

Improving School Attendance in a Rural North Dakota Community

When a school district in North Dakota began having hard conversations about its struggling status, a simple, yet crucial, contributor to academic success became abundantly clear: “We’re never going to make academic improvements unless the kids are here to learn,” the Parshall School District elementary school principal recalled.

That conversation laid the groundwork for a districtwide project, enacted in partnership with the [Region 11 Comprehensive Center \(R11CC\)](#), [North Dakota Department of Public Instruction \(NDDPI\)](#), and the [North Dakota Regional Education Association \(NDREA\)](#), to address this long-standing problem of lagging student attendance. The district used continuous improvement to build local capacity, better connect the district to the community, and increase student attendance. While there is still work to be done, the district’s two schools recently exited their status as Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) schools (a designation based on the schools’ academic performance).

Using Improvement Science Tools to Identify the Core Problem

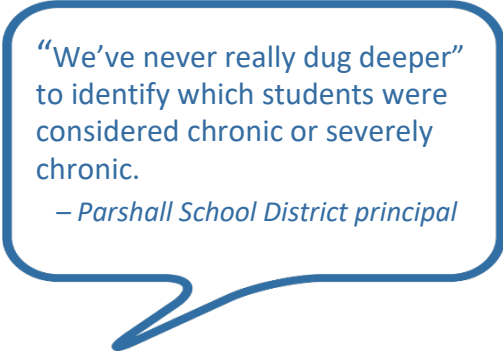
Before selecting improvement tools and methods, the partnership, known as the high-leverage problem (HLP) team, needed to understand the lived experiences of the community and the systemic challenges the school district faced. Past iterations of statewide support for TSI schools often lacked this focus.

The [Parshall School District](#) serves the rural town of Parshall, which has a population of fewer than 1,000 people. The two Parshall schools are attended predominantly by students who identify as Native American, as the district is located on the [Fort Berthold Indian Reservation](#), home to the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation. The Parshall School District has long been underserved, under-resourced, and struggled with low student attendance. Cycles of poverty, fear of authorities, and generational trauma have all contributed to a lack of awareness about the importance of attending school, the principals noted.

The improvement work began with school leaders considering how to address the schools’ academic outcomes. Working with the HLP team, using improvement science tools and methods, they identified a core problem that felt big enough to matter and small enough to solve: low student attendance.

To understand what systemic factors contributed to the district’s attendance problem, Parshall and the HLP team collaborated to generate a fishbone diagram, which identified key areas to address. A simplified version of the diagram is shown in Figure 1.

In addition, school leaders noted that they had not previously worked intentionally with attendance data, nor built awareness for parents and others about what the data said. According to one of the principals, “We’ve never really dug deeper” to identify which students were considered chronic or severely chronic.

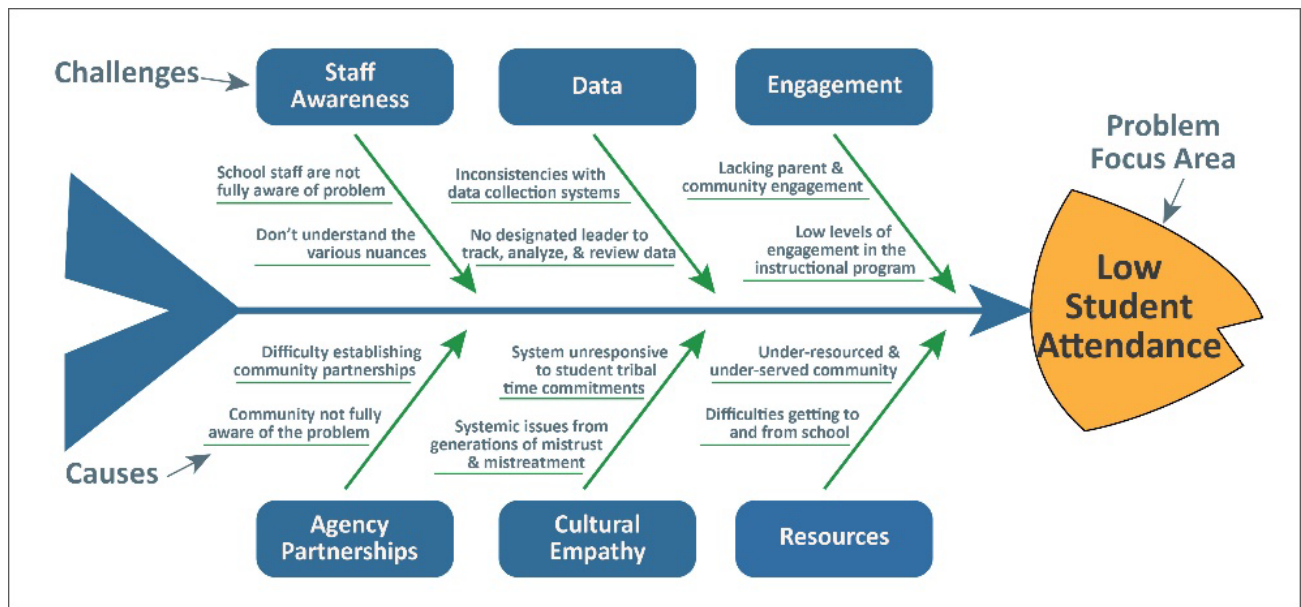


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Figure 1. A Simplified Parshall School District Fishbone Diagram



