

BUILDING THE HABIT OF GOOD ATTENDANCE



By Garth Webster

Kalihwisaks/Creative Services

The February 2024 article, *Shifting to the Science of Reading*, focused on third grade reading proficiency levels of Indigenous students in Brown County. The article also calls out a key success factor (Attendance) in their journey to achieve benchmark reading levels.

Educators across the United States all agree that missing 10% (18 days) or more of any school year negatively impacts a student's ability to read at their grade-level. This goal is particularly important at grade three because, as Oneida Youth Education Services (YES) Program Manager, JoAnn Ninham points out, "Before the third grade, students are still in the learning-to-read mode. In third grade and beyond, however, students are expected to be able to read-to-learn." Ninham goes on to say, "If students aren't at school, they can't learn. It's also extremely important for students to be at school in the morning because this is when most reading classes are held." This is why Ninham and her YES Team have been working so diligently to increase attendance levels for Native students in Brown County.

Before the pandemic, Native student chronic absenteeism levels were hovering around 16-17% in

Brown County, which according to the standard, is too high. This is why the most recent 2020/2021 report is so alarming, which indicates that 43% of Native students in Brown County missed more than 10% of the school year. This represents a roughly 36% equity gap between Native and White students.

Ninham has observed first-hand, as well as through conversations with educators and community members, that Native students are very distracted by their devices, whether that be with phones or video-game machines at home but also, have increased levels of anxiety and a fear of getting sick, despite the pandemic being over. Fortunately, Ninham's team, along with policymakers and school districts are using the data to engage with parents to implement solutions to chronic absenteeism.

Studies show chronic absenteeism places students on a path towards dropping out and all the negatives that come with it. Even if students are absent at minimum levels, say 10 days (5.5%) per year, they will miss 130 days between kindergarten and graduation. Compare this to a student missing 20 or more days per year makes it abundantly clear why Native students are falling behind. Together, Ninham stresses that we have to act now to change this narrative.

When Do Absences Become a Problem?

Chronic Absence – 18 or more days

Warning Signs – 10-17 days

Satisfactory – 9 or fewer absences

These numbers assume a 180 day school year.

What Can You Do?

- Set regular bedtime and morning routines.
- Lay out clothes and pack backpacks the night before.
- Keep your child healthy and ensure they have required shots.
- Introduce your child(ren) to their teachers and classmates before school starts.
- Develop backup plans for getting to school on time if situations arise. Call on a family member, a neighbor, or another parent.
- Schedule non-Covid 19 related medical appointments and extended trips when school is not in session.
- If your child seems anxious about going to school, talk with teachers, counselors and other parents for advice to make your child feel comfortable.
- If your child must stay home, ask the school for resources and ideas to continue learning at home.
- To encourage success, track the days they were absent, and not absent, on a calendar each evening after school. Develop a system of rewards for your child for achieving attendance levels.

The February 2024 edition cited a 68% Chronic Absenteeism rate Native students, which is actually the rate for Native students specifically in the Green Bay Area Public School District.



Shifting to the Science of Reading-Part I



Photo Courtesy Oneida YES Program

Front row, left to right: Marcie Jefferson, Jackie Smith, Stephanie Stevens, JoAnn Ninham, Kathy Doxtater, and Tami Kaczrowski. Back row, left to right: Orleana Batiste, Cari Clayton, Myriah Summers, Vicki Strzelecki, Jane Powless, Wendy Summers, Doug Younkle, River Ocker, Sharon Skenandore

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Kalihwisaks/Creative Services

The Oneida Youth Enrichment Services (YES) Program has recently discovered that just 5% of third grade Native American students in Brown County, including Oneida students, are reading at a proficient level or above. Proficiency is otherwise known as reading at the grade level expectation. During the same period white students in Brown County were reading at a 43% proficiency level. This gap between Native American students and white students represents an equity gap.

JoAnn Ninham, YES Program Manager, along with Oneida Organizational Development Specialist, Ann McCotter, disclosed that the 38-point equity gap was revealed from results of the 2021/2022 3rd grade Forward Exam for English, Language, and

Arts (ELA). McCotter expressed her disappointment, “The system is driving unequal results and we need to understand and work to change this,” which was confirmed by Ninham, “It’s alarming and we feel families need to know this.” Both agree that there are many factors contributing to this data point, as Ninham explains, “The dynamics brought about by

the Pandemic, mental health, generational trauma, families living in poverty, students not having a feeling of inclusion, and school attendance are all on the list. However, the last item, school attendance and ensuring that kids are in school, is one we’d

like to call out.”

