



BY REQUEST...

INCREASING STUDENT
ATTENDANCE:
Strategies From
Research and Practice



JUNE 2004

NORTHWEST REGIONAL
EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY

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FOREWORD

This booklet is one in a series of “hot topics” reports produced by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. These reports briefly address current educational concerns and issues as indicated by requests for information that come to the Laboratory from the Northwest region and beyond. Each booklet contains a discussion of research and literature pertinent to the issue, how Northwest schools and programs are addressing the issue, selected resources, and contact information.

One objective of the series is to foster a sense of community and connection among educators. Another is to increase awareness of current education-related themes and concerns. Each booklet gives practitioners a glimpse of how fellow educators from around the Northwest are addressing issues, overcoming obstacles, and attaining success. The goal of the series is to give educators current, reliable, and useful information on topics that are important to them.

During a period of two months, the author surveyed the last decade of research that discusses strategies or experiments to increase attendance. Although the intention was to find research that is considered “scientifically based” by the No Child Left Behind Act¹, it was quickly determined that little research of that kind exists. Thus, the search was broadened

¹A summary of the definition used in NCLB of “scientifically based research” is “research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs” (No Child Left Behind, p. 126).

to include a range of research designs—peer-reviewed, published and unpublished, mixed quantitative and qualitative research, case studies, surveys, expert opinions based on personal experience, and promising practices from community-based organizations. As certain themes emerged from the research, key studies were collected to represent those themes. Research on factors that contribute to student success for students of different cultures, especially Latino, African American, and Native American, was also reviewed. Although individual studies may not have been reviewed in depth, a full reference list enables the reader to explore the research further.

INTRODUCTION

Recently *The Oregonian* newspaper published a special series called “Fixing High Schools” (Betsy Hammond, Bill Graves, and Melissa Jones, January 11–13, 2004). The series examined ways successful high schools motivate and challenge students. As part of the series, a reporter shadowed three Gresham high school students last year. For these youth, school wasn’t so engaging or positive.

Jessica has had a chronic absence problem, struggles with classes, and had not been able to connect with teachers. Olivia failed two classes after missing a few weeks of school during a family trip to Mexico, but is working hard to catch up. Although she tries to get involved in her school, Olivia says that respect is a big issue, especially for cultural and sexual minorities. Blake, who hopes to go to college, is taking easier courses to get better grades, and “carefully tracks his unexcused absences as they neared the number that would prevent him from getting a parking pass” (Jones, p. 3).

These stories are not uncommon. Schools report high dropout and absentee rates—some cities across the nation report absenteeism as high as 30 percent (Garry, 1996). And with the emphasis on ensuring that students are meeting and exceeding academic standards, schools are struggling to increase attendance rates knowing that chronic absenteeism contributes to students’ lack of educational progress.

Although the importance of attendance is well understood, effective strategies for increasing it are not so definitive. Much of the research in this area has looked at the effectiveness of intervention programs—programs that are put into

place once a student has been identified as chronically absent. Although promising practices exist across the country, there are no “silver bullet” approaches proven to keep children in school.

Other research has investigated how school disengagement relates to decreased attendance. In addition to asking “How can we help students deal with their problems in coming to school?” many researchers, schools, and community members are also asking, “How are the schools contributing to absenteeism and how can schools work with communities and parents to keep youngsters engaged, in school, and learning what they need to know to be successful?”

This booklet attempts to briefly summarize the research on this very complex issue. It presents some research-based ideas as a starting place for those who want to develop better policies and practices for attendance and to understand the factors that contribute to increased attendance, engagement, and a lower dropout rate. This booklet emphasizes, as does other research on attendance and dropouts, that strategies and policies must not be implemented in isolation from each other; that attendance policies, family engagement, student engagement, and community engagement must all connect for any strategy to really succeed.

IN CONTEXT: FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL ISSUES

It is well known that a most important key to children’s academic success is having them attend school on a regular basis. To emphasize this, the federal government made attendance an “additional indicator” for elementary and middle schools to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)² of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2002). Four states in the Pacific Northwest—Alaska, Montana, Oregon, and Washington—are using attendance as an indicator. Under NCLB, each state can set its own target rate to meet AYP for each year. Oregon’s target is 92 percent attendance. Alaska set its target at 85 percent attendance, explaining that “attendance below this level represents too much school missed to learn the reading, writing, and mathematics standards at proficient level” (U.S. Department of Education, 2003, p. 62). Washington’s target is an unexcused absence rate of 1 percent, and Montana has not yet decided their target rate. NCLB also requires, for the first time, that districts report unexcused absences to the state.

Although the AYP indicator used for high schools is based on student dropout rates, rather than attendance, attendance is, of course, just as important for high school students as it is for younger children. Statistics show that absenteeism due to reasons other than illness and cutting individual classes increases with each grade level, starting in the eighth grade (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Poor atten-

²For the full text of this provision, see NCLB Title I, Part A Sec 1111 (b) 2 C www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg2.html#sec1111

dance is a major indicator of gradual alienation and disengagement, and may lead to a student dropping out permanently (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Schargel & Smink, 2001; Schwartz, 1995).

States and districts are also responding to the growing concern about chronic absenteeism. In 1995, Washington State passed the Becca Law that created a mandatory process for schools to inform parents of truancy, required districts to file truancy petitions if a student had a certain number of absences, and gave power to the juvenile courts to issue sanctions against students and parents (Aos, 2002). The law also required districts to report to the state unexcused absences at the end of the school year, and provide data on what programs or schools have been developed to serve students who have excessive unexcused absences. A recent study that analyzed whether the Becca Law had an effect on keeping children in school (Aos, 2002) reported that truancy provisions appeared to result in a statistically significant increase in high school enrollment. To provide additional support and information for districts, the Washington State Becca Taskforce convened its first truancy conference in 2004 to present research-based strategies, showcase promising truancy prevention programs, and to bring together educators, court officers, and community members to work together on truancy.

Although academic achievement is certainly a driving force for developing these policies, it is not the only concern. The budgets for most school districts are based on average daily attendance, and high absenteeism can result in the loss of funds (Ford & Sutphen, 1996). More important though, is that decades of research indicate that children who have

chronically unexcused absences are at risk for having more serious behavioral issues such as substance abuse, involvement in criminal activity, and incarceration (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001). Of course, not all students who are truant become criminals, but it is safe to say that school truancy is a predictor for more serious criminal activity.

Particular attention is being paid to increasing attendance and lowering the dropout rate of culturally and linguistically diverse students, and students from low-income homes, who historically have had higher dropout rates than middle class white students. In Oregon, for example, the 2002–2003 Hispanic dropout rate was 9.1 percent, the highest of all groups, with African American dropout rate at 9 percent, American Indian/Alaska Native at 6.3 percent, and white students the lowest at 3.6 percent. The good news is that dropout rates have declined five years in a row for Hispanics, faster than the rate of dropouts as a whole. Dropout rates for African Americans and American Indians have also declined in the past few years. In spite of improvement, it is not enough. It is more necessary than ever for schools to create a culture of high expectations that rewards effort, that is supportive, welcoming, and respectful for all their students (Brandt, 1992; ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, 2000; Wimberly, 2002).

WHY STUDENTS DON'T ATTEND SCHOOL

Before deciding what strategies to use to increase attendance, it can be beneficial to look at the reasons why students don't attend school, and just as important, why they do stay in school, and what they do like about it.

There are well-established risk factors associated with dropping out and skipping school—family background and relationships, past school performance, personal characteristics, and school or neighborhood characteristics (Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). For instance, home dynamics such as impoverished living conditions, frequent home relocations, lack of child supervision, and other family issues are often related to non-attendance.

Corville-Smith et al. (1998) found six variables that were statistically significant predictors for distinguishing absentee high school students from regularly attending students:

- 1. Students' school perceptions:** Absentees are less likely to perceive school favorably
- 2. Perception of parental discipline:** Absentees perceive discipline as lax or inconsistent
- 3. Parents' control:** Absentees believe parents are attempting to exert more control over them
- 4. Students' academic self-concept:** Absentees feel inferior academically
- 5. Perceived family conflict:** Absentees experience family conflict
- 6. Social competence in class:** Absentees are less likely to feel socially competent in class

The authors note that because these variables are interrelated, targeting a single area for treatment is unlikely to be effective. They suggest that success is more probable if community members and organizations, parents, students, and school staff share in the task of identifying solutions to all these concerns.

Although knowing these risk factors can be helpful to schools in general, predicting who will not come to school is more complicated than just taking those factors into account. Gleason and Dynarski (2002) analyzed the effectiveness of these widely used risk factors, and determined that few of them did well in predicting who would drop out. (Not surprisingly, high absenteeism was the factor most associated with the highest dropout rates.) Students who are not in these high-risk categories may not come to school, and so will be left out of intervention programming.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

To understand more clearly why students are not coming to school, many researchers and practitioners are interviewing and surveying students to obtain answers. Recently, the Oregon Department of Education interviewed students enrolled in alternative high schools and asked what it was about their school that kept them in, and what they would change about their previous high school to make it a better place. Interestingly, they all responded similarly, regardless of background or environment, with this statement: "Respect me for who I am, require me to do my best, and give me the help I need to achieve it" (Brush & Jones, 2002, p. 3). They need teachers who will be patient and "persevere" with their individual rates of learning, and want teachers to have high expectations for their learning; they

will work to achieve goals to meet those expectations, as long as they have the support.

