

BRIGHT SPOTS

School Attendance



Burton Elementary School, Grand Rapids, MI

Each week, Principal Ana Aleman-Putman of Burton Elementary convenes her attendance committee to review the latest data and plan interventions for students who are missing school. She views attendance as an instructional issue. “When we increase attendance, we increase instructional time, which improves academic success.”

At Burton, chronic absenteeism, defined as missing more than 10 percent of the school year, has dropped from 23 percent in 2006 to 10 percent in 2010, a result of the cumulative effects of an eight-year, district-wide initiative. It’s no accident that third-grade reading proficiency has jumped 14 percentage points in that same period, to 85 percent.

“We ask ourselves, ‘What can we do to show the kids — and their parents — the importance of being in school?’” The answer is a combination of expectations, incentives and interventions.

Aleman-Putman and her staff are very clear that at Burton Elementary, students are expected to be in school. Many families used to take four weeks in the winter to return to their original homes outside the country. Now Burton accepts neither tardiness nor long absences. Parents who call in to say a child is sick are encouraged to bring the child to the on-campus health or dental clinic to minimize time away from the classroom. Unexcused absences trigger a phone call or home visit from Norma Lopez, the district’s family support specialist in charge of Burton and seven other schools, without whom, Aleman-Putman says, the task would be “impossible.”

Lopez has been instrumental in educating parents, students and staff on the instructional impact of attendance. “We’re not looking to prosecute students for truancy,” says Lopez. “We just want them in their seats so they can learn.”

WHO THEY ARE

464 students, Pre-K–5th

82% Hispanic, 8% African American

77% English Language Learners

96% Free and Reduced-Price Meals

WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

90% 2010 attendance (95% state average)

Chronic absenteeism:

2010 10.4%

2009 9.3% (first semester only)

2008 27.4%

2007 23.4%

CONTACT

Burton Elementary School

Grand Rapids, MI 49506

(616) 819-2262

Ana Aleman-Putman, Principal

aleman-putmana@grps.k12.mi.us

National research shows that chronic absenteeism can be a serious contributor to lagging academic performance among low-income children, who have more trouble than their more advantaged peers at making up for lost time. Attendance Works, a leading nonprofit organization focused on reducing chronic absenteeism nationwide, has recognized Burton for its work combating the problem on www.attendanceworks.org.

Sweet incentives

Burton students with perfect attendance for a month are honored as STAR (Studious, Thoughtful, Accountable and Respectful) students. They are rewarded with a STAR T-shirt and an ice-cream party, and their pictures are prominently displayed on a TV in the school lobby. At the end of this year, students with perfect attendance will celebrate at a pool party.

“By having awards that they can earn, students are motivated to make sure they get to school every day even when issues come up for their family,” says Aleman-Putman.

Whatever it takes

The attendance committee — Aleman-Putman; Assistant Principal Lisa Minnella; Lopez; Burton’s attendance secretary; a representative from the Kent School Services Network, which sponsors Burton’s attendance-boosting efforts; and others — works with a network of supports to eliminate obstacles to attendance. A single mother whose car has broken down needs to walk to the school with her small children in tow: the team gets her a fat-tire stroller. They give out laundry vouchers, gas coupons, clothing and alarm clocks, always with a message about the importance of being in school.

“It’s a true collaboration,” says Aleman-Putman. Nurses are on hand to address medical issues. Case managers dispense public assistance checks and food stamps on site, at the workplace and the school. “We’ll do whatever it takes to make sure the parents are productive and the kids are in school.”

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

- **Weekly review by attendance committee.**
- **Work with a collaborative of government and nonprofit service providers.**
- **A student incentive program.**