

Calhoun Intermediate School District

Truancy Process and Handbook

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Philosophical Statement:

It is the belief of the Calhoun Intermediate School District Attendance Officer that school truancy is a symptom, not a problem. In order for us to work in partnership with local school officials, we must rely on school building officials and school counselors and/or teachers to determine the true problem manifesting into school truancy or school phobia. Only then can we direct our attention to successful prevention and intervention strategies that will help the pupil be successful in school. Our partnership begins with the partnership between school officials, parents and students. Only when this partnership needs support should efforts be directed toward the Calhoun ISD Attendance Office. Then, only as a last resort, a referral to the appropriate County Juvenile or District Court will be considered. We know when non-attendance is becoming a behavior pattern, the earlier in a student's school career that action is taken, the better chance to assure intervention success.

Introduction:

According to research, pupils are absent from school for a variety of reasons, including sometimes-willful truancy. In situations of truancy, the problems causing absenteeism are often: poverty, neglect, lack of parental support or understanding of the importance of education, peer influence or difficulties, and boredom to name a few. Research also tells us that approximately 44% of all violent juvenile crimes committed by teenagers occur between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. by students not regularly attending school. In programs such as California's "Community Approach" daytime juvenile crime decreased by 10% and regular daily school attendance increased by 5%.

Conversely, in a recent survey conducted by Highland Park Schools, students are engaged and regularly attend school when: class is interesting, instruction is participatory, parents "insist" on attendance, the teacher makes class special, teachers care and have high expectations, teachers enforce classroom rules, teachers mark attendance promptly, to name a few responses.

It is the role of the Calhoun Intermediate School District Attendance Officer to compliment the efforts of local school district building officials in enforcing the Michigan Compulsory Attendance Act. It is always the decision of the local school district building official when to make a truancy referral and when to further explore next step actions.

The Calhoun Intermediate School District Attendance Officer would like local school district building officials to concentrate efforts on prevention first and foremost, and then working in a partnership with the Calhoun Intermediate School District, on intervention. It is assumed that attendance policies will be defined, distributed, explained and enforced consistently within the district. Further, this policy must clearly state the consequences the students may face relative to lack of regular daily attendance (up to and including loss of credit). As you can well imagine, at a point when the student faces such

consequences, they act as a direct deterrent to the student returning to school. Hence, our intervention is mitigated until the next semester, typically.

Best Practices:

In order to support the efforts of the local school building officials, we have researched best practices in alternative approaches relative to students having a difficult time making a commitment to regular daily attendance. Further, we have provided a resource tool in this handbook regarding how parents can help building officials help students stay in school. Perhaps this could be distributed to all parents in the building or certainly those with whom you are working on truancy referrals -- maybe to post on the refrigerator with all the other important "stuff" or to include in the building handbook that goes to every parent.

Another measure we have added is a school building official checklist that must be completed as you process through a truancy situation prior to making a referral. This checklist is also included in the handbook. As noted in this checklist, we expect school buildings to have a consistent pre-referral process as well as a process for moving through the steps of a truancy referral. As mentioned earlier, the school building official dictates the steps of the process and the recommended actions at each step. The Juvenile Court does require a meeting at the ISD Attendance Officer level encompassing parent(s), school official(s) as well as involved student(s) prior to accepting a court petition; this is the only action step that is dictated.

Truancy Pre-Referral Process:

As a problem-solving tool, this handbook includes a newly developed Pre-Referral checklist that school building officials can use to determine the reason for the student's excessive absences. This problem solving may lead to positive interventions prior to a making (or instead of) a Truancy Referral. Further, this information will prove helpful throughout the referral process up to and including court intervention, if determined necessary. We are requiring the completion of checklist with all Truancy Referrals to help the Calhoun ISD Attendance Officer document local actions taken by school officials and to assist the Officer in direct dealings with the parent. **It is very important for school building officials to log all contacts and/or interventions when working with students; especially those we are referring for non-attendance.**

Truancy Referrals are made when:

