

What to know on school attendance rules

New law means absences trigger earlier contacts

Grace Tucker and Kelli Weir

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Ohio parents might get more calls about their student's missed school days this year.

That's because of changes in state law that activate the "chronically absent" label – or missing 10% of instructional time for any purpose, including excused and unexcused absences, like doctors appointments and staying home due to weather, respectively.

So, more absences will be monitored by schools, and parents can expect to be contacted more frequently about those absences. The idea is to inform parents of their student's absences earlier and intervene if the student needs more support to get to school.

While both excused and unexcused absences have always been used to calculate chronic absenteeism, the legislative changes made in last year's state budget require districts to respond to attendance issues sooner. The law also does away with the "excessively absent" label schools once reserved for students who reached a certain amount of unexcused or nonmedically excused absences.

In short: Even medically excused absences now count toward the attendance thresholds that trigger school intervention. And parents can expect to hear from their district if their student misses as few as two or three days of school a month.

"We need families to understand that when they go on college visits or if there's inclement weather ... even that

"It's more about providing supports to students and families rather than penalizing the student for poor attendance." Nikki Campbell

Revere Local Schools director of personnel and operations

contributes to chronic absenteeism if that child does not come to school," Cincinnati Public Schools Superintendent Shauna Murphy said.

Research has shown that students who miss too much school – even two days a month – often fall behind academically compared to their peers and are at a greater risk of not completing high school on time.

Revere launches process to notify parents earlier

Revere Local Schools has launched a process to begin warning parents sooner if their student is missing too much school.

Under a new chronic absenteeism policy, the district will send a letter home after a student has missed 5% of the school year for any reason, as now required by state law. That equates to roughly two days a month.

If a student misses 10% of the school year, the student is considered to be chronically absent, and school officials will begin to investigate the reasons behind the student's absences.

Nikki Campbell, Revere's director of personnel and operations, said school officials could schedule a phone call or conference with the family if they believe the absences are impacting a student's learning. She said the meeting would include a discussion on the ways the school could help remove any barriers that are preventing the student from attending class. "Our hope is that we put the supports in place and (the student's) school

attendance improves,” said Campbell, who serves as the district’s truancy officer. “It’s more about providing supports to students and families rather than penalizing the student for poor attendance.”

If a student misses 15% of the school year, the student is considered habitually truant, and the family will be required to meet in person with district officials. Campbell said the discussion would try to further pinpoint how attendance could be improved so the district isn’t forced to refer the student to truancy court.

Revere previously sent its first notification after a student had missed 10% of the school year. It also didn’t count medical appointments toward the missed days.

But state lawmakers changed student attendance requirements when it passed House Bill 96 in September. The bill also required school boards to adopt a new policy complying with the updated requirements by Aug. 1. Campbell, who emphasized that parents should still keep their children home when they are sick, said Revere had 255 students districtwide in December who were deemed chronically absent under its previous attendance thresholds. No student needed to be referred to truancy court last school year, she said.

She expects more families to receive the first warning letters since the absence threshold is lower but believes fewer of them will progress to being labeled chronically or habitually truant because the district will be talking with families and adding supports sooner.

The district has scheduled a parent information night for 5:30 p.m. Sept. 22 in the Revere High School auditorium to discuss and answer questions regarding the attendance policy.

What will actually change for parents?

A major change parents might see under the new law is hearing from their district sooner about their student’s absences.

Before the change, schools had to notify parents when a student missed 38 hours of class in a month, about six school days, or 65 hours in a school year, about 11 days. Absences excused for nonmedical reasons, such as a religious holiday or a college visit, and unexcused absences counted toward those missed hours.

Now, districts must notify parents when a student has missed 5% of instructional hours for any reason. For students in through sixth grade, that equates to about 45 hours, or seven and a half days of school. For grades 7-12, that amounts to 50 hours, or about eight days.

The shift reflects a trend in recent years toward decriminalizing missing school, Cincinnati Public Schools General Counsel Dan Hoying said.

By asking schools to intervene sooner, there’s a hope that the school can offer the supports to combat that student’s absenteeism, making juvenile court intervention for truancy “an absolute last resort,” Hoying said.

That approach is spelled out in Cincinnati schools’ revamped attendance policy. Adjusted in April, the new policy provides three tiers of supports for absent students, starting with universal communication to all families about the importance of attending school. The final tier involves intensive, individualized help, like helping a student find stable housing or work through a mental health crisis.

Has the definition of truancy changed?

The definition of habitual truancy has not changed.

State law determines habitual truancy by whether a student meets the following number of unexcused absences:

- 30 or more consecutive hours (about five school days).
- 42 or more hours per month (about seven school days).

- 72 or more hours per year (about 12 school days).

The requirements to file truancy complaints in juvenile courts also remain unchanged. But the new law required schools to adopt a policy by Aug. 1 developed alongside their county juvenile court that establishes early interventions to confront root causes of absences.

Districts can still choose not to file a court complaint if it's determined the student has made "satisfactory progress" toward improving attendance.

What exactly constitutes satisfactory progress varies from district to district.

How will this affect schools' chronic absenteeism rates?

The actual math behind the way chronic absenteeism is calculated districtwide hasn't changed.

In determining rates of chronic absenteeism for its yearly school report cards, the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce counts a student's hours missed for any reason divided by the total of enrolled hours to determine a student's absence rate. If that rate exceeds 10%, the student is considered chronically absent.

Districts see the new law as an opportunity to better educate their families on the realities of chronic absenteeism, which has been rising at districts statewide.

The issue of inclement weather becomes especially tricky when considering how to lower chronic absenteeism rates while continuing to serve vulnerable families, Hoying explained.