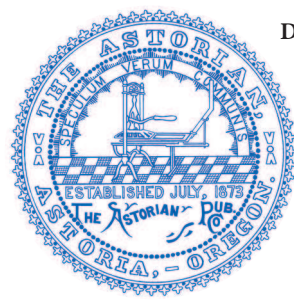


# THE DAILY ASTORIAN

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Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Students roam the halls of Astoria High School Tuesday morning on the first day of the new school year. A Strive for Five campaign targets absenteeism.

## School absenteeism saps chances for high achievement

Woody Allen said “80 percent of success is showing up,” an observation that rings true. If you can’t meet basic scheduling obligations, what are the odds of somehow blundering into a good life in today’s increasingly complex world?

School absenteeism is a variation on this truism, except that frequently absent students test the limits of just how often they can not show up and get by anyway. If not showing up at all is the death of prospects for a rewarding and well-rounded life, blowing off classes too often is like a chronic illness, sapping chances for high achievement.

Our Tuesday story explored how educators are searching for ways to combat absenteeism — a nagging issue that hamstring learning and consistently places Oregon near the bottom nationally. Meanwhile, the Seattle Times reported Sunday “that in 28 percent of Washington schools almost a third of all students are missing weeks of classwork, a rate that ranks as second-worst in the nation, after Alaska.”

Locally, an average of more than one-fifth of students in Clatsop County were chronically absent in the 2015-16 school year, missing at least 10 percent of the 180 school days, according to the most recent data from the state Department of Education.

Attendance trails off badly toward the end of high school, when students should instead be gathering momentum for careers by doing well in classes. More than 28 percent of juniors and seniors at Astoria High School, more than 30 percent at Warrenton High School and 40 percent at Seaside High School are chronically absent. Active intervention is needed well before the final years of K-12 schooling to make sure to minimize the underlying reasons for missing classes.

Absenteeism is bound up with family and individual dynamics that some school officials understandably despair at influencing. If parents don’t consider getting to school to be a high priority, odds aren’t ideal that external forces can replace that lack of motivation.

And yet there are case studies showing that communities can make a real difference in improving school-attendance rates, and thus the prospects for students’ success in life.

The just-published “Portraits of Chance” ([tinyurl.com/yd4xycd4](http://tinyurl.com/yd4xycd4)) provides road maps for lowering absenteeism.

“What works is taking a data-driven, comprehensive approach that begins with engaging students and families as well as preventing absences from adding up. The key is using data as a diagnostic tool to help identify and target where chronic absence is a problem,” the report states.

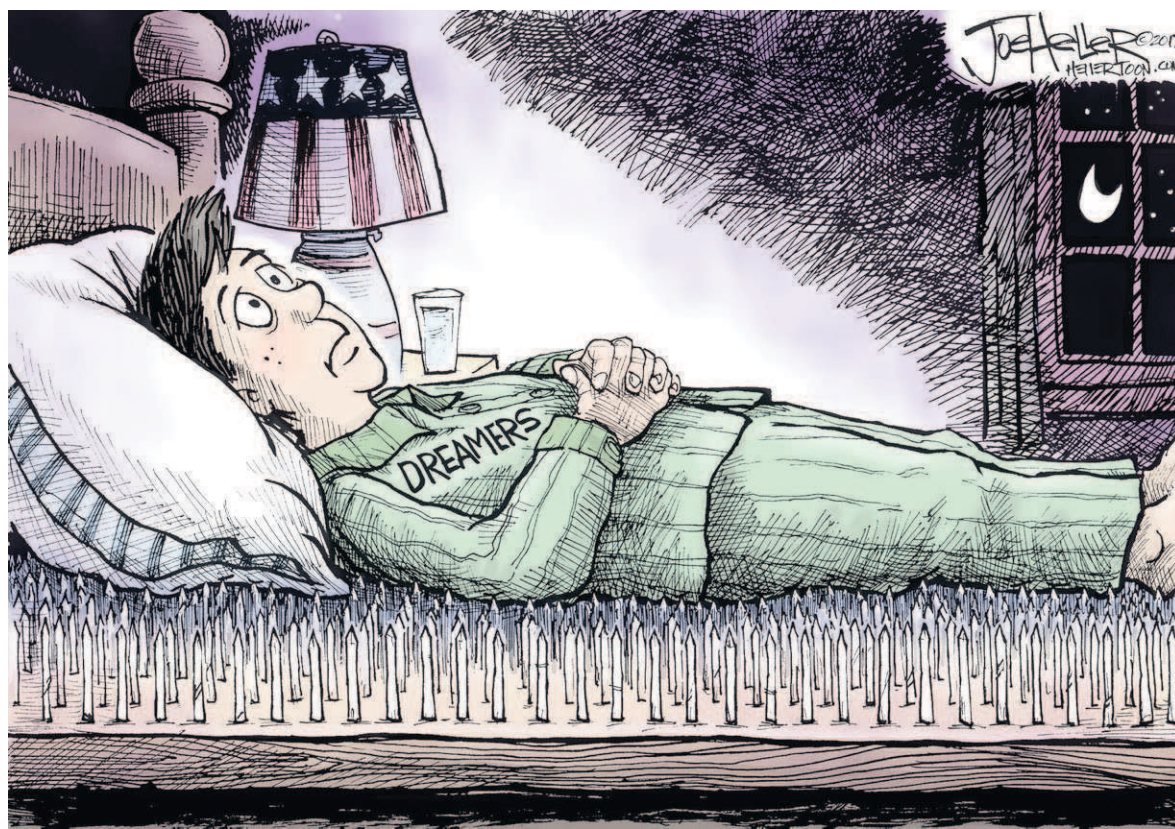
In a case study from elsewhere in Oregon, “the Tribal Attendance Pilot Project illustrates the power of using data to raise awareness of attendance challenges (in this case, Native American students) and the power of partnering, in this case among tribes, rural districts and families.”

