

Milwaukee Public Schools Truancy Reduction Efforts

General Demographic Information

- Our district enrollment is approximately 85,000 students enrolled in just over 200 schools.
- Approximately 78% percent of our entire student body qualifies for free or reduced lunch.

Habitual Truancy Rate

- When examining the habitual truancy rate The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) defines a “habitual truant” as a student who has five or more unexcused absences in one of the two semesters.
- It is important to understand what this definition looks like in an actual school setting. Under this definition, a student with five unexcused absences or attendance rate of 97% qualifies as a habitual truant.
- When we look at the number of students in Milwaukee who had 20 or more unexcused absences, keeping in mind while missing 20 days of school is a lot, that still is an 88% attendance rate.
 - Using the attendance figures from the 2007-2008, approximately 14% of the overall MPS student body falls into this category.
 - Three percent of elementary students have 20 or more unexcused absences.
 - Eight percent of middle school students have 20 or more unexcused absences.
 - Thirty-four percent of high school students have 20 or more unexcused absences.

Challenges

- One of our greatest challenges in the Milwaukee Public Schools is the mobility of our students.
 - Approximately 30% of our students will move to a different school every year. This does not include students that are new to the district, students who are in top grades such as fifth graders moving to middle school or 8th graders moving to high school.
 - During the school year, approximately 25% of our high school students will switch schools, 10 to 12% of elementary students and 15% of middle school students will switch schools during the year as well.
- This is important to keep in mind when we examine how the data is generated. DPI uses a school’s third Friday enrollment count as the denominator and the total number of students that have attended that school during the course of the year, as the numerator.
 - Given the mobility rates in MPS, we actually have schools that will appear to have more than 100% habitual truancy rates.

Truancy vs. Attendance

- The habitual truancy rate for Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) went from 50.2% in 2001-02 to 46.3% in 2006-07.
- In 2006-07 the attendance rate for MPS was 87.7%.
 - The attendance rate for elementary students in MPS was 92.6%.
 - The attendance rate for middle grade students was 89.1%.
 - The attendance rate for high school students was 79.4%.

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- MPS recognizes the importance of school attendance and has provided funding and staffing to focus on truancy reduction and regular school attendance. To this end,
- All MPS schools are required to maintain and monitor accurate student attendance. These records are kept electronically in our student database.
 - At the school level, the principal or school leader is responsible for monitoring the attendance.
 - Attendance data is also monitored at the district level to ensure data quality as well.
- Parents/guardians are informed that they should provide an excuse for their child when they are absent from school.
 - The following reasons listed are considered by the school as legally excused absences:
 - Personal illness
 - Funerals
 - Required legal appearances
 - Designated religious holidays
 - Medical or dental appointments
 - Family emergencies – student absences which contribute to the health, safety or financial well-being of the family
 - Driver’s examinations
 - Educationally beneficial activities approved by the school principal
 - School suspensions up to fifteen days, only during the expulsion process
- An absence by a student may be excused by the school principal or school leader when the school receives a report of the absence from the parent or guardian either in writing; via electronic format (for example by transcribed telephone calls or transcribed voicemail, e-mail or fax); or by any other method of personal contact of which a written record is kept by the school.
- The statement must be presented within 48 hours after the student’s return to school, or the absence shall be considered a truancy.
- When there are students with a significant number of unexcused absences, all school staff members are required to follow the district truancy policy and initiate the different levels of the district truancy intervention plan as needed.
- Prior to initiating the district truancy plan, there are steps a school must take beginning with the first unexcused absence.

