

EMILY BRIGHT: This is *Minnesota Now*. I'm Emily Bright in for Nina Moini. We're turning back now to Minneapolis Public Schools, where students are back after spring break. It's also the first week after the district ended the temporary virtual option that it launched in January. The purpose of that program was to provide education to students who were afraid to leave their homes during the surge of federal immigration agents to the state.

More than 6,000 students used the virtual option at one point or another, according to the district. Even as they worked to support learning, educators were raising concerns that immigrant students and students of color could experience a repeat of the learning losses and drops in attendance that followed the COVID-19 pandemic.

Joining me now is someone who works to keep Minneapolis students in school. Colleen Kaibel is the district's director of student retention and recovery. Thank you for taking the time, Colleen.

COLLEEN Hi, Emily. Thanks for having me.

KAIBEL:

EMILY BRIGHT: Well, thank you. Can you start by just explaining how your office works to try to keep students enrolled in school?

COLLEEN So I am the director of student retention and recovery. So we work on both keeping students enrolled and
KAIBEL: identifying and finding students who have left-- so who have been dropped from enrollment most often through the 15-day drop, students who leave for other reasons, such as moving districts, going to a charter, leaving the city, the state, whatever. We know where they're at. So students where we don't know where they've left, where they've been dropped by the state-mandated 15-day consecutive absence rule, our team reaches out to identify those students, recover them, re-enroll them, and get them on track in school.

EMILY BRIGHT: So earlier this month, the *Minnesota Star Tribune* reported that between December 1 and the end of February, 400 students in the district were dropped from enrollment, meaning they missed that consecutive 15 days. That's a 49% increase from the same period last year. And I know there are many different factors behind student absences. But what's your understanding right now of how the ICE surge affected attendance?

COLLEEN Well, we know in Minneapolis that enrollment trends are shaped by multiple variables. Therefore, any decline
KAIBEL: that we've seen during that period of time can't be solely interpreted as a result of Operation Metro Surge without doing further analysis. So we're going to continue to monitor and build support to recover those students. But some of those students during that time have already been identified, recovered, and re-enrolled.

EMILY BRIGHT: Did the temporary virtual option seem to help keep students in school during that ICE surge?

COLLEEN I think it definitely helped keep them connected. It was a great option. Fortunately, we rolled it out pretty early. I
KAIBEL: think we were the first district to roll it out. And we saw families take that opportunity to just feel safer by learning from home and yet staying engaged and doing the work, and also connected to their classroom. So when a student was in virtual learning, most of them were connected to the classroom that they would have been in had they been in school.

EMILY BRIGHT: Sure. I'm curious, is your office doing anything differently now following the surge of federal agents?

COLLEEN KAIBEL: Well, we're always doing something different because one response with 6,000 students that were in virtual learning is not going to work. So we need to be really fluid and constantly building new responses. And certainly, this is a lot like the pandemic, where attendance and engagement were impacted.

And similarly, we alone can't repair the harm of Metro Surge on our own. So though we realize we play a critical role-- we're trying to provide stability, trusted relationships, make sure students are connected to counseling, they feel a sense of safety and belonging-- we know that our staff might be the first to notice any early signs of stress or trauma. So making sure that we are really heightened in our awareness to watch for that and connect students to support as quickly as possible--

EMILY BRIGHT: I'm glad you mentioned counseling. I know even though the scale of ICE activity has decreased, many families are still dealing with the ramifications of having loved ones arrested, detained, deported, or the fear and uncertainty of that happening in the future. So I wanted to ask, how does mental health and trauma intersect with your work to prevent absenteeism?

COLLEEN KAIBEL: Well, we really work to support students who might feel anxious or fearful when they're returning to in-person learning. But that requires us to help restore a sense of safety, predictability, and trust. So we really want to acknowledge their feelings without amplifying fear.

And we do that by re-establishing routines, yet emphasizing safety, that sense of belonging. We offer students a comprehensive, multi-tiered system of mental health supports. For example, all schools have at least one social worker and a variety of online resources, a school counselor. And we have an array of services. And we're trying to make sure we're connecting the right student to the right service.

EMILY BRIGHT: Now, we should clarify-- I'm a parent. Most kids miss a couple of days of school a year being out sick, for example. But we're setting that aside. We're looking at chronic absenteeism. So I wanted to ask, could you talk about the short and the long-term impacts on students' learning when they're missing lots of school?

COLLEEN KAIBEL: Well, that varies student to student. And I would say at this time, like for our students who participated in the temporary online learning or students who maybe just stopped coming for a period of time, it's too early to tell what the learning loss may have been. So what we need to do is when we re-enroll them and we're working on that re-engagement is really take time to get to know them individually. It's pretty common knowledge and well researched that when a student-- the more a student misses school, the more they miss in learning. But we have to identify student by student what their learning loss was, and then what do we do to support the recovery of that learning loss?

EMILY BRIGHT: I wanted to ask you about Roosevelt High School. That was the site of some of the federal activity we've been talking about. And the temporary virtual option was announced in the days after Border Patrol agents used chemical weapons and tackled people outside the school. And it's also now the site of a pilot program where students work to boost attendance. Can you tell me how that program works?

COLLEEN KAIBEL: Sure. So we have a student-led attendance team at Roosevelt High School. This is actually year two. And it is a group of students that have been selected-- it was a process of volunteering and selection-- students who are really working to identify the impact of absenteeism in their building, what they can do peer-to-peer to restore daily attendance, to build that sense of community, and to support one another in a healthy school environment where all are learning and on track to graduate, to succeed.

So that group-- they're doing a lot of work. They actually wrote a grant to the Partnership for Student Success out at Johns Hopkins. And there were over 700 applicants in that grant application. And they were one of, I believe, 18 or 20 selected out of over 700 applicants. So they are looking forward to using that grant funding to expand their work not only within the walls of Roosevelt High School, but outside.

They want to talk to our middle school students. They want to talk to them about the importance of preparation in middle school for your high school years, how daily attendance impacts your learning and translates to helping your high school years be not easier, but just more understandable, let's say, so you know what's going on when you enter those halls of Roosevelt High School, or whichever Minneapolis high school you choose to attend.

EMILY BRIGHT: And for kids, it means so much to hear it coming from a peer. I love hearing about that program. Colleen, thank you for your time.

COLLEEN You're welcome. Thanks for the invitation.

KAIBEL:

EMILY BRIGHT: Colleen Kaibel is director of student retention and recovery for Minneapolis Public Schools.