



WDLC BRIEF

Online Attendance

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Introduction

The current report is focused on attendance in online courses and programs. Attendance aligned to seat time is a construct that has existed since the Industrial Revolution yet remains commonplace in state policy. In both brick-and-mortar and online schools, attendance is easy to determine: the student is either physically/virtually present or not. In either case, it is easy to gauge presence — in face-to-face through their physical presence, and in online through their presence via login and activity reports. The challenge for both environments is how to get students to be present when there are chronic absences. Teachers and student support personnel attempt to reach out and feel helpless when students are not answering course messages, emails, text messages or phone calls, and the situation worsens when the student's parents are also not responding. Despite these difficulties, online programs, as is the case in traditional programs, are required to make sure that students are doing their work in their online courses.

Thus, online programs have been redefining what online attendance means in this different context. Re-defining attendance for online programs involves making sure that “students are attending to lessons, progressing in their learning, and benefitting from instruction” (Archambault, Kennedy, & Bender, 2013). In the field of online learning specifically, many question how and if attendance really gets at learning. In face-to-face, taking attendance means a student saying “here” whereas in online learning programs, the student is often asked to prove they are “working.” Just because a student is present doesn't always mean they are actively engaged, which could

About These Reports

As the field of K–12 online and blended learning continues to evolve, programs around the world work together to discover what fits and what doesn't when it comes to the intricate pieces of the puzzle that make up a school/program. No stranger to this evolution, the Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative — consisting of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Wisconsin Virtual School, and the Wisconsin eSchool Network - is working on a collection of topic-based case study reports to share a variety of approaches the programs in their network take to put the puzzle together. The reports are not prescriptive, but intended to stimulate leaders to be purposeful and thoughtful about solutions which will differ based on program structure, student demographics, staff vision, and stakeholder needs. Each report presents associated key questions; taken together, these questions may provide a framework for thinking through these topics and making similar programmatic improvements in processes and services.

**This report was written through a partnership with Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute, the research arm of Michigan Virtual.*

Citation

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be said for learning in face-to-face schools as well. A student's presence in online learning truly depends on what engagement structures are in place within an online learning program, which will be discussed in subsequent sections of this report. With concepts like mastery, competency-based, and proficiency, some of the ambiguity of attendance tied to seat time is going away.

It is important to note that Wisconsin Virtual Charter Schools do have statutory guidance surrounding attendance and open enrollment (Wis. Stats. § 118.15, 118.40)¹. As provided from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) truancy, failure to participate (virtual charter schools) and expulsion can limit a pupil's ability to open enroll and may even result in termination of the pupil's open enrollment. The following section provides more specifics about this statutory guidance.

There is still work to be done to provide even more clarity and guidelines as to how to measure attendance in a more meaningful way when it comes to online, blended, and other emerging models, especially when an online program is not a virtual charter school. The remainder of this report is a summary of survey data gathered from Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative members to understand how they think about, implement, and track online attendance in their programs/schools. The survey results are shared below to help other programs better understand what key questions, considerations, and practices they may want to consider to best meet the needs of online learners when it comes to online attendance. Twelve out of a possible 28 programs responded to the survey.

Online Attendance in Wisconsin Online Programs

Online Attendance Policy

One of the program recommendations shared by respondents is the establishment of a formal attendance policy. Out of those who responded, 58% reported having a clear and established online attendance policy. In addition to the 58%, Dawn Nordine, Executive Director of Wisconsin Virtual School shared that their program, which offers supplemental online learning, has a "drop/engagement" policy that is "based on

Whenever a pupil attending a virtual charter school fails to respond appropriately to a school assignment or directive from instructional staff within five school days, the virtual charter school must notify the pupil's parent or legal guardian.

The third time in the same semester that a pupil fails to respond appropriately to a school assignment or directive from instructional staff within five school days, the virtual charter school must also notify the nonresident district, the pupil's resident district, and the Wisconsin DPI. The nonresident district may terminate the pupil's open enrollment.

If the pupil's parent notifies the virtual charter school in writing before the assignment or directive is due that the pupil will not be available to respond to the assignment or directive during a specified period, not to exceed a total of 10 days during a school year, the school days during that period do not count against the five school days. The pupil must complete any assignments missed during that period.

