

ATTENDANCE

MONDAY

TUESDAY

WEDNESDAY

THURSDAY

FRIDAY

EVERY SCHOOL DAY COUNTS

The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data

National
Forum
on Education
Statistics



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National Cooperative Education Statistics System

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) established the National Cooperative Education Statistics System (Cooperative System) to assist in producing and maintaining comparable and uniform information and data on early childhood education and on elementary and secondary education. These data are intended to be useful for policymaking at the federal, state, and local levels.

The National Forum on Education Statistics (the Forum) is an entity of the Cooperative System that, among its other activities, proposes principles of good practice to assist state and local education agencies in meeting this purpose. The Cooperative System and the Forum are supported in these endeavors by resources from NCES.

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February 2009

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Suggested Citation:

National Forum on Education Statistics. (2009). *Every School Day Counts: The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data* (NFES 2009–804). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

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A volunteer task force of the National Forum on Education Statistics produced this document. It was developed through the National Cooperative Education Statistics System and funded by the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education.

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Acknowledgments

The Attendance Task Force thanks the members of the Forum who contributed suggestions and resource materials that were necessary for the accuracy and usefulness of this Guide.

The Task Force also thanks the following people for valuable suggestions on improving the publication:

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Joyce Sackleh
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Waterford, Michigan

Raymond Martin
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Stephen Metcalf
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In addition, the Task Force thanks Frances Erlebacher for overall editing and the Creative Shop for designing this publication.



Foreword

The National Forum on Education Statistics (the Forum) is pleased to present *Every School Day Counts: The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data*. One goal of the Forum is to improve the quality of education data gathered for use by policymakers and program decisionmakers. An approach to furthering this goal has been to pool the collective experiences of Forum members to produce “best practice” guides in areas of high interest to those who collect, maintain, and use data about elementary and secondary education. Standardizing the way data systems record student attendance—that is, developing a taxonomy of common attendance codes—is one of those high interest areas.

Every school day counts in a student’s life. While research substantiates the importance of teacher effectiveness on student academic success, even the best teacher cannot be effective unless students are present in class. Regular attendance is essential to providing students with opportunities to learn, and these opportunities are limited when students do not attend school.

Moreover, access to accurate, timely data about whether individual students and groups of students regularly attend school is critical to making instructional and programmatic choices targeting student attendance behaviors. High-quality data enable educators to identify which students are absent; as well as the frequency of, and reasons for, their absences. By arming schools with actionable information, these data can guide the design of interventions intended to improve attendance and student achievement.

In this guide

- ✓ Chapter 1 discusses the objectives of the publication, and explains how the attendance taxonomy was developed.
- ✓ Chapter 2 provides a detailed description of each code in the attendance taxonomy.
- ✓ Chapter 3 discusses common challenges and effective practices related to attendance data, including developing an effective taxonomy; and ensuring needed data accuracy, communication, collaboration, planning, and automation.
- ✓ Chapter 4 shares examples of how states, school districts, and schools are using detailed attendance data to improve student attendance behaviors.
- ✓ Appendix A includes a crosswalk between the attendance codes taxonomy and reasons for student absences identified in available state and school district resources.
- ✓ Appendix B identifies differences among state statutes currently used to categorize educational activities that take place outside of school.
- ✓ Appendix C lists additional Forum resources for schools and districts.

The National Cooperative Education Statistics System

The work of the Forum is a key aspect of the National Cooperative Education Statistics System (Cooperative System). The Cooperative System was established to produce and maintain, with the cooperation of the states, comparable and uniform educational information and data that are useful for policymaking at the federal, state, and local levels. To assist in

meeting this goal, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), within the Institute of Education Sciences in the U.S. Department of Education, established the National Forum on Education Statistics (the Forum) to improve the collection, reporting, and use of elementary and secondary education statistics. The Forum deals with issues in education data policy, sponsors innovations in data collection and reporting, and provides technical assistance to improve state and local data systems.

Development of Forum Products

Members of the Forum establish task forces to develop best-practice guides in data-related areas of interest to federal, state, and local education agencies. They are assisted in this work by NCES, but the content comes from the collective experience of the state and school district task force members who review all products iteratively throughout the development process. Documents prepared, reviewed, and approved by task force members undergo a formal public review. This public review consists of focus groups with representatives of the product's intended audience, review sessions at relevant regional or national conferences, or technical reviews by acknowledged experts in the field. In addition, all draft documents are posted on the Forum website prior to publication so that any interested individuals or organizations can provide feedback. After the task force oversees the integration of public review comments and reviews the document a final time, publications are subject to examination by members of the Forum standing committee sponsoring the project. Finally, the entire Forum (approximately 120 members) reviews and formally votes to approve all documents prior to publication.



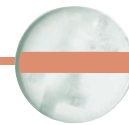
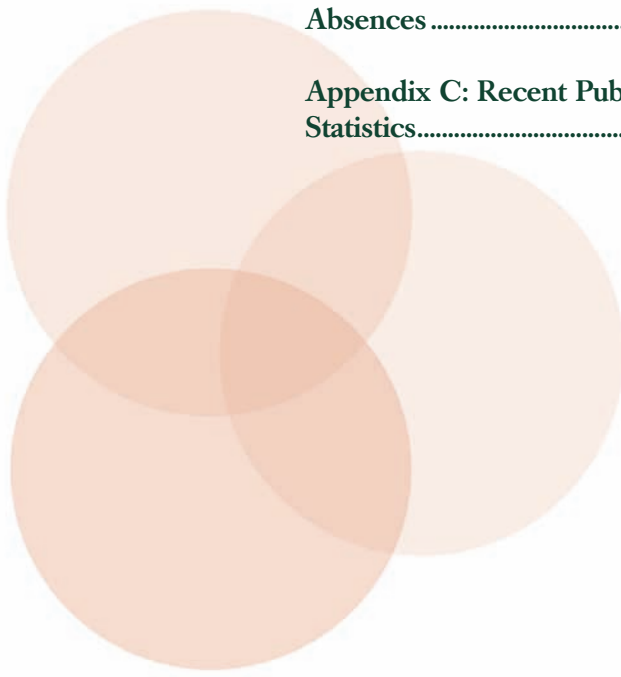


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CHAPTER 1 Introduction

ATTENDANCE

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FRIDAY

Every school day counts in a child's academic life...