Below are other commonly cited reasons that students have given for not attending school (Clement, Gwynne, & Younkin, 2001; Wagstaff, Combs, & Jarvis, 2000):

- ◆ Viewed classes as boring, irrelevant, and a waste of time
- ◆ Did not have positive relationships with teachers
- ◆ Did not have positive relationships with other students
- ◆ Was suspended too often
- ◆ Did not feel safe at school
- ◆ Could not keep up with schoolwork or was failing (and there were no timely interventions)
- ◆ Found classes not challenging enough (worksheets and reading with lectures were the predominant activities), and students can miss class days and still receive credit
- ◆ Couldn't work and go to school at the same time

If schools are to successfully address low attendance, clearly they must understand why their students don't come to school, not just rely on national reports, as helpful as they may be. School staff members can conduct student focus groups, have an external organization conduct surveys, and meet with students individually to find out what the issues are, both in the school culture and their personal lives. For instance, when the Linn Benton Lincoln Education Service District (Oregon) staff conduct their attendance audits, they talk directly with groups of students and individuals who are absent quite often, before they make recommendations for what strategies to use (see the Northwest Sampler section for more about this audit process). Staff members are also extensively interviewed to determine how they think policies might be improved.

One promising survey is the School Success Profile (SSP) developed by Bowen and Richman at the School of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. While the SSP isn't designed as an attendance survey, it can be a useful tool to understand students' beliefs about themselves, their neighborhoods, schools, families, and peer groups and can inform prevention and intervention planning and programming. The tool is based on best practices research, has been used by many districts and community organizations, and has been endorsed by the National Dropout Prevention Center. (For more information about the SSP, visit the Web site: <http://schoolsucceessprofile.org>).

STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE ATTENDANCE

Once school staff members have reached a more complete understanding of why students are not attending school, they can investigate what strategies might be the most helpful for their students. A review of the relevant research and professional literature reveals a number of views and solutions for increasing attendance. Much research, especially research on truancy prevention, views attendance problems as the result of a “functional problem,” such as self-motivation, peer relations, mental health, substance abuse, social skills, poverty, and discipline. Interventions are designed to treat these problems by using counseling and family mediation, involving law enforcement, and providing social services (see, for example, Dembo & Turner, 1994).

A broader view of attendance issues, which is becoming more prevalent in the literature, is that attendance is an indicator of larger, more complex issues of disengagement and student motivation, and that school culture and structure contribute to both (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Lee & Burkam, 2003). Researchers and experts have identified issues that may contribute to student absenteeism, and offered implications for designing a continuum of building-level approaches and student supports in the school. Although these experts still want students and families held accountable, there is a growing recognition that schools need to take a positive approach in looking at how the school structures, culture, academics, and other factors contribute to attendance problems. As Lee and Burkam (2003) suggest, “When researchers frame dropping out as a function of stu-

dent background and behavior, the implication is that students themselves are at fault for taking such unwise actions.” This might tend to let school staff members off the hook, they say, and deeper investigations into how the school culture can contribute to attendance may not take place. Researchers at the National Center for School Engagement are encouraging schools to ask themselves how they can provide a positive, welcoming, safe, academically challenging, and personalized environment within which students can succeed.

In NWREL’s review of the literature, we found no research that definitively answers the question: Do some strategies work better than others? Neither did we find many resources that offer step-by-step guidelines for developing attendance strategies. We have found a few studies that attempt a quasi-experimental study of certain approaches, but more studies exist that correlate a strategy with increased attendance, increased graduation rate, or studies that have determined certain outcomes as a result of an intervention (such as mentoring increasing student attendance). Many of the studies, too, had a small sample size, and relied on surveys for information.

Research has shown, however, that key factors must be in place for any school change strategies, including attendance strategies, to take hold and be effective (Keirstead, 1999; Slavin, 1997). Scott Perry, student services director at Linn Benton Lincoln Education Service District (Oregon), who has years of experience in conducting attendance audits and providing student and family services, echoes researchers in advising that “sustained improvements will only occur in schools that have ‘system readiness.’” This includes a cohesive staff, trusted and shared leadership, data-based decisionmaking, an oversight team for school improvements, a positive climate, and identification, evaluation, and assessment of school

and student needs. In addition, research on comprehensive, effective, truancy prevention programs indicates that consistent policies, building-level support and commitment, and continuous evaluation all are important for success (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, n.d./a).

Keeping these research perspectives in mind, strategies for increasing attendance can generally be placed into the following, often overlapping, categories:

- ◆ Sound and reasonable attendance policies with consequences for missing school
- ◆ Early interventions, especially with elementary students and their families
- ◆ Targeted interventions for students with chronic attendance problems, such as truancy reduction programs—both school and community based.
- ◆ Strategies to increase engagement and personalization with students and families that can affect attendance rates: family involvement, culturally responsive culture, smaller learning community structures, mentoring, advisory programs, maximization and focus on learning time, and service learning

The following pages summarize these strategies that existing research suggests may contribute to increased student attendance and engagement. Many of the ideas come from case studies of schools and programs, as the quantitative research offers little in the way of practical guidelines. Some strategies are obviously more effective for certain age groups than others.

For example, parental intervention of ten is more effective for younger children than for teenagers. Additionally, because elementary schools often are more personalized than middle or high schools, strategies to encourage personalization are even more important for older children. This is by no means a complete and definitive list of strategies, but will provide a starting place for schools to guide them in their exploration of the topics. Since each strategy can only be covered briefly, additional resources are listed for more information.

ATTENDANCE POLICIES

Sound and reasonable attendance policies can set clear standards and high expectations for students (French, Gerstle, & Neilhaus, 1991). The goal is to foster self-discipline in students and “a personal investment in a positive school climate and community” (French et al., p. 1). Attendance policies set limits on what is allowable behavior in the school and determine consequences for actions. Petzko (1991) found, for example, that “excessive absences” policies in which students lose credit after a certain number of absences seemed to increase attendance.

On the other hand, “zero tolerance” policies that have very harsh consequences may have the opposite effect. There is research to suggest that extremely punitive policies such as suspensions and detentions don’t have a positive impact on attendance, especially with minority students and students in poverty (Epp & Epp, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2003; Skiba & Knesting, 2001). Say Shannon and Bylsma, “Actively discharging students pushes students out the door” (p. 33). In-school suspensions, where students are provided academic support and are kept engaged in school rather than sent home, are a better solution, suggests the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (2002). The suspension time can be used to pro-

vide more assistance to struggling students, and can keep students up to date with coursework while they are out of class.

Research appears to be mixed as to whether incentives or rewards may increase attendance. Epstein and Sheldon (2002) found that rewarding elementary students for good attendance with parties, gift certificates, and recognition at assemblies had a meaningful correlation with reducing chronic absenteeism as well as increasing daily attendance rates. Several schools profiled in the Northwest Sampler use incentives such as school dollars to buy books, T-shirts, and so forth, and report this as being successful. Other researchers, however, question these policies for motivating students in the long term (Wagstaff et al., 2000). Using incentives in combination with other strategies is probably the most effective.

Although research may not provide definitive answers as to what policies work best, high school principal Robert Rood, in a 1989 NASSP article, provides some questions for administrators to consider as they develop policies:

- ◆ Have students with chronic absenteeism been identified and counseled?
- ◆ When students are absent, is there an effort to contact the home?
- ◆ Is there consistent enforcement of the attendance policy by all administrators and teachers?
- ◆ Has the attendance policy been recently evaluated for effectiveness and revisions implemented? Input should be taken from all parties involved—teachers, administrators, students, administrative staff, counselors, etc. Everyone needs the chance to voice concerns and understand the policies.

- ◆ Is good attendance valued and rewarded in the school and classroom? Many schools, such as Warm Springs Elementary and Pablo Elementary (see Northwest Sampler section for more details) are posting and announcing daily, weekly, and monthly attendance rates, as well as having fairs and parties to celebrate excellent attendance.
- ◆ Is there an instructional incentive for students to be at school every day? Are classes interesting and challenging enough for children to be motivated to attend school?

What Factors Contribute to Effective Attendance Policies?

Some other recommendations are compiled from primarily anecdotal information from practitioners (Dougherty, 1999; Epp & Epp, 2001; French et al., 1991; Rood, 1989).

