

From Compliance to Invitation

How school systems in Oregon are gaining ground on the attendance battle by focusing on individual student relationships

BY SHELDON BERMAN

When 13 Oregon school districts agreed in January 2024 to confront chronic absenteeism together, they shared a daunting starting point. In 2023-24, one in three Oregon students was chronically absent, missing at least 10 percent of the school year and giving the state one of the nation's highest absentee rates.

The participating districts ranged from Burnt River, a ranching community of 65 students near Oregon's eastern border with Idaho, to Beaverton, the state's second-largest district with nearly 37,000 in the suburbs west of Portland. What they shared was a budget problem: A statewide fiscal squeeze left few able to add the nurses, social workers or family liaisons that research identifies as effective measures.

And yet 12 of the districts moved the numbers, posting reductions in chronic absence that ran from 4.2 to 10.6 percent in the first year.

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Heidi Sipe (left), superintendent in Umatilla, Ore., asked faculty to conduct "relationship audits" to gauge how well they knew each student and family.

They did it not by purchasing a program but by changing a culture. Their experience, documented in a study for the Coalition of Oregon School Administrators and AASA, carries a message: The most powerful attendance interventions are not policies or purchases. They are relationships that are within reach of districts of every size and circumstance.

'You Are the Strategy'

The largest first-year gain in the cohort belonged to Winston-Dillard, a rural district of about 1,300 students south of Roseburg, where roughly 45 percent of the students live in poverty. In one year, this district cut chronic absenteeism by 10.6 percentage points, from 43.0 to 32.4 percent — though the rate climbed partway back the next year, to 36.6 percent, a net two-year improvement of 6.4 points.

Winston-Dillard's turnaround rested on two strategies. The first was a detailed attendance handbook that reframed every staff interaction with families through an empathy lens, rewriting phone scripts and letters to emphasize partnership over penalty.

The second was a mindset, captured in superintendent Kevin Wilson's message to every adult in the system: "You are the strategy." Whether a student feels safe, known and willing to show up, he argued, depends on how each staff member treats that student. So staff members learned to ask, "What is going on for this student?" rather than "Why haven't you been here?"

Ask Students First

Banks School District, with about 1,100 students a half-hour northwest of Portland where one in five lives in poverty, took a different route to achieve a 7.6-point drop over two years, from 37.7 to 30.1 percent. Knowing that punitive tools like truancy notices already had failed, they chose one strategy and went deep. They asked students why they weren't coming.

PHOTO COURTESY OF UMATILLA SCHOOL DISTRICT

Through individual interviews, focus groups and pizza lunches with the 10 percent of students who attended least, the answer came back consistently. Students didn't feel connected to their teachers or engaged in the work.

As a result, Banks invested first not in a student program but in adult capacity, launching a staff-wide book study on educators' own social and emotional competencies and coaching teachers to shift from teacher talk to student talk. The district's premise was simple: When students feel they belong and someone notices whether they are there, they show up.

The Message Home

Transforming how schools communicate with families was one of the cohort's most consistent, high-impact changes. Three of the school districts show its range.

Lincoln County is a sprawling coastal district of about 4,800 students stretching from Lincoln City to Yachats, where 43 percent live in poverty and a quarter are Hispanic. Superintendent Majalise Tolan took an all-hands-on-deck approach, giving every school a 5 percent improvement target and rebuilding the message to families around three words — "We miss you" — in place of veiled warnings.

The district also folded attendance into its multitiered system of support and convened teams to address the housing, food and transportation barriers behind many absences. Chronic absenteeism fell 5.9 points over two years, from 45.0 to 39.1 percent.

Gresham-Barlow, a suburban district of roughly 11,500 students 15 miles east of Portland, faced one of the cohort's steepest starting rates. Under superintendent Tracy Klinger, the district, whose families speak 91 languages and where 38 percent of students live in poverty, replaced written letters that tallied missed days with communications celebrating days attended, trained school secretaries in strengths-based conversation and supported kindergarten teachers in home visits that lifted attendance in the early grades. Chronic absenteeism dropped 4.7 points over two years, from 45 to 40.3 percent.

Umatilla, a small district of roughly 1,400 students on the Columbia River, made connection itself the strategy. Superintendent Heidi Sipe moved away from the old, now-prohibited citation process toward what she called invitation.

Faculty in Umatilla conducted "relationship audits," reviewing class rosters to determine whether they knew each student and the family's story. Where gaps appeared, teachers adopted the "2x10," a two-minute conversation with a struggling student for 10 straight days about anything but attendance. The district, where 72 percent of students are Hispanic and 47 percent live in poverty, cut chronic absenteeism by 5.4 points over two years, from 38.4 to 33 percent.

Everyone's Job

Although every school district in the cohort launched school- and district-based attendance teams that tracked individual student attendance and planned interventions where needed, the cohort's two largest districts show how organizational commitment sustains the work.

Hillsboro, a district of about 18,600 students west of Portland whose families speak 165 languages, named "collective efficacy" its primary strategy.

Attendance is not just the attendance clerk's job, but everyone's. It convened school-based attendance data teams to monitor attendance and provide interventions. Its district attendance team enlisted leaders from counseling, student services and English language learning; built a data system that flags growth as well as problems; made attendance a central goal of its strategic plan; and integrated social-emotional learning with its equity work. Chronic absenteeism fell 5 points



Consultant Sheldon Berman, a retired superintendent, studied school districts in Oregon that treated attendance as a culture problem.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CAST



Ryan Noss, superintendent in Corvallis, Ore., believes students' social-emotional competencies need daily attention, woven into the academic core.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CORVALLIS SCHOOL DISTRICT

in the first year, from 35.4 to 30.4 percent, then slipped to 31.8 percent, a net two-year decline of 3.6 points.