Wisconsin DPI –
Failure to Participate

¹ Wisconsin DPI. Habitual Truancy, Failure to Participate (Virtual Charter Schools) and Expulsion. <https://dpi.wi.gov/open-enrollment/resources/truancy>

progress we share with schools and provide our teachers as a baseline for engagement.” One of the programs communicates clearly within their policy what attendance means in their courses: “Attendance in online courses is performance-based. It is measured not only by logging on to the computer, but by successful assignment completion and submission, participation in course activities such as threaded discussions, and communication with the online teacher.”

Tracking Attendance

Online programs and schools tracked attendance in a variety of ways, including but not limited to the following:

- **Contact logs**
- **Pacing charts/
Adequate course progress**
- **Data analytics from Learning Management System (such as weekly progress reports)**
- **Attendance taken in live classes**
- **Assignment submissions**
- **Activity logs**
- **System log-in**
- **Weekly check-ins with parents/guardians**
- **Face-to-face attendance at school (supplemental programs)**
- **Time spent online**

Some attendance tracking processes varied based on grade and course content. For instance, elementary students in one program are measured by their pace in the course, whereas the high school students in the same program are required to attend live synchronous classes. Some programs require that students regularly attend live lessons, such as dual-credit and Advanced Placement. One respondent said, “We explain to students that they should expect to have about five active log in hours per week per class for a traditional four-month semester. This is covered in our orientations and contracts. If a student is able to stay caught-up with less hours, that is fine. Students need to find the balance of what the class needs.” Kim Gauen, Counselor at Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District’s (MCPASD) 21st Century eSchool explained, “We focus primarily on pacing when assessing attendance. As long as a student is keeping up with their due dates, we do not look at time or number of days logged in. If students are behind pace, then we consider time logged in.” Erik Hanson, Dean of Digital Learning at Appleton eSchool, shared, “We have been practicing weekly online attendance with the Maestro and now Genius attendance tool for over 10 years. It is important and plays a factor in student success (pacing and progress).”

Wisconsin Virtual School, a supplemental online program, does not take attendance, and instead, as Dawn Nordine, Executive Director of WVS explains, “They support the schools they serve to guide them around progress in the course as a method of attendance.” Similarly, another respondent said that attendance to them is more about “task completion.” For one of the schools who offers both fully online and supplemental online classes, they differentiate by having the teachers in the fully online program take attendance and then they designate the librarian as the attendance taker for the supplemental courses. For some programs without a policy, while they “believe it [attendance] is crucial to success... consequences are not in place as much as the program would prefer.”

Specifically, virtual charter schools in Wisconsin have a regulation focused on attendance called “Failure to Participate” as mentioned earlier. When asked how this played out in their program, most programs

shared that they have a specific policy that aligns with this regulation². One program shared that their “school week for full-time attendance is from Tuesday through Monday. Tuesday’s grade checks are done to see if full-time students were in attendance.” There are also programs that have a step policy, similar to a student agreement that requires the student to agree to prior to them taking the online course. There are also programs that send out correspondence to parents and guardians so that all stakeholders are clear about what their responsibilities are for the students’ attending to their online course work. Kim Gauen shared more information about how they use weekly progress reports to meet the “Failure to Participate” regulation:

We pull weekly progress reports. When a student starts to fall behind (at least four assignments) in their class(es), we contact the student about a plan to get caught up. If they do not follow that plan, we then reach out to both student and parent requesting they spend time in the building to get caught up. If that does not receive response and/or follow through, then we send letters requesting a meeting (until we reach the required three attempts, at which point we notify them they will be withdrawn from the program at the end of the semester).

We expect teachers to first enforce attendance by calling parents when students are not in attendance as expected. After three failures, we bring in a lead teacher to assist who then makes repeated attempts to get the student back in regular attendance, pace, etc. We will also consider implementing interventions and course modifications at this point, if deemed appropriate. Continued failure to attend goes to the Principal who calls the parents and issues a formal warning letter to parents and resident school district. Continued failures result in the student being remanded back to the resident school district by way of a final phone call and termination of enrollment letter.

