

Guidelines for Handling Cases of Excessive Absences from School

According to Florida Statute 1003.26, students who are exhibiting a pattern of nonattendance must be referred to the Child Study Team (PST) for assistance with the remediation of the problem.

The following guidelines are intended for PST Chairpersons, team members, and those addressing attendance within school sites. However, the Compulsory School Attendance Manual (distributed by School Social Services) and Student Accounting Services should be referenced for more specific, technical information regarding compulsory school attendance and district procedures.

1. A representative from the school (e.g., instructional, administrative, clerical, and/or support staff) must notify parents of each unexcused absence. Notification can be done through phone calls, Volusia Connect, or personal contact with the parent. For households with no phone or schools not using Volusia Connect, a letter may be used to contact the parent/guardian. See sample letter Parent Notification of Unexcused Absences (form 2001099). Parents should be encouraged to utilize the ParentPortal to access information about their child.
2. Teachers should take every opportunity to notify parents of developing patterns of nonattendance and determine the cause. Parent contact must be made or attempted prior to referral to the Problem Solving Team. PST 2 can be utilized to document parent contacts and consultation with the school social worker. If the teacher or the school staff has exhausted all attempts to contact the parent (e.g., phone calls, phone messages, letters, notes, etc.), a social work referral requesting assistance in communication may be generated.
3. The attendance clerk or designee is to monitor the attendance using the following compulsory attendance report printouts and inform the PST Chair and/or school social worker of any students developing patterns of nonattendance according to the information, excluding out-of-school suspensions:
 - FOCUS Letter Queue (5 unexcused absences within a calendar month)
 - FOCUS Letter Queue (10 unexcused absences within 90 calendar days)
4. The PST Chair, school representative, and/or school social worker reviews the FOCUS Perfect/Excessive Attendance Report to determine which students/cases are serious enough to forward to the Problem Solving Team (PST). Data determines whether the problem should be addressed through the PST meeting designated for attendance concerns only. Invitations to the PST meeting should be made to the parents and school social worker and may exclude other members of the Problem Solving Team (e.g., school psychologist, content area specialists, etc.). However, students who also demonstrate academic and/or behavioral concerns for reasons beyond poor attendance should be referred to the PST and the standard PST procedures should be followed.

Schools must prioritize which students are actually referred to PST for attendance issues only. Suggestions for prioritizing students to be brought before PST due to excessive unexcused absences include:

- a) Consider the age of the students. Those students who are under age 16 are to be given priority over those ages 16 or older. Schools may also want to consider whether students age 5 and under should be referred to the Problem Solving Team or whether attendance issues for these students should be handled through parent/teacher conferences. Please note these students are not subject to compulsory attendance.
- b) Consider the number of unexcused absences. Students with a high number of unexcused absences and a prior history of excessive absences are to be considered before those students who have no prior history and a low number of unexcused absences. Prior communication with the school administrator regarding unexcused absences and/or extenuating circumstances should also be taken into consideration.

- c) The grade level of the student is to be considered. Schools can set their priorities and refer students based upon those priorities.
 - d) Students who are under Department of Juvenile Justice supervision may need to be referred to their DJJ Probation Officer for follow-up rather than being brought before PST.
 - e) Students whose parents request services should be given priority.
 - f) Students with excessive behavior referrals or who are suffering academically must be given priority.
5. For students with attendance issues only whose concerns have not been remediated as a result of the strategies agreed upon with the student and/or parent, the Request for Problem Solving Team Assistance (PST 5) is to be completed and forwarded to the PST Chair. Schools may use the designated PST Parent Invitation Letter (form 2009021) to invite parents to the PST meeting. Every attempt shall be made to include school social workers in PST meetings when attendance is the concern.

An Attendance Contract (form 2001042) may be completed at this time, if appropriate, and a copy given to the parent. In addition, parents should be advised of their right to appeal if they believe that the interventions recommended are inappropriate or unnecessary and should be provided a copy of the Notice of Right to Appeal (form 2001097). If a parent chooses to exercise their right to appeal, then they should be given a copy of the Notice of Intent to Exercise Right to Appeal (form 2007188).

