

Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance

Recommendations for Improving School Attendance in Connecticut



A Project of the Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee

July 2008

2008 Summary Recommendations

- I. Student 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 Department of Education should work with the Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance in the analysis and publication of attendance data.**
- III. The State Department of Education should adopt statewide and local school district attendance targets.**
- IV. Local school districts should have attendance data-driven planning processes in place at the district and school building levels.**
- V. The State Department of Education should work with the Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance to expand Consortium membership and provide training and technical assistance on the issue of student attendance.**
- VI. The Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance should provide guidance concerning student attendance policy, particularly with respect to loss of credit at the high school level.**

Introduction

The Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance (the Consortium) is an association of local school and statewide agency representatives focused on raising school attendance by improving the collection and use of student attendance data. In 2001, the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee (JJAC) engaged a number of school districts in a multi-year collaborative process to learn about data-driven planning; explore attendance data collection strategies and best practices; and identify and meet member training needs with respect to data. By exploring attendance improvement strategies and disseminating Consortium findings throughout the state, the Consortium hopes to influence key leaders and build support for attendance improvement efforts at both the state and local level.

Member school districts are eligible to apply for modest JJAC grants in support of school attendance improvement initiatives and must contribute local data to a Consortium-wide database that is used for training purposes and to compare data across districts. Grants are supplemented by capacity-building activities that help districts learn from each other and develop data analysis and planning skills. Through regular Consortium meetings, members discuss strategies for improving attendance and receive expert training and technical assistance on use of attendance data.

Consortium Results

Consortium school districts have identified an array of strategies to help improve attendance and specific measures for assessing the impact of policy and practice changes on student attendance. Attendance improvement strategies have been organized into four broad categories:

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

Participating School Districts

Ansonia	Middletown	Region 19
Bethel	New Britain	Stonington
Canterbury	New Haven	Thompson
Danbury	New Milford	Vernon
East Windsor	Norwich	Waterbury
Fairfield	Plainfield	Waterford
Hamden	Region 10	Winchester
Hartford	Region 13	Windham
Killingly		

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

The Consortium has been collecting attendance data from member districts since 2001 and has spent substantial amounts of time analyzing the data to identify meaningful measures of attendance at the student, school, and district levels. Collaborative efforts of local districts and cooperating state agencies have resulted in the identification of two key measures of attendance: average daily attendance and the percentage of students attending less than 90% of the time. **Average daily attendance**, or ADA, calculates the number of days in attendance for all students divided by the number of days enrolled (possible days in attendance). The **percentage of students attending less than 90% of the time** identifies those students missing 10% or more of the school year (18+ days of school) and shows the extent to which students are exhibiting extreme levels of absenteeism. Such students can be referred to as chronic non-attenders.

The two measures, when used in conjunction, provide an indication of the degree to which student absenteeism is a problem and the extent to which chronic non-attenders may be affecting average daily attendance overall. In some cases, a relatively small number of students can have a significant impact on ADA. It is important to note that, when calculating attendance, the Consortium does not differentiate between “excused” and “unexcused” absences because of differences in how local districts define excused absences. More importantly, the Consortium’s premise is that students must attend school to learn and succeed. Therefore, the key question is whether or not a student is in an instructional environment on a given day. For example, a student assigned to in-school suspension is counted as being present while out-of-school suspension days are counted as absences.

Analysis of Consortium attendance data reveals some disconcerting information. Attendance data show that students miss an average of 12 days of school each year – more than two weeks. The data also show that one-third of ninth graders miss nearly one month of school. Such findings lend credence to concerns about student absenteeism in Connecticut and indicate that further analysis is necessary to shed light on the nature of the attendance problem and how it may be addressed.

Recommendations

- I. Student 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.

II. The State Department of Education should work with the Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance in the analysis and publication of attendance data. The Consortium has developed the ability to analyze and report on attendance data via two key measures – average daily attendance and the percentage of students attending less than 90% of the time. The SDE has published a standardized definition of attendance to be used by local school districts for purposes of reporting student-level attendance data through the SDE’s periodic district data collections. The SDE and the Consortium should work together to publish a “student attendance report card” showing student attendance results at the state level, by district and school, and by District Reference Group (which is a term used by the SDE to group similar districts based on student enrollment and indicators of socioeconomic status and need). The report should also disaggregate attendance results by additional factors such as demographic characteristics, grade-levels, and school size.

III. The State Department of Education should adopt statewide and local school district attendance targets. Local district targets for average daily attendance should be set using the following guidelines:

- a. If a district’s average daily attendance (ADA) is below the average ADA for its District Reference Group (DRG), the district should work to increase its ADA by at least 1% per year using the DRG average as a target.
- b. If a district’s ADA is at or above the average ADA for its DRG, the district should work to increase ADA by 0.5% per year using 95% ADA as a target.
- c. If a district’s ADA is at or above 95%, the district should work to maintain that level of attendance with no decrease in ADA greater than 0.25%.

Local targets for chronic non-attenders (the percentage of students attending less than 90% of the time) should be set using the following guidelines:

- d. If a district’s percentage of chronic non-attenders is below the average for its District Reference Group (DRG), the district should work to decrease the percentage by at least 2% per year using the DRG average as a target.
- e. If a district’s percentage of chronic non-attenders is at or below the average for its DRG, the district should work to decrease the percentage by 1% per year using 10% as a target.
- f. If a district’s percentage of chronic non-attenders is at or below 10%, the district should work to maintain that percentage of chronic non-attenders with no annual increase greater than 0.5%.

IV. Local school districts should have attendance data-driven planning processes in place at the district and school building levels. Every school and school district collects detailed data on attendance, but this information needs to be used to design effective strategies for improving attendance and raising student achievement. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of attendance data should happen before districts set a course of action to improve attendance and be used to monitor the effects of policy and practice changes.

- V. The State Department of Education should work with the Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance to expand Consortium membership and provide training and technical assistance on the issue of student attendance.** As a multi-year, collaborative effort of local school districts and statewide agencies, the Consortium is uniquely positioned to provide input into and comment on reports and legislation on the issue of student attendance based on its expertise on the issue and an understanding of both local procedures and state-level concerns. Expanding Consortium membership will improve the quality of local input regarding attendance issues and broaden networking opportunities for all members. The SDE should encourage local districts to join the Consortium and build upon the Consortium model to provide training and technical assistance to districts in their efforts to improve the quality of attendance data and make progress toward new attendance targets.
- VI. The Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance should provide guidance concerning student attendance policy, particularly with respect to loss of credit at the high school level.** Many districts have in place attendance policies that punish high absenteeism with loss of credit, particularly at the high school level. The Consortium should conduct a literature review to identify national best practices and determine how Connecticut school districts are handling this issue. As a result of this analysis, the Consortium could develop guidelines for effective attendance policy regarding loss of credit for non-attendance, as well as recommended strategies to help students “catch up” academically.

More information can be found on the JJAC web site. Click [here](#) or go to www.ct.gov/opm/JJYDprograms and click on School Attendance.