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BREAKING NEWS AT CHICAGOTRIBUNE.COM

An empty-desk epidemic

TRIBUNE WATCHDOG Starting as early as kindergarten, tens of thousands of children in Chicago public schools are missing so many days of class that their educations are in peril. But little is being done to get them back in school.



SCOTT STRAZZANTE/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Fifth-grader Curtis Gardner, center, lines up after recess at Spencer Elementary Technology Academy. Curtis has nearly perfect attendance this year, according to Chicago Public Schools, even though he didn't register until about a month after classes started.

By DAVID JACKSON, GARY MARX AND ALEX RICHARDS | Tribune reporters

As city leaders battle over the future of Chicago's failing school system, a stunning fact is being ignored: Truancy and absenteeism in the elementary grades are crippling the education of tens of thousands of children.

Nearly 32,000 students in kindergarten through eighth grade — or roughly 1 in 8 — missed four weeks or more of class during the 2010-11 school year, according to a Tribune analysis of previously undisclosed Chicago attendance data.

For children born into poverty, the flood of missed days threatens to swallow any hope for a better life. For the Chicago Public Schools, the empty seats undermine efforts to boost achievement and cost the district millions in attendance-based funding.

The crushing pattern of detachment from school often begins in kindergarten, when no child can be said to have a choice in the matter. In the 2010-11 school year, 19 percent of Chicago kindergartners were officially listed as chronic truants because they racked up nine or more unexcused absences.

But truancy is only one cause of missed classroom time. Parents often keep students out of school for days or even weeks of excused absences, sometimes on the flimsiest of pretexts, educators say.

The district's official attendance statistics, meanwhile, obscure the depth of the problem because school authorities are required to count a child as absent only if he



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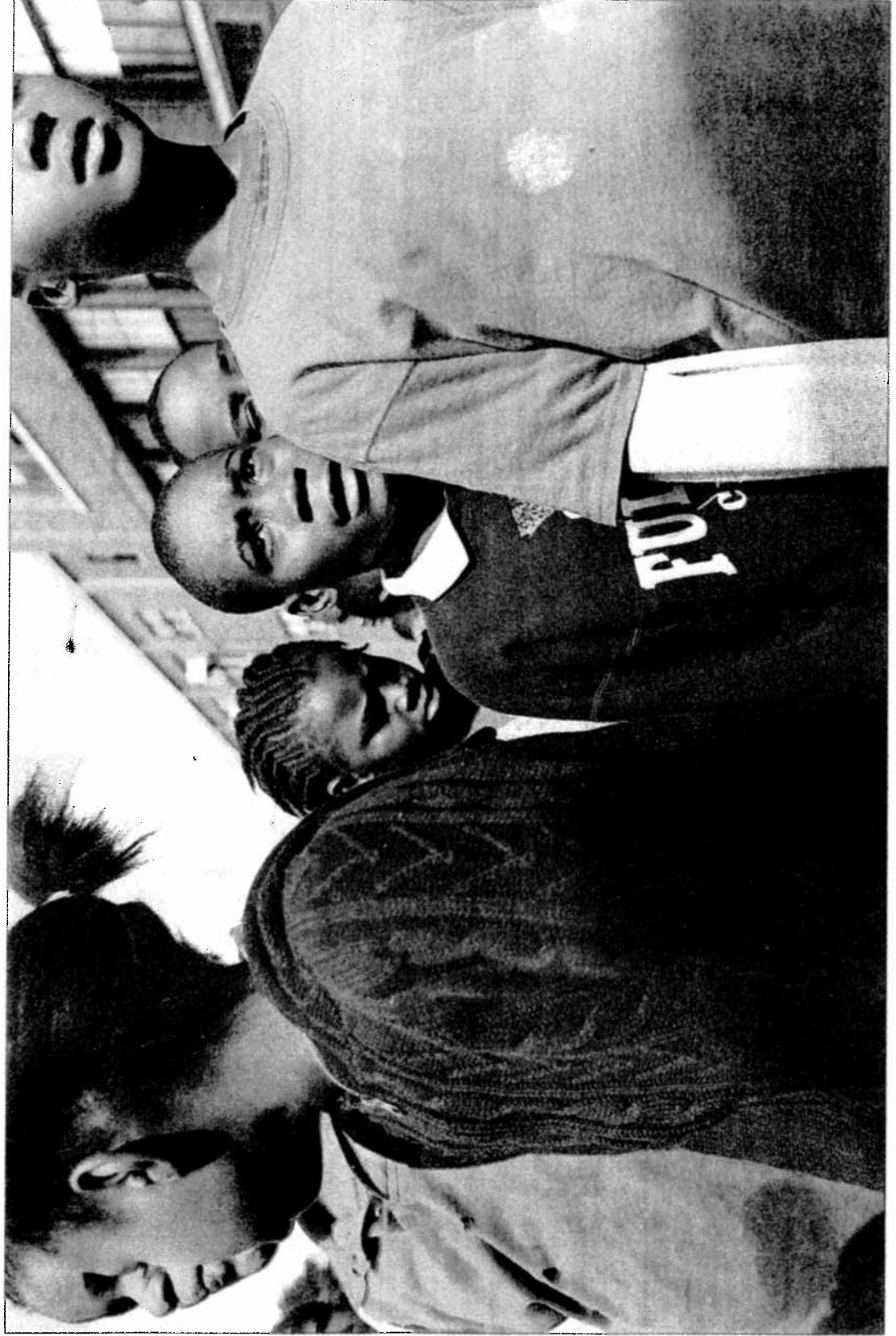
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more simply because their families enrolled them late, pulled them out early or lost time while transferring between Chicago schools.

Totaling the time since kindergarten when Curtis was absent or not enrolled, the fifth-grader has already lost 180 days, more than a full classroom year, according to records provided by his family and other sources. He spent several of those lost weeks this fall drifting through his mother's threadbare apartment or driving around the Austin neighborhood with her longtime companion, an alley mechanic who fixes cars for cash.

"I felt sad because I wanted to learn like the rest of the kids," said Curtis, a polite and gregarious boy whose family struggled to assemble the paperwork required to enroll him. "I kept telling my mom: 'I want to go to school; I want to go to school.'"

Absenteeism in the elementary grades is especially acute in African-American communities on the South and West sides scarred by gang violence, crippling unemployment and grinding poverty.

Counting truancy, excused absences and gaps in enrollment, more than 20 percent of black elementary school students missed at least four weeks of class in 2010-11, compared with 7 percent of whites and 8 percent of Hispanics.

"I've had kids come in and miss a year or so of school without blinking an eye," said Shawn Jackson, Curtis' principal at Spencer Elementary Technology Academy, where the student body is almost entirely African-American. "I have 10-year-olds staying home to watch a 5-year-old sibling. If the parent or guardian can't afford to take off work, the next person in line has to step up."

Children with a learning or emotional disability also miss class in disproportionate numbers, the Tribune found, despite federal laws designed to keep such students in school. About 42 percent of K-8 students with an emotional disability

missed four weeks of classes in 2010-11, compared with 12 percent of students without a disability.

The Tribune investigation is based on internal attendance data on about 247,000 elementary school students from 2010-11, the most recent year available. To assess the total number of missed classroom days per child, the Tribune analyzed both excused and unexcused absences, as well as gaps in enrollment for students who stayed in the district.

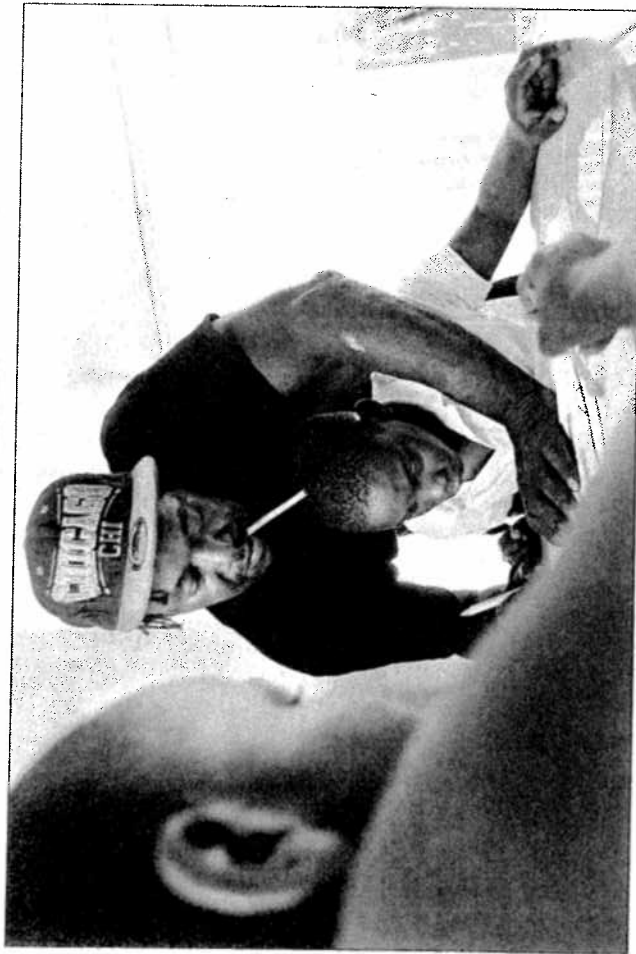
The district stripped identifying information from its data to meet strict educational privacy laws, but the Tribune located off-the-grid students by interviewing youths, their families and people who work with children. In some cases, parents and others provided documents showing how many days individual students missed.

Reporters encountered girls whose relatives made them stay home to care for younger siblings and unsupervised boys who all but lived on the streets. Many students lost weeks or even months of class time as their families scrambled from home to home, fleeing foreclosure and debt.

In several cases uncovered by the Tribune, children's absence from elementary school depended on the silence and inaction of relatives and neighbors, as well as government agencies outside the schoolhouse.

"Just right on my block, I see kids who have stopped coming to school. I can't believe this is a hidden problem — I think people are turning their heads away from it," said Cynthia Peterson, community liaison at Spencer.

Schools CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett, who took charge of the district a month ago, declined to comment. Spokeswoman



SCOTT STRAZZANTE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Jerry Brown helps Curtis Gardner, 11, with his homework at their West Side apartment. Curtis spent some of the time he was absent from school driving around the Austin neighborhood with Brown, an alley mechanic and his mom's longtime companion.

No truant officers

Robyn Ziegler acknowledged that "there are far too many children who are missing more than four weeks of school in a given year, and that really eliminates any ability to establish a routine and a sense of belonging or for any degree of continuity in learning."

Massive budget shortfalls have limited the district's resources, Ziegler added, but "we're looking to continue ways to engage parents, students and the community at large in keeping kids in the classroom."

In grades K-8, poor attendance often stems from factors beyond the schools' control or even the child's—chaotic homes, ineffective parents, rising rates of poverty and homelessness. But as the sole institution that has consistent contact with every youth, schools bear an inescapable burden to identify and help retrieve missing students.

Because the state provides local districts vital funding based on attend-

ance rates, boosting attendance at CPS by just 1 percent also would mean close to \$9 million in extra money for the district, according to Tribune calculations confirmed by officials from the Illinois State Board of Education.

Yet city officials have steadily choked off anti-truancy resources amid an ongoing financial crisis and a frequent churning of top administrators.

The district eliminated its army of truancy officers two decades ago, although a

handful of administrators focus on attendance and sometimes make home visits. In the past 20 years, Chicago has cycled through more than a dozen truancy programs while collecting few if any data showing whether they worked or why some failed.

