

5th - 12th grade

VA, TX, NC, WI,

elem. 4-8

school improvement

Every Student Has a Voice

middle 3.7
high 3.5

Attributes	Mean	Frequency
Overall, how satisfied are you with your school?	3.60	
I have a best friend at this school.	4.38	
Teachers make me feel my school work is important.	3.80	
At this school, my opinions seem to count.	2.93	
A teacher seems to care about me as a person.	3.92	
In last 7 days, I received praise for doing good work.	3.01	
I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.	3.71	
I know what is expected of me at this school.	4.19	
I feel safe at this school.	3.60	
I am always treated with respect at this school.	3.12	
I have a chance to choose how I learn	3.33	
I have a teacher who inspires me..	3.39	
What I'm learning now will help me in the future.	3.91	
I looked forward to going to school each day last week.	2.97	
This school makes me feel good about myself.	3.47	
I know I will graduate from this school.	4.64	

Legend

N:

1 = "Not at all satisfied/Strongly disagree"

5 = "Extremely satisfied/Strongly agree"

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All the excuses: After 31 years in the classroom, Kearney Senior High School teacher Gary Stubbs has heard all kinds of excuses from students who miss or are late for class.

Tackling Truancy

Broad Approach to Absenteeism Making Inroads in Kearney

For every student who skips a class or a day of school, there's a unique reason or excuse. During his 31 years teaching business, Gary Stubbs has heard most of them.

One student missing from Stubbs' classroom is living by himself, and has no family structure to encourage him to attend. A 16-year-old single mother has missed Stubbs' business classes to take care of her sick child.

"Another student was here for two days, but is now MIA. Another was here for a week, but not since," said Stubbs.

Attending class is not a priority for every child. But through a new program instituted last fall, Stubbs and his Kearney Senior High colleagues are working to lower the school's truancy rates.

Kearney's approach uses incentives and attendance grades to encourage students to attend daily. When the school's efforts fail to alter a student's behavior, the Buffalo County attorney steps in, said Trent Steele, assistant principal.

Initial results are promising. The best week this year had 62 percent better attendance than for the same week during the previous year, said Steele. There have also been unexpected results: an increase in tardies.

"It's a better-late-than-never result. We have more kids

getting in the door. For some, getting in the door is a victory," he said.

County Attorney Shawn Eatherton said improved school attendance today means a reduced caseload for his office tomorrow.

"We can show that students who have problems attending school will some day become the adults that we prosecute," said Eatherton.

While the chronically truant are still prosecuted, Eatherton said the idea is to alter the behavior of the occasionally truant before their tendencies become chronic. The real results won't become evident for years.

"If we're working with freshmen and sophomores now, it will be years before our office sees any real results," he said.

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Open Campus

Kearney High has had an open campus for 40 years or more. Under that setting, said Steele, students with self-discipline do well. Others do not.

"For some, the temptation to leave campus was too great," he said.

Steele and other teachers and administrators began targeting truancy more than a year ago. A study showed that the

Alarming Numbers

unexcused absence rate frequently hit 20 percent, and sometimes reached 30 percent.

"Those were alarming statistics," Steele said.

Another factor: In 2004, the Nebraska Legislature raised the compulsory age of attendance from 16 to 18. Students who in past years might have dropped out and joined the workforce are today enrolled in high school.

"The Legislature created a challenge for us, but it's a good challenge," says Steele. "The days of being a productive member after dropping out of high school are gone."

Silver Bullet

The core of Kearney's plan is relationship building.

"When I started this process, I was looking for a silver bullet. I'm finding that it's not that easy. It takes diligence and effort to learn about each student. What are their strengths, their motivations? Why would they miss and what would induce them to come back to class?" said Steele.

Finally, it takes a lot of time, especially for teachers.

"They're the key component in this. They're the ones who build relationships with the students," said Steele.

But Steele runs the show, says chemistry teacher Julie Larsen. She said Steele travels the hallways every day, chatting with students and ushering them to class.

"You can institute all kinds of rules and regulations, but if they have no respect for who's running the show, they'll find a way around those rules and regulations," said Larsen.

