

A Teacher Perspective on Attendance Policy



“Attendance is the most important factor in school success. Attending school all day every day is associated with long-term life gains in careers, in marriage, (and) in preventing criminal activity.”

- Dr. Gina Kuyers

Executive Summary

Everyone agrees that attendance is one of the most important factors influencing student learning and graduation rates, and yet it often feels like something that is difficult to get right. If Hawaii schools are to achieve the ambitious student success goals set forth by the Hawaii Department of Education, then they first have to ensure that the foundational bricks on which they build that success are solid. That means ensuring a quality attendance policy that accounts for all students, supports teachers in their classroom, and reports accurate data to administrators and the community. With this paper, we would like to encourage the Hawaii Department of Education to make getting kids in school and ensuring accurate reporting a stated priority.

Problem Brief

A Community Perspective

Currently, as a matter of policy in the majority of high schools, a student could be wandering the streets or worse without a family member being alerted for up to nine hours after the school initially knows that the child is missing. Parents have a right to know if their child did not arrive at the destination to which they set out in the morning, and schools have a responsibility to notify parents immediately when it is discovered that a child is not where he or she is expected to be.

According to the interviews Learning First Hawaii has conducted with attendance clerks and teachers, there is a high probability that the attendance data currently communicated to the public is dramatically underreporting the number of absences and chronically absent students. While there is no official data available on the margin of error, anecdotal evidence from conversations with teachers and staff suggests that, on a daily basis, as much as twenty percent of teachers could be reporting erroneous attendance data or not turning in attendance at all. This is largely due to a dearth of support structures to ensure that attendance is entered. That problem is compounded by the fact that the current reporting system construes missing data as attendance.

There is good reason to be concerned that gaps in our attendance policies currently leave children unaccounted for and the public misinformed. There are thousands of schools all over the country that have policies that do not allow this, so why should we?

A Teacher Perspective

Teachers feel that there should be a philosophy within schools that administrators are there to support teachers, but that that philosophy is currently flipped in practice. Instead of administrators executing administrative and reporting duties and allowing teachers to focus on instruction, teachers are more often required by administrators to sacrifice instruction in order to conduct reporting and administrative duties that support the due diligence responsibilities of the administrators.

An example of this can be seen in the way current attendance policies require teachers to execute double reporting in the majority of secondary schools. Teachers must first report attendance to the Department of Education (DOE) in electronic form so that DOE staff can easily collate the data, and afterwards, if teachers are to see any enforcement of the school-wide attendance policies in their own classrooms, they must report the same information again through a laborious, hand-written process that requires physical delivery of paper referrals to various points of contact. Despite the fact that teachers already report absences to administrators and the DOE using an electronic system, neither the DOE nor administrators use that system to support teachers in their classrooms.

Whether a student receives any consequence for an unexcused absence is entirely dependent on a teacher's ability to prioritize the completion of the hand-written process above lesson preparation, above providing individualized student attention, above grading, and above the teacher's own professional development. This system creates a workload that stretches the bandwidth of teachers to their breaking point and decreases the frequency of compliance. Many teachers feel that the double work and the double standard for efficacy diminishes the focus and value placed on instruction, on supporting classrooms, and on the role of teachers.

What kind of policy would best support classrooms?

“Teachers desire a clear policy with consistent consequences that support Instruction”

There are four guiding principles that teachers believe are at the heart of a successful attendance policy:

- ✱ Attendance should be recognized as a foundation of an effective education system.
- ✱ The execution of attendance policies should support the philosophy that teachers are instructional leaders first and foremost and that administrators and the DOE work to support that instruction.
- ✱ Attendance policies should facilitate clear communication between students, parents, teachers, and administrators.
- ✱ Repercussions for non-attendance should reflect the importance of classroom learning and consistency with other DOE actions.

