TEACH[R]

Reviewing the management of school attendance through the lens of multi-tiered systems of support

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Abstract

Healthy school attendance is a key contributor towards a young person's prospects beyond the formal education setting. Parents and schools both share the responsibility of supporting student attendance at school; as such, schools are required to have policies and processes in place for when absenteeism occurs. The concern around attendance rates in Australian schools has been a popular topic post-COVID, with the prevalence of attendance problems. There is developing research on how schools can efficiently support student attendance through using a framework such as the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support. This paper sought to review the current attendance policy and procedures in a small regional independent school to identify areas for improvement. Surveys were distributed to stakeholders in the school's attendance management practices to allow their perspectives on current policies and processes to be shared. The key findings of the research revealed that a lack of a consistent process exists within the school due to poor policy implementation. Recommendations for improving role clarity and bolstering the policy with tiered interventions to support the follow-up of absenteeism and prevention were made.

> *There is developing research on how schools can efficiently support student attendance*

Introduction

Student attendance at school has received increased attention in the years following the COVID pandemic and has become a global focus (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020; Landell, 2021). In Australia, schools share the responsibility in monitoring and managing student attendance alongside those of the parents (Australian Government, 1990; NSW Education Standards Authority, 2023). The average school attendance for the site school – X Christian College – was 86.81% in 2022, marginally lower than the 90% benchmark set by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] (2020).

This project reviewed the current policies, procedures and resources for managing student attendance at a NSW independent school. Participants included the stakeholders in managing attendance at the school level, such as the Principal, front office ancillary staff, and teachers (classroom teachers in the primary school, year advisors in the secondary school and the heads of school). The investigation reviewed the current procedures and policies in place and provided recommendations to improve school processes surrounding the management of attendance at a tier one level. This research is for the benefit of students and the school, as while the prospects of students increase with better attendance at school (Landell, 2021), the reduction of students requiring further, intensive support reduces the burden on school resources (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).

Literature Review

Attendance legislation and regulation

The Education Act 1990 (Australian Government) outlines that school is compulsory for children aged six to 17, or the completion of Year 10 – whichever occurs first. It is the parents' duty to ensure enrolment and attendance; however, it is equally the school's responsibility to maintain daily attendance records and report unsatisfactory school attendance to the Minister for Education. Furthermore, schools must have policies and procedures to monitor and follow up on student attendance and absence and "improve unsatisfactory student attendance with intervention strategies to increase engagement in school learning" (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2023, p. 53). Between these two supporting pieces of legislation and regulation, managing student attendance is one of many vital processes required within a school to support student achievement.

2023 Attendance statistics in Australia

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) collects and reports on a wide range of attendance data from all Australian schools. *The National Report on Schooling in Australia* (ACARA, 2023a) outlines attendance statistics from across all education sectors and states. Nationally, the average attendance rate in 2023 was 88.6% and had risen from 86.5% compared with the previous year. Within NSW, the attendance rate was slightly higher than the national average at 89.2%, and in NSW independent schools, it was 91.6%. A trend in the data shows that independent schools had the highest levels of attendance in all states compared to the alternative education sectors, such as government schools or catholic schools (ACARA, 2023a).

Attendance rates and levels have not fully recovered to the pre-COVID level, and while there has been improvement over the last two years, there is cause for concern over long-term trends (ACARA, 2023a). According to Kearney and Graczyk (2022), higher levels of absenteeism can be attributed to "recent health crises, technological and demographic changes, modified instructional formats, and global economic challenges" (pp. 1–2). Data on attendance levels from 2015 to 2019 display a gradual downward trend. Rules and regulations enforced in a post-COVID world, where symptomatic children were asked to stay home, caused a significant downward spike in attendance data. Despite this fluctuation, the 2023 data remain consistent with this pre-COVID trend (ACARA, 2023a). These trends suggest a deeper, underlying issue behind the steady regression of student attendance.

