

Saks Schools to Join Learning Supports Program

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If a trend established over the past year holds, three area schools could see a lot more of their kids present for each day of school over the next year. Saks' elementary, middle, and high schools in January will adopt a plan of "learning supports" to counteract barriers to education that occur outside the classroom.

Four other Calhoun County schools already in the learning supports pilot program have seen sizeable decreases in student absences after adopting new policies under the program.

The State Department of Education in 2013 announced it would roll out the new program to 10 school districts in Alabama, and Calhoun County was included. Anniston High School is participating in the learning supports initiative, too. Principal Sherron Jinadu said her school's plan is still in the early stages.

In Calhoun County, Superintendent Joe Dyar and another administrator, Holly Box, are leading the program. Teams from Weaver Elementary, Weaver High, Wellborn Elementary and Wellborn High were the first to participate. The teams started training with representatives from the state last November, and decided to focus on attendance.

By December, the four schools were implementing individualized plans to curb student absenteeism. "We wanted to improve our attendance rate because that has a direct impact on achievement," she said. "If students aren't at school, they aren't learning." Box said by phone Thursday that those four schools saw an increase in attendance almost immediately. By the end of the semester, they averaged a 32 percent drop in absences. "That's equivalent to about 8,000 days added for students," she said. Chris Hayes, principal of Wellborn High, says that over a single semester of the program, his school .