Sunday Edition interview from WWJ-950 News Radio (August 2024)

Hosted by Alisa Zee

Other Speakers:

Dr. Alesia Flye from Macomb Intermediate School District (MISD), Kelly Philips from Oakland Schools, and Sabrina Rudy from Wayne RESA

Part One

Alisa Zee:

Good morning. I'm Alisa Zee. Thanks so much for spending this Sunday morning here listening to the Sunday Edition. A lot of our kids have started school already. Most, I think though, are starting soon. I remember when I was a kid, so many years ago, we all started after Labor Day. A lot of schools start before Labor Day. If you're homeschooled, it's certainly a year-round event. But regardless of when your kids start school, it's important that they go to school, that they make it to school, that their attendance is strong.

And I am joined with three wonderful women who have fast become three of my best friends here in the studio because we're talking about a fabulous initiative called in class is where it's at. So I want to say good morning to Dr. Alesia Flye with Macomb County Schools. Thank you. You are assistant superintendent for instruction and chief academic officer. You're like the chief cook and bottle washer when it comes to what goes on in the classrooms, aren't you?

Alesia Flye:

Some days it definitely feels that way, but we work as a team in Macomb County and excited to be partnering in this endeavor with my colleagues from Wayne in Oakland.

Alisa Zee:

Well, speaking of those colleagues from Wayne in Oakland, enter from Oakland Schools, Kelly Phillips, now McKinney-Vento Regional Grant Coordinator. Kelly, what the heck?

Kelly Phillips:

McKinney-Vento Regional Grant coordinator supports students and families who are experiencing homelessness. And I provide support to the district liaisons in Oakland County. We have 28 districts in Oakland County and 22 charter schools. Each of those schools has a liaison that is appointed to support students and families who are experiencing homelessness. And I provide consultation and support to all of those liaisons.

Alisa Zee:

And in your spare time?

Kelly Phillips:

Lots of time with my five children.

Alisa Zee:

Well, and I will tell listeners that Kelly came here with a couple of her kids because they had just come from a volunteer exercise, which is just so great. We have to get our kids involved in volunteer efforts. Last and certainly not least, from Wayne County, Sabrina Rudy, what's a special populations consultant? Good morning, Sabrina.

Sabrina Rudy:

Good morning Alisa. And thank you for this opportunity to raise awareness about our campaign and the importance of being in school. So a special populations consultant, my role is essentially the same as Kelly in some ways. I support the homeless liaisons within the 130 districts and public school academies in Wayne County. And I also support the foster care liaisons as well.

Alisa Zee:

All three of you, what you do is huge. So first and foremost, thank you for making sure all of our children are well taken care of and have the opportunities and resources they deserve. That I believe, and I don't think anybody will argue with me, is their right. So thank you all for what you do for all of our kids. It is huge, huge, huge. We know and coming from your own paperwork here, the building blocks of good attendance. We need to instill these building blocks in our kids from the get-go.

When I was little, it didn't occur to me to, I don't know, maybe I was a goody-two-shoes, but even when I wasn't so little, when I was in junior high and high school, I didn't skip class. I didn't fake stomach aches. Maybe I was just one of those nerds who liked school, and maybe someone had instilled in me those building blocks. It is so important for our kids to be in school, not just on count day, but every single day. So who would like to go first and talk to me about this collaborative initiative because it's so important that the entire Tri-County area is on the same page. Dr. Flye Alesia, would you like to jump in first and tell us about this initiative?

Alesia Flye:

Absolutely, Alisa.

Alisa Zee:

It's hard for you to say Alisa like it's hard for me to say Alicia, isn't it?

Alesia Flye:

We are so excited about this opportunity. I know in Macomb, this opportunity to partner with our colleagues, as they said in Oakland and Wayne, and bring greater awareness to the importance of good school attendance. And this is a first of its kind public awareness campaign where we are galvanizing and have curated resources for families. As you mentioned, some of the building blocks that some of us grew up with and you were in school. But we know our world is a little more complex and we know that there are some barriers, there are some challenges for families, but we also understand that students who are in school generally do better in terms of their academics as well as their social experiences.

Alisa Zee:

Of course, I'm just guessing Kelly and, or Sabrina, that the pandemic set us so far back because where there was chronic absenteeism in some areas, new pockets of absenteeism opened up through the pandemic when kids were learning at home, and some without parental supervision, just because that's the nature of their home life. How are we doing in climbing out of that, so that then we can start to get better and better instead of just catching up? Either one of you.

