

# Chinook Observer

## Schools to absent students: We want you here

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KATHERYN HOUGHTON/Chinook Observer

Annika Wolters, 23, went through a period in her life when school didn't feel important. After successfully finishing college, Wolters said she wanted to return to the Peninsula to help Ilwaco High School students want to be there each day.

Twenty years after Washington lawmakers passed a law requiring kids attend school, the state is still grappling with identifying students who habitually miss class. While the state pushes responsibility to each district, individual schools bear most of the weight to find the students sliding into a statistic.

Half of Washington's juvenile court proceedings revolve around truancy cases, or students who collect unexcused absences. However, a recent study by Washington state courts estimated those cases only reflect one-third of students who qualify as truant.

Pacific County Juvenile Court Administrator Wayne Leonard said it's hard to know why only a fraction of truancy cases are recorded.

"The answer could vary from each county, and even each school district within a county," he said. "As far as I'm aware, how it's done hasn't been tracked since the law was put in place."

In 1995, the state legislature required kids from the ages of 8 to 17 attend school. The law mandated school districts report truancy petitions to a court if a student accrued seven unexcused absences a month, or 10 within a year.

Once a student receives a truancy petition, the court is supposed to tap into a variety of government, community and private resources to resolve the issues that led to their absences.

According to the state's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, during the 2014 school year, there were 39,143 cases of students with 10 or more unexcused absences. Within that year, 6,088 truancy petitions were filed.

Within Pacific County, there were 30 petitions in 2014, according to court records. In Ocean Beach School District, there were nine.

Ocean Beach Superintendent Jenny Risner said the district implemented a new attendance policy at the beginning of this year to ensure schools and the district are on the same page in defining an unexcused absence and that the policies were up to date. The district's office said the new policy was administered throughout the schools and would be online by Dec. 1.

## **Ilwaco High School**

Americorps member Annika Wolters' job at Ilwaco High is to create the school's first truancy reduction program. There's a chart outside her office that shows attendance each week by grade.

"Seniors need to step it up," she said. "They haven't made it to 90 percent once this year."

Sophomore attendance began at roughly 97 percent the first week of school and fell to 90 percent by the 9th week. Juniors and freshmen have hovered around 90 percent.

Wolters starts her morning with a list of missing students. Seven years ago, Wolters' name would have made the list. As one of the few people of color in Ilwaco, she said she often felt isolated. During her sophomore year, school felt irrelevant after one of her close friends committed suicide.

Wolters missed three weeks of classes in one month. Often, her mom explained the absence to the school and it would be excused. She never received a truancy petition, but her time out of class led to three incompletes, meaning Wolters had to catch up or not pass those classes.

“When that happened, I felt like I had to live for myself and my friend,” she said.

She caught up in school and became the senior class president. She attended Western Washington University, where she was elected student body president, and double majored in visual journalism and communication studies.

“After graduation, I felt like I could go anywhere,” Wolters said. “But I knew there were kids here dealing with stuff out of their control.”

## **Attendance club**

A student missing school can alter their entire life, according to The Alliance for Excellent Education. A study by the Alliance states kids who miss school are less likely to hold long-term jobs or be economically stable.

The impact spreads across the country. The study estimated that if half of the dropouts from the nation's classes of 2010 had graduated, the U.S. would have another \$7.6 billion in earnings, \$713 million in tax revenue and \$9.6 billion in economic growth by the time the students hit the middle of their careers.

Wolters returned to Ilwaco High on Sept. 1 with a goal to make it easier for students to be there.

Once she sees a name on her list several times, she gives the kid a mandatory invitation to join the attendance club, where she meets with a small group of students to help them catch up. The first week she held the club, she invited 15 kids but only saw eight. Now the numbers hover around 15 to 20 consistently.

The school also rewards good attendance. There are days when cupcakes are randomly delivered to a classroom if everyone was present and on time. If students have good attendance, their names are placed into a drawing to win a prize.

When she sees a new student on her list, Wolters pulls them out of class to find out why.

Students have told her they don't want to go to class because their teacher or classmates are being unfair. So, Wolters offers to go to class with them. For others, they missed the bus and couldn't get to school, had family problems, or had a challenge Wolters said she would have never expected.

“A lot of what I'm doing, and what this school wants, is to take the shame out of what these kids are dealing with,” she said. “Let them know no matter what, we want them here.”