



Attendance Innovation Campaign **Aligning Attendance Data to Improve Student Outcomes**

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School Success Begins with School Attendance

Attending school on a regular basis is critical to the positive development of children into contributing members of society. The empirical literature shows that students who miss more than 10% of instructional days are at an increased likelihood for high school dropout, substance abuse, self-harm, mental health challenges, and a range of other negative outcomes.

Recent North American studies report that approximately 10-15% of students demonstrate problematic absenteeism and, if these prevalence rates are accurate for Alberta, thousands of students would be placed at significant risk for these negative future outcomes. Further, students who experience chronic stressors, such as socioeconomic disadvantage, are placed at an even greater risk for school absenteeism, and represent a specific population who benefits greatly from proactive and reactive interventions. The potential size of this issue within Alberta highlights the need for efficient and effective attendance data tracking, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms that occur at the individual school level and can be compiled for divisional and provincial review.

Current Attendance Practices Across Canada

Across Canada, school authorities differ in their practices surrounding the collection, monitoring, and evaluation of attendance and tardiness data. These differences are unique to each province and education system, including provincial legislation and its emphasis on the importance of school attendance and tardiness, school board policies and technological capacities, and idiosyncratic school procedures. Attendance and tardiness should not be complicated behaviour to gather accurately because they are one of the clearest outcomes we can examine in schools – presence, absence, or tardy. Unfortunately, great variability exists between school boards, schools, and classrooms in how this data is collected and the accuracy of entered information. Attempts to track and evaluate student attendance and tardiness at a provincial, divisional, or school level often fail before they have even started because of this issue. To effectively use attendance and tardiness data to inform practice and explore intervention efficacy, we implemented a standardized practice to collect and monitor attendance and tardiness within Rocky View Schools (RVS).

Standardizing Attendance Data

The ability to act on attendance practices is inherently linked to the accuracy and meaningfulness of collected data. As eluded to earlier, idiosyncratic school procedures often dictate the frequency and nature of how and what is gathered. While all schools vary in the degree to which students enter and exit their building during the day, we believe that having a standardized gathering system is critical to improving the precision of collected data. Within RVS, attendance is taken at a minimum two times per day in elementary and middle school, and every period in high school. If a school is a multi-level school, attendance data is collected at a rate that is consistent with the highest level. For example, a school that educates students between grades 7 to 12 takes attendance every period or block rather than twice a day. Increasing the frequency of measurement with respect to absence and tardiness offers districts and schools more information about student performance and helps to identify trends early.

While school authorities may differ on how often attendance and tardiness data is collected, we all share a common need to understand why students are not at school or not coming on time. We utilize what is referred to as attendance codes or categories to document the specific reason for why students are not at school when data collection is taking place. Documenting the broad categorical reasons for why students are not in school informs intervention efforts and allows school authorities to monitor specific attendance and tardiness trends. Unfortunately, schools rarely share a standardized bank of reasons for why students are not in school and, if provincial and educational authorities wish to use data to improve attendance practice, this would need to happen. It is important to keep in mind, however, that an inverse relationship exists between the number of attendance codes and the potential for data entry error. For example, previously in Rocky View Schools, we had a total of 36 attendance codes that were used throughout our schools to collect attendance information and know, first hand, the negative impact it can have on data tracking and evaluation. On the other hand, some provinces have swung the pendulum the other direction and limited themselves to a small number of attendance codes. For example, Saskatchewan Ministry of Social Services (2016) limits themselves to only four codes. It is important to note that a common bank of attendance codes needs to be supported by professional development opportunities surrounding when to apply them. We have encountered scenarios wherein school staff would apply different attendance codes to represent the same target reason for absence.

After reviewing educational acts from across Canada and available attendance codes from the United States, Australia, and four provinces, the following standardized attendance codes have been implemented district wide throughout RVS during the 2017-2018 school year (see Table 1).

Table 1. RVS Standardized Attendance Codes	
Present	Absent
PR – Present (Regular)	AH – Absent (Health)
PI – Present (Irregular)	AF – Absent (Family)
PN – Present (Non-Instructional)	AU – Absent (Unexcused)
PS – Present (Suspension)	AT – Absent (Unavoidable)
PP – Present (Special Programming)	AS – Absent (Suspension)
	AV – Absent (Vacation)
	AP – Absent (Special Programming)
	LL – Late/Leaving Early

As depicted in Table 1, school presence has been broken down to capture the unique learning environments that exist in our modern schools. For example, being able to track the frequency in which students access specialized programming (e.g., mental health classroom) can be useful for

