

Student Presence and Engagement

The Manitoba Department of Education has provided guidelines to school divisions to formulate a policy regarding students attending school regularly and participating in their educational experiences as required by law. The Department calls it an “Action Plan to Enhance Student Presence and Engagement.”

Absenteeism has long been a concern as it has been widely accepted that it is critical students be present in schools to get a quality education. Being present when attendance was taken was a rite of passage every morning. Students would say, “present” or “here” in response to their name being called. But time and circumstances have blurred the lines and the importance of being “present”. During the pandemic, pupils were not present in the traditional sense and even as we moved out of covid protocols, students were encouraged to stay home if they were feeling cold or flu like symptoms. While some students excelled during the pandemic with at home or online instruction, most students did not do well mentally, socially, or academically. However, it did open the door to discussions about the value of being physically in the desks for some. It also brought into question whether simply being in the classroom is enough to fully engage students and whether attendance is really that important. But as time goes on, it has become increasingly evident that students who are not present are more likely to be disengaged and disconnected from both their peers and their schoolwork. This creates a lack of belonging which often leads to mental health issues and students look elsewhere for fulfillment.

The Manitoba government has reiterated that attendance and engagement in the classroom are important and need to be emphasized and recorded. Divisions and schools have been tasked with the job of monitoring attendance and intervening when unexcused absenteeism becomes chronic or severe. These will be flagged in the reporting process and the provincial directive is that a student specific plan will be created. While there are excused absences that are unavoidable, it should be noted that students, schools and the community need to work together to help students reach their full potential at school.

Students should be supported in recognizing that missing school involves missing important instruction, classroom discussions, social opportunities and assessment practices. Parents and schools need to work together to emphasize the importance of student presence and engagement. Schools need to continue to make sure they are welcoming and inclusive facilities where students are engaged in their learning. The community as a whole need to continue to recognize that attending school is a priority. When sports groups, medical professionals and service industries try to accommodate whenever possible to make appointments, practices, and games after school hours, these all support the success of our students. Together, we can work towards having the best possible education for our children who are the future of our communities. For further information, you can look up the Presence and Engagement Policy on the Beautiful Plains School Division website.

What we all want is to ensure that every student gets the education they will need to help them with the next steps in their lives.