

Attendance Commission

Meeting Minutes,
June 23, 2016

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 - Springfield
Stephanie Bernoteit - Springfield
Lori Fanello - Chicago
Karen Fox - telephone
Tiffany Gholson - telephone
Victoria Jackson - telephone
Madelyn James - Chicago
Elizabeth Malik - Chicago
Matthew Rodriguez - Chicago
Diane Rutledge- telephone
Deanna Sullivan - Springfield
Harold Sweeney - Chicago
Antoinette Taylor - Chicago
Kevin Westall - telephone

Not Present

Karen Hunter Anderson- sent proxy
Christina Campos
Jennifer Gill
Diane Grigsby-Jackson
Heidi Grove
Hosanna Jones
Alexandra Mays – sent proxy
Joseph McMahon – sent proxy
Melissa Mitchell
Scott Wakeley
Crysta Weitekamp

II. Welcome and Opening Remarks

There was initially an insufficient number of attendees to constitute a quorum, so Jeff Aranowski proposed a revision to the Rules of Procedure for the Attendance Commission. He volunteered to draft a resolution for the July meeting to allow a commission member's proxy to fully represent the member at Commission meetings. In order for this resolution to pass, a quorum must be achieved at the July 28 meeting and two-thirds of the members must approve.

A quorum was achieved minutes later, and the Commission was able to move forward with the third agenda item.

Chairperson Antoinette Taylor referenced the current Illinois budget crisis and explained both sides have the best interests of the people of Illinois in mind. She was hopeful that a resolution would soon be reached.

III. Approval of Minutes from April 4, 2016 and May 6, 2016

The motion to approve the minutes from April 4 was made by Lori Fanello and seconded by Madelyn James. The minutes were then unanimously approved. Since a quorum had not been achieved at the May meeting, the minutes of that meeting did not require approval as no official business had taken place.

IV. Every Student, Every Day Conference - Debrief and Discussion

The *Every Student, Every Day (ESED) National Conference: Eliminating Chronic Absenteeism by Implementing and Strengthening Cross-Sector Systems of Support for All Students* took place June 9-10 in Washington D. C. and was attended by representatives from 39 states. The Commission was

represented at the conference by Ms. Taylor, Deanna Sullivan, and Madelyn James. Alexandra Mays was also in attendance at the conference as her agency, Healthy Schools Campaign, had a role in conference development.

Deanna Sullivan said the conference provided an enormous amount of information and expressed high praise for the U. S. Department of Education's capacity to serve as a clearinghouse for the variety of data and documents related to the multiple facets of this issue.

One important take-away from the conference was the fact that conference speakers emphasized that the measurement of absence needed to include every single day out of school, regardless of the reason, for the purposes of defining "chronic absence."

The U. S. Department of Education, in collaboration with the National Ad Council, has begun a public relations campaign to make the public aware of the importance of getting children to school every day. Ms. Sullivan also explained there were many sessions at the conference to support the engagement of parents: helping them understand the importance of attendance, listening to parents about obstacles to school attendance in the community, and developing supports/resources within the school setting and with community partners.

Communication and shared responsibility were also stressed as vehicles for change such as through an awareness campaign for local school personnel and families/communities about LEA policy changes, state regulatory changes to data systems, and/or changes in state law.

Two of the Commission's outcomes concern the need to have mechanisms for improved data systems, mechanisms for reporting data, and heightened accountability. Ms. Sullivan explained there are lots of vendors and programs to help schools gather the data, disaggregate the data, monitor and report the data, and determine trends across student groups so that school communities can effectively respond. Many vendors and schools have developed systems to allow school personnel to easily track absenteeism data on a daily/weekly basis or on a more actionable timetable. The keys to data mechanisms for the purposes of intervention on a daily or weekly basis that provide for immediate supports are reviewing daily to determine dips in attendance and viewed in the aggregate for groups like grade levels or boys/girls either weekly or monthly.

Illinois has a longitudinal data system (ILDS) adopted in 2009. The last meeting of the ILDS Governing Board was March 3, 2016 where the group discussed ILDS plan priorities, data privacy issues, and data sharing agreements.

Ms. Sullivan reminded the Commission that outcome number four calls for utilizing data to target supports on a multi-tiered basis to increase college and career readiness. She said there's no question that supports are critical to efforts to make sure chronically absent students get to school. There was much iteration of the basic recommendations of weekly meetings, organization of resources, personalized student interventions, and utilization of community resources. Across this country, there are all kinds of people doing many innovative things to provide those supports. There is no one correct approach because of the variety of challenges there are to school attendance. Conference attendees reflected on the diversity of the communities, schools, families and students involved, emphasizing that recommendations for support must be flexible to accommodate diversity in all its forms.

