

Decorah Community School District implemented new policies to comply with Iowa's new compulsory attendance law, Iowa Senate File 2435. The Iowa Department of Education recently provided an FAQ, linked here [Senate File 2435: Chronic Absenteeism FAQs](#)

Please review the following policies, FAQ, example scenarios, and attendance coding below:

- 501.1 – Compulsory Attendance
- 501.17 – Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy
- 501.17-R(1) – Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy Regulation

Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy Definitions

Chronic Absenteeism occurs when a student misses **10% or more** of scheduled school days or instructional hours. Both **excused and unexcused absences** contribute to this total. However, **exempt absences**—such as those for legitimate medical reasons with documentation, religious services, or court-ordered activities—**do not count** toward the chronic absenteeism threshold. Only **non-exempt absences**, excused or unexcused (such as family vacations), are included in calculating a student's absenteeism rate.

Truancy applies to students aged **6 to 16** (if they have yet to turn 16 by September 15 of the current school year) as defined by Iowa's compulsory education law. A student is considered **truant** if they accumulate **20% or more non-exempt absences**, including **excused but non-exempt absences** (such as family vacations or undocumented medical appointments) and **unexcused absences** (such as skipping school or failing to provide a reason). **Truancy is determined solely by non-exempt absences**, regardless of whether the school has excused or approved them.

New Requirements Under Iowa Senate File 2435: Truancy and County Attorney Notification

Under Iowa Senate File 2435 guidelines, stricter protocols are now in place to ensure compliance with compulsory education laws for students between the ages of 6 and 16. These rules emphasize accountability for both schools and families in promoting and maintaining regular school attendance.

Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy Determinations:

Exempt Absences: Absences for documented medical reasons (MEDx), religious observances (RELx), or court-directed activities (CRTx) are exempt and do not count toward truancy determinations.

Non-exempt absences, whether excused or unexcused, **count toward a student's truancy status**. Students are **chronically absent** if they reach **10% non-exempt absenteeism** in a grading period. When this threshold is reached, the district will send a **certified letter** to the family notifying them of the student's chronic absenteeism, as Iowa Senate File 2435 requires. This early intervention is intended to work with families to address any barriers to attendance before the situation escalates.

If absences continue and a student reaches 20% non-exempt absences, the student will be deemed truant under Section 299.8 of Iowa law. At this point, the district is legally required to notify the County Attorney, regardless of whether the school excused some absences that are not exempt under the law (e.g., family vacations or undocumented medical absences).

School Engagement and Prevention: Once a student has reached **15% non-exempt absenteeism**, **the district will initiate a school engagement meeting**. This meeting will include the student, family, and school officials, who will work together to identify barriers to attendance and develop an **Absenteeism Prevention Plan**. The plan will be monitored weekly with **meaningful, two-way communication** between the school and the family to ensure adequate support. The goal is to provide targeted interventions that promote the student's regular attendance.

Legal Consequences: Legal action is considered a last resort. The district will work with families to improve attendance, including engagement meetings and absenteeism prevention plans. However, if participants in the school engagement meeting fail to enter into an absenteeism prevention plan, or if the child or the parent, guardian, or legal custodian violates a term of the plan or fails to participate in the meeting, the County Attorney may initiate legal proceedings. Legal steps may also be taken if a student surpasses the 20% non-exempt absenteeism threshold and attendance does not improve despite intervention efforts.

These new regulations are designed to uphold the state's compulsory attendance law and improve student attendance while focusing on family collaboration and support.

FAQ:

1. Why do we have these new attendance laws?

- Senate File 2435 (SF 2435) was passed into law on May 9, 2024, with an effective date of July 1, 2024. The law modifies compulsory attendance requirements, focusing on absenteeism, truancy, and communication with legal authorities such as the County Attorney. These updates aim to address chronic absenteeism and ensure students attend school regularly. The Iowa Department of Education has guided school districts, including Decorah Community School District, to update policies accordingly.

2. What ages fall under this policy?

- The compulsory attendance law applies to children at least six years old and under sixteen by September 15. While the law specifies specific actions for this age group, Decorah Community School District (DCSD) must report attendance for all TK-12 students, regardless of age, to the state.

3. What is the definition of excused and exempt absences?

- An **excused absence** is when the school determines the reason for the absence is valid, and no disciplinary action will be taken. A parent or guardian must notify the school office for an absence to be excused.