Ziegler said those programs were eliminated under previous district administrations. "The responsibility for developing and implementing the strategies is at the school level" now, she added, "because they are in a unique position to know what's needed most in their communities."

However, the Tribune found that when a child does not come to school, today's principals rely primarily on a robocalling system that often fails to connect to anyone.

"These are the kids who most need the help, and principals just don't have the resources," said Julius Lawson, principal of Von Humboldt Elementary school on the Northwest Side. "We don't have truant officers. We don't ... hold parents accountable when their kids are not in school."

The fight against elementary school truancy isn't simply about getting children back to their lessons. When a home is unsafe or the streets are home, absence from class is often a signal that a child is in deep

peril.

In one chilling case uncovered by the Tribune, a girl in fourth grade became pregnant after disappearing for two months from her South Side elementary school in spring 2010.

At the time, she and her two younger brothers lived with their great-aunt in a filthy house where adults with records of drug abuse and violence were also staying, government records show.

Child welfare workers took protective custody of all the children after learning of the pregnancy, and the preteen girl underwent a traumatic and risky late-term abortion.

In a new foster home and school, the girl and her brothers reacted defiantly to structure and discipline, records show. As she entered fifth grade, the girl was diagnosed with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, and neither of her brothers, who entered second and fourth grades that year, could read.

Even under less extreme circumstances, spending months away from school in the early grades often puts children on a track toward delinquency and substance abuse. Youths who ultimately drop out are more likely to wind up on public assistance and do prison

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time, at enormous cost to taxpayers, national studies have shown.

From the Big Muddy River state prison, where he is serving a 12-year robbery sentence, 32-year-old Dwayne Taylor recalled disappearing from school at age 11 and joining the underworld of truants on Chicago's West Side.

"I ran with 10- and 11-year-olds every day. There were 14 or 15 of us," Taylor said.

He and his buddies fashioned a lean-to clubhouse from discarded plywood "so the police wouldn't pick us up. We'd stay there until school was over. We'd steal cars, sell drugs and steal out of stores, and lay up in the club," Taylor said.

"There's a million more like me out there every day."

13 lost families

In early October, two months into Spencer's year-round "Track E" calendar, dozens of manila files were spread across the desk of attendance clerk Denise Fells.

Each represented a youth who attended Spencer the year before but didn't show up again, or a child whose family began to register him or her in the fall, then

disappeared.

Some of the families, like Curtis Gardner's, were struggling to produce the paperwork required for enrollment. Some couldn't come up with the \$15 for a copy of their child's birth certificate, the \$20 for a parent's state ID or even the \$2.25 bus fare to get downtown to buy those credentials.

Other children simply couldn't be found.

Elementary attendance rates are at the crux of several high-stakes accountability measures reported by school districts and states, and local principals across the city said they face intense public and political pressure to show improvement.

As part of their effort to track down missing students and bring them to school, Fells and Jackson, the principal, have drawn on parent volunteers to make phone calls and send letters. Still, by last week, Fells had failed to locate 13 families, and she began preparing "lost child" reports for the CPS central office.

"We just put the file to the side (and) pray for the parents that they bring their child to school," said parent volunteer Dyres Walker. "They could be in school somewhere else or they could be wandering the streets. It's really scary."

The Tribune's investigation found that the CPS attendance database listed about 1,600 kindergartners through eighth-graders as "unable to locate" or "did not arrive" in the 2010-11 school year. Authorities couldn't tell the Tribune what had happened to those students — whether they had transferred out of the district or were not attending school at all.

Ducking into classrooms and crisscrossing the hallways, Jackson radiates energy and optimism, and the principal has been credited with pulling up the historically dismal attendance and test scores that put Spencer on course for shutdown before he arrived in 2007.

Spencer was pulled off the probation list last year, and the century-old schoolhouse has recast itself as a citadel of hope in one of Chicago's most distressed and violent neighborhoods.

Attendance problems in grades K-8 are concentrated in communities like this, with higher crime rates and more single-parent households and families on public assistance. In Chicago, many African-American communities struggle with this convergence of hardships, and the city's attendance data show that disconnection from school

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SCOTT STRAZZANTE/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Spencer Principal Shawn Jackson tells eighth-grader Janel Garrett that she is late for class at the West Side school. Janel, who missed more than a month at the start of the year, said she "would wake up late, eat, watch TV" during that time.

Empty-desk epidemic



Janel Garrett holds a 2-year-old niece at her family's West Side apartment. Janel's mom, Denise Smith, says she and her daughters have slept in public parks and in a car.

chicagotribune.com/truancy

Watch a video of Tribune reporters David Jackson and Gary Marx talking about their investigation into truancy in Chicago schools, see Tribune photographer Scott Strazzante's photos and find out how the Tribune analyzed school attendance data.

in the earliest grades is especially common among black children.

For example, 36 percent of the city's African-American kindergartners missed at least four weeks of school in 2010-11 because of truancy, excused absences or gaps in enrollment — more than twice the rate of Hispanic and white students.

As children get older, the reason for missing school can be as simple as not having shoes that fit, clean clothes or winter coats.

"It's obvious sometimes that they haven't had a bath or their clothes and coats are filthy," said Michelle Young, vice president of the local school council at May Elementary Community Academy on the West Side. "The other kids tease them — children can be cruel. I feel we should have a washer and dryer here."

At Spencer, eighth-grader Janel Garrett started class more than a month late, just days before Curtis and more than a dozen others enrolled. Last year she missed more than two months at another elementary school, records show.

Her mother, Denise Smith, has felony convictions and lives in a West Side apartment on public aid. In the past, Smith said, she and her daughters have occasionally slept in public parks and in a car.

To enroll Janel at Spencer, Smith had to prove she was living in the area after moving from a West Side apartment outside the school's boundaries. That meant getting a new state ID, but she had trouble paying for it.

During the weeks when Janel missed school, Smith said she kept the girl indoors because of frequent shootings and drug dealing right outside her doorstep.

"I would wake up late, eat, watch TV. It was boring," Janel said. "I was glad to be in school."

As Janel adjusted to classes, other new arrivals kept showing up. On Friday, Fells registered four new students — in grades eight, seven, six and two — who hadn't been in school yet this year.

When any of the 890 or so students enrolled at Spencer don't arrive in the morning, Jackson said school staff normally calls the family. "Also, they get the robocall, but the numbers don't work a lot of the time," he said.

One reason such phone calls often don't succeed is that impoverished families are constantly on the move. Thousands of CPS students are homeless — at the end of the last school year, records listed 9,500 K-8 students "in temporary living situations," meaning their families were moving between the homes of relatives or living in emergency shelters, hotels or cars.

Jackson was one of only a few principals authorized by CPS to speak on the

record about elementary school absenteeism, but his concerns are shared by many administrators at other schools who spoke privately with the Tribune.

"We lost resources from CPS. Truant officers were gone before I got here," Jackson said. He also lost a pilot program that hired parents to visit families of truant children. Contrary to his expectation, Jackson said, the families seemed to appreciate the contact.

To connect parents to Spencer — and emphasize the value of attending school — the principal has been offering adults free classes, from GED prep work to computer training and photography.

For the children, Jackson said his teachers installed computers, held science fairs and tried to provide a curriculum "that engages students and makes them want to be here. That is what we can control."

'She wants to go'

Solving the crisis of elementary truancy would require authorities inside and outside the school system to cooperate. But in numerous cases examined by the Tribune, that didn't happen.

For example, a variety of officials had contact this spring with a troubled mother named Sharina Junior who was staying temporarily in a condemned and foreclosed South Side bungalow without heat or water, records and interviews show.

For more than a year, caseworkers with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services had noted in their files that Junior's four children were rarely in school, if ever. Police had taken the youngsters to relatives' homes when their mother was in the lockup or a psychiatric hospital. And employees of a neighborhood school found themselves face to face with an angry Junior as she tried, unsuccessfully, to enroll two of her children.

Yet none of these government entities found a way to ensure that Junior's children — three boys and a girl, ages 4 to 11 — were getting an education. When police and DCFS officials finally placed them in protective custody in May, none of the children had been to a school or preschool for months, according to DCFS.

One boy, age 6, told investigators he couldn't spell his name and didn't know his birthday.

"It is a typical story in this neighborhood. It's not unusual that kids just fall through the cracks here — it just isn't," said minister Yolanda Morris, who runs the New Mount Calvary Missionary Baptist Church day camp in Englewood that Junior's children attended this summer. "It's like they drop out and disappear and don't exist anymore."

Starting last year, Junior was the subject of four investigations by DCFS after hotline calls alleged that she beat her children, left them unsupervised and abused drugs.

A relative and a neighbor separately called the DCFS hotline this spring to say they came across Junior's 7-year-old boy smoking marijuana or the 4-year-old openly displaying the drug in the hallway of a South Side apartment building.

"They stay up all times of the night, and none of them are enrolled in school," one caller told DCFS in April. "These children are in a bad situation and someone needs to save them."

In the four DCFS investigations, an agency summary said, one consistent finding was "lack of school attendance by children."

Under state law, when DCFS workers learn that a child is not attending school, they are legally obligated to notify the school — or the regional office of education if the child is not enrolled at all.

But in the thick DCFS files examined by the Tribune, there is only one men-

tion of contact between the agency and the district. In April, an investigator left a message with the CPS law department asking "if there is a school in the area that the children are enrolled in," according to a DCFS report. The files show no record of any response.

Kendall Marlowe, DCFS operations chief, declined to comment on this or any specific case but said: "We have to do a better job of notifying and working with school districts when we learn of kids not attending school."

Chicago police declined to comment on Junior's specific case and referred reporters to their general policy regarding youths who miss school: When officers encounter a child younger than 16 during school hours, they write a "school absentee report," send a copy to CPS and return the child to school or home.

Last year, police filed 34,800 such absentee reports, records show. But at CPS headquarters, the forms are sent to storage without being analyzed, the Tribune found. "Due to staffing and time constraints, CPS is often unable to read the reports or take real-time action to address the needs of the youth," an official CPS report to the state said.

For Junior's oldest children, the last school they attended for any length of time was Henderson Elementary last winter, according to family members and DCFS records. But the eldest child — a slender, soft-spoken girl with braided hair — told DCFS that "her mother would argue all the time with the principal, so they just stayed home."

During the months they were absent, the 11-year-old did her best to care for her younger brothers and teach them the ABCs, records and interviews show. She told a DCFS caseworker that "she wants to go to school and every day she is told that she is going to school and it has not happened," according to a government report.

Junior did make one attempt to enroll two of her children at Cook Elementary in April. But she was arrested after she "became irate and struck (a school official) in the upper chest area with an open hand," a

police report said. Charges of battery and trespass to government property were filed but later dropped.

DCFS took custody of Junior's children after determining she had neglected them. In an interview, Junior said she is taking medication for depression, attending a parental guidance course and seeing her children when DCFS arranges supervised visits.

"I don't like that I am considered a bad parent," she said. "It's upsetting to me to not be capable of the things normal people do. Fitting in with society, being able to relate to one another. Those are things I am hoping for."

Grandmother Mary Lewis, the children's current guardian, said she is doing everything in her power to give the youngsters a sense of trust and normalcy, including walk-

ing them nine blocks to the neighborhood elementary school.

"They've been through enough," Lewis said. "They don't need to go through nothing else."

Lewis showed reporters school progress reports for the oldest three children. The girl earned an A in writing during her first month of seventh grade; her first-grade brother earned mostly B's while the third-grader got all F's and D's.

