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**CHIEF
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Chronic Absenteeism Report

PARTNERS



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CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM REPORT

March 20, 2017

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Executive Summary

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:

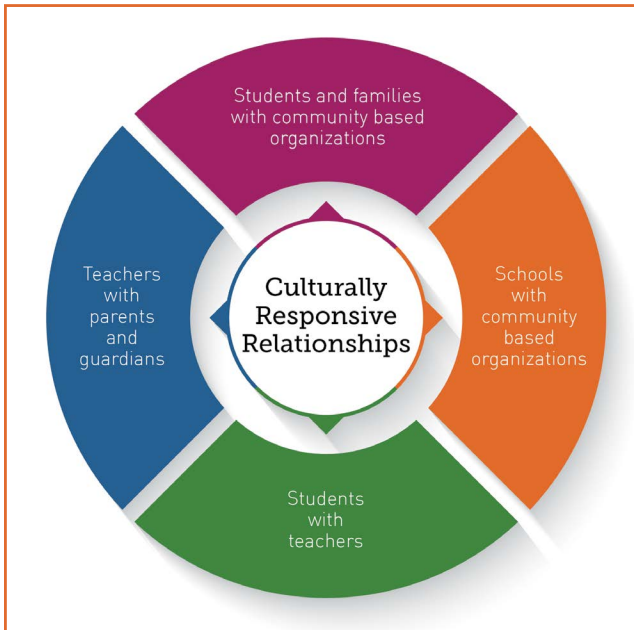


Figure 1. Factors related to culturally responsive relationships.

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) To determine effectiveness schools must prioritize examining existing and prior interventions
- 2) Historical trauma impacts student attendance
- 3) Exploring expanded bus transportation options is best practice
- 4) 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.

Introduction

It is one of the few reports that suggest that school-based disengagement factors, and failure to meaningfully engage students and families contribute significantly to chronic absenteeism.

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

After spending over six months traveling the state listening to barriers and opportunities in myriad communities—former Chief Education Officer Dr. Nancy Golden identified chronic absenteeism as a critical issue impeding student success that needed more examination. Given the prevalence of existing reports focusing on school/district perspectives, she commissioned this study to focus on student and family voice. This work is a result of collaboration with the Chief Education Office, the Coalition of Communities of Color (CCC), and Portland State University (PSU). Oregon students bring an immense amount of value to our schools and communities. They are budding scholars, linguists, artists, advocates, athletes, musicians, scientists, welders and more. For a variety of reasons though, far too many are not attending school regularly. As a result, our communities and state as a whole are not benefiting from their incredible talents and contributions - even in the climate of promising practices, unprecedented assessment approaches, and policy innovations.

In Oregon, one in five students routinely misses more than 10 percent of their school days. This intensifies in high school¹, and contributes to 26 percent of students not graduating on time². Therefore, we are compelled to identify more comprehensive solutions, particularly those that reach students whom our current systems do not adequately support: students of color, students with disabilities, students living in poverty, students who have faced discipline, and English Language Learners. While other research reports have centered on specific school interventions (from The Children's Institute³, Upstream Public Health⁴, Attendance Works⁵, for example), this report centers on the factors that give rise to student disengagement from school. It

is one of the few reports that suggest that school-based disengagement factors, and failure to meaningfully engage students and families contribute significantly to chronic absenteeism. New research on parent engagement suggests that these findings will resonate more broadly:

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

PSU researchers conducted 44 focus groups in seven regions of Oregon, 14 key informant interviews, and three consultations with the Coalition's Educational Equity Committee. This qualitative data, including over 80 hours of recorded sessions and 850 pages of transcripts provided valuable insights never before gathered in Oregon. In order to understand the reasons for difficulties attending school, the researchers spoke with roughly 350 students and parents, to identify the reasons for student disengagement. The researchers spoke more with teenage students - ages 12 and above, so our insights focus more on older students, but parents certainly gave voice to the challenges facing younger students. Community stakeholders also reinforced these issues. While we provide some balancing of these stories with the experiences of educators, the narrative that we share is that of student and family at the center of the story of chronic absenteeism in Oregon. As such, it is a unique contribution to the field.

Literature Review

The clear link between chronic absenteeism and two key indicators for student success, *third grade reading proficiency and College and Career Readiness Program objectives*, has prompted focus and attention on interventions to reduce chronic absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Chang & Romero, 2008; Ginsburg, Jordan, & Chang, 2014; Henderson, Hill & Norton, 2014; John W. Gardner Center, 2012; Tapogna & Hart Buehler, 2012). The following section reviews local and national literature about chronic absenteeism to identify potential strategies to most effectively support, and engage Oregon students and families in achieving greater school success. It focuses first on defining chronic absenteeism and describing its link to school success; then describes the populations that are most vulnerable to chronic absenteeism and briefly discusses theoretical causes for chronic absenteeism; finally, it describes local and national best practices that specifically address chronic absenteeism.

What is Chronic Absenteeism?

A single, consistent definition of chronic absenteeism has yet to be established nationally and, in many cases, across districts and states (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Chang & Romero, 2008; Ginsburg et al., 2014). Although the specific percentage of absences that qualifies as chronic varies from state to state, an increasingly accepted standard of 10 percent of school days missed annually as the definition of chronically absent is utilized in this document, and is recommended by many organizations working towards reducing chronic absenteeism (Eco Northwest, The Children’s Institute, The Chalkboard Project, Attendance Works, 2010; Ginsburg et al., 2014; Henderson et al., 2014). Variations on the

definition of chronic absenteeism include 20 percent of days absent, 21 or more days (about a month) of school absent, 15 days absent, and 3 or more days absent in the previous month (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, Ginsburg et al., 2014). Importantly, these differences in definition make the comparison of data across states and across reports of chronic absenteeism impossible to collapse. As a result, throughout this document, charts and graphs do not reflect one uniform measure of chronic absenteeism, but rather present chronic absenteeism data as they were collected and reported for each study.

Chronic absenteeism is distinct from other markers of student attendance in that it counts school days missed for *any* reason – and that it tracks *individuals*, focusing on the levels of schooling missed for individual students, rather than aggregate measures across students (John W. Gardner Center, 2012; Ginsburg et al., 2014). Other measures of school attendance, such as average daily attendance, truancy, disenrollment, and suspension, were specifically designed to meet objectives different from those of chronic absenteeism, and are thus helpful – but not entirely accurate or detailed – in creating a general sense of absenteeism in schools. Since these measures are often our current sources of information (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Chang & Romero, 2008; Henderson et al., 2014), definitions and background on each of these measures are discussed below.

Average daily attendance: a measure for school-wide resources. Average daily attendance is the percentage of enrolled students who attend school each day. This measure does not provide student-level data, but rather provides information to schools and districts about the school-

Its focus on only *unexcused* absences makes truancy an inaccurate measure of total school days missed. The characterization of these absences as “unexcused” also implies student misbehavior and a reason for punishment

wide resources required for each day (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; John W. Gardner Center, 2012; Ginsburg et al., 2014). As such, average daily attendance measures do not indicate whether absences are spread across many students or select repeat offenders, nor do they illustrate patterns of absence, such as specific classrooms or unsafe neighborhoods, that might give an indication of why students are chronically absent (Buehler et al., 2012). They do, however, fulfill the objective for which they were created by providing information regarding daily resources.

Suspension is exclusionary discipline.

Suspension is a type of exclusionary discipline that has a variety of forms, including in-school suspensions, removal from the classroom, and out-of-school suspension, and each kind of exclusionary discipline has slight differences in definition for students with disabilities (Hall & Manieri, 2010). State to state, suspensions are measured differently; in some states they are included in truancy totals, and in some states they are included in absenteeism totals. Oregon includes them in its absenteeism totals (Buehler et al., 2012).

Truancy measures unexcused absences.

Truancy generally measures how many students miss school without an excuse (Ginsburg et al., 2014). Its focus on only *unexcused* absences makes truancy an inaccurate measure of total school days missed. The characterization of these absences as “unexcused” also implies student misbehavior and a reason for punishment (Chang & Romero, 2008), but provides little information about reasons for these absences. Utilizing truancy as a measure for young children’s absences highlights the punitive, rather than supportive and investigative, nature

of it; young children can only stay home with an adult, so likely it is not the child alone making the decision to stay home. Is the unexcused absence for such children truly students’ misbehaviors, as truancy implies, or are there some other family-related needs that prevent the child from coming to school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Buehler, Tapogna & Chang, 2012)? While truancy does measure the unexcused absences it was intended to measure, it also raises many questions.

Disenrollment sometimes obscures absences.

Disenrollment, broadly defined, is the “discontinuing” of student’s attendance at school. Disenrollment can occur through a variety of procedures, the specifics of which vary according to state. Some of these procedures are voluntary, such as a parent’s voluntary disenrollment of her child for reasons such as relocation, and a student aged 18 or older voluntarily dis-enrolling. Other instances of disenrollment may be instigated by the school, including lack of residency in the district or country (Illinois Legal Aid, 2012; Zepeda, 2010), or lack of attendance. In Oregon, a student is automatically dis-enrolled after 10 consecutive-day absences. In order to attend school after this time period, the student must re-enroll in school. Once a student is dis-enrolled, they are no longer considered “absent.” Thus, since a dis-enrolled student is no longer considered in absenteeism counts, disenrollment procedures sometimes obscure the total number of days individual students are absent (personal communications, January 09, 2015, February 12, 2015).

While each of the above-described measures provides important information, they (individually or collectively) do not provide an accurate picture of total days

absent for individual students. In order to make the most of this opportunity to propel students' school success, data specific to chronic absenteeism must be collected and utilized to inform interventions. Focus on *all* absences for individual students enables closer examination and better understanding of consequences, causes, and solutions as they pertain to individual students' progress towards Oregon's 40-40-20 and Third Grade Reading proficiency goals, achievement, health, and well-being (Henderson et al., 2014).

The Links between Chronic Absenteeism and Success in School

Chronic absenteeism is linked to critical markers of success in school. Being absent prevents students from learning fundamental skills and knowledge, and missing school days equates with missing critical building blocks for basic skills that accumulate and grow into larger and larger deficiencies.

This snowball effect of chronic absenteeism begins as early as preschool. Children with more consistent attendance in preschool tend to have stronger kindergarten readiness scores, and are more likely to attend school consistently in kindergarten. They also perform better on math and reading skills assessments. Importantly, all of these foundational skills add up to a greater likelihood of reading mastery by the end of 3rd grade – and likely meeting 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency goals – which in turn leads to lesser likelihood of being held back at that time (Ginsburg et al., 2014; Attendance Works, 2013).

Chronic absenteeism as early as 6th grade is linked to high school graduation. Sixth graders who are chronically absent are more likely to be behind their peers by 10th grade (Ginsburg et al., 2014), and those who are not chronically absent are more likely to graduate within a year later of expected on-time graduation (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Baltimore Education Research Consortium, 2011). For high school students, chronic absenteeism is a strong predictor of academic achievement and staying in high school, above and beyond suspensions, test scores, or being on track for grade; beyond high school, chronic absenteeism is also predictive of post-secondary enrollment rates, and is linked to increased involvement with the juvenile justice system (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Beyond education, these consequences also have implications for individuals' long-term health and wellbeing. Children who do not graduate have greater health risks as adults; and less education in adults is associated with poor health (Henderson et al, 2014; Telfair & Shelton, 2012). Addressing chronic absenteeism is thus not only an opportunity to support the education and development of young people in our state, but also an opportunity to affect their long-term health (Henderson et al., 2014).

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Chronic Absenteeism in Oregon

Chronic absenteeism in Oregon is in the national spotlight because it has the unfortunate distinction of having one of the highest levels of chronic absenteeism in the nation (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Ginsburg et al., 2014; Hammond, 2014).

There is also hope in the fact that we have identified groups of students who our current systems are not adequately set up to support in having regular attendance. Identifying these populations not only enables more targeted culturally and regionally specific interventions, but also hints at the possibility of improving a core issue that might have far-reaching potential for also helping improve other related outcomes.

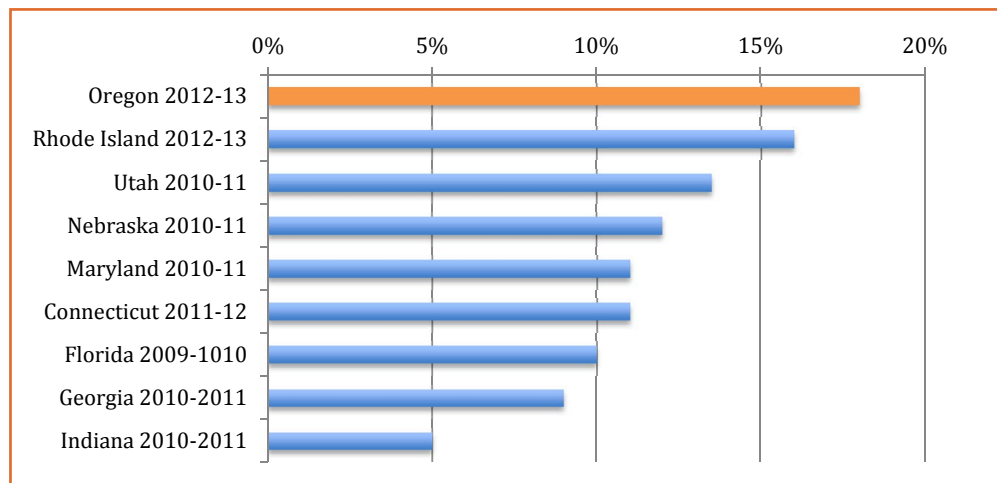


Figure 4. Chronic absenteeism in Oregon. Across 9 states with chronic absenteeism data, Oregon has the highest percentage

Source: Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012.

Specifically, despite the fact that rates collected in Figure 4 are from different years (as a result of when the research was conducted), Oregon's rate of chronic absenteeism is likely the highest among the states where data is available. Nationally, one in 10 kindergartners are chronically absent. Notably, because chronic absenteeism rates differ greatly between schools rather than districts, nearly a third of the chronically absent students in the primary grades were accounted for in only 20 percent of Oregon elementary schools (Buehler et al., 2012). For eighth graders, Oregon is among one of the six states with 25 percent or more of students reporting missing 3 or more days of school (Ginsburg et al., 2014).

But hope and direction for intervention does exist in this picture for Oregon. Concentrated levels of chronic absenteeism in primary schools rather than districts (described above) imply that targeting schools identified as having high absenteeism rates could have profound impact on absenteeism overall. And targeting primary schools may greatly improve the long-term trajectory of absenteeism rates for these students. Additionally, chronically absent Oregon students are typically absent for 10-20 percent of school days – not more (Buehler et al., 2012). There is also hope in the fact that we have identified groups of students who our current systems are not adequately set up to

support in having regular attendance. Identifying these populations not only enables more targeted culturally and regionally specific interventions, but also hints at the possibility of improving a core issue that might have far-reaching potential for also helping improve other related outcomes.

Populations Most Susceptible to Chronic Absenteeism

Nationally and locally, the following populations have the highest levels of chronic absenteeism - students of color, students with disabilities, and low-income students (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Ginsburg et al., 2014; Taponga & Buehler, 2012). This research does not report on the intersectionality of disability, race, and income but does dive into the data with regard to the over-representation of students of color in special education the “Students in Focus” section.

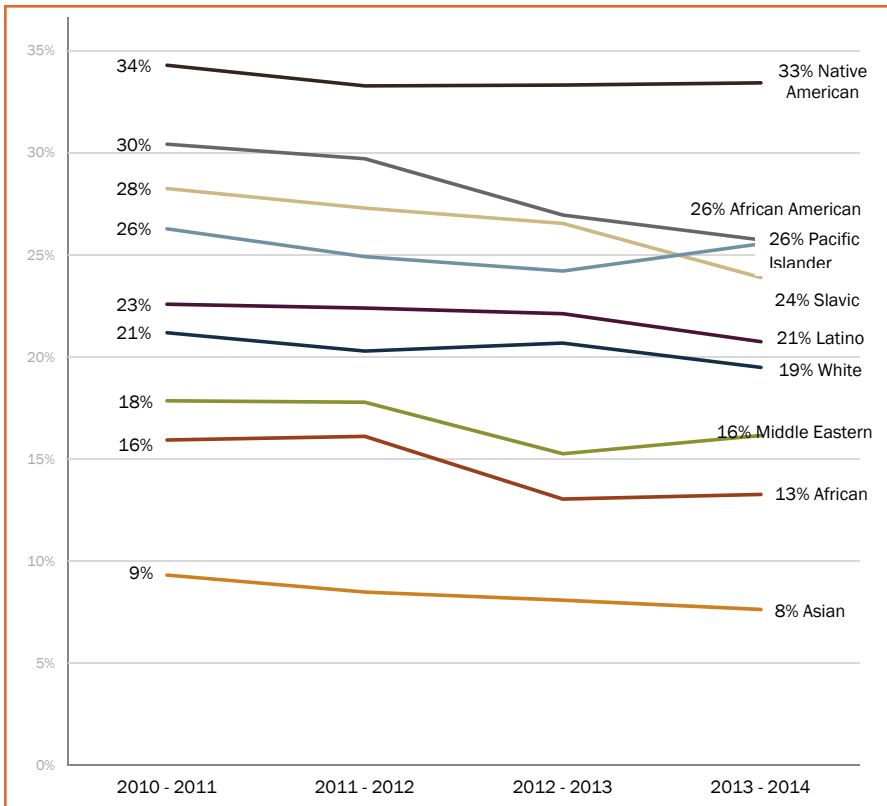


Figure 5. Percent of students that are chronically absent by race / ethnicity, Oregon, 2011-2014.

Source: ECONorthwest analysis/ODE data.

Figure 5 presents chronic absenteeism rates across race and ethnicity groups over time. Native American students held the highest rates of chronic absenteeism at 33 percent in 2014, 14 percentage points higher than their white counterparts. Middle Eastern and African Immigrant and Refugee students had rates of 16 percent and 13 percent, respectively. Only 8 percent of Asian students statewide were chronically absent in 2014.

