The Development of a High School Attendance Policy

Wallace A. Brown
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THE DEVELOPMENT OF A
HIGH SCHOOL ATTENDANCE POLICY

by
Wallace A. Brown

A Project Report
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment
of the
Degree of Specialist in Education

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
August 1979
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Wallace A. Brown

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Development of school policy should be undertaken with great care and thought. The search for attendance policy information led to a review of Michigan School Law, and of the policy guidelines of several agencies. In addition, a survey of the attendance policies of 33 schools in Southwestern lower Michigan was undertaken. Included in the search was: 1) an examination of Bloomingdale's School Board policies and student handbooks, 2) two hours per day working in the attendance office at Bloomingdale High School, 3) a search for data on which to base conclusions, and 4) interviews with principals and superintendents.

The result of the data gathering has been most interesting and enlightening. For example, there seemed to be as many attendance policies as there were schools. Additionally, there appeared to be a broad range of thought and a variety of policies.

Ultimately, it is hoped that this study will produce a recommendation that will contain the fundamentals of an effective attendance policy.\footnote{Brown, Wallace A., for the purposes of this paper, attendance will be defined as physical attendance at high school.} This author
believes that a thoughtfully developed policy reduces the possibility of controversy.
CHAPTER II
CONSIDERATIONS
General Ideas

The development of regular attendance patterns by students is an important objective of the public schools. The efforts of parents, teachers, administrators, and students should be directed to encouraging sound attendance patterns. Though the State Department of Education and Intermediate School Districts have established guidelines regarding attendance, each local school board has the authority to establish an attendance policy which will best meet the needs of its school system. The specific method of encouraging attendance in school and the specific regulations which affect attendance in a school system have been left almost completely to the discretion of local districts. The amount of learning that takes place within a school and even the degree of success a school system can achieve in the educational process, has been shown to be related to regularity of attendance in school. Participation in classroom activities as well as association with peers and teachers is vitally important.

Since, by themselves, laws requiring mandatory attendance are an educationally ineffective method of
dealing with absenteeism, it is hoped that local schools will develop programs so attractive to each student that they will not wish to miss classes. There are, of course, equally rewarding experiences outside the local school system. Experiences such as travel and special programs have notable value. However, these should be considered as additions to the local program and not as substitutes. Regular attendance is invaluable in enabling pupils to profit from the school program.

It is this author's experience that attendance patterns affect the development of attitudes and habits for adult life. One of the aims of high school, then, should be to teach students to be responsible. The practice of regular attendance develops responsibility, good habits, and self discipline.

A school's attendance records may be requested by institutions of higher learning or by prospective employers. They often consider attendance records as part of application data. Punctuality and regular attendance are traits highly desired by employers. Any absences from school, regardless of cause, become part of the student's permanent record and may have far reaching effects upon her/his future.

It seems fitting, then, that local Boards of
Education establish an effective attendance policy and that "this policy meet the district's needs, that it is well written in terms of policy quality, and that it does not contradict local philosophy or violate existing legal statutes."  

Philosophy

Since student attendance is directly related to the educational process, it seems reasonable that the school's attendance policy be compatible with and related to the educational philosophy of the school system. Bloomingdale High School's philosophy states that:

"It is our responsibility to promote activities that will develop good self images and promote proper social attitudes so that all individuals can find their place within the school setting and within the community.

We believe that education is concerned with the social and physical growth of every individual student. These concerns are met by the knowledge, skills, ability, and character of each student through learning experiences. It is through these processes that the desire for continued learning should be developed."  

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The learning experiences that take place in the classroom environment must be considered to be a meaningful and essential part of one's educational process. "Time lost from class is intrinsically irretrievable, particularly in terms of opportunity for interaction and exchange of ideas between students and between teacher and student. Therefore, classroom attendance is considered to be an integral part of the student's course of study."\(^4\)

This author has found that absences are disruptive and in violation of the rights of others to have an uninterrupted class. A student who is continually absent severs her/himself from the direction of her/his learning. S/he hinders her/his ability to acquire good learning skills and growth in knowledge. Missing class discussions, classroom interactions, written assignments and examinations means the student has missed part of the on-going learning process. Many activities that take place in a classroom are difficult to reconstruct later, and may never be completed by the absentee. Among these activities are: lecture, individual teacher-student discussion, group discussion,

and films. Frequent absence results in a loss of continuity in the learning process for the student. No amount of make up work can replace a lesson presented during class time.

A school system has the responsibility of maintaining a high quality of education for its students. In order to achieve this, the school must create an atmosphere free from distractions and disruptions. Schools should establish policies that encourage each student to attend class each day, and develop a regular attendance pattern. It is also important that the school personnel make the student aware of the value and importance of regular attendance, and that they try to identify and remedy situations where student absence is excessive.

"If a school is going to make any headway on attendance, it must establish policies that clearly specify expectations to students and parents and delineate the outcome of good and poor attendance."^5

Goals for the Establishment of an Attendance Policy

Several points have been discussed previously in

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this paper that should be kept in mind when considering attendance policy. Some of the considerations to be included when developing goals for attendance are:

1. Development of responsible student attitudes and responsibilities.
2. Success of students and schools.
3. Records of attendance for employers and institutions of continuing education.

An additional point to consider in goal formulation is the effect attendance patterns have upon academic achievement.

"Studies of students' progress in school show high correlation between attendance and success or absence and failure." This has reaffirmed what was stated by Joseph Levanto in his speech "The Problem of Attendance, Research and Solutions." Students who have regular attendance records generally achieve higher grades, enjoy school more, and are more successful after leaving high school. "It seems necessary for the student to devote particular attention to regular attendance in order to be relatively successful in school life."  

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7. Coloma Public Schools, "Coloma High School Attendance Policy," Coloma, Michigan, 1976, p. 6 (Mimeo.)
One might conclude from this information, as well as from research studies, that establishing specific attendance goals can guide the development of an effective attendance policy. Such goals might include the following:

1. To instill in each student the sense of responsibility necessary for success in high school and adult life.

2. To identify and attempt to remedy situations where excessive absence is having an adverse effect on the student's school progress.

3. To decrease significantly absenteeism of students whose absence exceeds the "normal" health allowance of five days a semester.

4. To create an attendance policy that is administrable.

5. To place more responsibility for attendance on the student and parent.

6. To make the earning of credit directly contingent on the student's regular attendance.

7. To develop a more positive attitude toward good attendance practices.

8. To increase communication between the school and the parents.

9. To increase rapport between school and parents based upon the premise that the schools are willing to work on the attendance problems.8

Every class period should be considered very important. Students must be in regular attendance and on

8Feist, "Napa", 1976, pp. 11-13

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time if they are to derive maximum benefit from the educational program, and to develop habits of punctuality, responsibility and self-discipline.

While keeping records of student attendance is primarily a school function, the ultimate responsibility for insuring regular school attendance rests with the parent and student. The school's role is to continually try to teach the students the value and importance of attending school regularly. Through the cooperative efforts of parents and the school, it is assumed that each student will develop attendance habits and attitudes which will be helpful to her/his present and future endeavors.
CHAPTER III

BLOOMINGDALE ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS

Background

Many secondary school administrators have expressed concern that rising absenteeism will cause institutional anemia, in that teachers, counselors, and administrators will spend disproportionately more time to manage the attendance situation, and less time on matters related to the instructional program. The quality of teaching, counseling, and administering can easily be affected by the attendance program.9

This seemed to echo the statements of the high school principal in Bloomingdale. The building administrator and the office staff were putting an excessive amount of time and effort into dealing with attendance. The principal indicated that Bloomingdale's absence rate was above the state average. He wanted to find a way to reduce the absenteeism. However, he believed that the established policies limited his actions, and gave him no specific guidelines to follow. He, therefore, was trying to stay within the confines of "past practice."


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The high school principal believed that the practices outlined in the previous year's student and teacher handbooks and those being used for the current year were inadequate in that they were vague and confusing and needed revision. The guidelines in effect left many situations unclear. He believed there were many vague areas in the policy and that it was quite lenient. He suggested that a study of possible policy revisions be made. That suggestion led to this study.10

There seemed to be some confusion regarding the status of the attendance policy at Bloomingdale High School. Therefore, it was decided to investigate board policy and find out what the official attendance policy was and how it related to past and present attendance practices.

The search began by reviewing previous student and teacher handbooks to find the attendance policy statements. During the course of the search, a study conducted in 1973 was discovered.

