

## CASE 21



### *Every Day Counts*

#### School Attendance Is Important

#### BACKGROUND

Principals know that students must be in school in order for learning to take place. Every day counts by making a difference in the degree of sustained learning that occurs. Moreover, employers want to know that prospective employees have habits of dependability and punctuality. Human resource divisions of business and industry routinely review employment applications to assess attendance patterns before reviewing the same applications for academic standing. School attendance benefits society as well as individuals. Society reaps benefits from an educated and informed citizenry, while individuals are able to realize greater economic benefits because of job credentials and skills. In addition, individuals have opportunities to make more substantial contributions to their communities when their background includes educational opportunities and experiences.

Compulsory school attendance is legally governed by the concept *parens patriae*, the common law doctrine that gives the state the prerogative to secure the welfare of individuals. Because parents have a duty to educate their children, the state may compel them to do so. In the 1944 *Prince v. Massachusetts* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court found a legal guardian guilty of contributing to the delinquency of a minor by permitting her nine-year-old ward to sell Jehovah's Witnesses publications on a public street (Alexander & Alexander, 2005). The court record reads:

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The family itself is not beyond regulation in the public interest . . . acting to guard the general interest in youth's well being, the state as *parens patriae* may restrict the parent's control by requiring school attendance, regulating or prohibiting the child's labor and in many other ways. (pp. 10–11)

This legal doctrine of *parens patriae* gives states the authority to provide for the welfare of adults and children as a “father to all persons.” Because education is vital to the welfare of the state, states may require parents to send their children to school. The decision in *Prince v. Massachusetts* (1944) defined the state's prerogative as superior to parents when parents fail to provide for the welfare of their children. The court expressed the view that children have the right to be protected not only against physical abuse but also against the ignorance of parents. Heard by the U.S. Supreme Court so many years ago, this case established a precedent for attendance cases.

Decisions in cases related to school attendance are based on the beliefs that

1. Education is vital to the welfare of the state
2. The requirement of education is not an unreasonable or arbitrary exercise of state power

In most states and school districts, parents are required by statute to explain the cause of any absence of a child under their control or charge within a time period specified by school district policy. Students typically are excused for absences because of illness, death in the immediate family, inclement weather, or a valid reason preapproved by school officials.

Teachers are accountable for accurate documentation of student attendance. School attendance figures are sometimes requested for legal proceedings that center on family matters and conflicts as well as truancy cases. Beginning teachers should seek information related to regulations, policies, and required documentation about school attendance.

Local school principals who are knowledgeable about attendance requirements are able to support the work of teachers and to influence academic progress for students. While confronting parents who fail to comply with laws and regulations that govern these areas can be an unpleasant chore, benefits to students outweigh the anxiety experienced in situations that need to be remedied. In addition to knowledge of the law and local school district policies, principals must balance various factors in each individual attendance case before making a final decision. Among the factors that influence a principal's perspective are the age of the student, home life, and health.

This case involves a new principal faced with the challenge of improving attendance figures in a high school located in a suburban community adjacent to a large metropolitan area. The school has served and responded to changes in this community for 55 years. During past years, Golden Oak High School received recognition for achieving the highest rate of attendance among all high schools in the district. In more recent years, approximately 85 percent of the student population has missed 10 or more days from school each year.

As the principal, Mr. Rhodes investigates examples of poor student attendance; he has discovered that school personnel have applied local school policies with personal discretion in past years. It seems that the athletic director has favored and supported absences for varsity players, and two of the more established teachers who plan to retire are not reporting students' absences on a regular basis. Moreover, Mr. Rhodes has learned that the school counselor has played a negligible role in resolving issues of declining student achievement. Attendance problems have been addressed by homeroom teachers without input from school administrators or counselors.

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#### FACTORS TO CONSIDER

- Administrative and teacher responsibilities for student attendance
- Adherence to school district policies by all school personnel
- Impact of student attendance on school achievement
- Use of attendance data to address student needs

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#### THE CASE

Mr. Rhodes is a first-year principal at Golden Oak High School. The school serves 965 students in Grades 9 through 12. Students are offered many extracurricular activities, including 11 different team sports. Football is the dominant sport, supported by the community at large with a rival high school in the same district. Sports activities, in addition to 31 different clubs, present opportunities for all students to be involved in some kind of school-sponsored activity.

