

Case Study

**Improving Attendance by Engaging
Families as Partners in Student Success**

Fulton County Schools

May 2021

“Leveraging [the program’s] technology created channels for constant and productive communication between families and schools.”

—Chelsea Montgomery, Executive Director of Student Supports, Fulton County Schools

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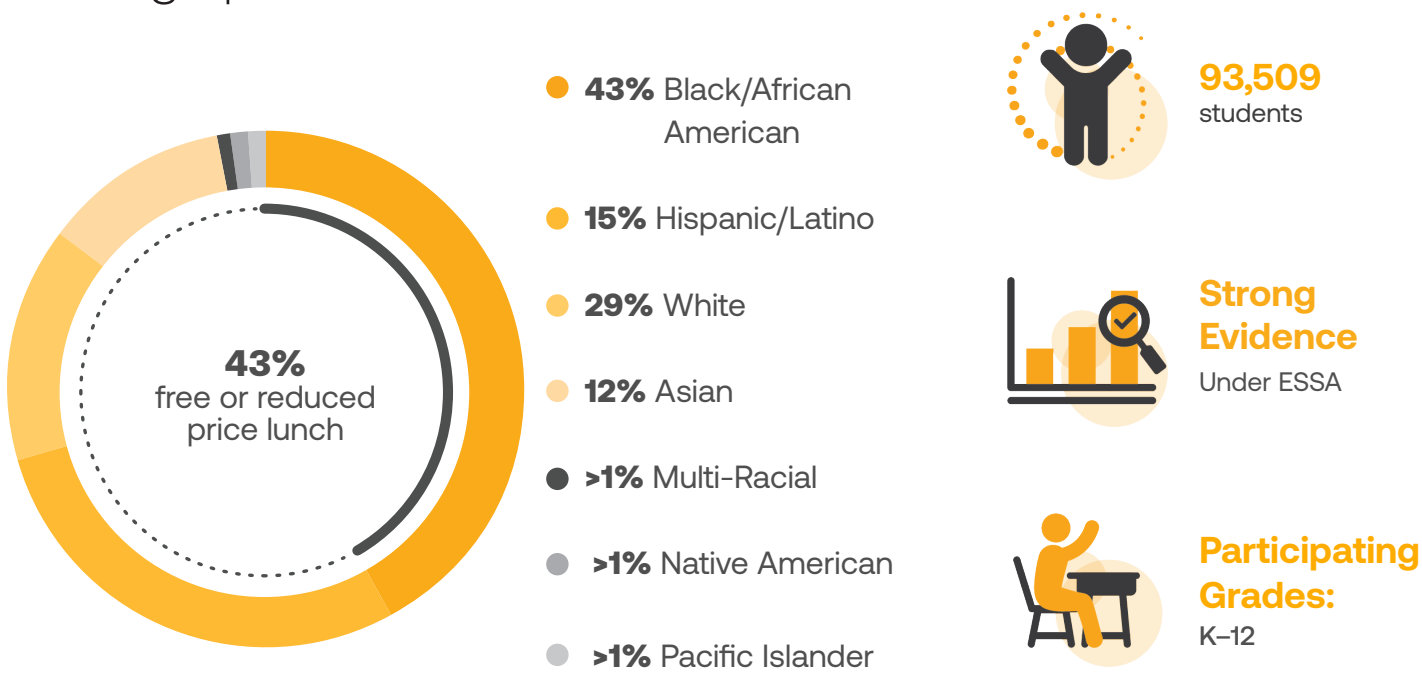
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Executive Summary

For two years, Fulton County Schools (FCS), the fourth-largest school system in Georgia, and EveryDay Labs have partnered to support students and families in their Title I schools by providing proactive outreach paired with inbound support designed to help them overcome barriers to attendance. Led by Chelsea Montgomery, Executive Director of Student Supports, FCS has taken a comprehensive approach to address absenteeism that leverages EveryDay Labs' evidence-based absence intervention as part of their Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS). As their partnership with EveryDay Labs enters its third year, this case study provides insights on the implementation and impact of their holistic approach to attendance on students, families, and educators across the district.

2020–2021 Partnership at a Glance

Demographic Info:



Proactive Outreach



We monitor our partners' attendance data, and when students in the district miss more than 5% of days, we begin to send their families personalized communication via text and mail—which we refer to as “nudges.”