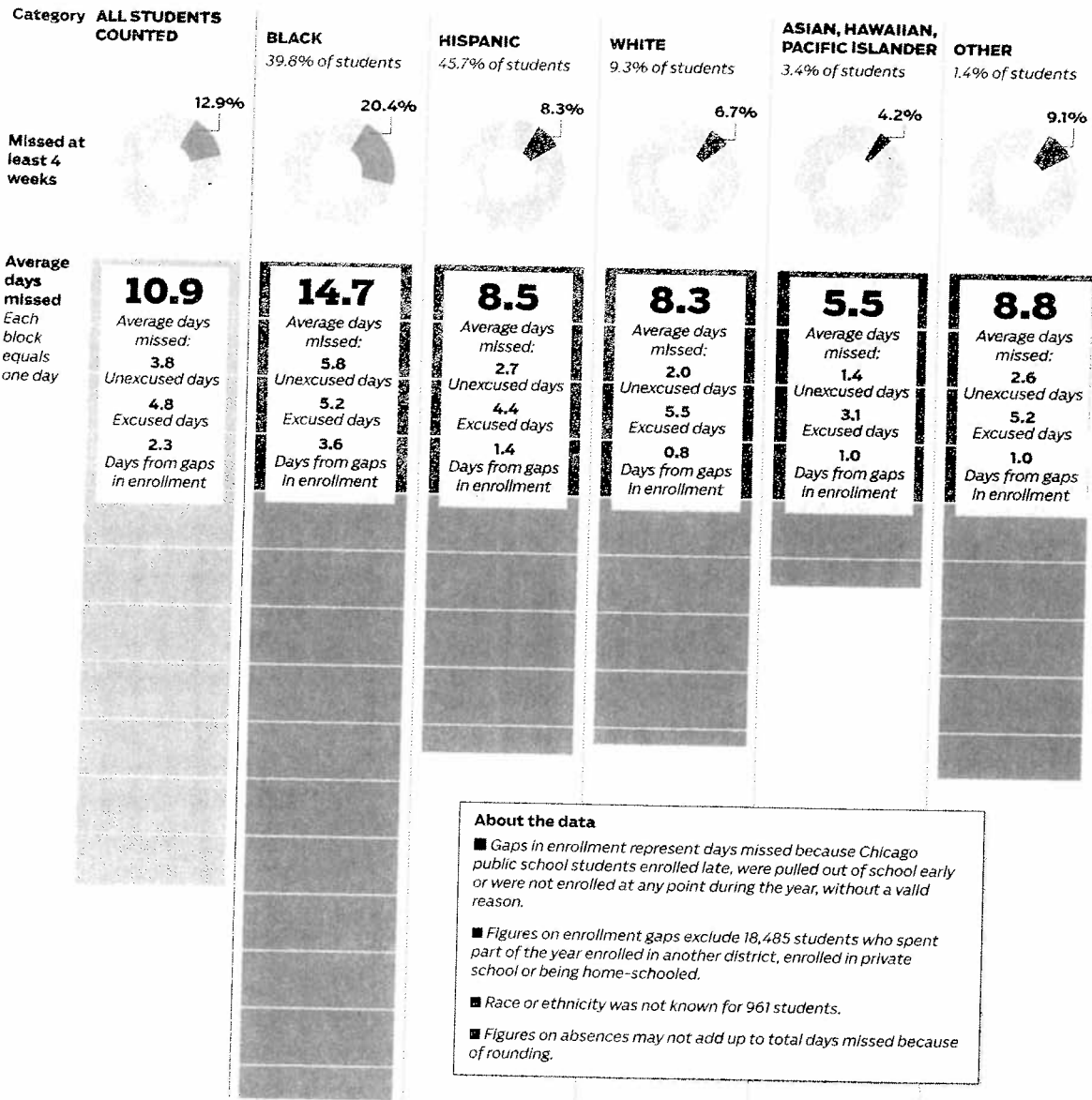
But they had missed only one day of classes between them.

dyjackson@tribune.com
gmarx@tribune.com
arichards@tribune.com

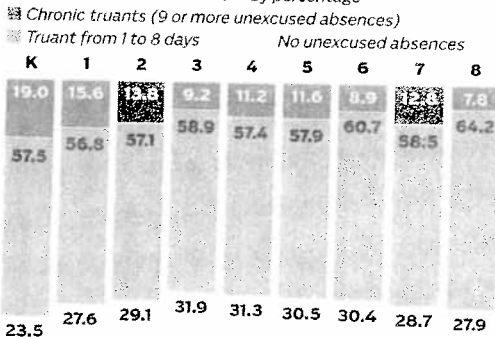
A pattern of missed school days

There were 170 days in Chicago's 2010-11 school year, but many children in grades K-8 didn't make it to class nearly that often, according to a Tribune analysis of data on 247,000 students. To read more about how these conclusions were reached, visit chicagotribune.com/analysis.

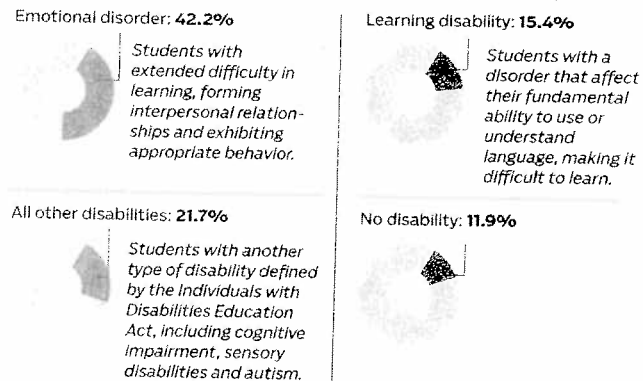
Absences from school, by race



TRUANCY IN GRADES K-8 By percentage

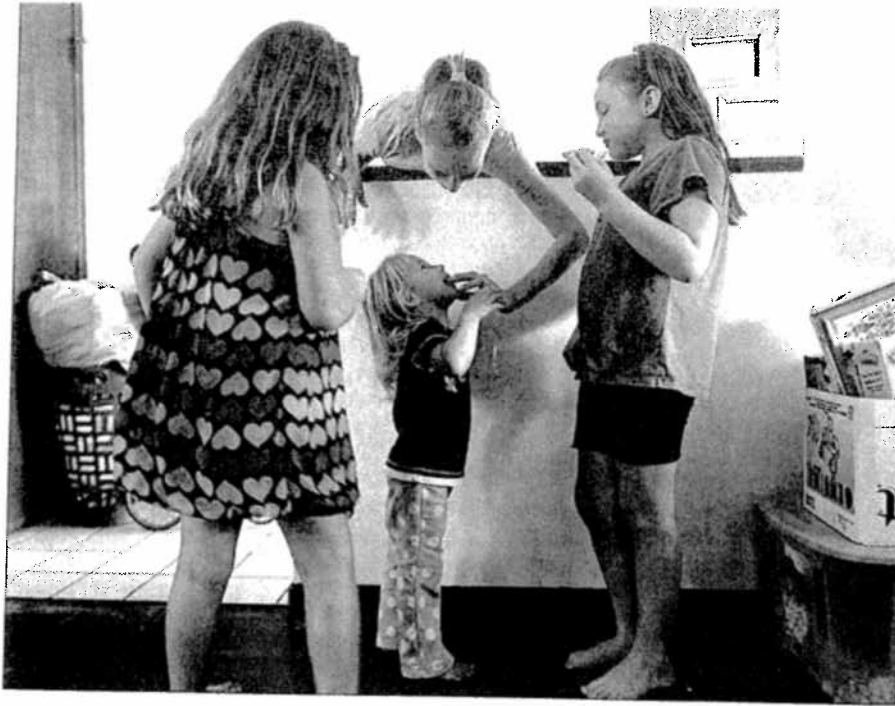


STUDENTS WHO MISSED FOUR OR MORE WEEKS By disability type



SOURCE: Tribune analysis of Chicago Public Schools records

ALEX RICHARDS AND KATIE NIELAND/TRIBUNE



SCOTT STRAZZANTE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Nicole "Nickii" Ledcke, top center, missed months of school to help care for her siblings, including sisters Roxanne, from left, Savanna and Revianna.

A challenge for 'Mommy No. 2'

BY DAVID JACKSON AND GARY MARX | Tribune reporters

As Nicole "Nickii" Ledcke puts it, she had "legit reasons" to drop out in the elementary grades. Her gangbanger father had been murdered when Ledcke was a toddler, and her unemployed mother was perpetually moving the family of seven children one step ahead of creditors.

Nicknamed "Mommy No. 2," Ledcke often spent school days changing her younger siblings' diapers, doing the laundry and scrubbing the house.

Year after year, she missed months of classroom time, school records and interviews show.

Now 18, Ledcke is struggling against long odds to graduate from high school — even as she is searching for a school that will take her 15-year-old brother, who has all but dropped out.

"A lot of kids, as soon as they fail, they give up. But I had the willpower to go on," Ledcke said. "Since I've been in fourth grade I've always loved school. I've been on honors. But my schooling just got messed up."

This fall, Ledcke started her senior year at Young Women's Leadership Charter School on the South Side, Chicago's only all-girls public school, where officials said she had been an exemplary student.

"When she comes to school, it was truly because of her own doing. It wasn't anyone making her come — she pressed her way here and made it here," said school Director Deniece Fields. "She's had a life, that's for sure."

But in late September, Ledcke learned that she needed to make up two half-credits in speech and algebra, and the frustrated teen stopped attending and took a part-time job as a nanny. Last week she registered to enroll in a new alternative school, and she insists she will find a way to graduate this year.

"I have a million reasons why I could have dropped out at any time — legit reasons," Ledcke said.

Ticking off a list of the seven Chicago public schools she has attended, Ledcke recounts living in shelters and bouncing around the country as her mother moved from Florida to Ohio, always returning to their native Bridgeport neighborhood.

"We've been evicted and had our stuff on the street," Ledcke said. "We never sit in one place too long. Stability was not part of my life."

In her family's 31st Street apartment were piles of black plastic garbage bags stuffed with clothes. The family was about to move again, without a new lease lined up.

"It's like, don't even unpack, we're going to have to go again," said Ledcke's mother, Shannon Zvirblis.

The family in 2010 moved to the southwest suburbs, but Zvirblis could never collect the paperwork required to enroll her children in school. Asked why, Zvirblis said she was nearly nine months pregnant at the time and relying on a borrowed van with soft tires, faulty brakes and lug nuts coming off one wheel.

"That stopped the school thing for a couple of months," Zvirblis said.

Ledcke and three elementary-level siblings spent nearly half the year out of school as a result.

Besides problems finding rent money, Zvirblis said she has been hobbled by depression.

"My mom wouldn't get up until 3 p.m. sometimes," Ledcke said. "I had to hold the house down."

Zvirblis said of Ledcke: "She's my left arm. She does everything for me. Days I couldn't get out of bed, the kids, the breakups, my psychotic behavior, my back and forth all our life. I could go on forever."

Earlier this year, Ledcke witnessed the knife slaying of a 29-year-old cousin outside a Bridgeport bar after a dispute over a love triangle, and she missed school when she testified before the grand jury.

Returning to class the next day, Ledcke felt school authorities had no clue about her family turmoil.

"I am going through stuff, and people half the time think you are bull-crapping about it," she said. "People judge you. They say, 'Oh! It's 10 o'clock: You're here today!'"

