



May 2016

**CHIEF
EDUCATION
OFFICE**

Chronic Absenteeism Report

Executive Summary

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The Chief Education Office (CEdO) has commissioned this report on chronic absenteeism in Oregon schools to better understand this problem in general, to specifically hear from students and families most likely to be chronically absent, and to present recommendations for the State and local communities. This report is a result of collaboration between CEdO, Portland State University (PSU), and the Coalition of Communities of Color (CCC). Researchers from PSU conducted all of the original research. This report builds on previous work in Oregon and around the country, but it is not a duplication of existing research. Instead, the research is a novel contribution because of its extensive use of focus groups, inclusion of culturally specific focus groups, detailed thematic analysis between and among stakeholder groups, and deep-dives in the areas of students with disabilities and Native American students.

The report's literature review gives the reader a comprehensive foundation that defines the terms and measures associated with school attendance, shows the connection between attendance and academic outcomes, provides statistics related to chronic absenteeism and achievement for Oregon, provides a framework for understanding the reasons for absenteeism, and details current practices that are considered the best for schools, districts, and states to increase attendance. The review shows that although chronic absenteeism affects students of all ages, it is particularly a problem for students of color, students with disabilities, and students living in poverty. Finally, the problem is complicated, and requires a range of interventions, tailored to specific communities that address every context of students' lives. The review demonstrates that there is still a good deal to learn about chronic absenteeism and that

conducting focus group research will paint a better picture of the Oregon context and identify benefits and drawbacks of specific practices for specific locales.

Forty-four focus groups, at seven sites throughout the state of Oregon, were conducted. In most locations, four focus groups were held with four different groups of participants, including: parents of children currently enrolled in school, students aged 12-18, educators and staff currently engaged in chronic absenteeism work in the school system, and community members actively engaged in a community organization. In Washington County, an additional group interviewing parents of students with disabilities was also conducted. The following locations were selected as research sites: Bend, Prineville, and Madras; Curry County; Hillsboro and Beaverton; Medford; Multnomah County; Salem; and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Twelve additional focus groups were conducted with culturally specific organizations representing the African American, African Immigrant, Asian, Asian Immigrant, Latino, Native American, and Slavic communities. For each culture, one focus group was conducted with students and one focus group was conducted with parents. We also held three community focus groups with members of organizations serving culturally specific communities. An additional fourteen meetings were conducted with key stakeholders and experts.

The extensive data set from the focus groups and interviews was analyzed and key themes were identified and categorized. The report includes numerous quotes from focus group participants with a focus on highlighting the voice of the students and families most likely to be

Parents are consistent in saying they want a better life for their children and see high school graduation as key to that better life. This finding challenges the common perception that when children miss school, it's a sign that their parents don't care.⁶

Students voiced considerable desire for improved relationships with their teachers. The majority of students told us they wanted better relationships with their teachers, even among students who expressed that they did not care about what happens at school; they yearned for relationships with a teacher.

The literature on chronic absenteeism consistently recommends a holistic approach that accounts for all of the contexts of a student's life. For this approach, accountability and intervention for chronic absenteeism is everyone's responsibility, including the student, the family, the school, the community, the district, and the state. This shared responsibility is best shouldered by collaborations.

chronically absent. The focus group results resulted in the identification of two overarching themes that are centered within the school context: (1) attendance as a function of culturally responsive education practices, and (2) attendance as a function of systemic barriers. Culturally responsive teaching practices include relationships and school and classroom opportunities. Systemic barriers span a large set of circumstances that affect schools and families. The following diagrams depict the themes:

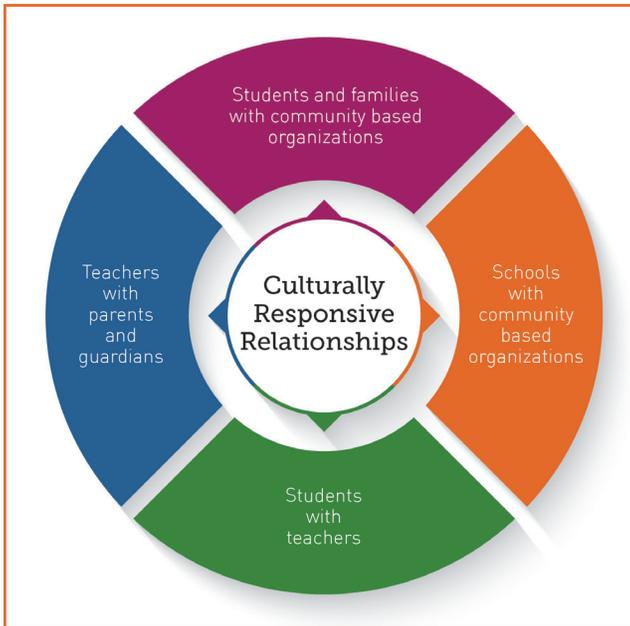


Figure 1. Factors related to culturally responsive relationships.

