

Illinois Attendance Commission

Meeting Minutes
February 19, 2016
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

The meeting was called to order at 10:04 a.m. by Chairperson Antoinette Taylor.

Jeff Aranowski (Present - Chicago)
Lori Fanello (Present - telephone)
Karen Fox (Present - Chicago)
Tiffany Gholson (Present - Chicago)
Jennifer Gill
Diane Grigsby-Jackson
Heidi Grove (Present - telephone)
Victoria Jackson (Present - telephone)
Madelyn James (Present - Chicago)
Elizabeth C. Malik (Present - Chicago)
Alexandra Mays (Present - telephone)
Melissa Mitchell (Present - Chicago)
Matthew Rodriguez
Diane Rutledge (Present – Springfield)
Deanna Sullivan (Present - Springfield)
Harold Sweeney (Present - telephone)
Antoinette Taylor (Present - Chicago)
Scott Wakeley (Present - telephone)
Crysta Weitekamp (Present - telephone)

II. Welcome and Opening Remarks

III. Approval of Minutes from January 25, 2016 Meeting

A motion to approve the minutes was made and seconded. No one was opposed.

IV. Attendance Works Presentation

Cecelia Leong, Associate Director of Programs, and Sue Fothergill, Associate Director of Policy, for Attendance Works were present via conference call to address the commission. They explained that Attendance Works is a national and state initiative that promotes awareness of the important role that school attendance plays in achieving academic success starting with pre-school. Since their founding in 2010, they have offered practitioners and

policy makers resources and solutions to address attendance problems; there have been over a million hits on their website, and users have downloaded thousands of their free data toolkits.

The initiative has three focus areas to improve student attendance:

- Build public awareness and political will
- Foster state campaigns
- Encourage local practice

The group is currently gearing up its ‘Superintendents Call to Action’ webinar on April 12, 2016, at 1:00 p.m., to mobilize district superintendents to prioritize attendance with a heightened emphasis on data collection and analysis. Planning is also underway for the organization’s Attendance Awareness Month in September 2016, and Attendance Works has welcomed several national partners to the effort including the Healthy Schools Campaign which has a representative serving on the Attendance Commission. Last year over 400 communities and districts participated in Attendance Awareness Month, and Illinois had the third highest level of participation in the country.

Ms. Leong and Ms. Fothergill explained they had been asked to provide frameworks and strategies to solve attendance problems, and they explained they promote the utilization of multiple measures of attendance.

Average Daily Attendance

For example, in Illinois the Average Daily Attendance (ADA) figure is used to calculate how money is allocated; however, the ADA represents only the best three months of attendance. This calculation overstates the actual number of students who are in school and can mask chronic absence. The Attendance Works speakers demonstrated with a slide showing six schools in Oakland, California in a district with an ADA of 95%. Despite the high district ADA, the six schools had chronic absence rates that varied from 7-16%. The same slide depicted six schools in New York City where the ADA is 90%; however, these six schools had chronic absence rates of 20-26%. The speakers related that while funding tied to attendance in other places can result in over-counts, district policies on what constitutes an attendance day impact accurate data collection as was demonstrated with the example of a middle school in California where a student’s presence in school for one period of the school day counts as a full attendance day.

Truancy data is very important but the calculation varies by state. In Illinois, if a student is absent for any portion of the school day without permission, that student is truant. In Maryland, the truancy standard is unexcused absences that exceed 20% of days in a school year. In California, you are truant if you are missing for three days without an excuse.

Chronic Absence Effects

Chronic absence, however, is the measure that matters most at Attendance Works because this data can inform who is at greatest risk for academic failure. Truancy rarely occurs in the primary grades as a child who is absent from school will have a note excusing the absence. A pattern of these absences, however, has been shown to affect future achievement and create a pattern of behavior that predicts future absences. Tracking student attendance is very important to take note of which children are falling off-track. It is easy for teachers and parents not to notice a pattern of two absences a month, especially if the absences are all

excused. The calculation for chronic absence varies around the country but ranges generally from 5-10% of the total school year days. The Office of Civil Rights within the U. S. Department of Education currently defines chronic absence as missing fifteen days.

Patterns of absence, excused or unexcused, have a cumulative effect on learning. When children miss school, they miss exposure to a language-rich environment, an essential component of the school experience for low-income children. They do not reap the benefit of time spent on task in a class and miss valuable class instruction. Regular school attendance puts children on track for success and predicts engagement in learning which can lead to college enrollment through a pattern of persistence. Such a result is possible for all children if schools, families, and communities collaborate on the importance of school attendance.

Barriers to Attendance

Chronic absence is solvable, especially if data is used to help unpack contributing factors, according to Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins University. The contributing factors don't occur at the same rate in every community. Districts have to mine the data to learn why chronic absence occurs in their communities and within the families of their enrolled students.

