

Illinois Attendance Commission

Meeting Minutes

March 10, 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

Present

Jeff Aranowski (Chicago)
Lori Fanello (telephone)
Karen Fox (telephone)
Heidi Grove (telephone)
Victoria Jackson (telephone)
Madelyn James (Chicago)
Alexandra Mays (telephone)
Melissa Mitchell (telephone)
Deanna Sullivan (Springfield)
Harold Sweeney (telephone)
Antoinette Taylor (Chicago)
Crysta Weitekamp (telephone)
Kevin Westall (telephone)

Not Present

Tiffany Gholson
Jennifer Gill
Diane Grigsby-Jackson
Elizabeth C. Malik
Matthew Rodriguez
Diane Rutledge
Scott Wakeley

II. Welcome and Opening Remarks

Chairperson Antoinette Taylor welcomed the commission members to the meeting.

III. Approval of Minutes from February 19, 2016 Meeting

Victoria Jackson wished to correct the minutes by indicating she had been present on the telephone during the February 19 meeting. Jeff Aranowski noted that the word 'Agenda' was in the heading rather than 'Minutes.'

Madelyn James moved to accept the minutes with corrections and Mr. Aranowski seconded. The minutes were then approved by all present.

IV. Public Hearing Debrief

Ms. Taylor asked the members of the Public Hearing Committee (Jeff Aranowski, Madelyn James, Lori Fanello, Harold Sweeney, and Deanna Sullivan) to provide a summary of the hearing that was held on March 3, 2016, at the Illinois Coalition for Educating At-risk Youth (ICEARY) Conference in Bloomington-Normal.

Ms. Sullivan said the hearing was widely attended by many people throughout the state who have expertise in the areas of attendance and truancy, and the information they shared was especially instructive. She categorized the ideas expressed by hearing attendees under three headings: Identification, Interventions and Supports, and Challenges.

Identification (of the Problem)

- Lack of access to attendance data – need immediate access
- Need standard, uniform attendance policies, not building to building differences
- Need immediate response to each incident of truancy
- Must see warning signs earlier
- Referral to truancy officers earlier
- Special attention to fourth, seventh, and ninth graders, students entering transition grade levels

Interventions and Supports

- Community- and faith-based supports are vital
- Peer juries and/or truancy review boards have benefits
- Use of mentors who were formerly truant students
- Transition back to school setting from alternative programs specific to students who have long term absenteeism
- Home visits are very important
- Need more choices for reporting attendance data
- Power to administer consequences
- Outside agency help with the population under age 10
- Have constructive consequences in each Regional Office of Education (ROE)

Challenges

- No real consequences for absent/truant students (repeatedly stated)
- Lack of consequences even after extensive provision of services
- Special interest groups tie the hands of state's attorneys
- Funding

Ms. Fanello shared her impressions and expressed how grateful the members of the ICEARY group were to share their thoughts and ideas with members of the commission as they are people who are very passionate about their jobs. She categorized the comments expressed by hearing attendees according to the following divisions:

What Is Working?

- Many positive relationships among students and families and administrators and secretaries
- Truancy review boards (need more) that hold hearings to get kids back in school and parents on board with measures

What Is Not Working?

- Inconsistencies between the ROEs and the county courts – not everyone does it the same way and when you have many counties in a ROE, you have to know what the court is going to do in one county and what it will do in the next.
- Mental health issues came up multiple times and the fact that there is very little support to address those issues with children and their families.
- Mentioned very often is the fact there are no real consequences, and the courts do not have the power to change behaviors.
- Need more consequences and need more support to help students overcome issues

What Else?

- Preventative grants to work with students with excessive excused absences either individually or in small groups
- Professionals need to share their best practices instead of working in siloes, need to share their exemplary work.

Ms. James concurred with Ms. Fanello and Ms. Sullivan. She referred to her recent attendance at a P-20 Council meeting with Representative Linda Chapa LaVia where there had been a presentation and discussion of the Governor's Cabinet for Children and Youth, an effort that would facilitate targeted, collaborative efforts by different state agencies and departments to address issues together rather than in a series of overlapping and separate programs. She felt the attendance issue would garner attention and promote concerted efforts.

At the hearing, Ms. James said people were basically in two camps:

- Those who advocated for preventive measures, intervention strategies, building relationships, and trying to get to the root of truancy problems
- Those who think the laws we have should be followed, and there should be uniform consequences when they are not.

Ms. James advocated for an examination of early school attendance problems in order to resolve issues before they become truancy problems. School and district staffs have to find the underlying reasons for younger students' attendance and truancy issues. It is incumbent upon them to figure out why children are not getting to school on time or, more specifically, why their families are not getting them to school on time rather than simply relying on enforcement of the laws. She feels families are not acting in defiance of laws but rather in response to other pressing needs like finding secure housing, stable employment, and sufficient food; however, there are some families that must also be engaged in a way that they see that it is in their own self-interest for their children to attend school.