The more barriers the students of color have, the more they need culturally specific organizations... to help represent them and help them navigate the system.

There was a clear articulation of the history of residential schools still being alive today. Native children were forcibly taken from their families and put in schools with the explicit goal of eliminating indigenous culture from the children.

In short, we cannot examine absenteeism as a microcosm of the student but rather a symptom of a larger systemic concern.



Figure 2. Factors related to culturally responsive classroom and school practices.

“I need my son to help me go to meetings. I can’t do the bus without him. I can’t talk to people without him.”

“We want to see the school celebrate our children’s achievements and success. Every day, I struggle to understand how my child is treated in school.”

“[Teachers] are not looking at us as capable. I don’t know if it is because of our race or because we are Latinos. They just feel that these kids aren’t going to make it, so that’s how the kids feel.”

“All my teachers were white and I know that they are educated people and they live in nicer neighborhoods. So they kind of seem like aliens or something. You know what I mean, they are so different. I know how my child feels like they don’t resemble what we have at home. See you don’t know how to talk to them... They seem really intimidating and different.”

“I think that a lot of kids don’t go to school because school is not engaging. All you do is write stuff down, copy stuff.”

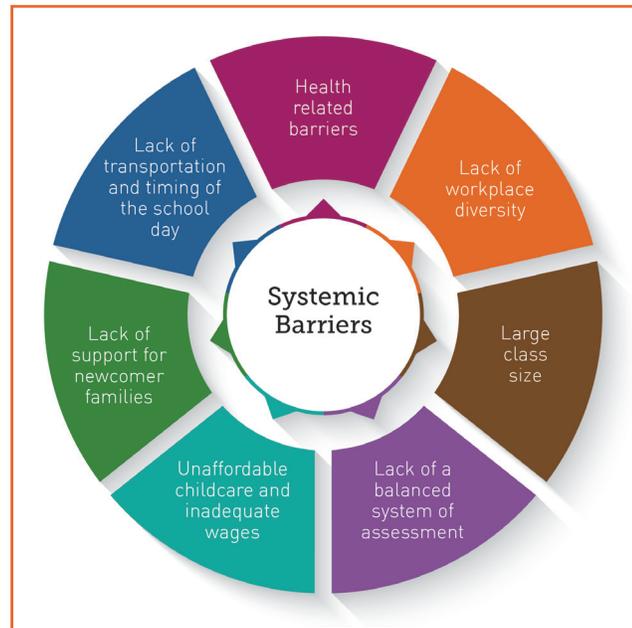


Figure 3. Factors related to systemic barriers.

In addition to the general themes discovered, the study included particular focus groups and independent analysis of two particular student groups most affected by chronic absenteeism, students with disabilities and Native American students.

With respect to students with disabilities, the report identifies five findings:

- 1) Disproportionate special education identification is often the result of race and class biases
- 2) Early diagnosis is difficult when access to medical care is limited
- 3) Families expressed a need for a robust support network
- 4) Chronic absenteeism may not be a correct label for some students with disabilities
- 5) There is a lack of more inclusive and less restrictive placements

With respect to Oregon Native American students, the report identifies findings based on focus groups with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation:

- 1) Chronic absenteeism has a greater effect in the Umatilla School district than the state average
- 2) To determine effectiveness schools must prioritize examining existing and prior interventions
- 3) Understanding the broader economic and social context is best practice
- 4) Historical trauma impacts student attendance
- 5) Exploring expanded bus transportation options is best practice
- 6) A deeper examination of special education policy with respect to this community is needed

Recommendations

Beyond these specific findings, the report offers the following recommendations that apply for all students and families:

Increase educator professional development and support with respect to building culturally responsive and sustaining practices and school communities.

