

Rhetorical Analysis Essay Prompt #1

After reading the article below, write an essay in which you explain how Richard Calhoun builds an argument to persuade the audience that Oregon needs to fix its high absenteeism rate in public education in order to improve achievement and graduation rates. In your essay, analyze how Richard Calhoun uses one or more of the features listed below (or features of your own choice) to strengthen the logic and persuasiveness of the argument. Be sure that your analysis focuses on the most relevant features of the passage.

Your essay should NOT explain whether you agree with Calhoun's claims, but rather explain how the editorial builds an argument to persuade the audience.

Analyze the effectiveness of the editorial considering the following:

- evidence, such as facts or examples, to support claims
- ethos, pathos, logos, repetition, cause & effect, attention to specific audience
- reasoning to develop ideas and to connect claims and evidence
- stylistic or persuasive elements, such as word choice or establishing common ground, to add power to the ideas expressed

“Empty Desks” by Richard Calhoun for the Oregonian newspaper in 2014

Eighty percent of success is showing up, as the saying goes. Clackamas High School knows this. Alice Ott Middle School in outer east Portland knows it, too. If every school adopted their ultra-persistent approach to fighting absenteeism, Oregon could dramatically boost its academic achievement and graduation rate.

Over the past week, The Oregonian's Betsy Hammond has exposed and analyzed a little-known problem in Oregon schools: creeping absenteeism. It is highest among low-income students and in rural areas, but startlingly high across the board. Her main finding?

“Last school year, nearly one in five Oregon students missed at least 10 percent of the school year,” she wrote. “Those roughly 100,000 students were absent 3½ weeks of school or more – in most cases without raising alarms at their school.”

By missing two or three days a month for minor sniffles or family issues, Hammond found, students can end the year with an unexpectedly poor track record. These absences tend to be so sporadic that even parents themselves may not notice the steady accumulation of missed days. Yet they take a major toll. Regularly absent students fare much worse in school than peers with similar backgrounds who

miss only a couple of days every year. They're also more likely to drop out, which contributes to Oregon's standing as the nation's second-worst state for on-time graduation.

Now for the good news: Some schools have beaten the odds by taking a swift, methodical and positive approach to getting students into class. One is Alice Ott Middle School, a high-poverty school in Portland's David Douglas School District. This school has earned national recognition for exceptional results, and the principal says its attendance strategy is central to success. Likewise, Clackamas High School has one of the state's best attendance rates for high schools, and it ranks in the top 10 for graduating low-income students on time.

At Alice Ott, the secretary will call home after the first absence, not the fifth or 10th. Students who had attendance problems in elementary school are automatically asked as sixth graders to check in every morning at the office, where they'll get a friendly hello and maybe a sticker or granola bar. The principal and counselor even pay home visits to get kids out the door. The attention makes a difference.

Clackamas High takes a similar approach, *The Oregonian* found, with a system that automatically red-flags students as soon as they've missed 16 class periods, or the equivalent of four days of school. School leaders don't wait until a student misses a week or two in a row, at which point the student is already a functional dropout; they intervene immediately. School administrators lead this effort, freeing teachers to spend more time teaching and less time as truant officers and remediation specialists.

Other Oregon schools should copy their approach. That includes elementary schools, where absenteeism is also common and more parent-driven. Some K-5 schools, including Nancy Ryles Elementary in Beaverton, have cracked the code for getting more families to treat school attendance as a top priority.

One caveat: The state's problem isn't just behavioral, but cultural. As schools tackle students' absenteeism habit, it's only fair to recognize the state's own complicity. Oregon contributes to the problem by sending a message to students, year after year, that school isn't important. For starters, the state destabilizes schools with boom-and-bust budgeting. Local districts chop days from the calendar to save money, ending up with a school year that is days or weeks shorter than the national norm of 180 instructional days. Many school districts seem to have adopted a stutter-step approach to instruction, with constant early-release and late-start days. And many high schools either don't require juniors and seniors to take a full course load or they quietly discourage it. It's no wonder that students have taken the hint. In Oregon, education feels more like a part-time diversion than a full-time endeavor.

Most Oregon schools face a better budget scenario for the 2014-15 year, thanks to a mix of better state funding, improving local tax revenue and a reduction in the growth of pension costs. School leaders are better able to focus on improving their schools, not just managing cuts. Adopting a strong attendance strategy is one of the best and cost-effective places to start.