Every Student Counts

Make the attendance connection

A school reference guide for student attendance

August 2015
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Chronic Absenteeism

Definition

For the purpose of this discussion, chronic absenteeism is defined as a student who has, for any reason, missed 10 per cent (about 18 days) or more of the school year or in the previous year, missed a month or more of school.

We assume that barring illness or an extraordinary event, students are in class. Students at risk of chronic absenteeism are not often identified negating the impact of early intervention.

We need to change our assumption, since an attendance issue is often a first indicator that a student is having other challenges.

We know that school attendance leads to success. This means that students need to attend school, whether it is through regular classes, online learning, blended programs, home education or off campus courses.

As educators, we cannot truly understand achievement gaps or efforts to close them without considering chronic absenteeism.

The emerging data on absenteeism and achievement suggest that we need to re-examine our assumptions about what has and has not worked.

Efforts that have appeared to be only modestly to not at all successful have greater potential if the student is in school to benefit from them.

For example:
Schools often employ educational assistants or specialized teaching staff for specific students....but if the child is not attending school they cannot benefit from the intervention.
After reviewing research from Alberta, Canada and the United States, some very clear trends show that absenteeism is a stronger predictor of drop out rates than suspensions, test scores or students who have been retained.

As a result, many strategies used in drop-out prevention programs focus on increasing student attendance; so there is some overlap between absenteeism and dropout interventions.

**Why is the student absent?**

Our first step is to identify why a student is not attending school. According to “The Importance of Being in School Report,” students miss school for many reasons, which fit into three broad categories:

**Can’t**

Students who cannot attend for reasons like illness, injury, family responsibilities, housing instability, inadequate transportation, the need to work, or involvement with the juvenile justice system.

**Won’t**

Second are students who will not attend school. This is typically to avoid bullying, unsafe conditions, harassment and real or perceived embarrassment resulting from learning difficulties, social awkwardness or something as simple as the sanctions imposed on them if they arrive late.

**Don’t**

Students sometimes do not attend school because they do not know the value in attending or nothing stops them from being absent.

During the Alberta Every Student Counts project, students said they want to feel welcomed at school and have a sense of belonging. They want an adult to care about them, to connect with them, to help them resolve issues and to help them with their learning. They want to be valued.
Any discussion related to attendance needs to focus on the school jurisdiction’s ability to identify why the student is not in school and provide supports.

Research identifies a number of risk and protective factors that may provide guidance to school jurisdictions and schools planning strategies to increase attendance.

**Interventions and Strategies**

As a school, how do we address chronic absenteeism? Where do we start?

*Pyramid of Intervention*

By referring to the Pyramid of Intervention, we can see that there are three levels of increasing intensity that need to be considered:

**Universal**

Universal interventions benefit all students. At this level, it’s critical that school staff communicate clear expectations with the students and their families about the importance
of regular attendance. These types of activities and strategies are based on consistent school-wide expectations for regular attendance for all students.

**Targeted**

Targeted interventions provide early intervention for students with attendance issues. In these cases, a systematic approach to reinforcement, either at the class or individual level, regarding school attendance and participation in learning. We need to engage the student and parents in efforts to increase attendance. This includes collaborating on strategies that could be used at home, at school and in the community.

**Specialized**

Specialized interventions benefit a small number of students that require intensive, individualized supports and services. In these cases, it's prudent to develop an individual plan that includes or focuses specifically on attendance. When chronic attendance is significantly affecting the student's learning, it may be necessary to access additional community supports. The involvement of school, home and community is vital for success in these situations.

See: [http://education.alberta.ca/admin/supportingstudent/inclusiveedvideoseries.aspx](http://education.alberta.ca/admin/supportingstudent/inclusiveedvideoseries.aspx)
**Five Strategies**

Using the lens of [High School Completion Strategic Framework](#) on attendance we focus on:

1. Evaluating – Tracking Progress
2. Ensuring – Student Engagement
3. Increasing – Successful Transitions
4. Creating – Collaborative Partnerships
5. Promoting – Positive Connections

### 1. Tracking Progress

Monitoring attendance data is core to early identification of chronic or increasing absenteeism. However, it is rare for the school district leader, school principal or teacher to be able to identify how many students have missed 10 per cent or more of the school year, or in the prior year, missed a month or more of school.

Therefore, the problem is that since information is lacking, it is difficult to make informed decisions.

