

Student Engagement and Attendance

Once attendance becomes an issue, disengagement is heightened and once a student is disengaged from their learning then the student struggles with the purpose of their education.

To really connect with a student, school personnel need to get to know the student both inside and outside the classroom. Involving the student in discussions about their learning and goals is important to understand them. This allows for identification of the student's strengths and needs and can enhance the experience the student has both in the classroom and outside (Jones, 2008). This way the student will want to attend school and not feel they have to.

For a student to be truly engaged in their learning they must participate socially, academically and intellectually in their schooling. Attendance is one of the nine indicators that fall within these categories. If a student is not attending school he/she is at risk of not being successful or engaged in their schooling (Willms, 2011).

The students who miss school tend to do so for a variety of reasons. For some it is because of school issues and they do not feel they belong, they are struggling in their work or even feel unsafe. For others it is due to home or community issues such as parental substance abuse, neglect, negative peer influence or even family financial concerns; and still for others it is due to personal issues which could be health related (both physical and psychological), substance abuse, or having no clear goals and not valuing education. The outcome for these truant students is not positive. They often experience isolation from peers at school, suffer from low self-esteem, may become involved in an unwanted pregnancy, experience violence, failure in school learning and drop out which then could lead to unemployment and lead to criminal behavior (National Center for School Engagement, 2007).

It is also known that students who have attendance concerns in the early years of school are more apt to drop out of school later (Jay Smink & Reimer, Ph.D., 2005). Attendance promotion and encouragement needs to happen at all levels of schooling.

How to combat attendance concerns?

There are a multitude of programs that various jurisdictions use to deal with the attendance issues schools face. Two organizations that host a variety of such programs are:

The National Dropout Prevention Center at <http://www.dropoutprevention.org/about-us> and the National Center for School Engagement at <http://www.schoolengagement.org>.

According to the research and work done by the National Center for School Engagement, the best practices and models for truancy prevention need to involve more than just school personnel. These models should also encompass the following:

- *Collaboration* involves the school or school jurisdiction with other community partners. The issue is shared and those involved will have a shared vision as to how to resolve or work together to begin to solve the attendance/truancy issue. Expertise, resources and ideas are maximized.
- *Family involvement* involves active participation from the parents/guardians. Parents are asked for their advice and expertise as it relates to their children. This is important to do on a regular basis and not just when there are problems.
- *Comprehensive Approach* focuses on both prevention and intervention. When there is an attendance concern the school intervenes immediately and provides the necessary supports collaborating with the necessary groups to assist the family. To be comprehensive it means to also be flexible and to recognize that each non-attender is individual and therefore the intervention needs to match the individual and their family. To be truly comprehensive and effective the plan must act on the first unexcused absence and continue to act on each absence thereafter (elementary to adolescence).
- *Incentives and Sanctions* are used for attending and non-attending students and fit the youth/child and their family. Incentives should be motivating to the student and their family. The sanctions need to be clearly linked to the behavior that is unacceptable, so school policies should be reviewed to determine if they encourage attendance or not, i.e. suspension from school for not attending is contradictory to the non-attender.
- *Supportive context* is a must for the program to be sustainable. Time is needed to collect attendance data and then to identify the attendance issue and what the solution could look like.
- *Evaluate the program* regularly and continuously. Having outcome data is valuable for ongoing planning and sustainability of the program.

(Reimer & Dimock, 2005)

Examples of Programs that assist with Attendance

- 1) **Count me In.** This is an incentive-based attendance program. Students are eligible to win prizes based on perfect attendance from month to month. If a student is legitimately absent, i.e. due to illness during one month, they start over the next month. The families are involved so they have an awareness of what the incentives are and can assist with promoting attendance (World Education, 2008).
- 2) **The A-Team.** This approach identifies staff as mentors. By having a mentor the students learn that someone at school really does care about them. Students are identified as needing a mentor if they have chronic attendance concerns. Parents are informed of this mentor arrangement by letter. The students meet with their mentor at a weekly meeting over lunch. At these sessions, discussions revolve around the importance of attending school and those that are good attenders share what it is like to attend all week and the benefits of being at school all week. These good attendees receive lots of praise and then earn a free pizza lunch at the end of the month. For those students that have the greatest attendance concerns, the A-Team mentor touches base daily with that student. When a student is away a phone call is made to the home

and the parent is asked to bring the child to school or provide permission for the school to pick up the student and bring them to school (World Education, 2008).

- 3) **PACT (Partnering to assess and counteract Truancy).** This program sends letters home to the family regarding the lack of attendance in school by their child. Depending on the situation the letter can consist of concern, stressing the importance of education or even identifying the compulsory school attendance law and the consequences of violating it. When the school is in the process of sending a second letter, a school team is identified (counsellor, social worker, and teacher) and it assesses the family situation. The team determines what intervention needs to occur and if the family should be referred to the School Attendance Program, a voluntary program that assists with parenting and management skills (World Education, 2008).
- 4) **Check and Connect.** “The goal of the program is to help students attend school regularly, participate actively in school and get a good start on the path toward graduation” (Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004, p. 284). It involves monitoring the students’ achievement, mentoring, case management and other supports. The “Check” component continually assesses the student on his/her engagement in learning and the “Connect component involves program staff providing individualized attention to students, with partnerships with school personnel, family members and community service providers” (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, What Works Clearinghouse, 2006, p. 2). Students are assigned a monitor/mentor who reviews their performance regularly and keeps parents and teachers involved in the progress of the student. The mentor also has the responsibility of connecting the student and their family to other resources that will assist them with any type of barriers that could affect the students’ learning and educational advancement (College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, 2008).
- 5) **Families and Schools Together (FAST).** This is a two year school-based program at the elementary level with identified at-risk students. These students and their families participate in group sessions for eight weeks. Once complete, the families are followed up with, on a monthly basis, for the next two years. Although not particularly targeted to non-attenders, this program engages the whole family. The program focuses on the relationship the parents have with the school, family dynamics, management and enhancing the motivation of the student to learn (Reimer & Dimock, 2005).
- 6) **Alberta’s Approach to Collaborative Practices.** This practice has eleven principles that support a wraparound approach to support the student. The goal is to engage and address the needs of the student at risk and his/her family. It involves collaboration with the family and other support services to determine solutions for the student and family and offer the supports necessary (Alberta Education, Government of Alberta, 2011).

