

## STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL PERSONNEL WORKING WITH CHILDREN EXPERIENCING SCHOOL AVOIDANCE/ANXIETY ISSUES

### **IDENTIFYING A STUDENT AT RISK:**

- *Excessive truancies from school*
- *Avoidance of activities or interactions in which student previously participated*
- *Change in homework patterns (refusal, missing, or incomplete assignments)*
- *Patterns of academic failure, i.e. decrease in grades, changes in test performance*
- *Pattern of negative peer relations, such as decreased social activities/isolation*
- *Decreased motivation associated with negative feelings towards school*

The team approach works best and is optimal for the student with anxiety and avoidance behaviors. Teachers, school staff, parents, students, and outside supports working together to establish a consistent structure/pattern can be the foundation to success.

### **School refusal can be a result of (Kearney and Albano, 2007):**

- Avoiding school-related stimuli that provoke negative affectivity
- Escape aversive social and /or evaluative situations
- Seeking attention from primary caregivers
- Tangible rewards outside of school

### **STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTIONS**

1. School personnel should keep track of both excused and unexcused absences; allowing excessive absences without consequences may foster the refusal, anxiety and avoidance behaviors. Once a pattern of excessive school absences has been identified, it may be helpful to schedule a meeting with the school personnel, parents and student to discuss absences and implement a plan for educational success as well as require a medical note on re-entry for all upcoming absences.
2. It is important to initiate and maintain communication between school personnel and parents on the student's progress and expectations. Sending a written weekly report home to parents provides consistent dialogue between home and school of the student's progress.
3. Expectations for attendance, homework, assignments, and tests need to be clearly defined for the student and parents.
4. The student may benefit from a designated school personnel, such as the school social worker to check in with the student and help the student to feel more connected to the school.
5. School assimilation is essential for the students with anxiety and avoidance behaviors. Encouragement of extracurricular activities and student participation can decrease anxiety, foster independence and increase connections in the school setting. Students can work in the office, be a classroom helper or teachers assistant to increase integration in the school environment.
6. Addressing negative peer relationships need to be addressed in the school environment, such as bullying, teasing, etc. Social skill development may be necessary to promote change. School social workers, counselors, psychologists, teachers and peer groups are resources for intervention. Peer mediation may also be necessary.
7. A psychological/neuro-cognitive assessment and/or intervention may be determined necessary if patterns of academic failure are present. Identifying and implementing emotional/behavioral/academic accommodations for students may be needed.
8. Academic accommodations may be necessary through the development of a 504 plan and/or case study evaluation. Outside therapeutic resources may also need to be recommended.

## CORRELATES OF FUTURE ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS

1. Attendance patterns: frequent excused absences, suspicious excuses, frequent tardiness
2. Poor classroom performance in general
3. Limited participation in extracurricular activities and physical education
4. Physical appearance (dress, personal hygiene, size, health)
5. Eating disorders: anorexia, bulimia, obesity
6. Frequent change of schools and grief and loss issues for child
7. Sibling performance in school was negative or sibling was a dropout or truant
8. Family environment reveals problems, e.g. overprotective
9. Two or more years behind in reading and/or mathematics
10. Failure of one or more school years in elementary school
11. Friends not school oriented or dropouts/truants
12. Friends much older or substance abusers
13. Feelings of not belonging/social isolation
14. Behavior problems requiring disciplinary measures
15. Recent divorce in the home or single parent home
16. Recent death in the home or terminally ill parent
17. Alcohol and/or drug abuse and/or child or alcoholic family system
18. Emotional problems/psychosomatic illnesses: asthma, colitis, ulcers, eczema, enuresis, encopresis
19. Absent from home without parental consent
20. Lack of parental supervision before and/or after school
21. Abused and/or neglected (spouse or child)
22. Disconnected or no phone during the last school year
23. SED or LD placement
24. Moved 4 or more times in elementary school
25. 20 or more absences in kindergarten or first grade
26. Separation issues of parent/child

## HOW PARENTS CAN HELP STUDENTS STAY IN SCHOOL

The following is a partial list of ways parents can help students stay in school. The key to regular school attendance is parent involvement. When parents are concerned about the educational experience and take an active interest in the educational process, their children are less likely to have attendance problems and are more likely to graduate.