The 1973 study was conducted to categorize the existing official policy of Bloomingdale's Board of Education. This study was undertaken by Thomas Jones,  

10Paul Storm, Principal, Bloomingdale High School Interview, Bloomingdale, Michigan, Spring, 1978.
then principal of Bloomingdale Middle School. Apparently, Mr. Jones undertook the study as part of the requirements to complete a Specialist Degree. He reviewed board minutes from January 1966 to January 1973, and found that Bloomingdale had no adopted policy for attendance.\textsuperscript{11}

Using the board minutes of August 23, 1972 for guidelines, he developed a written policy for attendance which was submitted to and adopted by the Board of Education March 8, 1973. That policy, #5113, stated:

"It is the policy of the Board of Education to allow students in grades six through twelve a maximum of seven absences each nine week marking period, absences in excess of seven for reason other than doctors' excuse, pre-arranged vacations, or other extenuating circumstances, will result in loss of grades for that marking period. Students in grades kindergarten through five are expected to be in attendance each day school is in session, except in case of illness or other situations that would be interpreted as an excused absence by the building principal.\textsuperscript{12}\"

What happened to this official attendance policy of the district remains unclear. Mr. Jones left the district at the end of that school year. Apparently, the adopted policy was mislaid and/or forgotten because

\textsuperscript{11}Jones, \textit{Policy Development}, pg. 26
\textsuperscript{12}ibid.
at the time of this study no one in the district had a copy or knowledge of the policy. In the research for this writing, the 1973 study was located at Western Michigan University's Educational Leadership Library. This information was shared with administrators at Bloomingdale who were surprised and pleased to learn that the policy statement had been found.

The next principal that entered the system either did not know what the established policy was or chose not to follow it. In searching board minutes for a copy of the policy it was noted in the minutes that, "a copy of the policy is attached". However, the copy had not been included. It is assumed, therefore, that the policy was unavailable. Probably the best indication of what the policy stated was found in 1974-75 student handbook (Appendix A). The statements in the 1974-75 student handbook seemed to lack any clear definitions of an excused or unexcused absence, or what constituted loss of credit. Instead, it stressed the importance of being in school, and did not address itself to what happened if a student was not in school.

In September, 1975, a new high school principal arrived at Bloomingdale. Since there was no policy book, he followed the handbook developed by the previous principal regarding attendance. This again left many situations
unclear. In the fall of 1976 the principal changed the attendance system to an excused or unexcused type of policy.\textsuperscript{13}

Although board minutes show no record of a change in policy, the handbook indicated the following:

"Absences from school for the reason of illness, emergency situations, or death in the family, will be excused. All others except approved in advance absence requests will be unexcused."\textsuperscript{14}

In May, 1977, the recently appointed superintendent began developing a board policy book. By reviewing the minutes, the last attendance policy he found was that of 1973. He therefore, included it in the official board policy book.

When a new high school principal arrived in the fall of 1977, he followed the previous principal's handbook. He continued the attendance procedure he assumed to be board policy. During the course of the school year he learned of the policy which had been written in the new board policy book. This policy was basically the one approved March 28, 1973, and was reviewed, changed slightly, and adopted May 23, 1977. This policy stated:

"It is the policy of the Board of Education to allow students in grades 6 through 12 a maximum of five excused absences each 9 weeks marking


\textsuperscript{14}loc. cit. p.2.
period. Absences in excess of five for reasons other than medical excuse which require a medical doctor's excuse, pre-arranged vacations, or other extenuating circumstances which are excused by the principal, will result in loss of credits for that marking period."

In the midst of two existing attendance policies, this study was begun. Since there was some confusion as to exactly what the attendance policy was, among both staff and students, the administration decided to finish the year without policy change and hoped to start the next year with a new policy provided by this study.

Principal's Comments

This author had frequent discussions with the Bloomingdale High School Principal during the last months of the 1977-78 school year after he had requested that a study be done of the attendance policy. Aside from these discussions, which were mainly for background information, two additional discussions were conducted specifically for purposes related to this study and to gain his views of attendance policies. These discussions were held on July 6, 1978, and on July 13, 1978, in the Principal's office at Bloomingdale

\[15\]

High School.

The Principal stated that he had been following past practices in attendance procedures. This included attendance policies as written in the 1976-77 and 1977-78 handbooks. He indicated that he tried to monitor all unexcused absences, to contact parents when needed, and to assign detention for all unexcused absences. He seemed concerned with the lack of specific guidelines, and indicated that there was no written policy for many of the problems related to attendance. The absenteeism rate was higher than it should have been in his judgement, yet students were being excused for their absences. The Principal felt he was obligated to excuse any absentee who had an excuse from his parent or guardian. This legitimized an unlimited number of absences.

The Principal believed that the policy which was adopted May 23, 1977, had some shortcomings. Because of the word "excused" before absences, there was the possibility that a student could have an unlimited number of absences, and still receive credit for the class(es) s/he had missed. He believed the requirement of a written medical excuse for each illness
was unrealistic for Bloomingdale's school system. He also believed that the phrases "extenuating circumstances which are excused by the Principal" and "excused absences" could result in inconsistent practices because there were no specific indications of what should be included.

He believed this policy could be difficult to administer fairly and could require increased effort and time. However, he noted, "we need to find something that will decrease absences". This author could not agree more.

Superintendent's Comments

An interview took place with the Superintendent of Bloomingdale Schools on July 14, 1978, for the purpose of obtaining his views on attendance and attendance policies.

The Superintendent believed that a policy that only indicated a maximum number of allowable days absence was not strict enough. He believed that students and parents should justify each absence from school. He thought the policy for next year (as reproduced on page 13) contained the fundamental concepts for an

\[16\] Storm interview
effective attendance policy. It was short and to the point. It did need improvement, however. One of the weaknesses, as he saw it, was the number of times a student could potentially be absent and receive credit. He wanted to see more stringent rules governing excused absences. He believed, however, that parents had the right to determine when to keep their children out of school and that possible excusable reasons should include: family emergencies, medical reasons, and pre-arranged events. He noted that if unexcused absences exist, no credits should be given, and make up for work missed should not be permitted. He thought students absent for valid reasons should be able to make up work.

Eventually," he stated, "the parents must assume greater responsibility for making sure their children are in school and for notifying the school when they will be absent". He summarized by stating that, "the attendance problem would not be solved until the expectations of the schools and the needs of the parents are both met."\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{17}\)Donald Dragoo, Superintendent Bloomingdale Public Schools, Private interview, Bloomingdale, Michigan, July 14, 1978.
Author's Comments

Part of the attendance problem in Bloomingdale may have been because the intent of the attendance policy was not clearly stated. Further complication of the problem was the absence of stated attendance procedures. This author agrees with a statement made during the interview with the High School Principal. He stated that "the attendance policies being used are vague, hard to administer, and basically ineffective."\(^{18}\)

This author spent two hours per day of the last four months of the 1977-78 school year working in the attendance office at Bloomingdale High School. The purpose of this time was to gain a general knowledge of the attendance procedures and collect information for this project. In doing this, it was hoped that the weak and strong points in the operating attendance policy and procedures could be recognized. This information could then be used in the formation of a recommendation for a future attendance policy. After working in the office a short time, the amount of administrative time and effort necessary to implement the

\(^{18}\)ibid.
attendance policy became evident. Not only did the principal work in this area, but two secretaries worked full time to monitor attendance.

This author worked with the principal and attendance staff to try to improve the office practices as they related to established procedures. Something more was needed!

On July 20, 1978, this author accepted an appointment as Secondary Principal of Burr Oak Community Schools, Burr Oak, Michigan. It became obvious that this study would not be completed by fall of 1978. Therefore, the Principal at Bloomingdale elected to follow the attendance policy adopted by the Board of Education in May, 1977, for the school year 1978-79. Although this was not the policy with which he had hoped to be working, a new attendance policy was not ready for adoption. This author agreed to continue working on a policy statement and to keep him informed of the progress.

Attendance seems to be a universal concern of high school administrators. Not surprisingly, then, one of the first items of review at Burr Oak High School was the attendance policy. The existing policy at Burr Oak was basically of the excused and unexcused - no absence limit variety. It was only a
short time after the school year had started that absence began to become a problem. The Burr Oak School Board indicated that virtually all absences with parent approval were to be accepted. The author, then Principal, noted an absenteeism rate of above 10%, with no flexibility to improve conditions under the present policy.

Many of these absences did not seem necessary but had to be excused. The situation seemed to be getting worse as students realized they could be absent for almost any reason as often as they chose. This seemed to be similar to the situation at Bloomingdale. The problem needed correcting.

Was this problem unique to Burr Oak and Bloomingdale or did other school districts also have problems in this area? What type of alternative attendance policies were available? What were other area schools using for an attendance policy?

To find information on what other schools were using for attendance procedures, and to gain insight into alternatives available, it was decided to survey area public schools to gain information regarding their attendance procedures. A description of this survey process is given and results are in Chapter IV.
CHAPTER IV
SURVEY REVIEW

Survey Information and Purpose

A letter was sent on May 9, 1978, to the superintendents of thirty-three public school districts in the southwestern corner of lower Michigan requesting samples of their attendance policies (Appendix B). By May 31, 1978, twenty two attendance policies had been received from the schools surveyed. A second letter was sent to the schools that had not returned a policy statement (Appendix C). Five additional policies were received in response to this letter. The schools included in the survey were those served by Regional Educational Media Centers (REMCs) eleven and twelve (Appendix D). Names and addresses of schools and superintendents were taken from directories obtained from their respective intermediate school districts. Information regarding size or type of district was not gathered since the purpose of the survey was to gather information regarding attendance policies. It has not been the purpose of this study to make judgements or draw conclusions about the quality or the appropriateness of any particular policy statements.
General Overview of Policies

In attempting to categorize and analyze the sample policies received, several characteristics became apparent:

1. Attendance policies had no stated criteria or standard length. Policies ranged from four lines to twenty-four pages.

2. Policies seemed to fall into two general categories: Those which based a punitive decision on the number of days absent and those that employed another method of dealing with absenteeism.