- ◆ Attendance policies must be publicized and understood by all staff and students. There must be a clear understanding of the difference between excused and unexcused absences.
- ◆ Policies should be aligned with the district's policies and goals.
- ◆ The purpose should be to change behavior, not to punish. Reconsider the use of zero tolerance policies such as suspensions for truancy and instead consider less severe consequences such as community service or in-school detentions (Skiba & Knesting, 2001).
- ◆ There must be effective reporting, recording, and monitoring. Investigate the various computerized attendance tracking systems currently available.
- ◆ Policies must include full family involvement, with parent notification and frequent home-school contact.

- ◆ If a reward or incentive program is to be used, this should be clearly specified in the policy.
- ◆ Develop two-way contracts among students, administrators, teachers, and families that delineate standards of performance for the student, services the school will provide, or changes the school will make.

EARLY INTERVENTIONS

Schools need to be responsive to the signs of a student becoming uninterested in school or signs that a student is struggling in class. Students such as those mentioned in the introduction of this booklet started to skip classes, take less challenging classes, and fall behind long before a serious problem developed. This is why providing ongoing supports such as ones that will be described in the following sections are so important.

Interventions that start in elementary school, according to some studies, are more effective in increasing attendance than starting in middle or ninth grade (Holbert, Wu, & Stark, 2002). “Working to help a child establish a positive relationship with the school system in the earliest grades would seem to be more feasible than working to rectify a negative relationship when the child becomes an adolescent,” suggest Ford and Sutphen (1996).

There are a few studies that evaluate strategies in elementary grades. We looked at two studies in particular that focused on early interventions. Ford and Sutphen (1996) evaluated an attendance incentive program in one elementary school in which graduate students of social work implemented a two-part attendance program: schoolwide intervention and focused interventions for children in first-third grades who

had missed an excessive amount of school. Below is a summary of the program components.

School-based interventions promoted student attachment to school. College students of social work monitored student attendance calendars, met with each child on a daily basis, and gave verbal praise and encouragement for attending school. Each day the child attended, the student got a sticker on his calendar and a token.

The Focus program consisted of daily counseling sessions of 15 minutes to an hour. Children were encouraged to verbalize their feelings and concerns, and to identify aspects of school they enjoyed; social work students were instructed to emphasize these positive connections to school. Further rewards were given at the end of the week. Later, in a maintenance period, students met with social work students on a weekly basis.

Home-based interventions focused on the perceived problem of absences being linked to limited or inconsistent parent involvement in school prep routines: children did not have fixed homework or bedtimes, no one encouraged them to wake up in time to get ready for school, or they were left on their own to get ready. Lack of transportation was also identified as contributing to absenteeism. Interventions included home visits or telephoning parents to encourage them to be more attentive to their children’s school activities and responsibilities. Specific problem-solving interventions included helping parents establish evening and morning routines.

The program was evaluated after one year. Although some students initially had fewer absences, absences increased in the fourth quarter. This might indicate that the most positive

effects were when children were obtaining daily interaction and feedback, rather than the weekly feedback that occurred later. It was noted that families were a driving force in their children attending school and that many issues contributing to the children's excessive non-attendance could not be resolved with micro-level, short-term interventions.

In another study, Baker and Jansen (2000) reported the results of a similar intervention in which students who had many unexcused absences met in groups with school social workers. The main goal was to improve attendance by creating a supportive group, tracking student attendance, assisting children with building friendships and social skills, encouraging positive peer pressure, and building self-esteem. The intervention was very positive—13 of 14 students had better attendance, and students had improved attitudes about school and improved self-esteem. As with the Ford and Sutphen study, a major challenge was working with parents who did not recognize the importance of regular attendance, and the challenge of assisting parents with few resources to provide day care and good health care.

TARGETED INTERVENTIONS

Programs specifically designed to help students with attendance and dropping out include in-school, alternative, and community-based programs; and partnerships between school, community organizations, and community juvenile justice agencies. Most of these programs are at the high school level, although some are in middle schools as well.

Although many such programs exist, there are few well-documented rigorous evaluations of such programs to determine their effectiveness. Case studies and longitudinal evaluations attest to the promising practices of such programs.

In 1999, the Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program provided grants to programs that were engaged in community-wide, comprehensive plans to reduce truancy. The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC) is the national evaluator of this program and has done research and additional evaluations of other promising programs. The CFFC has identified key components for effective, comprehensive truancy prevention/intervention programs (2002, n.d./a):

- ◆ Have consistent policies and practices, which keep children in school, rather than pushing them out.
- ◆ Involve families in all program planning and implementation. There must be mutual trust and communication for families and schools to work together to solve problems.
- ◆ Provide a continuum of supports to students, including meaningful incentives and consequences. Supports should include academic (e.g., tutoring, after-school programs, creating smaller learning communities), behavioral (e.g., mentoring, group or individual counseling), family, and health (e.g., drug and alcohol rehabilitation). Meaningful incentives should be long, not short-term, and consequences should not be punitive, but serve to keep students in, not push them out (e.g., in-school suspensions rather than out-of-school suspensions).
- ◆ Collaborate with local law enforcement, community organizations, mentoring programs, and social services. This may be challenging at first because community groups often see attendance as a school responsibility. But as programs profiled in this booklet show, collaboration is indeed beneficial to pool resources and to have more community input.

- ◆ Ensure building-level support and commitment to keeping children in the educational mainstream.
- ◆ Continuously evaluate programs and obtain meaningful and relevant data to make informed changes.

Most truancy intervention programs involve the juvenile justice court systems in deciding sanctions for truancy. Judging by a panel discussion at a recent truancy conference in Washington state, the “jury is out” as to how effective courts are in solving truancy problems. It was generally agreed at the conference that courts should be used as a last resort, and that punishment is the least effective method to encouraging children to come to school, especially for children of color who are on the fringe of school and society anyway. As Ken Seeley of the National Center for School Engagement suggested at the conference, if judges in juvenile court could use their role as an advocate for getting children the help and services they need, rather than just as a punisher, they might have a more positive effect.

Below are two programs that the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children have found to be effective or promising. To see examples of additional programs visit www.truancyprevention.org.

Fulton County (Georgia) Truancy Intervention Project.

The program pairs trained legal professionals who are willing to donate their time and services with children who are chronically absent and their families. TIP volunteers contribute their time to serve as legal counsel in juvenile court proceedings, and also serve as caring advocates and mentors for the child and family. According to the TIP Web site, the program’s effectiveness has been well documented during

the past few years with statistical reports maintained and updated on a yearly basis. Of the almost 1,500 children represented before July 1, 2000, more than 75 percent had not returned to juvenile court for any reason. In the 2000–2001 school year, 88 percent of the 243 children represented by TIP returned to school without further incident in the Juvenile Court. For more information, see the Kids in Need of Dreams, Inc. Web site at www.truancyproject.org

Kern County (Bakersfield, CA) Truancy Reduction Program.

This program sponsored by the Kern County Probation Department and the Kern County Substance Abuse Prevention Education Consortium, is composed of 39 districts representing 119 K-12 schools. It is funded through the Title IV Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act.

The program focuses on early intervention and stresses collaboration between schools and juvenile probation officers. The program targets students in kindergarten through 10th grade who have at least four unexcused absences and/or incidents of arriving late to class by 30 minutes or more. Home visits with youths and their families and pooled resources foster mutual cooperation. Components include assessment, home visits, weekly school contacts, counseling with the student and family, referrals to community resources, mentoring, and evaluation. Students referred to the program are usually monitored for an entire academic year. The goal, however, is to stop truant behavior within four months.

According to the data on the Web site, since the program began, chronic school absences and tardiness have decreased at participating schools. After three months in the program,

participants' unexcused absences dropped 43 percent in the 1995-1996 academic year.

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND PERSONALIZATION

As mentioned previously, schools are not only examining attendance policies and truancy intervention programs, but are also looking at how schools can become more supportive for students, so that they will be more likely to remain in school. There are multiple factors that can affect engagement and attendance. For each one of these approaches, an entire booklet can be written. The following sections present some of the most important factors with a sampling of representative research and literature for each approach, and provided some resources for further exploration.

Family Involvement

During the past several decades, the benefits of parents' and other family members' involvement in children's education have been well-documented. Although it isn't the only factor in improving student learning, 30 years of research has consistently linked family involvement to higher student achievement, better attitudes toward school, lower dropout rates, increased attendance, and many other positive outcomes for students, families, and schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

In particular, Epstein and Sheldon (2002) found in a study of 12 elementary schools that as the schools developed school-family-community partnerships to help improve attendance, the average rate of chronically absent students decreased from 8 to 6.1 percent. Most important was constant and personal communication between the family and the school. In schools where home visits occurred on a regular basis, the overall percentage of chronic absenteeism was lower.

Family involvement is absolutely vital in attendance intervention programs. Most truancy intervention programs involve and hold family members accountable every step of the way—from initial contact, to family counseling, to court hearings. It is important to remember that informing families of attendance problems is not enough, that encouraging their active participation during times and at locations most convenient for them can show that schools value family input and contributions.

