

Coeur d'Alene schools emphasize attendance as new year starts

Scott Maben/SR

One of the fundamental back-to-school challenges is to get students to keep coming back each day of the school year.

The Coeur d'Alene School District kicks off its new year today with a campaign to reduce chronic absenteeism and stress how regular attendance is essential for academic achievement.

School Board Chairwoman Christa Hazel talked about the "Make Every Day Count" campaign at a gathering of district teachers and staff last week at Lake City High School.

"Ask your families to encourage their student to participate," Hazel said. "Not only is the goal to help each student be successful in the classroom, attendance plays a key role in our district's financial health as our state funding is based on average daily attendance."

Last year that average was 93.5 percent districtwide, and this year's budget is based on that figure. But officials hope to boost average attendance to 95 percent.

"Create a welcoming physical environment for family members visiting our schools," Hazel recommended to about 700 district employees in the high school gym. "Ask them about their needs to be good partners with you in advancing their child's education. Look for ways to engage families, not just involve them."

With an eye on the state's first attendance reporting period, through Nov. 6, the district also will try to motivate students with rewards for showing up. Those with perfect attendance each week in September and October will be eligible for weekly drawings for gift cards, movie passes and other prizes. They and students who miss no more than one day in the first nine weeks also could win an iPad or iPad mini.

Nationally, 1 in 10 kindergarteners and first-graders miss at least 10 percent of instructional time over the course of a school year – about 18 days in most districts, according to a report from Attendance Works, a national advocacy organization, and the nonprofit Healthy Schools Campaign.

The Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University estimates that 5 million to 7.5 million kids – 10 to 15 percent of the K-12 population – meet that threshold for chronic absenteeism.

Students who miss that much school typically experience lower reading scores in elementary school and are at greater risk of failing key classes and dropping out of high school, education researchers have found.

Schools are using special incentives and acknowledgments to play up the importance of attendance.

Borah Elementary School holds a monthly assembly to recognize kids with perfect attendance along with those who are praised for outstanding behavior, Principal Rick Kline said. “It’s a big party,” he said.

The school, which serves a large number of low-income households, also has held drawings for grocery store gift cards among students with perfect attendance.

“What we try to do is reach the parent, because we’re finding a lot of times with the high poverty we deal with in our community, sometimes it’s just a matter of parents not getting the kids to school,” Kline said.

“We just got a lot of families that are struggling right now. And sometimes it’s just a matter of, ‘Hey, I don’t have the gas money to get my kid to school if they miss the bus,’ ” he said.

The value of good attendance was reinforced Wednesday when Borah hosted its annual back-to-school extravaganza. Families were reminded of one incentive that always captures the attention of students: free bicycles from Parker Toyota for fifth-graders who finish the year with perfect attendance.

Kline said Borah’s average attendance was in the low 90s when he started there three years ago, and now it’s about 95 or 96 percent. The school also has pushed to boost parent attendance at teacher conferences, and it’s up to around 98 percent, he said.

“We just feel it’s important to get our parents into schools, get them to be a part of their child’s education and hear the message that we need to send,” Kline said.

The reasons for high absenteeism range from illness to taking care of younger siblings while parents work to simple truancy, said Michelle Williams, the assistant principal at Lakes Middle School. School officials explore each case to try to offer families help, she said.

“So it’s mainly about building the relationships with families and trying to communicate what their needs are and help get them the support they need,” Williams said.

If that doesn’t work, she said, a team of volunteers will go to a student’s home to ask parents or guardians what they may need to help get a kid to school.

“Anytime a student is missing more than 10 percent of a school year, the impact is huge, no matter what the reason,” said Kelli Aiken, a school counselor at Lakes. “It definitely impacts their grades. If you’re not at school, you’re not learning the material, and then it’s a big snowball.”