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# BULLETIN

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# Fifty Ways To Improve Attendance

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Although absenteeism is an important problem in secondary schools, improving student attendance is not a difficult task. Fifty basic steps to get administrators and teachers on the right track are offered.

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BY DAN MILLER

**A**LTHOUGH TRUANCY and absenteeism continue to plague secondary schools throughout the nation, educators can successfully raise average daily attendance rates using the following guidelines:

1. *Create an attendance philosophy for the school.* This philosophy should be publicized in the student/parent handbook, in assemblies, and on plaques or posters in classrooms.

A typical statement of philosophy might read: "Our school is committed to the philosophy that every student should attend every class every day. Regular attendance and promptness are expected in all classes and are essential for success in school. Learning to par-

ticipate in group discussions, developing an appreciation for the views and abilities of other students, and forming the habit of regular attendance are legitimate objectives for any course, and learning that is lost due to absence can never be adequately replaced."

2. *Create a structured attendance policy.* The policy, which is communicated to everyone in the school, describes the responsibilities for students, parents, teachers, administrators, counselors, and attendance secretaries.

The school's attendance policy should outline the steps to be taken if truancy continues, such as administrative and counselor contact with the students and parents, stiffer penalties, involvement by a truant officer, and court referral.

3. *Hold students accountable.* Hold

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DAN MILLER is principal at Thomas Jefferson Jr. High School, Waukegan, Ill.



students accountable for their unexcused absences by ensuring that they make up time missed in class through detention, in-school suspension, or Saturday school.

4. *Create a make-up work policy.* Create a consistent policy that allows students with legitimate absences two days to make up their missed schoolwork for every day absent. Truants would have one day to make up work for every day absent.

5. *Get the word out.* Make improved student attendance a schoolwide goal and hammer home the importance of promptness and regular school attendance at every opportunity.

Set forth a detailed plan of attack at the opening faculty meeting. In classrooms or assemblies discuss the seriousness of the issue and the responsibilities of students. Make sure parents are aware of the attendance problem and utilize Open House and the parent newsletter to discuss their responsibilities as parents.

6. *Schedule attendance assemblies.* The principal, the truant officer, and a juvenile officer can discuss attendance issues and answer questions about attendance and truancy.

7. *Contact truants personally.* Divide the responsibility for regularly contacting truant students among administrators, counselors, homeroom teachers, and social workers so that each educator has four or five truants to keep tabs on.

Each educator should contact the truants periodically by note, letter, phone call, conference, or quick hallway discussion to let them know that someone cares about them and that someone is watching.

8. *Involve truants in cocurricular activities.* A coach or activity sponsor who takes the time to talk with a truant may interest the student in a cocurricular activity. Involvement in an activity the student enjoys would increase the student's interest in school and, ultimately, improve the student's school attendance.

9. *Call parents of truants.* Make sure the parent of each student who is absent without an acceptable excuse is contacted daily by phone. Establish a policy that holds parents responsible for phoning the school if their child is absent; if that phone call is not received, call the parent to inform them of the absence.

Although phone calls may not be effective in cases of chronic truancy, they will ensure enough parent support and pressure on students to increase overall school attendance and make the effort worthwhile.

Person-to-person contact is preferable, but computer-driven electronic callers are also effective in maintaining parent contact. If it is impossible to make phone contact about a specific absence, send a letter or postcard.

10. *Mail letters from the principal.* The principal should mail letters to parents at successive stages of a student's truancy to emphasize the importance of regular attendance, to review the school's attendance policy, and to review possible penalties if the truancy continues.

11. *Schedule parent conferences.* Mandatory parent conferences should be scheduled first with the counselor, then with the dean, and then with the principal at successive stages of a student's truancy.

12. *Consider alternative schedules.* Analyze truants' schedules to see if class changes would resolve their conflicts. Beyond that, perhaps a change to an alternative program, a work/study program, or a work program during the day combined with night school would improve the student's attendance and achievement.

13. *Draft attendance contracts.* Through the counselor or dean, create attendance contracts with truants. Contracts should cover a specified span of time, spell out responsibilities and expectations for the truant and the person enforcing the contract, provide for penalties and rewards, and be signed by all parties involved.

