

**Op-Ed for Sun Journal
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Will You Help?

By Bill Webster, Superintendent of Schools – Lewiston

Wednesday, September 27th, is the first day of school in Lewiston, Auburn and many other Androscoggin communities. The new school year always begins with high hopes and expectations on the part of students, parents and teachers. Will you help everyone realize these hopes and make our children even better learners? How, you may ask, as you are not an educator and, maybe not even a parent. And, isn't that the teachers' responsibility in the classroom? After all, much has been written about the performance of educators and schools, and we know that most area schools have been given a "C" grade or worse by the State of Maine.

Little has been written about how a community can better support the education of children. There is increasing research, however, that strongly suggests that some of the most important contributors to a good education happen outside the classroom walls. Three key factors are school readiness, school attendance and degree of summer learning loss.

The process of school readiness begins long before kindergarten. Children from lower-income families are much less likely to be read to at home, often have no books in the home and may hear as many as 30 million fewer words than children from more affluent families. If you have a 4-year old, I hope that they are already enrolled in our ½-day pre-kindergarten program. Please read to any children in your life, give them books, and if you deal with families in any capacity (preschool, pediatricians, relatives), please encourage them to read to their children, provide them learning experiences and engage them in conversation. Your support will also be critical in adopting universal pre-kindergarten in our schools.

**Tips for Supporting Education
In our Community**

- Read to the children in your life
- Support parents in making sure their kids get to school daily
- Support universal pre-K in our schools
- Encourage summer school participation

Once formal education starts, chronic absenteeism can steal the time students need to be successful in school. Chronic absence is a broader measure of school attendance than truancy and reflects all absences, unexcused and excused. Roughly 10% of our students miss 18 or more days of schooling per year. Poor attendance is often a key indicator of challenges at home and foretells future dropouts and poor workplace habits.

In one attendance study, students who missed 10% of school days in kindergarten and 1st grade were four times more likely not to be proficient in reading or math in 3rd grade. Another study concluded that over 50% of students who were chronically absent for just two years would

eventually drop out of school. A third recent study found that students who are chronically absent are much less likely to ever complete post-secondary education.

Even in the first month of school, absenteeism takes its toll. Research has identified that students who miss even 2 or 3 days of school in September are four times more likely to be chronically absent during the year. Students who are absent for 4 or more days in September are 16 times more likely to be chronically absent for the year! Please don't let your children miss a day of school if they are not sick. If you are an employer, support your employees in getting their children to school, and help your neighbors, relatives and friends get their children to school.

Summer is also a critical time for students learning. Generally, students from low-income households will lose the equivalent of 2-3 months of instruction if they do not attend summer school. By 6th grade, summer learning loss alone can put some students 2 to 3 grade levels behind their peers. Please support summer learning experiences next year, enroll your own children and encourage other parents to participate in summer school. Our summer school blends academics with hands-on activities and weekly field trips that tie into the curriculum. Children have fun and may even learn to love school!

Your help is needed to make our children be better learners. Thank you.