

Guidance for Attendance Policies
February 2022

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Please contact achievement@doe.mass.edu with suggestions and/or questions.



Guidance for Developing Attendance Policies

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INTRODUCTION

Students who attend school regularly are more likely to have success in school and careers. [Research](#) supports the connection between regular attendance and a student's personal, social, and emotional wellness and academic success. When students are not present in school, they miss out on opportunities for social development and are often not able to make adequate academic progress; they may disengage from learning as they get further off-track and may even drop out of school.

Attendance is an important factor for students to reach four key educational milestones as reported in the Massachusetts Early Warning Indicator System (EWIS):

- (1) reading by 3rd grade as assessed on the grade 3 MCAS English Language Arts (ELA) test;
- (2) meeting grade level expectations as measured on the grade 6 MCAS ELA and Mathematics tests;
- (3) passing all grade 9 courses; and
- (4) graduating from high school.

There are many different reasons that a student may not attend school consistently – for example, work or family responsibilities, chronic illness, lack of stable housing, as a response to falling behind in schoolwork and/or failing courses, behavioral and mental health needs, and other personal or academic challenges. The impact of missing school is significant. Massachusetts [data](#) show that 96% of students with high attendance in 10th grade graduate from high school in 4 years, while only 69% of students with low attendance in 10th grade graduate from high school in 4 years.

This guidance document is intended to help inform the development of or updates to each school district's attendance policies and practices. The information provided in this document includes: key terms and definitions, brief overview of laws on compulsory school attendance, responsibilities of parents/guardians, school committees and schools, recommendations for written policies, and sample best practices. In addition, this document contains information about chronic absences, truancy, and dropping out. The goal is to support school districts and educators in working with students and their parents/guardians to promote consistent student attendance and engagement in learning.

COMPULSORY SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Massachusetts' compulsory school attendance law ([G.L. c. 76, § 1](#)) requires children between the ages of 6 and 16 to "attend a public day school in the town the student resides, or some other day school approved by the school committee...." The law recognizes the right of parents to choose from among several educational [options](#), including enrolling their child in a private or parochial school or an approved homeschooling program. The most common option is enrolling children in the public school district in which they live. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education ("DESE") offers a tool [School Finder](#) where anyone can look for school options as well as specific programs and pathways being offered in their geographic area.

The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) has the authority under [G.L. c. 69, § 1B](#), to "establish the permissible and mandatory ages for school attendance." The Board exercised this authority in regulation at [603 CMR 8.02](#), which sets the mandatory minimum age for school attendance. It states that "[e]ach child must attend school beginning in September of the calendar year in which he or she attains the age of six. Each school committee may establish its own minimum permissible age for school attendance, provided that such age is not older than the mandatory minimum age established by

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603 CMR 8.00.” The maximum age for compulsory school attendance (age 16) was set by a special act of the Legislature, Chapter 741 of the Acts of 1965. Neither the Board nor the Legislature has changed it.

RESPONSIBILITIES

[General Laws chapter 76](#) sets out many aspects of compulsory attendance, including the responsibilities of parents/guardians and school committees.

Parents/guardians must:

- ensure that a child in their care attends school. [G.L. c. 76, §2](#).
- call the school at a designated number at a designated time as established by the school committee to report a child’s absence and reason for it. [G.L. c. 76, §§1A, 1B](#).

Each [school committee](#) shall provide for and enforce the school attendance of all children actually residing therein in accordance with state law. [G.L. c. 76, §1](#). Schools must record *daily* student attendance for all students, whether they are learning in-person or remotely. For any students learning remotely, it is vital that the school conducts a daily "live" check-in.