The rise in attendance problems in Australia

A parliamentary research paper synthesises Australian trends from 2022, reporting that attendance trends downwards from Year 3 to Year 10, with the largest decline in attendance between Year 7 and 10 (Clark, 2023). This is in line with patterns of students with attendance problems found in the literature. Students struggling with attendance are deemed common during the first two years of schooling before coming to a peak in the transition between primary and secondary school, before increasing towards the end of schooling (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Ehrlich et al., 2018, as cited in Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).

The downward trend between Year 7 and 10 is interesting to observe. Clark (2023) compares the attendance rate of the 2022 cohorts of Year 7 (87.3%) and Year 10 (82.9%), which shows a 4.4% gap. What needs to be considered is that this isn't tracking the same cohort of students through the years; it is comparing two different groups of students. Concerningly, when this 2022 Year 10 cohort was in Year 7 in 2019, the attendance rate was at 91.9%, showing a 9% decrease in attendance rate over the four years (ACARA, 2023b).

The largest point of difference in data is between schools in major cities compared with those in remote areas, as "attendance…declines as geographical remoteness increases" (Clark, 2023, p. 9). These disparities in attendance between the different locations of schools further contribute to the complex, multifaceted nature of attendance. Hence, finding solutions for schools that are efficient to implement and effective for their context is challenging.

> *Behind each statistic are students and their families, each with their own ecological context and reasons for their absence*

Introducing Student Attendance Problems (SAPs)

Data from Australian schools, across a variety of schooling contexts, reveal that there are students who struggle with attendance. Behind each statistic are students and their families, each with their own ecological context and reasons for their absence. This requires schools to not only identify which students struggle with attendance, but also the underlying cause and whether it is problematic. These are more commonly referred to in the literature as Student Attendance Problems (SAPs).

Not all absenteeism from school is problematic. While a majority of attendance over the last five years is deemed justified, it is marginally the majority, leaving a significant portion of absences unjustified. Unjustified student absenteeism occurs for a wide variety of reasons, including when a parent has responded with an unexcused reason, or no contact has been made from the parent and therefore absence is unexplained.

Schools need to distinguish between absences

as problematic and nonproblematic to inform best practice in intervention (Heyne et al., 2018). Heyne et al. (2018) suggest some absences can technically be excused but are masking serious problems.

The literature suggests four categories of student absenteeism (Heyne et al., 2018; Landell, 2021): school refusal, truancy, student withdrawal and exclusion. School refusal presents as a student who has difficulty attending school, while their parents have made a reasonable effort for them to attend (Berg, 2002, as cited in Heyne et al., 2018, p. 12). Similarly, truancy is defined as students intentionally not attending school, but concealing it from their parents (Heyne et al., 2018). School withdrawal has a different intentionality behind it, as "absenteeism is predominantly motivated by parent factors" (p. 15), for example, parents not attempting to get the child to school (Heyne et al., 2018).

The last category of problematic attendance is school exclusion, where the attendance stems from school-based actions. Expulsion and suspension – internal or external – from school is acceptable if schools stay within the guidelines set forth by the government. All school staff are required by the Disability Discrimination Act (Australian Government, 1992) and the Disability Standards for Education (Australian Government, 2005) to implement adjustments to support students' access to education. Where schools have the "inability or unwillingness" to make these adjustments, students can be discouraged from participating in school events. Low-achieving students may also be discouraged from attending school on days when testing occurs, which reflects the school's academic performance (Heyne et al., 2018).

> *The use of teams in a school supports the workload of staff by sharing the responsibility and helps in succession planning*

The challenges of identifying SAPs

Unfortunately, the terminology regarding SAPs is often inconsistent or misused. If a school is to implement support, consistent definitions must be used for the sake of research to guide research-based practice (Heyne et al., 2018). Truancy is a good example of a concept that researchers have struggled to define over time, which has greatly impacted the progression of literature on the topic (Keppens and Spruyt, 2017b as cited in Heyne et al., 2018). The biggest barrier to defining truancy is the broadness of the topic as it encompasses motivation, reasoning and location (Heyne et al., 2018). Therefore, schools look to various support programs to pre-empt some of these issues.

The Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Framework

The Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework is built on the cornerstone of implementing evidence-based, preventative practices for all students. MTSS combines principles from Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS), which have common traits such as the focus on quality instruction, a preventative approach to academic or behavioural challenges, interventions for all students, the rigorous use of data, and the utilisation of teams within the school.