Most residents of the community are middle-income families, but some students live in poverty while other students are from high-income families. In the past, the student population has not been diverse, but in recent years, Hispanic and Asian families have moved to the area, creating a more diverse population. Parents work in a metropolitan area adjacent to the community. While some parents are professional people, most work for local industry or

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manage small businesses of their own. Most parents spend one to two hours commuting to work each day, which gives them little time to support their children's after-school activities.

The school has a reputation for having a low turnover rate among the teaching staff. Most teachers have at least 10 years of experience in their current assignments. From year to year, the school has added only one or two new teachers to the staff.

The day after his appointment by the board, Mr. Rhodes met the superintendent, Dr. Newman, on the campus at Golden Oak High School. Dr. Newman described several problems with the school's instructional program that he wanted Mr. Rhodes to improve. The most pressing concern related to school attendance. During past years, attendance had declined. Last year, Golden Oak had the lowest percentage of student attendance among all high schools in the district. Dr. Newman explained to Mr. Rhodes that school board policy was aligned with state law, which allowed excused absences only for illness, death in the immediate family, inclement weather, or a valid reason excused by the principal with prior approval. Dr. Newman also pointed out that local school district policy penalized student's grades for unexcused absences in excess of five. Upon five unexcused absences in a class, teachers had authority to subtract 10 points from the student's total number of points for the quarter. Dr. Newman also took time to describe the positive relationship between the school district and agencies such as social services and the juvenile court. He encouraged Mr. Rhodes to work closely with social services and the juvenile court system to remedy attendance problems.

The Christmas holidays had just ended, and Mr. Rhodes now turned his attention to attendance figures for the first semester. It was time to investigate the reasons for the high rate of absenteeism among selected students. As he checked the current attendance figures, he identified five of the 659 students who had missed more than 10 days during the first semester of the school year.

One of these students, Karen, was an eleventh grade student whose academic record documented grades of A's and B's during her freshman and sophomore years. Anecdotal notes included on Karen's report card reflected positive comments by teachers about the quality of her work prior to this year. She was inducted into the National Honor Society her sophomore year. The quality of Karen's work during the current year was diminished as her number of absences increased. As Mr. Rhodes checked the forms in her permanent record, he noted that she was married this past August, just before school opened. Nothing in her record indicated that the school counselor talked with her, but Mr. Rhodes found notes indicating that Karen's parents had called the counselor's office requesting conferences with teachers. Karen had missed one or two days randomly on Mondays and Fridays throughout the first semester.

Mr. Rhodes also noticed that she failed to take one of her midterm exams before Christmas.

Another student with excessive absences was named Tyrone. Tyrone, a tenth grade student in the honors program, missed 14 days during the first semester. His records reflected average progress in his classes. Two attachments to Tyrone's attendance record documented reasons for his absences. The first attachment was a handwritten excuse from his mother for an absence of five days. Tyrone's mother attended a professional conference in Washington, D.C., during September. The written excuse explained that both Tyrone and his father had accompanied her on this trip and that they toured several of the Smithsonian museums as an educational excursion. A second paper attached to Tyrone's attendance record was a typed letter signed by his dad requesting approval for Tyrone to miss another week of school in November to accompany him to Canada. Tyrone's dad explained that Tyrone had never been to Canada, and his father listed several educational reasons to justify another week's absence from school. In his note, Tyrone's dad assured the school that he would guarantee that his son would complete all missed work within a week of returning to school. Although the school district's attendance policy allowed students to miss only three days from school for personal reasons, Tyrone's homeroom teacher noted that she would excuse a second week's absence from school.

A third student, Kristina, a freshman enrolled in regular classes, missed at least four days in a row during three different weeks of the first semester. Other than these absences, Kristina was present. Form letters signed by Kristina's minister asked that she be excused from school to attend out-of-town church meetings. Specific information describing the location and dates of these meetings was not included in the letters. Kristina's homeroom teacher initialed and dated each letter and approved them as excused absences. Kristina's algebra teacher added a copy of a note requesting a conference with her parents to her permanent record folder. The algebra teacher explained that Kristina missed two major exams during the first semester due to absences. Among her grades in other academic subjects, she earned two C's and one D.