The key point from the study is it isn’t necessary to become discouraged about absenteeism. A variety of effective strategies are available around the nation, models that can be adapted in local school districts around the mouth of the Columbia. These strategies tend not to be massively or instantly successful, but will make a difference in the lives of many young people if they are implemented and consistently applied.

A Tuesday report from the Brookings Institution ([tinyurl.com/Brookings-Rural-Dreams](http://tinyurl.com/Brookings-Rural-Dreams)) makes it clear just how critical education is to determining which of America’s rural counties languish as economic backwaters and which establish paths to upward mobility.

“Improving K-12 quality in distressed areas will improve young residents’ life prospects and preparedness for adulthood,” Brookings observed. “The broad lesson of our findings is that in counties where children are able to prepare well for adult life, they do well: even if, in many cases, this means moving elsewhere. Country boys and girls from modest backgrounds can go on to succeed every bit as much as their city cousins.”

We must make sure local schools meet students’ needs. And we must do a better job of making certain students consistently take advantage of the education they are offered.



### GUEST COLUMN

## Thinking about suicide? Please stay

By AMY BAKER

Special to The Daily Astorian

September is National Suicide Prevention Month. The point I want to make is simple and if you want to skip to the end, here it is: please stay.



I say this from the bottom of my heart to each and every person in this community. I

say this knowing fully that staying alive means that you may continue to suffer. It’s a big “ask,” so let me explain.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for those between the ages of 15 and 34. Death by suicide claims more lives than murder and natural disasters combined. Suicide is not a rare, isolated event. It’s real and permanent, leaving those left behind in agony.

In my professional and personal life, I’ve stood beside those who couldn’t see beyond their own despair. Men, who take their own lives at almost four times the rate of women, may have been considering suicide because it’s better to be dead than “weak.” I have crossed paths with young adults who felt that they were completely alone in the world, and who could not bear the thought of living on.

Suicide prevention is not an academic exercise for me, nor, I’m pretty sure, for any of my staff who work alongside me at Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare. We care about this topic because we’ve looked deep into the face of this epidemic and long for a way to make it stop.

For family members and loved ones, suicide is devastating. For them, the loss is plagued by stigma, guilt and the horrible onslaught of “what could I have done differently?”

Suicide leaves a horrible wake in its path, shaking the foundation for all of us. Suicide is like a weed with many shoots that wraps itself around all of us, casting doubt on hope and our sense of future. It frays our social fabric and brings into question the compact each of us has with society. As a community, we agree to build a future together, knowingly or not. We agree to hope for our children and our collective future. To paraphrase Jennifer Michael Hecht from her book “Stay: A history of suicide and the arguments against it:” Either the universe is a cold dead place with solitary sentient beings, or we are all alive together,



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

The crisis respite center in Warrenton helps patients with mental illness.

**Suicide leaves a horrible wake in its path, shaking the foundation for all of us. Suicide is like a weed with many shoots that wraps itself around all of us, casting doubt on hope and our sense of future.**

### SUICIDE SIGNS

If you or someone you know is experiencing any of these symptoms, please seek help.

- Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no purpose
- Talking about feeling trapped or being in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious, agitated, or reckless
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

committed to persevere.

I do not dismiss the sense of despair that can feel completely disproportionate to the life a person lives, creating guilt for not being able to cope, on top of being lonely and miserable. The despair people feel is legitimate. At Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, we see people every day who suffer with mental illness, or addiction, or both, to an extent that can be incomprehensible. If you are one of them, still, I ask you to stay.

If you are contemplating suicide because you don’t want to be a burden to someone else, contemplate this: the burden of staying is infinitely smaller to those you care about. Your family and friends will drown in regrets.

To those of you who have at some point contemplated suicide — and we are legion! — yet decided to live, I am forever grateful. You chose to honor your future self, to give the future you a chance at joy. You chose to stay, if only for your family, or your religion, or whatever reason was compelling to you. Let’s face it. We all suffer, some more than others, but suffering is the human condition.

It takes heroic courage to stay. In the face of despair, this courage demands our respect. In my work, I am honored to bear witness to this courage. Those who live are silent, extraordinary heroes and they deserve not only our gratitude, but our deep admiration. If you or someone you know is contemplating suicide, please tell someone. We are here, as are others. The suicide lifeline at Lines for Life is 1-800-273-8255 and for youth it’s 1-877-968-8491. Our immediate access number is (503) 325-5724.

Amy Baker is the executive director of Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare.

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