

Tackling Chronic Absenteeism in Fall River

By: Barbara Allard, Chair of Mayor William Flanagan's Task Force on Attendance

Chronic absenteeism, defined as students missing more than 10% of school (18 days) a year, is a major problem across the country as well as right here in Fall River. The rate of chronic absenteeism in Fall River for the 2012-2013 school year was an alarming 30%. On average, almost 1 out of every 3 Fall River students was absent 18 days or more last year. That's more than three weeks of lost learning last year alone! Students who are chronically absent, year after year, continue to fall further and further behind in their studies, will more than likely never catch up, and far too often end up dropping out of school.

Even more disturbing is the fact that a large percentage of Fall River students who continue to be chronically absent are our very youngest learners, those in kindergarten through grade two. Despite the perception that activities in these early grades center around crayons, crafts and games, it is in the early grades that children develop fundamental study habits, begin to read, build math skills, learn to interact appropriately and become engaged in education.

Although the rate of absenteeism decreases somewhat as students get older, research has shown that chronic absence in kindergarten and first grade leads to lower performance in third grade, which in turn is tied to decreased attendance in sixth and ninth grade, and an increased risk of a high school student eventually dropping out. For each of the past three years, 9th grade students in Fall River were absent an average of 20 days - a full month of schooling! By the time a child who misses eighteen days or more of school every year reaches high school, he/she will have lost almost a full year of education, time pretty impossible to recoup.

Addressing absenteeism requires a community effort. It cannot be the sole responsibility of schools. With that in mind, Mayor William Flanagan and Superintendent of Schools Meg Mayo Brown have organized a community task force to tackle chronic absenteeism in Fall River. This task force is comprised of over 20 representatives of local agencies and organizations as well as number of school officials and administrators. The group has been meeting monthly to assess various initiatives being experimentally implemented in our city schools, as well as to research and develop other innovative solutions to the problem.

To further facilitate the process, schools are currently surveying students, family adults and staff to determine some of the root causes for poor attendance which, in turn, will help shed light on even more potential solutions. In addition, to help foster better communication between schools and family adults, the task force is developing fliers and brochures highlighting the importance of regular attendance as well as clarifying the difference between excused and unexcused absences. The value of education, especially in those early grades, needs to be constantly and consistently communicated with families, any and every way possible. Accordingly, improving school-parent communication has become a high priority for the task force.

All of these efforts will require a lots of hard work and commitment from school staff, family adults and the community which, over time, will not only help our young people grow into productive, resourceful citizens, but will benefit Fall River in anticipation of even more future high school graduates armed with great pride and much optimism.