- According to district policy, an **exempt absence** is excluded from being counted toward chronic absenteeism under Iowa law. If a student provides appropriate medical documentation, the absence will be classified as "medically exempt" (MEDx) and will not count toward the state's chronic absenteeism threshold.
- Please note that an excused absence may not always be exempt and could still count toward chronic absenteeism. For example, while the school may excuse a family vacation, the absence will still count toward the student's 10% chronic absenteeism rate, as Iowa Code requires.

4. What is defined as a grading period?

At Decorah High School, final grades are based on semester grades. However, to define a grading period that allows for timely response to absenteeism, Decorah High School will use quarters as our grading periods. At the K-8 level, grading periods are divided into trimesters. The 2024-25 dates of each grading period will be as follows:

Buildings	Dates	# of Days
Decorah High School	First Semester	
	Q1: August 23 to October 18, 2024	39
	Q2: October 21 to December 20, 2024	44
	Second Semester	
John Cline Elementary Carrie Lee Elementary Decorah Middle School	Q3: January 6 to March 6, 2025	43
	Q4: March 10 to May 22, 2025	55
	T1: August 23-November 7, 2024	53
	T2: November 10-March 6, 2025	68
	T3: March 10-May 22, 2025	52

*Please note the number of days in each grading period may change due to weather-related cancellations.

5. How many non-exempt absences can my child have before reaching the 10%, 15%, and 20% thresholds?

- The district will contact the County Attorney if a student reaches 15% chronic absenteeism or 20% truancy under the new law. However, these contacts are not required if a student qualifies for an exemption based on any of the following criteria:
 - Has completed graduation requirements or obtained a high school equivalency diploma.
 - Is excused for sufficient reason by a court or judge.
 - Is absent due to religious services or instruction.
 - Is unable to attend school due to legitimate medical reasons.
 - Has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that affects attendance.
 - Has a Section 504 plan that affects attendance.

Students whose absences fall under these categories will not be counted toward the 15% or 20% thresholds for County Attorney contact.

	John Cline Elementary Carrie Lee Elementary Decorah Middle School TK-8	Decorah High School 9-12
Grading Period	Trimester	Quarter
10% (number of days)	Trimester 1: 5.5 Trimester 2: 7 Trimester 3: 5.5	Quarter 1: 4 Quarter 2: 4.5 Quarter 3: 4.5 Quarter 4: 5.5
15% (number of days)	Trimester 1: 8 Trimester 2: 10.5 Trimester 3: 8	Quarter 1: 6 Quarter 2: 7 Quarter 3: 6.5 Quarter 4: 8.5
20% (number of days)	Trimester 1: 11 Trimester 2: 14 Trimester 3: 10.5	Quarter 1: 8 Quarter 2: 9 Quarter 3: 9 Quarter 4: 11

*Please note the percentage of days may change due to weather-related cancellations.

6. How is attendance recorded in PowerSchool at all buildings?

- **High School/Middle School:** Attendance is taken every period.
- **Elementary Schools:** The day is divided into four periods, each equated to approximately 25% of the school day. Arriving late (before 9:00 AM) counts as tardy, which can impact attendance rates if it is excessive.

Attendance Periods	John Cline Elementary		Carrie Lee Elementary	
	MTThF	Wednesday	MTThF	Wednesday
Period 1	8:00 - 9:45	9:00 - 9:45	8:05-9:50	9:05 - 9:45
Period 2	9:45 - 11:30	9:45 - 11:30	9:50-11:35	9:50-11:35
Period 3	11:30 - 1:15	11:30 - 1:15	11:35-1:20	11:35-1:20
Period 4	1:15 - 3:00	1:15 - 3:00	1:20-3:05	1:20-3:05

- **Tardy (all buildings):** Students arriving before 9:00 a.m. but after the building start time will be marked as tardy (MTThF). Tardies do not count toward absenteeism rates unless they occur frequently/regularly.

7. I'm planning to do college visits with my student. Are those excused absences?

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- Per the Iowa Code and Iowa Department of Education guidance, college visits are not exempt. Our District will track these absences as required by the state and count them toward chronic absenteeism. However, the school will excuse the absence, and we will not impose any additional school-based consequences.

8. My student wants to attend state basketball to cheer on their friends. Is that an excused absence?

- Per the Iowa Code and Iowa Department of Education guidance, attending activities and events as a spectator is not exempt. Our District will track these absences as required by the state and count them toward chronic absenteeism. However, the school will excuse the absence, and we will not impose any additional school-based consequences.

9. Are family funerals an excused absence?

- The school will excuse the absence, and we will not impose any additional school-based consequences.

