

Research Brief

Student Attendance: Research and Strategies

Question: What are the characteristics of successful student attendance programs for the high school?

Summary of Findings: It is commonly believed and well supported by research that students who attend school regularly are more successful than those who do not. The challenge for high schools is to design and implement attendance policies and programs that monitor, encourage, and reward student attendance using available resources and without burdening faculty and staff with cumbersome monitoring and reporting procedures. Most important, to be truly successful, attendance policies and procedures must be part of a comprehensive plan to create and maintain student centered, achievement focused learning communities.

Major Findings and Conclusions

Why Students Don't Attend School

A major review of research on the subject of school attendance, conducted by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL, 2004) shows that students who fail to attend school exhibit several distinct characteristics:

1. Students' school perceptions: Absentees are less likely to perceive school favorably
2. Perception of parental discipline: Absentees perceive discipline as lax or inconsistent
3. Parents' control: Absentees believe parents are attempting to exert more control over them
4. Students' academic self-concept: Absentees feel inferior academically
5. Perceived family conflict: Absentees experience family conflict
6. Social competence in class: Absentees are less likely to feel socially competent in class

Interviews with chronically absent students reported in the NWREL survey of literature revealed perceptions that interfered with school attendance and encouraged them to stay away:

1. Viewed classes as boring, irrelevant, and a waste of time
2. Did not have positive relationships with teachers

3. Did not have positive relationships with other students
4. Was suspended too often
5. Did not feel safe at school
6. Could not keep up with schoolwork or was failing (and there were no timely interventions)
7. Found classes not challenging enough (worksheets and reading with lectures were the predominant activities), and students can miss class days and still receive credit
8. Couldn't work and go to school at the same time

A Comprehensive View

According to NWREL, A broader view of attendance issues, is becoming more prevalent in the literature – that is attendance is an indicator of larger, more complex issues of disengagement and student motivation, and that school culture and structure contribute to both. Those who study the issue advocate designing a continuum of building-level approaches and student supports in the school. Although these experts still want students and families held accountable, there is a growing recognition that schools need to take a positive approach in looking at how the school structures, culture, academics, and other factors contribute to attendance problems.

Although there is no evidence that any single strategy or group of strategies are consistently effective in improving student attendance, there are common elements of all interventions, uncovered by NWREL, that should guide program development. These factors, recommended by the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, include: consistent policies, building-level support and commitment, and continuous evaluation. They continue to say that strategies for increasing attendance can generally be placed into the following, often overlapping, categories:

1. Sound and reasonable attendance policies with consequences for missing school
2. Early interventions, especially with elementary students and their families
3. Targeted interventions for students with chronic attendance problems, such as truancy reduction programs—both school and community based.
4. Strategies to increase engagement and personalization with students and families that can affect attendance rates: family involvement, culturally responsive culture, smaller learning community structures, mentoring, advisory programs, maximization and focus on learning time, and service learning

Effective attendance policies and programs:

- ✓ **Are clear and easy to understand.**

Attendance policies and programs must be clear and easy to understand in order to effectively improve student attendance. Additionally, policy and program information should be provided to parents and students on a regular basis. Frequent mention of attendance policies and programs in parent newsletters, on websites, via “on-hold” telephone recordings, and even in arts and sporting event programs, will help to facilitate understanding of just how important attendance is for high school students.

✓ **Are part of a strong, student focused school climate.**

A strong, student focused school climate provides a safe and healthy environment that encourages the best in everyone from students to faculty and staff. A healthy school climate is the result of careful planning and organization, and an unwavering focus on achievement, self-esteem and physical and emotional well-being of students. No single factor has a greater impact on student attendance than the climate and culture of a school.

✓ **Provide opportunities for rewards and incentives.**

While rewards and incentives for attendance seem to spark controversy, there is no question that they work in improving attendance. In school districts where students receive rewards such as added points for semester grades, or relief from semester exams, attendance does improve. In some districts, more tangible, and less controversial rewards such as T-shirts, free movie tickets and discounts at local merchants seem to work to improve student attendance. In several districts in Florida, students who meet academic and attendance goals are entered in a drawing for a new car at local dealerships. The tension builds as students take their report cards to the dealership each grading period and the impact on attendance is remarkable.

