SCHOOL ATTENDANCE TRACKING:
Challenging and Effective Practices

National Center for School Engagement

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Promoting attendance, attachment and achievement

School Attendance Tracking: Challenges and Effective Practices

Tracking school attendance is a challenge at best, a nightmare for many. The No Child Left Behind Act holds states accountable for reporting attendance. However, there are a variety of reasons why attendance data are often misleading. Misleading data have financial ramifications for the schools and safety issues for students. For instance, if a child is known not to be in school, parents and school officials can follow-up to find out why the child is missing and if he or she is in danger. The most daunting challenge is *consistency*. Attendance tracking is wildly inconsistent, often between classrooms, schools, and districts.

Teachers within the same schools track attendance differently even when provided with sophisticated tracking systems (e.g., electronic classroom tracking, like Campus). Many track attendance only at the beginning of class which can lead to tardies being counted as absences. Some teachers believe it is the students' responsibility to correct the inaccuracies but students rarely know this or go out of their way to do so. Some teachers are non-compliant with tracking absences, especially if there is no motivation to do so. In addition, counselors and other staff who may be meeting with a student during his/her class period, may not report the whereabouts of the student which again leads to inflating the absence rate.

Inflation of the absence rate is not usually the main concern when tracking attendance. Schools are motivated to *look good* when it comes to attendance. The State School Attendance Review Board in California revealed that schools report truancy rates (unexcused absences) between 0% and 2000% with little relation to the size of the school[1]. One reason for the underreporting is the desire to mask truancy as something else. Over and under reporting is often a result of how truancy is defined, especially as it relates to tardiness and period absences. Again, this reflects the inconsistency with which schools define truancy[2] and their willingness to report it. Districts suffer from similar inconsistencies.

In addition to these inconsistencies, the practices of what to do when attendance is a problem vary, depending on the seriousness with which the school or district takes attendance, and the resources available to deal with it. If the school falls short on following up with absent students, attendance tracking becomes even more difficult. This can result in "losing" a student in the system, assuming a chronic truant has transferred, or simply applying a code that means "unverified" to the attendance records. Consequently, the school no longer records the student as non-attending, just unknown or non-existent. These codes are not necessarily included in drop out rates.

Some view software programs as the key to successful attendance tracking. There are numerous data tracking programs which are helpful aids, such as SASI, StarBase or StarStudent, Campus, STI, and many more. The greatest benefit in using these databases is seen when there is alignment among districts within a state. Consistency in reporting can be improved if all districts use the same database. Of course, the data are only as good as what is entered. Coding systems, attendance definitions, and personnel practices may still vary widely.

There are solutions to the challenges in attendance tracking. Challenges are based upon coding and follow-up on absence data. Solutions need to address how to improve coding and the

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[1] For more information on this and related reports contact David Kopperud, Education Programs Consultant, California Department of Education, Counseling and Student Support Services, 1430 N. Street, Sacramento, CA. email at DKopperu@cde.ca.gov.

[2] For more on this topic click on the web publication entitled "National Definition of Truancy" at www.schoolengagement.org

process by which attendance data are verified once initial absences are identified. Table 1 outlines both the challenges and the solutions.

Table 1: Challenges and Solutions to Attendance Tracking

Challenges	Solutions
Teacher inconsistencies in reporting attendance	• Motivation by principals including consequences of non-compliance. • Clear school policies. • Create a serious school culture of tracking attendance. • Evaluate teachers on attendance tracking practices. • Attendance tracking training for substitute teachers.
Inflating absences	• Replacing tardy status with wrongful absence reporting at the end of class. • Encourage other staff (counselors, etc) who meet with students to be responsible for those students' attendance data.
Inconsistent/Incorrect coding	• Well defined absence codes, i.e., defining how many tardies or period absences = a daily absence. • Eliminate using a single period absence as an indicator of daily absences. • Period tracking (e.g., track in every class or 2 + times a day in elementary). • Enter all absences as unexcused until there is evidence of a legitimate excuse. • Use software that allows for easy updates/corrections of attendance data.
Meaningless Codes	• Eliminating unverified and "unknown" codes
Incorrect codes on chronic truants/drop-outs	• Immediate follow-up with truants. • Eliminate transfer or drop-out status "assumptions" – insist on evidence of attendance at the transferred school. • Create a common student number that identifies the student regardless of transfer status. • Employ dedicated staff to address truancy, such as truancy officers and community advocates. • Eliminate automated parental notification processes – personalize the process via phone and home visits. • Provide attendance data on report cards. • Encourage personal relationships between parents and teachers, such that teachers follow-up with parents when a student is missing.
Inconsistencies between schools and districts	• Implement district-wide and state-wide tracking and reporting policies. • Provide incentives to schools. • Use common database systems.

The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) is an initiative of The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC). NCSE strives to build a network of key stakeholders who share the belief that improving school attendance and school attachment promotes achievement and school success.

NCSE was established as a result of more than a decade of educational research about youth out of the educational mainstream conducted by CFFC. The impact of this work has been the development of significant investments of state funds to reduce suspensions expulsions and truancy. Over five years ago, CFFC began working with the OJJDP, US Department of Justice to assist in the planning and implementation of pilot demonstration projects across the country. As projects developed, CFFC became the national evaluator of this five-year truancy demonstration project.

The culmination of ten years of program experience and research has identified truancy and school engagement as the centerpiece of NCSE's work to improve outcomes for youth who are at the greatest risk of school failure and delinquency. We are national leaders in applying research to help communities prevent and reduce truancy.

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