

MILITARY-CONNECTED STUDENTS *and* PUBLIC SCHOOL ATTENDANCE POLICIES



SPECIAL

Topic



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE OF INNOVATION AND IMPROVEMENT

June 2011

Dear Colleagues:

As we enter our nation's 10th year of continuous combat operations, the stresses borne by our military families continue to grow. There are more than 1.2 million children of service men and women in our schools. Of these, more than 120,000 currently have a parent deployed to a combat zone. Many of these parents are on their second, third, or fourth deployment. Some of these children live near large military installations. But, because our armed forces rely so heavily on the activated National Guard and Reserves, students of deployed parents can live in any community across our nation and attend any school. Deployments can also affect children of military contractors and civilian government employees who are also frequently deployed.

Among the many challenges for military families is the need for flexibility related to school attendance policies. When a service member is deployed to a combat zone, military families often ask schools to grant their children excused absences so the family can spend extended time together before the deployment, during mid-tour breaks, and after the military parent returns. In many cases, "time off" from duty is directed by the military units to which service members are assigned and is commonly referred to as "block leave."

We can all appreciate the desire for families to be together during a time as stressful as the deployment of a parent. And all of us want to do whatever we can to support our military families. However, deployment-related absences can cause challenges for schools and school districts. Educators are concerned that increased absenteeism can reduce educational outcomes, and, in some cases, negatively affect a school's adequate yearly progress (AYP) status. These concerns have made some districts reluctant to accommodate requests for deployment-related absences.

Many districts, however, have developed successful ways of responding to this unique need without adversely affecting academic performance or accountability ratings. This helpful guide provides resources for school districts seeking examples of effective practices that address the needs of military families while maintaining high standards and upholding established attendance policies.

The practices outlined in this publication come down to common sense: communicating effectively, planning ahead, and finding practical solutions to meet the needs of families while respecting the responsibilities of school personnel.

I want to thank the Military Child Education Coalition for developing this guide to attendance policies in our nation's public schools. I hope that this publication will be a useful aid for you in your decision making.

Very Respectfully,

James H. Shelton, III
Assistant Deputy Secretary
Office of Innovation and Improvement

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www.ed.gov

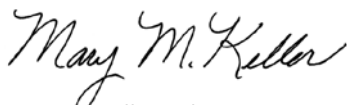
The Department of Education's mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.

MILITARY-CONNECTED STUDENTS *and* PUBLIC SCHOOL ATTENDANCE POLICIES

School attendance is important. Students without good attendance miss instruction, key concepts, experiences, class participation, and the opportunity to ask questions. They are more likely to fall behind, and ultimately, more likely to drop out before graduation. Greatschools.org reports that a 2008 study conducted by the Rodel Community Scholars at Arizona State University tracked students from kindergarten through high school and found that dropout patterns were linked with poor attendance – beginning with kindergarten!

There are legitimate reasons for missing school, such as an illness or unexpected emergency. Military-connected students have been granted additional leave to visit with parents or guardians who are on leave from deployment, about to deploy, or have just returned from deployment. How many days can they take and who makes those decisions? What can communities, installations, schools, and families do to successfully balance students' education with their family responsibilities?

This MCEC *Special Topic Section on School Attendance* contains information and tips to help you make the best decision for students – whether you are a principal, installation commander, state board member, or parent.



Mary M. Keller, Ed.D

President and CEO, MCEC

Visit the
following web resources
to learn more:

