

## Strategies for Improving Parent Responses to Attendance Notification Using SMS

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Daily notification of parents regarding student unexplained absence or lateness using messageyou™ ensures school accountability and duty of care. While most parents appreciate the notification, some don't reciprocate with a prompt reply. Increasing the number of parents who use SMS to either pre-empt a student absence or respond to a message received from the school will further reduce school administration time in updating student attendance records and follow-up activities.

The following suggestions aim to assist schools raise the benchmark for improving parent responses to SMS and to increase the number who use the reply SMS functionality.

### 1. Parent Mobile Phone Data.

Increasing the number of accurate parent mobile phone numbers will potentially increase parent responses.

It is recommended that regular checks are made of all parent mobile phone numbers in the school's data base. One strategy to achieve this is to phone parents for whom there has been no explanation for absence. This will test the accuracy of the phone number and at the same time clean up the unexplained absence reasons. Home group teachers could be given this task to achieve over a specified period. It may also be useful to focus on specific year levels, depending on time of the year (e.g. focus on new parents at the beginning of a new year).

An alternative strategy is to post letters to parents for whom no response has been received (see appendix 1 to this report).

See separate MGM white paper on *Maintaining Parent Mobile Phone Data*.

### 2. Getting Parents Onside With the SMS Strategy.

More parents are likely to cooperate in replying to the school text messages if they understand and accept the benefits of receiving communication from the school. This means that when the school initiates the SMS strategy it is necessary to explain;

- The potential of using text messages (via mobile phones) to provide other information of importance to parents (e.g. last minute notification of changes in bus time returns from camps and excursions).
- The benefits to parents of receiving SMS communications instead of voice (e.g. capacity to read and respond to messages in their own choice of time and location, and peace of mind in knowing they will be contacted on the same day if their child does not turn up at school as expected).
- The ease for parents in sending messages to the school prior to an absence, (e.g. – no more early morning telephone queues).
- How to send and receive text messages.
- The benefits to the school and consequently their children arising out of this more cost efficient method of communication.

Communication about the mutual responsibilities and benefits of SMS absence notification for both parents and the school needs to be repeated for all new enrolments (during the year in addition to the start of each new school year).

### **3. Communicating With Special Groups (Indigenous and NESB Parents).**

It is recommended that where the school has a significant indigenous or non English speaking population, the school engage in a targeted communication strategy engaging parents of these students. Each school will need to be guided by the characteristics of their local population and the support resources available within a school district or state. For Australian indigenous populations, this could be achieved through the support of the Aboriginal Education Workers (or the equivalent for a particular state) and coordinated by a member of the school executive.

Most state governments provide interpreter services to support schools work with NESB parent groups. In some communities mentors may be available through ethnic associations and clubs or refugee support groups.

Where there are a number of parents in a particular group, it may be possible to run group parent information workshops to explain the reason for using SMS, and where necessary train parents in the use of SMS and obtain parent feedback about the process. If possible these sessions would be assisted if there were key community leaders or interagency family support workers or school home liaison officers who could advise and assist with the process. Alternatively, the school will benefit if families can be reached by home visits or individual contact.

While it is possible to support these initiatives by sending newsletters or other written material which has been translated into appropriate languages other than English, prior care should be taken in assessing the written literacy levels of parents.

### **4. Getting Feedback from Parents (Parent Attitude Survey)**

Each school should seek feedback from parents about the SMS process by conducting a phone, post-back or email survey (e.g. based on the template provided by MGM Wireless). It is suggested that the phone survey will return better results. Whilst a random survey across the whole school will provide an holistic overview, a survey targeted on the basis of analysing reply data (e.g. a high focus on including parents for whom no response has been received in specific year levels) may produce different strategies for different parent groups.

### **5. Focus on Year 6/7 & Other Parents New to the School**

Each new year presents an opportunity to target parents new to the school. It is recommended that a significant effort is made to ensure these parents understand the importance of notifying the school regarding absence, responding to SMS messages and providing a mobile number. The school may wish to consider producing a pamphlet to hand out to all parents new to the school, which outlines the school goals & expectations in relation to attendance (including SMS). This could be done at the time of enrolment or scheduled parent information briefing meetings.

Other opportunities include:

- Distribution of materials on new Student induction days.
- School leaders provide parents with an overview of the goals and expectations of the process at specific events such as Principal Tours and School Open Days.

- Year Level or Form Group Teachers brief parents during Term 1 information evenings or scheduled parent teacher nights.
- Provide training opportunities for parents in text messaging (at relevant school functions).
- Enlist the support of the School Council, Parents and Citizens groups or a parent liaison officer to contact parents personally (e.g. telephone tree networks and coffee mornings).

## 6. **Widening the use of SMS for other Parent and Student communications.**

Schools may benefit from using SMS for communicating information which is perceived by parents as being perhaps more positive than absence notification. By developing the use of SMS as a regular form of communication, more parents may respond as the technology becomes more familiar. Care obviously needs to be taken to avoid spamming parents. Some examples of possible initial SMS opportunities include:

- Notification or thanks (e.g. working bee participation, help on a fundraising event).
- Reminders for committee or other special meetings (e.g. school council).
- Refer parents to significant changes to events, calendar, course details etc. on the school's web site.
- Late bus arrivals (e.g. camps and excursions).
- Sport cancellations.
- Reminders about exam schedules.