Here are some suggestions from the research and school practitioners on how to involve parents in increasing attendance:

- ◆ Overall, parents are the school's main source of support for getting children to school. Share ideas with parents and make them part of the team—don't place blame on them (Sheverbush, Smith, & DeGruson, 2000).
- ◆ Family counseling sessions should focus on finding positive solutions and treating the family with respect. The goal is to emphasize solutions based on the power of the family, rather than the power of the school (Sheverbush et al., 2000).
- ◆ Conduct a communitywide public relations effort to stress the importance of school attendance and the necessity of family involvement (Sheverbush et al., 2000).
- ◆ Establish a contact at school for family members to work with (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).
- ◆ Make home visits to chronically absent children. Provide a home family liaison to identify the root causes for children not coming to school, and to "initiate discussions about community services that can assist" (Schargel & Smink, 2001, p. 51)

- ◆ Establish immediate personal contact with families when the problem first arises. Many schools make phone calls rather than send impersonal letters as a first contact.

For more about building relationships with parents, refer to By Request ... *Building Trust With Schools and Diverse Families: A Foundation for Lasting Partnerships* (www.nwrel.org/request)

Personalized Learning

Increasingly, schools are recognizing the importance of creating structures and opportunities for personalized learning. Indeed, research strongly suggests that schools which have created smaller and/or personalized learning environments have higher attendance and lower dropout rates (Fashola & Slavin, 1997; Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Secada et al., 1998; Wasley et al., 2000). Wasley et al.'s study compared Chicago's small schools, including schools-within-schools, with other schools in the system and found that attendance rates were higher in the small high schools. Students in small high schools attended almost four or five more days of school per semester than students attending the other high schools. The authors caution that small schools are not a "panacea" for increasing attendance or raising achievement: "It is important to avoid seeing small schools as the sole solution to all that ails education. Rather we suggest that it is a key ingredient in a comprehensive plan to improve education" (p. 66).

The study found the following conditions were present in the small schools that made gains in attendance, promotion, and decrease in dropout rates possible:

- ◆ Teachers know students well
- ◆ Teachers have high expectations for students, which often leads to high expectations within students

- ◆ Teachers foster critical judgment in their students
- ◆ Teachers use a broad range of strategies to engage their students
- ◆ Students report feeling safer in their schools
- ◆ Accountability is strengthened among parents, students, and teachers

Structures for Creating Smaller Learning Communities

Currently, many large high schools are creating small schools-within-a-school to make education more meaningful for students and to affect attendance, dropout rates, discipline, and academic performance. Research shows that personalization is more likely to occur in smaller learning communities and attendance rates are higher (Cotton, 2001; Wasley et al., 2000). Following is a brief summary of the types of smaller learning community structures:

- ◆ **Academies** are smaller groups within a school, usually organized around a particular theme. Career academies, for example, integrate academic and vocational instruction, providing work-based learning within a personalized learning environment. Freshman academies are designed to ease first-year high school students' transition from middle to high school. Research has indicated that students making the transition from middle to high school are more at risk of dropping out than at any other time. Some high schools with ninth-grade academies have shown increased daily student attendance (Morrison & Legters, 2001) and schools across the country are reporting success. One of these is Nathan Hale High School in Seattle, which saw an increased attendance rate from 83.5 percent in 1995 to 91 percent in 2001.
- ◆ **House plans** divide students into groups that take classes together with the same house teachers. Houses often have

their own student government and social activities. Houses differ from academies in that they don't have themes.

- ◆ **Schools-Within-a-School** differ from the above approaches in that they are autonomous within a larger school, and have their own culture, program, staff, students, budget, and school space.
- ◆ **Magnet schools** have a core focus, such as math, art, or science, in which students from around the district will take classes together in one school. Sometimes the admission requirements are competitive.

Key elements of effective smaller learning communities (SLC) include (Cotton, 2001):

- ◆ *Autonomy.* Smaller learning communities maintain as much control as reasonable over space, schedule, budget, curriculum, instruction, and personnel.
- ◆ *Identity.* The community of adults and students within each SLC has established goals that drive all decisions and create conditions unique to each SLC.
- ◆ *Personalization.* The smaller learning communities implement strategies that take advantage of downsized environments and facilitate all students being known well.
- ◆ *Instructional Focus.* Each SLC emphasizes the importance of instruction geared toward improved academic achievement for all students.

- ◆ *Accountability.* Students in SLCs demonstrate progress on state, local, and schoolwide assessments as well as progress toward established SLC goals, both academic and affective.

Caring Relationships

Perhaps the most important finding in research concerning dropout prevention, attendance, student engagement, and effective small schools is that students are more likely to remain and achieve in schools where people care about them (Benard, 2004; Green, 1998; Steinberg & Allen, 2002; Wimberly, 2002). If relationships between staff and students and their families are to affect student outcomes, they must be based upon trust, respect, fairness, and equity. The research shows that in schools where there is trust, caring, and support, there is higher attendance, higher student performance, and a lower rate of suspensions (Green, 1998; Strand & Peacock, 2002).

A caring and supportive school in which a student's culture is respected, and where children can identify and make connections with their heritage is vitally important for students of diverse cultures. In a recent study, 150 Native students reported in interviews that "being well-grounded and connected to their tribal culture" was a large part of why they stayed in school (Strand & Peacock, 2002). Students who were doing well in school reported that participation in a school culture that included Native history, language, and culture was also a factor. To learn of some excellent examples of schools that are creating safe, trusting, and culturally based climates for Native American children, go to www.nwrel.org/nwedu/09-03/index.php and read the Spring 2004 issue of NWREL's *Northwest Education* on Native students.

Mentoring

There are many kinds of mentoring: school-based, community-based, faith-based, peer mentoring, e-mentoring (use of technology such as e-mail to facilitate and/or support a mentor/mentee relationship), and career-vocational mentoring. Mentoring is one way to ensure that a child has a continuous, sustained, and caring relationship with a trusted adult—whether in or outside school. Research on two nationally known mentoring programs (Big Brothers/Sisters and Across Ages) clearly indicates that children who were mentored in these programs had increased attendance, more positive attitudes toward schools, and possibly improved grades.

Not all mentoring programs have these benefits, however. A recent meta-analysis showed that, as a whole, mentoring programs have only small benefits. The key, say Dubois and colleagues (2002), is that well-designed mentoring programs must have these factors in place to be effective:

- ◆ Ongoing training for mentors
- ◆ Structured activities for both mentors and youth
- ◆ Expectations for frequency of contact, mechanisms for support and involvement of parents, and monitoring of overall program implementation

Indicators of a successful mentoring relationship include frequency of contact, emotional closeness, and longevity of the match. Mentoring researchers caution people that one should not expect that a mentor will solve all the child's problems, including attendance, and that a mentor program will automatically mean other strategies don't need to be in place. Ideally, a mentoring program should be part of the comprehensive plan for increasing attendance. For more information about designing, implementing, and evaluating mentoring programs visit NWREL's National Mentoring

Center Web site (www.nwrel.org/mentoring/about.html). The site also has information on training curricula, program guidebooks, and a database of more than 5,000 mentoring programs across the country.

Student Advisories

Advisory programs are set up in many ways, but the overall goal of all such programs is to provide every student with a teacher or staff member who will assist in providing emotional, academic, and personal support. These are especially useful in large middle and high schools where students don't have a chance to form personal relationships with their several teachers. Often the program has two components: a daily period when advisers connect with their students, and an ongoing, consistent, long-term relationship. These adults can help the student become integrated into the school, help students identify problems, mediate between students and teachers, and generally help them become engaged with their learning (Wimberly, 2002).

Although there are few quantitative studies that address the effectiveness of advisory programs on student attendance or achievement, Simpson and Boriack (1994) found that 70 chronically absent students in a special advisory period had marked decreases in absenteeism during the period of the program. Many researchers have linked decline in motivation to the decline of teacher-student relationships and social bonding (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991). As Galassi, Gullledge, and Cox (1998) explain, most studies on advisories have "serious methodological flaws" or are "one shot investigations" (pp. 13-14).

Some schools have reported unsuccessful advisories, either because the advisory periods are too unstructured, or there

is little time to have such periods. Here are a few tips for success for creating advisory programs (Goldberg, 1998):

- ◆ The planning and discussions for how to organize the advisories need to be realistic. There are many variations and not all are necessary to a successful program.
- ◆ Advisers must understand what is expected of them and the expectations should be realistic. For example, advisers must know how often they are to meet with individual students, and what roles they are expected to play with parents, scheduling, and other issues.
- ◆ The advisory program should be focused on a certain goal or goals. Often schools report that advisory periods are meaningless for students because there is little interaction with the adviser. If this is the case, perhaps a more structured activity such as an open discussion of issues with students choosing the topics, or a project on conflict resolution might be more beneficial (www.newvisions.org/schoolsuccess/practices/student/index.html).

Three excellent resources for implementing advisory programs in middle and high schools are Galassi, Gullledge, and Cox's *Advisory: Definitions, Descriptions, Decisions, Directions* (1998), Goldberg's *How To Design an Advisory System for a Secondary School* (1998), and Osofsky, Sinner, and Wolk's *Changing Systems To Personalize Learning: The Power of Advisories* (2003).