The data clearly reveals the imperative to improve relationships and classroom and school policies. The educator support and development called for in this recommendation not only responds to the needs of students of color, students with disabilities, and students living in poverty, it will simultaneously improve conditions and resulting attendance rates for *all* students.

Increase the number of meaningful partnerships between schools/districts and community based organizations, especially culturally specific organizations.

These partnerships can provide the key services that wrap around and support students, families, and schools. These partnerships can also provide ways to examine the broader socio-cultural context of communities and families. Examples exist across the state where public and private organizations work together to collectively impact school attendance, and includes churches and community centers.

Increase diversity in the educator workforce. Teachers who are culturally and linguistically diverse tend to bring to teaching an understanding of minority students' cultural, backgrounds and experiences (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2000; Villegas et.al., 2012). And, although teachers of color vary significantly in their own backgrounds and experiences related to those of their diverse students, compared to their white counterparts,

minority teachers are more likely to understand many aspects of the lives of minority students (Milner, 2006).

By statute, the State already has a goal in this area and publishes an annual report on progress. Data from this report demonstrates the need to accelerate progress in order to increase attendance.

Offer engaging content and course offerings.

To the extent that teachers have a great deal of choice with respect to what curriculum is used to facilitate students reaching high standards and becoming critical thinkers; they can increase engagement with culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining decisions. At the secondary level, course offerings that have a career focus are the reason many students attend school. The key idea is that students vote with their feet based on engagement and their perceptions of relevance and responsiveness.

Revise policies and procedures to eliminate discipline disparities.

Excluding students from school is a harsh consequence. It results in non-attendance immediately and is a contributing factor in continued absenteeism and/or drop out. In many situations, students of color and students with special needs are more likely to be suspended or otherwise removed from regular instruction.

Conduct deeper studies of attendance initiatives.

The report illustrates some possible examples of practices that are not effective unless they are developed in a cultural specific and sustaining way. Any conclusions with respect to what are "best practices" are likely very sensitive to how these practices are constructed and implemented in a given context.

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



44

Focus Groups including 8 culturally specific and 1 focused on students with disabilities.

473

Individuals interviewed including students, parents, educators, community stakeholders and experts

2

Primary Resounding Themes

6

Recommendations

Locations of Focus Groups:

- Bend, Prineville, and Madras; Deschutes County
- Curry County
- Hillsboro and Beaverton; Washington County
- Medford; Jackson County
- Multnomah County
- Salem; Marion County
- Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation; Umatilla County

2 PRIMARY THEMES

1. Culturally Responsive Practices

Relationships

- Students with teachers
- Teachers with families/guardians
- Students/families with community based organizations
- Schools with community based organizations

2. Systemic Barriers

- Unaffordable childcare and inadequate wages
- Lack of support for newcomer families
- Lack of transportation and timing of the school day

Classroom and School Opportunities

- Engaging curriculum
- Course offerings aligned to student aspirations and interest
- Professional development on school culture and climate
- Elimination of racial bias
- Improved academic supports
- Improved classroom management

- Health related barriers
- Lack of workplace diversity
- Large class size
- Lack of a balanced system of assessment

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increased educator professional development and support with respect to building culturally responsive practices and school communities.
2. Increase the number of meaningful partnerships between schools/districts and community based organizations, especially culturally specific organizations.
3. Increased diversity in the educator workforce.
4. Deeper studies of attendance initiatives.
5. Offer engaging content and course offerings.
6. Revise policies and procedures to eliminate discipline disparities.

“At least 75% of students said that they wanted a good relationship with a teacher - wanting for a teacher to reach out to them. Few of our disengaged and chronically absent students had such relationships.”—Chronic Absenteeism Report Excerpt

“I have noticed that some of my other peers, too, when you are walking the hall, and depending on your race or your skin color, the administrator will stop you. They will be, even if you don’t have—for example, for me, even if I walk in the hallway without a pass, they will not stop me. They will be, “Oh, hi. Hello.” They just let me go. But for somebody probably with a different skin color, they will be, “Stop, what are you doing, why are you here?”-----STUDENT

“For me, our situation here, we focus on working, working all the time and we don't go to school for English. The reality is that in my case since we have the language barriers, sometimes we don't send our kids to school or we take them out of school to help us interpret.”---PARENT

“I asked for help and still didn’t understand. So I stopped asking for help. And stopped going to the class.”---STUDENT

“I think that a lot of kids don't go to school because school is not engaging. All you do is write stuff down, copy stuff”---STUDENT

