CHAPTER 5:

Poverty and school attendance: Barriers and possible solutions

This report is one of a series documenting the findings of the Poverty and Education survey. For additional information, see: http://www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx

A BC Teachers’ Federation study. This survey was conducted by BCTF Research in collaboration with the Anti-poverty action group of the Committee for Action on Social Justice.
About the Poverty and Education survey

The Poverty and Education survey: A teacher’s perspective was conducted by BCTF Research in collaboration with the BCTF Anti-Poverty Action Group of the Committee for Action on Social Justice, building on the findings of focus group research that explored poverty and education issues with teachers in four school districts. The purpose of the provincial survey was to assess whether and to what extent the focus group findings reflect teachers’ experience across the province, to deepen our understanding of how poverty and education issues vary by regional, socio-economic, and school characteristics, and to identify what resources are most needed to address poverty within BC schools and the community.

Contributions and acknowledgments

BCTF Research Department

- Research design, data analysis, and reporting of survey results: Margaret White, Senior Research Analyst
- Assistance in all phases of the research project: Anne Field, Research Assistant
- Leadership and support for the project: Larry Kuehn, Director, Research and Technology Division

Committee for Action on Social Justice—Anti-poverty action group

As staff and committee members have changed since the study began, we would like to acknowledge those who contributed, past and present, at various phases of the research project.

- Leadership, co-ordination, and input into final reports, Barb Ryeburn, Assistant Director, Professional and Social Issues Division
- Leadership, co-ordination, and survey promotion: Kathy Hartman, Assistant Director, Professional and Social Issues Division
- Leadership in the early phases of survey design: James Chamberlain, Assistant Director, Professional and Social Issues Division (up to August 2012)
- Pre-testing, survey promotion, and/or input into survey results: Amy Dash, Sue Spalding, Debbie Sabourin, Annie Ohana (current members as of May, 2013) and ongoing input from members of the CASJ Anti-Poverty Action Group
- Survey development and questionnaire design: Ilse Hill (former member of the CASJ Anti-Poverty Action Group)

We would like to acknowledge former members of the CASJ Anti-Poverty Action Group (Ilse Hill, Julia MacRae, Stacey Kemp), and Linda Young of the Vancouver Elementary School Teachers’ Association Anti-poverty Committee, for their contribution to the focus-group research in phase one of the study. We also wish to acknowledge the contribution of all the teachers who took the time to complete the survey, assisted in the pre-testing, and the teachers who participated in the focus groups that led to the development of this survey.

We also wish to thank Adrienne Montani of First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, for taking the time to review a draft of the survey, and First Call for providing us with opportunities to share the research results with community groups across BC.

We also wish to acknowledge the BC Teachers’ Federation for supporting this project.

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1 White, M., Hill, I., Kemp, S., MacRae, J., and Young, L. (2012). Poverty and education: A teacher’s perspective—Summary of the findings of the focus group research. Available at: www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx.
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Information on study design and who responded to the survey: See Chapter 1, Teachers who responded to the survey and the students that they teach, at www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx.
Introduction

What we learned about poverty-related barriers to school attendance from the focus group research

Low attendance is a barrier faced by some students, many of whom experience poverty, that contributes to learning gaps and prevents them from fully participating at school. The focus-group discussion revealed that the reasons for low attendance are complex, with resources needed to address the barriers parents face (e.g., transportation, family illness, having other small children), as well as being sensitive to cultural issues and involving parents in such a way that they feel more positive about and connected to their child’s school.

Teachers observed that some families living in poverty seemed to have difficulty getting young children to school consistently. Some teachers noted that as students get older they often become more independent in terms of getting themselves to school, although older students sometimes miss school to look after younger siblings while the parents are at work. And some students work in paid employment to help support their family. This can add to the stress students are under from trying to keep up with homework after working long hours, or when their work schedule conflicts with their school schedule.

Attendance was not an issue for all students dealing with poverty. For some, school appeared to be a safe haven, with teachers observing that low-income students tended to appreciate what the school had to offer, often arriving early and staying late, rarely missing a day of school. Some of these schools received extra funding to provide meal programs, after-school activities, and other programs to help build a strong sense of connection among students in the school community.

Survey objectives (related to attendance)

Objectives of the survey related to poverty and school attendance included (1) to document the proportion of students in the class(es) where low attendance was a concern, (2) to learn to what extent the poverty-related barriers to attendance identified in the focus-groups are an issue across the province, (3) to seek feedback from teachers as to the challenges encountered by students who are working in paid employment, (4) to assess from a teacher’s perspective to what extent schools across BC are using approaches that were identified in the focus group to encourage students to attend school, and (5) to elicit information from teachers about the strategies they use to support students with low attendance and address poverty-related barriers to school attendance.

White, M., Hill, I., Kemp, S., MacRae, J., and Young, L. (2012). Poverty and education: A teacher’s perspective—Summary of the findings of the focus group research. Available at: www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx.
School attendance and poverty-related barriers

This section of the survey asked teachers about the proportion of students in their class(es) for whom attendance was a concern, the poverty-related barriers that can make it difficult for students to attend school, and the challenges encountered by students who are working in paid employment. The survey also asked teachers about the approaches their schools use to encourage attendance, and to describe the strategies they use to support students who are having difficulty attending school because of the family’s economic situation.