Culturally Responsive School Culture and Curriculum

Although there are no quantitative studies that link attendance to language and culture, the existing literature that identifies issues and factors that contribute to the educa-

tional success of culturally diverse students all agree that the following are very important:

- ◆ Each student should have at least one adult who is “committed to nurturing a personal sense of self-worth and supporting the student’s efforts to succeed in school” (ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, 2000). These adults must also recognize and respect their students’ cultural identity, which will help build a trusting relationship (Wimberly, 2002). This is especially important, according to Wimberley’s study, for African American students, who are less likely than white students to talk to their teachers outside class, and who may be in even more need of support. For example, the 95 percent Hispanic Lennox Middle School in California has an “Adopt a Student” program in which students receive at least one hour of daily one-on-one student-teacher contact. One task of the student’s staff partner is to ensure student attendance.
- ◆ Teachers need to have the highest expectations for all children, especially those who have been stereotyped in the past as underachievers or “truants.” They should engage children in challenging content and make education relevant and interesting (Secada et al., 1998).
- ◆ Curricula can incorporate and honor students’ language and culture. In many Alaskan schools, Alaska Native language and culture are integrated into the standards-based curriculum. In fact, Alaska has standards for culturally responsive schools, guidelines for respecting cultural knowledge, guidelines for strengthening indigenous languages, and a handbook for developing a culturally responsive science curriculum. (See www.ankn.uaf.edu/standards/ for more information.)

- ◆ Teachers need to be experienced with the most effective, research-based practices for English language learners (Padrón, Waxman, & Rivera, 2002). Additional resources for obtaining this experience can be found at www.cal.org, the Center for Applied Linguistics Web site.

Alternative Programs

Although alternative schools and programs have been around for years, within the last 15 years there has been a “rebirth” of such programs especially for children at risk of dropping out (Reimer & Cash, 2003). Alternative schools can be a self-contained classroom in a school or a school-within-a-school; they may be semi-autonomous or on their own. The structures and purposes of alternative programs may vary, but they all have one thing in common: providing students an alternative in which to learn. Charter schools, which may offer options not available in other schools, are becoming more prevalent across the country, with more than 30 states and the District of Columbia passing legislation to allow them (Reimer & Cash, 2003).

As the numbers and types of alternative programs have grown, so has the scrutiny as to their effectiveness with student achievement and keeping students in school. Although there is still little quantitative research on the effectiveness of these schools, qualitative research does exist. An evaluation of Portland (OR) public alternative high schools shows progress in keeping children in school: attendance rates are at 83 percent, up from 79 percent two years earlier (Wang & Devine, 2002). Barr and Parrett (1997) state, “Perhaps most significant, in study after study,

alternative schools have been shown to take students that more conventional public schools either could not or perhaps would not teach and have documented remarkable education success.”

Researchers Schargel and Smink of the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University have found through their evaluations and research of effective programs the following characteristics of effectiveness (2001, p. 117):

- ◆ Maximum teacher/student ratio of 1:10
- ◆ Small student base not exceeding 250
- ◆ Clearly stated mission and discipline code
- ◆ Caring faculty with continual professional development
- ◆ School staff having high expectations for student achievement
- ◆ Learning program specific to student expectations and learning styles
- ◆ Flexible school schedule with community involvement and support
- ◆ Total commitment for each student to be a success

For additional information about establishing and evaluating alternative programs, consult the National Dropout Prevention Center’s 2003 booklet, *Alternative Schools: Best Practices for Development and Evaluation*, by M.S. Reimer and T. Cash. It is available for purchase by contacting ndpc@clemson.edu or www.dropoutprevention.org

For a list of regional alternative programs that have had some success view the By Request on *Alternative Schools: Approaches for Students At-Risk* at www.nwrel.org/request/sept97/article10.html

Focus on Learning, Maximize Learning Time, and Have High Expectations

If the school and classroom teachers focus on learning, and maximize that time, students are more likely to achieve higher standards. The amount of time schools and teachers use for learning vary, especially with the addition of procedural matters, test taking, transitions between activities and classes, and off-task activities. In her review of the effective schooling practices of the last 20 years, Cotton (2000) offers these key approaches:

- ◆ Emphasize at all-school gatherings and in classrooms that learning is the most important reason for being in school. Post learning goals and standards in the classroom and in the newsletter, and make sure family members understand them as well.
- ◆ Let students know that the school has high expectations for their achievement and believes in their ability to meet and exceed those expectations.
- ◆ Allocate time for various subjects based on school learning goals and investigate alternative scheduling (such as block scheduling) to ensure there is enough time to cover core subjects.
- ◆ Provide extended learning opportunities after and before school and in the summer.
- ◆ Keep loudspeaker and other “administrative intrusions brief.”
- ◆ Make sure that the school day, classes, and other activities end on time.

- ◆ Keep transition time between lessons short.
- ◆ Supervise seatwork activities and small-group activities to keep them productive.
- ◆ Hold students accountable for completing assignments, turning in work, and being in class every day.

Service Learning

In general terms service learning is where students learn through active participation in thoughtfully organized service projects that meet the needs of communities. It enhances and is integrated into the academic curriculum. Structured time is provided for students to reflect on the service experience. Although the research is—as with other strategies—primarily based on survey evaluations of programs, with few control groups and little evaluation of long-term sustainability, the existing studies do show that service learning is associated with increased student attendance (Billig, 2000).

Service learning is appropriate for children of all ages. Although issues such as recruitment, logistics, and buy-in are important to resolve, service learning is becoming more popular throughout the country.

At Langley Middle School on Whidbey Island, Washington, service learning has been fully integrated into the curriculum. Eighth-graders are involved in the Youth in Philanthropy project, in which they research and identify specific community needs and identify organizations that can address those needs. Students then grant \$10,000 provided by a local philanthropy organization to chosen local nonprofit organizations. Another

project has seventh-graders partnering with AmeriCorps to restore a wetland in the area, which incorporates essential learning requirements from the Washington State Science Standards. Langley was recognized in 2002 by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) as one of 16 schools in the United States that have done an outstanding job of integrating service learning into the curriculum. For more information about Langley, see the CNCS Web site at www.leaderschools.org/2002profiles/langley.html.

The Corporation for National and Community Service has identified “Hallmarks of Effective Service Learning Programs” (2002, p. 9) that programs may wish to consider:

- ◆ Service activities should be of sustained or significant duration. Program experience suggests that a minimum of 40 hours during a school year is necessary to yield positive results for students and the community.
- ◆ Teachers, after-school program coordinators, or sponsors need to work with students in order to draw the connections between what the students are doing and what they should be learning. Even if service activities are conducted outside class, it is important that the project have clear and specific learning objectives.
- ◆ The service that students perform should have a strong connection to the curriculum they are studying or to their after-school activities.
- ◆ The relationship between service and democratic practices, ideas, and history should be made explicit in order that students see service as a civic responsibility.

- ◆ Project participants should be given time to reflect on their service. That may involve asking students to keep a journal, or having teachers and organizers lead discussions or coordinate activities that get participants to analyze and think critically about their service. These activities need to be planned, not left to chance.
- ◆ Students should have a role not only in executing the service project, but also in making decisions about its development. Students should be involved in leadership roles in all phases of the project.
- ◆ To ensure that service is really useful and strengthens community ties, strong partnerships with community groups based on mutually agreed-upon goals, roles, and responsibilities are essential.

The Service-Learning Northwest Resource Center in Vancouver serves the state of Washington, the Pacific Northwest region, and beyond. The center provides resources, training, and technical assistance to educators, students, and community-based organizations throughout the service-learning community (www.servicelearningnw.org). For more information about service learning, NWREL has published the “Service Learning Toolbox” with work sheets and checklists to help you and your students get started: www.nwrel.org/ruraled/learnserve/resources/SL_Toolbox.pdf. For additional information about service learning see the National Service Learning Clearinghouse at www.servicelearning.org

WHAT CAN INDIVIDUAL STAFF MEMBERS DO?

Here are some suggestions for how teachers, administrators, and all staff can directly and indirectly affect student attendance and their desire to attend school (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, n.d./b; French et al., 1991; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Staff members who provide and model caring relationships, high expectations, a structured learning environment, and opportunities for students to participate and contribute can indeed turn students' life around (Waxman, Gray, & Padrón, 2003).

- ◆ Make students and their families feel welcome. Greeting them when they arrive and posting signs in their native language are just a couple of ways to communicate to parents and students that they are valued members of the school community. Hiring administrative staff members who speak the same language as families is another way not only to welcome bilingual families, but to provide them with someone who can act as an interpreter.
- ◆ When a student is absent, immediately talk to their family member in person—by personal phone call during the day or the evening.
- ◆ Let children know that when they are not in school, they are missed. Talk to them about why they were gone, and if there is anything you can do to help.
- ◆ Reward and recognize good attendance, not just great attendance. Post signs and announcements on the school Web site, in libraries, and in community centers.