Why Does Attendance Matter?

A missed school day is a lost opportunity for students to learn. In this era of increased accountability for states, districts, and schools, the connection between student attendance and learning is being studied more than ever before. As a result, education agencies are asked with increasing frequency to report attendance data in a standard manner to allow comparisons across organizations and jurisdictions.

The primary rationale for high-quality attendance data is the relationship between student attendance and student achievement. Teacher effectiveness is the strongest school-related determinant of student success,¹ but chronic student absence reduces even the best teacher's ability to provide learning opportunities. Students who attend school regularly have been shown to achieve at higher levels than students who do not have regular attendance. This relationship between attendance and achievement may appear early in a child's school career. A recent study looking at young children found that absenteeism in kindergarten was associated with negative first grade outcomes such as greater absenteeism in subsequent years and lower achievement in reading, math, and general knowledge.²

Poor attendance has serious implications for later outcomes as well. High school dropouts have been found to exhibit a history of negative behaviors, including high levels of absenteeism throughout their childhood, at higher rates than high school graduates.³ These differences in absentee rates were observed as early as kindergarten, and students who eventually dropped out of high school missed significantly more days of school in first grade than their peers who graduated from high school. In eighth grade, this pattern was even more apparent and, by ninth grade, attendance was shown to be a key indicator significantly correlated with high school graduation.⁴

The effects of lost school days build up one absence at a time on individual students. Penalties for students who miss school may unintentionally worsen the situation. The disciplinary response to absenteeism too often includes loss of course credits, detention, and suspension. Any absence, whether excused or not, denies students the opportunity to learn in accordance with the school's instructional program, but students who miss school are sometimes further excluded from learning opportunities as a consequence of chronic absenteeism.

Background

The National Forum on Education Statistics (the Forum) Attendance Task Force that developed this document began its work as the Truancy Working Group in 2006, which

Research shows that attendance is an important factor in student achievement.

Student attendance matters, and the quality of attendance data matters as well.

was focused on defining “truancy” under the reporting requirements of Title IV of the federal Safe and Drug Free Schools program. This group determined that truancy was actually an extreme case within the broader issue of student attendance, warranting guidance from the Forum. And, the Task Force was convinced that high-quality attendance data can help educators understand where students are during the school day and can be used to help staff intervene in a manner that improves student attendance and achievement.

The Truancy Working Group became the Attendance Task Force in July 2007. Task Force members used their experience and a wide range of resources to generate a list of common attendance codes and develop the attendance code taxonomy presented in chapter 2. State attendance statutes were aggregated for all 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The Task Force reviewed this list of reasons for student absences to determine how each state’s policies could be reflected in this taxonomy. Reasons that applied to students who were no longer enrolled were excluded from this document, which addresses only the attendance status of enrolled students. Students who have withdrawn from a school are not subject to attendance codes because they are no longer enrolled in the school.

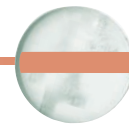
For a taxonomy of student exit codes, see the Forum document, *Accounting for Every Student: A Taxonomy for Standard Student Exit Codes*, available at http://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2006804.asp.

State attendance policies are the basis of attendance codes used by states and school districts. Therefore, attendance categories in this guide were derived from the attendance codes used by states and school districts. To ensure that the taxonomy was based on real-world practice, Forum members from several state education agencies and school districts submitted their attendance codes for a comparative review. These existing attendance codes were collapsed into the smallest number of categories that covered every reported code while maintaining states’ or districts’ differences. For example, a number of state or district policies identified “absences for bereavement” as a separate category while other states categorized bereavement under the more general “absences for family reasons.” The Forum attendance taxonomy includes both categories. However, some attendance codes were combined; the taxonomy includes a single category for “legal or judicial requirement” that includes absence for judicial proceedings, trial dates, or time in court custody. See appendix A for a crosswalk between the taxonomy and reported state and district reasons for student absences.

Objectives

In alignment with the Forum’s mission to support the development of comprehensive data systems, improve data coordination, and lead discussions on key data issues, this publication has the following four objectives:

- ✓ explaining why high-quality attendance data matter;
- ✓ creating a standard attendance taxonomy that defines “attending/present” and “not attending/absent,” categorizes attendance codes in an exhaustive and mutually exclusive way, and supports improved attendance data quality and comparability between states and districts;
- ✓ identifying common challenges to collecting accurate and comparable attendance data and providing practical suggestions for addressing these obstacles; and
- ✓ demonstrating how detailed, accurate attendance data can supply actionable information to guide policy and procedural changes in schools, districts, and states with a goal of improving student attendance.



Why does data quality matter?

High-quality attendance data serve as the foundation for understanding where students are during the school day. These data provide the information needed for schools to formulate practices, programs, and policies to improve attendance rates. Comparable data also allow comparisons between schools, districts, and states—which is necessary for educators to identify relationships between student attendance and student achievement, promotion from grade to grade, and high school graduation. Districts and schools depend on accurate attendance data for a number of other reasons as well. For example, staff need to know which students are under the schools' supervision each day as a part of the district's general building, staff, instructional, and fiscal management responsibilities. This information is also necessary on testing days for determining whether schools and districts are meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Moreover, these data become critical in the case of national, local, or family crises.

What does the attendance taxonomy do?

This attendance code taxonomy is an exhaustive, mutually exclusive set of codes that document a student's attendance status at any given time.

The taxonomy presented in chapter 2 contributes a basis for standardizing student attendance data, which are currently documented and coded in a number of different ways across the nation. Because of these differences, there is a common need for the means to translate state or local definitions into a universal accounting of attendance data. The need for this coordination is compounded by the growing variety of educational settings in which students spend their time, including virtual schools, institutions of higher learning, and work–study settings. In the absence of such a national standard, attendance data cannot be compared across schools, districts, or states, making the comparison of different attendance interventions and programs difficult, if not impossible.

The taxonomy also allows users to compare absenteeism, average daily attendance (ADA), and other high-interest statistics because it facilitates the exchange of transcripts across districts that may have different attendance policies. Finally, the taxonomy increases the trustworthiness of data reported to community and policy groups because of its foundation of standard terms, categories, and definitions.

