

Be There: Student Attendance and Achievement



A Discussion Paper

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INTRODUCTION



Student attendance and learning

Nova Scotia's Action Plan for Education is designed to help improve results for students, especially in math and literacy, and to better prepare them to lead productive lives in a changing world.

Those goals are best supported when students regularly attend school.

Research shows that the quality of teaching is the main influence on student learning in the world's top performing schools. Students cannot learn from their teacher if they do not come to class.

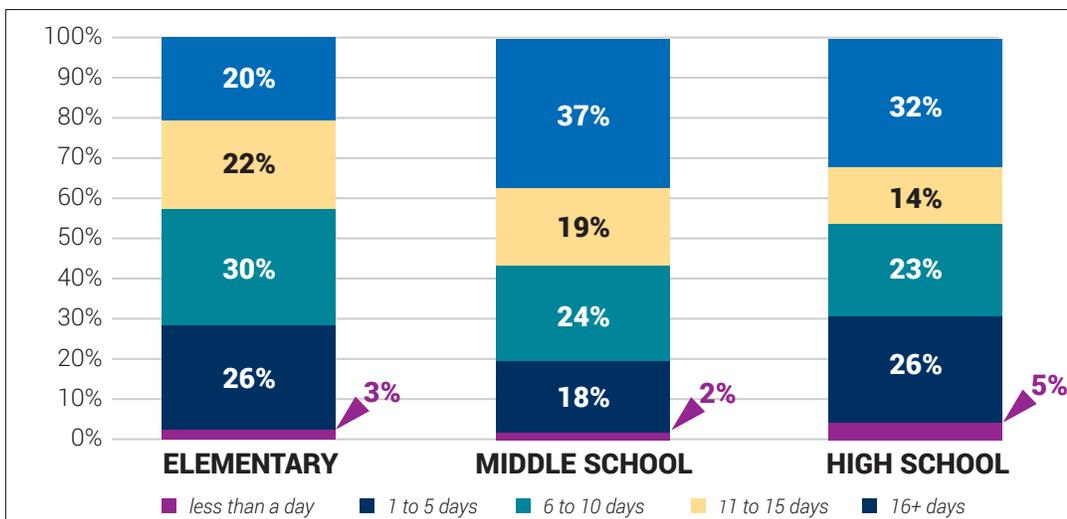
Expecting regular attendance in school also helps prepare young people for expectations in the workplace – to be at work on time every day unless there is a legitimate excuse for absence.

When in school, students develop skills in teamwork, relationship building, and collaborative problem-solving.

As well, students make friends and participate in activities in school that help them develop socially.

Despite these benefits, 28 per cent of all students missed 16 or more days of school last year. Within each grade level, 20 per cent of elementary, 37 per cent of middle school, and 32 per cent of high school students missed 16 or more days.

2014-15 STUDENT ABSENCES (% of students within each day range by grade level)



What we have learned

More than 19,000 Nova Scotians helped shape the Education Action Plan, sharing comments on a range of issues, including attendance and accountability:

- ▶ The importance of regular attendance must be emphasized with students and their families, beginning in elementary school;
- ▶ If attendance issues aren't addressed, students fall behind and become less and less interested and engaged in learning and in school;
- ▶ Older students must share accountability for their learning, including accountability for attending school;
- ▶ If students don't understand the importance of attending school, this behaviour can continue in the workplace; and
- ▶ Incentives for attending school, and clear consequences for not doing so, are needed.

The Minister's Advisory Committee on Student Issues discussed attendance with Education and Early Childhood Development Minister Karen Casey. Together with the issues described above, technology was a part of that discussion. Because students can access class work and homework online, some think that it is okay to skip class. However, they miss out on the other benefits such as learning to work in teams and being with friends. Further, when teachers are required to prepare take-home packages or to help students catch up in other ways, it takes their time away from other students.

Teachers are concerned about the impact of poor attendance on student achievement.

As well, some families are struggling to meet their responsibility for getting young children to school every day and on time.

Actions under way

Keeping students interested and engaged in school is a priority in the Education Action Plan. Two of the four pillars for change are focused on an innovative curriculum and inclusive school environments, both with direct links to student engagement. Actions include:

- ▶ prevention and early intervention programs to help students with behavioural issues;
- ▶ more SchoolsPlus sites, working with families and bringing more programs and services into schools;
- ▶ focus on individual student needs;
- ▶ flexible programming choices and options, including opportunities for academic enrichment;
- ▶ more hands-on, community-based, career-related programming; and
- ▶ cultural awareness and equity.

Work on student engagement must continue. Research indicates that despite individual, family, and community factors that contribute to non-attendance, students will attend a school that is welcoming, supportive, and academically stimulating. This, in turn, will contribute to better student attendance and achievement.

Discussion paper purpose

The purpose of this paper is to ask Nova Scotians for ideas, beyond what are in the Education Action Plan, on how to increase student attendance. Responses will be used to help develop a provincial student attendance policy.