The integrated MTSS model breaks support into a three-tier system where tier one is focused on delivering universal, preventative support/s for all students. Tier two incorporates targeted support for at-risk students, and tier three focuses on intensive support. In the MTSS framework, all tiers build upon each other, and everything builds up from the foundational, universal level. Implementation of the framework involves rigorous data collection and use, implementing practices and supports, utilising teams of staff and stakeholders and evaluation of the implementation (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

Beyond academics and behaviour

Navo and Williams (2020) looked at the MTSS model inclusively and claimed that it can be applied to more than academic and behavioural problems. Their model includes "social-emotional learning, leadership, community and family engagement, and instructional frameworks" (2020, p. 5). Kilgus et al. (2015) also found that the MTSS framework could be used to help with problems such as mental health. Schools are increasingly being relied on for mental health support, another factor that can contribute to chronic absenteeism (Allison et al., 2019; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). Due to this complexity, a common finding in the literature surrounding the support of student attendance problems is the use of an MTSS framework (Clark, 2023; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020; Landell, 2021).

Kearney and Graczyk (2022) promote the use of an MTSS as an effective framework for schools managing SAPs, but emphasise the need for depth to be added to the model. Typically, the MTSS framework is considered a triangle that covers the three tiers, but this does not cover the multifaceted nature of absenteeism.

A multi-dimensional MTSS supports the practical use of the framework in working with attendance, as it aids in correctly implementing intervention by examining the different domains of absenteeism. Firstly, students with attendance problems are identified, followed by identifying what kind of SAP is prevalent. Secondly, a functional profile analysis digs deeper into the motivation behind the absenteeism. Thirdly, the grade level of the student must be considered, as different methods of intervention will be required for different developmental stages.

Teaming

A key component for the survival of an integrated MTSS model in a school is the sustainability of the model. The use of teams in a school supports the workload of staff by sharing the responsibility and helps in succession planning. With staff turnover in schools, when a staff member leaves, their experience and expertise go with them, which can be detrimental to a program. Teaming allows staff to upskill, collaborate and problem-solve (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Teams will look different between schools due to the size and makeup of an individual school's staff. Acknowledging this, McIntosh and Goodman (2016) model includes a team at every level in the school, including individual student teams, classroom teams, grade-level teams and school leadership teams.

At a school leadership level, the team would drive data collection procedures and select and implement strategies for implementation across the whole school, ensuring consistency. The monitoring of data and implementation of practices and interventions would flow into the responsibility of the classroom teachers. A student team would be required when support is needed for tier two or three interventions and should involve the classroom teacher, student and parents (Heyne et al., 2018).

Interventions

At a tier one level, the focus is on the prevention of problems and the optimisation of learning for all students. The word practice is used over intervention as it implies the embedment within normal routines and a universal approach rather than being targeted at any student. In regard to attendance, practices at this level could include parent and student education, regular analysis of attendance data, a focus on high-quality teaching to improve student engagement, school-based social-emotional programs and positive recognition for good attendance (Dunn & Stein, 2023; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). There is a strong theme in the literature of developing the culture of the school to embed good attendance habits through developing a welcoming community and the strengthening of student connection and engagement (CESE, Attendance Works, 2018; 2022).

In contrast to tier one, supports needed at a tier two level become student-targeted and are considered supplementary to what is already in place at tier one. According to Yong and Cheney (2013), tier two supports target a group of students, target more than one skill area and involve a wider network of adult support than just a classroom teacher. Due to the nature of tier two interventions, classroom teachers may not necessarily be the main implementers, but they need to know the process for referring students to this level of intervention (Yong & Cheney, 2013). Attendance intervention at a tier two level could look like regular support meetings, mentoring, Check-In/Check-Out (CICO), small group support, transition planning and behavioural interventions (Attendance Works, 2018; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020)

Tier three is the most time and resource-intensive tier of support as intervention becomes tailored to an individual student's needs. At this level, there is a stronger need to examine a student's situation holistically and look at the interconnection between academics and behaviour. In addition to what is in place from previous tiers, interventions can include individualised learning adjustments, alternate learning methods, and collaboration with external specialists, all of which require intensive case management (Attendance Works, 2018; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).

