

Southern Oregon school celebrates attendance that's among the best

White Mountain Middle School students and staff celebrated student attendance success Tuesday morning before looking at how to keep their positive momentum going.

"Tell your families we know they're supporting you to come to school to get a great education every day," said Cynda Rickert, superintendent of the Eagle Point School District, in her opening remarks at the awards assembly in the middle school's gym. "Go home and thank them for me, would you?"

Students filling the bleachers offered round after round of applause for guests attending their awards assembly: officials from the Eagle Point School District, the Oregon Department of Education's Every Day Matters team and the Attention2Attendance program.

Attention2Attendance facilitated Eagle Point's progress in reducing absences, making it a shining example in Oregon with one of the highest attendance rates among school districts of its size.

"We couldn't be prouder," said Phil Ortega, attendance and student services coordinator for the school district.

Ortega has been a leader in the work to get kids to school every day, making countless sit-downs and as many phone calls and house visits during the six years he's been in his position.

White Mountain Middle School Principal Karina Rizo accepted awards on the school's behalf from the state and the attendance program for the school's progress in reducing chronic absenteeism — defined as a student missing 10% or more of the school year.

The school district is reaping the rewards of its labor in 2020, which highlights how promoting good attendance isn't a single-year endeavor, said Marnie Jewell, an education specialist with the state's Every Day Matters campaign.



Andy Atkinson / Mail Tribune White Mountain Middle School principal Karina Rizo holds two awards during an assembly in White City.

Oregon rolled out the campaign in November 2018, after the Oregon Legislature approved funding for a new plan to reduce chronic absenteeism — a rate that includes one out of every six Oregon children, according to the Every Day matters website.

Every Day Matters provides materials and resources to help schools support families who are struggling to get their children to school regularly. Part of the plan involves offering targeted support, in the form of "chronic absenteeism coaches," to school districts identified as needing the help.

Other school districts offer the team insight as to what's working.

"We're actually learning lessons from Eagle Point," Jewell said.

Terra Hernandez with Every Day Matters presented Rizo with ODE's Excellent Attendance Award.

"All of the work that you're doing by showing up is making a difference for generations of your families," she said. "This is a well-deserved award for you all sitting out in the crowd just as much as it is for your administrators, your principals, your teachers. This can't happen without all of you."

Brenda Tapp with Attention2Attendance then presented a second plaque, the Exemplary Attendance Award.

"It's a big deal for me to be here today," she said. "You guys are in the top three of all Oregon school districts with regard to attendance."

With plaques soon to go in the trophy case and the promise of ice cream bars as a reward later, most students were dismissed back to class or to a lunch period. About 20, though, went to the library instead, for a quieter lunch with the representatives from ODE and Attention2Attendance.

After munching on pasta, salad and garlic bread from Pizza Schmizza, the students were seated in a circle and asked to give honest feedback on attendance and their school that the Every Day Matters team could take to kick off its planned statewide data collection.

"Your input is super important," Jewell said.

Rizo asked her students questions about their relationships with trusted adults at school, things they would change about the middle school, and what it takes to get to school and what gets in the way.

Several students who spoke mentioned that they ran the risk of missing something important if they weren't in class. School, they said, was an important place to develop social skills, with one student calling education "the key to your success."

They and their friends sometimes miss class for a variety of reasons, they said. Students might not have reliable transportation, and one boy talked about how he sometimes misses the bus because it doesn't always come at the same time.

Several mentioned the role of parents.

"Some of my friends, their parents don't really care," said Zarahi Lozano, an eighth-grader. "They don't really try for their education. I know that's one major thing that prevents people from coming to school."

The student feedback will help the officials figure out how to fine-tune their ongoing supports for schools and districts that have significant ground to make up. From students to district leaders to state officials, there's a consensus that progress remains to be made.

"We always say, instruction only works when kids are there," Jewell said

For more information about Attention2Attendance, please contact SI&A at www.sia-us.com.