✓ **Incorporate strict penalties for truancy.**

Stricter attendance policies, with consequences for truancy ranging from lower grade point averages to fines and jail time for parents, are paying off in some school districts. Many districts are partnering with juvenile justice personnel to create programs aimed at keeping students in school and punishing those who are truant.

However, so called “zero tolerance” programs have shown mixed results, especially with poor and minority students. Early attendance problems that result in suspensions or failure make it more difficult for students to redeem themselves, even if their attendance improves. That contributes to the sense of hopelessness about school that is often characteristic of truants anyway.

✓ **Recognize and build on the attendance impact of existing programs.**

1. *Transition programs that ease middle school students into ninth grade*
School leaders can ease students' transition into high school by implementing transition programs that address the needs of students and their parents and that facilitate communication between middle school and high school teachers and support staff. Students who make a comfortable transition from middle to high school tend to be more confident students with better attendance. For more information visit <http://www.principalspartnership.com/library.html> and click on Ninth Grade Transitions.
2. *School based health programs*
Since the most legitimate absences are the result of illness or injury, schools with comprehensive student health programs tend to have higher rates of attendance. Programs that promote healthy lifestyles and provide access to community health-care programs for needy students are a vital part of systemic attendance program. In one school, a “wash your hands” program promoted by the school nurse helped to cut the spread of colds to students and faculty. In another, students and teachers teamed up to support one another in giving up cigarettes and smokeless tobacco. Finally, one school set out to lower its pregnancy rate by focusing on education and access to community programs. All three schools improved their attendance rate as well as the health and well being of their students and faculty.
3. *Career education, and work/study programs and college dual/enrollment*
Programs that give students a head start on their post high school goals are effective in lowering a school's dropout rate and raising school attendance. Students who plan to enter the workforce immediately after graduation often begin their work careers while still in school. This often results in students who attempt to juggle full time academic work with a part or full time job. Providing academic credit for job experiences in work/study programs helps keep these kids in school, and improves attendance. Additionally, dual enrollment programs in community college job training programs or academic transfer programs help to improve attendance by building skills and clearly linking high school attendance to future career goals.
4. *Academic support for under achievers*
Tutoring programs, writing centers, math labs, mentoring programs and other forms of academic support have a positive effect on both achievement and attendance. Students who feel successful in school are much more likely to attend on a regular basis.
5. *Extracurricular activities*
Students who participate in activities such as sports, music, the arts, clubs and interest groups have higher attendance rate than students who do not

participate in extracurricular activities. Providing opportunities to engage in high interest activities tends to promote social bonding which increases attendance. Time and resources spent strengthening existing extracurricular programs and reasonable participation policies do not prevent low achieving students from participating have a very positive impact on overall student attendance.

✓ *Help to articulate the importance of good attendance.*

Articulating the importance of attendance in ways that are meaningful to all students can have a very positive effect on attendance. Students need to understand that attending school is important in the context of their future plans and goals, not just in terms of grades and academic success. Career fairs that focus on employability skills (including good attendance), guest speakers who discuss the importance of high-school attendance, and student focus groups who discuss ways to make school more meaningful can go a long way towards improving student attitude towards school and school attendance.

The National Council on Economic Education's website includes a lesson plan that engages students in an analysis of various attendance incentive programs and has them compare the cost of the programs with the improved earning potential of high school graduates. The aim of the lesson is to underscore the importance of attendance to the future goals of students.

References:

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL). (2004). Increasing Student Attendance: Strategies from Research and Practice. Portland, OR: Author.
<http://www.nwrel.org/request/2004june/strategies.html>

Online Resources:

Increasing Student Attendance: Strategies from Research and Practice NWREL

<http://www.nwrel.org/request/2004june/strategies.html>

This excellent and comprehensive treatment of the topic takes a broader view of attendance issues, which is becoming more prevalent in the literature. This is the single, best comprehensive review of literature and best practices currently available. It includes descriptions of model programs.

Denver Public Schools and School by School Attendance Policies

<http://www.educationpartnerships.org/>

http://rockymountainnews.com/drmn/education/article/0,1299,DRMN_957_3790656,00.html

Denver's School by School policies surveyed by the Rocky Mountain News show vast differences in the complexity and completeness of the plans.

