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State agencies collaborate to locate, engage students
Some students are not on school rosters, others are chronically absent

SANTA FE -- Three state agencies are joining forces with local school districts and charter schools to track down students who have dropped off school rosters or who are chronically absent from remote classes.

The Public Education Department is partnering with the Children, Youth and Families and Indian Affairs departments to identify, locate, contact and intervene to get students back in school to ensure their safety and to provide for their continued learning opportunities and well-being.

“This has been an impossibly difficult year for all of us, no doubt about it,” Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham said. “The only thing that could make it tougher is an educational setback for a child, or a risk to their safety or well-being, that could’ve been avoided. The state of New Mexico is committed, first and foremost, to the welfare of its children.”

“School attendance is not optional, even amid a global pandemic,” PED Secretary Ryan Stewart said. “The whole machinery of state government is working to ensure that New Mexico children are enrolled, engaged and learning.”

School attendance data, which identify students who are chronically absent, are not reported to PED until the 40th day of the academic year, which is next week. But anecdotal reports from some districts suggest high absenteeism among remote learners.

Districts and charter schools determine for themselves what constitutes attendance in the remote learning mode -- whether it is being present for an online lesson, checking in by email or some other method.

“We know many districts and charters have put systems in place to identify and support disengaged students, but there are still far too many gaps and needs,” Stewart said. “We are putting all resources at our disposal toward connecting students with adequate internet and providing disengaged students with academic coaching or social and emotional supports. While we continue to hope that additional federal resources for schools will be forthcoming, we’re prepared to support our students with the full range of state resources available,” he said.

Enrollment is also a concern. The department previously had no way to count or track students who are simply dropped from a school’s roster after 10 consecutive days of absence.

“These are the students we’re most concerned about because we don’t have information on their learning or, more importantly, on their well-being during the pandemic,” Stewart said. “We’re standing up a new, parallel reporting process now that will collect that data, along with new partnerships with CYFD and IAD to quickly mobilize to support these students,” Stewart said.

“The Indian Affairs Department is working in collaboration with our sister agencies to ensure that tribal communities have access to the resources they need to get children connected and engaged,” Secretary Lynn Trujillo said. “Our department will work with tribal leaders and tribal education directors to identify, locate and provide support to get students back in school as well as assistance to their families.”

Once the agencies have identified the missing students, the PED and CYFD will contact families to determine if their students are enrolled in private school, being home-schooled or need an intervention to return them to the classroom. More than 13,000 students are being home-schooled this fall, about 5,000 more than last year.

CYFD also responds to phoned-in reports of educational neglect. When the agency’s screening process determines a case does not meet the threshold for abuse or neglect, it is referred to Family Resource Connection Lite, a team of workers who reach out to families to find out what services and supports they need to get their children to school. To date, this program has connected with approximately 200 families. An additional 71 families with existing relationships with the department have been contacted by their field workers for support.

This non-punitive approach focuses on child well-being and connects families with resources and schools, Secretary Brian Blalock said.

“The pandemic has forced thousands of New Mexico families and educators to adjust to changing conditions quickly, and we’re responding on many levels to help support families during this uncertain and often frustrating time,” Blalock said. “We encourage anyone in need of assistance getting their children connected to their schooling to call our Statewide Central

Intake at 855-333-SAFE or #SAFE from a cell phone or reach out directly to your child's school for assistance.”

CYFD is also capitalizing on longstanding relationships with school districts and law enforcement agencies across the state -- for example, by assigning liaisons to specific schools to give them a single point of contact to report concerns of truancy or educational neglect.

Teachers -- along with doctors, police, social workers and other professionals who come in contact with children -- are required by law to report suspected child abuse, and when schools first closed to in-person learning in the spring, CYFD saw a dip in those reports. However, the volume of reports has since returned to normal, beginning in June.

CYFD's Workforce Development Division has created an [instructional video](#) to help educators and social workers identify potential signs of abuse or neglect through a virtual learning environment.

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