

Appendix 2

Case Study

Balbriggan Community College

Existing Attendance Monitoring Procedures

With Input from Consultation with Staff

Consultation for this case study was carried out with the school principal, the year heads, the school attendance officer, the attendance administrator, and the school secretary. The report looks at the current attendance monitoring systems, identifies weaknesses in the systems, and suggests how these can be modified or changed to improve the system.

Current Data Gathering Mechanism:

The current data gathering mechanism involves two swipe-in registrations and two manual registrations (periods 1 and 6)¹. Students swiping in are automatically marked **present** on the attendance administrator's system. Manual registrations are used to update and correct the data gathered by the swipe-in system. Consultation with staff regarding the registration system suggests:

- The swipe-in system is considered ineffective and requires too much manual checking and follow-up. Because of the manual checks required, the swipe-in system doesn't produce accurate reports early enough for effective follow-up with parents
- At times, up to 75% of students are consistently failing to swipe in. There are no incentives for students to use the system correctly and students, knowing the backup manual system is in place, may be depending on it to register their attendance. The swipe system is also open to abuse, with the suggestion that small numbers of students are swiping in for other, absent students, particularly in the afternoons
- Manual registration works reasonably well in the mornings, but less well in the afternoons, when there are fewer staff to manage it. Neither of the registration systems (swipe-in & manual) is effective for students on a reduced timetable², who may enter and leave the school at non-standard times
- Because students change option groups³ after period 1, it can be difficult to track down and check on individuals after period 2 begins. Changes to class groups – where a new student arrives in the school, where a student leaves, or where a student changes option choices – are not being communicated effectively either to the school secretary or to the attendance administrator, so that the accuracy of class group lists deteriorates over the academic year. Because afternoon manual registers are based on period 6 class group lists, this leads to some students' names not appearing on the correct manual register. It is possible that students could be marked absent even when they are at school, but no longer in the class for which their names appear on the register.

Late Students:

While it is in the interest of the school to track students who are consistently late, there is a danger that some of these students, by not swiping in and by missing registration periods, are being marked as absent

Currently, students arriving into the school after period 1 has begun are required to go to the attendance administrator's office, where their details are updated to the system. The attendance administrator provides a stamped notification (late note) for each student to take to their teacher, showing that they have reported to the office. Not all students are following this procedure; it is possible that some students simply wait for the end of period 1 and then go into their period 2 classes

Absence Follow-Up:

There are two elements to absence follow-up: contacting parents to inform them that their child is absent, and follow-up with the student on their return to collect a note and enter a reason for absence into the system.

The experience of projects run in schools with School Completion Programmes shows that *prompt* and *consistent* follow-up to student absence is the most effective way to improve overall attendance. Such follow-up, however, requires an effective data gathering mechanism to ensure that information about absence passed on to parents is accurate. Follow-up at Balbriggan Community College is difficult because:

- The data gathering mechanisms do not produce timely reports that allow immediate follow-up
- Significant time is spent each day trying to improve the accuracy of the data

¹ First period in the morning, and first period in the afternoon

² Students who, for one reason or another, attend school for only part of the week or for specified classes

³ Move from their form group into one of several class groups

- Even with this, accuracy cannot be guaranteed, as students can still “slip through” the system
- The resources and mechanisms to manage consistent follow-up are not in place.

Direct Follow-Up with Parents:

Consultation with staff on the subject of follow-up brought up the following points:

- In general, the parents of a child marked absent on any particular day are not contacted by the school. Some year heads make a point of contacting the parents of students who have returned from periods of absence without bringing a note, but this does not appear to be consistent across all years
- There was general agreement that neither the year heads nor the attendance officer has sufficient time or resources to follow up on every absent child on a day-to-day basis. There also appears to be no clear delineation between the responsibilities of the attendance officer and the year heads in regard to follow-up
- Because of time constraints, most people felt that a text-based system would be the most effective for contacting parents on a day-to-day basis, and at least one person is using this facility from the Anseo system. Several people said they found the phone less effective, both because of the time it takes to call parents individually, and of the fact that some parents appear to ignore calls that they recognise as coming from the school. Most staff members appear to use letters for contacting parents in specific situations, but feel these are too time consuming for day-to-day use

When asked what extra resources would be needed to improve follow-up with parents, the following was suggested:

- The guidance service could be extended – currently the guidance counsellor covers all guidance and counselling needs. A second counsellor, with a remit to deal with following up on absent students, was suggested.
- A home-school liaison person would make a significant difference, especially in following up with parents who do not engage with teachers / respond to letters. This would take pressure off the year heads, and would make it more likely that attendance problems could be “nipped in the bud”

