

Maine schools say path to fixing chronic absenteeism starts with building relationships

Small steps like Sanford's 'walking school bus' help kids make it over that first barrier – getting to the bus stop – as a way to reduce absences in class.

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Lana Cohen Press Herald



Staff members from Sanford Pride Elementary School help children cross Main Street at a bus stop on Jan. 9. *Derek Davis/Staff Photographer*

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On a gray, 15-degree January morning, 10-year-old Chris Smith stood outside his house near downtown Sanford. He was wearing black snow pants and an electric-blue puffer jacket.

A smile grew across his face as he saw Carol Lantagne, a Sanford pre-K education technician, and Kristin Daly, Pride Elementary School’s assistant principal, walking toward him, moving briskly down the street still snowy from the storm two days before.

Two years ago, Chris missed 43 days of school. Last year, he missed 25. But so far this year, the Sanford fourth grader has missed only one.

The difference? He’s now part of a “walking school bus.”

Every Monday through Friday, a school employee – almost always Lantagne – picks Chris up from his house and walks him to his bus stop a few blocks away.

On the five-minute walk, Chris chatted animatedly with Leah Marks, the outreach worker in the Sanford School District who organized the walking bus and occasionally joins in on its morning route. He recently turned 10 years old, he explained.

“I got a Rice Krispies Treat with M&M’s and a chocolate milk all to myself,” he said. “And next weekend, I’ll have a real birthday, with cake.”

He hoped it would be vanilla and decorated with characters from his favorite video game, Minecraft, he said.



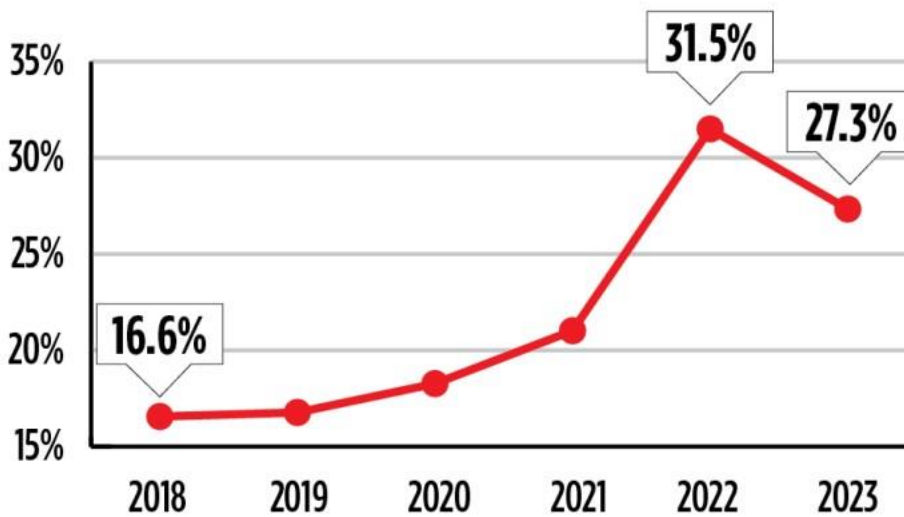
Carol Lantagne, an ed tech at Sanford Pride Elementary School, walks with third grader Christiano Mulamba on Jan. 9. School staff have been helping children get to the bus stop as a way to combat chronic absenteeism. *Derek Davis/Staff Photographer*
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Sanford’s walking school bus picks up multiple students from their homes and waits with them at their bus stop. It is one of many school- and district-run initiatives set up statewide to stymie the chronic absenteeism that reached record levels during the pandemic and has yet to significantly drop back down.

Students are labeled chronically absent if they miss more than 18 days, or 10% of the school year.

Before the pandemic, 16.8% of Maine’s K–12 students met this definition. During the pandemic by the 2021-22 school year, that number almost doubled to 31.5%. Last year, it [dropped slightly](#) to 27.3%.

Chronic absenteeism in Maine schools



SOURCE: Maine Department of Education

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The key to getting students back is to help them and their families create strong and positive connections with their school and to reduce barriers that keep students from attending, said Marks, who has been working in school attendance for a dozen years.

‘I’M REALLY TRYING’

For Chris and his mother, Jessica Mullen, the walking bus did just that.

Mullen is a single mother to four children. Her youngest, Eric, has severe disabilities and requires significant and near-constant attention. She lives hours from family in Waterville and has only a small community in Sanford.

Getting Chris to the bus stop on time while also caring for Eric was a significant challenge and some days, just not possible, she said.

“As a mom I struggle to make sure I get everything done the way it’s supposed to be,” Mullen said. “I’m really trying. Sometimes it might not seem like it, but I really am,” she said.

She said the walking bus gave her the support she needed to be able to get Chris to school and give Eric the attention he needs.



Sanford Pride Elementary School students wait at a bus stop on Main Street on Jan. 9 after a big snowfall two days before. *Derek Davis/Staff Photographer*

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And for Chris, it’s a highlight of his day.

