

Illinois Attendance Commission

Meeting Minutes
December 4, 2015
10:00 a.m.

James R. Thompson Center
100 West Randolph Street
Fourteenth Floor V-tel Room
Chicago, Illinois 60601



Alzina Building
100 North First Street
Third Floor V-tel Room
Springfield, Illinois 62777

I. Roll Call

Present

Jeff Aranowski (Chicago)
Mark Bishop (Chicago)
Lori Fanello (Chicago)
Karen Fox (Chicago)
Diane Grigsby-Jackson (telephone)
Heidi Grove (Springfield)
Madelyn James (Chicago)
Elizabeth C. Malik (Chicago)
Melissa Mitchell (Chicago)
Matthew Rodriguez (telephone)
Deanna Sullivan (Springfield)
Harold Sweeney (Chicago)
Antoinette Taylor (Chicago)
Scott Wakeley (Chicago)
Crysta Weitekamp (telephone)

Not Present

Jennifer Gill
Diane Rutledge
Tara Stamps

II. Welcome and Opening Remarks

Jeff Aranowski opened the meeting at 10:07 a.m. and explained there were nine more appointments to the Illinois Attendance Commission to be completed. These nine vacancies include the following:

- Director of Department of Children and Family Services or designee
- Director of Department of Public Health or designee
- Chairperson of Illinois Board of Higher Education or designee
- Chairperson of Illinois Community College Board or designee
- Chairperson of State Charter School Commission or designee
- An Illinois non-profit, anti-crime organization of law enforcement that researches and recommends early learning and youth development strategies to reduce crime
- An Illinois non-profit organization that conducts community-organizing around family issues
- An association representing school principals
- An organization that advocates for health and safety of Illinois youth and families by providing capacity building services
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III. Introduction of Commission Members

Mr. Aranowski then asked all members present to introduce themselves and identify their particular areas of expertise that would be beneficial to the work of the Commission. He added that such background knowledge would be useful when committees are formed as members would want to gravitate to their preferred topical areas.

IV. Administrative Issues

A. Open Meetings Act Requirements

B. Ethics Requirements

Mr. Aranowski reminded all members of the need to submit certification of completion of the Open Meetings Act and the state Ethics Training requirements.

V. Discussion of and Adoption of Rules of Procedure

Mr. Aranowski drew the members' attention to the draft Rules of Procedure in their folders. He identified some of the particular components of the Rules and explained they were consistent with Roberts' Rules of Order.

Deanna Sullivan asked a question about Section 1.2 C and wondered if an end date of 2020 should be added since that date is in statute. Mr. Aranowski explained that Section 1.2C stipulated to the provision of an annual report to the General Assembly by December 15 every year, and that the end date of 2020 should be added. He went on to explain, however, that House Bill 4343 was proposed by Representative Linda Chapa LaVia to extend the due date for the first annual report to March 15, 2016 since the Commission was meeting for the first time on December 4, 2015.

Mr. Aranowski asked that members be polled as a two-thirds vote is required for adoption of the draft Rules of Procedure. All members present voted to adopt the Rules of Procedure.

VI. Selection of Commission Chairperson

Mr. Aranowski asked if any member wished to nominate someone to chair the Commission or to volunteer their own services. Antoinette Taylor volunteered to lead the Commission due to her involvement with the drafting of the legislation creating the Illinois Attendance Commission and her leadership role with the Truancy in Chicago Public Schools Task Force. Ms. Taylor expressed her feeling that the Commission facilitates continuity in the state's effort to resolve attendance problems as the legislation to create the Commission was introduced after the expiration of Truancy in Chicago Public Schools Task Force.

As there were no other recommendations or volunteers for the position of chair, the motion to accept Ms. Taylor's offer to serve as chairperson was made and seconded. Ms. Taylor was confirmed as Commission chair by unanimous agreement of all members when polled.

It was agreed that Commission members would receive by email a timeline of events that led to the creation of the Truancy in Chicago Public Schools Task Force and the final report that had been issued by this task force at the end of its term of service on July 31, 2014.

Mr. Aranowski said the work of the previous truancy task force would by no means set the parameters for the work of the Commission as it has a separate, statewide task but would provide some historical context to the effort that preceded the current undertaking to address school attendance issues in Illinois.

VII. Review and Detailed Discussion of Public Act 99-432, House Bill 4343, and the Role of the Commission

Mr. Aranowski explained that Public Act 99-432 was signed into law in August 2015. He read aloud the salient portions of the Act in order to define the Commission's mission, duties, and obligations:

The Attendance Commission is created within the State Board of Education to study the issue of chronic absenteeism in this State and make recommendations for strategies to prevent chronic absenteeism.