I. Attendance should be recognized as a foundation of an effective education system.

Action 1: Make Ensuring Student Attendance And Reporting Attendance Accurately A Stated Priority Of The Department Of Education

No other educational goal can be accomplished if the foundations of our education system are indefinite. For some, the argument against making attendance a stated priority is that everyone already understands its importance. But teachers, those who work most closely with students, know from experience that schools routinely do not give the attention and support that attendance deserves because of a lack of structure or resources. This makes teaching harder because it undermines classrooms. Weak or poorly enforced attendance policies overwhelm and disempower teachers, leading to lower self-efficacy (which leads to less effective instruction) and higher turnover. By making attendance a stated priority, the DOE and school administrators will give this issue the focus it deserves and well as give teachers the support they need. If policy makers and education leaders are going to say to students and to the public that attending school is important, then that message needs to be reflected in the actions and stated priorities of our schools.

II. The execution of attendance policies should support the philosophy that teachers are instructional leaders first and foremost and that administrators and the DOE work to support that instruction.

Action 2: Ensure That Attendance Is Entered In Real Time And Notify Parents Right Away When A Child Is Unexpectedly Absent

Verifying the safety and well-being of a child that is not in school when the parents or guardian believes that he or she is in school is a moral issue as well as a legal and educational issue. As it stands right now, many schools rely on automated calls that are made in the evening to inform parents and guardians that a student did not attend school that day. This means that a school may wait as long as nine hours between discovering that a student is unexpectedly missing and actually notifying a parent or guardian. Between the proliferation of cell phones, the availability of employer numbers, and the irregular work schedules and stay-at-home status of many parents and guardians, the benefits and responsibility of immediately contacting the family of an unaccounted student vastly outweighs the argument that parents are simply more easily reached in the evening. In addition, since the current system relies heavily on an automated system to make calls after school hours, there is no guarantee that parents are actually being reached. If reaching the parent really is the primary motivation behind scheduling calls in the evening, then human beings should be making those calls.

When a teacher submits the attendance for a class, the parents of any unexpectedly absent students should be notified immediately by the school using available home, cell phone, or workplace contact information.

Ensuring attendance and accountability should be within the scope and duties of school administrators and staff and should not fall at the feet of teachers, who should be focusing on instruction. Consequently, administrators may want to consider setting up a text messaging system with verified phone numbers to aid with this task.

Schools should designate a dedicated attendance clerk whose sole responsibility is to ensure that attendance is turned in by every teacher within ten minutes of the beginning of a period. If a teacher has not submitted attendance within that timeframe, the clerk or an aid should call the classroom. If there is no answer, a runner or courier should physically visit that classroom and ask for a paper copy of the attendance log. Once the attendance clerk has verified that every teacher has input attendance, automated texts or in-person calls should go out to every daytime contact number for every guardian of every absent child. All parents should know that their child is unexpectedly absent from school within an hour of the school becoming aware.

Action 3: Redesign The System For Collecting Parent Contact Information So That Students Are Asked For Updated Information On The First Day Of Class

In order for any contact system to work, contact information needs to be correct. According to anecdotal evidence, in some classrooms as many as 50% of parent numbers listed in the electronic system used for attendance reporting and student data, eSIS, may be incorrect. This is largely because the process for collecting contact information is flawed.

The current system requires students to take home emergency contact cards to be filed out by parents and/or guardians. Teachers are then, in theory, supposed to divert from their instructional duties and instead focus on calling students' homes (using the outdated information in ESIS) in order to retrieve these cards. This creates a workload that is distracting and detrimental to instruction within the classroom. If a student's information is correct in ESIS, then it does not need to be updated, and if it is incorrect, then there is no way for the teacher to appropriately follow up anyway. Even if there were a high return rate for the Emergency Contact cards, administrators would be handed hundreds or even thousands of paper forms that would then have to be manually input into a computer.

Teachers already understand the faults in this system, and they feel that they are asked to use a knowingly flawed process. As a result, the turn-in rate for emergency contact cards and the number of follow-up calls actually made home is dismally low.