- 7) **Truancy Assessment and Service Centers Model (TASC).** This model focuses on three critical components: 1) children in K – 5 with five unexcused absences 2) each TASC program uses a local advisory board composed of representatives from Child welfare-related agencies 3) the TASC program is evaluated annually.

A student is referred by their teacher which includes a survey (RISK – I) measuring behaviors that place the child at risk for academic problems. The TASC manager reviews the referral and categorizes the student at a low or high risk of continued truancy. Low risk – at this level a letter is sent to the parent and explains the attendance laws and outlines consequences and continued unexcused absences. It explains that continuous attendance monitoring will occur for the remainder of the year and if there are no further unexcused absences then no more action will be taken. If unexcused absences continue then the child is moved to high risk.

High risk – at this level a family conference is arranged with the TASC case manager. At this conference, TASC assists the parent with resolving the issues with their child's attendance concerns from school. A RISK II survey is conducted which measures the specific needs of the child and family. This allows the TASC manager to appropriately link children and their families to the most appropriate resources and services available in the community. Continuous attendance monitoring remains for the year and regular family contact occurs to confirm compliance and to assess adequacy of services. If truancy continues then a referral is made to the Juvenile Justice System (Jay Smink & Reimer, Ph.D., 2005; Rhodes, Thomas, Lemieux, Cain, & Guin, September 2010).

- 8) **Truancy Toolkit.** The toolkit encompasses the vision that every child will graduate from high school and be ready for post-secondary or employment. It has comprehensive guidelines involving “cross-agency collaboration” for schools, families and communities. The toolkit has specific strategies that address schools, parents and communities so that it is a comprehensive approach to the truancy issues. The programs incorporate prevention and intervention strategies.

An example of one type of program consists of increasing the parental involvement in the problem by communicating by various means with the parents, hosting additional school time for those truants such as after-school, Saturday school, and having study hall with a tutor support.

Another school has a “2 level of concern” type of model. This involves a Truancy Prevention Program staff person. Level 1 involves monitoring attendance daily, communicating with parents/guardians regarding any absences, monitoring of behavior and academic achievement and referral to community resources where necessary. At level 2, in addition to level 1 process, case management sessions and therapeutic intervention are implemented, counselling for the student at school is arranged, counselling for the family is also arranged, and review of family goals occurs every 6 weeks and participation in all school meetings (Pennsylvania Department of Education and Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, Juvenile court Judges' commission, Special court Judges Association of Pennsylvania, Center for Schools and Communities, 2011).

9) **Supervised Alternative Learning.** This is a program to be used as a last resort by school boards for students between the ages of 14 and 17 years who are serious non-attendees.

Each school board is required to establish a Supervised Alternative Learning Committee. The committee is represented by at least one member of the board, at least one supervisory officer qualified as a teacher and at least one individual who is not a member or employee of the board and is a community representative. A student who is at risk of dropping out of school is referred to the school board's Supervised Alternative Learning Committee by an application process.

Once approved by the committee, the student can be excused from regular school attendance with the development and implementation of a Supervised Alternative Learning Plan. This plan must be monitored by a person identified at the school or board as the primary contact, at a minimum of once per month, for a given time period. The plan outlines the required activities for the student's self-development, which may or may not include school. These required activities must include one or more of:

- enrollment in one or more courses for credit at a school, outreach centre, online or by correspondence;
- enrollment in a life skills course for no credit;
- job-related training;
- full or part-time employment;
- volunteering;
- counselling to address barriers in learning; or
- any other activity that will help the student reach his or her educational and/or personal goals.

Upon completion of the learning plan, it may be renewed, or a transition plan is developed back to the regular school or if the student is 18 years old, a transition plan to post-secondary or employment is developed (Ministry of Education, Ontario Government, 2010).

Conclusion

Early intervention in regards to attendance will make a difference for those students who are moving towards disengagement from school. It is very important for schools to accurately monitor, identify early and intervene with students who are truant. The system used by schools in recording attendance must be effective in providing this information so that interventions can be implemented before the situation becomes chronic. Effective tracking must consist of knowing what the definition of 'truant' is. Questions such as the following need to be addressed:

- So what constitutes as an absence?
- Must the excuse be verified by the school?

- Does it need to be written or phoned in?
- How many truant absences can occur before the school is required to intervene with parents, sanction students and make referrals to the Attendance Board?
- When should attendance be collected in elementary schools, junior high schools and high schools?
- How should it be collected at the various division levels?
- Who should collect the data?

(Bye, Alvarez, Haynes, & Sweigart, 2010)

Answering these questions will assist schools in working collaborately with the key stakeholders in developing and enforcing attendance policies and procedures. This will help with the ongoing data collection and evaluation of their procedures.

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