

Improving Roll Marking Practices – version 2

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This white paper looks at some of the most effective practices and technology options for improving roll marking accuracy, increasing administrative efficiency and reducing absence follow up time.

TYPES OF ROLL MARKING

Duty of care, audit and funding accountability, provide a need for schools to know that students are present at the times when they are scheduled to attend. In addition, the authenticity of absences needs to be validated.

To minimise data entry, most schools record by default ‘absence’ rather than ‘presence’ for the following:

- Morning (AM) absence – generally defaulting to whole day absence unless marked otherwise.
- Afternoon (PM) absence – not marked separately in most schools, but where an afternoon roll call is carried out, the roll data is used to confirm whole day absence.
- Late Arrival – mostly marked to include the time of arrival, with students being given an artefact to present to the relevant teacher, authenticating the time of their arrival.
- Early Departure - where students present either a note or other evidence authorising early departure.
- Unauthorised absence from a scheduled teaching session during the day – initially marked by default as truancy until proven otherwise.

All schools have procedures to account for and record acceptable (justified) variations in student attendance at scheduled sessions such as:

- Programmed work place learning (e.g. VET / TAFE / Work Experience)
- Excursions
- Sport, Performing Arts or other events conducted out of the school or scheduled lesson(s).
- Regular individual or small tutorial sessions (e.g. instrumental music)
- Time out for students (e.g. to visit a counsellor / behaviour management etc).

The most effective schools are those that require data entry for all of these variations well **in advance** of the planned absence, or, when this is not possible, have simple procedures to ensure a student’s absence is communicated to the appropriate staff member in a timely manner.

ROLL MARKING ISSUES

Roll Accuracy & Absence Authentication

While the requirements and complexities are well understood, most schools seem to be challenged by the practicalities of achieving accurate rolls and validated absence in at least some of the areas listed above. The main cause for inaccurate roll marking and unauthenticated absence relates to:

- Administration processes, which in some cases are either too complex or time consuming, or the roll marking period is too short.
- Relief teachers who do not know the students or roll marking procedures.
- Failure of electronic roll marking equipment, software or connectivity.
- The attitude of the roll marking teacher regarding the importance and priority of accurate roll marking and authentication of all absences.
- The attitude of the person taking the student from the normal scheduled class regarding the priority given ensuring the correct notification and roll procedures are followed.
- The attitude of the students to ensuring their presence is recorded, or non-compliance with signing in or out – particularly an issue when students have flexible timetables.
- The attitude of parents regarding the priority and importance of providing the school with absence validation.

Administrative Issues include;

- The significant time required to manually transcribe paper roll information into the Student Information System (SIS) database.
- The significant time required to reconcile the multiple possibilities for a student's absence – often recorded in separate locations, formats and sometimes in different databases. This issue is exacerbated when trying to validate absences at the end of a day.
- Functional limitations of some student management system software, particularly data entry interfaces for fractional absence and the capacity to automatically reconcile whole day and partial absences.

SOLUTIONS

The potential solutions to overcoming roll marking accuracy and attendance validation issues generally involve:

- Improving existing school procedures
- Strategies which focus on changing the attitudes of students, parents and teachers.
- Electronic solutions which reduce workload, make it easier for people to comply with the requirements and reduce the opportunities for human error in the roll marking process.

A. School Procedures and People Management

Regardless of the technology employed to assist in the roll marking process, school procedures need to be simple to understand, enable compliance by all parties, are monitored and enforced.

1. Effective School Leaders;

- Are clear with staff students and parents about expectations.
- Ensure roll marking requirements are documented, unambiguous and capable of being followed by all.
- Try to understand whether the failure to regularly conform with roll marking expectations is a product of systemic difficulties, or lack of skills or attitude.
- Monitor performance, promote programs which reward appropriate behaviour and act in situations where expectations are not met.

2. Support & Motivation Strategies for Teachers

The following examples reflect effective practices in Australian secondary schools;

- keep the roll folders / forms as simple as possible.
- use a system of passes as a requirement for students leaving and joining classes.
- ensure the teacher has a back up (escalation) option if they experience difficulty with specific students who do not comply with the attendance recording process.
- use monitors or school assistants or teaming with a more experienced staff member.
- remove or minimise roll marking in difficult locations (e.g. out door assemblies).
- close supervision and support by a middle manager (e.g. corridor duty or class visits).
- delay the entry times for roll data to allow for the extra time needed or
- delay sending messages to allow for this extra time requirement.
- provide a mobile phone or other communication device for staff supervising excursions.
- require teachers to follow up with parents when a message has been sent home due to a roll marking error.
- provide roll folders with student ID (photos) for Relief Teachers (home room).
- Monthly rewards for staff who get it right – or badly wrong! (make this a fun thing).
- Ensure school support staff responsible for entering absence data escalate problems to school leaders.

