

To Research Approaches and Methods Schools Are Using To Positively Manage, Monitor, Communicate and Celebrate Attendance

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INTRODUCTION

There is a vital link between successful educational outcomes for students and their attending school. Students have to be present and engaged in order to learn. Common sense and research suggest that being in school consistently is important to ensuring children have a strong foundation for subsequent learning. Research shows that students, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status or ethnicity, lose out when they have poor attendance. Going to school regularly in the early years is especially critical for children from lower socioeconomic families who are less likely to have the resources to help children make up for lost time in the classroom.

When attendance is poor everybody pays. The learning experiences for students who attend regularly can be diminished by the disruption to the learning environment when teachers divert their attention to meet the learning and social needs of those who miss serious amounts of school. By working together to ensure all children attend school consistently, schools and communities make it possible for children to learn and for teachers to focus on teaching.

The research has also found that poor attendance seems to lead to a range of problems among young people. Studies have established lack of commitment to school and truancy as risk factors for substance abuse, teen pregnancy, delinquent behavior and most obviously – school dropout. Conversely, a strong commitment to school has been identified by researchers as a protective factor against risky behaviours among youth.

While parents are primarily responsible for getting their children to school every day, schools and communities have a role to play in recognizing and addressing the barriers and challenges that inhibit them from doing so. Student absences could be an indicator of systemic problems affecting the quality of their educational experiences and/or the healthy functioning of the entire community.

It is not surprising that the Government/Educational agencies and schools put a great deal of effort and resources to monitor and improve school attendance.

METHODOLOGY

Research Sample

For my research I visited 20 low decile primary and intermediate schools in West Auckland and South Auckland. These were also schools with high numbers of Maori and Pacific Island students. At each school I spoke with either the Principal or the delegated staff member with

responsibility for student attendance. In a number of the schools I also spoke with students in order to gain input from student voice.

I would like to thank the Principals, staff and students who made me welcome and willingly gave up their valuable time to assist me with this research project.

Method

I decided that interviews were the best way to obtain data for this project. This would enable me to ask follow-up questions to get the best picture possible of what schools were doing.

I asked schools to describe 'the approaches, practices and methods being used to manage, monitor, encourage, communicate and celebrate pupil attendance'. I specifically asked to hear about the positive things that happened in a school that affected and encouraged student attendance. I did not include in the scope of the project the legal interventions available to schools.

I asked the students to tell me 'what things motivate them to want to come to school or what it is that makes them want to come to school'. I also asked them to describe what would make them not want to come to school.

Literature On Student Attendance

As part of the project I conducted an internet search of the literature available on student attendance. I found there is a good deal of information available which provided me with an international perspective on the topic.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

I identified four main components that contributed to the objective of encouraging and maintaining student attendance. These were:

- ✚ The procedures and practices schools had in place to monitor, follow up and reward student attendance.
- ✚ Making school an inviting and attractive place that students feel connected to.
- ✚ Engaging families/whanau and connecting them with the school.
- ✚ Addressing barriers to attendance.

Procedures and Practices Monitoring and Following Up On Attendance

All schools could describe a set of well defined practices for monitoring student attendance and following up on absences. These were consistent across schools and involved daily phoning/emailing/texting parents, letters home, face to face meetings and involvement of improving school attendance services.

Most schools are now using electronic registers for recording attendance. Schools have found electronic registers to be extremely effective. Electronic registers have reduced the time it takes for administration staff to receive notification of absences and makes follow-up that more efficient. Electronic registers also generate a range of very useful reports. As one principal said, 'Information is available at our finger tips.'

Schools regularly informed parents and students of the procedures. It was considered important for the school to convey to parents/students the message that attendance was important for student learning and the school genuinely cared for students. It was believed if

parents understood their role in the attendance monitoring process they would appreciate the need to ensure students attended school regularly and on time and to notify the school when their children were absent.

While all schools had a designated person who was the 'attendance officer', adequately resourcing this person was frequently difficult. Attendance was one of a number of things they would have responsibility for. The attendance officer required very good interpersonal and telephone skills in order to deal with parents in a professional and friendly manner. Several schools mentioned having attendance officers who were from the same ethnic background as the parents to be a bonus.

Schools provide parents with an answer phone service to notify absences and many have a mobile phone for parents to text to. Few schools were using the automated texting services now available citing the cost of the service and difficulties keeping phone number data bases up-to-date.