McCotter explained that a standardized goal for all students in this area is not to miss more than 10% (18 days) of the school year. Unfortunately, a recent attendance report shows that 24% of non-Native students have missed more than

10% but among the Native American population, this number jumps to 68%. Ninham and the Y.E.S. program are combatting this by engaging with area schools to collaborate and work on attendance levels, as well as reading proficiencies, with district administrators and shares her elation with how things are going, “We’re excited to establish a sharper focus on this and more collaboration than ever before.” McCotter continues by sharing studies that emphasize why it’s critically important to ensure our third graders succeed at reading:

- History has shown the difficulty of getting a student in fourth grade or older up to grade level in reading once they have fallen behind.
- There’s a strong correlation between students that aren’t proficient readers by third grade with the likelihood of not graduating high school, which can lead to reliance on welfare and public services as well as higher rates of incarceration.

Along with these motivating factors, Ninham and McCotter are also encouraged by a relatively new movement regarding how students

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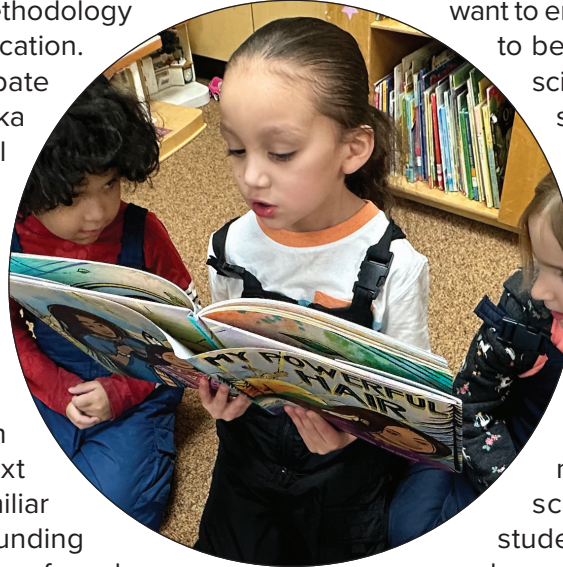
Ann McCotter

are taught to read.

In July 2023, the Wisconsin Act 20 Legislation was passed, bringing a change to how reading is taught in elementary schools. Specifically, the legislation will require school districts to train administrators and teachers on the Science of Reading (SOR) methodology of reading instruction. Transendeducation.

org explains the longstanding debate between SOR and the previous, aka Whole Language, instructional method, "Educators have long debated the most effective way to teach young people how to read. For decades, a key part of this debate was between structured phonics instruction and a more "whole language" approach. The whole language approach encouraged learners to use context and visual clues to decipher unfamiliar words, providing a contrast to "sounding them out" with a structured dissection of words through phonics. Now, schools and educators are embracing a long-standing body of research cumulatively referred to as the science of reading. which highlights the importance of explicit and repeated phonics instruction."

SOR utilizes 5 pillars: Phonemic Awareness (hearing the sounds), Phonics (matching the sounds of letters and combinations of letters to words), Vocabulary, Fluency, and finally, Comprehension. In the documentary, *Right to*



Read, Kymyona Burk, Senior Policy Fellow for the Literacy Foundation for Excellence in Education, points out that the SOR is an improvement on Whole Language theory because it aligns with the cognitive function of how the human brain learns. She continues by adding, "We

want to ensure all students have the opportunity to be with a teacher who has learned the science of reading, who has learned the structure of literacy approach, and teaches students how to decode words and how to encounter words they don't know and use the skills and strategies they've been taught explicitly and systematically, in order to crack the code of reading."

In the end, despite being faced with an uphill climb, Ninham is staying vigilant and optimistic to her mission to collaborate with families, schools, and communities so that students feel connected and valued and perhaps most importantly, using key data in a positive way to educate, advocate, and mentor students (and guardians) in an environment where they can live a culturally, spiritually, socially, emotional, and cognitively balanced life. In part two of this series, we'll dive deeper into the specifics of how Oneida will engage the community to support an increase in 3rd grade reading proficiency with the help from Councilwoman Jennifer Webster.

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