- students are between six and 16 years of age for a formal Truancy Referral
- a pattern of absenteeism is noticed by school personnel, and indicated by school policy as unsatisfactory; parents are notified of pending referral and have an opportunity to discuss the situation
- school personnel feel the pattern of absenteeism is excessive and is interfering with the student's school success; this could even include situations when a student has

had excused absences without a doctor's statement or that the statements lack authenticity; also for excessive tardiness

- there are special circumstances that a school official considers to be serious enough to warrant a Truancy Referral (this could include excessive absences due to head lice, etc.)
- a student under age 16 leaves a school building and the school building officials are unable through their own efforts and resources to locate the whereabouts of the student or nature of "drop"
- referrals are made prior to the point in time that a student has lost credit -- we lose leverage to encourage the student to return to a class if they will not receive credit for the semester

Truancy Referral Process:

In the interest of good will, due process and a spirit of partnership, the parent(s) must be notified by school building officials of a pending Truancy Referral. The parent should be informed of the entire referral process steps including the fact that continued lack of regular daily attendance could lead to court intervention. It would be preferred that the school building official inform the parent of this in writing or as a part of a documented pre-referral meeting. It is assumed that problem-solving with the parent will occur prior to a referral. It is assumed that the school building officials will continue to work with the student(s) and parent(s) after making a referral to Calhoun ISD to improve attendance.

After the school building official has utilized all resources at the school building level and completed the pre-referral process, they may then make an attendance referral to the Calhoun ISD Attendance Officer. The only form required to institute a truancy referral is an Attendance Referral Form. This form should be electronically **completed** -- if available, home and work phone numbers of parents are essential. The **Attendance Referral form** will be completed and electronically sent to the Calhoun ISD Attendance Officer via the truancy database.

The **critical information** from the referral form is the **intervention steps** and strategies attempted at the building level. We do expect that specific actions are noted on the log (in the truancy database) that details the interventions made by teachers, counselors and/or other school building officials. We expect that **school building officials will then internally continue to track the student's attendance and request further action** from the Attendance Officer should attendance not improve following the mailing of the Attendance Referral Form to the parent(s).

Following this action, the ISD Attendance Officer will then send the Referral Form to the parent(s). A CISD file will then be created for the student and logged in the truancy database.

Case Follow-up by Building Official:

After making a referral, the school building official should monitor the student's attendance and make a request via the truancy database to the Calhoun ISD Attendance Officer for "further action". If the student's attendance is still unsatisfactory, the building official will e-mail the Calhoun ISD Attendance Officer or will receive a 30-day follow-up to prompt further action.

1. In May and September Building Officials should review their students in the Truancy Database to determine their current attendance, current status and next steps if required.
2. The ISD will also need building officials to follow-up with the Attendance Officer on the 30 day e-mail reminder as follows:
 - ~ *Building official* will determine case status (this information must be e-mailed to the CISD via the truancy database):
 - i. Continued concern
 - ii. Building official requests next step
 - iii. Improved attendance – no action required at this time
 - iv. Transfer (where student transferred will be information provided to CISD)

Notice of Violation of Compulsory Attendance Act:

After discussing the student's case with the school building official, the Attendance Officer will then upon request send, via certified mail, a Violation Notice that requires attendance the day following receipt of the Notice. A copy of the State statutes enacting the Michigan Compulsory Attendance Act will be attached to the Violation Notice. A copy of this notice may be viewed on the truancy tracking log entry page once this step is reached.

Required Parent and School Officials' Meeting:

After the school building official has allowed time for the receipt the Violation Notice, if the student's attendance is still unsatisfactory, the building official should immediately notify the Calhoun ISD Attendance Officer. Prior to making any court referral, the school building official will work with the Calhoun ISD Attendance Officer to schedule a parent and student meeting at the school building. All appropriate personnel should attend this meeting to best identify intervention strategies prior to filing a Court Petition.

