

Schools: Missing school has an impact that spreads across the country

Continued from Page 1A

In 1995, the state Legislature required kids from the ages of 8 to 17 attend school. The law mandated school districts report truancy petitions to a court if a student accrued seven unexcused absences a month, or 10 within a year.

Once a student receives a truancy petition, the court is supposed to tap into a variety of government, community and private resources to resolve the issues that led to their absences.

According to the state’s Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, during the 2014 school year, there were 39,143 cases of students with 10 or more unexcused absences. Within that year, 6,088 truancy petitions were filed.

Within Pacific County, there were 30 petitions in 2014, according to court records. In Ocean Beach School District, there were nine.

Ocean Beach Superintendent Jenny Risner said the district implemented a new attendance policy at the beginning of this year to ensure schools and the district are on the same page in defining an unexcused absence and that the policies were up to date. The district’s office said the new policy was administered throughout the schools and would be online by Dec. 1.

Ilwaco High School

Americorps member Annika Wolters’ job at Ilwaco High is to create the school’s first truancy reduction program. There’s a chart outside her office that shows attendance each week by grade.

“Seniors need to step it up,” she said. “They haven’t made it to 90 percent once this year.”

Sophomore attendance began at roughly 97 percent the first week of school and fell to 90 percent by the ninth week. Juniors and freshmen have hovered around 90 percent.

Wolters starts her morning with a list of missing students. Seven years ago, Wolters’ name would have made the list. As one of the few people of color in Ilwaco, she said she often felt isolated. During her sophomore year, school felt irrelevant after one of her close friends committed suicide.

Wolters missed three weeks of classes in one month. Often, her mom explained the absence to the school and it would be excused. She never received a truancy petition, but her time out of class lead to three incompletes, meaning Wolters had to catch up or not pass those classes.

“When that happened, I felt like I had to live for myself and my friend,” she said.

She caught up in school and became the senior class president. She attended Western Washington University, where she was elected student body president, and double majored in visual journalism and communication studies.

“After graduation, I felt like I could go anywhere,” Wolters said. “But I knew there were kids here dealing with stuff out of their control.”

Attendance club

A student missing school can alter their entire life, according to The Alliance for Excellent Education. A study by the Alliance states kids who miss school are less likely to hold long-term jobs or be economically stable.

The impact spreads across the country. The study estimated that if half of the drop-outs from the nation’s classes of 2010 had graduated, the U.S. would have another \$7.6 billion in earnings, \$713 million in tax revenue and \$9.6 billion in economic growth by the time the students hit the middle of their careers.

Wolters returned to Ilwaco High this term with a goal to make it easier for students to be there.

Once she sees a name on her list several times, she gives the kid a mandatory invitation to join the attendance club, where she meets with a small group of students to help them catch up.

The first week she held the club, she invited 15 kids but only saw eight. Now the numbers hover around 15 to 20 consistently.

The school also rewards good attendance. There are days when cupcakes are randomly delivered to a classroom if everyone was present and on time. If students have good attendance, their names are placed into a drawing to win a prize.

When she sees a new student on her list, Wolters pulls them out of class to find out why.

Students have told her they don’t want to go to class because their teacher or classmates are being unfair. So, Wolters offers to go to class with them. For others, they missed the bus and couldn’t get to school, had family problems, or had a challenge Wolters said she would have never expected.

“A lot of what I’m doing, and what this school wants, is to take the shame out of what these kids are dealing with,” she said. “Let them know no matter what, we want them here.”

Tongue Point: ‘The estuary is one of the most important places in the Columbia River Basin’

Continued from Page 1A

South Tongue Point, located east of Astoria off of U.S. Highway 30 south of the industrial property at North Tongue Point, includes more than 130 acres of mostly undeveloped land. The college leases 7.5 acres for \$13,000 a year from the state for the MERTS campus. The federal government owns a square of the land, a dock and an office at the end of Liberty Lane. The state, which controls submerged lands, also leases land for salmon net pens next to the dock to the Clatsop County Economic Development Council.

Living classroom

JoAnn Zahn, the college’s vice president of finance and operations, said there are two parts to the college’s application for South Tongue Point. One is to purchase the land under the MERTS campus. The other would be to purchase more than 100 acres for a living classroom south of Liberty Lane, with the financial support of the Columbia Land Trust and the Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce.

“There are many pieces that would need to fall into place for this to happen,” Zahn said, cautioning that the partnership is still in the early stages.

Nadia Gardner is a coast and estuary conservation manager for the land trust, which manages more than 2,200 acres of shorelands along the lower 80 miles of the Columbia River. She said the two environmental groups



Joshua Bessex/The Daily Astorian

Remains of a railroad pass through the property at South Tongue Point.

would seek funding from a number of different entities to buy the property and restore it to tidal wetlands, including the Bonneville Power Administration, the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

“The estuary is one of the most important places in the Columbia River Basin,” she said, noting that the more tidal habitat fish have to acclimate, the better the chance they have of surviving once they enter the ocean.

