

## Chalkboard's K-12 Action Plan

### **#12: TAKE ATTENDANCE MORE SERIOUSLY**

*Goal: Increase attendance. Make sure all students are in school every day.*

**Recommendation:** If kids aren't there, they can't learn – so it's time to take attendance seriously. Attendance reform efforts should begin by creating a uniform way of measuring attendance, so attendance patterns can be compared across schools, and problems and successes can be identified. Next, the state should move to a system where schools are funded based on attendance, not enrollment. At the same time, the state should help low-attendance schools improve, so that no schools are unfairly penalized.

**Success Measurement:** Oregon should rank in the top ten states for percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders attending school (based on NAEP survey data). Schools will only count in this ranking if they report no problems or only minor problems in the following areas: absenteeism, tardiness and classroom misbehavior. The state should also increase its current average attendance rate of 93.4 percent to 95 percent or above.

**Concept:** The state's method of funding schools is not well aligned with the goals of student attendance and success. As a first step, the state should select a uniform method for recording student attendance in all schools statewide. This is the only way school officials will get an accurate picture of attendance in their schools. Also, as standards-based reforms, like the school-level report cards, increasingly use attendance as an indicator when comparing the quality of schools, uniform accounting will make sure that these comparisons are both accurate and fair. Oregon Department of Education (ODE) should prepare a plan and timeline to gradually phase in funding of school districts based on attendance rather than enrollment; ODE should present the plan to the Oregon Legislature, as well as a uniform method for recording student attendance across districts in Oregon. ODE should test its plan while simultaneously promoting truancy reduction programs and working with those districts most heavily impacted.

**Public Opinion:** *Chalkboard's 2004 report, The Condition of Oregon K-12 Education, reported that Oregon school officials are much more likely to express concern about absenteeism than officials in other states. Moreover, parental involvement in schools is closely related to student attendance; research shows a high correlation between parental involvement in school activities and homework and attendance rates. In Chalkboard's statewide public opinion poll, Oregonians viewed parental involvement as critical to the success of the K-12 system and said efforts to make parents direct partners in their children's education should be prioritized. A recent survey of school officials suggests that Oregon's parental involvement falls roughly mid-range nationally, but lags well behind involvement reported by officials in the Northeast and Midwest.*

*Using Chalkboard's Citizen Feedback Guide survey, Oregonians rated the idea of ODE developing a uniform method for recording student attendance across the state and preparing a plan to fund school districts on student attendance, rather than enrollment, a 3.6 on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).*

**Supportive Research:** The State School Funding Formula measures student *enrollment* known as Average Daily Resident Membership (ADM<sub>r</sub>). This method tracks the number of children enrolled in a district's public schools on an average daily basis over the course of the school year. ADM<sub>r</sub> potentially provides an unintended fiscal incentive to be lax in attendance policies. If students do not attend school, class sizes are reduced; but under the funding formula, revenues remain constant. Please note that there is no evidence that any districts or schools explicitly act on this incentive.

A transition to the Average Daily Attendance (ADA) accounting method would encourage schools to emphasize attendance. The ADA count creates a team approach where teachers, administrators, parents and students all make sure that students attend classes whenever they are healthy. Teachers and administrators are responsible for quickly determining why a student is not in class. Because they risk decreased funding, schools would be motivated to engage parents and students in attendance efforts. This change would also align the state's fiscal system with existing state and federal accountability systems.

Linking funding to attendance should inspire attempts to improve attendance before the system is even implemented. Within Oregon and elsewhere, schools and districts have collaborated with parents, law enforcement agencies and other community partners to reduce truancy. While programs differ in their scope and details, the US Departments of Education and Justice offer five recommendations to districts working to improve attendance:

1. *Involve parents in all truancy prevention activities.* Many truancy programs provide intensive monitoring, counseling and other family strengthening services. Schools should encourage regular contact between teachers and parents before problems arise. Schools may also consider arranging convenient times and neutral settings for parent meetings, starting homework hotlines, training teachers to work with parents, hiring or appointing a parent liaison, and giving parents a voice in school decisions.

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2. *Enforce firm sanctions for truancy.* School districts should communicate zero tolerance for truancy. State legislatures have found that linking truancy to the student's grades or driver's license can help reduce the problem. In Delaware, Connecticut and several other states, daytime curfews during school hours allow law enforcement officers to question youth who are not in school.
3. *Create meaningful incentives for parental responsibility.* Parents of truant children must assume responsibility for truant behavior. It is up to each community to create meaningful incentives for parents to ensure that their children go to school. In some states, parents of truant children are asked to participate in parenting education programs.
4. *Establish ongoing truancy prevention programs in schools.* Each truant student has unique reasons why he or she misses a lot of school. Schools need to combat the root causes of truancy. This might mean tutoring programs, added security measures, drug prevention initiatives, mentorship efforts through community and religious groups, campaigns for involving parents in their children's school attendance, and referrals to social service agencies. Some Wisconsin schools offer educational counseling that considers if learning difficulties are contributing to the problem or if curriculum changes could help.
5. *Involve local law enforcement in truancy reduction efforts.* School officials should link with local police, probation officers and juvenile and family court officials to enforce truancy policies. Police Departments report that community-run, temporary detention centers are successful. Police take truant youth to these centers rather than bring them to local police stations for time-consuming, resource-draining processing. Police sweeps of neighborhoods where truant youth are often found can be dramatically effective when they are part of a comprehensive anti-truancy initiative.

Chalkboard understands that various factors influence absenteeism and we believe that schools should work actively with parents and community members to keep students in school. A new ADA absentee reporting system could add extra urgency and incentives for such partnerships. A focus on truancy causes, including drug and alcohol abuse, will lead to a better understanding of the issues facing our students, and will help refine community assistance for children and parents.

***(Please visit the "Download Center" section of [www.chalkboardproject.org](http://www.chalkboardproject.org) to see source data: Citizen Public Opinion Statewide Poll: Highlights of Key Findings; Citizen Feedback Guide Survey Results; and ECONW Report: Condition of K-12 Education in Oregon, pp. ii, 2-8 to 2-11; Improving Quality & Strengthening Accountability in Oregon's Schools: Full Report, Ch. 8, pp. 8-1 to 8-7; Attendance Issue Paper, pp. 1-5.)***