

Chronically Absent Students:

An Opportunity to Integrate
Public Health, Social
Services and Education

Dr. Tia Henderson, Upstream Public Health

Upstream Public Health advocates for institutions to set *policies* and *practices* that make it easier for people to have healthy options and lead healthy, full lives.



Why Being in School Matters: Chronic Absenteeism in Oregon Public Schools

A Research Brief

By Melanie Hart Buehler, John Tapogna and Hedy N. Chang | June 2012



The vast majority of states maintain attendance data in their longitudinal student data bases. Yet few ever use this rich source of information to identify how many students are academically at risk because they have missed too much school and which districts, schools and student populations are most affected. This analysis of Oregon attendance data collected by the state's Department of Education, demonstrates the valuable insights gained from examining how many students are chronically absent—defined as missing 10 percent or more of school during an academic year for any reason: excused and unexcused absences, as well as time lost to suspensions.

Conducted by ECONorthwest—in partnership with the Children's Institute, the Chalkboard Project and Attendance Works—this analysis revealed that chronic absence is a significant issue in Oregon, dragging down academic performance, for communities and students of all demographic backgrounds, but especially those in families living in poverty.

In the 2009-10 school year, nearly a quarter of all K-12 students in Oregon were chronically absent.

Equally troubling, researchers found that absences starting in kindergarten predicted poor attendance and lower achievement in the years ahead.

The study revealed problems with chronic absenteeism at every grade level, starting with 24 percent of kindergarten students and dipping to about 14 percent of third graders before climbing to 38 percent in the 12th-grade. Researchers found troubling rates of absenteeism in all types of communities—rural, suburban and urban—with the highest rates among students living in poverty and those with disabilities.

The good news is that this research also shows that chronic absence is a solvable problem. While many schools are struggling with high levels of chronic absence, the research also identified schools that are beating the odds by maintaining higher than expected attendance rates despite serving high risk populations.

The findings in this analysis have already brought attention to the issue in Oregon. The governor's office has included the chronic absence rate among sixth-graders and ninth-graders as a key performance metric in the new achievement compacts that districts are signing with the state. And the Chalkboard Project, a partner in this study, has posted district-by-district data on its Web site (www.openbooksproject.org), responding to public demand for more information and accountability on this important matter.

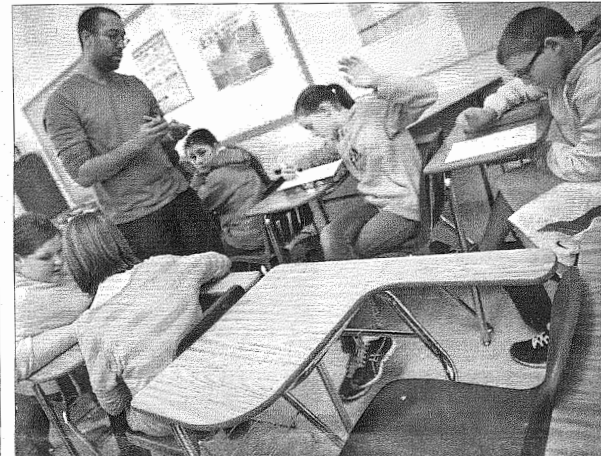
Sunday Oregonian

ALWAYS ON OREGONLIVE.COM

FEBRUARY 9, 2014

Empty desks | No state looks worse

'Atrocious' attendance puts learning at risk

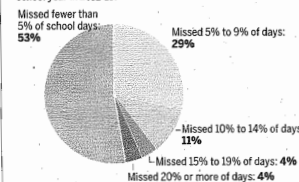


MICHAEL LLOYD/THE OREGONIAN

A single empty desk is not normally a cause for alarm. More than 99 percent of students miss at least a day of school. But Oregon has an epidemic of chronic absenteeism that goes unnoticed. A student who misses school two days a month ends up missing more than a tenth of the school year, enough to put him or her in academic jeopardy.

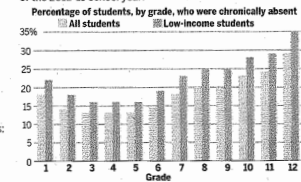
Rampant absenteeism

One in 5 Oregon students missed 10 percent or more of the school year in 2012-13.