Kelly Phillips:

Yes. I'll go ahead and take that. Kelly from Oakland, and our trends are improving. So last year we did see that our chronic absenteeism rates in Oakland County were at 31.9%, and that was down from the year before, which was 42.1% in the '21-22 school year.

Alisa Zee:

And what does that mean when you say chronic absenteeism is at 31 in change?

Kelly Phillips:

That means students missing more than 10%. I'm sorry, were you asking what chronic absenteeism means?

Alisa Zee:

Yes.

Kelly Phillips:

More than 10% of a school year. So that would equate to more than five days absent per semester.

Alisa Zee:

And 31% ish is where we're at in the county right now, which thank goodness is down.

Kelly Phillips:

It's down. But that's still, when you look at that in real numbers, that would be 40,000 students in Macomb County were identified as being chronically absent in the '22-23 school year. And that number in Oakland County was nearly 50,000 students that were chronically absent. And in Wayne County, it was nearly 115,000 students. So when you combine all of those kids together, that's over 200,000 students were reported as chronically absent and the Metro Detroit region last year. We really want to, as a Tri-County team, build awareness, share positive messaging,

why kids should want to attend school. We want to provide resources and support to help remove any barriers families have to their children achieving good attendance.

Also, it's important to note that our families who are experiencing homelessness have additional barriers to achieving good attendance. And chronic absenteeism rates for those students experiencing homelessness was exponentially higher in all three counties last year. Macomb County saw 69% of students who were experiencing homelessness were also chronically absent. Oakland County had 63% of our students experiencing homelessness that were reported as chronically absent. And Wayne County saw 72% of their students experiencing homelessness that were chronically absent. We know this impacts graduation rates. And across the state, the graduation rates for '22-23 for all students was 82%. And for our students who were experiencing homelessness, that was 58%.

So our hope is that through this campaign, families and students will be encouraged and excited to attend school regularly. They'll feel comfortable accessing the resources they need to address any barriers to attending school. And that school attendance will continue to improve over the next several years.

Alisa Zee:

Let us have a big amen on that. On all of the above. Now the statistics are alarming, if not shocking, and especially as they increase exponentially when we're looking at kids experiencing homelessness. I am guessing a lot of listeners right now though, are shocked and Sabrina, don't take it personally please, but I would like you to talk about it because people are not surprised about things like this in Wayne County, which seems kind of silly to me because this cuts a swath across all areas. But I'm guessing there are many people who are surprised about Oakland and Macomb Counties seeing such high rates of chronic absenteeism. It cuts a swath across all regions, doesn't it, Sabrina?

Sabrina Rudy:

I agree with you. It does. And while the numbers are higher in Wayne County, oftentimes there is a connection between high levels of poverty and additional barriers to attending school. I mean, that's one thing that we've been addressing through this campaign as well, really looking at some of our most vulnerable populations such as our families, caregivers, students who are experiencing homelessness, knowing that they have an even higher absenteeism rate than we do. Our housed students. So making sure that we share information with the families so that they know where they can go to for resources, connecting with their schools, connecting with

that homeless liaison within their school that every single school district has assigned by a federal mandate. So our roles in our counties, though the numbers are staggering, that's one of the reasons that we're doing this campaign. We know that there are resources that we can provide to our families and we can support our schools with this at the ISD and RISA level.

Alesia Flye:

And Alisa, if I may add to what Sabrina was saying, when we talk about... Again, one of the focus areas of this campaign is the awareness around the resources and whether you live in Macomb, Oakland, or Wayne, all of our schools are connected to community resources. We want to make sure that families, especially students and families who may be having some challenges currently, that we can work with them And that we can connect them with resources and areas for food and some instances, housing, clothing, school supplies. We just want to make sure that we are removing any barriers so that students and their families that they feel very comfortable, respected, and feel like their needs are being met when they're in our school communities. And we just can't stress enough that we would like them to reach out to their local school district and we can assist them if they're having challenges. We would love to see them in class because that's where it's at.

Alisa Zee:

And what you've pointed out is key. There are resources, and whether we're looking at our school districts, our veterans, the homeless people in our communities, when they don't know about the resources that are available, they cannot, it's not that they will not, but they cannot take advantage of them because they don't even know they are there. I did not know that there was a federal mandate that a homeless liaison was available everywhere at every school. That is so important, and it's important not just to have that liaison, but that we know about it and we know that there's a place these kids can go. When we're talking about getting other services for kids, whether it's higher hopes, giving food to Head Start families in the city of Detroit, whether it's the Kiwanis Club giving books to kids who don't have new books to read. There are so many fantastic opportunities and really important resources for people that we just need to shine a light. We're going to pause in a moment for a moment, but I think we have a little bit more to talk about. Will you ladies please stay with me?

