During the very cold and snowy winter of 2015, school attendance in Hartford, Connecticut, dipped, prompting new thinking by the local grade-level reading campaign. “We started to look at how weather patterns affect our attendance, which is part of identifying barriers to attendance and developing intervention strategies,” says Mario Florez, a Hartford Public Schools administrator who oversees the local GLR campaign’s effort to reduce the number of students who are chronically absent — missing 10 percent or more of school.

Launched in 2013, Hartford’s chronic absence effort — addressing an issue that can slow students’ ability to read proficiently by the end of third grade — helped earn the local GLR community a 2014 Pacesetter honor from the Campaign.

Overall during the 2014-2015 school year through May, half of Hartford’s 30 public schools serving elementary students saw chronic absence drop by at least 5 percent from the previous year. “There’s good stuff going on. Now we have to scale it up,” says Florez.

Hartford’s effort began by assessing the lay of the land differently, with help from Attendance Works, a GLR Campaign Partner (which also has produced a winter-weather messaging toolkit). Rather than look at average daily attendance — which can paint a falsely rosy picture and mask the repeatedly absent students — Hartford began focusing on chronic absence.

The discovery that chronic absence was as high as 47 percent in some elementary schools in 2012-2013 “was cause for concern,” recalls Paula Gilberto of United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut, Hartford’s GLR campaign lead. When these data were shared with city and school officials, they readily supported the chronic absence work, which was “profound, in terms of getting the attention that this needs,” says Gilberto. Having 15 GLR communities in Connecticut also helped win the governor’s buy-in.

Hartford’s effort is led by:

- The local GLR campaign’s chronic absence community team, which includes school officials, city employees and community-based organizations. Bimonthly, it reviews
districtwide attendance data for the 30 schools serving elementary students and works to update strategies.

• Hartford Public Schools' District Attendance Remediation Team, DART, which includes two district-based attendance case managers and other central office staff. Biweekly, it reviews attendance data for all 49 district schools and addresses challenges that may spur changes in district policy.

• An attendance team at each school, which includes an administrator and support staff. Monthly, it analyzes school-level data, identifies students who are chronically absent or soon to be and intervenes. At schools with 25 percent or more students who are chronically absent, the team must meet weekly.

Raising public awareness has been key. Signs about the importance of school attendance have adorned city buses and the Hartford airport’s baggage claim area. School newsletters spotlight the issue. Community activities mark Attendance Awareness Month in September. DART uses Facebook, Twitter and other social media to draw attention.

With 19 percent of Hartford’s K-3 students chronically absent, as of May 31, 2015, other measures on the horizon to improve attendance policy and procedure include:

• Increasing central office oversight and assistance to schools to ensure that they pursue a tiered intervention that provides more intensive attention and services to students who are chronically absent or at risk.

• Sending “robo-calls” (automated phone calls from the school district to the homes of absent students) earlier, before 10 a.m., rather than the more customary 11:30 a.m.

• Going beyond the robo-call to collect information about students who are frequently absent and share it with staff via the district’s online student information system. An attendance team member will try to reach an absent student’s parent and use a new questionnaire to pinpoint and address issues causing chronic absence such as illness, housing, poverty or transportation problems exacerbated by bad weather.

“It's really about identifying those high-need families and giving them that personal touch,” says Florez. “This is happening at some schools but we hope to push it out districtwide.”

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