



# SHOWING UP, STAYING IN

*How Oregon schools partner with students, families and communities to beat chronic absence*



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**KATIA RIDDLE**, Children's Institute Senior Communications & Policy Associate, researched and wrote the profiles of the districts and schools in this report. A former journalist for national news organizations, she is the author of multiple Children's Institute reports, including *Baby Steps Into a Big World*, *Leading the Way*, and *Building Blocks*.

**ART DIRECTOR:**  
**JON TAYLOR CARTER**

**PHOTOGRAPHERS:**  
**ADAM BACHER, JAMIE LUSCH**

**COVER PHOTO:**  
White City Elementary School beats the odds on chronic absence. **PHOTO BY JAMIE LUSCH**

**BACK COVER PHOTO:**  
Celebrating attendance success at Ventura Park Elementary School. **PHOTO BY ADAM BACHER**

# Getting ahead of Oregon's chronic absence problem



At White City Elementary outside of Medford, students work together to spell words and earn rewards for perfect attendance. These exercises are part of a larger system of positive behavioral supports that encourage good attendance.

In the 2015-16 school year, the Oregon Legislature has committed to publicly funding full-day kindergarten. In so doing, Oregon will make its first universal investment in early learning. Given the compelling body of research that shows quality early learning benefits children for a lifetime, the Children's Institute applauds Oregon legislators and educators for making

this significant commitment.

In order for the state to earn a maximum return on this critical investment it is imperative that Oregon's kindergarteners attend school regularly. Poor attendance is already a corrosive force in the education of too many students in Oregon, many of them kindergarteners. Without swift intervention, this

problem will no doubt limit the success of the state's increased investment.

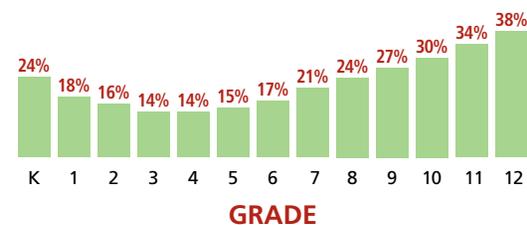
Chronic absence is generally defined as a student missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason. Between 18 and 23 percent of Oregon students are chronically absent (*see Calculating Chronic Absence sidebar, page 5*). In practical terms this means that every year more than 100,000 K-12 students are missing too much school. In a recent report<sup>1</sup> measuring chronic absence in all 50 states at fourth and eighth grade, Oregon was tied for fourth worst in the nation.

Moreover, both across the country and in Oregon, chronic absence disproportionately affects economically disadvantaged students and students of color; a 2014 analysis by the Oregonian found low-income students in Oregon are 50 percent more likely than other students to be chronically absent.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these facts, chronic absence is not widely understood or acted on.

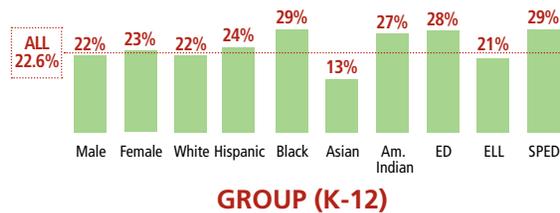
"America's education system is based on the assumption that barring illness or an extraordinary

## 23% OF K-12 STUDENTS IN OREGON WERE CHRONICALLY ABSENT



Percentage of Oregon students who were chronically absent, by grade. SOURCE: ECONorthwest analysis of ODE data, 2009-10

## CHRONIC ABSENCE DIFFERS SIGNIFICANTLY FROM AVERAGE FOR SOME SUBGROUPS



Percentage of Oregon students who are chronically absent, by subgroup. ED = economically disadvantaged; ELL = English-language learner; SPED = special education. SOURCE: ECONorthwest analysis of ODE data, 2009-10

event, students are in class every day,” writes Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins University, one of a handful of universities and NGOs that have taken up the issue. “So strong is this assumption that it is not even measured.... Like bacteria in a hospital, chronic absenteeism can wreak havoc long before it is discovered.”<sup>3</sup>

The federal government neither requires nor asks states to report on chronic absence, nor does Oregon comprehensively or meaningfully measure it. The existing data that reflects the breadth of Oregon’s attendance problem has been produced by journalists, public health organizations and nonprofits that are sounding the alarm on chronic absence.

## Early attendance supports future success

Poor attendance is often seen as an issue for high school or middle school students, but chronic

absence is a significant if not greater problem in kindergarten. Studies show that chronic absence can be as high in kindergarten and first grade as it is in ninth or 10th grade. A student’s attendance in kindergarten also has been shown to be a key predictor of attendance habits and future probability of graduating; in a 2010 longitudinal measurement of chronic absence in Oregon<sup>4</sup>, students who had missed more than 20 percent of school days in kindergarten were in the bottom quartile of academic performance in 10th grade.

By the time a student reaches the later school years, attendance habits are entrenched and students are likely to be further behind academically. To truly attack chronic absence, educators need to help students and their families set the stage for good attendance when they arrive at school, and then continue to offer supports in order to maintain good attendance habits as students continue through the education system.

In fact, the best possible attendance support and intervention would reach students before kindergarten. One possible contributor to Oregon’s high rates of chronic absence is the early education opportunity gap for Oregon students before they reach the K-12 school system.

Oregon ranks in the bottom quarter nationally for access to state-funded preschool, enrolling only 8 percent of all 3- and 4-year-olds<sup>5</sup>. As a result, many families do not have an opportunity to practice good attendance at these early ages. Emerging research suggests these early years provide a critical window<sup>6</sup> to develop attendance habits.

“Preschool is a rare moment,” says Hedy Chang,

founder and director of Attendance Works, a nonprofit that does national advocacy around attendance issues. She says programs that target children before the age of 5 can help shape parents’ fundamental thinking about their partnership with schools.

## Innovative schools lead the way

Though this is a debilitating problem both for Oregon and the rest of the country, there are proven interventions. Oregon took a first step toward acknowledging the problem in 2012 when the Oregon Department of Education worked with Governor Kitzhaber’s office to add a measure of chronic absence in sixth grade to the state’s achievement compacts. In order to have a meaningful impact across the state, however, policies and efforts around attendance need to begin earlier and leverage what we know works.

With awareness of this problem growing, momentum is building and messengers from many corners of the state are joining the rallying cry for action. In addition to the work that has already been done, organizations including advocacy group Upstream Public Health and Multnomah County education initiative All Hands Raised are working to find solutions.

Advocates have united around this message: The time to address chronic absence in Oregon is now.

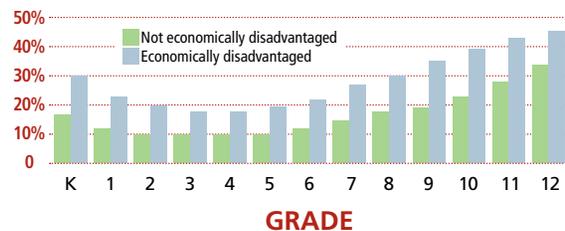
The purpose of this report is to examine the ways the state can begin to effectively address Oregon’s chronic absence epidemic, with a particular focus on reaching at-risk children as early as possible.

The report focuses on two high-needs school dis-

tricts in the greater Portland Metro area — David Douglas and Hillsboro — and one high-needs school, White City Elementary outside Medford, that have implemented effective strategies to change their rates of chronic absence, especially in the early grades.

Given the poverty rates and the many at-risk students in these communities, their districts and schools are likely candidates to have high rates of chronic absence. And yet, the educators working in these places are succeeding in combatting the problem and have driven their rates of chronic absence below the state average.

### ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS WERE CONSISTENTLY MORE LIKELY TO BE CHRONICALLY ABSENT



Percentage of Oregon students who were chronically absent, by grade and economic disadvantage.  
SOURCE: ECONorthwest analysis of ODE data, 2009-10

In these unusual pockets of success, students and their families are working in partnership with their schools and communities to find paths around attendance obstacles and increase their chances of graduating high school, completing secondary education, and going on to become civic minded and productive adults.