- When a student is absent, an automated phone call is sent to the student's identified parent or guardian.
 - This phone call is sent for every unexcused absence, whether it is the student's first or fifteenth.
 - In addition, elementary schools are required to make every attempt to verify unexcused absences within a two hour time frame.
- Schools must identify truant students, or students who are absent without an excuse. The administrator or designee shall notify the parent or guardian of a student who is truant from school before the end of the second school day after receiving a report of an unexcused absence.
- Notification must first be attempted by telephone and personal contact before a letter can be sent.
- The administrator or designee must also monitor the student database to determine which students have received the centrally generated 5-day attendance letter.
 - This is a letter that is generated automatically and sent from our central office to the home after the fifth unexcused absence.
- The administrator or designee must ensure the school generates and mails the 5-day Certified Habitual Truancy Letter once a student accumulates 5 unexcused absences.
 - In essence, every parent or guardian of a student who has five unexcused absences receives not one, but two letters informing them of the problem.
 - It is important to note that the centrally generated letters do not count toward the minimum number of parental contacts which must be attempted to file a District Attorney Referral (See Attachment B).
- The administrator or designee must monitor the database to determine which students have received the centrally generated 15-day habitual truancy letter and the centrally generated 25-day habitual truancy letter.
- During this time, the administrator or designee must also ensure that the school social worker is providing appropriate interventions to attempt to return the student to regular attendance.
 - These contacts are recorded in the electronic student database.
- Truancy conferences may result in a variety of solutions to the truancy issue. If conferences do not occur, because staff are unable to make contact or the parent/guardian does not wish to take part in the process, other solutions to the truancy issue are implemented.
- Other solutions may include a District Attorney referral which is generally undertaken after the 15-day letter has been sent.
- Schools are also required to ensure that there is a process in place to assist habitually truant students when they do return to school.
 - This may include conferences with the social worker or counselors.
- Administrative accountability specialists, individuals who supervise principals and school leaders, regularly meet and review each school's execution of the truancy plan.
- Attendance accuracy and procedures are also examined in the school-wide audits conducted by MPS.

Milwaukee County Truancy Plan

- MPS has also addressed attendance and truancy through the recommendations of the Milwaukee County Truancy Committee. The Milwaukee County Truancy Committee in compliance with Wisconsin State Statute 118.162, requires that the superintendent of the school district which contains the county seat convene the Milwaukee County Truancy Committee.
- The Truancy Committee is required to make recommendations to the school boards of all districts in the county on items to be included in the districts' truancy plans every four years. The initial meeting of the Truancy Committee was held in May 2007, and the final report was completed in March of 2008.
- The report, titled *Truancy: Final Report of the Milwaukee County Truancy Committee*, described the factors that contribute to truancy in the county. In addition, the report contained recommendations for legislation or social services' policies that should be enacted or developed to assist in dealing with truancy in Milwaukee County.
- The recommendations of the Milwaukee County Truancy Committee that have been implemented by Milwaukee Public Schools include the following:
 - A. Truancy manifests itself primarily at the secondary level but its tendencies are often conceived at the elementary level. Therefore, increasing resources should be devoted to prevention and intervention programs at the earliest possible age and continue through the middle grades. Focus at these early grades should be on the improvement of self-image and development of family support of the child and his/her education efforts. All prolonged or frequent absences need to be carefully evaluated and followed up. Additionally, alternative programs should be implemented, if appropriate, at these grade levels.
 - i. Through the Wellness and Prevention Office schools have implemented curriculum that addresses self-esteem, drugs and alcohol as well as healthy living habits.
 - ii. The Wellness and Prevention Office includes the MPS Health and Physical Education departments, Safe and Drug-Free Schools, and other grant funded programs. The mission of the office is to support the physical, social, emotional, and academic development of all students. Wellness is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Their goal is to develop confident, self-reliant, and self-directed individuals who are capable of reaching their full potential as productive members of society.
 - iii. Creative Option Seat Program (Grades 6-12)
 - iv. Alternative Middle Schools Programs
 - v. Why-Try Program
 - B. At the secondary grade levels, school districts should create alternative programs first within the schools, and then outside of the schools, that will help keep students interested in school and attending school. For the same group of students it is important to enforce the truancy laws quickly to impress on them that there are, in fact, truancy laws with which they must comply.