www2.ed.gov

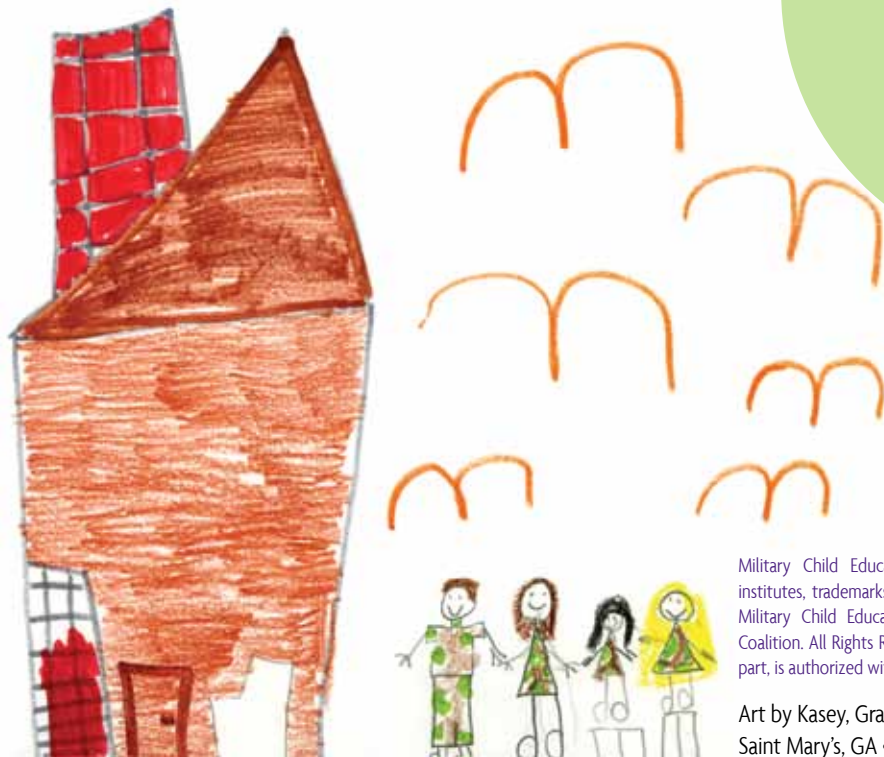
www.attendancecounts.org

www.dodea.edu

www.MilitaryChild.org

www.NASBE.org

www.SchoolQuest.org



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Art by Kasey, Grade 2 • Mary Lee Clark Elementary School
Saint Mary's, GA • Navy

How Are Schools Governed?

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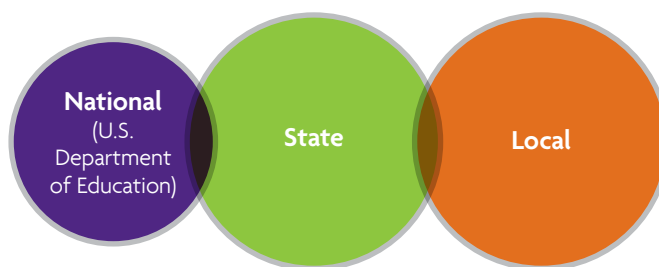
Shared by the U. S. Department of Education Office of Innovation and Improvement and the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) - Educational Partnership

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The authority to operate a school in the United States is granted by each of the states individually. There are approximately 16,000 public school districts nationwide, and public education school cultures and traditions are inherently local. The state has both the responsibility and the authority for their public school systems.

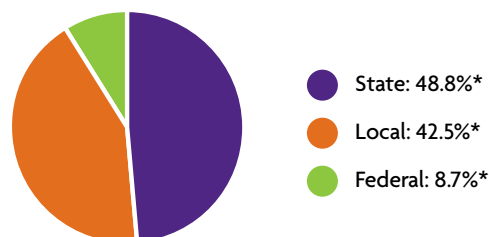
At the federal level, the U.S. Department of Education's role is to formulate federal funding programs involving education, and to enforce federal education laws regarding such things as privacy and civil rights. Proponents of strong local control over education policies often cite the 10th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: powers that the Constitution does not delegate to the United States and does not prohibit the states from exercising are "reserved to the states respectively or to the people."

THE U.S. PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM



SOURCES OF PUBLIC EDUCATION FUNDING - FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL

On average 90 percent of public education funding comes from state and local sources.

