

Improving Attendance at Beech Grove Intermediate School: A Recommendation Report

Introduction

Like other schools around the nation, Beech Grove Intermediate School is experiencing a serious problem with attendance. This has been cited as a problem and something that needs to be addressed so that Beech Grove Intermediate can achieve the attendance rate they need to become a Four-Star status school. Currently, the attendance at Beech Grove Intermediate is averaging around 95 percent. The rate needs to increase to 97 percent for the school to achieve Four-Star status. Beech Grove Intermediate does have an attendance policy; however, other strategies could be implemented to increase the attendance. Attendance is an important part of children's and parents' everyday responsibilities, and poor attendance habits cause lifelong consequences. Many schools around the nation report low attendance and high tardiness rates. This problem needs to be addressed in order to help our children do well in school and become responsible adults. Children who are habitually late or chronically absent miss out on much that is learned in school. Even being 5 to 10 minutes late each day creates a situation where children can lose a considerable amount of time that is being spent on their schooling. Also, it is known that children with poor attendance rates in elementary and high school continue to show problems of tardiness and even proficiency later in life once they go to college or pursue a career. Changes in the attendance program at Beech Grove are needed, and the following report is intended to propose tactics for increasing the attendance rate at Beech Grove Intermediate School.

Methodology

For this report we surveyed teachers from six local elementary and secondary schools to get an idea of what other schools were doing to increase their attendance. We received 50 completed questionnaires. We also searched scholarly databases such as ERIC to find relevant articles on the problem of increasing attendance. These articles outline several solutions to increasing attendance in schools.

Review of the Literature

This review of recently published literature on attendance addresses causes, effective policies, parental contact, community involvement, teacher/student relationships, and rewards and incentives to increase student attendance.

Causes of Absenteeism

All the literature agrees that absenteeism is an all too common problem for schools around the country. This can be traced to a range of causes from unsupportive school environment to poor health of the student. According to John Dougherty (1999), home dynamics play a key role in absenteeism. The parents are the key to how often a child attends class (Dougherty, 1999, p. 10). Janet Ford and Richard Sutphen (1996) agree with this and list parent influence on absenteeism as number two on their list for reasons for absence. They go on to state that lack of caring by the parents, or parents who are not home to see the child off to school are major reasons for students not to go to class, especially with younger students (Ford & Sutphen, 1996, p. 96). Other than home life, illness of the child is also given as a common reason for absenteeism in the literature.

Also, appointments and vacations are listed as top reasons in the literature as well. Dougherty attests to this in saying, “It is now common practice for students to miss school for general appointments to avoid tests and assignments” (1999, p. 10). Two authors noted that homeless students or students who live in a family that move very frequently are more likely to be chronically absent from school (Epstien, Sheldon, 2002, p. 311). Some of the authors also agree that if a student is not succeeding in school then they are less likely to want to come to school. This also goes along with schools that do not give praise to students or interact with the students so that no one feels left out, and help to see that everyone succeeds (Dougherty, 1999, p. 10). In short, all of the authors agree that parental involvement and student-teacher interaction is very important in keeping absenteeism down.

Effective Policies and Parental Contact

As schools seek new programs and ideas for increasing student attendance, one of the two most frequently mentioned tactics in the literature are having an effective attendance policy and increasing communication with parents and guardians. According to Dan Vandivier (2003), a high school principal, attendance policies must be stringent and must also be persistently adhered to. He states that policies must be fair and also have “flexibility to accommodate mitigating circumstances” (Vandivier, 2003, p. 81). Vandivier’s new attendance policy no longer distinguished between excused and unexcused and allowed administration discretion in dealing with excessive absences for legitimate reasons (Vandivier, 2003, p. 81). Dougherty (1999) agrees that schools must produce a clear fair attendance policy that is up to date and standardized and communicate it.

Many studies have also shown a correlation between increased parental contact and increased attendance (Smerka, 1993; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Smerka (1993) noted that after mailing notices to all parents informing them of the success of the attendance program and asking for their support, the perfect attendance rate increased to 13.9 percent (p. 96.) He claimed that the key to good attendance is promoting it everywhere to everyone (Smerka, 1993, p. 96). Another study also found that “the degree to which schools overcame the challenge of communicating effectively with families was related to gains in student attendance and declines in chronic absenteeism” (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, p.315). The study noted that providing families with someone to talk to at the school about attendance or other issues was effective in increasing attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, p.315).