As part of the contract, it is also helpful for students to graph their attendance at least two weeks prior to counselor intervention and at least two weeks subsequent to intervention so that they see a visual representation of their daily progress.

14. *Involve truants in group counseling.* Through the guidance department, establish group counseling sessions for chronic truants. Often including truants in groups that are not composed exclusively of students with attendance problems provides them with positive reinforcement and encouragement from their peers.

Community organizations and family service agencies might also be willing to establish group counseling in the school setting.

15. *Refer truants to the social worker.* Involving the social worker with truants and their families can often be the key to breaking a truant's habit of absenteeism.

16. *Counsel parents.* The counselor or

social worker can hold parenting sessions to help parents of truants learn coping skills and develop positive feelings about the school.

17. *Test chronic truants.* Examine the records of chronic truants to determine if a possible cause of the student's absenteeism is frustration with schoolwork, emotional problems, or learning problems. If so, conduct a case study evaluation to determine if the student qualifies for any special services.

18. *Involve the truant officer.* Do not hesitate to involve the truant officer in home visits, parent conferences, counseling sessions, school assemblies, and in the filing of court petitions.

19. *Visit the home.* Administrators and counselors should visit the homes of chronic truants to talk with their parents. Taking the school nurse on these visits to validate the illness of chronic truants is also effective.

20. *Implement police sweeps.* Enlist the cooperation of the police department to pick up and deliver to school truants they find on the streets during school hours.

21. *Offer help.* Provide the parents of chronic truants with the names and addresses of those community service and mental health agencies that offer family and youth counseling services.

22. *Involve local agencies.* Enlist whatever help you can from local agencies such as charity or family services or the housing authority. In urban areas housing authorities are usually willing to talk with families of truants because those children often cause problems in the housing developments when they are absent from school.



23. *Notify juvenile authorities.* Maintain a dialog with juvenile authorities about the attendance of those students involved in the juvenile probation system. The probation officer will provide additional support for good school attendance.

24. *Refer parents to court.* File court petitions against parents who deliberately defy mandatory school attendance laws. It is important, however, to contact the state's attorney and to have his or her support before appearing in court.

If your community court system does not prosecute violators of the mandatory attendance laws, work with local government officials to create local ordinances governing student truancy and parental noncompliance.

25. *Refer parents to the department of children and family services.* On the basis of educational neglect, refer parents who violate the mandatory school attendance laws to the department of children and family services or other agencies that investigate child abuse and neglect.

26. *Develop a public relations packet.* Develop a public relations packet that includes information and articles describing the attendance problem in an effort to inform parent groups and community leaders and to gain their support in addressing the problem.

27. *Enlist the help of the local media.* Work with the local media to feature the truancy problem and focus community attention on the problem.

28. *Provide incentives for good attendance.* Create a schoolwide incentive program that rewards students for such

things as good behavior, achievement, school service, and good attendance.

One type of reward is a certificate with a detachable bottom portion that can be signed by parents, cut off, and deposited in a box for weekly drawings. Winners receive prizes such as school supplies, discount coupons, paperback books, and free movies.

At the end of each month, each student with perfect attendance can be rewarded with a certificate.

29. *Conduct attendance competitions.* Average daily attendance rates can be calculated at the end of each month, and the homerooms with the highest attendance rate or the most improved attendance rate are rewarded with free ice cream, certificates, discount coupons, a movie party, or other such incentives.

30. *Provide feedback to homerooms.* As a follow-up to the attendance competition among homerooms, provide continual feedback in the form of statistics or graphs to show a homeroom's attendance progress in relation to the other homerooms in the school. The homeroom teacher should follow through with pep talks, counseling, and encouragement to improve the homeroom's attendance.

31. *Reward good attendance.* Be generous in rewarding and praising good attendance at awards assemblies. Attendance certificates, pins, charms, and attendance patches that can be sewn on letter jackets and sweaters are popular.

32. *Publicize good attendance.* Publish the names of students with perfect attendance in the newspapers.