3. The problem of absenteeism was a concern of everyone surveyed.

4. The administrators surveyed indicated that they did not have perfect systems but kept looking and trying to find the best possible solution.

5. There seemed to be an urgent need for collection and analysis of attendance data in secondary schools since no policy model had been developed in southwestern Michigan.

6. The State Laws and Department of Education Guidelines provide only general guidance with a few specific attendance policy aids.

From the characteristics mentioned above, item two offered the greatest amount of data concerning the attendance policies of area schools. The remainder of this chapter will focus on item two.

Attendance Policy Analysis

Twenty-three of the twenty-seven schools that:
returned sample policies used a punitive action with students which was based on the number of days the student was absent. (Several variations existed within these policies).

The policies within the punitive category all stated that after the student was absent a certain number of days, s/he could, or would, lose credit for the particular class missed. The number of allowable absences ranged from five to eighteen per semester (see Column I). The number of surveyed schools using that maximum number of days is shown in Column II.

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<td>ABSENT DAYS ALLOWED PER SEMESTER</td>
<td>SURVEYED SCHOOLS USING THAT MAXIMUM NUMBER</td>
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<td>1</td>
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Mean = 12.5 days
Median = 12.5 days
All policies within this category had an "escape clause". That is, there was some stipulation within the policy providing flexibility regarding the number of days a student could be absent before s/he lost credit for the class. These stipulations fell into two categories:

(1) Those that did not count certain types of absences (non-countable absences).

(2) Those that counted all kinds of absences up to a maximum number of days. After the maximum days absent was surpassed, credit for courses was withheld. An exception would be made for a predetermined excusable reason.

As mentioned, several schools did not count certain absences (Category #1, Non-countable absences). The following is a compiled list of excuses that the schools would accept in order to classify an absence as non-countable. Most schools accepted only some of the excuses listed below:

1) Suspensions from school
2) Authorized trips
3) Hospital confinement
4) Pre-arranged absences excused by the administrator
5) All school functions and activities
6) School bus problems
7) Court appearances
8) Doctors' excuse

It is interesting to note that while one school would count an excuse, another school might consider it non-countable. An example of an excuse accepted in both policy categories was suspension from school.
While several schools considered suspension a countable absence, at least one school did not. If any item appeared in any attendance policy as non-countable toward the days absent, it has been listed.

The second category of absences, as previously indicated, allowed a student to be absent a designated number of days. After the designated days were "used up", students would receive no credit for courses from which they were absent. These policies usually contained provisions for exceptions. If a student was absent beyond the allowed days, the excuse had to relate to the following reasons or credit for the course would be lost.

1) Medical
2) Absence pre-arranged with the administrator
3) Accident
4) Hospital confinement
5) Pre-arranged trip
6) Death in family
7) Doctor or Dental appointment
8) Funeral
9) Wedding
10) Personal illness
11) College or job interview (Seniors only)

Twelve policies provided for some type of process where the student could make an appeal to either extend the number of days s/he was allowed to be absent, or show reasons why lost credit should be regained. Usually, the student, accompanied by parents or guardians, had to appear before an appeal committee in order
to appeal his/her case. In five schools, an administra-
tor in charge of attendance was the only person to hear
an appeal. Two schools left the decision of an appeal
to the individual classroom teacher, while five schools
each had a committee appointed to hear appeals. The
committees were made up of combinations of administra-
tors, teachers, students, or counselors.

Five schools that returned sample attendance pol-
icies did not limit the number of days a student could
be absent. Instead, they determined their action on
whether the absence was excused or unexcused. The
following is a compiled list of actions the school
could take if the absence was unexcused:

1) The student was given a grade of F, E, or 0
   averaged in the course grade for the day of the
   unexcused absence.

2) Each unexcused absence lowered a student's
   final course grade.

3) A certain number of unexcused absences lowered
   the student's final course grade.

4) The student was given detention after school.

5) The student was not allowed to make up work.

6) The student was suspended from school.

Several reasons were listed as being acceptable
for an excused absence:

1) Medical appointment
2) Personal illness
3) Family death or illness
4) Funeral
5) Pre-arranged absence
6) Hospital confinement
7) Other emergencies as judged to be such by administrator.

All schools surveyed had a clause about class "skipping". Most policies defined skipping as an irresponsible, unauthorized absence from school. Information gathered indicated that skipping resulted in one or more of the following:

1) Detention after school
2) An unexcused absence
3) A day charged toward maximum allowed days
4) Suspension from school

Also included in most attendance policies were rules regarding tardiness. Information indicated that tardiness resulted in:

1) Detention
2) Day or days absent charged toward total number allowed

Several policies indicated that tardiness over ten minutes was considered skipping class.

Comments and Conclusions

The information gathered reflects a wide range of thought and practice regarding attendance policies. Several policies indicated that unexcused absences could be made up. Other policies indicated that no credit for unexcused absences would be allowed. Many policies indicated that after a certain number of days
were missed credit for the course would be lost. Other policies indicated credit would be withheld for unexcused absences only. Several made no distinction between excused and unexcused absences for a designated number of days. Some indicated that each day of absence would be judged to be unexcused or excused. The important consideration to this author was whether one type of attendance policy was particularly effective in encouraging the students' attendance, thereby providing maximum learning opportunity for all.

To determine what policies had been most effective in decreasing student absenteeism, this author analyzed several studies across the United States which seemingly produced notable results. These studies are summarized in Chapter V.
CHAPTER V

RESEARCH DATA

Some Attendance Policies That Have Worked

Research studies seem to indicate that the type of attendance policy being used has a definite effect on school absenteeism. One such study was conducted by the administration of Napa High School in Napa, California. The study took place in 1975 and 1976.

Initial data seemed to indicate that as many as one thousand students could, with proper motivation, show improvement in attendance at Napa High School. Prior to the initiation of a new attendance policy in the 1975-76 school year, Napa administrators judged each case separately. They did not specify to students and parents either attendance expectations or the outcome of good or poor attendance.

The new policy shifted more responsibility for attendance to the parents and student. With the new policy, earning of credits became directly contingent upon a student's regular attendance, assuming, of course, satisfactory completion of class work. The supporting philosophy centered on increasing student motivation to attend. It also clearly defined what was expected.

Some of the general conditions that were
incorporated into this new policy were:

1) A student's class credit was forfeited upon exceeding absence limits

2) Letters were sent home to parents informing them of students' absences

3) A review board was established to hear student appeals for extending absence limits.

The program focused on student absences due to truancy, and not on illness, although many of the illness absences reported were due to other, not-so-legitimate causes. The attendance program demonstrated a direct relationship between the earning of credit and the student's attendance. Communication between parents and the school was emphasized. The policy designated twelve absences per semester as the maximum allowed each student under normal circumstances. Beyond twelve absences from any class, students risked forfeiture of credit and could be dropped from class rolls.

Before the initiation of the new attendance policy, little more than one-third of the student body stayed within the national norm of five days per semester.\textsuperscript{19} The other two-thirds were absent more than five days, many for reasons other than illness.

\textsuperscript{19}Feist, 1976, "Napa", p. 13.
In the spring of 1975, 622 students had less than five days' absence, or about 40.8 per cent of the total student body. In 1976, after the initiation of the new policy, 1,263 students exhibited normal health patterns as set by HEW (Health, Education and Welfare), or 81.3 per cent of the student body. In 1975, 501 students, or 37.4 per cent of the student body were absent more than thirteen days. In 1976, after the new policy had been implemented, only 66 students, or 4.2 per cent of the student body had missed more than twelve days. Many of the 66 who missed more than twelve days were out of school because of extended illness. Only 3 per cent of the students were still out of school for questionable reasons.

With the initiation of the new attendance policy the absentee rate dropped from a high of 11 per cent in 1975 to 4.7 per cent in 1976, a reduction by 6.3 per cent. In considering absences, it was found that there were 10,816 in the 1975 spring semester compared to 6,014 during the same period in 1976. This indicated that there were 44.4 per cent fewer absences in 1976. No improvement in attendance patterns was noted in Vintage High School, Napa's other high school, which was used as a control for study. Evaluation of the
program indicated that while students were less satisfied with this policy, parents and faculty members were generally favorably disposed to it.\textsuperscript{20}

Another study undertaken at the Norwich Free Academy in Norwich, Connecticut, initiated in 1975, examined several factors that appeared to influence attendance. The findings indicated that attendance patterns can be traced to class, sex, age, parental employment, number of parents living at home, I.Q., programs of study, school activities, race, language spoken at home, religion, class rank, failing or low grades, and the student's personality.\textsuperscript{21} The study was originally intended to focus upon the design of a systematic method for the identification and analysis of factors related to absenteeism. However, the results of this study provided some significant data relative to absenteeism in general.

