2, for example, were assigned a check-in mentor, who would look out for them in the morning and serve as an additional

liaison between the school and parents, Schneider said.

That's how they found out that one of their students who had been absent had been staying at a Ronald McDonald House about two and a half hours away in Philadelphia. (Seaford is nearly equidistant from Washington and Philadelphia.) The child's mother had been receiving medical treatment for postpartum complications, Forston said.

The school was quickly able to set up remote learning for the student, allowing them to stay on track and keep up with their peers while the family was out of the state, Forston said.

Regular communication with the family also meant that the school stepped up quickly when the student returned to Delaware, ensuring that they had district-provided transportation ready to pick up and drop them off at school, Forston said.

The support went beyond transportation and included buying essentials for the student—from clothing to shoes to food.

“It's like a one-stop shop at West Seaford. When we find out what the issues are with the attendance, we connect with local resources, and resources within our school, and staff resources. We try to take all the excuses off the plate and hear the families out so that we can make sure they are here at school learning.”

4. Bake the philosophy into the system

Schneider and team have documented their procedures to ensure that new staff members understand the emphasis on preventing chronic absenteeism. Responsibilities are delegated among staff members. On-boarding materials help new hires get up to speed.

“I think right now it's ingrained in the teachers,” Schneider said. “It's part of what they do every morning. They do check to see if kids are missing. It might have seemed like a big lift in the beginning to shoot a message for every kid that's absent, every day. But now it's just become part of what we do here.”

“It's just become habit,” she added.

5. Be open to change

While the systems are working, Schneider said she and her team are constantly looking for ways to improve. The list of supports the school provides is not a finished document, and she'd also like to fine-tune the attendance database to color-code the various reasons why students are absent. That will allow her to spot trends—and develop targeted responses—even earlier, she said.

She's also thinking about ways to deepen bonds between students and staff. One idea is to create a "school family model," where every staff member would "adopt" a group of students. The staff of about 50 would be assigned about eight students each, with whom they'll meet about twice a month for fun and learning activities. They'd also sit together during school assemblies and stay together as a family during the students' time at West Seaford.

Schneider encourages other principals to start tackling chronic absenteeism early.

"Don't wait until it becomes a problem," she said.

It takes a group effort to create—and maintain—a successful campaign, Forston said. "It can't just be one person," he said. "Because everybody is going to see something different."

But the key message is that students must be in class to learn, Schneider said.

"There is a lot out there about the 'science of reading' and which curriculum to pick. But the bottom line is that it doesn't matter which curriculum you choose if your classroom seats are empty and the students aren't showing up consistently," Schneider said. "So here at West [Seaford], we would dare to say that if a school is experiencing high or extreme level of chronic absences, that getting kids to school every day should be the school's most important initiative."