

Niagara Gazette

March 17, 2013

Districts find prekindergarten students among the most absent

The Associated Press
Niagara Gazette

Niagara Gazette — BUFFALO — Teacher Hoa Mai is on the phone with a father whose daughter recently missed her 21st day of school six months into the academic year.

"The standards are so high now and she's missing instructional time," the attendance specialist urges while working her way through a list of chronically absent students.

She's begun with some of the most notorious truants: 4-year-olds.

Educators say a district's youngest students are often among those with the worst attendance, in many cases because public preschool is not mandatory and parents regard it as little more than babysitting.

It's a problem that needs to be addressed, experts say, especially after President Barack Obama's recent proposal to expand funding of voluntary public prekindergarten for any 4-year-old whose family income is 200 percent or less of the federal poverty level, a \$47,100 threshold for a family of four. He envisions it as a way to close the achievement gap for poor and minority students, improve high school graduation rates and ultimately strengthen the workforce.

That can't happen, educators say, if children don't show up and parents don't see its educational value.

"You really have to sell them on the importance of pre-K and kindergarten: It's not what is used to be," said John Crabbe, the Buffalo school district's attendance services supervisor. "It's so important now in terms of reading readiness and general school readiness."

New York is among the vast majority of states that don't make school attendance compulsory until the age of 6 or 7. Only eight states require attendance at age 5.

"It's not even mandatory, so why should I send her? 'Why are you calling me?'" Mai says, reciting responses she gets from parents of frequently absent 4- and 5-year-olds.

While school districts track general attendance, few track chronic absenteeism in prekindergarten or later. The Baltimore Education Research Consortium found that city

recorded a 26.5 percent rate in prekindergarten in 2010-11 and 27.4 percent the year before that. A 2009 study by the nonprofit Community Action Project in Tulsa, Okla., found 64 percent of the youngest students were missing 10 percent of school days while in Chicago, 28 percent of prekindergarten students were chronically truant in 2010-11, the district said.

Making matters worse, chronic absence is more harmful to lower-income students, experts say, because families have less access to transportation and health care, and fewer resources to make up for lost time in the classroom.

A 2008 report by the National Center for Children in Poverty linked chronic early absence in kindergarten with lower academic performance in first grade.

A 2011 study of 640 California children found that by the end of third grade, only 17 percent who were chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade were performing at grade level, compared with two-thirds of their peers who attended regularly.

Attendance expert Hedy Chang describes three kinds of attendance obstacles: real barriers, such as transportation; aversion to school because of separation anxiety, nerves or a curriculum that's not engaging; and parental discretion. She said it's the last factor that comes into play for many of the youngest students.

"It's more thought of as child care for when the parent needs it as opposed to the child's development and really helping prepare for early literacy skills that are going to be the foundation for school," said Chang, director of Attendance Works, a Maryland-based initiative that mentors districts in fighting absenteeism.

In Buffalo, prekindergarten and kindergarten attendance regularly runs over 90 percent from month to month. But identifying exactly which students were absent revealed a kindergarten chronic absentee rate of 43 percent in 2010-11, meaning four of every 10 students missed at least 18 days.

Now, school principals are told which students are chronically absent and families are contacted by specially trained attendance teachers or social workers, who emphasize the importance of school and offer help, if needed.

In another initiative, Buffalo has a plush costumed frog named Ready Freddy who doles out hugs and high fives inside youngsters' classrooms.

Attendance in Lynda Nero's class has improved dramatically this year, she said, after the mascot program helped parents realize her prekindergarten classroom isn't simply the day-care program they may have envisioned. With walls covered in calendars and color charts, and shelves and tables filled with computers, blocks, pegboards and books, it's a place to begin learning literacy, math and writing as well as to master fine motor skills and be social.

Students spend a year building fundamentals like identifying upper- and lowercase letters and their sounds, recognizing numbers from 0 to 20, and learning physical education, music and art.

The idea is to prepare them not only for kindergarten — but for college.

"We start now," Nero said, "asking them, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?'"

Inside Nero's classroom at the Martin Luther King Multicultural Institute, little Rhema Jones rubbed her eyes and told a visitor she didn't want to be there.

"My mommy always makes me go to school," she said. "I want to lay down and go to sleep."