

Appendix 3

Balbriggan Community College

Effective Attendance Monitoring

Comments and Recommendations

An effective attendance monitoring system in any school requires:

- Data gathering mechanisms that can return accurate data within an hour of the start of the school day
- Consistently applied policies and procedures to support attendance monitoring

Of these, it is the policies and procedures that have the greatest impact on the efficacy of the system; no matter how good the data gathering mechanism, *it will fail if policies and procedures are not developed and fully implemented to support it.* Given this, the following might be considered to be the characteristics of an effective system:

- A data gathering mechanism that can be used to accurately register attending students
- A system to capture and register late students
- A mechanism that produces timely lists of absent students, preferably before the end of period 1
- A straightforward mechanism for contacting parents of absent students
- A mechanism for flagging absent students to be followed up for notes / reasons for their absence
- Procedures to ensure notes / reasons for absence are communicated to the person responsible for managing the registration system
- Procedures to ensure changes to class groups (newly enrolled students & students changing options) are updated to the registration system in a timely fashion

Data Gathering Mechanisms:

Both Anseo from Ivertec and the attendance functions of Facility are capable of handling registration *if adequately supported by policies and procedures*, and both systems are already in place within the school. Comparing the two systems:

Anseo from Ivertec	Facility from CCM Software
Data is automatically entered to the system when the student swipes in	Data can be entered quickly (OMR) based on manual registers completed by teachers
Databases students who are marked present; all other students are considered absent	Databases students who are marked absent; all other students are considered present
The attendance administrator is already very familiar with the system	The attendance administrator would need training to use the system
The system can provide reports in NEWB format	A module is available to provide reports in NEWB format (cost approx. €650.00)
The system has an SMS (text) function	The system does not have SMS option, but this is expected to be available by the end of the year
Relies on the students for data entry. Needs very robust policies to ensure student compliance	Relies on teacher-led registration. Needs consistent policies to ensure ongoing accuracy
May require extra checks to correct for students who did not swipe in	Does not require second, backup registration

Anseo can send bulk SMS messages to parents to alert them that their children have not registered in school on a particular day; this is the preferred approach to contacting parents, and does not require major manpower. However, because it relies completely on the students to register their own attendance without any co-ordination from school staff, robust policies would need to be in place to ensure student compliance with the system. Even with these, backup manual registration might still be required to correct for student failure to register on an ongoing basis. Backup registration, currently used in the school, delays the production of a final list of attending / absent students. It is also likely that students, knowing they will be picked up by the manual system, may be less likely to register with swipe cards; thus the checks used to correct the data may themselves contribute to non-compliance.

Facility, when combined with OMR (optical mark reader) technology, can quickly access data directly from the manual register. If the registers are returned in a timely fashion (policy issue), it is feasible that the data could be available before the end of period 1. Facility doesn't currently have a mechanism for bulk text messaging, and so all follow-up with parents would need to be done by phone. Developers CCM Software, however, anticipate that an SMS add-on will be available

before the end of 2006, though probably not in time for the start of the academic year in September. The cost of the SMS module is not known at this time.

Policy and Procedure Recommendations:

As stated, the level of effectiveness of either of the registration systems will depend, to a large degree, on the supporting policies and procedures within the school. Policies and procedures will be slightly different depending on the system adopted, but will nevertheless need to be enacted and carried out consistently in order to ensure effective attendance monitoring. The important policy and procedure points for Balbriggan Community College are listed below:

1. Explicitly recognise the joint responsibility (school and parents) for ensuring that students attend school. At present the school takes on all the responsibility for monitoring attendance, with checks eating up manpower that could be used more effectively in follow-up work
 - Alert parents, before the beginning of the next school year, of a school policy of recognising students who are registered on a particular day as being present, while unregistered students will be considered absent
 - Ensure that students understand that they have a responsibility to ensure that they are registered on a particular day, and provide them with consistent mechanisms for doing this (under whichever registration system is used)
 - Alert parents that, where a student is being kept home, the parent should telephone the school on a *designated number* before the end of period 1 in order to ensure that they are not contacted by the school. Ensure that absences reported by phone are either directed to the attendance administrator, or are communicated to her under a set procedure before bulk mails are sent
2. Assign the first 5 minutes of periods 1 and 6 to registration. Students are already in their form groups for period 1. While it would be disruptive to gather them into their form groups for period 6, there is no reason why they can't be registered in their period 6 option groups, providing the registers for this period are accurate
 - Get staff agreement for the registration times, explaining how the system will improve the school's ability to monitor and deal with attendance and absence issues. Put a monitoring procedure in place to ensure that teachers return completed registration forms to the attendance administrator by about 9:30am. Implement a consistent (weekly) policy of approaching teachers who do not return registers on time
 - Either arrange that a staff member collect the completed registers at a given time, or arrange a consistent procedure whereby a student returns the registers to the attendance administrator's office
3. Clarify and consistently implement a policy whereby late students are captured by an auxiliary registration procedure before entering the classroom. This will, of course, need to take account of available resources. Some options that might be considered:
 - Have late students enter the school through a designated door. Place a staff member at this door to auxiliary register late students and issue them with late notices to take to their class teachers

