FLORIDA PUBLIC SCHOOL ATTENDANCE POLICY RESEARCH BRIEF

November 2024 • Ashley Dees, Ph.D.

FLORIDA GRADE-LEVEL READING CAMPAIGN

AN INITIATIVE OF FACCT

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

This project was designed to conduct a comprehensive analysis of attendance policies and procedures across Florida's 67 public school districts. The study aimed to uncover discrepancies in the classification of excused versus unexcused absences and to evaluate the consistency of policy implementation within each district. Data collection and analysis were conducted from October 21, 2024 to November 29, 2024, providing critical insights into attendance management practices statewide. Due to the limited scope of engagement, additional time would likely yield further insights that could enhance our understanding of the broader impacts of attendance policies on the educational outcomes of students in Florida.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Is there a discrepancy between the attendance policy set forth by the school district and how an individual school implements the policy?
2. Is parent documentation accepted for an excused absence, to include when a student is ill?
3. How many days can a parent write an excused absence note for a student per academic year?

ABOUT THE DATA

Scan to Access Data

Column A contains the 67 Florida school districts that were reviewed for the project.

Prior to answering the research questions, the researcher identified the school district's attendance policy (column B). This data was primarily found in the school district's School Board policies, Student Code of Conduct, Student/Parent Handbook, or attendance policy document.

If the school district defined the term attendance or absence, it was included in column C.

During the review of attendance policies, the researcher identified notable statements and practices that, while not directly tied to the primary research questions, offered valuable context. These observations, documented in Column D, addressed various attendance-related topics, including the management of tardies and early checkouts, handling of school-sponsored events, suspension policies, and teacher attendance recording practices. While tangential to the main focus, these insights provide a broader understanding of how attendance is approached across Florida's school districts.

Column E defines what the school district considers to be an excused absence. Column I defines what the school district considers to be an unexcused absence. Every school district defined an excused absence, however not every school district provided a statement for what constitutes an unexcused absence. This data was primarily found in the school district's School Board policies, Student Code of Conduct, Student/Parent Handbook, or attendance policy document.

Column F includes the findings to the research question Is there a discrepancy between the attendance policy set forth by the school district and how an individual school implements the policy? The question was answered with Yes (1) or No (0).

Note: The scope of this study reviews the 67 school districts that match up with counties in Florida and does not analyze special schooling districts.

The researcher reviewed a minimum of five school websites within each school district. If the attendance statement on a school's website differed from the school district Code of Conduct, Student/Parent Handbook, or the School Board document (whichever document(s) were reviewed for the attendance policy information listed in columns B, E, and I) then the researcher considered this a discrepancy.

Column G includes the findings to the research question Is parent documentation accepted for an excused absence, to include when a student is ill? The question was answered with Yes (1) or No (0). The researcher noticed many districts require medical professional documentation if a student is out for an extended number of consecutive days.

Column H includes the findings to the research question How many days can a parent write an excused absence note for a student per academic year? The number of days ranges from 0-20 days per academic year. The mode of the data is 12 days per academic year.

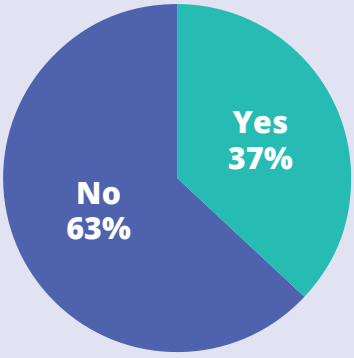
The Sources page in the excel spreadsheet contains the URL link to where the data on the Policy spreadsheet can be found.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The findings from the research reveal discrepancies across school districts on how attendance policy is implemented, tracked, and recorded. 25 out of 67 school districts have discrepancies between the school district's School Board policies, Student Code of Conduct, Student/Parent Handbook, or attendance policy document and at least one school website within the school district.

Figure 1

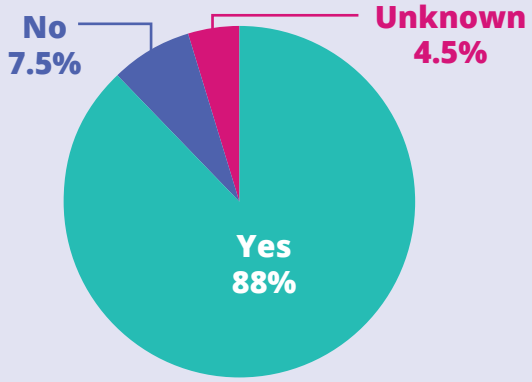
Is there a discrepancy between the attendance policy set forth by the school district and how an individual school implements the policy?