## CALCULATING CHRONIC ABSENCE ■ ■ ■

Chronic absence has twice been comprehensively measured in Oregon. The first analysis, published in 2012, was a joint effort between the economic consulting firm ECONorthwest, the national advocacy group Attendance Works and Oregon nonprofits The Chalkboard Project and Children’s Institute.

Using data from the Oregon Department of Education, it was the first statewide effort to calculate school and districtwide rates of chronic absence across the state. The study also looked at attendance habits among different populations including students of color and those who are economically disadvantaged.

The results were staggering. The report found Oregon to have a 23 percent statewide rate of chronically absent students in K-12, with low-income students and students of color affected disproportionately. No state that measured it at the time had a higher rate of chronic absence.

In 2012, Oregon took a first step toward addressing the problems highlighted in the report by adding a measure of chronic absence in sixth grade to the achievement compacts, a statewide school and district report card.

The second analysis was completed by the Oregonian in February 2014 in a five-part series on chronic

absence. In *Empty Desks: A Special Report on Oregon School Absenteeism*, reporter Betsy Hammond worked with the Oregon Department of Education to obtain data records of Oregon students. The paper then calculated rates of chronic absence at the state, school and grade levels. The Oregonian reported that the statewide chronic absence rate was 18 percent.

After this second analysis, Oregon Chief Education Officer Nancy Golden acknowledged the problem as a significant one in the state, and has promised to use her position to make tackling chronic absence a top priority in the 2014-15 school year.

In addition to these statewide analyses, in 2014 Attendance Works collaborated with National Assessment of Education Progress to measure attendance in all 50 states by asking students in fourth and eighth grade on assessment exams how many days they had missed during the month previous to taking the test.

By this measure, Oregon had some of the worst chronic absence rates in the nation: 24 percent of students self-reported missing three or more days of school in a month. These chronically absent students also had consistently lower test scores, tracking a full year behind benchmarks in reading and math.

Oregon is fortunate to have educators who are tracking this problem and implementing solutions. The question now is whether Oregon will learn from

these leaders, recognize chronic absence as a significant obstacle to academic success, and implement the necessary strategies to address it.

1 Chang, H.; Ginsburg, A.; Jordan, P. (2014). Absences Add Up: How School Attendance Influences Student Success. Attendance Works; Los Angeles, CA  
 2 Hammond, Betsy. (2014). Empty Desks, Oregon’s Absenteeism Epidemic. Oregonian; Portland, OR  
 3 Balfanz, R.; Byrnes, V. (2012). The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation’s Public Schools. Johns Hopkins University; Baltimore, MD  
 4 ECONorthwest (2012). Chronic Absence in Oregon. Portland, OR  
 5 Barnett, S.; Brown K.; Carolan, M; Squires, J. (2013). The State of Preschool 2013. National Institute for Early Education Research. Rutgers Graduate School of Education; New Brunswick, NJ  
 6 Allensworth, E.; Ehrlich, S.; Gwynne, A.; Pareja, S. (2014). Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences. The University of Chicago; Chicago, IL



David Douglas Attendance Specialist Kenan Ginsberg talks to third-grader Ryan about his attendance. With Ginsberg's support, Ryan and his family improved his attendance from below 50 percent to 90 percent.

In 2011 and 2012, Ryan missed most of first grade at Ventura Park Elementary in the David Douglas School District.

Ryan and his family<sup>1</sup> only barely registered that he had an attendance problem, the quiet result of the other issues consuming their lives at the time. His parents, Mary and Clinton, were going through a rough time in their marriage. They grew up in poverty and had overcome significant obstacles including addiction and incarceration. With both of them sober and Clinton working a good union job in mechanical installation, they were fiercely guarding the small fortress of stability they built for their kids. But the vigilance was wearing. Often the stress in the family's small apartment would crack apart their marriage.

With much of Clinton's family dead from drug-related causes and little nearby support, Mary's one refuge was her mom, who helped raise Ryan from birth. During that year when things were hard at home, Mary often would take Ryan to her mom's house in Canby — a good 25 miles down the freeway from their apartment in Southeast Portland. In the morning, getting all the way back to Ventura Park Elementary was tough.

# ENGAGING EVERY FAMILY

*David Douglas School District recognized it had a serious chronic absence problem and decided to invest in getting the most at-risk students to school.*

When she was at home, Mary struggled to set limits with Ryan. A small, trim and usually good-natured woman with tidy blond-red hair, Mary was 32 when Ryan was in first grade. Looking back, she now recognizes that as a first-time parent, she lacked the skills to create structure in her household. At home alone with Ryan, she felt more often than not he was calling the shots. “I knew I couldn’t beat this kid,” she says, “but I didn’t know what else to do.”

Feeling she lacked authority, and distracted by her marriage struggles, small things like getting up and out the door became major obstacles to arriving on time at school. Mary recalls one 30-day period in which Ryan missed 18 days.

Her relationship with the school became increasingly strained as the year progressed. She had ignored the multiple letters that came to her house about Ryan’s attendance. She was starting to feel embarrassed dropping him off and paranoid about the way the school staff looked at her when she did.

Once a family starts down a path of poor attendance like this one did, studies show, it is unlikely their child will ever have good attendance habits. So it’s remarkable that two years later the family was able to achieve a dramatic change in Ryan’s attendance. At the end of his third-grade year in 2014, 9-year-old Ryan had a nearly 90 percent attendance rate. The positive change in this single factor over two years significantly increases Ryan’s odds of graduating high school.

Ultimately Mary and Clinton were responsible for the changes that got their son to school, but the catalyst for the family’s turnaround was a district-wide strategy by David Douglas School District to combat chronic

absence. It is a strategy that has been carefully crafted to reach every single family and student in the system.

“The bottom line is you can have the best instruction and strategies and resources, but if the kids are not there physically we’re not gonna close the achievement gap or do the best we can for them,” says David Douglas Superintendent Don Grotting. He points out that focusing on students who are chronically absent is a way to get to those who are hardest to reach but need interventions the most. “When we looked at the data we found that students of color and children in poverty are the most likely to be chronically absent,” he says. “So we decided to invest in getting them to school.”

Grotting estimates that the district spends \$150,000 annually for the two staff positions devoted exclusively to attendance. In addition, there is unmeasured time put in from staff at all levels including teachers, principals, and counselors. He says considering the tremendous returns it has had for both students and the school, the investment of time and money has been “a no-brainer.”

## Low chronic absence in elementary schools

David Douglas does not regularly keep a single, district-wide calculation on its chronic absence rates, but the evidence of this strategy is easy to see across the district, where most of the elementary schools now have chronic absence rates below the state average, despite higher than average rates of economically disadvantaged students.

An example is Ventura Park Elementary, where Ryan attended first grade. In Oregon, high-poverty schools

like Ventura Park — where 83 percent<sup>2</sup> of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch — are likely to have high chronic absence rates. Indeed, in 2010 24% of Ventura Park students were chronically absent in kindergarten through third grade.<sup>3</sup>

**“The bottom line is you can have the best instruction and strategies and resources, but if the kids are not there physically we’re not gonna close the achievement gap or do the best we can for them.”**

*David Douglas School District Superintendent Don Grotting*

But today, after three years of intervention, the school’s chronic absence rate has been cut in half. In the 2012-13 school year, 12.7 percent of students<sup>4</sup> were chronically absent in grades first through fifth. First graders — often a grade with high absences — had a chronic absence rate of only 9.7 percent.<sup>5</sup> In the 2013-14 school year, the school performed above average academically compared to other schools with similar demographics.<sup>6</sup>

The David Douglas secret to cultivating good attendance habits is a strategy that was set in motion through a collaboration of some of the nation’s most creative educational thinkers and a handful of progressive education leaders in Oregon.

In 2010, Multnomah County was one of three test sites across the country involved in a national initiative called the Early Childhood and Community Schools

# EARL BOYLES PRESCHOOL FOCUSES ON ATTENDANCE ■■■

While many of the David Douglas School District's elementary schools are consistently beating the odds in attendance, in the 2013-14 school year Earl Boyles Elementary had one class that outperformed most others across the school and the district.

