



Escuela Avancemos Academy Wins Hearts and Minds

Every School Day Counts Detroit Case Study #1

When Covid-19 restrictions hit Southwest Detroit, Escuela Avancemos Academy was ready with door-to-door engagement and personalized support for every student. Escuela Avancemos, a K-7 community school with wraparound services, “educates with love,” working to close the achievement gap through extensive and targeted services to support and empower the local community, families and students.

Ana Maria Ulloa, co-founder and CEO of Escuela Avancemos, believes that family engagement and support is the best path to student attendance and achievement. As a founder, Ulloa said *“...from the get-go, the community and parenting piece was at the center of everything that we do. We actually believe that children come with a family, and unless you support the whole family, especially in our communities, you are not going to have advancement in education.”*

This belief and the attendance practices implemented by school staff have proven effective with a student population that is 92% English language learners (ELL) whose primary language spoken at home is Spanish. On Count Day in September 2020, the school reported increased enrollment from 312 to 348 students and a 98% attendance rate.

School Data Snapshot



Location: SW Detroit @2635 Howard St, Detroit, MI 48216

Founder & CEO: Ana Ulloa
Executive Director: Stephanie Yassine

Grades: K - 7th

Total Enrollment: 348

Chronic Absence Rate (SY 19-20): 22.3%

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): Hispanic - 94%; African-American - 2.6%; Caucasian - 3.4%

English Language Learners: 92%

Special Education: 9%

Unique Approach:

- Individualized family-centered engagement
- The only school in Detroit that provides door-to-door transportation

Foundational Supports During Covid-19

Many have reported how the pandemic exacerbated the digital divide and socioeconomic disparities that exist for students and families living in low-income communities. For Escuela Avancemos, providing internet connections and hardware was just the first step to addressing the pressures of the “digital divide” and at-home learning placed on students, parents and educators. *“Attendance in the virtual world is completely different because they don't have to come to school,”* Ulloa said. Getting students to attend school in-person and virtually required two types of connection, one digital and the other social.

On the digital front, Escuela Avancemos mobilized public funding and partnerships to purchase Chromebooks and tablets for every student who needed them. Emma Berroa, the school secretary, coordinated with Comcast to get homes connected to internet service. Berroa and other members of the school staff worked with families who felt discomfort speaking with Comcast over the phone or were not aware of the internet service options. Some families chose to remain unplugged, opting not to accept internet service at home. *“I will tell you, honestly, some parents had no interest in connecting... They would tell us, ‘I don't want to connect,’”* Ulloa said. For families who declined internet service, Escuela Avancemos provided hard-copy learning packets and materials.

For families who accepted virtual learning via the internet, staff initiated orientation and training to introduce technology platforms in a way that parents could understand. Among the technology platforms introduced to families were Zoom, Seesaw, Google Suite and ClassDojo. The staff immediately learned that training parents was not enough. Parents who must work and cannot quarantine at home employ older siblings, neighbors, relatives and friends to monitor their children for virtual learning. Older students must balance virtual learning for themselves and their younger siblings. Multiple caregivers were working with students, and some students were home alone during virtual school hours. Teachers had to pivot and provide orientation and training to students and a wide range of caregivers. *“We train babysitters, we train brothers, sisters, and whoever we can find,”* Ulloa said.

Escuela Avancemos has witnessed mixed results trying to sustain academic achievement in a hybrid learning model, especially for students in younger grades, ELL students, and special education students. School leadership and faculty were most concerned about the inequity of virtual learning environments and the readiness and fatigue of parents and caregivers. *“Even if you give them a little desk, there's no space [at home], there are so many people in the household. If you have a special education child, we get videos of the child running around crying,”* Ulloa said. For a kindergartener who speaks only Spanish, virtual instruction limits their exposure to English, and there is limited support at home to assist with language instruction. Books and instructional materials are sent home, but everyone in the household speaks Spanish.

Caregiver fatigue and burnout are very real for the families served by Escuela Avancemos. *“Parents, they're getting tired. We need to find a cure to this disease [Covid-19], somehow. They're really getting tired because they didn't sign up to be teachers,”* Ulloa said. Thinking about the path forward, Ulloa hopes to have more space for learning pods to support students returning to in-person instruction, digital classes for parents in the evenings and weekends, and partnerships that connect high school students as technology mentors for younger students and their families.

