

An Audit of the Attendance Policy and its Relevance to Grading Practices and  
Student Achievement at Columbia High School in the School District of South  
Orange and Maplewood

Final Report

Prepared for the School District of South Orange and Maplewood  
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“Flaking Out: Student Absences and Snow Days as Disruptions of Instructional Time,” *National Bureau of Economic Research*. 2014

“Why Attendance Matters,” *Attendancesworks.org*

“How Chronic Absenteeism Affects Student Achievement,” *Edmentum.org*

“Guidance for Reporting Student Absences and Calculating Chronic Absenteeism,” State of New Jersey, Department of Education.

“Every Student, Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism,” United States Department of Justice.

Attendance and Grading Audit Finding and Recommendations  
The School District of South Orange and Maplewood

I. Introduction:

This audit represents the final report of a study commissioned by the School District of South Orange and Maplewood as a part of its policy-making and governance authority within the State of New Jersey. It was conducted from August through December 2018 through a series of interviews, site visits and policy and document analysis. Some of the interviews and document analysis were performed off-site.

The audit was designed to evaluate the extent to which the district’s attendance policies and procedures are educationally sound, clearly delineated, and effectively administered. The audit also examined how the attendance policies had an impact on grading and student academic performance. Recent findings at Harvard University’s Kennedy School indicate that poor attendance can account for up to a quarter of the math achievement gap among students of differing socio-economic levels. In that study, it was found that in Massachusetts “individual attendance varies by demographic group and grade, but not by gender. Poor students are absent an average of 10.1 days a year, non-poor students just 6.9 days. 2 percent of non-poor students have more than 30 absences. More than 6 percent of poor students do. By 9<sup>th</sup> grade, the average black student is absent more than 14 days per year, the average Hispanic student is absent more than 12 days per year, the average white student is absent almost 9 days per year, and the average Asian student is absent almost 7 days per year.” (Joshua Goodman, “Flaking Out: Student Absences and Snow Days as Disruptions of Instructional Time,” The National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, June 2014).

The correlation between attendance and student achievement has long been established. The results of this audit clearly indicate that problems with its attendance and grading policies and the credit recovery system could threaten the academic integrity of the district. *A more effective implementation of its attendance policies will allow the South Orange and Maplewood School District to ensure to its taxpayers that this important element of school governance is functioning to the benefit of its students.*

## II. Methodology:

The audit was designed to make use of several sources of information gathered over the period cited. These sources included personal and group interviews, site visits, document analysis, and policy review. Although all relevant stakeholders were interviewed and large portions of the board's policies and school procedures were analyzed, the focus of the audit was primarily on student attendance and its impact on grading and academic performance.

This audit is designed to (1) assess the quality of the written policies and procedures regarding attendance (2) examine how these policies have effectively been communicated to students, parents, and faculty (3) evaluate the implementation of these protocols, and (4) recommend modifications to the policies to increase their value in the day-to-day operation of the school district.

The interviews were conducted with the goal of providing a consistent approach to the evaluation of the data. To that end, most of the on-site interviews were conducted in the same setting (High School Conference Room A 107), using a questionnaire (attached) that was also the same for each group. The interview questionnaire was submitted for approval to the board and superintendent prior to the interviews. To ensure integrity and candor, the confidentiality of interview subjects is respected as a hallmark of the audit interviews.

Sufficient time was allotted for the interviews to allow each group to add additional information that might not have been covered as part of the specific interview questions. At the end of each site interview each group or person was specifically asked for both their solutions to the problems discussed and to list any relevant information that might have been omitted from the discussion.

Following an initial meeting with the superintendent and district administrators, the audit process focused on collecting and evaluating board practices and policies on grading, attendance and credit recovery. In addition, PowerSchool and Guidance Department data reflecting student absences and its impact on grades were collected and evaluated.

The interview process began with meetings with the following relevant stakeholders:

- Principal and Assistant Principals
- Former High School Principal
- District Supervisors
- Guidance Department
- Child Study Team
- Business Administrator
- Technology Director
- Students
- Parent and Community Members
- Teachers Association President
- Faculty

### III. Interview Responses

District and school administrators were chosen for audit interviews because of their responsibility for formulating and communicating these policies. Faculty were chosen by administration to represent a cross-section of disciplines, years of experience, and diversity (thirteen teachers were interviewed). Parents were contacted by administrators and represented individuals who had both many years of experience with the high school through multiple students attending and also parents who were new to the community; they also represented a variety of diverse backgrounds (ten parents were interviewed). A cross-section of students were interviewed, representing diverse backgrounds and academic profiles. However, the majority of students interviewed were twelfth graders, as they had had the most experience with and knowledge of the school's attendance policies (thirteen students were interviewed).

