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Absenteeism Was a Big Problem in This District. A New Strategy Is Getting Results

By Madeline Will — February 05, 2024 ⌚ 11 min read

Sharon Bradley, the director of student, family, and community services for the Plano, Texas, school district listens to staff members on a special team that focuses on helping students and their families address a range of challenges that may get in the way of regular attendance and engagement at school.

— Shelby Tauber for Education Week

Sharon Bradley

Recognized for Leadership in Parent/Family/Community Engagement

Expertise:

Parent/Family/Community Engagement

Position:

Director of Family and Social Services

Success District:

Plano Independent School District, Plano, Texas

Year:

2024

Sharon Bradley remembers how it felt to miss school for reasons outside her control.

As a young girl in Mississippi, she loved school. She had perfect attendance most years. Then, in middle school, her mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia.

“There were days where she did not want me to go to school because she felt as if someone was going to hurt me,” she said. “It flipped from her taking care of me to I took care of her.”

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Madeline Will, February 5, 2024 • 5 min read

By the time she was in high school, her mom was unable to work. Her father was working, but money was tight. Bradley took on shifts at both Subway and Walmart to help pay the bills, which left her so exhausted that at times she would miss school or arrive late to catch up on sleep.

The experience shaped her approach to her work as the director of family and social services for the Plano Independent school district, located a half hour from Dallas. In that role, she has revamped the way the nearly 50,000-student district handles chronic absenteeism and truancy. Instead of taking a punitive approach to unexcused absences, district officials now work to identify the root causes—and then find solutions to get those students back to school.

Growing up, “there were times when it was really hard, but I had teachers who helped me. They encouraged me,” said Bradley, now 43. “They provided the same support that I want every educator in my school district to provide our kids.”

And that supportive, compassionate approach is yielding results. Despite national trends of rising absenteeism, the Plano school district referred about two dozen students to truancy court last school year—down from 444 referrals in the 2017-18 school year, Bradley’s first year in her position.

“I was doing things that did not sit right with my soul,” she said of that first year. “I was doing things because it’s the way we’ve always done it.”

Research shows that chronically absent students—meaning they miss 10 percent of school days for unexcused and excused reasons—are likely to fall behind academically, engage in risky behaviors, and eventually drop out of school. On top of that, Texas students aged 12 and older who are sent to truancy court for unexcused absences can face a \$100 fine, the suspension of their driver’s license, or a referral to the juvenile-court system. Parents might also face a fine of up to \$500. Before 2015, the consequences were even more severe, with some students jailed for not paying the fines and continuing absences.

The district’s student body is about 30 percent white, 27 percent Hispanic, 23 percent Asian, and 13 percent Black. But Black and Hispanic students, as well as students with disabilities, were disproportionately being sent to truancy court, Bradley said.

Thank you notes and photos with Plano ISD staff decorate the cabinets in Sharon Bradley's office in Plano, Texas, on Dec. 14, 2023.
— Shelby Tauber for Education Week

“We were introducing a student—a child—to the juvenile-justice system prematurely because of attendance,” Bradley said. “I began to have some conversations with [district] leadership, and I said, ‘Hey, I want an opportunity to create something that’s more effective. Just because we’ve been doing it does not necessarily mean it’s effective.’”

Bradley spent the next few years implementing tiered intervention strategies on every school site to reengage students before they became chronically absent. In fall 2020, she established a districtwide intervention that represented a significant shift from the old way of doing things: an attendance review board for students who have 10 to 12 unexcused absences and are about to be referred to truancy court.

In a series of hearings, a team of officials from the district, including a mediator (usually a retired administrator), works with the student and their parent or guardian to understand why the child is not attending school and what kinds of interventions or resources the family needs.

After several weeks, the review board reconvenes to see if the student’s attendance has improved. If it hasn’t, the district can then refer the students to truancy court. But in most cases,

the students have reengaged in their school communities.

“There are so many families that we’ve been able to help, so many children who are now attending school that weren’t attending school a few months ago, even a few years ago,” Bradley, a 2024 EdWeek Leaders To Learn From honoree, said. “They’re graduating and they’re doing great things because of the work of the attendance review board.”

Giving students one more chance

An attendance review board is not a new concept. In California, for instance, the state legislature established school attendance review boards in 1974 to keep students out of the juvenile-justice system.

The approach is aligned with what the research says is best practice, said Hedy Chang, the executive director of Attendance Works, a national nonprofit addressing chronic absenteeism.

“The key to improving attendance is identifying and understanding and addressing the things that cause kids to miss school in the first place,” she said. “There’s no evidence that shows a punitive approach improves attendance.”

But in Plano, Texas, it took some creativity and hard work to make such an intervention happen. While district leaders approved the concept, Bradley was initially given a limited budget and no additional staff, since the district’s budget for the year had already been set.

Instead, she reworked the job descriptions of her existing staff and pulled furniture out of a district warehouse to set up a mock courtroom in an underutilized conference room. She also pursued and obtained several grants, which she uses to pay the mediators, counselors, and family liaisons, who check on students in between hearings and help guide the parents as they work to follow the directives set by the review board.

“She had a plan,” said Courtney Gober, the district’s assistant superintendent for student, family, and community services. “She was very confident that it would be an asset to our campus, really a benefit to our students.”

And it has been, he said. “It sort of changed the perception of the school for a lot of these families. They don’t usually have good experiences with our schools,” Gober said.

But the vast majority of families summoned to the review board show up anyway, he said, because they know it's their last chance before being referred to truancy court. And then, they get meaningful support.

