

Student Attendance and Engagement Policy

Education and Early Childhood Development

1 Introduction

Students are expected to be in school, every day and on time. Regularly attending school helps students learn and problem-solve in teams, as well as develop a sense of responsibility and reliability.

The province is committed to improving student achievement and career readiness of all students. The value of time with teachers in the classroom, and how that contributes to a student's learning, must be continually emphasized.

The objective of Nova Scotia's student attendance policy is to set clear, consistent expectations, supports, and accountability for regular and punctual student attendance at all grade levels.

2 Guiding Principles

Student Success and Achievement

Regular attendance at school supports greater student success and achievement.

Equity and Fairness

Application of this policy will not punish or marginalise students for circumstances beyond their control. Students who are most vulnerable will receive supports, based on the student's individual needs. This will not be left to teachers alone, and is a shared responsibility.

Shared Responsibility

Students, parents/guardians, school boards, and community partners must work with school community members in meeting a clear expectation: students need to be in school. Schools will work with students and families to build positive relationships and promote regular, ongoing communication. Partners in health, justice, and community services must meet the non-educational needs of students and families that are affecting their ability to attend school.

Flexibility

Teachers and principals will use their professional judgment to determine when there may be extenuating circumstances affecting a student's attendance. In these cases, the school will work with the student and/or their family to respond with the appropriate incentives and supports, and/or to develop accountability mechanisms that recognize the student's unique situation.

3 Monitoring Attendance

All students must attend school as required by the *Education Act*.

3.1 Recording Attendance

Recording attendance provides teachers with the opportunity to identify students who are at-risk of developing an issue with their attendance. Schools will develop a standard process for monitoring attendance and outlining when to contact home.

- (a) **Grades primary to 9:** the classroom teacher will record student attendance on a daily basis, in accordance with school practice, and will work with the office to note any student absences that may occur throughout the day.
- (b) **Grades 10 to 12:** the teacher for each class/course will record student attendance, with the information entered into PowerSchool by the end of the school day.

3.2 Explaining Absences

All absences from school must be explained in a written note, email, or phone call from the student's parents/guardians, as per the school communication procedure.

3.3 Excused Absences

- (a) An excused absence is when a student's absence is unavoidable, as in the case of illness/injury or other rare circumstances (e.g., bereavement, observances for religious holidays, significant cultural events).
- (b) An excused absence also occurs when a student is absent from class for reasons that are directly related to that student's learning, such as being in the office with Student Services, participating on a school-authorized field trip, school sanctioned extra-curricular activities, or participating in other learning related activities or placements, such as a co-op.
- (c) Medical appointments should be arranged outside of school hours. When this is not possible, an explanation must be included in the communication from the student's parents/guardians and will be marked as an excused absence, if appropriate.

3.4 Unexcused Absences

- (a) An unexcused absence is:
 - any absence that occurs without notification by the parent
 - in school but not in class
 - vacation outside of school holidays
 - participating in activities not authorized or organized by the school (e.g., external sporting event).

- (b) Students may face circumstances that prevent them from coming to school. Communication between the home and school is necessary to determine the reason for the absence. School administrators, in consultation with teachers, can use discretion in recording an absence as a special circumstance.

3.5 Late Arrivals

All students are expected to be present and prepared for the beginning of class. A student arriving to class at any point beyond the scheduled start time is considered late.

- (a) **Elementary, Junior, and Senior High grade levels:** students arriving late to school will report to the office to have their arrival recorded.

3.6 Make-Up Work Packages

Following a student's absence, upon request from the principal, a teacher will provide a record of lessons taught as well as any materials the teacher would ordinarily prepare for the student's class. Teachers are not required to provide materials beyond those ordinarily prepared for the student's class and are not required to provide these materials prior to their release to the class, or revisit lessons covered while the student was out of class.

4 Addressing Student Absences and Chronic Lateness

Student absenteeism and chronic lateness can be complex issues, requiring a staged and multi-faceted response. Responses will vary based on the age, grade and development of the student, the professional judgment of teachers and principals, and the individual circumstances of the student.