59 out of 67 school districts accept parent documentation to excuse an absence due to student illness. Five (5) school districts do not accept parent/guardian documentation to excuse an absence due to student illness and three (3) school districts did not indicate if parent/guardian documentation would excuse an absence due to student illness. Of the 59 school districts that state they do accept parent/guardian documentation for an excused absence, 17 of the school districts do not indicate how many days can be excused before medical professional documentation is needed to excuse the absence(s).

Figure 2

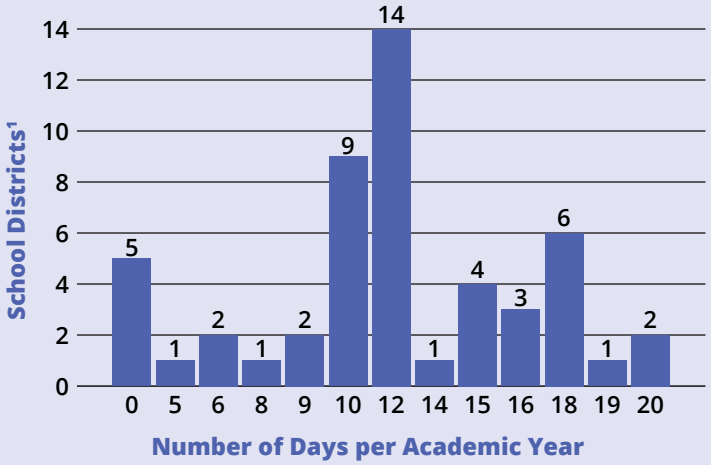
Is parent documentation accepted for an excused absence, to include when a student is ill?



In the 42 school districts that accept parent or guardian documentation and have established limits on excused absences, parents or guardians are permitted to excuse between 5 and 20 school days per academic year. The mode of the data is 12 days per academic year.

Figure 3

How many days can a parent write an excused absence note for a student per academic year?



It is worth noting that within the academic year, many school districts limit how many days can be excused with parent documentation per quarter or semester. If a student reaches the allotted parent excused illness days within the quarter or semester, the student must present medical professional documentation for future absences in that same quarter or semester to be excused. The researcher also found that most school districts have a set number of maximum days in which a student must present the documentation to the school in order for the absence(s) to be excused. If a student does not submit the documentation (parent/guardian or medical professional) to the school in this allotted time, the absence(s) will be considered unexcused and may not be changed in the attendance records.

[1] Three school districts have a different number of maximum excused days for primary and secondary schools within their district. The number of days for both the primary and secondary schools was included as individual observations in the above figure.

Note: The scope of this study reviews the 67 school districts that match up with counties in Florida and does not analyze special schooling districts.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In conducting the review of schools in each of the 67 school districts analyzed as part of this report, many topics which need further evaluation were revealed. First, school suspension (in-school and out of school) are being recorded differently by school districts. The inconsistency that is created in how a school district records in-school suspension and out of school suspension causes issues when/if a student becomes a habitual truant (some school districts deem in and/or out of school as excused absence(s) whereas others consider them to be unexcused absence(s)).

In addition to the discrepancy in how suspensions are recorded for attendance purposes, there is not a consistent policy on if suspended students can make up missed schoolwork. One school district leaves the decision of school makeup work eligibility to the school administration (Union County School district). It would be beneficial if all school districts were consistent in how suspensions are recorded and handled when it comes to student makeup work.

Another topic which needs further research is how school districts recognize student participation in school-sponsored activities. School sponsored activities can include, but are not limited to field trips, extracurricular activities, athletics, and assemblies. School districts vary on if they consider student participation in these activities during the school day to be recorded as excused, unexcused, or no absence in attendance records. The different ways this participation is recorded leads students in some school districts to reach their maximum number of excused absences sooner than students in other school districts. If the school district views the participation as unexcused, then it impacts when/if a student may become a habitual truant.

As research was conducted around full day absences, how schools record unexcused tardies and early checkouts became a topic which needs further examination. Not all school districts communicate how unexcused tardies and early checkouts are recorded. For school districts that did indicate how they are recorded, on average every three (3) unexcused tardies or early checkouts or a combination thereof, results in one (1) unexcused absence for the purpose of determining whether a pattern of non-attendance exists and truancy purposes. There was a range from three (3) tardies/early checkouts to seven (7) tardies/ early checkouts equaling one unexcused absence. Some school districts limit the number of tardies to be recognized in one grading period. In Jackson County, an unexcused tardy occurring after the allowable number of tardies has been met, will be counted as an unexcused absence. In some districts, the number of tardies and early checkouts which equal a full day absence are based on the number of periods in the school day. The wide range of policy (or lack thereof) surrounding tardies and early checkouts should be further reviewed.