She said she would clutch her books and walk by, thinking: "You don't know my life. Let me just be here."

Ledcke knows her future is precarious. "It's like, one fall kind of brings me two steps down," she said. "But I don't give up."

Missed chances in truancy fight

Chicago school officials have tried but largely abandoned various strategies for combating truancy in grades K-8 in the past two decades, while collecting little if any data on whether the programs were effective or why some failed. A few programs remain in place but operate on a limited scale or are riddled with problems, the Tribune found.

Eliminated

Truancy officers: The 153 truant officers who once knocked on doors when children had three consecutive days of unexcused absences were eliminated in 1992 because of budget constraints. For a time, the Chicago Public Schools' central office used area attendance administrators, or Triple A's, to assist schools. But they were also dismissed in recent years, and authorities now say individual schools are best positioned to determine whether they have an attendance problem and to devise solutions.

Chronic truancy adjudication: Illinois law authorizes school districts to hold truancy hearings at which a hearing officer can require the student and his or her parents to improve attendance, get counseling or do community service. The little-used program was suspended in 2010.

Community groups: CPS once gave grants of roughly \$60,000 each to about a dozen community organizations assigned to specific schools to retrieve chronic nonattenders. The program ended two years ago amid internal questions about cost and accountability. Principals can now use discretionary funds to hire outside agencies.

Ongoing

Robocalls: If a child doesn't arrive by 9:30 a.m., schools initiate robocalls to contact the family, followed by mailings after the fifth and 10th unexcused absences. Of the 5.7 million calls made in the 18-month period ending in July, more than a quarter failed, mostly because the phone number did not have enough digits or was out of service, CPS data show. "Successful" calls include those that reach an answering machine. Officials say it is difficult to maintain valid phone numbers for highly mobile impoverished families. The district said it is seeking a new contractor to "increase our ability to complete many more calls each day."

Truancy hotline: People who spot a school-age child on the streets or in a home during school hours can make a report by calling 773-553-4000. The callers typically get a recording. CPS policy is to check messages every other day, but one former employee said it often took days longer. CPS would not provide records that could enable the Tribune to gauge the hotline's effectiveness but said the hotline gets just two calls a day on average.

State grants: CPS this year received \$3.2 million in state grants for truancy prevention, down from \$3.7 million last year, and uses that money to staff "Re-engagement Centers" focused on high school truants and dropouts.

Check & Connect: Trained mentors make weekly hourlong visits or calls with about 450 at-risk first-through seventh-graders under a pilot program using federal and private foundation grants. The mentors work with school staff and bring in services from outside agencies. The program targets youths with midlevel attendance problems — 10 to 33 missed days last year. Check & Connect is in its second year in Chicago but was effective in reducing dropouts in Minnesota, studies show.

Missed opportunities

Police reports: When Chicago police find or detain a child younger than 16 on the streets during school hours, they hand-write "school absentee reports" and send a carbon copy to school authorities. At CPS headquarters, the police forms are boxed and sent to storage without being analyzed. "Due to staffing and time constraints, CPS is often unable to read the reports or take real-time action to address the needs of the youth," an official CPS report to the state said. Students returned to school by police "often (go) in the front door and out the back." Last year, police filed 34,800 absentee reports.

Court referrals: Illinois law allows county courts to intervene in the most serious truancy cases. Parents who "knowingly and willfully permit" young children to remain truant can be charged in adult court with a misdemeanor. Chronically truant youths and their parents also can be brought into juvenile court and provided with supervision and counseling or sanctioned. The Cook County state's attorney's office said it knew of no truancy referrals from CPS to the juvenile or adult courts during the last decade while a CPS official said school officials were told truancy cases would not be prosecuted.

— David Jackson and Gary Marx

Other districts are
getting students
back to school
Coming Monday

Chicago Tribune



QUESTIONS? CALL 1-800-TRIBUNE

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2012

BREAKING NEWS AT CHICAGOTRIBUNE.COM

Female vets trying to keep corps group going

As numbers dwindle, Chicago WAC association looks to add to its ranks

BY BARBARA BROTMAN
Tribune reporter

Time has taken its toll on the Chicago Chapter of the Women's Army Corps Veterans' Association.

It once bustled with members, as befitted its venerable history. It is the first group of WAC veterans in the nation — Chapter 1, "Where it Began," its newsletter puts it. Formed in 1946 by WAC mothers and returning WACs, it served as the model for the group's national association, which also was organized at a meeting in Chicago.

By the 1970s, some 400 women veterans belonged to the group. Chapter meetings were so big that they could only be accommodated by the city's largest hotels.

Even now, members remain devoted. "We had an experience that is unique," said Lizette Rhone, a retired schoolteacher from the North Side who is the chapter's president. "And we're proud of the fact that we ... made a contribution to our country in time of need."

But the World War II veterans who make up the majority of the chapter's members are in their 80s and 90s. Many have become ill or frail, moved away, or died.

The Chicago chapter is down to 20 members. Of those, only five are able to attend the monthly meetings.

"Attrition is taking a whole lot of us out of the picture," Rhone said.

"We are thinning out," said Yolanda Imhoff, 94, of Evanston.

But not giving up. Bound by shared

Please turn to Page 8

How Obama won, and what's ahead for GOP

A peek inside "the cave" at President Barack Obama's headquarters reveals the math and data wizards who helped drive the campaign to victory using analytics. Their work on predicting voter behavior may change

TRIBUNE WATCHDOG EMPTY DESKS

Despite budget cuts and a sagging economy, Galesburg finds ways to get students back in school. Similar methods could work in Chicago, educators say.



SCOTT STRAZZANTE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Denise Miller, an outreach worker at Silas Willard School in Galesburg, Ill., listens for activity at a home as she looks for a student who didn't show up for class. The district says its anti-truancy program has brought in \$234,000 in additional funding tied to attendance.

'No giving up' on town's young truants

BY GARY MARX AND DAVID JACKSON | Tribune reporters

GALESBURG, Ill. — Moving from Chicago's South Side to a public housing development in this city of 22,000 was a major culture shock for Keona Lee.

For one thing, she never expected to find a truancy officer at her door, asking why her second-grade daughter had missed one day of school.

"In Chicago they don't do that," said the single

mother across Illinois — from Lake, Will and McHenry counties to Murphysboro, in southern Illinois, and Galesburg, near the Iowa border — are using an array of tools to get students back in school.

Outreach workers who make home visits and provide services can help reduce truancy, records and interviews show. With rising rates of child poverty and homelessness contributing to the problem, sometimes the fix is as simple as an alarm clock or winter boots.

Silence of families, neighbors keeps some cases hidden

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Lack of

TRIBUNE WATCHDOG EMPTY DESKS

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SCOTT STRAZZANTE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Denise Miller, an outreach worker at Silas Willard School in Galesburg, Ill., listens for activity at a home as she looks for a student who didn't show up for class. The district says its anti-truancy program has brought in \$234,000 in additional funding tied to attendance.

'No giving up' on town's young truants

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2012

BY GARY MARX AND DAVID JACKSON | Tribune reporters

Silence of families, neighbors keeps some cases hidden

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Lack of funding hinders fight against truancy, educators say

Page 13

GALESBURG, Ill. — Moving from Chicago's South Side to a public housing development in this city of 32,000 was a major culture shock for Keona Lee. For one thing, she never expected to find a truancy officer at her door, asking why her second-grade daughter had missed one day of school.

"In Chicago they don't do that," said the single mother, who has lived in Galesburg for five years. "In Chicago they don't care. Your second-grader isn't coming to school, they don't come to the house to see what's going on. That's one kid they don't have to worry about."

While Lee struggled to get the willful 7-year-old to school as required by Illinois law, the truancy officer returned several more times, then issued Lee a \$75 ticket.

The intervention exasperated Lee, but she admits that it worked. "I made sure she got to school every day since then," said Lee, whose daughter is now in third grade.

While Chicago has all but abandoned anti-truancy programs for elementary students, districts

across Illinois — from Lake, Will and McHenry counties to Murphysboro, in southern Illinois, and Galesburg, near the Iowa border — are using an array of tools to get students back in school.

Outreach workers who make home visits and provide services can help reduce truancy, records and interviews show. With rising rates of child poverty and homelessness contributing to the problem, sometimes the fix is as simple as an alarm clock or winter boots.

Other cases can be dauntingly complex. Some children are kept out of school to serve as surrogate caretakers for younger siblings. Others come from families roiled by domestic violence, mental illness or homelessness, where the adults lack the will or wherewithal to get their kids to class.

For problems the outreach workers can't solve, regional school authorities convene truancy hearings with the student and his or her family to hammer out attendance strategies and contracts.

And if need be, indifferent parents can be held accountable through tickets like the one issued to Lee — or, in the most extreme cases, through



Part of outreach worker Denise Miller's job is to go into the neighborhoods to look for students who don't show up for school. Officials credit this type of work with helping to reduce the district's truancy rate among K-8 students.



Silas Willard first-grader Brandon Medina, holding on to grandfather Joe Delgado, resisted getting on the bus for the first two weeks of school. **SCOTT STRAZZANTE/TRIBUNE PHOTOS**

misdemeanor charges against the parents, or juvenile court actions that allow judges to order supportive services or impose sanctions.

Local authorities go to these lengths because absences from school in the earliest grades can have a devastating effect on children, their families and the community, as well as draining millions of dollars from school districts whose state and federal funding is keyed to attendance rates, government records and Tribune interviews show.

In Chicago alone, nearly 13 percent of the city's roughly 250,000 students in grades K-8 missed four weeks or more of school in 2010-11, while administrators could not say whether about 1,600 others had transferred to other districts or simply vanished, a Tribune investigation found.

But Chicago Public Schools eliminated its truancy outreach officers two decades ago amid budget woes and turnover among top officials. The district also has never enforced school policies that remain on the books, such as linking parents' public housing leases and welfare assistance to their children's school attendance, or taking parents to court.

Top Chicago school officials say fines and court sanctions don't reduce truancy and only worsen the lives of impoverished families. "Our goal should be helping people by lifting them up," said Jadine Chou, chief safety and security officer for CPS.

Authorities in other districts believe tough measures do help families, and they want more options to hold parents accountable.

"We believe it is a form of abuse to just not get the youngest children to school. That is irresponsible," said Cathy Elliott, an assistant principal and truancy officer in Alton, near St. Louis, where authorities use municipal tickets and court interventions and fines to fight truancy.

Making home visits

On first blush, you might not expect parallels between inner-city Chicago and Galesburg, a town surrounded by farms. It is where poet Carl Sandburg slept on a mattress of corn husks as he was raised by immigrant parents and where Ronald Reagan attended first grade at the Silas Willard School.

But life here has gotten tougher as huge factories closed and the methamphetamine trade spread like a prairie fire through counties across Illinois. The overall percentage of low-income students in Galesburg rose from 54 percent in 2009 to 62 percent two years later.

Galesburg schools also absorbed an influx of former Chicago families like Lee's, which was among the thousands displaced when Chicago's massive CHA high-rises were razed.

Like Chicago's schools, the Galesburg district has been plunged into financial crisis and is facing layoffs and a massive budget hole. "We are in extremely dire straits," said Jason Spring, the school district's alternatives program coordinator.

Yet Galesburg officials have vowed to maintain their 2-year-old elementary school anti-truancy push. They credit it with reducing the number of chronic truants in kindergarten through eighth grade from 74 in 2009 to 16 in 2011. Those are students with nine or more unexcused absences.