Students of color, with the exception of Asian/Pacific Islanders, have higher rates of chronic absenteeism than white students (Ginsburg et al., 2014). Among these students of color, Native students, both nationally and locally, have the highest rates of chronic absenteeism

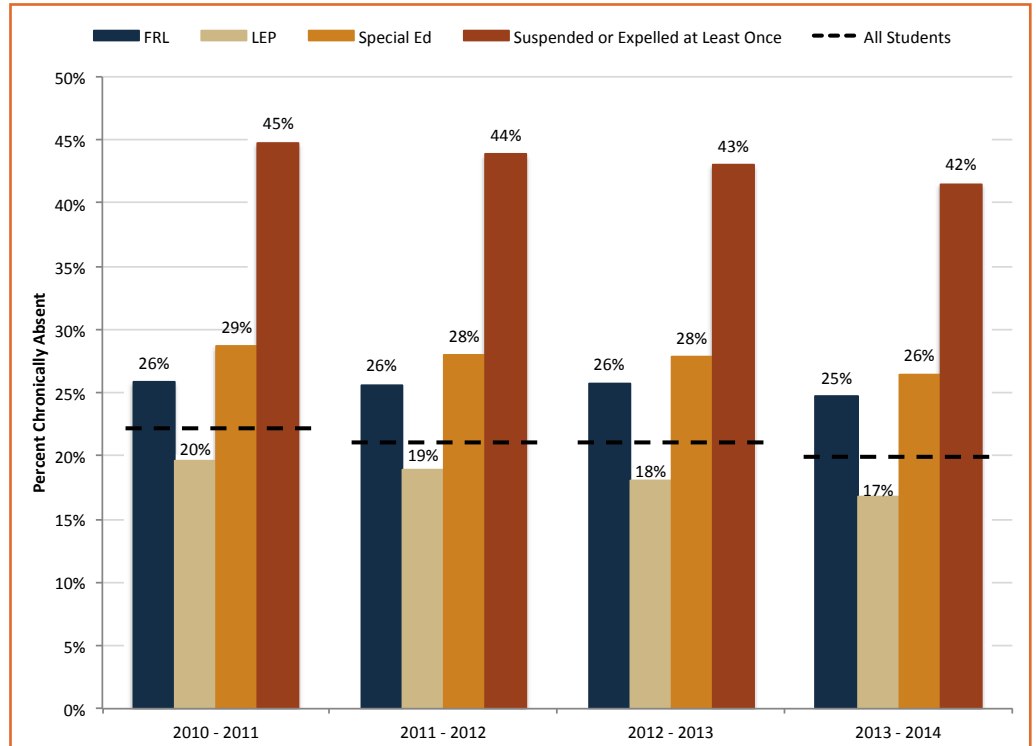


Figure 6. Percent of students that are chronically absent by groups, Oregon, 2011-2014.

Source: ECONorthwest analysis/ODE data.

In 2013-2014, over 35 percent of combined Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL), Limited English Proficiency (LEP), and Special Education students were chronically absent at the high school level. As seen in Figure 6, FRL, Special Education, and Disciplined students all tend to have higher rates of absenteeism than that of all students. LEP students, however, tend to have lower rates. Only 17 percent of Oregon LEP students were chronically absent in 2013-2014.

Students of color in 4th and 8th grade. Students of color, with the exception of Asian/Pacific Islanders, have higher rates of chronic absenteeism than white students (Ginsburg et al., 2014). Among these students of color, Native students, both nationally and locally, have the highest rates of chronic absenteeism (Eco Northwest, 2014; Ginsburg et al., 2014).

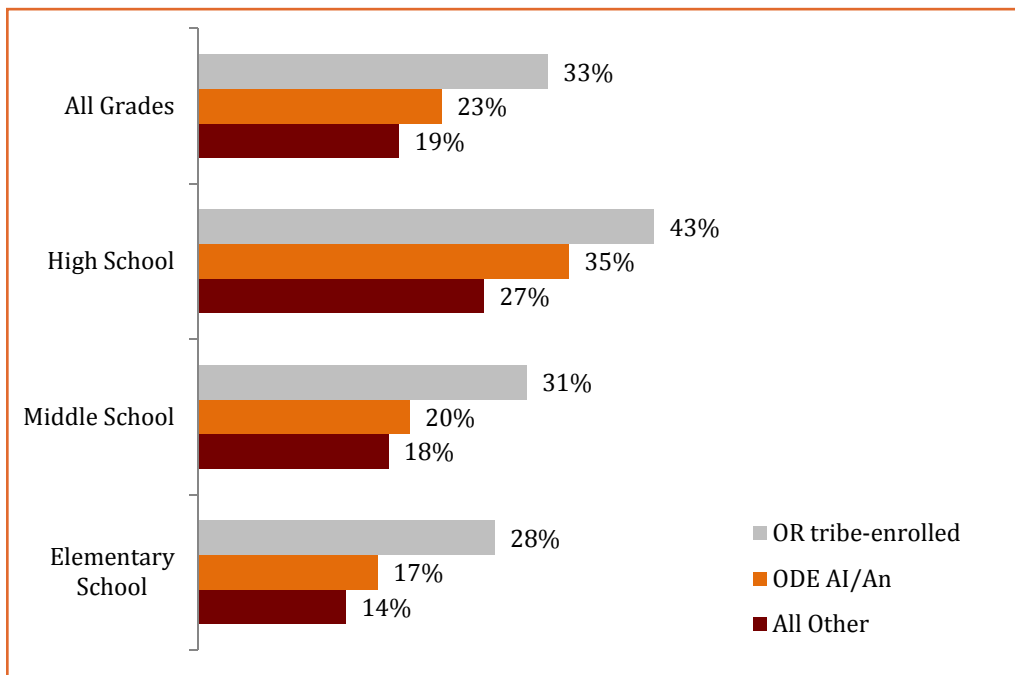


Figure 7. Highest rates of chronic absenteeism for Native students in Oregon. ODE = self-identified Native American students in Oregon

Source: ECONorthwest, 2014

Finally, in Oregon, Latino students experience the long-term repercussions of chronic absenteeism acutely. This is particularly alarming given the population growth projected for the Latino community in the coming decades.

Across all of the populations discussed, Native American students have the highest levels of chronic absenteeism.

Finally, in Oregon, Latino students experience the long-term repercussions of chronic absenteeism acutely. This is particularly alarming given the population growth projected for the Latino community in the coming decades. Chronically absent Latino first-graders had lower reading scores than any other chronically absent children (Chang & Romero, 2008). With this unstable foundation of reading abilities, Latino students, together with English Language Learners, also then experienced the sharpest increase in chronic absenteeism rates from early to later grades, lending more evidence to the snowball effect of chronic absenteeism (Buehler et al., 2012).

Across all of the populations discussed, Native American students have the highest levels of chronic absenteeism. Special education students have the second highest levels, and students who are Black or low-income experience the third highest level (Buehler et al., 2012). Attendance data are missing more often from schools serving students of color and low-income students (Chang & Romero, 2008), so there is more to be researched, learned, and understood about these disparities in absenteeism rates.

Of all our student populations, we have the most to learn about chronic absenteeism and students with disabilities and how to better support them

Students with disabilities. The extent of what we know about students with disabilities is stated above; they experience the second highest level of chronic absenteeism. Of all our student populations, we have the most to learn about chronic absenteeism and students with disabilities and how to better support them (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Ginsburg et al., 2014).

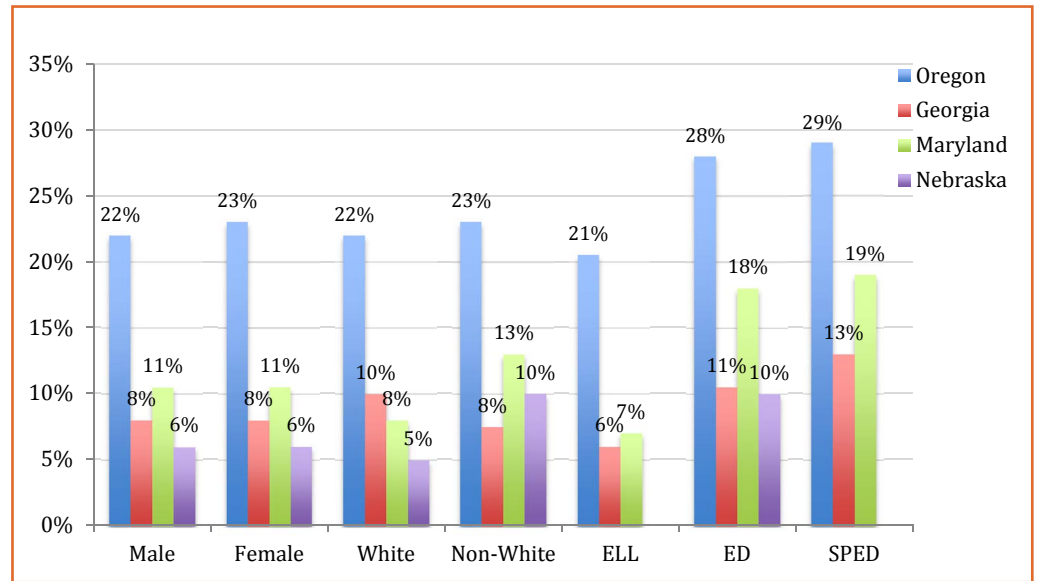


Figure 8. Oregon students with disabilities have the highest percentage of chronic absenteeism* for these 4 states in 2012.

*Chronic absenteeism definitions: Oregon = missing 10 percent or more of enrolled school days; Rhode Island = missing 10 percent of enrolled school days for those who attended at least 90 days; Maryland, Florida, Nebraska = Students absent 21 or more days of those enrolled all year.

Source: Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012

Students living in poverty. Nationally, as illustrated in Figure 9 below, students living in poverty are more likely to be chronically absent than their more affluent peers. In Oregon, this same difference between students living in poverty and their more affluent peers is exaggerated; low-income students are nearly twice more likely to miss excessive school days than their peers (Buehler et al., 2012). Low-income Kindergarten students experience this disparity acutely; nationally, they are four times more likely to be chronically absent than their high-income peers (Attendance Works, 2012; Ginsburg et al., 2014; Henderson et al., 2014).

Low-income Kindergarten students experience this disparity acutely; nationally, they are four times more likely to be chronically absent than their high-income peers

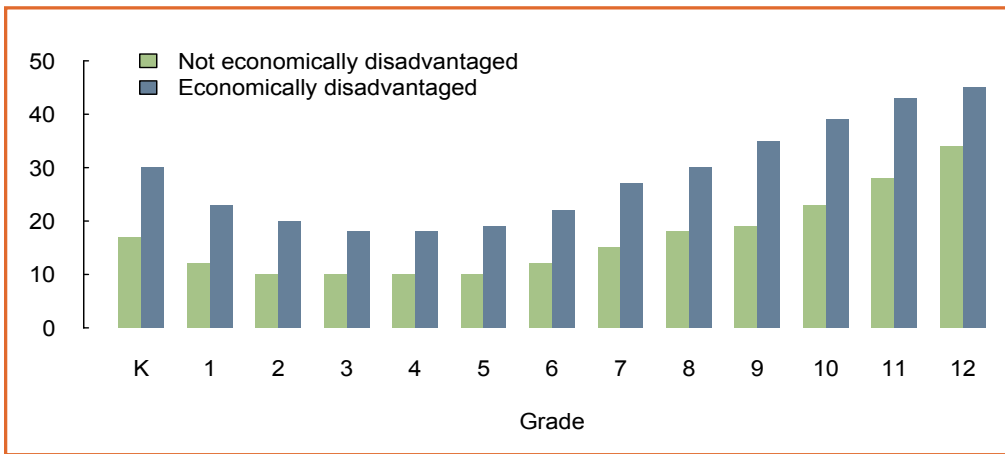


Figure 9. Low-income Oregon students have higher absenteeism at every grade level.

Source: Eco Northwest, 2012

In Figure 10 below, we are able to look more deeply at Grades 4 and 8, and compare Oregon’s situation to the national data. While we see that Oregon’s gap is smaller than the USA gap, but that absence levels are generally worse, particularly in Grade 8, and where non-low income students are disengaging from school at levels much closer to their low income counterparts. This chart differs somewhat from Figure 9 above, which identifies that there is a bigger gap. Our understanding of the difference is that Figure 9 is based on the following data practices: (a) the numbers include 2013, and (b) Figure 10 uses a slightly more substantial measure of chronic absenteeism as it includes 3+ days absent per month, while Figure 9 measures are operationalized as 2 or more days per month.

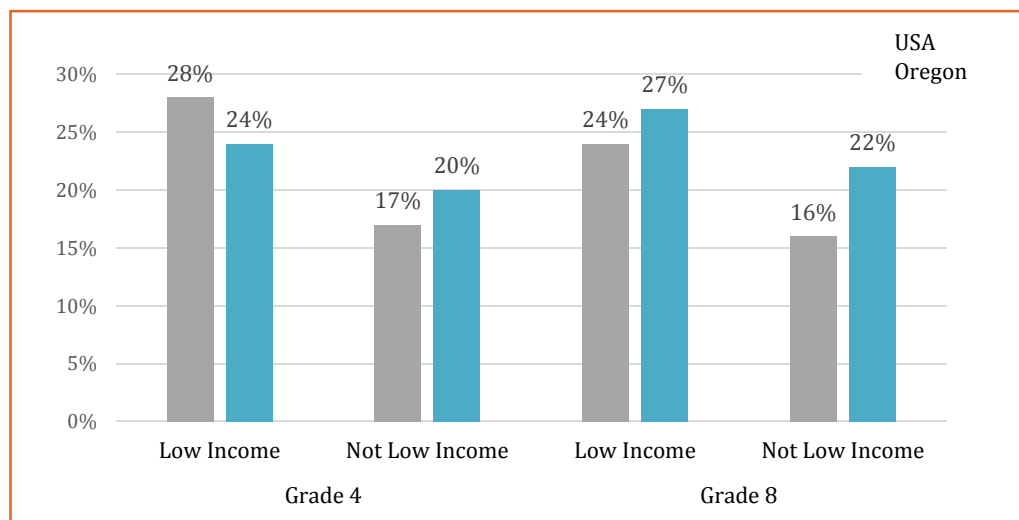


Figure 10. Higher absenteeism percentages for 4th and 8th grade students with economic disadvantage in 2011-2013.

Note: Chronic absenteeism defined as missing 3 or more days of school in the prior month.

Source: Attendance Works, 2015.

Highly troubling is the impact of missed class on academic achievement. When research was done in Oregon (ECONorthwest, 2012)⁷ on the degree to which chronic absenteeism affects school performance, it was found that students who missed 10 percent or more days in Kindergarten were testing at lower levels in grades 3, 4, and 5, as measured by NAEP scores. The size of this difference by 5th grade was about 6 points, equal to about half a grade. For students who missed this much schooling in 5th grade, their academic performance was worse through to 10th grade. By 10th grade, their RIT scores were about 5 points less, equal to half a grade level. While this does not say that chronic absenteeism causes lower academic achievement in higher grades, it certainly suggests that is a risk factor for weaker academic performance.

When we look at these same data disaggregated for higher and lower income students, the patterns worsen. For the research, we need to turn to a national study conducted in 2014 (Ginsburg et al., 2014). The difference in scores for students who consistently attend school versus those who are chronically absent is bigger for low-income students than for affluent ones. While fourth graders from more affluent families scored 8 points lower than fourth graders with good attendance, low-income fourth graders scored 10 points lower – the equivalent to one grade on the NAEP scores (Ginsburg et al., 2014).

Chronic absenteeism by grade level. Statewide, there were approximately 588,000 total students in the 2013 - 2014 school year. Of those, nearly 117,000, or 20 percent, were chronically absent. The share of the population that is chronically absent varies significantly by grade level (see Figure 12 below). Only 15 percent of elementary school students across Oregon were chronically absent, compared to 29 percent of high school students and 17 percent percent of middle school students in 2013 - 2014. Since 2011, the rate has fallen three percentage points among high school students and two percentage points among middle school students. While some groups have performed better than others, overall rates of chronic absenteeism have declined since 2011, dropping from 22 percent to 20 percent over the four-year period. Rates among high school and middle school students decreased three and two percentage points, respectively.

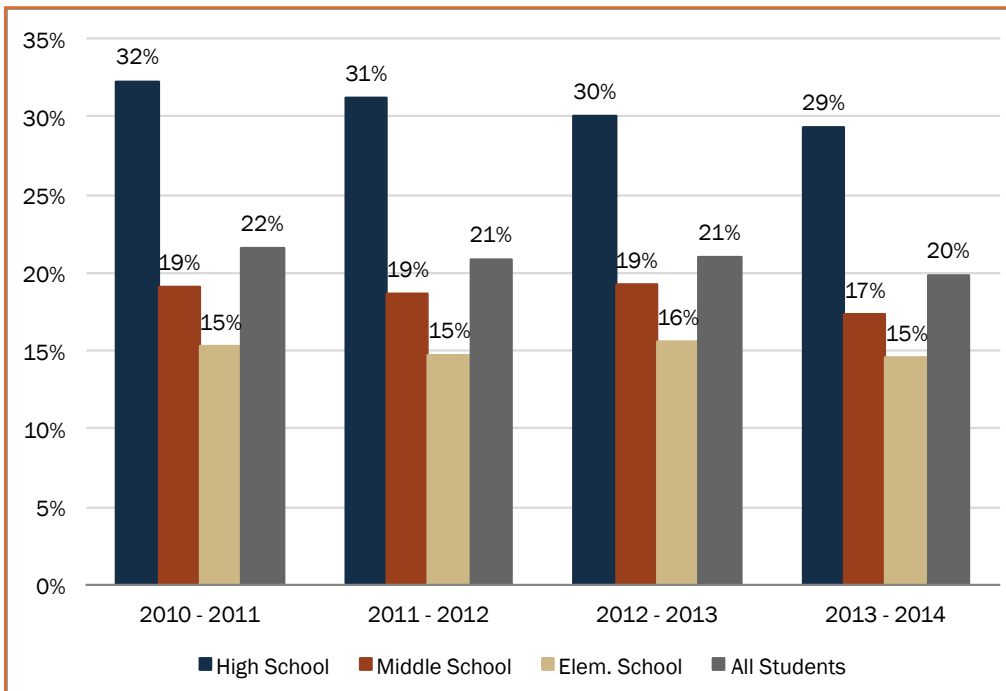


Figure 11. Percent of students that are chronically absent by grade level, Oregon, 2011-2014.

Source: ECONorthwest analysis/ODE data.

Digging into the nature of the problem, researchers have theorized three categories of potential causes for chronic absenteeism barriers including “cannot go” reasons; aversions or “will not go” reasons; and “do not go” reasons, all of which cut across family, school, and community environments

Reasons for Chronic Absenteeism

Digging into the nature of the problem, researchers have theorized three categories of potential causes for chronic absenteeism barriers including “cannot go” reasons; aversions or “will not go” reasons; and “do not go” reasons, all of which cut across family, school, and community environments (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Henderson et al., 2014; Chang & Romero, 2008):

- Barriers to attending, or the “cannot go” reasons, that includes health, bullying, transportation, and family responsibilities;
- Aversions to attending, or the “will not go” reasons, such as academic struggles, poor school climate, weak parent engagement with teachers and the school itself, often due to parents’ own negative encounters with either the school or their own schooling history, and the uncertainty of new environments;
- Cultural valuation dynamics, quite simply put as the “do not go” reasons, that includes rationales such as the family does not consider it important, family or cultural events taking precedence, economic participation to support the family, or lack of concern if absences are not consecutive.

This framework is a significant improvement over the historic treatment of chronic absenteeism that has focused on issues such as truancy (Holbert, Wu & Stark, 2002; Maynard et al, 2014), regular attendance, unexcused absences, and school discipline systems (Henderson et al., 2014). Barriers to attending school include health care use or access, chronic illness, poor transportation, family responsibilities, and neighborhood safety concerns. Aversions include academic

struggles, lack of engaging structure, poor school climate and ineffective school discipline, lack of transportation, parents’ own negative school experiences, and uncertainty of new environments (as evidenced by chronic absence spikes in kindergarten, sixth grade, and ninth grade, typically years when students transition to new schools). Finally, “can’t go” beliefs are beliefs about attendance being unimportant if, for example, they are excused, or if the child is young, or if absences are not consecutive. In many cases, absenteeism is driven by multiple reasons across all three categories of reasons (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Chronic Absenteeism Best Practices

Experiential knowledge about chronic absenteeism, extant in reports produced by non-profits, summaries of interventions, and academic articles, exists. Although very few chronic absenteeism programs have been rigorously evaluated (John W. Gardner Center, 2012; Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Railsback & NREL, 2004; Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010; Thomas, Lemieux, & Vlosky, 2011; Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, & Kelly, 2012; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004), and compatible best practices across these works are identifiable.