The researcher came across many school districts which had different attendance policies and definitions for excused and unexcused absences for Elementary, Middle, High School, and/or K-8 schools. Although it may be developmentally appropriate for primary and secondary schools to maintain different policies, it is worthwhile to research further and determine if a consistent policy in each of these school classifications across all the 67 school districts analyzed would help to reduce contradiction in attendance policies within the state of Florida.

Overall, this project has revealed many discrepancies in how Florida's 67 public school districts implement attendance policies and record attendance. The inconsistencies can impact a student's ability to participate in extracurricular activities at the public school and eligibility to obtain or maintain a learner's driver's license and driver's license. Long-term, it may have adverse effects on students' future opportunities in the post-secondary education system. It is crucial more research be conducted to identify best practices and implementation of attendance policies and record keeping across Florida's 67 public school districts.

OBSERVATION NOTES

*Below is a running list of observations maintained by the researcher throughout the research phase of the study.

- Discrepancy between excused absence policies among individual schools within a school district.
- Varying number of maximum days a school will accept an excused absence note from parent upon student return to school (2-5 days upon return to school).
- Attendance policies may vary between elementary, middle, and high schools.
- Unexcused tardies and early checkouts may end up counting as one unexcused absence (range of 3, 4, 5, 6, or 7 unexcused tardies/early checkouts equals one unexcused absence for attendance records). Not many school district attendance policies explain how tardies/early checkouts are recorded.
- Dixie and Liberty county state that a principal or designee will determine if the student absence is recorded as excused or unexcused.
- After 5th consecutive absence due to illness, school requires doctor's note for absence to be excused. If illness is due to Covid, etc., school nurse can see student (Franklin School district).
- Some school websites have student code of conduct from 2-10+ years ago (Columbia school district- Five Points Elementary School, Westside Elementary; Gadsden school district- Gadsden school district high school, Holmes- Holmes school district high school).
- Columbia County School District- Lake City Middle School has restricted google drive access to code of conduct (https://lcms.columbiak12.com/en-us/learning-links-ed98368c)
- Varying number of days provided to makeup missed schoolwork for excused absence(s) (1-10 days).
- Varying policies on whether a student can makeup missed work for an unexcused absence.
- Varying number of excused days for lice cases.
- Calhoun County School District provides an easy to understand visual of excused absence and required documentation needed:

EXCUSED ABSENCE	REQUIRED ACTION
Any three absences	Parent note for days absent
Therapy from licensed health care professional for the treatment of autism spectrum disorder	Note from licensed health care practitioner or behavior analyst
Personal illness after any 4 absences	Note from doctor, dentist, or school health nurse/ aide
Family death/illness	Parent note for days absent
Chronic/long-term illness	Medical documentation Physician's Certification Form
Parent trips	Pre-approved by principal
Educational trips	Pre-approved by principal
School-sponsored activity	Pre-arranged with administration (student marked "present")
Judicial action	Copy of subpoena or summons Notice of juvenile detention
Military dependents visits in time of combat duty	Approved by principal
Religious holidays	Prior written notice to principal or teacher

Note: The scope of this study reviews the 67 school districts that match up with counties in Florida and does not analyze special schooling districts.

- In some school districts, each school provides their own expectations on attendance (i.e.- “Edwins Elementary School believes that regular attendance…”). Some district schools only reference Florida Statutes.
- Okeechobee School District’s parent guide and student code of conduct each have a different list of excused absences.
- A school in Seminole school district (Lake Howell High School **https://lakehowell.scps.k12.fl.us/cms/one.aspx?pageId=2913949**) offers a QR code or online link to submit attendance note.
- Taylor County School District board policy includes extensive list of excused absences. The Taylor County School District elementary school within the school district considers some of the reasons included on the Board’s list as exceptions to the attendance policy:
    - Chronic or extended illness (must have a doctor’s verification). Students suffering chronic illnesses – e.g, Asthma, Diabetes, etc. – must submit to the principal at the beginning of the school year, a doctor’s verification of the condition
    - A note from the hospital, and/or physician must verify hospitalization
    - Death in the immediate family requiring extended absence (parents/guardian written verification needed)
    - Court subpoena (copy of court paperwork for verification) (**https://content.myconnectsuite.com/api/documents/0d49ff5945dc4babac891f52b337667c.pdf**)

FLORIDA GRADE-LEVEL
READING CAMPAIGN

AN INITIATIVE OF FACCT

For more information on the research contained within this brief, please contact:
Michele Watson, CEO of FACCT, at mwatson@facct.com or 850-320-2388.