The preschool program at Earl Boyles is part of a special early learning initiative called Early Works, a collaboration between Children's Institute, David Douglas, and many community partners, including Mt. Hood Community College Head Start and Multnomah County Early Childhood Special Education. Earl Boyles is the only school in the district that contains an integrated and aligned preschool. As such, the preschool is subject to the same measure of attendance and attendance protocols. In the 2013-14 school year the preschool classroom averaged a remarkable 94 percent attendance rate<sup>1</sup>.

Andreina Velasco, who worked as the Children's Institute's family engagement coordinator at Earl Boyles during the 2013-14 school year, believes that one reason the preschool had such a high attendance rate was the many adults working in the classroom and the intimacy of their relationships with parents and students. In addition to the teacher and two aides who staffed the classroom full-time, preschool students and their families regularly interacted with behavior specialists and family workers through the school's collaboration with other public programs.

"With so many people who could support the classroom, we were able to do intense work with families to overcome obstacles to attendance through home visits,

many conversations, and intervention," says Velasco.

She recalls one preschool family that was struggling with a number of serious issues: the student's father had been deported, and the student herself had significant medical issues. Both mother and daughter were having separation anxiety. If the mom couldn't stay with her daughter at school, they both would stay home.

"We had a number of meetings with the mom and all of the specialists and asked, 'How can we make sure the child can be here, even if the mother can't?'" says Velasco. "We really worked with the

family around their comfort level and to meet them half way." By the end of the year, the student's monthly attendance was in line with that of the rest of the class.

This kind of intense intervention with families in the preschool classroom is in part made possible by the federal Head Start protocol around family engagement. Although the preschool is part of the elementary school, as a Head Start program it also benefits from that program's mandated federal guidelines that require family workers to emphasize the importance of attendance before the school year even begins.

"The expectation is very clear," says Nora Flores, a Head Start family worker. "Families are required to call us if they don't attend. If they don't call, we call them." Flores worked with many families in the Earl Boyles preschool during the 2013-14 school year.

These families met with Flores before they set foot in the classroom for the first time. "Just having that conversation up front is such a big tool," she explains. During the first meeting family workers like Flores established relationships, set expectations, and also talked through different scenarios. "We clarify, if you have a runny nose, you still come to school," she says. Family workers continued to work with the students over the course of the year, and if they ran into obstacles the family worker would help the family brainstorm solutions.

Emerging work on attendance suggests good attendance habits can be set with families of very young children through this kind of intervention before a child reaches kindergarten. In one recent study, researchers followed students from Head Start classrooms with good attendance records and found that these attendance habits continued through third grade.<sup>2</sup> Some experts believe that setting good attendance habits at these early ages is the single best opportunity in the course of a child's education.

"An early childhood teacher can make a unique connection with a preschool parent," says Hedy Chang, director of the national group Attendance Works. "It's a time when they are excited and hopeful about school, open to healthy habits and building relationships with the school."

As part of the Early Works initiative, the Earl Boyles preschool program is relatively nascent. In 2014 it expanded to serve 90 preschoolers in the new Richard C. Alexander Early Learning Wing. The goal of the preschool and the objective of Early Works is to provide universal, high-quality early learning. Good attendance is a fundamental part of that calculation. "Our challenge as we scale up," Velasco says, "will be to have these kinds of relationships with every family."

<sup>1</sup> Earl Boyles Elementary Attendance Team

<sup>2</sup> Allensworth, E.; Ehrlich, S.; Gwynne, A.; Pareja, S. (2014). Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences. University of Chicago; Chicago, IL



Part of the Early Works initiative, the preschool classroom at Earl Boyles had a 94 percent attendance rate in 2013-14.

Linkage Project that helped to align early childhood providers with K-12 educators.<sup>7</sup> Given that attendance habits are often set before kindergarten, the group identified chronic absence as a key issue to focus on and invited Hedy Chang, director of Attendance Works, to present at a conference for participants.

Among the attendees was May Cha, then director of the project for Multnomah County. Cha cites the conference as a pivotal moment in developing her understanding of chronic absence and she has remained one of Oregon's strongest advocates for attendance policy since then.

Once she returned to Oregon, she and her Multnomah County colleagues worked with The Children's Aid Society, which was providing technical assistance as part of the grant, to start analyzing Multnomah County's chronic absence numbers at individual schools. The more Cha and this team analyzed Oregon's chronic absence figures, the clearer it became that Oregon was experiencing an epidemic. The state has a chronic absence rate between 18 and 23 percent<sup>8</sup>, one of the highest in the nation. Cha's team worked out a constructive approach to the issue, delicately informing schools of their chronic absence rates and then offering technical assistance to combat the problem.

Reactions, she recalls, were all over the map. "I remember people were going 'What is this?'" says Cha. "What does it mean?" There were a handful of principals who did share her alarm. "I was getting calls from districts saying 'We have a real big problem,'" she says.

David Douglas was one of those districts.

One of the state's biggest districts, David Douglas has the highest rate of low-income students in the

Portland area; like Ventura Park Elementary, many of its schools have above average numbers of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.<sup>9</sup> Aside from the complications that come with poverty, many of the students here are also navigating challenges as English-language learners. There are more than 70 languages spoken in the district.

Once they understood the problem, staff immediately recognized that addressing chronic absence would bring huge benefits, both for the students and the teachers who would often get frustrated trying to teach kids who weren't in school. "We realized we couldn't just stand by and watch knowing that 20 to 30 percent of our kids weren't in school," says Florence Protopapas, who heads attendance strategy for the district. "We had to do something."

Today, the David Douglas system has several key components: data systems that help provide counselors and social workers with critical information about each student, school-wide attendance teams that provide triage for individual families and students, and family workers who help the schools to reach the families who need additional support — often outside the school walls. Staff across the district also work together to create a school culture that values and promotes attendance.

### *Family worker, miracle worker*

Ryan's mother, Mary, came face to face with the district's attendance strategy two years ago when Kenan Ginsberg, the social worker whose job it is to

work with families in the district who are struggling with attendance, showed up at their front door.

"Kenan is a miracle worker," she says. "He is the best thing to ever happen to our family."

The day that Ginsberg knocked on her door and said he was there to discuss Ryan's attendance, Mary was prepared to mount her defense.

But there was no need. Mary realized that Ginsberg was not there to prosecute her. "Kenan is just real," she says. "He's like, 'I'm here for you. What can we do?'"

Ginsberg's primary job with families like this one and the roughly 75 others he works with who have elementary or middle school students is to help them identify and overcome obstacles keeping the child out of school.

Over a few months' time, Ginsberg had a series of meetings with Ryan and his parents and talked to them about what was going on in their house. Looking back, Mary remembers that period as a hard one, but also one that undoubtedly marked a turning point. "I cried," she says, remembering her first meeting with Ginsberg.

Ginsberg helped the family make a schedule for Ryan that included things like bedtime and leaving for school. They talked about tools for enforcing these routines. He also explained the critical link between early attendance habits and later graduation. Perhaps most importantly, he helped them manage conflict at home.

Mary and Clinton have another son, 2-year-old Matthew. His mother is determined he will have good attendance habits from his first day in preschool. "I'm doing everything differently with this kid," she says.

Originally from Brooklyn, N.Y., Kenan Ginsberg is a fast talker and a fast mover. His formal training is as a social worker, but watching him work it's clear that

his skill set also includes street savvy. In this job he has acted as marriage therapist, drug and alcohol counselor, mentor, enforcer. He has personally paid families' electricity bills.

Ginsberg is deeply invested in the success of "his kids," and finds his work energizing even though he says the daily struggles of these families can be heart-breaking. He recently spent a Saturday with his brother swapping out washer-dryer units from their homes and driving them across town so that he could have one in his office; for families struggling with homelessness, dirty clothes can be an obstacle to getting a child to school. "Tell your mom I've got a washer-dryer in my office now," he told a sleepy second-grader as he drove him to school the next week. "She can use it anytime. And it's free, of course."

On an average morning, Ginsberg looks at his attendance numbers at about 8:30, after teachers have taken their first counts of the day. Then he starts making phone calls after that. Ginsberg might drive a child to school, help a family arrange a doctor's appointment at the school clinic or facilitate a mental health referral. In some cases he works with the Department of Human Services to remove kids from abusive family situations.