To determine these best practices, a thorough search of reports of produced by non-profit organizations (e.g., Attendance Works, 2012; Ginsburg et al., 2014; Chang & Romero, 2008), reviews of specific interventions (e.g., The Baltimore School Attendance Campaign; NYC Interagency Task Force on Chronic Absenteeism; Verde Involving Parents – North Richmond, CA, Check & Connect – Minneapolis, MN), and academic articles (e.g., Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Goldstein, Little, & Akin-Little, 2003;

Teasley, 2004; Hoyles, 1998; Kearney, 2008) was conducted. This search yielded a large number of best practices, described below.

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 (Chang & Romero, 2008; Henderson et al., 2014; 2005; Sheldon, 2007; Teasley, 2004). In contrast, highly punitive programs that place the responsibility for truancy solely on the family and student have been found

to alienate rather than leading to improvement over time (Flannery, Frank, & Kato, 2012; Hoyle & Collier, 2006; Railsback & NREL, 2004; Teasley, 2004).

It is clear from the literature that comprehensive interventions are best structured in *tiers*, starting with universal practices that focus more on prevention, through steps with increasingly targeted interventions, ultimately ending with specific and focused attention on individual families, as illustrated below in Figure 13 (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Chang et al., 2008; Ginsburg et al., 2014; John W. Gardner Center, 2012). As interventions become more targeted, more resources, involving more of the student's world, are engaged.

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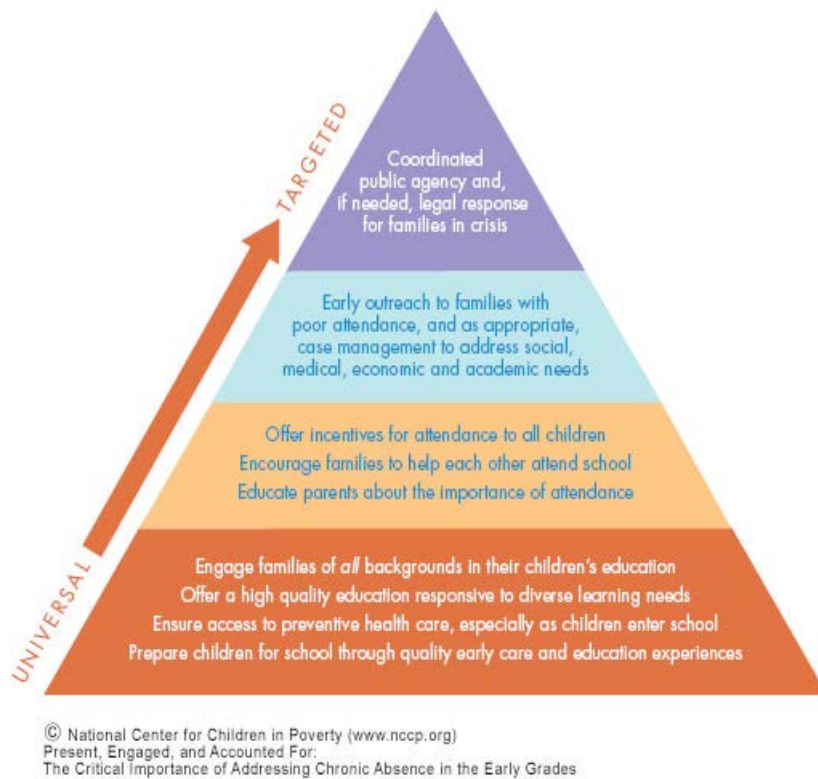


Figure 12. Chronic absenteeism interventions move from universal to targeted actions.

At every tier of intervention, the key is meaningful connection with families. And in order to foster such a connection, a number of pieces must be in place. State initiatives must structure policies to help develop and financially support this work; schools and districts must have established chronic absenteeism as a priority and also have the capacity to do this work; and, infrastructure for collaborative partnerships with community organizations who understand the realities of these families' and students' lives must be established (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Chang et al., 2008; Ginsburg et al., 2014; John W. Gardner Center, 2012; Railsback & NREL, 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

Best and promising practices conducted entirely within schools, school districts, and education service districts. Within schools, school districts, and education service districts the host of best practices and promising practices can be broken down into three categories:

- 1) Genuine communication and engagement with families;
- 2) Strong culture of attendance in school and afterschool programs; and,
- 3) Strong inclusive curriculum.

Genuine communication and engagement with families. Best practices in communication and engagement with families focus on genuine attempts to work with families to emphasize the importance of school attendance with them, to inform them about school procedures and policies regarding absenteeism, and to support them. These best practices include:

- Provide high quality early care and early education experience for families and children by orienting families to school norms and helping families

make regular school attendance part of their daily routine;

- Provide timely information about attendance to parents;
- Educate parents about the importance of attendance; e.g., arrange attendance workshops for parents that deal with attendance policies, procedures and consequences; publish attendance policies and information on school websites and in school handbooks; and,
- Invite parents to attend school with student for an hour to promote connection with the school and greater empathy between parents and children.

A strong culture of attendance in school and afterschool programs. Practices designed to build a strong culture of attendance strengthen attitudes about attendance for students, families, and educators so the importance of attendance pervades students' lives in every context.

Educator-focused best practices include:

- Embed chronic absence interventions into existing initiatives. For example, host an AttenDANCE; and,
- Generate and analyze data on who is chronically absent, making better use of attendance data that is already gathered. For example, electronic dashboard that gets real-time data.

Family-focused best practices include:

- Encourage families to help each other attend school, creating a community focus and support network for preventing school absences.

Student-focused best practices include:

- Strengthen after-hours youth development and extracurricular programs; and,
- Offer incentives for attendance to all children, for individual students and classes.

Strong inclusive curriculum. This domain aims to ensure that education is high quality and responsive to the diverse learning styles and strengths of students. Best practices also focus on students' everyday lives to create connections with adults. These practices include:

- Revise overly punitive discipline codes, making court a last resort;
- Establish school plans to address bullying;
- Establish student advisory periods that provide every student with a teacher or staff member who will provide the student with emotional, academic, and personal support;
- Create smaller academies in schools;
- Connect school work to students' lives and aspirations;
- Promote caring practices in the classroom. For example, provide more frequent positive rewards and minor consequences;
- Develop and maintain culturally responsive teaching;
- Develop peer tutoring programs; and,
- Address health reasons that may be preventing students from getting to school by providing access to school-based health, psychosocial, mental, and physical supports, including breakfast programs.

Best practices in collaborative partnerships between education providers and community based organizations.⁸ Collaborations between education providers and community-based and culturally specific organizations are an essential piece of managing chronic absenteeism.

Collaborations in task forces. Task forces include educators, nurses, and liaisons from the courts, community-based organizations, and culturally specific organizations who work in the school and are connected to the school. These task forces are typically led by an attendance point person, and convene on a weekly or monthly schedule. They identify students who are beginning to struggle with attendance and try to help that student and family get access to the resources they need.

More extensive outreach. For students who are identified as on the path to chronic absenteeism, outreach goes beyond education providers. Expanding outreach to community-based and culturally-specific organizations not only increases potential for making contact with families and students as well as increasing opportunities for genuine connection, it also helps families get help with needs that go beyond education. These practices include:

- Engage community partners such as after-school programs, the housing authority, and local businesses to reach families about the importance of attendance, through vehicles such as organize and host a parent success summit and resource fair, ad campaign for public awareness, getting celebrities to record wake-up calls to students, and donate incentives and rewards for attendance;

- Coordinate public agencies – ideally through a comprehensive center that can provide holistic supports for families and children – to connect families to resources such as health care, eye assessments, transportation access, health insurance access, mental health agencies, counseling for students and families, transportation supports, resources to access housing, and improved safety;
- Provide opportunities for service learning, in which students learn through active participation in thoughtfully organized service projects that meet the needs of communities, that increases the chances of heightened civic awareness and participation, that in turn can promote engagement with community and a sense of purpose in life;
- Connect students and families with “success mentors” (sometimes including attendance counselors or truant officers, but with mentoring roles additionally filled by community staff or volunteers), who are responsible for connecting with families whose children are chronically absent.
- With clearly delineated protocols, and after all of these other measures are made available to provide extra support, consideration of referral to truancy court might be considered, at which time the legal system becomes heavily involved.

Best Practices include a level of Parent Empowerment. The literature demonstrates the benefits of (a) beginning the education process early, (b) effectively and meaningfully engaging parents, and (c) overcoming the histories of fractured relationships with the education system.

Parents as first teachers. Supporting parents in their emergence as teachers for their children is an evidence based practice to support child development (Allen, 2011), for strengthening learning outcomes for children living in poverty (Wagner, Spiker & Linn, 2002), and it is increasingly recognized as valuable for Latino families (although not yet well studied in other communities).

Parent engagement in the school system. Parent involvement is highly correlated to attendance, as well as student achievement results and improved attitudes to learning (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Mattingly et al., 2002). One particularly influential literature review identifies that the impact of family and community involvement with students results in:

- Higher GPA and scores on standardized tests or rating scales
- Enrollment in more challenging academic programs
- More classes passed and credits earned
- Better attendance
- Improved behavior at home and school, and
- Better social skills and adaptation to school” (p.24, Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Parents providing emotional support to students. The ability of parents to provide emotional support to their children has been highlighted in the outcomes of three studies of parent engagement programs in California (Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004 and 2012; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012).

Parents advocating effectively with teachers and schools. Programs that support parents to jointly (in group settings of parents that hold shared identities) identify barriers to their meaningful inclusion in the education system can promote both the confidence and skills for parents to then advocate on behalf of their children.

Best Practices in connecting Families to Schools, and Promoting Effective Advocacy. Research shows the following as promoting connections:

- Conduct a series community workshops on attendance to promote its importance
- Establish partnerships among different agencies (e.g., faith-based organizations) that leverage community supports to improve attendance (e.g., calls home and connections to community resources)
- Make direct contact by phone and home visit with families of every absent and tardy student, offering referrals and resources (e.g., bus tickets, alarm clocks, raingear, etc.)
- Provide monthly incentives for attendance
- Provide connection with a multidisciplinary team of professionals for family services
- Support parents as the holders of valuable stories about their children's backgrounds and cultures, and integrating these stories into the school curriculum
- Offer supports to parents to advance their own educational goals, enabling them to show their children the importance of their own learning. One important educational topic is learning English, that in turn provides additional

capacity for parents to gain social and economic inclusion in the USA

- Gain leadership support from schools and local officials
- Offer educational training on how to support their children's education (and providing child care at the same time). Parents of color and parents living in poverty are less likely to read to their children
- Provide student and educator training about classroom disruptions, violence prevention, and conflict resolution
- Provide tutoring and mentoring with a clear focus on absenteeism
- Address transportation concerns for students by tracking real-time data about public transportation issues

Several of these studies, particularly those rooted in critical race theory, emphasized the corresponding importance of creating the school as a welcoming and affirming environment for students and families of color. Several factors were highlighted: the importance of having teachers and administrators of color in the schools; shifted discourses and school climates that affirm the identity and history of all students; heightened language capacity so educators can speak to parents in their own languages, and; curriculum that includes respectful and validating histories and intellectual contributions of all students. If these three features were prominent in schools, students and families would be more likely to be productively engaged (Sleeter, 2011; Okihiro, 2010; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Castaneda, Kambutu, & Rio, 2006; Quijoch & Rios, 2000; Marschall, Shah, Donato, 2012).

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We also know that to improve attendance rates our schools must shift to a culture of inclusion and affirmation of the discontent of, particularly, students and families who are culturally and linguistically diverse.

An Alternative Approach with Mixed Results is Truancy Court.

There is an alternative approach to chronic absenteeism that has experienced some success in getting students to school. This approach also has clearly-delineated protocols for trying to make contact with students and families, but bypasses the enlistment of other agencies and resources, and instead proceeds to truancy court after attempts to contact families fail. While consideration of other resources are included in these legal proceedings, this approach places the legal system and its related fines and threats of further legal action at the core of its process.

While this approach is showing efficacy in getting students to attend school, data regarding its efficacy in improving other measures of school success, such as 3rd grade reading proficiency and high school graduation rates, are not available. Such policies have been found to be more alienating over time than improving in the past, despite their potentially positive impact on school attendance (Flannery, Frank, & Kato, 2012; Hoyle & Collier, 2006, 1998; Railsback & NREL, 2004; Teasley, 2004).

Conclusion

We know a great deal about chronic absenteeism. We know it has profound negative consequences for students of color, students with disabilities, and low-income students. We know it affects students of all ages, and has cumulative consequences. Finally, we know that chronic absenteeism is complicated, and requires a range of interventions, tailored to specific communities that address every context of students' lives. We also know that to improve attendance rates our schools must shift to a culture of inclusion and affirmation of the discontent of, particularly, students and families who are culturally and linguistically diverse.

There is also still a good deal to learn about chronic absenteeism. While solid theory backs our understanding of the causes of chronic absenteeism, conducting research will enable us to back up these theories and examine them in an Oregon context. Similarly, while valuable experiential wisdom informs our knowledge of best practices, clear research regarding the benefits and drawbacks of specific practices for specific locales will teach us how to customize interventions to be most effective. Beginning to do some of this work will enable us – educators, policymakers, community organizers, and researchers – to design systems and policies that will best support each of Oregon's students.

Methodology

Interviews

Forty-four focus groups, at seven regions 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 who did not attend school regularly; students aged 12 to 18 prioritizing those who faced attendance challenges; educators and staff currently engaged in chronic absenteeism work in the school system; and community members actively engaged in a community organization that focused on improving student outcomes. In Washington County, an additional group interviewing parents of students with disabilities was also conducted.

Site Selection Criteria

Research sites were selected in collaboration with the Chief Education Office (formerly Oregon Education Investment Board) and the Oregon Department of Education (ODE). Sites were selected based on the following criteria: (1) capturing geographic diversity in the state; (2) existence of a Regional Achievement Collaborative⁹ or other local organizer to recruit relevant participants; (3) known chronic absenteeism initiatives, or particularly low or high known rates of chronic absenteeism; and (4) the inclusion of at least one location governed by an Oregon Tribe. 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.

Culturally Specific Focus Groups

To meet the objective of capturing culturally specific practices and experiences, 12 additional focus groups were conducted with culturally specific organizations in Multnomah County. These organizations represented 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 family members. The specific organizations involved as organizers and participants in these focus groups included: APANO (Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon), Hacienda, IRCO (Immigrant & Refugee Community Organization) – Africa House and Asian Family Center, KairosPDX, NAYA (Native American Youth and Family Center), SEI (Self-Enhancement Inc.), and The Slavic Community Center. We also conducted two focus groups with members of the Educational Equity Committee of the Coalition of Communities of Color, partners in this research study.

Recruitment of Focus Group Participants

In each site and for each culture represented in this study, an organizer actively engaged in the community was recruited. This organizer and/or her organization were paid an honorarium to advise us about the community, recruit participants that met our requested criteria, provide an interpreter if necessary, manage the logistics of the event, and foster participation in a webinar.

Meetings and Interviews of Statewide Stakeholders and Experts

An additional 14 meetings and interviews were conducted with key stakeholders and experts. One of these interviews was conducted with experts regarding students with disabilities. One interview was conducted with a highly recommended educator with experience teaching in culturally specific and mainstream schools. Another interview was conducted with an educator with a great deal of experience successfully addressing chronic absenteeism across a number of school districts. Finally, 5 meetings were held with organizations with strong connections to chronic absenteeism and/or education. These organizations included: Chalkboard; The Children's Institute; COSA (Confederation of Oregon School Administrators); OEA (Oregon Education Association); Stand for Children; and, Upstream Health.

Analysis of Qualitative Data

Analyses of the focus group data reflect the credibility standards identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985): member checking, triangulation (interviews with key informants, focus groups and surveys), peer debriefing and negative case analysis. Transcripts were analyzed using conceptually clustered matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and grounded theory, using iterative, constant comparison, line-by-line analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) including open coding, selective coding, and narrative lines. Checks on reliability were conducted by members of the research team by discussing findings with key partners from the Coalition of Communities of Color.

Quantitative Data

Data regarding chronic absenteeism were provided by ODE to ECONorthwest for this project. ECONorthwest conducted customized data runs and analyzed the data for various populations, disaggregated to examine differences in absenteeism in accordance with race and ethnicity, language spoken at home, disability status and type, and enrollment in English Language Learner programs. The results of these analyses are included in this report.

Participation Practices

Description of participants. The overall profiles of the participants are a diverse group in terms of race. Because we "oversampled" communities of color, we ended up with our student and parent participants being more than 50 percent persons of color. These same groups were primarily low income, with more than 80 percent at levels that are not more than twice the poverty level. As a result, this is not a representative sample of participants but rather a purposive sampling, designed to capture those who are more likely to disengage from education and with higher levels of chronic absenteeism. Our educator pool were long-term employees, with approximately 30 percent having worked for more than five years in education, and an additional 50 percent present for three to five years.

Profile of participants.

- **Educators:** 53 percent have worked in the education field for more than 5 years, 13 percent in the field for four to five years, and 30 percent for one to three years. Only 5 percent had been an educator for less than a year.

- **Community Stakeholders:** 64 percent are active as educationally-linked service providers and/or advocacy practitioners for more than five years, 16 percent active for four to five years, and 13 percent active for one to three years. Only 7 percent were active for less than a year.
- **Parents:** An estimated one-third are living in poverty and an estimated one-third are living in low income, meaning they live on incomes up to

twice the poverty rate. Only 8 percent of those who participated were at family incomes above \$70,000 per year. Nine percent made an income between \$50-\$70,000 per year and 19 percent were between \$30-50,000 per year. The racial identity of parents and students is shown below in Figure 13 on the next page. The average number of children in each family was 2.7, meaning that the average family size was approximately 4 people.

Table 1. Composition of Input into this Research Project

Groups	Number of focus groups	Total number of participants
Parents (7 regional groups, 6 culturally specific focus groups, and one disability focus group)	14	172
Students (8 regional groups and 6 culturally specific focus groups)	14	178
Educators (all regional)	7	42
Community Stakeholders (7 regional and 2 culturally specific focus groups)	9	67
Expert Interviews		14

Focus group questions varied for each group of participants, focusing for parents and students on supports for and barriers to regular school attendance, and for stakeholders and educators on the policies and programs they've seen effectively help reduce chronic absenteeism.

