

Calculating and Reporting Attendance and Truancy in Online Schools

Pursuant to §22-30.7-105(2)(a), *“a student who is participating in an online program shall be subject to compulsory school attendance . . . and shall be deemed to comply with the compulsory attendance requirements through participation in the online program.”*

Participation for Funding Purposes

Active participation for students in online programs is clearly defined in State Board Rule (CCR 301-71 8.0) and is evaluated based on student schedule and logins that meet specific criteria. The full-time and part-time status of students for funding purposes has been defined by State Board rule as a minimum number of equivalent instructional hours in a given student’s schedule. The number of equivalent hours is based on the number of instructional hours a brick-and-mortar student would spend in a physical classroom over the course of a semester or year in order to complete a course. Equivalent hours and instructional hours differ because an online student may require more or less time to complete a class than he/she would in a traditional school setting.

Once a determination of part-time or full-time status has been made based on a student’s schedule, student logins will be collected and evaluated against criteria established in Colorado Revised Statute and State Board Rule to ensure the student was “participating” in the online school during the Student October Count period.

Calculating Attendance for the Safety & Discipline Indicator Collection

The State collects several measures of student attendance in the Safety & Discipline Indicator (SDI) collection, but in the past some online schools were advised to report default metrics of 100% attendance and 0% truancy for these measures. It is unclear why this inconsistency originally occurred, but moving forward all online schools and their authorizers are required to report metrics that are truly representative of actual student attendance and truancy rates.

Individual school policies and procedures depend upon the limitations of the Student Information System (SIS) or the Learning Management System (LMS), the student-teacher ratio, grade-level of the students, and learning model used by the school. Despite the variance in virtual schools, every online school should have consistent, authorizer-approved participation/attendance and truancy policies and procedures that are communicated to parents, students, and teachers.

After exploring different options for recording and calculating attendance rates, it was determined that there is not a one-size-fits-all method that can be applied to all online schools. With this in mind, there are three different methods that may be used for recording attendance depending on the model of the virtual school: 1) Minimum login time requirements, 2) Specific task completion for a given time period, 3) Minimum lesson/unit completion requirements. None of these methods are meant to be mutually exclusive and a combination of these methods may be utilized to record and calculate attendance rates.

1. Minimum Login Time Requirements. Establishing a minimum amount of time that must be spent logged-in to coursework per day or week is the simplest option to implement because attendance can be easily recorded in most SISs designed for use in brick-and-mortar schools. Most of the same SISs used in brick-and-mortar schools are commonly used in online schools

and there are few SISs designed specifically for use in virtual schools. This method of taking attendance is fairly black and white as it is easy for an instructor to verify and report whether or not a student logged into course work for a sufficient amount of time.

This method does not take into account the amount of actual work completed by the student during the time logged in to course work, but does provide a comparable measure to the “seat time” measure that is used to calculate attendance in a brick-and-mortar school. This can easily be entered into an SIS on a daily basis, again much the same as is done in a brick-and-mortar school. Additionally, schools may mandate that students must log into course work at certain times during the day as well as specific days throughout the week. While simple, this method of calculating attendance does not allow a high level of flexibility for students who are unable to fulfill a minimum number of hours or log in to course work during designated days and times.

2. Specific Task Completion for a Given Time Period. Another method for recording and calculating attendance is mandating that students complete a series of regularly scheduled tasks on a daily or weekly basis. If the student completes all of the required tasks during the specified amount of time, he or she is considered in attendance. If the student does not complete all of the tasks, then he or she is not in attendance or is only partially in attendance. This method of recording and calculating attendance is widespread in post-secondary online courses.

Tasks may include, but are not limited to, contacting the teacher by phone or email, participating in a discussion thread, attending a virtual tutoring session or webinar, and/or submitting a specific assignment. Any task or interaction that can be *electronically* documented and contributes to student engagement could be used for recording attendance. Another strategy would be to weight tasks in order to reflect the importance or difficulty of each task.

This method for recording and calculating attendance is fairly compatible with most SISs, especially if student task completion is recorded on a daily basis. Measuring students by completing tasks over a timeline also allows for more flexibility as the students can be allowed to complete tasks at any time during the given timeline, or if more structure is required, the students can be asked to complete their tasks by a specific time of day or by the end of the week.

3. Minimum Lesson/Unit Completion Requirements. The third method for recording and calculating attendance affords the most flexibility and, if implemented correctly, holds students to the highest level of accountability. In this method, student attendance is directly tied to what the student accomplishes and/or produces over a given period of time. The assignments completed essentially become the evidence that a student has been in attendance, and if no work is produced, then a student is not considered to be in attendance.

In this scenario, the timeline established for completion of work is critical as some students may require more/less time to complete assignments. It is important when implementing this method that extra time is not the only accommodation used with students for whom extra time in the classroom may be a valid accommodation.