Implementation of MTSS

Successful implementation is crucial for the success of any program (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). For the sustainability and success of the program, McIntosh and Goodman (2016) advocate for gradual integration, beginning with a focus on tier one, universal support.

By preparing the school for change and using the principles of implementation science and using the lens of school improvement, there is a stronger chance of uptake and long-term success (Bohanon et al., 2016). Bohanon et al. (2016) outline a six-phase plan for implementation. Firstly, staff buy-in is sought through showing the need for change and aligning the goals of the intervention with the school's vision and mission. Secondly, the team is formed with clear roles. Thirdly, a smaller-scale version of the program is run. Fourthly, the program is put into full operation with all staff. Once the program is running well, innovation, the fifth phase, can then begin to occur. This is where changes to the supports can be made, or additional interventions if needed. Finally, the sustainability of the program becomes the focus with training provided to future leadership staff. This last phase aligns with the work of McIntosh and Goodman (2016), as they recommend that new staff join the leadership team yearly to avoid staff-burnout.

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Case Study: Kellyville High School, NSW

In the Teacher podcast (Earp, 2024 May 23), Deputy Principal Glenn Kayes from Kellyville High School in NSW, a school of 870 students, discusses the changes the school has made to increase its attendance statistics. The school has implemented an attendance team that consists of two Deputy Principals, alongside a Head Teacher in Welfare and Year Advisors, an Aboriginal Education Coordinator

(AEC) and a representative from the Inclusive Education team within the school. The multiple inputs from different sectors of the school bring valuable insights and perspectives when coming together as a team. The school's drive behind having a team approach is to create sustainability for staff and to avoid the failure of a functioning system if staff leave. This team reviews attendance data twice a school term and uses this to facilitate conversations in their other meetings. Furthermore, they distributed a student survey to ascertain student understanding of attendance.

The school has focused on developing the following five strategies to support better attendance for all students in their school. Firstly, the school educated and informed parents and students about their individualised attendance levels and linked information concerning the impacts of non-attendance through a bi-termly report. Secondly, they began analysing attendance data to identify students at risk of low-attendance and then began to distinguish which ones may have attendance problems. Thirdly, they built a school culture of rewarding students for positive attendance for the year. Fourthly, they intentionally promoted various extra-curricular activities to build student motivation and a sense of community. Finally, they support student welfare through a well-being program that focuses on resilience (Earp, 2024 May 23).

> *the school educated and informed parents and students about their individualised attendance levels*

Research Question

How do staff responsible for following up and managing student attendance perceive:

a. the current procedures in place regarding student attendance?
b. tiered interventions with existing school policies and practices regarding student attendance?

Methodology

This investigation involved surveying staff across the primary and secondary schools and administration to review the current understanding and attendance procedures of the site school. This project occurred at X Christian College in regional New South Wales. Initially, a survey was distributed to all participants, designed to gather information on general staff knowledge and feelings about current attendance policies and procedures. A second survey was then sent to a cross-section of participants, designed to ascertain their views on the priority for development of Tier One interventions.

Current policies and procedures

The current *School Attendance Guidelines* reiterate the standards for school attendance as outlined in the *Education Act* (Australian Government, 1990), including the responsibilities of the school, parents and students. The document also elaborates on the implementation of the government standards within the school context and outlines the policy and procedure for the management of student attendance. The "student absence process management" outlines the process for being notified of student absence, reviewing the data, and then the roles of the staff in following up on the attendance by contacting the parent or carer. There is a referral process that begins with the Year Advisor and moves through the levels of school leadership, depending on the continuation of absenteeism or lack of student or parent engagement in the process.

Participants and recruitment

Participants in this research project were volunteers amongst X Christian College staff members who responded to an invitation. Staff members invited to participate in the project are stakeholders in managing and following up on student attendance across the school. Participants included the Principal, front office ancillary staff, and teachers responsible for following up attendance (classroom teachers in the primary school, year advisors in the secondary school and the heads of school). In total, 16 staff volunteered and were invited to participate.