Alesia Flye:

Absolutely.

Kelly Phillips:

Absolutely.

Sabrina Rudy:

Absolutely.

Alisa Zee:

To get a pluses in following instructions because I said, "If we're running out of time and I ask all in unison say, absolutely. And they did." Hooray. But we do want to talk about in Class is where it's at. We want to talk about how people can get information and why it is so important that this is a collaborative effort between Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb Counties. We all have to work together for the good of our kids. Is there a website people can go to visit before we pause for an instant?

Sabrina Rudy:

Yes, there is. If anyone wants to find the resources and supports and tips and how to connect with your schools, you would go to learninclass.com, and you can choose which county your child attends from that site. Learninclass.com.

Alisa Zee:

Learninclass.com. Well, you three are schooling me in some important ways. I want to say thank you to Oakland Schools, Kelly Phillips, Macomb Schools, Dr. Alesia Flye, Wayne Schools, Sabrina Rudy, and I got everybody in the right order and at the right place. That doesn't always happen. The website one more time before we pause.

Kelly Phillips:

Learninclass.com

Alisa Zee:

Learninclass.com, collaborative effort to get our kids, not just to the classroom, but staying in the classroom, which is where it's at, the learning, the socialization, and so much more. So thank all three of you for being here with me today. I really appreciate you.

Kelly Phillips:

Thank you. We appreciate you as well.

Alesia Flye:

Thank you for this opportunity as

Alisa Zee:

Well. And thank you all for spending this Sunday morning here with us. Once again, I'm Alisa Zee. You're listening to the Sunday Edition.

Part Two

Alisa Zee:

Good morning. I'm Alisa Zee. Thank you so very much for spending this Sunday morning here with us listening to the Sunday Edition. Is it the last week in August? I think it is. I have three stunned people. Yes, it really is the last Sunday in August.

Kelly Phillips:

Hard to believe.

Alisa Zee:

But summer is far from over. It's a beautiful, sunny day. Summer is far from over, not until at least a few weeks from now. Now that being said, that doesn't mean that school hasn't started

already. The three ladies in the studio right now, for you guys, it's probably school all year round, isn't it, for the three of you?

Sabrina Rudy:

Yes, it is.

Kelly Phillips:

It is.

Alisa Zee:

Man, oh man. I'm still here, I'm happy to report, with Kelly Phillips from Oakland Schools, Dr. Alesia Flye with Macomb, and Sabrina Rudy with Wayne. You guys don't even take the summer off, do you?

Kelly Phillips:

No, we do not.

Sabrina Rudy:

No.

Alisa Zee:

Boy, oh, boy. Well, thank you, thank you, and thank you because I think some people at the beginning of a school year might look and say, "Well, why isn't everybody 1,000% prepared?" It's because there's a lot to be done over the summer that not everybody is spending time doing. The three of you certainly are. And I am not casting aspersions on any of our teachers. I have the utmost respect for all of our kids' teachers and so much gratitude that they do what they do. And one of my kids was a little bit of a troublemaker, so thank you Mrs. Maher for taking such good care of her. They are all perfectly wonderful people, but you know what I'm not saying.

So what we're talking about this morning is a collaborative effort between the three counties, Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb, to get our kids not just to show up and be in class, but to stay in class day after day after day after day. And we know that some kids face unique challenges. Some of the challenges sadly, are not as unique as we would like them to be when we're looking at homelessness and food insecurity. But it is critical that all of our kids get to school, stay in school, and grow on every level possible. So any one of you wonderful women, feel free to jump in and talk to me about In Class Is Where It's At and why you're working together on this project.

Dr. Alesia Flye:

Yeah. Alisa, the collaboration is extremely important in this project. We want to make sure that we're reaching as many students and families as possible, and what better way to do that than to collaborate on this very important matter in having as many of our students in class as possible. And just as you were speaking earlier about our jobs and activities over the summer, a key part of our job is responding to and meeting the needs of students and families. And as we've been discussing, our students and families, whether you're in Macomb, Oakland or Wayne, are in different places and they come to us with different experiences.

