



Organizations Team Up to Promote Preschool Attendance

County-wide collaboration includes Kent ISD, Grand Rapids Public Schools, Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative, Grand Rapids Community College, K-Connect, Kent School Services Network, Great Start Collaborative, Steelcase Foundation, and Believe 2 Become

With 6.5 million students chronically absent from school in the United States each year, including an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 in Kent County, several local organizations are teaming up to make sure our youngest children are establishing good attendance habits early.

Through a catchy local attendance campaign that has gone national, educational institutions, non-profits, community organizations, and philanthropy in Kent County are joining forces to help parents of Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) preschoolers understand the importance of good school attendance county-wide, beginning in the first months of preschool.

“Most parents know that good school attendance is the foundation for learning essential skills on time, staying on track in school, and graduating from high school,” said Michael Ghareeb, Kent ISD Director of Early Childhood Education. “They might be surprised to learn, however, that good attendance means missing fewer than five days a year and that attendance habits start in preschool. Good attendance in preschool will make your child more likely to graduate from high school, and more likely to earn a good living as an adult.”

The effort includes two opportunities from [Believe 2 Become](#), an initiative of the Doug & Maria DeVos Foundation, to participate using social media and smart phones: (1) a fun October social media video contest featuring preschoolers, and (2) a school-year-long text messaging component that sends parents helpful attendance and literacy tips every two weeks. Collaborative support for the texting program has come from the Great Start Collaborative, Steelcase Foundation, and B2B.

The [social media contest](#) will include GSRP classrooms at Kent ISD, GRPS, Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative (ELNC), and Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC). Each GSRP preschool teacher will be invited to post a short video of their students saying “Strive for less than five!,” using all the creativity and energy their tiny students can muster. The video that receives the highest engagement on social media will win a grand prize of \$200 in gift cards, and nine other videos will be selected as \$100 gift card winners in the following categories: most creative, most funny, greatest age range (parents and grandparents are welcome!), most people featured, most colorful, most inclusive, most endearing, most persuasive, most powerful.

A quick YouTube search of “Strive for less than five” reveals dozens of creative attendance videos produced by schools across the country, using the slogan first created by [Believe 2 Become](#) and GRPS, then freely shared via [Attendance Works](#), a national nonprofit dedicated to reducing chronic absenteeism.

This effort builds on the multi-year success of [Grand Rapids Public Schools](#) attendance efforts, the regional in-school efforts of [Kent School Services Network](#) (KSSN), which have kept the issue of chronic absenteeism front and center, locally. “We never expected our success and the campaign to go national,” said Mel Atkins, GRPS Executive Director of Community & Student Affairs. “But we were fortunate to partner with Attendance Works and grateful to Believe 2 Become for creating a message platform that is both catchy and clear: Strive for less than five.”

“We discovered that patterns of chronic absenteeism often were masked by other attendance metrics,” said Carol Paine-McGovern, Executive Director, KSSN. “Along with the support of KSSN workers in several schools, the campaign helped GRPS significantly reduce chronic absenteeism, and other districts around the country took note. Now Kent County is leading the way in bringing preschool families on board.” Strive for less than five has been replicated in over 1100 schools serving nearly 650,000 children across the nation.

The original “Strive for less than five” local campaign also featured billboards, yard signs, posters, stickers, and a too-big-to-miss leader board making attendance data visible in each GRPS school.

“The experiences of several education leaders and funders showed that positive impacts on chronic absenteeism was possible in Kent County,” said Pam Parriott, Executive Director, [K-CONNECT](#), a collective impact organization working to give all children in Kent County a clear path to economic prosperity. “Now we are aligning both data and messaging to help all families understand that better school attendance leads to better school performance, higher graduation rates, and improved economic opportunities in the future.”

Starting the effort in preschool is valuable, as both elected officials and educators continue to work to achieve the goal of 95% reading proficiency by third grade. Years of studies show students who can read well by third grade are most likely to succeed in the school years ahead.

Also working toward that goal is the [Great Start Readiness Program](#) (GSRP), Michigan's state-funded preschool program for four-year-old children with some educational risk factors. Administered by the Michigan Department of Education's Office of Great Start, GSRP allocates its funding to intermediate school districts, including Kent ISD, and select large local districts, such as Grand Rapids Public Schools. Starting the attendance message early could produce long-term gains for students.

"Students in schools all over the country are now saying Strive for less than five, and it started here," said Ron Koehler, Asst. Superintendent, Kent ISD, "Strive for less than five days absent is a memorable way to say don't miss more than five days of school this year. Many parents still do not realize that missing just one day of school each month can threaten their long-term academic success."

Now thousands of preschoolers and their parents will get the memo too, and start developing good, or even excellent, attendance habits in the preschool years.

"A missed day of school is a missed opportunity to learn, even in preschool" said Chaná Edmond-Verley, senior program officer for Believe 2 Become. "This is all about helping our youngest residents begin to realize their potential in preschool, because for all children in Kent County, success starts early."