It is important to address attendance issues as soon as possible. An increased frequency of missing class (e.g., 10-15 per cent of time missed), or emerging patterns (e.g., chronic lateness, absent every Monday, always absent for a specific class, leaving after lunch, etc.) are some of the indicators that a student may need support to improve their attendance.

4.1 Staged Approach to Absences and Chronic Lateness

The approach to addressing student absences and chronic lateness will be provided in a progressive manner as outlined below, with the goal to provide a continuum of support. A strong focus on prevention strategies that target the entire student population will lead to fewer issues in the future (diagram provided in Appendix B).

4.1.1 Universal/Prevention Strategies will focus on promoting regular attendance for all students, through efforts that may include:

- clear communication of expectations to students and their families

- a public awareness campaign with materials emphasizing the importance of regular attendance and the value of being in school
- a school-wide incentive plan (see Appendix C)
- initiatives that focus on creating a safe and supportive school environment
- monitoring and analyzing board-wide student attendance rates and targeting resources to schools with the highest absentee rates, through the school board's existing Attendance Committee

4.1.2 Increasing Connections will be made when there are any unexcused absences or when the frequency of total absences or chronic lateness has reached 10 per cent of class time. This can include

- increasing communication between school and the student/home (e.g., email, phone call, letter, including those generated by PowerSchool)
- providing mentorship opportunities (staff-to-student, peer-to-peer)
- connecting the student and/or their family with in-school supports such as to the school guidance counsellor or SchoolsPlus if applicable.

4.1.3 Early Intervention responses will be used when an issue with attendance has been identified and/or the frequency of total absences or chronic lateness is between 10 and 15 per cent of class time, or earlier if advised by the student's teacher. At this stage, responses can include

- convening an Attendance Support Team (see 5.2.1)
- identifying and removing barriers to attendance
- identifying available supports, through the Attendance Support Team and connecting the student and/or their family with school-based or board-based supports and/or outside agencies or support services, as needed
- developing a student attendance plan, which may include an attendance improvement contract
- communicating the risk of losing school privileges and/or a course credit to the student and their family (grades 10 to 12 only, see 5.5)

4.1.4 Targeted Interventions will be provided for students facing greater attendance challenges, often when the frequency of total absences or chronic lateness has gone over 15 per cent of class time, such as

- developing a student attendance plan, or modifying an existing one
- identifying available supports, through the Attendance Support Team and connecting the student and/or their family with school-based or board-based supports and/or outside agencies or support services, as needed
- recommending loss of course credit for students in grades 10 to 12

5 Incentives, Support, Accountability

5.1 Incentives

Attendance incentives are most effective when part of a comprehensive approach that includes outreach to families with more significant barriers to attendance. Incentives may be part of creating a positive school-wide culture to encourage regular school attendance (see Appendix C).

- (a) Principals and teachers will determine if incentives will work for their students, and if so, what incentives are appropriate. School Advisory Councils/Home and School Associations may be consulted on broad incentive programs for a school.
- (b) Incentive programs must be inclusive, fair, and equitable to all students.
- (c) If a school determines an incentive program will be used, it must be clearly communicated to students and their families.

5.2 Support

5.2.1 Attendance Support Team

When a teacher identifies a student in need of support to improve their attendance, an Attendance Support Team will be convened.

The team will comprise the school principal, the teacher making the referral, and other school staff as necessary based on the individual needs of the student (e.g., guidance counsellor; school psychologist; Race Relations, Cross Cultural Understanding and Human Rights (RCH) coordinator; SchoolsPlus coordinator; mental health clinician), and will:

- meet as needed, based on teacher recommendations
- identify the supports the student needs
- develop a plan to connect the student to the appropriate supports, which may include the development of an attendance improvement contract (see 5.2.2)

5.2.2 Attendance Improvement Contract

In developing a plan to connect a student to the appropriate supports, the Attendance Support Team may develop an attendance improvement contract between the student (when appropriate), family members, school professionals, and community partners. The contract may include:

- reasons for the absences
- supports for the family or student, including services outside the school
- actions and accountability for all partners in the plan, including student incentives/consequences
- a sample contract is provided in Appendix A

5.3 Accountability

Accountability for student attendance moves from the parents/guardians in the elementary grades, to the student as they progress into junior and senior high. When late arrivals or unexcused absences become frequent, holding students, particularly those in high school, accountable helps them learn about how their actions affect others (their own learning, their teacher and classmates, and their preparation for post-secondary education and employment).