Mr. Aranowski explained that public hearings will yield different results depending on the particular community that is being heard. The public hearing at the ICEARY conference was attended by those who deal with at-risk youth whose school attendance issues have devolved into chronic truancy. Many participants in that discussion are truant officers or run alternative education programs. He said that when the commission conducts hearings in other areas, we may hear more about issues of particular communities – crime, poverty, and other root causes – so the commission has to look at this holistically. He recalled the public hearings that were held when he was a member of the Truancy in Chicago Public Schools Task Force in three different Chicago communities when attendees expressed disdain for punitive measures in response to chronic

absence and truancy. He said the public hearings are an incredible opportunity to engage with the public on all sides of the issue.

Mr. Aranowski also expressed his gratitude to the ICEARY members for going out of their way to accommodate the commission by not only providing an opportunity to hold a hearing at their annual conference but for attending it in large numbers as well. He looks forward to the possibility of an annual hearing at the group's conference and the opportunity for commission members to be conference presenters.

Ms. Taylor addressed the concept that prevention through proactive measures to initiate change is a good strategy with the families of children who are very young. She said everyone agrees that if we get to children and their families early, we can prevent attendance problems from occurring. By fourth grade, the concept of school attendance has to be ingrained within both. She explained further, conversely, that when proactive policies fail, schools must be reactive in the face of attendance problems. One reactive response is to look at excused absences because for some children they occur too frequently and when children are not in school, they are missing out.

Mr. Aranowski informed the commission that the National Association for the Education of Homeless Youth and Children (NAEHYC) has an annual conference this year in Orlando and another one planned for next year here in Chicago. They will be soliciting presentations and he would like the commission to present at this conference.

V. Final Report Update

Mr. Aranowski informed the commission that the annual report that had been prepared by the commission administrator with input from commission members, had been sent to an editor in Springfield, was finalized, signed by Superintendent Tony Smith, and sent for publication in Springfield. It will be delivered to the state Board of Education and the General Assembly on Monday, March 14.

Ms. Taylor reminded everyone that HB 4343 is still on the back burner. This is the bill establishing an extended timeline for this annual report, from December 15, 2015 to March 15, 2016. The text of this bill was included in the appendix of the report.

VI. Discussion of the Possible Public Relations Campaign

Ms. Taylor launched a discussion of a possible public relations campaign to be conducted by the commission. She said the annual "Back to School" awareness campaign is not sufficient but could be encompassed into a larger effort. An attendance awareness campaign would educate people about the compulsory age of attendance in the state (age six) and could convince parents they are accountable for their children's attendance patterns. Ms. Taylor suggested everyone on the Commission could use their websites as vehicles to promote the public relations messages about school attendance to parents and stakeholders, and on the Attendance Commission's website, there could be a resource tab for parents and educators.

Ms. James said her organization would cooperate and she wondered if there was a way to link this effort with the national *Every Student, Every Day* campaign which offers a broader, stronger message than just a back to school reminder. She feels the only tagline we need is the *Every Student, Every Day – Illinois* so people understand children have to be in school every day.

Melissa Mitchell agreed that our effort should be linked to the national campaign because of the amount of resources that are available through this campaign. She said her organization's website would love to promote a statewide attendance campaign and wondered if the state superintendent would include it in his newsletters.

Mr. Aranowski said once we have a message, we can approach the superintendent for inclusion in his weekly bulletin. He suggested that the commission could also conduct webinars. He referred to information that Ms. Taylor had shared about the involvement of Attorney General Kamala Harris in California who spearheads a statewide effort aimed at bolstering school attendance in partnership with other government agencies, professional alliances and associations, and foundations. He suggested the launch of a similar statewide effort with the collaborative involvement of many state agencies, educational administrators, civic entities, private business, and charitable foundations.

Ms. Taylor said there are so many boards and associations represented on the attendance commission, that that would provide a way to get started to before launching a full out campaign in 2017.

Ms. James said Matthew Rodriguez would be very helpful to a public relations campaign startup as he is head of the Illinois Parent Teacher Association. She said we should begin to communicate our message to administrator academies and other gatherings of administrative stakeholders across the state, and there has to be a plan to roll things out in 2017 and engage with various stakeholder sectors around the issue of school attendance.

Mr. Aranowski asserted the need for a strategic plan as the commission has a long life span and has the potential to be quite thorough. The commission needs to be very intentional and strategic in its planning because the execution of a plan in a scattered approach will dilute the message. The plan must also be regularly evaluated to assure effectiveness.

Ms. Mitchell concurred and said we need a strategic plan

Ms. Taylor suggested a short term strategic plan and a long term one.

Mr. Aranowski suggested the commission administrator gauge the interest of commission members to form a subcommittee to examine this issue and present a plan.