Proportion of students for whom low attendance is a concern

The survey asked teachers, “How many students are there in your class(es) for whom low attendance is a concern?” Most teachers indicated having some students for whom attendance is a concern. Two-thirds of the respondents (63.5%) indicated attendance is a concern for “Less than one-quarter” of students, and 16.6% indicated it is a concern for “Between one-quarter and one-half” of students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Proportion of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>63.5%</td>
<td>Less than one-quarter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>Between one-quarter and one-half</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>More than three-quarters of all students currently teach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>No answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>Between one-half and three-quarters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How many students are there in your class(es) for whom low attendance is a concern?
Percentage of teachers indicating a proportion (n=778 respondents)
The survey also asked teachers, “Of the students with low attendance, how many are you aware of who are also experiencing poverty?” One-third of respondents indicated “Less than one-quarter” and 12% indicated “Between one-quarter and one-half” of students with low attendance are also experiencing poverty. About one in four respondents indicated at least one-half of the students for whom attendance is a concern are also experiencing poverty.
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Characteristics of schools where there is at least one-quarter of students for whom low attendance is a concern

The following tables compare data on the socio-economic, regional, and zone characteristics for teachers who indicated having at least one-quarter of the students in their class(es) for whom attendance is a concern, with that of all respondents. A higher proportion of teachers in low-income schools (53.4% vs. 32.8% of the sample) and in rural schools (30.7% vs. 22.4% of the sample) indicate that attendance is a concern compared to the sample as a whole. The table with data on zone suggest that schools located in North Coast (8.6% vs. 3.9% of the sample) and in Vancouver Island North (16.6% vs. 12.3% of the sample) have a higher proportion of students for whom low attendance is a concern.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-economic context</th>
<th>More than 1/4 of students with low attendance (n=163)</th>
<th>All respondents (n=778)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>53.4%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle income</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High income</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed incomes</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>More than 1/4 of students with low attendance (n=163)</th>
<th>All respondents (n=778)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote area</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
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<td>No answer</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zone</th>
<th>More than 1/4 of students with low attendance (n=163)</th>
<th>All respondents (n=778)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kootenay</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okanagan</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Coast</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Central/Peace River</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraser Valley</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro Vancouver area &amp; West</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver Island North</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver island South</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Poverty-related barriers to attendance

The survey also asked teachers about how many students miss school for reasons identified in the focus-group research as poverty-related barriers to school attendance. The chart below shows the results for elementary and middle/secondary teachers in the survey, and the table shows results for the sample.

The most significant poverty-related barrier to attending school is “Student does not have a stable living or housing situation”. In the survey, two-thirds of elementary teachers and 85.6% of middle/secondary teachers indicate having students in their class(es) who miss school for this reason. The barriers listed are most significant for students in middle/secondary grades. Of the 307 middle/secondary teachers in the survey, about two-thirds or more indicate “A few”, “Some”, “Most”, or “All” of the students in their class(es) miss school for the following three reasons: “Stay home to look after younger siblings” (72.6%), “Lack of transportation to and from school” (63.2%), or “Parent has illness or disability that makes it hard to get children to school” (64.2%).
Students working in paid employment

Of the 307 middle/secondary teachers in the survey, 71.7% (220 teachers) indicated they have students in their class who are working in paid employment. Of these 220 teachers, almost one-half (45.5%) indicated “A few” students, one-quarter (26.4%) indicated “Some” students, and 7.3% indicated “Most” students work in paid employment to help support themselves or their families.

Of the 220 middle/secondary teachers with students in their class(es) working in paid employment, 40.5% indicated “A few” of the students, and 27.3% indicated “Some” of these students miss school for the reason “Work schedule conflicts with school”.

* Percentages are based on 220 middle/secondary teachers who indicated having students in their class(es) who work in paid employment.
Teacher observations of educational challenges for students working in paid employment

Of the 220 middle/secondary teachers who are aware of students in their class(es) who work in paid employment, about one-quarter indicated it is a challenge for “Most” or “All” students in their class(es) who are working in paid employment to “Complete assignments on time” (26.8%) and to “Maintain grades” (23.1%). About one in ten teachers indicated it is a challenge for these students to “Attend classes regularly” (13.2%) and/or to “Stay enrolled in course or school” (10.9%).

* Percentages are based on 220 middle/secondary teachers who indicated having students in their class(es) who work in paid employment.
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Approaches used by schools to encourage school attendance

The survey asked teachers about what approaches the school uses to encourage and support students to attend school. Of those who answered the question (and for whom it applied to their teaching situation), eight in ten teachers indicated their school uses strategies such as “Staff are welcoming to students, if they arrive late” (79.3%), and “Programs to help track school attendance” (80.7%). About two-thirds (64.2%) of teachers indicated the school has “Programs to welcome and involve parents in the school”. About one-half (56.8%) indicated the school has “Dedicated staff to support attendance”, and less than one-third (29.5%) indicated the school provides “Assistance with travel costs to and from school”.

Does your school use any of the following approaches to encourage school attendance?
(Excludes “Does not apply” and No answer)

- Staff are welcoming to students, if they arrive late (n=725) 79.3%
- Programs to help track school attendance (n=722) 80.7%
- Dedicated staff to support attendance (n=716) 56.8%
- Assistance with travel costs to and from school (n=634) 29.5%
- Programs to welcome and involve parents in the school (n=713) 64.2%
Strategies teachers have found helpful to support students who are having difficulty attending school because of the family’s economic situation

The survey asked teachers, “What strategies have you, as a teacher, found helpful to support students who are having difficulty attending school because of the family’s economic situation?”

