

DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION
Wilmette Public Schools

INFORMATION ITEM

Date: June 19, 2017

To: Members, Board of Education

From: Denise Thrasher, Ed.D., Assistant Superintendent
Romy DeCristofaro, Ph.D., Assistant Director of Student Services

Subject: School Attendance Update

BACKGROUND

In April 2017, the Illinois State Board of Education approved the State's plan under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to include chronic absenteeism as an indicator reflecting 10% of a school's quality score. Although this is a new factor for Illinois schools, District 39 had already identified school attendance as a contributor to school success and developed a two-year strategic goal. During the 2016-17 school year efforts were focused on increasing teacher and parent awareness. Additionally, schools implemented a multi-tiered system of attendance support through routine attendance monitoring and early intervention.

In a previous report, the Board was provided updated attendance data from the 2013-14 school year through 2015-16. The charts below provide additional longitudinal attendance data indicating both positive and chronic absence trends going back to the 2012-13 school year and also includes end of year data for this school year. Positive attendance is defined as a student being present for 95% of school days or more (absent fewer than 9 days). Chronic absences are defined as missing 10% of school days (18 or more excused or unexcused) in an academic year.

Longitudinal Attendance Data

Positive Attendance Trends (less than 9 absences) by Grade Level

Grade Level	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
EC	49%	61%	53%	60%	50%
K	68%	58%	64%	65%	69%
1	64%	71%	63%	68%	74%
2	68%	71%	65%	63%	71%
3	66%	67%	63%	63%	68%
4	71%	70%	65%	65%	73%
5	60%	63%	59%	71%	68%
6	58%	57%	57%	63%	68%
7	66%	71%	70%	80%	72%
8	65%	55%	64%	61%	68%
Total	64%	65%	63%	67%	70%

*Data collected using end of year attendance and June 1 enrollment

Chronic Absence Trends (18 or more absences) by Grade Level

Grade Level	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
EC	10.8%	10.0%	19.0%	3.5%	11.8%
K	4.4%	4.3%	3.9%	2.8%	4.5%
1	2.5%	3.2%	7.6%	4.6%	3.2%
2	1.5%	2.8%	3.6%	5.4%	4.6%
3	5.0%	4.6%	3.7%	4.2%	6.3%
4	3.4%	3.3%	6.4%	5.0%	4.1%
5	5.9%	5.3%	6.7%	4.8%	7.3%
6	9.7%	11.1%	8.5%	8.4%	5.0%
7	5.0%	7.7%	9.9%	5.6%	6.0%
8	6.9%	6.6%	10.1%	11.1%	8.3%
Total	5.1%	5.7%	7.1%	5.9%	5.7%

*Data collected using end of year attendance and June 1 enrollment

Interpretation

Positive attendance rates are gradually improving and 2016-17 end of year data shows that approximately 3% of students who were in the middle group (between 9 and 17.5 absences) during the prior year moved into the Positive Attendance category this year. Chronic absences have improved since they were at a high in 2014-15, but have remained relatively stable over the last five years.

Understanding School Refusal

According to Kearney & Silverman (1996), school refusal refers to child-motivated refusal or difficulty attending school or classes and there are four primary functions. The term “school refusal” often has negative connotations for parents. However, the term may encompass a variety of behaviors which are outlined in the table below.

Four Functions of School Refusal

Function of School Refusal	Definition	Examples of Traits
1. Avoidance of Negative Affect	To avoid school-based stimuli that provoke a general sense of negative affectivity (anxiety and depression)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Somatic complaints • Sadness/depression • General Anxiety
2. Escape from Evaluative or Social Situations	To escape aversive school-based social and/or evaluative situations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Phobia • OCD • Perfectionism
3. Attention Seeking Behaviors	To pursue attention from significant others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separation anxiety • Sympathy from family • High enmeshment/poor boundaries
4. Pursuit of Tangible Reinforcements	To pursue tangible reinforcers outside of school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video-games • Internet • Sleep

During the last two months of the 16-17 school-year, building level teams considered students identified in April 2017 as being chronically absent and determined which students to further investigate using a School Refusal Assessment tool developed by Drs. Christopher Kearny and Marie Albano. It is important to note that when parents were contacted, school teams accepted parent’s reasons for the high level of absences. Reported excessive absences for reasons including illness, vacation, bereavement, or a combination of these reasons were coded separately and are **not considered a function of school refusal** and were not included in the school refusal category.

Chronic Absence Analysis

Two charts representing the information gleaned from the chronic absence analysis and use of the School Refusal Assessment are presented below.

Chart One separates chronically absent students into two categories: School Refusal or Other. Any student impacted by one or more of the four functions were grouped into the school refusal category for an overall percentage. Any student with excessive absences that fell outside child-motivated refusal or difficulty attending school were separated into the Other category. This category includes vacation, medical, personal, sports, bereavement, or a combination of these factors. The purpose of this chart is to understand the overall percentage of students in each grade and districtwide who are impacted by school refusal.

