MANAGING YOUR SCHOOL

a LeadSpace "just in time" guide for first-time principals

11. Leading Your School's Learning Environment: Attendance (Presence)

OVERVIEW

This "just in time" guide focuses on the principal's role in student attendance processes and issues. It focuses on:

1. Presence and absence in New Zealand schools: the administrative requirements.
2. Your school – attendance as it is now.
3. Engagement and attendance – getting beyond just data collection.

Attending to students' presence (and engagement) are key underpinnings for achievement – a good system needs to be in place before quality learning can occur. Kiwi Leadership for Principals (2008) makes links to systems-related areas of administration.

Every school needs to have systems that help create conditions for staff and students to work effectively together. Everyone appreciates simple, clear goals and effective processes.

Note: The terms "presence" and "engagement" emerge from the Ministry of Education's *Statement of Intent 2007–2012* (SOI).

This guide is to encourage discussion and action about presence issues. Many of the web links take you to relevant parts of the *Kiwi Leadership for Principals* document (2008).

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1. PRESENCE AND ABSENCE IN NEW ZEALAND SCHOOLS: THE ADMINISTRATIVE REQUIREMENTS

Directions, regulations, and practices for managing student attendance are well-defined and available online.

- Use the Student Attendance collection as the source for regulations and guidelines for in-school actions.
- Within the Student Attendance collection, use the Attendance Guidelines (PDF 1MB) to give you a clear picture of the legal requirements and Ministry expectations.
- Use the Attendance, Absence and Truancy in New Zealand Schools in 2006 report to get the nationwide picture about attendance.
- Keep up to date about attendance regulations with this Electronic attendance register page. It provides useful policies and protocols, reports on using electronic registers, and tips about attendance practice. Look at the case studies.

- Use the downloadable document Attendance Tips for Best Practice for Ministry suggestions, tips, and protocols.
- Effective Attendance – Practice in Schools (Word 1MB) – Use this resource to judge the effectiveness of your attendance system. (This is part of a range of resources from the Department for Children, Schools and Families in Britain.)
- How the scheme works – Getting to prosecution – a New Zealand trial on speeding up the process.

A presence checklist

This checklist will help you to ensure you know about and understand attendance processes:

☐ I know the law about attendance (see Education Act 1989, sections 20, 25, 29, 31).

☐ I know the Ministry of Education attendance regulations.

☐ I know the board of trustees' responsibilities regarding attendance.

☐ I know our procedures for monitoring attendance are in place and regularly reviewed, using a checklist such as the one in Attendance Guidelines.

☐ I know our attendance expectations and monitoring attendance procedures are readily available in written form for students, parents, and caregivers.

☐ I know our attendance expectations are emphasised in teachers' discussions about student progress.

☐ I know and understand the capabilities of electronic attendance registers (eAR).

2. YOUR SCHOOL – ATTENDANCE AS IT IS NOW

Attendance and absence data collection is a daily chore that involves every member of the school community. In schools where the average presence is consistently over 90%, attendance checks are easier. Where average presence drops down into the 80–90% range, the daily chore can become very demanding in terms of time.

In such cases, the chore can become a burden for school staff and may lead to errors and omissions. With more absences to check, the cycle of cross-checks can soak up time and energy.

However, as a daily, very familiar, routine it lacks urgency and apparent importance in the minds of some students and their families.

Principals who develop and use management systems to support and enhance student learning:
- know about effective management practice and systems, and model consistent use of them:
- prioritise and resources selected areas targeted for improvement;
- use evidence to monitor progress, plan and manage change;
- delegate the running of systems to appropriate staff;
- establish contingency strategies for when unseen circumstances arise.
  (KLP, p 19).

Reflect on attendance in your school setting

Analyse the attendance data to make sure you know exactly what the patterns are for your school.

Use the lists below under *Who has poor attendance?* and *Who has excellent attendance?* as starting points for your analysis.

Analysing the data

Who has poor attendance?

