

Illinois Attendance Commission

Meeting Minutes

April 4, 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)
Victoria Jackson (telephone)
Madelyn James (Chicago)
Hosanna Jones (Chicago)
Elizabeth C. Malik (Chicago)
Joseph McMahon (telephone)
Melissa Mitchell (Chicago)
Harold Sweeney (telephone)
Antoinette Taylor (Springfield)
Scott Wakeley (telephone)
Crysta Weitekamp (telephone)

Not Present

Karen Hunter Anderson (represented by proxy Ashley Beeker, Springfield)
Stephanie Bernoteit
Tiffany Gholsen
Jennifer Gill
Diane Grigsby-Jackson
Heidi Grove
Alexandra Mays
Matthew Rodriguez
Diane Rutledge
Deanna Sullivan
Kevin Westall

II. Welcome and Opening Remarks

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

There were four representatives from Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) present who wanted to know when a member of their organization was going to be appointed to the Commission. Ms. Taylor advised the members of this group that they would have to wait until the public participation portion of the meeting to speak. The group was informed, however, that appointments to the Commission emanate from the governor's office.

III. Approval of Minutes from the March 10, 2016 Meeting

Harold Sweeney said the March 10 minutes did not reflect his presence on the telephone. Crysta Weitekamp indicated via email that she also had been present on the telephone. Both had joined the meeting shortly after attendance had been recorded by a substitute administrator.

The motion to approve the minutes, as amended, was made by Madelyn James and seconded by Beth Malik. There were no objections to the Commission's adoption of the minutes.

IV. Legislative and Regulatory Review

Jeff Aranowski said all the references to legislation and regulatory provisions with respect to attendance and truancy are available on the Commission's Google drive. Article 26 of the School Code is the chief citation for all attendance related terms as it deals with compulsory school attendance, defines truancy and chronic truancy and other related terms, and sets forth the responsibility of school districts to adopt absenteeism policies and truancy policies subject to the approval of the State Board of Education, among other things. It also discusses those instances of nonattendance that are exempt from the compulsory attendance regulations in the state of Illinois: confirmation classes, legal engagement in work during the school day, enrollment in private school, etc. He said the Commission should look at what is currently on the books in terms of truancy and attendance.

What is not seen in Article 26 is what it means to be in attendance at either a public or a private school. While there is an operative definition of what is meant by missing school without a valid cause, such as truancy, Mr. Aranowski said we do not, however, have a valid definition of excessive absenteeism or what constitutes an excused absence vs. an unexcused one. The regulations from the state board of education offer some specificity in guidance for districts to develop their own absenteeism and truancy policies, but by and large the responsibility lies with the districts and how they want to approach school, community, and family engagement. The Illinois Association of School Boards (Deanna Sullivan) offers a widely used school board policy template to subscribers of their services, so there are many similarities in these policies across the state.

Mr. Aranowski said all these legislative resources are available on the Commission's Google docs page. This easy access to rules and statutes ensures that Commission members have a handy compendium of what is already on the books instead of starting from scratch when they look at recommendations for legislative change. Mr. Aranowski explained that sometimes people make recommendations for legislation when all it might really take is to change a word or two in current legislation

He said we have to integrate some of the statutory and regulatory provisions around special interest groups such as the homeless, particularly those with special needs, in order to maintain their educational services such as when these might be delayed pending the outcome of some dispute around residency or enrollment. The main portion of the School Code addresses attendance and truancy but there are other situations – homelessness, special needs, English language learners, pregnant students – that have to be integrated into our broader discussions.

Ms. Taylor informed the Commission that Senator Jacqueline Collins had sponsored some bills related to education and is very involved in juvenile justice because of the number of young people who miss school and become involved with the police and the juvenile justice system. She explained further that juvenile justice is also an emphasis in the Every Child, Every Day national initiative with which the Commission should be aligned. Referring back to Mr. Aranowski's point about the needs of the homeless, Ms. Taylor asked Beth Malik of the Chicago

Coalition for the Homeless to extract some relevant information from the homelessness piece in the Every Child, Every Day national initiative to make sure we are not missing anything on that end. This subject would likely be an agenda item in June.

Victoria Jackson asked if Article 26 has language about district reporting requirements. Mr. Aranowski said that it does.

V. Attendance Works Survey Discussion

Ms. Taylor explained the survey was provided to all fifty states by the Attendance Works initiative. The survey questions can help the Commission analyze the gaps in what the state is currently doing and what needs to be done. It can provide guidance on the direction to go in and the areas in which the Commission might want to dig deeper.