What are common challenges to and practical solutions for improving attendance data?

Improving the quality of attendance data involves many functions within districts and schools. These include local technology capabilities and procedures, as well as services targeted at student populations that may otherwise be difficult to track. Procedural concerns highlighted in chapter 3 include administrative guidance such as clarifying how attendance data are coded in the school and district. Other concerns are related to organizational challenges like establishing a culture of data quality for all staff. Management issues are also of concern including dealing with students who are regularly scheduled to be off site or participating in virtual education. Technological challenges include automating data systems, upgrading technology resources, training staff to use technology to manage data, and integrating data and systems that are otherwise not interoperable because of hardware or software limitations.

How can schools and districts act on the data to improve student attendance?

The taxonomy presents a detailed way to collect attendance data but, for the information to be useful, schools and districts need to be able to act on the data. Many schools and districts use detailed data on attendance to guide policies or practices that improve student attendance. The examples presented in chapter 4 may inspire other education organizations to examine their local attendance policies, analyze student data, and identify new strategies for improving student attendance rates.

Using the Attendance Codes Taxonomy

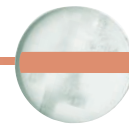
There are considerable variations in coding systems among states and often among school districts within a single state, and this taxonomy is designed to accommodate these variations. Users can “crosswalk” their existing attendance codes to the taxonomy. For example, in one district a student might be considered “absent–excused” if he is serving as a poll watcher at an election; in another district he might not be considered absent at all. Both districts could use the same category in the taxonomy to describe the student’s activity that day, while interpreting the category in line with their own policies.

This taxonomy was designed for use as part of an overall student information system, and potential users should keep several factors in mind when they consider how they will use the attendance taxonomy.

ATTENDANCE CODES ARE NOT ENOUGH. The categories themselves do not include all of the information that a school district would probably want to maintain about a student’s attendance. The taxonomy does not address the time period for which attendance is recorded; that is, whether an entry reflects attendance status at one time during the day, attendance during each class period, or attendance for some portion of the school day (for example, absent for doctor’s appointment in the morning but present in the afternoon). Also, states and districts will vary in how they convert attendance data into decisions about what constitutes tardiness, what comprises chronic absenteeism, etc. Users will have to make judgment calls about how to classify unusual attendance situations. Finally, the definitions cannot vouch for the accuracy of the information. A school or district adopting this coding system will still need to determine procedures for confirming and documenting students’ attendance status in order to ensure acceptable data quality.

THIS GUIDE WORKS BEST WITH AN AUTOMATED STUDENT INFORMATION SYSTEM. The taxonomy includes 15 attendance codes plus a temporary “place holder” condition of “absent–situation unknown.” While it is possible to record and maintain this information on paper forms, an automated system would be far more efficient. For example, an automated information system could conceivably enter “out of school–regular instructional program activity” for every student when the roster of parental permissions is received, while a paper system would require entering the information for each student by hand, one record at a time.

THIS GUIDE IS NOT INTENDED TO CHANGE STATE AND LOCAL ATTENDANCE POLICIES. State laws, regulations, and policies determine what constitutes an absence, the definition of tardiness, the time unit for counting attendance (e.g., minutes, hours, periods, days), whether an absence is excused, and the definition of truancy. This taxonomy



does not address these important issues. The guide is not intended to change state and local policies related to these choices, but it may be a useful tool for state boards and legislatures when considering future action related to attendance decisionmaking.

THIS GUIDE DOES NOT DISTINGUISH BETWEEN EXCUSED AND UNEXCUSED ABSENCES. All absences reduce a student’s opportunity to learn. Thus, this guide focuses on where students are during the day and does not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences.⁵ The distinction between “excused” and “unexcused” is made by state and district policymakers, who also determine the consequences associated with unexcused absences. Users will need to supplement this taxonomy of attendance codes with an indicator of whether a type of absence is excused or unexcused.

¹ Adelman, C. (2006). *The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School through College*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

² Romero, M., and Lee, Y. (2007). *A National Portrait of Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades*. New York, NY: The National Center for Children in Poverty.

³ Hickman, G.P., Bartholomew, M., and Mathwig, J. (2007). *The Differential Development Trajectories of Rural High School Dropouts and Graduates: Executive Summary*. Phoenix, AZ: The College of Teacher Education and Leadership at the Arizona State University at the West Campus.

⁴ Allensworth, E., and Easton, J.Q. (2005). *The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

⁵ The National Center for Education Statistics *Handbooks Online* provides the following definitions:

Excused absence: “A student is not present at school or at a school-endorsed or sponsored activity, but is temporarily excused from attendance because he or she: 1) is ill and attendance in school would endanger his or her health or the health of others; 2) has an immediate family member who is seriously ill or has died; 3) is observing a recognized religious holiday of his or her faith; or 4) is otherwise excused from school in accordance with board policies.”

Unexcused absence: “A student is not present at school or at a school-endorsed or sponsored activity without acceptable cause, parental knowledge, or authorization from the school administrator or his or her agent.”



CHAPTER 2

Attendance Codes Taxonomy Category Descriptions

A student is considered “present” if he or she attends an instructional program that has been approved by the state and/or school...

This taxonomy includes two major categories: Attending/Present and Not Attending/Absent. The terms “attending” and “present” are used interchangeably in this publication, as are the terms “not attending” and “absent.” Each category is further broken out into codes that describe how the student spends his or her time, whether present or absent. These codes were developed to help schools collect and analyze data on student absences and design interventions that will improve attendance and achievement. There is one code in the taxonomy to describe each instance of student attendance. The codes are intended to address the following information needs:

- ✓ Where is the student?
- ✓ Is the student participating in regular curricular instruction or instruction related to the regular curriculum?
- ✓ Under whose authority is the student?

It is important to remember that statutes and practices differ from state to state and across localities concerning recognized reasons for student absences. The subcategories in this taxonomy do not address whether or not an absence is excused. States and districts are responsible for making these determinations. Appendix A presents a crosswalk between the taxonomy and a sample of reasons for student absences from states and districts. Examples of how state statutes differ in defining attendance are highlighted in appendix B.