- Use the [Attendance, Absence and Truancy in New Zealand Schools in 2006](#) to get a nationwide picture. The sections on Student Factors and School Factors help you get the nationwide picture quickly.
- Find the data for your school when you log-in to SchoolSmart in e-Admin. (Principals have a username and password.)
- Using the same criteria and approach required for the Nationwide Attendance Survey, take your in-school attendance data for a representative period this year (say the month of May) and analyse the attendance patterns for girls, boys, different ethnic groups, different year levels, Mondays and Fridays.
- Look beyond averages and medians. Look at the bottom 10%. What is the impact of their poor attendance on their achievement and school achievement?
- Compare your attendance analysis with the nationwide picture.
- Identify any issues that need your consideration. For example, in-school variations and truancy.
- Provide staff and board with regular snapshots of absence issues.
- What do students think is "poor attendance"? Is there a need for a change of mind?
- Are you satisfied with your school's absence record and the processes used to implement the collection, analysis, follow-up and benefits gained from the processes involved?

Who has excellent attendance?

- Use your attendance data collected (for example, for May). Take the data for those who have excellent attendance and analyse it.
- Provide a report to the staff and board on those who attend well.
- What is done about students with very high levels of attendance?
- Do the characteristics of those students who have excellent attendance provide any understandings that will help raise the levels of attendance of others?
- What do students think is "excellent attendance"?

Your school attendance patterns

- What are you pleased about?
- What are you unhappy about?
- What are the correlations between attendance patterns and student achievement for specific groups?
- What can you do about altering the present attendance situation?

Keep these results readily available to assist school decision making and action.

3. ENGAGEMENT AND ATTENDANCE – GETTING BEYOND JUST DATA COLLECTION

As you work on issues to do with attendance, give thought to these leadership attributes noted in the KLP:

Principals who focus the school culture on enhancing learning and teaching:
- build distributed leadership networks that secure commitment and responsibility for continued improvement through all levels of the school;
- challenge and modify values and traditions which are not in students' best interests; School Culture

Non-attendance does not go away. Students may go, but the issue remains visible in school attendance records.

"In-school" or "school-based" factors offer the best starting points for principals and teachers to apply strategies to reduce non-attendance. Such strategies can be viewed as "pull factors", working to retain or increase engagement in learning.

Promotion of the school as a supportive and caring place is commonly at the core of strategies to strengthen engagement. The nature of teaching and learning is being included in strategies to reduce absence levels.

Graeme Withers, Senior Research Fellow, Australian Council for Educational Research, published a paper for the Learning Choice Expo, Sydney June 2004. The full document Disenchantment, Disengagement, Disappearance is available online. Section 3 Initiatives to lessen rates of non-attendance (pp. 21–29) and Section 4 Discussion (pp. 30–34) offer useful comment.

He identifies these common ingredients in strategies used to strengthen engagement with formal education:

- dynamic classrooms led rather than ruled by teachers
- classrooms which respond flexibly to students' stated or perceived needs, rather than a rigid, qualifications-driven process
- strengthening teachers' skills with in-service education which enables them to function more professionally for a wider range of student abilities and interests
- cultural inclusiveness and sensitivity to learning styles, languages and traditions amongst minority ethnic groups
- changing a school climate to emphasise cooperation and to encourage active learning, to take place in and out of the classroom
- whole school commitment to effort in reducing absenteeism and suspensions, involving not only the whole school community, but also its surrounding community
- provision of options for any suspended students, allowing their learning to proceed
- smaller schools where values and expectations are shared and clear, both in policies and their enactment
- a thorough system of pastoral care and counselling, which reaches parents as well as students

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(from Withers G. (2004), *Disengagement, Disenchantment, Disappearance.* A paper prepared for the Learning Choice Expo conducted by the Dusseldorf Skills Forum, Sydney, 23–24 June)

Examples in New Zealand and other OECD countries that have paid attention to some of Wither's suggestions include:

- Accurate data and community connection: Kaitaia Primary School
- Curriculum and learning needs: Rotorua Girls' High School
- A district approach: Taihape Area School
- A best practice checklist: California Department of Education
- A teaching practice focus: Te Kotahitanga – Kerikeri High School
- An educational strategy: SEAL – Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning for secondary schools, England. This is one part of a rich store of information.

