

MHPSD Teacher Process for Student Absenteeism & Tardiness

This document contains the fundamental elements and subsequent processes required to create an effective absence/tardy early warning and intervention system in Medicine Hat Public Schools. It is based on the research conducted by Rocky View School Division and implemented through their "Present with a Purpose" attendance campaign. Please note that schools may organically modify this plan based on student and school needs.

Foundational Requirements

The process for implementing an absence/tardy early warning and intervention system relies on a variety of individuals who work in a coordinated effort to provide timely support for students and their families.

Teacher Connection with Students and Families

At the beginning of the year, you represent our best connection to students and their families and it is critical that steps be made in September to initiate connection. This can be done by contacting your parents and let them know a little bit about how their child is doing or describe a little about themselves to establish initial rapport. If or when intervention is required, this provides school and Learning Supports staff with a key contact individual for a given student. The initial conversation can occur over the phone, in person, or through other MHPSD approved communication methods. It is critical that this conversation occurs prior to the end of September, as this time coincides with the first attendance evaluation. As the year continues to unfold, it will be critical to keep a positive line of communication open to students and parents who continue to flag on the early warning system, ensuring that contact from school can remain positive. Monthly check-ins are a strong way to build relationships with your families and are empirically documented to provide a proactive mechanism that can boost student achievement and attendance patterns.

The Absenteeism/Tardiness Early Warning System

Current empirical thought outlines that missing 10% or more instructional days will greatly impact the academic development of students in all grades and translates to how 18 absences over an academic year can place students in peril with respect to their academic, behavioural, emotional and social development. In addition, tracking the number of days absent by the end of term or year will not result in effective or timely interventions for students with problematic absenteeism. With this system in place, student attendance or tardiness will be identified quickly and remediation can provide more lasting change. The following section provides the process that follows after a student has been identified through the early warning system.

	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Frequency Scan	F-S ≥ 4	F-S ≥ 3	F-S ≥ 3	F-S ≥ 3	F-S ≥ 3	F-S ≥ 3	F-S ≥ 3	F-S ≥ 3	F-S ≥ 3	F-S ≥ 3
Period Scan			P-S ≥ 5			P-S ≥ 5			P-S ≥ 5	
Semester Scan					S-S* ≥ 9					S-S* ≥ 9
Year Scan										Y-S* ≥ 18

The following is an overview of the process model, with teachers' key roles highlighted:

Step One: Identification of Students with Attendance/Tardiness Issues

At the end of each month, school admin and support staff will print lists of students who meet or exceed the frequency levels and provide this information to their assigned teachers.

Teachers should then contact the student(s) on your list and parent(s) to identify what primary barrier is impacting their ability to arrive at school – either in general or on time. A conversation between you and your families for absenteeism will target many domains and describe whether academic, behavioural and social-emotional concerns are present within the student and likely causing their attendance to slip.

The following section provides a list of potential conversation questions that can be used to start of the conversation with parents or legal guardians.

Potential Conversation Questions

We are very concerned about x's number of absences. High numbers of absences make it hard for students to succeed in school. We very much want x to be successful.

- Are you aware of X's absences?
- What do you think the reasons are for these absences? Students can be absent for a multitude of reasons, such as difficulty waking up in the morning, getting bullied at school or avoiding academic challenges.
- Is X having any medical issues that could be impacting his/her attendance?
- Is X having any emotional issues that could be impacting his/her attendance?
- Have there been any recent stressful events, such as a death in the family or move?
- Sometimes students have high numbers of absences because of stress in families. Are there any stressors in the family that might be contributing to these absences (e.g., finances, transportation access and domestic violence)?
- What have you tried to address these issues? What has worked? Was there a time this concern was not impacting attendance, and what is different?
- Are you already in contact with any of our staff, such as the School Counsellor or Family School Liaison Worker around this issue?
- Do you know how to access PowerSchool?
- Do you know how to check X's attendance?

The identified barrier should be documented in Log Entries to inform future intervention efforts.

Depending the identified issue, teachers are able to reference the following hierarchy to determine which school personnel is most appropriate to address the specific, barrier, aversion, engagement, or myth related concern.

Barriers	
Lack of access to health or dental care	Vice Principal/Principal
Poor Transportation	Vice Principal/Principal
Trauma & Mental Health	FSLW/Guidance
Homelessness	FSLW/Guidance

Aversion	
Child Struggling Academically or Socially	FSLW/Guidance
Bullying	Vice Principal/Principal
School Discipline Practices	Vice Principal/Principal
Negative Parental Experience with Education	FSLW/Guidance
Un/diagnosed Disability or Disorder	FSLW/Guidance
Concerns with facilities	Vice Principal/Principal

Engagement	
Perceived lack of engaging or relevant instruction	Vice Principal/Principal
Perceived lack of meaningful relationships with adults in the school	FSLW/Guidance
Vulnerable to being with peers out of School	FSLW/Guidance
Poor school atmosphere or climate	Vice Principal/Principal

When teachers encounter an attendance myth during a conversation, they are in the best situation to address the misconception. There are seven commonly held misbeliefs that parents have about their child's attendance. Below, these myths are presented alongside answers that teachers can use to begin an accurate discussion.