Absent from class

About 100,000 Oregon students missed 10 percent or more of the 2012-13 school year.



Source: Analysis by Betsy Hammond of The Oregonian, using 2012-13 school year data from the Oregon Department of Education.

Note: Excludes students who enrolled after the midpoint of the school year and those attending alternative schools.

DAN AGUIAR/THE OREGONIAN

By Betsy Hammond
betsyhammond@oregonian.com

A huge but overlooked problem is jeopardizing the success of tens of thousands of Oregon students, leaving them at risk of never learning to read well or failing to graduate from high school.

It's not class size, curriculum or teacher training.

It's attendance.

Last school year nearly 1 in 5 Oregon students missed at least 10 percent of the school year, an investigation by The Oregonian shows. Those roughly 100,000 students

were absent 3½ weeks of school or more, in most cases without raising alarms at their school.

No other state has been shown to have a chronic absenteeism rate as bad as Oregon's.

"It's atrocious," said Rob Saxton, Oregon schools chief.

Students are deemed chronically absent if they miss 10 percent or more of school days.

Last school year 24 percent of Oregon high school students missed that much. And so did 20 percent of eighth-graders and 18 percent of first-graders.

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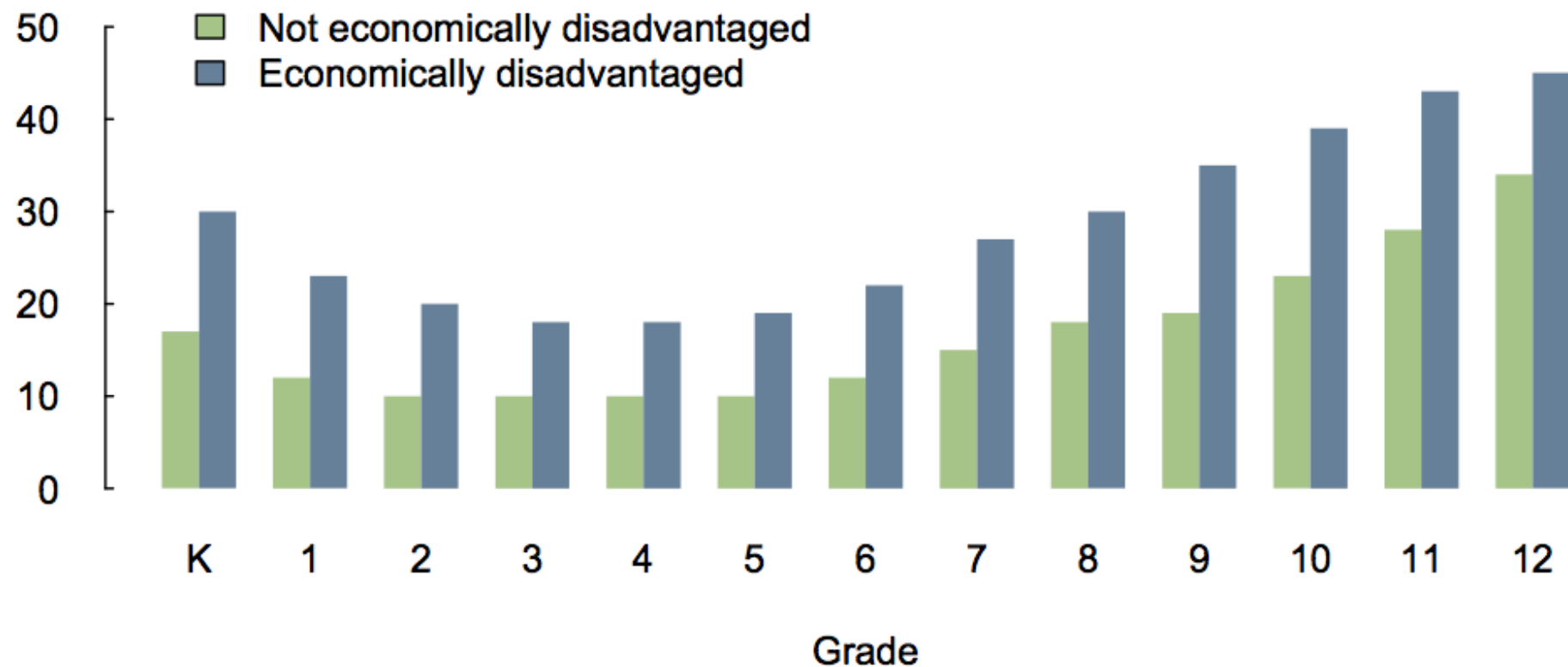
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Economically disadvantaged students were consistently more likely to be chronically absent