In order to track progress, it is important for school administrators and staff to have a good understanding and a clear process to analyze district, school, classroom and individual student attendance data.

With this data, students at risk of chronic absenteeism can be identified. Informed decisions can then be made to provide early interventions that have the greatest positive impact for the student.

**Questions to Consider**

- How is school and classroom attendance data monitored and reported?
- How do administrators and staff track and report chronic absenteeism?
- How does the district or school attendance policy ensure students at risk of chronic absenteeism are identified early?
- How is the student records system used to track and monitor attendance data?
- How many students in the school are chronically absent? How many in your classroom?
• How are school attendance rates shared with the school and community?
• What school/classroom universal, targeted and specialized supports are in place to ensure attendance rates are maximized?

2. Student Engagement

Creating a culture of learning that engages students and increases school attendance includes addressing social, academic and intellectual engagement.

Social engagement refers to participation in school activities, including peer relationships, clubs, teams and other opportunities to connect with the school community.

Academic engagement refers to participation in the requirements for school success including attendance, completing assignments and participating in learning activities.

Intellectual engagement refers to an individual student’s psychological and cognitive investment in learning. It is an absorbing, creatively energized focus resulting in a deep personal commitment to exploration, investigation, problem-solving and inquiry over a sustained period of time.

Each type of engagement is a way of thinking about proactive strategies and interventions that can support regular attendance for all students.

Whether through technology, distance learning, infusing culture or language into courses or more flexible programming, the key is to be more responsive to the needs of individual students.

In order to ensure that students are active contributors in what they learn, how they learn and how they demonstrate their learning, schools need to modify the experience for students and teachers through changes to school structure, culture, pedagogy or leadership.

School Structure

School structure includes organizational structures that allow learning to occur under a variety of circumstances and conditions including: flexible schedules, year-round calendars and modified timetables.
**School Culture**
School culture is made up of the values, beliefs and shared meaning of all education partners. Elements include: student voice, engagement and caring and respectful learning environments.

**School Pedagogy**
School pedagogy is the art and science of teaching and refers to the styles and methods of instruction used in the teaching profession, including grading practices, assessment and instructional strategies.

**School Leadership**
School leadership has a key role in improving classroom practice, informing school policies and making connections beyond the walls of the school building.

**Questions to consider:**
- How are students with attendance issues helped to feel a sense of belonging in school?
- Which extra curricular clubs or programs are students with attendance issues involved in?
- Which academic or non-academic activities does the student participate in?
- How has the student been consulted about their challenges, interests and achievements?
- How was the student/family involved in creating the attendance plan?
- Which learning and assessment strategies are used to create opportunities for the student to explore and demonstrate learning in ways that are meaningful to them?
- Which alternative programs and/or schedules have been discussed or implemented to encourage school attendance and engagement?
- How has the student demonstrated their commitment to learning?
- What types of projects or other learning activities does the student initiate?
- What is the students' long term education or career plans?
On the Alberta Education website (https://education.alberta.ca/), see:
- The Walk Around: A School Leader’s Observation Guide
- The Walk Around: Teacher Companion Tool
- Walking Together: First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum
- What did you do in school today?
- Redesigning High School

3. Successful Transitions

Transition planning is an event that results in changes to relationships, routines, expectations or roles. Transition planning is multi-faceted and occurs throughout the life cycle, including during school years. In order for transitions to be successful, they must be carefully and deliberately planned.

There is evidence that chronic absenteeism increases at key transitions — the start of formal education in Kindergarten or first grade, the move to middle or junior high, again to high school, and then into Grade 12.

Several key points were evident from the pattern of absenteeism during transitions:

- Chronic absenteeism starts as early as kindergarten.
- Absenteeism rates improve over the elementary grades, consistently hitting their lowest levels in third and fourth grades. This suggests that there is a period of adjustment for some families to having their children attend school regularly, but that over time, many do make this adjustment and attendance improves.
- The rate of chronic absenteeism begins to rise in the middle grades and steadily and substantially increases throughout high school. This indicates that new factors arise by the middle grades, leading more students to miss school.
- The highest rate is often observed in Grade 12. This indicates graduating students are not immune from missing significant amounts of school.
- Students who drop out are often chronically absent before this happens.

