

GETTING

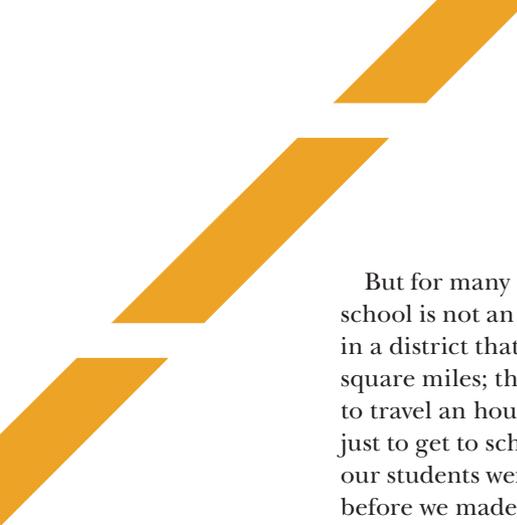
Address transportation challenges
to close the achievement gap

By John George and Rachael George

Showing up is half the battle. If we can get students to show up to school consistently, we can get them involved within the school community and build partnerships with parents. Then, success is bound to happen.

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But for many students, getting to and from school is not an easy feat. We previously worked in a district that covered approximately 1,200 square miles; there, it was typical for students to travel an hour and a half on the bus one way, just to get to school. This meant that many of our students were awake and on the bus even before we made it out of bed for our morning run. For a middle school or elementary-aged

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student, such early awakenings and long travel times are not only intense, but often traumatic.

In many rural and remote schools, poverty is a big player that lurks at the table when you talk about barriers to closing the achievement gap. In our schools, between 67 and 95 percent of our students were eligible for free or reduced-price meals. These students already faced a plethora of challenges, which were multiplied by transportation barriers. Students and families were reluctant to participate in extracurricular activities due to distance and a lack of good transportation options. Students who needed to attend medical or mental health appointments frequently missed school, as the distance between home, appointment, and school was often great. Students who missed the morning bus often missed the full day of school, as they lacked another alternative.

Providing transportation is expensive, but we knew we couldn't give up. Instead, the community, district, and schools came together to rethink how we did business. Our shared goal: to provide a quality, well-rounded educational experience to our students.

As principals, we focused on three things: getting kids to school consistently, involving them in the school community, and building partnerships with local organizations to provide wrap-around services to our families and students. When we focused on these three areas,

the transportation challenges that once held kids back became catapults for growth.

Getting Kids to School Consistently

The physical act of getting students into the classroom is much more labor-intensive when there are 50 miles between home and school. For example, consider what happens when students who rely on the bus miss their morning ride. We had one student who walked two miles to her neighbors' house—where the nearest phone was located—to call the school and explain her absence. When we received this call, we promptly drove out and picked up the student so she could attend as much of the school day as possible. This example might seem extreme, but it was a regular occurrence in our district. We did whatever it took to get students to school.

Many of our students had to endure an hour-plus ride to school. Depending upon school start times, such a long bus ride often meant that kids were riding to and from school in the dark, with little time to play outside or to complete their homework. We couldn't do much about the distance or pickup times for students, but we could control the amount of homework students received and provide academic resources. So, on long bus routes, we assigned on-bus tutors and stocked school supplies; that way, students could complete their classwork prior to getting home. We also provided lending books that were available for students to read independently during their journey.

In addition, our schools moved to a standards-based grading approach, with a heavy emphasis on proficiency. This shift not only cut down on meaningless homework, it also significantly impacted the quality of instructional time and use of assessments to monitor student progress. Within three years of implementation of standards-based grading, both of our middle schools were ranked in the top 10 percent of middle schools in Oregon.

Long distances and transportation challenges also meant that family and medical appointments were a frequent cause of student absences. Instead of simply leaving school to attend an appointment and then returning later, students would often be absent for the entire day. While some of these appointments were unavoidable, we saw that their impact could be drastically reduced if services were

available closer to the educational setting. So, in Cave Junction, a site-based health center was built in each of the area schools. Students then had nearby access to certified medical personnel, so they missed less class time for routine checkups and were able to get on-demand medical care when sick. Families saved time and money, too, as adults didn't need to take time off work or buy gas to transport their child to and from school for the appointment.

Eventually, we were also able to provide space for our students to meet on-site with both public and private mental health service providers. We enjoyed building strong partnerships with mental health professionals, and students missed less class time. They were able to step out of class, attend their scheduled counseling sessions on-site, and then return to class.

Getting Kids Involved in the School Community

We know that kids who are engaged with the greater school community, beyond the classroom, typically do better. Our schools offered student council, Honor Society, sports, and various clubs for students, but transportation challenges made it difficult for many students to be involved in extracurricular activities.

We used 21st Century Learning dollars, allocated through the state and federal government, to facilitate student involvement, but we still had kids who weren't able to participate in after-school activities due to the extreme distance and lack of transportation options. Eventually, our district provided activity buses for students to ride home after evening activities. With 21st Century Learning dollars, we expanded the activity bus schedule so it ran five days a week, thereby allowing all students to access after-school tutoring, sports, clubs, and groups. After we added the activity bus, we noticed an increase of up to 200 percent in student participation in after-school activities and events.

We remained cognizant of event scheduling, too. We held most sporting events and dances immediately following the dismissal of classes, so there wasn't a delay between school dismissal and the start of events. Our data indicated a significant decrease in discipline issues and much higher attendance rates for events after we instituted this practice.

Building Partnerships

We also carefully planned the dates and times of parent-focused activities as we worked to

build partnerships between home and school. Events were often scheduled back-to-back for parents; we also tried to ensure that scheduled events served multiple purposes. For instance, we scheduled open house events before the beginning of the school year, and handed out schedules and class lists during the event. We'd even fold in Title I presentations and parent involvement plans to increase our families' exposure to information.

We always paired a highly desirable activity for the students and parents with vital parent events in order to increase motivation to attend. We also often offset the cost of travel by raffling off gas cards and other monetary incentives for families. Typically, such incentives increased our parental attendance rates by 25–50 percent.

We also rethought the location of family meetings. It's convenient for staff to hold events at school, but we found that it was more convenient for the families to hold meetings, conferences, and events at locations closer to families' work or home settings. If a family couldn't make a meeting with teachers due to transportation issues, we arranged to meet the family at an off-site location so they didn't have to worry about travel. Other times, we offered to pick them up and transport them to the event. While this approach can be challenging on a large scale, we found it highly effective in building relationships between home and school.

Community partners also helped us support our students from rural and distant areas. During long weekends and vacations, many of our students had limited access to quality food. We depended upon the local community partners to help provide food bags and resources to the students; the bags were sent home with students, thereby eliminating the need for additional transportation to access food.

The development of these practices and partnerships took time, diligence, and a highly cooperative spirit from all parties, with a significant focus on sustainability. Garnering support from all stakeholders and solidifying agreements and procedures are keys to ensuring that these practices are sustainable. With effort, it's possible to close the distance—and the achievement gap. 

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