At this meeting, an attempt will be made to develop or amend a student/parent/official contract where student, parent and school official expectations are explored and agreed upon to assist the student in improving their school attendance. The parent will be informed that State law holds them ultimately responsible for their student's regular daily attendance and that the parent will face consequences for failing to comply with the law. They will understand the impact a court referral will have on the student (including a juvenile court record), on the family (in terms of financial penalty, required actions, or even removing the student from the home in extreme cases) and others.

Note:

1. All school attendance meetings with parents scheduled mutually by the Calhoun ISD Attendance Officer and the local school building official will be convened at the child's school; we can discuss location of more than one student has been referred from a family at different building levels. Please plan accordingly for your own schedule as well as that of the teacher, school counselor or school social worker if you feel it would be helpful for one of them to attend the meeting -- depending upon the needs of the child(ren). The Calhoun ISD Attendance Officer will then schedule the meeting (mutually selecting the date with the building official) and notify the parent by sending a letter.

Following this meeting, should the student or parent violate, or be unwilling to enter into, the student contract, we would expect the school building official to request a court petition. Again, we would hope that a reasonable time frame is provided for the student to change their behavior. Moreover, should the student's attendance continue to be unsatisfactory, the school official must immediately notify the CISD Attendance Officer. At this time, it is expected that a list of potential court interventions is brainstormed to assist the court in determining next steps. We want to be sure to allow ample time for action by the student and parent in compliance with State law and the agreed upon contract expectations. If the school building official feels a Court Petition is the best next step, they must direct the Calhoun ISD Attendance Officer to take this action on their behalf via the 30-day notice in the truancy database.

Court Intervention:

Should the Calhoun ISD Attendance Officer file a Court Petition on behalf of the school official, it is expected that the school building official and other appropriate personnel will make themselves available for any and all court appearances, hearings, or filings. When attending a Court proceeding, the school officials should have available: the CA 60, IEPC information (if applicable), information regarding other professionals involved with the student (school counselor, school social worker, etc.), and other pertinent documentation not already provided to the Calhoun ISD Attendance Officer. Such information would include logs of all related contacts and/or interventions made on behalf of the referred student. If the school building officials are aware of other information that would prove helpful to the Court in making its findings, please document in writing and have available for the Court (parent attitudes regarding truancy

and school success, prior juvenile convictions, other agency involvement (since completing the Pre-Referral Checklist), parents' work history, residential status of student and family, etc.).

Following the filing of a court petition by the Calhoun ISD Attendance Officer, the court will typically schedule an informal "Preliminary" hearing. At this hearing, where all parties are summoned to court, the attorney referee will attempt to determine the reasons for lack of child(ren) in regular daily attendance, and indicate that a formal hearing will be scheduled should the student's attendance not improve.

Typically, unless a student already has an open file with Juvenile Court, the initial hearing before Juvenile Court is an Informal Hearing with the Attorney Referee. A parent may make a request for a Formal Hearing at that point and all parties are represented by legal counsel (their own or an appointed counsel). Court interventions include, but are not limited to, the following:

At a formal hearing, the court will enter into a court order for the child(ren) to be in regular daily attendance and may even place the student on probation (at the parent's expense). Should the child(ren) then violate the court order, the offense moves from a status offense of truancy to a criminal offense of violation of a court order. Their processes then dictate the court response. During this process of court intervention, an understanding of the student's true problems manifesting into truancy can help the court determine what other available services or agency interventions may prove helpful. These agency interventions can become a part of the court order (under the Juvenile Diversion Act). Such interventions may include family counseling, drug and/or alcohol counseling referrals, etc.

Only in extreme cases will we move for temporary placement outside the home or placement in the Juvenile Home School. It is important to note that the courts have supported these actions in some cases; however, it is an intervention of last resort.

Truancy Process and Strategies / Research

A simplistic approach to improved attendance or truancy prevention is the prevention of students staying out of school without a valid reason. Often, when students are not in class, local, state and national research is available to document the increased juvenile crime during school hours (burglary, theft, breaking and entering, vandalism, etc.). This is why we must look at efforts to prevent truancy as a **collaborative responsibility** of educators, law enforcers, parents and community members. The research is focused on two strategies: truancy prevention and intervention. More extensive research is available through the National School Safety Center. Schools also must encourage regular daily attendance and graduation due to NCLB requirements.