For the purposes of this document, attendance is defined as follows:

A student is “present” or “attending” if attending an instructional program that has been approved by the state and/or school. Three assumptions apply:

- ASSUMPTION 1:** Each site in which a student is enrolled (whether singly- or dually-enrolled) is responsible for taking attendance for the day or portion of the day.
- ASSUMPTION 2:** School is in session for the day or part of the day. Students are not counted as present or absent if school is closed.
- ASSUMPTION 3:** Students who have transferred out of the school, dropped out, completed school, or are otherwise not enrolled are not counted as present or absent.

Category 1: Attending/Present

Definition of Attending/Present:
A student is “present” if attending an instructional program approved by the state and/or school.

Category 1 includes students who are “attending” or “present.” A student is present if attending an instructional program that has been approved by the school and/or state. This definition means that school, district, or state personnel have deemed the activity to be part of the student’s educational program. It encompasses learning that takes place in a variety of settings outside of the classroom, if such placement has been recognized as part of the student’s approved educational program.



CATEGORY 1A: Present–In school, regular instructional program

The student is in class. This includes attendance at sites other than the school of record if the site is part of the student’s regular instructional program approved by the school and/or state. Examples of other sites are institutions of higher education, vocational/technical centers, and special education centers.

CATEGORY 1B: Present–Nontraditional school setting, regular instructional program

The student is engaged in his or her regular instructional program in a nontraditional school setting. Examples include hospital- or homebound instruction, as well as off-campus distance education.

CATEGORY 1C: Present–Disciplinary action, receiving instruction

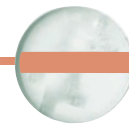
The student has been removed from the regular instructional setting for disciplinary reasons and is receiving instruction. In-school suspension typically falls within this category, but it also includes out-of-school suspension if instructional services are provided.

CATEGORY 1D: Present–Out of school, regular instructional program activity

The student is involved in an activity outside of school that is part of his or her regular instructional program, such as a field trip or work–study. The student is under the direct supervision of school personnel or someone who has been designated to act in place of school personnel.

CATEGORY 1E: Present–Out of school, school-approved extracurricular or cocurricular activity

The student is outside of school, participating in instruction that is related to, but not part of, the regular curriculum. Examples include school-approved extracurricular or cocurricular activities, such as a debate, an athletic competition, or a conference that has educational value.



Category 2: Not Attending/Absent

Definition of Not Attending/Absent:

A student is “absent” if he or she is not physically present on school grounds and is not participating in instruction or instruction-related activities at an approved off-grounds location.

Category 2 includes students who are “not attending” or “absent.” A student is absent if he or she is not physically present on school grounds and is not participating in instruction or instruction-related activities at an approved off-grounds location. This taxonomy does not determine whether or not these absences are “excused.” States and districts are responsible for making these determinations.

CATEGORY 2A: Absent–Noninstructional activity recognized by state or school

The student is out of school and involved in a noninstructional activity recognized by the school or state. Examples include such civic activities as involvement with the National Guard, service as a legislative page, jury duty, or participation on an election board. Note that “recognized activities” are not necessarily considered “excused” absences.

CATEGORY 2B: Absent–Religious observation

The student is out of school observing a religious holiday or participating in religious instruction.

CATEGORY 2C: Absent–Illness, injury, health treatment, or examination

The student is out of school because of personal physical or mental illness or injury, including health-related appointments.

CATEGORY 2D: Absent–Family emergency or bereavement

The student is out of school for unexpected family reasons. Examples include lack of child care for a parenting student, care for a sick relative, and bereavement for a family member.

CATEGORY 2E: Absent–Disciplinary action, not receiving instruction

The student has been removed from his or her regular instructional setting for disciplinary reasons and is not receiving instruction. This may include either in-school or out-of-school suspension if instructional services are not provided. It does not include expulsion since expelled students are not enrolled in school.

CATEGORY 2F: Absent–Legal or judicial requirement

The student is out of school due to a legal obligation to attend judicial proceedings, required appointments, or trial or hearing dates. Or, the student is serving time in jail or is in the custody of the court and is not receiving instruction.

CATEGORY 2G: Absent–Family activity

The student is out of school because of a family vacation or other activity. This also includes family time related to a parent being deployed to, or returning from, military duty.

CATEGORY 2H: Absent–Student employment

The student is out of school for employment purposes. This does not include work–study or school-related employment.

CATEGORY 2I: Absent–Transportation not available

The student is not in school because transportation is not available. For example, roads have been closed due to flooding.

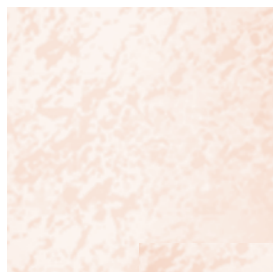
CATEGORY 2J: Absent–Student is skipping school

The student is willfully not attending school without parent or school approval.

CATEGORY 2K: Absent–Situation unknown

The student is not present and the reason for the absence is not known.

“Situation unknown” is a default category to be used only until the correct attendance category is determined.



CHAPTER 3

Common Challenges to Collecting Attendance Code Data and Effective Practices for Addressing These Challenges

Districts will face challenges in achieving high-quality attendance data...

The taxonomy presented in chapter 2 demonstrates how student attendance data can be categorized and standardized to improve data quality, interventions and policies, and nationwide comparability. Yet, several procedural and technological challenges still jeopardize the accuracy, utility, and comparability of attendance data. This chapter will explore these challenges and suggest practices for addressing them based on state and district experience.

Challenge: Overlapping and/or Nonexhaustive Taxonomies

Every school or school district maintains student attendance records. However, not all record systems distinguish attendance conditions clearly. Categories can be so broad that the information is of limited usefulness: “present” and “absent” cover most situations but do not tell a teacher or administrator whether a student is ill or simply “cutting class.” On the other hand, if lists of reasons for absenteeism are too long, record keepers are likely to use only a few of the codes. The codes must be easily understood. If it is difficult for the person filling out the attendance form to judge what category an incident of absenteeism falls into, the information provided will be unreliable. All of these data quality problems make the information less useful. And, the less data are used, the less likely it is that attention will be paid to data quality.

An *exhaustive* taxonomy accounts for all attendance scenarios without using an “other” code. A *mutually exclusive* taxonomy provides only one possible code for each attendance scenario.