Ms. Sullivan added that Illinois is way ahead of other states by virtue of the fact it has established an Attendance Commission. Illinois is ahead of most states in providing statewide leadership to help districts and communities identify the best practice for their students.

In her recap of the conference, Madelyn James said she noticed a paradigm shift had occurred in the discussion of chronic absenteeism, from a view toward compliance to a focus on the diminished opportunities for children who miss school.

Conference speakers advised a focus on the root causes of chronic absenteeism through data collection, analysis, and sharing among all partners in a child's education – school leaders and teachers, families, and community stakeholders - via visual presentations, data dashboards, and graphs to build strategies and interventions to address the attendance gap.

Certain transition stages in a child's academic life trigger school attendance difficulties: preschool to kindergarten, kindergarten to first grade, and elementary or middle school to high school. Ms. James said we have to be very strategic about what those transitions look like so children do not fall through the safety net; we have to figure out ways to stay engaged with them.

Ms. James reminded everyone that there are ways to share information without violating Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) such as the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) and Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) laws. It may be difficult to share information but not impossible.

Ms. James also shared with the Commission some of the efforts of the federal government to track and support migrant student populations whose mobility puts them at high risk for chronic absence (Migrant Education Program and the Migrant Students Information System).

Other vulnerable populations who must be tracked and targeted for specific supports locally and statewide include the homeless, English language learners, and students with disabilities.

Ms. James further explained that at the conference there was discussion of the fact that among all the causes of chronic absenteeism, there are some that are beyond the control of the child. A family in distress over economic, emotional, or physical health factors may consider school less than a priority, especially when a child is very young as evidenced by a high rate of absenteeism in preschool. There have been some interesting initiatives to address health and housing issues and unmet needs with pediatricians, housing authorities, mentoring programs, homeless advocacy advocates, after/out school programs, coaches, etc.

Current theory advocates a holistic approach to solving the attendance problem in our country such as engaging the health community in identifying and supporting children's health so they can be present in school. It was suggested that schools become Medicaid providers and also hire staff to handle wraparound services such as dental and mental health since health is cited as the number one cause for early childhood absences, from pre-kindergarten to third grade.

Finally, Ms. James said there were several high level questions raised specific to data needs:

- How will chronic absence data be incorporated into accountability and support structures for ESSA?
- How will states and communities build capacity to use data and implement effective practices?
- How will states and communities sustain cross sector partnerships?

Ms. Taylor said that if health is a factor that affects a child's ability to attend school, we have to address 504 plans. If a child is on a 504 plan, the student is medically involved as there is something going on that adversely affects that student's ability to be engaged in the general education

curriculum and in the learning environment. The data for students with 504 plans was not included in the Chicago Tribune series (*An Empty Desk Epidemic*) as this data is hard to find. The Chicago Tribune reporters said they suspected that if 504 data was included the absentee rate for students with disabilities, the numbers would have been off the chart. Ms. Taylor advised we should just say students with documented disabilities because that would include both groups. If children have those health concerns that are adversely impacting school attendance, we should engage a process within our districts to see if certain students are eligible to receive services under a 504 plan which then means protections under the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. We have to make sure we identify all applicable initiatives so that districts have a lot in their arsenals to help children.

Harold Sweeney asked a question that he said might betray his cynicism because of his work in truancy prevention. He wondered if students were considered absent for medical reasons simply because their parents called them in sick or if the children were verifiably sick.

Ms. James restated her emphasis on children's medical, dental, and mental health as she said health is the number one reason for absences in early childhood. She has been working with the Early Learning Council around health-related reasons for chronic absenteeism. She said that the American Academy of Pediatrics says the number one reason children go to the emergency room is related to dental health. She said Illinois is a state with a severe dental shortage of pediatric dentistry practitioners. She said children from poverty level families suffer an exposure to bacteria that impact their physical and dental health.

Mr. Sweeney reiterated his question and reasserted his skepticism and inquired who is determining the status of the child's health, a parent or a health practitioner.

Emily Carroll, who was on hand to represent the Healthy Schools Network and has since been appointed as a member to the Commission, said the Office of Civil Rights within the U. S. Department of Education considers chronic absence to include excused absences. She said there is data that distinguishes between children who are called in sick by a parent and those who are experiencing long term health issues, and this data supports that most excused absences are for treatable illnesses with problems related to oral hygiene and asthma as the two most likely causes for absence.