And we just want families to know that we value each of them and that we are available and there are resources to helping connect so that they are in school. And I think, also, one of the unique features of this collaboration is that it's a proactive stance. Truancy is a traditional approach and it's reactive. But with our Tri-County Attendance Awareness Campaign, In Class Is Where It's At, it's a proactive measure. It's focused on proactive actions and its resources, again, with the sole purpose of helping to increase our attendance and to make sure that students are in class so that they can thrive and be their absolute best.

Alisa Zee:

Exactly. That's all we want. I don't think that's too much to ask, do you?

Sabrina Rudy:

Not at all.

Kelly Phillips:

Not at all. Not at all. And also, what Dr. Flye was saying about us collaborating together, I think we found we are more dynamic together and we've been really able to build on all of our strengths and make this campaign what it's becoming. It's a really creative campaign, and we're working on improving good attendance for all students. We wanted it to be creative. We want to speak directly to Metro Detroit students and their families, provide resources. We do have some shared resources across the counties as well. So we just really think that working together has given us the ability to be the best that we can all be and for our families and students.

Alisa Zee:

Sabrina, what do you think about ads at bus stops and ad campaigns saying, "Come sit down and stay in your classroom"?

Sabrina Rudy:

Yeah, I can't wait to actually see them. I have not yet. I know we're all on the lookout for them and taking pictures when we do, and hearing the spots on the radio and so on. But I'm very excited to know that no matter where anyone travels within the Tri-County area, they'll be able to see what our message is. They'll be able to see how important it is to be in school. When I think about our slogan, "In Class Is Where It's At," I was really thinking about what is the "it," right?

Alisa Zee:

Sure.

Sabrina Rudy:

And I was thinking it's the growing and the learning, and it's helping students reach their full potential. Building relationships. You have to be in school to build those relationships and discovering their talents and interests.

Alisa Zee:

Yes.

Sabrina Rudy:

So yeah, this is very exciting.

Alisa Zee:

I'm going to be on the lookout also. I want to see these ads and hear the ads. It's so exciting and you know you're going to be hitting the right people because everybody across these three counties will see or hear something telling them, "Make sure your kids are in school," and it has to start in the home.

Kelly Phillips:

And we're hoping that when families see these billboards ... And they are. They're bright and colorful and positive. We're hoping when they see the billboards or they hear the messaging, they come to our website, they come to our landing page, learninclass.com, and they find which county they need to click on so they can receive the resources and supports, and talk with their school and their district and remove those barriers so that their students are attending regularly.

Alisa Zee:

I would imagine your principals and teachers and teachers' aides and everybody who works at the schools, I would guess they are all thrilled about this initiative. Yes?

Dr. Alesia Flye:

They absolutely are. Teachers and administrators are certainly aware of the challenge and what our statistics say.

Alisa Zee:

Sure.

Dr. Alesia Flye:

So everyone has been looking for ways to address it, and I think they appreciate it when there's a cohesive, collective effort and focus on this. And so they are excited that not only that we have the one voice, I should say, in each of our counties respectively, but there's always greater power and making an impact when we are working collectively as Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb as a Tri-County initiative.

Alisa Zee:

I love this.

Sabrina Rudy:

And I know in all three counties, we've been working closely with attendance teams in the schools and in the districts on developing their own plans internally on how to increase attendance, so it only made sense now for us to go to the parents and caregivers with this message.

Alisa Zee:

I'm going to be on the lookout. Will you have a Facebook page where people can take pictures of themselves in front of one of the billboards or the bus signs? Just an idea. Just planting it in the suggestion box because I think that would be cool. I'd love to see people from all over, all three counties, taking pictures next to the "In Class Is Where It's At" signs.

Dr. Alesia Flye:

I think you've added another layer to our campaign. We love it. Thank you for the suggestion.

Alisa Zee:

My pleasure. Well, I just want to say thank you to all three of you, again, for the work that you do for taking such good care of our kids. Oakland Schools' Kelly Phillips, Macomb Schools' Dr. Alesia Flye, Wayne Schools' Sabrina Rudy, I, for one, am grateful for you. So thank you all very much and thanks for sharing the message. I'm glad we were able to make this happen.

Kelly Phillips:

Thank you for this opportunity.

Dr. Alesia Flye:

Thank you so much for giving us the opportunity to share In Class Is Where It's At.

Sabrina Rudy:

And thank you again for this opportunity, and don't forget to visit learninclass.com.

Alisa Zee:

Thank you all for spending this Sunday morning here with us. Once again, I'm Alisa Zee. You're listening to the Sunday Edition.