Are you doing something about unsatisfactory attendance?

Check that your decisions and actions arise from analysis of the school's attendance data.

a. Put in place a school-wide attendance focus

Read the Systems section of the KLP (pp. 19–20) to confirm the professional characteristics used as you work on this process.

This principal's checklist provides a guide for school-wide attendance as part of your school's engagement in learning strategy:

☐ Our daily recording of attendance provides accurate and timely summaries week in and week out. Re-works to overcome entry errors are rare.

☐ In our school a range of people (class or form teachers, deans, senior staff) use the attendance data as a basis for strengthening student engagement through personalised approaches and systems.

☐ Our monitoring of attendance data at least meets the criteria suggested in the Attendance Guidelines, page 8.

☐ Our parents are regularly informed about their children's attendance weaknesses and asked to play a key role in rectifying them.

☐ There is a school-wide process for acknowledging excellence in attendance.

☐ We apply absence and truancy procedures fully and consistently. We work collaboratively with other schools, the Truancy Service, and other agencies.

☐ Recording of attendance and absence is making full or increasing use of computer technology to reduce the dollar and human costs of school- wide monitoring.

☐ At least every six months we reflect upon the attendance issues that are of concern to teachers and, where necessary, provide action based on the analysis of data collected from day to day.

☐ Our annual reviews of attendance processes use criteria like those from the Attendance Guidelines, page 7.

Use this checklist and the [Attendance Guidelines](#) (PDF 1MB) to assist you to make sure the school-wide processes are in place and working to improve the levels of engagement.

Probably 70–80% of students will respond satisfactorily and meet the communication demands of such systems. For example, parents phone in absences.

Note: Attendance focus is part of your Engagement Initiatives. Make them work together. Check the Understanding Engagement document in this series.

b. Strengthen your school-wide focus by emphasising each teacher's responsibility for attendance in their class or classes.

– **Personalise learning:** The teacher's classroom role to retain or strengthen engagement is the key here. Such an approach requires teachers to recognise and act on their importance in personalising schooling so students feel more engaged with learning and achievement. Meeting student needs in class being a key requirement.

– **Reduce in-school variation in attendance:** Teachers taking responsibility for the attendance at their class(es) will personalise messages to students about any lack of attendance. Such action is likely to bring improvement when combined with active work on engagement processes to provide "dynamic classrooms led rather than ruled by teachers" (See Withers' suggestions above.)

– **Target:** Clearly identify those students who are not meeting school expectations and require teachers to provide a focus on them. Such an approach will bring attendance improvement with another 5–15% of students as they respond to a more personalised education system.

C. Engage support agencies, counsellors, and other services

Take responsibility for the truants and difficult cases by participating in district support systems. Be able to clearly identify who is in this group.
– Truancy Service, GSE, social welfare agencies, drug and alcohol counsellors, iwi authorities, and other social services may all play a role in working with the students who have the worst attendance.
– Develop effective communication systems with these agencies. Ensure that daily information flows are working well as required.
– Participate in district truancy initiatives and support any local committee.
– Recognise that at intermediate and secondary school level, the complexity of working with truants is often beyond the resources of your school.
– Ensure there are means to re-integrate students who have had lengthy absences so the 'pull factors' of school can get to work.

CONCLUSION

This "just-in-time" document includes reference to several parts of the *Kiwi Leadership for Principals* (KLP) to help confirm the way the principal's actions are based on sound practice.

Your ideas on resources and information about attendance, absence, and presence are welcome. Send them to the address below.

FEEDBACK AND SUGGESTIONS

Suggested additions, questions, or comments on this guide should be emailed to leadership@tki.org.nz.