

## WA Middle School Wins Attendance Contest

By Donna Gordon Blankinship, Associated Press

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FOR RELEASE SATURDAY, JANUARY 28, 2012, AT 12:01 A.M. PST - In this photo taken Jan. 11, 2012, principal Mia Williams sternly directs students toward class at Aki Kurose Middle School in Seattle. Students used to have a lot of excuses for why they missed school or showed up late at the urban school, but are being heard much less frequently now. Staff members call the homes of children who don't show up, teachers make home visits with police officers and a school-based social worker helps families. Photo: Elaine Thompson / AP

SEATTLE (AP) — Students used to have a lot of really good excuses for why they missed school or showed up late to Aki Kurose Middle School. A parent's car had mechanical problems. They had to stay home to take care of a younger sibling. They overslept.

Those excuses are being heard less frequently. The students have improved their attendance enough to win a national contest and soon will get their prize: A visit from a surprise hip hop artist, who will be principal for the day and entertain kids at an all-school assembly.

Last week's winter storm postponed the special event to celebrate their success in the Fall Attendance Challenge sponsored by national nonprofit Get Schooled, but the staff at Aki Kurose continues to celebrate the ways better attendance has improved learning at the school.

Eighty-eight schools from 17 states participated in the contest. Chaparral High School in Las Vegas, East High School in Des Moines, and Academy at Palumbo in Philadelphia won regional titles.

Attendance is only about 4 percent better than last year at Aki Kurose, but even a change like that has made a real difference in discipline, attitude and test scores at the urban middle school in a South Seattle neighborhood, said principal Mia Williams.

Now if a student is late or doesn't show up, they are called by at least one staff member. Teachers make home visits with police officers. A school-based social worker helps families work around the issues that are keeping students from school.

"The thing that works the most is that somebody notices," said Assistant Principal Jennifer Hodges.

As you walk through the hall, it is clear that the staff has memorized the statistics on every child.

A young woman near the front office shies away when the principal asks if her aunt had a talk with her. A boy walking away from his classroom when he's supposed to be heading toward class gets a lecture from Williams.

"We know all of the kids. We know when they're not here and that matters," Hodges said.

Williams thinks it's the positive discipline as much as the close eye on attendance that has really turned the school around.

Although handing out rewards for good behavior is common in elementary schools, middle schools with similar demographics are more likely today to hand out suspensions than slips of papers kids can trade in for treats at the school store.

The school of about 600 kids is in one of the most diverse — and poorest — Seattle neighborhoods. The student population is nearly half black, more than 30 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, 12 percent Hispanic and 8 percent American Indian or Alaskan Native.

Nearly 90 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and last year's state test scores showed many were below district and statewide averages.

Aki Kurose has had an unexcused absence rate above 5 percent for each of the past five years, while the district-wide and statewide averages are below 1 percent. Historically at Aki Kurose, more than half the students typically miss at least 10 days a year, and more than a hundred students typically miss more than 10 percent of the school year.

National organization Attendance Works says poor attendance, which they define as missing at least 10 percent of the school year, puts students chronically behind their peers and leads to high dropout rates in high school. Targeted responses — health and social service assistance on campus, for example — plus adults keeping an eye on individual students are some keys to improving attendance, the organization says.

Williams said the kids motivate each other, because they all know the whole school will benefit. The kids also advise the principal about what would help them get to school and class on time. They wanted music in the hallways between class periods, and Williams is wrestling with the school's ancient communications system to make that happen.

Dana Johnson, 14, says it takes six alarm clocks to make sure he gets up on time. He doesn't know what career he will pursue, but the eighth grader says, "I need to make it to school. I need an education."

His teacher, Stefanie Hardgrave, says there are still some students struggling to make it to first period on time. She said some of their challenges are too big to solve with special assemblies and prizes for good attendance.

"The kids at our school have so many challenges because of poverty," Hardgrave said. "As a society we need to figure out how to change that."

Attendance and truancy is still far from perfect, but Williams says they're moving in the right direction. And test scores have improved dramatically. While nearly 70 percent of the kids were in academic danger at the beginning of the year, now only a handful are really struggling, Williams said.

An eighth grader who says he wants to be a lawyer someday says some kids had trouble waking up on time after sleeping in all winter break, but he thinks that overall, more kids are coming to school ready to learn. "I think there's still room for improvement," said student body president Joseph Seumaala, 13.

Read more: <http://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/WA-middle-school-wins-attendance-contest-2753489.php#ixzz1ssV1dWpd>