In many communities, there are misunderstandings about school attendance, like whether or not it is important for a young child to attend school every day. Most families say they want their children to go on to college, to successful careers, but they are in denial about the importance of school attendance during the formative years. Pre-kindergarten and kindergarten lay the foundation for future grade levels, and attendance matters greatly. Research has shown that children who are chronically absent in kindergarten, even if their attendance improves as they move through the succeeding grade levels, have lower rates of achievement. Children are building social and academic skills as well as lifelong habits in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. Parents understand how much is missed if a child misses four days of school, but do not understand how much is missed by missing two days here and two days there. Having conversations with parents, school psychologists, and counselors about the reasons for absence can help a school unpack its attendance data. What are the barriers? Are there issues around school climate? Are there aversions, like bullies or a parent's own bad school experiences? You have to break it down into smaller problems that are manageable and solvable.

Other common barriers to regular school attendance, as cited by the Attendance Works presenters, included chronic health problems, expectations within families for older siblings to care for younger ones, and unmet basic needs such as transportation, housing, food, and clothing.

Tiered Interventions

A public health pyramid was utilized by the presenters to demonstrate the utility of providing tiered interventions to remedy school attendance issues.

- Tier 1 - All students
 - Recognize good and improved attendance
 - Educate and engage students and families, set high expectations
 - Monitor attendance data – dig into data for kids at risk, need data at their fingertips, rewarding just perfect attendance does not support a schoolwide strategy, better to set goals and reward that success

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- Clarify attendance expectations and goals - foundational
 - Establish positive and engaging school climate – very important to make kids feel good
 - Address common barriers to getting to school – busing, dangerous neighborhoods; address the barrier with a school strategy rather than a one on one
 - Tier 2 - Students exhibiting chronic absence missing 10%
 - Proactive text messaging combined with response to each absence
 - Provide personalized early outreach
 - Meet with student/family to develop plan; adjust as needed if not working.
 - Offer attendance mentor/buddy
 - Tier 3 - Students who missed 20% or more of the prior school year (severe chronic absence) or have a history of truancy.
 - Intensive case management with coordination of public agency and legal response as needed

Tier one interventions for the entire school community benefit all students as they foster sustainability. Interventions on the other two tiers drive the change that needs to occur. Of paramount importance in crafting solutions to chronic absenteeism, however, is the responsibility of district and school administrators to focus on positive engagement by developing and encouraging caring relationships, effective messaging, and a positive school climate to motivate daily attendance

Key Ingredients for Change and Sustainability

The presenters identified key ingredients that are essential to systems change and sustainability:

- **Capacity Building** expands ability to work together to interpret data, engage in problem solving, and adopt best practices
- **Strategic Partnerships** between district and community partners address specific attendance barriers and mobilize support for all ingredients
- **Shared Accountability** ensures chronic absence is monitored and reinforced by policy, operating with knowledge
- **Actionable Data** needs to be taken in multiple levels. Must be accurate, timely, and virtually reported. You cannot wait for the end of the school year to monitor trends over time to see if things are getting better or worse.
- **Positive Engagement:** Uses caring relationships, effective messaging, and a positive school climate to motivate daily attendance

Actionable Data

Actionable data is accurate, accessible, and regularly reported, and can be used to monitor at the school level. Administrators must ensure everyone understands the data in order to determine attendance barriers for both individual students and the community at large. School level multi-disciplinary teams should be formed to address barriers and mobilize support for actions. One of the most important things you can do with data is to look for disproportionality to identify issues with particular subgroups. Students with

disabilities are among the groups with the highest rate of absenteeism. Absence rates tend to spike in some communities for ninth graders as they transition to high school. A ninth grade bridge program is necessary to stem this tide.

How can chronic absence and suspension data be used?

- To determine the size and scope of the issue
- To identify the right points for interventions
- To see trends over time
- To identify positive outliers and best practices
- To find schools needing greater support
- To identify student sub-groups disproportionately affected
- To allocate scarce resources more efficiently

The Attendance Works presenters emphasized the importance of looking for positive outliers and best practices as well as school principals and leaders who are making a difference in the lives of children. When districts face common challenges, administrators can work with peers for solutions and to share practices that have proven to be successful. Peer-to-peer learning can also create excitement around shared challenges and practices. Peers can share inspiration and knowledge at the local level and build training around proven solutions.

Federal Initiatives

The Office of Civil Rights within the U.S. Department of Education plans to release a first-ever national chronic absenteeism data report in Spring 2016.

The *Every Student, Every Day* campaign is a shared initiative sponsored by the following federal agencies: Department of Education, Department of Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and the Department of Justice. These agencies are shining a spotlight on the problem of chronic absence and have offered ideas around their particular areas of operation in a toolkit that includes a “Dear Colleague” letter with guidance for states, schools, and local communities. There will be an *Every Student, Every Day* virtual summit on November 12, 2016.

Tied into the *Every Student, Every Day* campaign is the My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) Success Mentors Initiative, sponsored by the U. S. Department of Education, the Ad Council, and the Mott Foundation which began in January 2016.

A national chronic absenteeism summit will be held in June 2016.