Data collection and context

A baseline survey was conducted online using Microsoft Forms. This survey was used to investigate both the knowledge and practices of the participants in relation to school policies and student absenteeism. The follow-up survey (Dunn & Stein, 2023) provided to school staff was distributed in paper form. The second survey was used to determine the participants' perspectives on the priority of Tier One interventions. (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

Data analysis

Data from the survey were analysed to answer the research question by interpreting the data and looking at the patterns and regularities in views expressed by the participants. In the analysis of survey data gathered, the researcher followed the qualitative methods outlined by Denscombe (2017) to create a grounded theory in response to the research questions.

Benefits and risk management

The school has a responsibility to its support staff by having rigorous processes that enable them to do their jobs efficiently and effectively. McIntosh and Goodman (2016) support the effectiveness

of the MTSS framework; however, the authors are open about the initial costs of staff time and human resources through the implementation process. Recommendations made from this research are intended to be taken into consideration by an attendance team that can oversee the implementation of further support.

Results

The two surveys distributed to participants were

Table 1: *Survey 1 results (n=14)*

Survey Question	Yes		No	
1. Has the participant read the policy?	10 (71%)		4 (29%)	
2. Familiarity with procedure for following up attendance.	12 (86%)		2 (14%)	
3. Awareness of role.	13 (93%)		1 (7%)	
4. Understanding of 'at risk' definition.	13 (93%)		1 (7%)	
5. Awareness of students 'at risk'.	14 (100%)		0	
6. Existing process of reviewing class attendance data?	7 (50%)		7 (50%)	
	Thoroughly	**Mostly**	**Somewhat**	**Not at all**
7. Does the current processes match the policy?	1 (7%)	2 (14%)	10 (71%)	1 (7%)
	Number of Staff Who Mentioned It			
6a. Discussion of personal attendance tracking habits.				
Looking at class attendance data	7 (50%)			
Not aware of responsibility	1 (7%)			
Making contact with parents	3 (21%)			
Looking at data reactively	2 (14%)			
7a. Discussion on adherence to policy.				
Procedure isn't in line with policy	3 (21%)			
Inconsistent application amongst staff	1 (7%)			
Issues in role clarity	4 (29%)			
Lack of staff training	1 (7%)			
Lack of time to follow-up.	1 (7%)			
8. Suggestions for improvement				
Scheduled time to follow-up.	2 (14%)			
Accountability for teachers	2 (14%)			
Communication proformas	3 (21%)			
Preventative strategies	1 (7%)			
Clear, simple processes	3 (21%)			
Earlier identification of absence	1 (7%)			
Additional Comments				
Seeking colleague assistance	2 (14%)			
Clarity on what is approved and unapproved.	2 (14%)			
Lack of parent engagement	3 (21%)			

> *The school has a responsibility to its support staff by having rigorous processes that enable them to do their jobs efficiently and effectively.*

used to investigate the current policies and procedures regarding student attendance at X Christian College, understand staff perceptions of what is in place and make recommendations for improvement. The findings revealed that there are current procedures in place to manage attendance and while there are positive factors associated with the current process, the participants have also found many challenges. Staff at the site school have identified an inconsistent approach to following the processes outlined in the Student Attendance Guidelines.

From the survey provided to 16 participants who are responsible for managing student attendance, 14 (88%) staff responded. Of this, five participants were primary school teachers and five were secondary school year advisors. Two were front office ancillary staff who maintain the clerical side of attendance, and two were primary and secondary leadership staff. To support the anonymity of staff, participants will be identified by number. The results from the survey are displayed in Table 1.

Staff expressed the need for more emphasis on processes that are "easy to follow" and "rigorous"

As seen in Table 1, 71% of staff have read the Student Attendance Guidelines. Among the four respondents who recorded that they had not read the policy, two were leadership staff. More participants reported that they were familiar with the procedures in place for managing attendance, with 12 reporting in the affirmative (86%). The majority of staff reported that they were aware of their role in following up on attendance.