"In a family with a first-grader, I may never even meet the kid," he says. "That's better. You don't want them to experience stigma in school when they get pulled out to meet with a specialist." With children in kindergarten and first grade, the intervention is almost entirely with the parents. The goal is to set the stage for success, rather than remediate poor habits later.

David Douglas' attendance strategies span all grades,

and the district employs another attendance specialist who works at high schools. Still, Ginsberg says that when he doesn't reach a child until the later elementary or middle school years when responsibility for showing up is largely handed over to the student, it is harder for him to have an impact. Kids this age often have not only attendance problems but behavioral issues as well.

One recent afternoon, Ginsberg sat with Ben (not his real name), who falls into this category, an eighth-grader who Ginsberg had been working with for months. Though Ben was at school that day, he hadn't been spending much time learning. Clearly a bright albeit frustrated child, he had been starting fights with his peers and refusing to take responsibility for himself. Teachers had recently intervened when he put another student in a head lock. "Do you want to act like a young man, or do you want to act like a 3-year-old?" Ginsberg said gruffly to Ben, who sat hunched in front of him, "because this is 3-year-old behavior."

With a student like 13-year-old Ben, Ginsberg feels desperate. "I'm just trying to stop the hemorrhaging, and hope that we can give him one or two successes," Ginsberg says.

## *Attendance as a shared responsibility*

While family worker positions like Kenan Ginsberg's are critical in helping David Douglas combat chronic absenteeism, it is only one part of the



As part of their district attendance strategy, staff at David Douglas elementary schools work to create a climate that promotes good attendance.

job in getting kids to school consistently.

In addition to the approximately 18 percent to 23 percent of Oregon's students who are chronically absent, roughly a third<sup>10</sup> hover in a danger zone just above the 90 percent attendance threshold. A big part of the attendance puzzle is reaching these students proactively, before they and their families fall into crisis. In other words, the attendance strategy can only be effective in David Douglas if most students never need the services of Kenan Ginsberg in the first place.

Built on the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports system in which school teams meet often to evaluate the needs of individual students, schools in David Douglas have regular meetings at which they discuss attendance. The team makes sure to include as many of the adults in a given student's life as possible to work on a coordinated strategy to help students get to school. The responsibility for a student's attendance

## ATTENDANCE AT DAVID DOUGLAS SCHOOL DISTRICT

After three years of strategy and intervention around attendance, David Douglas School District has significantly lowered its rates of chronic absence. Elementary schools across the district now have lower than average chronic absence rates despite higher than average numbers of economically disadvantaged students.

### KEY DISTRICT STRATEGIES:

- family engagement, including two full-time attendance specialists who work across the district to engage students and families
- regular school attendance team meetings to implement system of tiered intervention with absent students
- district and school-wide promotion of attendance through school competitions and other behavioral supports that lead to a positive culture of attendance
- student information system that supplies accessible, critical data around attendance to staff at all levels

### BY THE NUMBERS ■ ■ ■

#### VENTURA PARK ELEMENTARY

Enrollment: **about 500**

Free or reduced-price lunch rate: **83.4%**

Chronic absence rate: **12.7%\***

#### LINCOLN PARK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Enrollment: **about 630**

Free or reduced-price lunch rate: **89.6%**

Chronic absence rate: **11.5%\***

\* Chronic absence rates as stated in February 2014 Oregonian report Empty Desks: A Special Report on Chronic Absenteeism; the rates are for the 2012-13 school year. All other school demographic information is from the Oregon Department of Education.

in turn becomes a shared one.

One of these meetings took place on a March morning in 2014 at Earl Boyles Elementary with a team made up of teachers, school counselor Christine McHone, and Principal Ericka Guynes. All sat around a table filled with spreadsheets and graphs detailing student-level attendance while McHone used an overhead projector to highlight individual students and the data around their attendance.

Student by student, the team discussed those under 90 percent attendance. Some students had needed only a little encouragement to improve, and the team discussed celebrating these positive changes with “good job slips” and pizza.

Other cases of repeated absence were caused by issues such as the student or family’s health, economic stress, job changes, transience, and other family dynamics. No fact was too sensitive to call forth if it was relevant; the team spoke frankly about subjects like race and culture in so far as they were affecting the students. “I’m concerned about her,” said McHone. “I know her dad has a new female friend in his life, and that has caused some issues.”

When a student’s attendance starts to slip, the team’s first course of action is a positive phone call home in which the teacher calls the parents and en-

courages attendance. In some cases, even this small gesture can make a tremendous difference. Failing that, the student will trigger another intervention such as a letter home describing the student’s attendance and a reminder to parents and families of the important connection between showing up for school regularly and school performance. If this schedule of interventions fails consistently — such as in the case of Ryan — the case is referred to a family worker like Kenan Ginsberg.

But a family worker referral is not standard. Many students, the school has found, respond to these earlier efforts. At this meeting the team brainstormed a course of action on some of the tougher cases. One student, for example, seemed to be living at least part-time with her aunt. Without a legal guardian the teachers and staff couldn’t have a frank discussion, even if the aunt was acting as the primary caretaker.

One critical function of these meetings is to provide the emotional support to staff that it takes to do this kind of hard work. Yet another family they discussed that day was facing a parent being deported and another with a debilitating health issue.

“It’s a lot,” says McHone. “Too much for one teacher or counselor to handle on their own.” With the attendance team model, they have a village behind them.

1 Last names withheld to protect privacy.  
 2 Hammond, Betsy. (2014). Empty Desks, Oregon’s Absenteeism Epidemic. Oregonian. Portland, OR  
 3 2009-2010 chronic absence measurements provided by Multnomah County from an individualized analysis of key schools in grades kindergarten through third in the county’s Schools United Neighborhoods Program during that school year.  
 4 Hammond, B. (2014). Empty Desks, Oregon’s Absenteeism Epidemic. Oregonian. Portland, OR  
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 6 Oregon Department of Education  
 7 The Early Childhood and Community Schools Linkage Project was a partnership with the Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership. The project was funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.  
 8 ECONorthwest (2012). Chronic Absence in Oregon. Portland, OR; and Hammond, B. (2014). Empty Desks, Oregon’s Absenteeism Epidemic. Oregonian. Portland, OR  
 9 Oregon Department of Education  
 10 Hammond, B. (2014). Empty Desks, Oregon’s Absenteeism Epidemic. Oregonian. Portland, OR

Fourteen years ago when Roger Will started as a high school counselor at Century High School in Hillsboro, he noticed a troubling pattern. “Out of nowhere, we would get these sheets of paper that would inform us that we’d lost a student,” he said. State law mandates that once a high school student has 10 unexcused absences they are automatically kicked out of the system. The slips of paper were the only warning Will would see before a student dropped out.

Each time it happened, Will felt like he was being delivered a physical reminder that he, along with the larger education system, had failed another student — one he hadn’t even known was in crisis. “I would think, ‘I had no idea this student was even missing school,’” he says. “As a newcomer to the system, I was like, ‘Why aren’t we talking about this?’”

Looking for more information about students who were silently slipping away, Will started pulling their files, and he discovered a pattern. For many of them, ongoing absences had been part of their pattern for years. “They hadn’t been coming to school regularly since kindergarten,” he said. “But no one had noticed.”

Will was seeing first-hand something that the



At Farmington View Elementary, Care Teams meet regularly to discuss attendance and to offer additional support for students and families who are struggling to attend school. From left: Principal Roger Will, Care Team coordinator Kathy Wilson-Fey, Washington Deputy Jarrod McCreary, school counselor Lisa Pfister.

# THE MAGIC IS THE SYSTEM

*Hillsboro School District combats chronic absence with a sophisticated data-driven strategy that reaches every student at every level of attendance and academic performance.*

studies on chronic absence have shown to be true: Attendance habits are set in a student's earliest years of school. Students who have poor attendance habits in kindergarten are likely to be the very same students who will not make it through high school.

He shared his findings with his colleagues, and together an informal group of them embarked on a quest to find strategies to combat chronic absence and prevent students from dropping out. Though they were focusing on intervention at the high school level at the time, it was not lost on Will that these students would have been far less likely to need intervention in the first place had they learned good attendance habits in their younger years. "After that, I always said that if I became an elementary school principal I would make attendance a big priority," said Will.