Chronic absence is included in the recently passed *Every Student Succeeds Act* and is a required reporting metric for schools. Chronic absence could be adopted by states as an additional metric for measuring school performance.

Comments

Alex Mays was asked to comment on the Healthy Schools Campaign’s partnership with Attendance Works and Title IV which she said previously was structured as a series of grant programs for physical education programs, anti-bullying efforts, and school safety issues. Schools are asked to look at their data and decide what their greatest student needs are and how to address them and Title IV funding could be used to address those needs. Ms. Mays

said the connection between chronic absence and chronic health problems is quite strong and one of the health issues that impacts attendance very heavily is asthma.

Madelyn James asked about geo-mapping of communities and the presenters responded that they had engaged in efforts to determine areas of need in certain communities. A fairly common problem they found was the difficulty some rural residents had with transportation to and from school. Another uncovered problem was around the issue of school uniforms and the effect stringent policies had on school attendance. Ms. James also referred to a recent Illinois Department of Public Health report and its assessment/mapping of health concerns affecting children across the state.

V. Illinois Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) Network Presentation

The presenters were Michele Carmichael from the Illinois State Board of Education (Behavioral Health Supports) and Julie West, Co-coordinator of the Illinois MTSS Network Statewide Program. Also in attendance was Patricia Brown, also Co-coordinator of the Illinois MTSS Network Statewide Program.

Ms. Carmichael drew a parallel to Attendance Works and their efforts to focus on attendance through a process to develop a continuous improvement plan based on data collection, analysis and interpretation of data, interventions, and progress-monitoring.

She provided a historical perspective on the evolution of the Illinois State Board of Education's attempts to provide districts across the state with the means to address barriers to student achievement. ISBE took a look at various efforts to resolve issues related to discipline, effects of disabilities on academic achievement, reading and literacy development, English language learning difficulties, and a lack of parent/family engagement, among other student-centered issues, and arrived at the conclusion that many of these problems could be tackled in the same way.

Many of the existing programs relied on tiered interventions methodologies, but they were operating in siloes and had affiliations with multiple advocacy groups. The problem was compounded by a lack of sustainability because the focus of each effort was not on the process itself.

Ms. Carmichael said the people involved discovered they needed to train on the system first and then show how each practice/process would be able to be maintained and sustained. They implemented a model of training, coaching, and technical assistance to be used statewide that was an integration of the content-specific pieces from the previous separate models; this early merger operated initially as the Illinois Statewide Technical Assistance Center. This amalgam of a variety of programs that utilized the tiered response strategy eventually led to the creation of the Illinois Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) Network, a framework for continuous improvement that is systemic, prevention-focused, and data-informed, providing a coherent continuum of supports responsive to meet the needs of all learners.

Sustainability was ensured through strategic partnering with school districts to coach staff in MTSS implementation and with the Illinois Institutes of Higher Education to insert MTSS into educator preparation programs at nine universities. Another component is the MTSS

Network's effort to encourage parent/family engagement awareness of and involvement in the process. An MTSS evaluation component, a two-pronged approach to evaluate and provide tools, enhances the MTSS Network's efforts to sustain. Finally, a statewide network of coordinators and coaches engage in training, team-building, and technical assistance.

The MTSS Network takes a systemic approach and builds district capacity by focusing on organizational supports to build internal capacity and tailor school level models. Ms. Carmichael explained that a district plan for MTSS can be adapted for whatever need is demonstrated by the data: behaviors, attendance, achievement, etc. Districts can use their data to identify students who are struggling, determine the root cause for the struggle, and intervene early.

The district must find the funding, develop policy, get stakeholder support, and achieve visibility for whatever the issue or need is. The district must focus then on developing capacity at the building level through professional development, coaching, and evaluation. Ms. Carmichael referred to Attendance Works' emphasis on peer learning and supports since the MTSS network model utilizes teacher leaders who diffuse the process throughout their buildings.

The continuum of supports to be provided through an MTSS model for school attendance would begin with an initial layer of universal supports to entire student bodies. Progress-monitoring will reveal students who continue to struggle with regular school attendance. Layers of supports would continue as the number of struggling students dwindles from some to a few. Supports at this level will involve families, analyses of physical and mental health, the appointment of an adult mentor in a school community, and any other intervening strategy that can remedy students' nonattendance issues.

VI. March 15 Annual Report Update

Ms. Taylor informed the commission that HB 4343, which provides an extension of the commission's annual report due date from December 15, 2015 to March 15, 2016, is currently with the Rules Committee.

A draft copy of the annual report will be sent to members by the commission administrator on February 26 and any comments, changes, or edits should be submitted by March 1.

VII. Public Comment

There was no public comment.

VIII. New Business and Open Discussion

Ms. Taylor issued a reminder to members that the first public hearing conducted by the Attendance Commission will take place at the ICEARY Annual Conference on March 3, 2016, at the Bloomington-Normal Marriott Hotel and Conference Center.

IX. Adjourn

Madelyn James moved to adjourn, and the motion was seconded by Karen Fox at 12:07 p.m.