While the interview responses necessarily represent a degree of subjectivity, efforts were made to triangulate their accuracy by confirming statements with other interviewees, comparing their content with existing documentation, and qualifying the audit's representations of these responses. Therefore, a descriptive term such as "some" represents responses that are less than a majority, but generally more than 30%. A descriptive term of "a majority" represents more than 50% but fewer than 75% of the responses, while "most or many" represents more than 75% of the responses. Any responses that

represented issues that were clearly a danger to the operation of the school or a violation of law would be reported (none were indicated).

IV. Observations:

- A. The most recent New Jersey Department of Education School Report Card indicates that because of chronic absenteeism, students at Columbia High School are not on track for success. The chart measuring chronic absenteeism lists the school at 11.2% and “Needing Improvement.” This data suggests that absenteeism must be considered a priority action item for the district.
- B. The most prevalent response—the one coming from nearly all the interview groups—was a lack of clarity in their understanding of the attendance policy and a belief that changes in that policy had not been effectively communicated to the educational community. This observation was voiced most strongly by parents and students.
- C. The second most frequent response among parents and students indicated a lack of consistency on the part of both administrators and teachers in the interpretation and implementation of the attendance procedures.
- D. Among parents interviewed, there is a general confusion about the nomenclature surrounding attendance procedures. This included an understanding of what constitutes lateness, as well as the difference between excused and unexcused absences.
- E. What was described by faculty as a “confusing attendance policy” has had an effect on the district’s grading practices and caused a large number of end-of-year grade changes and added to a lack of understanding of the correlation between attendance and grades.
- F. Students interviewed have reported that the ambiguities relating to attendance have also created an over-reliance on a credit recovery system that seems to be both inconsistently applied and educationally flawed.

- G. A disproportionate number of African American students appear to be affected by the attendance and credit retrieval policies.
- H. The highest rate of chronic absenteeism occurs among students with disabilities.

V. General Summary of Observations:

It appears that the South Orange and Maplewood School District has not managed the high school attendance policy in an efficient and effective manner, resulting in high absenteeism across all grade levels. This is evident by the NJSMART reporting that the school falls into the chronic absenteeism rate, the high number of class absences reported and the inconsistent reporting of class and daily school attendance.

These attendance issues have impacted the integrity of class grades, and more significantly, course credit. Many students at all grade levels have received a “No Credit” status for classes in which they have accumulated absences beyond the stated limit, and they have been part of what has been described by many groups as an inconsistent credit-retrieval process. More significantly, an over-reliance on credit retrieval may represent a threat to the school’s academic mission and integrity. Based on a qualitative and quantitative investigation, the following findings, conclusions and recommendations have been prepared:

VI. Findings:

- A. According to Department of Education data, at the K-12 level, white students in the South Orange Maplewood School District are chronically absent at a rate of 7.6% while African American students are reported at a rate of 15.9%. Economically Disadvantaged students have a chronic absentee rate of 20.5% while students with disabilities are reported at a 28.5% rate of chronic absenteeism. The data also reveals that, on a K-12 basis, 14% of students in the district are absent more than 15 days. Absentee rates greater than 10% are considered chronic.
- B. Despite the identification by the Department of Education of chronic absenteeism as an impediment to student success, the district has not, until

now, sufficiently addressed this issue in a timely and effective fashion. The present board and superintendent are to be commended for moving forward with this analysis.

- C. The study finds that there is a general lack of understanding among most interview groups as to who has responsibility for enforcement of the attendance policy and overseeing the daily attendance of students. Most parents and students have reported that since the Dean of Students position was eliminated and an Assistant Principal was added there has been confusion regarding administrative responsibility. As a result, there is insufficient understanding among many stakeholders of who is administratively responsible for student attendance and engaging students with attendance issues.
- D. A recent examination of Columbia High School's website indicates that information on absenteeism is not being effectively disseminated to parents: under the school's *General Information* tab, the *Absence* section directs students to contact grade level Deans (a position that no longer exists) regarding absences. There is no listing for the appropriate grade level administrator who should be contacted. Further, for users seeking additional information, the site directs them to an error screen indicating that the page has been moved. This tab was last modified on August 3, 2012 (see District Documentation in Section Two).
- E. The study reveals that among the stakeholders, there is also a lack of understanding of the details of the attendance policy. The majority of those involved in the focus group discussion shared the impression that they are confused about the specifics of the attendance policy and procedures. The relationship among and the definitions of "excused absence," "unexcused absence," and "absent" is poorly understood, resulting in confusion about individual attendance numbers. There is also a misunderstanding surrounding the relationship of "tardy to class," "tardy over 10 minutes," and "class cuts" as applied to student attendance.
- F. The study finds that many parents interviewed believe that there has been insufficient communication regarding the attendance policy and procedures, leading to misunderstandings and confusion. The majority of stakeholders reported not understanding and not being clearly informed about the attendance policy procedures and protocols.



