Superintendent’s Memo #188-20

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**COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA   
Department of Education**

DATE: July 24, 2020

TO: Division Superintendents

FROM: James F. Lane, Ed.D., Superintendent of Public Instruction

## SUBJECT: Tracking Attendance for the 2020-2021 School Year

Keeping attendance is a critical task for schools and divisions; attendance is a metric for a multitude of statutory and regulatory requirements as well as data that can be operationalized for important school functions. Specifically, daily attendance is tied to compulsory attendance, monitoring truancy or gauging student well-being, determining funding by way of average daily membership (ADM), and serving as a proxy for student engagement, notably as it informs the chronic absenteeism indicator for accreditation. Because many school divisions are employing and adapting to new instructional delivery models beyond brick-and-mortar, the ability to track attendance by conventional measures - i.e. visual observation or face-to-face interaction - is less practical/feasible. Because each division, and even school, will have unique instructional models based on their individual needs and capacities, attendance tracking will look different according to modality and circumstance.

This memo offers suggestions to schools and local school divisions for setting expectations and tracking attendance in a variety of instructional settings as well as additional considerations for the collection and use of attendance data. This guidance is intended to inform local attendance policies or practices in place for the 2020-2021 school year to accommodate for the unique circumstances created by the prevalence of COVID-19. Additionally, considerations are underway to waive or adjust accreditation and the role of chronic absenteeism for the 2020-2021 school year (or 2021-2022 accreditation year). School divisions will be notified if such a waiver or adjustment is approved.

## Setting Expectations for 2020-2021

It is difficult to establish a tracking system that can reliably and consistently address all of the above, but ensuring attendance can still perform key functions for the 2020-2021 school year remains critical. The guidance provided on how to approach attendance in various instructional delivery models allow schools and school divisions to promote the well-being of students through meaningful interaction, meet compulsory attendance requirements, and provide accurate data for the maintenance of ADM.

*Additional Considerations for Local School Divisions*

* Does your local school board need to develop or adopt a local policy to reflect a change in approach or is it simply adjusting and clarifying practices?

## Meaningful Interactions

To encourage the overall well-being of students, divisions should set a minimum expectation for the frequency of meaningful interactions. Meaningful interactions are understood here as two-way engagement with a student and staff that allows some sort of feedback or input from the student on successes and challenges. It is critical that divisions communicate these expectations to families to ensure they fully understand what is expected and seek ongoing feedback on challenges that families are facing in supporting children to attend.

Meaningful interactions may be structured in a way that a student is in contact with one of their teachers or appropriate school staff on a daily basis. However, the type of interaction will be necessarily different for individual grade levels. Elementary students (preK-5) should have a meaningful interaction with their teacher or appropriate school staff on a daily basis. Recognizing the young age of these students, families will play a key role in enabling access for remote attendance and divisions should communicate how these interactions will take place and offer ongoing support for families.

For secondary students (grades 6 - 12), interactions with teachers or appropriate school staff may be structured to allow for daily contact. For example, on Monday, the student touches base with a math teacher; on Tuesday, a science teacher; on Wednesday, their school counselor makes contact. However, at minimum, secondary students should have a meaningful interaction with each of their teachers or another staff member on a weekly basis with attendance checks, as detailed below, occurring on the other days.

The frequency and quality of meaningful interactions should also be considered in delivering services and support for vulnerable student populations such as students with disabilities, English language learners, etc. Certain students may require more intensive approaches in order to receive an appropriate education and needed supports.

*Additional Considerations for Local School Divisions*

* Does the person reaching out for meaningful contact already have a relationship with the student and able to provide answers or support to that student?
* How can you leverage plans for the division’s instructional model and plan to incorporate opportunities for meaningful interaction?

