



**NCSE** | National Center for School Engagement

## **School Policies that Engage Students and Families**

**National Center for School Engagement**

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**An initiative of the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children**

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## **School Policies that Engage Students and Families**

School policies tend to either to engage students and families in the learning process or push students out of schools. Often, there is much variability across schools as to how these policies are implemented. In general, the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) has identified the following policies that are more conducive to recapturing students in school.

### ***Attendance Policies that Distribute Responsibility Broadly***

Many school and school district attendance policies place the responsibility for student attendance solely on the shoulders of parents/guardians and the student, themselves, without recognizing that teachers and school staff also have some accountability for attendance. Beyond accurate attendance monitoring, school personnel should consider what motivates students to attend classes and school functions. Additionally, schools must consider their response to chronic truancy. Schools should have a clear and consistent process in place for the first unexcused absence and for subsequent unexcused absences. This process must be communicated to students and parents at the outset of the school year. Staff must be available to track down truant students to find out what is the underlying cause of excessive absences. If supports and resources are needed, these should be provided through school social workers or psychologists. Teachers should be encouraged to make the necessary interventions including parent contacts or conferences. All parties must take responsibility for improving attendance. This includes students, parents, extended family, teachers, other school personnel and the community.

### ***Grading Based on Attendance***

Grading based on attendance is becoming a more common practice in schools. It clearly communicates the importance of attendance and consequence of non-attendance. A student should be rewarded for participating in class discussions. At the same time, failing a student due to a pre-determined number of absences, without any appeals process, can be very detrimental to the students' success. Consider this example. If a student has already failed a class, what is the motivation to continue to attend this class? A student may choose to just leave school. Although some may start again the following semester or school year, often students find it easier to never re-enroll. Providing partial credit for completed coursework is a worthy alternative. Consequences for non-attendance are important, however when students are attaining passing grades, despite non-attendance, does it make sense to fail the student? Additionally, appeals should include a jury of impartial school and community members. Appeals processes for class credit must involve more than just the classroom teacher.

### ***Withdrawals Due to Excessive Absences***

A common school district's local school policy is to withdraw students who are over the mandatory school age, due to excessive unexcused absences. Although many policies also indicate that substantial effort must be made to contact the pupil and/or parent to identify the reasons for non-attendance, in practice this is not always the case. Schools typically do not have the staff or resources to track down every chronic truant. Unfortunately, without this kind of effort, the dropout rate will only increase. Schools

need to explicitly describe the steps necessary before withdrawing disenrolling students. These steps should include a face to face visit with both the student and his/her parent/guardian. The school should develop a school re-engagement plan or offer other creative options such as a GED or alternative school. All efforts should be made to track down missing students.

***Establishing a Statewide Common Student Identification Number***

In order to truly understand graduation and dropout rates, a statewide student identification number should be established. This ID should be assigned to students when they are first enrolled in elementary school and should follow them through to high school graduation. All alternative, charter and GED programs should use this same student numbering system. In this way, more accurate statewide dropout and graduation rates can be developed. More accurate data will help schools and communities understand the true extent of the problem and intervene accordingly.

***Use Alternatives to Out of School Suspension and Expulsion***

Many schools suspend or expel students for excessive unexcused absences and most recognize that this consequence does not typically re-engage the youth in school, or prevent further trancies. Often students are pleased that they are allowed 3 days off school, which was the point of skipping class in the first place. In-school suspensions and detention are a viable alternative. Meaningful community service for excessive absences such as tutoring younger students or organizing a school event are good alternatives. Withholding privileges can be effective, such as no school athletics or field trips, however, we recommend that these are used as incentives as opposed to punishments. Sometimes extra curricular activities are the only thing that motivates students to attend and long term banning from these activities can motivate students to dropout. Additionally, catch-up classrooms are recommended for students to re-engage in learning while not holding back their other classmates.

***Creative and Effective Communication to Notify Parents of Absence***

Although it is critical that parents are notified of their child's unauthorized absence from school, often students erase the voice mail message or toss the school letter before mom or dad know about the problem. Additionally, some chronic truants are homeless, do not have phones or are from families that do not speak English. Finding effective ways to communicate absence is critical. Given enough school personnel, home visits are ideal. Many truancy officers and school resource officers are beginning to do home visits with truants and their families. Often truants become delinquent (Gavin, 1997) so establishing rapport with the family early on is critical.

***Coaching Students to Alternative Schools, GED programs or the Work Place***

Adults and children all have different ways of learning. Mainstream schools do not work for all students. However, schools cannot be too quick to coach students to alternative options. With high stakes testing, it is often tempting to encourage low achieving, chronically truant students to leave their home school for another alternative. Often it is these students that are "pulling down" the school average. A recent report from ETS (Barton, 2005) indicates that nationally one-third of our students are failing to graduate

from high school. This begs the question, if mainstream high schools are not working for one-third of our students, isn't it time for schools to change. Many feel that school reform is so difficult that it would be easier to establish a separate system of alternative and charter schools. However, others feel that these schools draw valuable and needed funding from our mainstream public schools. This debate will continue and probably not be resolved in this decade. In the meantime, schools must be cautious about coaching students out of school or pushing students out, too quickly

☑ ***School Finance Based on Average Daily Attendance***

School funding is often based on a fixed per pupil cost. However, how those pupils are counted varies widely between states. Some schools receive the funds based on the number of students enrolled at the beginning of the school year. Other states have one or several "school count" days. Often schools will hold large celebrations and pizza parties to get as many students as possible to school on count day. If a student has an unexcused absence on count day, schools often have the option of filing a truancy petition within a certain time period in order to recoup costs for that student. Unfortunately, after count day has passed, there is very little motivation for schools to keep students in the classroom. Overcrowding, limited school supplies, and high teacher-student ratios often encourage schools to let go of absent students. It is recommended that all states use an average daily attendance to calculate school finance. In this way schools have incentives to keep students in school to the end of the school year. Additionally, school finance will more closely approximate actual students served.

#### References

- Barton, P. (2005). *One third of the nation: Rising dropout rates and declining opportunities*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Services.
- Gavin, T. (1997). Truancy: Not just kids' stuff anymore. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 66, 8-14.

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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