



DMGROUP IN ACTION

# Windham Public Schools (CT) Tackles Chronic Absenteeism

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## Windham Public Schools (CT) Tackles Chronic Absenteeism

Kathleen Choi

At DMGroup's 2018 Superintendents' Strategy Summit, Dr. Pat Garcia, superintendent of Windham Public Schools (WPS) in Connecticut, was intrigued to hear keynote speaker Dr. Todd Rogers speak about his success in reducing chronic absenteeism by applying behavioral science. Absenteeism has been a persistent challenge for WPS, where approximately 18% of students miss 18 or more days of school. Upon hearing Todd Rogers' presentation, Dr. Garcia was eager to explore what type of impact this new approach might have on her district.



Windham Superintendent Dr. Pat Garcia with students

### Combating Chronic Absenteeism with Behavioral Science

Dr. Todd Rogers is a behavioral scientist and Harvard Kennedy School of Government professor renowned for successfully leveraging behavioral science to increase voter turnout in the 2008 presidential election. Now, he is applying similar techniques to the education sector. At his Student Social Support Lab at Harvard, Rogers and his team research how behavioral science can improve attendance and increase student achievement levels. This research is put into practice through the work of his firm EveryDay Labs, formerly known as InClassToday.

Rogers' research shows that parents frequently have misconceptions about their child's school attendance — underestimating how many days have been missed, believing that their student is absent less often or the same number of days as other students, or believing that missing a few days of school is not that important. EveryDay Labs directly addresses these misconceptions by creating personalized Absence Reports that they mail to students' homes during strategic windows to maximize the report's effect on reducing absenteeism. These Absence Reports constitute what behavioral scientists call "nudges" — unobtrusive interventions to promote a healthy behavior. The "nudges" are not a mandate to

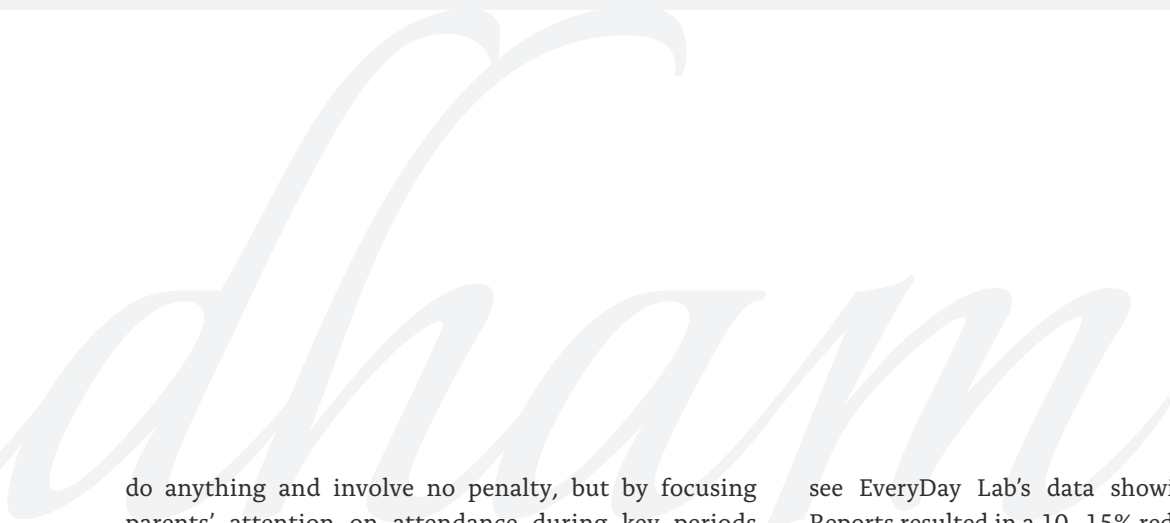
### FAST FACTS



Total  
Students:  
**3,377**

**8** schools

- 1 Early Childhood Center
- 4 Elementary
- 1 STEM K-8 Magnet
- 1 Middle School
- 1 High School



do anything and involve no penalty, but by focusing parents' attention on attendance during key periods throughout the year, the Absence Reports have been shown to reduce chronic absenteeism significantly.

### Addressing Chronic Absenteeism at WPS

Windham Public Schools is designated as one of Connecticut's Alliance Districts — one of the state's 33 lowest-performing districts — and therefore is eligible for increased funding to support initiatives to increase student outcomes and close achievement gaps. As an Alliance District, Windham is required to submit an improvement plan that outlines district strategies to make key practice changes and improve outcomes. WPS's district leadership team is all too aware that ensuring every student is in school every day is key to improving student outcomes. Previous analyses showed that chronically absent students at WPS were half as likely to meet benchmarks on state assessments as students who were not chronically absent. So, focusing on improving the chronic absenteeism rates is a critical component of Windham's Alliance accountability plan.

