



# Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data

# National Forum on Education Statistics

## ■ Mission

- The mission of the Forum is to plan, recommend, and develop education data resources that will support local, state, and national efforts to improve public and private education throughout the United States.

## ■ Members

- Representatives of state and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs)
- Representatives of Offices of the U.S. Department of Education and other federal agencies
- Associate member representatives from U.S. territories, Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs), and national education associations

# Working Group Motivation

- The group was convened based on Forum discussions on and interest in chronic absenteeism.
- The group determined that a Forum resource could assist SEAs and LEAs with attendance data collection and reporting.
- The group created the *Forum Guide to Collecting and Reporting Attendance Data*, which substantively revises and expands the information published in *Every School Day Counts: The Forum Guide to Collecting and Reporting Attendance Data* (2009).

# Document Purpose & Audience

**Purpose:** To recommend practices that will help education agencies collect, report, and use attendance data to improve student and school outcomes.

**Audience:** Individuals concerned about the utility of attendance data, including staff in federal, state, and local education agencies whose responsibilities include any aspect of collecting, reporting, or using attendance data.

# Table of Contents

## ■ Chapter 1: Introduction

- discusses why school attendance and attendance data matter; and
- describes the relationship between attendance and student achievement and success.

## ■ Chapter 2: Attendance and Enrollment

- describes the relationships between attendance, enrollment, and withdrawals.

## ■ Chapter 3: Attendance Taxonomy

- explains the importance of using an attendance taxonomy; and
- provides an exhaustive, mutually exclusive attendance taxonomy.

# Table of Contents

- Chapter 4: Common Challenges and Best Practices
  - discusses attendance data practices in different types of educational programs and environments;
  - explores some of the challenges SEAs and LEAs may face in ensuring high-quality attendance data; and
  - suggests best practices for overcoming these challenges.
- Chapter 5: Tip Sheets for SEA & LEA Stakeholders
  - features tip sheets that summarize the key responsibilities, considerations, actions, outcomes, and motivations for a wide range of local and state stakeholders.
- Appendix A features a customizable letter template that can be used to communicate the importance of attendance to families.

# What is Attendance?

- **Present/Attending:** A student is “present” or “attending” if they are attending an instructional program approved by the state, district, and/or school.
- **Absent/Not Attending:** A student is “absent” or “not attending” if they are not physically present on school grounds and not participating in instruction or instruction-related activities at an approved off-grounds location.
- **Related terms:**
  - Chronic absenteeism: The number of students absent 10% or more school days (approximately 18 school days total) during the school year.
  - Average daily attendance (ADA): Defined by state law or regulations.
  - Enrollment: Whether a student's name was, is, or will be officially registered on the roll of a school or schools.

# Why is Attendance Important?

- A missed school day is a lost opportunity for students to learn.
- Students who attend school regularly achieve at higher levels than students who are not regularly in attendance:
  - improved educational engagement;
  - improved social engagement;
  - higher scores on standardized tests;
  - more likely to graduate; and
  - more likely to pursue postsecondary education.
- In 2013-14, more than 6.8 million students were chronically absent.

# Importance of Quality Attendance Data

- Quality attendance data can be used to
  - help ensure student safety and wellbeing;
  - identify students in need of targeted attendance interventions;
  - understand barriers to consistent attendance;
  - identify root causes of chronic absenteeism; and
  - input into early warning systems.

# Attributes of Quality Attendance Data

- **Accuracy:** The information must be correct and complete. Data entry procedures must be reliable to ensure that a report will have the same information regardless of who fills it out.
- **Security:** The confidentiality of student and staff records must be ensured, and data must be safe.
- **Utility:** The data have to provide the right information to answer the question that is asked.
- **Timeliness:** Deadlines are discussed and data are entered in a timely manner.

# Common Challenges and Strategies

## ■ Challenges

- Overlapping and/or nonexhaustive taxonomies
- Collecting standardized data under nonstandard conditions
- Data management mishaps
- Poor communication
- Outdated electronic attendance systems
- Attendance as an accountability measure

## ■ Strategies

- Build a culture of quality data and data use
- Review and improve attendance policies and procedures
- Establish a comprehensive and manageable taxonomy
- Engage and communicate with stakeholders
- Plan for nonstandard data
- Invest in student information systems
- Use communication technology systems

# Challenge: Overlapping and/or Nonexhaustive Taxonomies

- Attendance taxonomies that are not exhaustive, mutually exclusive, and easy to understand may result in incomplete or inaccurate attendance data collection and reporting.
- Characteristics of attendance taxonomies in need of improvement include
  - the taxonomy does not clearly distinguish between attendance categories;
  - the taxonomy is too broad, and does not account for every student attendance scenario;
  - the taxonomy is too narrow, making it lengthy and unmanageable; and
  - the taxonomy is difficult for staff to use accurately.

