

# Astoria leaders take multifaceted approach to boost attendance rates

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**A**t Astoria School District officials have been implementing a range of purposeful efforts both large and small over the last three years to make school a more appealing place to be for students—and it's safe to say the work is paying off.

"I had three kids last year who each missed over 60 days of school, and this year, they have not missed a day of school," says Superintendent Craig Hoppes. "That's because we've made connections with those kids and have helped them individually with some of the problems they were facing."

That astonishing feat does not represent the whole picture, however, as Hoppes and the Astoria SD school board have made systemic changes aimed at helping all students rather than focusing solely on those who are the furthest behind.

All four schools now incentivized positive attendance in some way, whether it be through holding special assemblies; publicly recognizing students who don't miss a day in any given month; giving away t-shirts promoting the district's "Strive for Five" messaging; or entering students with good attendance into drawings for free Dutch Bros. hot chocolate.

Astoria SD also recently became one of the handful of districts statewide to waive any fees students would otherwise need to pay to participate in extracurricular activities. The goal was to make sure all students had the opportunity to feel connected to their school, and there is clear evidence that it is already working.

Those three students who went from missing upwards of three months' worth of class time all found connections to their school through athletics, Hoppes says, noting that the district's middle school has seen an especially large influx in extracurricular participation.

Those efforts are paying off in attendance as well. Just three years ago Astoria's chronic absenteeism rate was over 25 percent. Now, chronic absenteeism is at 12 percent and falling almost daily.



**"Last year three kids each missed over 60 days of school, and this year, they have not missed a day of school."**

"Our goal is to bring that down to 10 percent, and we're going to get there, I have no doubt," Hoppes says. "Families are more involved now, and there's been a greater awareness and understanding in our community of the importance of attendance."

That shift in understanding among families didn't happen by chance. Hoppes took on the additional role of truancy officer, and the district moved to implement The Achievement Initiative, featuring Attention2Attendance (A2A)—an early warning and intervention system developed by School Innovations & Achievement (SI&A) to track student attendance and send letters home to families when their child is trending toward being chronically absent.

Teachers in the district also began making phone calls to parents or sending postcards to students' homes with simple, positive messaging encouraging families to reach out if they needed help to get their child to class.

Susan Cook, COO and Leadership Coach at SI&A says the results of Astoria's full court press approach should serve as an example of best practices for other districts struggling to improve attendance.

"Astoria School District has seen an astonishing increase in attendance rates because Superintendent Hoppes and the school board have made improving parental outreach and connecting children to their schools the central focus," Cook says. "These are steps that all districts can emulate to change their school culture to one of showing up."

Hoppes says to further improve attendance, the next step in Astoria is to increase mental health counseling resources for children and their families struggling to make it to school because of common challenges like anxiety, substance use issues, severe school stress or family-related trauma.

"By next year we plan to have even more wraparound supports in place," Hoppes explains.