Prevention Strategies:

Develop a Collaborative Approach:

Due to this connection between truancy, dropouts and crime and the economic impact that will have on communities, successful programs begin with a 'truancy prevention committee' involving representatives from the school building (principal, teacher, counselor, etc.), law enforcement (if available as a resource), and community as well as parents. This group should mutually set expectations, goals, define responsibilities (school officials, students, parents, etc.) and determine possible activities. This process works best if students, parents and community residents understand the purpose and goals in terms of the economic impact.

Review Policies and Student Code of Conduct:

In order to set clear expectations regarding the connection between school attendance and school success, district policies and codes of conduct should clearly articulate the consequences of non-attendance. Schools successful in truancy prevention regularly discuss these expectations throughout the instructional process (teachers, counselors, etc.). Simply providing a copy to students and/or parents does not ensure that expectations will be met nor does it enlist the students and parents as an integral partner in the process. Many of you already provide public recognition for good attendance; A Kentucky High School provides jobs to at risk students who stay in school, A New York High School requires an 85% attendance rate in order to participate in extra-curricular activities. While these strategies don't have overwhelming success with chronic truants, they should be reviewed based on the buildings' population. Many at risk students will actually benefit from and may have improved attendance if they are encouraged to be more involved in extra-curricular opportunities. Most policies focus on consequences for non-attendance.

Promote Ongoing Communication with Parents and Community:

If the district uses a newsletter, this is an ideal vehicle to discuss concerns, strategies, expectations and improvements with regard to truancy. The districts should annually

publish (for all to review) the main components of the Compulsory Attendance Act, the legal consequences, as well as a brief overview of our process. This is a strategy where the school officials can partner with law enforcement (often DARE Officers) to encourage attendance and discuss truancy prevention. Officers are in a good position to discuss the effects of truancy in terms of violence, crime, and other community statistics.

Research Related Services:

A district must know its community and seek out other resources that may impact on the underlying causes of non-attendance. The Calhoun ISD Student Services software has options to computer generate letters to parents at different levels of absenteeism stating the school building officials concerns and eliciting the parents help and support.

Intervention Strategies:

In order to develop a successful intervention process, school building officials need to rely on teachers (especially in the elementary and middle school grades) as an integral part of the communication network with parents. Research indicates that parents have a stronger connection with and feel less intimidated by teachers than school officials.

Teachers can help identify truant behavior early by:

- ◇ keeping regular and accurate attendance records
- ◇ communicating with students and parents about the importance of daily class attendance
- ◇ promptly reporting to the building central office prolonged absences
- ◇ personally work to support truant students when they are in attendance (the overwhelming feeling of being behind often exacerbates the truancy problem)
- ◇ helping building officials understand the true cause of non-attendance in each student's case (lack of attendance is a symptom not a problem)

School officials must stress to parents that they are a partner in their student's success in school. When students are truant, there needs to be immediate notification to and consultation with parents. This linkage should be identified in the district policy regarding process, timelines, etc.

Consequences for non-attendance must be clearly indicated and linked to school success; according to research, students will react better to intervention if they have a 'second chance' -- due process rights are also required.

If the school district considers truancy a systemic community problem, they should research the possibility of school counselor liaisons or police officer liaisons (there are successful models in Calhoun ISD). They should again involve the community in this process with awareness information; one community who embarked on such a campaign titled it: "Love Your Children -- Keep Them in School!"

When students transition to another building (grade level transfers, transfers in, etc.) they are high risks for truant behavior. Students are often faced with: a changing peer support group, establishing different relationships with peers and staff, a changing home environment, etc. As new students are counseled, especially those with other risk factors (siblings dropping out, siblings with truant behavior, peer culture with truant behavior, etc.), courses, teams, classes should be carefully determined. The same is true when a student begins to exhibit truant behavior; the school officials should attempt to determine if a change in school environment might help the student be more successful.