- i. Since 1986, in accordance with state law, Milwaukee Public Schools have been offering alternative school options to parents and students considered at risk of not completing high school.
 - ii. Milwaukee Public Schools have offered charter school options within the district since 1993.
 - C. Each Milwaukee County school district superintendent should appoint a staff member to a "continuation committee" to work with the factors contributing to truancy and possible in-school solutions for truancy that have proven to be effective. The committee should be charged with the responsibility to examine effective in-school solutions and to share the result with their district school board.
 - i. MPS employees and MTEA members serve on the Education Committee for the Milwaukee Alliance for Attendance.
 - D. Each school board needs to become increasingly aware of and give increased attention to the present laws, which allow them to create modified programs for students. The board should encourage the use of these laws to prevent truancy and encourage school attendance.
 - i. Milwaukee Public Schools informs all staff and parents of the truancy policies of the district through the Parent/Student Handbook on Rights, Responsibilities and Discipline, which is distributed annually.
 - ii. Truancy Abatement/Burglary Suppression Program (TABS).
 - iii. Increased school social worker and guidance services to address attendance problems.
 - iv. Police liaison programs within schools.
 - v. School breakfast programs.
 - vi. Homeless program (McKinney-Vento) and services.
 - vii. Alternative schools and programs, e.g. Transition High School, After School Academy, MATC program, Vincent H.S. programs.
 - viii. The return of students to their neighborhood schools and the accompanying proximity of parents to the school.
 - E. All school boards in Milwaukee County should adopt the following list as excused absences:
 - i. Personal illness
 - ii. Funerals
 - iii. Required legal appearances
 - iv. Designated religious holidays
 - v. Medical or dental appointments
 - vi. Family emergencies
 - vii. Driver's examinations
 - viii. Approved school district sponsored activities
 - ix. Prior approved absences which have been deemed educationally beneficial for the student by the school principal
 - x. Parent-Excused Absence (up to ten days per year)
 - xi. All other absences, except those listed above, should be regarded as truancy.

- xii. Milwaukee Public Schools Parent/Student Handbook on Rights, Responsibility and Discipline outlines the laws and districts policies on Student Attendances and Absences and Parental Notification of Absences
- F. School boards should define the time limits and methods required for the documentation of legal absences as defined above.
 - i. Milwaukee Public Schools sends written notification to parents if a student has five unexcused absences in a semester.
 - ii. Milwaukee Public Schools contacts the parent of students in grades K-8 within two hours of the beginning of the school day if a parent has not phoned the school and 48 hours for high school students who do not come to school.
- G. All school districts should continue to work with their municipal officials to create municipal truancy ordinances as recommended in 118.163. These ordinances need to be established in order to provide quick response and therefore more effective and timely enforcement for truancy violations.
 - i. Truancy Abatement/Burglary Suppression Program (TABS).
 - ii. Milwaukee Alliance for Attendance- Judge Valerie Hill
- K. School boards should be encouraged to continue to work with the options available through the municipal courts and district attorney's office for the enforcement of truancy laws with parents.
 - i. Milwaukee Public Schools Districts Attorney Liaison
 - ii. District Attorney Referral
- L. The legislature should make state financial aid available to school districts to assist the districts for the following purposes related to dealing with truancy:
 - i. The creation of alternative school program designed to keep students enrolled in school K-12.
 - 1. MPS Safe Streets Initiative
 - 2. Eight targeted MPS schools provided with special funding to increase attendance -Bay View, Bradley Tech, Burroughs, Custer, Hamilton, MEC, Pulaski and Vincent (Attendance Challenge)
 - ii. The hiring of school personnel who would assist in the management of local school district truancy plans as required by 118.162.
 - 1. Milwaukee Public Schools District Attorney Liaison
 - 2. School Social Workers
 - iii. The creation and operation of countywide truancy centers.
 - 1. TABS
- M. The Milwaukee County government private sector enterprise should discourage the use of public facilities for activities that may lure youth out of school during school time.