When holding students accountable, consequences will be implemented within the context of the supports that should already be in place to help the student improve their attendance.

5.3.1 Withholding School Privileges

In some cases it may be appropriate to withhold school privileges until the student has demonstrated an improvement in their attendance (e.g., participation in school activities, sports).

5.3.2 Loss of Credit

In order to earn a course credit in high school, students are expected to be present for at least 80 per cent of class time. When a student has missed 20 per cent of class time due to unexcused absences, a teacher can recommend loss of credit to the Attendance Support Team.

- The Attendance Support Team will review the recommendation and make the final recommendation to the principal.
- The principal is responsible for communicating the decision to the student and family.
- Loss of credit can occur in cases where the Attendance Support Team feels that strong efforts have been made to address issues leading to absenteeism and to improve the student's attendance but no improvement has been demonstrated by the student.
- In the event a student loses a course credit, the Attendance Support Team will work with the school, student and their family, on alternatives for the student, including:
 - > in-school options, such as credit recovery (if applicable)
 - > the correspondence studies program
 - > an alternative high school, adult high school, or community college

6 Roles and Responsibilities

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is responsible for:

- establishing the provincial attendance policy in consultation with school boards, principals, teachers and other partners;
- communicating the policy to school boards and ensuring schools boards support decisions made at a school-level regarding attendance issues;
- promoting public awareness on the expectation and importance of student attendance;

- raising awareness among other government departments on their role in addressing attendance issues;
- collecting and reporting on provincial attendance data, including reasons for absences and links between attendance rates and student achievement; and
- monitoring and evaluating implementation of the policy with input from school boards, teachers, principals, and other school community members.

School boards are responsible for:

- communicating the provincial student attendance policy, including the importance of attendance, to all schools;
- supporting the decisions made at a school-level regarding attendance issues;
- ensuring that all principals and teachers have a process for monitoring student attendance, such as PowerSchool;
- establishing and ensuring the regular operation of a School Board Attendance Committee;
- delivering professional development to support student engagement and policy implementation; and
- sharing and supporting best practices on student engagement and attendance improvement among schools.

Principals are responsible for:

- leading a school-wide approach to promote regular and punctual student attendance;
- establishing a school communication procedure related to absences from school;
- communicating with teachers, families and students of the provincial attendance policy;
- taking all reasonable steps to secure full and regular attendance at school of the students enrolled in the school;
- keeping attendance records respecting every student enrolled at the school;
- helping to identify, understand, and address systemic barriers for attendance;
- providing leadership in developing a team approach to responding to issues of serious absenteeism, including building partnerships that enhance community and school-based supports to students and families to reduce any barriers in getting to school;
- determining when an absence is excused, other than for the reasons listed in the policy; and
- participating on the Attendance Support Team when an attendance issue has been identified.

Teachers are responsible for:

- reinforcing, as appropriate, to parents/guardians and students the value of regular school attendance (e.g., class discussion, reinforcement on course outlines, communication plan);
- taking steps to secure full and regular attendance at school of the students under their supervision;
- maintaining accurate attendance records;
- communicating regularly with parents/guardians;
- working with students and families to support students' continued learning when they are absent from school with an acceptable excuse; and

- participating on the Attendance Support Team when an attendance issue has been identified.

Students in grades primary to 6 are responsible for:

- attending school regularly and on time, to the best of their abilities;
- understanding that regular, punctual attendance is expected, and that unexcused absences and late arrivals are not acceptable;
- attending meetings to address attendance issues, as appropriate; and
- catching up on school-work missed because of any absences, as appropriate.

Students in grades 7 to 12 are responsible for:

- attending school regularly and on time;
- understanding that regular, punctual attendance is expected, and that unexcused absences and late arrivals are not acceptable;
- explaining the reason for their absence to the best of their ability;
- taking increasing responsibility for improving attendance as they age;
- attending meetings to address attendance issues, as appropriate; and
- catching up on school-work missed because of any absences.

