

Recommendations for Improving School Attendance in Connecticut

Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance

A Project of the Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee

October 13, 2004

Summary Recommendations

- I. Attendance needs to be a much higher and more visible priority of education policy at the state and local levels in Connecticut.**
- II. The State should annually collect comparable student-level attendance, not just truancy, data from each school district.**
- III. The State should publish attendance data and publicize state performance with respect to formally adopted performance targets.**
- IV. Local school districts, with the assistance of the State, should have attendance data-driven planning processes in place at the district and school building levels.**

Introduction

The Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee

The Connecticut Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee (JJAC) is a Governor-appointed committee of volunteers charged with advising the Governor and the staff at the Office of Policy and Management on juvenile justice and delinquency prevention issues. Also, the JJAC is responsible for overseeing the distribution and use of federal juvenile justice funding to Connecticut.

Truancy has long been a concern of the JJAC because it is an early indicator of more serious trouble for youngsters including dropping out of school, delinquency, crime, and drug and alcohol abuse that result in long term consequences to both the individual and the community. Effective truancy prevention and intervention projects require a community approach which involves parents, school officials, law enforcement, children's services providers and others. The JJAC has funded many such projects and has learned that it is both costly and largely ineffective to use juvenile justice interventions – such as placement in residential facilities – to address truancy.

The JJAC began applying a youth development approach to its work in 1998, shifting its focus away from “truancy” and toward the more positive goal of improving school attendance. After many years of funding specific truancy reduction projects that often achieved their goals, but did not leave lasting effects, the JJAC was ready in 2001 to try a new approach to attendance improvement. The result was the creation of the Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance.

The Consortium Model

The Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance (the Consortium) is an association of local school and statewide agency representatives focused on raising school attendance by concentrating on improving the collection and use of information on attendance. The JJAC provides modest grants to member school districts in support of data collection, analysis and planning efforts; school building-level attendance task forces; and related training for school staff including teachers. Grants are supplemented by collaborative projects and capacity-building activities that help districts learn from each other and develop data analysis and planning skills. Through regular Consortium meetings and training events, members discuss strategies for improving attendance and receive expert training and technical assistance on how to use attendance data.

Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance

Participating Local School Districts

Ansonia	Danbury	Hartford
Killingly	New Britain	Norwich
Stonington	Winchester	Windham

Participating Statewide Agencies

Connecticut Association of Boards of Education
Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents
Connecticut Association of Schools
Connecticut Consortium for Law & Citizenship Education
Connecticut State Department of Education
Department of Children and Families
Judicial Branch
Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee
Office of Policy and Management

Consortium Results

While the focus of the Consortium grant program has been on using data and technology to improve attendance, participating school districts know that the most effective way to make a difference in attendance is to take a comprehensive approach. Poor attendance gauges the gap between where schools are and where they should be. School leaders must create a culture within each building that values regular school attendance. Schools must implement multiple strategies to address the multiple problems that lead to absenteeism. They also must put in place procedures to open the lines of communication among school staff, students, and their families to address attendance before it becomes a serious problem. An assessment of the Consortium school districts' experiences in the past three years reveals an array of strategies to help improve attendance. The strategies have been organized into four broad categories:

- 1) **Make Attendance a Priority** – build awareness and commitment to regular school attendance in school buildings, in homes, and in the broader community.
- 2) **Establish Effective Attendance Policies** – ensure that effective attendance policies are in place and enforced consistently across the district and within school buildings.
- 3) **Collect Data and Monitor Attendance** – collect and monitor attendance data to ensure effective interventions occur when students begin to exhibit patterns of poor attendance.
- 4) **Use Data for Program Planning** – select attendance improvement strategies based on quantitative and qualitative analysis of local attendance data.

