

Guidance Document

Attendance Study

Local District Attendance Policies

WINTER 2024

Purpose

A primary purpose of this study was to learn more about local district's attendance policies and tracking procedures. The findings in this guidance document present information on local districts' definitions and policies on excused and unexcused student absences and demonstrate the variations that exist across school districts.

State Guidance

Ohio Administrative Code 3302 Chapter 69 outlines regulations and conditions governing the issuance of excuses for school absences. For an absence to be excused, a parent or legal guardian must provide an explanation for the absence. The following conditions may warrant an excuse of absence from school:

- illness of the child;
- illness in the family where the presence of the child is necessary;
- quarantine in the home;
- death of a relative limited to a period of 18 school hours;
- medical appointments;
- observance of religious holidays;
- a college visitation;
- military pre-enlistment duties;
- placement in foster care or court proceedings related to this placement;
- homelessness; and
- family military deployment activities.

Additionally, an absence may be approved in an emergency or other circumstance that the school superintendent constitutes as good and sufficient cause for absence. The approving authority may or

Research Notes

Methods

This mixed methods study utilized quantitative and qualitative data sources. Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze survey data, EMIS records and local districts daily attendance patterns. Content analyses were conducted on open ended survey responses.

Data Sources

- Ohio Attendance Survey (2023)
- EMIS
- Local District Attendance Data

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may not request additional documentation like a doctor's note or verification of the date and time reported at a visitation or obligation.

Based on this guidance, local districts establish their own policies dictating what constitutes an excused absence in their school and what documentation is required. Local districts also establish thresholds for how many absences can be considered excused with or without documentation in a school year.

Major Findings

Local District Policies: Medically Excused Absences

Survey respondents (n=134) were asked how their district or community school defines a medically excused absence. The open-ended survey results found that most districts require a note from a medical provider for an absence to be considered medically excused. Some districts or community schools allow an absence to be documented as medically excused if a parent calls in and states student illness as the reason for the absence. Analyses revealed widely varying thresholds for absences to be considered excused without medical documentation:

“A medical excuse for personal illness will be accepted in the form of doctor’s note within five (5) school days of the absence or parent call-in on the day of the absence due to illness or doctor’s visit. A student may have up to nine (9) medically excused absences without a doctor’s note, but with a phone call from a parent or guardian;”

“Each student has six call-in’s by a parent each semester. Once the sixth call-in has been used they are required to provide a medical excuse. All medical absences are required to have a medical excuse from a physician; or documentation from the school nurse;”

Definitions of “medical provider” also varied, with some explicitly stating it includes visits to mental health professionals.

Local District Policies: Pre-Planned Multi-Day Absences

Survey respondents (n=135) were asked if their district or community school has a policy for pre-planned or multi-day absences. 85% of respondents indicated that they have such policy. Of these respondents, over 1/3 indicated advanced notice is required for the pre-planned multi-day absences to be considered excused. Most pre-planned multi-day absences are for vacations. Analyses revealed widely varying local policies on whether vacations are considered excused or unexcused absences:

“Families are allowed to request 15 days for extended vacations. We have a large number of families that travel overseas to visit family.”

“The board does not believe that students should be excused from school for vacations or other nonemergency trips.”

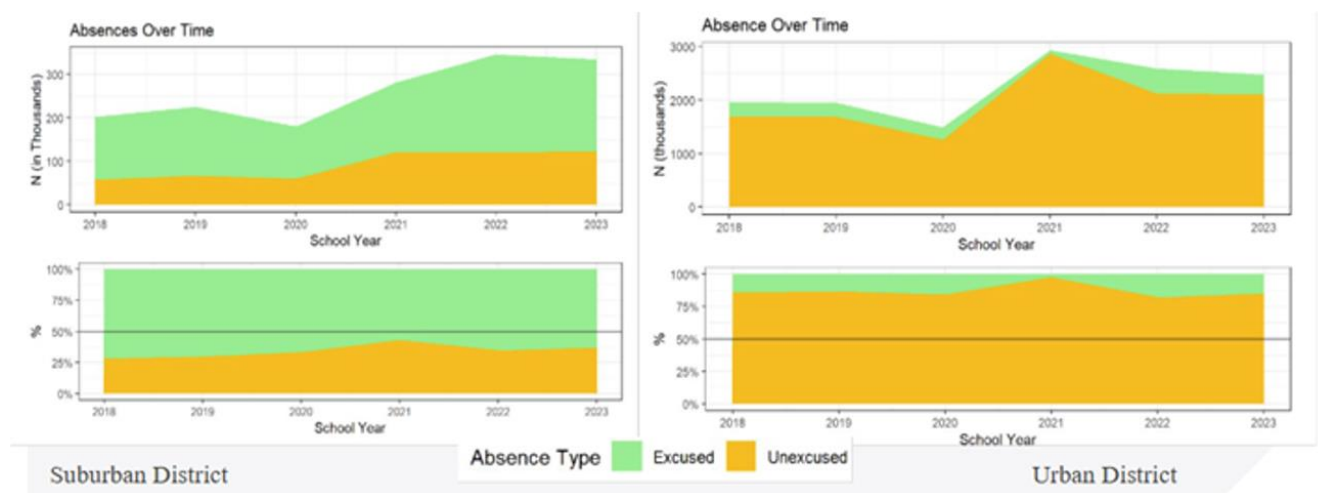
Some districts count vacation as excused if the trip has an educational focus, whereas others count it as excused provided the student has not been excessively absent:

“Up to five days will be excused but students cannot have more than 65 hours absent to qualify. Any time requested after 65 hours will not be approved.”

Local Districts Excused and Unexcused Absences

The number of reported excused or unexcused absences is the product of a district’s policy and tracking procedures. Using the daily student attendance records provided by partnering school districts, analyses show how these variations in school policies impact recorded excused and unexcused student absences. A suburban district (the two visualizations on the left) indicated that they accept a parent’s note for medically excused absences 6 times per school year before requiring a doctor’s note. The urban district (the two visualizations on the right), however, defaulted to counting all absences as unexcused unless the student brings appropriate documentation.

Figure 1. Excused and Unexcused Absences Over Time



Policy and Practice Considerations

A key finding of this study is that while state law provides clear guidance on what counts as an excused or unexcused absence, the local interpretation and implementation of the law leads to wide variation in rates of excused and unexcused absences. Unexcused absences are a measure of consequence, as the accumulation of unexcused absences over a month or year trigger consequences for the students, families, and school personnel. Districts with more stringent interpretations of what counts as an excused absence, and districts that default to unexcused absences (and perhaps lack capacity to follow up and determine if the absence could in fact be excused), are more likely to be compelled to implement the required responses to excessively absent students, including the development and implementation of an absence intervention plan, which may involve family and community referrals.

A potential strategy to address this discrepancy could include greater standardization of how excused and unexcused absences are defined and operationalized. Challenges to implementing greater standardization would include local resistance to changing locally determined norms and policies, and potential administrative burdens in accurately gathering documentation to make determinations of excused/unexcused absences in a timely manner.