



Pulling Students Out of Isolation at New Paradigm Loving Academy

Every School Day Counts Detroit Case Study #4

Attendance improves when a school community offers a warm and welcoming environment that emphasizes building relationships with families and stresses the importance of going to class every day. The key is developing 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.

Before and during the pandemic, communication has been the key to New Paradigm Loving Academy (Loving Academy) efforts to get students to school every day. Loving Academy is a pre-K to fifth grade public charter school serving 136 students. Yolanda Eddins, Director of Community and Parent Affairs, said that pulling students “out of isolation” requires Loving Academy to reach out consistently with phone calls, letters home and home visits.

Loving Academy combines personalized early outreach, positive engagement, and capacity building across the school community to achieve sustainable rates of student attendance. This approach aligns with the best practices to reduce chronic absence introduced to Loving staff by Attendance Works.

Personalized Early Outreach

At the end of the 2019-20 school year, Loving Academy surveyed families three times to determine their preferences for returning to school for the fall. From the surveys with families through the summer, school leadership realized that some families became more comfortable with wanting their children to return to campus while others wanted to keep their students at home. After analyzing the surveys, Loving Academy started the school year employing a hybrid approach with small groups of students traveling to campus in person and the majority of families opting for virtual learning. Even during the pandemic, everyone at Loving Academy played a role in making sure families win in this “new” normal for learning.



Location: 1000 Lynn St, Detroit, MI 48211

Principal: Jacqueline Dungey
Director of Community and Parent Affairs: Yolanda Eddins

Grades: PK - 5th

Total Enrollment: 136

Chronic Absence Rate (SY 19-20): 45%

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: 99%; Other: 1%

English Language Learners: 13.3%
Special Education: 10%

Unique Approach:

- **Champion leadership**
- **Personalized early outreach, going above and beyond to engage with students and families**

The targeted outreach to families at risk of chronic absence is part of a comprehensive strategy to send a message to all families and students that going to school matters, even during the pandemic. Parents come to trust Loving Academy as a network of schools that can help to ease their anxiety. Eddins recounted the testimony of one parent who compared her experience at Loving Academy to other schools. *“She was like, ‘since I brought my kids to Loving, I don’t have to run back and forth up there. They don’t call me for behavior issues. They work with my kids. I’ve been able to work my job...Loving, they work with you, they keep up with you.’ She was able to go on her phone and pull up recent text messages from me and from some of the other staff.”*

Parent communication and messaging during the pandemic was critical. The school worked to impress upon families the need to create a regular routine and school-going culture at home. Eddins attributes the conversations with families in the spring and summer before school reopened with preparing families for the reality of learning during the pandemic. She said *“because we worked hard to keep up with our families even in the spring [and] in the summer, a lot of them went to summer school, the kids did even virtually. So, it was just a matter of getting recent updates.”* As part of their school-wide messaging, the Loving Academy attendance team distributed fliers, such as the grade-level Impact of Attendance, to families at parent meetings or sent home with students. Day-to-day distractions and anxieties surfaced for families, students, and staff during the pandemic. When speaking to the anxieties, Eddins said, *“Some people did not send their kids to school because they don’t want them to go, they have their own fears and anxiety. That paralyzes them every day.”*

For families overwhelmed and stressed by the setbacks of the pandemic, Loving Academy launched a Covid relief fund to help families with emergency needs such as food, utility bills, or housing. This emergency support along with other resources Loving Academy coordinated for families before the pandemic resulted in improvements for families’ well-being. Eddins shared her personal experience supporting a family. She said, *“people who were living in shelters, even during Covid, we were able to transition them to stable housing...this one particular [parent] we have worked with almost a year, and she was able to, in July, move into her own home...I followed up, connected her to some other resources, and celebrated that moment with her.”* Eddins pointed to this as an example of the Loving Academy strength-building approach to family engagement paying off.

Positive Engagement

Loving started the 2020-21 school year following a hybrid model with some students attending in-person and others attending virtually. Students attending in person are grouped in classroom pods and follow along online. Teachers facilitate instruction online from their classrooms on campus, and all students whether they are on campus or at home follow along. According to Eddins, students in person and online received the same instruction from their teacher. She said, *“the teaching tools that teachers had were accessible to them [were the same]... We realized that if the teachers are on their platform, the way that they normally teach, it would be more comfortable for them and for the students.”*

Getting students online and in school was not easy. At the state and local level, mixed messages were being communicated about the importance of going to school during the pandemic. Loving Academy worked to counter messages from the governor and state education officials that deferred the administering of grades and standardized testing, the typical metrics used to measure student achievement. Eddins recalled, *“we had to even get ahead of that in real-time. The school worked to inform parents ‘You may not see the impact [at the] end of the school year like you have before, but they’re going to get behind. You gotta keep them motivated and keep them in a routine to learn.’”*

Loving Academy built a community of school staff, students, and families who understand the importance of attendance and what it takes to get every student to school every day throughout the pandemic. Eddins stated, *“We had to do our very best to serve people in real-time... even if it was seven or eight o’clock at night.”* She noted that during these exchanges school staff learned that parents were overwhelmed from *“the financial piece, the emotional piece, the reality that this [the pandemic] is really happening. And not really fully understanding the ramifications of why supporting their students online is important.”* Teamwork ensured that more than one person on staff was responsible for student attendance and family engagement. During the pandemic, Loving Academy accelerated its outreach to parents, involving more staff to send text messages, emails, or make phone calls to learn proactively what was happening with families.

