



NCSE | National Center for School Engagement

Guidelines for a National Definition of Truancy And Calculating Rates

National Center for School Engagement

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**An initiative of the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children
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Guidelines for Defining Truancy and Calculating Rates

Considerations in Defining Truancy

Generally, most educators and court personnel who deal with truancy define it as an unexcused absence from school. Beyond this general understanding is a myriad of state and local permutations that qualify and quantify truancy through statutes, policies, regulations, and even school building codes of student conduct. The intent of this document is not to prescribe a national definition, but rather to advise on important elements to consider. New federal requirements make state education agencies determine a school-by-school truancy rate. The first step is for the appropriate state agency to decide what “truancy” means. Then they can begin to develop a formula for a rate. This publication is designed to help those who take on the task of defining and reporting truancy.

Sample Definition

The following is a generic definition of truancy that fits many states’ policies. It is offered as a starting point. As with any definition, there are questions raised in interpreting and implementing it. Some of these questions follow the definition.

Unexcused Absence/Truancy- *If a student is absent without an excuse by the parent/guardian or if the student leaves school or a class without permission of the teacher or administrator in charge, it will be considered to be an unexcused absence and the student shall be considered truant.*

Questions to consider include:

1. What constitutes an “excuse”? Need it be written? If so, is an e-mail message good enough? Will a phone call suffice? Must the excuse be verified by a school official?
2. How many trancies can occur before the school is required to intervene with parents, sanction students, and make court referrals?
3. How are parents notified that their child is truant?

4. What if the school does not agree with the parent's decision to excuse an absence?
5. Are suspended students considered truant?

All of these questions require either state or local policies in order to interpret and implement them in the real world of school management. Because of differences in the way states answer these and other questions, aggregating state data into a national rate is problematic. Any federal reporting requirements must acknowledge state and local differences in the definition of truancy and its implementation.

Components of a Truancy Definition

Minimally, the following considerations should be made in formulating any complete policy statement about truancy. These are the areas that should be clarified:

- 1) Truancy is any absence unexcused by the school. An absence that is excused by a parent but not by school officials is still a truancy.
- 2) Truancy applies even if only part of the day is unexcused. In secondary school, students often skip one or two periods but attend the rest of the day.
- 3) Truancy is determined only if a case is reviewed. There should be a review and determination by a school official that the absence was unexcused before it is labeled a truancy.
- 4) Truancy is a term reserved for cases that are referred to court: The "truancy" label should only apply to students who have so many unexcused absences that they have triggered a court referral. This level of truancy is often referred to in statutes as "chronic truancy".
- 5) Truancy only applies to students between the ages of compulsory school attendance. Truancy is a term applied only to absences accrued by students who are required by state law to attend school.

The Federal Requirements for Truancy Reporting

Beginning with the 2005-06 school year, state education agencies are required to report truancy "rates" on a school-by-school basis to the US Department of Education. The specific federal requirements appear on the following page¹:

¹ Information provided by Janelle Krueger, Colorado Department of Education, Division of Prevention Initiatives, 2004.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: Title IV, Part A, Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities; SEC. 4112. RESERVATION OF STATE FUNDS FOR SAFE AND DRUG-FREE SCHOOLS.

(c) State Activities

(3) UNIFORM MANAGEMENT INFORMATION AND REPORTING SYSTEM-

(A) INFORMATION AND STATISTICS- A State shall establish a uniform management information and reporting system.

(B) USES OF FUNDS- A State may use funds described in subparagraphs (A) and (B) of subsection (b)(2), either directly or through grants and contracts, to implement the uniform management information and reporting system described in subparagraph (A), for the collection of information on —

Report to State on school-by-school basis.

(i) truancy rates;

- (ii) the frequency, seriousness, and incidence of violence and drug-related offenses resulting in suspensions and expulsions in elementary schools and secondary schools in the State;
- (iii) the types of curricula, programs, and services provided by the chief executive officer, the State educational agency, local educational agencies, and other recipients of funds under this subpart; and
- (iv) the incidence and prevalence, age of onset, perception of health risk, and perception of social disapproval of drug use and violence by youth in schools and communities.

(C) COMPILATION OF STATISTICS- In compiling the statistics required for the uniform management information and reporting system, the offenses described in subparagraph (B)(ii) shall be defined pursuant to the State's criminal code, but shall not identify victims of crimes or persons accused of crimes. The collected data shall include incident reports by school officials, anonymous student surveys, and anonymous teacher surveys.