We may want to further explore (perhaps through an Expert in Residence Program), individuals from successful programs to provide teacher and administrator professional development in: determining risk factors, early signs of truant behavior, or other high risk characteristics to better intervene with students before they are overwhelmed or lost.

Truancy Response:

Most of the strategies offered by model programs are already in place in many, if not all, Calhoun ISD Schools:

- ◇ In-School Suspension (rather than out-of-school)
- ◇ Saturday School Programs (to allow for the student to make-up time and work missed -- a type of 'second chance')
- ◇ Operation 'Stay in School' (in Fresno, CA where a collaborative is supported by school officials, local law enforcement and agencies with a main objective to enforce the compulsory attendance statutes); this model is similar to the one used in Battle Creek -- students out of school during the school day are taken to a reception center by law officers and then taken to their attendance school (agencies provide support with student and family on identified barriers)
- ◇ Court Intervention - we have worked diligently with Juvenile Court (now Family Court) to affect change and feel we have made positive gains both in terms of conducting hearings as well as legal representation throughout the process

Model Programs:

- ◇ Project HOPE (Helping Others Pursue Education) is an intervention program designed to help students grade five through twelve. This is a magnet school (alternative school) for truancy offenders as well as those suspended or expelled. It is a partnership with City of Inglewood, CA, Los Angeles County agencies (education, social services, probation) and Juvenile Court. It is a success-oriented academic approach in an alternative setting. Since its inception, police records document lowered daytime juvenile crime. [contact: Ed Brownlee, Project HOPE, Inglewood Unified School District, 441 Hillcrest Blvd, Inglewood, CA 90301]
- ◇ “Use Rewards” - says James VanSciver from Pocomoke City, MD (a small rural High School principal). They had never experienced higher than average absenteeism (93% attendance rate) but several students were at risk and he knew the school staff could make a more positive impact on all students (at low or no cost). He feels two things keep students in school: a positive relationship with the principal or assistant principal and peer pressure or support. Jim has a variety of ‘positives’ he uses to keep kids in school: communication about expectations, an announcement is read each day stressing the importance of perfect attendance (changed slightly each week), perfect attenders are posted, sent a congratulatory letter, press release to print media, and certificates placed in students portfolios. He also awards T-shirts (‘cool ones’) to perfect attenders.
- ◇ Absence Addict Program -- this program focuses on trying to understand why the student is exhibiting truant behavior (goes to the problem vs. the symptom). Students are invited to join a student support group (modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous) where students are strongly encouraged to help each other, recruiting others at risk of dropping out, making up work, etc. Both paid and volunteer personnel provide counseling and listening as well as coordination. They have been able to document a reduction in the dropout rate from 10% to 2% over the last three years. [Mitchell High School, 1205 Potter Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80909 (719/520/2701)]
- ◇ PALS and PRO - Tatum (TX) Independent School District operates low-cost programs to provide immediate assistance to at-risk student. PALS (People Against Losing Students) is a K-12 program which pairs at risk students with an adult volunteer who meet at school in an attempt to foster feelings of self worth among students. PRO (Parents Reaching Out) Program is designed for grades 4-6 and enlists parents to help students with homework for an hour after school each day (they use federal funds to pay parents \$5 for the hour; teacher supervision is provided in a learning center environment). Counselors and teachers determine student placement after family consultation. [Tatum Independent School District, P. O. Box 808, Tatum, TX 75691 (903/947/6482)]
- ◇ “Show Up and Do Well” - Lexington School District Two in West Columbia, SC is an inner-city school with 41% of its 9,000 students scoring in the bottom quartile of state assessment tests. The Administration brought with them a new vision which is

now a Board Policy: “Give every child the opportunity to succeed, to develop their individual and unique potential, don’t blame the student, don’t operate on the assumption that poverty and social deprivation prevent children from learning and, a professional is to personally greet each child each day.” Student expectations are simple: show up, do their work, and behave. Each building staff is expected to have a written strategy to mobilize staff and motivate parents and students. They have an aggressive referral process leading to court intervention. He uses such slogans in his weekly newsletters to the community as: “Kindergarten is not day care”, “You miss school, you miss out”, “Absenteeism is everyone’s fault”. Policy changes, staff development and the focus on ‘Attendance is the #1 Goal’ improved the attendance rate in 1994 to 96%.

