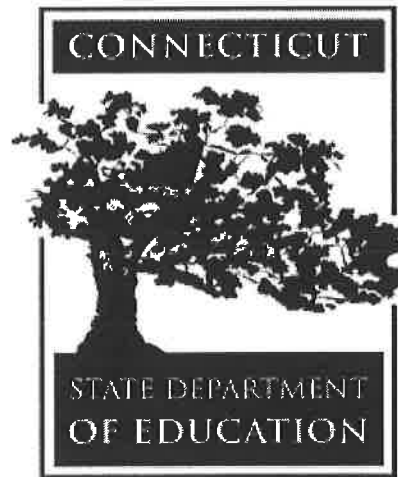


Connecticut State Department of Education



Guidelines for Implementation of the Definitions of Excused and Unexcused Absences and Best Practices for Absence Prevention and Intervention

April 2013

The Two-level Approach to Excused Absences

The State Board of Education definitions establish two levels of criteria for an absence to be considered an excused absence (see table below).

Level	Total # of Days Absent*	Acceptable Reasons for a Student Absence to Be Considered Excused	Documentation Required within 10 Days
1	One through nine	Any reason that the student's parent or guardian approves.	Parent or guardian note only.
2	10 and above	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student illness (<i>Note: to be deemed excused, an appropriately licensed medical professional must verify all student illness absences, regardless of the absence's length.</i>) • Student's observance of a religious holiday. • Death in the student's family or other emergency beyond the control of the student's family. • Mandated court appearances (additional documentation required). • The lack of transportation that is normally provided by a district other than the one the student attends (parental documentation is not required for this reason). • Extraordinary educational opportunities pre-approved by district administrators. (Opportunities must meet certain criteria. See below for details). 	Parent or guardian note and in some cases additional documentation (see details of specific reason).

* Note: The total number of days absent includes both excused and unexcused absences.

It is important to note that while the first nine absences in a school year can be deemed excused for any reason the parent or guardian provides, the 10th and each subsequent absence establish a more stringent and specific set of reasons for the absence to qualify as excused. The flow chart (attachment C) offers a visual tool to help determine if an absence is excused or unexcused.

In cases where a student's extended absence crosses levels, the rules should be applied as if there were two separate absences, one under Level 1 and the other under Level 2. For example, if a student is absent for five days on a family vacation and those absences represent numbers seven through 11, absences seven, eight, and nine would fall under Level 1 rules and can be accepted as excused; absences 10 and 11 would fall under Level 2 rules and would not be considered excused.

It is critical for schools to communicate the different levels of criteria to parents and develop feedback methods so parents can track their child's excused and unexcused absences. Schools are strongly encouraged to inform parents when their child has reached his or her sixth and ninth absences and remind them of the stricter rules that apply to absence number 10 and above.

Documentation

Parent or guardian notes and other documentation are central to determining whether a student's absence is excused or unexcused. While a note from a parent or guardian will likely be the most common form of documentation, other methods of reporting a student's absence are acceptable. For example, a parent or guardian can report the student's absence in person to an authorized school official, such as an attendance clerk. The table below details the different types of acceptable absence documentation and the required elements for each type.

Parent or Guardian Note	In-Person Explanation from Parent or Guardian to an Authorized School Staff Member	School Nurse Evaluation (either in person or telephone consultation)
Dates of absence	Dates of absence	Dates of absence
Reason for absence	Reason for absence parent or guardian reports	Reason for absence
Signature of parent or guardian	Name of parent or guardian reporting the absence	Date and location of the consultation
	Date and location of the report by parent or guardian	Type of the consultation (i.e., did they see the student themselves or speak to a parent about the student)
	Signature of staff member receiving report	Signature of school nurse

School staff must receive or generate documentation for each incidence of absence. An incidence of absence is a set of consecutive school days absent. If a student is out three consecutive days, that is one incidence of absence; therefore, only one note is needed. If the student is out three days but attended school one day between day two and three, the student has two incidences of absence and needs two notes. Schools should accept notes covering a series of absences only if the absences share a common cause.