- ◆ When students are afraid of being ridiculed or criticized by both teachers and other students, or are afraid of making mistakes, they are less likely to want to work. School staff can create an environment of mutual respect within which students are not afraid to speak up.
- ◆ Teachers, administrators, and school counselors can help with family problems by seeking referrals to other agencies or to support within the district.
- ◆ Teachers can provide high expectations for all students, guide students in focusing on their strengths, and challenge students to work beyond what they think they can do (Benard, 2004; Waxman, Gray, & Padrón, 2003). This is especially important for children of diverse cultures, who may in the past have had teachers with low expectations of them. “It goes without saying that high-expectation educators do not label their students—as ‘at risk’ or anything else,” says Benard.
- ◆ Don't rely on using rewards as the only strategy for increasing attendance. Research shows mixed results for this approach, and positive results are often not long term.
- ◆ Create shared learning opportunities for students to work together—either during whole-group or small-group lessons, or with peer tutoring. Some research indicates that this encourages students' motivation and engagement.

CONCLUSION

Systemic solutions to attendance problems will originate from a system that is made up of teachers and administrators who understand the importance and interconnectedness of supporting climate, significant relationships, engaging and challenging content and instruction, and rules, policies and procedures.

—Wagstaff, Combs, & Jarvis, 2000

The issues of student engagement and attendance are complex and there are no simple solutions. Labeling a child a “truant” is not going to help matters, and neither is ignoring the underlying reasons why a child or young adult is not coming to school. As Schargel and Smink succinctly say, “Confining students for six hours a day in a place where they do not want to be is a prescription for failure” (p. 245).

This booklet presents much information that at first glance can be overwhelming to consider when time and energy are in short supply. Although each of these strategies can make a difference with attendance, and even more of a difference if combined, the first steps for schools are to determine reasons for absenteeism, assess the weaknesses and strengths of current practices, and look at promising practices that can be adapted to particular school cultures. School staff and students can achieve specific goals and celebrate small successes, even as they are grappling with the overall picture.

One thing is clear, everyone concerned with the well-being of our children needs to be involved in finding solutions, and looking at the problems in new ways. Making a commitment to doing so, such as the programs profiled in the following Northwest Sampler have done, is a good place to start.

NORTHWEST SAMPLER

We have profiled several community and school efforts to increase attendance and keep children engaged in school. These efforts are at several levels: county, regional service agency, schools, and community organizations. These are just a few of the many efforts across our region. We provide contact information so you can reach the programs for additional information.

Note: The following profile contains excerpts from a previously published article in *Northwest Education*, Spring 2004, “Healing Wounds” by Joyce Riha Linik (www.nwrel.org/nwedu/09-03/claok/healing.php).



LOCATION

Pablo Elementary School (K-5)
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CONTACT

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The statistics are alarming: More than a third of all Native American students don't finish high school. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the high school completion rate in Northwest states ranges between 55 and 65 percent. In Oregon and Alaska, Native students are twice as likely to drop out as their white, non-Hispanic peers. In Montana, they're three times as likely to leave school.

As a result, efforts are underway across the region to stem the tide of youth leaving school without diplomas. Many of these programs seek to salve past injuries and engage the entire community in keeping students in school.

"We're looking at ways to foster trust and a relationship not only with the child, but with their family and their community," explains Julie Cajune, Indian education coordinator for the Ronan-Pablo School District in Montana. "Distrust is a community issue, not just a school issue. We need to recognize there are wounds in order for healing to take place." The Ronan effort, funded by a \$255,000 grant from the Kellogg Foundation, is directed by a steering committee representing the entire community: elders, school staff, business leaders, working people, and even middle and high school



students. After conducting exit interviews with students who chose to leave school, the committee developed several strategies to address the most common causes.

Since teen pregnancy is one of the leading reasons, a child care facility now operates in a building donated by the tribe, enabling young parents to stay in school. To help failing students, computerized classes are offered after school so they can make up lost credits and still graduate with their peers. A mentoring program using community volunteers targets sixth-graders and high school freshmen because those are difficult transition years.

Because research shows that feeling connected to just one adult at school can increase a student's chances for academic success, faculty members meet daily with small groups of eight to 10 students and engage them in out-of-school activities throughout the year. These activities have included rafting, rock climbing, and camping trips, as well as community service projects such as tutoring elementary students or shoveling snow for elders.

"The idea," says Cajune, "is to build a community of belonging."

The approach seems to be working. A student Cajune describes as "never excited about school—let alone talking about a school activity" enthusiastically flags down Cajune in the library to show her photos of his school-sponsored rafting trip. Quantitative data are beginning to support the qualitative: During the program's first year, the dropout rate for American Indian students in the district fell below the rate for non-Native students for the first time in years, perhaps ever.



Increasing attendance has been an important goal for Ronan's Pablo Elementary School. In 1998, Pablo's schoolwide attendance was a dismal 78 percent; the goal has been to increase it to 95 percent. The key is to focus on the positive, and to celebrate attendance schoolwide every month, says Principal Andrea Johnson. If a student is absent from school, a teacher contacts the family either by phone or a handwritten note. When students miss days, the teachers emphasize to the families that the absence will affect their performance. The intent is not to criticize, but to ask if there is anything the staff can do to help. "We also tell parents that we have a partnership. And your part of the partnership is to make sure your children are in school," says Johnson.

The half-time social worker and full-time counselor work with the family support team to monitor and troubleshoot attendance. They will make daily visits to family homes, if necessary, to help and encourage. They help solve problems, such as arranging transportation, or with basic needs such as getting electricity hooked up.

The Ronan Business Committee and Ronan/Pablo Indian Education Committee sponsor awards each month for students meeting the 95 percent attendance goal. Family activities reward the entire family of students who reach the goal. The strategies have worked: Attendance has climbed to 92 percent for the last few years, and the school is still reaching toward that 95 percent goal.



LOCATION

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CONTACT

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Two years ago, Warm Springs Elementary achieved Adequate Yearly Progress in all areas but one: attendance, which was 91 percent (92 percent needed to reach the target). There are various reasons for the lower attendance, explains Principal Dawn Smith, but the reality is that families need to travel long distances during the day to do business and to obtain basic medical, financial, and other services, and often need to take their children with them.

Smith knows involving families is crucial. "We talked with parents, got suggestions to make attendance better, and implemented those ideas. What doesn't work," she says, "is to send home an official letter outlining the consequences." Instead, she and her staff talk with the families and/or send personal letters home that express their concern that students will fall behind if they don't attend school. "We tell parents that their most important role is to get their children to school," Smith adds. Teachers also send "Coming Week" letters home to families that describe the core subject plans for the week, scheduled assessments, scoring rubrics for state work samples, demonstrations of the "hows" behind math processes, and specialized homework to support the week's lessons. In this way families know what their children are



missing when they aren't in school, to show that extra homework will not make up for the missing days.

Positive publicity for increasing attendance numbers is another strategy. They are posted everywhere in the small community: at the post office, tribal center, and grocery store, and at the school's front entrance. The school's Web site has a running banner that tells the attendance for each day, and the monthly attendance (for September 2003 it was 94 percent). Students are honored each month for perfect attendance at monthly award assemblies, and receive certificates and "book bucks" (school dollars that buy new paperback books at the school). That award (by parent suggestion) will now include a new school logo shirt that will have iron-on emblems for each month they earn the award.



LOCATION

Linn Benton Lincoln Education Service District
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CONTACT

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Scott Perry, Student Services Director
Phone: 541-812-2605
Web site: <http://student.lblesd.k12.or.us/attendance.html>

ATTENDANCE AUDITS

Determining what strategies are needed to improve attendance can be daunting for school and district personnel. It may also be hard for school staff to evaluate their own practices. An external evaluation can help schools understand what good practices they have in place, and what they need to improve.

Linn Benton Lincoln (LBL) Education Service District (ESD) in Oregon has designed an attendance audit process based on years of best practices research to help their district schools increase student attendance. The audit is combined with follow-up services for students in need, such as attendance officers, family liaisons, and social workers.

Because attendance services have been prioritized by ESD districts through a "resolution" process, the ESD uses some of the state funding for these services. The service is also available to districts outside the ESD for a fee (see the Web site for more information).



The attendance audit is an independent, objective, research-based system in which an expert team from the ESD visits the school, interviews staff and students, and documents and evaluates current attendance policies and practices to determine why students are absent from school, and what can be done to increase attendance. School audits are strictly voluntary—the district contacts the ESD if they want an audit. Many come back for follow-up assistance, as well.

Before the visit to the school, the school principal and administrative team are given a survey of the status and priority of evidence-based attendance practices in the schools. On the day of the audit, a team from the ESD visits with the school administration team and asks, “Which three major issues would you like to focus on?” Next, the audit team spends the day interviewing students and staff, and observes how students enter the building and begin the day. The team eats lunch with students and asks them for insights about attendance. The team also meets with students who have chronic attendance problems. They then review school attendance tracking processes. At the end of the day, the team and school administrative staff meet for an “exit dialogue.”