The Attendance Commission shall identify strategies, mechanisms, and approaches to help parents, educators, principals, superintendents, and the State Board of Education address and prevent chronic absenteeism and shall recommend to the General Assembly and State Board of Education:

- (1) a standard for attendance and chronic absenteeism, defining attendance as a calculation of standard clock hours in a day that equal a full day based on instructional minutes for both a half day and a full day per learning environment;*
- (2) mechanisms to improve data systems to monitor and track chronic absenteeism across this State in a way that identifies trends from prekindergarten through grade 12 and allows the identification of students who need individualized chronic absenteeism prevention plans;*
- (3) mechanisms for reporting and accountability for schools and districts across this State, including creating multiple measure indexes for reporting;*
- (4) best practices for utilizing attendance and chronic absenteeism data to create multi-tiered systems of support and prevention that will result in students being ready for college and career; and*
- (5) new initiatives and responses to ongoing challenges presented by chronic absenteeism*

The Attendance Commission shall hold hearings on a periodic basis to receive testimony from the public regarding attendance.

The Attendance Commission shall submit an annual report to the General Assembly and the State Board of Education no later than December 15 of each year.

Reaching back to the Truancy in Chicago Public Schools Task Force which was convened in 2013 in the aftermath of widespread media reports of the lack of oversight, accountability, and structures to track and remedy chronic truancy and absenteeism in the Chicago Public Schools,

Mr. Aranowski highlighted some of the recommendations from the task force report to indicate where that task force was leaning:

1. Need for common definitions of *absenteeism* and *chronic absenteeism*:
There is, however, a definition in statute for *truant*: “a child subject to compulsory school attendance ... who is absent without valid cause from such attendance for a school day or portion thereof.” (105 ILCS 5/26-2a)
2. Improved data collection and analysis:
The task force saw an imperative to gather and interpret data in a timely manner to inform strategies and solutions. Data should be accessible to school officials, parents, and advocates within the parameters of FERPA and student privacy concerns.
3. Preventive measures:
Such measures are necessary to combat attendance issues across a continuum, from excessive to chronic, and include family and community engagement and public awareness campaigns, specifically aimed at subsets of students with heightened attendance difficulties (homeless students, students with disabilities, and English language learners).
4. Appointment of attendance coordinators:
Positions could be assumed by someone already on staff to initiate and maintain communication with students facing attendance difficulties and their families.
5. Professional development tailored to the specific needs of a particular school or district
6. Interventions:
These range from early childhood interventions to the ninth grade on-track indicator to Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). Interventions require the support of the community; attendance problems cannot be tackled in isolation and answers often lie in a focus on the school culture.
7. Recommendations:
The truancy task force recommended an increase in evaluation efforts and progress monitoring including the call for the establishment of a permanent commission to look at truancy.

Chairperson Taylor explained that the Commission is focused on the broader issue of school attendance in order to have a greater impact on all attendance-related issues such as unexcused, excessive, and chronic absences as well as truancy. Truancy efforts are focused on recovery while attendance efforts seek to reduce the occurrence of truancy. Attendance issues are the precursors of absenteeism and truancy.

Diane Grigsby-Jackson asked about the length of the term. Mr. Aranowski explained the Commission will run for five years, and members will serve for that length of time unless they need to have a replacement named in the case of job change, move, etc.

Karen Fox inquired about financial considerations with regard to solutions. Mr. Aranowski explained the truancy task force was careful to stay away from solutions which required financing. The attendance coordinators which were identified in the task force’s

recommendations were thought to be people already on staff who would take on additional duties, people who would serve as the central points of contact rather than people hired specifically for that role. Ms. Taylor said it played in the task force's favor not to push the money factor, and to focus on root causes, raise awareness, and start discussions.

The subject of public hearings was raised, and Ms. Taylor explained their necessity as they will inform the efforts of the Commission and attach legitimacy to its work.

Harold Sweeney explained that the Commission is on the radar of anyone working on truancy today as practitioners are looking for support and solutions. Ms. Taylor concurred and explained she has heard from many administrators who want assistance tackling their attendance issues.

Madelyn James added a note of caution that the Commission needs to be very strategic about where the public hearings are held as people in different sections of the state face different problems relative to funding and transportation.

VIII. Discussion and Possible Adoption of Mission, Goals, Timelines, and Meeting Schedules

Mr. Aranowski reminded the group that the first report to the General Assembly is due March 15, 2016, and they have to be mindful about establishing goals and making progress toward meeting goals by that time. Hearings would provide valuable data.