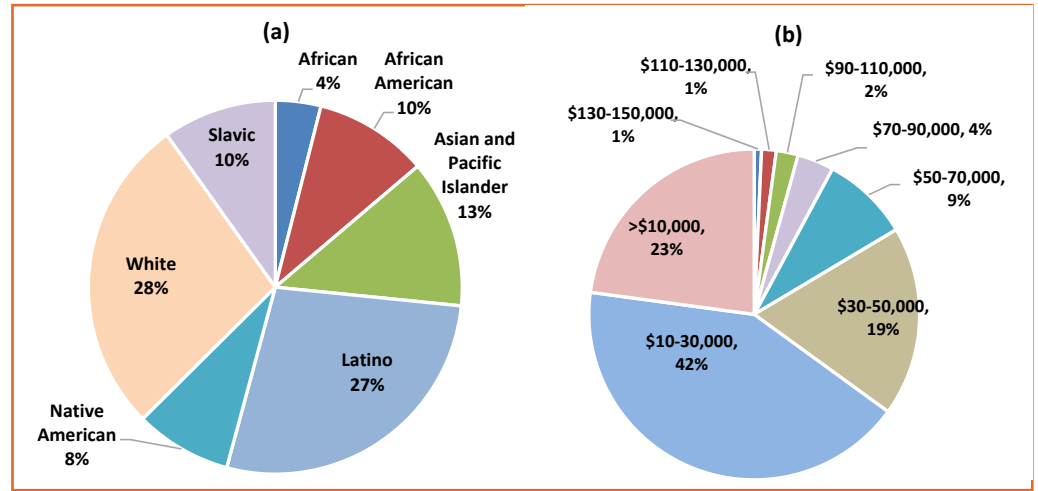


Figure 13. (a) Composition of students and families. (b). Income level of participating families.

Procedures for focus groups, interviews, and meetings with statewide stakeholders.

All participants signed consent forms before participating. Student participants also submitted consent forms signed by their parents prior to participating. Focus groups lasted from one to two hours. Focus group questions varied for each group of participants, focusing for parents and students on supports for and barriers to regular school attendance, and for stakeholders and educators on the policies and programs they've seen effectively help reduce chronic absenteeism.

Limitations

This is a qualitative research study that has intentionally gathered the experiences of those who face challenges in getting to school every day. As a qualitative study, its strengths are that it captures experiences

and insights in robust ways, as the text of participants' contributions is retained in the context in which their words were intended.

Qualitative research is best recognized for exploratory studies that are trying to understand an experience, as opposed to one that is trying to determine the magnitude of a problem or the results of an intervention. It allows researchers to inductively generate theories for the study of a phenomenon (which in this case is chronic absenteeism). The findings are illustrative of experience and the reports on which they are based are full of the words of participants themselves, which are believed important for helping readers understand an issue at greater depth than would be provided by a quantitative study.

The limitations of qualitative research are two-fold: Only the researchers in the room are able to discern how widely held various perspectives are, because they are able to observe body language, facial expressions,

and the prevalence of agreement and disagreement that exists in the room. The conditions of a focus group mean that not every participant is able to answer every question, thus making observation an important ingredient of the analysis. Second, the data results can be skewed by the researchers' bias. Protections are made to guard against this, including the analysis tools noted above, and the inclusion of additional researchers in this study (which in this case included three researchers: Dr. Ann Curry-Stevens, Dr. Connie Kim-Gervey, and Julia Meier, Esq.) as well as members of the CEEdO research team, and members of the Coalition of Communities of Color Educational Equity committee who vetted the findings at least once. The researchers hold a commitment to authenticity and rigor, noting their bias and working deeply with each other to notice and limit its influence over both the research design (what questions were asked), the analysis (what patterns and theories emerged) and the findings (what action items emerged from the study). The CEEdO research team provided an external accountability structure for the research, asking for both data-based evidence to back up assertions, as well as citations from the literature that reinforced findings.

We relied upon local organizers to do the recruitment for the study, paying them for this effort, and asking for them to give priority to students and parent who were struggling with attendance, and with educators and stakeholders who were connected to such populations. While a total of 473 people participated in this study, it is neither a representative sample of the groups who participated (students, parents, educators, community stakeholders and key informants) nor a full canvas of the types of initiatives underway in schools to improve student outcomes.

We do not suggest that these findings are representative of the entire body of stakeholders who are connected to chronic absenteeism, and at the same time believe that the research sheds important insights on the causes of chronic absenteeism and forwards important and plausible interventions that can help address the issue.

This study is best considered as *insights, experiences and opportunities that hold potential to improve student experiences*. This is a qualitative study with findings that point us in the direction of how to address the challenges that students face with getting to school every day.

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Themes from the Focus Groups

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, any teacher.

The researchers categorized the qualitative data into two major themes: culturally responsive practices and systemic barriers. First, students, families, educators and community-based organizations identified classroom practices and relationships, which the educational landscape refers to as culturally responsive educational practices. Culturally responsive teaching is defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. It is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly (Gay, 2000).

Theme IA. Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices: Relationships

Relationships: students with teachers.

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, any teacher. At the close of about 90 percent of the focus groups, we asked everyone what they would prioritize “if they could change just one thing.” At least 75 percent 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. Some general comments were made about the importance of relationships between teachers and students, and emphasized how important these relationships were for more marginalized¹⁰ students:

“Connecting kids to a caring adult is essential.”

“Occasionally there are deep caring relationships in schools. [These characteristics are desired]... looking at you for what you are, not judging me, feeling so good walking in, and friendly supportive small classes. We really have to get teachers to stop judging the behavior of students.”

“Many instructors that I hold still in high esteem are because they cared about me as an individual, as a human being. Not only did they welcome me in, they pushed me. They told me that they had a higher expectation of me. Those higher expectations were the thing that made you do better, made you do the best you could, to be who you could be. It is not just do you have to be a person of color to help a child of color, a student of color?”

“Relationships are often the problem [for students being engaged at school].”

“[The teacher] has respect for the students.”

“[Our teacher] will add stories, like personal stories on the side and make us all laugh.”

“I think we should have teacher evaluation to know how they could improve, because if they seriously don’t care about you, you are not learning anything.”

“[My top priority is]...to be more connected to your teacher, be able to speak to them and they can understand you and actually talk to you, too.”

This focus on caring relationships does not mean that expectations or demanding curriculum is rejected.

“They prepare us -- since we are going to high school and stuff next year, they are preparing us. They are on us more, more strict and on us more, because they want us to do better at a higher level.”

Students consistently prioritized relationship elements of fairness, racial affirmation, greetings, and listening to information about one’s background. In terms of fairness, students were highly attuned to favoritism and preferential treatment. When teachers clearly preferred specific students, they were more flexible and less punitive regarding schoolwork, and classroom and school rules. Students described some students getting opportunities to make up work or retake tests that others were not. Similarly, some students were given the freedom to leave classes, while others are not. Students of color described these preferences to be dictated by the color of the students’ skin.

“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, okay.’ 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?’”

Other students in a more rural area described preferential treatment as observed when students were able to manipulate a flawed system, and evidence of a system that is unfair.

“In [my teacher’s] class, he will pick on students because I was sitting in class and my head phones on, and not do this, and then another kid will do that, and he will just pick on him and kick him out and tell him to do the assignment.”

Students expressed the importance of greetings. The literature shows that to be seen and affirmed by their teachers reinforces the relationship (as has been included in the earlier literature review). The attempt to connect is *critical* to students; even in the instances when students felt they couldn’t quite connect – with teachers who are good, but don’t quite “get it,” they clearly appreciated, remembered, and valued the attempt.

“She actually cares about the students. You can see that when comes into lunch, or in the morning. She will walk up to you, and ‘Hi, how is your morning? What’s going on?’”

“My child just needs someone to connect to her everyday. Not much – just a ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’ and ‘looking forward to seeing you tomorrow’ is enough.”

“Well, at our dances and social activities, we see the teachers interacting with the students as well and getting involved, so that is nice.”

In terms of racial affirmation and racial bias, criticism was abundant in the ways that both students and parents spoke of concerns over educators who did not respect them, and who were racially hostile and who belittled them. They also identified concerns over teachers who did not help them find a pathway back to academic success, once they had slipped. Negative relationships appeared to narrow student engagement in their schooling. At the same time, students knew they wanted

Negative relationships appeared to narrow student engagement in their schooling. At the same time, students knew they wanted improved relationships with teachers. Students of color noted racism, both overt and subtle forms.

improved relationships with teachers. Students of color noted racism, both overt and subtle forms.

“One teacher said, ‘You guys are a Title I school and now I see why, because you guys act like this.’”

“Her energy, from day one, was ‘you guys probably don’t know as much as the last school I was in.’ She said the last school she was in was ... way more wealthy and stuff like that. From day one, her energy was ‘Oh, they are not as smart as my last school.’”

Others were subtler, yet just as easily identified by students. Poignant incidents of implicit racism based on assumptions about students’ backgrounds and the management of recent immigrants and English Language Learners (ELLs) were raised by many students of color. Recently-immigrated students spoke about being treated as students of similar-looking, but very different cultures and not getting appropriate support for their needs regarding language and basic understandings of the school system. For some students of color for whom there are no school-based language supports, students from the same ethnic group were assigned to interpret and teach each for extended periods of time (with no extra time or supports built in for either the teaching or learning student). For example, in one instance, English Language Learners were included in a classroom, but separated and left to do vocabulary work on their own rather than integrate with the rest of the class and academic material. In another instance, a teacher spoke with authority about the students “wrong” use of his first language.

“I would change the way our Spanish teacher teaches, because I tell [her] that we speak in our family, as a comment,

and she tries to correct me. I am basically telling her, ‘Oh, we say this,’ but Spanish language teachers, are, ‘Well, it doesn’t really matter because the Spanish we are teaching you is better.’ There is no ‘better’ or ‘worse’ Spanish, basically.”

The two-fold interaction of a lack of a supportive personal connection with any one educator alongside negative experiences with educators was noted as being particularly detrimental. We heard from parents and community stakeholders that they were unhappy with the distance that exists between teachers and students. The following comments were made in the focus groups by educators, and reflect a common understanding of the limitations of educators in being successful with every child:

“They have to meet me halfway.”

“I’ve done all I can; now it’s up to them.”

That said, community stakeholders drew attention to the dangers of such discourse:

“The adult is 100 percent responsible for reaching to the kid. It doesn’t mean you’ll win but [you] should not be waiting for them to meet you half way. They are a kid – that is just how it is going to be. And I’ve seen a lot of kids throw their life away because they did not have the ability to reach out and if in fact an adult disrespects them in front of their friends, it is the worst thing you can ever do to a kid.”

“When educators say they want a 50/50 approach to a relationship, it presumes kids are equally responsible as adults. But adults hold almost all the responsibility... they need to be fully responsible for the relationship. Don’t stop trying and don’t think it is okay to stop trying.”

Well over half the parents who participated in this study gave voice to a perceived lack of educator investment in academic success for their children. This was more pronounced for families of color than for white families, although certainly present for numerous white families as well. Many parents of color had changed schools due to this experience. In one focus group, one-third of parents had changed their children's schools, and another would have changed if she had been able to cover the costs of additional transportation for being outside the school's catchment area. In another two focus groups, all the parents had chosen a culturally specific educational setting for their children, with the majority of these parents choosing this option to avoid high levels of racial bias in the regular school system.

“Teachers don’t care about us or our children. They don’t see us as capable. They feel as if our kids won’t make it and the kids know it.”

“[My children] used to ask for help. But the teacher turned them off school.”

“When they teach content about Native history, they still are teaching that [uprisings] are all our fault. My daughter was teary this year when she told me about it.”

“The teachers don’t resemble us, they don’t understand us, and they are intimidating.... We know that teachers are being trained to be more culturally inclusive and more inviting. We don’t see enough of it in the school. [Many] are intimidating.”

“Teachers need to understand historic trauma.”

“He has never had, even since he was a baby in private day care, he has never had a teacher of color.”

Parents expressed frustration at the schools, and more specifically at teachers who, in their perspective, shoulder responsibility for making schools unwelcome for their children:

“The teachers should take training or meetings to hear from the parents, to know more about the needs of the parents and the students, to hear more about the students’ needs and how can parents help students to be more successful at school.”

“Teachers should be able to tell when there’s something bothering students. They need to call home to explore what’s up and how to be helpful in the classroom... Conferences are the only way to get feedback. And then I’m rushed and don’t want to bring up tough issues.”

“Not all teachers are bad. Usually the racism they show is not direct. Many times it is not what they say, but what they do or don’t do. It is really hard for kids to take Spanish when they know more Spanish than the teacher, but the teacher knows the rules of academics in Spanish, so the kids will challenge the teacher because they teacher is learning herself Spanish, but she knows the rules for accents and she knows the verbs and the predicate forms, and they will focus on things that kids don’t know, and try to shame them in front of other people and say, “Can you give me the predicate form of the verb to run?” Well, I don’t know what the predicate is. My mom never told me the subjective. So it is not always what they say but how and how they behave or their attitude and so forth.”

Many of the parents in this study had traumatic school experiences and when they went back into the schools, these memories were brought into the foreground, and their own reactivity surfaced. When entering schools, and for some also in talking with teachers by phone, they feel dread and guarded.

“My grandson overheard a teacher telling his friends, ‘don’t talk to Emilio – he’ll take you down the sewer.’ My grandson left school immediately... he was devastated and it still affects him today... he finished school but it was a nightmare.”

“Teachers really need to be aware of what they do and how it affects kids. I remember as a kid being like, that kid gets picked on, that kid is being bullied by those teachers: ‘I am not going to do that because I don’t want to be picked on.’ Then I was thinking, ‘What does that kid feel every day, getting picked on by your teacher?’ Then the kids do it, too. I don’t think that people necessarily do it on purpose, and then that kid has that permanent stamp on him. So they tell the first grade teacher, ‘This kid is bad,’ so that kid goes into first grade, that teacher already thinks they are awful. They go to third grade and they already think they are awful. It just continues. I think that happens so much. You have a bad first two months of kindergarten, that’s it, you are just a bad now, forever. The kid never hears someone say, ‘You know, you are really good, you are a good reader.’ Why try? What is the point?”

For some parents in the focus groups, this catalyzed an advocacy response. For others, it reinforced what they felt they always knew about schools – they are unapproachable and ill-equipped to serve their children. Many of the parents in this study had traumatic school experiences and when they went back into the schools, these memories were brought into the foreground, and their own reactivity surfaced. When entering schools, and for some also in talking with teachers by phone, they feel dread and guarded. For many parents in the focus groups, their

ability to advocate for their children is blocked by language, culture or exclusion. When students do not get to see their unfair treatment rectified, they can lose respect for education as an institution, and this is significant impediment to attending every day and every class.

“I want to see a change at all [our schools] because this affects every last [child in our community]... those are our next presidents, those are our next doctors, those are next lawyers, those are our next teachers, regardless of where they come from. If we don’t have these meetings, if we don’t come out, if we don’t voice our opinions, changes are not going to be made. Unfortunately, we are the community and it is up to us, at this point, to make a change in all of the schools. If my voice can help somebody else’s parent who wasn’t able to be here because of whatever the reason may be... I’ll be that voice.”

Many educators involved in this research agreed that more staff resources are needed in schools, staff members who can develop and maintain individual relationships with students and their families. Sometimes these were part of the counseling staff, and sometimes they were part of community-based organizations, and less frequently they were the teachers themselves. Opinions varied on who should be responsible for attendance; the majority of educators interpret this to be parents’ responsibility with a smaller percentage of educators believing that teacher relationships with students could benefit attendance. In closing this section, it is important to remember that students and their families value a quality education. For student focus groups, when we asked them to “identify a good thing about school” the majority did not say things like “sports” or “friends” but rather getting a good education.

“You don’t have to pay me [to go to school]. Just give me a good education.”

“[A good thing about school is]...just being able to get an education.”

“I’m going to school to get my diploma. That will help me get a better job.”

Relationships: Teachers with Parents/Guardians. Two dimensions of the parent-teacher relationship were highlighted in the data. The first was in areas where improved relationships hold potential to support student learning and engagement, and the second was in areas where improved relationships helped parents address their own ambivalence about the education system. There were a few exemplary stories of a partnership between a teacher and family to carefully track student attendance and homework status. In one such case, parents were encouraged to get involved and open their child’s backpack every afternoon, and require the student to do homework every evening. They also were encouraged to help with homework, to get involved and share a bit about their experiences at school. By the end of six weeks, the student had caught up and did not need the oversight. This was a great partnership, with the teacher’s outreach being successful through reaching out to the parents. In a second example, a community-based outreach worker connected parents and the teacher:

“My son didn’t want to come to school because he has a hard time reading and other kids made fun of him... We nipped it in the bud. We took away everything from him and he just got back his TV privileges – it’s been gone for four months. At the last teacher-parent conference... instead of being the lowest, he’s now one of the

highest... We asked for a daily progress report and he had to get good marks on it in order for him to do anything... it was a group effort [of parents and the teacher]... We asked if he had any homework, he said ‘no.’ And were told by the teacher to look in his backpack every day, and it turned out he gets homework every day. And now if he doesn’t have homework or the progress report, he can’t do anything. He can just sit on his bed and read. And he doesn’t like that. He can’t play or do video games. So far it’s working, but he’s only in the third grade.”

Most parents in the focus groups want to actively work with educators to help their children attend school regularly, but have frequently found that teachers have not made such engagement easy. Synthesizing a range of contributions, the researchers perceive that parents want relationships with their children’s teachers, yet found communication to be frustrating as teachers appeared to be limited in their willingness to connect with parents. These parents recognize that large classrooms make such one-to-one relationships harder, but given their importance for supporting parents to be meaningfully involved in their children’s education, it remains essential. They want communication to begin with understanding their children’s histories, and for all one-to-one relationships to start with positive affirmation of the child’s strengths, then add *early* notification of problems, and subsequently include parents in partnerships to solve problems. In far too many illustrations by parents, teachers either had no relationships or were fully focused on the problems posed by students. In most narratives, parents identified teachers as in dire need of being

Parents want communication to begin with understanding their children’s histories, and for all one-to-one relationships to start with positive affirmation of the child’s strengths, then add *early* notification of problems, and subsequently include parents in partnerships to solve problems.

culturally responsive, and in demonstrating consistent respect and affirmation of their children. Parents believed this lack of relationship is driven by both shortcomings in school funding (as classroom sizes are too large to maintain proactive connection with parents and guardians), and the reluctance/refusal of teachers to engage in such relationships.

We also heard about lost opportunities in such engagement, where parents wanted to be more helpful to their children's education, but due to conditions such as school staff who do not speak their language, or reticence to even enter the doors of the school, or being pressed for time when holding down several jobs, or the school responded too slowly or incompletely to be effective, opportunities were narrow. Parents know they can provide help to their children to support their school success. For some parents, however, they have few resources to draw upon to support their children's learning.

"I come from a place where it is very, very poor. I don't know how to write. I don't know how to read. I didn't go to school because my parents were very poor. They didn't even have money to buy a pencil or a notebook... I tell my kids to take advantage, take advantage of all the opportunities so you can succeed. I don't want you to drop out of school."

"I don't understand the 'new math.' It's confusing and while I like that the school provided us [parents] with a training in the math curriculum, it took them until April to do it. I couldn't help from September until April. What a waste."

Parental ambivalence about schooling showed up among parents of color. The trauma of their own schooling experience

resurfaced conflicted feelings about whether or not they should impose school attendance on their children. While this was mostly experienced by parents of color, other parents felt ambivalent about the importance of getting their children to school every day.

"I hated it... with all the racism, I hated it.... But I still try to point out the good things, and look to others to help my kids. I encourage them to talk to others about their future options."

"Sometimes [school officials] don't respect us. When a teacher chews off my arm, I have to walk away."