A school committee must have an [absence notification](#) program in each of its schools:

- Massachusetts law ([G.L. c. 76, §1B](#)) requires that each school notifies a parent or guardian of the child’s absence if the school has not received notification of the absence from the parent or guardian within 3 days of the absence. The Department strongly recommends that such parental notification take place on the same day that the student is absent, if possible. The school must also have a policy of notifying the parent or guardian of a student who has at least 5 days in which the student has missed 2 or more periods unexcused in a school year or who has missed 5 or more school days unexcused in a school year.
- Massachusetts law ([G.L. c. 76, §1B](#)) requires that the school principal or headmaster, or a designee, make a reasonable effort to meet with the parent or guardian of a student who has 5 or more unexcused absences to develop action steps for student attendance. The action steps shall be developed jointly and agreed upon by the school principal or headmaster, or a designee, the student, and the student's parent or guardian and with input from other relevant school personnel and officials from relevant public safety, health and human service, housing, and nonprofit agencies. The Department encourages the school principal, headmaster, or their designee to hold the meeting to discuss the action steps with the student and the student's parents or guardians *in-person*.

Massachusetts law requires every school committee to appoint one or more supervisors of attendance. [G.L. c. 76, §19](#). The school committees of two or more towns may employ the same supervisor of attendance. Massachusetts law specifies some of the duties of attendance supervisors. [G.L. c. 76, §20](#).

WRITTEN ATTENDANCE POLICIES

School committees and districts are encouraged to regularly review and update their school attendance policies and protocols to promote student safety, wellness, and academic success. DESE recommends that written attendance policies at a minimum include the following components:

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- Interventions and services the school may use to promote consistent student attendance and reengagement (e.g., assigning a trusted adult advocate/liaison to build a relationship with the student/family).
- The benefits of regular school attendance and participation, clear expectations and responsibility for student attendance.
- Definitions of excused and unexcused absences as well as definitions of chronically absent and habitually truant.
- When and how absences are to be reported by parents or guardians to the school, by the administrative designee to classroom teachers, and by teachers to the administrative designee for classroom attendance.
- Parent/guardian responsibilities for reporting a child's absence including method of reporting, expected time of notification, any required documentation verifying the reason for the absence, and deadline for submitting said documentation.
- Timeline for school notification to parents/guardians of an absence in the event the parent or guardian did not report the absence.
- Identify who from the school will check-in and follow-up with students and families in cases of absences, when this will happen (e.g., member of the school attendance team will follow up after 1 unexcused absence and attendance officer will follow-up after 5 excused absences), how this will take place (e.g., call, text, home visit, etc.), what services and supports may be offered, and how this will be documented. Discuss importance of communication and coordination with the student's 504 or IEP Team for students with disabilities.
- The steps that will be taken when further support or action is needed (e.g., designated school personnel will request an in-person meeting with the parent/guardian and/or the student after the 5th absence; referral to a [Family Resource Center](#) or other community-based resources; up to filing a [CRA application](#) if appropriate under the specific circumstances).
- Any academic consequences for excessive absenteeism (e.g., loss of credit).

SAMPLE BEST PRACTICES FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Improving and sustaining good attendance requires active and deliberate engagement of personnel at the district and school level with students and families. Fostering a sense of belonging and partnership among students and families is a key component to improving student attendance and success. See [Acceleration Roadmap](#). Data analysis is key for identifying students who are struggling with attendance and/or are chronically absent and targeting interventions and resources to improve student attendance. Use of Edwin Analytics and the EWIS system is strongly recommended. [Edwin Analytics](#) is a reporting and data analysis tool that gives authorized school, district, and state level users access to information and reports that support improvements in teaching, learning, and educational outcomes. The **Early Warning Indicator System (EWIS)** identifies students who may be at risk of not meeting important academic milestones and allows authorized users to monitor overall attendance, in-person attendance, and remote attendance, as well as suspension information.

At the district level:

- In addition to appointing a supervisor of attendance as required by Massachusetts law ([G.L. c. 76, §19](#)), establish a district-wide attendance team that meets regularly and examines attendance data by school and student to identify trends for individual students as well as patterns for specific student groups such as by race, students with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care, and English learners. The team can help

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develop an action plan to address barriers to school attendance experienced by individual students or groups of students in the district.