Report to the public required.

(D) REPORTING- The information described under subparagraph (B) shall be reported to the public and the data referenced in clauses (i) and (ii) of such subparagraph shall be reported to the State on a school-by-school basis.

(E) LIMITATION- Nothing in this subsection shall be construed to authorize the Secretary to require particular policies, procedures, or practices with respect to crimes committed on school property or school security.

For the first time, these new federal requirements will provide a national view of truancy. If we are to marshal resources and improve social policy, this kind of data is essential for policy makers and public officials. The specific reporting processes are still being developed in many states and will not be uniform across states. Even within states,

truancy definitions sometimes vary from school to school. Because of the complexity and ambiguity of defining and reporting truancy, we will at best have a general picture of truancy trends as we move forward. Each state's definition and rate calculation will need to be reviewed at the national level, and any national report will have to be made with many qualifiers.

The Truancy Rate Calculation Example²

As an example, we will use the Colorado formula for calculating a truancy rate. Districts are already providing, by school, both the *Student Total Days Attended* and *Student Total Days Possible*. This forms the basis for determining the "attendance rate" which then allows the calculation of a "non-attendance" rate. A non-attendance rate differs from a truancy rate, however, since it includes excused in addition to unexcused absences. The calculation of a truancy rate according to the Colorado method follows:

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{Student Total Days Attended} \\ & + \text{Student Total Excused Absence Days} \\ & + \underline{\text{Student Total Unexcused Absence Days}} \\ & = \text{Student Total Days Possible} \end{aligned}$$

Other Ways to Calculate Rates

An alternative way to calculate Student Total Days Possible is to add the number of students enrolled in the school across each day of the school year. Following that method, the Student Total Days Possible would equal the sum of:

$$(\text{Students1} + \text{Students2} + \dots + \text{StudentsY})$$

² Example taken from a presentation titled, "State and Federal Issues of Truancy Under the No Child Left Behind Act," by Janelle Krueger, Colorado Department of Education, Division of Prevention Initiatives. Presentation at "Partnering to Prevent Truancy" conference hosted by Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, December 2004.

where $Students_1$ equals the number of students enrolled on the first day of the school year, and $Students_Y$ equals the number enrolled on the last day of the school year.

Regardless of the method chosen, the question arises of how to count one “day” of attendance or absence. The calculation is best performed in secondary schools as the sum of periods attended (or missed) in order to be most accurate. A student who sleeps in and misses every first period all year should be thought of neither as “never truant” nor as “always truant”. However, in high school, a policy decision still needs to be made regarding how to code free periods during which the student does not need to report to anyone. If the student misses all other periods during the day it is reasonable to mark the student absent during free periods as well. But what about days in which the student attends some classes but not others? Rules regarding how to count days present and days absent must be decided upon, and can be expected to vary across schools and districts.

Note that ideally, Student Total Days Possible is not the product of the total number of school days in the year and the official number of students registered in the school. The reason is that the true number of registered students changes throughout the year, but the official number is usually a tally of students present in school on only one particular day or during one particular week. Some students enroll after the school year has begun and others leave before the end of the year, so the average number of students enrolled in the school on any given day may differ from the official count. If average enrollment drops after count day, using the official enrollment number will inflate the total number of school days possible and make the truancy rate look smaller than it really is. If overall enrollment grows after count day, using the too-small enrollment number will shrink the total days possible and inflate the truancy rate.

Once a count of Student Total Days Possible has been made, the rest is easy. Divide Student Total Unexcused Absence Days by Student Total Days Possible to yield a truancy rate. Multiply that rate by 100 to yield a truancy percent.

$$\frac{\text{Student Total Unexcused Absence Days}}{\text{Student Total Days Possible}} = \text{Truancy Rate}$$

Conclusion

Clearly, every state will wrestle with the definitional complexities and the calculation process and find reasons to question the final rates. A key variable is how schools count who is “enrolled” to find the possible student days of attendance. Another key issue is how to decide whether an absence is excused or unexcused. It is inevitable that arbitrary decisions will need to be made to determine who is counted, and how they should be classified. Local variations in policies and practice will be the unavoidable result.

Despite the method that schools and states choose to use, and the lack of consistency across schools, the reporting requirements of No Child Left Behind mean that we will at last have a reasoned estimate of truancy that can inform public policy. We need to focus national attention on attendance; truancy rate reporting will help us better understand how many students are missing school and missing learning so that we can develop state and national strategies to improve school engagement.

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.



National Center for School Engagement

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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