A set of attendance code choices—a taxonomy—that cannot account for all attendance scenarios without use of an “other” code invariably results in a loss of information about the absence. A taxonomy that does not adequately distinguish its terms permits overlap in attendance scenarios; in other words, more than one code may be appropriate for a single situation. If the school’s taxonomy is not exhaustive and mutually exclusive, data will not be accurately categorized and data quality will suffer. Schools, districts, and states also need a taxonomy of attendance codes that are feasible to collect accurately and on a regular basis. The number of codes should be adequate to categorize every student attendance scenario, yet not so granular to be unmanageable.

RECOMMENDATION: ESTABLISH A COMPREHENSIVE, YET MANAGEABLE TAXONOMY.

A key to improving the quality of attendance data is establishing a taxonomy that covers all situations with minimal chance of confusion. This publication presents a taxonomy that is an exhaustive, mutually exclusive set of codes that document a student's attendance status at any given time. By its "exhaustive" nature, the taxonomy accounts for the full range of possible attendance scenarios that may arise in a K–12 education setting. "Mutually exclusive" means that each situation can be categorized by only one code. In the context of attendance codes, this means that one and only one code is necessary and sufficient to categorize any student's attendance status. Such a taxonomy is presented in chapter 2 of this document.

Challenge: Data Management and Communication

Data quality is dependent upon the quality of the system that collects, edits, and maintains the information. Quality suffers when education organizations lack clear policies and procedures for entering, verifying, and validating attendance data. Often, attendance clerks or other data entry staff do not have the time (and freedom from distractions) needed to ensure accuracy. They may not always understand their data quality responsibilities and the school's or district's procedures.

Clear communication is required among school personnel and between the state, school, and community. Data quality suffers when school staff members are not aware of attendance policies or lack consistent terms, definitions, rules, and procedures when dealing with attendance issues. Problems also arise when staff members fail to communicate effectively with parents and guardians to track students, identify a student's enrollment status, and gather the information needed to apply attendance codes correctly.

RECOMMENDATION: BUILD A CULTURE OF QUALITY DATA. A strong, commonly shared commitment to high-quality information resources can do a lot to ensure good data management and open communication. Developing a systematic process for encouraging and supporting data quality is the subject of two publications developed by the National Forum on Education Statistics. The *Forum Guide to Building a Culture of Quality Data: A School and District Resource* describes how to establish or improve a culture of data quality, including specific roles and responsibilities for principals, teachers, office staff, school board members, superintendents, data stewards/coordinators, and technology support personnel. A more recent publication, the *Forum Curriculum for Improving Education Data: A Resource for Local Education Agencies*, builds on the Forum Guide by providing lesson plans, instructional handouts, and resource materials for training K–12 school and district staff in developing this culture.

A culture of data quality encompasses both effective data collection and verification procedures. In other words, any effort to build a culture of quality data should include a standard process for communication between the front office, teachers, families, and staff at any learning site attended by the student. Training on the process and any changes to the process can help maintain agreement about standard operations across all stakeholder groups.

For more information about building a culture of data quality, see the following free resources from the Forum:

- ✓ *Forum Guide to Building a Culture of Quality Data: A School and District Resource*, available at http://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2005801.asp; and
- ✓ *Forum Curriculum for Improving Education Data: A Resource for Local Education Agencies*, available at http://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2007808.asp and <http://www.academypa.org/sifa/splashDQ.html>.



State and Local Efforts to Improve Data Quality

In Kentucky, a state-level audit of the attendance data collection process at selected schools has emerged as a helpful practice. In advance of the audit, the Kentucky Department of Education supplies each of the selected schools with a checklist of 32 attendance-related documents that will be requested during the audit. These documents include attendance records in addition to school schedules, teacher information, transportation information, and materials regarding specific groups of students (e.g., dropouts, hospitalized or homebound students, suspended students, seniors, students in the early grades, and program-based groups).

The checklist also includes the state's Attendance Audit Questionnaire. This survey gathers information about a school's attendance system, master schedule, data entry and verification procedures, monthly teacher reports on attendance, and the number of students involved with virtual high school, performance-based courses, and placement other than at school sites. Completed questionnaires must be signed by the principal or his/her designee before being submitted to the state education agency.

Additionally, attendance clerks in the Jefferson County Public Schools monitor school data with oversight and guidance from internal auditors who rotate between schools for on-site support. Moreover, personnel at the district office are assigned to specific schools for extra assistance including monitoring and problem solving.

Finally, school and district staff members use a handbook to guide truancy reduction efforts. This handbook provides detailed instructions about accessing the district's computer system and logging interventions with the families of absent students. In order to improve the accuracy of the attendance data, the county advises that attendance clerks be housed in a quiet setting. Another best practice is to alert attendance clerks through the computer system when a student acquires three unexcused absences.

RECOMMENDATION: COMMUNICATE THE IMPORTANCE OF BETTER ATTENDANCE DATA.

A commitment to data use actually leads to better data. One key to improving attendance data may be highlighting for educators the benefits of better attendance data and the potential these data have for improving student achievement. Low quality, vague attendance data cannot be trusted to guide schools and districts toward policies and practices that improve student attendance. High-quality, detailed attendance data can provide schools and districts with information that can be confidently used to guide improvements in policies and practices that impact student attendance. Leaders at the state, district, and local levels can build a demand for better attendance data—from those who collect the data to those who use the data—by reinforcing this opportunity to improve student attendance, which is linked to more positive student outcomes.

Challenge: Standard Data Under Nonstandard Conditions

First, the collection of attendance data is complicated by the unit of time used to track attendance—whether by the minute, hour, class period, half-day, or full-day. For example, consider the contrast between elementary schools, where students are typically with the same teacher all day, and middle and high schools where students may change teachers each period throughout the day. While it can be efficient to mark elementary students absent or present for the whole day, it may be more suitable to capture older students' attendance for each class period. Furthermore, daily attendance counts will not be correct if staff do not understand how to aggregate data from separate classrooms, buildings, or school periods.

For more information about data from nontraditional education settings, see the *Forum Guide to Elementary/Secondary Virtual Education* at http://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2006803.asp.

