

Research Brief

Successful Attendance Policies and Programs

Question: What steps can be taken to assure that High School students have the best attendance possible?

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:

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.

✓ **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.

Online Resources:

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.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.educationpartnerships.org/>

<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.**

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