



International Network for School Social Work

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How to Improve the Attendance Rate and Reduce Chronic Absenteeism

The school year begins

The school year begins around the end of August or beginning of September in Europe, North America, China, Ghana and Vietnam. Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and South Africa start school in January or February, and Japan and Korea in April. A new school year is an opportunity for schools and school social workers to consider how to improve attendance both for the school population as a whole and for school children with a pattern of chronic unauthorized absence. Rather than waiting until ineffective policies and practices have compounded the problem and until delayed referrals for social work come in, school social workers can take this opportunity of a new school year to help the school implement constructive preventive measures from the outset and to design effective ways to respond when children first show a pattern of absence.

School social work expertise

School social work's beginnings over a hundred years ago were associated with new mandatory attendance laws. Attendance officers were hired in the UK and visiting teachers in the US to ensure that parents send their children to school. It was clear that many social factors kept children out of school, and the early attendance role became a social work role to address the problems. Although the role constantly changes to deal with emerging barriers that prevent children from benefiting from their education, promoting regular attendance and dealing with chronic absences remain part of school social work. Social workers' holistic approach, role as liaison with parents, skill in problem-solving and focus on strengths make a good fit for attendance work.

Attendance Policy

Multiple factors contribute to children missing excessive amounts of school: some originate with the school system, such as poor curriculum, inadequate teaching, unsafe schools, poor sanitation and unclear policies; family problems that impact the child's readiness to go to school include every social, health and personal issue; likewise every problem that children experience in their growing up affects their attendance. School social workers' use of systems theory in evaluation and intervention makes their input to the school's attendance policy invaluable to ensure that it reflects the complexity of poor attendance and that the school's response meets children's needs.

Solutions

Chronic absenteeism is complex and there are no easy solutions. On the other hand it is possible to improve the attendance of the total school population significantly by implementing policies and

practices that have been shown to be effective. The school social worker can use knowledge of behavior change to both 1. Increase the total daily attendance rate by working with all school staff and 2. Develop a program for the more difficult task of reducing chronic absenteeism.

1. How to increase the daily attendance rate by involving all school staff

Developing a whole school plan for increasing total daily attendance is an ideal preventive program for school social workers. Starting with publicizing clear attendance policies for excused and unexcused absences to parents, pupils and school staff and using electronically tracked daily attendance data to pinpoint problems, the school social worker can develop creative ways to increase awareness of the value of regular attendance and use positive reinforcement with the pupils, parents and teachers to increase the attendance rate.

2. Reducing chronic absenteeism requires creative use of social work skills

This is the more complex and difficult task. It means accepting that the goal is to produce statistically significant improvement in the attendance rate of the group of pupils who are excessively absent, without necessarily solving all problems. It is important to use methods that are based on effective ways of changing behavior and to keep weekly records of the individual's attendance in order to verify improvement. Effective behavior change hinges on positive reinforcement, social support, setting short-term goals for improved attendance, clear communication, tracking progress using electronic attendance data and promoting consistently positive support by all school staff for identified pupils. One key to success is not to wait until a case is referred, but to use the previous year's attendance data to identify pupils who will likely have excessive absence (i.e. those who missed 20 or more days) and to work with them from the beginning until the end of the school year. This long-term involvement ensures that progress is maintained and allows documentation of improvement over the previous year's attendance.

Ineffective interventions

Since mandatory school attendance was introduced there have been legal sanctions for non-attendance in many countries. Although parents are not prosecuted when children commit crimes, they are prosecuted, fined and even sentenced to jail time when their children miss excessive amounts of school in some countries such as the UK and some US states. In the UK, Ministry of Justice figures show that "the number of fines handed out by the courts rose by 30% between 2013 and 2014. Last year 9,214 parents were issued with fines, 74% of those who were found guilty. On average, they were ordered to pay £172. The figures also show that 18 parents were given custodial sentences in 2014, up from seven the year before" (The Guardian, August 12, 2015). There is no evidence that prosecution increases school attendance or improves parents' commitment to their child's education. On the other hand, school social work offers solutions that are effective, improve the pupil's attitude to school and resolve a range of associated problems.

Avoid labeling

School social workers avoid labeling children to prevent raising expectations that the pupil will be problematic. However, even in the social work literature, professionals routinely use the label "truant". This negative stereotype has equivalents in many languages. The German *Das Schwänzen* is an example that is derogatory, while *unentschuldigtes Fernbleiben* (unexcused absence) is neutral. Labeling does not help the school understand factors that have contributed to the child being absent. Slang terms in many countries such as bunking, mitching, skulking, wagging and playing hookey do nothing to increase understanding and solve the problem. Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn can be seen as an illiterate truant rejecting the benefits of education or as motherless, homeless, abused by a drunken father, and failed by society and school system. His problems and resiliency in 1885 may be typical of pupils who are missing too much school today.