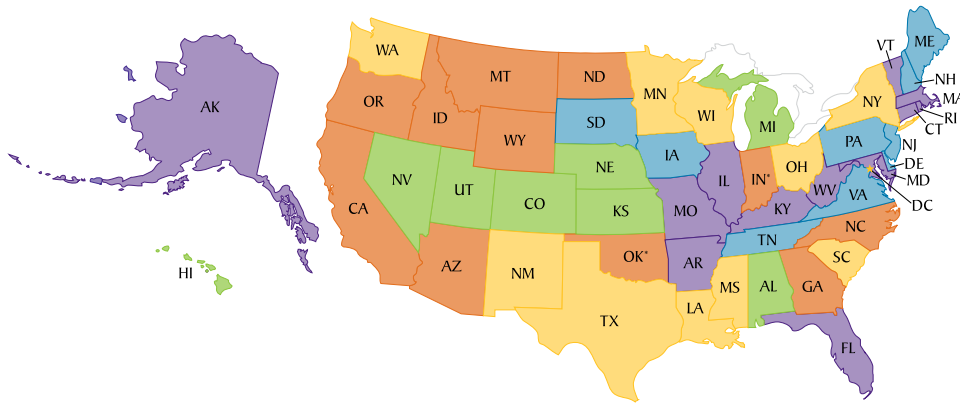


*Estimation
School Finance Redesign Project, Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, Working Paper 9, "What is the Sum of the Parts? How Federal, State, and District Funding Streams Confound Efforts to Address Different Student Types," March 30, 2007.

ATTENDANCE POLICIES & RULES?

Today state boards of education or their equivalent exist in every state except Wisconsin and Minnesota, as well as in Washington, D.C., and other U.S. jurisdictions. Their diversity is great, varying in method of selection, size, and governance structure. While the scope of board responsibility is defined differently in every state, there are some common areas of jurisdiction, including statewide curriculum standards, establishing high school graduation requirements, and implementing the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (formerly No Child Left Behind, or NCLB).

STATE EDUCATION GOVERNANCE MODELS (2010) - Map 1



Model I: Governor appoints state board, board appoints/selects chief state school officer

Model II: Elected state board, board appoints chief state school officer

Model III: Governor appoints state board, independently elected chief state school officer
*chief state school officer also serves as chair of state board

Model IV: Governor appoints state board and chief state school officer

Other Models: These states do not follow one of the four models listed above. For a complete description visit www.nasbe.org

Developed and distributed by the National Association of State Boards of Education/ www.nasbe.org

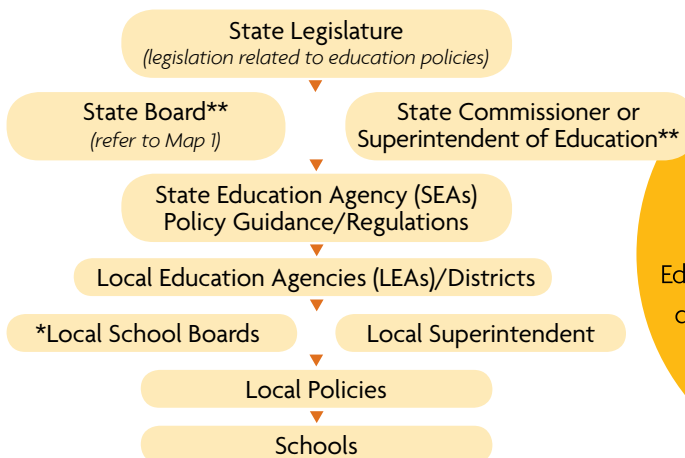
What does this mean for Military Families?

By Dave Splitek, Ph.D., MCEC Vice President of Programs and Services

Map 1, "State Education Governance Models" shows four possible configurations for State Boards of Education and the bottom line is that they all work to improve the quality of education for every student in their state's public schools. As a military parent your best avenue for access and influence still lies with your local school administration, with the elected members of your local school board, and with your state's commissioner on the Interstate Compact for Educational Opportunities for Military Children (the majority of the states have signed). Also, the installation School Liaison is someone who can effectively advocate for military-connected students and parents.

All of these officials are committed to high quality education and successful students. Don't be afraid to reach out to them with your questions and to praise and encourage them when they have done something that works well for military students.

STATE EDUCATION GOVERNANCE FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS AT-A-GLANCE



IMPORTANT FACT:
Most states allow their Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to make the determination whether a student absence for any reason is to be counted as excused or unexcused.

INSIGHTS

on Public School Attendance Policies

By Belinda Pustka, Ph.D. for the Military Child Education Coalition

School districts are under increased pressure for student accountability while at the same time experiencing decreased revenue to meet those demands. Maximizing student time in the classroom is more important now than ever before. Balancing the needs of students to get the best education possible while allowing them time to spend with their military parents/guardians prior to deployment or after they return from a deployment to a combat zone is a critical balancing act.