Second, certain students may be difficult to track for attendance purposes because, for example, they spend a portion of the day or week at a special education center, take a class at a postsecondary institution or private school, participate in a vocational class, or temporarily attend a juvenile correctional facility. Care must be taken not to duplicate attendance data when students are counted in more than one setting at the same time. Another category of students who can be difficult to track are those taking virtual courses. Attendance in an online setting may be defined differently than attendance in a physical classroom due to the focus on student-paced course completion instead of seat time.

Finally, conflicts between software programs provided by vendors and a school's data collection system can present substantial challenges. When, for example, attendance software collects data based on a half-day unit of time, but state or local policy requires full-day measures, the school faces a conflict. Even when data are transformed to bridge these differences, data quality often suffers as a result of the added manipulation of data.

RECOMMENDATION: PLAN CAREFULLY WITH INPUT FROM ATTENDANCE DATA COLLECTORS, REPORTERS, AND USERS. By involving a broad base of representatives of the potential users of attendance data, those who will report or record attendance, and the many settings in which students receive instruction, schools can develop a reliable data collection system. The units of time represented in attendance reporting must be as clearly defined as the attendance categories are. Measuring attendance in non-traditional/multiple site settings requires clearly defined and commonly applied attendance codes, as well as effective communication among staff at each site.

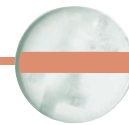
Technology can also help track student "attendance" in online schools. Participation can be verified in such ways as documenting when students log on and off of their computers, the number of keystrokes, and logging when students call their teachers. See the *Forum Guide to Elementary/Secondary Virtual Education* for guidance on data collection, reporting, and policymaking for virtual education.

Careful planning at the district level, coordinated with state and federal reporting needs, will produce clear specifications for the attendance data system. These specifications are the foundation for conversations with in-house programmers or information software vendors. The Forum has a suite of products that can help decisionmaking about many aspects of hardware and software systems.

For more information about data system technology initiatives, see the *Forum Unified Education Technology Suite* at http://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_tech_suite.asp.

Challenge: System Automation

Why does technology matter? In organizations that lack automated data systems, school staff members are more likely to fall behind when trying to track student attendance on a daily or more frequent basis. Although technology has improved greatly over the years, attendance continues to be recorded by hand in some organizations, which invariably leads to entry errors and data quality concerns. Finally, a school without an automated data system may fail to contact parents in a timely manner when students don't come to school. This may not be, strictly speaking, a data quality issue, but the timeliness of those calls to parents is often a key factor in attendance intervention efforts.



RECOMMENDATION: UPGRADE INFORMATION SYSTEMS. Organizations with inadequate technology may need to consider the feasibility of upgrading existing data systems or purchasing/building a new system. In addition to hardware and software costs, any changes to the data system must be accompanied by training if staff members are to be expected to have the expertise needed to collect and report high-quality attendance data.

RECOMMENDATION: AUTOMATE COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY. Many technological options are available for improving communications related to student attendance issues. For example, some school districts use an automated system to notify parents each time a student is absent. These notification systems can generate letters, email, or phone messages designed by policymakers. Another communications strategy is to provide daily correspondence through one of these media to notify parents of a student's attendance status (either present or absent). Other intervals may be appropriate for automated communications, such as when consequences are triggered by a certain number of absences. No matter the specific communication medium, district upon district has shown that proactive communication with parents is an effective tool for remedying student attendance concerns.

Summary of Recommendations

- ✓ Establish a mutually exclusive and exhaustive, yet manageable taxonomy.
- ✓ Build a culture of quality data.
- ✓ Plan carefully with input from attendance data collectors, reporters, and users.
- ✓ Upgrade information systems.
- ✓ Automate communication technology.



CHAPTER 4 Acting on the Data

Real students improved their attendance behaviors and educational opportunities as a result of educators acting on attendance data, working with families, and increasing the effectiveness of attendance intervention efforts...

Collecting detailed attendance data as suggested by the taxonomy in chapter 2 can help states, districts, and schools identify patterns in the frequency of student absences and reasons why students are missing school. Once education leaders understand how student absences are affecting their community, they are in a position to make the case for changes that will improve student attendance. This chapter presents examples of state, district, and school actions that can serve as models for education organizations across the country hoping to improve attendance data and solve attendance problems.

A variety of approaches can be used to help educators understand the scope of a school's or district's attendance problems. *Qualitative* analyses include taking a closer look at local attendance policies to determine whether they support optimal student attendance. *Quantitative* analyses include investigating whether student attendance data correlate with student demographic groups, academic performance, grade levels, retention patterns, school completion, and graduation.

Attendance Data in Action

The states, districts, and schools profiled in this chapter transformed attendance data into actionable information to improve attendance rates. Real students improved their attendance behaviors and educational opportunities as a result of educators acting on attendance data, working with families, and improving the effectiveness of attendance intervention efforts.

Improving attendance and achievement: Sioux Falls School District, South Dakota

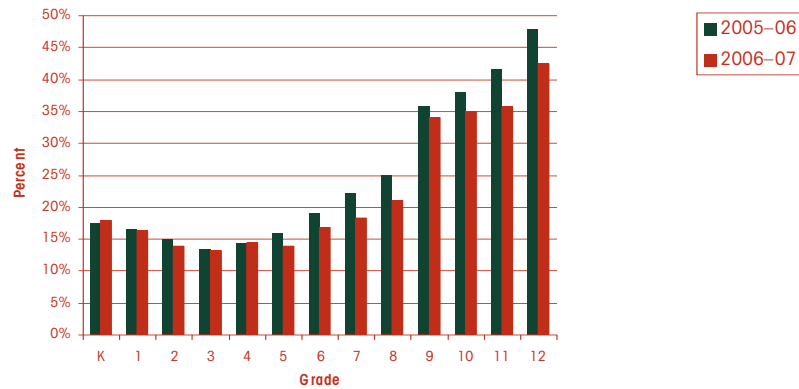
As school leaders in Sioux Falls, South Dakota reviewed the challenges of meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP), a common theme surfaced—student absenteeism. With access to detailed attendance records, the district took a long, focused look at the probable causes of their absenteeism and implemented a plan to educate the public about policy changes intended to boost attendance and achievement.