Parents/guardians and families are responsible for:

- communicating with their child about the importance of attending school;
- ensuring and monitoring their child’s regular and punctual attendance;
- avoiding making commitments for their children during school hours;
- supporting their child’s teachers in their efforts to provide an education for their child;
- providing schools with a timely explanation of a student’s absence;
- attending meetings and working with the school if their child’s absenteeism needs to be addressed; and
- reaching out to the school for support when the student’s attendance is an issue.

Community partners are responsible for:

- identifying and responding to the needs of students and families that extend beyond the school system; and
- participating in student attendance planning and providing necessary supports.

7 Definitions

“**Community partners**” refers to professionals outside of education (included those working in mental health, hospitals or clinics, community services and justice) who can support the non-educational needs of students and families, allowing teachers to focus on teaching.

“**Parent**” includes, except in the definition of entitled parent, a guardian and a person acting in *loco parentis* to a child.

“Public awareness materials” can include print, video or web-based information that schools and School Advisory Councils can use to support their communications with students and families on the importance of being in school, beginning in grade primary and continuing at all grades.

“School Board Attendance Committees”, established under the *Education Act*, will lead in monitoring and analyzing board-wide student attendance rates and will target resources to schools with the highest absentee rates.

“School community member” is defined as any adult who interacts with a child in a school setting in any capacity. A school community member includes, but is not limited to, principals, teachers, administrative staff, coaches, teacher assistants, custodial staff, and volunteers.

“SchoolsPlus” brings government departments and community agencies together to help teachers and principals address individual youth and family issues that they do not have the time or training to deal with themselves. SchoolsPlus teams include mental health clinicians, and community outreach workers.

Appendix A – Sample Attendance Contract

Student Name	Student Age/DOB	Student Grade
Student Address	School	
Parent/Guardian Name	Parent/Guardian Phone Number(s)	
Number of times late to class	Number of classes/days absent out of number of possible days	

In accordance with the Provincial Student Attendance Policy, [SCHOOL NAME] expects all students to attend school every day and on time.

REASON(S) FOR STUDENT ABSENCES

- Late to school Late to class Skipping school Missing bus Bus suspension
 Peer Conflicts School anxiety Poor Grades Needed at home Tired/Oversleep
 Illness Afraid of school Work/Job

RECOMMENDED PLAN OF ACTION

IN-SCHOOL SUPPORT(S) TO BE PROVIDED

EXTERNAL SUPPORT(S) TO BE PROVIDED

By signing this contract, **the student agrees to:**

- Attend all classes on time
- Follow all school rules every day
- Meet regularly with teachers, administrator, and other school staff as required
- Complete all class assignments and homework
- Other: _____
- Other: _____

By signing this contract, **the parent agrees to:**

- Discuss with my child the importance of attending school
- Support my child’s regular and punctual attendance
- Avoid making commitments for my child during school hours
- Provide the school with a timely explanation of my child’s absence
- Attend meetings and work with the school to address attendance issues
- Other: _____
- Other: _____