In addition to simply having contact with parents, many authors agree that it is the responsibility of the parents to monitor their student’s absenteeism (Dougherty, 1999; Ford & Sutphen, 1996; Kube & Radgan, 1992). Dougherty (1999) says that parents “must be responsible for their child’s daily attendance and promptly inform the school attendance office when the student is absent” (p. 11). One study shows that increasing communication with parents and involving them in the student’s education are strategies for increasing attendance. This study also cited the use of a letter to parents informing them of the policy and encouraging them to discuss the importance of good attendance with their children (Ford & Sutphen, 1996, p. 96). Another study also said that parents “must be responsible for the student’s daily attendance” and they must “stress the importance of daily attendance to their children” (Kube & Radgan, 1992). Creating effective attendance policies that are reviewed and renewed regularly and establishing parental contact are very important stepping stones for increasing attendance in schools.

Community Involvement

While it is not crucial to the success of an attendance program, many of our authors agree that solid community involvement can positively impact attendance rates. Many schools work with businesses in the community to offer incentives for students with good or perfect attendance ("Raising School Attendance," 2002). John Daugherty (1999), an education professor at Lindenwood College, refers to programs which offer a series of incentives for attendance, ranging from fast-food coupons to entertainment centers which were offered at a discount from local businesses (p. 16). A different form of contribution is noted in Bob Maggi's (1991) case study of a school in Missouri. A local company contributed \$500 to fund their mentoring/ adoption program. Seeing how successful the project was, the company doubled the amount it contributes to the program. Another article suggests that schools work with law enforcement and local businesses. The author states, "With their support, children who should be in school will be in school" ("Raising School Attendance," 2002). Joyce Epstein and Steven Sheldon from The Johns Hopkins University agree, saying, "Developing productive school-family-community connections has become one of the most commonly embraced policy initiatives in schools and school districts" (2002, p. 308).

There are times when the community involvement takes a much more negative but still necessary angle. Often, students will be habitually absent and schools are now working to address that issue. Janet Ford and Richard Sutphen, social work professors at the University of Kentucky, mention that in some states or districts parents of students will face fines or even jail time if they fail to adhere to attendance laws (1996, p. 95). Dougherty suggests other tactics, such as "implementing police sweeps, involving local agencies and the media and notifying juvenile authorities" (1999). Of course, these tactics are usually implemented in only severe cases of absenteeism. Community involvement and support can be a wonderful addition to attendance policies if tailored to meet the school's needs and the student's desires.

Teacher/Student Relationships

While family and community involvement both play important roles in maintaining good student attendance, our sources all agree that student-teacher relationships are also very important. Several authors encourage one on one meetings, or mentoring students who have attendance problems. In fact, at least one study (Maggi, 1991) is devoted entirely to this practice and with great results, while others ("Raising school attendance," 2001 and Vandiver, 2003) simply add it into their attendance programs. Authors agree that to curb poor attendance teachers should lecture students every day about the importance of attending school daily. Kube and Ratigan (1992) insist, "Teachers must let students know that they are missed when they have been absent. They must ensure that important learning experiences occur each day in their classes" (p.3), while Dougherty (2003) concurs and adds, "And they must value and reward good attendance" (p.76).

According to the literature, the teachers are also responsible for coming up with new and creative ways to entice children into coming to school every day. These enticements run the gamut from Vandiver's (2003) idea of being exempt from having to take the final exams if the student has perfect attendance to Ford and Sutphin's (1996) strategy of giving tokens to students with good attendance so that they could cash them in on prizes at the end of the week (p.98). In the end,

authors agree that in order to keep attendance under control, educators need not only to regularly come up with new and innovative ideas to keep students coming to school but to consistently tell the students how important it is for them to be present every day.