The education code in five states have specific guidelines for excusing absences related to parent/guardian deployment to a combat area or reuniting following a deployment. These states are Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Michigan, and Georgia.

All the remaining states allow Local Education Agencies in their states to make the determination whether a student absence for any reason is to be counted as excused or unexcused. Many states rely on the recently enacted **Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children** for the foundation of decision making.

All state education agencies participating in the Interstate Compact have developed and disseminated

guidance concerning the implementation of this agreement to their respective Local Education Agencies (LEA). This guidance might have been provided several months ago, so LEAs and campus administrators may need to review the earlier guidance provided by the state. At the beginning of each school year, state agencies may want to remind LEAs and school districts to develop guidelines for implementation of the Interstate Compact.

CONCLUSION

Communication is a process. Most issues that arise between parents, students and school districts could be avoided with frequent and positive communication. Like most skills, communication must be practiced. Establishing a strong communication link between parents, students, the community, and the teachers in the school enhances the education process for all students.

What is the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children?

According to the Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission website (www.mic3.net), the goal of the *Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children* "is to replace the widely varying policies" affecting our military-connected students as they move between school districts and states. The Compact addresses key educational transition issues such as enrollment, placement, attendance, eligibility, and graduation. The Compact was developed by the Council of State Governments' National Center for Interstate Compacts, the Department of Defense, national associations, federal and state officials, departments of education, school administrators, and military families.

To see which states are involved or find out more information, please visit www.csg.org/militarycompact or www.mic3.net.

By consistently practicing communication and working to maximize education opportunities, we will be able to provide the opportunity for a quality education for all students.



Art by Seth, Grade 2 • Loyd Elementary School
Fort Benning, GA • Army

Examples of different policies:

The National Association of School Boards provided a sample policy pertaining to the implementation of the Interstate Compact. The example from Connecticut includes the following reference to student absences due to parental/guardian deployment:

“Students of active duty personnel shall have additional excused absences at the discretion of the District for visitations relative to leave or deployment.”

From Lee County, Florida, the following is an example of their adopted policy:

“A student whose parent or legal guardian has been called to duty for, is on leave from, or immediately returned from deployment to; a combat zone or combat support posting shall be granted additional excused absences at the discretion of the Superintendent or his designee.”

Statutory Authority 1000.36, 1001.42, 1001.43, F.S.

The Texas Association of School Boards: As part of their 2010-11 recommended Texas policy updates, the reference to the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children was included in their model Student Handbook in a section titled Accommodations for Children of Military Families*:

“Children of military families will be provided flexibility regarding certain district requirements, including:

- Immunization requirements
- Grade level, course or education program placement
- Eligibility requirements for participation in extracurricular activities
- Graduation requirements

In addition, absences related to a student visiting with his or her parent related to leave or deployment activities may be excused by the district. The district will permit no more than ___ excused absences per year for this purpose.”

*The state of Texas has the largest number of military-connected students, K-12th grade.

Here’s an example of the policy for Fort Bragg, North Carolina, schools:

Public schools MAY grant up to 5 days of excused absences for Military families with Soldiers returning for block leave. **(Note:** This is *not* a Fort Bragg/Army-wide Policy) Conditions in which the school may grant excused absences for block leave include: the excused absence is pre-approved; student is in good standing; student has a prior record of good attendance; missed work is completed and turned in within the school’s allotted time period; and absence is not during standardized testing dates. Please contact your local school for additional information.



Art by Nathan, Grade 4
Stuart Mesa Elementary School
Oceanside, CA • Marines

TIP FOR PARENTS!

Check your child’s “late work policy” and “make-up work” policy in their classroom. Ask the teacher how your child can continue with their work even while on leave. This can be especially important in grades six through twelve.

We all play a critical role in ATTENDANCE

We all play a critical role in making sure we maintain the balance between providing adequate time in the classroom and supporting the special needs of military families. The following are recommendations for each member of the school community that will lead to enhanced educational opportunities for the military dependents.