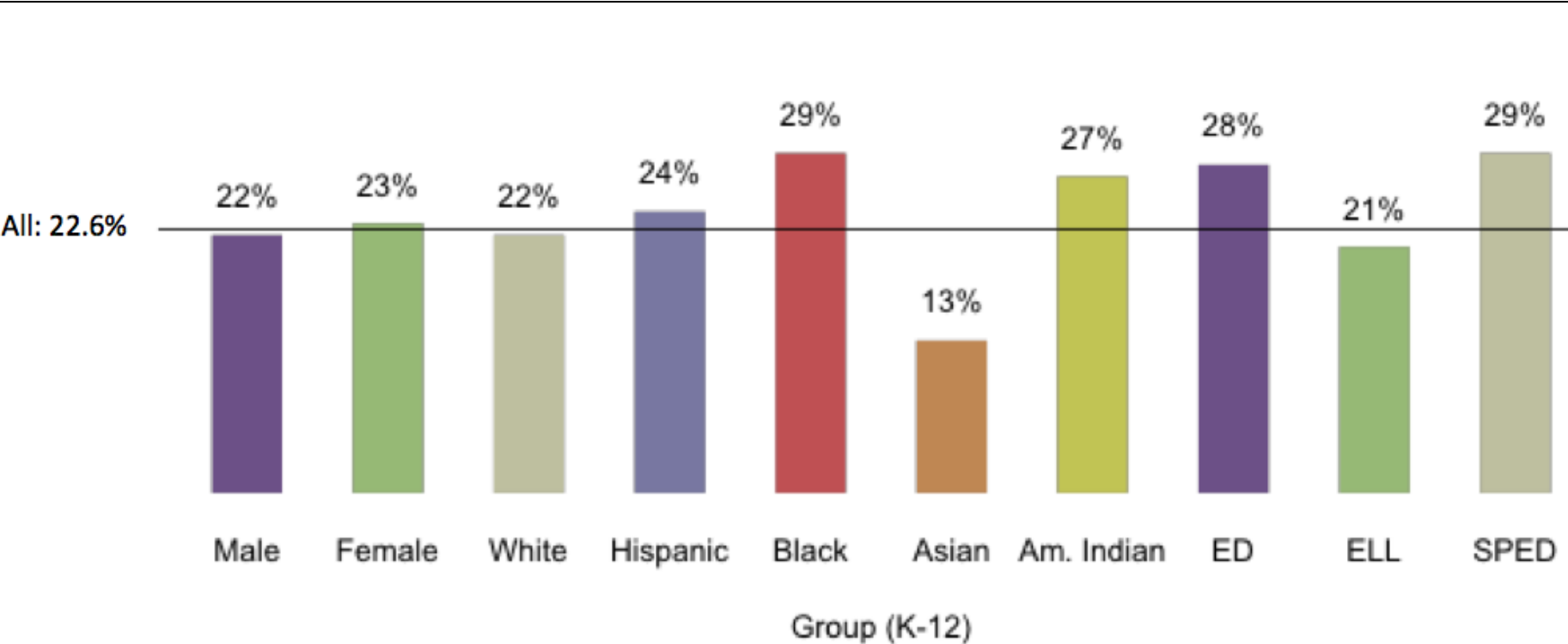


Percentage of Oregon students who are chronically absent, by grade and economic disadvantage

Source: ECONorthwest analysis of ODE data, 2009-10.

