

# English III

## 2001-2002

### McCall-Donnelly High School's New Attendance Policy

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Planning on adding a week to your spring vacation in Switzerland? Feeling a little under the weather and looking for a quiet day of rest and a trip to the doctor? If you're a student at McCall-Donnelly High School, you might want to rethink missing school for these reasons.

During the 2001-2002 school year, MDHS adopted a new attendance policy that demands greater student attendance. The previous attendance policy allowed five unexcused absences in each class per semester, and unlimited absences excused by a parent. The new policy allows for merely six parent-approved absences in each class per semester. If a student misses more than six classes, then he will lose credit in that class.

There are built-in allowances for students' extracurricular activities. For instance, absences for school-funded sports and trips are permitted under any circumstances. A student can be granted further absences for extraordinary circumstances such as a national competition, college visit, or a once-in-a-lifetime experience. However, medical and dental appointments are never automatically approved.

While this policy has proven to be effective in preventing students from skipping classes for trivial reasons, forcing students to stay in class is not always beneficial. Because sickness is not an approved absence, contagious illnesses have continually plagued the students of MDHS during the past school year. Additionally, student athletes in sports which are not sponsored by the McCall-Donnelly School District are constantly faced with the difficult decision of either failing classes or missing important competitions. Establishing a meaningful policy that meets everyone's needs has been an elusive and difficult challenge for MDHS administrators.

#### **Controversial Motives**

We decided to investigate the new attendance policy because, as student-athletes attending MDHS, our participation in unsanctioned sports, such as Nordic skiing, could result in our losing high school credit. Furthermore, the policy is very controversial, as many students feel that it limits their freedom to make responsible decisions.

Student Skylar Swinford stated, "It is the student's responsibility to attend school. If you can't decide [what's important] for yourself, then you will never learn." Parents also feel that the policy has reduced their parental authority. Not only are students and parents occasionally offended by the policy, but teachers also have misgivings about any policy's effectiveness in enforcing attendance. "My classes should offer a learning experience that can't be replaced without considerable effort," MDHS math teacher Bob Burns said. "If you can pass a class by not being there, then I question the importance of that class."

Interestingly, Burns, who wants his students to be "responsible, accountable, and proficient," shares the same viewpoint as Industrial Technology teacher Greg Dittmer. Simply stated, Burns and Dittmer feel that students should want to attend their classes. "In my class, the students want to be there because they have to walk away with a finished product," said Dittmer.

#### **Regular Attendance, Rising Grades**

Despite these reservations, many people feel that the new attendance policy has many positive effects. More time spent in class results in more learning opportunities for students. When students attend class regularly, teachers spend less time with both absentees and make-up work, and more time on moving ahead in class. Several teachers said that they are reluctant to proceed with their curriculum or to give lectures over difficult material when students are not present.

Increased attendance has had an impact on the success of students. Rita, McCall-Donnelly High School's attendance secretary, said, "With the increase in attendance, [the faculty] has seen grades rise proportionately." Another positive effect of the tightened policy is increased funding for MDHS. Funding is based both on the number of students in school, and on the number of hours each student attends class. The more days kids are in school, the more money our school district receives.

## **Communicable Dissent**

Even with all these positive effects, many students at the high school find the new attendance policy very restrictive, and question its validity. As student Kristen Sprague says, "It's the student's life, [going to school] should be her responsibility." At sixteen years old, students may legally drop out of high school with parental permission. Kate Lohff, another student, says, "If sixteen is old enough to drop out, it should be old enough to miss school." Students resent being treated like elementary school children, who need their parents' permission for everything they do.

Furthermore, being in class a lot is not always beneficial. One student we know had a debilitating cough. Nevertheless, in order to avoid losing credit, he attended class, despite feeling miserable. Within weeks, the remaining members of his class also had contracted this persistent cough. Since illnesses or a doctor's note are not pardoned absences under the new policy, many sick students are forced to come to school. Consequently, students with mononucleosis or the flu spread the disease instead of staying at home.

## **Athletics over Health? Sure!**

Sports have also become an issue for students. During the 2001 soccer season, members of the boys' varsity soccer team missed nearly twelve days of school for soccer games. These absences were excused because they were for a school-sanctioned event. All of us are now training for cross-country skiing. As a community sport, absences for regional Nordic qualifier races are not automatically excused.

Questions come to mind when one considers this policy. Do students learn more from an official school sport than they would from a community team sport? Are school sports more important than a student's health? If someone is very sick, should he come to school and spread the illness because he does not want to miss any more class time?

These strictures appear nonsensical and could be changed without diluting the policy. Students can be excused for legitimate reasons, pending a signed note from a parent. While the MDHS attendance committee did grant 100% of appeals that were brought before it during the 2001-2002 school year, nearly all of the teachers and board members we spoke to thought that medical absences should be automatically excused. Susan Bechdel, president of the MDSD school board, explained that the committee does its best to be fair to students, but she agreed that it seems "ridiculous that orthodontics and medical reasons are not covered by the policy." Adults and students both felt that if someone needs to go to the doctor because he is ill, then he should be excused for that absence, and not penalized for having a quiet day of rest at home.

## **An Acceptable Plan**

Even with its apparent flaws, MDHS's new attendance policy has certainly produced the intended results. Grades are rising as fewer students skip class. Many teachers and school board members had positive words to say about the new policy. Shop teacher Greg Dittmer is pleased with the plan as it stands. Even though students attend his classes because they want to, not because they have to, he agrees that students are more inclined to attend this year than they were last. "The proof is in the pudding," he says.