Among the more significant findings were:

1. Absenteeism is on the increase. Absenteeism rose significantly each succeeding year as well as each succeeding semester of the study.

2. Absenteeism increased with each succeeding class and age group from the ninth through twelfth grades.

\textsuperscript{20}loc. cit., p. 33
\textsuperscript{21}Thompson, "Student Attendance and Absenteeism", p. 5.
3. There was strong correlation between high rates of absenteeism and failing grades.

4. Absenteeism was lowest for students with the higher I.Q. scores and academic achievement.\textsuperscript{22}

The method Norwich Free Academy chose to deal with absence was to lower grades for the marking period for each unexcused absence and to issue a failing grade when a total of 10 absences had been reached no matter whether excused or unexcused. There was a method of appeal. This approach resulted in a significant reduction in absenteeism, and further suggested:

(1) adoption of a firm and well-publicized attendance policy based on a "no work, no pay" concept, (2) development of an effective reporting system to regularly inform parents of student absences, and (3) implementation of an alternative curriculum for chronic absentees.

Another recent study was conducted by William Brokowski, assistant principal at New Milford, Connecticut. He explored the relationship of various factors to the adoption of a more restrictive attendance policy. He compared the performance of students in attendance, tardiness, course failures, academic average,

\textsuperscript{22}ibid.
participation in extra-curricular activities, and disciplinary suspensions prior to and during a period of highly controlled attendance.

Brokowski initiated an attendance policy that included a lowering of academic grades and withholding class credit for students exceeding a twenty day absence limit for the year. He found that when a restrictive policy was in operation, attendance improved. Some specific findings showed:

Older students with low I.Q.'s exhibited the most improved performance under the policy; i.e., higher attendance, decrease in number of course failures, increase in academic average and participation in activities.

Students with low I.Q.'s developed a significant difference in performance for attendance and achievement variables.

Students with low I.Q.'s developed a significant increase in suspensions.23

The implications arising from this study are summarized by Brokowski:

The implementation of a restrictive and punitive administrative control policy for attendance may result in improved performance in attendance and achievement for certain students. The maturity and ability levels of students should be recognized for the appropriateness and desirability of such policies.

Additional strategies for attendance beyond restrictive or punitive rules should be devised to improve student performance in attendance.

23Brokowski, Comparison of Secondary School Student Performance in Attendance, p.3.
and achievement since the findings of this study indicate that all students evidently do not perform more favorably on these variables.\textsuperscript{24}

Several other studies were reviewed that had been undertaken by school systems interested in developing effective attendance policies. All the programs that were reviewed had ideas and formats similar to the ones just detailed in this paper, in that they in some way limited the number of absences that would be tolerated in order to maintain class credit. They would withhold course credit for those students who had exceeded the allowed number of absences. Other significant principles represented in most policies included:

1. Shift burden of responsibility for attendance from school to parent and student.

2. Take a strong position on the value of regular attendance in classes.

3. Give notification to parents of student's absences at intervals.

4. Incorporate the thoughts of parents, teachers, and community into the policy.

5. Give students the opportunity to make up classwork for absences that are justifiable.

6. Ensure that a student receives required amount of instruction per semester, as required by law, in order to receive credit.

7. Provide due process for any student who has exceeded the absence limit.

\textsuperscript{24}loc. cit., p.4.
8. Make some provisions for exemptions from the policy.

9. Publicize the policy, and make the students, parents, and community aware of the consequences.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) has gathered information from several other successful school attendance policies. A common feature of all the schools that adopted new policies was their use of a restrictive and punitive type of attendance policy and their attempt to solve absentee problems with new attendance policy and procedure. Many reduced their truancy rates by one-half as a direct result of the new policies and procedures.

The policies that these schools initiated generally can be categorized into eight approaches. Some schools used two or three approaches simultaneously to improve their attendance. These categories are:

1. Transferring chronic truants to alternative schools or programs.
2. Exempting students with good attendance from final examinations.
3. Withholding credit for excessive absences.
4. Lowering students' grades for excessive absences.
5. Enlisting volunteers to telephone the homes of each absentee and the offices of working parents.
6. Mailing attendance reports home as needed.
7. Appointing personnel to gain better control of attendance.

8. Suspending or expelling for excessive truancy.²⁵

The report concluded by indicating that attractive school programs are not sufficient to reduce absenteeism significantly. Therefore, the focus must be specifically upon the management of attendance. Excessive absenteeism is a complex and continuous secondary school problem with many underlying causes. Most exemplary programs reflect strong policies that are cooperatively and consistently developed and well publicized.

With the ideas gathered from the survey of area school districts, and data from research studies from across the country, pieces of an exemplary policy began to develop. However, there seemed to be a large area yet untouched. Before finalizing an attendance policy, it seemed appropriate to become familiar with the history of the development of compulsory education, with Michigan School laws on the subject, and with the role of various educational bodies in the state. A review of information gained in these subjects is contained in Chapter VI.

²⁵Thompson, "Student Attendance and Absenteeism", p.7.
CHAPTER VI
HISTORY, LAW, AND THE ROLE OF SELECTED AGENCIES

History

Compulsory education dates back to the early English settlements in our country. In 1642, the Massachusetts Colony enacted the first compulsory education law in America. In 1647, Massachusetts passed the first law that placed the responsibility for education on the community. By 1852 Massachusetts had passed a set of compulsory attendance laws, and by 1900, thirty-one states had some form of compulsory school attendance law.

"The earlier attendance laws provided that the child had to be in school a certain number of days each year for a number of years of his life. Since then there has been a steady trend to increase the length of time the child must be in school each year, and also to make the span of years greater."26 In recent years, however, with the advent of teacher unions, this is no longer the case.

Since the early history of the public school, the school census or the number of students attending was

used as a basis to appropriate state funds to public schools. In 1930, twelve states allocated funds to public schools primarily on the basis of census. Seventeen states used the census, together with other criteria, for apportioning money (state aid) to the public schools. Where funds are distributed to the schools on the basis of attendance, the potential loss of allocated funds has stimulated the enforcement of attendance.27

Today, most states require children from age seven to sixteen to attend school. A few states require attendance starting at age six and extending beyond sixteen, but these requirements are not commonplace.

Most states permit children from five to twenty-one to attend school without special permission. Permission from the local board of education is normally required to permit students outside those age limits to attend. Such laws usually apply to general classroom situations, and not to special programs.

All states have developed statutes that may exempt a child from compulsory attendance. However, some states go beyond this to give the local district power to develop its own regulations in this area.

27loc. cit., p.331.
There is a great range of conditions, among states, that may exempt a child from compulsory attendance. Most states seem to provide exemptions for:

1. Satisfactorily completing a certain grade upon reaching a certain age.
2. Mental retardation or physical handicap.
3. Private or parochial school attendance, or private tutor.

A few states allow exemptions for:

1. Passing an examination showing achievement of certain grade levels.
2. Living a great distance from school, with no transportation available.28

In 1871 the Michigan legislature passed an act compelling children between the ages of eight and fourteen to attend a public school for a period of twelve weeks, six of which had to be consecutive. The act also contained the provision that no child under the age of fourteen years could be employed unless he attended school at least four months of the year. In 1895, this act was changed to include the ages of seven to sixteen years for children living in the cities. In 1907, this limit was changed to include ages six through sixteen for everyone. The law remains in effect in 1979.

Michigan School Law

The State of Michigan has specific laws relating to school attendance, which Michigan public school districts are obligated to uphold. The law states that a school must drop from its attendance roll any student who has been absent for ten consecutive days for a reason that cannot be determined by school authorities. It further stipulates that pupils are to attend regularly as far as physically possible.29

Local school districts and boards of education have been given the authority to set forth requirements that must be met before credit is given. These requirements may vary from one local district to another.

Section 340.731 of the General School Laws of Michigan requires every child between the ages of six and sixteen to be in school. This law states:

"Every parent, guardian, or other person in the State of Michigan, having control and charge of any child between the ages of six and sixteen shall be required to send such child to public schools during the entire school year. The child's attendance shall be continuous and consecutive for the school year fixed by the school district in which the child is enrolled.

Exceptions to the law are children who attend a private, parochial, or denominational school, a page or messenger in the legislature, one who is physically or emotionally incapacitated, and children under 9 years of age who do not reside within two and one half miles of the school if transportation is not provided."30

Most boards of education assume that students over the compulsory attendance age and attending regular school are seriously seeking an education. However, when a student age sixteen or older shows by her/his action that such is not the case, s/he can be dropped from the regular school program until s/he is willing and capable of serious educational pursuits.

