

Yutan receives state attendance award

Taylor Shull

Public school attendance has decreased drastically; from 2024-2025, 21 percent of students in Nebraska were chronically absent. However, on Friday, Sept. 26, Yutan Public Schools was recognized for its positive efforts to increase attendance.

"I'm just really proud of our staff and our students and administrators for just creating an environment where kids feel comfortable and safe and supported, so they show up to school each day and know that they're going to receive the best from our staff on a daily basis. It's a lot of pride for the community and the school district itself to know that this is the place where kids want to be each day," superintendent Brett Schwartz said.

The district was recognized in an assembly conducted by Nebraska's Lieutenant Governor, Joe Kelly, and Commissioner of Education, Brian Maher. Because this was a district award, the administration wanted both the elementary and high school students to attend.

"We wanted to make sure that we could bring all of our students together. It was kinda tricky because we already had an assembly scheduled that day in the afternoon, but we just thought it was important," high school principal Stefanie Novotny said.

The assembly started with Schwartz giving his respect to students and staff for receiving such an award.

"Today, we're here to celebrate a simple truth that in education we all know to be true: that when students show up, they grow. And here in Yutan, our students come each day, ready to learn, ready to contribute and ready to make the world a better place," Schwartz said.

Schwartz was followed by Kelly, who was filling in for Governor Jim Pillen. Kelly explained that the state has a goal to increase the attendance rate of students across the state of Nebraska.



Kindergartners to seniors in high school sit and listen to Lieutenant Governor Joe Kelly give a speech. Kelly asked students to raise their hands if they were involved in an extracurricular activity. (Ginger Eikmeier)



Kelly explains the importance of students being in school. He read from a proclamation that explained the plans for the upcoming future. (Ginger Eikmeier)

"It's a very aggressive goal, as we applaud Dr. Maher and the State Board of Education and schools like Yutan who are willing to engage, that we're going to take whatever the number is today of kids who aren't showing up for school, and we're going to reduce it by one half," Kelly said.

Maher then explained how bullying, lack of resources and even family problems can play a role in the attendance issue.

"I'm sure many of you can think about a time if you or a friend has missed school for one or more of those reasons...but the Department of Education is committed to helping more students get to school regularly, and that's why we've invested quite a bit of time and quite a bit of money in the schools to support student attendance and creative resources for your schools, and we've championed events like this for schools like yours," Maher said.

To wrap up the assembly, Kelly read parts of the governor's proclamation to get the final message across.

"And whereas the Nebraska Department of Education has declared its commitment to having chronic absenteeism reduced by 2030 by half, and the Nebraska Department of Education has included reduction of absenteeism in the state's accountability and support system, whereas barriers to student attendance may include lack of access to health care, resources, unreliable transportation, missed communication, bullying and mobility and whereas schools and communities can work to better understand the root causes of poor performance," Kelly said. "Now therefore, I, Jim Pillen, governor of the state of Nebraska, do hereby proclaim the month of October 2025 School Awareness Month."

After the assembly, staff and students had various takeaways, taking a step back and realizing how great the accomplishment was.

"It was an honor to be recognized, and I hope that our future holds more awards and accomplishments," English teacher Nearly Freeman said.

Some of the students credited their teachers for this honor, such as senior Maddie Fenn, who shared how the teachers made a lasting impact on her.

"I think that the teachers at Yutan have very close bonds with each student, and they set good examples and mindsets for the students," Fenn said.

Schwartz agreed that Yutan's teachers and other staff members leave a positive impact on the students.

"We've got a great staff here. I think that's the number one reason why kids show up to school: they want to be here and want to do things because of our staff," Schwartz said. "They love and care about kids, and I've seen that throughout our district, from our teachers to our custodial staff to our people that work in our food service and in our teachers in the classroom. I believe that helps kids stay connected to our school."

Beyond the staff, the district has also tried its best to connect the students through activity offerings, creating bonds that give them something to look forward to every week.

"I think the things we do hopefully connect kids to school with activities and programs. Teammates is a great option, and I really, really appreciate the Chieftain Buddies program that we have here. That's really, really neat to see," Schwartz said.

Overall, the proclamation highlighted that the outlook for the future is positive, and the administration at Yutan plans on keeping it that way.

"I hope we can continue to do good, to do good things, to be recognized in our district," Novotny said.



Schwartz (center) poses with Lieutenant Governor Joe Kelly and Commissioner of Education Brian Maher after the proclamation signing ceremony. The proclamation declared October as school awareness month. (Ginger Eikmeier)