Chronic Absence Affects Many Children

Some Groups Worse Off



Percentage of Oregon students who are chronically absent, by subgroup ED = economically disadvantaged; ELL = English language learner; SPED = special education. Source: ECONorthwest analysis of ODE data, 2009-10.

Reasons Children are Chronically Absent

Barriers

Lack of access to health care,
Lack of use of care

Poor transportation

No safe path to school, Bullying

Chronic illness

Aversion

Child struggling academically

Lack of engaging instruction

Poor school climate and ineffective school discipline

Parents had negative school experience

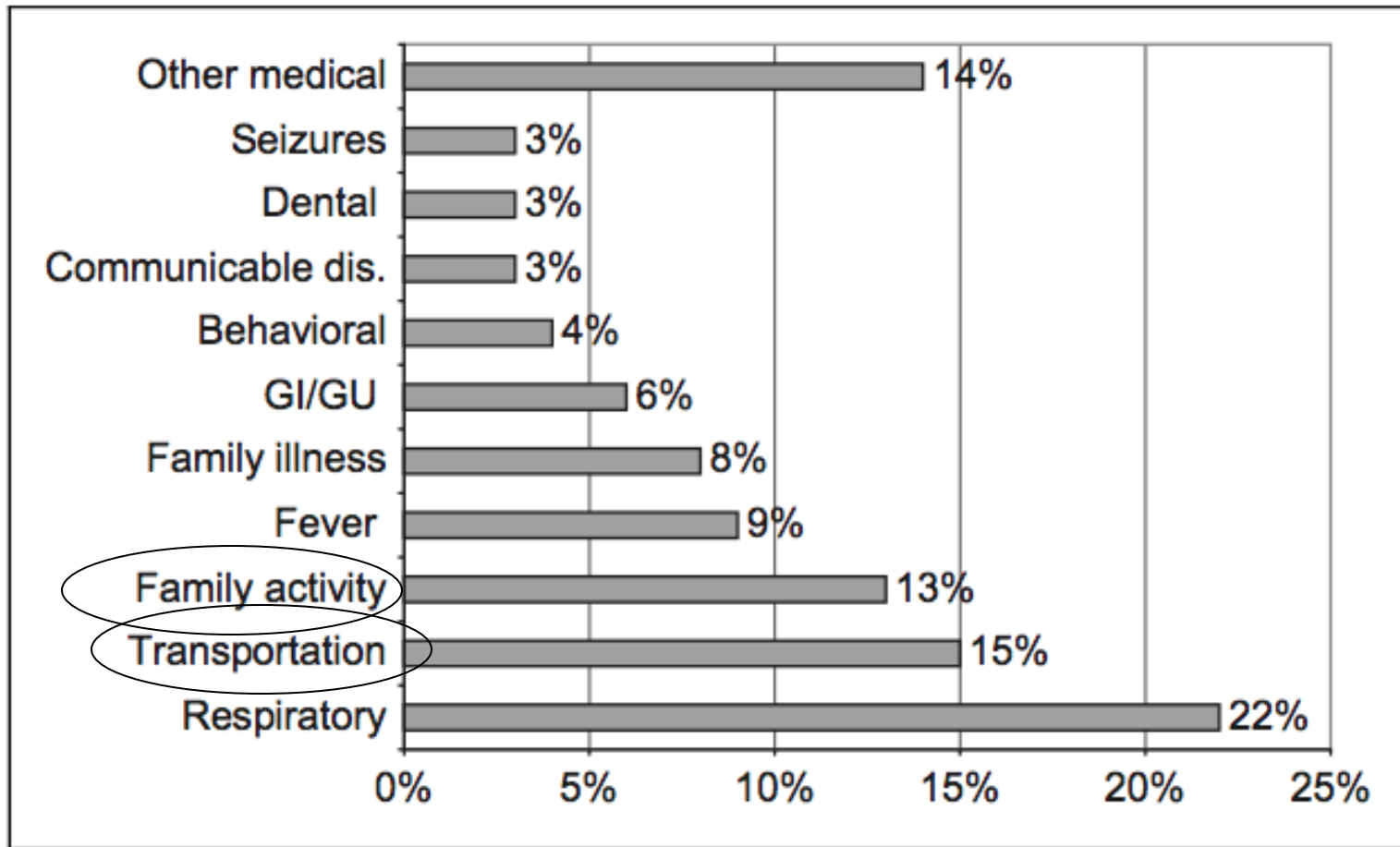
Myths

Absences are only a problem if they are unexcused

Sporadic versus consecutive absences aren't a problem

Attendance only matters in the older grades

What leads to barrier...aversion and myth reasons? K-3rd Grade Student Absences



What leads to these reasons?

