

Tracking Student Attendance

Overview

Across the country, districts are making thoughtful decisions on how to best track attendance data for virtual or hybrid instruction and account for their students' school participation. Because every district looks different, it is critical for school and district leaders to provide direction on fair and just ways to "count" a student as present. Across race and place, students are experiencing challenges with technology, connectivity, home responsibilities and family health. This is especially true in Black, brown and rural communities where policymakers have denied communities appropriate access to broadband and digital devices.

Virtual Attendance Considerations

1. Some families are sharing devices, which can limit when a student is able to use a mobile device, even at home. Even when there is a device, low bandwidth/connectivity issues might limit the student's participation.
2. Some families may opt out of having their students recorded in live virtual classrooms, so using that as a measure of attendance is not always an option. Additionally, live participation as the only means of determining whether a student is present is not the most equitable way to track attendance.
3. Some parents work during the day, giving students the responsibility of watching younger siblings, which makes it difficult for them to participate in digital learning.
4. Some students might be ill or helping care for a family member who is ill. They also might be mentally or emotionally affected by the pandemic and the challenges that digital learning can bring.
5. In addition to tracking how active students are during virtual learning, attendance can also be a way to ensure that students are accounted for and safe while away from the school building.
6. Attendance looks different in virtual and hybrid learning environments. Some districts take into consideration student emails to teachers and completed assignments, in addition to tracking during live classroom settings.
7. In the Spring 2020 semester, many districts did not require attendance to be taken by instructors, so there were few models to follow at the start of the Fall 2020 semester.
8. In some states, such as North Carolina, some schools have moved from tracking attendance daily to tracking attendance every three days, taking note of trends in absences. When needed, partners in the district responsible for connecting are then notified to reach out and determine if the family needs any support. Asking the family what needs they have will help districts identify the reason for the attendance issue.

Note: Considerations for this topic are wide-ranging. Each state, and each district within a state, might have a different interpretation of student attendance and participation.

Key Questions to Ask

- Should attendance be limited to being "logged in" to the school's portal, Zoom, or Microsoft Teams course?
- Do students feel safe and comfortable turning on cameras when their living conditions are less than ideal when compared to other students?

- Could requiring cameras to be on reveal that some students are working in parking lots or businesses because there is no internet access in their homes?
- Are students sharing devices or internet bandwidth? Do they live in a home with multiple family members, making sound and video quality difficult because of distractions and noise?
- How do we account for students who do not have internet access or a digital device, especially when their districts are not providing other learning options?
- What if a student's personal internet is disconnected for non-payment?
- What if a student lives in a rural community and internet access is not an option?

Guidelines for Prioritizing Student Health and Wellness in Attendance Policies

Be mindful that absences are a signal that students might need additional supports and can highlight inequities that should be addressed before they fall too far behind.

- Families and students should have flexibility to attend or participate in learning activities outside of typical school hours.
- Students should not be penalized for attendance issues alone; this is inclusive of suspensions of any kind, expulsions, referrals to truancy officers, etc.
- Educators should consider all the possible reasons a student is not “showing up” in digital learning spaces.
- Attendance tracking can provide educators with meaningful data that signals when a student is missing instructional time.
- Absences should not be used in a punitive manner; they provide an opportunity to respond proactively to support students to re-engage.
- Attendance is a critical first step towards engagement and mastery; there can be no learning without it.
- School funding should not be tied to attendance. (At the start of the school year, many states still required districts to report headcounts that affected how funds were budgeted. Though this normally occurs during the first 10 – 20 days of school, many students continued to enroll after that time and the result is that teachers are teaching far more students than they would in a normal school year.)

Additional Resources and Insight

[As School Year Begins, Students Raise Their Voices – National Education Association](#)

[Attendance & Truancy: Questions & Answers for School Districts – Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction](#)

[COVID-19 How are state education agencies and districts tracking student attendance during remote learning? – Institute of Education Sciences](#)

[The Challenge of Taking Attendance in Remote Learning – FutureEd](#)

[Tracking Student Attendance Under Remote Learning Is a Complicated Mess – Education Week](#)