Harold Sweeney asked if the survey was intended for individual school districts, and Mr. Aranowski said it was a survey of the State Educational Authority (SEA) across the country. He added that this can be a very useful tool to help Commission members see where the deficiencies are in statute or regulation or, conversely, to determine if that state has excessive regulatory and statutory provisions that are not working.

Madelyn James asked about early childhood and explained that there is an early childhood longitudinal data system, but she was not sure how it will dovetail with the state's planned K-12 longitudinal data system. Ms. James expressed her hope that when the Commission looks at programs funded through the state, that preschool programs and truancy prevention initiatives will be part of the focus due to the data around preschool attendance issues and early interventions.

Mr. Aranowski agreed that grant funded pre-kindergarten programs should be studied. Mr. Aranowski also said he understands her wish that the early childhood data be one with K-12 data, as the data is there, but the state does not currently integrate the data.

Miss James said if someone wanted to start tracking the segment of the student population that is chronically absent and determine what kinds of supports and investments are needed, it is important to know when the absenteeism started. It is essential to track patterns over time, look at preschool and initiate prevention patterns.

Harold Sweeney said that nothing in the truancy statute applies to the issue of preschool attendance.

Ms. James said the concept of truancy is not attached to preschool attendance because it is actually the parent who is truant when a child misses a certain number of school days.

Harold Sweeney wants the courts to treat nonattendance all through elementary school as a parent issue. As someone involved in anti-truancy efforts, he said when they try to get involved with families whose children are under the age of six, the mandatory age for school attendance, the parents would rather pull their children out of school than deal with truancy representatives, so they wind up actually doing them a disservice. (Note: Article 26 of the Illinois School Code mandates compulsory school attendance for children under the age of six years old if they have been registered for school).

Mr. Aranowski said this discussion reflects the dual nature of the Commission, that we should not just focus on truancy but on school attendance and keeping kids in school. He said a positive

focus on attendance will help as opposed to where we may be already losing the child through truancy.

Ms. Taylor referenced the comments made at the public hearing held at the ICEARY Conference in March when members expressed the wish that they could have an attendance focus on the early school years. They said by the time children with attendance difficulties are in third and fourth grades, the pattern is set and is hard to reset with them or their parents as it is “a done deal.” She went on to explain that the Every Child, Every Day initiative provides a community action guide to keep early learners in school

Ms. Taylor said when the legislation was being written for the Commission, the inclusion of early childhood was intentional based on the work of the truancy task force. She also stated that Illinois is the only state seriously looking at attendance through the P-12 spectrum, not just the 9-12 or K-12 lenses.

Ms. Taylor emphasized also that while on the Truancy in Chicago Public Schools Task Force, she heard from people in higher education that the chronic absenteeism trends follow students into the community colleges and universities. For that reason, Ms. Taylor welcomed the appointment of Karen Hunter Anderson of the Illinois Community College Board to the Commission since students’ attendance issues translate into a lack of success on the college levels. Some of these students have gotten into the habit of showing up when they want to show up. Ashley Becker, who was attending the meeting as the proxy for Karen Hunter Anderson, said students with spotty high school attendance records tend to think that they can skip college classes and someone will be around to hold their hand and help them catch up with what assignments they missed. Attendance and attrition are huge issues at nearly every institution in the country. These students enter college in developmental education sequences, and they are barely making it after having struggled through elementary and high schools, partly because they do not want to be there. Ms. Baker explained further that if they had irregular attendance in K-12, they obviously were not acquiring the skill sets they needed to succeed on the college level. In Illinois, 70% of the community college students have to take developmental math and only 1 in 10 of this group finish college

Melissa Mitchell, who is a member of the Illinois P-20 Council, said college and career-readiness is a priority with the Council, and the definitions they have developed have been around academic skills, nonacademic mindsets and behaviors, career readiness and career exploration, and opportunities to structure program pathways.

VI. Literature Review

A literature review from the Truancy in Chicago Public Schools Task Force was provided to the Commission. This review offers a summary of a dozen major reports, studies, and research articles that offer varied analyses of school attendance problems and strategies for solutions. Ms. Taylor asked the Commission members to read the summaries which identified key findings and recommendations, so Commission members do not have to duplicate efforts. She also asked for suggestions for additional resources that should be provided to the Commission administrator to be disseminated to the group.