Attendance Matters to All

What is the key to attendance success at Escuela Avancemos? *“Attendance is everybody’s business,”* said Ulloa. Every member of the Escuela Avancemos staff contributes to making sure every child gets to school in person and virtually. Ulloa looked to the resources and best practices shared during the Attendance Works Peer Learning Network (PLN) seminars to inform the school’s approach to attendance before and during the pandemic.

Using student-level data, school staff changed how they document, track and share information about student absences. They shifted their focus from the individual absence to monitoring for a sequence of absences and trends for a single student or groups of students. *“We want to identify trends and reasons why [students are absent]. If we know that this child has missed so many days, what are the reasons, and what can we do to help? Or in Covid time, what can we recommend if we cannot help?”* Ulloa said. Working with Attendance Works, Ulloa worked with her team to create a “school-going culture” for all students, families and staff.

Creating a School-Going Culture

The school-going culture at Escuela Avancemos starts with door-to-door transportation from home to school. With a substantial transportation budget and a valued partnership with Apollo Transportation, students are guaranteed door-to-door transportation. The majority of students take advantage of this service. Parents and students are greeted by a family engagement specialist at their door. They reassure parents that their children are in safe hands. *“We keep the family’s thinking in mind,”* Ulloa said. Outreach specialists reassure parents that their children are in safe hands with the message *“You are giving me your ‘tesoro.’ You’re giving your treasure,”* she added.

During quarantine, family engagement specialists visited student homes to deliver and pick up learning packets, identify urgent needs and have conversations with parents about virtual learning. Outreach specialists shared attendance messaging with parents and handed out attendance recognition to students during the bus ride to school. Attendance is taken during the bus ride.

Positive Parent and Teacher Relationships

Winning the hearts and minds of parents and caregivers starts with *“the school having conversations with parents and having other parents talk to parents about why attendance is important,”* Ulloa said. Family engagement efforts during the pandemic include a weekly virtual meeting promoted as “un cafecito,” a coffee hour. *“Every single Friday every teacher is responsible for making sure that their parents come to ‘Un Cafecito,’”* Ulloa said. During the Un Cafecito, parents can get an update from their child’s teacher and ask questions. There are no language barriers. Bilingual staff members are assigned to each teacher to provide translation support. These weekly meetings are guided by a belief that Ulloa described as *“changing the mentality of the teachers.”* The goal of the Un Cafecito is to build on the skills of parents creating an environment for teachers to empower parents not deflate them.

Once students arrive at school in person or virtually, staff members shift their focus to getting students engaged in learning. *“Because one thing is getting connected, and the other one is getting them [students] to participate, engage and be inspired,”* Ulloa said. Two curriculum coaches, both bilingual, observed the classroom and virtual lessons to see how children were participating. In addition to providing instructional support, they recognized

teachers with small items, such as gift cards, to celebrate teachers' work with students and to influence the teachers' "sense of well-being and of being appreciated," Ulloa said.

Strategic Partnerships

When challenges outside of the school's control surfaced as barriers to attendance or learning, Escuela Avancemos employed a whole child, community school approach. If a family needs food, health care, or mental health counseling, school staff turn to community partners to provide families with the resources they need to get their students to school every day. Food distribution takes place every week. If families need to talk to a counselor, Wendy Cortes, the school social worker, coordinates referrals for counseling.

As a community school, a number of community partnerships help deliver wrap-around services to students and their families. Examples of how partners support the school include health care services that are coordinated with the Vernor Urgent Care Clinic and Covenant Care Clinic, after school enrichments provided by Urban Neighborhood Initiative, and a food pantry hosted by Basilica of St. Anne's.

Attendance Best Practices

Ulloa's commitment to all children learning and thriving is immutable. During these times of competing demands and debates about the health and well-being of teachers and students, Ulloa said, "Loyalty has to be to the family and to the student, not to your school. In these cases, sometimes that's the best answer." Escuela Avancemos Academy is an example of how a focus on establishing whole school supports can foster positive rates of student attendance and engagement in learning.

Working together as a school community with students, families and community partners, the school's high rates of attendance and engagement can be attributed to the following:

- Positive relationships between school staff, students, and families.
- Consistent support for all families to facilitate learning at home and in person.
- Door-to-door transportation to provide access and relationship building with families.
- Coordination with strategic partners to meet the basic needs of students and their families.

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.