Melissa Mitchell said we need to define absence, what is excused and what is not. A student's early dismissal from school at noon for a doctor's appointment is counted differently across the state. The Commission needs to look at attendance/absence policies across the state as well as patterns in state attendance data. There should also be an effort to discover trends in attendance data for population subgroups and by geographical areas. Ms. Mitchell also noted that it would be interesting to see how Illinois compares to other states with regard to comprehensive definitions of terms and procedures in place to support children and families.

Mark Bishop added that it is important to see what other states are doing in terms of best practices, data collection, and identifying attendance strategies. He cited the work of Hedy Chang, the director of Attendance Works, a national organization that addresses absenteeism. Ms. Chang advocates the regular tracking of attendance data and using it to shape interventions and school-wide approaches to address chronic absenteeism. Mr. Bishop also said we have to have a grasp on the difference between absenteeism and truancy as their causes are different and they look different in different populations. He also echoed the sentiment that everyone has to be on the same page with regard to the definitions.

Harold Sweeney cautioned there are kids for whom there is no data because they simply never go to school.

Scott Wakeley initiated a discussion about parents who provide an excuse for any and all absences for their children. They (school and district officials) are frustrated because the parents always provide cover when the school calls, even to the extent they are able to obtain doctors' notes. He advised that more accountability measures are necessary to stop these practices, especially since these notes are usually written by non-medical personnel. Very often, the doctors' offices do not check to see if the child was actually seen on the date in question. Mr. Sweeney said that his organization contacts the doctors to determine the validity of school excusal notes. Another point of view was offered by Deanna Sullivan who said there are dental and medical professionals who work with students who want to ensure that schools accept the

validity of the excusal notes and count the absences as excused. They would like statutory language to say doctors' visits during the school day should be excused. Mr. Sweeney concluded that there are different standards across districts. What is excused in one district is not excused in another.

Beth Malik said her organization tracks attendance data for homeless students and faces many challenges with this due to their mobility. Sometimes there are periods of weeks and months when these students are not enrolled in school, and these days are not being tracked and counted. Data does not capture days when there are gaps in student enrollment.

Melissa Mitchell brought up the state's ongoing effort to launch a longitudinal data system and its potential capability to track attendance because it would use student identification numbers across the state.

Mr. Aranowski said the Student Information System is useful, but some attendance is still not reported when enrollments change from one school to the next. The data are only as good as what is being reported.

Madelyn James wondered if Hedy Chang or someone else with a broad national perspective could speak to the group and invited other members to provide resources and information about other states' services. Ms. James further stated that some incredibly important work is being done in California, Georgia, and New York. She also advised the Commission to be positive in its approach to solutions and support children and families and not use parents as scapegoats.

Mr. Aranowski proposed we use a positive approach with districts and empower districts to make decisions that are good for kids. He explained that districts face a lot of mandates, and while it would be great to have consistent data and definitions, some districts need to retain their specific character if it works for their kids.

Ms. Mitchell said a presentation by Hedy Chang could get everyone on the same page and would inform the Commission on other states' progress. She wondered also what it looks like if a doctor is writing a note every week for a student because there are cumulative effects to absenteeism. School attendance in early years is a predictor of who will graduate from high school.

Ms. Taylor said the Commission needs to look at the task force report and also hear what Hedy Chang has to say. All members have to be mindful of the reports that are due each year, but the reality is the Commission has five years to provide effective solutions after much research and discussion. Members have to know the difference between what can be legislated and what should be recommended.

Mr. Wakeley said it makes a huge difference for districts if something is mandated or if it is recommended because what works in one place might not work somewhere else. You have to see who has similar challenges. Recommendations are better than mandates to permit some autonomy among districts. You do not want to tie the hands up of people who are doing the most important work with children.

Ms. Taylor said sometimes things need to be legislated. Children with disabilities provide a common thread with regard to attendance no matter where or who they are. When you look at the homeless population and the children in the juvenile justice system, you find they were usually students with disabilities. Sometimes you need a template solution to make things equitable.

Mr. Aranowski said something that is recommended for legislative change does not necessarily create a mandate. Sometimes there are things in the law that need to be changed because something legislated in another era no longer works today. It is not productive to suspend or expel a student for nonattendance.

Mr. Wakeley said there are hurdles and you have to do everything you can to keep kids in school, even those who fail to bring in health and dental forms. He explained we make the rules that cause problems for ourselves especially with regard to health forms and such. He cited the requirement that high school seniors must have meningitis shots and if they don't they lose out on certain achievements as a punitive measure. He said it is difficult to keep the kids who are in school in school because of arcane rules.