Parents

1. Let your child's teacher, or if your child is a secondary student with multiple teachers, the school counselor/principal know about your pending deployment and any special arrangements for care you have made that might be out of the child's normal routine. The earlier you notify the school about your future deployment, the more time they have to make sure they are prepared to support you in any way your circumstances may need.
2. As your time for your deployment to a combat area or a reunion with your family following a deployment nears and you would like your child to be excused to spend time with you, notify the school in advance of the absence. Some states or school districts require a written notification of absence be submitted and approved prior to the student absence. Find out if this is a requirement by your local education agency (LEAs); while it may not be a requirement of all states or LEAs, putting your advance request in writing is probably good practice for everyone.
3. Many states allow LEAs the opportunity for discretion to determine whether a student's absence is excused or not. Most districts that are given discretion by the state to make this determination will make their decision based a variety of factors, including your child's previous attendance and whether or not your son/daughter is earning passing grades. Remain vigilant in tracking your child's grades during the months leading up to your deployment or reintegration, especially if you plan to ask for your child to be absent from school in order to spend time with you.



TIP FOR PARENTS!

Many schools communicate online. Check with your child's teacher for email addresses or where messages may be posted on the web.

Educators

1. When parents notify you they will be deploying, take this opportunity to tell them you will keep them and their safekeeping in your thoughts.
2. Military families are transferred frequently throughout their career. While the communication you receive from the parent of military dependents who are assigned to your classroom may not be as consistent as you would like prior to deployment, understand that communication is process. Work to establish strong methods of communication with the military parents, and they will often take these newly learned styles of communication with them to next school in the community to which they are being transferred.
3. Educators should be alert to the effects of deployments on students. Express concerns to the school counselor.
4. Sometimes the parent's return requires adjustments, such as a household move. If you have a student who may have a sudden move out-of-state, to give a parent support during a period of recovery, make sure the receiving district gets all the paperwork needed to help that student be successful, especially during trying times.

School Districts/Local Education Agencies (LEAs)

1. During a recent survey, most states report that the determination of whether or not student absences are excused is a decision made at the local level. Some states require/recommend local education agencies adopt detailed policies while other states allow the guidance to be outlined in the student handbook or in guidance provided to attendance committees. Check to see what your state requires and then determine how your district wants to handle this decision if you are allowed discretion.
2. If your state is one that passed the Interstate Compact, then certain agreements were approved which you may need to heed. Most states have sent out guidance, but if you are not familiar with the provisions of this agreement, contact your state department of education.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS!



If a student is absent for more than two days, check with the attendance office or counselor or parent. This may let you know the duration of the absence so you can collect assignments and plan for catching up the student upon his return. Having a teacher web page is an efficient, effective way to keep students and parents informed of classroom assignments and activities during extended absences.

