

we engage

This is the second of a series of articles prepared by Governance Support Branch highlighting promising practices for reducing truancy and increasing school completion rates. This issue focuses on the strategies implemented at one Edmonton high school.

A Work in Progress

Eastglen is a senior high school in Edmonton with a diverse socioeconomic and ethnic population of approximately 1000 students. The school provides a broad high school program that includes Advanced Placement, fine arts, athletics and programming for students with special education needs.

Four years ago, staff devoted a professional development day to discussing how to improve student achievement. All agreed that the foundation for improving achievement was to increase student attendance. This was the beginning of the Eastglen Attendance Initiative, coordinated by Shannon Smith, Department Head of Student Services.

The ultimate goal of the initiative is to ensure that each Eastglen student completes high school.

Communication

The initiative began with enhanced communication with parents and a more comprehensive system of recordkeeping. For some years, Eastglen relied on an automated phone master program to advise parents of student absences. This system did not work as well as it was intended to, as some students became proficient at ensuring the calls were never heard by parents.

Student Information System (SIS) flags helped to identify students missing classes and teachers began to call parents directly. Phone calls were paired with letters to reinforce conversations and letters were also sent to parents who could not be reached by phone. All contacts were documented and combined with attendance records. This strategy resulted in better

parent-teacher communication, but student attendance continued to lag.

Responses to poor attendance

Eastglen's next strategy was to develop a range of strategies for poor attenders. These included making good attendance a requirement for participation in popular school activities; study halls to catch up on missed work; case conferences; interviews; contracts; in-school suspension and, for students under sixteen years of age, referrals to the [Attendance Board](http://education.alberta.ca/parents/role/workingtogether/board.aspx) (<http://education.alberta.ca/parents/role/workingtogether/board.aspx>).

Despite the commitment of Eastglen's dedicated staff, student response still fell below expectations.

A small research project that examined records of twelve students referred to the [Attendance Board](#) found that eight of these students had documented problems *as early as the second grade*.

What became apparent was that poor attendance was frequently a symptom of more complex challenges facing some teens. As Shannon Smith put it, "just as no two snowflakes are the same, no two students had the same story."

Strengthening community resources

On the premise that *if you ask the question, you should be ready to deal with the answers*, Eastglen added another major strategy to its repertoire—greater use of district and community resources.

The Attendance Initiative team added a school based social worker and an aboriginal liaison worker to

provide liaison between home and school and to assist with referrals to community agencies.

Relationships with community service providers were enhanced through increased dialogue with youth probation officers, Police resource officers, Children's Services workers, Alberta Mental Health Services, the Northeast Community Health Centre and Catholic Social Services. For students under the age of sixteen, the Attendance Board played an active supporting role through its referrals to support agencies.

Personalized instruction

Students returning to classes following extended absences required alternate programming. The school collected a suite of learning modules to "fill in the gaps" and to ease re-entry to the classroom.

The payoff

While there is still room for improvement, students are responding to the multidimensional approach of in-school engagement and community support.

In reviewing the various strategies employed, the team noted that it was easy for them to fall into the trap of being reactive rather than empowering by focusing on problems outside of their control.

This year, the Attendance Initiative has officially changed to become the High School Completion Initiative, a title that better reflects its larger scope.

Creating connections

Students who do well in school are actively engaged in learning and have positive relationships with others in the school and beyond. Students who are disaffected and who do poorly in school are those who have no personal or positive connection with teachers, other students, or campus activities. For some, school experience has been negative rather than rewarding.

Eastglen now focuses on those aspects of school culture that create connections for all students in a safe and caring environment. Teachers note and celebrate even small successes, acknowledge when a student is at school and welcome them back when they have been away.

The Eastglen High School Completion Initiative will always be a work in progress. But continued teacher dedication, administrative support and commitment of resources are creating a culture of hope.

For further information on Eastglen's High School Completion Initiative, contact Shannon Smith at Shannon.smith@epsb.ca

Celebrate Your Successes

Tell us what your school is doing to keep kids in school, and how your practices have improved attendance and reduced dropouts. We want to celebrate Alberta's school success stories in our future issues to provide inspiration and guidance to other schools.

Please send a brief description of your promising practices. Please include your name, e-mail and phone number, so we can contact you for more information.

Please e-mail your success story to:

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