Most schools were operating a reward system for student attendance. These systems included:

- ✚ Weekly reward for the class with the best overall attendance. This took the form of recognition at assembly, presentation of a cup and possibly the reward of a longer morning tea or similar.
- ✚ End of term cup.
- ✚ Certificates for students with 100% attendance at the end of the term/year.
- ✚ Publishing the name of the room with the best attendance in the school newsletter.

Useful Approaches Schools Can Take

Below are summarized a range of useful strategies schools can employ that will assist them with their attendance monitoring and follow-up procedures.

- ✚ Have a whole school approach that reinforces good attendance.
- ✚ Clear procedures for staff, parents/whanau and pupils for accurate recording and reporting.
- ✚ Appropriate training and support for staff using the system.
- ✚ A daily system for checking the attendance of pupils. Electronic systems are proving very efficient.
- ✚ Procedures to resolve unexplained absences.
- ✚ Collecting and analyzing attendance data to identify causes and patterns of absence.
- ✚ A range of reward systems for pupils with high levels of attendance and those who are improving.

Making School An Inviting And Attractive Place That Students Feel Connected To

Both the literature and schools agreed that the 'culture' of the school is an important influence on student attendance. Schools can be a place that students feel connected to and part of, a place they feel like attending or a place where they dread walking in the door. Studies show that schools can play a major role in how students feel about attending school.

The following factors were all mentioned as contributors to making school an inviting and an attractive place that students will feel connected to:

✚ Implementing High Standards and Expectations For Student Learning

Students frequently said they came to school to learn, that learning was important. Below are some of their thoughts.

- ✚ 'I like to learn interesting stuff I don't know.'
- ✚ 'It is good when we have some say in what topics we are learning.'
- ✚ 'Our teachers understand us and what we are struggling with.'
- ✚ 'I was pleased when I moved up two levels at maths. I was really interested to know I had gone up levels. It was good to get feedback from tests.'

High expectations must be accompanied by caring support from teachers and others. Students need work that is challenging but also achievable. If it is too easy they become bored, if too difficult they will become frustrated and disillusioned. Much of this task is the responsibility of the teachers, who are faced with the challenge of meeting the different needs and abilities of their students.

✚ Sense Of Belonging

Students need to know that there are people in the school who really care about them and what they are doing. Several people commented that school was the place students turned to when things were not going right for them.

Students who are proud of their school, feel respected and able to talk to their teachers and believe their teachers are interested in them will develop a greater bond and sense of belonging that makes them want to be there.

This is what children had to say:

- ✚ 'We get to interact with other people.'
- ✚ 'I feel like school is my second home.'

One principal also mentioned the need to react positively to returning students, to tell them we missed them. It is important for them to be welcomed back, encouraged and made to feel it is worthwhile making the effort to be at school.

✚ Fair And Consistent Behaviour Expectations

When discipline problems occur, effective schools have early intervention policies and procedures in place. The research indicates that when schools have harsh and punitive discipline policies, students feel less connected to the school. An approach that promotes connectedness is to help students learn from their actions, take responsibility, make amends and change their behavior.

- ✚ 'The best thing about my school is the learning and the teacher. She is strict but she is kind.'
- ✚ 'Children need discipline, strictness is alright.'
- ✚ 'We don't like teachers who are grouchy and blame you for things you don't do.'

✚ Extracurricular Activities

Having motivated teachers who are involved in providing students with a range of extra-curricula activities (sports, arts and cultural) helped staff provide an environment that was exciting for students to be in.

These extras were often cited by students as a motivator for coming to school.

- ⊕ 'Having cultural involvement and responsibilities help us want to come to school.'
- ⊕ 'Sometimes school puts on programs, gardening group and school trips.'
- ⊕ 'I like doing PE, sport, art, music and culture group.'

✚ Student Opportunities To Participate In Decision Making

- ⊕ 'Being leaders, its fun.'
- ⊕ 'Its good having responsibilities.'

A significant approach to enhancing student's connectedness to school is to incorporate more collaborative ways of learning into classroom learning and teaching programmes. The literature on formative assessment strategies describes that students are more likely be engaged in the learning process when they have a sense of ownership of their own learning.

Schools also provided students with a variety of ways to being given responsibility for the school organization and decision making. These included being monitors, responsibility for organizing school events (assemblies, social events), peer mediators, leadership academy and environmental committee.

✚ Peer Relations

Children at all schools spoke of the opportunities to learn and play with their friends as a good reason for wanting to come to school.

- ⊕ 'I like coming to school to play.'
- ⊕ 'I like seeing my friends.'
- ⊕ 'Growing up with other people. They become my best friends.'

