

## TRANSCRIPT

## Every Day Counts: Increasing Attendance to Improve Student Outcomes – Opening Remarks

SPEAKER Martell Menlove, Utah State Superintendent of Public Instruction

EVENT TITLE Every Day Counts: Increasing Attendance to Improve Student Outcomes

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KARL WILSON

It is an honor for me to introduce our State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Dr. Martell Menlove, who, when he heard about the issues that we'll be discussing this morning, felt a great desire to clear his schedule to be here with us for a few minutes to show support for our efforts to have every day count in the life of our students and seeking to overcome the challenges of chronic absenteeism. Would you please join me in welcoming Dr. Martell Menlove, our State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

**[Applause]**

MARTELL MENLOVE

I went into education a number of years ago because I thought I could have an impact on the lives of young people. And I hate to admit that I've made some choices that it seems like I keep getting further and further away from the opportunity to have that happen. To those of you who do that on a daily basis, thank you. To those of you who are there interacting with the young people in this state, who are impacting what's going on in their lives, I look up to you, I appreciate it, particularly as we work with those students who are most at risk, and I think that's one of the issues that we need to talk about and need to look at as we work through these things today.

Also, Karl listed those who have been involved. I appreciate those organizations and agencies in the state who have tried to look at chronic absenteeism and recognize that something needs to happen; something needs to happen if we are going to make some changes in the lives of young people and something needs to happen in the state of Utah if we're going to achieve the goals that we're looking forward to. So thank you. There've been some efforts this month already with Attendance Awareness Month and some other things that have happened, and to those who have been involved with that, including the Governor's Office, we appreciate that.

I was trying to think back as I was trying to prepare something to say, similar to what Karl talks about, with an experience of how we really interact with this, and what are we talking about when we're talking about absenteeism and the impacts that has and the effects it has on the lives of young people. As a young principal, my first experience was at Stansbury Park Elementary. Susan Loving—here shaking her head—she and I are probably the only two that

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remember that, but I was young enough at that time that I was reminded by five or six members of that staff that they had been teaching, that they were teaching prior to my being born, and sometimes that was an advantage for me and sometimes it was not. They had a great recognition program at Stansbury Park Elementary. Monthly they had recognized Students of the Month, we would take their pictures, we would put them on the wall, we would have an assembly, we would invite their parents, we'd all sing "We are the superstars, honest, brave and true, we are the superstars, turquoise, red and blue," or something like that.

Several months into doing that I was in a faculty meeting, and we were talking about that, and I suggested that it seemed like we were always honoring the same students and the same families, and you kept hearing the same names over and over again. I suggested that maybe we need to do something to honor students who were not always the top students and maybe we ought to look at some other things like citizenship or attendance. I remember Clifford Gonzalez, who was a wonderful third grade teacher, raised his hand, he said, "Hey, Martell, in my classroom it's all the same student." And I once again was reminded of the critical nature of having kids in school if we really are going to have an impact.

My experience has been, if you look through the K-12 system, you end up with a kindergartener similar to the individual that Karl described, a youngster who doesn't attend. Pretty soon they're behind, pretty soon they're not having positive experiences in school, pretty soon they're behaving differently or poorly. All of a sudden there's some issues there, all of a sudden they stop coming even more and more, all of sudden we know what happens, and this student now eventually drops out and does not complete the system. And often times I believe those things happen because of what initially happens with absenteeism. I've had the opportunity to look at some data from the state and, Kristin, I don't know what you'll share with us, but I was amazed as I looked at . . . across the state, and if we define chronic absenteeism as missing more than 10 days in a year, there are schools in our state that have 40, 50, and 60% of their students who miss more than 10 days in a given year. And a majority of our schools have absentee rates in the low teens or the high single-digit numbers. And to think that we have that many students . . . and again, I didn't take time to multiply out, but we have 620,000 students in the state; if we have those schools, and the absentee rates are at that rate, there's obviously something that needs to happen.

As I looked through that list I noticed that absenteeism is an issue in large schools, in small schools, in rural districts and urban districts. I believe there are certain populations—and I think we'll talk more about this today—of minority students that are more likely to be at risk and more likely to exhibit some of the tendencies we're talking about. And, again, as I looked through that list I was not surprised, but I noted that elementary and middle schools and high schools all have, in certain situations, high absentee rates. I'd be cautious as we look at that data that, it seems to me, like I can't guarantee that we're all using the same definition in collecting the data, but obviously there's some concerns out there that we need to look at. I'm convinced that if we really are going to address poor attendance, we have to look at schools, families, and communities. Those of us in the school system sometimes think we can solve things, but I think in this situation we have to look to communities. We have to look to parents.