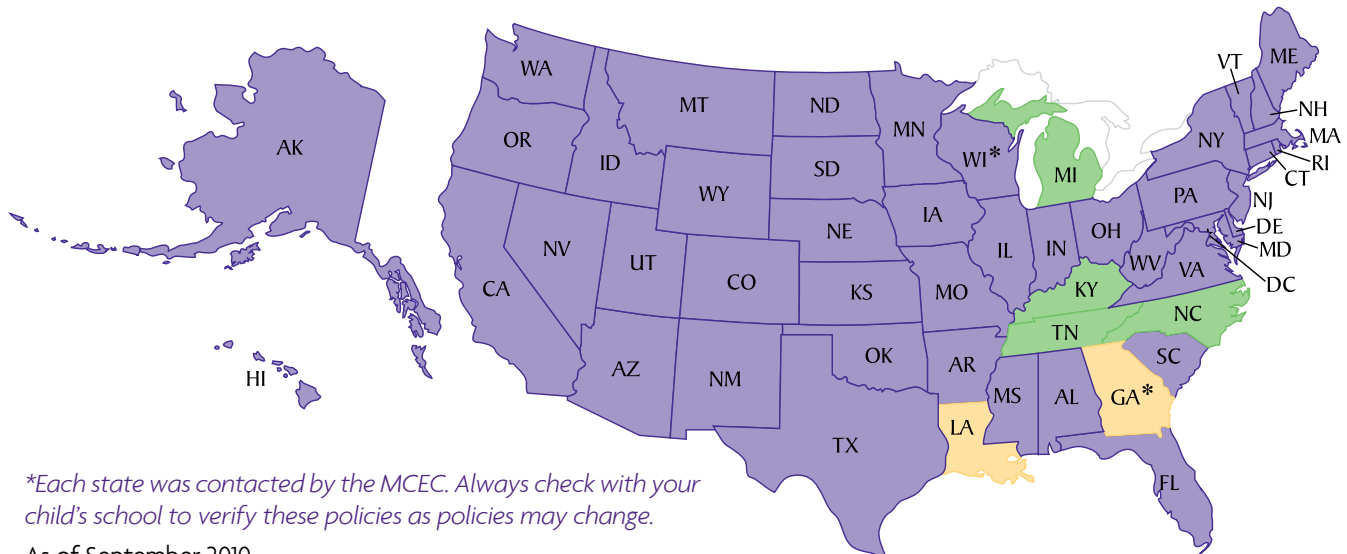
Commanders

1. All branches of the military emphasize maintaining strong communication links between the military installation and the school district that supports your military members. Often members of the military choose to live in communities that are located some distance from the installation from where they are assigned. When communicating with the public remember to cast a wide net and involve communities that may not traditionally serve a large number of military dependents. All local education agencies would like to share in this information, even those serving a small number of military dependents.
2. Help those assigned to your command to understand that the manner school districts handle excused/unexcused absences will vary from state to state and sometimes between local education agencies in the same state. Encourage them to check with schools where their children are enrolled to see whether or not a student who is absent due to a parent deployment or reintegration will be counted as excused or unexcused.
3. Communicate with the local school districts and be familiar with the local school's policies.

TIP FOR PARENTS!

Consider your students' academic needs before taking them away from the classroom! Students already struggling academically or with attendance may not be granted additional leave. School is your child's job.

ATTENDANCE POLICIES AND THE MILITARY-CONNECTED STUDENT – STATE OR LOCAL?



**Each state was contacted by the MCEC. Always check with your child's school to verify these policies as policies may change.*

As of September 2010

- Local Policies
- State-wide Policies
- Caveats

CAVEATS:

- Kentucky: 1 day deployment, 1 day return, up to 10 days R&R
- Michigan: MCL 3.1041-3.1
- North Carolina: G.S. 115c-407.5 Article V (E) - Absence allowed; check with school
- Tennessee: 1 day deployment, 1 day return, up to 10 days R&R - TC 49-6-3019

5 FIVE MYTHS

About School Attendance

Written by Hedy Chang

Co-author of "Present, Engaged, and Accounted for," a 2008 report on chronic early absenteeism, and the director of Attendance Counts (www.attendancecounts.org) a national and state level initiative

With millions of children beginning the new school year, millions of teachers have inevitably begun to take the daily roll in their classrooms. Done right, this simple task not only can provide a way to welcome and engage student, but also can offer important clues about students, classrooms, and whole communities. Most schools miss out on this information, though, because they don't track the right numbers and they trust the following commonly held myths.



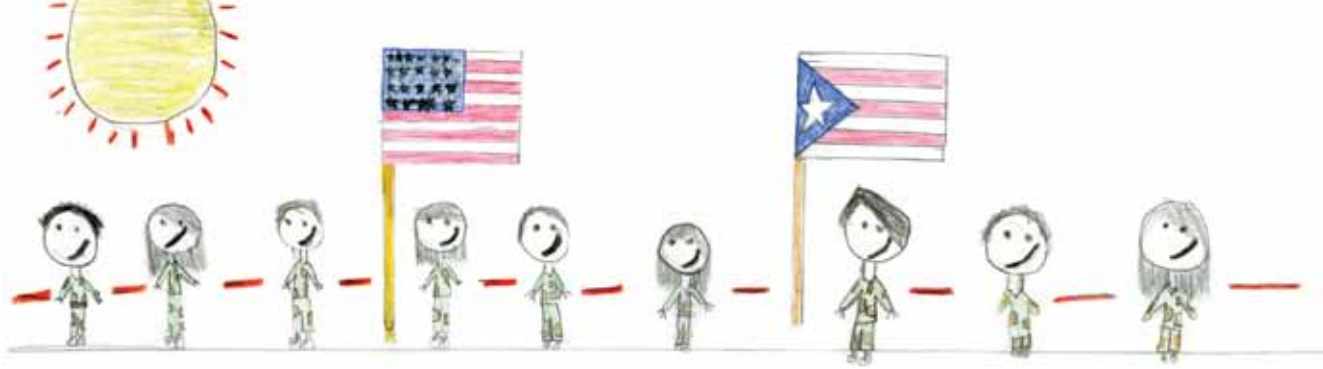
Art by Destiny, Grade 6 • MacDonald Intermediate School
Fort Knox, KY • Army