## Tracking and Defining Attendance

Attendance checks should be conducted on a daily basis regardless of instructional modality, so that a data point is available for each student on each school day. While the frequency of checks must be consistent for each student, different measures of “in attendance” may apply. Meaningful interaction with a student may double as an attendance check. For elementary students, this should already occur on a daily basis. However, for secondary school students, there may also be a need to determine what constitutes “in attendance” when a meaningful interaction cannot occur on a daily basis. Teachers and appropriate staff may need to pool their meaningful interactions or attendance checks so that a data point is available for each student on each school day.

The *Tracking Student Attendance in Various Instructional Delivery Models* chart provides a menu of examples for tracking attendance in the different instructional settings and by way of different measures, i.e. time-based measures of attendance and task- or product-based measures of attendance. Some of the examples below may also be considered a meaningful interaction based on the quality of exchange and whether it is “two-way engagement with a student that allows some sort of feedback or input from the student on successes and challenges”.

## Tracking Student Attendance in Various Instructional Delivery Models

|  | **In-Person** | **Remote - Online** | **Remote - Other** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Time-based** | Physical presence during the scheduled instructional day | Virtual presence for a synchronous online lesson  Login time to a learning management system  Activity log on a learning management system  Total time log on a learning management system  Phone call or real-time online chat  Time-stamp for posts or submissions | Submission of a time log  Phone call  Face-to-face meeting (may be an option for divisions have students come in for packet or work collection/drop-off) |
| **Task- or Product-**  **based** | Participation in classes/submission of coursework | Participation in a synchronous online lesson  Demonstrated evidence of engagement with peers for collaborative work  Engagement on a discussion board  Email exchange  Phone call  Submission of task or assignment  “View” tracker for asynchronous online lesson | Submission of task, product, or assignment |

The options provided in the *Tracking Student Attendance in Various Instructional Delivery Models* chart may be used to determine attendance as it informs a student’s status on the school roll, as provided in the Standards of Accreditation at [8VAC20-110-130](https://law.lis.virginia.gov/admincode/title8/agency20/chapter110/section130/).

*Additional Considerations for Local School Divisions*

* How will the division communicate attendance expectations and support to families?
* At what point does attendance data signal a need to engage with a student and/or the adults supporting their learning remotely differently, more frequently, etc.? Divisions should use an equity lens and specifically monitor attendance of vulnerable populations to ensure equitable access (e.g., students with special needs, ELLs, homeless children, young learners).
* What support can the division provide to students not attending? For certain populations, divisions may also need to consider support for families.

Divisions should consult their school board attorney to ensure that nothing in their guidance shall be construed to excuse a parent or guardian from the compulsory attendance requirements set forth in § [22.1-254](https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title22.1/chapter14/section22.1-254/) of the *Code of Virginia*, which permits participation in educational programs and courses at a site remote from the school with the permission of the school and in conformity with applicable requirements.

## Data and Reporting

Whether via meaningful interactions or supplementary attendance checks, attendance data must also be reported and operationalized, so the need for reliable, consistent data should be a consideration for local school divisions. For the purpose of attendance data through the tri-annual Student Record Collection (SRC), the Virginia Department of Education will provide school divisions with additional information on how different attendance scenarios will be communicated in the SRC.

*Additional Considerations for Local School Divisions*

* Beyond state-level needs, what role does attendance data play for the division? Does the attendance tracking system continue to meet these needs?
* What other data does the division need to support truancy officers?
* Can selected daily attendance tracking practices apply per course or per period? Divisions will want to consider how requirements for teachers keeping attendance log may serve as a complementary record-keeping function.
* What is considered an excused or unexcused absence? For example, if a student was unable to login because of device or connectivity issues, is that considered an excused absence? School divisions should evaluate their policies on excused and unexcused absences with an equity lens.

Please note that the guidance above is designed to create a system of attendance tracking that is practical, purposeful, and reasonably implemented before the 2020-2021 school year. Virginia Department of Education staff will continue to discuss the long-term role of attendance data and provide additional guidance and resources to support school divisions in future school years.

JFL/lms