

# Tribal Attendance Pilot Project (TAPP)

## WILLAMINA SCHOOL DISTRICT

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### **TAPP Objective**

TAPP will improve attendance in the American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students K-6 at Willamina Elementary School by at least 10% in the school year 2016-17.

### **TAPP Action Plan**

- Ensure that all American Indian/Alaska Native students and families receive school, district and community supports that improve attendance
- Ensure that the Family Advocate will participate in culturally responsive activities and provide effective support for students and families.
- Recognize good and improved attendance
- Engage students and parents
- Monitor attendance data and practice(s)
- Provide personalized early interventions and outreach
- Develop programmatic responses to barriers as needed

### **Profile of School**

Willamina Elementary School is one of three schools in the district including a middle and high school, all of which are on one campus. The entire school district receives grant funding to provide free breakfast and lunch provided for all students. The elementary school is a kindergarten through sixth grade school with currently around 490 students. Of those, approximately 36% (175) are students who have American Indian/Alaska Native filled out on their school registration papers and/or filled out a Title VI form listing which tribe they're affiliated with. Most American Indian/Alaska Native students at the elementary school are primarily affiliated with the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. According to the Oregon Department of Education (ODE), in the 2014-2015 academic year, the American Indian/Alaska Native graduation rate for the district was 71.4%, completion rate was 88.5% and dropout rate was 2.6%.

(Data provided per student information system at school.)

### **Communication Plan**

There were many ways families and the community were informed of TAPP throughout the year. Prior to TAPP being implemented in the school, there was an article about the program in *Smoke Signals*, The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde's newspaper. The

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district superintendent also wrote about TAPP in the community newsletter, *The Bulletin*. A fall newsletter from the elementary school principal introduced TAPP and Rebecca Arredondo, the TAPP Family Advocate, to students and families.

An informational table display was set up at Before School Conferences with the Family Advocate standing by to offer information and answer questions. A similar table display was set up for Open House night. Whenever there were attendance raffles or events, flyers informed families that TAPP was the funder and similar announcements were made at the monthly Student of the Month/Attendance assemblies, which families were invited.

### **TAPP Efforts**

TAPP efforts to improve attendance included having the Tribal Attendance Family Advocate introduce classroom incentives, e.g., class chants/high fives/certificates for 100% attendance, a bulletin board tracking attendance in each class, monthly attendance challenges, monthly attendance assemblies; personal connections with families through face-to-face interactions, phone calls, emails, and texts; and the creation of individual family plans and student incentives that were formed from the personal connections. A stronger relationship and communication between the school and the Grand Ronde tribe was also reinforced.

### **TAPP Success**

By looking at the attendance percentages generated by the eSchoolsPLUS attendance program and comparing individual students' percentages from the 2015-16 school year to their percentages in the 2016-17 school year, we can see how attendance has changed for American Indian/Alaska Native students from the year prior to TAPP's implementation to the initial implementation year. (Some students were excluded from this data comparison because they were either not here one of the academic years, or were only here for part of either year—enrolled after November, or withdrew prior to April. All of the sixth graders from the 2015-2016 year and all the kindergarteners from the 2016-2017 year were excluded because they were not at the elementary school one of the years so didn't have data from which to make a comparison.)

As of the beginning of April 2017, 14% of American Indian/Alaska Native students at Willamina Elementary School who were enrolled in both 2015-16 and 2016-17 had 10% growth in their attendance rate. An additional 44% made some kind of positive growth, for a total of 58% of native students improving their rate of attendance this year. Sixty-six percent (66%) of American Indian/Alaska Native students had 90% or higher attendance rates. According to the Oregon Department of Education, when comparing the first two quarters of the 2015-2016 academic school year data with that of the first two quarters of 2016-2017 academic school year, there has been a 6% decrease in chronic absenteeism (chronic absenteeism = less than 90% attendance). We are hopeful that this trend will continue in a comparison of the third quarter data.