Rewards and Incentives

Research has shown that attendance increases when schools incorporate incentive programs into their attendance policies. Bob Maggi (1998), principal at Jarrett High School, began a program which encouraged teachers to adopt a student. Maggi (1998) claimed that “A \$500 grant from Southwestern Bell Foundation was distributed to the adopting teachers to be used to their discretion: for birthday or holiday gifts, for taking student out for dinner or a show, or to buy a sweatshirt or dance ticket” (p.12). It only took one year for Jarrett High School to receive the results they were searching for. Terrance Smerke (1993, p.95), principal of Aurora Middle School, along with other schools found it effective to reward the children with positive letters of their accomplishments (*Best Practices for School Attendance*, 1998). According to Janet Ford, PhD, and Richard Sutphen, PhD, both assistant professors, other types of incentives are posting student’s names in the hallway or reading them over the public address system (1996).

One observation mentioned in the article “Raising School Attendance” (2002), was that Monday and Friday “are typically the days with the highest absenteeism. Planning special events for these days could improve attendance.” Vandivier (2003), principal of Twin Rivers High School, and John Dougherty (1999), professor of education at Linden-wood College, agree that rewards such as movie tickets, food coupons, and gift certificates will increase attendance. The article *How do you improve student attendance*, claims that one way to boost attendance is to put all the students’ names with perfect attendance into a drawing (2001, p.26). Ann Kube, math teacher at North Scott High School, and Gary Radigan, principle at Ankeny High School, agree that incentives encourage students to attend school regularly (1992). As most of the authors stated, incentives have been proven to increase attendance.

Punishments/Consequences

All of our authors agree that absenteeism has negative consequences for students, schools and society. In the article “Early Intervention to Improve Attendance In Elementary School for At risk Children,” Janet Ford and Richard V. Sutphen discuss the effects on students. They say that non-attendeers generally fall behind their peers in academic achievement and the development of social competence (Ford & Sutphen, 1996, p. 95). Consequences for parents include fines and jail time; consequences for schools are loss of funds, and for society higher rates of unemployment, poverty and lack of preparation to enter the work force (Ford & Sutphen, 1996, p. 95). Dougherty agrees that habits of absenteeism and tardiness affect work performance when youngsters become adults (1999, p. 7). In Dan Vandivier’s article entitled “Improving Attendance, A Formula that Worked” he discusses an attendance policy at Twin Rivers High School in Brosely, Montana. Policies stated that students that miss more than six days in a semester are not considered to have earned credit, and no distinction is made between excused and unexcused absences (2003, p. 81). As for students and specific punishments our authors disagreed with suspension. Dougherty states, “that suspending a student is giving them what he wants, a vacation” (1999, p. 9). As most of the authors conclude, there is some form of punishment given to a student that misses excessive days.