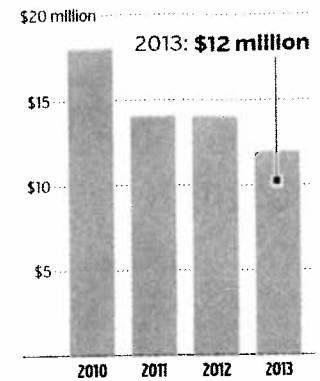
During those years, the overall attendance rate increased for every one of the town's eight primary and middle schools — and for the district as a whole. Those attendance rates continue to climb this year, according to preliminary figures provided to the Tribune by district officials.

Truancy funds

Grants from the state's Truants Alternative and Optional Education Program pay for anti-truancy efforts across Illinois. But because of fiscal woes, the payouts have declined.

APPROPRIATIONS TO TRUANTS PROGRAM

By fiscal year



SOURCE: Illinois State Board of Education TRIBUNE

Galesburg District 205 Assistant Superintendent Guy Cahill said the district's anti-truancy program has paid for itself by bringing in \$234,000 in additional state funding that is tied to attendance.

On their frequent home visits to locate truant kids, Galesburg outreach workers have walked in on meth

houses; one likened the drug's smell to hitting "a wall of ammonia and urine." They scan the police blotter for dope busts and other crimes to spot families that will likely not get their kids to school the next day.

And they trade stories of being threatened by pit bulls, being jumped by pet squirrels and encountering

parents getting buzzed first thing in the morning.

"I think I've seen most of Galesburg naked," said outreach worker Lisa Zimmerman, an 11-year veteran who has lived in low-income housing as a single mother of two and brings an un-sentimental, results-oriented attitude to a job she loves.



Truancy officer Lorenzo Pugh, left, and outreach worker Joe Pilger often compare notes about truant students they "need to keep an eye on."

"I've had families that frustrated me, but there's no giving up. Bottom line: I don't care if you like me, this is about the kid."

Zimmerman works out of Steele Elementary School in a cramped office lined with stuffed animals and other toys she uses to put kids at ease. By 9 a.m. one recent day, she had compiled a list of a dozen youngsters who hadn't shown up at school.

She ticked through the names. "This boy saw his dad get shot. This one is living with grandma. This one's family lost their home. Every kid has their story," she said.

One fourth-grader on her list missed a total of two months last year. Zimmerman telephoned his house, grabbed her keys and quickly recounted the reasons behind the boy's chronic truancy as she strode to her

car: The child and his mother were living in a shelter, then they moved in with relatives. But nobody is getting along or ensuring the child gets to school.

Zimmerman drove past low-rise housing developments and grimy trailers with extension cords running to the homes next door. When she pulled up to a sagging wood-frame home, a chatty, bespectacled boy was waiting on the front lawn.

As he scrambled into Zimmerman's car, the outreach worker questioned his mother about how she would get him to school the next day, and the day after that.

On the drive to Steele, the youngster was elated. "School is my favorite thing," he told the truancy officer.

As he bounded into the building in an oversized Scooby-Doo T-shirt, Zimmerman said she'll make a drive like that when she has to, but she refuses to be a taxi service and won't hesitate to ticket the parents of chronic truants or send them to court.

"I am not looking to be politically correct or be your friend," Zimmerman said. "I would like your kid to see that there is another way to live."

Punishing parents

The debate over whether or how to hold parents accountable for truancy in the earliest grades has spread across the country and divided communities.

In recent months, for example, the Los Angeles School Police Department says it has dramatically reduced the number of citations issued to truant students and instead is referring the youth to counseling and other services.

But about 25 miles south in Long Beach, the city prosecutor last year announced that he would begin hauling the parents of chronically truant students in grades K-8 into court. In cases where that happened, the youths' average number of unexcused absences dropped by half, city officials say, even though none of the cases progressed beyond a pre-court conference.

"When parents hear they could be prosecuted for their kids missing school, they take school attendance more seriously. My program is just one additional tool in the toolbox," said Long Beach prosecutor Douglas Haubert.

Several national experts on crime and education told the Tribune that they knew of no authoritative studies analyzing whether taking parents to court and other

TRIBUNE WATCHDOG EMPTY DESKS



Outreach worker Joe Pilger talks with a third-grader at Nielson Elementary School in Galesburg. He says he gives plastic alarm clocks to students to help them get to class on time.

SCOTT STRAZZANTE/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

'There's no giving up'

*Continued from
Previous Page*

tough measures to fight truancy in elementary school are effective.

"I lament the shortage of peer-reviewed research studies not only on official sanctions for truancy but on legal sanctions as applied to school conduct in general," said Rutgers University sociologist Paul Hirschfield.

There is a lot of impassioned advocacy on the topic, most of it arguing against punishing kids and their parents for truancy, said Arizona State University criminologist Gary Sweeten.

What's lacking are hard data and research, he said. "There's a vacuum there."

In Galesburg and other communities, the job of outreach workers is not just to retrieve truants and hold parents accountable, but to intervene before the pattern takes hold.

While Zimmerman was bringing the fourth-grade boy to Steele, first-grader Brandon Medina was three miles away at Silas Willard, sitting at a pint-size desk in the hallway with his face buried in his folded arms.

The school's outreach worker, Denise Miller, was using an empty classroom to meet with Brandon's distraught grandmother, his homeroom teacher and a school counselor.

For the first two weeks of school, Brandon had sobbed relentlessly when the big yellow bus arrived, and he resisted getting on, his grandmother Melissa Delgado told the group.

A former teacher, Miller already knew Brandon's chaotic back story: The 6-year-old's mother had left the family, had a new baby and had recently stopped visiting Brandon altogether. His dad wasn't in the picture. His grandmother had taken custody three years before, and she was overwhelmed by Brandon's noisy refusal to get on the school bus.

"I don't know what to do. I don't know what else to do," Delgado told Miller and the others.

Miller probed for whether Brandon had specific complaints about school. He said that the classroom was loud and that he had trouble making friends, Delgado said, and he claimed that his tummy hurt.

Behind it all, Delgado acknowledged, the boy was miserable because his mom no longer visited him or the family. "She doesn't come. Brandon's a

little boy. He needs (her) in his life, but it doesn't happen."

Even without the turmoil in this boy's life, the step up from kindergarten to first grade can be a huge transition, Miller said. "There are a lot of changes. Let's give him some time. Let's try to start his mornings off as calm as possible."

Miller advised Delgado not to indulge Brandon — and not to get anxious or tearful herself when she says goodbye to him at the school bus. Ideally, Miller said, Brandon should have "a clean break" from home when he leaves for school.

For now, Miller suggested that they avoid the bus. If Delgado drove Brandon to school, Miller said she would be there waiting to greet him and walk him to class.

"Bring him in," she said. "I don't mind being there."

With the meeting wrapped up, Miller opened the door and Brandon hurtled in and hugged his grandmother by the waist.

"I want to go home," Brandon said desperately. Delgado fought back tears.

"Not today," she said. "You're OK."

Shoes and alarm clocks

In a cabinet behind his desk at nearby Nielson Elementary School, outreach worker Joe Pilger keeps a stash of plastic alarm clocks. He hands them out to truant kids who say they can't wake up in time for the school bus.

Pilger also shops for sneakers.

A parent recently approached Nielson's principal at an open house and confessed that her fourth-grade daughter owned only flip-flops, which are prohibited by the school's dress code.

So after Pilger saw the last kid onto the bus at the end of a recent school day, the former college football

lineman and fifth-grade teacher headed for the Target store at the edge of town. He spent 10 minutes sorting through sneakers before selecting a pair of girl's size 3s for \$21.69. He used the school's small "miscellaneous funds" account to make the purchase.

Last year, Galesburg outreach workers bought 76 pairs of shoes for Nielson students.

When school starts each year, Pilger said, "I'm looking down at the feet to see which shoes have dollar-size holes in them. It's alarming."

Back at Nielson, in his windowless office, Pilger keeps a carefully highlighted printout of his caseload. On a recent morning, he pored through the names with Lorenzo Pugh, director of truancy programs for the Regional Office of Education, who works with 23 schools in Galesburg and four surrounding school districts.

A former football standout like Pilger, Pugh carries a badge and can issue \$75 tickets to parents or refer them to the county state's attorney for neglect proceedings if all else fails.

He and Pilger strategized, using verbal shorthand that reflected their familiarity with the names on Pilger's spreadsheet.

"That one we need to keep an eye on," Pilger said, highlighting the name of a first-grade boy whose mother had just been arrested.

Just down the list was another kid who brought a switchblade to school last year. He was suspended for 10 days on top of the 13 absences he'd already racked up.

Pilger highlighted the name of a student with 11 sick days last year, saying: "They were shady excused."

"That is where the habit starts," Pugh said.

Starting this year, Galesburg requires a doctor's note after three con-

secutive sick days. And last year Galesburg joined the growing number of Illinois municipalities that have passed ordinances allowing tickets and fines for truant youth who are age 13 or older and for the parents of preteen kids.

Pugh said his office has issued 50 tickets, including 30 for the families of students in kindergarten through eighth grade. Most of the time, the \$75 tickets are waived after the children return to school.

Pugh called the tickets effective for families with truant children in the elementary grades. "It makes a difference. It gets the kid to school," he said. "Citations do work."

Because of the success of these anti-truancy measures, Knox County prosecutors said they have had no need in recent years to file the most serious neglect charges against parents of truant youth. Under Galesburg's school policy, those misdemeanor or neglect charges can be filed against the parent when a student age 11 or younger has 20 absences, whether excused or not.

And while Galesburg is a fraction of Chicago's size, Cahill is convinced that the strategies being used here and elsewhere in Illinois could be effective in the big city.

"We think it is replicable — it starts by creating a culture that celebrates attendance and an expectation that you drive down to the classroom level."

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dyjackson@tribune.com

The future is
on the line for
two students
with truancy
issues

Coming Tuesday

Girl missed five years, yet nobody spoke up

On a bungalow-lined street in south suburban Crestwood, residents caught glimpses of an adolescent girl who never seemed to go

to school.

The girl would meet her younger siblings as they got off the school bus, but she never was on the bus herself.

"Sometimes she would sit on (her) front steps and say, 'I can't stand it in there,'" one resident told the Tribune. "People all over the neighborhood talk about this."

But the neighbors felt uncomfortable sticking their noses in other people's business.

And so it went for five years, until the girl escaped the house at age 16. According to police, court and school records, her parents were forcing her to stay at home to serve as a caretaker for four stepbrothers.

The case underscores that school and government authorities cannot be expected to retrieve missing elementary-level students on their own. Often they must rely on neighbors and relatives to step forward.

The Crestwood girl had never been enrolled in school after her mom brought her there from the Middle East. To local school officials, it was as if she didn't exist.

Indeed, while some truant children in grades K-8 are on the street during school hours, many are staying indoors,

said Johns Hopkins University research scientist Robert Balfanz, who studies school attendance. Only close family members and neighbors may know they are there.

"If there were actually tens of thousands of kids roaming the streets of Chicago at one o'clock in the afternoon, there'd be a big community uproar. And sure, there are tens of thousands of kids not in school, but it's not visible," Balfanz said.

The girl's tragic story finally came to light in 2010 when she fled and was taken into state custody.

"Her mother does not allow her to leave the house and ... she has to cook and clean the whole house like a slave," a Crestwood police report stated. The woman was convicted of battery, having beaten the girl in an effort to thwart the escape.