- ◇ Community Service Early Intervention Program - In Marion County, OH, Juvenile Court and the Marion City Schools have teamed up to develop a program aimed at providing support guidance and counseling for at-risk youth, helping them to have a more positive and productive school experience. This program focuses on potential truants and dropouts during their 9th grade year. Referrals are made by a variety of building officials as well as outside service agency staff based on: physical problems or limitations, social dysfunction caused by sexual or physical abuse, their own or parent(s) drug or alcohol abuse, family difficulties or other special needs. The coordinator then selects the community intervention to support the academic efforts. A community service piece is part of the program and successful students are used to tutor and counsel other youth in the program. Parental participation is required during the entire six-week sequence. [contact: Molly Ratliff, Coordinator, Community Service Early Intervention Program, Edward Ruzzo Juvenile Justice Center, 1440 Mt. Vernon Ave., Marion, OH 43302 (614/389-5476)]
- ◇ Rohnert Park Stop and Cite Program (California) was developed over 20 years ago designed to reduce truancy and juvenile crime during school hours. This program stresses a positive connection between the police and students where policeman issue courtesy citations to suspected truants (twice without penalty and the third citation requires parent and student to meet with school officials). They have documented reductions in burglaries, theft, vandalism, and other juvenile crime. [contact: Rohnert Park Department of Public Safety, 5200 Country Club Drive, Rohnert Park, CA 94928 (707/585/1122)]
- ◇ ACT (Abolish Chronic Truancy) is modeled after the Neighborhood Watch program and relies on the entire community to become involved. ACT is designed to energize the entire community to combat truancy; focused not to punish students or parents, but to get truants off the streets and back in school. Special deputy district attorneys work with school administrators and teachers at targeted buildings. This team tracks attendance in the building, working with specific at risk students and families. The team analyzes related problems, making suggestions for interventions. If the intervention is not successful, an informal hearing is held in the district attorney’s office prior to prosecution. [contact: Los Angeles District Attorney’s Office, 18000 Criminal Courts Building, 210 West Temple Street, Los Angeles, CA 90012

(213/974/7401) or <http://da.co.la.ca.us>] -- CISD also has a packet of material. If you are interested contact Laura Whipple.

- ◇ New Futures School - is an alternative school in the Albuquerque Public Schools, which offers programs to keep pregnant and parenting teens in school. Employment training, counseling, childcare, health services, secondary education and GED Prep are all offered. The district uses: Community Development Block Grant funding, JTPA, Social Services Block Grant funding as well as private foundation support. Satisfactory school progress and daily attendance in a job training class is required for participation in supported employment (which provides school credit for work experience). [contact: New Futures School, 5400 Cutler NE, Albuquerque, NM 87110 (505/883/5680) -- student target population could be expanded based on consortium needs; may be an idea for a county-wide PSA . . . the CISD also has a packet of material available. For those interested in this program, contact Laura Whipple]

- ◇ Join Together - is a program designed as a community-wide strategy to keep kids in school and reduce crime and substance abuse. This program stresses schools' need to have a written strategy that involves a wide range of community groups, which address prevention, treatment, public safety, jobs and economic development. This program provides ongoing support to communities attempting to make a similar impact with 'Join Together Monthly Action Kits'. These kits provide research, proven strategies, ideas and information on a wide variety of related topics. [contact: Join Together at www.jointogether.org or call (617/437/1500) -- the CISD has a packet of material including excerpts from the Monthly Action Kits. For those interested, contact Laura Whipple.]