

## Improving School Attendance – Communication is the Key

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This article cites recent reports that identify effective communication within the school and parent community as a vital factor in reducing unauthorised student absence. The article then offers insights into the communication strategies developed by MGM Wireless as part of its school attendance and communication solutions.

1. In an update on the status of attendance in Australia, the UK and NZ, in the paper ***Disenchantment, Disengagement, Disappearance***, prepared by Graeme Withers<sup>1</sup> for the Learning Choice Expo, Dusseldorf Skills Forum, Sydney, June 2004, Withers identifies the need for schools to involve the whole community in its commitment and effort to reduce absenteeism and suspensions.
2. A report of the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) set up in the United Kingdom, ***What Works in Tackling Truancy***, claims, “*The most effective anti-truancy measure is to act quickly and consistently, and always to contact parents immediately children are absent. This shows that the school does not tolerate truancy and means that parents can't ignore it either. With measures of this kind, attendance rates rise quickly by 5 to 10 per cent. Home-school agreements also help to make parents take their responsibilities seriously.*”
3. Along with other recommendations, The Victorian Auditor General (December 2004 Report), identified that in relation to improving attendance management, attention needs to be paid to developing consistent, effective follow-up processes in schools for unexplained and unapproved absences. The report also identifies the need for schools to build stronger partnerships to support student attendance with parents and the local community, including greater involvement of school councils, and notes that: “*both schools and parents (need to) share responsibility for resolving unexplained absences. Delays or failure to communicate on the part of some parents clearly impact on the school's ability to resolve this issue. Further attention needs to focus on ways that contact with parents can be improved.*”

While these reports outline a comprehensive range of absence reduction strategies, it is often the case that communication and engagement between each of the key participants has not been effective under existing school protocols. MGM Wireless' leadership in school attendance communications and management has come about through innovative use of mobile messaging technology combined with a profound understanding of schools, their processes and communities.

In examining your own school's strategies in resolving unexplained absence and improving student attendance it is important to consider the extent to which the shared responsibility of parents in the process is recognised. It is also important to ensure that the mechanisms by which this communication takes place are as fast, efficient, secure and reliable as possible.

The MGM Wireless solution helps schools raise the benchmark for improving parent responses to school communications through its thorough Planning, Implementation, Review and Support processes.

Key parts of the MGM Wireless solution are:

- Gaining the support of parents with a strategy that uses the most reliable and efficient methods of communication, incorporating text, phone, letter and e-mail components.
- Increasing the number of accurate parent mobile phone numbers.
- Exploring the potential for using text messages via mobile phones for a range of information important to parents. An example is the last minute notification of changes in bus time returns from camps and excursions.
- Sharing with parents the benefits of receiving SMS communications instead of voice. These include the capacity to read and respond to messages when and where they choose, and the peace of mind that comes with knowing they will be contacted on the same day if their child does arrive at school as expected.
- Encouraging parents to send messages to the school prior to an absence, avoiding the frustration of early morning telephone queues.
- Developing appropriate strategies in partnership with special cultural groups, including indigenous and those of non English speaking background.
- Inviting feedback from parents to guide changes in school communication.
- Automating follow-up procedures to allow immediate intervention for students at risk. Alerts are automatically generated and forwarded to the appropriate school personnel by the MGM Wireless WatchLists solution.

School Councils and Parent Groups should be working with Principals to ensure their school's communication strategy utilises the technologically advanced and cost effective options now available in this country. While it is every parent's right to know quickly if their child has not arrived at school each day, it is also the parent's responsibility to provide timely and appropriate communications if their child cannot attend. The many advantages of two-way communication using mobile phone text messages can help the process significantly, but any such use must be coupled with sound strategies and policies that reflect school expectations.

An examination of the desired outcomes and unique circumstances of your own school is an important first step in improving attendance, and can be arranged by calling MGM Wireless on 1800 300 346 to make an appointment.

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<sup>i</sup> Graeme Withers is a Senior Research Fellow with the Australian Council for Educational Research