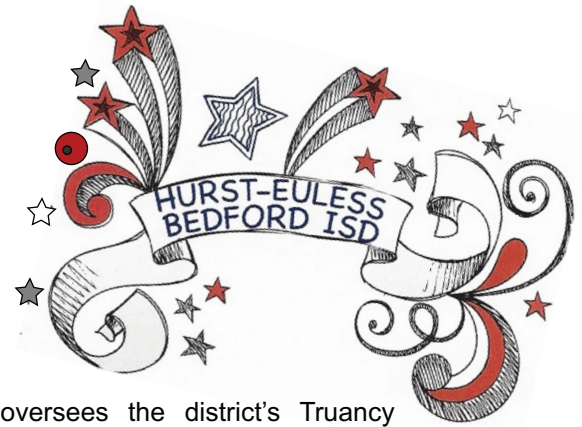


District takes four-pronged approach to reduce truancies



Truancy in Texas public schools is a real problem. Not only do school districts lose money if students are not in school, but truant students can suffer real and long-lasting effects.

According to a National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS) report, "truancy is a concern for communities, because students who miss school are often unable to develop interpersonal relationships or gain the knowledge and skills they will need for future employment." The report goes on to say that chronic truants are likely to drop out of school and engage in delinquent behavior.

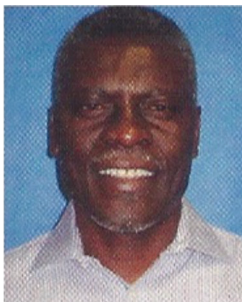
Hurst-Euleless-Beford (HEB) ISD, located in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, has felt the pain of truancy. Between the 2000-2001 and 2007-2008 school years, unexcused absences rose from 39,955 to 42,773.

Partners Against Chronic Truancy (PACT) is a program operated by the Dallas-area Arlington Police Department. A recent PACT report echoes NCJRS' findings: "Truancy is one of the critical issues facing youth today. It is considered a gateway to crime and, for many juveniles, it is the first criminal offense committed."

The rise in HEB ISD's truancy came hand-in-hand with a dramatic shift in the district's demographics. During the 2000-2001 school year, the district's student population 88.9 percent white. By 2009-2010, the district was officially designated minority-majority. With that shift came socio-economic changes. This year, a little more than 50 percent of HEBISD's students are

economically disadvantaged and 39 percent are considered at-risk.

"Truancy problems aren't exclusive to any ethnic group, but they can be tied to economic status," says HEB ISD student attendance specialist Dr. Nathaniel



Dr. Nathaniel Hearne

Hearne, who oversees the district's Truancy Department.

"Over the past 10 years, there has been a 25 percent to 30 percent rise in our economically disadvantaged student population," Hearne says. "And a student who doesn't have resources will skip school. It doesn't matter the race or ethnicity."

During the 2008-2009 school year, HEB ISD decided to make a concerted effort to cut down on the number of students cutting class. Under Hearne's direction, the Truancy Department developed and implemented four strategies to tackle the problem from several angles. The results of the district's efforts speak for themselves: During the 2009-2010 school year, the number of unexcused absences dropped from 42,773 to 33,691. The attendance rate for grades K-12 was 97 percent and the completion rate stood at 95 percent.

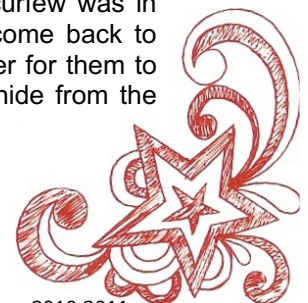
How they did it

The first weapon in the anti-truancy arsenal was setting a daytime curfew.

"We went to city officials – the mayor, the chief of police and others – and presented these [truancy] figures and asked, 'How can you help us?'" Hearne explains.

The curfew, subsequently passed by the city council, makes it an offense for minors to be out of school between 9 a.m. and 2:30 p.m., when school is in session. The curfew immediately drew results.

"During the first three weeks the curfew was in place," Hearne says, "I had kids come back to school and tell me that it was easier for them to just be in school than to run and hide from the police."





Student attendance specialist Dr. Nathaniel Hearne (second from left) meets with Discipline Alternative Education Program staff about student truancy. Pictured left to right with Hearne are teachers Josephine Kline and Lunnessa Wade and Principal Thomas Iles.

The ordinance also gives police power to issue a \$500 citation to the parents of students in violation.

“For the first couple of weeks, parents were angry, but then they saw we were helping and people started to thank us,” Hearne says. “Now we get a lot more positive feedback. The community knows we’re doing good, and word spreads.”

HEB ISD’s second step was mandating parent meetings when students are in violation of the compulsory attendance law (CAL). A violation occurs when a student has three or more unexcused days or partial days in four consecutive weeks. Under the district’s mandate, all school principals are instructed to send a referral to the Truancy Department any time a student is in violation of the CAL. In turn, a truancy officer will contact the student’s parents and request a meeting. At these meetings, parents are informed of the law and given an opportunity to speak with a Team Focus member. Team Focus is a nonprofit advocacy group that enlists volunteer community members and professionals to provide student mentoring and individual and family counseling. Team Focus has proven to be a powerful tool, not just in combating truancy, but also in helping families in general.