The lower reaches of the river have many different species listed under the federal Endangered Species Act, she said, including 13 different types of salmon and steelhead.

The idea at South Tongue Point, Gardner said, would be to move around dredge spoils, remove invasive species, plant native species and create more habitat.

Gerald Hamilton, the interim president of the college, said the college could have an environmental sciences program or a living lab.

Possible port

South Tongue Point, zoned marine industrial, was created between the mid-1940s through the 1970s by soil dredged from the Columbia River shipping channel by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The site, located along a channel of the Columbia and next to a defunct railroad

line, is valued as both wildlife habitat and as one of the few remaining locations for a deep-water shipping port. Paul said the state and federal government had an ownership dispute over the property, and the state paid the feds for a clear title to most of the land at South Tongue Point, with the idea of developing it into a port.

But the site has had trouble attracting investors.

In December 2013, Warrenton Fiber applied to acquire the southern two-thirds of South Tongue Point. David Nygaard, a co-owner of the company, said the company had been looking at the site for years, as it occasionally runs out of space on the 40 acres it leases from Warrenton at Tansy Point.

Mapping: Maps set flood insurance rates

Continued from Page 1A

‘Tremendous’ cost savings

Accuracy concerns in flood-prone areas affected by the Columbia River near Warrenton and Astoria had stalled adoption of all mapping work throughout Clatsop County, when FEMA originally planned to approve the southern and northern portions of the county together.

North County agencies are now working together to complete an in-depth analysis and technical review of the draft flood maps.

“It is important for insurance payers throughout the county to get this right, and that’s what we’re determined to do,” Warrenton Mayor Mark Kujala told The Daily Astorian in August.

Flood plain maps have two significant uses: to set flood insurance rates and to provide cities with guidelines

for regulation. In Cannon Beach, new construction in the flood plain is required to be above reach of the 100-year flood level.

Flood insurance rates rose significantly two years ago

and subsidies were phased out last year.

Under the new maps, Cannon Beach’s downtown comes out of the flood plain. Barnes has said “the cost savings there are tremendous.”

Community member Bruce Francis urged the council to move quickly on adopting a Letter of Map Revision request during an October meeting “so citizens can take advantage of the lowered rates.”

Shoeboxes: ‘We always hope to make a mark bigger than we did last year’

Continued from Page 1A

Over the next year, the shoeboxes will be delivered to children ages 2 to 14 across the world. Sometimes delivery can take up to several months, because of difficulties getting the shoeboxes to remote locations.

The Kennys’ granddaughter, 7-year-old Kylie, said her favorite part of the program is “helping children get to have stuff,” although she also enjoyed handing out stickers and candy to those delivering boxes to the drop-off site. She and her family put together two boxes — one for a girl and one for a boy.

All participants specify if their shoebox is for a boy or girl and from which age category. Lorri Kenny said, for some reason, they generally get more packages for girls and for children in the younger age groups; the oldest category often “is lacking,” she said.

Many of the volunteers this year were belonged to North Coast Family Fellowship, but “anybody that would

be really excited about Operation Christmas Child could help,” Kenny said. Anyone can prepare a box, regardless of religious views, but Samaritan’s Purse is an evangelical Christian humanitarian organization.

Samaritan’s Purse’s church partners in other countries help get the shoeboxes into the hands of children at their churches, local public schools and other sites. Kenny said she likes the program because “It’s not just about the box; the box is where it starts.” Children are invited to their local church for a multi-week religious discipleship program, which ends with a graduation ceremony, and receive Bibles in their native language.

Some children share their stories about getting a shoebox, and their testimonies often reveal what an impact the shoeboxes have and how happy they are to receive even seemingly mundane items, like pencils, notebooks, balls or brushes.

“We forget how much we’re blessed,” Kenny said.

“We take a lot for granted in the United States.”

Mark Kenny agreed it often takes giving up so little to pack a shoebox for a child and it can be a big eye-opener for people to see “what we can do without.” Since becoming a leader, he said he’s enjoyed “being able to work with a team of people that’s really excited about (the program) and to listen to testimonies afterward about how (the boxes) affected children’s lives.”

Sometimes a recipient will start corresponding with the giver. Lorri Kenny said her grandson, Dylan Macomb, now has a pen pal in the Philippines because of a shoebox he packed with his family last year.

North Coast Family Fellowship, the only drop-off location in Clatsop County, is part of the larger northwest team, along with sites in the Portland-metro area, Tillamook and others, for the program.

“We always hope to make a mark bigger than we did last year,” Lorri Kenny said.



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Registration
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