After analyzing two years of detailed student attendance data, district leaders identified which grades had the highest absence rates and at what grade intervals the greatest hikes in absenteeism occurred. Figure 1 shows the overall percentage of students with more than 10 absences at each grade level for school years 2005–06 and 2006–07. School

Better student attendance starts with interventions that are based on detailed attendance data.

Around the country, states, districts, and schools are acting on attendance data to improve student attendance.

Figure 1. Percentage of students with 10+ absences by grade level, Sioux Falls School District, South Dakota: School Years 2005–06 and 2006–07

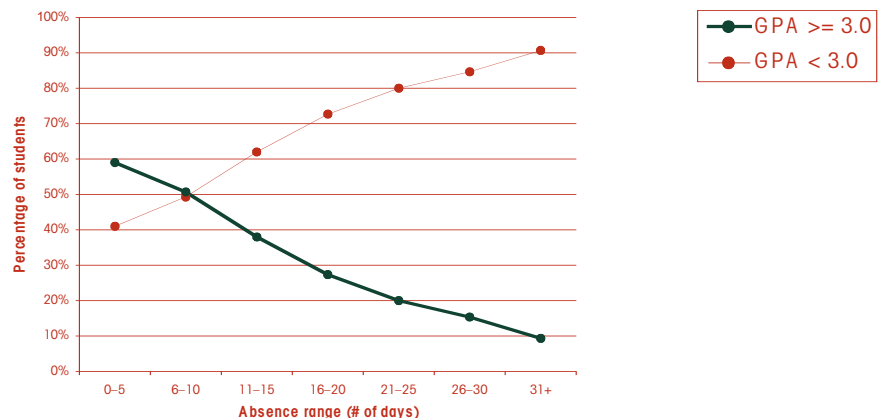


Source: Sioux Falls School District, South Dakota, May 2008

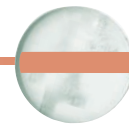
leaders were concerned about absentee rates associated with the transition between schools. They saw that, during both school years, the greatest increases in the percentage of students with more than 10 absences were between the fifth and sixth grades, between the eighth and ninth grades, and between the eleventh and twelfth grades. Twelfth graders exhibited the highest rates of overall chronic absence with more than 40 percent of students missing more than 10 school days during each school year.

Moreover, figure 2 shows that district analysts found a statistically significant negative correlation between grade point average (GPA) and number of days absent from school.⁶ Put simply, it shows that the more absences students had, the more likely they were to have a GPA below 3.0 and, conversely, the fewer the absences, the more likely students were to have a 3.0 GPA or higher. This relationship was consistent for students at every performance level, regardless of whether or not the absence was excused.

Figure 2. Percentage of students with grade point averages (GPAs) above and below 3.0 by absence range, Sioux Falls School District, South Dakota: School Years 2005-06 and 2006-07 combined



Source: Sioux Falls School District, South Dakota, May 2008



These data had implications for each school’s ability to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets for grades 3 through 8, because part of the state’s AYP determination is based on either achieving an average daily attendance (ADA) rate at or above 94 percent, or showing progress in the ADA from the previous year. To achieve a 94 percent attendance rate, students could not be absent more than 10.56 days during a school year of 176 days.

Using attendance data as a means to investigate reasons for absences, the district discovered that two of the most common reasons for student absences were parent request or undocumented illness. Additionally, two-thirds of out-of-school suspensions at the high school level were for excessive absences, meaning that local policy was exacerbating the attendance problem by removing students who were already missing school from the classroom.

The district facilitated seven community meetings to share these analyses and the effects of missing 10 school days on a school’s ability to meet AYP. Leaders changed the district’s attendance policies to reflect the serious nature of the 10-absence threshold. In addition, rather than suspending students out-of-school for unexcused absences, the district made students responsible for spending extra time before or after school to make up missed assignments—all because policymakers had access to detailed, high-quality student attendance data.

Intervening with the individual: Aurora Public Schools, Colorado

In Colorado, leaders in the Aurora Public Schools were concerned about the increasing number of truant students. The school district took a proactive stance on truancy reduction by developing and implementing a districtwide program. The district superintendent personally visited the homes of students not in school. Schools increased their focus on accurate daily attendance accounting. The attendance policy and corresponding regulations were revised to clarify expectations. Protocols were developed. Seven district-level truancy specialists collaborated with the schools, families, and the courts to assist in remedying truancy issues. Each secondary school hired four or five of their teachers to work additional hours to case-manage 15 truant students each. The district implemented a range of interventions such as tutoring, counseling, Saturday school, parent support groups, and substance abuse treatment. Over 800 staff volunteered to mentor at-risk students.

Table 1. Change in number and percent of habitual truants by school level, Aurora Public Schools, Colorado: School years 2006-07 to 2007-08

School Level	2006-07		2007-08		Difference 2006-07 to 2007-08	
	Number habitual truants	Percent of total membership	Number habitual truants	Percent of total membership	Percent change	Change in number of habitual truants
Total district	4,567	15.2	4,306	14.7	-0.4	-261
Elementary	1,010	6.4	390	2.6	-3.9	-620
Middle	967	14.8	1,032	16.5	1.8	+65
High	2,590	33.0	2,884	37.2	4.2	+294

Habitual truancy is defined as 10 or more days of unexcused absences in a school year.
Source: Aurora Public Schools, Colorado, May 2008

Although this truancy reduction program is in its infancy, positive results have already been noted at the elementary level and across the district as a whole.

Data at the end of the 2007–08 school year indicated that 78 percent of Aurora schools decreased the number of students with 10 or more unexcused absences (defined as habitual truants). Overall, the district reduced its number of habitually truant students from 15.2 to 14.7 percent, or by more than 250 fewer students who were habitually truant in the second year. Fully 51 chronically absent students were brought back to school by the October 2007 count date, increasing district funds by \$350,000. As shown in table 1 above, there was success in truancy reduction at the elementary level, with chronic truants reduced from 6.4 percent to 2.6 percent. Middle schools and high schools began to standardize truancy tracking and set a baseline for comparisons. Although the percentage of truant dropouts at these grades increased from their 2006–07 levels, more than half of the district’s secondary schools reduced their numbers of habitually truant students.