He doesn’t really like school, Mullen said, but he loves the walk to the bus stop. On the one day he missed school this year because he was sick, he begged her to let him meet up with the group anyway, she said.

Mullen is proud of Chris' improved attendance record. It feels good, she said, to know he is getting to school most days.

Addressing chronic absenteeism is complicated because it's not a root issue, it's an indicator that there are other things going on, said Jess Anderson, executive director of Count ME in Maine, an organization working to increase school attendance in the state.

"It doesn't tell you what's wrong, it just tells you that there's a problem," she said

Generally, that problem is poverty, Anderson said.

"Think of it like Maslow's hierarchy of needs," she said. "If a student doesn't have a place to live, an emotionally safe environment to go home to or enough food to eat, then school is not going to be a priority," she said.



Luzineide Maunzanga, a student at Sanford Pride Elementary School, waits for her school bus in Sanford on Jan. 9. *Derek Davis/Staff Photographer*

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'POVERTY IS A MAJOR ISSUE'

Difficult home lives, caring for younger siblings, having full-time day jobs and mental health challenges are all reasons that Dexter Regional High School students start missing significant amounts of school, Principal Stephen Bell said.

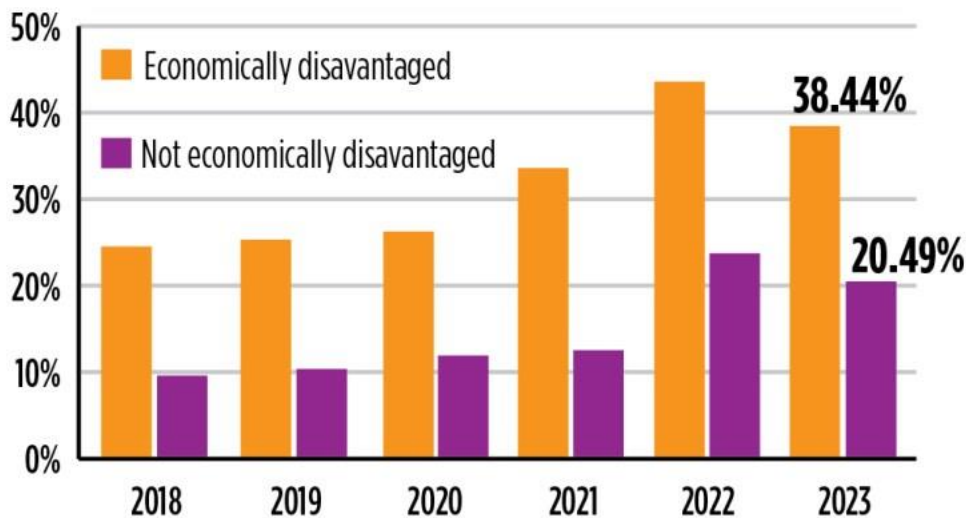
As with schools across the state, chronic absenteeism skyrocketed at the Penobscot County school during the pandemic.

Bell is hopeful that the school’s efforts to reengage students will help bring chronic absenteeism back down to at least pre-pandemic levels. But it’s challenging, he said, because the major issue leading to missed school days is poverty. And poverty is a behemoth to go up against.

Economically disadvantaged students are significantly more likely to be chronically absent than their counterparts, according to state data.

Last year, 20.49% of non-economically disadvantaged students (those living above the poverty line) were chronically absent. But the rate was almost double – 38.44% – for economically disadvantaged students (those living below the poverty line).

Rate of Maine students who missed at least 18 days of school



SOURCE: Maine Department of Education

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At the outset, Bell said he works to make the school as welcoming as possible to its 270 students – a place where students feel safe, happy, successful and engaged.

But year after year, some students still stop showing up. That’s when the school social worker and school police officer come into play. They do home visits to try to find out why students aren’t coming to school and encourage them to return.

Sometimes they find that a student is home taking care of their younger siblings because their parents are at work and can't afford child care, sometimes the students themselves are working, sometimes they're struggling with mental health and sometimes they're homeless, couch surfing, and just trying to survive, Bell said.

Dexter's teachers, administrators, mental health professionals and social workers work together to bring kids back to school – to sell school as a safe, warm place with food, friends, adults who can be trusted and access to other resources. And this past year, with financial assistance from the state for training, they've started building individual plans for each kid who is chronically absent or otherwise struggling in an effort to get them back on track.



Carol Lantagne, left, an ed tech at Sanford Pride Elementary School, greets fourth graders Chris Smith and Isabel Soule before walking to the bus stop on Jan. 9. *Derek Davis/Staff Photographer*

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But as the school works to pull kids back into school, other forces push them away.

“Poverty is a major issue in rural Maine,” Bell said. “And with mental health on top of that, it can be tough to convince kids to come to school.”