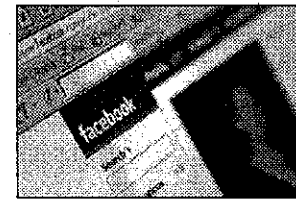


# Education

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## Study probes causes of school absenteeism Results will help guide needed services at Hays CISD

BY KIM HILSENBECK

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Parents at four Hays CISD schools are being asked to cooperate with a research study on student absenteeism, according to Elsa Hinojosa, executive director for secondary performance.

Kyle and Fuentes elementary schools, along with Chapa Middle School and Lehman High School, are the focus of a new study by E3 Alliance, an Austin-based nonprofit working to ensure academic success in Central Texas. The study also includes four schools from Pflugerville ISD.

The main thrust of the research is to gather data to help school districts decide what services and support are needed for families whose children are absent from school, specifically those who miss school on a chronic basis.

"We have data on who is absent and when," said Amy Wiseman, lead researcher and project director from E3, "but we are missing the why part of the equation."

The "why" is the crux of the study, according to Wiseman.

She said campuses currently request data on why a student missed school and parental or medical notes are required for any absence, excused or unexcused.

Excused absences include funerals, family emergencies, illness/medical

**"We have data on who is absent and when, but we are missing the 'why' part of the equation."**

–Amy Wiseman, E3 Alliance lead researcher and project director

visits, weather-related issues and visiting a family member in the military. Unexcused absences include vacations, missing the bus and taking care of another family member.

For purposes of the study, Wiseman said families are being asked to provide as much detail about a student absence as possible – which may be more than they normally provide.

Hinojosa said, "Students and parents will continue to follow our procedures for reporting absences to their school, but might receive a follow-up phone call about the absence."

Through a grant from Central Health and St. David's Foundation, E3 hired temporary staff at Hays CISD and Pflugerville ISD during the two-month study period. They are being paid at a substitute teacher rate, according to Wiseman, but there is no cost to either district for participating in the research.

Wiseman said the extra personnel will make it easier for the campus staff

to contact parents or family members of absent students in the event that no excuse or reason was provided or to gather additional details about an absence.

She added that she designed the study to collect more detailed information about absenteeism. The team is particularly interested in chronic absences – meaning students who are not in school more often than the average number of absences at that campus.

"We are looking for data about students with common illnesses and issues, including asthma, diabetes, depression, anxiety and dental problems," Wiseman said.

She said the study aims to determine if students who miss school for those reasons are receiving medical treatment for those conditions.

"And if not, we would like to know why not," Wiseman said.

However, Wiseman pointed out that the research is intended to capture data on all absences, not just chronic

episodes or students from low-income families.

Once collected, Children's Optimal Health (COH), another Austin-based nonprofit, will map the data to determine if there are any hotspots in the respective districts that need additional services or support to ensure students' attendance.

An example of additional services may include a low or no-cost health care facility for low-income families, according to Wiseman.

COH is the same company that conducted obesity mapping for the district last year.

In her experience, Wiseman said there are three primary barriers preventing students, particularly from low-income families, from seeking medical treatment.

"The cost, having transportation to get to the doctor and work scheduling conflicts," said Wiseman, "are the main reasons we see low-income students not getting medical treatment."

By analyzing the E3 study data, Hinojosa said campus leaders will better understand student attendance trends.

"They can then develop plans to increase attendance rates," she said.

Wiseman said the data collection for the study runs through March 20. She added that all information is confidential and students will not be identified in the data, which will be available later this spring.