Practical Ideas to Improve Student Punctuality & Attendance

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INTRODUCTION

For many, schools are the centre of the community, a place where many young people learn and develop social skills, leadership skills, team skills, cultural understandings and develop as citizens. For a much smaller group, school is quite different. These students may have been confused by learning difficulties, harassed and bullied in the playground, fallen out with a teacher, or distracted by problems at home. They may come from an environment where learning is not a priority. Such students are likely to have low self esteem and perceive themselves as failures. The may avoid 'crowds' and choose at risk behaviours to obtain attention.

While good programs, exciting curriculum, caring teachers and a good school canteen may be enough for the majority of students to choose to attend regularly, even the best students will occasionally opt-out, unless there is an efficient system of monitoring in place. New technologies (emails, SMS) can build an expectation of regular attendance and punctuality, but there is no doubt that these work best within a total attendance plan.

This paper documents a number of steps that can be taken to build a school culture where students choose to attend and be punctual. It recognises that when working with students who are in essence young people with needs, meeting these needs allows them to bond and feel a part of the school community. School Leaders are encouraged to use the paper to stimulate review and discussion amongst staff and with students.

MAKE PUNCTUALITY AND ATTENDANCE IMPORTANT TO STUDENTS?

Students seem to agree that class attendance is important, yet they will skip classes to complete assignments, undertake part-time employment, engage in a personal project, or as a means of work avoidance. This can be elevated through parent-child learning support. With school and parent co-operation student attendance can improve through:

- Communicating with parents via a text messaging system alerting them to student lateness and unexplained absence. A variation to daily messaging is to send messages after a student is late 3 or more times.
- Co-ordinate student – parent monthly meetings to discuss a reward system for attendance and punctuality (e.g. additional allocation of access to internet time, canteen vouchers, CD's, library privileges, tickets to theatre or sports, Subway vouchers, 10% added to school grading if attendance is improved, leadership opportunities)
- Consider creative, fun ways of rewarding attendance. Primary school teachers know the value of a smiley face sticker for encouraging student effort. This can be translated using age-appropriate incentives (entrance to a canteen raffle based on attendance, unsupervised library access time, pyjama party for 95% attendance, school funded sleepover or camp.
- Consider part time schooling – part time paid work. Negotiate with the employer that work is dependent on school attendance at a specified assessment level.
- Form class teams and reward improved 'team attendance' (peer pressure). Make it a fun competition with short term prizes and prizes for sustaining attendance rates.

- Individual student case studies have revealed the benefit for some students of arranging peers or mentors to collect a student "friend" on the way to school or providing an alarm clock.
- Indigenous student support programs in some parts of Australia involve organising transport to pick up students and running breakfast programs.
- Provide safe attractive places for students to congregate when they arrive at school.
- Check the consequences of lateness – is there follow up?; are the consequences applied uniformly?; is lateness being inadvertently rewarded in the eyes of students?
- Use graphs or charts or signs to highlight punctuality in the same way workplaces tag accident free days (e.g. 10 consecutive days of 100% punctuality).
- Check the causes of lateness – are parents the problem?
- If parents are causing their children to be regularly late (e.g. students rely on parent transport), it is worth trying to meet with the parent to discuss the issue. The meeting may be an opportunity to explore alternative transport options or to demonstrate the impact of lateness on learning and classroom management.

What works in your school ……….?

EXPLORING SCHOOL CURRICULUM in IMPROVING STUDENT ATTENDANCE:

Although schools have limited control in intervening at the home level, they do have significant control over the structure and content of the curriculum. For example, good schools will give attention to:

1. **Class Structure and Content – including the building of social cohesion.**

Good schools structure classes so that those who attend experience obvious benefits, such as better grades, personal growth, and friendships. Classes need to be structured to build positive relationships student to student, teacher to student and student to teacher, increasing the desire of students to participate fully. Strategies may include:

- Structured learning which is explicit (expected outcomes, core and optional learning tasks, timelines and assessment techniques and criteria).
- Collaborative learning opportunities including informed discussions.
- Testing that is focussed on classroom learning to reward classroom presence.
- Avoid laborious and non productive use of class time (copying copious notes, lengthy lectures, repetitive tasks).
- Provide classroom variety and use all the senses in creating a learning environment (video clips, guest speakers, model making, cross faculty tasks, idea sharing, group presentations).
- Negotiated curricula, within structured learning frameworks or scaffolding.
- Using key resources (people) engaged in related occupations / activities – e.g. accessed via the internet. Contributions may include information, data, advice, assessment and encouragement.
- Use in-class quizzes or assignments (evidence shows this is a significant motivator done regularly and unannounced).
- Providing scope for students to reflect upon and build from their own experiences.

2. Policies

Expectations regarding attendance should be clearly explained and attainable as older students are often more willing to comply with policies when they understand the reasoning for them. Such communication also conveys a level of adult-to-adult respect between faculty and students.

Present your policies in oral and written formats, and follow through with established consequences. Students quickly learn to ignore policies that are not enforced and staff can turn a blind eye to enforcing policies which require them to follow complex, drawn out procedures. Note the following:

- An attendance policy can communicate that a faculty member values student attendance.
- Require attendance for the student to obtain and present critical information (ie personal engagement in the learning) and use this in the assessment process.
- If students are penalized for missing class, they are going to want an opportunity to explain their absences.
- Grade class participation (peer learning).
- Communicate to parents consequences for missed exams or late assignments – e.g. text home 'lost marks' information.
- Remove the emotive / personal element in enforcing consequences (focus is on the behaviour and hard data, not the personality).
- Fairness and equity need to be balanced against the need to consider exceptional circumstances.
- Consider student panels or appeal processes.