- Develop district-wide messaging for parents/guardians, students, and community partners that promotes the benefits of regular school attendance. Share such messaging using various methods of communication (e.g., fliers, social media, website banners, posters) in English and other languages commonly used in your school community.
- Provide schools with resources and tools to address chronic absences in a non-punitive, culturally competent manner, including time for professional development for staff to understand chronic absenteeism, its negative impact on student success, and effective ways to improve student attendance.
- Prioritize **family engagement** that builds on families' strength and culture and fosters equity.

At the school level:

- Establish an attendance team that will regularly review: (1) student level data and identify students in need of support before they become chronically absent; (2) attendance data organized by student groups, such as by race, students with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care, and English learners, and engage in root cause analyses to address any barriers to attendance and identify interventions and supports to improve attendance.
- Create and use a [tiered system](#) that promotes attendance awareness for all students, early interventions for students who are beginning to show signs of chronic absenteeism, and specific individual interventions for students having the most trouble getting to school every day, including active and culturally competent communication and engagement with students and families. Additionally, the tiered system of support should include clear ways for addressing the reasons that students may not be attending school consistently (e.g., **increased mental health needs resulting from the pandemic, impact of bullying, homelessness, disability**), and highlight non-punitive measures to address any such attendance barriers.
- Establish clear policies and procedures aligned with the tiered system of support and inform staff, students, families, and community partners about them.
- Identify the school personnel responsible for following up with students and families to identify and promptly address factors contributing to absences, including but not limited to any barriers inside or outside of school (such as student mental health needs or parent/guardian failure to send the child to school).
- If the parents/guardians of a student experiencing attendance issues have limited proficiency in English, communicate about attendance concerns with the parents/guardians in their primary language and engage appropriate interpreters and translators as necessary.
- Develop an internal communication plan to ensure all who are engaged with the student (parent/guardian, special education team, classroom teachers, student support team, etc.) know the student's attendance status, any follow-up needed regarding it, and the staff members who will follow up and provide support if attendance issues persist.
- Create a strong positive culture by being intentional about building positive relationships with students and families in a culturally responsive manner.
- Ensure that every student has at least one [caring adult](#) in school who will connect with the student and review whether they are on-track academically. Students are more likely to attend if they feel safe and cared about inside the school.
- Invite, encourage, and promote student and family voices in school matters.

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School committees, districts and schools may incorporate some of the best practices described above into their written attendance policies and protocols.

For more information on strategies for improving attendance and fostering a sense of belonging among students, please see [Promoting Student Engagement, Learning, Wellbeing and Safety](#) and the [Acceleration Roadmap](#).

CHRONIC ABSENCES

Students who miss at least 10% of days enrolled (e.g., 18 days absent when enrolled for 180 school days) are considered [chronically absent](#). National [research](#) shows that chronic absenteeism erodes the academic and social skills needed to succeed in school. [Children living in poverty](#) are more likely to be chronically absent due to life circumstances such as lack of access to health care, housing insecurity, and unreliable transportation.

Sample key strategies for reducing chronic absences:

- Family engagement: Intervene early by [engaging the family](#) before a student becomes chronically absent. When the school and the family are able to develop a positive, solutions-focused relationship and work together to remove barriers for attendance, academic learning improves and the risk level for dropping out diminishes. Resources such as the DESE Family Engagement [Framework](#) and [Promoting Student Engagement, Learning, Wellbeing and Safety](#) can support schools in the work of building positive, supportive relationships with families.
- Home visits: A study from John Hopkins University found that students from families who participated in home visits with a teacher from the school had better attendance and were more likely to see improvement in their reading scores. A second [study](#) from John Hopkins supporting home visits identified a Parent Teacher Home Visit (PTHV) Model. In this model, teachers work in pairs, visiting the homes of students and focusing on nonconfrontational relationship building as their primary goal.
- Community connections: Sharing information about or referring students/families to community resources for additional supports could help reduce or eliminate barriers to attendance.

Special considerations for students with disabilities:

- As appropriate, convene the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team to address any impact of the student's disability on attendance and address any changes needed to the IEP to ensure the student receives a free appropriate public education.
- A student may be referred for an evaluation to determine eligibility for special education or related services if there is reason to suspect the student has a disability that impacts the student's ability to attend school regularly.