## 7. **Follow-up Procedures**

It is critical that when parents do not respond to SMS messages, the school follows up. A failure to escalate parent non replies sends a signal that the school accepts the parents' abdication of responsibility.

To assist teachers involved in this process the following strategies are recommended:

- Each Teacher / Attendance Officer is given a list of students for whom there is no mobile phone on the school data base. When these students are absent, the teacher can phone the students' parents and / or seek a note next lesson. This information is automatically provided where schools have purchased messageyou™ WatchLists.
- Where there is a process of Year Level Coordinator follow - up each week, this is rigorously followed. A Year Level WatchList alert will provide senior staff members to automatically receive information each day regarding the worst offenders.
- The process of sending letters after specified absences is consistently followed. WatchLists provides an option for automatically generating mail merge letters for students who reach school specified unexplained absence criteria.
- The Home Liaison Officer or similar support officer is kept informed of unsuccessful attempts to contact parents who have not responded or were not able to be contacted, so that personal home visits can take place. A WatchList for specific students can be generated to automatically alert these key people.

## 8. **Reducing Absence; Other Possible Strategies**

messageyou™ is an important part of a range of attendance management strategies. These include action focussed on teaching and learning, improving the relevance of curriculum content and the appeal of teaching materials and a raft of student welfare and family support strategies. In addition to these some schools have developed a number of incentive schemes to support student attendance. Examples include:

- Establishing contracts for senior students aimed at zero tolerance of unnotified absence.
- Attendance Awards given to students who reach attendance or high levels of absence notification milestones (these could include vouchers or gifts donated by local businesses).
- Either SMS or letter acknowledgment to parents of students who achieve unnotified absence benchmarks over set periods.
- Link participation or qualification for specific non-compulsory activities to zero unnotified absence or low levels of unauthorised absence (e.g. no school - no pool).
- Include absence data as part of all student performance reviews, case meetings, employer references etc.
- Invite visiting speakers or use mentors to focus on negative impact of high absenteeism and assist specific students identify with their story.
- Review student welfare strategies to identify other support programs for students who need help with attendance; e.g. personal organization management, buddies or mentors willing to call in to collect fellow students on way to school, provide alarm clocks etc.
- Use the student groups (e.g. forums and representative councils) to provide feedback to the school administration about other possible strategies or incentive schemes.
- Community programs (e.g. no shop sales to students during school hours, police pick up and school return).

## Appendix 1 (A): Parent Notification – Follow-up Letter or Diary / Newsletter Template

(note: reference to legislation applies to NSW and may not be appropriate to use in other Australian States).

### <SCHOOL NAME> – PARENT REPLIES TO ABSENCE NOTIFICATION

Dear Parent/Caregiver,

<School Name> sends an SMS message to the parent's mobile phone if a student is recorded as being absent without an explanation. If you are not receiving text messages and believe you should be, please contact the school on <Phone> as soon as possible to confirm that we have your correct mobile phone details.

Alternatively, If you are receiving SMS messages, it is important that you reply to the school within seven days (Government legislation requires it). The easiest way to reply is by SMS. If this is not possible, please send a note in your son/daughter's diary, or phone the school within seven days of receiving future notifications.

#### NOTE:

If you SMS or phone the school before <time> to advise us of your Child's non-attendance, <School Name> will not send an SMS to your mobile phone.

## Appendix 1 (B): Parent Notification – Follow-up Letter or Diary / Newsletter Template

### PARENT REPLIES TO ABSENCE NOTIFICATION

<School Name> sends an SMS message to the parent's mobile phone if a student is recorded as being absent or late without an explanation. By using SMS to reply, parents can save call costs and time by avoiding possible switchboard delays in reaching the appropriate person in the school by phone.

When communicating with the school by SMS, please include the following information, particularly if you have more than one child attending the school;

- Name of your child
- Year Level or Roll Class
- Reason for absence or lateness
- Day of absence or lateness

Some examples of text message formats are included below as a guide.

Steven Scott, Year 11 was sick yesterday (Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> November)

= **“Steven S yr11 sick tues 15 nov”**

Angela Caruso, 8S11 was away for family reasons (eg funeral) on Friday 12 October

= **“Angela C 8S11 family frid 12 oct”**

#### NOTE:

If you SMS or phone the school before <time> to advise us of your child's non-attendance, <School Name> will not send an SMS to your mobile phone.

## **Appendix 2: School Diary Insert**

### **SMS NOTIFICATION OF STUDENT ABSENCES**

The school will notify parents and caregivers by an SMS on their mobile phones if students are absent or late to school without reason. This occurs each day starting at approximately <insert time>. It is parents' and caregivers' responsibility at all times to provide current mobile numbers to the school.