Multipronged support

Attendance services are just one part of the “positive behavior supports” that LBL provides. ESD attendance audit staff members, many of whom have a background in social work, do not see attendance as isolated from other schoolwide issues. Attendance is not simply a problem to be fixed and then set aside. LBL ESD has developed the Hallmarks of Effective Schools model that overlaps positive behavior supports, effective instruction, and wraparound case management. The ESD recognizes that effective schools have clear,



schoolwide systems of positive behavior support, teachers who understand and apply best practices in instruction, and the capacity to provide more intensive, wraparound care management for students with more intensive challenges. All these areas need simultaneous focus and all are related to school attendance. “We look at attendance as a symptom of larger issues,” explain Judi Edwards and Scott Perry. “We emphasize that strictly enforcing policies is not the solution to schoolwide issues of why children are not coming to school. The important questions are: What is really going on with a child who regularly skips school? What are the barriers that are causing him/her to not want to come to school?”

In addition to providing attendance audits, Linn Benton Lincoln ESD is home to several attendance officers who serve area districts. Attendance officers identify students and families who need support as early as possible. They provide the link between student and school staff in many cases. Ann Lundeen, an attendance officer, explains that to start helping, she needs to understand why the student is not coming to school. She asks the student to tell his or her “story” in a personal conversation. “I might find out a number of things from the story—that the student is struggling academically, or maybe has problems handling drugs and alcohol. Students really need someone to hear them, and encourage them to speak up and voice their concerns. I want to develop a relationship with both the child and their family. I need to find out what the parents’ stories are, too.”

The ESD has recently completed its 25th attendance audit. The demand for their audits and wraparound services have steadily grown in the last few years. Increasing attendance has been a priority for district superintendents, and they have



funded four attendance officers, up from two a few years ago. Not only do LBL staff emphasize that students will achieve to higher standards if they attend school, but they also present superintendents with data that make it clear the attendance support is providing a real cost savings. When students are absent for 10 or more days, the district loses basic school funding for each student. LBL calculated that in 2002–2003, 299 students returned to school as a result of LBL attendance services, which recovered 17,629 membership days, and equaled \$493,612 district dollars saved.

The attendance audit staff has compiled some common challenges for schools in reaching attendance goals:

- ◆ Policy not in line with practice
- ◆ Inaccurate data collection
- ◆ Intervention systems largely consequence-based
- ◆ Intervention not systematic
- ◆ Lag time between student choice to not attend school and consequence
- ◆ Communication breakdowns
- ◆ Hall pass inconsistency

Some recommendations the staff have made are:

- ◆ Hold weekly or bimonthly attendance meetings to review lists of absent students, develop action plans, and review building processes including accuracy of data entry and communication systems
- ◆ Place teachers/administrators in halls during passing periods for middle and high school students
- ◆ Develop systems of rapid communication with parents
- ◆ Make sure all staff, especially the school secretary, understand the difference between excused and unexcused absences



- ◆ Make timely referrals to the attendance officer
- ◆ Use a consistent hall pass system
- ◆ Provide instructional alternatives that may be more meaningful to children who are likely to skip school
- ◆ Start lessons with an activity to keep children more engaged and less likely to be late to that class

West Albany High School recently completed an attendance audit. Susie Osborn, the assistant principal, said that having an unbiased audit process was beneficial in that both positive and critical comments came from outside the school. “We had the audit results shared with the entire faculty, and then the faculty broke into small learning groups and discussed the findings.” One of the suggestions was to standardize hall passes so that they all looked alike. In this way it became easier to tell who was not in class. Another suggestion was to make sure staff were in key areas of the school to look out for students who weren’t in class. The school also realized that consequences for missed school needed to be immediate to have the most impact.

The auditors also recognized and shared with us things that West Albany is doing well. When students were asked which policies deterred them from skipping school, they said that lunchtime detention was a good motivator. For students who need extra help with achieving standards, West Albany offers a self-contained academy program in which a husband and wife team-teach. The 30 students, mostly freshmen and sophomores, work together on social skills as well as curriculum. “This is a very welcoming environment,” says Osborn. All the students have senior students as mentors.

These strategies seem to have had an effect. The dropout rate has been less than 3 percent, down from 6 percent several



years ago. Attendance has improved as well, with an increase of 2 percent since last year.

Dayton High School, located in a small, rural town outside Portland, also completed an attendance audit. The district superintendent took the issue seriously enough to contract with the ESD for the audit. In addition to implementing new procedures using a computerized attendance tracking system, school staff are taking a more personalized approach to cutting down on class tardiness by standing outside classroom doors, greeting students as they enter, and making sure everyone is in class on time.

Dayton High School counselor Amy Aebi is trying out something new this year to encourage and support three ninth-grade students who have problems with attendance. She asked each student to select a teacher mentor with whom they meet daily after school. The students receive a candy bar when they have gone to every class that day. They also target short- and long-term goals for rewards. These rewards include \$5-\$50 gift certificates, balloon bouquets, lunch out with their mentor, etc. The students and teachers keep track of each class attended every day. Aebi also provides ongoing support for each student and has weekly meetings with all three together to discuss career goals, go on field trips to colleges, and discuss problems and concerns. Student progress is announced and celebrated by the entire school.

Aebi quickly realized that the positive attention was far more meaningful to the students than the short-term reward. She has seen a huge improvement in both attendance and grades. Most important, these students know



they can accomplish their goals for improvement. “Having an advocate in school really has made a difference,” says Aebi.

The home environment affects attendance the most, according to Aebi; students have usually experienced attendance difficulties for years. The positive experiences with the mentor and extra attention not only help them at school, but have also helped with their attitudes and relationships at home.

With additional resources, Aebi would like to expand the program to reach more students, and work with them throughout their high school career. For children who have few resources at home, making positive connections with adults in the school leads to more interest in doing well and accomplishing personal goals.



LOCATION

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Hispanic high school students have the highest dropout rate of any student population group in Oregon. While it has steadily declined in the last five years, and is now at 9.1 percent, it is still much higher than the dropout rate of 3.6 percent for white students.

The Oregon Council for Hispanic Achievement is working to provide critical school retention services to help students stay in the public school system. The retention program is grounded in an understanding of the importance of acting right away. Investing in these students now will show a sound return in the future for them and their community.

Proyecto Adelante and Proyecto Conexion are two student retention programs that work intensively with students and families to provide support for academic success. On-site case managers establish relationships with students and parents, make home visits, and provide training and other services to keep students in school. Proyecto Adelante is currently working in selected Multnomah County schools focusing on increasing communication among students, parents, and schools.



A student is referred to Adelante when he or she hasn't attended school for several consecutive days. Counselors make a full assessment of the student's situation—academics, behavior, and home/family—to obtain a broad perspective of what has contributed to the nonattendance. Each student receives an Individual Service Plan, which connects them and their families with services and also focuses on academic improvement.

Older children often stay at home to take care of younger siblings, says Oscar Sweeten-Lopez, the student retention director, because families lack other child care. If the case worker realizes that this is one reason the student is not coming to school, he or she will try to find appropriate child care for the younger siblings.

Project Adelante also provides academic support and cultural enrichment activities. In one school, an after-school club provides two days a week of homework help and tutoring, and two days of project-based service learning activities.

The wide variety of services work to increase self-esteem and build on the strengths of the Hispanic students and their families, who may not have been respected or given opportunities to succeed in school in the past.

The project also works with individual schools to facilitate cultural awareness and strengthen projects that involve families. The Stories of My Families oral history project asks students to interview their family and builds an awareness of their culture and family background. Another pilot project has teachers and students create an activity book to reinforce certain concepts that families can do together at home.



The ultimate goal for Project Adelante is to build capacity within schools so they can take the lead in providing services. Indeed, some high schools in Portland have hired Latino advocates to provide support for parents and students.

According to Sweeten-Lopez, a successful program for retaining Latino children must include relationships with parents. Staff must show respect to children *and* their families. They must also have an understanding of cultural issues that contribute to student's non-attendance, such as older siblings caring for the younger ones.

Project Adelante staff members talk with teachers about cultural issues that can inhibit a trusting relationship with families. For example, to have successful family-teacher conferences with Latino families, they emphasize the importance of a preexisting personal relationship with the family. Sweeten-Lopez also suggests that school staff members talk with parents about how conferences and school communications work, prepare them for the cultural differences, and ask that they be flexible as the relationship develops.



LOCATION

School Attendance Initiative
Multnomah County, Oregon
Department of School and Community Partnerships

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The Multnomah County School Attendance Initiative (SAI) is a non-punitive, strength-based, and culturally appropriate approach to assist students in maintaining regular attendance. The primary intervention strategy consists of outreach to families of K-8 students in support of their efforts to improve their children's attendance. SAI staff members help families identify their strengths and supplement those strengths with services rather than focusing on their deficits.

