

Early Identification and Early Intervention for Students with Frequent Absences

Summary Report May 12, 2009

Background

Through the Community of Practice, the licensed school nurses (LSN) initiated a study of students with illness related absences. It had been observed by the middle and high school LSNs that students with poor attendance in middle school continued this pattern in high school. Frequent absences are of concern because this places students at risk for school difficulties such as poor academic performance, social disconnectedness, and higher incidence of drug use and pregnancy.

During June 2008, data was gathered that verified a pattern of frequent student absences beginning in elementary school. Six students who had attended Edina Public Schools beginning in the early elementary years were studied. Three of these students had attended Edina Public Schools since kindergarten. These six students were chosen because they had one of the following conditions:

- Were on an attendance plan.
- Had been identified as having frequent absences by the middle school nurses.
- Had known mental health concerns.

Historical attendance data showed that the pattern of high illness related absences in high school had started in elementary school (range 12-51 full day absences). For four of the students, the pattern of high absences started in grades 1-3 (13,19,19,17 full day absences). For two students, the high absence pattern started in sixth grade (17 full day absences). All of these students had tardies (range 2-64) and additional half day absences (range 2-44). Three of these six students had been evaluated and received special education services.

LSN Activities for the 2008-2009 School Year

In order to better understand the problem of student illness related absences and to develop intervention strategies that would positively influence student attendance, the licensed school nurses performed the following activities:

1. Gathered individual school data on illness related student absences and individual school procedures for monitoring absences.
2. Gathered information from neighboring school districts on attendance policies.
3. Developed and implemented intervention strategies including participation on the Problem Solving Team or School Assessment Team and contact with parents.

Key Findings

- I. School Absence Data.** Elementary LSNs identified students in 3 schools with 7 or more school absences and tardies for the time period, 9/2/08-3/31/09. Secondary LSNs identified students with 7 or more absences for each class period for the semester.
1. Based on LSN review of high school students who have been placed on attendance contracts, the pattern of poor attendance appears to be established in elementary school. Untreated or inadequately treated mental health problems are often contributors to poor attendance.
 2. The LSN at one middle school identified one student who had missed a total of 205 days of school throughout her school career. A second student had missed 149 days. These two students alone had missed approximately one full school year of instruction.
 3. In each of the elementary schools that were part of the study up to 24 percent of students had missed 7 or more days during the time period.
 - a. Concord 157 out of 717 students, range 7-19 days.
 - b. Cornelia 133 out of 543 students, range 7-25 days.
 - c. Creek Valley 129 out of 582 students, range 7-32 days.
 4. Based on the total number of students with absences, there appears to be an increase in absences from third to fourth grade.
 5. In one elementary school cultural barriers to attendance appear to be a factor. Many of the students on the seven or more absences list are Somalian.
 6. At the high school level there are students who have patterns of frequent absences who also perform very well. The lack of participation in the academic program of these individuals is often minimized because the student's academic performance does not appear to be affected.
- II. School Attendance Policies and Procedures**
1. The enforcement of the attendance policy at Edina High School and Valley View Middle School has increased parent awareness of student attendance and has improved student attendance.
 2. Established procedures for identifying students with attendance problems and guidelines for multiple levels of interventions are critical for implementation of the school attendance policy. Specific guidelines for multiple levels of intervention for frequent absenteeism are not in place or routinely implemented throughout the district.

3. Practices for recording of student attendance are inconsistent. In some schools, students are counted as absent for a full day, when the student is actually tardy.

III. School Assessment Teams and Committees

1. Attendance as well as student performance and behavior concerns are usually addressed through Problem Solving/School Assessment/ ACT teams. In the secondary schools, the team members include the social worker, Asst. Principal, attendance clerk, and the LSN. In the elementary schools, the LSN is not a routine member of the team.
2. Teams that are effectively addressing attendance concerns meet regularly, have established attendance thresholds, review attendance reports to identify students with potential problems, and discuss the range of student concerns that all members of the team may be observing.
3. At the high school, students with attendance problems are often known by multiple members of the team and have mental health problems that have been under addressed or undiagnosed. Team members establish a plan regarding the appropriate individual to contact parents and initiate interventions. In one situation, addressing a student's poor attendance helped the student receive necessary evaluation and treatment for clinical depression.

IV. LSN Contacts with Parents

For a small group of students who had missed 7 or more days of school, the LSNs reviewed the student's absences, teacher and social worker concerns, and the student's academic performance. When there were no specific concerns identified the LSN contacted the parent to ask about the student's health, inform them of the number of absences, and provide educational information regarding the importance of students being in school.

1. LSNs reported that this telephone contact was often received positively by parents. The majority of parents were surprised to learn of the total number of student absences.
2. Some LSNs saw a temporary improvement in attendance following the telephone contact with parents. Some parents were unconcerned since the student was continuing to perform well academically.
3. Parental mental health concerns were identified for some elementary aged students who had frequent absenteeism and frequent tardies. In one situation, an elementary student was placed on an attendance contract that required the student to have a note from a physician for every illness absence. The parent then started using the emergency room visits to obtain the required medical documentation.

4. LSNs recommended that the first intervention should be a letter from the principal informing the parent of the total number of student absences. The principal and team members develop a plan for continued absences.
5. The LSN is often plays a key role in intervening with students who have attendance problems. A second semester junior in high school did not have an attendance contract for the first time in his high school career following LSN intervention. The LSN initiated a 504 plan to help the student manage his anxiety at school.

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Best Practices Recommendations

1. Establish a district wide statement about attendance expectations that is stated in measurable terms. One possible example is: "The attendance goal is 95%. Students that have 8 or more absences per year fall below the attendance goal.
2. Use multiple methods to inform parents, students, and staff regarding the attendance expectations. The measurable attendance expectations would be published in each school handbook, presented by the principal/assistant principal at the Welcome Back to School events, posted on the district and individual school websites.
3. Identify and intervene with elementary students who have attendance problems. Long standing patterns of poor attendance are difficult to change. Lost instructional time due to frequent absenteeism impacts student performance and requires additional teacher efforts to help students meet academic standards.
4. Identify cultural barriers to school attendance and implement strategies to increase attendance among students from other cultures.
5. Continue use of PST, ACT and SAT teams to discuss and plan for students with attendance concerns. Include the LSN in intervention efforts for students with frequent illness absences. Use written school guidelines for multiple levels of intervention with students who have poor attendance. An initial written letter from the principal or assistant principal seems most likely to engage parents in helping address the student's attendance problem.