

TRANSCRIPT

Every Day Counts: Increasing Attendance to Improve Student Outcomes – Welcome and Introductions

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My name is Karl Wilson. I am the State Director of Title I in Federal Programs at the Utah State Office of Education. And I'm pleased to have received the invitation to be a part of this conference today and to welcome you.

This important [event] is part of the celebration and recognition of September as the Attendance Awareness Month and the importance of helping schools help students achieve success as we have them in school.

We have several goals today for the conference. One is to increase the awareness about the consequences of chronic absenteeism, to share examples of strategies that are used to improve attendance, and to promote graduation and success for all students.

We'd like to thank REL West, Utah State Office of Education, and others who've worked to organize this conference today. We recognize that we have representatives from our State Legislature, from school districts, schools, other government agencies and community-based organizations, and we hope that this is a meaningful experience for you as we work to meet the needs of children in Utah.

Let me tell you a little about where this all started. A few years ago, a group of dedicated educators who are interested in ensuring that we help all students make it successfully to graduation and reduce dropout, started to work on an initiative that resulted in the Utah Dropout Prevention Alliance. I believe we have representatives from all 14 schools in that alliance today. We welcome you. We thank you for your insights and your experiences that you'll be able to share with others.

In that process a lot of research was done at the school level about what is it that we know that puts students at risk of *not* graduating from high school? Early warning systems to identify at-risk students were developed and over the years one of the factors that was identified that put students at risk of not graduating from high school is chronic absenteeism.

At the school level, people recognized that it's not the same situation with every family and every child. We need to identify why, and then once we identify why is it that a student is

chronically absent, what are the right supports or interventions to help that student and family be successful?

For me, I like to put a face with the issue. So if you'll indulge me for just a minute, I'd like to tell you about my early teaching experience, and a student who transferred into my classroom who was eight years old and very, very behind in learning how to read and write.

When she transferred into the school, we quickly realized that it was not unusual for Amanda—I use that name because it's my daughter's name and it wasn't really her (laughter)—was typically gone every Friday. But when we got into the middle of winter it became two days a week that she was gone; and then about two weeks before Christmas, she stopped coming to school altogether.

We talked with the principal. We talked with the counselor. And we also talked with other state agencies about our concern. And we decided to work together to find out what was happening in Amanda's life. That resulted in having a substitute teacher for my class for a couple of hours, and a team of us went to the home.

This was a single mother, five children. Amanda, eight years old, was the oldest. When we got to the home, it was a rental, one bedroom, the door would not close, the windows would not close, and the temperature inside the home was right around 35 degrees. And Amanda, with her four younger siblings, were all in bed trying to keep each other warm.

The mother was not there. She was out trying to find work.

Having a policy that all students are in school every day is a great policy, but more needed to happen in order to provide the supports and interventions for that family. DCFS was involved, but it wasn't in a punitive way. It was to reestablish the supports to help that mother care for her children and ensure they were in school. It also took support from other agencies that were able to actually get the utilities turned back on so that they could have heat and light in their home.

And remarkably, after Christmas, Amanda was in school every day, and her ability to learn was seen quickly. She just had to be there for her to develop the skills to be successful. And she was so happy to be in school. It was really hard for an eight year old to be the babysitter at least once a week and to care for her younger siblings when mom wasn't there, and no other babysitter.

Without the right interventions I think Amanda, even at the age of eight, would have been doomed to a pattern of failure in her life. Please reflect in your own experience your Amandas. Who are the students that you have worked with or that you're concerned about in terms of ensuring that they're in a place where they can have success?

Our Utah Prevention Dropout—or Dropout Prevention Alliance—has been working to provide some very good information and suggestions on what we can do to help students succeed.

In addition, today you'll have the opportunity to receive a draft version of a guide entitled, "Dropout Prevention in Utah: Strategies and Resources on the Six Recommendations of the IES Practice Guide on Dropout Prevention."

Dawn—I know you didn't want me to ask you—Dawn, would you please stand for a second? This is Dawn K. Stevenson, working at the State Office of Education, and has helped with a very long, intense task force to provide these recommendations. So later this morning, we hope that you'll have a chance to pick up that draft booklet. We say "draft" because it hasn't gone to the State Board of Education yet. We're scheduled to do that in October, and then it has some great supports for schools and for everyone who's working to help students achieve success and graduate college- and career-ready.

At this point we'd like to thank those who have participated in helping to organize this. We'd like to ask representatives from the State Office of Education who've helped, REL West at WestEd, the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, United Way, Voices for Utah Children, and Attendance Work staff.

If they're here, would you please stand and let us recognize you for your efforts.

[Applause]