✚ Safety

The biggest turn off to students was not feeling safe at school. At every school students said that bullying, fighting, violence and bad language were reasons for not wanting to attend school. Students want to attend school where they feel safe.

Children said:

- ⊕ 'We don't want to come to school where there are fights, bullying and violence.'
- ⊕ 'A bad school is where there is bad language, nobody helping each other and where there are no rules.'

✚ Teacher/Staff Support

Trusting relationships between teachers/staff and students is seen to be key to encouraging student connectedness with the school.

- ⊕ 'Teachers encourage us. They give us good learning programmes. Sometimes the teacher will ring or visit (home).'

- ⊕ 'I like teachers who listen.'
- ⊕ 'Teachers make it fun, they have high expectations and they encourage you.'

✚ Attractive School Environment

A number of schools and students mentioned the general physical conditions of the school and the range of resources as being something that encouraged school attendance. For example schools mentioned their attractive grounds and classrooms, computers and active boards, availability of sports equipment and adventure playgrounds.

- ⊕ 'I don't like it when there is rubbish everywhere.'

Strategies That Foster Connection To School

- ✚ Create a welcoming environment for all who come to school. Greet visitors and students personally.
- ✚ Set high standards and challenge students to meet them.
- ✚ Help students to get to know each other.
- ✚ Build a strong relationship with each student.
- ✚ Involve students in planning, problem solving, identifying issues, and assessing curriculum in the classroom.
- ✚ Convey attentiveness to students and excitement about learning.
- ✚ Give students a say in what they will learn.
- ✚ Involve all students in chores and responsibility for the school and classrooms physical upkeep.
- ✚ Acknowledge and honour accomplishments and all types of competencies, such as helpfulness, good citizenship, most improved performance, volunteerism, participation in decision making, and cessation of negative behaviour.
- ✚ Establish with student input, school behaviour expectations that are fair. Find ways to keep students with behavior issues in school.
- ✚ Provide students with meaningful opportunities to participate in school governance. Give them leadership opportunities and chances to teach each other about respectful behaviour.

Engaging Families/Whanau And Connecting Them With The School

Schools create an important foundation for parents to see themselves as active partners in their children's education. Schools and teachers that build strong personal relationships to parents and offer a variety of opportunities for involvement can make a tremendous difference. Parents who are actively involved in their children's education are more likely to ensure children attend school on a regular basis.

Parents own negative personal experience with formal education can be an inhibitor to engaging positively with the school. Other challenges influencing family/whanau involvement

with schools are work commitments, substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, child abuse and involvement with the criminal justice system.

Research has indicated that there are several different types of parent involvement that should be undertaken including: (a) *parenting* – helping families establish supportive home environments for children; (b) *communicating* – establishing two way exchanges about school programs and children’s progress; (c) volunteering – organizing so that parents can help at school, home or other locations; (d) *learning at home* – providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and other curriculum related projects; (e) *decision making* – having families serve as representatives and leaders at school.

Offering a wide variety of opportunities helps to make it possible for parents from a range of backgrounds, diverse cultures and with varying levels of availability to participate.

All schools recognized the importance of encouraging and engaging families to connect with the school and used a variety of approaches to foster this. These encompassed:

- Home/school partnership evenings
- Invitations for parents to attend cultural and sporting events
- Whanau engagement programs
- Whanau hui
- Parent workshops – eg Reading Together Programme
- Home visits
- Powhiri to which parents were invited
- New parent meetings
- Hippy programme
- Parent tutors – Rocket readers, culture groups
- Parent/student/teacher conferences
- Learning exhibitions of students work
- Friends of the School organizations
- Newsletters
- School web sites

Amongst the students comments there were references to their parents attitudes towards school and education which were an influence on the children.

- ⊕ ‘My parents tell me to come to school. They think its important.’
- ⊕ ‘Mum encourages me to come to school.’
- ⊕ ‘My parents wake me early to send me to school. They say I have to go so I don’t miss out.’