Thirteen participants (93%) reported they understood the definition of a student being "at risk" for low attendance. All participants reported that they are aware of students in their classrooms or within the wider school who are at risk regarding attendance rates.

Existing practices

Regarding the practices of participants reviewing attendance data, the responses were evenly spread between staff who do have a process and those who do not. When asked to elaborate on their existing process for reviewing data, seven participants shared that they looked at the data, but the regularity varied between these responses. For example, P1 shared that they "briefly look over the class roll to see where attendance is at", while P2 shared they have "no official process, rather a sporadic review", and P6, who reviews their class roll at the end of each month. Two other participants shared that they review data, but when prompted by an external factor, e.g. "prompted by others" or "when [it] pops up in conversation". Three participants mentioned that they make contact with parents, such as P11, who "contact[s] parent/caregivers to check on how things are at home and to see if there is a link to their attendance routine", while the other two refer to parent forms that are sent home to follow-up unexplained absence.

Adherence to policy

Participant views on the alignment of the current policy and procedure were varied. As seen in Table 1, a majority of respondents (n=10) believe that the current process "somewhat" matches the policy, while two participants reported that it "mostly" matches. One participant responded "not at all" while another believed that it is "thoroughly" followed. In further discussion on this question, participants spoke about why it may not align. Three participants spoke about concerns that "it's overlooked somewhat", or "some things that aren't done…e.g. bringing in a note the day after an absence, entering data on SEQTA". Four staff reported issues concerning role clarity, such as "[there are] blurred lines between whose role it is between the front office and the homeroom teachers", and "[reviewing data] falls on the homeroom teacher, not the front office". Further reasons behind the lack of alignment mentioned by participants included the lack of consistency of staff following it up, a lack of staff training in this area and a lack of time to follow up.

Suggestions for improvement

Participants were queried about what support they would need to fulfil their responsibilities. The most common supports mentioned were in the areas of parent communication and improvement of processes. Staff expressed the need for more emphasis on processes that are "easy to follow" and "rigorous". Two staff members affirmed the current parent forms used to communicate with parents, while another staff member suggested further scaffolded communication tools would be beneficial. Other suggestions by two participants included a scheduled time allocated for staff to review data, such as in staff meetings. Two participants also suggested implementing strategies for staff accountability, such as a checklist. One staff member also put forward the suggestion of preventative strategies, such as fostering improved student engagement. Another participant requested earlier identification of students at risk for high non-attendance.

Additional comments

Participants made additional comments relating to the management of attendance, which are worth including. Three staff members mentioned the lack of parent engagement, which includes parents not responding to communication or providing explanations. Further to this, two staff members

also mentioned the need for clearer direction on what absences are approved or unapproved. Two participants also mentioned relying on other staff to prompt or support them in managing attendance. For example, one participant seeks a colleague's assistance to find attendance data, while another participant looks at attendance data only when prompted by other staff.

Survey 2 results

A secondary survey designed by Dunn and Stein (2023) was provided to six staff and had a response rate of 100%. These six participants represented a cross-section of the school and included two ancillary staff, two school leadership staff and a primary and secondary teacher. They were selected due to their experience and positions in the school. Results included were selected on items deemed highest priority by a majority of the participants ($n \geq 3$). The results are displayed in Table 2.

As seen in the results displayed in Table 2, a variety of strategies have been identified as a priority for implementation by participants. Out of the four categories represented in the survey, interventions for families were the most chosen by the participants. Most of these items are related to communication with families. Education through communication to families around the importance and legalities of attendance and definitions for attendance problems was deemed the item of highest priority by five staff (83%) of participants. The next items of high priority, with four respondents, each target school teams and staff and families, include the review of attendance data, staff training in school refusal and more family communication regarding early warning indicators. The remaining items from Table 2 were deemed high priority by half of the respondents and include further support that targets families, school teams and students.

