

At school, Every Day Matters

The Oregon Department of Education last week announced a new campaign to tackle chronic absenteeism, which is linked to long-term gaps in achievement from assessment performance to graduation rates.

"We know that every day a student attends school means an additional opportunity for learning," ODE Director Colt Gill said in a press release.

The campaign, called Every Day Matters, is mostly housed on a website that offers resources to educators and parents to mitigate school absences.

Students are considered "chronically absent" if they miss 10 percent or more school days in a year. In the Medford School District, that averages out to four and a half missed days per quarter.

Butte Falls had the highest rate of chronically absent students among Jackson County school districts last year at 37.2 percent. At 16.1 percent, Eagle Point School District had the lowest rate.

Statewide, 20.5 percent of students in K-12 were chronically absent.

Like the state, local school districts are focusing on reducing absenteeism within their classrooms.

Both Medford and Eagle Point use a program called Attention2Attendance, which includes software to track attendance and a system to reduce truancy.

The approaches heavily involve parents, including sending letters home to them after four, seven, 10 and 14 days of unexcused absences. Eagle Point's team makes home visits.

District officials try to work with parents to first identify the causes of truancy.

Those could range from periodic and frequent sickness to more chronic issues, such as housing instability or unreliable transportation.

In most Jackson County school districts, homeless students see the highest rates of chronic absence, reflecting the disruption an unstable living situation has on their education.



Sixth-grade students begin working on math in Sara Detrick's classroom at Hoover Elementary School in Medford. Mail Tribune file photo

In Ashland, 40.5 percent of homeless students were chronically absent across all grades. In Central Point, 38.1 percent were chronically absent, and in Medford, 42.8 percent—379 students—were chronically absent last year.

Another aspect of Attention2Attendance involves removing barriers that may be hindering students from attending school.

"It's not about threatening families," said Kevin Campbell, Medford's director of secondary student achievement. "We're not saying send your student to school or else. If there are issues that prevent that, what can we do to help you remove those conditions?"

A year ago, Campbell showed the Medford School Board improvements since using A2A: a 3.6 percent increase in attendance rates in grades 6 to 8, and a 4.2 percent increase in grades 9 to 12, according to annual state report cards. He said progress has continued since then.

This year, the report cards highlighted data on regular attenders—students who attended 90 percent or more of school days—in kindergarten through second grade.

The state average for regular attenders in those grades is 83 percent. Only Ashland surpassed it at 86 percent. Central Point School District met the average and Medford, Eagle Point and Phoenix-Talent all fell within 5 percentage points of the average.

Research has shown that attendance patterns set early in students' lives often

follow them throughout the remainder of their education. Early chronic truancy has been linked to lower academic performance, and usually hits children in low-income homes the hardest, because they are less likely to be able to make up ground lost early in life.

"Third-grade attendance is a heavy predictor of high-school success," Campbell said. "I think part of the thinking there might be we concentrate on K through the second grade, we establish that pattern of positive attendance early."

Medford has focused its A2A efforts on high-school students, a decision that's supported by the attendance data.

Among each grade, chronic absence rates tend to creep up as students approach their upperclassman years. High school seniors have the highest chronic truancy rates of all grades in Medford, Phoenix-Talent and Central Point. The same is true across the state.

Campbell said that beyond test scores and graduation, emphasizing attendance will help students be successful throughout their lives.

"This is obviously a life skill," he said. "If we can get kids to attend school, they'll be better attenders at work, once you've established that pattern of showing up."

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