**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?**

According to the research and work done by the National Center for School Engagement, (www.schoolengagement.org) 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)

**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 collaboratively 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.

Excerpt from *Student Engagement and Attendance* Alberta Education

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