

An Oregon school district gets personal to curb chronic absenteeism, one family at a time

By Julia Silverman | The Oregonian/OregonLive :: 12/9/2024



Elena Anderson, a migrant education specialist at Waldo Middle School in Salem visited the apartment that parent Carla Flores-Rubio shares with her sons to bring blankets, water bottles and an attendance tracker for the family to hang on their fridge. The goal is to make sure that Flores-Rubio's son shows up every day at school. Julia Silverman

In the small, pin-neat bedroom she shares with her two sons — one 14, one 4 — Carla Flores-Rubio stands still for just a moment, to soak in the rare quiet.

Generally, her modest, two-bedroom apartment off a busy street in Salem is pleasantly noisy, thanks to her sons plus the roommate who lives in the second bedroom so that they can collectively afford the rent.

But on a recent Wednesday, Flores-Rubio had a few hours to herself before her 2 p.m. to 10 p.m. shift at a local restaurant, the most recent in a series of jobs she's had since arriving in 2022 after fleeing her native El Salvador, landing first in Mexico, then in the United States. (The others, in order: picking grapes, cutting grass, harvesting cabbage, wrangling vegetables at a cannery and working on a construction site.)

The quiet is a hard-won triumph. It means that her eldest, Jeferson, an eighth grader, is where he is supposed to be: in class at Waldo Middle School, about 2.5 miles away. The state's most recent data shows that nearly half of all Waldo students missed huge chunks of the school year last year.

Missing 10% of school days or more puts middle school students at serious risk for not being able to keep up in high school, increasing the chances that they will leave without a diploma, which has lifelong consequences.

[Chronic absenteeism numbers](#) have finally started improving in Oregon after reaching pandemic lows of nearly twice 2019 levels. But a grim 34% of students statewide still missed at least 10% of school days last year, according to data released last month by the Oregon Department of Education.

Districts around the state are trying various strategies to help. Gov. Tina Kotek has encouraged districts to call families to thank them for helping their children get to school more regularly. The state has urged schools to impress upon families that a cold or a sniffle isn't a reason to stay home. Schools have set up teams to comb through attendance data weekly to try to head off problems before they start. And principals around the state have described trying to make the school day a "can't miss" event, with pizza parties and cafeteria dance-offs for younger students and prom participation contingent on good attendance for high schoolers.

Salem-Keizer, the state's second-largest school district, has struggled profoundly with absenteeism, particularly post-pandemic. Its districtwide chronic absenteeism rate of 44% last year marked a 4 percentage point improvement over the previous year but remained markedly higher than any of the state's other large school districts'. Beaverton, for example, had a 28% rate of chronic absenteeism; Portland's was 37%.

Salem-Keizer, which sits at the nexus of the Willamette Valley's agricultural and wine industries, also balances demographic challenges that those districts do not.

According to the most recent Census Bureau estimates, from 2022, 16% of school-aged children in Salem-Keizer live below the poverty line, twice the rate as in Beaverton and Portland Public Schools. And the district is nearly 50% Hispanic and Latino, far above the 18% in Portland and 28% in Beaverton.

That's where Elena Anderson comes in. Anderson is the migrant education specialist at Waldo, charged with serving children from families like Flores-Rubio's, who have moved to the Salem area to work in forests, fisheries and farms. They may move more than once during the school year, following the harvest and interrupting the rhythms of the school year.

The 70 or so children on her ever-changing caseload are among the most statistically likely to miss school, Anderson said, because their families are often coping with the uncertainty of where to sleep, how to pay for food and whether they'll need to relocate at any moment.

Parents living from paycheck to paycheck can ill afford to stay home when younger siblings are sick or need care, so the responsibility often falls to middle and high schoolers. Those teens are also old enough to remember what it took for their families to make their way across Latin America and cross the border to reach Oregon, a trauma they carry each day, Anderson said.

Her job, particularly post-pandemic, is to help people like Flores-Rubio knock down barrier after barrier so that students like Jeferson can show up on time. Some days that means arranging for legal aid lawyers to speak with parents whose immigration and asylum cases are in judicial system limbo; others, it's setting up calls with potential employers and offering to interpret during job interviews.



Migrant education specialist Elena Anderson climbs the steps to Carla Flores-Rubio's apartment in Salem during a recent home visit. Julia Silverman

On a recent Wednesday, she climbed the three flights of stairs to Flores-Rubio's apartment bearing a bag full of blankets, water bottles and T-shirts, plus an attendance tracker for Flores-Rubio to pin to her refrigerator.

Once inside, Anderson gazed around proudly. She had helped source much of the furniture in the rooms from local nonprofits, including a bunkbed, living room chairs and a dining room table. The school also helps families obtain donated food and clothes. That support has been enough, Flores-Rubio said, that her restaurant salary can cover her portion of their rent.

The small apartment represents a big step up for Flores-Rubio and her sons, who previously lived in a shed on the property of a fellow immigrant.

Since the family moved to their new place, Jefferson's attendance has improved, Anderson said, but there are still barriers. The move meant he needed to get onto a new bus route, which took time to iron out. Knowing there are days when he still runs late, Anderson found him a community mentor willing to swing by and pick him up if he misses the bus.

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Like other teens, Jeferson — a talented visual artist who has been asking his mother for a guitar — has struggled to wake up on time after staying up late, on his phone.

So Anderson and Flores-Rubio talked, and then Flores-Rubio brought down the hammer: The phone was going away at night, she told her son, until he could prove that it wasn't going to keep him up until all hours and make him miss school the next day.

"My desire is for my two boys to finish high school and attend university," Flores-Rubio said in Spanish, with Anderson translating. "I would like to go too," she added shyly.



Carla Flores-Rubio stands in the sunny bedroom she shares with her two sons. Julia Silverman

Her restaurant job means she's home in the morning to prod Jefferson awake and to get ready for school. Still, Anderson wants to keep up the momentum.

So she asked Flores-Rubio to keep the attendance log on the fridge: Every day for the next three months, the family should circle each day Jefferson attends school, she said. At the end of the three months, if there are mainly circles, a prize would await him, Anderson promised.

Flores-Rubio listened seriously and promised to keep track, doing her part to solve her most personal piece of Oregon's chronic absenteeism puzzle.

"He understands the importance," she said of her son. "He knows I want him to have a family, not to struggle. And he wants to help me, his mom, too."

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