



Additional Attendance and Truancy Guidelines for Schools Implementing Distance and Hybrid Learning

Context

Student attendance and engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the importance of adopting equitable attendance policies. Attendance is a key piece of education funding and serves as an important data point in identifying students who are disengaging from school or could be facing barriers to their education outside of school. Students not attending or engaging with school represents a larger issue that school personnel need to investigate and address.

Before adopting interventions or policies to address student attendance, districts and schools should focus on clearly communicating logistics, supports, and expectations regarding distance learning and the remote portion of hybrid learning to students, families, and caregivers.

Students and families may be facing a number of barriers to attendance. These barriers are the result of current and historical inequities that can result in situations that will affect a student's ability to access distance learning. These situations may include:

- Students not having a quiet or private place in their home to complete school work.
- Students sharing household responsibilities, such as providing child care to younger siblings or relatives.
- Students being in a household where a number of people are using internet-connected devices at the same time.
- Students living where reliable broadband is scarce, thus limiting their access to distance learning at a given time.
- Students being in a household where adults have limited English language proficiency or limited technology skills, thereby limiting their ability to navigate learning platforms and facilitate their child's engagement in learning.

A district and school's attendance policy, if not thoughtfully crafted and implemented, has the potential to exacerbate inequities that exist in the Minnesota public school system.

Recording student attendance is a legally required and important part of the school day. It is, however, just the first step to ensuring that students are present for school and able to access their educations. Schools should track student engagement as well as attendance and draw a distinction between the two. Just because a student is attending does not mean they are fully engaged in their education or that they feel connected to their school. Likewise, if a student is not attending school in a distance learning format, this does not necessarily mean the

student is not invested in or engaged with their education. Addressing barriers to attendance is the first step in ensuring that students have access to a high-quality and engaging distance learning experience.

Taking Attendance

The following guidelines apply to schools implementing a distance learning model:

- Attendance must be taken at least once per day.
- Attendance is considered an interaction with a licensed teacher.
- There are multiple ways—such as participating in a synchronous class, posting completed coursework to a learning management system, or turning in coursework on a given day—for students to count as in attendance

In order to ensure that a school's attendance policy does not perpetuate inequities and penalize marginalized groups, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) calls on schools to take the following steps:

- **Provide options for how students can attend during the day:** Allow for multiple opportunities for a student to attend during a day. Schools that base attendance only on attending a synchronous session during the day could penalize students who aren't able to be online at a specific time because of circumstances out of the student's control. By allowing students to interact asynchronously, it gives students additional a chance to attend and to participate in their education.
- **Create a plan for how students can attend if technology fails to work:** Students should not be penalized for not attending if technology doesn't work as it is supposed to. Schools should create a process for how students can interact with their teachers, such as contacting the school to report issues with a learning platform or reporting an internet outage, and arrange a time and a way to submit work for the day. When assistance is needed, the district should provide or be able to direct the family to support in the appropriate language.
- **Provide clarity:** The process for how attendance will be taken should be clearly communicated to all stakeholders. The responsibilities of teachers, parents, and students should be clearly defined in a district and school's attendance policy.
- **Update policies to account for the effects of COVID-19:** Review attendance policies to ensure that, when appropriate, students who have an individualized education plan or a 504 plan receive attendance accommodations, particularly if a student is medically vulnerable to COVID-19 or if the student has a mental illness that may be intensified by the state of the outbreak.
- **Separate engagement expectations from attendance tracking:** Behaviors such as having video cameras turned on and microphones muted, sitting up in view of the camera, wearing appropriate clothing, having tidy backgrounds, and limiting interruptions might be indicators of whether or not a student is engaged at a given moment, but are not appropriate to determine attendance.

Tracking Attendance and Using Attendance Data

Earlier versions of the Guidance for Minnesota Public Schools: 2020-21 School Year Planning document stated that a "school's learning plan must include a process to identify and follow-up with students experiencing frequent absences to assure that barriers to participating in instruction can be identified and resolved."

Schools should proactively use attendance data to identify trends and to address issues proactively and positively before considering reporting a student as truant or involving social services (more on this below). Attendance Works has put out specific guidance on supporting consistent attendance during the pandemic in their [Attendance Playbook](#). MDE has guidance on implementing an [early warning intervention and monitoring system](#) that can be adapted to monitor student engagement and attendance.