Strategies to support students with low attendance described by teachers in response to this question are grouped by thematic areas, and presented with illustrative teacher quotes for each of these topic areas. Topic areas include:

- Multiple strategies to encourage attendance and support students
- Flexibility on the part of the teacher central to strategies to encourage completion of assignments
  - Flexibility about deadlines for completing missed assignments
  - Flexible scheduling
  - Adapting schedule and assignments for students in paid employment
  - Flexibility while communicating about the issue of low attendance
- Strategies to support students to catch up on missed assignments
  - Provide extra help in the classroom before and after school
- Use of technology to facilitate barriers related to school attendance
  - Provide online access to course content and communication with teachers
  - Email communication to communicate with student about missed assignments
- Creating a compassionate and caring community
  - Bring qualities of patience, kindness, support, and understanding
- Communicating and building relationships with students and parents
  - Communicating and building relationships with families
  - Communicating about the importance of attending school
- Communicating with students to support and encourage attendance
- Fostering a sense of connection
- Working as a team with school staff to support students with low attendance
  - Professional staff
  - Education Support Workers role in addressing barriers to school attendance
  - Family and Youth Workers
  - Aboriginal Support Workers
  - Multicultural Workers
  - Education Assistants
- Community and after-school programs
- Some strategies are supportive but do not necessarily change the situation
- Providing resources to meet the basic needs of students experiencing poverty
  - Food
  - Clothing
  - School activities and supplies
  - Multiple needs
  - Training in life skills that may help with school attendance
- Assisting with transportation for students to travel to and from school.
Multiple strategies to encourage attendance and support students

Many teachers described the multiple strategies they use to support students with low attendance. The following comments in which teachers describe some of these strategies illustrate the effort and care teachers put into encouraging and addressing barriers to school attendance. These examples illustrate the compassionate approach used to support students with low attendance that may include driving students to and from school, attending to basic needs for food and clothing, and creating a safe and caring space:

* Spoken with families about available services; had counsellors become involved with families; adapted assignments; driven kids to and from school; made sure their other teachers were aware of the situations.

* Staying in contact with student via email, being welcoming and understanding, implementing a free tutoring club after school that employs students with strong academics and to provide a quiet place for students to do homework before going home to go to work, make dinner, or take care of siblings.

* Transporting to and from school/appointments. Providing family breakfasts at school, getting them warm clothing, bringing in agencies that offer help in the home. Letting kids nap at school. Making them feel safe/loved.

* Mostly, I see children of parents who work many hours, coming to school late, tired, and often not properly fed. Their unstable home life seems to affect school work habits. Often the parents have mental health or behavioural challenges themselves (anger management, substance abuse, or other). I try to foster sincere trust and connection on a daily basis. I refer students I feel are vulnerable to our school counselor or art therapist. I allow them to eat when needed and try to teach them [about] all the supportive resources they have at school. I also foster connections with the parents to try to build support for their child’s learning at home. I very discreetly remind them that there is subsidy available for field trips that require payments.

* Being positive with them when they do attend, reduce workload so that they can catch up, provide them with extra help after school, pair them up with a work buddy of their choice to assist them in class when I am not available, adapt assignments.

* Extend deadlines for work, lunch-hour tutorials where we can cover curriculum AND have lunch, reduce content, allow test re-writes, give information about outside school assistance, help students access in-school counselling and lunch/breakfast programs.

* When I taught high school, this was a serious concern...I have worked all of the following into my classroom, to accommodate ANY after-school job or activity: * flexible submission dates; * online resources, class website, school-based email addresses, etc.; * only 30+ minutes of reading as standard homework, with my classroom open during lunch and after school for students who need homework help; * computers available in the classroom (I volunteer to maintain a laptop lab for our pod); * extra supplies in classroom cupboards.
The teachers’ responses to this question provide many insights into the depth and range of strategies teachers and the school use to address poverty-related barriers to attendance, and, as well, the personal qualities they try to emulate in supporting students with low attendance. These are presented on the following pages, grouped by topic area.

**Flexibility on the part of the teacher central to strategies to encourage completion of assignments**

Flexibility was a central theme in teachers’ comments when describing their approaches to supporting school attendance. Teachers’ comments suggest many are flexible with adapting homework assignments, and allowing students more time to complete assignments.

*Students in these situations often need flexibility, support and understanding. I have often extended due dates, adapted assignments to make them more relevant to the particular student’s experience and stayed in touch via email (if students cannot attend classes regularly). An encouraging, non-judgmental attitude is also key.*

**Flexibility about deadlines for completing missed assignments**

Many teachers indicated they were flexible about deadlines for school assignments and exam dates, and adapted coursework for students with low attendance:

*Flexibility re: due dates, discussions with counsellors re. anything I can do to support student.*

*Allow flexibility with assignment due dates, extra help on subject material, try to get social support services for those students.*

*Being flexible with due dates, teaching materials more than once so that missing one day is not the end of the world.*

*I offer adaptations in terms of work required when the student is absent because the single parent is unable to get her to school due to her own health issues and lack of support.*

*Flexibility and willingness to adapt coursework.*

*Extensions on assignments, allowed to make up missed classes at an early-morning block.*

*Accept the situation and provide as much time as needed for assignments.*

*I use ‘soft’ due dates and give students as much time as possible to turn in assigned work.*

*Allowing more time for assignments, allowing students to choose the type of assignment they complete, not expecting the same output.*
Flexible scheduling
In some teaching situations, students are on modified schedules that can be adapted to the needs of students where low attendance is a concern:

We are a different educational setting where students attend 3 hours a day for 4 days a week. We have 3 shifts. If a student is having trouble attending, we can change their class time or give them a modified schedule – ex. full days instead of 4 half days to reduce transit costs.

Part-time schedule, outreach at home or in the community.

We provide packaged curriculum – hospital homebound teachers – drop in whenever they can – virtual school – community counselling 1 day per week if they will accept which most do not.

