

Orcutt Schools Update

Being in School Keeps Students on Track

By Bob Bush
Superintendent, Orcutt Union School District

A lot of us grew up with parents who were pretty tough-minded about school attendance. As a boy here in Orcutt, I had to be noticeably ill for my mother to even consider having me miss a day of school. She knew, quite simply, that if I weren't at school, I would not be learning.

In recent years, a substantial body of research has validated what our parents knew intuitively: Being at school is nothing short of essential to children's academic growth.

Multiple studies have found the following: (1) school attendance is a statistically significant predictor of academic performance; (2) students who miss school at an early age are more likely, in later years, to drop out of school; and (3) truancy and chronic absenteeism are correlated with substance abuse, gang involvement, and criminal activity.

In light of this research, the Orcutt Union School District is making a concerted effort to track, promote, and – if necessary – hold families accountable for school attendance.

Our work begins with communicating to our parents, in the district handbook we send home at the start of the school year, exactly what state law says about school attendance. The law excuses absences only for illness; medical, dental, or optometric appointments; bereavement; or religious holidays or ceremonies. All other reasons

given – and we hear them all, ranging from car trouble to parent illness to a malfunctioning alarm clock – are unexcused.

At the classroom and school level, our teachers and administrators encourage school attendance. Teachers in their communication with parents and principals in their school newsletters frequently discuss the importance of being at school. Teachers and principals often recognize students who accomplish perfect or close-to-perfect attendance.

“It’s so important that students are here, because they miss out on so much if they’re not,” says Liz Herbstreith, principal of Ralph Dunlap School. “I’m more than willing to work with families if they have a special situation, or if they have a child who is hesitant to come to school. I’ve talked to kids, talked to parents, even helped with transportation arrangements. The bottom line is that students need to be here.”

Meanwhile, we have improved how we track attendance. Our district’s student information system makes it easier than ever for office staff and school administrators to discern when students are either truant (three or more unexcused absences or unexcused tardies of over 30 minutes) or chronically absent.

Using our attendance data, we have a strong system in place for addressing attendance problems.

Student truancy triggers a letter from the school principal to a parent – which almost always ends the issue. If the student continues to be truant, however, then the district sends a second letter inviting the parent to an after-school meeting at which state law on school attendance is reviewed and parents can ask questions. Subsequent issues with truancy can result in a referral to a Truancy Mediation Team, a referral to the School Attendance Review Board, and/or even criminal prosecution.

Helping us with more severe attendance issues is Santa Barbara County District Attorney Joyce Dudley, who has assigned one of her deputies, David Chen, to track

truancy countywide, meet with families, and handle prosecutions for truancy. “One of the most effective, long and short term, means of preventing crime is keeping children engaged in school,” Dudley says.

Some students with attendance issues can benefit from personal encouragement and mentoring. In our elementary schools, we are grateful to have “Check Connect Respect” mentors (from the Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley coalition) who meet weekly with referred students to promote good attendance and to help the child feel more connected to school.

Some students suffer from chronic absenteeism – which the state defines as being absent 10 percent or more of the time, even for reasons accepted by state law. In these cases, our teachers and principals and often our district nurse meet with the parents to discuss the child’s situation and determine how attendance can be improved.

“Our hope each time we meet with a family is that they will turn things around,” says district Director of Pupil Services Lana Thomas, who monitors attendance and truancy districtwide and coordinates attendance enforcement with Deputy District Attorney Chen. “Fortunately, we have very few severe cases. The interventions we have in place are making a difference.”

Tracking, encouraging, and enforcing school attendance require lots of communication, collaboration, and work. Here’s thanking District Attorney Dudley, Deputy District Attorney Chen, Lana Thomas, our school principals, our teachers, and our school office personnel for their considerable efforts. In the end, recent research has confirmed what our parents knew all along – being in school is how our students stay on course for success – now, and later in life.

Superintendent Bob Bush can be contacted by phone at 938-8900 or by e-mail at rbush@orcutt-schools.net.

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