School districts involved in the Consortium agreed to contribute local data to a Consortium-wide attendance database. Districts have submitted computer files containing student-level demographic and attendance data to the Consortium data consultant annually since the 2001/2002 school year. The Consortium-wide database provides a pool of attendance data from the nine member school districts that is used for data analysis and training purposes. Analysis of these data reveals some disconcerting information. Consortium attendance data show that students miss on average about 13 days of school each year – more than two and a half weeks. The data also show that 45% of ninth graders missed nearly a month of school last year. In addition to analyzing attendance data at the Consortium level, member school districts receive district-specific reports to facilitate comparison of attendance results among member districts and analysis of local attendance data.

Statewide Approach

The Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee (JJAC) and the Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance have conducted all of their activities with the idea of disseminating Consortium findings and program information statewide. This position paper is meant to synthesize three years of effort into recommendations for action that are constructive, useful and realistic for educational organizations in the State of Connecticut.

Recommendations

- I. Attendance needs to be a much higher and more visible priority of education policy at the state and local levels in Connecticut.** With so much attention focused on school accountability for students' achievement on academic assessments, it is easy to overlook other important indicators of school performance that can help educators and policymakers improve schools. One of these indicators is average daily attendance, the percentage of students present in school during the course of the school year. To raise achievement, schools must take many steps to strengthen instruction and other practices. But paying more attention to attendance is a sound practical approach that, in combination with complementary strategies, can produce significant improvements in student learning and school effectiveness. One criterion for annual yearly progress under the federal No Child Left Behind legislation is that districts have a 95% participation rate in testing students. How can schools meet this requirement if average daily attendance is below that level?

- II. The State should annually collect comparable student-level attendance, not just truancy, data from each school district.** State policy needs to focus squarely on promoting high levels of *attendance*. Presently, policy is mainly concerned with the more extreme forms of *absenteeism*, truancy and habitual truancy. While truancy is an important concern, this narrow focus does not sufficiently communicate to parents, students, and teachers the importance of maximizing time in school and minimizing “excusable” reasons for absenteeism. One of the stronger findings from education research is that attendance and achievement are linked. Time on task matters. In other words, schools need to count and report the number of days each student spends in a school environment, rather than the number of days of unexcused absences. In addition, there are inconsistent definitions for “excused” and “unexcused” absences across Connecticut school districts and inconsistent

application of policies concerning “excused” and “unexcused” absences among schools. Collecting uniform attendance, not truancy, data across districts avoids the need to interfere with locally adopted attendance policies. Reporting on attendance data should not be overly burdensome to school districts in Connecticut given current technological advances and the districts’ need to meet other state and federal data requirements.

III. The State should publish annual attendance data and publicize state performance with respect to formally adopted performance targets. Although Connecticut has very clear and comprehensive laws concerning school attendance and truancy, student attendance data are not collected and published by the State Board of Education. Presently, there is no readily available, credible, timely information on average attendance rates among Connecticut’s schools and school districts. Consequently, local educators lack any benchmark against which to gauge their schools’ attendance or to define targets for improvement. Nor does the state have any way of knowing how attendance in Connecticut compares with that in other states or for the nation as a whole. Not until the State creates some kind of urgency or expectation concerning school attendance and attendance data will local districts pressure buildings and principals to pay attention to this issue. Connecticut should join the many other states that have made attendance one of several key indicators included in appropriate state and local school reports.

IV. Local school districts, with the assistance of the State, should have attendance data-driven planning processes in place at the district and school building levels. Local districts need to be comfortable using attendance data to improve attendance and school climate. Every school and school district collects detailed data on attendance, but is this information used to design effective strategies for improving attendance and raising student achievement? One need not be a researcher or statistician to use attendance data to help create and monitor effective strategies for school improvement. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of attendance data should happen before setting a course of action to improve attendance and should be used to monitor the effects of policy and practice changes. It is essential that new state policies stressing the importance of student attendance also recognize that local school districts can use help in making more effective use of attendance data.

More information can be found on the JJAC web site at <http://www.opm.state.ct.us/pd1/grants/jjac/jjacfunding/SchoolAttendanceFunding.htm>.