

## Sarasota Housing Authority's attendance program earns national acclaim, envy from Manatee

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The Sarasota Housing Authority developed an agreement with the Sarasota School Board, allowing them to know when a child living in public housing was missing school. In the four years the program has been running, it has cut down on chronic absenteeism by 25 percent.

SARASOTA -- Students living in Sarasota's public housing have been attending school much more regularly, ever since the inception of a partnership between the Housing Authority and the Sarasota County School Board.

The Sarasota Housing Authority's "Attendance Matters" program has made it a violation of a public housing lease for a child not to attend school regularly, and if a parent is not proactive in making sure their child gets to school, they could lose their housing voucher.

In the four years of the program's existence, chronic absenteeism has been reduced by 25 percent among children they have worked with living in public housing, according to William Russell, executive director of the Sarasota Housing Authority. And the Housing Authority has not had to evict a family based on their child not attending school.

The authority's efforts to keep kids in school earned it an Award of Excellence from the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials last month, and leaders in Manatee County have been talking about starting a similar program.

"We felt the need to address a truancy problem. We were aware that it was occurring and we felt like we couldn't just condone the fact that kids living in public housing were being truant, violating the law and just not being in school," Russell said.



Z'myah Williams, 5, will attend Alta Vista Elementary school going into kindergarten, picks up a couple of books during a Book-Rich Environment campaign event at the Sarasota Housing Authority in 2017

Russell said the program allows for data sharing between the school district and housing authority. If a child living in public housing is consistently absent, a representative from the housing authority will knock on the tenant's door to see why the student has been missing school.

Russell said those conversations often rectify the issue. If the child's absences continue, the school will reach out to the parents and schedule a meeting. If the parents don't attend the meeting and refuse to cooperate with the school, which Russell described as "an extreme situation," the School Board can issue a probable cause affidavit for the parents violating state law. The housing authority would notify the parents they have a week to fix the issue by meeting with the school, or they will lose their housing voucher.



William Russell, President & CEO of Sarasota Housing Authority

"It is never our goal to evict the family. We just want them to take it seriously," Russell said. "If the parent is just unwilling to do anything, then essentially they would be forfeiting their lease. We've never come close to that."

Beth Wilson, an instructional coach at Alta Vista Elementary School, reviewed data on Wednesday showing 38 percent of the school's second- and third-graders living in public housing had improved their attendance since last year.

Wilson pointed to one student who had 16 attendance infractions at this time last year. This year, that number is down to nine.

"Am I excited about nine?" Wilson said. "No, but that's a huge improvement."

Alta Vista Principal Barbara Shirley said parents have gotten used to seeing school and housing officials working hand in hand on issues.

"They walk in to school, and they see school staff and housing authority staff together, with the goal of supporting them or addressing challenging issues," Shirley said. "It's nothing for us to be walking around the Housing Authority with members of their staff."

Attitudes toward school attendance have shifted over the past decade, as researchers realized that missing up to 10 percent of the school year -- just one day a month -- is correlated to lower performance.

Hedy Chang, the director of Attendance Works, a national organization focused on reducing chronic absenteeism, told the Herald-Tribune last year that creative approaches are the only ways schools solve attendance issues.

“The key question is to say is, ‘Why?’ And what will help change it,” Chang said. “This needs to activate problem solving.”

### **Efforts to expand to Manatee**

Outgoing Manatee School Board member John Colon wants to establish a similar program in Manatee.

Colon, who lost his School Board reelection bid to Rev. James T. Golden, also serves on the Sarasota Housing Authority Board. He only has one more meeting before leaving the School Board, but he is hoping his fellow board members catch his enthusiasm for the program.

“The government is paying and the taxpayers are paying for these children,” Colon said. “The only way we can break that cycle of poverty is to have them get an education.”

Manatee board member Charlie Kennedy said he likes the idea.

“It is a pretty much a no-brainer. Anything we can do to motivate parents to get their kids to school, that’s a good thing,” Kennedy said. “If (Colon’s) data is accurate I’m all for it and I’m happy to pick up the torch.”

Willie Calhoun, executive director of the Manatee Housing Authority, agreed.

“Oh, it is definitely something we can look into, especially if it has been successful at the Sarasota Housing Authority and it is creating dialogue and helping kids stay in school or go to school, absolutely,” Calhoun said.

Bradenton Housing Authority executive director Ellis Mitchell, Jr. said his agency couldn’t participate in the program because their Housing and Urban Development classification does not allow them as much latitude as other housing authorities have.

Russell said it requires housing authorities commit time and resources to an area that isn’t under their specifically mandated oversight.

If attendance advocates “had come to me in my first four or five years, I would have been sympathetic but said, ‘Look this is not on my list of the top 50 things that I have to do,’” Russell said.

Russell said although the program may be outside the typical purview of a housing agency, it has helped establish relationships with the residents.

“It’s impressive on the parent that, hey, we are in this together. The Housing Authority cares about them, and this is why we care about it,” Russell said.