Michigan has a general law regarding nonattendance at school.

"380.1586 Nonattendance at school; notice; investigations; discussion of irregular attendance, failing work, or behavior problems with parent, (M.S.A. 15.41586) Section 1586. (1) The attendance officer shall investigate each case of non attendance at school when notified by a teacher, superintendent, intermediate superintendent, or other person of a violation of this part. If the child complained of is not exempt from public school attendance under the conditions listed in section 1561, the attendance officer shall proceed immediately in the manner provided in this part.

If a child is repeatedly absent from school without valid excuse, or is failing in school-work or gives evidence of behavior problems, and attempts to confer with the parent or other person in parental relationship to the child fail,

the superintendent of schools or the intermediate superintendent in a district which does not employ a superintendent, may request the attendance officer to notify the parent or the other person in parental relationship by registered mail to come to the school or to a place designated at a time specified to discuss the child's irregularity in attendance, failing work, or behavior problems with the proper school authorities.

The superintendent, or the teacher in a district which does not employ a superintendent, shall provide information concerning the nonattendance of each non-resident pupil to the intermediate superintendent of the intermediate school district in which the nonresident pupil resides. The intermediate attendance officer, when notified by the intermediate superintendent or superintendent of schools, shall investigate and proceed in all cases on nonattendance of non-resident pupils in the same manner provided in this part for enforcing attendance of pupils attending schools in districts in which they reside.31

Michigan Department of Education

The board of education of a local school district usually does not become involved in routine matters of attendance, unless approached by a resident of the district. The Board must act as a group in rendering opinions upon such occasions. If the Board's views differ from administration's, the Board may direct the administration to effect immediate changes. Except for such cases, however, the school board usually assigns duties regarding attendance to its administration.

31loc. cit., p.150, 380.1586.
The administrator usually responsible for administering the attendance policy is the building principal. The Hartford Public Schools' Administrative guideline is an example of the delegation of the attendance responsibility to the building principal. "All building principals shall supervise the following:

1. Record daily attendance in official record book.
2. Instruct each staff member in daily attendance roster and their personal responsibility.
3. Note the date of entering and leaving of all students to the school system.
4. Report each marking period to the office of the superintendent a summary attendance and membership report." 32

The school principal is not ordinarily without guidelines for administering attendance matters. Besides the General School Laws which were outlined earlier in this chapter, the State Department of Education issues mandates to the local intermediate school offices which in turn regulate the local school districts.

To qualify for state aid in accordance with Act #312 of the public acts of 1957, as amended, each school district is required each school year to operate

32 Hartford Public Schools, "Hartford Administrative Procedures Relating to Board Policy," Hartford, Michigan, 1978, Policy #515, unpaged (mimeographed) (Hereinafter referred to as Administrative Procedure.)
a minimum of 180 days in membership. A day in membership is considered a day when not less than 70% of the total number of pupils are in attendance at school.  

In Michigan, public schools are required to provide membership data to the State Department of Education for the express purpose of establishing eligibility for State Aid. "For the purpose of enforcing school attendance, the board of education of a school district may provide for the taking of a school census. The State Department of Education shall develop guidelines which a school district may use in conducting the census."  

This attendance and membership information is usually computed under the following guidelines as provided for in General School Laws of Michigan 380.1541. "Pupil membership shall be determined on the count day on the fourth Friday following Labor Day, except the pupil membership in special education programs shall be determined on the December 15 count day."  

Under certain conditions students may not be eligible to be included in the school count. This results in lost state revenue for the school district.

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33 ibid
34 General School Laws, p.148.
35 ibid.
Conditions which can cause a pupil not to be counted in membership count dates are:

1. Absences for 10 consecutive school days for a reason unknown to school authorities (A student whose absence for illness or other reason is excused by the school district may be counted.)

2. Absences for 30 consecutive school days for a known reason such as illness or travel.

3. Enrollment in the intermediate district trainable mentally handicapped program.

4. Residents in a school district located in another state.\(^{36}\)

As noted from the previous statements, when students do not attend school, they not only suffer the loss of education, but the school district can also suffer lost revenue from state funds.

It is easily seen that the attendance policy should have some definite guidelines and provide that students will not be absent unnecessarily. In addition, the policy should offer some type of encouragement so that the student will feel obligated to be present in school.

Intermediate School District

Most intermediate school Districts (ISD) become involved in school attendance in both student audits

\(^{36}\)State of Michigan, Department of Education, "Student Accounting Audit Intermediate School District Audit(s)," June 1978, p.2

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and in enforcing attendance. They monitor the local school district to make sure it complies with state regulations. Few guidelines are issued as to the exact manner in which this may be achieved. As an example, "Not less than 70% of membership must be in attendance to be counted as a day of instruction,"\(^{37}\) is a state regulation. Exactly how this is to be locally accomplished is not stated. If, however, this and other guidelines are not met and maintained, the school district is in danger of losing state aid funds. Other practices the intermediate school district monitors include: total days of instruction scheduled and operated in a school year, per cent of membership in attendance, required hours of instruction, and number of students enrolled in classes.

Some intermediate school districts offer suggestions which can be useful to a local school system in encouraging attendance. If the local school personnel have made every effort to deal with students with excessive absences, the student can be referred to the Intermediate School District. The ISD does maintain a school attendance officer to deal with excessive

\(^{37}\)ibid.
absenteeism. The office has the power to call on the Youth Service Bureau, which is an extension of the juvenile division of the probate court. Usually, the ISD attendance office would prefer not to be involved until a student has missed school 15% of the time.\(^3\) A letter addressing this matter constitutes Appendix E.

Few attendance cases referred to the Youth Services Bureau, ever reach the Probate Court. The St. Joseph County ISD attendance officer believes this is because the court's delay in hearing cases, and lack of serious punishment.\(^4\) A letter addressing this matter constitutes Appendix F.

Since the attendance office at the ISD has limited powers in working with chronic school absentees, it is assumed that school administration will take action to solve the problem when it occurs. Several methods can be utilized by the school administrator, including contacting the parents, social workers, and the Department of Social Services or other agencies. Probably one of the best defenses against absenteeism is a strong attendance policy. With such a policy in


\(^4\)Darryl Lipps, (St. Joseph ISD Attendance Officer) personal letters.
place, the administrator has the support needed to help keep absenteeism at an acceptable level.

From the information gathered, data seemed to indicate that student absenteeism was a major concern of schools both locally and nationwide. Any problem of this magnitude has many facets and ramifications for which there are no simple solutions. Some ways and means for dealing with absenteeism are discussed in Chapter VII.
CHAPTER VII
COMBATTING ABSENTEEISM
A Complicated Problem

Increasing school absenteeism may become the foremost problem in secondary schools. High school absenteeism has been increasing in recent years, and it has become a matter that is of serious concern to many school administrators, teachers, parents, and communities.

In the 1973 and 1974 National Association of Secondary School Principals' annual poll of members on school organization and curriculum, the members rated poor attendance their number one problem.\footnote{Thompson, "Student Attendance and Absenteeism," p.1.} In fact, the general consensus among administrators is that attendance is one of the biggest problems facing schools today.

General indications are that the rising absence rate has placed an undue strain on the schools. Large amounts of time, money, and effort have been spent enforcing the compulsory attendance law. School administrators and their staffs have generally been

\footnote{Thompson, "Student Attendance and Absenteeism," p.1.}
only moderately effective in maintaining control of attendance and have been struggling to prevent a complete breakdown in the school regulated attendance structure. Most critics agree that so far present methods of control have only slowed the increasing rate of absenteeism. An urgent need for the continued collection and analysis of attendance data in secondary schools is evident. Until recently, little research was done dealing with school attendance. Even now only limited studies are available.

High schools of ten to fifteen years ago averaged a 4 to 5 per cent absence rate. Today it is not uncommon for the rate to exceed 10 per cent.

Most school health officials consider a normal absence rate to be from 7 to 9 school days per year or about 4 to 5 per cent. Yet absence rates of 10 to 15 per cent are not uncommon, with some urban schools reporting over a 30 per cent rate of absence. This high rate of absenteeism can produce adverse effects, including:

1. Lowering teacher effectiveness.

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42 Levanto, "The Problem of Attendance," p.3.
2. Lessening the effectiveness of the examination as a teaching tool, since results cannot be discussed until absentees have made up the tests.

3. Lowering student morale since many students receive the same number of credits for less time in class.

4. Increased teacher frustration because many types of classroom work such as lectures, films, panels, and class discussions cannot be made up.

5. Lowering educational standards as work required tends to be geared to rate of absenteeism.

6. Wasting valuable class time in traditional attendance practices which are not effective.\textsuperscript{43}

Irregular attendance has other effects. A pupil who returns after several days absence may find that the school work is harder and possibly frustrating. The results of such frustrations often lead to failure. This pattern, repeated too often, may lead the student to drop out of school as soon as s/he has passed the compulsory attendance age limit.