Beth Michalski, who served for a time as the girl's foster mother, said the teenager "could not read or write a word (and) didn't know the concept of adding and subtracting."

To help her learn basic vocabulary, Michalski placed labels on household items and furniture, transforming the foster home into a forest of Post-it notes: Stairs. Light. Picture. Bed.

Now 19 and in an alternative school, the girl declined comment for this story. Records and interviews show she has steadily pulled her reading up to the fifth-grade level.

— Gary Marx and David Jackson

A 'devastating' lack of resources

Growing homelessness and child poverty are fueling truancy in the earliest grades across Illinois, but efforts to fight the problem are often thwarted by dwindling resources and weaknesses in state law, school administrators say.

The Illinois State Board of Education this year is giving school districts \$12 million in grants under the Truants' Alternative and Optional Education Program, compared with \$20 million in 2009.

"The state chops and chops — it is devastating," said Bobbi Mattingly, superintendent of Regional Office of Education No. 11 in central Illinois, where two "overworked and underpaid" attendance specialists, plus one working part time, handle roughly 200 truancy cases across seven counties in grades K-8.

"We are seeing more younger kids missing school — I think it is dramatic," said Clayton Naylor, director of truancy prevention for the Rock Island Regional Office of Education. "It seems like more people lack the resources to get their kids to school. They don't have the network it sometimes takes. Families are just giving up."

In four rural counties around Jerseyville, near St. Louis, where smokestack industries disappeared and the economy has collapsed, five truancy officers and mentors handle a caseload of 745 truants and at-risk youth, many of them middle-schoolers.

"There is a direct correlation between school attendance and delinquency. The more school they miss, the more they get in trouble," said Jersey County Judge Eric Pistorius, who handles the most serious truancy cases.

"You have to spend time to understand why the youth is absent," Pistorius said. "Maybe Mom works midnights. Is it transportation? Are there drug or alcohol issues? Is this a kid who can't answer the questions in class or gets picked on? You spend the time to investigate, then craft an individualized solution, monitor it and impose consequences."

But school authorities say Illinois law often prevents them from imposing consequences on parents of the youngest truants — those in kindergarten and first grade. State laws don't make school compulsory until age 7, when most youngsters enter second grade.

In most states, children must be in school starting at age 5. Illinois is one of 16 states where the bar is set at 7, and two others require attendance at 8, according to U.S. Department of Education figures.

"I would certainly like to see that happen," McHenry County truancy investigator Amy Buchanan said of lowering the compulsory age to 5. "I think that would be very helpful in the prevention end of it, to catch them earlier than later."

Another barrier to combating elementary school truancy comes when parents stave off authorities by falsely claiming they are home schooling their children.

Illinois is among 10 states that do not require home-schooling parents to register with the state, have their curriculum approved, administer standardized tests or submit to home visits by officials, according to the Home School Legal Defense Association, an advocacy group that opposes such regulations.

While experts say most home-schooling families do a good job, Illinois law provides little protection for youth whose parents abuse the privilege, according to educators and law enforcement officials from around the state.

"There are a lot of people that are so-called home schooling that I believe are (providing) almost no education," said Val Gunnarsson, chief judge of the state's 15th Circuit, based in Carroll County. "There's a problem with our statute on this. I recognize the constitutional right to educate your child at home, but I think the public has a right to say, 'Are you really doing it?'"

Jeffrey Lewis, an attorney and board member of Illinois Christian Home Educators, a statewide support group for home-schooling families, said, "We have seen situations where parents are not legally home schooling their children."

But Lewis said he did not think a registration requirement would help for "folks that abuse the system."

— David Jackson and Gary Marx

chicagotribune.com/truancy

Watch a video of Tribune reporters David Jackson and Gary Marx talking about their investigation and see photo galleries by Tribune photographer Scott Strazzante. Read part one of "An empty-desk epidemic" for free as a digitalPlus subscriber.

Chicago Tribune

FOR FRONT CALL 1-800-TRIBUNE

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2012

BREAKING NEWS AT CHICAGOTRIBUNE.COM

Fire force in mourning again

Veteran dies of heart attack after South Side call, the 1st death in 9 days for Chicago department

BY RICHARD HOLTZ
AND LARRY BOWMAN
Tribune reporters

Walter Patmon Jr. had to wait nearly a decade after he took the Chicago firefighter's exam before he fulfilled his boyhood dream of

working for the department.

He was then 43 — old for a rookie firefighter — but he quickly gained a reputation as reliable and helpful to co-workers, particularly newcomers to the demanding work, colleagues said.

“He put himself out to help you

in any way he could,” said Dave Benson, who worked with Patmon for the past six years. “Whenever you knew you were going to work with him, you knew you were going to have a good day.”

On Monday morning, Benson was hanging purple bunting at Engine Company 121's station house in Beverly in memoriam to Patmon. In a blow for a department still shaken from its first

death on the job in two years, the 18-year veteran died Sunday night of a heart attack less than an hour after returning from a minor fire, authorities said.

Patmon, 61, was cleaning equipment when he experienced shortness of breath, Fire Department spokesman Will Knight said. He was taken to Little Company of

Please turn to Page 9



Walter Patmon Jr. was 43 when he joined the Fire Department.

TRIBUNE WATCHDOG EMPTY DESKS



SCOTT STRAZZANTE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Isabella Phelan, 10, started missing school in kindergarten and lost more than a year of classroom days before she entered seventh grade. She was evaluated for special education services during fifth grade and now attends an alternative school.

A challenge unmet

Students with emotional or learning disabilities are entitled to an education. But in Chicago they often miss weeks of school, more than other children.

BY BOB D'AMICO AND GARY MARK | Tribune reporters

SIXTH GRADER Isabella Phelan would leave school in frustration every day in the middle of the day. Later that day, she was told to leave. And then there were the many days she simply stayed at home, not in a hospital or the classroom, but at home, sitting in bed.

Allow students
Attendance data provided by Chicago Public Schools show that students like Isabella, who are diagnosed with a learning or emotional disability — and there are thousands of them in grades K-8 — miss the more school days on average than children without a disability.

That statistic shows what the divide of learning disabilities represents in the classroom. About 10% of students in Chicago, the CPS has the largest school of

Saving Alex

School officials try to rescue a chronically truant 11-year-old. Page 6

chicagotribune.com/transey

Watch a video report on Alex, Peonzo and others

Boehner weighing next step for GOP

House speaker seeking to strike a balance with tea party wing, Obama

BY LISA MASCARO
Tribune Newspapers

WASHINGTON — As a subdued John Boehner started to lay the groundwork for a compromise with President Barack Obama to avert the year-end tax and spending crisis, the House speaker also began a delicate dance around the deep divisions in the Republican Party.

As Congress returns Tuesday, the Ohio Republican will have to contend with the tea party wing, which helped him retain the House majority as many conservatives won re-election but also contributed to losses in the Senate.

GOP leaders are re-evaluating their relationship to the movement, a political marriage that has fueled gridlock and, some believe, played a role in the party's dismal outcome at the polls.

The intense conservative opposition to tax increases could thwart the desire of Boehner and other Republicans to show voters

Please turn to Page 12



Happiness is a new Besides boxed set



SCOTT STRAZZANTE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Yajaira Rivera, 13, started missing school in kindergarten and lost more than a year of classroom days before she entered seventh grade. She was evaluated for special education services during fifth grade and now attends an alternative school.

A challenge unmet

Students with emotional or learning disabilities are entitled to an education. But in Chicago they often miss weeks of school, more than other children.

BY DAVID JACKSON AND GARY MARX | Tribune reporters

Sometimes, Yajaira Rivera would storm out of school in frustration during the middle of the day.

Other times, she was told to leave. And then there were the many days she simply stayed at home, avoiding both trouble and the classrooms where she was falling behind.

As a seventh-grader last year at Nobel Elementary School in Chicago, Yajaira missed 68 days out of 170. She'd already lost an additional 213 days since second grade, far more than a full year of classes, records show.

But Yajaira is not just any difficult student needing discipline. She is coping with learning and emotional disabilities that explain why a child described as "motivated to learn" by a school social worker has so many conflicts with teachers and

fellow students.

Attendance data provided by Chicago Public Schools show that students like Yajaira who are diagnosed with a learning or emotional disability — and there are thousands of them in grades K-8 — miss far more school days on average than children without a disability.

That disparity, along with the details of Yajaira's school experience, raise questions about how the district is handling the difficult but vital task of giving these students a shot at a decent education and a real future.

Education experts note that there are effective strategies for managing and nurturing students like Yajaira. But too often, disability advocates say, officials simply push these youths out of school or let

Please turn to **Page 6**

Saving Alex

School officials try to rescue a chronically truant 12-year-old. **Page 6**

chicagotribune.com/truancy

Watch a video report on Alex Frausto and efforts to get him back to class, see photo galleries by Tribune photographer Scott Strazzante and listen to reporters describe this series. Read the first two parts as a digitalPlus subscriber.

Disabled students often miss more school

Continued from Page 1

them slip away.

A 2012 Nobel school report provided by Yajaira's family states that "an intervention for minor infractions has been for her mother to bring or keep Yajaira home with her in order to avoid further escalation of Yajaira's anger and behavior."

That intervention — which advocates for the disabled called a potential violation of federal law — "has resulted in poor exposure to the general education curriculum," the school's report noted.

Yajaira's mother, Maria Figueroa, told the Tribune that she reached "an agreement with the principal at Nobel: When Yajaira is upset, I will not send her to school."

Nobel Principal Manuel Adriano denied that, telling the Tribune in a written statement:

"We have always worked hard to help this parent and her daughter and at no point did I or any member of my staff ever tell her to keep her child at home."

CPS spokeswoman Robyn Ziegler also disputed that Nobel staff allowed Yajaira to miss school as an intervention strategy.

"Behavior management is not a valid cause of absence," she said in a statement.

Regardless of whether Yajaira's absences were condoned by Nobel administrators, her case fits into a grim pattern.

Consider the 17,000 students in grades K-8 whose "primary diagnosis" in CPS' database is a learning disability — a disorder generally affecting the ability to use or understand language. On average, each of these students racked up two weeks of truancy and excused absences in the 2010-11 school year — about 20 percent more than those with no disability.

Also frequently gone from school were the 1,500 elementary students with an emotional disorder as their primary diagnosis — children whose behavior or feelings impede their learning and ability to get along with others.

On average, K-8 students with an emotional disorder missed

about four weeks of school because of truancy and other absences, the Tribune's analysis found. They also accrued 10 times as many suspension days as children without a disability.

Federal law requires schools to provide these students with counselors, aides and other support to help them succeed, and it specifically protects students with disabilities from being excluded from school through excessive suspensions or informal push-outs.

But in Chicago, advocates for the disabled say, many children with learning and emotional disabilities go undiagnosed for too long and are then given inadequate assistance. Alienated from classrooms they find humiliating and unrewarding, students like Yajaira tend to tune out or lash out, leading to suspensions and other missed days.

After hearing details of Yajaira's case from the Tribune, Equip for Equality attorney Rachel Shapiro said keeping Yajaira home potentially violated her right to a public education.

"Regardless of whether the mom suggested it, I do not think it is something that the school should have allowed to happen," said Shapiro, whose group serves youths with disabilities. "The

school owes the student a free and appropriate education, and if she is not in the classroom she cannot receive that. The school is supposed to tell a parent: 'This is not appropriate and we can't provide your child with a public education if she's sitting at home.'"