Use “units” of work and let students work on an independent schedule.

Having them work to complete just one or two courses at a time.

One teacher noted that instead of flexibility, attendance was mandatory in an alternate program:

Going to school is a mandatory part of the residential rehab program my students are in.

Adapting schedule and assignments for students in paid employment
The survey found that many teachers have students in their classes who are working in paid employment to help support their families. In the comments, some teachers indicated being flexible with students who are working in paid employment so they can better balance school assignments with their work schedules:

Excused work or allowed more time when a student has worked the graveyard shift....

If I know the student’s work schedule I try to adapt lessons to it (i.e. If I know he/she will always be late on Tuesday morning, I try to avoid assessment for that time). Also, if I give advance warning for major projects, students are able to often work around their schedules.

We have a very flexible schedule and allow students to do their school work as they can around work schedules.

Our school does not have deadlines for assignments, so we have a flexible schedule and school hours for those that work. However, only a few students can find work, while others want work but lack the skills and necessary tools like a phone.

My school is an alternative school that operates a self-paced program for virtually all students. This approach allows students to complete courses even when they have attendance gaps due to work schedules (or other factors).

Students who are working and have motivation work hard at school and are easy to support, such as asking for an extension or seeking extra help. It is difficult to help students with low motivation, see themselves continuing in poverty.
Flexibility while communicating about the issue of low attendance
A few teachers described being flexible and understanding while opening up communication with the student and family about attendance issues.

Always be welcoming and accepting, discuss obstacles and try to problem-solve with the student and parent, goal-setting to improve attendance.

Giving homework, additional assignments, more time for assignments Being open for them to talk to about the realities. Flexibility.

Extend deadlines; communicate with home to let them know how important attending school is for succeeding in school. Make class activities relevant to real life.

Alternate attendance schedule and sharing that with parents so that they know I am working with their child. Additional year at school to complete graduation, but talking with admin to ensure they participate with peer group for grad activities, etc. Ensuring that financial aid gets to as many students as possible for their needs.

Strategies to support students to catch up on missed assignments
Some teachers prepared homework packages, along with strategies to facilitate the homework.

Provide homework assignments and homework support to student.

Send homework to their house with another student.

Being prepared with packages of work for students to take home to do as an alternative to what the class may be doing.

Having work for them to do at home. Giving extra time to complete assignments. Extra one-on-one help when they return. Alternate assignments.

Providing work that can be done at home if the student is capable of independent work. Making sure they know that their “spot” is reserved for them (not striking them from the class list after a certain number of absences).

Provide extra help in the classroom before and after school
Several teachers open the classroom to students before and after class, and at lunch hour, to help them catch up on missed assignments.

I open my classroom by 7:30 and keep it open till about 6:00 almost every day so that students who miss classes can get extra help with their school work if they need it.

Homework support during the lunch break, to catch up.

I do not require my gr. 2 students to make up missed work; I give them extra help at recess when possible; I send work home to be finished (unless prior history shows that it will not be returned).

Providing extra time/help for students to come in and get their work done.

Exempt some assignments; give extensions; work with them at lunch or after school to catch up.
To be a good listener...Helped with assignments/homework after school when they are available to do it. Helping them to be organized – ensuring that time for work and studying are somehow balanced. Helping them understand the value of prioritizing...

Flexibility in test dates, assignment due dates. Availability out of class time for extra help.

I accept late assignments, and encourage students to come in during lunch or after school for me to help them catch up.

A few teachers commented that as much as possible they avoided assigning a lot of homework.

I do not assign a lot of homework; there is always adequate time in class to complete the learning outcomes and related assignments. Many do not have time outside of school hours to think about school work.

Not sending home homework, having school work completed in class.

Minimize the amount of “catch-up work” when they are in attendance to only the essential assignments.

I give very little homework, and have my room open at lunch for work on assignments or catch up.
Use of technology to facilitate barriers related to school attendance

The following comments illustrate how some teachers integrate technology into their strategies using email, blogs, class websites, and other online resources to assist students with low attendance to catch up on school assignments:

Provide online access to course content and communication with teachers

*Providing online practice for those who have internet.*

*Offer flexible times during the day for ‘catch-up’ or extra support and access to tutoring online.*

*Supply resources on website to access at home, mod. labs to use online virtual labs.*

*Post assignments on blog so if they miss they can easily catch up.*

*Using online to access course work. Looking at alternate education programs within school Encouraging continued attendance at school.*

*Put the work online so they can download it or do it on a separate piece of paper.*

*Having easy access to missed work – in class folder plus online access to missed assignments, lunch hour and after school tutorials to “catch up”.*

*Keeping class work updated on a website, phoning home and keeping open lines of communication.*

*Flexibility, “homework hotline” or website so that they and their parents can see what they missed, upcoming deadlines, etc.*

*Homework clubs, online/teacher blogs, adapted course materials and assignment expectations, alternate assignments.*

*Time extensions, homework clubs, and online support.*

Email communication to communicate with student about missed assignments

The following comments by teachers reveal how email communication can facilitate communication about missed assignments with students and parents, and enable students to receive and submit assignments:

*They may submit assignments through email, and they are also able to email me questions regarding homework.*

*Providing my work email/work phone number for questions and communication when needed with encouragement to use.*

*Adapt course materials; correspond via electronic means rather than forcing student to come in to school.*

*Moving educational resources online accessible at home and outside school hours. Give them means of communicating with a teacher outside of school hours for support (school email or teacher/course website).*

*Online work for those with access, open communication: calling student/asking student to discuss situation with employer.*

*Flexible deadlines and extra support outside class time. Occasional answering emails from these students. Or emailing work.*
Creating a compassionate and caring community

Bring qualities of patience, kindness, support, and understanding
The theme of welcoming students when they do attend, and showing patience, understanding, and compassion towards students, is an important part of a teacher’s approach to addressing barriers related to low attendance:

- I try to be welcoming, kind and understanding.
- Being welcoming and understanding.
- Make school a welcoming place.
- Make the child feel welcome when they can attend.
- Patience and understanding.
- Patience, patience, patience.
- Being understanding and non-judgmental.
- Compassion, counselling, monitoring attendance.
- Empathy and flexibility.
- Just support and understanding.
- Understanding, patience, more work.
- Kindness and understanding.
- Just being as positive and supportive as I can when they arrive through my door.