Eddins expressed the impact of a messaging campaign that celebrated the family resilience and commitment could have on morale. She said, *“I’m very humbled at the resilience that our families have shown. Sometimes, early in the morning, I’ll stay in my car just to watch the kids come in. And to see them put their masks on and they’re lined up and they got their backpacks.”* She imagined a messaging campaign about families winning during the pandemic. She shared, *“I’m talking about more stories, infomercials about people winning... A dad saying, ‘I’m not working, but you know what, my son learned how to read last week because even though I was stressed about my bills, I read to my son every day and now he can read.’”*

The Loving Academy attendance team recognizes students who were able to get to school, students who improved over time and reaches out to the parents of students who don’t show up. For students exhibiting patterns of chronic absence, Loving Academy convenes their parents in small groups to establish a community of support and accountability.

Eddins recalls parents being surprised that they were grouped together in a meeting addressing attendance, remarking *“I don’t know why I’m here.”* The defensive barriers with which parents arrived fell as the school staff presented them with a vision for winning in school and the role parents can play to help their students be successful. The parent meeting agenda included icebreakers and giving parents the *“chance to talk about... their desires and their hopes for their children,”* said Eddins. During the conversation, parents build on the things that they feel good about. Some teared up and cried when they shared their aspirations for their children. According to Eddins, some parents shared *“I want my son to be a doctor. I want to make sure that my daughter goes to college.”* During the session, the Loving Academy staff affirmed for parents the message *“how do you get them there, they have to show up to school first.”*

The meetings concluded with a review of the attendance patterns and behavior for their students, and parents completed an Attendance Success Plan identifying the support they need to help their student get to school. In some cases, they found help from other parents in the meeting. After the session, parents received a thank you card in the mail. Instead of being “called out,” parents were able to build relationships with other parents, creating “a social network of support” that they can trust even when they are at their most vulnerable.

Build Capacity of School Staff

Loving staff communicate to parents that students should be online, on camera, and ready to learn. If this message goes unheard, the risk according to Eddins is generational learning loss. Eddins said, *“I think probably the biggest thing that’s going to cost us in this country and education, especially in urban and minority communities... We’re going to be paying for this for years to come, it doesn’t matter what district you [are] with... We talked about the summer learning loss, I’m looking at the generational learning loss.”*

Through a series of peer learning network (PLN) seminars hosted by Attendance Works and ESDCD partners, Eddins and the team at Loving Academy were introduced to national best practices and strategies to further their student attendance efforts. Eddins commented on how the design of the PLN seminars created a community across participating charter schools. The sessions convened staff from public charter schools who may face unique challenges and needs compared to traditional public schools.

For its efforts to curb “*generational learning loss*,” the Loving Academy attendance teams accessed research, data, and tools shared by Attendance Works online and during technical assistance sessions hosted for the Detroit network of public charter schools. Eddins said, “*I think [Attendance Works] influenced our work this past school year by creating a platform where we could learn, where we felt safe, and where we felt like we were in a trusted environment, even with our peers, to be able to openly share about our challenges as well as our successes.*”

Attendance Best Practices

From the charter management organization superintendent to front office staff, everyone at Loving and its operator works to create a school-going culture. Eddins said “*the string...that tied it all together was communication within the building, where we touch bases...We didn’t wait until they showed up in a database... we were checking in throughout the day, ‘did they make it in yet? Okay, well, I’ll give her a call tomorrow.’”* The staff work to acknowledge successes and wins building on strengths to motivate parents and students to show up consistently.

Loving Academy applies the attendance tools and practices introduced by Attendance Works to reduce rates of chronic absence:

- Personalized early outreach to understand parent apprehensions about returning students to school during the pandemic, barriers to virtual learning, and pre-pandemic barriers and stressors;
- Positive engagement with families and students to message the importance of going to school and make connections between attendance and student achievement; and
- Capacity building to help build a school-wide culture of attendance and provide staff with the research, tools, strategies and messaging they need to engage each other, parents and students.

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 The Skillman Foundation and United Way for Southeastern Michigan investments in education and increased school attendance for all children in Detroit.