



International Network for School Social Work

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School Attendance

Keeping children in school with regular attendance is central to school social work: in many countries improving school attendance has been the initial reason for bringing social workers into schools. The reasons that children miss school are as varied as all the problems in society, schools, families and children. Children want to learn and be with their peers when schools are safe and caring, and the teaching is adapted to their needs. Much of school social workers' efforts go to helping the school become such a place. The research document "Finding effective solutions to truancy" by the University of Wisconsin–Madison and University of Wisconsin–Extension (http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/families/whatworks_05.pdf) provides guidance to make this happen.

Even if these conditions are in place, we still need a toolbox with a variety of tools to keep attendance high. Software that tracks students' attendance and manages the data gives you what you need to implement a successful program. Without the software, the school must have an alternative method that conveniently gives the school social worker accurate, current attendance data. This article describes a simple and effective tool that can be applied in any school by any school social worker using limited time and resources. All you need is the data.

Data and Reinforcement: All you need to improve school attendance

Marion Huxtable

Do you know how many days pupils at your school missed last year, or how many days a year the average pupil in your school system misses? School social work has been concerned with attendance since its beginnings in the first decade of the 20th century, and improving daily attendance is still a crucial part of our work in support of the children's school success.

The attendance program I developed in Arizona (Southwest US) was designed to improve the attendance of students in grades one through five (ages 6 through 10) who had missed at least 20 days of school in the previous school year. Twenty days is four weeks of school or 11.43 % of all school days. All students who had missed 20 or more days were included in the program, whether the absences were excused or unexcused. The goal of the program was to increase the average attendance of the students. Social and emotional issues of children in the program were also dealt

with, although uncovering and resolving the complex and often hidden reasons for the poor attendance was not the main goal of the program.

The interventions described here were started at the beginning of the year and continued until the end. Each week, I calculated each child's cumulative absences and percentage of days absent for the year to date, in order to compare the current attendance with previous attendance. It was easy to access the data, as daily attendance was entered in the school's computerized database.

Students were given rewards on a random, but frequent, basis for improvement. The reinforcement varied according to the needs of the child, the preference of the teacher and my own imagination. The rewards included tokens, such as stickers, material reinforcement, such as "good attendance" pencils, and activities such as special lunches. Praise for improved attendance from significant adults at school, especially the school principal and attendance clerk, was an important part of the program, so that the children could see the importance the school gave to their attendance. The special attention is the main reinforcer for improved attendance.

Parents and teachers were reinforced also in a variety of ways. Teachers were kept informed about the child's progress and given ideas for encouraging good attendance and reinforcing the children in the program. I sent "Good News" postcards to parents to announce improvement in their child's attendance. Awards ceremonies were held once a quarter for students whose attendance had improved. Parents were invited to attend the awards ceremonies.

Children who needed extra reinforcement were included in small groups. Each group member was given a calendar and allowed to choose a sticker for each day he or she was in school. The calendars were used to help children set goals, and to allow them to accumulate stickers toward a tangible reward. The groups gave me the chance to get to know the children better and to reinforce positive attitudes to school. Group activities focused on school issues, especially attendance. I only contacted parents to provide positive reinforcement or if attendance worsened.

Measuring Results

One attractive aspect of attendance work is that there are numerical results. This is a way of demonstrating the effectiveness of school social work interventions. Different workers (including social work students) in different schools have obtained consistent improvement in average annual attendance of the target group using the approach described here. The majority of children missed fewer than 20 days during the year they were in the program. The average number of absences dropped to 60 to 70% of the days the children had missed in the year before being in the program. Children, whose absences continued to be over 20 days in the year, were included in the program in successive years until they reached the cutoff of 19 or fewer days absent.

Essential Elements of a program for Improving Attendance

- Include all children who missed at least 20 days
- Reward all improvement at least once a week using age-appropriate rewards
- Start in the beginning of the year and continue until the end of the year
- Reward the child, parents and teachers for improvement in the child's attendance
- Recruit others (school principal/head teacher) to reward the children with praise and attention.

You can contact me at mhuxtable@olympus.net for information or read a complete description of this program entitled *A Reachable Goal: An Attendance Program for School Social Workers with too Little Time and too Much to Do* in Volume 25, No 1, 2000 of the School Social Work Journal.