- Make education a family priority
- Build the child's self-confidence as a student by recognizing when he or she does well in school
- Help the child develop good study and work habits
- Develop a system of praise and rewards for good study habits, good grades, and other good school-related behaviors
- Schedule a daily period of home study time
- Help with homework when needed
- Meet the child's teachers and other school personnel. They can provide important insights into the child's school performance and suggest ways for improvement
- Get to know the child's friends and classmates. They can influence the child's school performance. Lack of friends or problems with classmates can also affect school performance
- Find ways to discuss issues, subjects and course materials being covered at school
- Help the child develop an interest in extra-curricular school activities such as sports, band, clubs, etc
- Emphasize the important role education plays throughout life
- Get involved with the P.T.A., P.T.O., or school board in order to better understand and help change the problems related to school attendance
- Develop a phone-in policy with the school to check on the child's daily attendance, or have the person in charge of school attendance alert you about non-attendance
- Explain how dropouts have more trouble getting and keeping jobs and make less money than graduates
- Develop a school or community program designed to educate parents, taxpayers and students about the topic of school attendance

## **HOW EDUCATORS CAN HELP STUDENTS STAY IN SCHOOL**

The following is a partial list of ways educators can help students stay in school and benefit from the total educational experience. When schools are concerned about EVERY student's educational experience, they usually develop students who are less likely to have attendance problems and are more likely to graduate.

- Develop programs designed to identify potential truants and dropout at an early age
- Find ways to boost each student's self-image
- Help each student to feel an important part of the school
- Support and encourage students with school-related difficulties, rather than ignore or discourage them because they pose problems
- Set achievable standards for students with learning difficulties
- Provide tutorial service for all students in need of extra help
- Provide student assistance programs
- Provide full (K-12) counseling programs
- Help socially isolated students learn to develop and maintain friendships
- Design a "buddy system" that matches one concerned staff member with one student who is experiencing school related difficulties
- Encourage, invite, even assign students to participate in at least one extra-curricular school activity
- Make sure parents who are recent immigrants understand the compulsory attendance laws and policies
- Develop an attendance policy that checks directly with parents whenever their children are absent
- Experiment with new programs to help truants and potential dropouts remain in school
- Offer alternative educational experiences and programs both within and outside of school
- Make strong ties with local industries and develop work/study experiences and programs
- Provide easy re-entry programs for students who have already dropped out
- Convince the school board of the need for spending money to help truants and potential dropouts stay in school. the loss of state reimbursement for absenteeism can be greater than the cost of preventive programs
- Develop a school or community program designed to educate parents, taxpayers, and students about school attendance

## **ATTENDANCE SUGGESTIONS**

The following are offered in the spirit of collaboration that I hope has been established in our joint efforts to ensure good attendance for the students of DeWitt, Livingston & McLean Counties. Local boards should have a board policy related to truancy, absenteeism, and required medical excuses. These policies should be in all student handbooks and references made to these requirements via parent communication.

## **ATTENDANCE HIGH PROFILE**

Establish a value for good attendance by making it high profile throughout the district and throughout each building. Local administration and teachers can accomplish this goal in a variety of locally generated ways more creative, more complete, and more fittingly tailored to local circumstances than any program initiated by a central source such as the Truancy Outreach program.

## **REGULAR REPORTING**

- Regularly report good as well as poor attendance to parents. Reward good but not necessarily perfect attendance in ways appropriate to grade levels and community standards
- Recognize that it takes two parties to create an excused absence—a parent/guardian presenting information and your acceptance of that information and recording it as meeting one of the statutory exemptions to the compulsory attendance statute. Multiple, continued excused absences unchallenged by the school administration typically increase as the child progresses through school. Finding in hindsight that one has enabled such a situation to continue and worsen is an uncomfortable place to be
- Distinguish in the school record among excused absences, unexcused absences, excused tardiness and unexcused tardiness. Check marks and X's do not communicate well to parents and will not stand the challenge of judicial scrutiny when a truancy petition is filed either in the adult or juvenile courts

## **MEDICAL EXCUSE POLICY**

- Implement a requirement for medical documentation beyond a reasonable number of parent excused illnesses. The written medical excuse should be on a doctor's office letterhead, indicate the date the student was seen, the diagnosis, the dates medically excused, and the date that student can return to school