Figure 6: Most Common Issues Affecting Student Absence in Middle School, 1998-2001¹⁵

Issue	Average 3 Year Ranking
Chronic Health	1 Most Common
Mobility	2
Child Care	3
Food/Shelter/Clothing	4
Mental Health	5
Lice	6
Parenting Skills	7
Cultural Issues	8 Least Common

Holbert, T., Wu, L., Stark, M. School Attendance Initiative: The First 3 Years: 1998/99-2000/01. Oregon Department of Human Services, Multnomah County; 2002. Report No.: 3rd Annual Evaluation Report.

Economic Factors

- Economic Hardship
- Hunger, Food Insecurity
- Homelessness
 - Housing Instability
 - Homelessness



Children living in poverty are 25% more likely to miss three or more days of school a month

Social Factors

- School Climate
- Attendance Culture
- Bullying
- Family & Community Trauma

Multnomah Youth
Commission Youth
Voice/Education
Committee Sample
Findings:

Reasons for Disengagement <i>("I don't come to school because...")</i>	Count (n=9)
Issues or problems with school staff (e.g., teachers put down the student, teachers do not help the student)	7
The school administration is not supportive of student	7
Family issues, which include having to baby sit, having to work to help family financially, etc.	6
Student is bored	5
The school or class sizes are too big	5
Disengagement Other	5

Environmental Factors

- Transportation Barriers
- Failing School or Home Infrastructure (respiratory illness)
- Lack of Health Care Access

Is My Portable Classroom Making Me Sick?

May 8, 2014 | OPB



Teachers reported feeling sick in these portable classrooms at Portland's Scott School. |

credit: Cassandra Profita | *rollover image for more*

Health Conditions

- Behavioral, Mental Health Conditions
- Learning Challenges
- Oral Health
- Violence (e.g. abuse, fear of bullying)
- Physical Activity, Diet-Related Conditions (e.g. diabetes, obesity)
- Pain
- Respiratory Illness
(1 in 10 Oregon kids have asthma)
- Substance Use
- Youth Reproductive Health



We Still Want to Know:

**In Different Oregon Communities,
What Proportion of Absences
are from WHICH Factors and Health Conditions?**

**And, When We Focus on Addressing These
in Relation to Absenteeism – Does it Work?**

Developing New Study Proposals to Find Out!