School Year '20–21	Nudge Mailing	Nudge Texts	Total
Total nudges sent	18,600	204,732	223,332

Families Supported by Home Language	Nudge Mailing	Nudge Texts	Total
Spanish	1,436	4,681	4,743
English	6,289	26,617	26,970

Engagement Outcomes



Between **8,373–18,142** absences prevented



Families of **31,713** unique students supported and engaged



1,817 calls to the Family Support Team



18,129 responses to the Family Support Bot from **8,859** families

Expanded practitioner capacity to **focus on intensive intervention** and teaching and learning

The Need to Focus on Attendance as Part of a Student-Centered Approach

Prior to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and according to traditional compliance definitions and in comparison to peer districts, Fulton County Schools (FCS), a large, diverse district in a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, seemed to be doing fine with student attendance. The Georgia Department of Education defines chronic absenteeism as students missing 10% of the school year. Using this definition, the State of Georgia data showed the district was doing acceptably, even well, compared to other Georgia districts. The district had processes to call students who were absent and expectations in place for schools to follow up with students who accumulated too many unexcused absences.

FCS district administrators, however, made a commitment not to just be compliant with regulations, but rather to ensure that their processes and protocols were supporting the full range of needs of all of their students and families. And that starts with ensuring that all students are able to be present, participate at school, and engage in their learning. As district personnel grappled with broader questions about supporting students, they mined their data, listened to building-level administrators, and reflected on their own policies and procedures. They realized that chronic absenteeism, a measure of missed learning opportunities due to both excused and unexcused absences, was a persistent issue and strongly correlated with student outcomes. As district administrators unpacked the metrics, it was clear that a focus on improving attendance and engagement was also a focus on district achievement goals and overall student well-being.

Replacing Reactive Compliance with Proactive Support

Like most districts around the country, FCS had a reactive approach to attendance for even those students who qualify as chronically absent. They provided limited communication alerting families to a threshold count of unexcused absences being exceeded, which triggered the formal labeling of the student as having problematic attendance. These notifications came after the fact and did not provide support to help students and families overcome barriers to attendance. Further, using the 10% threshold meant that many students who were still missing a substantial number of school days did not get flagged for outreach right away. And for families with high rates of mobility, such as those moving in and out of the district, their traditional approach for tracking student attendance failed to identify students who needed greater support.

FCS district administrators came to recognize that they needed to address attendance in a more proactive way and with a more nuanced understanding of which students and families require support—including those whose students have primarily excused absences.

MTSS Framework to Support Attendance and Achievement

Chelsea Montgomery, FCS Executive Director of Student Supports, spearheaded this holistic, comprehensive approach to supporting students. Prior to taking on this role, Montgomery worked in several district departments including special education, teaching and learning, and student services. With this diverse background, Montgomery understood deeply that attendance is a prerequisite for positive student growth and development. And she knew that a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework was the most effective approach for districts to structure their supports to ensure that all students get the resources and services they need to be successful.

Montgomery explained that the use of the MTSS framework “forces one to consider attendance much more broadly and analyze the connections between attendance and other district departments and goals.” With this lens, it became apparent that many FCS students who were not previously identified needed support, and that prior methods were ineffective in improving and sustaining student attendance.

Bringing in a National Expert

Understanding the scope of the issue, but without sufficient district capacity to identify, plan, and implement the necessary supports, FCS decided to look for a third-party partner to implement a solution. With so many competing priorities for resources and attention, district personnel sought a high-impact, light-lift approach with national expertise to maximize student engagement. In creating the parameters for the Request for Proposal (RFP) to identify such a partner, Montgomery prioritized an evidence-based, proven solution that would effectively support students without adding additional burden to district or school staff. The RFP process determined that EveryDay Labs would be the right partner for Fulton County Schools.

Implementation: Supporting Students and Families from Communities Experiencing Economic Marginalization

FCS made the determination to target the EveryDay Labs intervention to Title I schools. From that point, EveryDay Labs went to work implementing their systematic, evidence-based absenteeism intervention. EveryDay Labs intervention combines the science of communicating for action and family supports to help students develop healthy attendance patterns. Research has shown that mailed nudge letters received at home are much more effective at promoting long-term behavioral changes than other forms of communication. In light of this impact, nudge letters are the foundation of the EveryDay Labs implementation model.

