

Province pushes new policy, action plan to battle student disengagement

Schools pressed to tackle absenteeism

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MANITOBA Education is giving school leaders until June to update their policies on chronic absenteeism in a bid to create urgency around improving student engagement and locating thousands of pupils who have become “inactive.”

Education Minister Wayne Ewasko — flanked by members of the province’s attendance task force, which ran from 2019 to 2022 — revealed on Monday the results of a years-long study of chronic absenteeism across the province.

The province has released both a policy directive and action plan “to enhance student presence.” It is also launching a targeted public awareness campaign, made with input from students, touting the benefits of regular school attendance.

“Students who attend school regularly are more engaged in learning, have a greater sense of belonging to the community, and are more likely to obtain a high school diploma — but there is no one attendance strategy that will work for all students in all schools,” Ewasko said during a news conference inside Kildonan-East Collegiate’s library.

Superintendents have received guidelines on everything from the terminology and proactive practices they should use in modern presence policies to how they should respond to chronic absenteeism and work with other stakeholders on the subject.

Expectations for monitoring, analyzing and reporting data are included in the policy directive.

The goal is to make sure schools and their partners are being more responsive and immediate in addressing non-attendance, Ewasko said.

The announcement comes 10 months after Ewasko’s office received a report it commissioned to investigate chronic absenteeism across the province and explore ways to improve it.

“Addressing Chronic Absenteeism in Manitoba: an Action Plan for Student Presence” concluded truancy has a direct negative impact on achievement, graduation, post-secondary enrolment, employment, health and the likelihood of involvement with the criminal justice and social services systems.

The 115-page document, obtained by the *Free Press*, found roughly 6,800 public school pupils were unaccounted for between the start of the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years — a period during which public health officials declared the COVID-19 pandemic.

Enrolment in the Winnipeg School Division, the province’s most populous district, dropped by 3,148 over that year. Some transferred or started homeschooling.

“For many of our students, the regular school day — 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., the regular terms, the regular expectations — it’s not one-size-fits all,” said Pauline Clarke, chief superintendent of WSD, during the news conference Monday.

Clarke, who sat on the province's attendance task force, said the province's renewed emphasis on student presence recognizes that reality and the need for alternative education options, such as offering flexible schooling hours.

The Vancouver-based consulting group that studied absenteeism in Manitoba called on local officials to update policy and practices to require an immediate and personalized response when a student has an unexcused absence and implement co-ordinated case management.

The report's recommendations have garnered mixed reviews, but task force members are in agreement an emphasis on co-ordination between stakeholders, including various government departments, is critical. Kent Dueck said chronic absenteeism must be examined as a deep-rooted issue that requires co-operation between safe and welcoming schools, government departments, and community organizations.

The executive director of Inner City Youth Alive, a faith-based resource centre that runs drop-in programs for students in Winnipeg's North End neighbourhood, called the new directive a milestone moment because the complexity of this issue is being acknowledged.

"For many years, the issue of absenteeism was kind of like an open secret. Through our inaction, I suppose, as a society, we tacitly came to accept that some children would not get an education," Dueck said.

— with files from Carol Sanders

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