While not commenting specifically on Yajaira's case, Harvard University education professor Thomas Hehir said excessive suspensions and informal exclusions from school are a nationwide problem for youths with disabilities.

"Once you get into that pattern, the implicit message you're giving the child is that school is not important; you don't need to be here," Hehir said. "It becomes a vicious circle."

Students with learning and emotional disabilities "are kids who have a lot of potential," Hehir added. "It's a myth that they can't be highly successful in school, if given the appropriate supports."

1st signs of trouble

At stake is the future of a 13-year-old slip of a girl with dark eyes, thick brows and a shock of dyed red hair whose desire to learn and be accepted shines through her troubled record.

One 2010 school report described a girl who liked to sing, dance and watch the children's sitcom "The Suite Life of Zack & Cody." Yajaira told the Tribune she aspires to be a veterinarian.

As a young child, Yajaira met all of her early developmental milestones — walking and speaking in phrases at a year old, quickly learning how to dress and later running errands for her mother, records show.

But her mother, who complains of migraines, back pain and the pressures of raising six children on public aid in an impoverished West Humboldt Park neighborhood, had trouble getting Yajaira to school starting in kindergarten. In second grade, Yajaira missed five weeks, records show, and that year she deliberately tripped a teacher.

Figueroa tried to find counseling to help with her daughter's learning troubles and explosive temper but was foiled by insurance and money problems. Yajaira mostly wound up on psychologists' waiting lists, school reports show.

Despite Yajaira's years of classroom absence, suspensions and academic failure, she was not evaluated for special education services until the middle of fifth

DISCUSS THIS STORY

Join David Jackson and Gary Marx at 1 p.m. Tuesday for a Twitter chat about the Tribune's truancy series. Ask questions and share comments using the hashtag #truancy.



SCOTT STRAZZANTE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Yajaira Rivera, shown with her nephew, got A's and B's with one C on her most recent report card, and has missed five days at her new school.

grade, when she was nearly 11. She was diagnosed with a learning disability.

CPS spokeswoman Ziegler told the Tribune that the district handled Yajaira's case correctly and that officials believe there were no delays in getting her evaluated.

The 2010 evaluation describes Yajaira as friendly and talkative, a visual learner and a "sweet girl who apologizes and feels remorse when she does something that is inappropriate."

At the time of her evaluation, Yajaira was only a little behind in

math, easily matched colorful pictures based on common characteristics to achieve a "high average" score on an IQ subtest, and had no problems expressing herself verbally. But she needed to have word problems read to her and had "deficits in reading, decoding and fluency." The fifth-grader scored at the second-grade level in spelling.

Yajaira was given an Individual Education Plan that required the school to remove her from general education classes for about 12 percent of the school day, put her in

specialized classes and provide her with social-emotional counseling.

But beyond the paperwork was a challenging girl in a hard-pressed school, and records show Yajaira continued on a downward spiral of academic failure and lashing out with curses and threats.

"I make myself go to the (principal's) office," she told the Tribune. "I'll curse off the teacher or throw something at another student or walk out and just walk to the office and tell 'em I don't want to go to school, and they'll call my mom."

She said of school: "They don't want me to be there, and I don't really care because I don't want to be there. I stay home, watch TV, eat, listen to music, relax, play Xbox and card games, read."

Twice when Yajaira was sent to the principal's office last year, she disappeared out the front door of the school, Nobel records provided by her mother show. In one incident, when the seventh-grader was placed in a room to cool off, "the lady at the front desk just looked at me as I walked out," she told the Tribune.

"I feel for the teachers," said Emily Runyon, a social worker at another CPS school who lived in the neighborhood and helped the family access services. "I'm sure Yajaira is difficult to manage in class. What she needed was re-

relationships and therapy — somebody helping her cope in those situations when she is angry and upset. Sending her away and giving her no skills to address those problems in the moment is not going to help her.”

Figueroa told the Tribune that Nobel staff more than once sent her a list of Yajaira’s absences and asked her to provide an excuse for each missed day.

“The office sent me a list of the days that she didn’t go to school. The office said to put whatever I wanted as an excuse ... she had a headache, a fever, whatever thing,” Figueroa said. “They gave me a piece of paper with all the days, I filled it out and took it back. All the days were excused.”

Such a change could have transformed days of truancy into excused absences, lowering the school’s overall truancy rate as well as Yajaira’s.

Figueroa said she wasn’t concerned about the practice, which benefited everyone involved.

“The school has a very good disciplinary reputation, and part of that is based on kids being in school,” she said. “For them it’s good because it makes them look good.”

Adrianzen, the principal, denied in his written statement that he and Nobel staff ever directed Figueroa “to falsify information ... related to her absences.”

Finding an alternative

Despite the array of services prescribed for Yajaira, her seventh-grade term got off to a rocky start.

By the end of November 2011 she already had “22 school absences, due to out-of-school suspensions, and her mother’s attempts to keep her out of school so Yajaira will not engage in inappropriate behaviors,” according to an evaluation from that month.

That year, Yajaira was suspended for two days for refusing to take off her hoodie in a classroom, then cursing. Days later she got another two-day suspension for swearing at a teacher before walking out of class.

“The general education teacher finds it ‘impossible’ to teach when she is in the class,” the school report said. “Sometimes she will sit quietly and not work, those are the times when teaching can occur.”

At the time, Yajaira was under tremendous stress. The brother to

whom she was closest was incarcerated on homicide charges. “Brother is in jail. Yajaira verbalizes wanting to stay in bed all day to deal with the pain. Mother does not send to school,” one school social worker’s report said.

By May, Yajaira had missed more than 50 school days. That month, a Nobel official called police after Yajaira threw a plastic spider at a girl and threatened to “beat” and “kill” her.”

The school social worker’s report from that month stated that the principal was “verbalizing intent to remove Yajaira from his school.”

About that same time, the school conducted another special education evaluation of Yajaira and this time diagnosed her with an added disability — an emotional disorder.

Yajaira’s new education plan required the school to remove her from general education classes for 100 percent of the school day — making it impossible for her to stay at Nobel.

With Runyon’s help, Yajaira was enrolled for eighth grade in September at Near North Elementary School, a therapeutic day school serving about 90 students who have failed in regular education because of behavioral problems and histories of truancy. The goal was for Yajaira to return to a regular public school during the year or as a high school freshman, her mother said.

As the school year began, Yajaira displayed a new knapsack, proudly unpacking pristine notebooks with Tinker Bell covers and a quiver of markers, highlighters and colored pencils.

“I am going to a new school. I don’t have the bad friends that I had. I can control my temper,” Yajaira said.

Yajaira’s first interim report card, issued at the end of October, showed she got A’s and B’s with only one C, in physical education. She had missed five school days at Near North — two of them after a second brother, age 15, was locked up while facing attempted murder charges in juvenile court.

On a recent afternoon, Yajaira carefully completed an enrollment application to five Chicago high schools, noting that she wanted to focus on health sciences, a step toward her dream of becoming a veterinarian.

“I’m doing a good job in school,” she said. “I need to keep it up.”



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Disabilities and missed school days

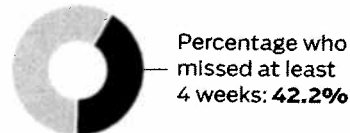
Children with a learning or emotional disability miss school in disproportionate numbers, despite federal laws designed to keep such students in the classroom.

AVERAGE DAYS MISSED BY K-8 STUDENTS

Chicago Public Schools, 2010-11

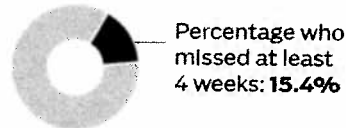
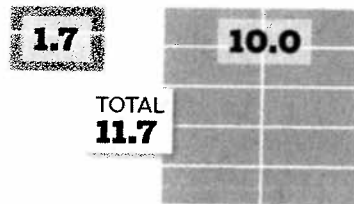
-  Gaps in enrollment (days missed because students enrolled late, were pulled out of school early or were not enrolled at any point, without a valid reason)
-  Excused and unexcused absences

Students with emotional disorders



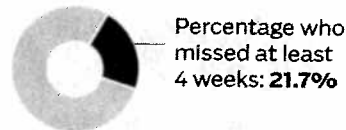
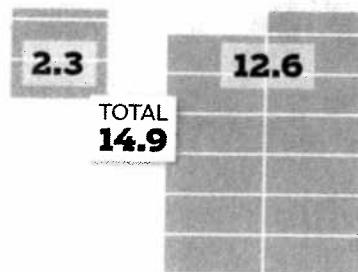
Emotional disorder: These students have extended difficulty in learning, forming interpersonal relationships and exhibiting appropriate behavior.

Students with learning disabilities



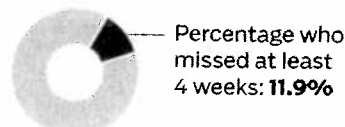
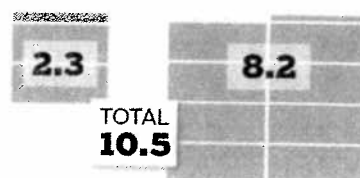
Learning disability: This condition affects students' fundamental ability to use or understand language, making it difficult to learn.

All other disabilities



Other disabilities: This category includes any other disability listed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, including cognitive impairment, sensory disabilities and autism.

Students without a disability



Note: Figures for average days missed from gaps in enrollment exclude 18,485 students who entered CPS from elsewhere or left for another district for a private school or to be home-schooled. Absences may not add to total days missed because of rounding.

SOURCE: Tribune analysis of Chicago Public Schools records

Saving Alex

Cadre of authorities in LaSalle County works with 1 goal in mind: Get 12-year-old back in school

BY GARY MARK AND DAVID JACKSON | Tribune reporters

LASALLE, Ill. — The 12-year-old stood mute and motionless in his family's kitchen. It was noon on a Wednesday in late August, and once again Alejandro Frausto was not in school. "Would you like to sit down, Alex?" asked Martha Small, a LaSalle County truancy caseworker making her first visit to the home. Alex didn't budge. He stood with head down and arms hanging loosely by his sides, a boyish sentry in baggy red gym shorts and a black T-shirt. Alex had already missed eight days of the new seventh-grade school year. He was absent for more than two months the previous year.

Other kids teased him about his chubbiness and the mop of unruly hair that dangles over his eyes, according to his mother. Alex denies being teased but said he fought back when provoked by classmates. School administrators accused him of erupting in bouts of anger, once even pushing a teacher. Now Alex won't go to school at all.

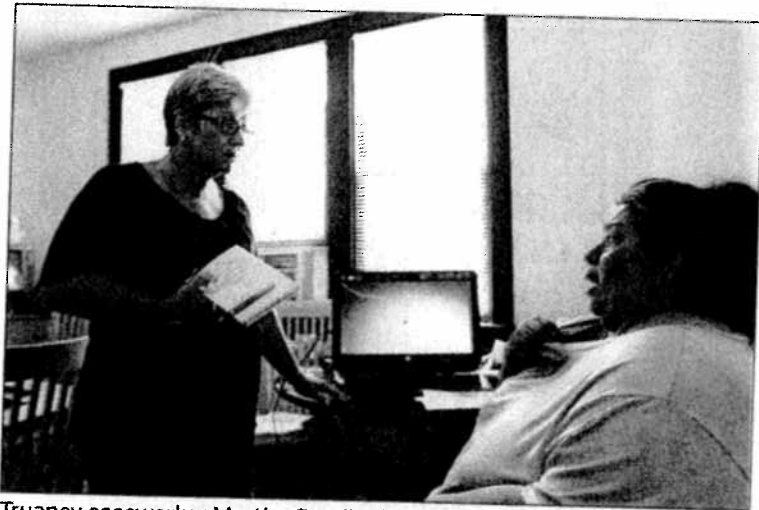
In a gentle but firm voice, Small reminded Alex that he must attend school. He began tapping his right thigh with his hand. His face reddened.