Discussion

This report sets out to ascertain staff perceptions and practices of current procedures in place and tiered interventions with existing school policies regarding student attendance. Between both surveys, participants were able to share

> *Out of the four categories represented in the survey, interventions for families were the most chosen by the participants*

Table 2: *Secondary survey: items for implementation by priority*

Item	Category	Number of participants perceiving as high priority (n=6)
22. Family Communication materials explain the legal limit for absences, definitions of truancy, and lawful consequences of excessive absenteeism.	For all families	5 (83%)
03. Regularly review attendance data (minimum bi-weekly).	Teaming	4 (67%)
09. Educate school personnel on policies, procedures, and early warning indicators of school refusal behaviour.	For all teachers	4 (67%)
23. Family Communication materials note early warning indicators of school refusal.	For all families	4 (67%)
01. Develop a school attendance team.	Teaming	3 (50%)
02. Identify clear roles and responsibilities for attendance monitoring and follow through.	Teaming	3 (50%)
05. Examine patterns of absenteeism.	Teaming	3 (50%)
12. Structure homeroom/first period to quickly identify absent students.	For all students	3 (50%)
13. Consider the layout of campus (e.g., open campus).	For all students	3 (50%)
14. Improve areas of social congregation.	For all students	3 (50%)
25. Family Communication materials identify a contact person for families concerned about attendance.	For all families	3 (50%)
26. Family Communication materials explain academic/credit/graduation requirements and impact of absences on grades.	For all families	3 (50%)
29. Immediate notification to parents as soon as absence is known.	For all families	3 (50%)

their perspectives on the current policies and procedures in place at the school site, as well as their priorities for tier one intervention development. Key findings that emerged from the results were the poor implementation of policy, challenges that staff experience and areas for further development within the policies and practices.

Implementation of policies and procedures

An interesting correlation exists between the reported familiarity with policy and procedure and the follow-through of the policy as it is written. Seventy-one per cent of participants perceived that the policy was "somewhat" followed. The lack of cohesiveness among what data tracking processes participants have in place further supports this. A clear disconnect exists between participants reading a policy and its embedment in everyday processes.

Role clarity plays an important role in enacting policy. There is confusion amongst staff regarding the responsibility of attendance management, with some participants saying it is not the front office's role, while others saying there isn't clarity if it's the front office's or the year advisor's role to manage attendance. A significant concern is that leadership are amongst staff who have not read the policy. If they are unaware of their role in the policy, they are unable to support or enact the policy. Teams within an MTSS framework, as outlined by McIntosh and Goodman (2016), play specific roles in the review of data and implementation of intervention. The school leadership team is crucial in overseeing the effectiveness of processes and for anything beneath it to function, as well as being actively involved in the policy development and implementation of processes. Interventions involving teaming were strongly supported in the second survey by participants. This further suggests that staff identify the need for stronger processes and the benefits of having a team approach.

> *The method of supporting absenteeism requires first the identification of problematic attendance and then the correct diagnosis*

Furthermore, as per the Student Attendance Guidelines, "the teachers, with assistance from Heads of schools, review consecutive or habitual absences and follow up". Half of the participants reported that they have no existing process for reviewing attendance data. While teachers have this responsibility, it is the responsibility of leadership in the school to have accountability measures in place. The literature clearly shows the importance of data analysis from an MTSS perspective (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016) and an attendance intervention perspective (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). Moving forward, putting in place measures to support accountability and transparency in the process is vital.

A limitation of the survey design was investigating the depth of staff knowledge regarding policy and process. Amongst the processes that are currently in place, the distribution of parent forms that follow up on unexplained absences was discussed by staff, which could be considered a tier one intervention, but nothing further. It is uncertain if staff are aware of the full procedure of managing attendance, or what is just relevant within their role. This area is worth further investigation.

There is a misalignment between the policy and current practice, which suggests a lack of quality implementation. Leadership within the school is responsible for the implementation and fidelity of implementation. While the policy outlines a process for managing attendance, without accountability measures in place to know if it has been fully implemented, the effectiveness of the policy cannot be evaluated.

Challenges

While a lot of challenges that respondents reported are linked to the issues with the policy as discussed previously, participants expressed challenges beyond policy clarity and implementation. Barriers that were highlighted include family involvement, a lack of training and time constraints. Certain challenges in the management of attendance can be anticipated due to the complex, multifaceted nature of attendance problems (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).