The following examples illustrate how teachers and counsellors draw on these qualities to support students while finding ways to encourage school attendance:

- All we do is encourage attendance by welcoming and giving emotional support to the students and their parents. We also encourage attendance at the breakfast program, sometimes providing other transitions into the class.

- I am aware that some of my Kindergarten kids are dropped off/picked up by older siblings on occasion. I always welcome and engage the older sibling and see if they are ok. I try and commiserate and let them know I understand what it’s like to grow up quick. I also encourage them to hurry and get on to school so they can learn too. I have previously signed up older siblings for the lunch program too as they were unaware of it.

- Whenever this occurs in my Kg. class, I talk to the parent, write in the report card, speak to the person who works on getting kids with poor attendance to school. I hug and am ecstatic to the child when they arrive (never irritated) as it is not their fault they are late. In the past for example a boy said he had to wake the parent up to get him to school, so I heaped on the praise.

- As an Area Counsellor, have collaborated with staff and Administrators to welcome families into the school, to hear the situation and to offer assistance, or make suggestions about supports in the community.
Communicating and building relationships with students and parents
When communicating with parents about low attendance, some teachers emphasize the importance of relationship-building, while others’ focus was on helping parents understand how low attendance is impacting their child’s learning and participation at school.

Communicating and building relationships with families

Build solid relationships with parents and phone calls.

Building a relationship with family, building trust – Providing opportunities for work to be done on an adjusted timeline – Flexibility and understanding!

Meeting with the family, listening, caring and being understanding about the challenges without judgement – Connecting parents with other parents and encouraging community support.

Connect with parents; praise student’s efforts to make it to school; entice student with highly motivating school activities.

Discussion with student why they are late; creating a trusting and open relationship; fostering support for the student and family to help balance at home child care and ensuring my student gets to school on time. Discussion with parent(s).

Reaching out to parent (usually it seems to be single-parent families) and learning more about their situation, then trying to link to community services.

Supportive conversations with parents to encourage punctuality and attendance; sending work home that was missed so the student is not behind when they return.

Talking to parents whenever they can find time over phone about reasons. Always show readiness to listen and understanding when late.

Maintaining positive contact with parents. Providing catch up work and offering support to learn missed lessons. Buddying students with strong learners to help them catch up.

Keep good communication open with family.

Maintain as much communication with home as possible.

Communicating about the importance of attending school

Meeting with the parents and explaining the importance of attendance and the impact it has on learning.

At the K level, all we have been able to do is send home letters and talk to parents about how their child’s lack of attendance is reflecting poorly on their ability to learn and be an active member of the class.

Conversations with student and parents re: the importance of school for long-term success. Some students choose to focus on work because of the rewards of money. They do not see the long-term benefits of school and education.

Talking to parents to investigate alternative solutions, seek social service support.

Talk to parents and explain how it’s affecting their child’s grades.

Parental education on the impact of their child staying home.
Communicating with students to support and encourage attendance

Maintaining open communication with students, with a focus on problem-solving, was mentioned as a strategy by some teachers.

*In the past, when I was an enrolling teacher, I afforded students extended opportunity to complete assignments. I also found that explicitly acknowledging and dignifying the challenges such students face was motivational. No matter whom you’re dealing with, a huge part of effective teaching is relational. My school’s motto is “Eye to eye with respect”; I tried to approach attendance and performance issues through this lens.*

*Just try to maintain contact with the student so that they know the door is always open. Try to encourage them and work with their schedule.*

*Discuss the issue with them and see how I can help (i.e. be more flexible with tardiness or absenteeism).*

*Discuss with student what they need from me in order to catch up on missed work and provide extra time for one-to-one assistance.*

*Discussion and reflection...problem solving strategies.*

*We try to look for the root cause of the lates or absences. And work to solve the problem.*

In some cases, teachers also involve counsellors in the problem-solving process:

*I have a personal conversation with the student; we include the grade Counsellor in helping make decisions, along with the parent(s) as to whether to cut back on hours worked OR drop/audit a course in order to succeed with less of a load of courses. Or get the student to take a self-paced online course, where warranted and suitable for the situation.*

*Encouragement, phone calls, offering AEW [Aboriginal Education Worker], counselling support.*

*Talking. Referral to counselling. I am alternate teacher; I organize course work to accommodate their situations.*

*Touching base with them through school-home liaison and when they attend.*

The following quote illustrates how heavy teacher workloads and large classes can make it more difficult for teachers to provide the one-on-one support needed to help students overcome barriers to attendance:

*When you are teaching 7 classes of 30, or 120 students a day, with the heavy demands on teachers academically, responsibilities, calling parents, monitoring assessment...etc. it is hard to counsel each student on their individual situations...it is getting harder and harder to do it “all.”*
Fostering a sense of connection
Fostering a sense of connection by showing the student you care and by engaging them and their parents in the school community was a common theme:

Connect with your students so they know you care about THEM and their learning.