In order to fix this, information needs to be collected directly from the students. During the first week of school, all students should fill out an online form, entering their names, addresses, and parent and/or guardian contact information, including cell phone and work numbers. The fear is that this may create an opportunity for students to give incorrect information, but this option would result in a much lower percentage of inaccurate and outdated information than is currently being used. Furthermore, there is little reason to believe that a student that would intentionally provide false information would be any more reliable at delivering a form to his or her parent or guardian, having his or her parent or guardian fill it out, and then returning the form to the school.

Action 4: Automatically Generate Referrals Based On The Attendance Data Entered Into The Electronic System

Currently, in order for any action to be taken by a counselor or administrator, a student referral has to be filled out by a teacher. Teachers usually have to hand-write these referrals and deliver them to a physical mailbox. In order to streamline accountability and allow teachers to focus on instruction, schools should simplify this laborious process by having referrals for attendance automatically generated from the online attendance system and emailed to the appropriate point of contact (the designated counselor or assistant principal). Automating this process would potentially save hundreds of work hours for teachers every school year, allowing them

to focus more closely on instruction, providing quality feedback to students, or professional development. If fully automating the referral process is not possible, then schools should have the attendance clerk track absences and create a process that would allow teachers to submit referrals quickly and with minimal effort, either through email or an online form.

III. Attendance policies should facilitate clear communication between students, parents, teachers, and administrators

Action 5: Automatically Generate Mail-Outs For Every Unexcused Absences

If a bank will send a separate letter for every single transaction of an over-drafted checking account, should not a school at least make the same effort for a child that is not attending class? Close and frequent contact between parents and schools is key to increasing student attendance, engagement, and success. If calls home are not working, there needs to be a backup plan. For every unexcused absence, a mail-out to the student's home of record should be sent. That letter should include an up-to-date tally of the total number of unexcused absences that the student has incurred and a copy of the school attendance policy.

Action 6: Designate A Community Partnership Month To Develop Closer Relationships With Local Businesses And Law Enforcement

While close community partnerships are needed year-round, it is sometimes hard to know exactly when, where, or how to start. By designating a block of time and a clear agenda to a specific team, schools can ensure that they are stoking the fires of community outreach and support each year.

Principal's should create a list of specific tasks that they want the community outreach team to accomplish during community outreach month or guide the team in coming up with a determined number of activities that fulfill a criteria set by the principal. For example, a principal could specify that a school administrator should speak at a neighborhood board meeting, or the principal may stipulate that some kind of partner activity be worked out between local law enforcement and the school, allowing the council to decide what kind of event they would like to create.

Examples of activities include:

- Talking to local religious leaders about setting aside time during a sermon to speak to their congregation about the importance of participating in the school community (ie: joining the PTA).
- Ask local business owners and managers if the designated individuals within the group can speak to employees about how to handle situations if truant students come into their place of business.

- Speaking at neighborhood board meetings to provide information about the status of programs within the school, needs within the school, test scores, and the academic plan.

Action 7: Create Positive Reinforcement Through Rewards And Recognition

Schools need to make attendance an accomplishment to be envied. In order to do this, schools need to accurately track attendance and publicly reward good role models. Schools also need to create systems that reward and encourage students that are motivated differently. Some students respond better to short-term goals, while others find it more exciting to shoot for more lofty long-term goals.

It would be ideal to have attendance awards given with the same frequency as grades; with quarter and semester awards culminating to a more prestigious reward at the end of the year. The goal is to allow a student who struggled with attendance to see the fruits of their labor if they make a concerted effort to improve, and when that happens, schools need to capitalize on that student's improved sense of possibility by continually setting bigger next goals.

There needs to be a delicate balance between providing enough awards that are given at intervals that encourage all students to aspire to achieve, but to not so many awards that they become common and lose their meaning.

As an example, an effective award system might look like this:

<u>Quarter</u>	<u>Semester</u>	<u>Year</u>
Gold Award 0 Absences	Platinum Award 2 Gold Awards	Moon Rock Award 2 Platinum Awards
Silver Award <3 Excused	Mercury Award 1 Gold + 1 Silver or 2 Silver Awards	Diamond Award 1 Platinum + 1 Mercury or 2 Mercury Awards

Pushback against rewarding attendance often comes from those that would argue that the rewards could make legitimately absent students feel discriminated against. There is not a single study or legal precedent that supports that claim. Making policy in accordance to a “what if” means denying thousands of students the opportunity to experience positive reinforcement, many of whom badly need it, in deference to a hypothetical.