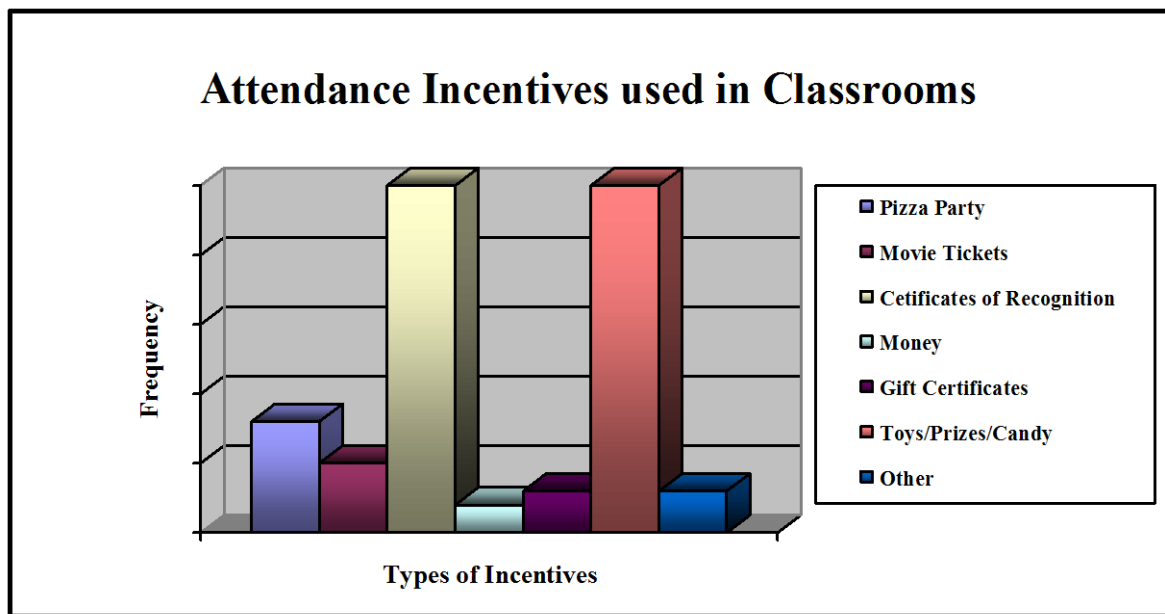
Conclusion

In conclusion, the above research findings all agree that attendance is a very important issue for students. The literature indicated that the following topics are important factors in increasing attendance: effective policies, parental contact, community involvement, teacher/student relationships, rewards and incentives, and punishments/consequences.

Primary Research Findings

A survey of local teachers was conducted in order to learn of specific programs that are being used to increase attendance. Kindergarten through fifth grade teachers were surveyed. The majority of those surveyed have been teaching for more than 10 years. The average attendance rate of the schools surveyed is 96 percent. Even though all schools surveyed have an attendance policy, not all teachers are informed of the details of the policy. For example, in one school 4 of the 9 respondents did not know whether their school provided a mentoring program for chronically absent students.

Figure 1

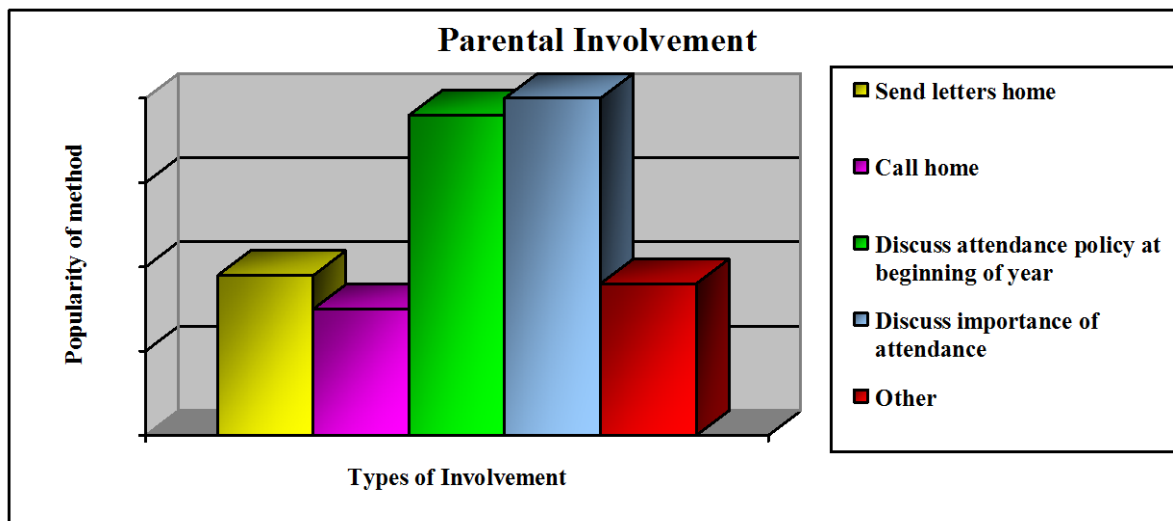


Source: Primary

Ninety-eight percent of teachers surveyed said their school had an incentive program that encourages good attendance. Figure 1 shows that certificates of recognition and toys/prizes/candy both are used most often in classrooms as incentives to come to school.

Eighty-six percent of teachers who implement an incentive program in their specific classroom say their program is successful in raising attendance.