I was . . . recently visited Palmer Court. I don't know if you're familiar with Palmer Court. Palmer Court is the old Holiday Inn; I think it was on about 10th South between Main and First West or Main and someplace down that area. Palmer Court is now a long-term residential facility for homeless and poverty, so young families, individuals, can move into Palmer Court. The motel rooms that were there have been refurbished and families are now living in these, young families, because the largest units there are two bedrooms, so you don't have large families there. Head Start of Greater Salt Lake—I think that's the right name—has a location there and we were visiting their classrooms. It was before school started so there weren't students there. Someone asked a question, “Well, what about attendance? Do you have good attendance?” And the teacher says, “We have perfect attendance.” She says, “If there's someone who's not here, I simply walk down the hall to the apartment, knock on the door, and the mother knows that I'm not going to stop knocking until she answers it, and I'm not going to leave until the child is ready to go back with me to school.” And I think, what a great example, and I know there are other schools that do things like that, that are involved in those types of things, but, again, it's an issue we're going to have to work together on.

There's several opportunities recently that people have taken to look at the success of our schools. The Governor's Initiative and Prosperity 2020—66 by 2020, meaning 66% of the adults having some type of certificate or degree—it includes some measures and some metrics for us, also including 90% of our third graders reading on grade level, and 90% of our eighth graders functioning on grade level in math, and 90% of our high school students graduating from high school. The State Board of Education has adopted those same metrics. This month we've released school grades in Utah for the first time. Some controversy with that; some things we need to continue to look at. I am convinced that school grades . . . that acquiring those goals associated with 66 by 2020 cannot and will not occur if we don't look at absentee rates. There are enough students who aren't being unsuccessful. There are enough students who are not proficient at grade level, and absenteeism is a continual and constant factor in that, and so it's something we have to do, it's something we have to move forward with.

I appreciate this day. We have here national presenters. We have experts. We have panels who will help us. We have a nationally known author who's going to spend some time with us. And all those things will be a great day for us today. However, I'm convinced that at the end of the day, absentee rates in the state of Utah are not going to change simply because we've been here. Someone, and I don't know who, a long time ago said to me, “You know, Martell, when all is said and done, there's usually a whole lot more said than done.” And at the end of the day today, there's some things that need to happen. Let me offer some suggestions to you.

One, we need to do a better job, as I mentioned, with parents. We need to engage parents in this process. We need to understand what's happening, we need to somehow get that collaboration, get that partnership working so we can move forward.

Number two, we need to continue with some collaborative efforts that have begun and engage in additional collaborative efforts that address these issues. I appreciate Voices for Utah Children and their efforts recently to talk about absenteeism. Senator Reed passed legislation in the last legislative session that establishes the Intergenerational Poverty Commission. I have the opportunity to serve on that commission and I think that that's another area where we will

work with other state agencies looking at what we can do. The intent there is to end this cycle of intergenerational poverty, but one of the issues we're going to have to talk about, we've already talked about there, is attendance at school and success at school. So there's some collaborative things that need to happen.

Third thing I'd suggest is that we need to look at Utah Code, we need to look at State Board rules, and we need to make sure that we have the incentives right in our funding system for the state of Utah, that we're providing the incentives that will result in students being in school and not students being away from school. You'll see legislation in this next session; Representative Joel Brisco is here. I think you'll see some legislation from him that talks about chronic absenteeism. We've heard in the news that Senator Osmond is looking at some, some modifications, possibly to the compulsory education laws. We need to make sure that as those things move forward, again, that we have the incentives right. I think the State Board of Education needs to come back and look at how we're funding. Maybe we need to readdress once again the concept of whether we're funding on average daily membership or average daily attendance, and make sure that we're rewarding those things that we know will result in improved student achievement.

And, finally, I appreciate the theme of this day and moving forward of this whole concept that every day counts. We need to make sure that every day counts in every classroom in this state every day. I can tell you from my own experience, and, again, I appreciate greatly wonderful teachers and I understand what's happening there. I believe in almost every classroom in this state those things are happening, but I can tell you it is discouraging when children come home from school and parents say, "So what'd you learn today?" and the first thing out of their mouth is "Nothin'." Somehow we need to make sure that every day counts and every day counts in every classroom in the state of Utah.

Again, thanks to those who have organized this, thanks to those who are here, again, particularly to those who are here who are there every day working with the young children in the state of Utah; my hat is off to you. I greatly appreciate what you do and again wish you the very best this day. So thank you very much.