Determined to implement additional best practices for reducing truancy at all grade levels, Aurora established the Early Intervention Program in two schools during the second semester of 2007–08. Based on Project Respect in Pueblo, Colorado, this strengths-based program uses truancy specialists to provide intensive case management to students and their families, and collaborate with the families and the courts, as needed, to overcome barriers to school engagement and success. Attendance data enabled the district to measure the success of its efforts. Of the 41 students who participated in this program, 35 improved their attendance—a remarkable 82 percent. Among these 35 students, 18 improved by case management alone, without going to truancy court. The 17 students who appeared in truancy court all improved by the end of the year. Aurora Public Schools intends to expand this program for the 2008–09 year.

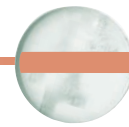
Partnering with the community: Alamosa School District, Colorado

Colorado’s Alamosa School District demonstrated how a plan to address school attendance problems can extend beyond the walls of educational institutions. Some of the district’s schools include only two or three grade levels, and function as feeder schools for the next grade level. As shown in table 2, a troubling trend emerged from the district’s feeder schools. In the 2006–07 school year, almost one third of the district’s kindergarten and first-grade students were truant, missing at least two weeks of school per year. Although

Table 2. Truancy rate by school, Alamosa School District, Colorado: School Year 2006-07

Grade	School	Truancy Rate (<i>percent truant</i>)
K–1	Polston Primary	32
2–3	Boyd Elementary	10
4–5	Evans Elementary	20
6–8	Ortega Middle	50
9–12	Alamosa High	42

Truancy is defined as missing 10 or more days of school.
Source: *Valley Courier*, Alamosa, Colorado, May 2, 2008



second and third-grade students had the least truancy at 10 percent, that rate doubled at the fourth and fifth-grade levels. Then, alarmingly, the rate increased to fully one half of the middle school students and 42 percent at the high school. While the rates were highest in middle school, the high truancy rate at the primary level was a concern, as it was thought to be the foundation for students' later attendance problems. The data provided a clear, unambiguous message that something needed to be done.

Instead of tackling the attendance problems in isolation, the district created a community partnership with joint responsibility among Social Services; the Center for Restorative Programs; and the offices of the District Attorney, Probation, and Mental Health. Prior to this collaboration, intervention did not begin until students had missed 30 days of school and the court system became involved—far too late for meaningful educational correction. By focusing on the earliest grades and promoting the importance of school, the collaboration created a role for each partner. Social Services added the statement “children will attend school regularly” to its personal responsibility contracts for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) clients. Principals referred families to the Center for Restorative Programs to help overcome barriers to attendance that ranged from parents' late work hours to lack of an alarm clock to the lack of clean clothes for the student. Probation officers became involved if the family was part of the court system. Poor student attendance soon had legal consequences for a family as it was interpreted as a sign of parental negligence.

Partnering with parents: Montezuma-Cortez School District RE-1, Colorado

School administrators in Colorado's Montezuma-Cortez School District RE-1 recently found that their building's attendance rates had fallen below the state average. Furthermore, the rates for American Indian and Hispanic students were disproportionately lower than other racial and ethnic groups.

In an effort to boost attendance rates, these schools are focusing on parent involvement. At the middle school level, administrators are proposing to include school attendance in the annual family contract, with a parent meeting scheduled once students miss more than 10 days of school, whether or not the absences are excused. At the high school level, administrators would like to limit excused absences to 10 per semester. In the early grades, the school board is now focusing outreach efforts on positive parent partnerships in order to prevent later attendance problems.

Digging up the roots of truancy: Cherry Creek District, Colorado

Colorado's Cherry Creek District has used its attendance data to unearth possible causes of student truancy. Teachers are now tracking attendance by period and determining whether or not absences are excused. The district begins its interventions with family notification and problem solving. If student attendance does not improve, data on classroom hours missed due to tardies and absences, both excused and unexcused, are used as part of the student profile for the Student Attendance Review Board. This group includes representatives from the school district, human services, and the juvenile assessment center; as well as a social worker, school deans, counselors, and mental health staff working to adjust the student's schedule or engagements. Student profiles have since indicated that students with chronic absences frequently have personal or family mental health concerns, substance abuse problems, significant family changes, and/or long-standing academic struggles.

Putting the details to work: Michigan

Other examples of the productive use of robust attendance data come from districts and schools in Michigan, where the development of detailed attendance codes has helped staff decrease student absences and respond to state and federal accountability requirements. Most districts use multiple attendance codes to track daily attendance, highlight why students are not in school or in class periods, and identify students needing extra support due to family issues.

In addition to tracking where students are during the day as suggested by the taxonomy, some Michigan districts add codes to track students who arrive late and/or leave early. In Michigan's Center Line Public Schools, for example, counting early leavers as "absences" demonstrated to parents the importance of the full school day. If the student is not in school, valuable class time is missed resulting in lower performance levels. Since this change, the number of students leaving early for jobs or families leaving early for vacations has decreased.

One principal of an alternative high school in Michigan relies heavily on the computerized student management system's tardy and discipline referral codes. The school's mission is focused on developing struggling students into successful citizens, and the school now uses behavioral choices related to attendance as an example of good citizenship. Both the tardy and the discipline referral codes help staff identify the need for intervention strategies to help get students on track with attendance goals. Moreover, with recent staff reductions, using data technology has become even more important in targeting needed interventions and supporting staff.

To support improving student attendance efforts, Michigan established the Michigan Pupil Accounting and Attendance Association (MPAAA) over 70 years ago. MPAAA is comprised of an elected board, an appointed board, and over 500 members represented from local districts, public school academies, and regional pupil-count auditors from throughout the state. The group coordinates efforts with the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), and the state's Center for Educational Performance & Information (CEPI) to ensure state and federal requirements are being effectively communicated and executed for enrollment, attendance, and pupil membership through training sessions, newsletters, and conferences. MPAAA and MDE provide guidance to districts in completing critical documentation affecting school funding and improving student attendance.

⁶ Correlations and their significance tests, calculated with the student's unweighted grade point average (GPA) and number of days absent, show that the negative correlation is substantial (.379 for 2006 and .388 for 2007) and statistically significant (less than .000). As the unweighted GPA increased, the number of days absent decreased.