This dynamic is even more pronounced in the Native American community where the legacy of residential schools (U.S. federal schools that forcibly removed Native American children from their families with the explicit goal of eliminating indigenous culture and replacing it with whiteness) remains a memory for grandparents, and continues as a historical trauma for most members of the community. Even among Native American parents working in professional roles, there can be tremendous ambivalence about sending one's children to school.

"You wouldn't believe the racism we experience in the school."

"I'm not sure how helpful I can be to my son. I have him turn to others to help. I encourage him to talk to other Native adults and elders."

"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."

Many parents live with unresolved historical trauma,¹¹ both for their communities at large, but also for many Native American parents and other parents of color who have had terrible school experiences themselves. This can create impossible expectations for parents to be not only their children's teachers, but also to be their motivators to get to class every day and on time. This trauma is exacerbated when school staff deflect or deny responsibility for their lack of cultural competence and ignorance of history and context.

“[A culturally specific organization] provides for healing from trauma. We provide holistic supports for families and kids. We connect children to their culture, and to their elders. We focus on the spiritual and cultural wellbeing not only for families and kids, but for the whole community.”

“Our [Latino] community needs to overcome internalized and historical oppressions that are way too sensitive to speak about outside of our community... healing and less isolation helps us build confidence to become leaders.”

“I've seen a lot of commentary from black families and black parents feeling, 'Why is my kid always targeted?' 'Why is my kid getting kicked out?' I don't know that the child has perfect behavior and it is unwarranted, but there is a strong distrust around the district as a system and the welfare of children, and a belief that the district really cares. So when the district becomes the person -- I use, again, district in the sort of large amorphous sense, as the person who is relaying information -- if that distrust is already embedded, it becomes very hard to penetrate and have an impact, even if the message is totally sound, positive. I think I've been surprised to see how deeply entrenched that is and

how much it really does impact a person's ability to hear and accept. So that's where the organizations, I think, that are serving community that are from the community, I think that is why they are able to have a different impact. There is already a different foundation they are starting from.”

Acts of disrespect, invalidation of children's futures and racism create deep and pervasive challenges for parents in motivating their children to go to school.

“I watched a white teacher observe a lunchroom full of students. She went up to two groups of Black students and said, 'Did you see the doll on the counter? It's missing.' She did not ask this of groups of white students.”

“[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.”

“My oldest son who was in the public school was told at one of the schools here the best thing you can expect is to go to Chemexico -- which is Chemekata, but is it Chemexico, and that is the only place you are going to get.”

“[My son] had to get his grades up to be in the police academy. I think he was asking one of the teachers to support him in that class specifically. She was, 'Oh, no, you can't do it,' [and] 'I don't think you are going to make it' and things like that. So he has to kind of quit for a few months, because he doesn't get this class up enough to be in the police academy. He was, 'Well, she is saying I can't,' so that was making him going back instead of forward.”

The focus group concluded that forcing a child back to school isn't always the best response -- sometimes, the most compassionate response is to stay home with a child for the day so as to reinforce their lovability and dignity.

This type of situation was repeated in focus groups time and again, amplified as pervasive concerns about racism and racial equity by many parents, and by almost all parents of color. The focus group concluded that forcing a child back to school isn't always the best response -- sometimes, the most compassionate response is to stay home with a child for the day so as to reinforce their lovability and dignity. In a way, this becomes what, in the employment context, is called "mental health days" -- meaning taking a day off for a reason other than being sick. We heard from parents, children and community partners that parents sometimes just want their children to stay home to be with them. Some students said this was exactly what they needed to prepare themselves to return to face bullying, or to face a teacher. Some parents said they knew they needed to give their children a break. And community partners said that while they understood that every day away from school was like "*stealing a day from their children's future,*" they were reticent to judge it or to further suggest that parents are inadequate in making such a choice.

"Sometimes I tell my mom about the drama that actually does on at school, and sometimes I'm just too sad to go to school because of the drama."

"I've only had to do that maybe once or twice... something and you are dealing with, so you don't really want to go to school. You just stay home and just contemplate on that or something."

"[My mom] asks me a series of questions like she is a psychologist or something. She decides if I'm -- because of drama and bullying and stuff like that, she is, OK, you need to face your problems, but you can take one day off and then you have to go back the next day."

The focus group expressed that parent outreach is more successful when facilitated by community-based organizations, and more specifically by culturally specific organizations when parents hold non-mainstream identities such as being of color or being newcomer immigrants and refugees.¹²

"[Culturally Specific Organizations (CSOs)] need to reach the parents that [schools] can't... with a team -- that's the only way we are going to get things done."

"I have [school districts] verbalize that they don't have community partnerships. A lot of them don't know how to go out and engage community organizations, so that is a challenge if you are in a rural community and you know you have an issue, but you are not equipped to address it... [even] strategies like home visiting [by school districts] -- I think it is a great strategy, but I know a lot of people are intimidated by knocking on someone's door or going to an apartment complex and kind of engaging with families in that manner. But I think it is a really effective strategy. It builds relationships with families. It depends on who's knocking on the door."

"I think CSOs [are] trusted. Sometimes what we have seen are teachers misinterpret a kid not showing up for school as intentional. They might be at home taking care of the kids. They are not going to raise that issue, and if the teacher is inquiring or someone is inquiring that is from the dominant culture, they may not pick up on some cues that culturally specific adults or organizations might be able to tease out what the real issue is... having someone that knows and can tease out the real issue may be able to troubleshoot"

around those issues and problem solve with the school. Likely, our families are not able to raise the issue unless there is someone who understands their experience and they trust to kind of reveal their situation. More than likely they will just say everything is fine or not even engage.”

“[Students and families of color] need to meet and be with people who look like them, understand their plight and their worldview and represent that world view to mainstream whoever it is, so mainstream educational systems or whatever it is. Those are the folks that need the help the most. We always have within our communities, there are those people who have barriers, but they can navigate any system. If you point them in the right direction and give them some basic information, they can navigate that system pretty well. It is those folks who don’t understand the system, the system is really foreign to their culture, both the culture that they come with and their culture of living within what we do. Those are the ones that need culturally-specific services the most.”

“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.”

Relationships: Students/Families with Community Based Organizations (CBOs).

This research involved oversampling parents and students of color in order to ensure that we heard from those who were facing the largest disparities in both chronic absenteeism and education in general. They voiced appreciation for the range of culturally specific services avail-

able to them. From the parents of students in culturally specific schools, we heard that the primary reason for these shifts was to leave intolerable regular schooling experiences, because, “No parent wants to see their kids fade and destroy their future.” They turn to services where their students were more assured of culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive schools where students of their children’s race were more prevalent than their previous school, and where educators and school staff were “likely to look like them.” When students were in such spaces, parents expressed appreciation for several achievements:

“We started first with the teacher and myself, and then it went to the teacher, myself and my son, and then it went to the teacher, myself, other teachers and my son. So they didn’t just give up and say, “Oh, look, he is just stupid” and move along. [A culturally specific school] just reached out the olive branch all the way to try and find out what kind of solutions we could all come to, to benefit him.”

“My little guy, he just switched school so he just joined [a culturally specific school]. One of the reasons we made the switch was he was getting to that point where he didn’t want to go. Every day, it was, ‘I don’t want to go to school, I don’t want to go to school.’ I could see a parent, after some time, say ‘Wow, could I take a sick day?’ because you just get worn down by that crying and fits and the ‘I don’t want to go. I get in trouble, it is boring’ -- whatever the reason is. But now he is excited about going to school.”

“They said, ‘We don’t send kids home. We work through it.’ They don’t say, ‘You didn’t get your work done so go sit out in the hall by yourself and the rest

of the class is going to watch a movie.’ They get a treat and you are punished. They don’t do that here. It helps to see kids that looks like you. For me, and I imagine for him, too, it is the feel, the energy, the commitment feel that you get from everybody at the school. We are not going to give up on your kid. We are all here to support you.”

“We love that [our culturally specific school] loves our kids.”

Relationships: Schools with Community-Based Organizations. There are many community based and culturally specific organizations working to support students and families across Oregon. We heard from roughly 50 organizations about their experiences and analysis of challenges that students face in getting to school on a regular basis. We heard a far-reaching set of concerns, such as rising needs and shrinking dollars, alongside similar concerns voiced by parents and students about the challenges facing families, whether they were newcomers, navigating a racially biased system, living in poverty or with disabilities.

“[Schools] need to be able to handle a bit of the disorganization that Culturally Specific Organizations bring in. Here’s a story about what worked: [the CSO] was invited into a school to help the principal learn how to do parent engagement. We did a parent literacy program, used peer teaching, and figured out how to link parents to help teachers... and kids began tracking the time they spent reaching... the principal was so enthusiastic. Now the school is filled with parents; they are coming in all day long. This huge barrier has been removed... but we’ve only been invited in to [about 1/7] of the schools in the district.”

“The Superintendents often want you in the schools, and those one level down want you there. But the school leads don’t want you there. So our roles get narrowed. We really need to be involved in the discipline system to make sure kids of color don’t get suspended when it isn’t necessary. Getting involved at that level needs school cooperation.”

Theme IB. Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices: Classroom and School Opportunities

This theme identifies the less relational and more service-specific types of challenges that give rise to student disengagement from school.

Greater curricular options. Students gave considerable voice to the need for greater curricular options. Some, who were headed for higher education, were impatient with electives that were not tied to their future learning:

“They make me take classes I won’t ever use, and I don’t have enough time to focus on the courses that really matter.”

For students not immediately headed for higher education, *they wanted classes and programs that would position them for jobs after leaving high school*, with or without a diploma. The disappearance of classes that support career exploration and trades preparation has been documented by the Oregonian as shrinking from 943 to 638 (or a loss of 48 percent of the programs) between 1995/96 and 2013/14.¹³ Both students and parents see this pattern as very harmful for students who are not going on to higher education. The heavy weighting of classroom content on academic subjects is defeating for many

high school students who participated in this research. Many such students try to get their diplomas because they know it is a prerequisite for an array of jobs (although they do not know which ones require it, but they know it can lead to higher wages), but staying in a class when one is not meaningfully engaged or when the courses are irrelevant to their futures is a huge barrier to regular attendance.

“I’m trying hard to get a diploma. I need it... I think... to get a job.”

“I’m going to school to get my diploma. That will help me get a better job.”

“I came back to school just to finish. Too many jobs need me to be a graduate.”

“Some schools have career building classes and I am into that, career building.”

Rural parents (particularly) were concerned for the narrow prospects many of their children had for gaining a diploma and also for their prospects after graduation.

“There just aren’t enough jobs here. The mill just closed and the jobs that are available are taken by adults who get hired over students.”

“Our kids need a hand in getting jobs. It’s too hard out there for them.”

Parents struggle to motivate students when they, too, find that students are repeating material or learning content that they do not perceive as useful for their futures. Parents in the focus groups stated that if courses were relevant, if students saw their usefulness in getting better jobs,

and if they were able to actually link with future employers, they would be motivated to get to school. And parents would have much less ambivalence about sending them to school every day.

“I used to have meetings and meetings at the school with the principal, counselor, psychologist, four of us and me as a parent. They used to ask him, ‘What do you want for your future?’ He just say, ‘I just want to be an architect or whatever.’ [He eventually dropped out.] He is working now in construction, but general labor. Now he has realized that he wants to go back to school.”

In rural areas, in particular, student opportunities for employment were scarce and the hoped-for support for either job placement or trade training rarely materialized. So many students who, in their own opinion, were unlikely to attend college, felt that their schools had failed to prepare them for what was increasingly seeming like a bleak future. Rebuilding the options to help students gain exposure to the trades, and to provide solid programming in job preparation and work placements is a strong recommendation across the regions we visited. Students in urban settings, with the variety of opportunities that exist, were less despondent.

“My son can’t pass the school exams so he’s not going to get his diploma. He’s not been able to get ready for work... there’s nothing the school really helped him with... [My recommendation is to] make sure the schools and teachers work for kids like him. Not everyone is going to go to college, especially from around here.”

Students found career exploration options helpful for their understanding of a range of jobs:

“[A culturally specific organization] shows us different jobs and lifestyles. Like what [she] was saying about the different opportunities... they bring in people who will have good jobs and show us what they do and then people who had a chance but messed up and showed us what happened to them and stuff.”

One superintendent gave voice to the dream of creating a large job preparation space where partnerships with local industry could allow students to get exposure to the skills and technical knowledge needed for various occupations.

“If we could build it, they would be excited to come to school... it’s worked elsewhere... many of us want to do it here too.”

Engaging curriculum. Students emphasized the need for more engaging curriculum. The research team estimated that about half of students and parents said that classroom experiences were not sufficient to keep students engaged. Stories of students simply being bored by teachers, or experiencing pedagogy as tedious were shared – everyone, routinely, wanted active learning to be a part of the classroom activities. The focus groups revealed that another dimension of disengagement was the relatively poor alignment between student aspirations and interests and course offerings. Some students wanted to focus on required courses and the option to drop electives that would not get them into college, while others wanted better electives so that they would have something to look forward to in their day.

“[What’s good about school is] getting an education and learning new things...if you go to your classes, you study and do work that involves and affects your life.”

“[School] prepares for your future career.”

“I’d like to have a class here [at a community college]... to get us started on what we want to do when we get older. For our senior year everything comes together and we start making those decisions.”

But many shared beliefs that they do not believe that they are learning enough.

“I wake up at 6:00 every morning and am here, and I want to be able to actually learn something. I want to go home and say, ‘Mom, this is what I learned today,’ instead of ‘What did you learn today?’ ‘I don’t know.’”

A majority of students who participated in this study felt that they are not getting the quality of education they need to succeed. Since they believe that school is the key to having a stable future, they are frustrated and upset by being in this position. Students and parents talked about teaching styles, contrasting their unique experiences with “hands-on” curriculum and discussions relevant to their lives which were vastly preferred over the more standard, but more frequent, experiences of rote learning at their desks.

“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.”

“Schools encourage left brain thinking on students, instead of the creative right brain. They focus on the boring and not anything creative. The left and right brains are different parts of your brain, and the right has art and music and creativity. Schools just don’t really focus on that at all and ignore it, kind of.”

“You get a dictionary and [inaudible] and then he tells us to do it. No help. He sits in the corner.”

“For some kids, like for my little guy, just having 7 worksheet papers stapled together and saying, ‘Here, do this,’ doesn’t work for him. To have that be what’s done every day -- I remember going to a parent-teacher like check-in conference because he wasn’t getting his work done. And he was sitting there and I was sitting there, and more than once she said, ‘I know he can do it. He is just not trying.’ It’s not a matter of him being able to do it. It’s about being the teacher not being focused on getting him involved. They also discussed teachers’ knowledge levels and experience with course content. In one instance that captured the tension and discomfort of learning from a teacher unfamiliar with course materials, a student in a rural location described getting a correct but different answer from the teacher, being told that he was wrong and disrespectful for contesting the teacher, and then ultimately being told that he had been right after all. Students interpret the message that they must be deferential to the teacher, even if the teacher is mistaken. They also gave voice to the problem with teachers not being prepared for class.”

“Sometimes the teachers are learning with us. That’s what I find with so many teachers.”

“Sometimes you probably do want to take this class or you are in this class, but the way the teacher teaches it just doesn’t communicate to you, and you just don’t understand. When they teach it, they probably do understand it, but when

you are learning it, they are either going too fast or are in their own little world, and they understand it, but the students don’t understand it at all. I don’t know, maybe it is that teachers have different techniques of teaching, but maybe they should listen to the kids to see what kind of technique or format they should teach it, in a way that the students will understand it, not only them but the entire class.”

Experiences with substitute teachers were cited as extreme examples of this lack of content knowledge. Students of color described attending classes with long-term substitutes who could not teach the content of the original class. The students had no opportunity to learn in these classes, and felt that their education time was being wasted.

“[Now the Chinese class] is called ‘enrichment’ on our schedules and all we are doing is sitting around doing homework. I feel like the school should at least be coming up with a different class to do, instead of Chinese, if we are not going to have a Chinese teacher, because the substitutes don’t know Chinese. So we don’t have anything to do but homework.”

“They will get a friend who was a teacher, but they didn’t teach that subject, and the stuff will be confused, and asking us what are they supposed to do, and we don’t know. We are supposed to be learning.”

Students described the inattention of teachers simultaneously as a “good thing,” and as “unhelpful.” Many described being unable to receive help when they asked for it because they were told they had not “earned” help.

“It is rough on me because I ask for help. Not a long time ago, but before winter break, I had asked -- I went to retake a test and I asked him for help, and he said that I goof off too much and I don’t ask him for help in class, so he didn’t want to help me with the test.”

Improved academic supports. Students described instances in which they have been met with belittlement, sarcasm, and no more chances, and they broadly agreed there is a pervasive problem with teachers who respond to incorrect answers with harsh responses. In these classrooms, a student’s misstep or inadequacy on any given day led only to punishment and humiliation, not support. Students noted that falling behind with unhelpful teachers led to a downward spiral from which they could not recover. Once students fall behind in these classes, they often cannot receive help, continue to do poorly, are labeled a “bad student,” and receive increasingly hostile treatment. They are less and less willing to subject themselves to feeling helpless and receiving hostility instead of support, so they skip the class more often. They noted that the less the student attends the class, the more hostile the teacher becomes, and the curricular repercussions for falling behind accumulate.

“For me, if I come in late he starts picking on me more for the harder questions. If I do a full page, except I miss one, he looks at my paper and picks me on that one question that I missed.”

“They just let you go. They don’t talk to you... Yeah, they give up on you.”

“They already know that you couldn’t do this and don’t do anything about it.”

“[Parents need] a designated time before or after school where they can spend with you and the teacher together.”

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

There were other instances of teachers reaching out and supporting struggling students:

“I have this teacher who puts in extra effort to make sure that kids actually pass his class. So he will have after school time when we can come in and we retake tests and he will individually talk and help.”

A few students of color who were not struggling academically said they felt lucky to avoid the negative attention they saw others receive, and had no expectations of receiving positive attention or garnering respect.

“We are doing fine by ourselves.”

“You do your work and they don’t really ask anything. That is a good point.”

The impact of not successfully engaging students in learning can be devastating:

“The first time I heard him say ‘I’m not smart,’ I was, ‘oh, god, I’ve got to get you out of here.’ I’m not smart! I know I am not giving him those messages at home. So to feel like -- for somebody to say he is just not trying, he would cry at home and say, ‘I’m trying, I’m trying.’ To say ‘you can do it but you are not trying’ and you know inside that you are trying harder than you have ever tried, so he comes up with ‘I must be not smart.’ Yeah, the importance of what you say sticks with these little ones. It makes a huge impact.”

Classroom management challenges.

Students from most sites were upset and frustrated by the management of other disruptive students in their classes, creating resentment among students, contributing to a hostile school climate. Notable for students of color, in some instances, this frustration was expressed as a dislike of and prejudice against students of other ethnicities, and deepening racial divides in the school. In others, it was dismay about their teachers' inability to manage their classrooms and the consequences those who are *not* disruptive face as a result. These students who are not disruptive were upset that their education suffered, and also felt unfairly punished when whole-class incentives were taken away because of a handful of consistently disruptive students.

“If there is one kid who will always be acting out in class, it is continuous, every single day. Every time you have that teacher, and I’ll get punished for it. We have this jar full of marbles... this kid kept acting up, so we all don’t get the pizza.”

