

## **Absenteeism and Tardiness: Philosophy & Practice**

### **Harrisburg Academy**

One of the major challenges of any school is establishing an effective academic calendar. There are multiple factors to consider.

First and foremost, an academic calendar must provide the appropriate amount of “time on task.” The standard for effective teaching and learning is 900 to 990 hours from Lower School through Upper School. For most public school systems this usually amounts to 180 days of school. At the Academy, we are able to exceed the “time on task” hours for teaching and learning in fewer days because of the length of our school day. For example, this year’s calendar consists of 172 days.

Second, an academic calendar has to reflect both the needs of the school as well as those of the community. National and local holiday, religious observances, parent conferences, vacation days, weather-related make-up days, and the necessary days to meet “time on task” determine the closing date of the school year. The Academy’s decision to begin the school year before Labor Day is a result of wanting to complete our curriculum and close the year in first part of June. The choice of holidays, vacation days, and other dates are the result of necessity, tradition, and community input.

Finally, an academic calendar should reflect the commitment of all of the members of the school community to following the calendar. Traditionally, independent school families are highly selective of the institutions they choose and, in part, the academic school year calendar plays a role in the selection of an appropriate school. However, not everyone who chooses a specific school may have the same philosophy or expectation of what meeting the academic school calendar actually means. Here at the Academy, we are fortunate to have committed families who work hard to adhere to the schedule we have established.

Even so, schools need to set attendance policies and determine and enforce consequences for absences. As stated in our handbook, the Academy expects a student to be present at least 90 percent of the time to warrant credit for “time on task.” In essence, *we believe a student who misses more than 10 percent of the time in class may not receive the appropriate amount of teaching and learning to be able to advance to the next level of education.* At the Middle and Upper School level, missing more than half of an assigned class (such as algebra, chemistry, etc.) constitutes an absence for that class. It does not matter whether the absences are excused or unexcused. **Class time missed cannot be replicated or replaced.** Our policy regarding work missed due to planned or unplanned absences reflects this belief. We prefer to provide work for students in advance of an absence, first, because classroom instruction and peer interaction cannot be replaced with individual, independent work; and second, because work outside the classroom (homework) *should be based on previous instruction* and guided by four principles: practice, repetition, preparation and independence.

Though we assess each situation on its own merits, it is important that families pay close attention to absences due to illness as well as to those absences due to family obligations or interests. We work closely with families to meet each student’s needs, academically and socially. This means that we are open to requests for absences outside the established schedule based on a family’s determination of need or interest, but we depend on families to remain committed to the “time on task” requirement. We also provide feedback to families by including days absent and/or tardy on each student’s progress report. We also communicate directly with families when a student’s absences may put them at educational risk.

We also ask families to apply the same commitment to “time on task” in avoiding situations where a student would be tardy. Tardiness may not have the same degree of impact on a student as missing a day of school, but the time missed can have some of the same residual effects. In our experience, **students perform best when they follow an established routine or structure in beginning the class day.** By arriving, organizing themselves, and beginning the day together, students feel connected and an integral part of the class community. As part of *The Responsive Classroom* and *Developmental Designs* approaches, we begin the day with a morning meeting that encourages peer interaction, establishes the day’s schedule, and “sets the tone” for the day. Students of any age who arrive late can feel “out of sync” with their classmates as well as pressured to “catch up.” A late arrival can create anxieties that affect the student’s morning, if not, in some instances, the entire day. A late arrival can also disrupt the flow of activities already occurring and create distractions for other students that can disrupt their ability to begin the day or continue the day effectively. It is often difficult to accurately gauge the effect tardiness can have on an individual or other individuals in the class, but the cumulative effect can be significant. At the Middle and Upper School level, a student’s tardiness may directly impact on the teaching and learning of a specific class or subject area. For example, a student who is late for his first-period algebra class may miss enough of the class to be considered absent, and missing 10 percent of algebra will jeopardize the student receiving credit for this class.

At the Early Childhood, Lower School, and Middle School level, students have little control over their arrival time or even their absences. The family is responsible for resolving issues that could lead to tardiness as well as minimizing absences. Referencing one of the principles of *The Responsive Classroom*, we expect that the adults in a student’s life will model appropriate and successful behaviors, such as punctuality and a commitment to lifelong “best practices.” Upper School students who transport themselves to and from school may have a more direct responsibility for their punctuality, tardiness, or absences, and will be held accountable for their behavior.

In the interest of effective partnerships, we are always willing to work with families in situations where tardiness or absences are directly related to organizational abilities or behavioral concerns. As always, our goal is the success of each individual student at the Academy.