– Anonymous survey respondent

Supports and Interventions

WDLC programs implement interventions to help truant students get back on track in their online courses. These interventions include but are not limited to the following:

- Establish and have students sign a Student Agreement that includes online attendance
- Set up 1-on-1 discussions with student
- Reach out to parent(s)/guardian(s) through letters, phone calls, emails
- Develop improved education plans
- Ask the student to develop a plan that will get them back on track
- Implement supervised working sessions
- Set up meetings for students with counselors and administration
- Invoke state-wide non-participation
- Invite students to a physical location in order to provide more support and structure
- Email progress reports to all stakeholders involved in supporting the student
- Involve district truancy (specifically for supplemental programs)
- Establish team of educators to help get the student back on track

2 Medford Area Public School District's Rural Virtual Academy. <https://www.medford.k12.wi.us/Policies/sectionrva/RVA-JE.pdf>

An added token of advice in the survey results was to keep documentation of all support and intervention attempts made by coaches, counselors, teachers, and administrators, so that there is a record for trying to help students who are not engaged. When multiple attempts at intervention and solution have been made, either the student needs to be withdrawn or, especially in the case of supplemental programs, the district or school-level administration are asked to get involved. The focus for all of the responses in the survey is about programs providing the student support to get back on track before penalizing the student in any way.

Fostering Innovation in Wisconsin Schools

Although published in 2017 the *Fostering Innovation in Wisconsin Schools*³ report provides guidance for districts to approach strategies to look *Beyond Credits and Seat Time and Toward Innovative Practices that Lead to College and Career Readiness*. As stated in the report, “Today’s era of increased expectations for what students need to know and be able to do to succeed after high school, students, parents, and educators in our state and around the country are working together to personalize learning and to expand the classroom beyond the four walls of the school building. While many states have enacted specific legislation related to high school credit and seat time flexibility, the flexibility for districts to pursue innovative approaches to high school graduation already exists throughout Wisconsin law.” Chapter two of this report provides initial guidance for schools and districts around flexibility within the credit and seat time requirements (i.e. attendance) that permit innovative practices including that of online learning programs. Some of the guidance associated with attendance is listed on the following page.

³ Fostering Innovation in Wisconsin Schools. <https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/cal/Fostering%20Innovation%20Credit%20Flexibility%202017.pdf>

We have found the most effective intervention is supporting students in the building at least once a week. We also require all full-time online students to meet with staff at the beginning of the year (or when they enroll) so they can meet the people who will be supporting them face-to-face and we can ensure they understand the basics of navigating the course. Students are more likely to respond to offers for help when they have a relationship with the people offering it.