The likelihood of a successful transition is significantly increased when schools work collaboratively with parents/caregivers, employers, community agencies and post secondary institutions to develop comprehensive transition strategies.
Transition strategies should be used early and often to support students transitioning from:

- home-to-school;
- between schools and grade levels;
- moving from within or outside the country;
- moving in and out of special education; and
- when leaving high school for post-secondary education or employment.

Questions to consider

- How are staff members and parents informed of transition processes?
- What consistent processes are in place at the school level and jurisdiction level to support student transitions?
- Which area of transitioning is an issue for the student? (i.e., changes to relationships, routines, expectations or roles).
- Which personnel, such as school leaders, teachers, counsellors, resource officers and/or liaison workers at both the sending and receiving learning environment are communicating about how to best support the student during the transition?
- How is the communication facilitated?
- What are the issues between the sending and receiving learning environments that support or impede transitioning for the student?

On the Alberta Education website, see:

[Managing School Transitions](#)
[Successful Transitions for FNMI Students Workbook](#)

4. Collaborative Partnerships

Providing access to a variety of activities and services in a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment helps improve student attainment, self-confidence, motivation and attendance. Through shared leadership and collaborative partnerships, students and their families will receive the supports necessary to ensure success for all. Determining the reason for absenteeism is essential for identifying barriers to attendance — food, shelter, mental/physical health, geographic location or other challenges. Identifying these barriers to attendance gives schools, community partners and families a voice and a choice in creating opportunities to reduce the barriers and increase attendance.
Rates of chronic absenteeism are similar across gender and ethnic background, but consistently higher among economically disadvantaged students and those in special education classes.

When supports and opportunities are plentiful, young people can and do thrive. When environments are deficient or depleted, youth tend not to grow and progress.

Studies show that when schools develop comprehensive (universal) programs, family, and community partnerships, they have higher levels of parent involvement, higher percentages of students pass standardized achievement tests and schools take fewer disciplinary actions with students. Then there is good reason to believe that the development of partnership programs can decrease absenteeism.

Questions to consider

- Who has the jurisdiction/school developed formal partnerships with to assist schools in supporting students?
- What student-centred, family-centred, school-centred and community-centred activities are in place to promote attendance?
- How has collaboration become a core value in the school, home and community?
- How is this student being supported though the involvement of community partners?
- How has the school facilitated collaborative relationships with parents and service providers?
- How do the parents and service providers ensure the student is attending school? What is the role of the school in this plan?

On the Alberta Education website, see:

- Working Together Toolkit
- Collaborating with Parents
- Alberta’s Approach to Collaborative Practices: Based on Wraparound Principles
5. Positive Connections

In order for students to experience success, positive connections must be created and maintained between the school staff, the student and their family.

For students at risk of chronic absenteeism, the intervention of specialized personnel such as those involved in mentorship programs, (career counselling, school liaison work, student engagement projects, resource offices or community agencies), provide the support the student needs to continue to attend or return to school.

We know that the most successful strategies for making positive connections include communicating with families about attendance and celebrating good attendance with students and families. Connecting chronically absent students with community mentors also reduces students’ chronic absenteeism from one year to the next.

Schools that conduct a greater total number of attendance-focused activities are more likely to decrease the percentage of students who miss a significant number of school days each year.

There are six types of involvement through which schools can connect with families and the community in order to improve specific student outcomes:

1. Parenting
2. Communicating
3. Volunteering
4. Supporting learning at home
5. Decision making
6. Collaborating with the community.

Parenting practices included:

- conducting workshops about getting children to school;
- making home visits; and
- using contracts to commit parents to getting their children to school.
Communication practices included:

- conducting parent orientations to explain school expectations and policies regarding student attendance;
- sending home newsletters listing the names of students with excellent attendance;
- giving families information about how to contact the school; and
- providing access to children’s attendance information on the internet.

Volunteering was measured with inviting parents to attend award ceremonies.

Supporting Learning at home shows the most promise for increasing student achievement. Families make a huge impact on how successful their children are with schoolwork, yet schools don’t often know what is happening at home. Schools need to invest time and effort into influencing learning-at-home routines.

Schools benefit when they include parents in the decision-making process. When parents provide their opinions and preferences regarding issues under consideration, they are more likely to buy-in to school policies and initiatives.

Collaborating with the community included:

- bringing in speakers to talk about the importance of completing school; and
- connecting chronically absent students with a community mentor.

