

Chicago Tribune

CORONAVIRUS

From wake-up calls to wellness checks, how CPS is trying to make sure no child is left disconnected as remote learning resumes Tuesday

By Hannah Leone

Chicago Tribune

Published: Sep 06, 2020 at 5:00 am



Eric Cochran, a social worker at Amundsen High School, said he's had "a lot of sleepless nights thinking about certain kids." (Abel Uribe / Chicago Tribune)

Mather High School counselor Paige Stenzel finally found out through a student's friend why he'd stopped participating in school: He'd started working a third-shift job to help support his family.

Stenzel decided to email the student with the new information, saying she was sorry if she was breaking anyone's confidence, but she was worried about him and asked if they could come up with a plan to salvage the semester. There was still time to pass all his classes, she told him.

"Once he realized he hadn't ruined his entire life by having bad grades in one semester, he agreed to have a video conference with me, and we sat down and very specifically made a plan, like, 'You're doing this assignment, you're ignoring this assignment,'" Stenzel said. "... He's going to go into his senior year on track to graduate."

From exhausting phone trees and dropping off Chromebooks to calling police for wellness checks, social workers, counselors and other support staff in Chicago Public Schools have gone to great lengths to track down students who aren't connecting with their schools during remote learning. They've encountered disconnected phone numbers and outdated addresses, and found students through siblings, friends and community partners. Some were missing school because of work or caretaking responsibilities. Others had a parent on a ventilator or a death in the family, temporarily went to a different state or were homeless.

With a new school year starting remotely on Tuesday, school communities are redoubling their efforts, while also figuring out how to build new relationships virtually with incoming kindergartners and high school freshmen.

More centralized efforts have also involved security officers and family and community engagement specialists for the district, CPS CEO Janice Jackson said at a news conference Friday.

"We have been embarking on a pretty aggressive effort to reach out to those families that we know are hard to engage," Jackson said. "... We started with the families who did not engage in remote learning in the spring. We also identified students from vulnerable populations, justice-involved youth. We've reached out to tens of thousands of families to make sure that they know that the first day of school is next Tuesday, to also see if there are any barriers that will preclude them from coming to school."

Jackson said staff will also focus on prekindergarten, kindergarten and transition grades, because they've seen "some drop-off" among those groups in districts that have already started fall quarter. For any students who don't log in Tuesday, CPS has an outreach plan.

"We will call those families, but then we will also activate student engagement teams at the school who will be able to go out and knock on doors," Jackson said.

Low turnout for a counselor's virtual "freshman connection" program emphasized that the transition between eighth and ninth grades will take extra work this year, Stenzel said.

"Instead of having 100 or 200 kids at freshman connection, you're getting 50 to 70, and these students have not been here before," Stenzel said. "Sophomores trust us, sophomores know us, and I am concerned about freshmen reaching out."

Stenzel said Mather has tried offering incentives for students to stay connected with reasons to come by the school, such as picking up senior class T-shirts.



Makeup sets and school supplies are picked up at Clay Elementary in Hegewisch. Schools sometimes use giveaways as incentives to bring students in for supplies and distanced school visits. (Zbigniew Bzdak / Chicago Tribune)

Outside Clay Elementary on Friday morning, student support manager Chavara Turner gave students cosmetics donated by Ulta and backpacks full of school supplies from Cradles to Crayons. Turner works for Communities In Schools of Chicago, which places 30 full-time staff members in Chicago schools, where they typically work with 40 to 50 students. The nonprofit also partners with more than 100 other schools.

Turner was used to seeing her students in person daily, helping them through times of grief or stress, or guiding them in staying on task and forming decision-making skills. The pandemic prompted more conversations about self-management, she said.

Self-management and awareness was already a goal for one eighth-grade student she'd been meeting with weekly, but he stopped engaging when remote learning started.

The school gave him a Chromebook, but Turner later learned his mom lost her job and they didn't have internet access. The short-term solution: asking him to go to the school, sit outside, connect to Wi-Fi and submit and download materials. She also started daily calls to wake him up.

She asked, if he dropped out of eighth grade, would he be able to fulfill his goals, like being the first person in his immediate family to graduate from high school? Together, they made a road map for him to catch up and start working on skills he'd need to adapt for high school.

"He just needed someone to remind him to be accountable for himself, remind him this was an opportunity for him to shine," Turner said.