– Kim Gauen, Counselor, MCPASD
21st Century eSchool

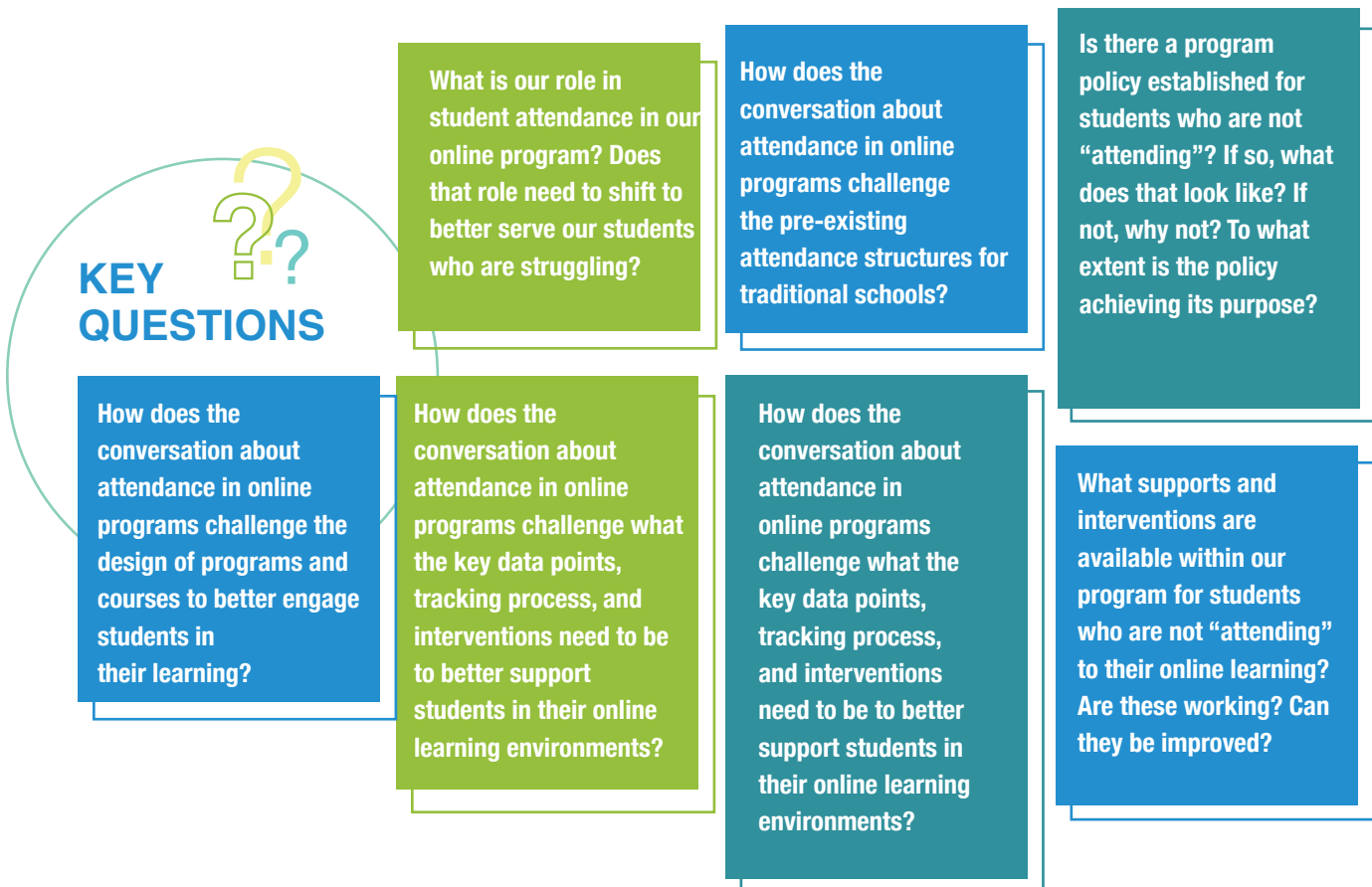
Truancy follow through in our District is not as strong as we’d like. There are a lot of steps to go through before admin will take a student to truancy court, and even once the student gets there, the judge does not seem to administer much of a consequence if any. So I am often not inclined to forward truancy of online students as much as it should be done. We just keep working with our interventions as much as we can within our program. Consequences for the poor attendance can in the end result in the student failing the class or not being eligible to take online courses in the future.

– Anonymous survey respondent

Guidance for Online Attendance

- Establishing alternative education programs
- Students requesting program or curricular modifications
- Establishing programs for those with exceptional educational interests, needs, or requirements
- Determining what constitutes for credit
- Districts awarding credits for students demonstrating proficiency
- Student participation in activities rather than classes
- Students taking online or blended courses
- Awarding credits through equivalency
- Offering different types of diplomas
- Establishing programs for students with high levels of maturity
- Determining school hours and calendar
- Students pursuing a high school equivalency diploma
- Waivers of statutory requirements
- Alternative compliance

As stated in this report, “Throughout Wisconsin’s history, the constitutional provisions and state laws governing the K–12 system were adopted with the goal of ensuring that all children have an equal opportunity to a quality education, while reinforcing the autonomy and authority of local school boards to deliver on that promise.”



Resources

Archambault, L., Kennedy, K., & Bender, S. (2013). Cyber-Truancy: Addressing issues of attendance in the digital age. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 46(1), 1-28. Retrieved from <http://www.iste.org/learn/publications/journals/jrte/jrte-fall-2013/cyber-truancy-addressing-issues-of-attendance-in-the-digital-age>

Evers, T. (2017). Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Fostering innovation in Wisconsin schools: Beyond credits and seat time and toward innovative practices that lead to college and career readiness. Retrieved on April 19 from <https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/cal/Fostering%20Innovation%20Credit%20Flexibility%202017.pdf>

Wisconsin Department of Instruction. School Attendance. Retrieved on March 13, 2019, from <https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/pupil-services/school-social-work/contents/attendance-truancy-dropout/resources>