Deanna Sullivan suggested that the way we should look at absences is to look at who is not in school, period. We need to be asking why children are not in school, getting to students early on before they get into the spiral. We have to look at trends and decide what needs to be discussed with parents.

Mr. Sweeney said his concern is that there are different interventions and you have to know which to use. You may have a child with a true medical condition or you may have a parent who is not parenting and simply calling his/her children in sick. It is essential to know the difference because you have to direct the interventions based on the real reason a child is not in school, you have to know which agency or agencies have to be utilized to fix the problem. He said truancy prevention efforts are being pushed down to the earliest levels of education because that's where the problem starts. When we have kids in middle or high school who have been chronically absent for years, the success rate is very minimal.

Ms. Taylor said you have to drill down the data and determine what the reasons for absence are in order to determine which resources should be used. You have to determine the pattern and the reason for the pattern. She said if we move toward a definition of attendance that includes both excused and unexcused absences, an idea that is proposed by the Department of Education and Attendance Works – everyone is encouraging states to look at a definition of attendance that incorporates both excused and unexcused.

Mr. Sweeney said the average student in his program receives six interventions which are administered repeatedly. He wondered what would constitute a health-related absence if the definition of attendance is amended to include all absences

Mr. Aranowski reminded the Commission that the state of Illinois does not have a statutory or regulatory definition for chronic absenteeism. There is one for truancy. He said we know that a lot of districts incorporate the concept of missing 5% of the last 180 school days as constituting truancy.

Ms. Sullivan said the decision about what constitutes chronic absence must be decided locally, the district has to decide what chronic absence is and the recommendation in Washington is two days a month which is significant for a student.

Mr. Sweeney said when the student gets older and has missed more than 20 percent of the school year, they can actually be removed from school for a semester.

Emily Carroll said OCR's data release was a first-look at national trends. They will be releasing more specific data in the fall of 2016. She also said one of the outcomes of the commission is to establish a working definition of chronic absenteeism. She said that is a good idea because under the new education law that is to take effect during the 2017-18 school year, the state will need to collect data on nonacademic indicators for all the schools in the state, and ISBE must choose what indicator or indicators that will be. The suggested indicator that was just released by the U. S. Department of Education is the indicator on chronic absenteeism. Ms. Carroll explained further that when it comes to the causes of absenteeism and the interventions that can be provided, there is a lot of flexibility because every district is different. She feels a common definition wouldn't necessarily be prescriptive because of the differences among districts.

Ms. Taylor said the commission was going to resume its legislative review in the July meeting which will enable the commission to concur on a definition of chronic absence.

V. IAC Member Self-assessment

Ms. Taylor would like all commission members to respond to the Attendance Works' survey that was distributed prior to the Every Student, Every Day Conference to all conference attendees. She said it will be interesting for all Commission members to see the scope of the U. S. Department of Education's view of the attendance issue and to see the responses of commission members and their determination of priorities. The survey is expansive and offers queries on topics that might not be familiar to everyone. Ms. Taylor explained that it was apparent at the conference that the teams from the many states (39) in attendance all experienced a degree of surprise when they found they could not answer some of the survey questions. This survey could provide a guiding light to efforts to meet the strategic outcomes of the commission.

VI. Office of Civil Rights Data Release

Ms. Taylor asked for any reactions commission members may have had to the release of data by the U. S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights that reflected gaps in key areas affecting

education equity and opportunity for students, including in matters of attendance. Ms. James said she was struck by the disproportionate number of students of color and students with disabilities who are absent from school. In reference to Ms. James' earlier statements about student health, she said there is a disproportionate number of African-American children who are admitted to hospital emergency rooms across the state for asthma-related problems. She said good physical health in early childhood is very important to overall development and cognitive capacity. We have to examine why there is disproportionality with regard to physical health and to achievement levels.

Deanna Sullivan said there was much discussion at the conference about the partnerships that should be forged between schools and communities in order to remediate situations that lead to reduced school attendance. Mackenzie Montgomery, proxy for Karen Hunter Anderson of the Illinois Community College Board, informed the Commission that she had previously worked for a Head Start program. Part of their model included a Family Partnership Specialist (caseworker/case manager) whose job involved going into the homes and instructing parents on oral hygiene. She wondered if school districts have the capacity to provide such instruction to parents to reduce the incidents of early-onset tooth decay and matters related to personal health.

