



Flexibility and Consistency Drives Success at Covenant House Academy Southwest

Every School Day Counts Detroit Case Study #5

When other schools closed and suspended instruction at the start of the pandemic, Covenant House Academy Southwest (CHA Southwest), an alternative charter school in Detroit, continued its online curriculum and graduated 13 students at the end of the 2019-20 school year.

CHA Southwest left their online curriculum open and available to students into the summer break. Christine Glasper, school counselor and assistant principal at CHA Southwest, said, *“instead of making them take a [summer] break like we usually do, we left it open so that they would be able to continue to do the catch-up... So, our staff was really awesome and they were basically on-call, even during their summer break to talk to students and help them through the curriculum and unlock things and prepare final grades.”* Students completed coursework online and staff coordinated a socially distanced “grad-a-van” to celebrate graduating students.

CHA Southwest enrolls students ages 15-22, to obtain their high school diploma. They are part of a public charter school district including four campuses located in Detroit and Grand Rapids, MI serving 900 students. By providing a safe, structured, self-paced learning environment, and qualified, dedicated teachers, CHA Southwest helps students graduate high school and pursue higher learning. CHA curricula are available online to students, and they are able to work either from home or from school. This instructional approach is by design and existed pre-pandemic. Students can enroll and complete courses at their own pace, and do not have to wait until the end of the school year to go up a grade level. This instructional flexibility and support helped to sustain student engagement and attendance throughout the pandemic.

The team at CHA Southwest understands that every day a student is absent is a lost opportunity for learning. They are working to implement several of the basic steps to address and reduce chronic absence in schools suggested by Attendance Works.

School Data Snapshot



Location: 1450 25th St, Detroit, MI 48216

Principal: Eric George
Assistant Principal: Christine Glasper

Grades: High School / Ages: 15 - 26

Total Enrollment: 232

Chronic Absence Rate (SY 19-20): 52.4%

Chronic Absence Rate (SY 20-21): data unavailable

*During Covid-19 pandemic, attendance has been taken as two-positive engagements per week.

Demographics (Race/Ethnicity): African-American - 61%;
Caucasian - 5%; Hispanic - 33%; Other - 1%

English Language Learners: 54%
Special Education: 38%

Unique Approach:

- Online, self-paced learning for alternative education
- Strong leadership, certified teachers available 100% of the time, and effective coordination around wraparound supports for students and families

Engage Students and Families

For the fall reopening, students and teachers had the option of returning in person or virtually. The hope was to keep the students as safe and stable as possible so that the pandemic did not stop them from making progress and graduating when *“they’ve got enough hurdles,”* said Glasper. Through the pandemic, school staff were *“on their phones using text messages to get in contact with students, emails, robocalls, social media, all of those things in order to keep the students engaged and keep the students working, whether they were in the building or at home.”*

The CHA Southwest alternative approach to secondary education requires an alternative approach to student attendance. Glasper said, *“We are really dynamic, I would say, with our attendance strategies. We’ve done everything from the typical letters home, robocalls. We [call] students who have missed a couple of days. We utilize announcements via our online curriculum platform. We use social media. Our retention team would go out and do home visits.”* The team at CHA Southwest leans on relationships with students to monitor their engagement with online learning and address any barriers they are facing at home or in the community.

The CHA Southwest team has transformed their school into a community center, creating spaces for students and their parents to attend meetings and learn about available resources. Pre-Covid, CHA Southwest provided food during meetings and events. During these sessions, CHA Southwest integrated attendance messages using informational fact sheets provided by Attendance Works. They follow up with social media outreach.

Glasper hopes for citywide attendance messaging to expand the importance of school attendance for every student in the city. The more they hear the message that attendance is important *“the more ingrained it gets,”* said Glasper. She imagines promotions like mass media, YouTube commercials, billboards, pop-ups on cell phones” being a great way for students to hear the message.