Find ways to connect to their experiences if possible. Let them know that I support them and care for them.

Keep them connected and flexibility by teachers. Our timetable is fixed so students can book work if they have a spare in the last block of the day.

Make connections with the student. Try to make school a safe, needs-fulfilling place to be.

Try to encourage and engage student in learning, checking in frequently and giving them special attention.

Try to make school fun and motivating and engaging.

Working as a team with school staff to support students with low attendance
Supporting students to overcome barriers related to school attendance can involve many different types of staff at the school, including professional and education support staff.

Letting the staff know, sharing the information so we all know (in confidence). We operate in a “Conspiracy of Caring”.

Professional staff
Some comments indicate the central role counsellors play in helping to address barriers to school attendance, and the need to communicate with other teachers and administrators about students who face challenges attending school:

Communicating with counselors and fitting the expectations of the curriculum to what they can do in their work schedule.

Conference with teachers to foster awareness.

Discuss with administration or counsellors. Provide extra support for the student.

Being a good listener, having open communication with the counsellors.

Talking to other teachers, support staff, especially mental health counsellors...

One teacher commented that in some situations these channels are unsuccessful, and social workers may need to be included on the team to work with the student and their family.

I need more strategies offered, as we’ve gone the administration route where they call home/send a letter with concern re: their child not attending school regularly. In one instance, we had to get the school-based social worker involved as we thought it was social services case and that the family needed to know how concerned we were at the school (that their child had the right to their education & shouldn’t be denied access to look after their siblings).
Education Support Worker’s role in addressing barriers to school attendance

The following comments by teachers illustrate the valuable contribution of Family and Youth Workers, Aboriginal Support Workers and Multicultural Workers who liaise with the student, family, counsellor, and teachers to support students with low attendance.

Family and Youth Workers

Ensuring strong relationship with the childcare worker who can give the child extra attention so they feel welcome at school. The childcare worker can also provide an extra connection between the school and child’s home. Keeping connected to the family and child to ensure both feel welcome at the school.

Youth and Family Worker available to pick up students if necessary.

We have a youth worker and a counsellor who help these students.

Doing home visits as a K teacher gives a sense of what support might be needed. Teachers are key to helping this student. Youth care worker works with teachers and students who are in challenging situations – only have 1 day a week in our school.

Aboriginal Support Workers

We have family counsellor and First Nation’s counsellor who contact the home.

Involce counsellor/Aboriginal support worker/childcare worker, etc. Help them to connect with a neighbour, etc. to assist with bringing children to school.

We have a First Nations support teacher who contacts families regularly to check with ongoing issues. This is very helpful to me as a teacher.

Our Aboriginal Home Support Worker has sometimes picked up students who have missed the bus and do not have a vehicle to bring them to school.

Working with Youth and Family Workers, our First Nations Worker.

Multicultural Workers

Multicultural workers and counselors.

Counselling team and inner city team. I used the multicultural workers and multilingual translators. I’ve worked with our community centre to enrol children in before school and after school programs and helped them get subsidies.

Let them come to class, contact parents in home language via independent or private community support workers and district multicultural workers.

Education Assistants

Work with students during recess and lunch, have a CEA work with students in small groups

LA support to keep them up to date (as much as possible) with assignments.

Communication with parents, extra time with SEA to work on projects.
Community and after-school programs

The following comments illustrate how community programs can engage families in the school community, and in doing so help improve school attendance:

*Trying to get programs for all ages so that older children can participate instead of walking the younger one home...Driving kids to games.*

*At the elementary school I am working at, there is a Share program that works out of the adjoining building that many of our parents go to for support with ELL or other programs. This seems to help in them bringing their children to school.*

**Some strategies are supportive but do not necessarily change the situation**

The following quote illustrates a teacher’s concern that flexibility isn’t always enough to close the learning gaps resulting from low attendance, and students fall behind their peers in spite of teachers’ best efforts.

*We can’t hold them accountable for NOT attending, so we follow the law, and adapt curriculum, adapt assessments, give extra chances, and pass them on to the next grade anyway.*

Two teachers noted that some strategies may be supportive and relieve some stress, but may not necessarily change the situation or reduce the educational impact of low attendance:

*I always tell them that education and learning is a life-long process and you don’t have to learn it all now. However, their living situation and/or family environment are often something that needs to be dealt with immediately. This relieves student stress but doesn’t help with their education... it just postpones it until they hopefully have time to deal with it at a later date. Also, accepting of late assignments/projects, allowing re-writes for tests, etc.*

*Staying in touch with the family – making the student welcome when they are at school. These strategies don’t change the situation, though.*

Another teacher noted that showing an interest in the student’s situation and providing them with some flexibility may be more important than trying to solve the problems they are experiencing:

*I encourage kids to tell me what’s going on in their lives that makes school or coming to class a challenge. I don’t solve their problem or even try, really, nor do they want me to for the most part, just give them some lee-way if there are extenuating circumstances. Personally, I believe this is part of good teaching. Kids don’t forget kindness, and perhaps they will have the opportunity to pay it forward in the future.*
Providing resources to meet the basic needs of students experiencing poverty

Some of the strategies teachers used to encourage school attendance included finding ways to address basic needs such as connecting students to breakfast programs, providing clothing, and finding resources so they could participate in school activities.