See: The Power of Positive Connections. Reducing Chronic Absence through PEOPLE: Priority Early Outreach for Positive Linkages and Engagement

Questions to consider

- How long has the student been involved with a formal or informal mentorship program?
- How has the student responded to mentoring?
- Who is the significant adult in the school or community who can provide unconditional support for the student?
- How has the school included liaison workers, resource officers or other personnel who use specialized engagement projects/activities to increase this student’s attendance?
• What types of engagement projects or activities have been used to date?

On the Alberta Education website, see:

- Alberta Mentoring Partnership
- Mental Health Capacity Building in Schools Initiative
- Mental Health Matters
- Success in School for Children and Youth in Care

**What do successful strategies have in common?**

Collection and evaluation of student attendance data is used to:

- ensure students are engaged in learning;
- increase successful transitions for students;
- create collaborative partnerships to support students and their family; and
- promote positive connections between the school, student and their family.
**Appendices**

**Appendix 1: Action Plan**

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<tr>
<th>ACTION</th>
<th>DETAIL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What have we done so far that has worked?</td>
<td>Activity(ies):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can we improve?</td>
<td>Target/goal:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What can we do to make this happen?</td>
<td>Activity(ies):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who will be involved and how?</td>
<td>Person:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is needed to support the people involved?</td>
<td>Resources:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When do we hope to achieve our target/goal?</td>
<td>Timeline:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How will we know we were successful?</td>
<td>Measure(s):</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Appendix 2: Attendance Campaign**

To supplement local initiatives promoting the value of attending school, the provincial Attendance Board has created a series of resources for use at the local level. The following resources and links to supporting research, tools and resources are available at:

http://education.alberta.ca/attendancetoolkit

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elementary</th>
<th>Junior High</th>
<th>High School</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poster</td>
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<td>Postcard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent Fact Sheet</td>
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<td>Parent Fact Sheet</td>
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Appendix 3 – URL (Web) Links

Alberta's Approach to Collaborative Practices: Based on Wraparound Principles
http://ideas.education.alberta.ca/hsc/current-projects/collaborative-practices/

Alberta Mentoring Partnership
http://albertamentors.ca

Attendance Works
www.attendanceworks.org

Promoting Healthy Relationships and Preventing Bullying
http://humanservices.alberta.ca/abuse-bullying/14842.html

Collaborating with Parents
http://inclusiveeducationpdresources.com/collaborating-with-parents/

Developing Effective Partnerships to Support Local Education - School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts
http://annenberginstitute.org/pdf/Partnerships.pdf

Every Student Counts
https://education.alberta.ca/media/9015552/everystudentcountskeepingkids.pdf

High School Completion Strategic Framework
http://ideas.education.alberta.ca/hsc/current-projects/

Inclusive Education Video Series
http://education.alberta.ca/admin/supportingstudent/inclusiveedvideoseries.aspx

Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools

Managing School Transitions
http://ideas.education.alberta.ca/media/11091/managingschooltransitions-promisingpracticesinalbertaschoolsapr13-09.pdf
Mental Health Capacity Building in Schools Initiative
http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/2754.asp

Mental Health Matters
http://www.education.alberta.ca/admin/supportingstudent/safeschools/mhm.aspx

Pyramid of Intervention
http://www.engagingalllearners.ca/learning-supports/

Redesigning High School
http://ideas.education.alberta.ca/hsc/redesigning/

Risk and Protective Factors
http://ideas.education.alberta.ca/hsc/KeyToSuccess/html/introduction_page2.html

Success in School for Children and Youth in Care
http://education.alberta.ca/admin/supportingstudent/collaboration/ppf.aspx

Successful Transitions for FNMI Students Workbook
http://education.alberta.ca/media/6397158/successful_transitions_fnmi.pdf

The Walk Around: A School Leader's Observation Guide
http://www.education.alberta.ca/media/14273824/the_walk_around_a_school_leaders_observation_guide.pdf

The Walk Around: Teacher Companion Tool
http://www.education.alberta.ca/media/14274234/the_walk_around_teacher_companion_guide.pdf

Walking Together: First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum
http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/aswt/index.html

What did you do in school today?
http://www.cea-ace.ca/programs-initiatives/wdydist

Working Together Toolkit
http://education.alberta.ca/admin/supportingstudent/collaboration/workingtogethertoolkit.aspx