Chavara Turner, a student support manager with Communities In Schools of Chicago, gives away makeup sets and school supplies at Clay Elementary in Hegewisch on Friday. At right is student Mia Guerrero. (Zbigniew Bzdak / Chicago Tribune)

In the first two months of the coronavirus school shutdown, CPS was unable to make contact with more than 2,250 students. By the end of the school year, and after the district broadened the definition of “contact” to include students who had logged into a Google platform at least once, that number was 559, with missing data for an additional 405 students.

In the end, Mather marked zero of its nearly 1,500 students “unable to contact.” But any given week, no contact was reported with 11% to 25% of students.

At Amundsen High School, which has a similar number of students, three students couldn’t be reached even once.

“There’s definitely been a lot of sleepless nights thinking about certain kids,” said Amundsen social worker Eric Cochran.

He was relieved recently to learn his part-time colleague would be made full-time. That means they can split the caseload of 149 students who have a required number of social work minutes each week, in addition to anyone else who needs help. He works closely with counselors and teachers, responding to crises or checking in on students who experience loss or trauma. Before, he had about 100 students, when the recommendation is about half that, he said.

The National Association of Social Workers recommends a ratio of 1 social worker for every 250 general education students, or 1 per 50 when they serve students with “intensive needs.”

In the latest Chicago Teachers Union contract, CPS committed to phasing in a social worker in every school. This year [the district has budgeted](#) for hiring 44 social workers, bringing the total to 536.

Beyond working with students individually, Cochran said he typically runs more than a dozen groups, such as one focused on social skills for children with autism and another about anxiety tailored to girls. He encourages everyone to prioritize their mental health.

“We’ve had parents lose their jobs, the stressors have increased, and a lot of our kids have experienced a lot of trauma in their life,” he said. “... COVID has really messed with all our mental health, and we need to make sure to do things to ... try to stay positive, try to cope and handle things appropriately.”

Cochran emphasized that he wants parents to contact counselors and social workers if they ever have concerns about a student.

“Staying connected is really the most important,” he said. “A lot of our high school kids will say, ‘Yeah, everything’s fine,’ and they’ll go to their room and they’ll do their own thing, but a lot of times they’re not doing OK.”

Aisha Kinslow, a CPS social worker who splits her time between two elementary schools, said she has a caseload of more than 60 students but works with many more.

“You’re a social worker for the entire building, a resource for the entire building, staff included if they need help,” she said. It’s a lot to juggle, but she was able to connect with all of her students during remote learning and called each student’s parents at least weekly.

With the social isolation the pandemic has caused, any issues students were already facing have only been magnified, she said.

“It was a hard transition,” Kinslow said. “It’s just a challenge to be creative, to think of, how can I provide the services without being right there?”

She was struck by how many students last spring wanted remote learning to be more engaging and to have more group work. Some were overwhelmed amid distractions at home, while parents of children with autism told her the screen time was too much.

For the fall, she’s planning time-management activities along with the tips and coping skills she reviewed in the spring. With new students, she hopes to start out just getting to know them, introducing herself to a parent, figuring out their goals.

“I’m trying to think about that now, changing my whole outlook of how to provide services to kids during this time,” she said.

Kinslow said she’s trying to work around parents’ schedules, sometimes adjusting her own, to make it as easy as possible for them to get their children the support they need.

Stenzel at times has found her workdays stretching to 8 or 10 p.m.

“You’re on your computer and you don’t get up, you’re getting a little obsessed with finding a student,” she said. “... It’s a lot of Nancy Drew stuff, but just making the connections.”

Sometimes the case doesn’t get solved: Prior to the pandemic, she worked with one senior on a plan to get back on track to graduate. But since schools shut down in March, she hasn’t heard from him.

“We had a plan, and I lost him,” Stenzel said. “You wonder where your students are and if they’re OK.”

Mather has five counselors, two social workers and a student support manager through CIS Chicago, Stenzel said.

Stenzel is concerned more students didn’t reach out about their mental health. When students are in school, their peers and teachers see them every day and may notice if

something is off. Students can drop in to a counselor's office. Online, it's hard to tell if they look OK, she said.

It's not always clear how many missed online classes should be a red flag. When there's concern about a student, reaching them can involve all of their teachers, the behavioral health department and school leaders. Stenzel said some of her colleagues used the summer to follow up with recent graduates and make sure they were able to keep their post-high school plans.

"CPS social workers are amazing," Kinslow said. "I have some of the best colleagues, they're so smart, they're so creative. If I have a problem, all I have to do is call a colleague and I'll figure it out."

hleone@chicagotribune.com

This article was updated to reflect the finalized number of schools in which Communities In Schools of Chicago will place full-time staff members for the 2020-21 school year.