As an initial step, EveryDay Labs helped clean the data from FCS's student information system (SIS) to ensure that families could be reached. In the first year, EveryDay Labs mailed 26,657 nudges to 12,942 students. These nudge letters included personalized attendance data and information about relevant supports in the family's home language sent on a strategically timed, research-proven cadence. Each of these letters included information about how to reach the EveryDay Labs multilingual Family Support Team, who fielded calls and connected families to district and community resources that helped overcome barriers to attendance. With EveryDay Labs providing this support, FCS educators were able to focus their time and energy on the important work of teaching.

In the second year of implementation, EveryDay Labs supplemented the nudge letters with personalized, two-way text nudges that provide access to a Family Support Bot. In the second year, EveryDay Labs mailed 18,600 nudges and sent 204,732 text nudges to the families of 31,713 students. This additional layer of support worked to address the more immediate needs of students and families during the pandemic, including reminders for registration, start times, information to guide transitions, and check-ins to ensure that students were able to engage in learning. Montgomery pointed out that this "leveraging of technology created channels for constant and productive communication between families and schools."

Results: The Value and Impact of the Partnership

Low-Burden, High-Impact, Actionable Insights

The partnership with EveryDay Labs allowed FCS to connect with hard-to-reach families and provide relevant supports without any additional burden on district or school personnel. The lift of this work from FCS was so light that school-based administrators hardly recognized the intervention was in place until they reviewed their attendance data. In other words, they saw the improvement without the hours of work usually necessary to make such a change. Montgomery described this process as feeling like “magic” from the school perspective.

The Family Support Team and the Family Support Bot—both of which are fully staffed and managed by EveryDay Labs—field questions and concerns from families as they work to overcome issues that are preventing students from consistent attendance. Montgomery shared that these resources provided an incredible support to families and alleviated a tremendous amount of burden from district staff: “When families need support, they call the resource center.” Additionally, the multilingual Family Support Team greatly increased FCS’s capacity to serve their Spanish-speaking families with live, personalized one-on-one support.

In addition to the direct impact on student attendance, the feedback and metrics from the Family Support Bot, the Family Support Team, and responses to mailed letters provided Fulton County Schools with valuable data that informed its broader approach to student support services. Specifically, the information gathered through these different channels provided the district with valuable data insights regarding common and shifting barriers to school attendance, allowing the district to take action to mitigate some of these issues.

Sustained Support and Engagement

Through this process, FCS families were connected with district resources to help their children attend and engage with school. And they were provided with regular reminders about how to maintain progress and improvement. In practice, this meant that not only did students with high absence rates return to school, they continued to remain engaged because of the ongoing reminders, communication, and support. This component of the EveryDay Labs partnership that allowed FCS to recover enrollment and maintain attendance is fundamental to ongoing student engagement and achievement.

Continuity through the Pandemic

Though no one could have anticipated a global pandemic and its associated challenges at the start of this partnership, having the infrastructure and communication channels in place allowed Fulton County Schools to avoid many of the increased attendance struggles that districts faced nationwide. In particular, Montgomery shared, “When we pivoted to virtual learning in the spring of 2020 and, again, with various transitions during the 2020–21 school year, we were able to utilize the text communications to reach families and support them in engaging with school.” Fulton County found tremendous value in their ability to connect with families—especially their hardest to reach families—as circumstances evolved during the pandemic.

Looking Forward

FCS’s experiences over the past two years have resulted in the district reaping the immense value of this multifaceted approach to engaging families, communicating the importance of regular attendance, and helping families overcome barriers. As a result, the school district has embedded this focus on student time, attendance, and engagement into their core organizational structure and approach.

FCS has dedicated itself to continuing and expanding this work moving forward. The Fulton County Board of Education formalized a more nuanced definition and proactive approach to student attendance by changing its district attendance policy. This new policy establishes that families will be notified earlier and more frequently about absences and ensures that the district has preventative and asset-based supports in place to keep students engaged in learning. Seeing the successes from their initial implementation, FCS is expanding their partnership with EveryDay Labs to include the entire district. In addition to the gains in learning time, the district anticipates achievement gains and related improvements in behavioral, disciplinary, and engagement measures.

Schools are complex cultures that are made up of the actual experiences of families with ever-changing circumstances. Fulton County has provided an exemplar partnership-based approach to ensuring that changes in circumstances do not result in insurmountable barriers to attendance. Fulton County, in partnership with EveryDay Labs, has implemented a proactive intervention that is keeping students engaged in learning. And being present is the first step to increasing achievement and fostering healthy student development.