- G. The study indicates that there is the perception among a majority of students, parents, and faculty that the attendance policy and procedures are inconsistently applied. Many stakeholders specifically noted that the credit recovery process lacked consistency and integrity in its application to students.
  
- H. Confusion surrounding the implementation of the attendance policies and procedures has led to concerns voiced by both the Child Study Team and Guidance Department about their roles in the process and the concern that incomplete attendance statistics could adversely affect the implementation of students' IEPs or 504 plans.
  
- I. PowerSchool data indicates that some faculty are inconsistent in their daily attendance reporting, resulting in marked inconsistencies in the individual class attendance totals of students. Inconsistent attendance monitoring, XXwhen coupled with a reported 11.2% absentee rate, could suggest that true absentee rates are in fact higher than 11.2%.
  
- J. The lack of a mechanism to follow up on individual class cuts in a timely fashion could result in the accumulation of class absences without proper intervention.
  
- K. Some interview groups indicated that problems associated with the attendance policy could lead to discrepancies between teacher grade books and the PowerSchool transcripts.
  
- L. Some interview groups indicated that students aware of the deficiencies in the reporting and implementation of the attendance policy might use those lapses to take advantage of the system.
  
- M. The problems associated with the attendance policy seem to be most pronounced with regard to Physical Education classes. These required classes are divided into quarter courses with quarter grades. As a result, inconsistent attendance results in failing grades accumulating more rapidly in these classes than in full-year courses.

- N. Some interview groups were concerned that the inconsistent application of the attendance policies and procedures and an over-reliance on credit retrieval process could eventually obscure graduation and passing rates.
- O. Confusion regarding lateness and cuts, coupled with gaps in PowerSchool attendance reporting, suggests that the attendance problems in the district might be more pervasive than the data indicate.
- P. According to an analysis of PowerSchool data, attendance issues tend to increase with grade level. In the 2017-2018 school year, the number of students who were absent more than the maximum allowable 18 days were:

Grade Level	Number Of Students
09	30
10	58
11	62
12	103
Total	253

- Q. The PowerSchool data reports also reveal that during the 2017-2018 school year, there was **no** distinction made between an absence and a cut. Every student was marked absent by default, until it was changed to *excused* or *unexcused*. However, prior to 2017-2018, every student was marked *cut* by default, until the cut was changed based on a phone call or a note from a parent/guardian.
- R. An examination of the PowerSchool data reports also indicate an inconsistent use of the “Tardy” designation – this appears to be an extension of the confusions surrounding nomenclature and reporting procedures.
- S. An administrator noted that prior to the 2016-2017 school year, teachers could arbitrarily choose a No Credit (NC) grade for students and that this choice was being inconsistently applied.
- T. Despite administrative attempts through letters home to clarify the NC policy, there remain among parents, faculty, and students, misunderstandings about its protocols and purpose. Further, lack of clarity about Credit Recovery and Course Recovery protocols persists.

- U. The resulting credit-recovery process affects what appears to be an inordinately high percentage of students. Confusion regarding its procedures and protocols conflate the notion of seat time with academically sound restorative procedures. Some groups indicated that there was a possibility that the existing credit recovery system might in fact *create* incentives for increased student absence rather than deter it.
- V. According to Guidance Department data, the number of individual requests for credit recovery during the 2017-2018 school year are as follows (Note: these numbers reflect individual requests, not individual students; therefore some students may have requested credit recovery in multiple classes):

Grade Level	Number Of Requests
09	180
10	240
11	195
12	279
Total	894

The number of students seeking to use the credit retrieval process is high enough to threaten the integrity of the school’s delivery of its curriculum.

VII. Recommendations:

1. The district should convene a focus group of parents, faculty, and administrators to review the existing policies and procedures with the goal of clarifying its language and streamlining its implementation. Many of the following recommendations could serve as guidelines for those changes.
2. Given the NJDOE’s designation of the school’s chronic absenteeism as an impediment to student success, as well as the Board of Education’s emphasis on this issue, every effort should be made to communicate the severity of the problem and to simplify explanations of its policies. (See “District Documentation” for the 2017 Columbia HS Summer

School brochure describing attendance at summer school, which provides an example of this emphasis and simplicity).

