

Trudy Evans: Rue Elementary School, Council Bluffs

Principal Trudy Evans knew that the preschooler's family cared about school attendance. The father would ride the little boy to Rue Elementary School in Council Bluffs every day on the handlebars of his bicycle. But when winter weather arrived, the absences started adding up. Then, the boy's father was hit by a car.



So Evans went to the Council Bluffs Community School District office and asked for help. She persuaded district officials to make an exception to a policy that kept preschoolers from riding the school bus. Soon, a bus was picking up the boy and his attendance soared.

"We believe attendance counts and we work together to support students in being in school and on time every day," said Evans, who has been a principal for 20 years, nine of them at Rue. Evans and her staff use a combination of positive messaging and incentives, along with personalized outreach, to ensure the school's average daily attendance rate stays above 95 percent. To demonstrate the commitment to attendance, Evans posts monthly attendance percentages on the school marquee.

A committee of teachers developed an incentive program that starts with individual incentives. These have included a VIP luncheon in the cafeteria, with school lunch presented on fine china place settings and served by a wait staff including the school administrative manager; back packs with school colors and mascot and coupons for free meals at local restaurants.

Recognizing that some young children simply can't make it every day and could be left out of individual rewards, the school also offers grade-level incentives. A bulletin board next to the main office displays the daily averages broken down by grades and by month. Winning grades may receive a Sundae party or an extra recess.



When children begin missing too much school, Rue's attendance team takes action. About 80 percent of the school's students qualify for free and reduced meal, and 17 percent are identified for special education services – student populations that often face challenges to attendance. District policy requires sending letters to families each time a student misses three, six, nine, 12 or 15 days in excused or unexcused absences.

Rue's team – which includes a district attendance coach, school secretary, counselor, school administrative manager and the principal – meets twice a month to review the students whose family have received a letter. They discuss possible causes for absences, such as illness, housing difficulties or transportation problems. They reflect on any academic difficulty the child may be having, and they talk about referrals to appropriate community agencies. "Community navigators" help connect students and families to the services they need.

"We're trying to do everything we can along the way, in such a way that we keep a positive relationship with the family," Evans said.

Out of about 370 students in the 2014-15 school year, the attendance team tracked 74 students about whom they had concerns. In some cases, the problems were resolved with a meeting or a phone call. The team also makes sure to place a call to celebrate improvements in attendance.

In 11 cases involving six families, the team took a further step of asking parents to sign an Attendance Cooperation Agreement, a district-wide process that involves families committing to reduce absences. In just two cases, the families moved on to mediation with the County Attorney's office. "It's not something we want to do," Evans said, "but sometimes that is the only way to get the child to school."

Evans' efforts come amid [a district-wide push](#) for improved attendance. As a part of the Grade-Level Reading Communities Network, Council Bluffs leaders consider reducing absenteeism a key strategy to ensuring that more children read proficiently by the end of third grade. Superintendent Martha Bruckner has set a goal of increasing the number of students who attend school 95 percent of the time.