



By FPS Attendance Specialist Gabe Whitney

The Role of the Attendance Specialist

School attendance is one of the most powerful predictors of student outcomes. Student attendance is a better predictor of a student dropping out than test scores. When a student is not in school, they lose out on valuable learning time, relationships, and the opportunity to build good life skills. A student not in school is 2.5 times more likely to become enmeshed in the criminal justice system than a student who attends regularly. Attendance is second nature to some, but to others, the barriers in life prove to be all too great to make attendance a priority.

As an Attendance Specialist, it is my role to address student and family barriers that may inhibit attendance. The great importance we place on attendance is not without reason, as you can determine from the statements above. I am fortunate enough to be able to work with students and families daily, with the goal of helping them build positive skills and habits. Each of them has a story to tell and struggles that many of us have never experienced or cannot understand. This is the beginning of the challenges of attendance in our district.

The hope for this year is that we can focus on the importance of attendance. A focus on attendance will take time and effort from staff members, students, families, and even our community. Many people do not comprehend the gravity of Chronic Absence, defined as a student missing 10% of instructional time or more. Many parents and students will often underestimate the amount of school they or their student misses by half.

Bringing attendance concerns to light in our district will help our students and families understand that success may come in many forms, but the basis of that success will often be rooted in a high school education. It took time to figure out how important an education was for myself as well. I was suspended from college for a semester due to lack of attendance. It took finding purpose within myself to turn things around. As a staff member, parent, or guardian, it is our responsibility to ensure that every student has the chance to find this purpose.

So, you may be thinking, "what can I do?" I will leave you with this. *Listen with the possibility of being changed.* The first, and possibly, the most important thing one can do is listen. Listen to what our students and children have to say. What is bothering them? What do they not like about school? Is there anything else we could be doing to help them grow?

We all like to feel like we are being heard. Students may have more wisdom about attendance than we ourselves do. By putting ourselves in their shoes, we have the ability to make powerful changes to a system that may not be perfect.

