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Policy/Program Memorandum 171

Date of Issue: June 26, 2024

Effective: June 26, 2024, Until revoked or modified

Subject: Attendance Support Programs (ASP)

Application:

Directors of Education

Supervisory Officers and Secretary-Treasurers of School Authorities

Human Resource Officers

Principals of Elementary Schools

Principals of Secondary Schools

Principals of Provincial and Demonstration Schools (including the schools operated by the Centre Jules-Léger Consortium)

Purpose

The purpose of this memorandum is to set clear and consistent expectations for school boards for the development and implementation of Attendance Support Programs (ASPs) with the goal of enhancing employee well-being and attendance to support student achievement and a healthy school/school board community.

Stability and continuity in the school and classroom are important. Educators who are consistently present and can better assess the learning needs of their students can plan their instruction responsively^[1], which is a key component to student learning and achievement. In addition, the consistent presence of all school staff helps to support student well-being and build a healthy school community.

Absenteeism not only creates operational challenges for school boards to meet educational priorities, but it also adds financial pressure on school boards. Although some school boards already have an ASP in place, not all school boards do. As such, school boards^[2] are required to establish an ASP for all of their employees. This memorandum also includes leading practices to support school boards with the development and implementation of their ASP.

The principles of the policy framework include:

- all school board employees play an important role in contributing to a supportive, positive and healthy school/school board community
- working together and valuing all voices promotes a healthy and supportive work environment and the well-being of employees
- attendance support is part of the regular operations of school boards

This memorandum must be implemented in alignment with applicable laws and must not be inconsistent with collective agreements. Where there is a conflict between the memorandum and a collective agreement, the collective agreement prevails.

Attendance Support

Attendance support is a non-disciplinary program intended to support employees who are not able to consistently attend work by setting an attendance threshold, recording and tracking attendance, and engaging with or coaching employees.

School board monitoring of attendance through the ASP may assist with the identification of employees who require a referral to disability management, other support programs, accommodation, or other employee assistance.

An effective ASP should encourage joint accountability for health and wellness by

seeking employees' input in creating solutions to address overall well-being and attendance.

The School Board's ASP: Required Components

Based on leading practices and research, the Ministry of Education requires all school boards to develop and implement an ASP in accordance with this memorandum with the following key components:

- statement of principles and objectives
- definitions of absences
- attendance threshold
- defined roles and responsibilities
- documented processes and procedures
- monitoring, evaluating and reviewing processes

Local priorities may guide school boards in determining the details and the parameters for each component of the ASP. School boards that have an ASP in place that is substantially equivalent to the approach set out in this memorandum and consistent with the purpose of this memorandum as set out above, may continue their ASP without modifications.

Statement of Principles and Objectives

The ASP must include a statement of principles and objectives. This statement should clearly identify the school board's long-term attendance goals and commitments of the school board to:

- create and promote a healthy school/school board community that contributes to safe, stable learning and working environments that ultimately support student and staff well-being and student achievement
- treat absences in a fair and consistent manner and be compliant with applicable laws and not inconsistent with collective agreements
- support employees in regular and consistent attendance at work while

considering individual needs on a case by case basis

Definition of Absences

The ASP must define and clearly articulate which types of absences are in scope for the ASP and count towards the attendance threshold.

Non-culpable absences (i.e., innocent absenteeism), which are due to factors where an employee has little or no control, such as using sick leave for personal injury or illness absences and medical appointments unrelated to work, should count towards the ASP threshold.

Culpable absences are absences that occur because of factors within the employee's control, such as using sick leave for reasons other than intended, or failure to attend work without notifying the employer. Culpable absences should not be counted towards the attendance threshold and be addressed through progressive discipline processes and/or may warrant unpaid days as per the collective agreement or other school board policies.

Approved personal leaves should also not count towards the ASP threshold.

Attendance Threshold

School boards must set an attendance threshold to identify employees who may enter the ASP and may benefit from early intervention in addressing attendance barriers. The threshold must be supported by empirical data, such as the school board's actual sick leave usage and averages and should be reviewed and possibly adjusted annually or biennially.

The threshold could apply to all employees in the school board but could be differentiated according to different job categories or based on employee groups that work ten vs. twelve months each school year, if administratively feasible.

Defined Roles and Responsibilities

The ASP must clearly define roles and responsibilities for all school board positions, including employees, human resources (HR), management, and union representatives.

Some responsibilities that could be assigned to different roles might include, entering

or approving absences in a timely manner into the attendance management system, setting attendance thresholds and scheduling and attending coaching meetings.

Documented Processes and Procedures

The ASP must list stages or levels of progression, with each stage clearly outlining the following:

- criteria for entering or exiting that stage of the ASP (e.g., reaching attendance thresholds or missing attendance targets),
- notification process for entering that stage of the ASP (e.g., automated/system notification, written notice, etc.) and,
- what occurs in that stage of the ASP (e.g., formal meeting, setting attendance goals, etc.) and who is included (e.g., union representation)

At any stage of the ASP, the school board should offer the necessary resources to support the employee (e.g., Employee and Family Assistance Programs (EFAP), accommodation, referral to disability management) as well as the opportunity to have an open discussion on the employee's attendance.

The number of stages should be reasonable (e.g., up to five stages), and there should be a clear differentiation between the progression in each stage. The length of each stage should be clearly defined and provide adequate time for the employee to sustain their attendance and meet the established attendance goals.

