

Getting Students “In School, ON TIME, Every Day”

The Zero Tardy Campaign has helped solve a persistent problem for elementary schools.

Catherine A. McDonald

Maintaining acceptable student attendance in public schools is tricky at best. In fact, at times, it can be likened to a crisis of epidemic proportion! There are many variables that affect a child’s school attendance, but arriving late to school in an elementary setting can affect every single student in the classroom.

Twelve years ago, at the elementary school where I served as principal, the staff decided to address the problem of tardiness by informing parents that children being tardy to school created a myriad of teaching and learning issues. The result of our efforts became known as the Zero Tardy Campaign, whose mantra is “In School, ON TIME, Every Single Day!” The campaign has been so successful in the two schools where I have served as principal that colleagues in my district have replicated it for their schools. It can work for you, too!

An Early-Morning “Power Hour”

We began the Zero Tardy Campaign by examining the attendance data for our school. We found that our daily attendance rate of more than 90 percent was not a concern. What was a problem was the high number of students who arrived after the last bell had rung, signifying the beginning of the instructional day. Over a period of one year, our staff tracked the circumstances where students arrived late for school, and began to communicate with their parents. Our efforts focused on phone calls, letters (translated to Spanish for those who needed it), and conferences with individual students. Additionally, the staff and I were able to create a “Power Hour,” an intense early-morning review of key language arts and math skills, designed to be fun activities that students would not want to miss.

In our communication with parents, we let them know that students who arrived late were missing out on this critical learning

opportunity as well as those beginning-of-the-day instructions that assist students in planning their day. At the same time, our parent advisory group endorsed the effort to communicate with parents the need for children to arrive on time each day, emphasizing habits that would be needed later in life.

Perhaps most importantly, I sought out a community business partner (a local orthodontist) who worked with me to provide incentives for students, including trinkets, oral health supplies, certificates, occasional food items, and the coveted Zero Tardy trophies! These tangible rewards gave students an additional reason to “buy in” to the Zero Tardy Campaign.

The Ultimate Motivator

The Zero Tardy Trophy was the gimmick that provided just the right motivation to get students in each class to arrive on time for 10 days in a row. Teachers agreed to track the number of days that all students in the class arrived before the tardy bell. As soon as 10 days were tallied, I made a guest appearance with a 3-foot trophy in tow and, at the onset of the campaign, a doughnut for each student in the classroom. (In keeping with efforts to reduce childhood obesity, the doughnuts were later replaced with coupons for additional recess time at the teacher’s discretion.)

Unfortunately, there are those times when no incentive or amount of positive reinforcement will remedy chronic tardiness, and additional efforts are needed to rectify this concern. In my district, the school board has an established policy for student absences, but student tardiness is left up to each principal to work with as he or she sees fit. When my Zero Tardy Campaign doesn’t make an impact on a chronically tardy student, I have pursued the legal course of action afforded by the state truancy regulations.

According to these regulations, schools must communicate to parents—in writing—the policy that governs student attendance. I do this in my parent handbook, in monthly parent newsletters, and in letters to parents of students who are chronically late to school. Working in collaboration with school district counsel, and supported by our district attorney, we have created the formula that every third tardy will result in a quarter-day unexcused absence. By converting tardies to unexcused absences, I can then use the state truancy law to initiate intervention with parents of chronically late students.

Recognizing the Results

Each May, I close the school year with an awards assembly focused on student achievement that goes “above and beyond” expectations of teachers and myself. Among the numerous celebrations on the agenda are the coveted attendance awards. Not only do I provide awards for perfect attendance, I also recognize “outstanding” attendance for those students who missed parts of school days due to a verified doctor’s appointment, or perhaps a death in the family. Many students make it a personal goal to collect Zero Tardy ribbons each quarter, and their own miniature Zero Tardy Trophy at the end of the year.

By making our school a positive learning environment with caring and supportive instructional staff, extracurricular opportunities, and extended learning for at-risk students, we can establish the love for learning that makes students want to come to school. By also working with parents to ensure that their children are “In School, ON TIME, Every Single Day,” we set the tone for a wonderful school-to-work transition.

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On the Same Page

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. What is our school’s attendance and tardiness rates?
2. What are unique variables that contribute to our school’s attendance and tardiness rates?
3. How does tardiness affect the teaching and learning that occurs at our school?
4. What are ideas for a schoolwide approach to improving our attendance and tardiness rates?