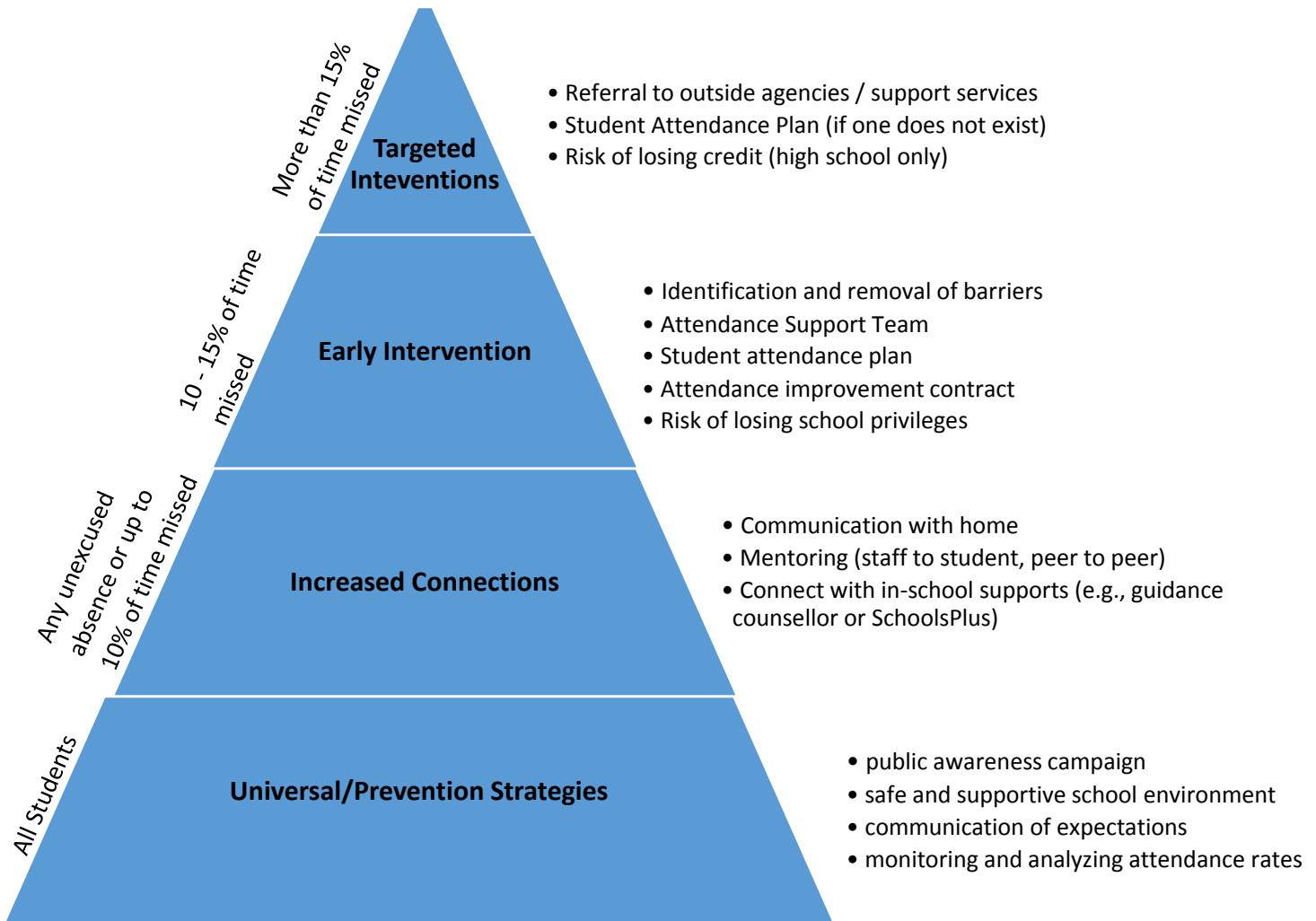
ADDITIONAL COMMENTS/STUDENT CONCERNS:

Student’s Signature Date

Parent’s Signature Date

Administrator’s Signature Date

Appendix B: Staged Approach to Absences and Chronic Lateness



* The goal is to provide a continuum of support. A strong base targeting the entire student population will lead to fewer issues in the upper tiers.

Appendix C: Attendance Incentives

A school may determine that an incentive program will work for their students, and if so, the program must be in alignment with the requirements in the Student Attendance and Engagement Policy.

Some things to keep in mind when establishing an incentive program:

- avoid recognizing only perfect attendance. Students should be rewarded for improved attendance, not just perfect records.
- reward timeliness, not just showing up to school.
- ask students what they consider a meaningful incentive.

The following are examples of incentive options. Schools should consider what will work best for their students and create incentives that are appropriate based on age, grade and stage of development.

- Positive comments from teacher
- Positive notes home to parents/guardians
- Extra time at the computer
- First-in-line privileges for lunch or dismissal
- Certificate for the best record or most improved record
- Name on the “Attendance Wall” in the classroom
- Chance to be the teacher’s assistant
- Food coupons redeemable in the school cafeteria
- Opportunity to “buy back days” with improved attendance