He got his chance eight years later, when he became principal of Farmington View Elementary school.

Today at Farmington View Elementary, brightly colored signs on the walls displaying the names of the competitors in the annual "Attendance Olympics," a competition in which students with perfect or near perfect attendance are awarded prizes, are one of the first things a visitor to this school of just more than 200 students sees. Every month students are rewarded with \$15 gift cards to places like Burgerville or the local movie theater. Twice a year, a student is selected to win a bike, the grand prize. Will pays for it out of the school's general fund.

So strong is the culture of attendance at Farmington View that it has had a ripple effect on the community and been embraced by the students and their families. Will recently had to negotiate with a mother who was

**"We've got so many mechanisms in place. No one thing is a magical solution — the magic is the system itself."**

*Hillsboro School District Superintendent Mike Scott*

trying to keep her child in the school's "100 Percent Club," meaning the child had no absences, even though he was going to have to miss school to attend an important family event. "I told her no," he said. "We would still find a way to recognize him, but perfect attendance is perfect attendance. No exceptions."

### ***A strategy to reach an entire district***

This culture of attendance is just one component of the larger strategy that Will has helped to put in place, not only at Farmington View Elementary but across the district of Hillsboro. The strategy is designed to reach every student at every level of attendance and academic performance. It includes: a sophisticated data system that supplies staff with critical information; individualized interventions to address chronic absence; a system that rewards attendance and creates a positive school climate around attendance, and a weekly attendance meeting of school staff that includes a family care worker.

"We've got so many mechanisms in place," says Hillsboro School District Superintendent Mike Scott. "No one thing is a magical solution. The magic is the system itself."

Scott is hesitant to put a figure on their investment in attendance in part because it is almost impossible to tease out from the district's other strategies around school culture. Fifty-three<sup>1</sup> percent of Hillsboro's students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and nearly a quarter are English-language learners.<sup>2</sup> The district has cultivated strategies to help its at-risk students, with special programs targeted for homeless students, English-language learners and those that have health issues or learning disabilities. District leadership also has a strong commitment to parent engagement.

Underlying all of these interventions, Scott says, is the understanding that students simply can't learn if they aren't at school.

"It's such a part of the culture that if you went to one of our meetings you might overhear principals swapping attendance strategies," says Assistant Superintendent Steve Larson. "But it's not an isolated battle cry. It's not: 'How do we get our students to come to school.' It's: 'What do we need to do to help our impacted students? How do we close the achievement gap?'"

To that end, the district employs four family workers called Care Team coordinators that help students work through a host of issues including attendance. Scott estimates these four positions cost the district roughly \$320,000 annually. In addition, there is a great deal of unmeasured time on the part of district staff that affects attendance.

Will says he sees evidence that these strategies are working in his school to improve outcomes for students every day. Sometimes it is in the story of a child who was struggling and then made a turnaround. Often it is anecdotes from teachers and counselors about

catching a child before their poor attendance causes setbacks. “This student was at a 93 percent attendance rate last year,” says Will, pointing to a picture of a third-grader. “But we got him up to 97 percent this year, and it was the first year he passed his OAKS test. I have no doubt those two things are connected.”

The numbers back him up.



Care Team members follow a schedule of intervention with students and families who are struggling with attendance.

At Farmington View Elementary, where 40 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, the chronic absence rate is 7.7 percent<sup>3</sup> — less than half the state average. The school’s academic scores are likewise significantly higher than the state averages; in 2013, 82 percent of Farmington View Elementary’s third graders were reading on grade level,<sup>4</sup> a metric that is possibly the single best predictor of a child’s likelihood to graduate from high school.

Farmington View Elementary is a shining example, but it is not an outlier. Across Hillsboro at least half of the district’s 26 elementary schools are beating the odds when it comes to chronic absenteeism.

## A strategy to reach the toughest kids

Roger Will is the sort of approachable, concerned principal that any parent would want. Will says a formative experience was one of his first jobs, when he spent seven years working at a residential program for at-risk youth in Beaverton. “It was such a gift,” Will says. “I worked with and helped some of the most difficult kids in the state of Oregon.”

One thing Will learned from that experience, he says, is that even the toughest kids want the same things every other kid wants. “They’re like every other human, they just want to be cared for and loved,” he says. “It was amazing how much success I saw when we put them in that environment.”

He came to believe that no child was unreachable. “You’d look at these kids’ files and you’d think, ‘Why do they even get up in the morning?’” he said. “But they did. And when they walked in the door to school, they just wanted to have a good day like anyone else.” The school’s job, he decided, was to support every child to have a good day.

In 2005, Will got a chance to incorporate this belief into the larger education system in Hillsboro. It was the kind of opportunity that only comes along a handful of times in a career. The school district had won a federal grant of \$4 million as part of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students initiative. The grant was intended to help schools and communities implement programs that keep students healthy, safe, and on track to graduation.

Out of that process and drawing from what he had learned in his research about best practices with

attendance and behavior management, Will played a key role in developing an attendance approach based in part on a school Care Team, where a group that includes counselors, social workers, teachers, administration and other community members meets to regularly discuss and intervene with students who have behavioral or attendance problems.

The Care Team protocol is clearly spelled out in a report that Will wrote and published along with his team of colleagues in 2009. The 130-page Hillsboro School District 1J Attendance Manual was distributed to every administrator in the district, along with school-wide staff trainings that helped the administrators implement the Care Team model at each school as part of the new school protocols resulting from the federal grant. It is a protocol that is still in use today.

In late September 2014, the Farmington View Elementary Care Team gathered for their first meeting of the year. Around the table sat a district Care Team coordinator, a school counselor, Principal Will, and a member of the Washington County Deputy Sheriff’s Office. Together the team looked one by one at each student who was under 90 percent attendance.

Some students, Will noted, had been on vacation or had health issues. Others had more serious issues including a student who wasn’t coming to school because he was too anxious. A lack of insurance had been keeping his parents from scheduling him for a mental health evaluation. Another student had confided in Will that he was acting out and skipping school because he had a tumultuous relationship with his father.

Each member of the Care Team contributed to the process of working through each one of these

## THE DATA SECRET WEAPON ■ ■ ■

Creating an effective attendance strategy takes the participation of everyone in a school including students, families, teachers, administration, and staff at all levels, even those who don't ever directly interact with the students they are supporting.

One of these behind-the-scenes teams in Hillsboro is the data team. Helping teachers and counselors to understand which students are at school, which are absent, what their absence rate is and what it has been over time is a critical part of attendance work. This kind of student-level data dashboard is not something most Oregon districts have.

In Hillsboro, by contrast, any teacher can have a complete data snapshot on their students' attendance within 30 seconds of sitting down at their computer.

When Principal Roger Will enters a name in the district's system, he can immediately see the student's daily, monthly and yearly attendance. In fact, Will can see the student's attendance record all the way back to his first day. "As long as he was at Hillsboro, I can see him," says Will. "I can look at a ninth grader's kindergarten numbers."

The mastermind behind the system, called Data Center Access or DCA, is James Harrington, who was the district's Chief Information Officer at the time the district received the federal Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant. "The premise around DCA is to give people easy access to the information when they want it, how they want it," says Harrington, who is now retired from the Hillsboro District and runs his own education consulting company. DCA also reflects a key change in moving to looking at attendance through student-level data rather than school-level data.

"For the most part student information systems — which are what most schools and districts have — start at the school-summary level," says Harrington. If districts want to track the attendance habits of individual students, they need to reverse engineer the

system. Harrington and his team, by contrast, built the DCA system to specifically target chronic absence along with other critical metrics at the level of the individual student.

The evolution of the DCA system in Hillsboro was a parallel one to building a culture of attendance and Care Team protocols in Hillsboro. "I had a really good relationship with the director of instruction who was leading that work," says Harrington, who has been a math teacher and software developer. "I essentially started inviting myself to their meetings and just said, 'What kind of data do you need?'"