Effective Strategies For Parent/Whanau Involvement

- Assess families' needs and interests about ways of working with the school.
- Set clear and measurable objectives based on parent/whanau input to help foster a sense of cooperation and communication among families and wider community.
- Appoint and train a parent/family liaison person to directly contact parents/guardians and coordinate family activities. The liaison should be bilingual as needed and sensitive to the needs of family and the community, including the non-English speaking community.
- Develop multiple outreach mechanisms to inform families, businesses, and the community about family involvement policies and programs through newsletters, web sites and local newspapers.
- Recognize the importance of a community's historic, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural resources in generating interest in family involvement.
- Use creative forms of communication between educators and families that are personal, goal-oriented, and make optimal use of new communication technologies.
- Mobilize parents/whanau as volunteers in the school assisting with instructional tasks, school lunches, and administrative office functions. Family members might also act as invited classroom speakers and volunteer tutors.
- Provide staff development for teachers and administrators to enable them to work effectively with families and with each other as partners in the educational process.
- Ensure access to information about nutrition, healthcare, services for

Addressing Barriers To Attendance

A number of schools mentioned a range of barriers that affected school attendance. In many cases schools were very proactive in taking practical steps to address these and assist parents and students overcome these barriers to attending school. Some of the barriers cited and steps taken were:

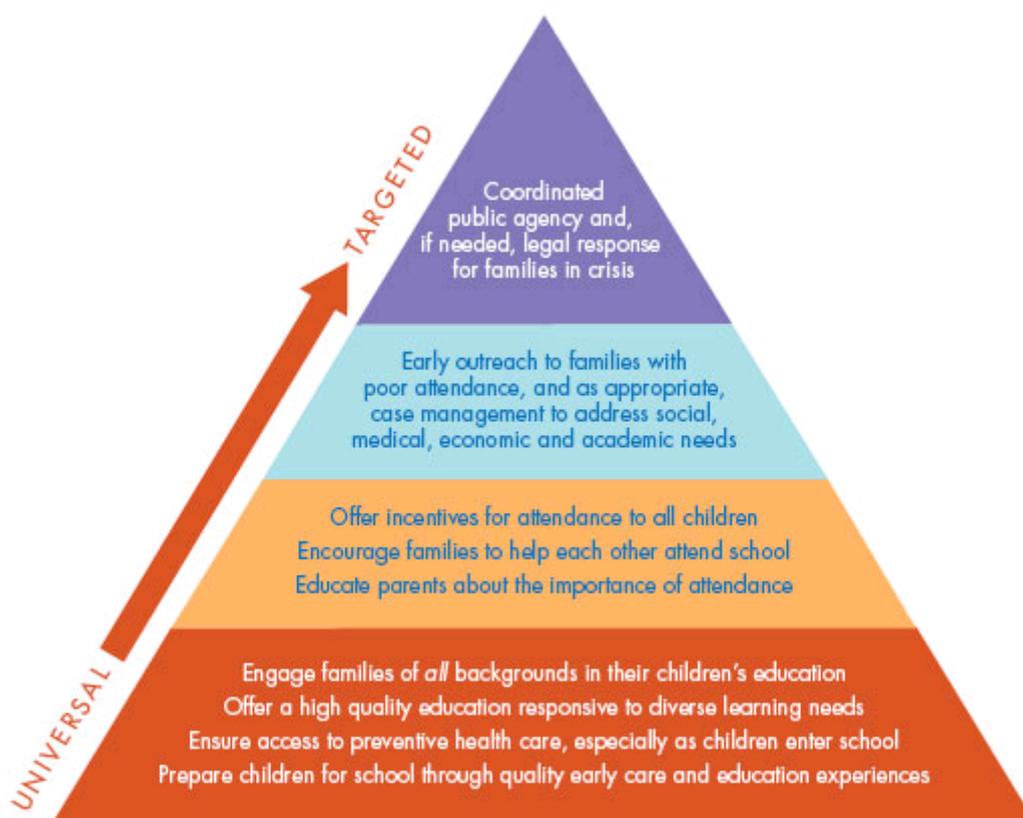
- Lack of food: Schools initiated breakfast programs and provided students with lunch.
- No School Uniforms: Schools provided students with uniforms and in some cases washed them where this was an issue.
- Trouble getting to school: Walking school buses were organised. Staff picked up children and brought them to school. Some schools were involved in the Rock On Police Programme.
- Health Issues: Informed the Health Nurse or other medical services.
- Truancy: Enlisted the help of Truancy Agencies and Social Workers In Schools.
- Family Crisis: Enlisted the assistance of Social Workers In Schools, other government agencies (CYPS), School Chaplin Service or local churches.

- Several schools mentioned that student attendance was down when the weather was bad. No schools mentioned a strategy or ability to influence weather patterns!

A Comprehensive Response To Attendance Issues

This pyramid is one way of looking at how a school can provide a comprehensive response to attendance issues. Universal strategies are at the base, with more targeted responses as you go up.

It illustrates how a school can look at what strategies it has in place and based on an assessment of its own strengths and challenges identify which strategies need to be put in place to support student attendance.



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Present, Engaged, and Accounted For:
The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades

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