

'Improving attendance is a no-brainer'

EDUCATION continued
from front page

American students throughout the state. One-third of Tribal students were chronically absent in 2011-12, with the highest rate – 43 percent – at the high school level.

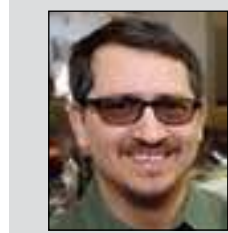
Students who miss that much school, especially at the elementary level, are unlikely to ever read or do math at grade level or earn a diploma, educational studies have shown.

The state Department of Education started a new program, the Tribal Attendance Pilot Project, which targeted 17 Oregon schools, including Willamina Elementary, to address the problem among Native American students. Approximately a third of Willamina students are Native American and most of those are Grand Ronde Tribal members or descendants.

The Oregon Legislature allotted \$1.5 million and the state Department of Education distributed that money to nine school districts that serve students who are enrolled in a Tribe with each district receiving \$150,000 each for the 2016-17 school year. Those school districts also are receiving the same amount of money to be used during this school year and in 2018-19.

At the participating schools, the project paid the salary of new staff members, called family advocates, to work specifically on Native American student attendance. The program concentrates on third-grade students, Department of Education Indian Education Specialist Ramona Holcomb said.

She told *The Oregonian* that the pilot project is seen as working and will continue because it “cannot solve chronic absenteeism in



“Chronic absenteeism isn’t bound to ethnicity. It’s not bound to American Indians. It crosses the spectrum.”
~ Leslie Riggs, Education manager

Chronic Absenteeism rates

School Name	American Indian/ AK Native		Other students		All students	
	2015-16	16-17	2015-16	16-17	2015-16	16-17
Willamina Elementary School	43.22%	36.51%	37.04%	26.59%	38.43%	28.92%
Willamina Middle School	45.45%	42.42%	50.51%	33.33%	49.24%	35.19%
Willamina High School	55.36%	48.28%	42.74%	37.50%	45.12%	39.60%

Source: Oregon Department of Education

Graphic created by George Valdez

a year.” Its successes include the “simple act of (schools) being more welcoming” to Native families and raising awareness of the importance of good attendance.

In Willamina, the school district hired Rebecca Arredondo as the Tribal Attendance Family Advocate and the school district, supported by the Tribal Education Department, started holding monthly Attendance Reward Nights where students who missed one day of school or less in a month were invited to attend and possibly win raffle prizes.

Willamina School District Superintendent Carrie Zimbrick said the district collaborated with the Tribe on the effort from the beginning, including Education Department Manager Leslie Riggs and other Tribal Education employees in creating the job description, con-

ducting job interviews and selecting the family advocate.

“I would say, for Rebecca, family outreach has always been a passion of hers even as a classroom teacher at Willamina Elementary,” Zimbrick said. “So when this position came about, she got really excited and came and talked to me about applying and leaving the classroom to do this work.”

Zimbrick said talking about chronic absenteeism with families and students, as well as working with families to support them in getting their children to school are some of the things that are positively affecting the absenteeism rate in Willamina. She said Arredondo has purchased alarm clocks and gas cards for families and provided transportation to get chronically absent children to school.

“I really like the fact that she is going to the families, too,” Zimbrick said. “The expectation wasn’t that you have to come to the school to participate. I think that was super important.”

“I think the best thing about what our TAPP does is when we hired the individual who was going to be the family advocate at the school, myself and Audra Sherwood sat on the hiring panel so we had a lot of say about who that person was going to be,” Riggs said. “The last thing that we wanted to happen was for somebody to come in and try and hammer everything that looked like a nail.”

Riggs agreed with Zimbrick that Arredondo’s outreach to Native families and listening skills have created a more welcoming environment.

“She spoke to our community members as human beings and was able to then start to develop relationships with folks in the community,” Riggs said.

Riggs said Tribal Education Department staff also worked closely with Arredondo to communicate concerns about individual Native youths experiencing attendance issues.

“It was easier then to understand what the extenuating circumstances were for the kids and the families, and why they weren’t

getting to school and taking a look at those issues as opposed to once again putting it into a punitive or a top-down model where it was an office coming into the home and telling them what they needed to do,” he said.

Riggs said discovering why a student is having a particular problem getting to school regularly and addressing the family’s specific issue is why Willamina has experienced marked improvement in its Native American absenteeism rates. “We made a surgical effort as opposed to just casting a wide net,” he said.

The effort within the Willamina School District to get Native American students to school appears to be having a spillover effect. Chronic absenteeism rates for other students also dropped in all three schools, most notably at the middle school where the rate plummeted from 50.51 percent to 33.33 percent.

Zimbrick said that although Arredondo concentrates on elementary school students, trying to instill a tradition of regularly going to school in youth, the district also found funds to expand its efforts by designating another employee to work with middle and high school students.

“A lot of our efforts at school itself were universal regardless of being Native or non-Native,” Zimbrick said. “Improving attendance is a no-brainer that is going to help impact dropout rates. We’ve found ways to fund another position.”

Halcomb, however, cautions against reading too much into first-year statistics. For example, she said Pendleton’s Washington Elementary School had 349 students in third grade in 2015-16 and 513 students in 2016-17, and the district only has one family advocate for all of those students.

In addition, Jefferson County had 49 inches of snow in January. Before the bad weather, its schools were showing a downward trend for chronic absenteeism.


Zimbrick said she and Halcomb participated in a national webinar on Sept. 12 called “Portraits of Change” and presented on how Oregon is tackling the Native American chronic absenteeism problem. The state Department of Education selected the Willamina School District to represent Oregon’s efforts.

“It was pretty cool,” Zimbrick said. “I am just really grateful and thankful that this is an initiative that the state is recognizing as an important piece of the education puzzle and addressing chronic absenteeism is something that we all need to pay attention to. If we find a model that works, we need to continue to support it.”

“I know one of the things that Willamina is doing is that it became very apparent to them that they have an issue there,” Riggs said. “Starting with the elementary kids was a really good idea because we need to create those habits. ... They are recognizing the fact that this is an issue. Chronic absenteeism isn’t bound to ethnicity. It’s not bound to American Indians. It crosses the spectrum.” ■

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