Opportunities to Partner to Address Health Reasons

Myths

Health educators inform family and schools of appropriate absences

Use of attendance data with schools

Barriers

School Based Health Center Wellness Visits

Voluntary dental, nursing care services

Connect families to transportation

Anti bullying policies, programs

Aversion

Mentoring

Teacher wellness supports

Support School Health Capacity, Restorative Justice

Parent engagement

Example: Key Parent Health Messages + Attendance

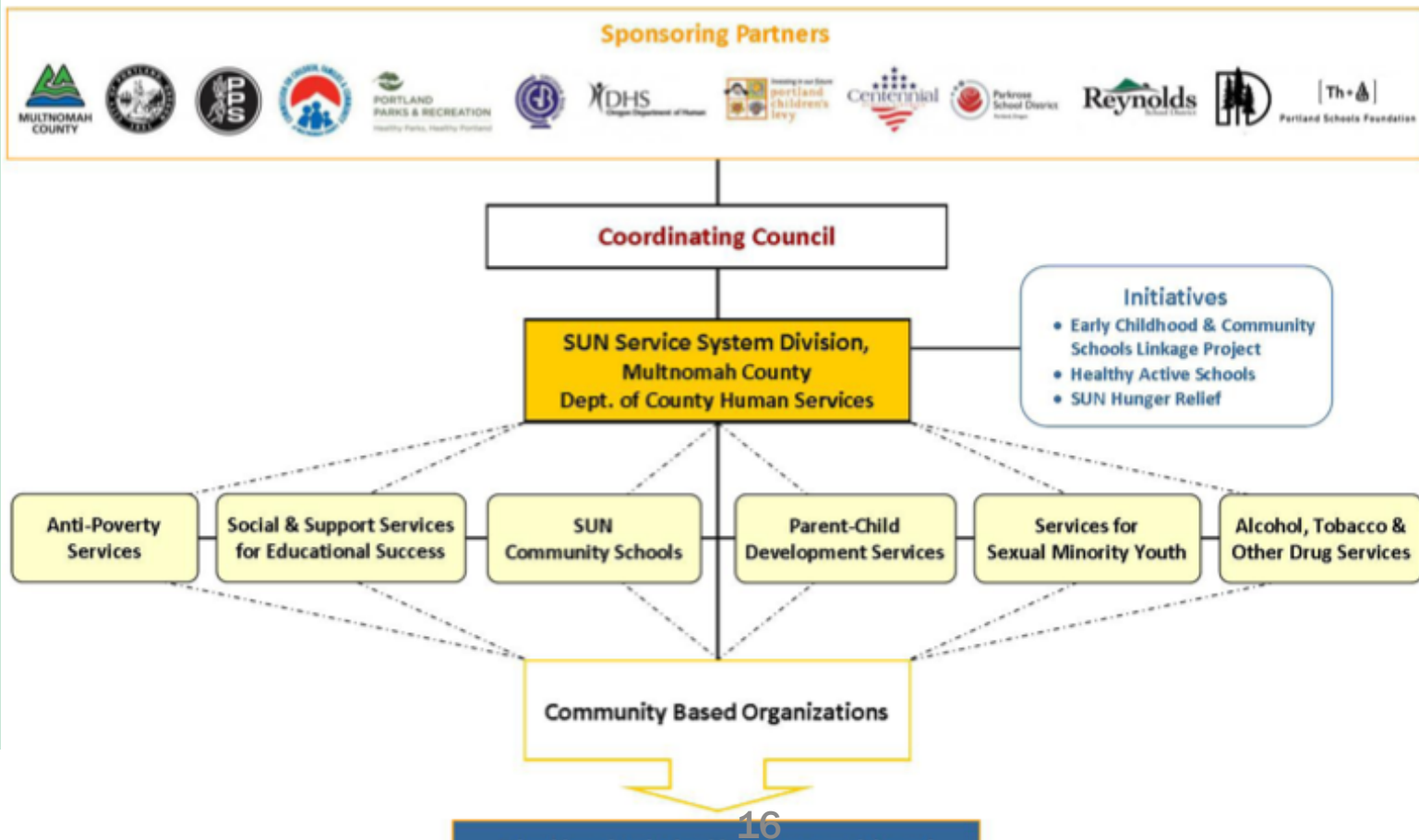
Symptoms or Illnesses	Should My Child Go to School?
Parent sick, stressed, hospitalized	YES – Get a neighbor, relative or spouse to take your child to school and pick him or her up.
Chronic disease (Asthma, Diabetes, etc.)	YES – Your child should attend school. School personnel are trained to assist your school with his or her chronic disease and associated needs.
Head Lice	YES – Your child can be in school if he or she has had an initial treatment with a product for lice.
Fever	NO - If your child has a fever of 101 or higher, keep them at home.
Coughing	NO - Keep child at home
Diarrhea	NO – If, in addition to diarrhea, your child acts ill, has a fever or is vomiting, keep him or her at home.

Source: A Health Flyer for Parents, The Office of the District Attorney, Alameda County, Alameda County Public Health Department, interagency Children's Policy Council, Center for Healthy Schools and Communities, 2012

Example: Integrating Social Services with Education

SUN SERVICE SYSTEM

Organizational Structure



What Works?

- **Everything to Some Degree**
- **What Works Best in Which Community on Which Issues? We Don't Know**
- **Opportunities to Learn More!!**

<http://www.upstreampublichealth.org/resources/ChronicAbsenteeismReport>