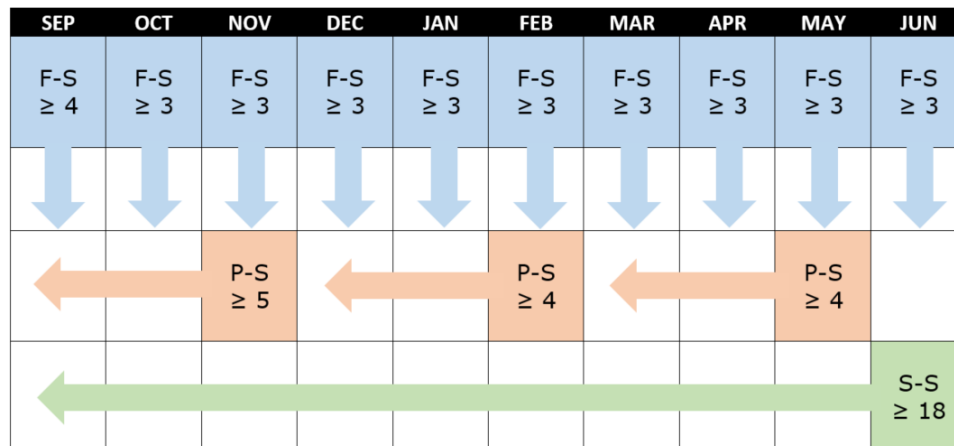
intervention planning and program evaluation. On the other hand, reducing the number of absence and tardiness codes to reflect the predominant, but not idiosyncratic, reasons reduces data entry error. In Table 2, we offer definitions for each attendance code so that school administrators, teachers, and secretaries can clearly delineate where students fall.

Table 2. Standardized Attendance Code Definitions	
Code Abbreviation & Name	Definition
PR - Present (Regular)	The default attendance code for students engaged in regular programming at school. This includes attendance at sites other than the school of record if the site is part of the student's regular instructional program (e.g., institutions of higher education, vocational/technical centres, inclusive education centres).
PI - Present (Irregular)	The student is not engaged in regular programming at the school. This includes writing exams, field trips, and/or meetings with school staff).
PN - Present (Non-Instructional)	The student is in the infirmary or engaged in school-sponsored extracurricular activities (e.g., school sporting events).
PS - Present (Suspension)	The student is serving an in-school suspension for disciplinary reasons and is receiving instruction.
PP - Present (Special Programming)	The student is physically present at the school but not engaged in regular programming due to behavioural, medical, and/or mental health functioning. Special programming should be reflected in the student's IPP or PLP in consultation with the Learning Support Team.
AH - Absent (Health)	The student is out of school because of personal physical or mental health or injury, including health-related appointments.
AF - Absent (Family)	The student is out of school for religious or family reasons (e.g., lack of child care for a parenting student, care for a sick relative, legal proceedings, bereavement for a family member). This also applies for adult or independent students who notify the school of their absences.
AU - Absent (Unexcused)	The student is out of school because of truancy, unknown reasons, and/or the parent has not notified the school.
AT - Absent (Unavoidable)	The student is out of school because of transportation, weather, or infrastructural barriers.
AS - Absent (Suspension)	The student is out of school because they were removed from regular programming for a disciplinary reason. The student is not receiving instruction at the school.
AV - Absent (Vacation)	The student is out of school because of family vacation or involvement in extracurricular activities that are not sponsored by the school.
AP - Absent (Special Programming)	The student is not at the school due to behavioural, medical, and/or mental health functioning. Special programming should only be used if reflected in the student's IPP or PLP with Learning Support Team consultation.
LL - Late/Leaving Early	The student arrives to class more than 10 minutes after the start time. This code is used if the student arrives even 1 minute prior to the end of class. This code can also be used to identify students who leave school early for any reason. The arrival time and/or reason for Late/Leaving Early should be documented.

Monitoring Attendance Trends

With improved data quality and meaningfulness, the monitoring of attendance and tardiness patterns provides unique insight to the educational health of students. We know that early identification of attendance or tardiness concerns are critical to the success of intervention. For this reason, we have developed an evidence-based early-warning system that can be used to flag students at-risk for chronic absenteeism, or missing 10% or more instructional days over a year. The system is based on a monthly evaluation of evidence-based markers to determine whether students cross a specific number of absences. As depicted in Figure 1, frequency scans (F-S) identify students who accumulate ≥ 4 absences in September or ≥ 3 absences in October through June. To identify students who may fall through the cracks of this early warning system, we also implemented three pattern scans (P-S) to occur over the school year. These scans look back over a three-month period to determine whether students accumulated ≥ 5 absences in the November P-S or ≥ 4 in the February and May P-S. Finally, in June, an overall summary scan (S-S) will identify students who remain at risk for chronic absenteeism and allows school teams to meet in August to brainstorm solutions for these students. If the student is transitioning to a new school, then it also allows time for administrators to inform the new school as to their work with a given student to address the problem. It is important to note that tardiness is not forgotten in this early-warning system and these numbers can also be used to address this concern.

Figure 1. Early Warning System for Chronic Absenteeism and Tardiness



The power of utilizing attendance and tardiness data to identify students in need can be amplified by examining this alongside historic and current academic achievement information, discipline reports, student engagement levels, and special education coding eligibility. However, the ability to perform this type of evaluation will depend strongly on the sophistication of specific student information systems employed by school boards.