



Fall River Area Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Inc.
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By Sally Chapman Cameron, *a member of the Fall River Area Chamber of Commerce and Industry Education Committee.*

How the community gets every child to school

In Fall River, getting every child to be in school every day is a city-wide project. It is yet one more example of how the members of community – whether they are parents with kids in our city schools – are working together to help your kids succeed.

A broad coalition of business people, healthcare providers, parents, social services, and interested community members have made a real dent in one of the most pervasive causes of underachievement in Fall River – chronic absenteeism.

Chronic absence is defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year for any reason. Being absent merely 2 days a month, even in the primary grades, wreaks havoc on a child's ability to make progress. Research shows that children who are absent 10 percent of the year in sixth grade can predict whether or not they graduate. Missing 18 days of school in kindergarten often means children start first grade behind, and it can predict whether they are able to read in third grade.

The three-year effort has resulted in impressive reductions in chronic absences –

- Letourneau Elementary School – In Kindergarten over a three year period, chronic absences have shrunk from 19 percent in 2013-14 to 1 percent in 2015-16. Among second graders in 2015-16, who were in Kindergarten in 2013, the percentage remained low at 5 percent. Over three years the overall percentage of chronic absences dropped from 15 percent to 5 percent.
- At Durfee, overall chronic absences dropped from 33 percent to 21 percent.
- At Viveiros, the largest elementary school, chronic absences dropped from 25 percent to 15 percent.
- At Morton Middle, overall chronic absences dropped to 17 percent in 2016 from 24 percent in 2013.



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Rather than the old-time “truant officer” approach, this effort instead focuses on creative partnerships and community education to help everyone know that being in school matters. Led by the Attendance Matters Task Force, chaired by Barbara Allard, Community and Parent Engagement Coordinator, the effort has engaged partners all over the city to help, and, as Allard says, “We are educating, collaborating, and changing the culture in the city.”

- BayCoast Bank displays a red school chair, the symbol for the Attendance Matters effort, in each of its branches with information that to reinforce the importance of attendance. More than 25 other partners do so as well.
- The individual schools created attendance teams to brainstorm ways to help kids get to school. At Letourneau, for example, teachers and administrators created a “walking school bus” to pick up children to walk them to school. The team identified areas that had higher numbers of chronic absences and, rain or shine, walk the route to escort children to school.
- The Attendance Task Force works with the largest pediatrics practices in the city, Highland Pediatrics and Pediatric Associates, to use the same language when speaking with parents about the importance of school attendance. This has resulted in changes in times for well visits so the children are able go to school before or after appointments. They are also helping educate parents about the very limited list of ailments that should keep a child from attending school.
- Community programs working within the schools such as the mentoring program SMILES has incorporated the importance of attending school in its program.
- The Department of Children and Families is now including school attendance as a goal within its family plans.
- To promote September as Attendance Awareness Month, the Attendance Task Force recruited community members from all over the city to form a congratulatory “high five” corridor at every school on opening day to welcome students to the new school year. Participants dressed in their work clothes included a college president, bank president, police officers, healthcare providers, firefighters, and many more.

So if you wonder who cares about your kids and our city schools, remember that the community has your back.