Background for Community-Level Work on Educational Adjustment, Achievement and Attainment in Adolescence: Reviewing the Literature on Contributing Factors
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By Zakia Redd, Jennifer Brooks, and Ayelish McGarvey

http://www.childtrends.org/what_works/youth_development/doc/KEducationES.pdf

This excellent, scholarly paper reviews the research regarding the factors in adolescents' lives that predict their educational adjustment, achievement and attainment. The review is limited to the review to the well-being of individuals aged 18 and under. The review is also limited to studies using rigorous analysis and/or evaluation methods.

School Attendance Improvement Strategies

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ai/cw/attendstrategy.asp>

Compiled by the California Department of Education, these selected school attendance practices are identified as having a positive effect in encouraging students to regularly attend all their high school classes.

The Challenge of Reform: Attendance

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL)

<http://www.ncrel.org/csri/reform/attend/snap.htm>

What can schools do to encourage attendance? Education consultant Ron Wolk says schools need to convene everyone -- students, parents, teachers, staff, and community representatives -- and take stock of the reasons students are staying away. Then they need to ask what the school can do to make students want to attend. Successful community schools are open up to 16 hours a day, year round. These schools include tutoring, parenting classes, counseling, on-site health care, recreation, tutoring, family nights, and adult education. A case study shows how one high school addresses this issue.

Student Centered High Schools

Education Alliance, Brown University

<http://www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/perspectives/stdntctrhs.pdf>

Education researchers at Brown have identified that comprehensive school reform, focused on creating student-centered learning environments, increase student connection to the school, improve attendance and promote achievement, especially among challenging students.

Truancy Prevention: Best Practices

<http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/truancy/best.html>

These promising practices to reduce truancy and promote attendance have been drawn from schools across the nation. They are assembled by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice. They provide detailed descriptions of the programs as well as contact information in each school.

Case Study

RANDOLPH COUNTY VOCATIONAL TECHNICAL CENTER

Elkins, W. Va.

A Decade of Committed Effort Results in Improved Student Achievement

http://www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/publications/case_studies/Randolph.asp

This case study describes a carefully planned, deliberate program to improve student attendance and achievement in a West Virginia high school. The program produced extraordinary results

American Psychological Society Observer, *Encouraging Student Attendance*

This excellent article talks about the importance of school attendance and what teachers and administrators can do to encourage students to attend school. It offers loads of very practical ideas for teachers and administrators.

<http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/1101/tips.html>

The News-Gazette Online, Champaign Illinois

This site links to a newspaper article outlining the use of rewards and incentives to improve attendance in an Illinois school district. The article has good information about the pros and cons of the use of rewards.

<http://www.news-gazette.com/story.cfm?Number=15244> *

The National Council on Economic Education

Website includes a lesson plan that engages students in an analysis of various attendance incentive programs

<http://www.econedlink.org/lessons/index.cfm?lesson=EM349>

University of the State of New York, State Education Department

This is a links to a document that outlines important information about attendance programs. The document includes several links to sites that provide good information as well as some hardcopy resources.

<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/rscs/chaps/Attendance/AttendanceIncentives.doc>

Education World, *Schools Get Tough on Attendance*

This article outlines the policies of four school districts that use everything from fines to rewards to keep kids in school.

<http://www.educationpartnerships.org/>

http://www.education-world.com/a_admin/admin263.shtml

ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges Los Angeles CA, *Successful Collaborations Between High Schools and Community Colleges.*

This article outlines partnerships between high schools and community colleges that have had a positive impact on student attendance, achievement and graduation rate. The article includes programs such as dual credit and concurrent enrollment.

<http://www.ericdigests.org/2001-4/high.html>

Department for Education and Skills, United Kingdom

A site in the United Kingdom that has a variety of template- like documents that can be modified and used for planning purposes.

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/schoolattendance/goodpractice/index.cfm?cat=10>

SouthCoastToday.com, *Combat truancy by making school worth attending*

This interesting editorial in a Massachusetts newspaper outlines some ideas for improving attendance.

<http://www.southcoasttoday.com/daily/05-03/05-16-03/a17op079.htm> *

*** Newspaper links often disappear so download quickly and save for future reference.**

Submitted

Date: 11/19/05 (Revised)

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