



U.S. gov't agencies team up to battle absenteeism, but is that a job for the feds?

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Four U.S. government agencies have plans “to address and eliminate chronic absenteeism” in America’s public schools, but the initiative may have little impact and adds yet another layer to a large federal bureaucracy.

The U.S. departments of Education, Justice, Health and Human Services and Housing and Urban Development launched the initiative. They define chronic absenteeism as “missing at least 10 percent of school days in a school year for any reason, excused or unexcused.”

The initiative includes four “action steps,” including gathering data about absenteeism and a campaign of positive messages. The initiative aims to “ensure responsibility across sectors.”

The initiative probably won’t have much of an effect, said Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute.

Having multiple federal agencies involved “seems like a way to add a little extra bureaucracy,” he said.

“I don’t think there’s anything necessarily wrong with saying it’s good to be in school, but I don’t think that’s a message people aren’t getting,” he said. “My guess is people who are chronically absent, I don’t know if a public information campaign is going to change that, and it certainly isn’t something the (federal) government should be doing.”

Why focus on attendance? Students who don’t attend school don’t do as well and are more likely to drop out. They miss out on college and opportunities open to people with higher educations.

The initiative characterizes chronic absenteeism as “an equity issue.” According to the departments:

Chronic absenteeism ... is particularly prevalent among students who are low-income, students of color, students with disabilities, students who are highly

mobile, and/or juvenile justice-involved youth — in other words, those who already tend to face significant challenges and for whom school is particularly beneficial.

This could be nothing more than a feel-good move to ease the administration out of office, McCluskey said. It doesn't cost a lot, and there's nothing that controversial about saying kids should go to school.

But, he said, the initiative may miss the mark.

“It wouldn't surprise me if people who miss a lot of school don't do as well in school (as the initiative claims). The important question is, Is there an underlying factor that causes them to miss school?” he said. “(Students) may have family dysfunction in some way, or medical issues. There are likely other things that drive absenteeism that are also driving those (educational) outcomes, though the absenteeism probably doesn't help.”

Many of the fed's concerns have already been addressed locally.

HOPE is a network of Christian schools deliberately situated in low-income areas of Milwaukee and Racine. It teaches students from difficult backgrounds, thanks to the city's school voucher program.

The network includes six schools serving nearly 2,000 students. For the past three years, all the high school graduates have been accepted to college.

Average daily attendance last year? Ninety-three percent.

The network of schools has specific steps in place to ensure that students show up. While procedures vary from school to school, the attitude is the same: The school can't achieve its mission if students aren't there.

“We're not going to realize our mission of ‘Christ, College, Character’ unless we have our kiddos with us as much as possible,” said Zach Verriden, executive director of HOPE. “We're not able to share with them the word of God. We're not able to help them improve academically, and we're not helping them to strengthen their character and level of maturity and professionalism if we don't have them every second we can possibly have them.”

Attendance incentives include dress-down Fridays, schoolwide assemblies each semester to honor students with perfect attendance and celebrations of homerooms with 100 percent attendance. Some teachers call missing students at home, and the whole class tells them they miss the student and he or she should come to school, HOPE Prima principal Chelsea Prochnow said in an email.

Teachers give out their phone numbers and they communicate with parents regularly. The intentional effort resulted in 100 percent attendance at parent-teacher conferences last year, Verriden said.

Parent involvement translates easily to student attendance, but a big part of successful attendance is excellent teaching and teachers.

“When you make teaching and learning really high quality and exciting, you find that kids more and more want to be at school, and when you make things like attendance a big deal and celebrate and incentivize that publicly, you’ll find that kids really want to be part of that celebration and part of that attention,” Verriden said.

McCluskey agrees.

“There has been some research that shows some kids just don’t feel engaged in school. They’re just not interested in school, and they may be absent, but it’s not the absenteeism that’s the problem,” he said. “There’s nothing at school that makes them want to be there and makes them want to be active.”