Food

*Breakfast program, lunch program, after school programs.*

*I am currently trying to find funding to support a District-wide breakfast program that would provide nutritious breakfasts to students experiencing financial hardship or are bringing less-than-adequate food items to school to support their physical needs.*

*I feed, clothe and drive them when necessary.*

*I provide them with food and try to get them odd (paying) jobs around the school.*

*Provide a warm breakfast if on time.*

*Provide food and resources.*

*Connecting them to community school coordinator – telling them about the in school weekly food bank – making sure that the families know that they can return the envelope for lunch money without $$ inside – making sure that children go to the breakfast program.*

*Morning phone calls, providing food to my entire class.*

*Referring students to our lunch and snack programs.*

Clothing

*Having a supply of outerwear and boots and inside shoes for students available to use.*

*Support of clothing, food, assignment modification.*

School activities and supplies

*Finding resources, and funds to allow them to get to school and to participate in class activities.*

*Giving resources to family that they can access for help.*

*Our Parent Advisory group helps pay for school supplies.*

*Support from community organizations.*

*Assisting students in applying for scholarships for post-secondary. Completing our financial assistance referral for a student so they can access school funds. Referring students to the Cinderella project for grad clothes.*

Multiple needs

*Talking to other teachers and community members, accessing outside agency, listening ear to parent, informing about food program, rent rebate.*
Training in life skills that may help with school attendance

Many of them need time-management skills to help them do all the tasks and chores expected of them both at home and at school.

Communities have attempted to put on parenting courses and such for our young parents, but one of the issues we have is that they sleep in and their children do too.

Assisting with transportation for students to travel to and from school

Lack of transportation is a significant barrier and the comments reveal the range of strategies school staff used to find ways to assist students to travel to and from school, if needed.

Support the parent in positive decisions; provide transportation and outside agency contact.

I have purchased bus passes for students, have requested bus passes from the school and/or the district. I phone regularly and have made home visits for those who cannot come to the school.

At our school, even though it is elementary, there are a few teachers who will volunteer to pick children up and get them to school and get them home if need be. They have driving profiles, proper insurance, and our school bought car seats. Paid for by teachers and some from PAC.

Going physically and picking up the child! Making them welcome no matter what time they arrive, etc...

Support staff have picked kids up, bus tickets have been supplied.

It helps if they enjoy at least some of what we do in class, and if they feel comfortable with me as a person. Actually going and picking them up in the morning (V.P. does this sometimes or an E.A.) is highly effective, but we can’t sustain it, of course.

Offered to go pick kids up at home, feed kids, give them any support needed to get them to attend school regularly – whatever it takes.

Our school tries to engage community resources to transport the students.

Picked up by support worker on their way to school.

Picking them up, helping parents access our UFC or parent liaison worker.

Principal arranges for busing for child – the breakfast program ensures some students arrive on time at school – support via meal programs encourages parents to send children to school.

We have given students rides home, with parent permission, so they can attend after school activities, provided transportation with an employee (teacher, CUPE or admin).
Summary and discussion: Chapter 5

The objectives of this section of the survey were to document the extent to which low attendance is an issue, the poverty-related barriers that can make it difficult for students to attend school, the approaches schools use to encourage attendance, and the challenges encountered by students who are working in paid employment. The purpose of collecting the qualitative data was to provide insights into the types of strategies teachers find helpful in supporting students with low attendance.

Quantitative results

Most teachers (84.5%) have some students for whom low attendance is a concern. Teachers in schools located in low-income areas and schools located in rural areas were more likely to indicate having at least one-quarter of the students in their class(es) for whom low attendance was a concern. About one in four respondents (combined percentages) indicated at least one-half of the students for whom attendance is a concern are also experiencing poverty.

The survey results indicate that the most significant barrier to school attendance is “Student doesn’t have a stable living or housing situation”. Two-thirds of elementary teachers and 85.6% of middle/secondary teachers indicate having students in their class(es) who miss school for this reason. Middle/secondary students seem most vulnerable to poverty-related barriers to attendance. Of the 307 middle/secondary teachers in the survey, almost two-thirds indicate having students in their class(es) who miss school for each of the following reasons: to “Stay home to look after younger siblings”, because of “Lack transportation to and from school”, or “Parent has illness or disability that makes it difficult to get children to school”.

Of the 220 middle/secondary teachers who indicated having students in their class who work in paid employment, almost one-half indicated “A few” students, one-quarter indicated “Some” students, and 7.3% indicated “Most” students work to help support themselves or their families. When asked how many of these students miss school because “Work schedule conflicts with school”, 40.5% indicated “A few”, 27.3% indicated “Some”, and 1.4% indicated “All” students working in paid employment miss school for this reason.

The survey results suggest that some students working in paid employment face challenges balancing school and work demands, and some may eventually drop courses or leave school. About one-quarter of these 220 teachers indicated it is a challenge for “Most” or “All” students working in paid employment to: “Complete assignments on time” and to “Maintain grades”. About one in ten teachers indicated it is a challenge for these students to “Attend classes regularly” and/or to “Stay enrolled in course or school”.

Qualitative results

Several teachers described multiple strategies they use to support students with low attendance, with these comments illustrating the effort and care teachers put into addressing poverty-related barriers to school attendance. Strategies teachers used to encourage school attendance included finding ways to address basic needs such as connecting students to breakfast programs, and providing clothing and finding resources so they could participate in school activities. Lack of transportation is a significant barrier, and the comments reveal the effort teachers and other school staff made to assist students with transportation, including driving students to and from school.
Flexibility a central element of strategies to support students with low attendance

Flexibility was a central theme in teachers’ approaches to encouraging students with low attendance to catch up on missed assignments. Many teachers indicated they are flexible with extending deadlines, adapting homework assignments, and allowing students more time to complete assignments. Several teachers open the classroom to students before and after class, and at lunch hour, to help them catch up on missed assignments. Some teachers indicated supporting students who are working in paid employment by being flexible about deadlines, adapting school assignments, and giving advance warning about major projects.

