

Focus on Attendance expanded for 2016-2017 school year

From inadequate transportation to addiction to difficulty in a math class to school bullying, there are myriad reasons that a student may be struggling with school attendance, and each of these barriers requires its own, unique solution. In an effort to decrease truancy and improve student outcomes, the Department of Human Services (DHS) has recently expanded its successful Focus on Attendance pilot county-wide, using collaboration and communication to best meet student – and family – needs.

Focus on Attendance, a partnership between DHS, the Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU), Juvenile Probation (JPO), and local K-12 schools, was established by the Local Education Success Truancy Prevention Roundtable Committee chaired by Family Court Judge Dwayne Woodruff as a proactive approach to address students with six or more unexcused absences. Through the program, schools identify an internal point of contact who is responsible for referring truant students to a joint team of AIU, JPO, and DHS staff housed at the AIU's office in the Waterfront. Once the referral is received, AIU, JPO, and DHS staff collaborate with the student, family, school staff, magistrate judges, and any service providers involved with the student to determine student and family needs. Both the student and his or her family will then have access to the DHS network of resources and in-home supports – all without being CYF-active. This assistance comes at no cost to the school district or families.

“We’ve always had a lot of people doing wonderful work to help children with poor school attendance, but navigating the system and communicating effectively was sometimes a challenge,” said Carlena Jenkins, integrated school outreach supervisor in Integrated Program Services. “Focus on Attendance allows us to be a triage. If a child is active in CYF, we’re going to connect the caseworker to the school staff thoughtfully. If the family needs paid, in-home supports, we can provide that level of care. If they need special education mediation or internal school process changes, we can make the right connections. This program lets us honor the uniqueness of each situation.”

Focus on Attendance was piloted in the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years at Pittsburgh Manchester and Pittsburgh King. Since then, the work has been dedicated to reviewing system-wide policies and gaps in services. This effort was one of many examples of how the schools and community wrapped around the issue of addressing poor school attendance. This school year (2016-2017), the program has expanded to provide Focus on Attendance to each of Allegheny County's 43 school districts.