

# THE TENNESSEAN

## This school restocks family pantries to reward attendance. Here's how.

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Chronic absentees have been a challenge for most of Metro Nashville Public Schools. Though it is improving, some schools are looking for new ways to help.

Warner Elementary School has found a creative way to incentivize parents to bring their children to school: the Warner Exchange.

The Warner Exchange is a store located in the school that provides families with necessities, as long as they bring their children to school.

Students receive five “Warner Bucks” each day that they attend school. On the last Friday of the month, parents receive the amount of Warner Bucks they have to spend and register to shop at the exchange.



Parents can get a max of 10 items for one child and 18 if they have two or more kids.

The store provides parents with diapers, wipes, laundry detergent, cereal, cleaning supplies and more.

“Cinnamon Toast Crunch goes quick,” Warner Principal Ricki Gibbs said with a laugh. “I tell them every time we need more.”



Gain, Swiffers and Fabuloso also go quickly.

In the year since the exchange was started, the reduction in chronic absenteeism has been drastic. It dropped from 42% to 28.9%.

The Warner Exchange has done more than help chronic absentees. It has gotten the community involved and given parents some trust in the school.



“We’ve been able to engage with our parents,” Gibbs said. “They now feel seen, heard and, more importantly, welcome here.”

Local churches, philanthropists and business owners have donated products and volunteered to help in the store on Fridays along with parents.

Stratford High School students come to the school to help restock the shelves, providing them with hands-on work experience.

The Warner Exchange is done in partnership with Communities In Schools, which has a site director at the school. The previous director, Ali Jenkins, helped launch the program.

Communities in Schools is a national education nonprofit that provides support to 40 schools in Tennessee, and 17 in Nashville.

“We’re here to help students meet their basic needs and make sure they are taken care of so that they are OK and can thrive in school,” said Leah Susi of CIS Tennessee.



At 7-months pregnant, Karimah Taylor, site director now in charge of the exchange, cried as a video played showing how the Warner Exchange came to be with Gibbs and Jenkins.

"I didn't realize how much bleach, Lysol or wipes meant to these families until I seen them in that store," Taylor said. "It feels good to know we're helping them."

Taylor said that building relationships with the parents and students has been incredible. If it's not something the exchange can provide, they have other grants that can help, and she's happy to know parents feel comfortable calling her for help.

Gibbs stressed the importance of having Taylor at the school and how beneficial it has been for parents, students and teachers, calling her a gap-filler who is able to connect with the community and parents in ways he can't.

"I, unfortunately, can't talk to every parent, but Taylor can," Gibbs said.

"Teachers can focus on teaching, students can focus on school and parents know they can talk to someone."



Gibbs said he hopes the exchange will help to encourage parents to bring their children to school and continue to decrease chronic absentees.

“The best way to change a child’s life is to give them a world-class education,” Gibbs said. “We’re exchanging basic necessities for your child’s attendance.”

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