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Addressing the Needs of the Saint Clair Attendance Policies

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Purpose

The Saint Clair School is a small rural school that houses kindergarten through twelfth grade in one school building. Currently the school has two attendance policies, one for elementary school and one for the high school. The two policies are very different in how they define attendance and choose to discipline absences. The purpose of this Capstone Project is to make recommendations to the Saint Clair School on how to make changes to their current attendance policies so that there are solid expectations from the students regarding absences.

Research Questions

What components make an effective attendance policy in a school that houses kindergarten through twelfth grade in one school building?

Literature Review

School attendance is very important when dealing with students and their education. It has been shown in many studies that attendance is important to a child learning because they must be present to learn and keep track of the information they are taught. "Occasional school absenteeism is typically non-problematic, but excessive absenteeism has been linked to serious problems such as violence, substance use, injury, suicide attempt, risky sexual behavior, and teenage pregnancy" (Almeida et al. 2006; Chou et al. 2006; Denny et al. 2003; Grunbaum et al. 2004; Guttmacher et al. 2002; Hallfors et al. 2002; Henry and Huizinga 2007). Excessive absenteeism also affects a child in their adulthood also. Some areas where the child may be affected are marital issues, occupational issues and other social issues that the student may encounter when they are adults (Hibbett and Fogelman 1990; Hibbett et al. 1990; Kogan et al. 2005; Tramontina et al. 2001; US Census Bureau 2005).

Attendance policies for schools have three main objectives they need to meet, 1) "to reconcile external requirements and legislation with the ethos and the character of the school. 2) to reinforce the consensus and values of the school and, 3) to improve consistency between staff" (Blith, 1999). According to Blith, consistency between staff at a school and quick effective response to absenteeism is most important to an effective attendance policy. Blith states that when a short term absence occurs an immediate response by school staff is the most effective way to reduce future absences. Another effective response to absenteeism is the expectation from the school to the family and student to contact the school within one school day to inform them that the student will not be attending school that day. If a parent does not contact the school, it is important for a school staff member to contact the parent or caregiver to infer if the student is excused or unexcused (p. 98).

Methodology

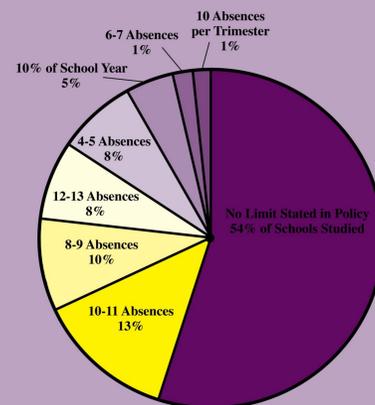
A content analysis was conducted with the current attendance policies for the elementary and high school at Saint Clair. These policies were then compared to attendance policies from 51 different rural Minnesota schools that house grades kindergarten through twelfth grade in one building. Several components of the attendance policies were compared, such as the maximum amount of absences allowed by each school, what types of interventions were used, and how many schools utilized such interventions. The policies were also compared to see if there were an appeal process that parents and students could make use of if they felt the school's decision was unjust.

Differences Between Grade School and High School Attendance Policies in Rural Minnesota Schools

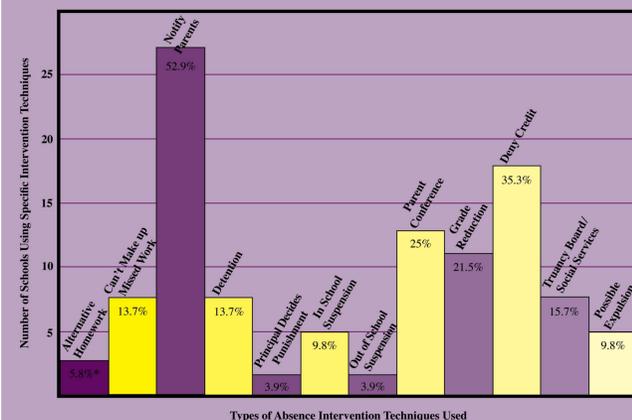
Same Policy (K-12)	Very Similar Policies (K-6 and 7-12)	Not Very Consistent Policies (K-6 and 7-12)
Battle Lake*	Badger*	Butterfield*
Becker	Floodwood*	Cleveland
Campbell-Tintah	Kimball* (k-5/6-12)	Climax
Comfrey	Lake City*	Hancock*
Edgerton	Minnesota	Mabel-Canton*
Fertile-Beltrami	New York Mills	Menahga
Esko	Pillager	Osakis*
Goodridge	Sebeka	Pine Island (k-8/9-12)
Grygla	Waubesa (k-4/5-12)	Randolph*
Henning	Wabasha Kellogg	Roseau*
Hill City		Rothsay
Kelliher*		Saint Clair*
Lancaster*		Verndale
Mahnomen		Underwood
Maple Lake		
Medford		
Milaca		
Moose Lake		
Nicollet		
Sleepy Eye		
Springfield		
Swanville		
Truman		
Warren		
Wrenshall		
Willow River		
Wabasso		

* Elementary absence policy not very explanatory and/or difficult to interpret

Maximum Number of Student Absences Allowed per School Year as Decided by School



Common Absence Intervention Techniques Outlined in School Policies



*Percentage of schools using technique (out of 51 schools surveyed)

Data/Results

The schools had a wide range of the maximum amount of absences allowed along with varying types of interventions used when issues with attendance became apparent. For example, the maximum absences per year ranged from 4 up to thirty, and many schools did not state how many absences they would allow their students. Schools relied on different processes for dealing with students who exceeded a specified amount of absences. Intervention techniques typically began with notifications to parents, increasing in severity until the student faced a truancy board, was turned over to social services, or was expelled. The most common forms of intervention included lowering the student's grade or denying credit. Twenty-eight of the fifty-one schools compared allowed parents and students to appeal the school's actions against the student while the others gave no mention of an appeals process.

Limitations and Barriers

There were a few limitations to this study, mainly deriving from the privacy policies of school districts. A major barrier is that not every school had their attendance policy available to the public, so a couple schools had to be excluded from the comparative study. Other limitations to the study included schools' absence policies not being very explicit, especially for elementary school, and policies being worded in such a way that multiple interpretations could be derived by the reader.

Conclusions & Recommendations

When comparing the different attendance policies, over half of the policies are consistent from kindergarten through twelfth grade. While looking at the policies, it seems that no individual k-12 policy proved any more successful at preventing absences than the others because there were no two policies that resembled each other. A uniform k-12 policy would decrease the number of student absences caused by confusion generated by moving from a less strict environment to a more structured absence policy in high school. A single attendance policy, and the possibility of a single handbook throughout elementary and high school, would assist students, parents, teachers, and staff with understanding basic rules and regulations. Through the variation of attendance policies across rural Minnesota schools, it is clear that Saint Clair School is not the only institution struggling with attendance policies and how to deter absenteeism.

Recommendations:

- ❖ Execute swift and immediate discipline for absences and keep them consistent for each student.
- ❖ Make the elementary and high school attendance policies similar throughout each grade.
- ❖ As an extension of the absence policy, create and utilize a single handbook for k – twelfth grades would reduce confusion, time spent in school board meetings, and costs.

References

References are available from the author upon request.