Harrington also had another source of information that was a key influence in building the system: his wife, who was a principal in the same district. Through candid conversations with her, Harrington was able to understand the gaps in the existing systems and some of the key problems between theory and practice. At the time, says Harrington, he also had a talented team of engineers working in his IT department, and the DCA project was one that everyone was enthusiastic about. "It was kind of like an entrepreneurial start-up company," he says.

During one summer, Harrington and his team built the DCA model. At first, the program had only five features. As the team rolled it out, they watched how people used it and slowly made it more sophisticated as appetite for new ways of looking at data grew.

The DCA system also provides access to a student's academic history, past behavioral issues, test scores, and qualifications like special education or English-language learner. Staff can then sort and aggregate these numbers as they wish, and even have the system email them metrics on a student at regular intervals.

It is hard to overstate how much the DCA system facilitates attendance work, says Principal Roger Will. "It just makes it that much easier for everyone to have a shared understanding of the numbers," says Will. "The data is not an obstacle. It's a tool."

situations: The Care Team coordinator brainstormed with the school counselor around accessing medical care for the student without insurance; Will and the Care Team coordinator made a plan to do some family counseling with the student who was struggling with his relationship with his father.

Though each student required a different course of action, the team was working through a formal system of tiered interventions that involved sending letters

home, making phone calls, and outreach through the Care Team or the deputy sheriff's office.

The schedule of intervention is pre-determined, but at all levels it requires creativity. Washington County Deputy Jarrod McCreary recalled one student who had finally turned his attendance around after McCreary started personally buying him a happy meal every week. "For four years his attendance had been below 72 percent, and then the happy meal got him up

to the 90s," McCreary said. "Sometimes you have no idea what's going to work until you try it."

### *Stable families are key*

Most of the conversation at this meeting revolved not just around students, but their families. As trained social workers, one aspect of the Care Team

## ATTENDANCE AT HILLSBORO SCHOOL DISTRICT

With about 50 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, Hillsboro's socioeconomics reflect those of the rest of the state. Chronic absence rates however, are now significantly lower than the state average. Elementary schools across the district — some with higher than average poverty rates — have chronic absence rates lower than the state average of 18 percent to 23 percent.

### KEY DISTRICT STRATEGIES:

- family engagement, including four full-time Care Team coordinators who work across the district to engage students and families
- regular school attendance team meetings to implement system of tiered intervention with absent students
- district and school-wide promotion of attendance through competitions and other behavioral supports that lead to a positive culture of attendance
- student information system that supplies accessible, critical data around attendance and related behavioral issues to staff at all levels

### BY THE NUMBERS ■ ■ ■

#### FARMINGTON VIEW ELEMENTARY

Enrollment: **about 220**

Free or reduced-price lunch rate: **40%**

Chronic absence rate: **7.7%\***

#### WITCH HAZEL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Enrollment: **about 570**

Free or reduced-price lunch rate: **72%**

Chronic absence rate: **9.4%\***

\* Chronic absence rates as stated in February 2014 Oregonian report Empty Desks: A Special Report on Chronic Absenteeism; the rates are for the 2012-13 school year. All other school demographic information is from the Oregon Department of Education.

coordinators' job is to help evaluate a family's situation and implement targeted interventions to address their challenges. One of their most important functions is to stay connected to students and families even — and especially — if the student is not attending school.

When the federal grant was first given to Hillsboro, the district employed eight Care Team coordinators. After this one-time funding ran out, district administration found the money to continue paying for four coordinators in spite of layoffs and lean budgets. "It was clear our investment in them was paying big dividends," says Superintendent Scott. "So we started funding the positions out of the general fund."

The Attendance Manual that Will and his colleagues wrote also spells out the importance of a positive school culture around attendance, and many of the district's schools have since built their attendance protocols on the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports strategy, a behavior management system that encourages positive behavior school wide. It was out of this idea that Farmington View Elementary hatched strategies such as the 100 Percent Club and the Attendance Olympics.

Though these positive supports around attendance are less expensive and time consuming than the interventions by the Care Team, they are equally important. In Oregon, about a third of students hover in a danger zone, on the edge of becoming chronically absent.<sup>5</sup> Reaching them through positive supports before they need interventions can potentially stop the problem before it starts.

The combined strategy works to deliver the mes-

sage across the district that coming to school is critical. Today at Farmington View Elementary, teachers put a flag outside their classroom when every student is in attendance. It serves as a message to the school and community that attendance is important.

After years of using this strategy, Will says he and many of his fellow Hillsboro principals and staff have worked out the kinks in the system to the point where it is a smoothly running operation. Still, he is the first to admit that this kind of student-level work is not easy. "It's the dirty work of education," he says, "working it through with each family."

For that reason, the Care Team model is critical, as it makes the responsibility for these kids getting to school a shared one between parents, students, and school staff. "No one person wants to hold the weight of attendance by themselves," Will says. "It needs to be something everyone works on together at the school."

During his time in the Hillsboro School District, Will has been a champion for these attendance strategies, but he is quick to point out that he has not — nor could any one person — put them into place alone. Hillsboro has attacked chronic absence through a district-wide commitment. "There are pockets of heroism taking place at any school," says Will. "But you can't run systems that way. The whole 'hero in a corner' strategy doesn't work. You just can't save every kid that way."

1 Oregon Department of Education

2 Oregon Department of Education

3 Hammond, Betsy. (2014). Empty Desks, Oregon's Absenteeism Epidemic. Oregonian. Portland, OR

4 Oregon Department of Education

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White City Elementary Principal Ginny Walker and Truancy Officer Phil Ortega work together to reach out to families. “We have our hot list of kids,” says Walker.

# SMALL BUT MIGHTY

*White City Elementary’s attendance strategy mirrored the ambition of larger districts, but at this rural school, success happened with less money, less formality, and fewer people.*

From 1998 to 2013 Jackson School District in rural Southern Oregon inadvertently set up an experiment between two similar schools.

Located nine miles outside of Medford, two of the district’s elementary schools, White City Elementary and Mountain View Elementary, literally sat next door to each other in a small community of just under 10,000 for this 15-year period. The two schools’ unusual proximity was a holdover from the “small schools” movement of the 1990s that promoted the idea that smaller is better. Both used the same district policies and each served roughly 400 students drawn from the same catchment area.

So it was notable that at the end of the 2013-14 school year, before the two schools merged to become one large elementary, one had a significantly lower rate of chronic absence than the other. White City Elementary’s chronic absence rate was 13 percent<sup>1</sup> — five points lower than that of Mountain View.

What made White City Elementary’s attendance even more notable was the tremendous obstacles school leadership faced. The families and children that attended these schools live primarily in the nine trailer parks surrounding them and in the smaller clustering of trailers located up Highway 140 in the foothills. Substance abuse and gang violence are frequent problems, with poverty and unemployment numbers consistently above the state average. Many of the parents who do have jobs in this community work swing and overnight shifts at Amy’s Kitchen, a food manufacturer based in Medford. The free or reduced-price lunch rate at White City Elementary in the 2013-14 school year was close to 90 percent.<sup>2</sup>

Because it was part of an unincorporated community, White City Elementary had even fewer resources than many other struggling schools. In the 2013-14 school year, for example, the school staff recognized that the monthly visits from the county's inmate work crews were not enough to keep drug paraphernalia off a popular walking path that many kids take to school. Without a city council or parks department to appeal to, the school principal eventually organized a work party in order to put down bark chips along the walkway.

Given all these obstacles, it would not have been surprising for White City Elementary to have chronic absence rates at least as high as the state average. And yet it was beating the odds, not only in comparison to its sister school but to other schools across the state.

So how did White City Elementary get its kids to school?

## *Birth of a one-school policy*

One morning in the spring of 2014, White City Elementary Principal Ginny Walker started her day with a stroll through the school's open-air hallways. The school was bustling and cheery, albeit somewhat shabby. Many of the school's "temporary" structures had been there for decades. On this day Walker visited classrooms and put a question to her students.

"Good morning, boys and girls," Walker said briskly as she walked into Room 8. "Just wondering what your percentage is today?" In response many

small hands in the class shot up and pointed across the room where paper letters were glued to the wall, beginning to spell out the word "weird."

