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New state guidelines tackle chronic absenteeism rates

by Alisha Kirby

(Conn.) With rates of chronic absenteeism already dropping in Connecticut schools, Gov. Dannel Malloy has announced new guidance to help districts continue their efforts in getting every child to class every day.

The guidelines, co-released by the governor's office and the Connecticut Department of Education, provide a framework for local and regional school districts to aid in developing strategic plans and implementing interventions that reduce chronic absenteeism rates in pre-K and K-12 schools.

One of the key ways of ensuring better attendance is rooting out the underlying reasons why children don't show up, according to Malloy's office. For example, the guidelines note that students living in poverty are more likely to be chronically absent at a young age because of challenges related to unreliable transportation, a lack of access to health care or housing insecurity. And because their families often lack the resources to make up for lost time, they are also the children who are more likely to suffer academically from those missed days.

Improving and expanding bussing, making home visits and partnering with local health organizations to provide services could help address at least some of the above.

"Tackling chronic absenteeism is critical to improving outcomes for all of our students so that they receive an adequate education that prepares them to succeed in life," Malloy said in a statement. "We need to do everything we can to ensure that all students, regardless of the life circumstances into which they are born or what town or city they live in, receive a quality public education."

Research shows that, unsurprisingly, when students regularly miss school they are far less likely to achieve academically. Young children who are chronically absent are less likely than their peers to reach proficiency in reading by third grade—a common benchmark for when students stop learning to read and begin reading to learn.

And as early as sixth grade, chronic absence has been identified as an indicator that a student will later drop out from high school.

Education officials and lawmakers in Connecticut have already taken steps to improve attendance throughout the state. Chronic absenteeism—defined by the state as a missing 10 percent or more of a school year—will be used as a metric under the state’s Every Student Succeeds Act school accountability plan already submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. The plan includes the development of state-level tiered interventions to reduce chronic absenteeism.

Last year, the Connecticut State Board of Education adopted a five-year plan that includes decreasing rates of chronic absenteeism as a means to improving student outcomes. And in 2015, the Legislature passed a measure that requires district and school-level attendance teams to be established in areas where chronic absence rates are high.

Recent state data shows that the rate of chronic absenteeism dipped below 10 percent for the first time in five years after a 1 percent decrease between the 2014-15 and 2015-16 school years. Attendance gains were seen among all subgroups in many districts across the state.

Sustaining that momentum will require that districts maintain a district attendance review team to routinely collect, analyze and utilize data to inform action, according to the guidance. That team should also promote shared accountability and continuous improvement among schools.

Individual school sites, meanwhile, must monitor attendance trends and develop school-wide attendance strategies targeting negative trends or promoting positive ones.

“Addressing absenteeism is part of ensuring the highest-quality learning environments for our students—and it’s key to narrowing the achievement gap,” Lt. Gov. Nancy Wyman said. “Connecticut has made historic investments in education over the past five years, test scores are up, and graduation rates are up. Underpinned by strong policy and Connecticut’s committed educators, this guide will help us build on that progress.”