Ms. Mitchell said you need different triggers in the legislation. She said it never made sense to send a student home after missing school. We do need to move toward stronger policies and practices that wouldn't be a burden to districts or have some unintended consequences for districts where certain problems are not a challenge. It also does not make sense to penalize children for something that is not in their control. How effective is it to remove a child from school if no one took her to the dentist? You have to work with the family directly to give them the support they need to get inoculations and dental checkups.

Mr. Bishop said discussions involve more than educators, and we need public health involved. It has to be clearly articulated to all stakeholders that more than educators are involved in school attendance issues.

Ms. Taylor echoed this sentiment and said we need someone with a pediatric association affiliation to inform and guide us. She said the Commission doesn't necessarily have to have everyone serve on the Commission from different entities, but we will invite certain professionals in to inform us.

Mr. Aranowski asked if anyone knows any districts with exemplary programs and solutions or community engagement models

Ms. Taylor brought up the subject of meetings (once a month) and most agreed the mornings were better. Meetings would generally be 90 minutes long.

Mr. Aranowski said since the Commission is an advisory body, it does not have to physically meet. With a notice of 48 hours, the Commission could meet via a conference call if a consensus is needed, but only on an occasional basis. He reminded the Commission that the first report is due to the General Assembly by March 15 and should be approved by the Commission by March 1.

Ms. Taylor said the Truancy in Chicago Public Schools Task Force followed every protocol and its work was highly respected. She wants the same for the Commission and does not want the work to be questioned. She promised to adhere to every protocol as its mission is too important. Children's lives are at stake.

Karen Fox said former task force members can provide guidance on the policies and procedures that had been researched and discussed.

Ms. Taylor cautioned that there were superintendents who did not know the compulsory age of attendance had changed and were operating on a previous policy. She explained further that it is necessary to know what is out there on policy and what is being practiced procedurally.

Mr. Bishop said his group looked at a lot of these issues and wants to share their report with the Commission.

With regard to notable research and study summaries, Ms. Mitchell said the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research's preschool report (*Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences*) and the ninth grade cohort reports (*Preventable Failure: Improvements in Long-Term Outcomes When High Schools Focused on the Ninth Grade Year: Research Summary* and four others) were good and should be circulated. Ms. James suggested that the New York absenteeism study (*Meeting the Challenge of Combating Chronic Absenteeism Impact of the NYC Mayor's Interagency Task Force on Chronic Absenteeism and School Attendance and Its Implications for Other Cities*) should also be considered

Heidi Grove suggested the use of Google drive to post these documents for easy access by Commission members. Ms. Taylor recalled the work of the Best Practice Committee on the truancy task force and wondered about providing Commission members access to that information.

Mr. Bishop said things are coming down the pike that may impact the Commission's work. The Office of Civil Rights is gathering truancy data and will be issuing a report in the spring. The Every Child Every Day initiative (U. S. Department of Education) will hold a summit in early June on chronic absenteeism that will involve the creation of 20 state teams through a competitive process. There will be an application procedure in early January which he will track for us.

Harold Sweeney said there is a conference in Normal on March 3-4 for all people connected with truancy statewide. The Illinois Coalition for Educating At-Risk Youth (ICEARY) includes truancy workers, administrators, teachers, and everyone on the frontlines of the anti-truancy effort within its organization. Mr. Aranowski expressed his belief that the Commission should have several members attend in an official capacity as this conference could inform future work for the Commission. Mr. Sweeney suggested the Commission schedule a hearing at the conference to hear everyone's concerns.

Diane Grigsby-Jackson offered space within the Department of Human Services DHS space for future meetings.

IX. Discussion and Possible Creation of Committees

Ms. Taylor said we may need to meet again to decide what the committees should be. She also reminded Commission members that there is an Illinois Secretary of Education – Beth Purvis – and the Commission will be checking in with her.

X. Public Comment

There was no public comment.

XI. General Discussion on Other Topics by Commission Members

Mr. Aranowski said the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is up for reauthorization. The current draft was passed by House a few days prior to the Commission's inaugural meeting and the Senate vote was upcoming. The state is operating under a No Child Left Behind (NCLB) waiver. There will be significant changes in an ESEA waiver which will affect funding.

Mr. Bishop said chronic absenteeism is going to be required reporting for the state plan and constitutes an allowable expense for professional development and funding.

All Commission members were provided a reminder that all Commission-related communication is to be funneled through the Commission administrator. This also applies to any media requests for information.

XII. Adjourn

There was a motion to adjourn which was seconded at 11:55 a.m.