Districts and schools should take the following steps to ensure that attendance is addressed proactively:

- **Establish an attendance team:** Schools should have a [designated team](#) that verifies attendance, monitors attendance and engagement data, ensures data is appropriately collected in a student information system (SIS), contacts and follows up with families and students, and monitors attendance and engagement plans.
- **Take a proactive and culturally appropriate approach to communicating:** Communication with students and families should begin before there is a concern about a student's attendance. Recognize that all families and caregivers are invested in their children's learning and have valuable insights into creating solutions to potential attendance issues.
- **Act early:** When students are absent from school or not engaging in school during distance learning, students and families should be contacted immediately before it becomes a chronic occurrence.
- **Utilize available staff:** Determine which staff have relationships with students and utilize those staff members to help engage students and leverage the relationships they have with them. Some staff may need to be re-assigned to prioritize this work.
- **Track attendance across learning models:** In order to analyze attendance trends, districts should include a specific code to distinguish distance learning attendance from in-person attendance.

If a student has to temporarily reside outside of the district due to the COVID-19 outbreak but is still able to attend online or via distance learning, do not penalize them. Refer to McKinney-Vento guidelines for working with students experiencing homelessness or experiencing housing instability.

Reporting Educational Neglect and Truancy to Local Social Services

With most students currently participating in distance learning or a hybrid model, reporting educational neglect or truancy requires extra steps, flexibility and creativity to meaningfully engage students and their families. The health and safety of staff and students are of the utmost importance. It is expected that school districts have attempted to identify and address barriers that may be preventing students from meeting attendance requirements prior to contacting child protective services with a child protection report. Proactively reaching out to social services to consult in a problem-solving way is encouraged prior to making a report. Students experiencing barriers to attending school are not necessarily in situations of educational neglect or truancy. Measures expected to be taken by school districts prior to counting unexcused absences and reporting to child protection include, but are not limited to:

- Making face-to-face contact with the student's family to identify barriers. This includes confirming students are still in the district and confirming families have received district communications.
- Addressing and remedying any technical issues that the students may be having during distance learning.
- Identifying any and all appropriate supports to ensure families have access to classes, which might include mental health referrals, transportation, referrals to child care, and financial resources.

When connecting with families about attendance issues, districts should utilize an approach of partnering with students and families to problem solve to address barriers. It should be assumed families want their children to be attending school and are working to the best of their ability to make that happen. During these incredibly challenging times, families must be met with compassion and empathy.

If, after making these additional attempts to engage students and their families, schools are unable to address the needs of families and students, and if the school has concerns about the safety of students, a report should be made to the appropriate county or tribal social service agency. If a report is made to child protection services, school districts are expected to outline measures already taken to address absences as part of the report.

Before a student or their family is referred to local social services for attendance issues, the attendance team must review each report to ensure that each referral is necessary, appropriate, and nondiscriminatory. The district should also assess if the referral is aligned to the district policy or any protocols installed during distance/hybrid learning. If the district determines the referral is inappropriate, then the district will continue efforts to engage the child and family in resolving the attendance issue. If an inappropriate referral is made, the district will promptly take actions it is able to take to remedy any adverse effects from the referral including providing supplemental instructional support, counseling support, and advocacy to remedy any punishment or harm that came as a result of the referral.

Habitual Truancy

Unexcused absences in distance and in-person learning settings should be included in habitual truancy counts reported in DIRS, as defined in [Minnesota Statutes section 260C.007, subdivision 19](#). The school's learning plan must include a process (outlined above) to identify and follow-up with students experiencing frequent absences to assure that issues of equitable access or barriers to participating in instruction can be identified and resolved.

Absences directly related to the COVID-19 outbreak, such as the illness of the student or a student's family member, or due to circumstances out of the student's control, such as a technology outage, should not count towards unexcused absences. Districts and schools should revisit their attendance policies to ensure that students are not unduly penalized for absences occurring during the distance learning period that are out of their and their family's control.

Keep Law Enforcement out of Attendance Matters

Law enforcement should not be involved in attendance matters. Referring a student or their family to law enforcement should only occur if there is significant concern that a child or another member of the household is in danger. Neither educational neglect nor truancy, as evidenced only by unexcused absences at this time, are credible reasons for concern for a child's safety.

Student behavior, including attendance during distance learning or while learning off-site in a hybrid learning model, should not be criminalized. Referring a student or their family to law enforcement can have damaging effects on the relationship between the student, family, and the school district; on the family itself; and the student. Such a referral can negatively impact a student's academic and social and emotional development and wellbeing.

Attendance while Quarantining and Isolating because of COVID-19 Exposure

If a student has to quarantine because of COVID-19 exposure, the student must be enrolled in distance learning for the duration of their quarantine. Following public health guidelines should not result in a student being counted absent.

If a student is in isolation because of a positive COVID-19 diagnosis but is asymptomatic or otherwise healthy enough to continue with distance learning, the student must be enrolled in a district's distance learning program.