1. Students don't start missing a lot of school until middle or high school.

Actually, one in ten Kindergarten and first grade students misses at least a month of school every year, national research show. In New York City, one in five elementary students falls into this category – a figure that led Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg to launch pilot programs addressing the problem in 25 schools this fall. This can't be labeled truancy in the early grades, since most five- and six-year-olds don't stay home without a parent's knowledge. It's chronic absence. Unexcused absences become a bigger problem in secondary school. But the bad attendance habits that lead to skipping school can become entrenched in the early years.

2. Absences in the early grades don't really affect academics.

National research shows that chronically absent kindergartners demonstrated lower academic performance than their peers once they got to first grade. For many low-income children, the poor performance persisted through fifth grade. A long-term study in Baltimore showed that many chronically absent sixth graders later dropped out of high school. In Chicago, poor attendance in ninth grade was a better predictor of dropping out than 8th grade test scores.



When too many students miss too much school, the classroom churn starts to affect the entire class, as teachers repeat material to help children catch up. When state funding is linked to attendance, these absences mean schools get less money.

3. Most schools already know how many students are chronically absent.

In fact most schools don't look at chronic-absence patterns. They measure school-wide attendance – or they track truancy (unexcused absences). Neither figure captures all that's going on. For example, an elementary school of 400 students can have 95 percent of its students showing up every day and yet still have 60 children missing 18 days – or 10 percent of the school year.

Further analysis can find that these students are concentrated in neighborhoods with no school bus service, in chaotic classrooms with an inexperienced teacher, or in communities with high asthma rates. Often, chronic absence is tied to poverty – to families who have no reliable transportation, little access to health care, and unstable housing, or no home at all. Understanding these patterns can lead to solutions – if we crunch and examine the numbers.

4. There's not much that schools can do to improve attendance; it's up to the parents.

While parents are certainly essential, schools partnering with community agencies can make a real difference when they work together. Some solutions are universal: educating parents and students about the importance of attendance and ensuring that every absence receives a response. Other solutions reflect particular challenges [...] A school in Providence, Rhode Island, found that some absentee students had parents who worked overnight

shifts, then fell asleep before bringing their kids in. The school opened an early morning program with breakfast, so that parents could drop children off before going home to sleep.

Sometimes, a child or family needs special attention. Baltimore and Providence have programs to help with transportation for students who can't get to school, and to offer health services and counseling to families who need that support. In New York City, 15 homeless shelters will each have a point person paying attention to whether children there are making it to school.

At its most intractable, truancy is a matter for the courts. There are dedicated truancy officers and court programs that can reach students when schools and communities fail to turn around poor attendance. But it's generally quicker and much less costly to start with preventive measures and targeted solutions.

5. The federal government has no role in reducing chronic absence.

While the best solutions are ultimately local, federal policymakers can help ensure schools are looking at the right attendance data. They can require reporting of chronic-absence rates, not just truancy. They can require states to add absences to longitudinal student databases. And they can assess school improvement not just by standardized-test scores, but by an array of measures, including chronic-absence rates. They can promote using federal grants to form school-community partnerships to reduce high levels of chronic absence.

Ultimately, it comes down to this: Students can't learn if they can't go to school. And schools can't improve if students don't show up to class regularly. The first step is discarding these old myths.

First appeared in Education Week on September 15, 2010. Reprinted with Permission from the author.

Art (above) by Paola, Grade 5 • Ramey School • Aguadilla, PR

PROMISING POLICY EXAMPLES

from School Districts/Local Education Agencies (LEAs)

The Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children stipulates that “a student whose parent or legal guardian is an active duty member of the uniformed services and is called to duty for, or has immediately returned from, a deployment shall be granted additional excused absences at the discretion of the Local Education Agency Superintendent to visit with the parent before the leave or deployment and/or upon return from deployment for reunification.” Below are examples* of what Local Education Agencies are doing to ensure students receive quality education while upholding their attendance policies.