Beaverton, Oregon's second-largest district with nearly 37,000 students and families who speak 98 languages, made attendance the centerpiece of a strategic plan organized around the promise "Belong. Believe. Achieve." Then-superintendent Gustavo Balderas told families plainly: "To belong, students need to be here." He made the share of regular attenders, by group and grade, the primary metric for its student well-being goal, with an explicit aim of closing gaps. Chronic absenteeism dropped 4.4 points over two years, from 33.1 to 28.7 percent.

Gladstone, a school district of fewer than 1,600 students 12 miles south of Portland, treated attendance as a community problem, not just a school problem. Led by then-superintendent Jeremiah Patterson and inspired by a campaign in Grand Rapids, Mich., "Gladstone Shows Up" enlisted local businesses, civic leaders, houses of worship and recreation programs around a single message on yard signs, posters, t-shirts and banners.

Data teams met every two weeks to connect personally with Gladstone students trending toward chronic absence. Chronic absenteeism fell 6.3 points in the first year, from 35.3 to 29.0 percent, before giving back some of that ground to 31.3 percent, a net two-year improvement of 4.0 points.

Small-Scale Relations

At the other end of the size spectrum, Burnt River, with 65 students spread across roughly 80 miles of eastern Oregon ranch country, where some children travel more than 20 miles to a four-day school week, showed that relationship-building scales down as well as up.

Superintendent Cassie Moore meets with families herself to surface the root causes of absence, teachers discuss individual students at faculty meetings, and project-based learning gives students work they don't want to miss. Amid rapid enrollment growth — the student body more than doubled, from 24 to 57, in one year alone — Burnt River's chronic-absence rate rose only modestly, from 33.3 to 35.1 percent. In a district this small, holding close through that kind of churn is itself an accomplishment.

Other districts pressed ahead on their own distinctive fronts. Phoenix-Talent, the cohort's most diverse and highest-poverty district at about 2,300 students in southern Oregon, paired "We see you" notes and peer mentoring with school-based health centers at all five of its schools. Silver Falls, a district of 3,700 students east of Salem, adopted the Winston-Dillard handbook and reframed discipline around restorative practices, cutting chronic absenteeism about four points over the two years, from 34.3 to 30.1 percent.

Building Belonging

Across the cohort, social-emotional learning was the most widely shared strategy. No district pursued it more deeply than Corvallis, a district of about 5,500 students in the mid-Willamette Valley.

At the elementary level, Corvallis' Caring School Community program opens and ends the day with morning and closing meetings, rituals that ensure every child is known by name. That same intent is carried into middle-school advisory and into collaborative literacy and math curricula in which making sense of a text or working through a problem also means listening, taking turns and depending on a classmate. Superintendent Ryan Noss believes social-emotional competencies are not a separate subject but a daily practice, woven into the academic core.

Examining the elementary classrooms where the community-building curriculum was implemented with the greatest fidelity, district leaders found those rooms also had the strongest attendance. The everyday work of helping students feel they belong translated into their showing up. Corvallis reduced chronic absenteeism by nearly 10 points over the two years, from 40.2 to 30.2 percent.

Why It Works

Two years of new research explains why these relationship-centered strategies pay off. A 2026 University of Chicago Consortium study, "Connection, Trust, and Learning," found the dimensions of school life most strongly tied to attendance, including safety, student-teacher trust, peer relationships and teacher-parent trust, mattered even more after the pandemic than they did before, and that schools serving nearly identical students had markedly different absence rates based on school culture. In other words, what a school does outweighs where its students live.

Most directly, a 2026 study by Evelyn Johnson, Emily Taylor and Jennifer Robitaille, published in *Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy,* of more than 8,200 middle schoolers found that students who grew in social-emotional competence over a year were far less likely to be chronically absent than matched peers who did not, regardless of where a student started.

The implication is practical. Schools don't have to wait for students to arrive with strong social-emotional skills. Helping them build those skills is itself protective. That is precisely what the Oregon districts did, strengthening the relationships and belonging that social-emotional learning is designed to build.

The Path Forward

The stakes are high. A 2025 study by the American Enterprise Institute of attendance in Maryland and North Carolina found the harm of missing school to be linear: Every absence further lowers reading and math scores, with no safe threshold or tipping point.

None of these strategies is complicated. What they required was a decision to stop treating attendance as a compliance problem and start treating it as a culture problem. Whether a district has 65 students or 37,000, the lever is the same: schools where students feel known and valued and adults respond with care and curiosity rather than scowls.

Oregon's cohort now has grown to more than 30 districts, and their fuller record carries a second lesson.

Most school districts reduced chronic absenteeism over the period, several sharply, but progress was not universal. Some districts saw their rates flatten or tick back up in the second year. Some of that backsliding reflected a pressure largely outside the schools' control. As federal immigration enforcement intensified, fearful families in some Oregon communities kept their children home. In districts with sizable immigrant and English-learner populations, attendance fell most among those students, pulling overall numbers back up even where a district's own efforts had not flagged.

That unevenness is itself instructive. Attendance is not a problem a district solves once and then sets aside. The cultures that draw students to school are built slowly and can erode quickly.

The school districts that held or extended their gains treated the work as continuing, deepening it year over year rather than declaring victory and moving on. Chronic absenteeism, the cohort's experience suggests, is not an intractable condition but an invitation, one that must be renewed each year, to build the kind of schools students want to attend. ■

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