If the parent is not in attendance at the PST meeting, the PST Chair will provide the parent with a copy of the PST forms indicating recommended strategies and a Notice of Right to Appeal form.

Note: Only if it is determined that an ESE student's attendance issues are directly linked or related to their exceptionality, the school should contact their District Placement Specialist (DPS) or IEP Facilitator, if applicable, to schedule an IEP meeting. A student with fewer absences may be referred for assistance from the team even earlier if a pattern of non-attendance is developing. The IEP Committee should utilize the ESE Request for Assistance/Attendance (form 2004029) and follow the Guidelines for Addressing Attendance Issues with ESE Students.

6. **Students with 15 absences (excused and/or unexcused) are reflected on the FOCUS Perfect/Excessive Attendance Report.** Schools are to send parent/guardian of those identified students the 15-Day Doctor's Note, found in FOCUS Letter Queue, requiring a doctor's note for subsequent absences due to illness, in order to establish if any of the absences are to be excused.

Note: If school officials have previously received medical documentation of a chronic condition for which ongoing absences are anticipated, then there is no need to send a notification "15-day Doctor's Note" letter to the parent/guardian.

Absences not due to illness (vacation, funeral, visiting college, etc.) do not require a doctor's excuse. The legitimacy of a cause for being absent shall be determined by the building principal or designee based on the following criteria: (a) whether the reason for absence is equivalent in importance to the student's need to be in attendance; (b) the needs of the student and the student's family; (c) the number of absences accumulated by the student; (d) other justifiable rationale.

7. Interventions developed throughout the problem-solving process which address the nonattendance issues should be documented on the PST 6A/H (form 2009060). The Family Assessment Form (form 2004239) may also be used to gather information about the family to assist with intervention strategies.

Note: When addressing attendance concerns only, or if poor academic performance is hypothesized to be resulting solely from poor attendance, PST 6A/H is used in lieu of PST 6-8. When attendance concerns are occurring with academic and/or behavioral concerns, PST 6-8 is completed as well as PST 6A/H.

8. After the initial PST meeting, the student's attendance should be monitored by the school designee. If attendance continues to be a concern despite the interventions, a referral to the school social worker for additional follow-up may be generated by submitting an Attendance Referral (form 2014002) or another PST meeting may be requested. School social workers are to follow-up to assist parents in complying with the recommended interventions and offer additional services, if needed (e.g., individual case management, parent/student education, group work, referrals to appropriate agencies). If further PST involvement is needed, the problem solving process should continue, including implementation and progress monitoring of additional interventions that best address the problem. These interventions may include (but should not be limited to) a referral to the school social worker, if not previously initiated. These further interventions should also be documented on the PST 6A/H.

Note: If the PST process has been initiated at one school and the student transfers to another school, a referral may be made to the school social worker at the new school, prior to scheduling a second PST meeting.

Information regarding students who are not enrolled in school should be referred directly to the school social worker for appropriate follow-up. This may include students for whom the district has received notification from private or non-public schools that have been withdrawn for noncompliance with the compulsory attendance law. Upon receiving referrals for non-enrollment, school social workers are to send the parent/guardian a 3-day letter (certified or hand-delivered) requiring enrollment in one of the options outlined in the Florida Statute, and provide appropriate follow-up as needed.

9. Parents who disagree with the strategies recommended shall have the right to meet with the District Student Placement Committee to discuss the matter by completing and submitting the Notice of Intent to Exercise Right to Appeal (form 2007188). If the parent is not satisfied with the action recommended by the DSPC, they have the right to request a hearing before the school board. Schools are to submit all written requests for an appeal to the Court Liaison for Attendance, School Social Services Office, EDC@Atlantic High, Portable 5.

Note: If attempts to contact the parent have failed or the parent is non-responsive to attempts/interventions and a student continues to accumulate unexcused absences, a "3-day letter" for unexcused absences may be hand-delivered or sent via certified mail by the school social worker.

10. If all reasonable efforts to resolve the nonattendance behavior fail, the school social worker will be responsible for taking the necessary steps to seek criminal prosecution for noncompliance with the compulsory school attendance law. This may involve a referral to adult court, ASAP, Teen Court, or CINS/FINS.