Absence causes problems, not only to the individual, but to the whole class of which the student is a member. The teacher sometimes gives more attention to the pupil who was absent. Consequently, s/he gives less attention to the whole group.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{43}Feist, "Napa", p. 41

\textsuperscript{44}loc. cit., p. 42.
A report published by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) indicates absenteeism in the school is a complex and continuing problem with personnel, institutional, economic, and social causes. Again, in 1978 the members of NASSP labeled attendance as their most troublesome day to day problem. When asked to identify major constraints of carrying out job responsibilities, principals placed student absenteeism at the top of the list.

Most studies indicate that considerable amounts of money, time, and effort are expended by high school staff and administrative personnel. Yet efforts are only marginally effective. The reasons for this are many: the problem is complex. No single action or policy can solve a problem with so many personal, family, community, and school factors.

The evidence available seems to indicate that the rate of absenteeism generally increases for the second semester. In addition, absenteeism appears to be more prevalent among boys, older students, one-parent families, prevalent among students with low personality ratings by teachers, and among those with

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45 Thompson, "Student Attendance and Absenteeism" p.1
low grades. Cohesive families, college preparatory programs, high grades, and extra-curricular activities correlate with better attendance.\textsuperscript{47}

There have been studies that suggest that absenteeism may be strongly affected by the achievement and success a child has in school. These studies also suggest that the child's absenteeism is related to his/her intelligence. Students with A's and B's have tended to be absent less frequently than have those with grades of C or lower.\textsuperscript{48} Since course materials are usually presented sequentially, with gain expected to be cumulative in nature, frequent absences lower probability of mastery of subject matter.\textsuperscript{49} What ever the reasons for poor school attendance, studies indicate that it often results in non-achievement of the objectives set by the school.

Frequent absences have come to be a reality in most schools. However, this condition does not seem to follow for adults in the work force. According to Bureau of Labor Statistics, adult absenteeism has changed little in the 20 years from 1956 to 1976. The average

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{47} Thompson "Student Attendances and Absenteeism" P.1.  
\textsuperscript{49} ibid
\end{footnotes}
worker missed only about nine days of work in 1976.\textsuperscript{50}
This would equal about 7 days when prorated for a nine month school year. This is fantastically low compared with the schools' absence rate. Why the striking difference?

While the working world has held a steady rate of absenteeism, the absence rate for schools has soared. In 1928, illness caused 63 per cent of the schools' absences. In 1939, 50 per cent of the schools' absences were generally attributed to illness. Today, however, the majority of absences are likely to be for personal convenience, recreation, or reasons other than illness. Certainly an objective, then, for any attendance policy is to reduce the level of the absenteeism which is not related to illness or severe family problems.

It would seem realistic to expect an average absence rate of 4 per cent, which is 7 days per year for the student with average health and only 3 or 4 days per year for the healthy student. An annual absentee rate of more than 10 days would then be considered excessive for most students. The real problem is how to go about achieving this level and controlling excessive absenteeism without expanding large amounts of time, money, or

energy.

Previously in this study, it has been noted that attendance does have a relationship to school achievement. A recent report by the Educational Research Service shows significant findings in this area. Among those findings, the most significant are:

Twelfth grade students with five or more unexcused absences per year, showed less growth in achievement on three standardized tests than did seniors with better attendance records.

The relationship between absenteeism and student achievement results, at least partially, from variations in the school's policy toward absenteeism.

Students' grades are related significantly to attendance, though residual gains were not associated with individual grade point averages and attendance.

Eleventh grade students with higher attendance, had more responsible attitude, enjoyment of school, and success in a school setting.\textsuperscript{51}

In addition to dealing with rising absenteeism and lower achievement, the school administrator must accommodate legislative and judicial restrictions and codes that increase the complexity of the attendance problem. The administrative Code of the State of Washington, for instance, states that "the reduction of a student's

grade on the basis of absence is clearly illegal."
WAC 180-40-235.52

Few states place specific restrictions on the school regarding the students' attendance. However, the legality of lowering student grades for poor attendance is still undetermined across the nation and is at best a questionable policy.

Withholding course credit for non-attendance is another matter, however. So far, a policy of withholding credit has not been successfully challenged in court. Such a policy, however, should include these elements:

1. A statement that adequate class attendance and participation is a requirement for course credit.

2. A statement defining the absentee rate considered as inadequate for credit.

3. Opportunity for due process, to include the right to appeal for excessive absences caused by mitigating circumstances.

In addition, the policy must be (a) adopted by the Board of Education and (b) widely distributed to parents, students, and teachers.

In today's legalistic workd, it also may prove helpful to include adequate attendance and good class participation as course objectives to be evaluated upon conclusion of the course.

No legal precedent exists indicating that a public school is obligated to grant credit to students who simply pass unit tests.53

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52Leonibus, "Absenteeism: The Perpetual Problem", p.3.
53ibid.
In today's world, the busy school administrator finds not only rising absenteeism and lower achievement levels because of it, but also legal issues which seem to complicate matters even more. It is no wonder s/he may be confused. The problems are evident, the solutions are complicated.

One of the reasons for this study was to provide some solutions for the absenteeism problem. Obviously, this is not a simple task. The absences that show in a school's daily attendance record are only the end result of a problem which may have many causes. An effective attendance policy may be but one way to influence to some extent what shows on the school's attendance record.

Evolving from this study are some concepts and ideas which stand out and need to be mentioned. These have been formulated into recommendations and will be discussed in the next section.

Recommendations

One of the basic reasons for an effective attendance policy is to decrease the absence rate, thereby enhancing educational experiences of students. Regular attendance should result in more opportunities for learning, since students will be in class to take advantage of them. More subject matter could be covered
in an average class because of a decrease in make up and review time for absent students. It appears that when student absenteeism is high, teachers become frustrated because of their inability to do an effective, efficient job of teaching.

The Napa study indicated that as attendance increased, teachers' morale increased, and frustration was minimized. Teachers began to feel that they were really being successful in providing a learning environment. Most teachers indicated a high correlation between the new attendance program and increased subject matter covered. \footnote{Feist, Napa, p.4.}

The New Jersey Commissioner of Education has made several comments relative to this issue.

"Frequent absences of pupils from regular classroom learning experiences disrupt the continuity of the instructional process. The benefit of regular classroom instruction is lost and cannot be entirely regained, even by extra after school instruction. Consequently, many pupils who miss school frequently experience great difficulty in achieving the maximum benefits of schooling. Indeed, many pupils in these circumstances are able to achieve only mediocre success in their academic programs. The school cannot teach pupils who are not present. The entire process of education requires a regular continuity of instruction, classroom participation, learning experiences, and study in order to reach the goal of maximum educational benefits.
for each individual child. The regular contact of the students with one another in the classroom and their participation in well-planned instructional activity under the tutelage of a competent teacher are vital to this purpose. This is the well-established principal of education which underlies and gives purpose to the requirement of compulsory schooling in this and every other state in the nation.55

A recent Gallup Poll of attitudes about public schools found that 86% of the citizens felt that parents should be held responsible for their children's attendance at school. While this may be an administrator's dream, the fact remains that if schools do not take the initiative on improving attendance, probably no one will.56

When little or nothing is done about attendance, the problem gets worse. Schools that seem to be improving their attendance records expend considerable thought and effort on solving the problem. The recommendations that follow for an attendance procedure have been developed with over a year of research and study and many hours of effort and thought.

1. The policy should clearly specify in writing attendance expectations and should delineate the outcome of regular and irregular attendance. Every student


56Leonibus, "Absenteeism: The Perpetual Problem" p.4
and parent should know exactly what is required for earning credit for a course of study.

2. The policy should be firm, fair, and consistently enforced. At each level of enforcement - teacher, counselor, assistant principal, or principal - compliance with policy should be expected.

3. Formulation of the attendance policy should have input and involvement from as many people as possible, including teachers, administrators, and students.

4. Follow-up on absences should be made by letter, telephone call to the home, or by some other means. Letters should be sent home at intervals as the student nears the maximum number of allowable days. The main concern should be to develop an effective reporting procedure to keep the home informed. The responsibility and burden for attendance should be shifted from school to the student and the home and parents. Studies have shown that a successful parent notification system can have a significant impact on reducing absence. The key seems to be early and continued communication.

5. A number of days should be set indicating the student’s absence limit. After this limit has been exceeded the student would forfeit credit. Data gathered in schools taking part in this study indicated twelve as both the mean and the median for the maximum allowable days.

6. The school's community should be informed about the policy. Copies of the attendance policy should be freely available. Of course, the school board should approve the policy. Each parent and student should be repeatedly informed of the attendance requirements.

7. A review board of some type should be established to make decisions relating to any individual who may request an attendance hearing because of extreme conditions. The board may extend the absence limit, continue credit on a
probationary basis or take such action as it feels necessary. The majority of schools polled in this study used a committee made up of teachers and administrators for this procedure, although this was not universal. The main concern should be that due process be provided for any student who has exceeded the absence limit.