VII. Discussion of Attendance Works Survey

Ms. Taylor explained that Attendance Works had sent a survey entitled *State Attendance Policy and Practice* through the Network to Advance State Attendance Policy and Practice (NASAPP) which was to be completed on behalf of the commission. Ms. Taylor and Mr. Aranowski considered the survey's questions, many of them centered on longitudinal data systems, types of attendance data used in state calculations, guidance on excused absences, the level of disaggregation of statewide attendance data, state policies on district accountability for absences, etc., and realized they could provide either limited answers or no responses to many of the questions. As a result, the questions for which they had no answers or only partial responses could serve as a guide for what the commission needs to accomplish during its tenure. Ms. Taylor requested a pdf of the survey from Attendance Works for the commission members to reference.

Mr. Aranowski explained that the survey focuses on chronic absences and truancy, fits in perfectly with what we are trying to do, and will generate thoughtful direction.

Ms. Taylor said the commission has generated a lot of interest and Deanna Sullivan explained there was a piece of legislation that was heard last week in the House Education Committee, and it had to do with removing the penalties for truancy and making certain interventions priorities over others (HB4240).

Harold Sweeney explained that ICEARY has expressed its opposition to the bill as it is written. Ms. Sullivan said her alliance has opposed it as well. HB 4240 would remove the stipulation that if a parent is found guilty of assisting his/her child in not attending school, that parent can be found guilty of a Class C misdemeanor, be fined up to \$500, and serve 90 days in jail and substitute a requirement that the parent take a parenting class instead. ICEARY opposes this bill because right now they feel they don't have a whole lot going for them to back them up, and unfortunately, the possible hammer of penalties is the only thing people notice.

Mr. Sweeney referred also to his attendance brochure *No Big Deal* which will be sent out to commission members.

Ms. Taylor said there is much interest in the work of the commission. Rep. Madigan has a task force in the House that is looking at funding reform and Senator Manar is working on a solution on the Senate side. A recommendation from the Truancy in the Chicago Public Schools Task Force regarding calculating average daily attendance for the state report card and GSA was included in HB3200 which was introduced last year but did not move beyond rules; however, it could be possible for similar measures to be included during this or future sessions. The P-20 Council was very involved with the truancy task force and Ms. Taylor will reach out to the Council in hopes of a similar collaboration with the Attendance Commission.

Ms. Taylor reminded members that it is one thing to be appointed to the commission, but it is another thing to serve. She asked that if anyone knows of anyone who would be interested in attending meetings or presenting at a meeting, they should contact the commission administrator or be referred to the official attendance e-mail address and/or website.

VIII. Public Comment

A representative from Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), a parent advocacy group, was present. She said her organization completed a study entitled *Why Isn't Johnny in Preschool?* which examined why more than half of preschool-aged children in Chicago were either not enrolled or not present in school. Transportation difficulties, work schedules, lack of awareness of available programs, navigation difficulties with online enrollment procedures were commonly cited barriers. Punitive measures for nonattendance of an enrolled child would dissuade parents from enrolling their children. Ms. Taylor invited the representative from COFI to forward a pdf of their study to the Attendance Commission e-mail address.

Ms. James cited some findings of Attendance Works with regard to encouraging preschool attendance: punitive measures rarely worked but an explanation of the effects of irregular school attendance on future achievement was effective.

IX. New Business and Open Discussion

Kevin Westall explained that many students with school attendance problems come from homes with little access to the internet, so online efforts to promote school attendance for that audience will fall flat. There has to be an effort to communicate in another way with these families. He also

reminded his peers that many younger students in pre-kindergarten to kindergarten have poor attendance rates. While pre-k attendance is not mandatory, efforts still have to be directed at families with children enrolled who are not attending regularly; otherwise, non-attendance patterns develop and are difficult to break.

Ms. James referenced the University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research's report - *Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences*. She said the report highlights a nearly 40% spike in absenteeism among preschoolers in Chicago with a 54% - 46% split over the causes, illness vs. family logistics. She said this is the level at which we must intervene in order to create lifelong school attendance habits. Ms. James also reiterated the need to intervene during the key transition periods, from pre-kindergarten and kindergarten to the primary grades, to the intermediate grades, to middle school, and at the ninth grade level with both the children and their families because of the heightened expectations at each new educational phase.

Mr. Aranowski concurred with Mr. Westall about the lack of technology in poverty-level homes and the need to develop other venues of communication. He also explained that while the mandated age for school attendance in Illinois is the age of six, there is a law in Illinois that if you enroll your child in school, the child must attend school.

Mr. Sweeney said he has found when you question parents whose children are under the age of six who are enrolled in school but not showing up, they usually pull their children out of school. He explained this is no one's intention but it happens.

Ms. Taylor said she had received an email about a national conference around school attendance issues that will take place in Washington, D. C. during the first full week of June. She explained that she would like commission members to attend, but they would have to do so at their own expense or through the support of their agency, organization, or other affiliation.

X. Adjourn

Kevin Westall moved to adjourn the meeting, and Madelyn James seconded the motion. The move to adjourn met with the acceptance of all members present.