The policy will set clear, consistent expectations regarding student attendance. At the same time, the policy will recognize and respect the professional judgment, knowledge, and experience of teachers.

Finally, the Education Action Plan encourages more hands-on, experiential learning, inside and outside the classroom (e.g., co-op, online). The attendance policy will set expectations for a student's full and regular participation in learning wherever it occurs, as defined by the teacher and public school program.

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES



Four fundamental principles are proposed to guide the development of a provincial attendance policy:

- 1)** Student Success and Achievement: The policy's primary goal will be to support greater student success and achievement.
- 2)** Shared Responsibility: Everyone has a role to play and interest in improving attendance.
- 3)** Flexibility: Every student brings to school a different set of circumstances, from their individual learning abilities and interests, to their responsibilities and realities at home. Teachers and principals should be able to use their professional judgment, working with families and others, to respond in ways that have the best chance of supporting the student.
- 4)** Equity and Fairness: The policy must be applied fairly and equitably, in ways that do not cause students who need support to fall further behind.

WHY STUDENTS MISS SCHOOL



The reasons students miss school can be very different, requiring different and sometimes complex responses. The reasons are also different in elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Illness is a common reason. Schools consider illness, attending medical appointments, or receiving treatment to be 'excused' absences.

We also know from research that poverty and the factors related to it are correlated with low attendance, starting in the early elementary years.

What if students are being bullied or harassed? What if they don't feel safe?

What if students have family obligations, for example, a child of their own or a need to help out at home? What if they have the opportunity, or need, to work?

What about family vacations?

Students are sometimes absent because they are involved with sports or leadership activities outside of their school. How do we balance the benefits of students being in class with educational benefits of opportunities which happen outside of the classroom?

If students are frequently late, should that be addressed within an attendance policy?

Arriving 10 minutes late daily adds up to missing three hours of class time each month.

The Impact of Arriving Late:

At Riverside Elementary, within the Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board, teachers are working hard to help parents understand what happens in class at the beginning of the day. Guided small group reading instruction happens at this time, and this is something that students who arrive late miss. The school also adjusted the bell times, from 8:30 a.m. to 8:20 a.m. to give students 10 more minutes to get ready for class, with teaching starting promptly at 8:30.

RESEARCH AND OUR OWN EXPERIENCE



In our schools

Schools are doing exceptional work to support students, working with families and communities to develop approaches that reflect the complexity of why students are absent.

For example, anxiety often causes absenteeism. Schools like Aldershot Elementary in the Annapolis Valley are working with parents, community partners, and students themselves to help address such anxieties and to encourage students to come to school. A team consisting of an outreach worker, guidance and resource, the principal and teachers, a mental health clinician, community support worker, and pediatrician are available, depending on the need. Parents are given information on what they can do at home to help. Teachers and others in the school work to ensure that students feel safe, valued, and accepted. A mental health assessment and intervention are available at the school and in the home.

Working together to make a difference

Schools, families, and community partners (Community Services, mental health professionals, police, etc.) are working together within the South Shore Regional School Board to improve student attendance. Data shows that attendance issues in middle school can be tracked back to attendance issues in elementary. As a result, the board is testing a multi-pronged, phased approach at two elementary schools, with SchoolsPlus, guidance, and student support staff playing key roles.

The work starts by clearly communicating with parents, staff, students, and the community that attending school is important to increase achievement. Schools had a kick-off event, and communication continues in various forms throughout the year.

Teachers are also actively involved, reaching out to students and families. The student support worker focuses on students who are absent most often. They work to understand the reasons for the absences and to develop an individual response tied to the needs of the individual student.

A staff member may connect parents with parenting support groups, or connect a student with extra tutoring. In some cases, a staff member comes to the home to help get the student to school. The work needs to be evaluated, but reaction to date from school staff and families is positive, as are the results for students.

Work in other schools includes:

- ▶ intervening early with students that have attendance issues;
- ▶ building relationships and communicating regularly with families;
- ▶ creating a student mentor program to help other students struggling with attendance;
- ▶ working with other community partners to identify the underlying reasons for poor attendance and to provide support;
- ▶ engaging students in conversations about attendance;
- ▶ focusing on transition years for students (primary, and moving into middle and high school); and
- ▶ creating a reward program for students who improve their attendance.

Working Committee on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate

The 2009 Working Committee on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate recommended a pilot project, tried in high schools in five school boards, beginning in 2011. The pilot project gave principals and teachers a range of responses that intensified as the number of absences increased.

The first step was to contact the parent or guardian, and that contact increased as absences increased. Eventually, if a student missed 20 per cent of their classes, and every other step had been tried, the student could lose credit for the course.

Results of the attendance pilot showed that increased, direct communication between the school and home improved attendance overall. Data collection methods did not allow for reliable evaluation of the impact a student losing a credit has on improving student attendance.