Certain types of absences in Level 2 require additional documentation or verification. Absences due to student illnesses and mandated court appearances require this additional information once the student has accrued more than nine absences (entered Level 2). For students in Level 1, these additional requirements do not apply. For absences due to student illness, Level 2 students must either provide a signed note from a medical professional who has evaluated the student confirming the absence and giving an expected return date or have his or her school nurse verify the student's absence with the medical professional treating the student. The medical professional who is treating the student can be the school nurse at the student's school.

Mandated court appearances also require additional documentation. Students missing school to make mandated court appearances must provide documentation such as:

- a police summons
- a subpoena
- a notice to appear
- a signed note from a court official

Alternative Documentation Methods

While notes will be the most prominent method of reporting and confirming student absences, technology may make other approaches possible. Online systems may allow for parent access to an absence application, or districts may develop systems to allow school staff, including school nurses, to report information on student absences. Such systems would have to collect all of the information that would be required in a note, but replace the signature with a personal identification number (PIN) or password. Any systems of this sort would need to have a high level of security and strictly controlled access.

Technologies, such as video chat, that allow school officials to have a remote conversation with the parent can be used in lieu of an in-person conversation, provided that the systems allow for two-way visual and audio interaction. Such conversations would be documented as in-person conversation.

Current e-mail and text messaging technology do not meet the level of security and controlled access necessary to be used to in this manner, so an e-mail or text message would not qualify. Under certain circumstances, e-mail could be an acceptable method for a parent to deliver a scanned image of a note.

Accommodations for Parents

With Connecticut's diverse student population, most if not all schools will likely encounter a student whose parent or guardian is not proficient in writing in English. These parents may or may not be proficient in writing in another language. Schools should make efforts to help these parents report their child's absences. For parents who are proficient in a language other than English, schools should accept absence notes in the parents' proficient language. For parents who are not proficient in writing in any language, schools should verbally inform them of the attendance requirements and that they may report a student's absence in person at the school.

Families without Health Insurance

Families who lack health insurance and/or those with limited means may find it challenging to meet the Level 2 requirement to obtain a note from a licensed medical professional for absences due to illness. In these cases, school nurses can evaluate the ill student, either in person or over the telephone, and, where appropriate, provide the required documentation for an excused absence.

School nurses can further assist schools and families by:

- assisting parents with accessing publicly supported health insurance for those children who are uninsured;

- gaining permission from parents to communicate with health care providers regarding students' health status; and
- providing schools with a perspective that validates why students with confirmed diagnoses may be frequently absent from school due to illnesses or for therapies essential to maintaining their health.

Exceptions to the Documentation Requirement

Two types of absences do not require documentation.

1. Absences that result from a student not receiving transportation from one school district to attend school in another district must be deemed as an excused absence. For example:
 - One district provides transportation for students of its town or region to attend schools run by another district, *and* the district providing the transportation shuts down due to inclement weather or other emergency, but the district that the student attends stays open.

In this situation, the student would be absent but would not need a parental note to that effect; such absence would be deemed excused.

2. The second type of absence that would not require documentation would be absences that are the result of disciplinary actions taken by the district. These disciplinary absences are neither excused nor unexcused.

Best Practices in Documentation of Absences

Districts can take some of the following steps to improve overall attendance and compliance to attendance policies:

1. Leveraging school nurses: School nurses can be a great resource in dealing with medical related absences. Using their expertise can especially benefit those students who have limited access to medical professionals.
2. Auditing notes: Schools may choose to include in their attendance policies a provision for verification of documentation. By auditing even a small percentage of notes, the school will reduce the likelihood of receiving questionable notes.
3. Posting policies and sample notes in multiple languages: Though many districts send attendance policies home to students, it is suggested that districts also post them in the school and on their Web site. Including sample notes of what is an acceptable note and what is an unacceptable note may also be valuable as it helps parents understand what needs to be in a parent note.
4. Working with parents: There will be times that schools need to work with parents to receive the required documentation in the acceptable timeframe. For example, the school may receive a parent note within the 10-school-day period, but the note is missing a required element, or a parent may experience difficulty procuring a doctor's note. In these cases, schools should work

with the parents to get the required documentation. These efforts can include an extension of the 10-day requirement, but only for absences in which some documentation was received within the 10 days. Such extensions cannot exceed an additional five days.