or

 - Have late students report directly to the attendance administrator to auxiliary register their attendance and to collect a late note (a stamped document from the attendance administrator confirming that the late student has been registered on the system)
 - Ensure teachers are aware that any late student not producing a late note is likely to be unregistered, and have them send the students to the attendance administrator for auxiliary registration
4. Consistently contact the parents of students who have not registered on the system, and who have not already been in contact with the school by the end of period 1
 - Contact may be by text or telephone call; while text is preferred because it is quicker, some telephone calls will need to be made (some parents will not have mobile phones; mobile numbers sometimes change, etc.)
 - Consistent parental contact will act as the incentive for students to co-operate with the registration systems of the school; it is anticipated that students who have skipped registration will, over a relatively short period of time, feel a degree of parental pressure to co-operate with registration
 - A designated person or persons should be assigned to carry out parental contact, and the contact itself should be done in a consistent and sensitive manner, in the hope of maintaining and improving engagement by the parents with the school
 - It is conceivable that attendance will improve as a result of full implementation of the system, which will in itself reduce the workload of attendance monitoring and follow-up. Where resources are available, the school might continue with consistent parental contact even after attendance has improved. Where resources are stretched, it may be feasible to have gaps in the full implementation of parental contact – e.g. run it consistently for two months at the beginning of the academic year, and for a period of weeks again following mid-term and Christmas breaks
5. Change the system for collecting notes from returning students, with priority given to ensuring that the notes reach the attendance administrator

- Alert all parents that explanatory notes will be expected for all students following a period of absence; explain the terms of the Education Welfare Act in this regard, and how unexplained absences are more likely to attract the interest of the NEWB
 - At the beginning of each day, prepare a list of students who were absent the previous day; this will act as a key list for students returning notes
 - Implement a policy whereby all students bring explanatory notes directly to the attendance administrator, and not to their class tutor or year head. Have the attendance administrator collect and file the note, and provide the student with a stamped notification to take to their year head
 - Given the number of students attending the school, it might not be feasible to file explanatory notes by student name (which would be the ideal filing solution, especially for providing data to the NEWB). A second-best alternative would be to file notes consistently by date
 - Assign staff to follow up on students who have registered as returning from absence, but who have not provided a note; carry out this follow-up on the morning of the return, if possible
6. Implement procedures to ensure that changes to class options / groups are communicated to the school secretary and updated to the administration (Facility) system as a matter of priority. Possible procedures include:
- For mid year incoming students: clarify the steps involved in enrolling a new student and create a form that allows these steps to be ticked off. When all steps have been completed, including enrolment data entered on the system, have the form signed off by the year head and the principal. This should be completed before the student starts attending the school
 - For students leaving mid year: clarify the circumstances under which a student is seen to be no longer attending (number of consecutive days missed, contact from parents, known to be in another school, etc.), and the checks that the school carries out to verify this. Create a form to track the school's interventions with such students, with a section where relevant staff (e.g. attendance officer / year head and principal) sign off on a student to confirm their non-attending status, and pass on to the school secretary to update the system
 - For students changing options: create a form to catalogue option changes and to show the date from which changes take effect. The form should be signed off by the year head and principal and a copy forwarded to the school secretary in advance of the change, to ensure that Facility registers are updated. If using Anseo, include a procedure to forward a copy of the form to the attendance administrator so she can update her system.
7. Clarify and clearly separate the roles of staff involved in attendance monitoring to ensure that:
- All staff are clear about their responsibilities in regard to attendance monitoring
 - There is little or no direct overlap in responsibilities
 - There are no gaps – areas not particularly assigned to anyone, but which everyone assumes will be handled by someone else

Some of the responsibilities that may need to be clearly assigned are listed below. Clear procedures may need to be drawn up and agreed for some of these.

- Distributing registers to classes (morning / afternoon)
- Collecting registers / returning registers to the attendance administrator's office (morning / afternoon)
- Inputting / updating of day-to-day attendance data to the system
- Auxiliary registration of late students
- Issuing of late notes / confirmations of auxiliary registration
- Outputting of daily absence lists
- Collection and filing of explanatory notes, and updating reasons for absence to the system
- Following up with students who return without explanatory notes
- Day-to-day notification of parents of absent students (text / telephone)
- Longer-term notifications to parents (e.g. when students reach absence milestones – 5, 10 days, etc.)
- Taking telephone calls to explain absence
- Taking telephone calls in response to school notification of absence
- Outputting of absence reports for year heads, etc.
- Monitoring staff compliance with manual registrations; follow-up with non-complying staff
- Coverage for absent staff (re: attendance monitoring)