Absence Notes:

Absence notes are important because they tell the attendance administrator the reason for the absence, which is reflected in the reports the school send to NEWB. Consistent failure to bring in a note following absence can also be an indicator of home / parental issues that may be affecting a child’s attendance pattern. Consultation with staff on how absence notes are handled raised the following points:

There is a procedure for dealing with notes:

- The student, returning from a period of absence, brings in either a journal note or a separate note and shows it to either their year head or their class tutor
- The year head or class tutor signs the note and the student then brings it to the attendance administrator, who enters the reason for absence on the system
- Journal notes⁴ remain in the student’s journal; separate notes are collected and kept by the attendance administrator, but are not filed by student name

In some cases, the standard procedure is not followed:

- Students sometimes just show notes to the teacher and go no further with them; as the notes do not reach the attendance administrator, the student’s period of absence is marked as unexplained
- Year heads / class tutors have to be aware of who was absent on previous days in order to follow up on notes; because of time pressures, this follow-up is sometimes inadequate
- It was suggested that there should be more pages in the journal for parent notes.
- It was noted that class tutors have no allocated time to check and follow up on notes

Other Aspects of Follow-Up:

- Letters to parents in relation to attendance all come out of the attendance administrator’s office, unless a year head makes a specific request to the school secretary
- Most year heads have standard letters on the school secretary’s system that they use to contact parents
- Bulk letters go from the attendance administrator’s system
- It would be useful to have access to standardised letters that could be mail-merged to the database for contacting parents
- Phone calls from parents – e.g. to explain that a child is sick – often come in to the school secretary, and she passes them on to the relevant year head. This is currently done informally, and a standardised procedure for ensuring these details are communicated both to the year head and to the attendance administrator would be useful

⁴ Notes written by parents using the designated pages in the student’s school journal

Changes to Class Groups:

A class group is the list of students assigned to a particular room at a particular time to learn a given subject. For some core subjects, the class group will be the same as the form group (where students are in their form class); for option subjects, the class group will be made up of students from different form groups. The details of class groups are maintained on the school secretary's system in the Facility CMIS program. Class group details need to be kept up to date because:

- They allow a given student to be located for any period of any day (e.g. to check attendance, or follow up on notes)
- They are the source of the student lists used to compile manual registers; inaccurate registers are frustrating for teachers and increase the chance that a student will be marked absent if their name is missing from the register, or if their name appears on the register but they are actually in a different class

Currently, there are no firm procedures in place to ensure that Facility is updated with changes to class groups. Class groups can change where:

- A new student joins the school after the first term begins
- A student leaves the school after the first term begins
- A student changes his / her option subjects mid-year

Class groups might also change during the year for students on a reduced timetable. Consultation with staff indicated that:

- For students joining the school mid-year, an enrolment form is filled out and the details (options, etc.) handled by the relevant year head. There is no formal procedure for ensuring that the enrolment details are returned to the school secretary to be updated to the system
- Students who drop out of school remain, by law, on the student register; Facility CMIS has an option to mark these students as non-attending
- When a student changes their options, this is arranged by the year head and the relevant teachers. No formal procedure exists for the information to be carried back to the school secretary (who would need to update Facility) and the attendance administrator (who would need to update Anseo, or pull updated data down from Facility), and it is generally communicated to them verbally on an ad hoc basis. Some staff suggested that a standard template to cover such changes would be useful

It was also noted that:

- A form exists to catalogue option changes for first year students only (students are more likely to change options in first year)
- There's no official channel of communication regarding changes to options between the school secretary and the attendance administrator; ideally their two systems should be kept in line

Frustrating Factors:

The consultation procedure brought up a number of issues that cause frustration to teachers:

- Some teachers have their own registers for all their classes, so they have to do a double register when completing the official registers (periods 1 and 6); it would be useful if a system existed that allowed only absent students to be marked
- Students who have left (approximately 30) remain on the system and keep on coming up as absent on the lists the attendance administrator prints for the attendance officer and the year heads. It would be useful to have a system to deal with these so that they do not appear as absent on every day's list
- There was a general feeling that staff members do not have the time and resources to do all the work they would ideally need to do to manage and follow-up on attendance / absence. In the words of one teacher: "there isn't enough time available to make a real difference, and recent years have seen a major negative change in the attitudes of parents towards school attendance"