Throughout this year, the overall relationship between families and the school has improved. Parents communicated more with the Family Advocate and the office about attendance. Students who were being picked up early came to the office and tried to convince their parents not to take them home early because it would affect their attendance. Many times this convinced the parent to keep the child in school until the end of the day. Teachers also occasionally called parents down to the classrooms who were trying to pick up students early and tried, themselves, to convince parents to keep their children in school the entire day. Parents have noticed how the incentives at school (raffle prizes, event nights, etc.) have positively influenced their children into wanting to come to school more often.

### **Lessons Learned as a Family Advocate**

*Sometimes to make important, meaningful change, you have to ruffle a few feathers.* Being a Family Advocate and trying to improve attendance means that sometimes you do and say things that others are not ready to hear or have a hard time accepting, but if you can continue to be consistent and compassionate, positive growth will happen.

### **TAPP Barriers/Challenges**

The path to connecting with families could sometimes be a barrier/challenge. Phone numbers didn't always work, emails may have been sent back, letters went home with no responses, and parents may have avoided the Family Advocate and others when they saw them at school. Family financial, medical, mental health, or transportation issues have occasionally been barriers, as well as families' past personal experiences within the school.

Trying to change the culture around attendance has been a challenge. At the beginning of the year many families picked up their children early for no other reason than to go home, avoid traffic, etc. The Family Advocate worked hard to try and change that habit by sitting in the office at the end of the day, asking if parents could wait until the end of the day to pick up their children. Another change in attendance culture was around what constitutes an excused or unexcused absence/tardy. This goes for both families (being encouraged to send in doctor notes, etc.) and the office secretaries (how absences/tardies are marked in the attendance program).

Another barrier/challenge had to do with the data collection system—the attendance program. Though Oregon attendance is calculated by “seat time” and not whole days, the reports generated by the attendance programs seem to sometimes disregard tardies or early pick-ups when calculating the percent a child was in school. For example, the report may say that a child had 100% attendance for the month, but when you look at their individual record, you may find that they had three tardies and left early two times throughout the month. Finding the right report within the program for the information being sought was also a challenge.

### **Role Partners Played**

Oregon Department of Education: Dedicated funding to the Tribal Attendance Pilot Project, provided support through Ramona Halcomb, Indian Education Specialist, and April Campbell, Advisor to Deputy State Superintendent on Indian Education, as well as a group of professionals in a variety of fields. They provided occasional Family Advocate meetings at the state to share ideas and support one another.

Willamina School District: Employed and provided an office space for the Family Advocate and provided physical materials and facilities usage.

The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde (CTGR): The Family Advocate and Family Services Coordinator at the CTGR worked together on family engagement and support and increased communication between the tribe, school, and families. The CTGR also provided facilities for some family night events, and a team of people to brainstorm events with the Family Advocate.

Family Advocate: Made personal connections with families about attendance, set up positive incentives for students, worked on changing the culture of attendance within the school, tracked data, organized and led assemblies. Participated in many meetings throughout the county on behalf of the school district, e.g., attendance policy meetings with a county judge, wraparound services meetings, and homeless liaison meetings (the Family Advocate was also one of two McKinney Vento Homeless Liaisons for the district). Attended a variety of conferences throughout the year as well as the National Forum on Dropout Prevention for Native and Tribal Communities where the Family Advocate was also part of a presentation about the TAPP program.

### **Sustainability Plan**

Improving attendance is a priority for the District k-12, we will utilize several of the strategies implemented by the TAPP Family Advocate at the 7-12 level next school year: student incentives, family incentives, and family nights. We are currently writing our measure 98 plan to include a Family Advocate at the high school level. The focus will be on improving learning opportunities by reducing absenteeism and alternatives to exclusionary discipline. We are expanding our administrative staff through the general fund budget, part of the duties of the added staff will be to focus on family engagement and improving student outcomes: attendance, course performance, and implementing programs district wide to reduce discipline that leads to exclusion from school.