"We uncover a lot of things," said Gober, who served as one of the mediators in the first year. "It is really not about attendance. Attendance is what brought you in the door, and we're glad that happened—when you start peeling back some layers, there's hunger or money [problems] or housing issues or domestic issues."

Recently, three siblings came before the review board. They and their mother were experiencing housing instability, Bradley said, and were bouncing between a friend's house, their grandma's house, and their car. As a result, the children were missing a lot of school.

Initially, though, "the mom didn't want to disclose that because she was worried as to what could possibly happen," she said. "A lot of people could see that as possibly a neglectful situation."

However, because the review board has multiple hearings that are spaced out four to six weeks apart, the district officials were able to gain the trust of the family. By the second hearing, Bradley said, "She noticed that, you know what, they're not here to judge me. They're here to help."

Sharon Bradley, the director of student, family and community services for Plano ISD, checks into the Grad Lab and chats with Kay Glawe, a counselor, in Plano, Texas, on Dec. 14, 2023.

— Shelby Tauber for Education Week

The review board developed a sweeping individualized family-support plan. Officials connected the family with a community housing agency. They noticed the children weren't wearing coats, even when temperatures dropped to the 30s, so they connected the family with an organization that provided appropriate outerwear.

District officials also learned that the high school student was responsible for getting the younger children up and ready for school when the mom had already left for work, so they bought the family an alarm clock. They connected the family with a mental health provider to help the children manage the anxiety and depression they were experiencing because of the housing instability. And they worked with the students' teachers and school administrators to make sure they could catch up on their coursework.

After all these steps were taken, attendance for each of the students increased, Bradley said: "They're doing great."

Another example: A single mom had young children who were consistently absent or missing school. The family was brought into the review board, and the mom explained the issue: She had to leave for her job in Dallas by 6 a.m., but the school bus didn't come until 6:45 a.m. Her kids were responsible for getting ready for school on their own, and they weren't making it out the door on time.

"It was a legitimate problem," Gober said. "She was doing the best she could."

The review board devised a solution. The children were among the last ones picked up on the bus route, so the district reversed the route to make them among the first ones picked up. That meant the children were only home alone in the morning for about 10 minutes, rather than 45—and the mom was able to make sure her kids were dressed and ready for school by the time she left for work.

Administrators also offered the mother a chance to interview for a job in the district. She ended up getting an offer but turned it down as she was making more money at her job in Dallas.

Even so, Gober said the intervention worked. The students' attendance has improved.

Undoing 'old ways of thinking'

Bradley knows some people see the work of the review board as "enabling" students. But she strongly disagrees.

"We're trying to undo decades of old ways of thinking—if the kid doesn't come, there should be a consequence," she said. "I think we need to just take the time to pause—because there's a lot of power in pause—to have a conversation, to see what is really going on. ... And instead of issuing consequences, let's No. 1, articulate our expectations and then offer support."

Bradley has made it her mission to spread this message outside just her district. As part of her work with the Plano district, she leads a cohort of more than 25 school districts in the Dallas-Fort Worth area that are interested in rethinking their attendance strategies. So far, about a dozen districts in the area have established their own attendance review boards, including the McKinney Independent school district.

Michael Winters, the senior director of administrative services there, said the district was experiencing an uptick in absenteeism following the pandemic and wanted to dig deeper.

Bradley helped the 23,300-student district establish its own attendance review system, which they have tweaked to meet their own needs.

“It’s been a game changer,” Winters said. Last school year, he said, 83 students were referred to an attendance hearing. More than three-fourths of those students ended up coming to school more regularly, and just nine were ultimately referred to truancy court.

His favorite success story so far has been an Advanced Placement and honors student who started skipping school after experiencing some personal tragedies.

“He said he didn’t know what to expect when he came to the hearing, but what he found was that there were people who were genuinely concerned about him and wanted him to be engaged,” Winters said, adding that counselors in the district helped get the student back on track.

Sharon Bradley discusses a student and family meeting with members of the Plano Attendance Review board which she designed in the wake of the pandemic to help re-engage students and families, improve graduation rates, and increase the district’s attendance rate.

— Shelby Tauber for Education Week

A comprehensive approach to boosting attendance

Part of Bradley's job in Plano is reducing absenteeism before students get to the point of being called to the attendance review board. At the start of every semester, she and her team do "welcome back" visits to the homes of students who are at risk of being identified as truant, to make sure those students have what they need to be successful. She also regularly trains educators in how to use tiered attendance intervention strategies to boost student engagement.

Bradley relies on community partners for this work, too. For instance, she noticed that many students were missing school for dentist or doctor appointments. She visited local dentists and doctors, as well as low-cost or free health clinics, and asked them to add some weekend or evening hours so that students could get care without missing school.

Bradley—who was previously a principal for an alternative high school in Plano—is persistent in her efforts to find solutions to any barriers to students' well-being and academic success, her colleagues say. She is frequently proposing new initiatives or opportunities for community outreach.

"She has a strong and deep passion for kids, especially kids who are often in the margins of school and life," Gober said.

That passion is, of course, in part informed by Bradley's own experience. While she never missed enough school to be identified as truant, she sees herself in the students who are missing school for reasons outside their control. And she strives to make sure they each have the same support she did.

"I had compassionate teachers and principals who took the time to ask me, 'What's going on?' and also asked me, 'How can I help?'" she said. "Those two questions changed the entire trajectory of my life."

And now, she said, the mediator of the Plano Attendance Review Board will always ask, "What's going on, and how can we help?"

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