

Improving Student Attendance

Douglas B. Reeves

To paraphrase education philosopher Yogi Berra, “School success is 90 percent showing up; the other half is mental.” Maybe that’s an overstatement, but research does show conclusively that attendance is strongly associated with student achievement (Johnson, 2000).

To motivate students to come to class, many schools have implemented tough attendance policies, typically stipulating that students will receive no credit for homework or tests that they miss because of unexcused absences. The problem is that these get-tough mandates are counterproductive and do little to reduce tardiness and truancy. Although teachers and school leaders may be tempted to punish truant students by lowering their grades, the experience of Superintendent Dennis Peterson and his colleagues in Minnetonka School District #276 in Minnesota suggests a better alternative: disconnecting grades from attendance altogether. Although grading policies are, in most districts, a matter of teacher discretion, system-level reforms require the support of the superintendent, board, and community. Peterson’s unconventional approach yielded exceptional results.

Uncoupling Grades from Attendance

In 2006, the attendance policy at Minnetonka’s high school required that a student’s quarterly class grade be lowered after three unexcused absences and again after each subsequent unexcused absence. Tardiness was also punished by lowering grades, with teachers reducing grades as much as a full letter grade for student work that was not turned in at the beginning of class. Assistant Principal Jeff Erickson commented, “Logically, one would think that the threat of reducing a student’s grade would work. However, it didn’t produce the results we desired” (personal communication, March 12, 2008). Students would skip class and take the grade penalties, but otherwise suffer little in the way of meaningful con-

sequences. When the district engaged in a bold policy change to disconnect unexcused absences from grades, skeptical teachers and parents predicted that attendance, along with respect for authority, would plummet. Although the school system included every stakeholder group in discussions before the policy change, discussion failed to placate the skeptics.



The key to Minnetonka’s success was not eliminating consequences for absences and tardiness, but rather finding the *right* consequences. Under the high school’s new policy, when a student misses a single class, he or she does not receive a lower class grade or a zero for missed work. Instead, within a few hours of the infraction the student’s parents receive a phone call (and, if available, an e-mail), and within 36 hours a

staff member meets with the student to inquire about the absence. Every unexcused absence results in after-school detention. The response of students shows that they take these consequences more seriously than they took a change in their grades. In the words of one, “Last year I could skip and nobody cared. This year, if I skip once I’m taken to the woodshed.”

The Result: Improved Attendance

Since Minnetonka High School adopted its new policy, unexcused absences have dropped by 42 percent, the number of disciplinary referrals has dropped by 64 percent, and suspensions have dropped by 37 percent. Fears that removing “grading as punishment” from teachers’ tool kit of motivational strategies would lead to disrespect for classroom educators have not been realized. The belief that in order to get students to behave, achieve, and attend school, teachers must

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wield the grade book as a punishment-and-reward system is simply not borne out by the evidence.

These results are strikingly consistent with evidence from other schools (Reeves, 2008). When schools improve grading policies—for example, by disconnecting grades from behavior—student achievement increases and behavior improves dramatically.

From Evidence to Policy

Grading is an emotional issue, as dozens of responses to my previous column on the subject in the February 2008 *Educational Leadership* attest. These thoughtful correspondents struck two common themes. A few enthused, “We disconnected grading from student behavior and it has been successful.” The great majority, however, said something more like, “I believe that the evidence you’ve presented is correct, but my colleagues just won’t buy into the idea of changing grading practices.” How to deal with this resistance to a reform that is so clearly needed?

The current arguments about grading policy are similar to the equally vehement arguments in the 1950s and 1960s about corporal punishment in schools. The American Academy of Pediatrics has long held that “corporal punishment may affect adversely a student’s self-image and school achievement and that it may contribute to disruptive and violent student behavior” (2000, p. 343). As recently as 1991, 30 states continued to permit corporal punishment, despite the fact that evidence dating back to the 1960s indicated that corporal punishment was ineffective in improving student achievement and very likely counterproductive. Ultimately, corporal punishment nearly disappeared from schools—not because the doubters accepted the evidence, but because coura-

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geous leaders made unpopular decisions that were based on research.

If, as a school leader, you wait to improve grading policies until you have total buy-in from the school community, then your school will be the last to change. If you take the risk that Superintendent Peterson and his colleagues took, you may endure criticism, doubt, and second-guessing—at least until your school reaps the benefits in terms of improved attendance, achievement, and discipline. **EL**

References

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Douglas B. Reeves is Founder of the Leadership and Learning Center, 978-740-3001; DReeves@LeadAndLearn.com.

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