“Team Focus mentors will partner with the family and work with them on whatever issues they might have,” Hearne says. “If they need help finding a job, they will try to find the resources they need. If it’s food they need or transportation, they’ll hook them up.”

Team Focus support is available around the clock.

“[The volunteers] make themselves accessible to the family at all times –even on weekends,” Hearne says. “They will try to find the resources to eliminate any kind of excuse for a kid not to be in school. As long as that family needs mentoring, they’re there.”

The third tool in HEB ISD’s anti-truancy toolkit is the Adults Relating to Kids (ARK) program, which was created to provide family counseling for students who are having serious truancy issues. Facilitated by the district’s professional counselors, ARK is based on the concept of unconditional love between students and their parents.

ARK counseling sessions are held one night a week for five weeks, and at least one parent is required to accompany his or her child to all five sessions. Over the course of the program, participating families are introduced to a myriad of resources and social services that can provide ongoing, long-term intervention.

Reactive to proactive

The district added a preventative measure to round out its anti-truancy campaign: an annual Girls and Boys Dropout Prevention Expo. HEB ISD enlists the help of community resources to put on these expos. Guest speakers and exhibitors have included judges from the Tarrant County Court System and area municipal courts; professors from local universities; child psychologists; school superintendents from neighboring districts; professional athletes from the National Football League; nutritionists; police officers –even convicted felons who have done their time and have a message for younger generations.

These presenters meet with at-risk girls in the fall and boys in the spring to address topics such as self-esteem, goal setting, decision making, and respect for self and authority figures. Parents are invited to the expo as well. During the event, they can speak with several agencies and experts, including mental health and mental retardation authorities, Cook's Children's Health Care System, Team Focus, EXCEL Treatment Program, Santa Fe Counseling for individual and family counseling, and Job Corps.

Hearne says with the right resources and speakers, an expo can be a very effective way to reach students and change their behavior.

"In our first expo, we had 60 girls, ages 12 to 18. One speaker was a woman who was incarcerated for drug offenses. She was so engaging that she had 60 teenage girls absolutely hanging on her every word," Hearne recalls. "[The students] weren't talking; they weren't texting – they were glued to the speaker, and they had tears running down their cheeks."

The expo isn't just about talking to teens. It's about taking action too.

"For parents who don't have Medicaid or CHIP [Children's Healthcare Insurance Program], Cook Children's will help the parents fill out all the re-

quired paperwork, and they'll stay with them until it's complete," Hearne says.

The EXCEL Treatment Program, Hearne says, is an in-patient substance abuse program in Fort Worth. The group sends representatives to the expos to discuss addiction issues. With parental permission, they'll even provide transportation to the treatment facility for students who decide they need immediate help.

Committed to the cause

Hearne says HEB ISD is fully committed to keeping students off the streets and in the classroom. It's not only beneficial to the district, but to the community at large.

"Long range," Hearne says, "if you're not getting an education, it's going to be twice as hard for you to get a job. If you graduate, you can get a job and become a productive citizen."

"If you're hanging out in the streets... there's nothing to do but crime," he continues. "And statistics show that 75 percent of prisoners – hard-core criminals – are dropouts."

Gene Buinger, superintendent of HEB ISD, echoes Hearne's sentiments.



Ryan Boyd, Dallas Cowboys executive for Public Schools Outreach, and Hurst-Euless-Bedford ISD student attendance specialist Nathaniel Hearne (standing, left to right) treat a group of elementary students who have demonstrated perfect attendance to a day at Cowboys Stadium. The students are from Donna Park Elementary, Spring Garden Elementary, and Midway Park Elementary.

“Too many students develop chronic patterns of absenteeism early on,” he says, “and unless a district has a program to address those and intervene in a very forthright manner, then it’s going to get worse over time.”

“By the time [these students] are in high school, they’ve dug a hole so deep that they’re not going to graduate with their class,” Buinger continues. “They’re not going to do well on [state testing]. so it’s natural that they’d consider dropping out.”

‘Students are learning patterns, and these patterns carry over into college and eventually into the job market, where their employers expect them to be at work.’

- Superintendent Gene Buinger

Regular attendance also helps establish good habits for life.

“Students are learning patterns, and these pat-

terns carry over into college and eventually into the job market, where their employers expect them to be at work,” the superintendent says.

Hearne says that parents sometimes protest that they can’t get their kids to school on time because of their jobs or other commitments. To this, he responds: “I understand that, but what’s most important? This is your child and your child’s education, so whatever you have to do to get your child to school, you just have to do it.”

Buinger says HEB ISD’s successful anti-truancy program can be replicated, but not for free. It’s an effort that costs money, manpower, and time.

“You’re going to have to put resources behind the program,” he says. “Some people may wonder if this is a good expenditure, and we believe that it is.”

Hearne invites other districts to mirror HEB ISD’s initiatives.

“We’re willing to work with any other district that wants to try to emulate this,” he says. “But you have to remember that it’s a community thing; you need buy-in to make it work. That’s what we’re trying to do here, and it’s working.”



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