TRUANCY

Under state law, a school-aged child who is not excused from attendance and who "willfully" fails to attend school for more than 8 school days in a quarter is considered [habitually truant](#). In some cases, absences may not be "willful" and there are underlying barriers to attendance that can be addressed through services and support. Depending upon the specific circumstances, schools may want to consider contacting or making a referral to a [Family Resource Center \(FRC\)](#). FRCs can quickly support students at

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risk of CRA filings and divert them from the Juvenile Court. FRCs are in every Massachusetts county and have dedicated “school liaisons” to help address school-related concerns raised by parents/guardians or by schools.

Districts may consult with their legal counsel to obtain assistance in determining whether a student is habitually truant and understanding all of the district's options when a student is habitually truant, including any additional supports, services, or outreach that may be appropriate. If the district or school is considering filing a [CRA application](#) in Juvenile Court, it should conduct a careful fact-based analysis to determine if filing is appropriate or not under the specific circumstances. *See e.g., Millis Public Schools v. M.P., 478 Mass. 767, 783-784* (2018)(explaining that a student can only be found to be a child requiring assistance on the basis of habitual truancy if the child “willfully” failed to attend school and explaining that “a child ‘willfully fails to attend school’ when he or she acts purposefully, such that his or her behavior arises from reasons portending delinquent behavior”).

DROPPING OUT

Despite the best efforts of schools, parents or guardians, and community partners, some students, upon reaching the age of 16 years old, will choose to leave school before receiving their diploma. State law ([G.L. c. 76, § 18](#)) specifies that “no student who has not graduated from high school shall be considered to have permanently left public school unless an administrator of the school which the student last attended has sent notice within a period of 5 days from the student’s tenth consecutive absence to the student and the parent or guardian of that student in both the primary language of the parent or guardian, to the extent practicable, and English.” The notice must contain all of the information prescribed in the statute. Among other things, the notice must initially offer at least two dates and times for an exit interview between the superintendent, or a designee, and the student and the student’s parent or guardian. The law specifies that “[t]he time for the exit interview may be extended at the request of the parent or guardian and no extension shall be for longer than 14 days.” [G.L. c. 76, §18](#).

The superintendent or a designee is required to convene an exit interview for the purpose of discussing the detrimental effects of early withdrawal from school, the benefits of earning a high school diploma, the reasons for the student permanently leaving school, and to consider alternative education or other placements. The superintendent or designee is required to convene a team of school personnel to participate in the exit interview. The team may include individuals such as the principal, guidance counselor, teachers, attendance officer, and other relevant school staff. The student or parent/guardian may invite individuals from outside of the school community who have knowledge of the student personally or in a professional capacity. The exit interview may proceed without the parent or guardian if the superintendent or designee has made a good faith effort to include the parent or guardian.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR REMOTE LEARNING

Most public schools in Massachusetts operate in-person, full-time, five days a week. However, there are some pathways that offer remote learning, such as the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Virtual Schools (CMVS), DESE-approved single district virtual schools, and home/hospital arrangements for students with a documented medical need. All remote learning pathways must include procedures for tracking attendance.

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If students are learning remotely, schools should identify practices that build the culture, engage students effectively, ensure accessibility for all students, and make the remote learning space safe and supportive. For example:

- Require that students have an opportunity to interact with educators each school day, including a daily “live” check-in between students and educators. Schools should establish protocols for checking with families and students on a regular basis to gather input on their experiences (daily student visual check-in) and check-out routines, family feedback meetings, and regular surveys and/or focus groups). As appropriate, schools should implement absence notification programs described above and include the steps that will be taken if the school is unable to have a “live” check-in for a specified number of days.
- Establish clear schedules and easy access to teacher-facilitated (synchronous) learning, any independent learning (asynchronous), and teacher office hour opportunities.
- Offer activities that build a sense of community and belonging and provide a clear support system (advisory time period to connect with designated caring adult, peer support activities, social activities, online class and breakout room practices).
- Engage in explicit work with students on the social emotional aspects of remote learning, including teaching social emotional skills they need to manage learning, screen time management, strategies to combat isolation, self-advocacy skills, goalsetting, etc.
- Employ strategies for orienting families and students on all aspects of remote learning (the remote experience, participation expectations, technology tools, technical support for students and families, family partnerships, etc.).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Student Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism \(DESE webpage\)](#)
- [Promoting Student Engagement, Learning, Wellbeing and Safety \(DESE resource\)](#)
- [Attendance Plan Reflection Tool for Local Education Agencies \(USED website\)](#)