“Teachers give kids with reputations for being in trouble and stuff like that, they give them too many warnings, and they do affiliate them with everybody else. So everybody else has to pay a price.”

Students frequently voiced compassion for teachers who are unable to manage classroom dynamics. Students offered explanations for these teachers who are not effective, citing systemic problems such as inadequate resources and large class sizes:

“They are not funded enough, not nearly enough funding. This school has no money for anything like basketball or textbooks.”

“Yeah, she haven’t talked about no money, about how she gets paid. I know she stays afterschool for kids, even though she is not supposed to.”

Numerous students believe no support is available to them for bullying, getting teased, and excessive *“drama”* at schools. Students in every focus group raised bullying and *“drama”* as a concern, but ensuing discussion was brief, limited to agreement about the lack of resources and support for managing bullying. Some bullying incidents were attributed to racial differences, and teasing was also connected to being an English Language Learners and the use of multiple different languages in school. In a comment that sounded close to desperation a student said:

“I just wish we all spoke the same language.”

He was so tired of having students make fun of his inability to speak English, and then once he spoke English, they made fun of his accent.

Racial bias. The majority of parents with children of color expressed concerns with racism and with the overwhelming white educator population.

“If they don’t know how to teach that child when it comes to diversity, it is not going to work. The other part of it is they need to have teachers in the school systems that look like us. All of our kids go to a school where people who are there look like them. They are comfortable. When you walk into an office, someone in there needs to look like you. When you walk into an office, you need to feel comfortable when you walk in the office, or when you walk into the office, you don’t need to be looked

at because you are African American and they feel some type of way or they don't want to deal with you, because they have had a bad experience with this mom or that moms. They kind of categorize you with everyone else. When you walk in, I am not everyone else. I am coming in there for a reason and a purpose. I know how to speak with you, first of all, and second of all, don't put me in that category because you had a bad experience with someone else. That's why I said, it needs to be diversity teaching all the way through the school, starting in the office with the principal, the secretaries, the teachers, the janitor, the person in the cafeteria, the SUN school coordinator, the person in the afterschool programs, the coach, who everybody is working with children. Everybody need to have that teaching or everyone needs to have that training or everyone needs to have that piece of it. There needs to be more African American people and Latino people and Russian people, everybody."

"My daughter's [white] kindergarten teacher said, 'Your child doesn't want to talk to me. You've got to tell her to talk to me.' That's so wrong. [The teacher] needs to build and create the environment and the relationship. Don't make me tell her to talk to you if she doesn't want to."

"What do you do when the person who insults a student is a teacher? It takes a super-confident child to say something, even to their parent."

The power of racism also gets embedded in parents as they wrestle with the harshness of enduring stereotypes that have harmed their psyche.

"Teachers really need to be aware of what they do and how it affects kids. I remember as a kid being like, that kid gets picked on, that kid is being bullied by those teachers. I am not going to do that because I don't want to be picked on. Then I was thinking, 'what does that kid feel every day, getting picked on by your teacher?' ... The kid never hears someone say, 'You know, you are really good, you are a good reader.' Why [go to school]? What is the point?"

"I had a friend that, he is an adult now, and he went to a school in Southeast, and I'm not even going to say what school district or whatever it was, but he was an adult. He saw his old teacher there. He said 'hi' to her and she says, 'Oh, I remember you.' She was like, 'Yeah, you were a thug.' He said, 'You taught me in 6th grade and I was a thug? What made you think I was a thug? I've gone to college, I've graduated.' He is justifying himself to this teacher as an adult and he is 30-some years old and feeling like a little kid standing there talking to her, trying to justify who he is... he walked away from her feeling like, 'Dang, I was in 6th grade again,' but he was a grown man. That's what I'm saying. People don't realize the power of words. When you put it out there, you cannot take it back, number one. And for two, when you put it out there and you speak it over our kids, that is negativity, and I don't want it around mine. If you are doing it to mine, I'm going to call you on it every time, I don't care what school you are at. You don't get to do that. I don't do it at home, and you don't get to do that to them either. That is just the bottom line."

Professional development on school culture and climate.

In the Oregon landscape of budget cuts and reduced school calendars, one of the first things to go is professional development days. Districts face difficult decisions on how to prioritize in this climate. District leaders note that there are both barriers and resources for effective professional development for promoting an inclusive school culture:

“We make training available but teachers just don’t come. Or them come once and think they are all done.... They also get defensive and shut down their learning.”

“We’d like to partner with teacher’s unions to better support racial equity in schools. We’re beginning to build these relationships.”

“We have made strong gains in Multnomah County through the Eliminating Disparities Collaborative. School superintendents work with culturally specific service providers to address core issues like disproportionate discipline. We have all passed racial equity policies, and conducted an assessment of racial equity in our districts [through using the tool we developed called ‘Tool for Organizational Self-Assessment related to Racial Equity’¹⁴] and that’s now available for everyone to use.”

Theme Two: Systemic barriers

In addition to the theme of culturally responsive practices, the focus group data expressed a number of systemic barriers as key contributors to chronic absenteeism.

Unaffordable Child Care and Inadequate Living Wages.

Students have responsibilities at home that make it harder or sometimes impossible to get to school. Occasionally, they need to stay home to help with maintaining the household so their parent can go to work, or so they can communicate for their non-English-speaking parent. Students who act as interpreters for their parents have more occasions than others to miss school. A sizeable number of students also had to care for their younger siblings; this added responsibility in the morning made it difficult to catch the bus to school. Other students also mentioned caring for their parents and/or grandparents when they’ve been sick. Finally, a handful of students maintained jobs after school and late into the evening that help support their families financially, but leave little energy for attending school. Since our discussions were in group settings with peers, it is likely that we did not hear about the family struggles that are most difficult to share. While paying for childcare is an alternative, the costs are typically prohibitive, and this typically leads to older children covering for younger children.

“Parents leave a 12 or 13-year-old in charge of the siblings and take them to school. The older brother, they just make the decision not to take them to school and they might stay at home... it is expensive to them to pay \$5 dollars to pick the kids up and drop them to school... it isn’t worth it for them to lose that wage.”

“For me, our situation [inaudible] 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.”

“When both parents work, the parents don’t want to pay somebody else to take their kids to school. Parents want to economize money. They only want to pay one hour to take them to school and one hour to bring them back from school. They want to pay one dollar for an hour. If they pay the person who is doing the child care, it is not worth it for them to receive a dollar per hour.”

“Sometimes the parents don’t want to pay a babysitter and they have to work. They let the older children take care of them.”

Settlement Supports – Interpretation and Communication Dependence. When asking about the causes for keeping a child at home, parents gave voice to the caregiving responsibilities they rely on older children to address. These issues were biggest for newcomer families who sometimes rely on children for translation or sometimes for getting around town. But this also extended to non-newcomer families where children need to be at home to let tradespersons come in to make repairs or to install services. This is needed when parents have jobs that limit their ability to be home.

“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. I think that is not good,

because we are putting the responsibility on the kids, saying that they need to get their siblings ready to do to school. I feel that that is not right. This is bad but sometimes that is a necessity for Hispanics. [Sometimes our] kids are not in school because they are helping us.”

“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.”

Newcomers struggle with these issues in pronounced ways. Absolute dependence exists, until adults learn some English and learn how to navigate their region. This also unsettles the family’s relationships as children gain considerable influence over their parents, due to the dependence. The unintended consequence of educating the student while not simultaneously empowering the parents is the creation of a power dynamic from which some families never recover. While these difficulties have always existed for newcomers, there are fewer language supports and a greater imperative for finding work. The urgency to become self-sufficient (for refugees) has intensified, as financial support access is not adequate. The end to food stamps for many families in poverty (as of January 2016) will intensify the needs for expanded settlement supports for newcomers. The link between student attendance and supports for settling parents suggests a need to expand such supports.^{15 16 17} Newcomer parents struggle with many settlement issues. Parent reminds us of the imperative that they hold for immigrant students to be successful in school:

“We need to be conscious. We need to make our kids aware of how important education is. We all, parents and immigrants, we are here for the same reason. We didn’t have

many opportunities. We didn't have opportunities for education. If we had [inaudible] at our country, we need to give the opportunities, provide opportunities for our children so they are not in the same situation as us."

"A lot of us didn't go to school from the same culture. We as parents, we go through tough situation and don't want the same for our kids. We are not the same. There are parents who think that money, making money is more important. They are working at a young age. We as parents have the authority to send our kids to school."

Lack of Transportation and Timing of the School Day. We heard of many instances where students cannot get to school because of transportation. This is a factor when students miss the school bus or public transportation, and in rural regions where there is highly limited public transportation. Sometimes, too, families cannot afford bus transportation or to keep a car on the road (or are denied driver's cards because of their citizenship status) and families cannot get their children to school. Poverty, too, drives students into jobs to help the family pay the bills, and students sometimes oversleep after being kept up late to work and/or do homework.

In rural regions where there is highly limited public transportation, missing the school bus or public transportation makes it impossible for students to get to school.

For many families, it is difficult to get children to school every day. School buses are inflexible, with children missing the bus if delayed by merely a couple of minutes, and most regions of the state do not have public transportation alternatives. The

mere act of missing a bus that stops, for example, at 7:58am for two minutes, means that students cannot get to school for the day. This is worse for families whose parents are at work, or who are still sleeping from working the night shift, or, are struggling with conditions of poverty. In these cases, older children are also needing to get younger children ready for school and out the door. For any parent who has tried to stick to an absolute timeline of departure from the house, we need to remember how difficult this is and the full spectrum of skills and creativity it takes to hurry along some children. Older children lack such skills. About 20 to 25 percent of absences seem to be attributed to this factor.

"[Students] are watching their siblings during the day because their parents get up early. If they don't get their siblings to school, they don't go to school. There are these dynamics and other things are hard. Who is making them go, if the parents get up early and go to work before you go, and you are supposed to do it yourself."

"The families where both parents work and they put the older one in charge of their siblings to send them to school. They are 13 or 14 years old, they are not responsible. It [should not be] their responsibility to take care of their siblings."

In response, many parents gave voice to the need for a late bus. If there could be just one bus for the district that picked up children who missed the bus, then students would at least be assured of a half day of school (or more), instead of none. Too many families are without reliable transportation so they require school busing options.

In addition to greater bussing options, parents are hoping for informal networks to be created, and for them to be connected with these to expand opportunities for shared transportation solutions.

The level and severity of student discipline issues while on the bus was noted as particularly troubling. In one school district, the equity interventions began with the bus drivers, because that was the first point of contact for students. Stories were pronounced about disrespectful bus drivers, with them leaving the bus while they could see the students were close to the stop. It is not uncommon for students to face exclusionary discipline for not sitting still, which means they could be suspended from the bus for minor behavioral issues, which significantly affects their ability to get to school during the suspension period.

Part of the challenge is the lack of alignment in the hours of the school day with the work day, which is particularly difficult for single parent families without much of their own safety net in getting children to school:

“When we were at Head Start, you could drop your kids off at 7:00 and pick them up at 5:00, and for our work schedule, it was easier to do that. That way it was more of a buffer. It is hard to get to school right at 8:00 when I need to be to work at 7:00.”

“It is dark. You don’t want your kid standing out there waiting for the bus. That means the kids have to get up at 4:30 or 5:00 to get ready for school and that is very difficult. That is why they are late and that is why they are absent.”

“I think it would be good that the school develops something where that allows parents to be late or to adjust their schedule in order for us to be able to take our kids to school.”

Parents also noted that the timing of the school day should be better aligned with what is known about the teenage brain and its unique pattern of circadian rhythms.^{18,19} Several studies from the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement show that moving students to a later start (closer to 9am) had a strong positive impact on student attendance, and a weak positive impact on student achievement. The biggest positive impact is on the learning environment which was “happier.” A reminder from the research that if a district does this shift, a long lead time is needed as parents need to align child care, transportation and figuring out what to do if only some children in their family start later:

“Mine is not a morning person. She likes school when she is there, but getting up in the morning is a struggle for her, every morning. She is just not a morning person.”

Health-related barriers. The literature indicates that when students do not have health care – including oral health – they are more likely to miss school.^{20,21} One research synopsis states, “When health is an individual factor for why students do not attend school, school-based health centers, school nurses, case management and health insurance have been shown to reduce rates of absenteeism.”²² The issue stretches beyond just sick students, and affects older siblings who have to stay home to care for sick younger siblings. There are also challenges with unclear policies and practices about what to do when there are health issues.

As stated by several stakeholders interviewed for this research, determining when children should be kept home and when they should be sent to school can sometimes be difficult. A basic understanding of the risks to the child and to other children is an important public health message, but one that is not widely available, nor are these messages generally culturally responsive. It is important that such communications be shared across the school system, available online in an array of prominent languages and readily discoverable.

When we turned to the experiences of parents in this study, parents most often felt equipped to decide when to send their children to school and when to keep them at home. Their typical benchmark was to keep them at home if they had a fever or if they were vomiting. One challenge is what to do when parents are at work and one of their children is sick. Without guaranteed sick days (and the ability to use these days to care for a sick child), parents need to leave their children alone, or miss their wages for the day(s), or have older children stay home to care for them. Parents expressed a need to improve sick leave policy across the state for those families with full-time work.

Some parents feel pressure to get their children to school, and it may not result in the wisest of decisions:

“When my kids, sometimes even when they are sick, I send them to school. I tell them it is okay, go to school. When they see you are sick, they will send you back, but at least you are not going to be absent.”

Also, with regard to health, clarity about head lice is needed. While parents did not raise this as an issue for their children,

health-based stakeholders raised this as a concern. The first recommendation is for myth-busting to occur. Continued shame surrounds this issue, suggesting that parents have not kept their children adequately bathed or their homes clean enough. This is likely of particular concern across some communities of color, and the public health department is advised to work assertively to understand the ways various cultures carry such shame, and to advocate for letting go of such self-deprecating responses.

A community stakeholder shared that Multnomah County Health Department had conducted parent surveys about the health-related reasons why students are absent from school. At the top of this list was head lice. Most districts have a policy that students need to be nit-free before returning to school. Newer information is available from public health nurses that *“as soon as you apply a lice-killing shampoo, kids can go back [to school].”*

Educator workforce that does not demographically mirror Oregon students. The rapid diversification of the demographics of Oregon exists both as a training and awareness issue, and also as a structural policy issue of school districts hiring mostly white educators. The result is that educators do not match the cultural, linguistic, citizenship status, or racial identify of students and their families. We also have a mismatch in terms of economic stature, whereby educators hold middle class economic status, while more than half of students are in poverty or low income (meaning living above the poverty line but below incomes that are double the poverty line).^{23 24}

Many teachers who participated in this research expressed considerable amount of fatigue, a sentiment that was echoed by their administrators who are being asked to understand a student body with a much higher level of diversity, and additional needs (often related to poverty, settlement, and employment conditions) that place stress and sometimes trauma on students. Oregon's school population is becoming more racially diverse, with the last five years moving from 31.6 percent students of color, to 36.3 percent of color by 2013.²⁵ Increasingly, this means that there is a mismatch between the teacher population and those whom they teach. A rapidly diversifying student population is being taught by white educators (with teachers of color at just 8.5 percent, while students of color make up 36.3 percent of the student body).²⁶

Both parents and students, along with administrators and other stakeholders, voice concerns about the cultural divide that exists. Some educators emphasized their belief that it is their responsibility to understand what is happening in students' lives and to learn about the cultural perspectives that shape students' beliefs about education.

"The teachers don't resemble us, they don't understand us, and they are intimidating.... We know that teachers are being trained to be more culturally inclusive and more inviting. We don't see enough of it in the school. [Many] are intimidating."

"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 all of us [educators] around this table deal with... different cultural identities and customs sometimes or different holidays that we deal with, and for those folks and those families sometimes they value that more than possibly their children going to school. So trying to meet with those folks and find out is there anything -- it is a pretty complicated situation."

"We train about culture. Those of us [educators] who are ready to listen and want to reflect and adapt and change what I do, I will do that. If someone next to me rolls their eyes, 'It's another initiative. It's the flavor of the week, next.' How do you have the rubber meet the road? ... I don't think it's an intentional thing, but I also think it's a not knowing piece. There's an education piece there that is very valuable when it comes to making other cultures feel welcome in our schools...people have to be willing to acknowledge that they need that. If you ask people about how they feel around another culture or whatever, you get statements like, 'I treat everybody the same no matter what color.' You get statements like that, which on the surface is OK, but in reality there should be some celebrating the differences and recognizing differences, and adjusting schools for differences. Being exposed to that and why that matters, there's a huge education piece there that we don't do in teacher training programs or in districts. There's some work that needs to be done there, but we're headed in that direction now."

Educators also raised the additional unfortunate reality of teacher burnout in discussing the direct educator relationships at school that affect student attendance.

“I have two ... teachers who work in a very challenging classroomTheir attitude towards their work is, I think, really impacting the kids so much so that when the kid is not at school, they do a hoorah. Those are their challenging kids. I wouldn’t want to come to a classroom if the attitude from my teacher was, ‘I really don’t want you here, and I’m going to pretend today that I want you here.’ So, some of the reasons why they don’t want to come to school, it could have nothing to do with what’s happening at home, or it could be a combination. I do think we have some educators who don’t treat kids right.”

“I think all the teachers want to be the best they can. The demands on them can take away their best abilities, or their best qualities.”

“... A supplement resource ... is only effective if it is part of a cultural change in a building. You can throw mentors left and right and you might see a change and you might not, but you wouldn’t even know why it happened, the change. The lift -- it is two-pronged. If it is about state investment, this is a place to look at adding supports, whether it is from culturally specific partners, whether it is from the state taking a harder look at DHS resources, piloting a project that is putting 6 of them in our schools to do attendance. But on the practice level, for schools, it is about culture change... contractual issues, cultural issues, political issues, but it is about that unified system.”

“If [schools] couldn’t increase the amount of staff, I would say any kind of training on compassion or child development. People seem so out of sync with child development. Social and emotional development is huge, and I think many of the people I know at [culturally specific school] are there because of that. My son has ADHD and is in class, and he is totally accepted. Today I had this meeting and I said, “Should we shorten his day? He is maxed out at the end of the day.” They said, “No, we want to have him the whole day.” I said, “You are kidding me.” It is amazing. Other schools would say, “Get [him] out of here.” [Their] is compassion, cultivating compassion and community. It is huge and that is not in the schools. So that whole knowing about the development and behavior management in a compassionate way.”

Some participants pointed to the value of having language access in the schools.

“All of my kids went to Rigler and they up until now I don’t have any complaints about Rigler. We have a principal who speaks Spanish. The secretary speaks Spanish. Now there is never an excuse [for failed communication].”

Class sizes challenges. Parents focused a lot on smaller class sizes, believing they were important for their child’s learning, but mostly because it would let teachers stay in touch better with families and provide more individual support.

“Yeah, they could have more than one [teacher] in the classroom, or teacher’s aide...”

“It seems it would be more cost effective to just have smaller class sizes and better trained teachers.”

“[My daughter] is not able to get [individual attention] sometimes, because there are so many students. She might be scared to ask a question or something sometimes, because they are just going to say, “We will get to the questions later,” or the teacher is busy to where she don’t have the time to sit down and actually explain something to her. She has to come home and I have to hear it later, that she is having challenges in math or something. Luckily there are the afterschool programs, like [the culturally specific program she attends], helping her to work on that, because in the classes it is hard to get that explanation sometimes, because the teacher has to move on. One student has a question and then others have questions, too. Sometimes a teacher will make that time to answer that, but with the large amount of students, it is hard to get to everyone.”