IV. Repercussions for non-attendance should reflect the importance of classroom learning in consistence with other DOE actions

Action 8: Late And Absent Policies Should Be Aligned So That Students Are Not More Incentivized To Be Absent Rather Than Late.

Current tardy and absence policies, in some schools, create an incentive for students to skip class rather than to come to class late. This is because many schools distribute detentions for tardy violations while levying no penalty for unexcused absences. Teachers at one school reported seeing students approach their classroom only to turn around after looking at their watches, knowing that a tardy violation would result in a detention but that an unexcused absence has no repercussions.

There are two ways to address this issue. The first is for the attendance office to hold students accountable for skipping class using quick, immediate repercussions. If a student is marked absent in one class but is present for the next, the attendance office should immediately call that student to the office to be counseled. Immediate accountability is the best way to deter bad behavior. Waiting hours or days to issue a student a repercussion psychologically disconnects the behavior from the repercussion and fails to be an effective deterrent.

The second step is to divide absences into two categories: Partial absences and whole-day absences. A partial absence results when a student skips a single class, and a whole day absence results when a student misses an entire day.

- 3 unexcused tardies = 1 after school detention + 1 partial absence
- 3 partial absences for any combination of classes = 1 Saturday detention

By aligning tardy and absent policies, students will no longer be incentivized to skip classes and will be more likely to attend class on a regular basis.

Action 9: Excessive Unexcused Absences In A Quarter Will Result In Automatic Failure

The fact that the state legislature recently extended the number of instructional minutes in the school year reveals an assumption among policy makers that more time in school equates to more learning. That said, the extended instructional minutes are likely to have no affect on student performance for our lowest achieving students. This is because the students who most need the extended time are also those most likely to have a high number of absences. Almost ironically, no student is actually required to be in school for any of those additional minutes. In order to target low achieving students, schools first need to get those students into the classroom.

Compelling student attendance for students with a high number of absences is a sticky issue with many strong feelings surrounding it, but the goal of all those evolved is that same: motivate students to learn and put a priority on creating opportunities for students to succeed. The last thing we want to do is to disenfranchise struggling students. It is with great consideration and regard for these ideals that the eight teachers in our focus group unanimously recommended that a high-school student that is

absent for more than 10 unexcused days in a quarter be automatically required to retake the course.

Allowing students to attend classes at their leisure with no repercussions does damage to every other student in the school by demonstrating that standards and expectations are meaningless; the effect of which is corrosive to student culture. Teachers know that if a class has five students that are at risk of a high frequency of absences, and there is no standard for attendance, then all five will push the limits for the number of days that they can miss, always believing that they can still pass until it is too late. Those students will fail without ever knowing at what point they crossed the line.

Another repercussion of a system with no clear standard is that teachers frequently experience pressure from administrators to pass students that do not meet reasonable measures for an acceptable number of absences. Students that pass as a result of this pressure are done a disservice by being taught that standards for success in life are low at best. And for students that fail as a result of non-attendance, the vague attendance line reinforces a feeling that passing was never really within their reach. These students never clearly understood what was specifically expected of them - a principle that is devoutly condemned in teaching and assessment but institutionally accepted in matters of administrative support.

Conversely, a classroom which has clear expectations for attendance will incentivize a greater frequency of attendance from the majority of the at-risk group, raising the overall achievement of the group. Furthermore, those that do not meet the standard will know exactly what they need to do differently next time in order to succeed.

Failing to teach students that there are expectations that must be met in life does them a disservice. The majority of teachers firmly believe that setting minimal expectations for attendance will help students be more successful in college and in the workplace later in life. Furthermore, many teachers feel that weak policies that fail to establish attendance standards are reinforcing behaviors that are detrimental to the vast majority of students in favor of extending marginal benefits to a slim majority when those benefits should be carved out through special exceptions.