Attendance Works:

- [Pathways to Engagement: A Toolkit for Covid-19 Recovery Through Attendance](#)
- [Three Tiers of Intervention](#)

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS USED

Present: According to DESE's [Attendance and Dropout Reporting Guidance](#), a student must be at school, at a school related activity, or receiving academic instruction for at least half of the school day to be counted as present. “Receiving academic instruction” includes in-person classroom learning as well as tutoring, online or distance learning. “Receiving academic instruction” does *not* include taking home classwork or doing homework.

Absent: A student who is not present (as defined above) is considered absent from school. It is up to the district to determine the way in which absences are identified and recorded locally (e.g., excused or unexcused).

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Chronic Absence: DESE reports chronic absenteeism as the percentage of students missing 10 percent or more of their days in membership regardless of whether such absences are excused or unexcused (e.g., absent 18 school days when enrolled for 180 school days).

Habitually Truant: Massachusetts state law ([G.L. c. 119, § 21](#)) defines as habitually truant “a school-aged child, not excused from attendance under the lawful and reasonable regulations of such child's school, who willfully fails to attend school for more than 8 school days in a quarter.”

Child Requiring Assistance (CRA): Massachusetts state law ([G.L. c. 119, § 21](#)) defines a [child requiring assistance](#) as “a child between the ages of 6 and 18 who: (i) repeatedly runs away from the home of the child's parent, legal guardian or custodian; (ii) repeatedly fails to obey the lawful and reasonable commands of the child's parent, legal guardian or custodian, thereby interfering with their ability to adequately care for and protect the child; (iii) repeatedly fails to obey the lawful and reasonable regulations of the child's school; (iv) is habitually truant; or (v) is a sexually exploited child.” A [CRA Application](#) may be filed in Juvenile Court by a [parent/guardian](#) or [school official](#) to address habitual truancy and/or other issues specified in state law. For more detailed information about CRA proceedings, please see [Juvenile Court Standing Order 3-21](#).

REFERENCES

A National Portrait of Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades

<https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/A-National-Portrait-of-Chronic-Absenteeism-in-the-Early-Grades-Oct-2007.pdf>

Absences Add Up: How School Attendance Influences Student Success

<https://www.attendanceworks.org/absences-add-up/>

The Attendance Imperative: How States Can Advance Achievement By Reducing Chronic Absenteeism

<https://www.attendanceworks.org/state-policy-brief-attendance-imperative/>

The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in The Nation's Schools

http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf

*Joining Together to Create a Bold Vision for Next Generation Family Engagement
Engaging Families to Transform Education*

https://globalfrp.org/content/download/419/3823/file/GFRP_Family%20Engagement%20Carnegie%20Report.pdf

Connecting Social-Emotional Development, Academic Achievement, and On-Track Outcomes: A Multi-District Study of Grades 3 to 10 Students Supported by City Year Americorps:

http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/201200507_EGC_CityYearReport_BalfanzByrnesFINAL.pdf

How Can Trusting Relationships With Adults Boost Student Success?

<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southwest/pdf/infographics/relsw-infographic11-508.pdf>

Every School Day Counts: The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data

<https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/attendancedata/index.asp>

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Study Shows Home Visits Improved Attendance

<https://education.jhu.edu/2015/10/study-shows-home-visits-improved-school-attendance/>

Going old-school: Home visits show marked effect on absenteeism and performance

<https://education.jhu.edu/2019/03/going-old-school-home-visits-show-marked-effect-on-absenteeism-and-performance/>

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