Ms. Taylor said the Head Start framework has been in place for a very long time and there is a lot to be learned from that model and incorporated into pilot programs on other levels across the state. She added that early childhood interventions are a priority of State Representative Linda Chapa LaVia.

Ms. James cautioned that it is not productive to blame families for their children's absences from school. She explained it was not a serendipitous decision on the part of the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Justice to join forces to solve the chronic absence problem in our country as they seek to provide a seamless array of solutions for the families whose children are missing from school.

Stephanie Bernoteit's agency (Illinois Board of Higher Education) works closely with the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development, and there are a number of initiatives underway that speak very much to the kinds of things considered here, ways to engage multiple partners within communities to both find children and families who might not typically seek out early learning and care services and then provide a robust array of wrap-around supports around the kind of issues we are talking about. She can point the commission to applicable models of such interventions and to current research through the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development.

Ms. Bernoteit's offer of assistance prompted Ms. Taylor to explain that since the commission includes representatives from all education sectors in Illinois, from prekindergarten to college, the Commission is looked upon very favorably by the U. S. Department of Education.

VII. Public Comment

Patricia Graczyk, from the University of Illinois at Chicago, presented at the Every Student Every Day Conference on a multi-tiered approach she knows Illinois is considering. A common theme at the conference was shared responsibility because schools cannot solve the problem alone. She appreciates the fact the Commission includes people from many different sectors in Illinois, so the idea of shared responsibility is apparent in the identification of which agencies, organizations, and nonprofits were selected.

VIII. New Business and Open Discussion August Meeting Cancelled

Ms. Taylor informed the Commission that the August meeting will not take place as many members indicated their inability to be present that month. Members will be asked to respond to the Attendance Works survey during that time period.

Legislative Updates

With regard to legislative updates, Ms. Taylor said HB 4343, sponsored by State Representative Linda Chapa LaVia passed both Houses and was sent to Governor Rauner's desk on June 16. This bill extended the date for submission of the first annual report of the Commission to March 15, 2016, a date the Commission met.

New bills concerning the Illinois Attendance Commission:

- SB100 (passed) concerns student discipline policies
- HB306 (did not pass) opting out of testing – Senator Manar wants the Commission to look at this bill and see if there are any implications for students insofar as attendance is concerned.
- HB 3190 (passed the House and is in the Senate) concerns pupil residency
- HB4606 passed both houses (this session's reworking of 3190 and has passed both houses) concerns pupil residency and funding is one of the iterations of school funding reform

Ms. Sullivan said if the commission is going to look into how attendance factors into the GSA, we need to look into the context of all those iterations of the original funding bill: one is an evidence-based funding model, one is the Manar bill, and another is a blend of those components. The Speaker of the House is forming a task force and the Senate President is as well for school funding reform.

Rules of Procedure Revision

Other new business included the proposition by Mr. Aranowski to repeal Section 4.4 of the Rules of Procedure in its entirety and replace it with the following text:

Attendance by proxy shall be permitted. Proxies representing commission members may vote and their attendance shall be counted for purposes of a quorum.

This will need to be its own agenda in July and requires a two-thirds vote to pass via a roll call vote.

Spotlight on Illinois

Ms. Taylor said there was great interest in the fact Illinois already has in place the initiatives suggested by conference organizers.

- Bringing together a cross-section of stakeholders – We have a standing Attendance Commission.
- Looking at multi-tiered systems of support to address chronic absence and truancy - We have the Illinois MTSS-Network which provides a holistic approach to interventions to guide greater student success in all problem areas.
Emphasizing early childhood focus - There is an early childhood steering committee working with the IL MTSS-Network.

The fact that Illinois has initiated efforts to remedy chronic absence ahead of other states prompted a representative of the acting Secretary of Education to request a meeting with Ms. Taylor, so on

June 14, she and Representative Chapa LaVia met with one of the Secretary's aides by phone. This person commented on the potential that is there with an attendance commission already created and at work and asked for specifics around the language that was used to draft the legislation and requested a copy of the commission's first annual report which was submitted to the General Assembly in March.

She explained further that Illinois Representative Bob Pritchard is in frequent contact with her about the Commission and communicates the Commission's work to his caucus.

IX. Ethics and OMA Update and Deadline

Members were reminded of the necessity to complete their Open Meetings Act training and to submit a certificate for that training to the Commission administrator. Members were additionally advised that everyone had to complete the ethics training on an annual basis and several members had not submitted certificates indicating they had completed the 2016 training.

X. Adjourn

Ms. James moved to adjourn the meeting and this motion was seconded by Beth Malik at 11:37 a.m.