33. *Display attendance posters.* To keep the attendance issue before the stu-

dents, display colorful posters related to good school attendance and to the importance of education.

34. *Praise parents.* Periodically send letters to the parents of students with exemplary school attendance, praising the efforts of both the students and the parents.

35. *Recognize teachers.* Recognize teachers who have fostered exemplary attendance in their homerooms or classes by praising them in the faculty bulletin, parent newsletter, faculty meetings, and awards assemblies.

### **Especially for Teachers**

Teachers are the key to the success of any school program. By following through on the techniques listed below classroom teachers can make a significant contribution to the improvement of student attendance.

36. *Set an example.* Set an example for students by attending school every day and reporting to classes on time. Your emphasis on the importance of good school attendance will be supported by your own actions.

37. *Maintain accurate records.* Keep accurate attendance records so that when the topic is brought up in parent conferences, court referrals, or other attendance processes, there is no question about the student's attendance.

38. *Follow attendance procedures.* Closely follow all attendance procedures so that students are faced with consistent attendance rules and procedures as they move from class to class. Be strict and consistent in enforcing the school's attendance policies.

39. *Emphasize attendance.* Insist that students attend class daily and report to class on time.

40. *Reinforce good attendance.* Reinforce good attendance in all contacts with parents—open house, progress reports, letters, conferences, and phone calls.

41. *Phone parents.* Phone parents of repeated absentees and discuss the importance of work missed and the need to make up the work promptly.

42. *Maintain a friendly personality.* Be friendly as you greet students at the classroom door and maintain a positive working relationship with students to ensure that they will want to come to your class.

43. *Create a pleasant environment.* Keep the classroom neat and clean and decorate the room with bulletin boards and posters so the classroom provides a pleasant environment in which to work.

44. *Improve punctuality.* Improve punctuality by providing a task for students to do when they first get to class. Start class when the bell rings to demonstrate the importance of attending on time.

45. *Make class special.* Use good classroom management techniques and effective teaching techniques. Use a variety of teaching methods and make every effort to make class special. Strive to make each class an experience students can't afford to miss.

46. *Conduct special lessons.* Conduct special projects or particularly interesting assignments on Mondays and Fridays when absenteeism tends to be the highest.



47. *Create a classroom reward system.* Provide incentives and periodic rewards for students with perfect class attendance.

48. *Give impromptu quizzes.* Give impromptu quizzes so that students who are interested in their grades and schoolwork will be reluctant to skip class for fear of missing an important quiz.

49. *Design difficult make-up tests.* Design a more difficult make-up test for students who are absent on test days to encourage all students to be present and take tests the first time around.

Many students procrastinate and feel they can do better on a test if they have more time to prepare. Others believe they can do better if they have time to discuss the test with a friend who has already taken it. An alternative exam for absentees that tests the same material and skills but contains more questions or is in essay form would discourage ab-

senteeism. Tell students that make-up tests will require more work from them.

50. *Consider student capabilities.* Avoid frustrating students by ensuring through careful planning or individualization that students are studying material they can understand. If it's impossible to help the student learn in the regular classroom setting, refer that student for special services.

Although these procedures require considerable time and effort, school administrators should commit themselves to doing everything possible to ensure their students' regular attendance.

Caring teachers, personal counseling, innovative instructional materials, and effective teaching techniques have little impact on students who are not in school to take advantage of them. By making sure students attend school consistently, we greatly increase the probability they will learn.

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## State Finances Point to Trouble

A recent report by the National Governor's Association indicates that 37 states anticipate less than 7.1 percent growth in total state revenues, which is troubling news for the nation's schools.

Federal budget cuts and collapsing energy and farm prices, and a tax revolt at the national level are making school financial problems different than those in different years, according to NEA President Mary Hatwood Futrell.

Futrell notes that according to current estimates, 32 states will fail to match this year's 7.1 percent national average increase in education revenues.

"As more pressure to fund education shifts to the state, we are heartened that education has been listed as the top budget priority by governors in 35 states," she says. "But, unfortunately, the data show that despite this high priority interest, many governors will be unable to deliver."