The method of supporting absenteeism requires first the identification of problematic attendance and then the correct diagnosis of the SAP (Heyne et al., 2018). Participants reported challenges with a lack of parent engagement, with some not responding to the communication sent regarding attendance or providing detailed explanations. With inconsistent or superficial data, staff have difficulty drawing conclusions regarding a student's situation.

Participants expressed a lack of skills or knowledge in managing attendance. Two staff members mentioned they require assistance from other staff, while another expressed concern about the challenging cases of SAPs and that they felt it was beyond their skill set. While the literature suggests that specialist knowledge is usually required for tier three interventions (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016), the domain of attendance intervention is not within the normal scope of a teacher's daily routine. As support beyond data review was not specifically mentioned in the survey questions, this research cannot ascertain staff exposure to managing cases of problematic attendance. If staff are not trained and confident to engage in the management of attendance, problematic attendance will not be followed up on. The results show that the school has students across all grades who are at risk for

poor attendance, as evidenced by the spread of participants. As the trajectory of students within the school with attendance problems will only continue to increase without support in place, to avoid staff feeling out of their depth, training must occur. Including staff in teams provides opportunities for staff to access support and be upskilled while also balancing their workload and avoiding burnout (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). The upskilling and education of staff was ranked highly in terms of priority by participants in the second survey and further supports the need for training. With clearer expectations, clear role descriptions, training and rigorous, efficient processes, staff should be able to manage their role.

Conclusion

In this investigation, the aim was to uncover staff perceptions of the current policy, practices and tiered intervention practices regarding attendance management within a small regional school. This study has identified that within the school, there is an issue with policy implementation, particularly concerning role clarity and a lack of consistent process. With leadership not being aware of their roles within attendance management, there is a lack of accountability and follow-through. This lack of clarity and procedural guidance has led to challenges staff face in maintaining consistent attendance processes. When given options for tier one interventions, staff prioritised interventions that focused on collaboration with families to support student learning. Furthermore, staff highlighted a need for ongoing communication and training to support them in fulfilling their role effectively.

The understanding gained here should help the school to adjust communication and clarity concerning the policy for more successful implementation. The strengthening of processes within a school leads to improved staff effectiveness and, therefore, better student outcomes. Better processes combined with more intentional collaboration with families would create a strong foundation of support for students, not just within attendance, but more holistically. If the school can integrate a tiered framework with policy implementation and incorporate all domains within an MTSS framework – teams, use of data, intervention – it will create clarity for staff and give them structure and guidance to support within their role. The fidelity of implementation is a crucial step that can often be missed but is vital for schools to run effectively (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

Recommendations for practice and policy

The findings of this study have several practical implications. Successful attendance policy implementation requires staff to know their roles and see the need for change (Bohanon et al., 2016); therefore, there is a definite need for ongoing policy development and targeted training for staff. This could begin with creating clear role descriptions that outline responsibilities for secondary year advisors and primary classroom teachers and then ensuring that staff feel well-equipped to work in that role. Integrating an MTSS framework that includes clear role definitions, data analysis and tiered interventions with the student attendance policy would provide many benefits to the school. Establishing role-specific teams within the school helps support the workload of teachers by sharing responsibility, but also provides the opportunity for accountability. The inclusion of tiered intervention strategies with policy also clearly communicates to staff evidence-based supports that are available to utilise when following up attendance. While the review of student attendance data is partially in place, embedding this into routine and upskilling staff to feel confident in understanding and acting upon the data is also an important step. Regular analysis of attendance data will help the quick identification of students with attendance problems, which is outlined in the literature as a vital step in preventing chronic absenteeism, as staff can proactively address attendance issues (Reid, 2012).

A second recommendation concerns the intentional involvement of families. As identified by staff, there is a need to communicate with families the importance and impacts of attendance, what is considered problematic attendance, and regular indications of their child's attendance statistics. Regular updates on student progress engage families more with their child's success and can foster a more proactive approach if issues regarding attendance arise. Results from the second survey outline simple ways that do not impede staff resources that can be incorporated to strengthen the home-school connection, such as the school newsletter. TEACH

> *there is a need to communicate with families the importance and impacts of attendance*

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