Emergencies

One of the acceptable reasons for a Level 2 student to be absent is a death in the family or other emergency beyond the control of the family. For the purposes of the definition of excused absences, emergencies are generally significant events that are outside of the control of the student's family. They are normally short absences consisting of a few days at most.

Examples of emergencies include:

- family member who is very ill and close to dying;
- student's home is lost to fire or eviction;
- family's home being quarantined;
- natural disaster;
- a student who is a parent and whose child needs to go to the hospital; or
- a family member's military deployment or return from deployment.

Some unexpected absences will not qualify as an emergency. These include:

- staying home to meet the plumber or other tradesman;
- routine childcare of a younger child by the student; or
- opportunity to work an extra shift at afterschool job.

Extended absences would be considered an emergency only under extreme circumstances. For example, if an order of the community health department quarantined a family's home for an extended period, such quarantine would be an extended emergency.

Absences due to family emergencies do not require additional documentation. A parental note explaining the emergency received within 10 school days is sufficient, but it is essential that the note explain the emergency so school staff can evaluate if the situation was indeed an emergency.

Extraordinary Educational Opportunities

From time to time, students encounter an exceptional opportunity for an experience of an educational nature. While these events may not be part of their schoolwork, they provide an excellent chance to further their education. Under certain circumstances, the days devoted to these opportunities can count as excused absences for Level 2 students.

To qualify as an extraordinary educational opportunity, it must meet the following criteria:

- a) The opportunity must be educational in nature. It must have a learning objective related to the student's course work or plan of study. Not all memorable and/or life experiences would be considered educational and, therefore, would not be available for this exemption.
- b) It must be an opportunity not ordinarily available to the student.
- c) It must be grade and developmentally appropriate.
- d) The content of the experience must be highly relevant to the student. While some opportunities will be relevant to all students, others will contain very specific content that would limit their relevance to a smaller group of students. For example, a trumpet lesson from jazz great Wynton Marsalis would be very relevant to students who play trumpet, but not to others who do not play trumpet.

Note: Criteria c) and d) above may mean that an exceptional educational opportunity exemption may be approved for one family member but not another attending the same event/opportunity.

Some examples of extraordinary educational opportunities include:

- the opportunity to meet the president of the United States or a foreign head of state; or
- a behind the scenes tour of the Kennedy Space Center.

Some examples of activities that do not qualify as extraordinary educational opportunities include:

- family vacations; or
- going to a concert of a favorite pop star.

Best Practices for Extraordinary Educational Opportunities

It is important that the school, the student, and the student's family all have a common understanding of the opportunity that is being requested and approved. To that end, the Department suggests that schools include the following elements in their plans and procedures for approving extraordinary educational opportunities:

- a) **Requests**: All requests for approval of exceptional educational opportunities should be submitted in writing, bear the signature of the student and his or her parent or guardian, outline the learning objective of the opportunity, and detail how the objective is linked to the student's coursework or plan of study, include additional documentation (where available), and be submitted prior to the opportunity.
- b) **Approvals**: All approvals for opportunities should:
 - be in written form;
 - detail any requirements placed upon the student as a condition of approval;

- include the specific days approved for the opportunities;* and
- include in the approval the caveat that the administration may withdraw its approval if the opportunity is canceled or the student fails to meet the mutually agreed on requirements of the approval.

c) Requirement to share: Schools should expect students to share their experience with other students and/or staff when they return. This will benefit the larger school community.

d) Approval not assured: Schools should inform parents that approvals are awarded on a case-by-case basis, are based on a number of factors, and that opportunities approved for one student may not be approved for another.