Using Data to Raise Awareness

Attendance data became a cornerstone of the district’s work. Sharing the tracked data with parents and the community helped increase awareness of how important attendance is to students’ academic outcomes. This outreach included letters to parents throughout the first semester with attendance status updates, as well as information about how absences are defined and tracked. For example, absences are limited to 10 unexcused absences per semester and/or 20 unexcused absences per year for any class. To help educate the community, the district shared data with the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation Tribal Council to raise awareness about the issue.

The district also made changes to administrative practices. They realized that tracking and consistently monitoring attendance is a full-time job. They relieved teachers from some of these responsibilities by creating an attendance coordinator position. To accommodate caregivers, the schools revised how they count attendance, dividing the school day into quarters instead of halves and ending attendance tracking at 3 p.m., so late-afternoon checkouts are no longer counted against students. “We tried to help parents that way,” said one of the principals, “and they really like that because they are actually switching some of their appointments to only miss the last quarter of the day instead of missing all afternoon.”

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Figure 2. Parshall School District Attendance

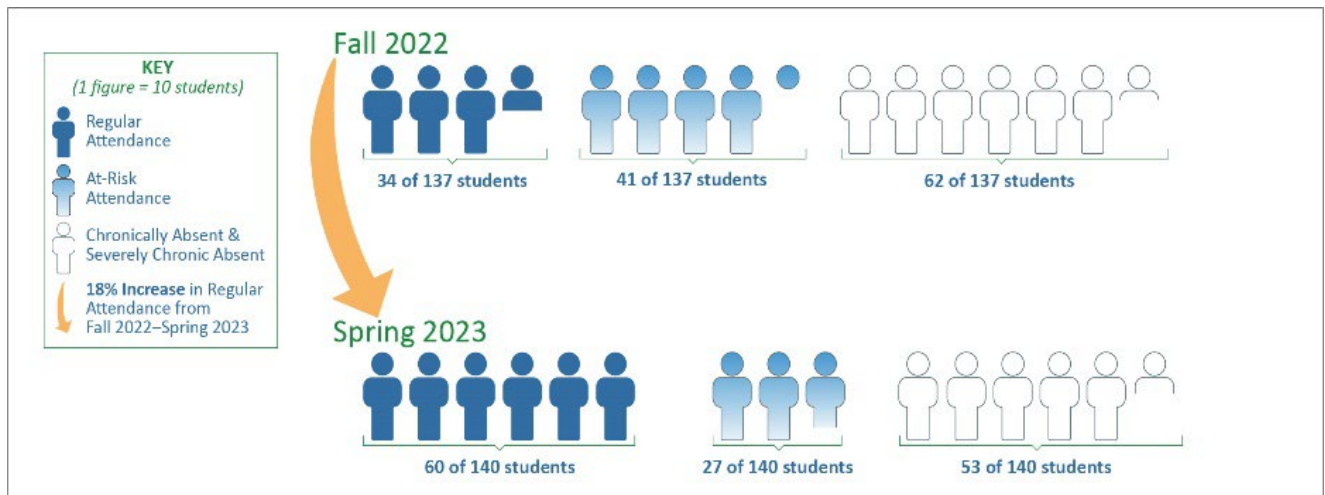


Figure 2 shows the dramatic improvement in attendance from fall to spring in the 2022–23 school year. Of note, combined chronic and severely chronic absences decreased from 43.4 percent to 37.8 percent.

In addition to increasing parent awareness, the efforts also resulted in changes across the community and included work with members of the Tribal Council. This united approach to address a community-wide problem helped dissolve operational silos that could have hampered the success seen at Parshall School District.

As one principal stated, family engagement and participation have never been as high as they are now. “We did make changes in everything, and we’ve made large gains,” the principal said. “And just bringing pride back into the children, making them want to come to school and care about their grades and care about their testing—just making more of that a priority, I think, helped us get off TSI.”

Gaining access to improvement science through the R11CC network helped the Parshall School District gain better insights into the core problem of student attendance underlying student achievement issues. The district saw, in a relatively short time span, significant positive changes in student attendance numbers, which they attributed to better use of attendance data, along with improvements to structures and processes related to attendance tracking and follow up. However, just collecting and using the data is not the whole story. The district’s multipronged work to implement community-driven systemic changes, create deeper relationships with caregivers, and build stronger connections to the Tribal Council and other stakeholders all contributed to the district’s success. The Parshall School District is leading by example as they embrace their motto: “Together, Stronger, Braver.”

Contact

For more information about Parshall School District and the work being done in North Dakota, please contact the R11CC co-directors, [Joe Simpson](#) and [Susan Shebby](#).