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New Definitions For Excused, Unexcused Absences

STANDARDIZED LANGUAGE WILL AID RESEARCH ON STUDENT ATTENDANCE, TRUANCY

By **CAROLYN MAZANEC DUGAS** and
MEGAN A. SMITH

Regular attendance is an integral part of any student's ability to be successful in school. Truancy is linked to increased risk for school dropout, delinquent behavior and school failure. The importance of regular school attendance and the perils of truancy have long been recognized by Connecticut's lawmakers, as evidenced by the numerous and varied laws enacted impacting school attendance.

Connecticut has mandatory school attendance laws on its books, placing responsibility on parents or guardians of students between the ages of 5 and 18 to ensure that their children attend public school or otherwise receive equivalent instruction. Likewise, school boards and school districts have numerous responsibilities related to students' school attendance, including the requirement that boards of education annually

Carolyn Mazanec Dugas is an associate in the Milford office of Berchem, Moses & Devlin P.C. She focuses her practice on Education Law. Megan A. Smith is an associate in the firm's Milford office. She also focuses her practice on Education Law.

report to the Connecticut Commissioner of Education information about student attendance rates and truancy in their districts.

Connecticut General Statutes Section 10-198a defines a truant as a child age 5 to 18, inclusive, who is enrolled in a public or private school and has four unexcused absences from school in any one month or 10 unexcused absences from school in any school year. However, prior to June 2012, there had never been a statewide standardized definition for excused or unexcused student absences. That situation changed on June 27, 2012 when the State Board of Education (CSBOE) adopted long-awaited definitions of excused and unexcused student absences as required under Public Act 11-136, "An Act Concerning Minor Revisions to the Education Statutes." The new definitions are to be used by school districts to determine which students qualify as truant for state reporting purposes.

Data Collection, Reporting

Historically, local and regional school boards have defined what constitutes excused or unexcused absences for their individual school districts through their board policies, resulting in definitions that varied from school district to school district



Carolyn Mazanec Dugas



Megan A. Smith

throughout Connecticut. When the time came each year for school boards to report to the Commissioner of Education on student and school performance, including information relating to truancy, different school districts were potentially reporting different information about truancy and student attendance, although the information was treated as comparable. The new standardized definitions help to create consistency in reporting by school districts and will enable the State Department of Education to collect and publish comparable data on student attendance and truancy.

New Definitions

The Connecticut State Board of Education defines a student as "in attendance" if the

student is present at his/her assigned school or an activity sponsored by the school, for a least half of the regular school day. A student who does not meet the definition of "in attendance" is absent.

The State Board of Education has adopted a definition of excused absence that excuses a student's first nine school absences in a given school year based upon a parent's/guardian's approval evidenced by the provision of signed written documentation by the parent/guardian to the school within 10 days of the student's return to school. While the submitted documentation must be specific and state the nature of and reason for the absence and specify the length of time out of school, no further documentation, such as a note from a doctor, is required for the first nine absences. The first nine absences may also be excused by a signed note from a school official who spoke in person with a parent/guardian about the absence, or a note confirming the absence by the school nurse or by a licensed medical professional.

Written documentation must be submitted for each incident of absenteeism. For example, if a student is out two consecutive days, one note will suffice to cover the two days of absence; if the student is out those two days and returns to school and relapses and is out again on a subsequent day, the subsequent nonconsecutive absence will require additional documentation. The State Board of Education is encouraging districts to take steps to allow non-English speaking parents/guardians to submit documentation in their native languages.

When a child reaches his/her tenth absence in a school year, the tenth absence and any subsequent absences in a given school year will only be excused with written documentation for one of these enumerated reasons: 1) for illness (only with documentation from a licensed medical professional for each day of absence); 2) for observance of a religious holiday; 3) death in a student's family or other emergency beyond the control of the student's family; 4) mandated court appearances (with additional written documentation required); 5) in the event of lack of transportation that is

normally provided by a district other than the one the student attends (no parent documentation is required in this instance); and 6) extraordinary educational opportunities (pre-approved by school administration in accordance with Connecticut State Department of Education guidance).

Under the new standards, both parents and schools now have the burden to monitor when a child reaches his/her tenth absence in a given school year.

Excluded From Definitions

The State Board of Education has specifically excluded absences that are the result of school or district disciplinary action from these definitions. Students who are out of school for disciplinary reasons such as

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out-of-school suspension or expulsion are not "in attendance" according to the state's definition; however, such an absence is not to be counted as an absence in determining whether or not a student is a truant or for reporting truancy to the state.

Existing Definitions

Notwithstanding the new definitions, school districts retain the right to maintain their existing definitions of an excused or unexcused absence for internal purposes such as promotion, grading and discipline. The practicality of maintaining separate definitions is best determined by individual school districts after consideration of their other board policies, district practices related to school attendance, promotion,

grading, attainment of class credit, and any unique circumstances or needs of their school populations. State Education Commissioner Stefan Pryor is quoted as referring to the defining of excused and unexcused absences as an action that "will preserve local decision-making while ensuring that families with children at risk of truancy receive the supports they need in the most timely manner."

Guidance Document

The State Department of Education is developing a guidance document to be published by September 2012 on the new standardized definitions of excused and unexcused absences. The guidance promises to provide practical advice to school districts to aid them in carrying out their statutory responsibilities to collect and report student attendance/truancy information and to clarify any questions about the definitions and their use by districts. ■