The fourth student, Carl, was in the tenth grade, and his schedule included regular classes in the morning and vocational classes in the afternoon. Carl was transported to the vocational school campus every afternoon where he received instruction in both construction trade skills and drafting. Carl's pattern of attendance reflected randomly missed days. In November, he was referred to the truant officer, who made a visit to his home. The truant office reported that Carl's parents didn't support strong attendance and told the attendance counselor that when Carl didn't feel well, he had their permission to stay home from school. The father also stated that his son's attendance was family business and

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not controlled by the school. The attendance counselor noted in her report that Carl's dad stated that he didn't finish high school either and that Carl could go to work with him if he wanted to instead of finishing school. Carl's personal data indicate that he had one younger brother and one younger sister enrolled, respectively, in the feeder middle and elementary schools. Mr. Rhodes made a mental note to ask the attendance counselor to check on the attendance of the younger children in Carl's family.

The fifth and final student attendance record was that of John, a junior and the quarterback on the football team. He had suffered an injury during the school district football jamboree prior to Labor Day. John was unable to play in the first two games of the season. His doctor granted permission for him to quarterback during the remainder of the season as long as he continued with physical therapy, which could only be scheduled on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons from noon until 2:30 P.M. Also in John's folder was a note from the athletic director requesting that John be excused from Friday afternoon classes to go home to rest during the football season. The athletic director had been at the school for 10 years and had coached teams to five state championships. Despite the fact that John had missed his afternoon classes three days a week, his teachers had not reported his absences as excessive.

After reviewing John's attendance record, Mr. Rhodes placed the folders of these five students on his desk. Each one presented problems that needed to be addressed. It was apparent to Mr. Rhodes that all stakeholders in the school community needed to be involved in correcting these problems and in developing a school culture that valued attendance and understood the relationship between high academic achievement and attendance.

**Questions**

1. What school district policies need to be reviewed with school personnel?
2. What will be the most effective way to communicate standards and expectations regarding school attendance to faculty and staff?
3. How can student achievement be linked with student attendance for professional development of teachers?
4. What should be required from students who submit form letters signed by local ministers requesting approval for absences to attend church meetings?
5. How will you propose helping school personnel other than regular classroom teachers understand the importance of and adherence to attendance policies?

## Activities

1. Identify key personnel who should be involved in developing a plan to improve student attendance.
2. Outline a long-range plan to improve student attendance at Golden Oak High School.
3. Role-play a conference about approval of the second week's absence from school with Tyrone's homeroom teacher.
4. Discuss key steps in addressing each of the five different attendance cases.
5. Draft a memo to teachers explaining a process for approving student absences for reasons other than illness or emergency.

## ISLLC Standards

**STANDARD 1—A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.**

### *Knowledge*

*The administrator has knowledge and understanding of:*

- The principles of developing and implementing strategic plans
- Information sources, data collection, and data analysis strategies

### *Dispositions*

*The administrator believes in, values, and is committed to:*

- The educability of all
- Ensuring that students have the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become successful adults

### *Performances*

*The administrator facilitates processes and engages in activities ensuring that:*

- Assessment data related to student learning are used to develop the school vision and goals

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- Relevant demographic data pertaining to students and their families are used in developing the school mission and goals
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**STANDARD 2**—A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

***Knowledge***

*The administrator has knowledge and understanding of:*

- The change process for systems, organizations, and individuals
- School cultures

***Dispositions***

*The administrator believes in, values, and is committed to:*

- A safe and supportive learning environment
- Preparing students to be contributing members of society

***Performances***

*The administrator facilitates processes and engages in activities ensuring that:*

- Barriers to student learning are identified, clarified, and addressed
- Pupil personnel programs are developed to meet the needs of students and their families

**REFERENCE**

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*Prince v. Massachusetts*, 321 U.S. 158, 64 S. Ct. 438 (1944).