

## Improving Student Attendance

By Douglas B. Reeves

To paraphrase educational philosopher Yogi Berra, “Showing up to school is 90% of the game; the other half is mental.” Research is conclusive that attendance is strongly associated with student achievement (Johnson, 2000): A drop in attendance from 95% to 85% cuts in half the chances that students will pass state literacy tests. As a result, many schools have tough policies for unexcused absences, typically including no credit for homework or examinations that were missed and other penalties that are designed to motivate students to come to school. The problem is that these “get tough” mandates have yielded counterproductive, and student tardiness and truancy remain a major challenge for many schools. Although teachers and school leaders may be tempted to increase penalties for truant students, new research from Minnesota superintendent Dennis Peterson and his colleagues suggests a better alternative: disconnecting grades from attendance.

### The “Get Tough” Fallacy

Minnetonka High School Assistant Principal Jeff Erickson expressed the logic of many school policies when he explained, “The previous attendance policy required the reduction of quarter/semester grades after 3 absences, and each subsequent unexcused absence thereafter. Tardiness, as well, caused a reduction of grades. The thinking went as followed: *If you don’t arrive on time, I am going to dock your grade. If this assignment is one day past the due date, you won’t receive any credit. If you skip on a test day, you fail the test.*” Erickson concluded, “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). When the district engaged in a bold policy change to disconnect unexcused absences from grades, there were widespread predictions that attendance, along with respect for authority, would plummet. What would students do if they no longer feared that grades would be used as a punishment for misbehavior?

### Finding the Right Consequences

The key to Minnetonka's success was not the absence of consequences for absences and tardiness, but rather finding the right consequences. For example, rather than receiving a reduction in a grade or a zero for missed work, a student who misses a single class will receive both a call (and, where available, an e-mail) to parents within hours of the infraction and within 36 hours, students have a personal interview with a staff member to inquire about the absence, and every absence results in after school detention. In the words of one student at the high school, "*What is it? Last year I could skip and nobody cared. This year, I skip once and I am taken to the woodshed.*" To many outsiders, the disconnection of grading penalties from absences would seem to be a decreased consequence; the students have come to a different conclusion.

### The Results: Improved Attendance

In Minnetonka, the student and faculty population have been stable in the past year, and the only major change has been the new policies for grading and attendance. Therefore, it is quite likely that changes in attendance and academic performance are not the result of a sudden influx of more well-behaved students, but rather the result of

the change in the district's policy. Since the new policy was adopted, unexcused absences dropped by 42 percent, the number of disciplinary referrals dropped by 64%, and suspensions dropped by 37%. These results are strikingly consistent with the evidence from Indiana reported in the February 2008 issue of Educational Leadership. When grading policies are improved, student achievement increases and behavior improves dramatically. The hypothesis that in order to get students to behave, achieve, and attend school, teachers must wield the grade-book as a punishment and the reward system is simply not consistent with the evidence. Fears that removing the "grading as punishment" from the tool kit of teacher motivational strategies would lead to disrespect for classroom educators have not been realized. The Minnetonka experience is not perfect – some students continue to skip class and show up late. There are, to be sure, adolescents who are belligerent and challenge authority, but the chances are strong that at least some of them were that way irrespective of local grading and attendance policies.

#### From Evidence to Policy

Grading policies are emotional issues, as dozens of responses to my previous column on the subject attest. There were two common themes of these thoughtful correspondents. A few enthused, "We disconnected grading from student behavior and it has been quite successful." The vast majority, however, expressed the doubt that "I believe that the evidence you have presented is correct, but my colleagues just won't buy into the idea of changing grading practices." Thus we have a situation in which a) We have a pervasive challenge with student absences and failures; b) We have evidence that present grading policies are part of the problem; and c) We have

evidence from the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century to the present day that alternative grading policies can be effective. How to deal with resistance to reform? I have concluded that the current “grading wars” are not dissimilar to equally vehement arguments in the 1950’s and 1960’s over corporal punishment in schools. Research suggested that corporal punishment validated the use of force and was therefore more likely to produce bullies and dropouts than compliance. Nevertheless, many people strongly believed that it was the only effective way to motivate students, with “the board” being the tool of choice in the junior high school I attended. But within a few years, corporal punishment disappeared from schools not because the doubters accepted the research, but because courageous leaders made unpopular decisions that benefitted an entire generation of students, including every reader of this journal who was never “motivated” by a board, hand, or whip. If the threshold for improving grading policies is “buy-in,” then you will be the last to change. If you take the risk that Peterson and his colleagues took, you will endure criticism, doubt, and second-guessing – at least until you experience improved attendance, achievement, and discipline.

#### Reference

Johnson, R. C. (2000) As studies stress link to scores, districts get tough on attendance. *Education Week*, 20(7), 1, 10.