Teachers, too, recognized that larger class sizes meant they had to overlook individual student needs.

“My classes are big... at mostly 35 and higher. It might be my subject, but it’s hard. Getting students focused and getting through the material is tough.”

Students gave voice to this as well:

“[I want my class to be] less crowded because for me it is easier to learn in classes with less people.”

“We had 28 kids in a class. I didn’t even know everybody’s name. Show up to class when the bell rings, this is what the work is, do the work and then go home. Then I started to just hate school. It was like I was wasting my time, almost. I didn’t feel like from 6th grade to 8th grade that I didn’t learn anything.”

Smaller classes are a means to ensure that students are getting enough individualized attention to understand key concepts before moving on. When remedial attention is needed, it ideally comes from one’s own teacher. Important, though likely of reduced effectiveness, are community based organizations that provide tutoring and homework help, teacher aids, and parent volunteers.

Impacts of standardized testing.

Educators expressed high levels of concern that the current focus on standardized tests has taken up too much classroom time and educator focus, as well as how much rapidly testing requirements have changed.

“That’s our number one complaint – and it’s probably the issue that limits our ability to focus on racial equity in the schools. Educators are too pressed to pay attention to much else than figuring out how to prepare students for the tests and how to help their students do well on the tests.”

Community stakeholders gave voice to what they see as an overemphasis on testing and the ways that this can undermine a child’s confidence. While they are not opposed to standardized tests, because these have placed the evidence base on racial disparities, they want more useful tests that do not consume so many teaching hours and educator focus. Sometimes, it seems, that teachers get consumed by measuring performance and reduce the amount of time they devote to more interesting and engaging classroom activities, shrink their focus on helping students catch up, and reduce their engagement in relationship and outreach to parents. Community members are concerned that the growing resistance among educators and some parents is serving as a distraction from the essential needs to address institutional

racism and culturally unresponsive teaching, too-few partnerships with community based organizations and culturally specific organizations, and too-few educators of color in the schools.

stakeholders envision that such testing and performance accountability metrics will be difficult to design but certainly not impossible.

Parents, too, voiced concern about the heightened focus on standardized tests.

“Why do school systems all over the place, base everything on tests? It doesn’t make any sense. It has never worked. It is never going to work, because the kids are too different. Kids are too different. They learn differently. Standardized testing is not the answer. It has never been the answer, and they base it on funding. That is why they want the tests. They want results, but how are you going to ask results from children? Little children have that responsibility based on them, that pressure. That is one of the things that I don’t like about school. I don’t like standardized testing at all. It doesn’t work.”

Community advocates also articulated a need for assessing the cultural responsiveness of administrators and teachers. Proficiency in culturally responsive pedagogy as well as the disposition and ability to connect with community based organizations (CBOs) and culturally specific organizations (CSOs) as well as with parents, needs to be a core performance requirement for hiring, retention and promotion. Standards need to exist across the institutions that recruit, train, certify, license, hire and promote educators into roles that hold power to influence the education of all students. Specifically, these standards are needed in higher education with respect to testing and graduation, in terms of licensure of teachers and administrators, and as they relate to both hiring and performance evaluation of all educators. Community

Students in Focus

While chronic absenteeism does impact every community (and not just those who are absent), it also has an even more exacerbating effect on two groups most affected by the systemic gap: students with disabilities and Oregon's Native American students. Starting with the former, students with disabilities learn to harness their strengths in a school setting that requires disproportionate testing, dozens of educational meetings, and various personal and academic challenges. We conducted interviews with researchers and professors in Social Work and Education at Portland State University, leaders of disability advocacy groups (Oregon Disability Commission; Women with Disability Health Equity Coalition, National Advisory Committee of Autism, Direct Care Alliance and Disability Navigators), a health advocacy group (Upstream Public Health, Stand for Children) as well as a focus group with eight mothers of students with disabilities. What follows are five findings:

Focus Group: Students with Disabilities

The field of Disability Studies²⁷ in academia, as well as the field of Special Education in the practitioner world is complex, multi-faceted, multi-layered, often institutionally centered and both arenas interact with social, cultural, historical, legal, and medical discourses. A growing number of special education scholars have challenged the scientific-medical framework that positions disability as a deficit, a pronounced deviation from the norm.

The Chief Education Office and the Oregon Department of Education analyzed aggregated data using student charac-

teristics to portray a nuanced picture of the overrepresentation of students of color in special education in Oregon. The data explains that about 19 of every 100 black students in Oregon schools will be identified for special education, about 18 of every 100 Native American students in Oregon schools will be identified for special education, and only 13 of every 100 white students in Oregon schools who will be identified for special education (OEIB, 2014). More specifically, when comparing the Racial/ethnic population of students in special education classrooms versus general education classrooms, African American students and Native American students are overrepresented, where 3.7 percent of students in a special education classroom are African American, but only 2.5 percent of students in a general education classroom are African American (OEIB, 2014). Similarly, 2.4 percent of students in a special education classroom are Native American, but only 1.7 percent of students in a general education classroom are Native American (OEIB, 2014). This is compared to a much smaller difference in white students, where 66.1 percent of students in a special education classroom are white and 65.1 percent of students in a general education classroom are white (OEIB, 2014).

Uncovering the context of overrepresentation through patterns of identification for each Race/ethnicity, the Oregon data showed evidence of specific disability categories that served a disproportionate amount of historically underserved students. These disability categories were either more stigmatizing or non-medical diagnoses that are operationalized as avenues for educators to act on implicit bias. For example, emotional disturbance and intellectually disabled have historically been the most stigmatizing disabilities

in special education. The Oregon data analysis described that 21 percent of students identified with emotional disturbance are Native American and 33 percent are African American, versus white students who account for only 15 percent of the population of students identified with emotional disturbance. The data also described that 22 percent of the total population of students with intellectual disabilities are Native American and 24 percent are black, versus white students who account for 14 percent of the population of students identified with intellectual disabilities. Another account of overrepresentation uncovered by the data showed that Pacific Island students accounted for 28 percent of the total population of students identified as hearing impaired, versus white students who accounted for only 8 percent.

Operationally, most schools represent the “normative model” that depicts society’s notion of the binary delineation between normal and different (Artiles et al., 2002). School culture reflects this “normative model” by responding to those who are “different” through categorization based on unmarked norms of white, able-bodiedness that influence their interactions with school institutions (Annamma, Morrison, & Jackson, 2014). The overrepresentation of students of color in special education in schools and a possible under-identification of students of color prior to school age requires an examination from a multivariate perspective to address the within-child deficit paradigm that perpetuates the normative model existing in school culture.

Variables that classify students in the normative paradigm include disability, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and cultural differences, each of which are

related to the negative notion of being different. Similar to the normative model, the medical model of education focuses on how these factors define a “defect” in the child, which ultimately detracts attention from external institutional variables like teacher and school practices that require conformity (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Specifically, the medical model exacerbates the way students of color are depicted in the traditional special education scope (Annamma, Morrison, & Jackson, 2014). For example, Heubert (2002) explained that as institutions demand standardization and homogenization, without an inclusive environment, special education serves as a space for students who cannot be assimilated into this conformity (Ferri, 2005).

The discriminating normative and medical models can be dismantled through policies and legislation that fight seemingly neutral language, which only reinforces white, able-bodied mentalities (Annamma, Morrison, & Jackson, 2014). Statutes and legislation that are “race neutral” provide administrators and school personnel the opportunity to make biased subjective decisions. The medical model diagnoses based on judgments about what is typical, explained by disabilities that refer to biological, psychological, or social factors outside of the normal curve (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Most school institutions follow this model of diagnosis to apply remediation for disabilities; yet schools do not often consider the cultural or historical context of students or the external factors contributing to differences (Annamma, Morrison, & Jackson, 2014).

Finding 1: Disproportionate diagnosing is often the result of racist and classist biases. Current diagnoses for disabilities include externalizing behaviors such as disruptions, noncompliance, and

Operationally, most schools represent the “normative model” that depicts society’s notion of the binary delineation between normal and different (Artiles et al., 2002). School culture reflects this “normative model” by responding to those who are “different” through categorization based on unmarked norms of white, able-bodiedness that influence their interactions with school institutions

excessive lateness or absences. While these behaviors may be problematic, they are typically a symptom of internalized challenges, and certainly not necessarily reflective of a behavioral disability. Such externalizing behaviors *not* grounded in a disability are more likely to develop for students who feel unwelcome and uncomfortable at school, who are potentially misunderstood by educators of a different culture (particularly for disabilities such as Communication Disorder), students who have a first language other than English, and students who do not have individuals who can advocate for them to get individualized help. As such, these instances of misdiagnoses are more likely to be for students of color and students with economic disadvantage, a finding that is reinforced in the literature.^{28 29}

Finding 2: Early diagnosis is difficult when access to medical care is limited.

Early diagnoses and support for a student with disabilities is challenging particularly your family is living in poverty, which is more likely if you are a student of color. Early diagnosis and positive early relationships with educators are both critical to enabling students with disabilities to establish and maintain positive relationships with educators and the school system and increase attendance. Yet, students of color and/or with economic disadvantage and certainly students who do not have U.S. citizenship are not as likely to have either of these experiences, since both require access to resources and time, as well as family and student ability to engage with the educational system.

“[Interpreted] [Her daughter] went to school, since the 1st grade here. They lived in California, and she went there in the 1st grade, but the mom always told the teacher that my daughter has problems. They say, oh, no, the problem is because she doesn’t speak English

so wait. So she was staying in a regular class until 4th grade. She never received support, special attention, special teachers for that.”

“When my son was in elementary school, he has a big problem just with one teacher. ... he doesn’t want to go to school. Sometimes he feels very afraid with her, too. ... He says, everybody is talking and talking, and she always [targets him]. She doesn’t understand about his problem... I went to talk with the principal, the counselor, with his teacher. But the problem continued. Almost every week the teacher sent me emails...his behavior needs to be better. There were no positive things, always negative, negative. I feel it is racist ... But I think teachers, they need to pay more attention...”

Finding 3: Families requested a more robust support network. Parents also described difficulties in getting educators to be responsive and the need for educators to have more training to effectively work with their children with disabilities. Students with disabilities would be helped by increased educator support and greater awareness of students’ disabilities.

“I think not just the teachers, but all the people who want to work around special kids - they should go to a special class and be more trained, because my girl ... They called me from school, and I was always alert on what was going on. It was the secretary from the school, and he was telling me, something happened to your daughter today in school and we just wanted to let you know...No, you are going to call me next time, and I am going to be there...I told her that I needed to talk to the principal, ... I told her, I need to talk to her. Well, she is not here. She already left the office.

Well, I am going to talk to her Monday. Oh, no, she is on vacation. I am going to leave a note and she will call you back. She never called me...I think everybody who is going to work with the special kids have a training, at least one or two trainings per year for those people. Call the parents. I am not invisible. I am here, call me and let me know what is going on with my son, how I can help.”

“We tried, ... my husband tried to contact the counselor, once, twice, and the third time we have a meeting.”

“My friend said, I’m so tired. Every single day the teacher has something to say about [X]. ... Every single the day the teacher complained about [X]. So one day ... the teacher was complaining to the mom, about, and he is listening, he is right there. The teacher complained about [X] being so bad and his attitude and nah, nah, and whatever. ... For a few days, he doesn’t want to go to school. He said, I don’t want to go to school, and that surprised me because he loves his school. ... But after they said this, from the teachers, who would want to go to school. They know they are going to be ignored. Who would want to defend it?”

Parents interviewed did not always expect or trust educators to support their children appropriately, and instead shouldered that responsibility themselves. Every parent participant in our focus group had one family member reduce or change their employment status to be more available to care for their child and advocate in school for their child.

“I used to have my job full time. Since then, I work part time, because I have a lot of appointments with [my daughter]. You have a lot of appointments for her, and to me, no matter what ... That is kind

of hard... The last job I got, they told me bye-bye, because I told them when they hired me. I have a special [child] and they said, if you have a problem that’s fine. But when there is the time I have to leave early, because of an appointment, and I got fired... You can get depressed, because you have to deal with home [inaudible] and you are not going to tell them, but on the other hand, you do need the money because you have kids and you have bills to pay.”

“So now my husband is having a part-time, because she needs to go to school. We need to drive her to school and bring her back home. Now we are trying to adapt our schedule to her. It is hard, because it is less income. But the first thing is her help.”

“No, you are going to call me next time, and I am going to be there, because I won’t work, I am going to be there. I am not happy with that. I said, no, you call me. Don’t do that to my daughter. I was mad... that to me was a big, big huge issue when they call me and said your daughter [had an incident], but we already talked to her. No.”

Finding 4: Chronic absenteeism may be a false label in this context. Separate from these issues of class and race is also a basic question about chronic absenteeism and disabilities, namely does the label “chronic absenteeism” make sense for students with physical disabilities? The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) recognizes 12 disability categories. In each category below, we identify the overall chronic absence rate for students with these primary disabilities. (Please note that these diagnoses do not necessarily mean they are receiving special education services.)

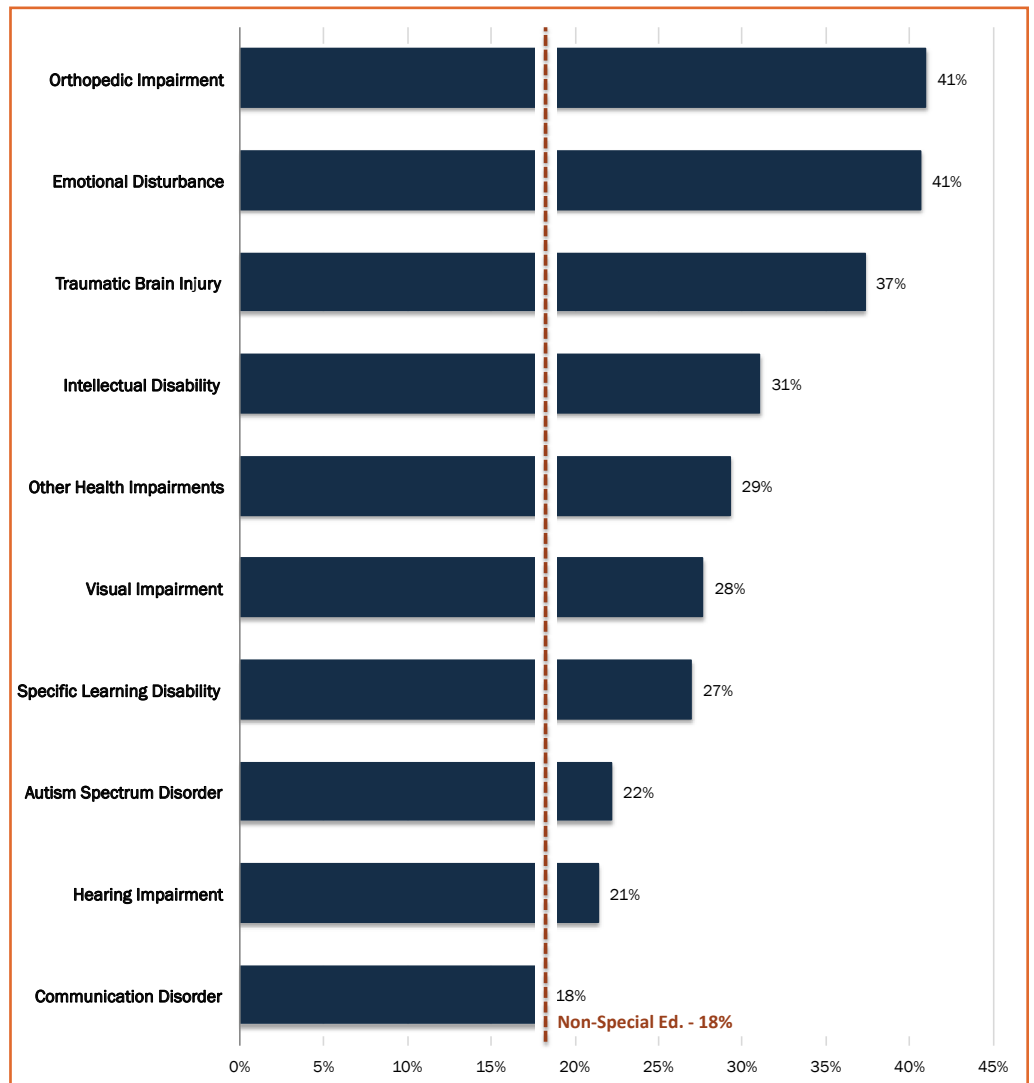


Figure 14. Percent of Students that are chronically absent by primary disability, Oregon, 2013-2014.

Note: These diagnoses do not necessarily mean they are receiving special education services.

Source: ECONorthwest analysis/ODE data.

The physical categories that require medical treatment are causing a large number of absences, and these rates are equivalently high among students with an emotional disturbance. It is currently unclear how such absences are managed from school to school and district to district, especially since students are dis-enrolled from the school

system after 10 consecutive absences. It is possible that students with such disabilities are dis-enrolled and enrolled again a number of times, and therefore not considered absent. Just as likely, students might have agreements with the school regarding attendance. Regardless of the specifics of how such absences are handled, it is likely that there is no consistent means for managing them, thus rendering the data for these students inaccurate.

Finding 5: Effective placements are inclusive and less restrictive. This focus group revealed a preference for a more inclusive academic setting. Further, rather than focus on managing the difficulty of educating and parenting students with disabilities, the strengths of these students must be celebrated, and their weaknesses accepted and supported, just like any other student. Students are not engaged academically with a structure that isolates them and has low expectations: Parents described classes for students with disabilities as homogenized across grade and academic levels and not at all individualized, and one expert corroborated parents' opinions by describing such classes as "holding tanks" with no specialization or individualization.

"If you go to any school with a disability class, they don't have any homework. They just go to school and play. That is what they do..."

"They [have] one class with let's say 10 or 7 kids and every kid has a different specialty. I think they should have -- because some of those kids need more help, and some of those they don't. I notice some of those kids, they are really smart."

"[Interpreted] She went to a school... a special school for her, but when she saw they had a lot of kids -- that is what I was thinking, with bigger problems. She said she had nothing to gain [inaudible] the kids, but they had a bigger problem when she saw those kids with Downs Syndrome and she thought, no. Her problem is different. I don't want my daughter here."

The disability-based experts who were interviewed provided analysis of the challenges that they believe lead to high absenteeism levels. While providing Special Education is,

"... essential for providing extra dollars and accommodations... it is a double-edged sword. [Special education students] are siloed, segregated and separated from their peers. They are distinguished as different and not capable. How they see school, how they behave, leads to isolation. School culture [defines] them as different and treats them with an attitude of separateness."

These experts explained that meaningful inclusion and elimination of the extant stigmas and prejudices from the day-to-day experiences of students with disabilities; as long as the school environment remains "hostile", students with disabilities' desire to attend school diminishes.

Not only does this problem exist for students, it also exists for special education educators who are also separated from mainstream teachers, making it far less likely that collegial resources about programs, interventions, and workshops get shared with capable students with disabilities; students with disabilities thus get fewer opportunities.