CALIFORNIA: LEAs offer “Independent Study Contracts” to families for block leave. (Per California Education Code 51747, Independent Study Contracts are restricted as follows: students in grades K-3, minimum of five days with a maximum of five days; students in grades 4-5, minimum of five days with a maximum of ten days.) Code 51747 provides districts with an opportunity to gain average daily attendance credit for a student who completes a program of independent study under the general direction of certified personnel while the student is legitimately off-campus.

CALIFORNIA: A local school district with oversight of the schools closest to the installation has the following policy regarding excused absences that students may use in order to be with a military parent/guardian before/ following a deployment event: Parents are allowed to excuse their child from school for a minimum period of five days to a max of ten using “Short Term Independent Study” contract. The policy accepts deployment of a parent as a valid reason for the excused absence. Parent/guardian requests a Short-Term Independent Study contract from the principal. The contract is signed by all parties, and upon turn in of all assigned work, the student receives an excused absence. If the number of days out of school is for a shorter term, the parent/guardian can ask for

“one-time homework.” Under “one time homework” the child would not be excused from school but their absence would be accounted for upon turn-in of homework. In this way, the absence would not count as a truancy if the student has that issue.

SOUTH CAROLINA: Explained absences are handled on case-by-case basis through consultation with family and school district, in consideration of each family’s situation. Explained absences are noted in student’s record; however, they do not count against attendance requirements.

FLORIDA: Deployment-related absences are covered under guidance provided in the district’s student handbook. Parents must request in writing to the principal at least three days prior to date of absence. All are considered on a case-by-case basis and are at the discretion of the principal. Military members may contact the Airman & Family Readiness Center (A&FRC) or SLO for further assistance.

NORTH CAROLINA: The policy is to allow principals to decide. If a child has good grades and few absences, the principals automatically approve the extended absence for one week and will consider longer absences based on the destination of travel (coast-to-coast by car, for example). If the child has academic issues or other absences, the principal will talk with parents about the potential impact of a long absence.

*These examples, shared informally by the U. S. Department of Education Office of Innovation and Improvement and the DoDEA - Educational Partnership, are subject to change at any time. Always check with your local school district to find information on the current attendance policy.

SEVEN THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW *about* SCHOOL ATTENDANCE POLICIES

1. State and district school policies may be different. Find out your district's policies by contacting the office directly.
2. School districts believe that students should be in the classroom if they are going to maximize their learning opportunities. If your child will need to be out, check on other local attendance make-up options. Some areas offer Saturday school, "Zero Hour" classes that are offered before or after school or at lunch, or even make-up work packets.
3. State funding to local districts is directly related to school attendance. Districts normally do not receive funds for a student who is not present.
4. Promptly follow district policies to ensure that qualified excused absences are excused. An absence not only is a day not present for instruction, but an unexcused absence may also result in failing grades for incomplete work. This can be catastrophic.
5. If your school expects you to notify them the day you keep a child home sick, do so. Learn to use online communications to reach the school staff. Many teachers maintain a school web page to post homework assignments, projects due, etc. This is a great way to stay current on what is going on in the classroom when your child is not there.
6. Even those districts which provide flexibility in attendance policies will consider current student performance when determining the number of absences that can be excused. This is more critical in high school courses in which credits are earned by the quarter or semester.
7. There are compulsory school attendance laws. Find out more at www.militarychild.org/whats-happening/schoolattendance.



Aunt Peggie

Do you have a question
for Aunt Peggie?

Log on to
www.MilitaryChild.org

By consistently practicing communication while working to maximize education opportunities, we will be able to provide the opportunity for a quality education for all students.

Thank you!

The Military Child Education Coalition is grateful to all those contributing to the *On the Move* Special Topic Section on School Attendance. This publication was made possible through the generous knowledge sharing of Charles E. Boyer, Ed.D., Special Advisor for Military Families, Office of Innovation and Improvement, U. S. Department of Education; Hedy Chang, Director of AttendanceCounts.org; Brenda Welburn and Tony Shivers of the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE); the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) - Educational Partnership; and the Military Services. A special thank you goes to our service members and their families, not only for the sacrifices they make every day, but also for their flexibility and understanding as each facet of government and education evolves to support them.

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