8. Provision should be made in the attendance policy to not count certain types of days toward the allowed maximum. Most certainly school sponsored and school related activities should not be included. Beyond this, the specific items included in this section will vary according to particular situations.

9. Absence days built into the attendance policy should not be considered as authorized days for absences but should be considered as provided for illnesses or emergencies. Though it might be thought that a policy that allowed a set number of days would tend to result in the student taking advantage of it, this author's investigations have proven the opposite. Administrators commenting on this issue indicated that students who would have ordinarily stayed home because of slight illness or other conditions now attend classes for fear of using too many of their allotted days. An interview with a high school principal brought out this point. He indicated, "Near the end of the semester there were students attending school who were slightly ill or who otherwise would not have attended classes."57 "Though some students and some parents feel students have these days coming, and use them irresponsibly, our tabulations indicate most feel otherwise."58

10. To help insure that students will not miss school unnecessarily, excused and unexcused

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absences should be a part of the policy. Exactly what would determine an excused or unexcused absence would be determined by the particular problem in any given school district.

11. There should be an alternative program planned for those students who remain the chronic absentees, i.e., establishment of counseling groups. Despite the most successful of policies or programs a few will continue to be absent excessively.

These recommendations are not meant to be conclusive. Other ideas could be incorporated into an attendance policy. An example would be curriculum improvements. Research shows lower rates of absenteeism for students attending a particular school for the special courses it offers. Other examples include special team teaching situations and homeroom plans. Community services and action learning programs have also shown success in decreasing absenteeism. All of these have appeared to have some influence on attendance.

Many variations as well as additions to the recommendations proposed are possible. However, the focus should be upon school-wide policies; not upon programs for special groups within the student body. There is evidence to show that other steps could be taken to increase attendance.

60 Leonibus, "Absenteeism: The Perpetual Problem", p.7
A variety of policies and procedures exists that may prove to be effective in dealing with the student attendance problem. Information gathered from this study, the school survey, together with research studies, support the author's belief that the recommendations itemized herein could be useful in the development of an effective process for the improvement of school attendance. The success of this or any other attendance procedure lies with its effectiveness in reducing the absenteeism rate in a school system. This author used the school system in which he was employed to test the recommendations listed in this study. The results are reported in the following section.

Adoption of the New Policy

It has been noted previously in this report that attendance is a problem almost every school faces. In early September, 1978, this author noticed excessive absenteeism at Burr Oak High School. Early estimates indicated that absences were above ten per cent of high school student enrollment. Complicating the attendance problem was a procedure allowing unlimited excused absences. Past practices dictated that students would be

\[61\text{ibid.}\]
given an excused absence for almost any parent verified absence.

Although the policy adopted by the Board of Education at the beginning of the year set criteria for excused absences, board members were unhappy with it, and felt strongly that every absence requested by the parents must be excused. That policy stated:

Excused absences -

Bring a note from your parents stating the dates and reason for absence. Bring it to the office before starting school in the morning. Excused absences will be granted for: injury, illness, illness in the home which requires the pupil's presence, or death in the family. Excuses must be received within two days after the student returns to school. The student will have as many days to make up missed assignments as he was absent. In the case of extended illness, the parent should contact the office before the student returns to school.

Pre-arranged absences will be excused providing an approved, completed advance permission form is turned in to the office from the parent at least one day prior to the anticipated absence. Pre-arranged absences will be excused if they are for: hunting, vacation, county fair attendance, doctor and dental appointments, and other reasons determined acceptable by the principal. Work should be completed in advance.

Unexcused absences are issued for all other types of absences not listed under excused or pre-arranged or if a note was not received within two days of the student's return to school. An unexcused absence will result in an "E" for the day, and work missed not allowed to be made up. More than seven days unexcused absences in one semester will result in loss of credit for that class.62

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Absenteeism was running high. Teachers and administrators were disturbed because of the excessive absences and the weak attendance policy.

At the Board of Education meeting September 20, 1978, the board members requested a study and suggestions for a possible revision of the present policy. Material was prepared, using the data obtained from the survey responses and the research findings of this report. A teacher's meeting was held to discuss possible attendance policies and to give interested teachers the opportunity to have input and voice their opinions. Board members were asked for their comments, and area principals were encouraged to express their views on attendance.

A policy was developed incorporating the comments and suggestions of persons listed above, and was consistent with findings of this study. The policy was presented at the October 18, 1978, Board of Education meeting and was accepted unanimously. A copy of the policy is provided in Appendix G.

Since the first six weeks grading period was almost completed, the policy became effective at the beginning of the second six weeks, prorating the maximum days allowed for absence for the semester. An attendance committee was established composed of four teachers and the principal, to hear student appeals for special
consideration. A teacher's meeting was held to explain and discuss the policy. A program was set with the school social worker to contact students who continued to have excessive absence problems.

Copies of the new policy were distributed to all teachers and students. The principal attended class meetings to explain and to emphasize the intent of the new policy.

Copies of a form letter were made available to teachers to use when the students reached established absence limits. Specific directions given to teachers regarding the letter may be found in Appendix H and the letter sent home to parents constitutes Appendix I.

At the end of the first six weeks, before the new attendance policy was put into effect, absenteeism was 10.2% of high school student enrollment. The new attendance policy became effective with the beginning of the second six weeks. At the end of that marking period absenteeism had dropped to 8.19%. At the end of the third six weeks, the absence rate was 5.79%, indicating a 43.2% decrease in absenteeism! No further data has been gathered, due to time deadlines for this writing. However, a letter of testimony from a teacher on the Attendance Board is included as Appendix J.
Concluding Comments

Clearly, the attendance policy implemented on October 23, 1978, succeeded in decreasing absenteeism. Burr Oak High School achieved a significant increase in attendance. This author believed it was due to the new attendance procedures that were instituted, as all other variables remained unchanged.

This author believes that his efforts to reduce absences focus on the symptoms of the problem and not on the problem itself. In this author's view, it is time to examine the total educational system to identify those practices that may contribute to the problem of increasing absenteeism. The question must be asked, "What can be done to develop better attendance habits?"

Hopefully, teachers will provide meaningful instruction in the classroom. Assuming that what takes place is an essential part of education, mandatory attendance limits can be imposed. The school board, administration, and teachers must take a definitive, strong position on the value of regular attendance. The school must feel an obligation to set minimum standards of attendance to obtain class credit and to keep parents informed of any student who is not meeting these standards. Once problems have been detected and desired directions affirmed, programs can be initiated to produce the desired results.
The attendance policy recommendations developed as a result of this study, certainly are not the "final word" on attendance. They constitute, however, one approach, an approach that has been derived from information gathered from Michigan schools, as well as from research findings from attendance studies conducted throughout the United States.

This study can provide administrators with information as to what several Michigan schools are doing about attendance. This information has been previously unavailable. There have been recommendations made to help formulate an effective attendance policy.

It must be emphasized that these suggestions and this policy do not claim to solve all attendance problems. This is only the beginning. Administrative actions, and policies and procedures cannot eliminate absenteeism. A strong stand on attendance will result only in partial success. The alternatives, however, are much less acceptable. The administrator must keep searching, trying new approaches, and working toward more efficient, effective attendance procedures. S/he may have to be satisfied with only small victories over a large problem.

Schools should no longer have to bear the burden of the blame for increasing absenteeism. Attendance is
and should be the responsibility of the parents and students. Those who advocate that learning should be fun or that innovation brings the students crashing through the doors are sadly mistaken. Serious and good education is plain hard work.  

Too much costly "administrative time" has been spent on attendance related matters in the past, time that could better serve to improve education for those who really want it. Schools have been expected to do too much, to carry too many burdens. It's time the school takes a stand toward those students who are absent excessively: "here's what we have to offer, here's what you have to do to get it."  

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64 Ibid.
ATTENDANCE

We believe that every pupil owes it to himself to spend every school day in school unless illness or an emergency condition existing in his home environment prevents him from attending. Each day of school missed by a pupil, whether justifiable or not, results in the creation of uncertainties and deficiencies of understanding in regard to the subject matter covered during his absence.

A matter that should not be overlooked by the student is that his daily contribution to class discussion and participation in class activities are essential factors in determining his grades. It should be obvious to all students that absences in themselves are determining factors in bringing about failing grades.

If you have been absent for any reason for any portion of a day, upon your return you must go directly to the office and fill out an absence slip. It is your responsibility to contact your teachers and make up all missed work.

Students who are in attendance in the morning must also be in attendance in the afternoon unless they have permission from the office to do otherwise. This permission, however, will be granted only by parental request or when a student becomes ill and it is apparent he must be allowed to go home.

If you plan to be absent from school on a particular day, you must clear this planned absence with the office. If the reason is a legitimate one, the office will sometimes approve of your planned absence and arrange for you to be given your assignments ahead of time.