“[Students with disabilities don’t get referred to programs outside the school [and there are] promising programs with such potential. There is such restrictions of opportunity for kids with labels. Teachers locked in on the special education side [of schools] many not even know of such opportunities... [They typically] don’t get offered access to everything from GED programs, night school, computer-based credit retrieval opportunities... sometimes smaller school districts move through some barriers, because faculty know each other. In a larger system, they are siloed and... [information does not flow through] the bureaucracy.”

One example cited is My Life, available through Portland State University that provides transitional supports for youth leaving foster care and establishing independence. Approximately 40 percent of youth in foster care receive special education services, yet very few referrals come from educators.

If students are given the opportunity to be mainstreamed, their first opportunity is typically in a non-academic class such as art or gym, rather than an academic class. These classes hold limited opportunity for student success, partially because they do not coincide with the necessary school climate improvements that would address the earlier noted stigma and prejudice but also because there are often unfamiliar structures that can challenge students:

“With their less predictable structure and familiarity for students, [these] are the classes in which many students with disabilities are least likely to be successful. [I have a child who] could understand the rules better in the regular classroom than [these non-

academic classes]. The students from special education classes weren’t following them. [And again] my son had a failing classroom experience.”

Sequencing the flow of mainstream and special education classes tailored to each student is a best practice, which requires both resources and staff who understand and can adequately support each students’ strengths and needs.

Finally, focus group participants mentioned that their children often had better experiences in elementary school and learned more there because they had more opportunities for individualized attention and schoolwork than they did in middle and high school. Participants expressed that a combination of relationships with educators, parents and students is needed to navigate student placement decisions (including mainstreaming decisions), alongside prepared educators who can work effectively with students with disabilities in both mainstream and special education settings. At the same time, the group pointed out the need for initiatives that can support the effective inclusion of all students and parents; welcoming, inclusive and affirming environments are essential to reducing absenteeism of students with disabilities.

Focus Group: Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR)

The second group in focus is the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Before we launch into statistics on absenteeism, income, unemployment and more, let us first

establish a common understanding that the CTUIR is a nation that:

- Is governed by a Constitution and by-laws adopted in 1949. The Governing body is the nine-member Board of Trustees, elected every two years by the General Council (tribal members age 18 and older),
- Has day-to-day business of the Tribal government that is carried out by a staff of about 520 employees in departments and programs such as natural resources, health, police, fire, education, social services, public works, economic development, and dozens more,
- Has many Tribal members who still practice the traditional Tribal religion called Washat. Some still speak their native languages. A language program is underway to preserve and teach the Tribes' languages,
- Has a Umatilla Dictionary now available for language learners—from fluent speakers who want access to the written language, and beginners who speak English-first, to students learning the Native language at varying levels, and
- Operates a newspaper and radio station.

CTUIR is a sovereign nation within the nation of the United State of America residing in Oregon. Three public school districts serve CTUIR, with Pendleton School District serving the vast majority. In spite of the CTUIR's strengths and capacity to contribute to schools and the larger community, Oregon schools are not meeting the needs of the CTUIR children.³⁰ This focus section is necessary because there is a broader context of factors that limit the success of children from the CTUIR.

As with the other regional visits, four focus groups were conducted with CTUIR parents and students (ages 12 or older), local educators, and community stakeholders. Additionally, data has been analyzed from the American Community Survey. As with other regions, we also have the results of customized micro-file data analysis from the Oregon Department of Education's (ODE) information on chronic absenteeism, conducted by ECONorthwest, a partner in this study.

While the ODE data does not allow us to identify the absenteeism rates for students of the CTUIR, it is highly likely that the majority of the students who identify as Native American in the ODE data for Pendleton School District are indeed from the Tribe. For Native students, the data is slim. We have an additional data problem with how ODE tracks student identities: Native American student identities are collected, but when such students identify themselves as members of additional races, their identity "disappears" from the Native numbers. When students identify themselves as Latino as well, their identity is subsumed under the Latino numbers. The cross-identification between Native Americans and Latinos is high, with this pattern reflecting both mixed-race identities as well as Indigenous immigration of Latinos from Central and South America into Oregon. Also, when Native Americans identify themselves as white or other communities of color, this identity is subsumed under a "multiracial" grouping. We are able, in our custom runs, to pull out such figures, and have been able to do this with the chronic absenteeism numbers.

Finding 1: Looking at existing and prior interventions is imperative. The types of initiatives undertaken in the region include the creation of a charter school about 10 years ago that is located on Tribal lands and focused on Native American culture, languages, and service to the Tribal community. Also available is a Native mental health service, Yellow Hawk. Indian Education Coordinators are on-site in schools, recently hiring another who is present in an elementary school. Given the centrality of these roles in tracking and supporting Native students who are struggling at school, and the fact the service is culturally specific (with the Tribe responsible for overseeing these positions), the culturally specific supports they offer has been instrumental in the success of numerous students.

Parents and stakeholders also expressed appreciation for a wide range of initiatives including:

- Early morning access to a gym where students play sports and then get a ride to school. play sports and subsequent get help in getting to school,
- Fairly comprehensive information sharing from schools to the home regarding attendance,
- A new grant for improving cultural culturally responsive curriculum,
- Tutoring supports recently secured by one Indian Education Coordinator, and high on the “wish list” for another,
- Family supports such as parenting classes and home visits, and
- Infrequent but important outreach by principals, teachers and the community police officer to students to encourage attendance.

Some initiatives no longer exist due to shifted priorities in host organizations. Bussing is a particular source of strain and stress for both families and children. A community staff member from the Yellow Hawk Tribal Health Center was able to ride along on the bus to support students with the aim of reducing their exclusions, but this ended when there were no such ongoing supports from the organization. As well, the community police officer’s hours have been reduced for similar roles in supporting attendance: he had been checking in at some problematic bus stops in order to reduce bussing conflicts.

In addition to the support services, the community makes heavy use of the quasi-judicial system to intervene with students who are chronically absent. Rather than a “last chance” intervention as has been seen in other jurisdictions, the Pendleton School District uses this intervention frequently. Two options are available to the School District from proceeding with such intervention. The first is the Community Accountability Board. This is the Tribal pathway. The Community Accountability Board (CAB) is an effort to keep Native children out of the formal court process by providing alternative disposition options. This diversionary approach is staffed by volunteers from the tribe and works from a problem solving as opposed to disciplinary approach. There are some frustrations with how long the process takes for decisions to be made and it is not uncommon for students to have been chronically absent for a few months before going before the CAB. It is also possible for students to go before the Tribal courts, should the CAB resolution not be possible.

Educators in this study emphasized their desire for students to be sent more quickly and with faster resolution through the

quasi-judicial system. Their sense was that students seen in these venues were more likely to then attend school regularly. While this is a valid emphasis, there have not been studies done about the impacts of such interventions and the differential impacts on students. Concern included financial impacts, long-term benefits, and mental health impacts.

While elsewhere in this study there are calls for a moratorium on such interventions until we know the outcomes and impacts of involving students in the judicial and quasi-judicial process, we are reticent to call for the same in Pendleton School District, given that Native American students are engaging in a culturally-specific process, run by the Tribal leaders. We flag these potential concerns and recommend research to learn of the longer-term outcomes of such interventions.

Finding 2: Historical trauma impacts student attendance. At the margins of discussion about the causes of chronic absenteeism, some quieter voices of parents and educational advocates demonstrated a more sophisticated understanding of barriers in getting students to school. These insights focused on both the history of colonization as well as current manifestations of a school system that has not placed the success of Native children at its center.

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. Residential schools were part of federal policy from 1879 (the Carlisle Indian School) until the late 1900s, following the implementation of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978, which gave

permission to parents to refuse that their children be placed in boarding schools.

“Children in these schools were denied access to effective and culturally appropriate parenting models and we are now into the ‘great grandparents’ generation’ of residential school survivors.”

Further, this historic trauma continues to infuse the community, as cited earlier in this report. There are some basic parenting approaches around accountability that were emphasized among Tribal members, believing that parenting programs could be useful to families helping parents set boundaries and using an array of strategies to hold their children accountable for their wrongdoings, including not going to school.

There was also recognition – again infrequent – that many Native parents have had difficult experiences in their own education. It becomes difficult to consistently emphasize the importance of school attendance when one doubts the value of such schooling and when acknowledging the degrees of racism that are part of both historic and current school climate. There were several stories of parents who talked about their children having little interest in schooling and a dead-ended sense of their own futures as a result of this:

“I was [getting] C’s as a student. I didn’t care. I wanted to get away. I did everything I was supposed to do and I didn’t care if I got a C. Just let me graduate and get out of here. It didn’t help me in my life.”

A synthesis of these relational challenges between parents and the school district is that effective parent engagement is deeply curtailed. As outsiders to this community,

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.

the researchers in this study experienced the environment as one of judgments on the parents and their ability to parent their children. Again, while only at the edges of conversations heard through this research, the frustration of parents exists for being judged by the school district:

“As soon as you judge me, and I know you are judging me, I’m not working with you.”

To amplify this disjuncture, several stories of particularly insensitive encounters were shared:

“The other day, I had to go home [while meeting with the Principal]. The principal just kept nipping at me, nipping at me. Finally, I just blew it, ‘Can you wait? I’ll deal with this when [I come back].’ He just kept going and kept going... they need to learn what respect is at these schools, because sometimes they.... don’t have it.”

“Sometimes the teachers just keep going, keep going and going... Don’t keep hounding the parents.”

Of ongoing concern for parents is that there are too few educators with Native identities, and the existing pool of white educators have too little understanding of Indigenous histories and Indigenous cultures. There is also a significant class divide between teachers and the students and families they serve. The following quote emphasize these divides.

“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.”

Beyond this analysis of the divides between educators and students is a significant level of pain:

“One of our topics was historical trauma and I think they really need to hire someone to do that in general. It is still effective in our generations today, our young generations. It shouldn’t but it is.... It is painful for them.”

Returning to the concerns from the researchers is the imperative to share and connect the experiences for CTUIR with the broader constructs of this research study. While there are elements of parental follow through that might be helpful to support students, absent from the dialogues of educators was a sense of responsibility for the ways that the schools fail students. We have referred to these previously as the “push out factors” that contribute to student disengagement. While student disengagement is most obvious in high school, it does also show up earlier. When parents are ambivalent of their own school experience and the desirability of their children to be in that environment every day, there is fertile ground for chronic absenteeism. We also noticed the practice of educators and service providers judging parent practices and an absence of self-restraint in providing moral judgments on whether or not they were good enough parents.

In short, the school-imposed barrier is the act of pathologizing families that leads to student disengagement. Accountability for the current state of schools can be fostered through an asset-based partnership with parent and families. In

the absence of this collaboratively-shouldered responsibility, students fall through the cracks, frequently with excessive damage to their self-concept. Says one parent:

“She didn’t think she was smart enough. She didn’t think that anything she was learning she would use later in life.”

Another parent says:

“I think that some of the kids that struggle going to school, I think there is depression and maybe just an absence of hope for some. I think that some, because again, it is maybe about mastery and it is difficult. They don’t feel good because they know they are not achieving.”

If there is any doubt as to the fracturing of partnership potential by one-sided allocations of responsibility, coupled with judgments on inadequate parenting, we are reminded of the parent who says, “As soon as you judge me, and I know you are judging me, I’m not working with you.”

Finding 3: Exploring bus transportation options to school is critical. Bussing is an issue of heightened concern for parents and community stakeholders, citing two major and interrelated concerns: the travel time on the bus, and the frequent exclusions that occurred due to behavior on the bus. Families identified that travel times of 75 to 90 minutes to get to and from school were standard. There must be solutions that do not require students from the CTUIR to routinely be those with the longest travel times. Combined with bus drivers that may not utilize or have knowledge of culturally-responsive practices, and a system that is sometimes arbitrary (with videos of problem behaviors not being shared with the parent), the

problem can be intolerable for some families:

“I have eight kids out at my house that all use the bus system. Half of them are kicked off the bus right now... they don’t want to take my kids to school... [the driver] won’t wait for them to get up that little hill [even when it is freezing outside]. [Once] my son dropped his books and he had to stop and pick them up, and the guy just left.”

“[The school] unbelievably they don’t actually know what is going on with the bus... it is the bus driver himself who is having an issues with so many of the families out here.”

“They dropped [my child] from the bus with no notice. I didn’t have time get other plans in place so he missed school for a few days.”

Finding 4: Examining special education policy with regard to this community is an important next step. Numerous parents identified challenges with gaining supports needed for children with disabilities. While the scope of this challenge is unknown, the dissatisfaction can be intense, with a tendency (again) of defining the problem as that of parental inadequacy, with one parent saying:

“[Teachers need] more training with kids with disabilities like my granddaughter with ADHD. They keep telling me that I need to go to training, and I said, ‘I’m not having the issues here... you guys are at the school.’”

Parents generally understand the IEP process to be one that can access important educational resources for their children, and cited the length for accessing this is problematic:

“I kept writing [my request for disability testing] in her planner... ‘Please, can we get her tested soon?’ She is finally on an IEP... it has taken forever to get the school to help. We are working a lot at home with her. Now there is a possibility of a second diagnoses... it is a lot of advocating, a lot of phone calls that I have been making, just trying to get her the help she needs.”

Sometimes, parents themselves understood their own cultural barriers to accessing disability supports:

“My dad said ‘no’ to getting help with an IEP. So my son is doing it on his own, without help.”

Shifting opinions on issues such as this will need to occur within the community itself. Providing culturally specific supports in both the identification of problems, and helping parents and grandparents to identify their own stigma-related issues could be helpful in helping students get to and stay in school.

Recommendations

The recommendations below reflect perspectives from across the state and are based in research that centers student, educator and family voice. They are built from the general findings from the study as well as the unique perspectives from the focus groups on Special Education and Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Although the research identified a set of specific topics, these recommendations are structured to be generalizable in multiple contexts:

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

The data clearly reveals the imperative to improve relationships and classroom and school policies. The beauty and the power of this recommendation is that it not only responds to the needs and strengths of students of color, students with disabilities, and students living in poverty, but also that these professional development opportunities 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 including social service agencies, community organizations, churches or other community centers work together to collectively impact school attendance.

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.

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.

Offer engaging content and course offerings.

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.

Conclusion

What is unique about this report is that it is a purposeful examination of our system through the eyes of and experiences of students most likely to be chronically absent.

Despite years of focusing on improving attendance, chronic absenteeism persists in Oregon schools, especially for particular groups of students. This report builds on other recent work in Oregon and nationally with respect to our current understandings of the definition of chronic absenteeism, the links between attendance and success in school, the data for Oregon schools, possible root causes, and finally best practices. What is unique about this report is that it is a purposeful examination of our system through the eyes of and experiences of students most likely to be chronically absent. The voices of these students, and their families, collectively give policy makers and educators a lens to view all of our current assumptions and understandings in a new light. The addition of interviews with educators and community organizations provides a window to the critical assets and systemic challenges of our current system.

The quotes from students, aged 12 to 18, are particularly poignant and sometimes difficult to read. Their statements, along with those of many parents, present a picture of school that must be understood. The generally accepted premise among educators and policy makers is that attending school is a good thing, that it is objective, student-centered, and neutral. However, the fact is that some students and families may be making an informed choice to miss some school based on previous negative/traumatic experiences. Although that choice limits the ability to access school and all it has to offer, it is understandable if you listen to the voices of students and families. Students who experience racism, who are more likely to be disciplined than others, who do not see themselves or their communities reflected in the curriculum, who cannot connect school to their life goals, and whose families have experienced historic trauma associated with schools are less

likely to come to school. In addition, students not attending school are often working in other ways to support their family stability. Although these may be the reasons students miss school, a narrative often emerges in the school that students and families do not value education. This narrative is destructive and has a compounding negative effect on student attendance by creating a less welcoming and more judgmental climate. Therein can begin a pattern of chronic absenteeism. In short, we cannot examine absenteeism as a microcosm of the student but rather a symptom of a larger systemic concern.

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 huge set of circumstances that affect schools and families. The six recommendations from this report attend to these themes and are suggested starting point for any comprehensive initiative to increase attendance. In addition, each recommendation contains identified promising practices that are operating at the school, district, and/or community level.

Oregon has recently enacted House Bill 4002 (2016) that directs the Chief Education Office and the Oregon Department of Education to develop a statewide plan to address chronic absences in public schools. This research study and the existing studies previously referenced, provide a critical foundation and a set of design parameters to develop a plan that results in positive changes for every school and student.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 ECONorthwest, 2015. The overall absenteeism rate in high school is 29 percent.
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- 5 Attendance Works is a leading research and policy advocacy group to address chronic absenteeism. Their work encompasses numerous dimensions of the issue including their "what works" website section which details abundant examples across the USA. Located at <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/>.
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- 8 Community-based organizations (CBOs) are non-profit, non-governmental organizations that provide many school-based services. They may also provide "school-linked" services whereby they provide services offsite, typically in their organizations, often providing transportation for students to go from the schools to the organization. Such services are typically funded by local governments to provide such services, often as anti-poverty initiatives. These organizations are also likely to be funded by local foundations, and occasionally by the school districts themselves. Funding is typically via grants and sometimes via purchase of service arrangements, meaning funding is tied to each student served. Each organization will be reporting outcomes to their funders, typically tied to the numbers of hours of service, and service outcomes such as various measures of school success. One particular form of CBOs is called a culturally-specific organization which is a CBO that has is explicitly designed to serve a specific community of color. Characteristics of these CSOs are that they are led and also staffed by members of the same community, are recognized by the community as being a resource for them, and that they are functionally accountable back to the community for their success.

9 <http://education.oregon.gov/regional-achievement-collaboratives/>

10 In this text, “more marginalized” refers to those students who are students of color, low income, with disabilities, newcomer, or ELL. The term includes all who hold a non-dominant identity, in terms of oppression and privilege.

11 Historic trauma is defined to include being widespread in the community, that the events generate high levels of distress and mourning in contemporary communities, and that the damage has been done by outsiders to the community, typically with destructive intent.. This definition is taken from Evans-Campbell, T. (2008). Historical trauma in American Indian/Native Alaska communities: A multilevel framework for exploring impacts on individuals, families and communities. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 23(3), 316-338.

12 Newcomers is an encompassing term intended to include immigrants and refugees who are foreign born. Sometimes we include the term “newcomer families” to include children who were born in the USA, but they are living in a newcomer family that will still be challenged by their newcomer status in terms of economic, linguistic, cultural, or social inclusion.

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15 For more information on the challenges facing newcomers, please see: Curry-Stevens, A. & Sinkey, A. (2016). *In need of a long welcome: Supporting the integration of newcomers to Portland*. Portland, OR: Center to Advance Racial Equity.

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- 23 In Oregon, 52 percent of students hold free or reduced lunch status (in 2013/14), meaning they are either in poverty or low income. This information was developed by Children First for Oregon and available through the Kids Count Data Center with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and downloaded from <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/8338-students-eligible-for-free-or-reduced-lunch?loc=39&loct=2#detailed/2/any/false/1249,1120,1024/any/16922>.
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- 30 This data is drawn from the information contained within this report. The data from the Pendleton SD has been compiled by ECONorthwest and is in the chart later in this chapter. The statewide figure is in the opening chapter of this report. Both figures are from data provided by the Oregon Department of Education for 2013/14.

