



BRIGHT SPOTS

HOLYOKE, MASSACHUSETTS

Young students in Holyoke, Massachusetts, were particularly fired up for school in early 2015, thanks to a contest that culminated in a roller-skating party for the class with the best attendance at each K-8 public school.

“The kids were so excited about the possibility of roller-skating that they were encouraging each other to come to school,” says Gina Roy, a Holyoke Public Schools administrator overseeing attendance work begun in 2013 by the local grade-level reading campaign known as the **Holyoke Early Literacy Initiative** (HELI).

“Attendance overall was very good. The contest had something to do with it, especially for the younger kids,” says Roy. The district-sponsored contest covered the month of March, when many students prepare for and take state assessment tests.

The contest is among the district- and schoolwide incentives developed as part of Holyoke’s work to reduce the number of students who are chronically absent — missing 10 percent or more of school — which can hamper progress to reading proficiently by the end of third grade.

Holyoke also created attendance teams at its 10 district schools, including eight K-8 schools. Each team — including a building administrator, school counselor, outreach worker and district attendance staffer — meets weekly to review attendance data, identify students at risk and reach out to their families. “We are targeting them before they become chronically absent,” says Roy.

Among 30 communities honored by the GLR Campaign as a **2014 Pacesetter**, Holyoke saw attendance for K-3 students increase by 1,887 days in 2013-2014 compared with the previous year. Chronic absence for K-5 students fell from 18 percent in April 2013 to 16 percent in April 2015. For kindergarten — which has especially high chronic absence, partly because kindergarten is not compulsory — chronic absence fell from 27 to 23 percent.

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Bright Spots showcase the work that Grade-Level Reading communities are doing to make progress on school readiness, school attendance and summer learning by 2016. They are written and produced by the Campaign. You can nominate a Bright Spot in your community by emailing Betsy Rubiner at brubiner@gradelevelreading.net.

“We’re making steady, small progress, year by year, grade by grade, across the district,” says Michael Moriarty, a former school board member who is the local GLR community lead.

“We are an urban district with a variety of challenges that impact the ability to attend school. We have a very high transient rate so you have to be able to capture who’s actually left the district. We have kids with chronic health problems and homelessness issues.”

Holyoke has benefited from resources provided by GLR Campaign Partner **Attendance Works**, including the **Count Us In** toolkit, which was distributed to principals and outreach workers; a non-punitive model **chronic absence policy** geared to grades K-3; and **attendance tracking tools** to identify students who are chronically absent or may soon be.

The attendance campaign is waged on two fronts. Districtwide work is led by HEL’s **Attending for Literacy** workgroup, which meets monthly to review data districtwide, pinpoint issues and identify strategies, plus inform and advise individual schools.

The workgroup includes school officials and a variety of community agencies. “It’s collaborative, cross-agency, with many voices adding differing things to the conversation,” says Moriarty, who co-chairs the workgroup with Roy.

On the school level, the attendance team drills down on its data and by fall can identify students at risk of chronic absence because they have already racked up several absences. “As each month goes by that becomes clearer and clearer,” says Moriarty.

Districtwide policy dictates that after a student has three unexcused absences, a letter of concern is sent to the student’s home. After five unexcused absences, the district attendance officer gets involved and the school outreach worker works to find out from a family why a student is missing school and then reports back to the attendance team.

Depending on the issue — say a transportation or bullying issue — other school staff such as the counselor or administrator may intervene. “They identify why the student is not at school and then come up with viable ways to help the parents get their child to school,” says Roy.

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