Ms. James said she would look at Every Child, Every Day and see if they referenced other readings and studies with relevance to the Commission.

VII. Strategic Plan Discussion

Mr. Aranowski reminded the group the Commission is active for five years, an amount of time not usually provided to commissions, councils, and task forces. Along the way the Commission must produce an annual report every December, so planning is necessary in order to reach various short and long term goals. He said this can be approached in different ways: an annual one year plan or an intentional five year plan and several one year plans within. He cautioned that the group should not become bogged down in strategic planning, but should aim for a planning strategy that is intentional and focused but also flexible. During the March meeting, the group had discussed a short term plan and a long term plan, both of which can be revised at any time. A plan will keep the Commission focused, on time, and accountable to themselves. Mr. Aranowski asked for volunteers to strategize the planning process and asked the Commission administrator to send an email out in which goals are set for plan targets. This issue will be explored further at upcoming meetings.

VIII. Public Comment

Mr. Aranowski reminded members of the public what the protocol is for public discussion and that the Commission adheres to the terms of the Open Meetings Act. He said members of the public have the right to ask questions, make comments, or offer suggestions.

Maralda Davis, a member of the public who had attended the meeting with a delegation from Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) asked what Chairperson Taylor meant when she said “parents were a done deal.” She posed the question on behalf of another COFI representative who had to leave the meeting but wanted the question asked.

Ms. Taylor and Mr. Aranowski both asserted that they would need more context in order to respond to the question as neither could recall that particular statement being made. (A subsequent review of the recording of the meeting revealed a reference to the need to focus on our state’s youngest students to promote and maintain healthy, lifelong attendance habits because by the time children are in third and fourth grades, they and their parents are “done deals” (see page 3). In the context of that reference, it was understood that young students with a history of poor school attendance and their parents who have not emphasized regular school attendance have developed habits that are hard to break.

Veronica Mercado of COFI said that organization is looking at ways to improve attendance. She wanted to know what the Commission is doing with regard to the ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) markers and about school climate.

Mr. Aranowski said the state is in a holding pattern prior to drafting a consolidated plan for ESSA implementation (a requirement for all states). Illinois is holding a series of listening tours around the state to explain what ESSA’s directives are and gather ideas about how Illinois can achieve ESSA goals. One piece for example, is making a determination about how to meet the educational needs of the homeless. We know what the law says about homeless students, the definition of homelessness, and the requirements for providing services to these students, but how are we going to get there?

Mr. Aranowski added that anyone who is interested in updates on the planning process and listening tour can email the Commission administrator to place them on a list for release of information for public consumption.

Mr. Aranowski also explained there is a new emphasis on school climate in ESSA, and through the 5Essentials Surveys, we have a lot of data on bullying and other school climate issues such as

the degree to which students feel safe in school. Mr. Aranowski thanked the COFI contingent for bringing up the school climate issue as student perceptions predict behaviors.

The 5Essential Elements Survey is a biannual requirement for districts and is completed in the fall. It identifies effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environments, and ambitious instruction as the factors that matter most for student learning. Teacher, student, and parent responses are calculated and included with the school and district report cards on the ISBE website. Mr. Aranowski said he would check on the availability of cumulative results for the state.

Ms. Taylor stressed the importance of listening to what the students have to say, as their voices need to be heard. The 5Essential Elements Survey records the student point of view also. She said the Commission should know what they say, why some feel disenfranchised.

Scott Wakeley said 30% of students in grades 6 -12 should take part in the survey.

IX. New Business and Open Discussion

Ms. James referenced the ESSA listening tours mentioned by Dr. Tony Smith in his Weekly Message and wondered if the Attendance Commission could piggyback with the state and be present to hear about attendance-related issues. She said Northern Illinois University has a P-20 Council regional group with lots of collaborators and partners.

Commission members were informed that the dates for listening tour are on the opening page on the ISBE website.

Hosanna Jones was introduced as a new member of the Commission. She represents the Illinois Charter School Commission.

The official announcement of the Every Student, Every Day conference is out. It will be held June 8-10, 2016, in Washington, D. C. State superintendents and state directors of education have been notified.

HB 4343, the bill introduced by Representative Linda Chapa LaVia to extend the due date for the first annual report of the Illinois Attendance Commission, is out of the rules committee and should move quickly to passage.

X. Adjourn

A motion to adjourn was made by Mr. Aranowski and seconded by Melissa Mitchell. There was no one opposed. The meeting was adjourned at 11:09 a.m.