When Dr. Garcia and District Attendance Specialist Jose Camacho met with EveryDay Labs, the two district leaders pressed hard to learn more specifics of EveryDay Lab's track record and approach. They were impressed to

see EveryDay Lab's data showing that their Absence Reports resulted in a 10–15% reduction in chronic absenteeism across 14 school districts, with impact consistent across grade level, gender, English language learners, and free and reduced lunch status. Dr. Garcia noted that the district itself had tried mailing letters to parents about their students' absences, but these efforts had failed to change behavior; in fact, the district had received feedback that families viewed these letters as solely related to compliance, and rarely saw them as providing useful insights. Excited by EveryDay Lab's personalized intervention and demonstrated results, Dr. Garcia and Mr. Camacho were eager to give this approach a try as part of their comprehensive attendance plan. Knowing that spring is a critical time for addressing absenteeism, Dr. Garcia and Mr. Camacho took quick action, and by March 2018, WPS engaged EveryDay Labs to launch a pilot program for the rest of the school year.

### Piloting a Simple Solution

Implementation was easy: WPS simply had to provide EveryDay Labs with student attendance data and address information. EveryDay Labs used this data to identify 743 students at risk of becoming chronically absent, just over 20% of the student population, and sent a series of personalized Absence Reports to these students' households. The Absence Reports were designed

English Language Learners

**27.4%**

Home Language other than English:

**48%**

Students with IEPs:

**20.5%**

Graduation Rate: (SY2017-18)

**85.6%** **86.8%**

District High School

Chronic Absenteeism:

**17.9%**

Source: SY2018-19; [https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district\\_detail.asp?ID2=0905190](https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district_detail.asp?ID2=0905190).

to address families' misconceptions about the importance of attendance. EveryDay Labs personalized the reports to show families exactly how many days their child had been absent and put their child's attendance into context by comparing these absences to those of his or her classmates. Up to three rounds of Absence Reports over the course of spring 2018 were delivered to 743 targeted students in English or Spanish, based on the student's home language.

Analysis of the results at the end of the school year showed that these three rounds of mailings eliminated an estimated 450 to 550 absences. Dr. Garcia noted that after the first round of mailings, she received many phone calls from parents asking about their child's attendance — something she had not experienced before. "I look at the [attendance] data, but also at the change in behavior of the parents and students. I think: Is this letter making an impact on the parents? Does it prompt them to pick up the phone [to inquire about attendance]? Yes, I saw the difference. I got those calls myself," Dr. Garcia commented.

WPS was pleased with the results. They believe that EveryDay Lab's personalized reports and the visual presentation of each student's attendance data compared to that of his or her peers made parents more interested in their child's attendance.

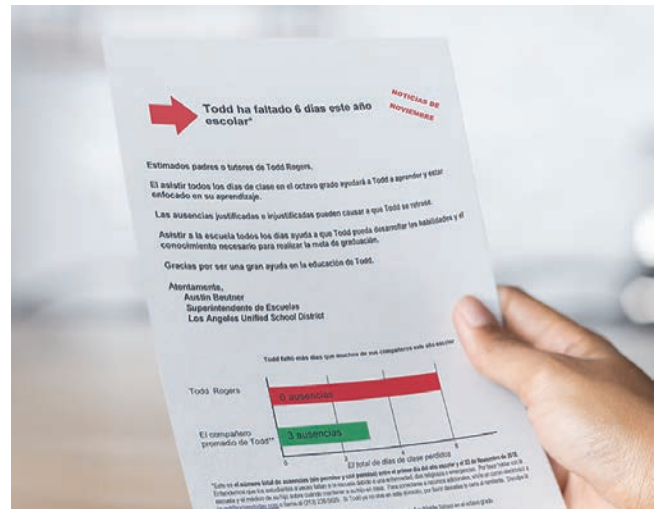
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### Initial Success Prompts Full Adoption

Dr. Garcia and Mr. Camacho viewed the Absence Report mailers as a powerful addition to their attendance strategy. EveryDay Labs provided a low-cost, easy-to-implement program that could target students in a broader target group. Based on the success of the pilot, WPS decided to continue the implementation into SY2018-19. For the full school year, a total of six rounds of mailings were sent to students in K-12—again, in English or Spanish as appropriate.

Based on the attendance data provided by WPS, EveryDay Labs identified 1,380 students to receive the mailings; in



An example of an individualized Absence Report delivered in Spanish

total, 4,869 personalized reports were mailed. At the end of the year, the results were analyzed, and the data revealed that an estimated 800 to 1,700 days of instruction were recovered for SY2018-19.

In addition to the EveryDay Labs Absence Reports, WPS has an Attendance Review Team in every school as well as a district-level attendance team. Each school Attendance

Review Team is composed of administrators, guidance counselors, school social workers, teachers, and representatives from community-based programs, who address truancy and attendance issues. School teams review attendance data, then isolate and target specific students for interventions, including home visits, mentoring, and other tailored interventions. The district-level attendance team meets monthly to review district summary attendance data. Representatives from each school team attend this monthly district meeting. The addition of EveryDay Labs' services helps WPS create a comprehensive set of supports to improve attendance, a key step in driving improvement in academic outcomes for Windham's students. ♦

EveryDay Labs, formerly known as InClass Today, is a strategic partner of District Management Group.

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