

## **Ways to Connect to School and Increase Student Attendance**

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***Key words:*** 3-8 keywords.

Attendance, Student/Family Engagement, School Support Teams

**Funding Sources:**

The funding for the project includes Manchester School District (MSD) staff, school social workers.

**Project Cost and Budget Narrative:**

No additional funds were needed for the project. The project was implemented with school district employees.

**Project Description:**

This is an outreach collaboration with schools to improve attendance and school community connection. The project looks at ways the school district can support students to increase attendance and implement strategies to support all families regarding the importance of education and attendance. Some of the concepts explored and analyzed were:

- Chronic school absenteeism among school age children who witness neighborhood violence.
- How trauma in students can contribute to lack of school attendance.
- Children who live with family members using substances have multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

The school district looked at these types of experiences and their possible effects on students' school attendance. The MSD staff were trained to identify the social causes of behaviors that led to poor attendance in school. Discussion about these factors and accommodations to help students cope were reviewed in a collaborative fashion and possible solutions were shared with district support staff.

**Staffing Pattern:****Staff Supporting Students**

- The school social worker was the team leader in implementation of National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) tools and principals. She also supported individual and family needs during the project.
- Administration/principals assisted in connection with students, examined attendance data, and supported students through varied schedules/individual needs.
- Attendance staff connected with students, families, and ongoing collaboration.
- Administrative assistants helped to develop and implement tracking data and explored ways to improve this process.

**Population Served:**

The project served a large urban school district in NH that targeted middle school and high school students in grades six through twelve.

**Project Origination:**

The project idea originated while attending several NDPC conferences. The concept and guiding principle was that school collaboration with the community makes a difference in student attendance and increases school connection. As a school social worker, I saw the importance of attendance as well as ways to take the National Dropout Strategies and implement them into practice with school climate and culture.

**Issues Addressed:**

- Student attendance; exploration of attendance concerns; barriers to school attendance.
- Support for students and families by exploring barriers to school attendance, family concerns, cultural views of education, and socioeconomic barriers.
- Ideas to increase positive school culture by collaboration with teachers, support staff, administration, parents and students.

**Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:**

- Increase understanding of student attendance and engagement from the point of view of the students and families.
- Analyze data collected from attendance records and outreach attempts by the school staff via letters, phone calls, and email communication.
- Improve student attendance rates with consistent outreach and student/family engagement.
- Explore new ways to look at student and family engagement. Begin with teacher outreach, community collaboration, and look at related factors (language, culture considerations, and understanding of family culture).

**Strategies and/or Interventions of the Project:**

Staff members from each school received training and participated in facilitated discussions. The project information was presented by the school social worker via two PowerPoint presentations. During the presentation, early engagement with the families and community connection techniques were discussed. Collaborative discussions by the staff focused on finding effective strategies to develop and implement a welcoming school culture and climate.

**Results (Outcomes and Achievements):**

- Developed a greater understanding of ways to improve student and family engagement.
- The school district modified policies to address cultural awareness, language concerns, and other challenges that families face, which affect student attendance in school.
- Identify and implement new ways to help families see the connection between attendance, graduation, and higher education.

**Project Timeline:**

This project started in the fall of 2019 and was scheduled to be completed by 2020. The effect of the pandemic on school scheduling delayed completion until June of 2021.

**Outcomes Related to School Completion, Dropout Prevention, and/or Graduation Rates:**

Teachers, social workers, and counselors learned the importance of implementation of alternative learning plans for students, early engagement, and relationship building all through the lens of systemic change including:

- Support for families and students can better help them understand how attendance may affect student dropout rates.
- Developed a greater understanding of ways to improve student and family engagement.
- School district goals, in collaboration with NDPC Strategies, were explored and aligned with goals from the New Hampshire Department of Education.

**Special Conditions, Expertise, and/or Skills Required to Carry Out Project:**

The school social worker reviewed a variety of dropout prevention skills. These included understanding family engagement, teaching tools, supporting teachers with classroom engagement, safe learning environments, and professional development to support teachers to encourage students to attend school and realize the importance of school attendance in relation to graduation rates.

**Current Status of Project:**

There are ongoing implementation outreach efforts to improve student attendance, increase engagement, and work with other community providers. Policy changes will be explored in the future at the district level.

**Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:**

I worked with other school personnel, teachers, administration, interns, and social workers to implement ways to connect with families and students to increase attendance rates and decrease dropout numbers. I provided training, support, attendance meetings, attendance plans, and provided National Dropout Center Prevention newsletters and materials.

**Lessons Learned:**

There is a need to implement and continue to support others in learning the NDPC Principles. This includes, but is not limited to system changes, exploring community resources, collaboration with college and career approaches, and most importantly looking at relationship building and collaboration.

**Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project:**

Continue to implement practices within the school district to increase understanding of the National Dropout Prevention Center's 15 Effective Strategies impact on all grades. While attending the National Dropout Prevention Conference over three years ago, I immediately thought of ways to utilize what I was learning and how to implement the strategies in my school district. After attending the conference, I immediately knew I wanted to become a National Dropout Prevention Specialist. The challenges include implementing innovative ideas for teachers to think creatively and begin establishing ways to engage students and the 15 strategies at the middle and high school levels. I have learned to collaborate with other social workers and to explain, in more detail, ways to support all students and families.