Although there is flexibility for implementing these recommended methods for recording attendance, a weekly timeline is recommended. In Colorado pursuant to §22-33-107(3)(a) C.R.S., a child who is “habitually truant” is between the ages of six and seventeen and has “four unexcused absences from

public school in any one month or ten unexcused absences from public school during any school year.” Based on the statutory definition of habitual truancy, it is possible that a student can become “habitually truant” within the period of one week. This should compel an online school to record and calculate participation for its students on a weekly basis, at a minimum.

Once a method and criteria have been chosen to assess whether a student is in attendance or not, an online school and its authorizer must determine how to quantify the attendance so that it may be reported to the State in the Safety & Discipline Indicator collection. Regardless of the internal methods used to track attendance, metrics for all of the following measures must be calculated and reported:

- **Student Total Days Attended:** The aggregate numbers of whole and partial days the students have attended school for the current school year. It is calculated by adding the number of days each student attended (full and partial days) in the current school year. *Student Total Days Attended = Student Total Days Possible – (Student Total Days Excused Absent + Student Total Days Unexcused Absent)*
- **Student Total Days Excused Absent:** The aggregate number of whole and partial days students had excused absences (out of school), for the current school year. Absence due to a suspension is excused. (A student who is tardy is not considered to be absent.)
- **Student Total Days Unexcused Absent:** The aggregate number of whole and partial days students were absent (out of school), without being excused from a parent/guardian for the current school year. (A student who is tardy is not considered to be absent.)
- **Student Total Days Possible:** The aggregate number of whole and partial days students would have attended school if there had been no absences for the current school year. It is calculated by adding the number of days that each student was enrolled in the current school year. Expelled students are included until date of expulsion. This number should be the sum of Total Days Attended, Total Days Excused Absent and Total Days Unexcused Absent. *Example: A school that has a 185-day calendar and a student population of 600 students would have 111,000 Student Total Days Possible.*
- **Habitually Truant Count - Four or more days in one month (A):** The unduplicated count of Habitually Truant students who are at least the age of six on or before August 1 of the year in question and under the age of seventeen years having four total days of Unexcused Absences from public school in any one calendar Month; calculated by the sum of Unexcused Absences converted to days and fractions of days.
- **Habitually Truant Count – Ten or more days in one school year (B):** The unduplicated count of Habitually Truant students who are at least the age of six on or before August 1 of the year in question and under the age of seventeen years having ten or more total days of Unexcused Absences, but never accumulated four or more total days of Unexcused Absences from that public school in any one calendar month; calculated by the sum of Unexcused Absences converted to days and fractions of days.
- **Habitually Truant Count – Met Both Conditions (A & B):** The unduplicated count of Habitually Truant students who are at least the age of six on or before August 1 of the year in question and

under the age of seventeen years four or more total days of Unexcused Absences from the reporting public school in any one calendar Month and also accumulated ten or more total days Unexcused Absences from the same public school during the Reported School Year; calculated by the sum of Unexcused Absences converted to days and fractions of days.

The following are hypothetical examples using different methods of recording attendance to obtain metrics for the measures above:

- **Example 1:**

Online School A has calendar schedule of 180 days in the school year with a student population of 300 students, resulting in 54,000 **Student Total Days Possible**. The online school determines that students must login to their classes for at least 20 hours per week, which is 4 hours per day in a 5 day week (Students may login any day of the week, including weekends). Each week, the school records how many hours students have logged into their coursework and uses the following method to calculate the number of individual student absences:

$$\frac{(20 \text{ expected hours per week} - \text{Actual \# of hours logged in})}{4 \text{ hours per day}} = \# \text{ of days absent per week}$$

Student A logged in to her courses for 18 hours during the week and her parents called the online school and excused the absence. Based on the above equation, Student A attended 4.5 days of school for that week and accrued 0.5 excused absences, which must be added to the **Student Total Days Excused Absent**.

- **Example 2:**

Online School B determines that a student must participate in a discussion thread (20%), respond to teacher emails/phone calls (25%), attend a synchronous class session (25%) and submit homework assignments (30%) by the end of the school week in order to be in attendance. The tasks are weighted as indicated. Each week, the number of student absences is determined by which tasks students completed.

Student B participated in a discussion thread, responded to emails and submitted homework assignments, but did not attend the synchronous class session and was not excused by a parent/guardian. The school used the following method to calculate Student A's weekly attendance:

$$5 \text{ days/week} \times (0.2 + 0.25 + 0.3) = 3.75 \text{ days attended/week}$$

Because the student was not excused, 1.25 days must be added to the **Student Total Days Unexcused Absent**.

- **Example 3:**

Online School C determines that a student must complete 20 lessons per week (4 lessons per day) to be in 100% attendance. Student C completes 4 lessons during the week. The school uses the following method to calculate the number of absences:

$$\frac{(20 \text{ lessons per week} - \text{Actual \# of lessons completed})}{4 \text{ lessons per day}} = \# \text{ of absences per week}$$

Based on this calculation, Student C has accrued 4 absences for the week. A parent or guardian did not excuse these absences, so they must be added to the **Student Total Days Unexcused Absent**. Additionally, this student would be added to the **Habitually Truancy Count: Four or more days in one month (A)**.