We have tried to make it clear that this is a full time school. We want you to consider it as such. No school can be effective in its instruction of students when the students are not in regular attendance at that school.
APPENDIX B

Letter from

Bloomingdale Public Schools
Bloomingdale, Michigan

As part of the requirements for completion of my Specialist Degree in Educational Leadership at Western Michigan University, I am conducting a study of attendance policies in other schools. To complete this study I am in need of your assistance. Would you please send me a copy of the attendance policy used in your high school(s)? I would appreciate any comments and or suggestions you feel would be of help to me in my study.

Please do not feel a formal reply is necessary. You may use the back of this letter for any comments you wish to make. I have enclosed a self-addressed return envelope so that you can simply drop it in the REMC mail to me.

I have been asked upon completion of my project, to recommend a new attendance policy for Bloomingdale High School.

Please be assured that anything you care to say or send will be used and appreciated.

Sincerely,

Wally Brown
APPENDIX C

Letter from

Bloomingdale Public Schools
Bloomingdale, Michigan

May 31, 1978

Dear Superintendent

About May 8, 1978, you should have received a letter from me asking for your help. I'm conducting a study of attendance policies in area high schools, and am in need of current policies in use.

I would appreciate a copy of your high school attendance policy and any comments you may wish to make regarding it, as soon as possible.

No formal reply is necessary, and our school will be in session all next week if you care to send it via REMC mail in the enclosed envelope.

Your response is appreciated.

Thank you.

Wally Brown
### APPENDIX D

**Superintendents and Schools**

**Survey Sent 5/9/78**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who Received</th>
<th>Superintendent</th>
<th>School</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. Alfred Hawkins</td>
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<td>Decatur Public</td>
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<td>Mr. John Gunnell</td>
<td>Mattawan Public</td>
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<td>Mr. Walter Schwarz</td>
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<td>Mr. Fred Stap</td>
<td>Bangor Public Schools</td>
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<td>Mr. Guy Leversee</td>
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<td>Dr. Charles Williams</td>
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<td>Mr. William Barrett</td>
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<td>Mr. John Wager</td>
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<td>Mr. William Middleton</td>
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<td>Dr. Robert Tilmann</td>
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<td>Mr. Loren Warfield</td>
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<td>Dr. George Conti</td>
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<td>Dr. George Kingsmore</td>
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<td>Dr. Charles Townsend</td>
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<td>Mr. Thomas Ryan</td>
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<td>Dr. David Lechner</td>
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<td>Mr. Frederick Schmidt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. Burton Aldrich</td>
<td>St. Joseph Public</td>
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APPENDIX E

Memo from
St. Joseph County
Intermediate School District
Centreville, Michigan

Vol. IX, No. 8
September 15, 1975

To: Superintendents and Building Principals

FROM: James Clark, Intermediate Superintendent

SUBJECT: Referral of School Attendance Problems

It was recommended at the June Administrator's Association Meeting that Miss Susan Streubens, Director of the Youth Service Bureau, and Darryl Lipps, County School Attendance Officer, meet to develop procedures for referral of school attendance problems.

The results of their meeting are as follows:

1. Local school personnel are asked to identify as early as possible students with poor school attendance.

2. Local school personnel should make every effort to resolve their school attendance problems. This can include meeting with the student, contacts with the parents by telephone, letter and conferences. It can also include making referrals to other school personnel such as the school social worker or other agencies like the Mental Health Association.

3. If after these steps have been taken the student still is missing school 15% of the time with unexcused absences, please make a referral to the Youth Service Bureau and at the same time a referral to Darryl Lipps. The Youth Service Bureau will begin accepting referrals on October 6th. (Because of the way the Youth Service Bureau is funded students living in Cass County should be referred to the Cass Youth Service Bureau.)
Mr. Wally Brown  
Burr Oak High School  
326 Eagle  
Burr Oak, Michigan

Dear Wally:

Enclosed is the last official thing I have gotten out to principals regarding school attendance. The Youth Service Bureau is really an extension of the juvenile division of the probate court. Its job is to handle those cases not serious enough to be handled by the juvenile division of the probate court. I am pretty sure the worker who serves Burr Oak is Mrs. Pat Hicks. Unfortunately, the juvenile division of probate court will only rarely become involved with a case if the student is just truant from school, even if all other means have been attempted.

When Sue and I established the figure of 15% we both felt that this would be very liberal. We hoped that principals would take action themselves before this much school was missed, and involve us before this if they had made some efforts to remedy the student's poor attendance.

In addition to letters to parents, conferences with parents and students I try to work with school social workers. Department of Social Services personnel and any other agency that might have some leverage in working with the family of a school truant.

If parents are not willing to cooperate and as a last resort I have taken a number of parents to court through the prosecuting attorney's office (District Court). This action is not taken very often because it can take up to two months before the case is actually heard by the judge and in many cases the parents are given a mere "slap on the hand".

Sincerely,

Darryl Lipps
APPENDIX G

1978-79 ATTENDANCE POLICY

Effective: October 23, 1978

BURRE OAK PUBLIC SCHOOLS

To obtain an excused absence a note from the student's parents or guardian must be presented to the principal's office within two (2) days after the student returns to school. The note must contain dates and specific reasons for absence to be accepted. Excused absences will be granted for injury, illness, illness in the home which requires the pupil's presence, death in the family, approved pre-arranged absence, and other extenuating circumstances which are excused by the principal. The student will have as many days to make-up missed assignments as he was absent. In the case of extended illness, the parent should contact the office as soon as possible, and before the student returns to school.

Pre-arranged absences will be excused for those classes where the student's teacher has approved his absence. The completed advance permission form must be returned to the office prior to the absence. Pre-arranged absences may be used for hunting, vacation, fair, doctor and dental appointments, and emergencies as determined acceptable by the principal. Time missed should be limited to one week unless approved by the principal.

All other absences not listed as excused or pre-arranged or if a note was not received within two (2) days of the student's return to school, will be unexcused. An unexcused absence will result in a "0" for the day, and work missed not being able to be made up. More than seven (7) times unexcused per class, in one semester will result in loss of credit for that class.

A student will be granted twelve (12) total absences (excused and/or unexcused) per semester. Upon exceeding this amount, no credit will be given for that class. Absences due to school sponsored activities, or with a written doctor's excuse will not be counted.

Upon reaching or exceeding this amount, the student may file for a hearing before the attendance committee, with his parents, or request an extension on his allowed absence days. This appeal must be filed immediately.
APPENDIX H

Memo from:

BURR OAK PUBLIC SCHOOLS

October 23, 1978

To: High School Staff

From: W. Brown, Principal

Re: Attendance Procedure

Please fill out absence letters (in duplicate) to be sent home in the event of absence or unexcused absence. Send both copies to the office, we will send a copy home and keep the other on file. These are very valuable if the student loses credit, and files for an appeal. Please send these out for this semester when the student reaches 7, 10, 12 and upon exceeding 12 absences or as you feel necessary. Second semester starts January 31st. Students are allowed 12 total absences this semester and 7 unexcused absences. Please send letters home at 5, 7 and over 7 unexcused absences, or as you feel necessary.
APPENDIX I

BURR OAK HIGH SCHOOL

Notification of Class Absence

Date__________

Student_______________________Class___________________

According to school attendance policy, which became effective October 23, 1978:

More than seven (7) times unexcused absence per class, in one semester will result in loss of credit for that class.

A student will be granted eight (8) total absences (excused or unexcused) for 2nd and 3rd six weeks, and twelve (12) total absences (excused or unexcused) for the 4th, 5th, and 6th six weeks. Upon exceeding this amount, no credit will be given for that class. Absences due to school sponsored activities, or with a written doctor's excuse, when submitted to the high school office, will not be counted.

Upon reaching or exceeding this amount, the student may file for a hearing before the attendance committee, with his parents, or request an extension on his allowed absence days. This appeal must be filed immediately.

According to my class records your son/daughter has:

___ number of unexcused absences
___ number of total absences

Please be advised that the above policy may have an effect on your son's/daughter's credit in my class.

Teacher_______________________Class Hour___________
Memo from Dave West

June 9, 1979

To: Mr. Wally Brown
From: Dave West
Subject: Absence Policy

Dear Mr. Brown:

I am writing this in response to your request for a written statement of my feelings concerning the current attendance policy here at Burr Oak.

I feel strongly that the attendance policy put into effect last fall has had very positive results in bringing our attendance into line with what I consider more acceptable levels of absenteeism.

In talking with students I have noted that they are very much aware of the limits placed on the number of absences they may attain. They openly admitted that had the limits been higher or lower that that would be the number of absences they would obtain, no more, no less.

One student in particular comes to mind when I think about the good things that have occurred as a result of instituting this policy. This student had a high number of absences the first two marking periods and as a result he came within a few percentage points of failing both times. The next six weeks (immediately following the beginning of the new policy) he obtained a 93% in my class. I believe this resulted directly from the fact that he did not miss any days after he had reached the number specified in the policy. I think this illustrates quite clearly the very positive value of having a policy with a set number of absences allowed before credit is withheld.

Thank you for all your cooperation this past year. It has been my pleasure to work with you.

Sincerely,

/s/ Dave West
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