Research, experience elsewhere

Recent research across the United States, supported by the Attendance Works network, identifies a range of strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism. These include recognizing good and improved attendance, engaging students and parents, providing personalized early outreach, monitoring attendance data and practice, and developing programs and services to respond.

For example, studies indicate that schools with success in improving attendance have well-established relationships with parents, guardians, social workers, and others in the community.

Based on these experiences and research, what role can everyone play in improving attendance?

A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY



The Education Act requires Nova Scotians between the ages of five and sixteen to attend school.

Improving student attendance is a shared responsibility. Efforts must begin in elementary or attendance problems are likely to continue.

Parents, guardians, students

The attitudes of parents and family toward attendance, and school overall, can play a major role in student attendance. Parents and guardians are accountable for ensuring their children regularly attend school. If parents and students are facing challenges, supports should be available.

Members of the Minister's Advisory Committee on Student Issues said students can also help other students, through student councils or clubs.

Students also said parents and guardians have real-time access to attendance data through PowerSchool, the student information system now used in all schools. This gives them more information to meet their responsibility in ensuring their son or daughter is in school.

Teachers, principals, school staff

Teachers are often expected to help students catch up on their work when the students are absent. If help to catch up is not provided, students may fall further behind which could lead to more absences, and lower student achievement. At the same time, helping students without an acceptable reason takes a teacher's time away from other classroom responsibilities and other students.

Is this a reasonable expectation if the student is absent without an acceptable excuse?

Who from the school should be responsible for contacting and increasing communications with parents or guardians?

Who should be responsible for monitoring the policy, to ensure it is applied fairly and equitably, and in ways that do not cause students who need support to fall further behind?

School boards, government, community partners

School boards and schools, supported by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, are responsible for creating schools and classrooms where students feel welcome, safe, and included.

Beyond their responsibility for creating welcoming, inclusive schools, what can school boards do to increase student attendance?

What role should school boards play to ensure an attendance policy is applied fairly and equitably?

SchoolsPlus teams (representing a variety of government departments and community agencies) are also working on attendance. What can government departments (e.g., Education and Early Childhood Development, Health, and Community Services) do to support these and other efforts?

The Education Act requires school boards to have attendance committees.

Across the province, the membership of attendance committees varies. In some boards, elected board members sit on the committee, while no elected members participate on the committee in other boards.

The role and function of attendance committees are also different, in some cases, duplicating responsibilities held by the principal or teacher. For example, some committees may review a recommendation to suspend a student due to significant absences, while others send a formal letter to parents outlining the consequences of absenteeism and steps to recover a credit that may be lost.

SUPPORTS, INCENTIVES, CONSEQUENCES

Students miss school for different and sometimes complex reasons, and the reasons can differ as students progress through school. If schools have a range of ways to respond, including supports, incentives, and consequences, they can tailor their response to what will get the best results, based on the individual circumstance.

The attendance policy's primary goal is to support greater student success and achievement. A second principle is to apply the policy in ways that do not cause students who need support to fall further behind.

Supports

In the early grades, children rely on their parents to get them to school on time. If the family is struggling, support for the family can have the greatest benefit in getting the student to school. That can range from arranging to get the child to school, to parenting groups, to breakfast programs. In some cases, other community groups may be able to help.

In later grades, some students do not attend school because the course is too hard, or not challenging enough. Arranging tutoring or finding ways to challenge the student differently may get the student back to school.

Pathways to Education, Spryfield, HRM

Pathways to Education is a community-based program, supporting youth education and helping students reach high school graduation. The program includes tutoring, leadership development and mentoring, social activities, financial support (e.g., free bus tickets, scholarships), and student-parent support workers who help connect teens, parents, school administration, teachers, and community agencies. It also makes a big difference in school attendance. Last year 73 per cent of the Grade 12 students who had participated in the Pathways project since Grade 9, had excellent attendance (i.e., they missed fewer than 5 per cent of their classes). This was a significant improvement over their attendance in Grade 9 and more than 20 per cent higher than their Grade 12 peers who did not participate in Pathways.

Incentives

Some schools use incentives to improve attendance, including student recognition, class rewards, and exam exemptions when grades and attendance are high.

Consequences

As part of the pilot project, described on page 7, principals could ultimately decide not to grant a course credit if the student missed 20 per cent of their classes in that course.

On the other hand, some people say such a consequence is not appropriate if students can pass the tests and complete assignments without attending class.

Regardless, they still missed the other benefits of attending school (working in a team, socializing, etc.).

Some schools use other consequences, such as in-school suspensions or loss of privileges (e.g., participating on a sports team).

A 2015 study showed that a compulsory attendance policy had a positive impact on grades but mainly for high achievers. Other studies found that consequences associated with absences were most likely to be applied to students already failing or likely to drop out.

NEXT STEPS



Thank you for taking the time to review this discussion paper.

An online survey is available at www.ednet.ns.ca/attendance to gather feedback that will assist in the development of a provincial student attendance policy.

Any other feedback may be sent to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development:

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