Integrating technology into strategies to address barriers to attending school

The comments by teachers illustrate the creative ways in which some teachers integrate technology into their strategies to address barriers to school attendance using email, blogs, class websites, and other online resources to assist students with low attendance to catch up on school assignments. The comments by teachers illustrate how email communication can facilitate communication about missed assignments with students and parents and enable students to receive and submit assignments.

Creating a compassionate and caring community

The theme of welcoming students when they do attend, and showing patience, understanding, and compassion towards students, is an important part of many teachers’ approach to addressing barriers relating to low attendance. Maintaining open communication with students, with a focus on problem-solving, was mentioned by some teachers, as was fostering a sense of connection by showing the student they care and by engaging them in the school community. When communicating with parents about low attendance, some teachers emphasized the importance of relationship-building, and of helping parents understand how low attendance is impacting their child’s learning and participation at school.

Communicating with school staff who support students with low attendance

Supporting students to overcome barriers related to school attendance is often a team approach, involving professional and education support staff. Some teachers describe the central role counsellors play in helping to address barriers to school attendance, and the need to communicate with other teachers and administrators about students. Others commented on the valuable contribution of Family and Youth Workers, Aboriginal Support Workers, and Multicultural Workers who liaise with the student, family, counsellor, and teachers in supporting students with low attendance.

Discussion and implications of the findings

There are several implications that arise from these survey findings on poverty-related barriers to school attendance. First, the finding that lack of a stable living situation is the most significant poverty-related barrier to school attendance illustrates the need for a provincial poverty reduction plan. Poverty reduction plans3 include an umbrella of policies to address underlying causes of poverty, such as affordable housing, accessible and affordable childcare programs, and increases in social assistance rates and the minimum wage. Improving the economic and social conditions of BC’s most vulnerable families through a poverty reduction strategy would help to remove a significant barrier to school attendance for low-income students.

Second, the survey results suggest that transportation barriers prevent many students from attending school. Lack of transportation is a barrier that can be addressed by providing the

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funding necessary to ensure that all students have access to the financial assistance needed to cover the cost of transit. Where public transit is not an option, students have traditionally travelled to and from school by a public school bus. In recent years, several school districts, urged on by the provincial government, have started charging a fee to parents for their children to travel to and from school. Students in low-income families are the most adversely affected by this policy. Even if financial assistance is available for students experiencing financial hardship, parents are often reluctant to disclose their economic situation.  

Third, the open-ended responses by teachers illustrate the valuable contribution of school counsellors and educational support staff whose role it is to liaise with and support students and families to overcome barriers to low attendance. Chapter 9 of this study provides evidence that there is a high unmet need for Specialist teachers to address learning gaps and Counselling services to support students experiencing poverty. Ministry of Education teacher statistics also show an ongoing loss of teaching positions, including counsellors and special education teachers, as a result of inadequate provincial funding. These survey findings suggest that more funding is needed for extra counsellors to address poverty-related barriers, as well as for extra learning specialists to address learning gaps. This specialist support is an essential element of efforts to improve attendance and educational outcomes for students experiencing poverty.

Fourth, the qualitative comments reveal that many teachers integrate technology into their strategies to support students with low school attendance by maintaining contact with them, sending and receiving school assignments, and providing online resources. While this is encouraging and holds promise for ensuring that students stay connected and informed, the survey results in Chapter 7 of this study suggest there is a considerable socio-economic gap in terms of students having access to the internet and computers at home. Unless this gap is addressed, unequal access to technology will become yet another poverty-related barrier to school engagement and academic success.

Fifth, the survey results indicate that almost one-half of teachers had students in their class who work in paid employment to help support their families. Students working out of economic necessity are less able to cut back on hours during exams or other peak times for school assignments. The comments reveal that some teachers provide flexibility to help these students balance their school assignments with their work schedule. But the survey results also indicate that for some students this is not enough—they face challenges attending school regularly and completing school assignments, and are at risk of leaving school altogether. A 2013 study by First Call BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition on child labour in BC found that one-third

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(36%) of youth said their education was affected by working in paid employment. According to the report\(^8\):

> Among those who described how their education had been affected by working, 16 per cent reported dropping out of school due to their work schedule and/or financial need, 19 per cent had missed classes because of work, 46 per cent reported being too tired and/or not having enough time to complete their homework or participate fully at school as a result of working too much, and 19 per cent said that their work experience had a positive effect on their education.

More needs to be learned about how many students are working out of economic necessity, whether there are any financial supports available to lessen their need to work to support themselves and their families, and how best to support them to balance work and school responsibilities. This is another area where a poverty reduction plan that improves the overall economic conditions of low-income families may take some pressure off students to work in paid employment, and instead allow them to focus more fully on completing school.

Finally, it is clear from the qualitative comments that many teachers take a holistic approach to low attendance that includes creating a caring and welcoming environment, responding compassionately to students while addressing attendance concerns, working as a school team to identify solutions and support students to overcome barriers, and finding ways to engage students and families at school. Teachers employ multiple strategies, and the comments reveal they have ample wisdom and experience to know what would most support students with low attendance. What is needed is the funding to provide the necessary resources to address the poverty-related barriers that prevent students from attending school. A failure to do so places these students at risk of falling behind their peers academically, reducing their chances of graduating from high school and making them more vulnerable to living out their lives in poverty.

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