Every day that classes at White City Elementary achieved 100 percent attendance, they added a letter to their word. Some chosen words in other classes that week were "awesome," "chili dog," and "iPad." After spelling a word, classes earned small privileges like iPad time or extra recess.

It was a small incentive, Walker said, but an effective one because of the attention it drew to the importance of attendance and the encouragement these children gave to each other to get to school. In one class during the 2013-14 school year, Walker recalled, students pooled their money in order to buy an alarm clock for their classmate who was struggling to get up in time.

These word exercises at White City Elementary were part of a larger system of supports that Walker put in place over five years of serving as principal to encourage positive learning and attendance habits, and help students when their attendance started to wane. The strategy involved family engagement, cultivation of a positive school climate around attendance, and helping families overcome obstacles to attendance. In many ways Walker's attendance strategy mirrored that of some of the larger districts in the state that have formal, multi-school policies. But at White City Elementary this work was done with much less money, less formality, and fewer people.

Small and fit, Walker's leadership style is firm but not loud. She is a principal who does a great deal of work behind the scenes rather than out on the public

stage, and she knows her research. After growing up in nearby Ashland, Walker went to college in Massachusetts and thought she might be an art historian in New York City, but missed her family and the country. "I'm not a big city girl," she said.

The 59-year-old has spent more than two decades as an educator in White City. Unlike many of the teachers and administrators she has seen come and go, Walker says she is undeterred by working in such a high-needs community. "I see how much need there is here," she says. "I feel obligated to stay."

At one point, she switched from working as a principal at another district elementary school to the same position at the high school, and watched as those kindergarteners that had come in behind and been held back in her elementary school were still struggling in high school.

"That sealed the deal for me," she says. "I could see that it had been such a huge mistake to hold them back. It just added two more excruciating years for them to struggle through the system."

The only answer, she decided, was to get them caught up during their first year of school. For that to happen, she knew, these students couldn't afford to miss a minute of that first year.

She was also responding to frustration on behalf of her teachers. "The teachers feel powerless when they are held accountable for their students not making the grade who are not here," she said. "It's a morale issue."

At White City Elementary, Walker drew both from the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports program and from a program called Success for All, a data-driven program that originated at Johns

Hopkins University and places great emphasis on attendance. Both of these systems rely on reinforcing positive behavior, developing consistency of expectations within classrooms and across grades, creating positive relationships between kids and adults, and providing extra supports for children who need them. Attendance is just one part of the puzzle in creating a positive and reinforcing school climate that helps children to succeed and learn.

Walker made attendance a small part of every person's job, and she constantly reminded her staff that every day really counts.

**“Everyone looks for the silver bullets. But what Ginny and her staff do is sweep away the noise and stay very focused.”**

*Jackson School District Superintendent Cynda Rickert*

The work undoubtedly paid off. In addition to its low rates of chronic absence, in the 2013-14 school year the school scored among the top 10 percent in the state for academic growth in the state's performance assessments. A self-professed data nerd, every year Walker set academic benchmarks for her students that went above and beyond state expectations. Many of these academic strategies targeted catching up kids in the early grades, something that Walker knows simply can't be done if students aren't in school. As a result, in White City's 2013 academic assessments nearly 73 percent of kids were meeting or exceeding reading benchmarks by the time they left fifth grade.

Jackson School District Superintendent Cynda Rickert acknowledges that Walker is a superstar. What Walker and her staff do, says Rickert, is not anything radically different than other teachers — it's that they're doing it so well. “Everyone looks for the silver bullets,” says Rickert. “But what Ginny and her



Principal Walker uses interventions and practices from two data-driven programs to promote good attendance.

staff do is sweep away the noise and stay very focused.”

Rickert promotes positive behavioral systems in all her schools and provides targeted interventions and assessments. But she acknowledges the laser-like focus

that White City Elementary staff had on attendance was unique in the district. Several times a year the leadership from all the schools gather and together examine test scores across the district.

“We have looked to and learned from Ginny's school many times over the years,” says Rickert.

## *Behavior change leads to culture change*

Walker says that implementing new systems in her school has not always been easy. “It was a culture change,” she says, one that was not always well received. Now that both students and teachers have seen the results, she suspects no one would ever suggest they go back.

For Walker the learning process started in 1998, when both Mountain View and White City received a Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Grant from the Oregon Department of Education. Through a process that involved a significant level of staff participation, the two schools chose the program Success for All to help them create the kind of interventions and reform they needed to support their students. Walker helped to implement the program across both schools, and after the program's funding ran out, she maintained many of the program's practices at White City Elementary, including outreach to families to overcome attendance obstacles.

Walker says that this aspect of the program was consistently one of her biggest challenges with staff. Teachers have a hard time breaking out of the mindset that their job happens exclusively within the class-

room. “Our staff across the district is fabulous, and all of them are willing to implement programs when they know they will make a difference,” she says, “but they are often very concerned that they wouldn’t be able to change what happens at a child’s home.”

Over time, she says, the staff saw the proof first-hand of working closely with kids on attendance. “It did motivate kids, and then the kids turned around and motivated their parents,” she explains. Regardless, every year with new staff, says Walker, there was a learning period in which they have to come to see the value of these kinds of interventions. “I think we all had to learn to be a little more empathetic,” she says, “and persistent. We had to learn to work with families until they found solutions.”

A key part of taking on this strategy was creating a sense of shared responsibility among staff. Walker and her staff consistently met with families who struggled with attendance, and pulled in other staff as needed. Getting kids to school was a job distributed across the staff from the principal to the teachers to the office staff.

In fact, it was the office staff more than anyone who worked on the front lines at White City Elementary to get kids to school every day. “Mondays I have the most calls,” says Kim Saiz, an administrative assistant at White City, who made calls to absent students. “I might get two or three pages of names and numbers to call.” If she couldn’t get parents on the phone, she would often directly call Amy’s Kitchen — the food manufacturing plant where many of them

work — with another Spanish-speaking aide on call for translation when necessary. Saiz was careful that her messages were encouraging, that she didn’t take a punitive tone with the kids.

“I say things like, ‘It’s important to be in school. This is a place you’re going to learn,’” she says. “Most of the time they end up coming in.”

Walker also relied heavily on Phil Ortega, the



Teacher Nicole Bryner helps promote attendance through fun activities. In addition to its low rates of chronic absence, in the 2013-14 school year White City scored among the top 10 percent in the state for academic growth.

district’s truancy officer, as a part of her attendance team. A former U.S. Marshal, Ortega spends his days driving through White City’s high-poverty and high-crime neighborhoods to investigate kids that aren’t in school. Despite his background in law and order, Ortega understands that working with families means appealing to parents without alienating them. He and Walker would often team up to conduct a kind

of person-by-person public information campaign. Together they would examine their attendance numbers and then set up meetings with families once they missed seven days. “I have my hot list of kids,” Walker says. Whenever she could, Walker would stop by on her way home for unannounced visits with these “hot list” kids and their families.

On one such visit at the end of the 2013-14 school year, Walker and Ortega found both parents home. “If your daughter doesn’t come to school in the early years, she’s much less likely to graduate on time,” Walker told the young mom, who stood outside her trailer with dripping wet hair, pulled out of the shower by the knock on the door. The student, a kindergartener, was inside watching TV. She had missed almost 50 days of school that year. “She’s very smart,” the girl’s mother said defensively.

Walker says many parents here don’t understand that their child’s innate intelligence is not enough to guarantee them success in school, and in kindergarten especially parents have a misconception that attendance is optional.

These particular parents explained that their daughter had been struggling to separate from them and simply didn’t want to go to school. Walker discussed the importance of cultivating good habits and the link between attendance and academic performance.

In this case, both she and the district’s truancy officer were convinced the effort was successful. “She’ll be in school tomorrow,” Walker said confidently as she drove back to her office. “I’m sure.”

## A problem bigger than one school

Despite her hard work to promote attendance, Walker says she constantly feels the strain of resources working in White City. In previous and better funded years, she was able to pay first-grade teachers to conduct home visits before the school year started, during which they would discuss the importance of attendance. She also hosted a breakfast club at the school she called the Sunshine Club. Based on the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports strategy called “check-in, check-out,” the Sunshine Club gave at-risk kids who were struggling with behavioral issues time before school in small groups to foster relationships with adults other than their teachers. It was a chance to pull these students back from the brink of crisis.