Chart One: Chronic Absence Analysis by Grade Level

Grade Level	School Refusal	Other
EC	14%	86%
K	22%	78%
1	10%	90%
2	28%	72%
3	36%	64%
4	15%	85%
5	40%	60%
6	43%	57%
7	45%	55%
8	55%	45%
Total	34%	66%

n = 265 students

Data shows that 34% of chronically absent students districtwide are impacted by reasons of school refusal and it is more commonly identified at the middle school and junior high level. Falling within the Other category, it is worth noting that approximately 11% of students with chronic absences involved parents excusing their children for reasons that were largely parent driven or a result of parent leniency. A few examples that fell into this category include:

- Following a morning dentist appointment, student did not return to school
- Student misses the bus, parent lets the student stay home
- Parent keeps the student home to spend day with family

Chart Two separates the reasons for the chronic absences further to provide a percentage of students impacted by each of the four functions of school refusal by grade level. Additionally, the Other category was separated to display the prevalence of students who were chronically absent primarily for medical reasons, vacation, or a combination of factors not related to school refusal.

Chart Two: Reasons for Chronic Absences by Grade Level

Grade Level	Function of School Refusal				Other		
	Avoidance	Escape	Attention Seeking	Tangible Reinforcements	Vacation	Medical	Combination
EC	14%	0%	0%	0%	0%	64%	21%
K	9%	4%	9%	0%	22%	22%	35%
1	5%	0%	0%	5%	30%	20%	40%
2	8%	8%	4%	8%	12%	24%	36%
3	7%	11%	25%	18%	11%	14%	39%
4	8%	4%	0%	4%	12%	23%	38%
5	27%	20%	3%	10%	7%	23%	27%
6	30%	20%	7%	3%	13%	23%	20%
7	23%	32%	0%	3%	13%	32%	10%
8	40%	18%	3%	13%	11%	29%	6%
Total	19%	14%	5%	7%	13%	26%	26%

n = 265 students

(Note: Some students displayed multiple functions of school avoidance)

This data shows that within the categories of school refusal, Avoidance (Avoidance from Negative Affect) and Escape (Escape from Evaluative or Social Situations) are the two most common reasons for missing school and are more prevalent in the upper grades.

Comparable Districts

Surrounding districts within the township were contacted about efforts regarding attendance practices. District 39 is leading the way in regards to attendance monitoring and interventions.

At the elementary level, two districts had no systems in place for tracking attendance data, while two other districts reported tracking attendance through PowerSchool but had no formal procedures in place for addressing attendance concerns.

Regarding New Trier High School (NTHS), the outreach by D39 prompted NTHS to generate and share an attendance report that included students with positive attendance and chronic absences going back to the 2012-13 school year. The data is presented in the table below.

New Trier High School Attendance Data from 2013-2017

	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
Positive Attendance	61%	64%	59%	58%	55%
Chronic Absences	10%	9%	11%	11%	15%

Summary and Recommendations

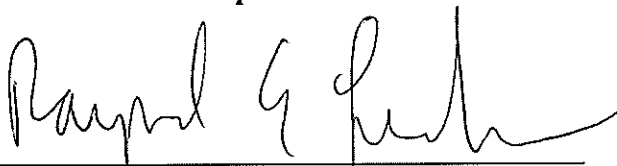
Promoting healthy attendance habits and ensuring students develop a sense of responsibility, resilience, and a strong work ethic around school will support them later in life to become successful and productive citizens. In collaboration with District 39 families, progress was made this year toward the strategic goal of improving positive attendance.

Upon reviewing the 2016-17 end of year attendance data, it is recommended that the attendance goal be adjusted from 80% positive attendance to a more realistic goal of 75% by the conclusion of the 2017-18 school year. Next school year, many efforts will continue and some new action steps will take place. First, each building will continue to routinely monitor attendance data in order to provide appropriate and timely tiered interventions.

New during the 2017-18 school year will be the addition of “chronically unexcused” absences on the State report cards. A student is considered chronically unexcused (or truant) if they accumulate 9 or more unexcused absences during an academic year. District 39 had 6 students with over 9 unexcused absences during the 2016-17 school year and this will be included in our 2016-17 School Report Card.

Second, parents will continue to receive monthly attendance reports and be notified of any concerning attendance patterns. Third, parents and teachers will be offered trainings and educational opportunities with a focus on early indicators of school refusal and supporting students at risk. Finally, D39 schools will work together to develop consistent guidelines for nurses and parents about when to send or keep a student home. Improving attendance is a goal that cannot be achieved alone and parent collaboration will continue to be an essential component of this initiative.

Recommended for presentation to the Board of Education,



Raymond E. Lechner, Ph.D., Superintendent