In the more successful schools there is greater understanding and acceptance of the role that each school staff member has regarding their personal accountability for students who are

scheduled to be in their care. However, in the final analysis, continued lack of compliance may become a performance management issue with a particular teacher.

The use of electronic roll marking devices does not lessen the requirement for these types of support.

3. Strategies for Students

The normal approaches to achieving student cooperation and engagement apply. Some examples relating to compliance with attending roll call and signing in and out of the school are;

- ensure that teachers are punctual and convey a sense of importance to the roll marking process.
- fair, equitable and consistent application of the rules – teachers who develop good student relationships generally achieve greater cooperation.
- consult, counsel and apply appropriate consequences.
- provide logical explanations for the rules.
- set targets and reward achievement (e.g. canteen vouchers, internet download time is increased, senior students earn privileges such as flexible timetables or special access to facilities).
- students themselves are involved in monitoring processes and determining rewards.
- individual student support (e.g. buddies to accompany the student to school).

Schools that take the roll in lesson 1 often have greater roll whole day absence roll accuracy, but suffer when it comes to follow – up processes.

4. Strategies for Parents

The provision of SMS communication greatly facilitates absence notification, absence validation and follow up. Experience in the majority of schools employing the MGM SMS solutions (messageyou™Schools and messageyou™Watchlists), indicates;

- rapid identification of roll marking errors, which once addressed improve parent confidence in the school management of absence.
- greater compliance with advance absence notification.
- greater compliance with absence explanation.

See other MGM White Papers which describe strategies for improving parent participation and cooperation with absence notification.

B. Alternative Roll Marking Options – Special Events

Unfortunately there is no simple answer to accurate roll marking at special events, mainly due to the complexities of these types of events, particularly those held off site. The following strategies have been used successfully in some schools.

1. Rethink the roll grouping,

Mark the roll based upon how students are being grouped for the activity; e.g. In swimming or athletics carnivals use the house groupings (if they have a house structure). It may be possible to use student House Captains to assist with this process.
OR

If an away event using buses it may be possible to allocate students to buses in advance and mark the roll on each bus. Alternatively have blank rolls on each bus - students record their name and home group on the roll as they enter the bus. For students who travel to the venue separately they would need to report to a specific person or location upon arrival (a lot easier if the event is being held within a contained area such as a swimming centre, not so easy if it is an oval or park). Be aware that this latter strategy will make more work for support staff

entering the roll data into the SIS.

OR

Divide the roll according to participation (e.g. spectators, marshals or event officials) and allocate roll marking responsibilities for each group.

2. If Using Normal Roll Groupings

Make students responsibility for reporting to the particular teacher at a set time (normally chosen to coincide with a break in the carnival or event program). In advance of the event, each Roll Group Teacher negotiates with students the time and location for reporting. Students may be given a period of time in which to report, rather than an exact time. It is then the student's responsibility to report to the teacher, knowing that if they don't their parents will get an SMS. To provide flexibility for the school, this is likely to mean that the roll marking could occur over a period of time in the morning. The school administration may set a time by which the roll needs to be marked but not specify the time nor place for each Roll Group. Even when teachers are involved in marshalling activities, there is still normally scheduled a break time for them. In the event that a teacher cannot be released to mark a roll, they would organise a substitute and notify the students of this in advance.

3. Staggered Start

In situations where the sports activity is being held at the school, another approach is to stagger the starting time for the sports event.

For example

Spectators may attend the sports event later in the morning and report for Roll Call in period 1 or 2 for normal lessons prior to the event.

Sports Participants report to the Sports Coordinator at the start of the day – perhaps on the school oval. The Sports Coordinator has the names of participants on a list (generally compiled from team sheets).

Student helpers report before school to set up equipment etc. These students report to a nominated person responsible for coordinating their activity and marking the roll.

Whole School Assembly: Alternatively if the school does not want to open up classrooms, all students report to an assembly at a set time prior to the start of the event for instructions and roll marking and then proceed to the sports activity.

No system is without its drawbacks. However the greatest success is where there is good event organisation, which includes a plan to mark the roll, ensure the security of students and minimise unauthorised ex-students or friends entering the sports event. Sometimes sports or other events are organised by teachers who do not think through the accountability requirements. All planning should involve consultation with the Head Teacher Admin. who can assist schedule appropriate staff and help with management strategies for the non – sports functions.

C. Excursions / VET – TAFE / Senior Student Flexible Timetables / Sport / Counselling Services / Early Morning Tuition

The potential for inaccurate roll marking increases when there are high levels of student movement within and off campus. All schools generally have processes which require advance notice of student absence at an approved activity, with this information being entered into the SIS by School Administration Staff. The following practices have been found to be effective in reducing roll marking errors.