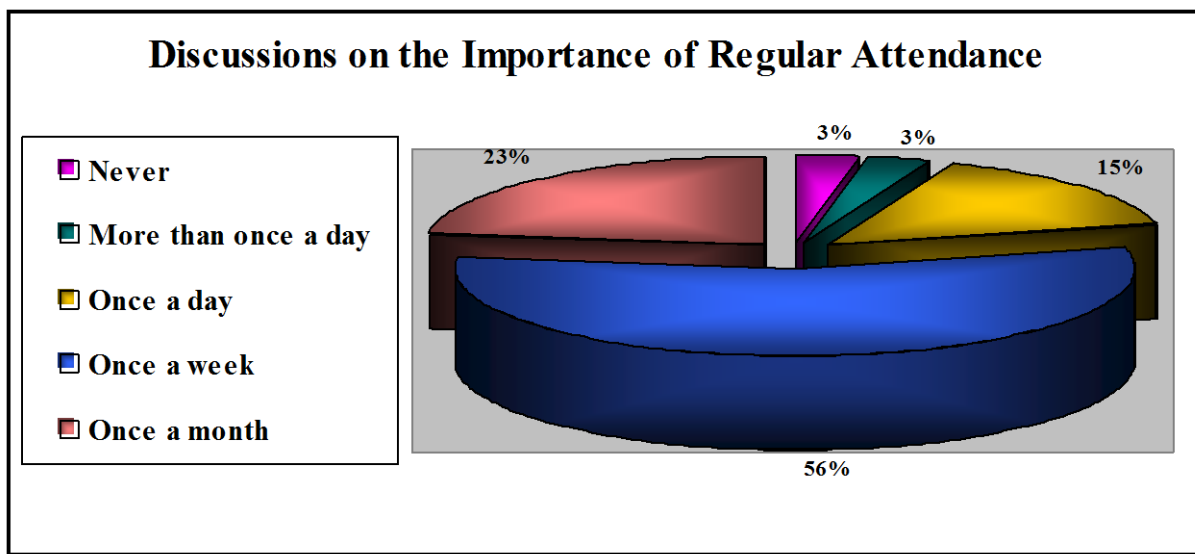
Figure 2



Source: Primary

According to our survey group, 68 percent of schools actively attempt to involve parents in their attendance programs. Seventy percent of respondents attempt to include parents when dealing with attendance problems. The two most widely used methods of parent involvement are discussing the attendance policy at the beginning of the year and the importance of attendance.

Figure 3



Source: Primary

An overwhelming 88 percent of teachers surveyed said they spend one-on-one time with students who are chronically absent. More than half of teachers surveyed discussed the importance of regular attendance with their students once a week. When asked if they make an effort to verbally acknowledge students when they return from an absence, 98 percent of the survey pool said yes.

Conclusion

The survey indicates that even though most schools have an attendance policy some teachers are not necessarily aware of it. This presents a problem when enforcing the attendance policy. However, several that are aware of the attendance policy implement specific incentives in their classrooms. This practice is shown to increase attendance within the classroom. Based on survey responses, teachers feel that communication with parents and students is also a key factor in increasing attendance. Through this survey we have developed some recommendations for increasing attendance.

Recommendations

- Create a clear and fair attendance policy that is up to date and communicate it. Provide someone for families to talk to about the attendance policy.
- Increase communication with parents by sending letters home and involving them in the student's education.
- Discuss the importance of attendance at conferences or through written messages and encourage them to discuss it with their children.
- Teachers should remind students daily how important it is to be in school every day.
- Teachers should always tell a child they were missed when they return from being absent.
- After more than 3 absences in a month there should be a one-on-one student teacher meeting.
- Chronically absent students should be placed with a teacher-mentor and meet one-on-one at least twice a week.
- Involve the community and local businesses by coordinating with them in incentive programs such as gift certificates and food coupons.
- Classroom incentive programs should be implemented particularly certificates of recognition and toys, prizes, and gifts.

Closing

In closing, absenteeism is not only a problem for Beech Grove Intermediate but the problem is growing for schools all across the country. It is important to do what we can to prevent America's future from becoming a complacent element in society. Based on our research we have made these recommendations and we feel sure that they will go a long way in helping to increase attendance at Beech Grove Intermediate school or, in fact any elementary school who is willing to implement these simple procedures within their school system.