

Improving Attendance: A Formula That Worked

Some might say the policy is surprisingly tough, but attendance is up and so are spirits at Twin Rivers High School.

BY DAN VANDIVER

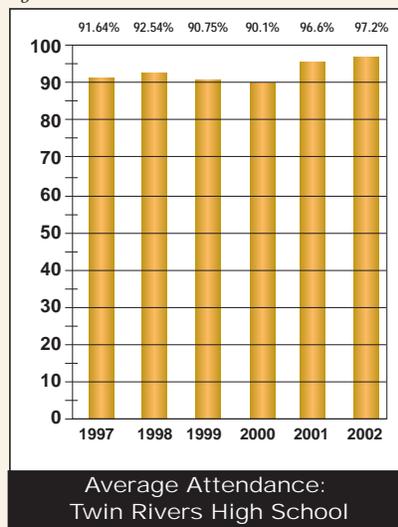
Few school administrators would question the value of a high percentage of student attendance. Improved achievement scores and increased district funding are two of the more obvious reasons to work at raising and maintaining attendance numbers. The more absences can be reduced, the less time and effort teachers spend helping students get caught up—time and effort that can be better spent enhancing the learning opportunities presented to all students. No amount of make-up work can compensate for the interaction with teachers and fellow students that is missed when a student is absent.

Financially, depending on the size of a school, the difference of one or two percentage points in attendance over the course of a school year can mean more money to hire another teacher, buy more computer equipment, or acquire whatever is needed to improve education. Suddenly, investing some effort and even money into raising attendance becomes a very attractive proposition. It is possible to develop a formula with a few key elements that will effectively raise a school's attendance. The right formula will vary from school to school, but there are some basics that should be included in every plan.

The program at Twin Rivers High School in Broseley, MO, came about mostly by design and partially by chance and has brought about a significant increase in the overall attendance at our small, rural, high school. So far, we have developed a formula that looks something like the following: An effective policy firmly enforced + meaningful attendance enticements + exciting rewards + a positive student climate = improved attendance.

The figure below shows a fairly consistent pattern of attendance between the years of 1997 and 2000. In 2001, after implementing a new attendance policy and practices, the significant jump in attendance is readily visible.

Figure 1



The Policy

One of my first assignments when I assumed the duties of a high school principal in the fall of 2000 was to write a new attendance policy and present it to the school board. I was less than thrilled to oversee a change that would be unwelcome by most students and many parents. But after some research into state laws and court decisions and polling several nearby school districts about their policies, I developed a proposal that was considerably more stringent than the prior policy. It was approved with unanimous board support: Students who miss more than six days in a semester are not considered to have earned credit, and no distinction is made between excused and unexcused absences.

This new policy, which we have doggedly adhered to, was designed to be firm. At the same time, it has been implemented fairly and has the flexibility to accommodate mitigating circumstances. Because our state courts have ruled that credits earned cannot be taken away based on attendance, it was important for us to word the policy carefully to establish that credit was *not* earned during an absence. Attendance requirements can be set beforehand, and based on those requirements, credits can be considered unearned if students miss too many days.

In addition to limiting allowable absences, we stopped distinguishing between excused and unexcused absences. Students are either at school or not, and the six allowable days are for necessary absences. Administrative discretion is written into the policy for dealing with situations in which students cannot avoid missing more than six days for legitimate reasons. Finally, there is an appeals process in place for students and parents who believe credits have been unfairly withheld. We have had fewer and fewer appeals filed each semester since the policy has been in place.

Enticements

This policy alone had some initial effect on our rate of attendance, but other factors have contributed to our improvement. The next component is meaningful enticements for students to attend. A large majority of our students would never go beyond the six allowable absences stipulated by our policy. These same solid students, however, will miss three or four times a semester out of convenience—it takes effort to schedule doctor and dentist appointments outside of school hours.

We stumbled onto a meaningful attendance enticement almost by chance. In the second quarter of the fall 2000 semester, we began requiring quarterly final examinations in all classes. The primary purpose was to give students practice taking a high stakes test that closely resembled our state's annual assessment. The following school year, it was written into the student handbook that students with perfect attendance in a class were exempt from the final in that class. We were taken by surprise at the end of the first quarter in the fall of 2001 to discover that we had approximately 125 students with perfect attendance out of a total population of 300 students. Another 50 to 60 students had perfect attendance in at least one class. The finals exemption provided a short-term (nine weeks) goal that was reachable and connected to a reward that students valued. Our faculty members contributed to this incentive's success by writing challenging final exams that students wanted to avoid taking and by making the exam grade account for a significant portion of the quarter grade.

The surprising success of the finals exemption led us to the next component of our attendance improvement formula. Our superintendent is willing to allocate money to provide rewards for positive

performance, but we did not have money budgeted to provide a significant reward to more than half of our entire student body. When I approached our superintendent with a proposal to take all of our perfect attendance students to a movie during school hours, he jumped at it. Our students love this activity. The theater orders the movie of our choice at cost with the only stipulation being that the concession stand is open. It costs the district \$350 to \$500 per quarter depending on the movie. Compared to the increased district funding our improved attendance brings, this is a minimal investment.

Once again, our teachers help make this part of the formula work by making certain that students who do not attend the movie have relevant, graded work to do. It is inconvenient for teachers when half of their students have a grade in the book for which the rest of their students are not responsible but this inconvenience is somewhat offset by having less make-up work the rest of the school year.

School Climate

Things like the attendance movie help contribute to the next component of our formula. Although I can't document or measure its effect on student attendance, I am firmly convinced that our efforts to develop a more positive student climate contribute to our attendance success. When school is an enjoyable place where students feel valued, welcomed, and comfortable, they are less likely to be absent.

Creativity

All these elements are important but one remaining element can influence all the other parts of the formula. Success is enhanced when improved attendance is approached with creativity and an understanding of your students. Our district happens to be in an area where deer hunting season is a major annual event. Fortunately, the

season in Missouri is relatively short and only one full school week is affected, but during that week, our attendance takes a definite hit. The school has responded to this situation in two ways.

1. The first Monday of deer season week is the lowest attendance day of the week and it has become a traditional day out of school on our district calendar. We call it Harvest Day and no one is absent.
2. We have adopted an "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" philosophy. Last year we sponsored a Big Buck contest at the high school. Students who bagged their deer could present it to a school official to be measured. A local sporting goods store helped with prizes. The catch was that to enter the contest, students could not have been absent at any time during deer season. Although I can't document a specific effect on our attendance, I do know of particular students who avoided absences so they could enter the contest—and every little bit helps.

The curriculum can be perfect and the instruction impeccable, but their effectiveness is lessened when students are not at school. Attention to the right combination of carrots and sticks—enticements and policy—can result in improved attendance. It has worked and continues to work for our school. Last year, we finished the entire school year with more than 40 out of 315 students with perfect attendance for the whole year. We just ended first quarter this year with 125 students who had perfect attendance in all seven periods. Another 57 have perfect attendance in at least one class. We are getting ready to go to the movies again! PL

Dan Vandiver (dvandiver.trhs@twin-rivers.k12.mo.us) is principal of Twin Rivers High School in Broseley, MO.