1. Regularly Scheduled Absence

Some options for managing Flexible Timetables (early starts / late starts / early departures) / Scheduled VET / Work Experience / Sport or other scheduled curriculum activities include;

- Student timetable information is entered into the SIS *in advance* by the School Admin. Staff with the correct attendance code (ie an explained absence).

- All variations to attendance in the SIS (e.g. student did not attend as expected) for these students are managed by the **School Admin. Staff only** (based on staff information, notes or parent phone calls).

2. Adhoc Absence

Removal from class must include notification of the person normally responsible for roll call. A pass system (e.g. diary note, pre-printed form or pass or a receipt printed from some electronic roll marking systems) can provide the appropriate authority for student movement and help authenticate and minimise inappropriate student movement. However, it needs to be backed up with;

- Hall or yard checks by staff (e.g. students are required to produce their pass when out of class)
- All staff actively enforce the procedures (not just the school leaders).
- Students without a pass are sent back or escorted to their scheduled lesson to obtain one OR if coming to a lesson late are provided a pass by the detaining teacher / counsellor / deputy etc.
- Where students miss or are detained for longer periods (over several lessons), this information is sent to the School Admin. Staff who ensure the roll details are accurate and inform the appropriate teacher after the event.
- Consequences for non - compliance. are enforced

D. Electronic Roll Marking Applications

Many schools are turning to electronic roll marking applications, particularly to reduce the administration time required for data entry. Unfortunately the network arrangements and native functionality of most Student Information Management Systems (SIS) currently used in Australian schools do not provide the tools required for effective management of roll marking. Consequently there are a number of 'add on' applications in the market, which have a limited life. The following functional guidelines are suggested to schools considering investing in better electronic roll marking solutions, particularly as Education Departments are moving to web based approaches, which are likely to include most of the category 1 features.

NOTE: electronic roll marking systems alone do not necessarily mean an improvement in roll marking accuracy. They still require the school to have good management practices and the cooperation of students and staff. They do nothing to achieve absence validation

Category 1 – Characteristics of the Most Effective Electronic Roll Marking Solutions

1. Allow staff to directly (synchronously) enter data into the Student Information System (SIS) - i.e. single database (SIS) with a range of data entry devices (PC / laptop / PDA) across a network (Intra or Internet).
2. Data entry can be managed using data relationship rules and user profiles (e.g. overwriting, bulk entry and appropriate user authentication).
3. Automatic population of related absence fields (e.g. lesson absence fields are automatically populated when a student is marked absent for a whole day, a morning or an afternoon).
4. The application confirms that a roll has been marked (important where there are no student absences on a particular day or lesson).
5. Have the capacity for either the student and or a staff member to record that a parent authorisation (e.g. note or phone call) was sighted or received.
6. Have the capacity to interface with messaging systems and store and retrieve details of communications between the school and parents.
7. Provides data, which enables appropriate monitoring and reporting of absence records and facilitates valid attendance diagnosis and accountability.
8. Have the capacity for an automatic receipt to be printed, recording the details of students arriving late or leaving early, with additional space for an acknowledgement signature (eg teacher or parent or other person of authority).

Category 2 – Interim Roll Marking Solutions

Existing school infrastructure and available electronic roll marking solutions require many schools to tolerate a separation of the SIS and the electronic roll marking application. Within this context the solutions should;

1. Ensure the roll marking application is a slave to the SIS, with limited (short term) data storage requiring daily or more frequent data transfer.
2. Allow seamless write back (asynchronous) data transfer from the roll marking application into the SIS. (E.g. hot synching).
3. Roll membership changes are automatically updated in the roll data collecting application / device with each data transfer.
4. Capable of being located in situations that enable staff surveillance.
5. Have tamper-proof function controls, where the application is being set up to allow student data entry (e.g. swipe card or keyboard or biometric or touch screen stations).
6. Provide an interface with communication (messaging) systems (where data needs to be accessed at times prior to transferring data back to the SIS).
7. Low cost to purchase and maintain.

Category 3 – Less Effective

Where possible schools should avoid electronic roll marking solutions where the roll marking application is separate from and becomes both the operational and residual absence management database. (i.e. the SIS becomes a passive data base). Such systems often;

1. Do not enable full data transfer back into the SIS.
2. Where data transfer is possible requires manual downloads from SIS to update roll membership (e.g. disk data transfer).
3. Require manual absence data manipulation or time consuming workarounds to provide attendance data to Education Authorities.
4. Don't have integrated reporting functionality (e.g. linking different sets of other student data held in the SIS).
5. Incur additional costs to provide new views of the data (e.g. when interfacing with third party applications).
6. Only provide a partial solution to the roll marking functionality.

As state education authorities increasingly develop centralised automated data collection approaches and student management systems, schools are advised to check the implications of purchasing electronic roll marking applications, particularly those in category 2 and 3.