“We would talk about what was going on at home, or just things like what time they got up in the morning,” says Walker. The school counselors would often staff it or Walker herself would attend. Sometimes the Sunshine Club would turn into a kind of group therapy. “Our kids are going through very scary things all the time,” says Walker.

Like the home visiting program, Walker had to let the Sunshine Club go without the money to pay school counselors to staff it.

With 60 percent Latino students, there were also significant cultural issues at play. Language issues can create additional obstacles to attendance, as students who don’t feel linguistically confident may be fearful about going to school. Vacation schedules and trips back to see extended family can also be an issue.

“We’ve had very little traction with trying to convince families not to take their children out for weeks or months at a time,” Walker says, as students often take international trips to visit extended family with little notice to the school.

Families here also have a 40 percent mobility rate, so Walker regularly sees them slip away even after she has made solid connections with students.

In the 2014-15 school year, White City Elementary merged with its neighbor and became a new school, Table Rock Elementary, which has about 750 students. Walker became the new principal.

The district has also made a new commitment to attendance, and is funding full-day kindergarten a year before it is mandated in Oregon in hopes that it can teach better attendance habits from an earlier age. Truancy officer Phil Ortega is working with kindergarteners before they arrive at school in order to explain to children and families the importance of attendance and to establish positive relationships before problems take hold.

Walker, ever optimistic, says she is already implementing her attendance work with her new student body because it is one of the few proactive and effective things she can do with families in the face of so many challenges.

“I think we’re so focused on the work at hand, we forget how much we’ve already done,” she says. “Sometimes I just ask myself what it would be like if we didn’t do these things.”

1 Hammond, Betsy. (2014). Empty Desks, Oregon’s Absenteeism Epidemic. Oregonian. Portland, OR  
2 Oregon Department of Education

## ATTENDANCE AT WHITE CITY ELEMENTARY

Located outside of Medford, White City Elementary had high poverty rates and many at-risk students. Drawing from a number of programs and practices, Principal Ginny Walker put into place a one-school chronic absence strategy at White City Elementary. As a result, the school had a significantly lower chronic absence rate than both the state and a neighboring school, which served the same demographic.

### KEY STRATEGIES:

- family engagement, including one full-time, district-wide truancy officer who works across the district to engage students and families
- regular staff meetings to strategize around needs of absent students and their families
- school-wide promotion of attendance through school competitions and behavioral supports, leading to positive culture around attendance
- student information system that supplied critical information around attendance to staff

### BY THE NUMBERS ■ ■ ■

#### WHITE CITY ELEMENTARY

Enrollment: **about 450**

Free or reduced-price lunch rate: **85.6%**

Chronic absence rate: **13.1%\***

\* Chronic absence rates as stated in February 2014 Oregonian report Empty Desks: A Special Report on Chronic Absenteeism; the rates are for the 2012-13 school year. All other school demographic information is from the Oregon Department of Education.

# Recommendations for state policy

The schools and districts spotlighted in this report are part of growing evidence proving that chronic absence can be reduced in the early grades, and that doing so increases student achievement. As the state embarks on a significant investment in full-day kindergarten, state leaders have an obligation to take action on chronic absenteeism. Without swift and effective interventions to combat this problem, the state's investment in kindergarten will not yield maximum benefits for children and the state's "40-40-20" vision – wherein 40 percent of students graduate high school and go on to receive a four-year degree, 40 percent get a two-year vocational degree, and 20 percent graduate high school on time and enter the workforce – will not be realized.

The data around chronic absence is available. Forward-thinking educators around the state have provided real-time examples of solutions to learn from. There is no time to waste.

Specifically, Oregon should take the following steps:

## *Measure the problem and empower schools*

### **Establish a system of public reporting around chronic absence beginning with kindergarten.**

The Oregon Department of Education should create a public, searchable database that disaggregates rates of chronic absence by student status including

race and ethnicity, English-language learners and special education, and reflects chronic absence rates at least twice a year at all levels including every grade, school, and district in Oregon. This public transparency would provide accountability and critical data to understand the nuanced patterns around chronic absence and to measure Oregon's success in combatting chronic absence over time.

**Provide guidance to districts in tracking and monitoring student attendance.** One of the single most powerful tools for schools and districts working on attendance are data dashboards that reflect the real-time attendance habits of their students and provide important indicators for early warning systems.

## RESOURCES ON CHRONIC ABSENCE ■ ■ ■

Attendance Works ([attendanceworks.org](http://attendanceworks.org)) provides extensive research as well as toolkits for educators, parents, community members, and policymakers around best practices for addressing chronic absence.

### **ADDITIONAL READING:**

- Balfanz, Robert; Herzog, Lisa and Maclver, Douglas J., Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in Urban Middle-Grades Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions, *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 223–235, 2007.
- Balfanz, Robert, and Byrnes, Vaughan, The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools. Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools, Baltimore, MD, 2012.
- Bruner, Charles; Discher, Anne and Chang, Hedy, Chronic Elementary Absenteeism: A Problem Hidden in Plain Sight, Child and Family Policy Center and Attendance Works, November 2011.
- Chang, Hedy and Romero, Mariajose, Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades, National Center for Children in Poverty, New York, NY, September 2008.
- Connolly, Faith and Olson, Linda S., Early Elementary Performance and Attendance in Baltimore City Schools' Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten, Baltimore Education Research Consortium, Baltimore, MD., March 2012.
- ECONorthwest, Chronic Absence in Oregon, ECONorthwest, June 2012.
- Hammond, Betsy, Empty Desks, Oregon's Absenteeism Epidemic, *Oregonian*, February 2014.

Without guidance from the state, each district and school currently works independently, and with varied results, to create systems that track attendance.

**Incorporate attendance data into existing initiatives.** An example is the Oregon Response to Intervention (OrRTI) project, a system already in place in many districts that provides targeted instruction to meet students' needs and a framework to identify students with specific learning disabilities. Another is the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports system already used by many districts and schools in Oregon. Both of these programs provide a natural foundation for attendance policy. Initiatives that target kindergarten and the early grades provide an opportunity to effectively address chronic absence: The Kindergarten Partnership & Innovation Fund should be renewed to provide schools, parents and communities a vehicle to coalesce around attendance. The roll-out of full-day kindergarten should also include interventions for addressing chronic absenteeism.

## Educate schools, districts, parents and communities

**Provide professional development for schools, communities and district staff around chronic absence strategies.** The state should take advantage of the leading schools and districts in Oregon that have already been testing and finding effective attendance strategies by helping these leaders to share their learnings with others. In addition, the national advocacy group Attendance Works regularly works with schools and districts to advise and technically assist

educators on attendance strategies. The state could act as a broker to bring this expertise to Oregon.

**Increase public awareness among parents of young children about the critical importance of attendance.** Attendance — especially in the early years — is influenced tremendously by family engagement and education. The state could consider a public information campaign around chronic absence using awareness raising tools such as school or district report cards or participation with existing national efforts such as Attendance Awareness Month. In addition, the state could use existing channels including early learning programs and kindergarten transition programs to help educate parents about the critical importance of attendance and its bearing on their children's future academic success.

## Create sustainable practices around chronic absence

**Ensure culturally relevant pedagogy and practices in implementation.** Given that chronic absence is an issue that disproportionately affects students of color, strategies to address it should be culturally sensitive and individualized to the unique needs of the child and family.

**Convene an interagency team to coordinate chronic absence efforts at the state level.** Agencies such as the Oregon Department of Human Services, the Oregon Health Authority, the Early Learning Division and the Oregon Department of Education could work collaboratively to address barriers to attendance by engaging community partners and identifying issues around resource allocation.



Emerging research suggests students who have good attendance in preschool, like the one at Earl Boyles Elementary, will continue these habits.



Children's  
Institute

childinst.org

1411 SW Morrison St., Suite 205 ■ Portland, OR 97205

Phone: (503) 219-9034 ■ Fax: (503) 419-6083



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