Monitor Attendance Data and Practice

School data provided a large-scale snapshot of attendance, and staff maintained a “hard to reach” list of students who required additional outreach and follow up to get them back on track. Following PLN sessions with Attendance Works, CHA Southwest team reorganized their approach to student communication and enhanced their documentation of interactions with students. They split up their student enrollment amongst staff creating phone call lists. Glasper said, *“we really come at it from a family perspective, from an all-hands-on deck perspective. There’s nobody that’s not involved with trying to get kids into school and engaged in school and prepared and set up for a successful future.”*

Following the onset of the pandemic, staff were expected to connect with the students on their call list weekly to check-in and see how they are doing. Glasper said, *“sharing information in terms of food bank information and how to stay safe and where to get PPE and things of that nature. And also, we were checking in to see if they could login from home and do a little bit of work. And making sure that the kids that were graduating were ready to graduate.”*

Programmatic Response to Barriers

Students continue to face pre-Covid barriers to attendance and graduation. Home-related barriers include family members getting sick, students needing to work to pay bills, and mental health stressors. Every day, the staff of CHA Southwest battle the effects of generational poverty upon their students. The pandemic created additional barriers to the ability of students to access services and stay on track academically. As she reflected on the needs of her students and the pandemic conditions, Glasper described key services and supports they provide at CHA Southwest.

- **Access to Social Supports.** Stable housing, reliable technology, internet access, family support, and childcare are among the social supports students at CHA Southwest require. Child care is a priority need for students who have children or have siblings that their parents cannot take care of because they have to work.
- **Access to Supportive Employment.** Students at CHA Southwest need to have a regular income to take care of themselves and/or their families. Glasper said, *“employment, it's sort of a double-edged sword with employment, because a lot of employers are not nights and weekends, they're nine-to-five... And that conflicts with school.”*
- **Normalize Mental Health.** Students with some extreme mental health challenges need help getting their families connected to behavioral health resources.

Pre-Covid, CHA Southwest started moving toward becoming a trauma-sensitive school and ramped up their efforts when the pandemic hit. The school created a centralized place to keep notes from phone calls *“so that if somebody connected with this student yesterday and I'm calling them today for a different reason, I would be able to see those notes,”* said Glasper. This approach makes it possible for staff to have meaningful conversations with students and link them to wrap-around services enabling them to *“run their own lives instead of their lives running them,”* said Glasper. Tracking student trauma in this way brought some resistance and concerns about student privacy. Being consistent, determined and establishing trust with students mitigated these concerns.

Staff put in additional effort to ensure that students are on track to graduate. One of the most challenging school-related barriers to graduation is the difficulty tracking down transcripts from former high schools. Students can request their transcripts from former schools, but schools are not able to request transcripts from each other. Students must retake courses when their transcripts cannot prove that they have already passed the class. Glasper advocated that changing this statewide policy would *“change life for counselors across the state of Michigan.”*

Attendance Best Practices

Consistency, flexibility and encouragement are critical to the CHA Southwest approach to student attendance and achievement. They give each student personal attention and respond in a way that leaves every student feeling valued. Glasper said, *“having a positive, supportive approach, being encouraging, as odd as it might sound, being annoying, so calling again and again and just not giving up and reiterating to the students that you matter to us and that we care about you and we're not giving up... We're here, so answer your phone, have been really successful perspectives.”*

When it comes to getting students to school, online and in-person, they are implementing the following best practices:

- Creating a school-wide school culture that promotes a sense of safety, respect and personal responsibility, where students feel connected and know that someone notices, in a caring manner, when they missed school;
- Using data already collected to examine which and how many students are missing 10% or more of the school year, monitoring data throughout the year, and determine how to put in place sufficient resources;
- Using qualitative and quantitative information to examine what factors are affecting student attendance and working with partners to connect students and families to needed supports.

About the Every School Day Counts Detroit Case Study Series: In October and November 2020, Every School Day Counts Detroit and Attendance Works conducted interviews with school staff from five local public charter schools to document their efforts to sustain school attendance during the Covid-19 pandemic. The schools chosen represented diverse grade levels and were headed by leaders committed to implementing effective attendance strategies. Unfortunately, it was not possible to determine whether these practices resulted in reductions in chronic absence rates given shifts in attendance taking practices and the challenging economic, social and health conditions facing families and communities during the pandemic. This work has been made possible by support from United Way for Southeastern Michigan and The Skillman Foundation's investment in education and increased school attendance for all children in Detroit.