Truancy

The “*Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act*” (Title IV, Part A of the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001) contains a requirement that State Education Agencies establish a [Uniform Management Information Reporting System](#) that includes, among other information, truancy rates. Due to these requirements, CDE developed the following definition of truancy for the purpose of calculating rates:

If a student is absent without an excuse by the parent/guardian or if the student leaves school or a class without permission of the teacher or administrator in charge, it will be considered to be an unexcused absence and the student shall be considered truant.

The SDI collection gathers data that is then used to calculate truancy rates based on the CDE definition. The truancy rate for a school indicates the percent of full or partial days possible to attend that students were absent without an excuse and is calculated by dividing the **Student Total Days Unexcused Absent** by the **Student Total Days Possible**.

The definition for truancy pertains to each full or partial day that a student is absent without an excuse for all enrolled K-12 public school students. The Colorado Revised Statute defines “habitual truant” as:

A child who has attained the age of seven years and is under the age of seventeen years having four unexcused absences from public school in any one month or ten unexcused absences from public school during any school year.

The [Habitually Truant statute, C.R.S. 22-33-107 \(3\)\(a\)](#), includes requirements for districts and schools to monitor students’ attendance and work with students and families to improve the student’s attendance.

Although every district must report common measures, the metrics are not comparable across districts because attendance and excuses for absences are rooted in a local policy unique to the district, and in some cases the individual schools. This is especially true in regard to online schools as aside from utilizing a different delivery method than their brick-and-mortar counterparts, each online school also has a distinct model and method for measuring attendance and participation. Truancy-related data may vary considerably across districts and schools, but this data can be used to set benchmarks and goals for

student engagement or be used as a performance indicator for achieving desired outcomes for school-wide initiatives.

While it may be difficult to monitor attendance and truancy in an online school, it is critical that online schools identify a meaningful system to measure and track their students' engagement, not only for State reporting requirements, but also to ensure that they are effectively serving students. According to the National Center for School Engagement, *"Truancy has been clearly identified as one of the early warning signs of students headed for potential delinquent activity, social isolation, or educational failure via suspension, expulsion or dropping out."* There are many factors that contribute to truancy, but it is recommended that schools first investigate whether internal policies or practices are negatively affecting student attendance/participation. School factors that contribute to truancy include:

- Lack of effective and consistently applied attendance policies.
- Poor record-keeping, making truancy difficult to spot.
- Push-out policies, for example, suspension as a punishment for truancy and automatic "Fs" for students with poor attendance.
- Parents/guardians not notified of absences.
- Teacher characteristics, such as lack of respect for students and neglect of diverse student needs.
- Unwelcoming atmosphere, for example, an unattractive facility or one with chronic maintenance problems.
- Unsafe environment, for example a school with ineffective discipline policies where bullying is tolerated.
- Inadequate identification of special education needs, leading some students to feel overwhelmed and frustrated with their inability to succeed (National Center for School Engagement).

The Colorado Department of Education recommends that authorizers and online schools periodically evaluate their attendance policies to determine how well they align with the guidance provided, whether their record-keeping procedures produce valid metrics for the State-required attendance and truancy measures and if there are any areas for improvement. Additionally, the Unit of Online and Blended Learning encourages online schools to use their attendance and truancy rates as self-evaluative indicators in the Unified Improvement Planning development process.

If your district or online school requires additional guidance in calculating or reporting attendance, you may contact:

Amanda Heiney, Unit of Online and Blended Learning
heiney_a@cde.state.co.us
P: 303-866-6897

Annette Severson, IMS-Data Services
Severson_a@cde.state.co.us
P: 303-866-6824

Sample Attendance Policies from Online Schools

School A

Attendance in School A is performance based. Attendance is flexible and allows learning to take place at any time – day or night. Therefore, we measure attendance based on the following:

1. Number of hours logged into coursework
2. Successful completion of assignments in a timely manner
3. Ongoing communication with the online teacher and School A staff.

A student is considered in violation of School A's attendance policy if he/she:

1. Is not passing an online course AND
2. Not logging in to that class full time (5-7 hours per week/course = full-time school)

In addition to the attendance expectations listed above, students are also expected to:

- Read announcements, check grades and due dates on a daily basis
- Check email and respond to any communication from teachers, advisors or school on a daily basis
- Work on course assignments during a time of their choice. Courses are available 24 hours a day 7 days a week.

School B

- Students must attend school every school day on the school calendar (a minimum of 180 school days). Families can request an educational leave of absence.
- Instructional time and progress can be entered on any day (e.g. weekends, holidays, etc.). Due to the nature of the school model, students have opportunities to learn and can work on curriculum 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- Time logged on a non-school day will count toward hours and progress, but not toward the 180 days. Students are expected to log into the School B LMS each scheduled school calendar day. If attendance is not recorded on a school day as listed on the school calendar, the student is marked as absent.
- Teachers will verify student attendance daily. Parents are responsible for ensuring attendance hours are recorded daily in the LMS.
- Students will be expected to log in to the LMS on each scheduled school calendar day and complete daily assignments. Students who are unable to log in to the LMS must notify the school with the reason for the student's absence.