The SAI is one part of a larger service delivery system called the School Age Policy Framework. The goal is to provide services to families and children in Multnomah County who have diminished government resources. The framework merges key services so that families can easily access those they need. Included are school-based services such as extended-day activities, family engagement, Parents Organizing for School Success, and individual, family, and group support.

One of the goals of SAI is to identify problems with attendance early so the problem will not become serious later. This is why the focus is on K-8 students, although high school students who are targeted for services through the School Age Policy Framework (SAPF) are also referred to SAI.



Each week the school receives a printout of all students who have missed three or more days of school in the previous week. Principals select students from this list for a referral to the SAI program. Upon referral, the principal sends a letter home, notifying the family of the referral to SAI.

Once the referral has been made, SAI outreach staff members make a home visit or telephone the home to find out the reasons for nonattendance, and offer services and referrals to other programs to help families address the barriers to attendance. Staff members may bring a culturally specific service provider into the support network at this time. For example, if transportation to school is a problem, the SAI staff try to procure a bus pass or alternative means of transportation. If the student doesn't have appropriate clothing to attend school, the staff will find clothes. Students and families are often referred to the county Family Center that provides counseling, housing, and drug and alcohol services.

Because SAI recognizes that families have multiple needs and issues, the staff provides a diverse array of services to help families and students. They include tutoring, mentoring, medical assessment, and parent education, especially around negotiating immigration and social service agencies.

For families in which the student's attendance does not improve or that need more assistance, additional case intervention services are available to create a support plan that addresses attendance issues. Once a student has been referred to SAI, his or her attendance will be monitored for the remainder of the school year.



SAI also provides extended learning, recreational, and support programs to students during summer and interim breaks. These programs are run by committed staff members and are especially valuable for children who are making a transition between schools.

SAI has documented the main issues affecting attendance with their students. The top three are education, behavior, and parenting skills. An educational need can be anything that the school was not providing—students may need a special assessment, an Individualized Education Plan, or tutoring. An evaluation report summarizes the needs: “Students are affected by issues of poverty—transportation, housing, basic needs ... Cultural issues arise frequently—translation needed or other culturally specific services.”

The evaluation report notes that 25 percent of referrals come from kindergarten and first grade, which further highlights the need to have early intervention in these grades.

The data from the last several years show a 12 percent increase in attendance for students who have been involved with SAI. And the effects do last—data show that attendance improves right after contact with SAI staff and gradually builds. After contact, more than 30 percent of the students were attending school 90 percent of the time.



LOCATION

Rex Putnam High School
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For some of us the experience of large, urban high schools in the 1980s was disappointing. Teachers seemed burned out and disengaged—there was little sense of community or caring, except from perhaps a few teachers. Classes were uninspired. Middle schools, on the other hand, had a house system that enabled teachers and students to really get to know each other. Classes were also more interesting—outdoor school and science fairs made science interesting.

Fortunately for kids today, many educators are recreating traditional high schools to include the personalized climate and structures similar to middle schools. They are realizing that schools around the country are not living up to the expectations of students, families, communities, and staff.

Darcy, a 10th-grader at Rex Putnam High School in Milwaukie, Oregon, is fortunate to have a very positive high school experience. An articulate, poised young woman, Darcy has a clear sense of purpose for her education. The school's career exploration program—Future Focus—is helping her explore different options for a career, and gives her the opportunity to shadow professionals on the job. She became inter-



ested in being a neonatal nurse after she saw how a nurse takes care of the premature infants in a local hospital. To prepare for this career, she chose health services as her focused program of study. Darcy created her own personalized education plan and chose electives such as anatomy, physiology, and leadership that relate to health services.

The Career Pathways program has certainly made classes more meaningful for the students, and they are more likely not to skip school because the classes are important to them. One student apparently was going to participate in the traditional “senior skip day” but decided that “well, I have to go to this class, and I have to attend this other class, so I might as well go to all of them.” Attendance is also more closely monitored when the students are in the same sequential block classes and have the same teachers.

Long before “smaller learning communities” and “personalized education” became the buzzwords in comprehensive high school reform, Putnam knew that changes needed to be made. In 1993, the 21st Century Site Council, a site-based decisionmaking group made up of teachers, classified staff, parents, students, and administrators, conducted a comprehensive schoolwide survey to gather perceptions of the school from staff, students, families, and community members. “There were a couple of surprise areas,” remarked Kathy Campobasso, the school-to-careers coordinator. While the staff reported that they cared for the students and felt connected to them, the students reported feeling exactly the opposite—they didn’t feel cared about at all and didn’t feel like the faculty knew them. This disconnect jarred administrators; they decided to look at the data and research what other schools were doing to connect with their students.



At that time, the dropout rate and absentee rate were rising, and grades were low. The first thing Putnam did was address students' concern about not feeling known, and instituted what Putnam calls "Access Period." Access, a form of advisory period, began as one period every other day in which all students were assigned to a teacher. During this period, students could also have access to any teacher in the building, as long as they acquired a hall pass from that teacher in advance. Students used "Access" to complete make-up work, get help with homework, take tests, and work on projects.

Later, the school further personalized education by creating the house system for ninth- and 10th-graders, in which a group of 90 students take core classes together in block periods for two years, and have the same language arts, social studies, and science teachers together. Now, Access Periods occur within houses, so access teachers are even better known by students. "This is not just an unstructured study hall," says one teacher. It is a time when students can work with each other and with other teachers, or have more time to work on a project.

Putnam makes sure that incoming ninth-graders are connected even before they start school. The school invites eighth-graders to tour the high school on a special night each spring. On Freshman Assurance Day, the first day of school, a Link Crew leads the ninth-graders through the day—all the staff are lined up in the hallway clapping and welcoming the new students. Not only do staff show they care, but the upperclassmen are committed to mentoring and caring for their younger schoolmates.

Putnam did not make all these changes in just one year; the staff gradually implemented the new processes over an



eight-year period. Nor was it easy. "Certainly it is difficult at first for teachers to lose autonomy," says Campobasso. A core group of teachers started the first house, got really excited about the process, and gradually the excitement caught on with the rest of the staff.

As a result of all these efforts, attendance rates are increasing and dropout rates are decreasing. The dropout rate for 2002–2003 reached an all-time low of 1.8 percent. These achievements have been accomplished without a schoolwide attendance policy, although each house sets its own policy. The emphasis, however, is far less on policies and more on what the school can do to make students' school experience meaningful. Maybe the lesson to be learned from Putnam is, if you create challenging, interesting classes, make sure students are cared about, and care about learning, then policies are less important.

**LOCATION**

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**PEOPLE HELPING PEOPLE PROGRAM (PHP)
(FRESHMAN TRANSITION PROGRAM)**

Wilson High School has had the highest daily attendance for the past three years of all high schools in the Tacoma district. Several things have contributed to the 92 percent average daily attendance rate, including quality incentives, a focus on engaged learning, and strong family participation.

Five years ago ninth-grade assistant principal Cherry Goudeau, with the leadership of Principal Paul Apostle, designed a program to provide extra support for freshmen. Goudeau asked older students what would have made their transition easier, and many indicated that mentors in the school would have helped. Thus, the “People Helping People” program (so named by a student) began. Goudeau’s vision was to build a network of peers, teachers, and internal and external mentors. Although she was able to match students with adult mentors the first year, she realized that it was “a scheduling nightmare” and focused on providing peer mentors for students in subsequent years.



The program begins in August with a “First Day of School Holiday” for freshmen and their parents. Freshmen receive a phone call from their PHP student leaders inviting them to the special day. Parents also receive an invitation and are provided a letter for their employers that explains the purpose for the event, and asks the employer to grant time off to attend.

During the special August orientation, freshmen are matched with their PHP student leaders who go over their class schedule, take them on a tour of the school, show them their locker, introduce teachers, and answer questions. Meanwhile, parents are attending panel discussions with teachers to ease their concerns about the transition.

As the year progresses, PHP leaders continue to meet with their students to provide encouragement, tutoring, and advice. Each month a student leader provides esteem, conflict resolution, work and social skills activities during a freshman English class. Student leaders benefit from the experience as much as their freshman buddies, as they learn leadership skills and earn service learning credits.

To provide incentives for using the character-building skills they learned, student leaders and teachers issue “Ram³ Pride Citations” to students who demonstrate characteristics such as attendance, respect, positive attitude, problem solving, patience, organization, and initiative. Once a student receives a citation, they get a Wilson Ram Head Certificate posted in the hallway. Currently there are more than 20 Ram’s Heads posted.

³The school mascot is a ram.



Goudeau is quick to point out how well the citations are working to provide positive feedback to students. When one discouraged student received a Ram Pride Citation, she glowed with pride—the look on her face was “priceless.” The citations became so popular that older students clamored to get them, and now all students can receive citations.

Although Goudeau says this program has taken much time and energy for her to organize, she knows any support schools can give incoming students is important, even if they can’t design an elaborate mentor program. “It only takes a little encouragement,” she says.

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