Small said quietly, "Don't panic, Alex."

As Small turned to speak with Alex's mother, Carmen Frausto, the boy whispered to a reporter about the anxiety he feels in class.

"I can't stand it in there. It's like four walls closing in," he said.

At age 12, Alex stands at a crossroads. When boys vanish from school in the elementary grades, grim fates often await: juvenile detention homes, state prisons. It happened to one of his older brothers.



Truancy caseworker Martha Small talks with Carmen Frausto, whose son missed months because of suspensions and not getting on the bus.

But in this predominantly rural county, where the child poverty rate nearly doubled from 2008 to 2009, authorities are pouring resources into saving Alex and other kids like him.

"Nobody is giving up on a 12-year-old," said Small, a 53-year-old woman with steady brown eyes.

Truancy officers no longer exist in Chicago, even though thousands of children in grades K-8 miss months of class each year or drop off the enrollment lists altogether. But spending time alongside Small and other "outreach

intuitive child who loved to read, romp on the baseball diamond with cousins and chat as she pattered around the house. His fourth-grade report card shows an A, two B's and a C, with four missed classroom days.

But in sixth grade, Alex started getting into fights with other students. He missed months of school because of suspensions and his refusal to get on the bus.

"They start to get at me," Alex said. "That's when I get angry, and don't allow it, and get mad. I've just had enough, and if somebody gets in my way, I'll deal with it."

At the start of seventh grade, officials enrolled Alex in the LaSalle County Regional Safe School, an alternative setting for students with behavioral problems. But as his isolation and anxiety about school built, he stayed home more often, playing "Call of Duty" on his Xbox, watching the History Channel on TV or pacing the floor with the metalcore band Asking Alexandria thundering through his ears.

His parents fretted, but they felt helpless to force Alex to venture outside the house.

Hard to reach

Alex's soft-spoken father, Javier Frausto, pleads with Alex to go to school, but he isn't around to make sure that happens.

Frausto leaves the house before 5:30 a.m. to commute to a job as a backhoe operator for a railroad freight company in Chicago. Often he doesn't return until well past 8 at night.

"I'm out working," Frausto said.

"It's hard for me. I'm thinking about him."

Alex's mother dropped out of school in seventh grade, when she was 15 and pregnant with the first of the couple's children. She describes herself as burdened by weight gain and depression. As her happy toddler grew into an introverted and difficult-to-reach adolescent, she often was confined to her chair in the dining room.

"He's a big boy, and he knows I cannot grab his arm because I use both my canes to walk," she said. "I don't know what to do."

Two of Alex's sisters have finished high school, but a third sister and all three of his brothers dropped out. One of the brothers, who is serving a four-year prison sentence for drug dealing, has completed a GED. He had served time in the county detention home for truancy starting at age 11, more than a decade ago, when such punitive sentences were routine.

Households like this one — with a distraught mom, a largely absent dad and a preteen whose future seems to be imploding — are the target of truancy officer Small's painstaking interventions.

On most days, Small zips from home to home and school to school in her own vehicle, a van with rust patches and 291,000 miles on the odometer.

Blending the instincts of a social worker, cop and family counselor, she crafts simple fixes — like bringing a cheap alarm clock to a home — or weaves together complex services and strategies for families plagued by substance abuse, domestic violence and mental illness.

Difficult cases like Alex's might take months or even years to resolve.

But Alex is smart, testing at grade level despite all the classroom days he's missed. And he has another huge advantage: an intact family that clearly loves him.

Taking notes as she sat in the Fraustos' dining room, Small gently but strategically tried to pick apart the troubling case. Has Alex seen a psychologist? Is he on medication? Will his father really be able to devote more time to the boy when he retires next year?

What's keeping him from school, and how can she support the family to get him back?

"I want to help him, but I can't," Carmen Frausto said, tears suddenly streaming down her face. Small inched a little closer to the mother.

"You are helping him," she said. "We are probably going to have to come up with something creative."

Small ended that initial face-to-face meeting on a businesslike note of optimism and resolve.

"We've got to get him healthy," the veteran truancy officer told Carmen. Then she turned to Alex. "You're expected to be in school," Small said.

But that didn't happen, and three weeks later, on Sept. 19,

Small convened a 90-minute "truancy hearing" that brought Alex and his family together with his teachers, as well as local and regional school authorities.

Sitting on plastic chairs in a school meeting room, they crafted a transition plan to ease Alex back into classes starting with just a few hours a day.

"I think I can do it," Alex said at the end of the hearing.

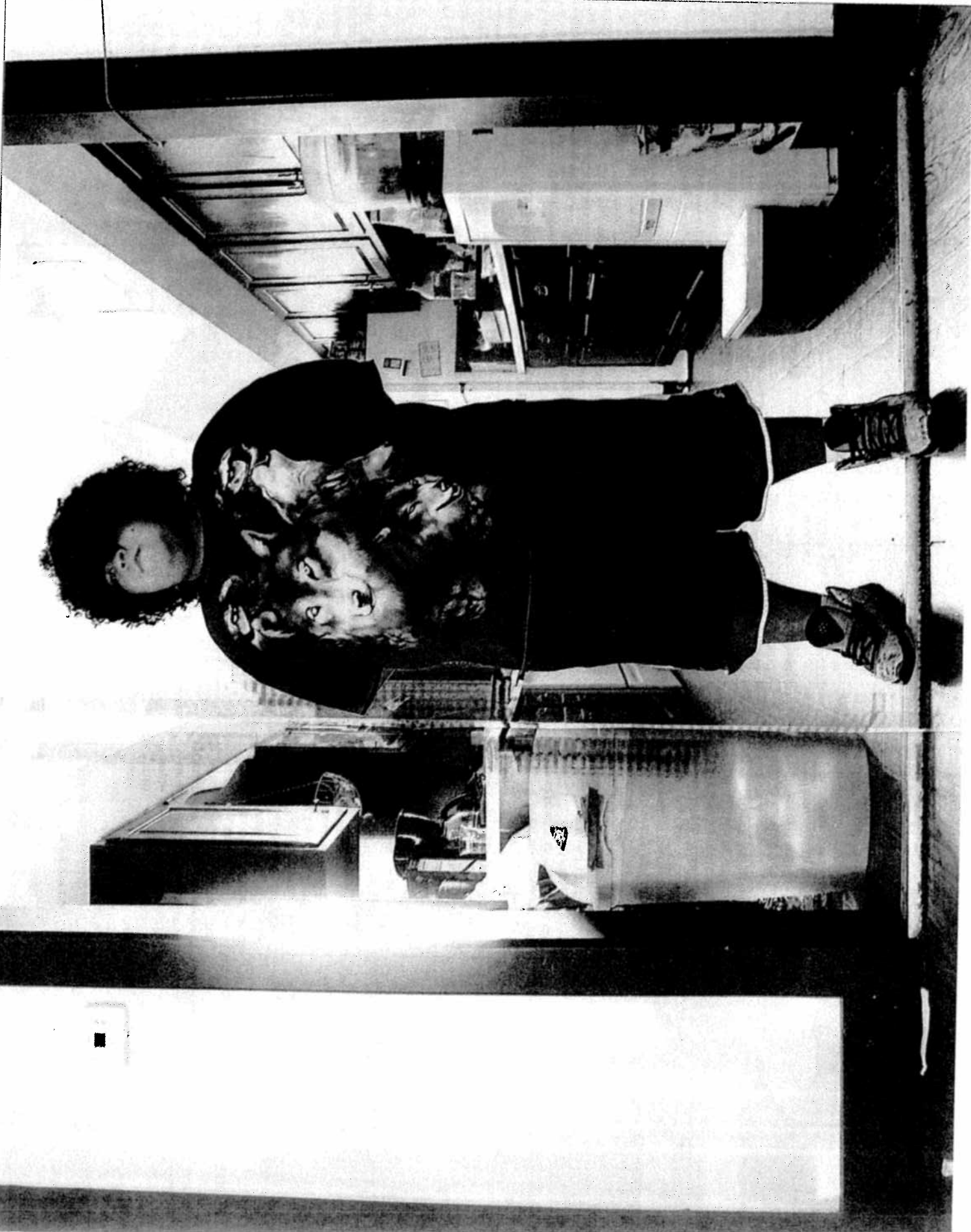
A court order

Alex did go to school the next morning. But not the next day, or the next.

A week later, Small referred the case to the LaSalle County state's attorney's office, which filed a juvenile court petition that can enable a judge to order counseling or other supportive services for a truant youth and his family, as well as fines and other sanctions.

It was the eighth such truancy case sent to local prosecutors since January, all of them middle-schoolers, according to prosecutor Vicki Denny. The court intervention doesn't always work, but in most cases "it does hit home," Denny said.

On Oct. 23, Alex and his parents sat before Judge Daniel Butte. With law books and the state seal gracing the wood-paneled court-



room walls behind him, Bute gazed down on the shaggy-haired 12-year-old.

"Alejandro! Pay attention," Bute began. "We find that you are a truant ... Here's how this works in my courtroom."

Alex was either going to return to his current school, Bute said, "or you are going to school in the detention home. We have a great teacher there."

Bute asked if Alex had any questions, but the boy was silent, his head bent toward his folded hands.

"Just so we understand each other, you're going to school one way or the other."

In minutes, the hearing was over. In the lobby afterward, Alex's mother seemed breathless and stunned as she studied the court order with Bute's signature.

Small rushed over to the family. "Are you ready to do this?" she asked Alex. He didn't answer.

She said he could earn a small iTunes gift card if he went to school every day that week.

"I will take the bus," Alex said quietly.

"That shows maturity — that shows you are stepping up now," Small said. "Because, trust me,

today is the day you've got to step up."

Carmen Frausto began to sob. "All of us," Small said. "Now is the time to step up."

Frausto wiped her eyes and asked if they had to take Alex to school immediately. Small nodded.

Alex made it through the afternoon at school, and he got on the bus the next morning.

But at a security checkpoint on his first full day back, Alex refused to remove his hoodie, walked out and punched the school wall.

School authorities called police, and Alex ended up at a psychiatric ward in Peoria. He was there for five days.

The episode led to a diagnosis — anxiety disorder, panic disorder and depression — and a regime of medications. His mental health made it "very difficult for him to attend school," a letter from his psychiatrist said.

Yet "it is to Alex's best interest to remain in school despite his severe anxiety of being around other people," the letter continued. "To allow him to be homeschooled will ... perpetuate his avoidant behaviors."

The doctors recommended accommodations for Alex, such as providing an alternative work space if the classroom felt loud and overwhelming, or even the use of noise-canceling headphones.

And so in early November, Alex was once again preparing to return to class.

Puttering with two computers in his family's dining room, he worried out loud that he was three months behind on his schoolwork, didn't have friends and couldn't stay focused.

"I get distracted unless I have my music," he said.

"They have to help you," his mother chimed in.

"That's what they said before," Alex responded. "I'll go, but it's not going to be pretty when I get there."

Alex did make it to school the next day and worked comfortably, with school officials accommodating his occasional need to pace when he got anxious.

The next day, he was on the bus again — and he hasn't missed a day since.

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