



NEWS RELEASE

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State-required student attendance protocol provides notification, communication to improve attendance

It goes without saying that attendance is important to student achievement. Often attendance problems are an initial indicator that a student may be falling off the track academically.

Georgia law required every school system to create an attendance protocol committee, comprised of a wide range of community leaders, to adopt a written student attendance protocol for each county. Gwinnett's committee, led by Superior Court Chief Judge Dawson Jackson and Juvenile Court Judge Robert Rodatus, finished its work last spring and presented the protocol for the School Board's review and endorsement in May 2005. Since then, the Gwinnett County Board of Education has submitted its protocol to the Georgia Department of Education as required by law.

Gwinnett's attendance protocol focuses on improving collaboration between the home and school, as well as with supporting community agencies; improving early intervention for students with attendance issues; and improving communication.

Key steps in Gwinnett's protocol:

-- Schools support and encourage good daily student attendance. Schools make a concerted effort to contact parents each time a student has an unexcused absence to inquire about the reason for the absence and to offer support and encouragement.

-- State Board of Education Rule 160-5-1-.10 defines the following as **excused absences**:

1. Personal illness or attendance in school endangers a student's health or the health of others. (i) Local boards of education may require students to present appropriate medical documentation upon the return to school for the purpose of validating that the absence is an excused absence.
2. A serious illness or death in the student's immediate family necessitating absence from school. (i) In the event of a serious illness in a student's immediate family, local boards of education may require students to present appropriate medical documentation regarding the family member upon return to school for the purpose of validating that the absence is an excused absence.
3. A court order or an order by a government agency, including preinduction physical examinations for service in the armed forces, mandating absence from school.
4. Observing religious holidays, necessitating absence from school.
5. Conditions rendering attendance impossible or hazardous to student health or safety. (For Gwinnett County Public Schools, the closure of schools for hazardous conditions may *only* be made by the Superintendent for the purposes of excused absences.)
6. Local boards of education *may* allow a period not to exceed one day for registering to vote or voting in a public election.
7. Local boards of education shall count students present when they are serving as pages for the Georgia General Assembly.

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P.O. Box 343
Lawrenceville, GA
30046-0343
770.963.8651
www.gwinnett.k12.ga.us

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-- Teachers of students who had 15 or more unexcused absences the previous year are notified so they can provide early encouragement.

-- Parents and guardians must sign a statement indicating they understand possible consequences and penalties for excessive unexcused absences. Students age 10 and up also must sign this statement which is included in the Student/Parent Handbook.

-- Attendance is addressed regularly at events (conferences, open houses, newsletters, etc.)

-- A series of four letters have been developed to communicate attendance expectations and to alert parents of attendance issues and consequences.

- Letter 1, which emphasizes the importance of good attendance, will be sent before school starts.
- A second letter will be mailed to the parents of students who had 15 or more unexcused absences last school year.
- The third letter is sent home to notify parents if their student accumulates five unexcused absences.
- And, for students age 14 and over, a letter is sent home at the seven-absence mark, outlining possible consequences should a student accumulate 10 unexcused absences. (State law calls for the suspension of a student's driver's license or permit for one full year or until the student reaches the age of 18 if a student:
 - *drops out of school and has remained out of school for 10 consecutive days.*
 - *has 10 or more unexcused absences from school during the current academic year or 10 or more school days of unexcused absences in the previous year; or*
 - *has been found in violation by a hearing officer, discipline panel, or tribunal of one of the following offenses, has received a change in placement for committing one of the following offenses, or has waived his or her right to a hearing and pled guilty to one of the following offenses: threatening, striking, or causing bodily harm to a teacher or school employee, possessing or selling alcohol or drugs on school property or at a school-sponsored event, possessing or using a weapon on school property or at a school-sponsored event, committing any sexual offense, or causing substantial physical or visible bodily harm to or seriously disfiguring another person, including another student.)*

-- Students with 10 to 15 unexcused absences are referred to the school counselor for additional help.

-- As appropriate, a Student Attendance Review Committee can convene and develop a plan of action to assist in improving a student's attendance.

-- Possible consequences and interventions for unexcused absences, tardies, or excessive early checkouts may include, but are not limited to, the following:

Morning Detention	Afternoon Detention
Saturday School	Revocation of School Transfer
Community Service	Counseling Group Participation
Loss of Driver's License/Learner's Permit	Loss of Parking Permit
Isolated Lunch	Student/Parent Conferences
In-school Suspension	Out-of-school Suspension
Referral to School Social Worker	Referral to Juvenile Court
Referral to Social Service Agencies	Referral to a Disciplinary Panel