3. The resulting revised policy and procedures should be a prominent part of the Student and Faculty Handbook. This handbook was not previously available on the district website.
4. The principal should determine building level administrative responsibility for attendance. The school administration, in turn, must clarify these responsibilities for the faculty and directly establish daily protocols for documenting student attendance. This should be done without delay and clearly communicated to staff, students, and parents. This administrative oversight should also extend to daily follow up on the previous day's attendance issues related to individual class cuts and attendance reporting and recording.
5. Individual class cuts (students are present in school, but skip certain classes) should be addressed as a discipline violation as well as an absence for attendance purposes. Class cuts should have a progressive discipline component as well as a clearly delineated limit. Individual class cuts should be more carefully tracked and recorded. (For example any student that intentionally chooses to skip/cut a class more than four times during the course of a school year could be considered withdrawn failing from that class.) If Individual class cuts are not efficiently monitored and controlled they can exacerbate students' overall attendance issues.
6. Daily class room management—specifically taking attendance and checking attendance lists— should be considered an integral part of teachers' day-to-day responsibilities. Consequently, attendance must be taken daily in PowerSchool by all teaching faculty.
7. Attendance lists should be generated by the attendance office soon after the first two class periods, distributed to staff and used to cross reference their daily attendance. For example, if a student is not in class and not on the attendance list, there is either an attendance recording issue or the student has cut the class. These inconsistencies should be brought to the attention of the appropriate administrator and reconciled *the next day* to determine if a student has indeed cut or there has been an attendance error.

8. As students' attendance in individual classes hit benchmarks, certified letters should be sent home consistently to notify parents and guardians of the accumulated absences. This should be followed by a meeting with the appropriate administrator. Suggestions would be at 6, 12 and 18 absences. This must be done continuously to mitigate the accumulation of egregious attendance problems at the end of the year.
9. A permanent faculty review panel for attendance should be formed to review attendance issues and make recommendations to the principal. The panel could aid in early interventions, as well as monitor any plans for credit recovery.
10. When a student reaches 18 absences, a meeting with the attendance panel or appropriate administrator should take place with the student, parents or guardians, and support personnel. These procedures should be applied continually throughout the school year. Credit for the class should be immediately withheld and a corrective action plan put in place. The corrective action plan should clearly outline that credit will be restored if the plan is followed; it should focus on eliminating further absences (without substantial reason), as well as further class cuts, and further lateness to school or class.
11. The terms "lateness to school," "lateness to class," and "lateness to class beyond 10 minutes" need to be clarified as they relate to class attendance. In addition, if the T10 policy is to be used, then the class cut resulting from three T10's must be closely monitored with a reporting mechanism, so the class cut is recorded and incorporated into an accumulated cut record.
12. A review of attendance procedures should be ongoing. Administrators should consider looking into the best practices of cohort schools, including the number of absences districts have in their policies. More importantly, however, the day-to-day attendance procedures, follow-up and accountability mechanisms should be carefully examined.
13. Protocols for the credit recovery system need to be established and clearly and consistently applied. The district should carefully consider its use of credit recovery while at the same time ensuring that such restorative practices have proper academic value.

14. The district should also examine its policies regarding both grade changes and the transfer of grades when a student changes classes or moves between class levels. These policies should be clearly communicated to the South Orange and Maplewood Educational community.

## VIII. General Conclusions

The audit concludes that there is an inconsistent communication, understanding, and implementation of the attendance policy at Columbia High School. To a degree, many of the existing policies are sound; however, the implementation mechanism and established protocols must be more consistent. Increased oversight may well address a number of these identified attendance issues. Such issues become exacerbated at the end of the school year impacting student grades and credit for classes. Most significantly, the confusion surrounding the attendance policy has led to an over-reliance on a credit retrieval protocol that appears to be inconsistently applied and may not be educationally sound. A recent study cited in *Education Week* suggests “that the level of school poverty and minority enrollment track closely with the intensity of credit recovery participation. Those dynamics put equity front and center: The students who tend to be at greatest risk for not graduating are the ones who will be most affected by credit recovery—for better or for worse.” (Catherine Gewertz, “Does Too Much Credit Recovery Lead to Inflated Graduation Rates?” *Education Week*, September 17, 2018).

South Orange-Maplewood School District  
Attendance Audit – Interview Questions  
September, 2018

Interview Group: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Do you feel that you are sufficiently aware of the high school's attendance procedures and policies as they currently exist?
2. If not, do you feel that you know where to look for those policies and procedures?
3. Do you think student attendance is an important piece of academic achievement and overall success? Why? Why not?
4. What current structures exist to hold students accountable for their attendance and support the delivery of a sound educational program?
5. What would be the most critical component of a student attendance policy?  
(Enforcement, number of days, protocols for credit withdrawal/retrieval, early warning/notice, etc.)
6. Do you feel that the district's curriculum is supported by its approach to student attendance?
7. In what ways does the attendance policy influence grading procedures?
8. If you think student attendance is a concern and needs a structured policy, how should that look? What do you think needs to be in place to support student attendance?
9. Do you have any additional suggestions for improving the district's approach to grading and attendance?