# Solution: Establish a Comprehensive and Manageable Taxonomy

- Attendance taxonomies should be exhaustive, mutually exclusive, and easy to understand.
- Characteristics of effective attendance taxonomies:
  - The taxonomy accounts for most attendance scenarios.
  - The taxonomy provides only one possible category for each attendance scenario.
  - The taxonomy's categories are clearly defined to promote ease of use.
- The guide includes an attendance taxonomy, which provides a voluntary, common set of student attendance categories that can help schools, districts, and states collect, compare, and use quality attendance data.

# Attendance Taxonomy Categories

## ■ Present Categories

- Disciplinary action, receiving instruction
- In school, regular instructional program
- Nontraditional school setting, regular instructional program
- Out of school, regular instructional program activity
- Out of school, school-approved extracurricular or cocurricular activity

## ■ Absent Categories

- Disciplinary action, not receiving instruction
- Family activity
- Family emergency or bereavement
- Illness, injury, health treatment, or examination
- Legal or judicial requirement
- Noninstructional activity recognized by state, district, or school
- Religious observation
- Student employment
- Student is skipping school
- Transportation not available
- Situation unknown

# Challenge: Collecting Standardized Data Under Nonstandard Conditions

- There are many variables that can complicate the ability to collect, record, and analyze attendance data in a comparable manner, including
  - enrollment in multiple instructional programs;
  - attendance in multiple school locations;
  - differences in virtual education attendance requirements; and
  - variations in school calendars across schools, districts, and states.

# Solution: Plan for Nonstandard Data

- Update data systems to account for attendance data that do not align with traditional attendance metrics.
- Account for unique variables and attendance situations in data analyses.
- Collect data at the smallest reasonable level and aggregate up.

# Challenge: Outdated Electronic Attendance Systems

- Manual paper systems or handwritten attendance tallies may compromise data quality.
- Data timeliness may be negatively impacted if attendance data are not processed promptly.
- Contact with parents and families may be delayed if attendance data are not reported promptly.
- Multiple entries of the same data may be needed if student data are not connected across the system.
- Data discrepancies may not be detected without built-in data quality checks.

# Solution: Invest in Student Information Systems

- Purchasing or upgrading a system to meet current needs can be a valuable financial investment.
- Some options include
  - upgrading an existing system;
  - purchasing a vendor-created system; and
  - building a new system.
- Systems are expected to meet local, state, and federal requirements.
- Useful systems features to consider include data validation reports, data quality dashboards, and early warning systems.

# Challenge: Poor Communication

- Communication barriers can pose significant challenges to attendance data quality:
  - Inaccurate, sporadic, or inconsistent communication between staff at the school, district, and state level may compromise data quality.
  - Staff may be unable to contact families about their student's attendance status in a timely manner if data reporting is delayed.
  - Families may be unfamiliar with attendance policies and procedures for reporting student absences.

# Solution: Use Technology to Improve Communication

- Staff have many options for communicating attendance data policies and procedures to agency staff, including training, written procedures, and webinars.
- Automated communication systems can be used to notify families when certain attendance situations are met.
- Publishing attendance policies online can help parents and staff understand attendance policies and requirements.
- Communication systems are expected to be compliant with all applicable Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations and policies.

# Tip Sheets

- The *Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data* includes role-specific tip sheets to help staff improve their attendance data practices
- Each tip sheet identifies
  - Responsibilities;
  - Things to Think About;
  - Things to Do; and
  - Outcomes (What's in it for Me?).
- The guide includes tip sheets for SEAs and LEAs:
  - Data Management and Governance Staff
  - Data Sharing and Use Staff
  - Teachers
  - School Office Staff
  - Principals and/or Designated School Officials
  - Central Office Staff
  - Superintendents

# Conclusion

Access to accurate, timely attendance data can guide the design of interventions intended to improve attendance and, in turn, promote positive student outcomes and increased student achievement.

# Attendance Data Working Group

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# Forum Resources

For more information about the Forum, please visit  
<https://nces.ed.gov/forum/index.asp>

Forum publications and resources are available for free at  
<http://nces.ed.gov/forum/publications.asp>