It should be understood that a student that has missed 25% of the classes for a course has nearly no chance of passing an exam that tests the covered material. If there is a student that can manage to miss that much class and still pass a course, Learning First Hawaii proposes the development of an appeals process to carve out the needed exceptions for those cases. Learning First Hawaii maintains that schools are responsible for teaching students to have high standards, and even though allowing a student to miss as much as 25% of a classes in a quarter and still pass is not actually setting a high standard, it does, at least, create a minimal expectation.

According to the interviews Learning First Hawaii has conducted, *schools with weak attendance policies are more likely to put a heavier onus for passing upon the teachers than on the students*. Teachers feel that this is not right, and that it has a negative effect on workplace culture, increasing the likelihood that teachers feel unsupported in their classrooms. Some teachers reported that they felt coerced to provide habitually absent students extensive make-up packets that supposedly teach every bit of what a student would have learned in the classroom.

The idea that completing a worksheet packet is comparable to classroom learning should be rejected on its face. Furthermore, allowing students to make up an unlimited number of assignments for an unlimited number of absences as a matter of school policy sends the message that school has no purpose other than to provide a controlled environment in which students do work that could just as easily be done outside of a classroom.

Teachers feel that administrative policies that are permissive of unlimited absences connote that their presence and influence is unimportant and expendable. In truth, there is no substitution for quality classroom learning or a quality teacher. Disenfranchising teachers in this way hurts all students and the educational culture within our schools.

In order to bring school policy into closer alignment with DOE policy intentions, to preserve the integrity of learning within the classroom, and to set standards that impart a reasonable level of responsibility upon students, a policy that creates minimum standards for attendance should be adopted.

The following actions are recommended in support of this policy:

- 1) After 10 unexcused absences for any given class, a student will automatically be given a grade of F for the quarter in that class.
- 2) If a student is given an automatic F, the parent can file an appeal to a committee to review the case. The committee should consist of the VP, the student's counselor, and no less than two teachers. The committee will make the final decision as to whether the student should be granted an exemption to the policy.
- 3) All students would be permitted to do make-up work for the initial 10 absences, and the progress of that work can be taken into account when considering any appeal.
- 4) Parents will be reported to the police department after the eighth 10 unexcused absence.
- 5) All students failed in the middle of a quarter will be moved into a counseling-based class with a curriculum centered on building mindsets for success.

This recommendation is not made without regard for students with special circumstances, but in the interest of the greater good, it would be best if

those circumstances were addressed by carving narrow exceptions for individual students using existing special education processes for recommending student accommodations. When it comes to getting the highest number of students possible to come to school on a daily basis, allowing worst-case scenario flexibility for all students is damaging to teacher workload, school culture, and student development.

Additionally, it is not our intent is not to marginalize the concerns of individuals that feel that such a policy may too heavy handed. One of Learning First Hawaii's core values is the validation of all stakeholder opinions, and we are sensitive to the concerns and objections posed by groups that dissent from our opinion in this matter. That said, based on our classroom experience and the deeply interpersonal interactions we have with students on a day-to-day basis, we believe that this policy is an instrumental part of improving the efficacy of our schools and the quality of education for Hawaii's students.

Conclusion

The DOE on the state and federal level have set high standards for academic achievement with regard to the Common Core Standards and College and Career Readiness goals for the 21st century. In order to accomplish the aforementioned levels of rigor, it is necessary that Hawaii schools have a system in place that ensures student success and accountability. Implementation of a thorough and efficient attendance policy will allow teachers to remain professionals in the classroom through alleviating tedious and laborious administrative duties, while streamlining communication between schools and families. Parents of chronically absent students are feeling powerless and defeated as the current system leaves them unaware of their child's whereabouts after they leave the house. Aside from the efficiency of the proposed system, ensuring the safety of minors is a moral issue that should be taken seriously. Our goal is to provide the best educational climate possible for students. Our job as educators is not simply to teach academics, but also to prepare our students to become well-adjusted, contributing citizens to a society that requires their presence — and that begins with their presence at school.