School boards should ensure that employees are made aware of the ASP and the different stages prior to taking effect, including the potential outcomes if an employee is not able to sustain their attendance. School boards should ensure that the ASP is applied consistently across the school board from the time it's introduced.

School boards should include samples or template letters as part of the ASP communication and/or training materials to support consistent application of the ASP. Documentation at every stage will also help to ensure the program operates effectively.

Monitoring, Evaluating and Reviewing Processes

The ASP must provide for a regular review and evaluation of the ASP. The review process should inform improvements to the ASP, within the policy framework set out

in this memorandum and must occur at minimum, every five years, or as part of the board's regular policy/procedures review cycle – whichever is the shorter period.

To understand the operational success of the ASP, school boards may wish to review both employee and management experience with the ASP, and consistency of application of the ASP across the school board. To evaluate the effectiveness of the ASP, school boards may consider looking at their School Climate Survey, sick leave data trends, the number of unfilled assignments, or EFAP usage.

The School Board's ASP: Development and Implementation

The Ministry of Education recommends school boards refer to the leading practices below to support the successful development and implementation of the ASP:

- establish an attendance support committee
- conduct a needs assessment
- review HR and system resources
- consider other related programs and resources
- establish a communications plan
- establish a training plan

Establish an Attendance Support Committee

School boards should establish an attendance support committee that includes representation from different levels of the organization. Committee members would provide input on setting attendance thresholds, feedback on communication and training materials, and insights on how the ASP is being applied within their school.

The following should be considered when establishing the attendance support committee:

- the composition of the committee should include bargaining unit representatives and management (e.g. principals, vice-principals, HR and school board leaders)

- the role of committee should be a consultative one, and the school board, led by HR, should retain decision-making ASpects of the ASP

School boards should also identify an executive sponsor (e.g., senior business official or superintendent of human resources) of the ASP to build support for the ASP across the school board's leadership team. The committee should regularly report back on efforts made in managing the ASP to the executive sponsor.

Conduct a Needs Assessment

Prior to developing or revising the ASP, school boards should conduct a needs assessment to understand the gaps between their current attendance practices, programs and policies, their attendance goals, and this policy framework. This assessment, which may look different for each school board, may be conducted through consultation with other school boards and with the support of an attendance support committee or third-party consultant.

The needs assessment should begin with the collection of sick leave data, which will help school boards identify any existing attendance concerns and provide a foundation for informed discussions and decision-making about developing the principles and objectives of the ASP.

Review HR and System Resources

School boards should review and assess existing HR resources that are available to support the ASP. Having a Human Resource Information System (HRIS) or attendance management system in place that can track and report attendance data is critical to setting an annual attendance threshold and providing support for case management by immediately identifying employees who have surpassed the absence thresholds and facilitating timely communication with employees at the various stages within an ASP. The system should be able to record absences consistently and accurately using specific absence codes that differentiate between sick days and other types of leaves.

School board staff should also be identified to manage the ASP (i.e., coordination of the ASP committee, implementation, communication and training, reviewing school board attendance reports, and reporting on the effectiveness of the ASP).

Other Health and Wellness Programs and Resources

School boards should also review other policies, programs, and resources in place to

support the health and well-being of employees outside of the ASP to ensure they are consistent with and support the ASP. Some examples of resources and programs are EFAPs, disability management policies and programs, and mental health and employee well-being programs delivered by third parties. School boards that do not have these programs or resources in place should consider adding them as they may improve the success of the ASP.

Establish a Communications Plan

When introducing or revising the ASP, school boards should build a communications plan to ensure all employees are made aware of the ASP prior to implementing it.

The ASP and communications materials should be made available electronically to all employees for easy reference. Communication materials should include templates to help support the consistent and fair implementation of the ASP. Differentiated communication for employees and management may also provide clarity on the roles and responsibilities in the ASP.

Regular reminders about the ASP should be considered for all employees including where they can access the ASP documents and other available supporting materials and resources. The reminders would ideally be timed with setting and communicating the annual attendance thresholds.

Establish a Training Plan

When introducing or revising the ASP, school boards should build a training plan for staff implementing and managing the ASP to ensure they have a clear understanding of their responsibility under the ASP.

Training could be provided in person or online and include guidance or toolkits on having conversations with employees, and on identifying patterns of absenteeism and preventative strategies and interventions to reduce absenteeism. The training could be accompanied by reminders on the collective agreement sick leave language and applicable laws such as the *Human Rights Code* and the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, information on the duty to accommodate, and best practices in supporting employees return-to-work after a prolonged absence.

Implementation Timelines

The ministry recognizes that there is a wide discrepancy between school boards in the extent to which ASPs exist and is allowing flexibility in the development and implementation to account for local circumstances.

School boards are required to develop or revise their ASP to meet the policy framework of this memorandum as stated above.

School boards must have the ASP posted publicly on the school board's website and implemented within two years of the effective date of this memorandum.

Footnotes

- [1] ^ Almarode, J., Hattie, J., Fisher, D., and Frey, N. (2021). Rebounding and reinvesting: Where the evidence points for accelerating learning. Corwin Press, INC.
- [2] ^ In this memorandum, school board(s) refer to district school boards, school authorities, the Provincial Schools Authority, and the Centre Jules-Léger Consortium)

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