Myths
Absences are only a problem if they are unexcused... <i>Response: While this intuitively makes sense, all absences, regardless of reason, add up and can cause negative academic outcomes for students.</i>
Sporadic absences are not as bad as consecutive absences... <i>Response: Research has demonstrated that time away from school demonstrates a similar impact of overall academic functioning. It does not matter whether it is sporadic or consecutive.</i>
Attendance only matters in the older grades... <i>Response: Evidence indicates that missing school in the early elementary years is highly predictive of academic problems in the future, so missing school at any time during a student's academic career will pose consequences to achievement.</i>
My child can easily make up for a missed day by completing a homework pack or make-up assignment... <i>Response: Many students struggle to catch up on lost time because it is difficult for us, as teachers, to go back over previously learned content in a way that does not single out children. Some students become anxious when this level of attention is drawn on them, which can result in them not asking questions and falling further behind.</i>
Absences are fine as long as parents sign-off... <i>Response: While absences can be excused if parents inform the school as to the reason for absenteeism, it does not mean that academic consequences will not befall students who are away from school. Although we will try our best, it is not guaranteed that your child will catch up for this lost time.</i>
Attendance is about legal compliance... <i>Response: While it is true that the School Act stipulates that school attendance is mandatory between 6 and 16 years of age, we just want students to attend school and benefit from the educational programming. We know that obtaining a high school diploma or certificate of achievement is critical for their future vocational and social success in life.</i>
Most of my child's classmates are absent at least as much as my child (10+ days)... <i>Response: It is interesting to note that many parents believe this statement. However, when we look into the data deeper, we come to find that parents generally underestimate their own child's absences by half. That means, if you think your child has missed 5 days, it is more likely the case that 10 days have been missed so far.</i>
Teachers do not mark attendance properly... <i>Response: At times there are challenges with this, but not often enough to cause me to be concerned. If your child feels this has happened, you need to phone me right away to clarify as children tend to tell this to their parents as a means to divert attention away from the real problem.</i>

Regardless of what a barrier, aversion, engagement, or myth related obstacle is noted, a formal record of the issue should be noted in Log Entries, including the action the teacher took to eliminate it. If a myth-related obstacle appears to be recurrent and not able to be corrected, please notify your FSLW/Guidance Counsellor.

Step Two: Activate Learning Support Team to Address of Attendance/Tardiness Issues

In the event that a negative barrier, aversion, engagement, or hardened myth is present for students and causing them to have poor attendance or tardiness issues, you will be able to work with the school's identified Active Learning Support Team to address the attendance problem. This will include developing an appropriate Student Attendance Support Plan. A letter of concern (Letter A) along with a copy of the attendance support plan will be sent home by admin. You should note these efforts should be noted in Log Entries and a copy of the plan can be uploaded to Dossier.

Step Three: Learning Supports-Level Address of Attendance/Tardiness Issues

School staff may involve Learning Supports staff, including Psychologist, Family School Liaison, First Nation Metis Inuit supports, Speech-Language Pathologist, Occupational Therapist, to help address whatever the primary obstacle to regular attendance is. School administration, in consultation with their school-based teams, may make referrals to these individuals at any point and it is encouraged to let Learning Supports staff know the actions that have already occurred prior to their involvement with students and their families. At this point, it will be beneficial to review the attendance support plan and consider involving the parent and student in any changes to the plan. A copy of letter B along with the updated plan should be sent home and cc'd to the Attendance Officer. All efforts to be noted in Log Entries.

Step Four: Division-Level Address of Attendance/Tardiness Issues

After the implementation of an attendance/tardiness improvement plan and difficulties are continuing to emerge, a meeting will be called between the student, parent, and school principal or designate. This meeting will clearly articulate the position of the school in trying to help the student succeed and that barriers are continuing to present. With permission from the Attendance Officer, an invitation to participate in a Community Conference with a trained facilitator may be extended to the family. Updates may also be made to the attendance support plan will be created in collaboration with parents and student and incorporate any recommendations from the Community Conference. It is important to note that not all families will be willing to participate in a Community Conference.

A community conference provides a place for all parties involved in a student's success to meet. Participants in the community conference work together to seek solutions to support a student to attend school and re-engage in learning. Participants at a community conference may include: the student and their family, family supports (extended family, friends and community support agencies), school staff and their supporting resources (e.g., social work, psychology, family school liaison worker, etc.) and the community conference facilitator (a specially trained person). At the community conference, the student and family have an opportunity to speak about what is happening for them. It is also a place for school authority staff to explain how they have been affected by a student's absence from school. Through these conversations, all parties gain an understanding of the barriers that are keeping the student from regularly attending school. The outcome of a community conference is a written agreement that includes actions and assigns responsibility to all those who have a part to play in supporting the student to improve attendance.

Step Five: Attendance Board Referrals

Should the above efforts fail, the school and system will have demonstrated our efforts to remediate and support the student's attendance. In consultation with the Attendance Officer, the school may complete a referral to the Attendance Board.