Positive Reinforcement

Kearney High students now receive an attendance reliability grade on their report card. For every unexcused absence and tardy, points are deducted. Steele said the grade gives parents an objective measure of their child's attendance.

School officials have also looked outside school walls for support, urging area employers to query student job seekers about their attendance grade.

"This is all about telling kids that, ultimately, school is important, attendance is important," said Career Center and TeamMates Coordinator Deb Eickhoff. "It's a life skill, getting to where you need to be."

Stubbs concurs. "Our teachers wanted to know what we could do to make these kids who don't see attendance as a priority accountable," he said.

Students also have a chance to earn points on their attendance grade by voluntarily serving in Saturday school or detention. "We wanted a policy that, if they skipped, there was a consequence. But if they took responsibility, they would be rewarded," said Steele.

There are tangible rewards for those who set attendance examples. Each week, Steele gives away his parking place to a student who recorded perfect attendance the prior week.

KHS plays home football games at the University of Nebraska at Kearney's Foster Field. At each home game, a student with perfect attendance is selected to sit in one of the

While no national data on the extent of truancy exists, these statistics have been gathered by ParentingTeens.com:

■ According to one confidential survey, nearly one in 10 among 15-year-olds were truant at least once a week.

■ During a recent sample period in Miami, more than 71 percent of 13- to 16-year-olds prosecuted for criminal violations had been truant.

■ In Minneapolis, daytime crime dropped 68 percent after police began citing truant students.

■ Studies have shown that two-thirds of male juveniles arrested while truant tested positive for drug use.

■ In San Diego, 44 percent of violent juvenile crime occurs between 8:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m.

■ In Pittsburgh, each day approximately 3,500 students, or 12 percent of the pupil population, is absent and about 70 percent of these absences are unexcused.

■ In Milwaukee, on any given school day, there are approximately 4,000 unexcused absences.

skyboxes with five of his or her friends. Attorney General Jon Bruning spoke to students, and gave away his University of Nebraska football tickets to a student with perfect attendance. Next on the schedule is a dodgeball game featuring perfect attendance students versus Faculty All Stars.

"I will do anything to improve attendance. My dignity is not important," says Steele.

'Hot List'

The Buffalo County Attorney's Office has Truancy and Diversion Officer Angela Krajewski at the school daily.

Krajewski roams the halls, looking for dawdlers and slow-pokes. She pushes them to class, eyeing students tempted to make a break for the doors.

"She's a pit bull. She hounds them," says Steele.

"I make sure they get to class. If it requires me to escort them to class, then I will do that," she said. "I'm the extra set of eyes in the school, really looking for kids missing class."

Krajewski also contacts parents to let them know that their child is skipping class. Reactions from parents are all over the board, she said. "Most are very appreciative and work with me. Some parents don't take it so well," she said.

Steele and Krajewski meet weekly to review a "hot list" of students most at risk. Teachers contact either if a "hot list" student is absent. Parents are alerted immediately.

Once a student reaches a certain number of absences, the county attorney's office takes over.

"Once I know a student won't make any more progress, I refer them to the county attorney for prosecution," she said. Even that, however, is not the last word. Krajewski says her office tries again, meeting with parents and the student to get attendance back on track.

Technology Helps

All those steps, however, pale beside the importance of relationships.

Steele has converted an old drafting table into a rolling desk — lovingly dubbed the Trent Steele Mobile Command Center by one student — and rolls through the halls with a wireless laptop containing every student's schedule and attendance status. As he visits with students, he can scan schedules to determine whether they're headed in the right direction. But chatter is more important than technology.

"As good as the technology is, nobody replaces the human contact you have with each of these kids to figure out how do we get them back in school," he said.

Chemistry teacher Larsen agrees. "The most important part is that Trent has made it a policy to do everything by building relationships with kids," she said.

Steele deflects praise back to the teachers.

"This has been a great staff. Teachers want to be involved with what's best for their students and their success," he said. "They have been the backbone of this effort."

Larsen says the problem hasn't been solved, but she's seen results. "Attendance is up," she said.