

# 'A-Team' attendance officers work around the clock to bring no-show students back to class

by Holly Dolezalek

At the close of the 2008-2009 school year, a Del Valle Opportunity Center graduate achieved two important firsts in his family. The youngest of four children, he was the only child to graduate from high school. He also was the first person in his entire family to go on to college; he now attends classes at a nearby community college.

Rocky Zepeda, district coordinator of at-risk-student services for Del Valle ISD, knows this young man — and his family — very well. He spent years trying to convince the student's older siblings to stay in school, but, one by one, they dropped out. Not one to give up, Zepeda turned his focus to the youngest one in the family, assigning an attendance officer to the case once the child reached junior high. That officer stayed in constant contact with the child for the next several years and even arranged for the student's transfer to the Del Valle Opportunity Center, the district's alternative high school, so the teenager could receive more-tailored academic support. Upon the student's high school graduation, the officer helped him enroll at the local community college and steered him toward scholarships that would help pay for tuition.

That might sound like a heroic effort in the name of "saving" one student. But for the five full-time and two part-time staff members on Del Valle ISD's "A-Team" of attendance officers, it's all in a day's work. And their efforts are certainly brag-worthy.

Del Valle ISD is made up of 12 schools and about 10,000 students who live in southeastern Travis County. The number of economically disadvantaged students in the district hovers around 80 percent, and the number of limited English proficient (LEP) students is generally about 30 percent.

Four years ago, Del Valle ISD employed two attendance officers, Zepeda and Ray Macias, who is now principal of the Del Valle Opportunity

Center. At that time, the district had five elementary schools, one junior high and one high school — quite a lot of territory for two men to cover. Meanwhile, Del Valle ISD's student population continued to increase each year. Something had to give.

"We have a lot of parents who are living in poverty and a lot of students who are living on their own; it takes a lot of resources to keep these kids in school," says Sandra Dowdy, assistant superintendent of schools for curriculum and instruction. "[Four years ago], we were looking to the future, and we knew we had a small team of attendance officers and a rising demand. So, we started adding officers to meet that demand."

The district added about one new officer each year. This year, one of the part-time officers at the opportunity center became a full-time employee. It's not easy making room in the budget to accommodate more officers, but the district understands the need.

"It's hard, but we know we have to do it," says Superintendent Bernard Blanchard. "It's a priority for us in two ways. First, it's the right thing for the kids. And the better our attendance is, the more revenue we bring in, which means better instruction for the kids."

That's why, when the state last year added attendance and dropout rates to accountability standards for Texas schools, Del Valle ISD was ready to meet the challenge. The district's completion rate in 2008 was 93 percent, compared to 88 percent for the class of 2007. The 2008 attendance rate sat at 96 percent, and the dropout rate decreased nearly a percentage point between 2007 and 2008, from 1 percent to 0.1 percent.

Dowdy likens the A-Team's mission to the reality show, "The Amazing Race." During the month of



Superintendent  
Bernard Blanchard

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September each year, the A-Team is on the move for “no show” acquisitions. According to new state rules, students are considered dropouts if they don’t show up by the end of September and they don’t have a “justified” reason for their absence. Justified reasons include if the student left the state, graduated, enrolled in a private school or started home schooling. The A-Team has to scour the area and utilize all their resources to locate each no-show student and either confirm a justified reason or convince the kid to go back to school. In a district the size of Del Valle ISD, there might be as many as 500 kids the officers have to account for in only 30 days.

With cell phones always in hand, the A-Team works nights and weekends. They track many miles behind the wheel, they knock on doors of houses, and they spend hours on the phone and on their computers. The officers talk to neighbors, friends and family members if they can’t reach the students directly.

“Last year, due to [Hurricane Ike], the state pushed back the deadline by a month, and we had two months to find all the no-shows,” says Dowdy. “This year, the real rule went into full effect, and we just had 30 days. It was tough.”

Sometimes, it’s only a matter of obtaining documentation that a no-show has enrolled in a new district. But in many cases, the missing kids have chosen not to come to school, and that’s when the A-Team’s mission gets tricky.

“It’s a different philosophy than the traditional disciplinarian approach to attendance,” says Dowdy. “This kind of work takes someone who understands that they’re not going out there to just force the students to come back. These officers know that they need to counsel the students, help them, get them resources and follow up with them. They need to have constant, day-to-day contact with these students until they start having success on their own.”

Before they head out to find the missing students, the officers arm themselves with as much information as they can find about each child.



Del Valle ISD’s “A-Team” of attendance officers include (back row, left to right) Barry Phillips, Modesto Robles and Rocky Zepeda, district coordinator for at-risk-student services; (front row) Larry Lindberg and Hilda Reyes.

“We look at their academic histories, their transcripts and their overall progress,” says Zepeda. “We also take a look at how long they’ve been in the district and how many times they’ve moved between schools. We want to know as much as we can so that when we talk to them and try to get them to come back, we can discuss their whole academic experience with them and find out what led to them not wanting to return.”

If the student has left home and is living apart from his or her parents — which is often the case — the officers still make contact with the parents to hear their take on the situation. Through reconnaissance, the officers often have a good idea why the students left and what will motivate them to come back.

“There’s always a disconnect in the child’s education,” says Zepeda. “We try to help the parents understand how they could have been more proactive [in keeping their child in school]. They often say they wish they had had this conversation a long time ago; we learn that the roots of the student’s decision go way back.”

The officers do their best to get to the bottom of those roots, knowing full well that students are less likely to stay in school if their circumstances work against them.

“These students have to have a connection to their education, which means we have to have a multitude of programs that address their circumstances,” says John Day, assistant principal and attendance officer for Del Valle Opportunity Center. To that end, the alternate high school offers flexible scheduling for students who must work and day care services for students with children.

The attendance officers’ work often extends beyond students to the whole family. It’s not

unusual to encounter students who have stopped coming to school because their families are in desperate need: their utilities have been turned off, there's no food in the house, the primary breadwinner or breadwinners are out of work, or the kids don't have clean clothes to wear to school. If the families are recent immigrants, they often have no idea what resources are available to them, so the officers step in to make those connections. In some instances, officers have gone as far as to offer themselves as resources.

"[The officers] will go buy food or clothes for these families out of their own pockets," says Dowdy. "They shouldn't, but they do it to make sure those kids can come back."

The officers have found it necessary to establish relationships with the judicial system as well. They routinely work with probation officers and judges to intercede for kids who have tangled with the law. The A-Team maintains contact with attendance officers in other districts too, which helps them keep track of where students might be when they're not in school.

When the A-Team successfully convinces students to return to school, it doesn't forget about them.



Rocky Zepeda, district coordinator for at-risk-student services, talks with a student at the Del Valle Opportunity Center. Attendance officers routinely check in with students once they come back to school to ensure things are going well.

"We watch for attendance problems or less-than-passing scores on the TAKS, or students who are falling behind on their grades," says Day of the opportunity center. "We also keep track of who has less support at the home, such as the students whose parents are working more than one job. In circumstances like that, kids will often take the easy way out, and we have to keep an eye out for that."

The A-Team officers view their work as a calling to improve not only their students' lives, but to improve the community as a whole.

"This team increases the potential for better lives for the very kids who need it the most," says Blanchard.

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