Does your school have an attendance / lateness Policy? / When was it last reviewed? / What processes are in place to communicate the policy to students and staff new to the school? / How do you measure its effectiveness?

3. Model the Behaviour You Wish To See

In teaching, as in parenting, we should examine our behaviour. We may be unintentionally modelling the very behaviour we deem undesirable in students by arriving late to class, being unprepared and not keeping appointments. Research shows that teachers arriving late to class greatly undermine the tone and expectations within school settings. 'We are what we do' and not 'what we say' in the eyes of students.

Do all staff model expected behaviour? / How do you know? / Are they given individual feedback?

4. Classroom Atmosphere (Culture)

Students are more willing to spend time in a place where they are comfortable and valued. Make the environment as comfortable as possible and make students responsible for maintaining the environment.

- Good teachers require respect amongst students and model this behaviour by respecting them.
- Run co-operative activities to create cohesion (tree planting, after school picnic or hike, visit the zoo, sponsoring a child in need). Invite and act upon student suggestions.

- Establish peer to peer learning support (score points for helping – score points for being helped), and time for this to occur.
- Create class time to discuss social issues (bullying, drugs, sexual responsibility, health)
- Listen to students – reflect the intensity of their feelings in your responses.

A healthy school climate is the result of careful planning and organization, and an unwavering focus on achievement, self-esteem and physical and emotional well-being of students. No single factor has a greater impact on student attendance than the climate and culture of a school.

In your school, what strategies have been put in place for staff to share ideas about improving classroom atmosphere? / Does your school charter provide a vision for the affective components of a vibrant and engaging learning environment? / Is there support for staff who want to change? / Who walks around the school on a regular basis monitoring the tone? / What does the physical environment reveal about who cares?

5. Establish or reinforce effective routines.

Schools which have clearly documented routines that are understood by all and rigidly followed are more likely to be successful. In particular, routines such as roll marking, roll updating, and follow up arrangements need to be clear to all involved in the processes within a school, and parent and student expectations must be clear. Give time to this in planning and in training staff.

Every school's attendance manager if asked can provide data regarding compliance with attendance management procedures.

What processes are in place in your school to deal with non compliance?

3. PROMOTING THE BENEFITS TO STUDENTS & PARENTS

Articulating the importance of attendance in ways that are meaningful to all students can have a very positive effect. Students need to understand that attending school is important in the context of their future plans and goals. Career fairs that focus on employability skills (including good attendance), guest speakers who discuss the importance of high school attendance, all go a long way towards improving student attitude towards school and school attendance.

Teachers can use class discussion to enhance students' critical thinking skills, to create a sense of community, and to explore ideas and values.

- Ask students to explain learning material in their own words, pose questions that require students to make connections between different elements of the class material, or challenge students to relate class material to other areas of learning.
- Ask students to take quality notes, where students must prioritize, organize, and synthesize the material being presented, and skills developed in one classroom generalize to other courses. These tools are beneficial no matter what career path students follow.

- In general, research demonstrates that regular class attendance significantly influences course grades and the development of academic skills (e.g. every day of tuition missed takes three days of dedicated personal learning to recover.

Collect, collate and analyse attendance data and correlate with student success.

Publish graphs or statistics or stories, showing positive relationship between attendance and success.

Promote the benefits of non- University further education opportunities.

In a broader sense, attending class increases students' personal interaction with a variety of teachers and support personnel raising the likelihood of finding mentors and role models who can help guide their academic, vocational, and personal development, while building lasting friendships and support networks.

In your school, what statistical information or personal stories linking success and attendance is provided to parents and students each year? / Do you prominently publicise successful past students? / Do you have old scholars willing to visit the school and talk with students about their experiences? / Are some of these people who 'dropped out' at school and built back their life the hard way?

4. SENIOR SECONDARY PROGRAMS

Transition programs can ease middle school students into senior school

School leaders can ease students' transition into senior school by implementing transition programs that address the needs of students and their parents and that facilitate communication between middle school and high school teachers and support staff. Students who make a comfortable transition from middle to high school tend to be more confident students with better attendance. Research from Tasmania suggests higher school drop out from students moving from a Middle School to a Senior Secondary School, where there are ineffective transition support arrangements. Queensland schools require all students to have an online career plan, which is linked to social security benefits.

In your school, what does the data indicate about the success of transition programs?

School based health and community programs, and co-curricular activities

Students who participate in activities such as sports, music, the arts, clubs and interest groups generally have higher attendance rate than students who do not participate in extracurricular activities. Providing opportunities to engage in high interest activities tends to promote social bonding which increases attendance. Spending time and resources strengthening existing extracurricular programs and establishing reasonable participation polices that do not exclude low achieving students from these opportunities have a very positive impact on overall student attendance.

How has your school engaged with the wider community to support school based programs?

Career education, and work/study programs and dual/enrolment (school/TAFE)

Programs that give students a head start on their post high school goals are effective in lowering a school's dropout rate and raising school attendance. Students who plan to enter the workforce immediately after graduation often begin their work careers while still in school. This often results in students who attempt to juggle full time academic work with a part or full time job. Providing academic credit for job experiences in community/work/study programs helps keep students in school, and improves attendance.

Additionally, dual enrolment in school/TAFE job training programs or academic transfer programs help to improve attendance by building skills and clearly linking high school attendance to future career goals.

Conclusion

As with all complex educational issues, there is no one solution to solve attendance problems. It takes a combination of sound communication structures, comprehensive policies, attractive and engaging programs, understood routines and a strong and inviting school climate to bring students into the school and keep them productively engaged in learning programs. If any one element is missing, attendance issues are likely to remain a problem. Good schools will explore each aspect and ask the question – "What needs to be improved?"