- i. Milwaukee County and the City of Milwaukee will not issue permits or license for events that would target school age children during the school day.
 - ii. Professional athletic teams will not promote student attendance to sporting events that occur during the school day.
 - iii. This save schools significant resources in terms of personnel time, making schools more willing to file cases.
 - J. Make accurate attendance reporting a priority.
 - i. Esis
 - ii. Attendance monitored by Central Office
 - K. Never assign out-of-school suspension as a punishment for truancy.
 - L. Catch problems early and act aggressively-
 - i. MPS Truancy Policy-Truancy intervention letters, phone calls and e-mails.
 - ii. MPS Social Workers
 - iii. MPS Strategic Plan
 - M. Use both incentives and punishments in dealing with truants and parents.
 - i. Attendance incentives, awards and programs implemented at the school level.
 - ii. District wide initiative- Attendance Marathon
 - N. That a public relations campaign involving MPS, the city and other community and TABS partners, be created to address the importance of attending school regularly and outlining community efforts against violators.
 - i. Attendance Marathon
 - O. Gain trust by assisting families in identifying and accessing resources that will support them in returning the student to school and maintaining regular attendance.
 - i. Parent Training hosted by Parent Information Specialist
 - ii. School Social Workers assisting parents with community resources.
 - iii. Department of Parent and Student Services-Homeless Liaison
- Recommendations of the Milwaukee County Truancy Committee that have not been implemented by Milwaukee Public Schools require the Milwaukee Police Department and the Milwaukee County Municipal Court System to address recommendations H, I, J, N and O that were recommended by the Milwaukee County Truancy Committee. Those recommendations as follows:
 - H. In order to improve services to truant students, Truancy Abatement Burglary Suppression (TABS) Center should be created within Milwaukee County serving the entire county. Personnel from various agencies, as well as school personnel at the center would provide appropriate professional services to help facilitate students' return to his/her school. The use of a TABS center should be considered by each board of education as an option based on the needs of individual districts.

- J. In order to provide these truancy services quickly and effectively for truant students, all police officers should be allowed to transport truant students found in public places and transport them to school or the truancy center for professional services and counseling. Since truancy by itself is not a delinquent act, all police officers should be given the proper training related to police intervention with truant students.
- N. Significantly reduce the time between a District Attorney referral, the time a disposition is made, and parental court appearance.
- O. 11/17/200811/17/2008Create truancy docket within the municipal court so that all truancy cases are heard on the same day. This save schools significant resources in terms of personnel time, making schools more willing to file cases.

Additional Attendance and Truancy Efforts

- Regularly review compliance with statutory requirements for attendance monitoring and truancy planning.
 - No Child Left Behind (NCLB) attendance requirements (yearly benchmarks).
 - During the last school year, a review of board attendance and truancy policies and procedures was started to ensure compliance with state statutes.
- Monitor habitual truancy at each grade level and develop strategies to minimize truancy in the early grades.
 - MPS Safe Streets Initiative works with students at targeted schools in grades 3 through 8, as well as their siblings on attendance.
 - This program is at six targeted elementary schools: Martin Luther King, Jr., Cass Street, Lee, Hopkins, Allen Field, and Lincoln Avenue.
 - Besides the district polices, each school has its own attendance and truancy strategies.
 - Attendance incentives such as prizes, awards, and special programs for students to encourage good and improved attendance.
- Identify alternative programming to help truant high school students obtain high school diplomas.
 - Night School
 - GED Option 2
 - Transition High School
 - Alternative Schools
 - Creative Option Seats (COS)
- Involve parents and guardians in truancy-related matters.
 - Truancy intervention letters, phone calls (automated and personal), and now expanding to include email contacts
 - Collaborative Support Teams (CST)
 - TABS
- Identify and collaborate with community service providers to meet the needs of habitually truant pupils.
 - Milwaukee Alliance of Attendance-Education Sub-Committee

- School Improvement Grant for eight targeted high schools
- Violence Free Zone
- Center for Neighborhood Enterprise
- New Concepts
- Running Rebels
- Boys' and Girls' Club
- TABS
- Community Learning Centers
- Consider the full range of available sanctions for addressing truancy.
 - Warning Letters
 - Referrals to TABS
 - Municipal Citations
 - District Attorney Referrals
 - Sanctions involving participation in school and after school activities
- Strategies have also been identified in the MPS Student Management Functional Plan, which was completed this past spring, for improving attendance across the district.