10. We have a family vacation planned. How does that impact my student's attendance record?

- Per the Iowa Code and Iowa Department of Education guidance, family vacations are not exempt. Our District will track these absences as required by the state, and they will count toward chronic absenteeism. However, the school will excuse the absence, and we will not impose any additional school-based consequences.
- Please notify your student's teachers and the school office well in advance of your vacation so they can make a plan for your student to complete their school work.

11. Will keeping my child home due to a religious holiday be considered exempt?

- Yes, students who are absent for religious services, holidays, or instruction are considered exempt from the attendance policy. These absences will not count toward the chronic absenteeism thresholds, and no contact with the County Attorney will be made.

12. My student isn't feeling well, but it doesn't warrant a doctor's visit. Do I need to make an appointment to get a note?

- If your student is home sick but does not visit a doctor, the absence will be marked as medically absent (MED). The school excuses this absence but is not exempt from the chronic absenteeism laws. If the absence is prolonged or you're concerned about reaching the chronic absenteeism threshold, it is advisable to get medical documentation to ensure the absence qualifies as a medically exempt (MEDx) absence.

13. What does it mean for my student's attendance record if the nurse sends them home ill?

- If the school nurse or a nurse associate sends a student home for health-related reasons, the absence will be classified as medically exempt (MEDx). Medically exempt absences will not count toward the chronic absenteeism threshold or require further actions, such as notifying the County Attorney.

14. My student has a planned surgery (i.e., tonsillectomy). Will that count against their attendance record?

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- With a doctor's note, this absence will be considered medically exempt (MEDx). The school excuses medically exempt absences, which do not count toward the chronic absenteeism threshold or require any formal engagement with the County Attorney.

15. If I have to pick my student(s) up early for an appointment, are they considered absent for the full day?

- At the middle and high school levels, a student who leaves early for an appointment will be marked absent only for the period(s) they miss.
- At the elementary level, the school day is divided into quarters. Elementary students will be marked absent for the quarter(s) of the day they miss. However, if the appointment lasts less than a quarter of the day, the student will be considered present.

16. My student has recurring appointments (i.e., physical therapy, counseling, and specialist). Does each appointment require a doctor's note, or can I provide one note for the year?

- One note can be provided to cover recurring appointments. Please consult a building administrator to discuss your situation and ensure all necessary documentation is in place.

17. To whom do I give a doctor's note or other documentation, and when?

- Doctor's notes should be given to the building secretary either before the absence or upon return.

18. What happens if my student's bus is late?

- Students will be counted as present and on time due to bus-related delays.

19. What is the District doing to help families comply with these policies?

- The district is committed to working with families to develop strategies and provide support for complying with attendance policies. For assistance, please contact the school's administrator or counselor.

20. Where can I see my student's attendance record?

- You can see your student's attendance record by logging into the PowerSchool portal at <https://decorah.powerschool.com>.
- Your student's absences are displayed on the landing page. Scroll to the bottom of the page for a list of absence types.

21. What are all the different types of absences, and can I see that in PowerSchool?

- The following are specific examples of attendance codes provided by the Iowa Department of Education, which are visible in PowerSchool. These codes help track student attendance according to state guidelines. More detailed information on how these codes are applied will be provided at the building level.
- **Common Attendance Codes in PowerSchool**
 - **T (Tardy):** Used when a student arrives late to school or class.
 - **MED (Medical):** Absence due to illness without a doctor's note; excused but counted toward absenteeism.
 - **UN (Unexcused Absence):** Absence without parental contact or explanation.

- **FAM (Parent Excused):** Absence excused by a parent (e.g., family vacation).
- **ISS (In-School Suspension):** Student is present but serving in-school suspension.
- **OSS (Out-of-School Suspension):** Student is absent due to suspension.
- **Exempt Attendance Codes**
 - **MEDX (Medical Exempt):** Absence due to a legitimate medical reason with a doctor's note or if sent home by the nurse.
 - **CRTX (Court Exempt):** Absence excused by a court or judge.
 - **RELX (Religious Exempt):** Absence for attending religious services or instruction.
- When viewed in PowerSchool, these codes indicate whether the absence is excused, exempt, or counts toward the state's chronic absenteeism requirements. If you have further questions about your student's attendance record or need clarification on these codes, please contact the school office for assistance.
- A complete list of Decorah Community School District attendance codes is linked here: [DCSD Attendance Codes](#)

22. If the county attorney is contacted, does that mean charges will be filed against parents/guardians?

- No. Contacting the County Attorney is only required when a student reaches 15% chronic absenteeism or 20% truancy. However, this contact does not automatically result in charges. The County Attorney's goal, along with the school's, is to work with families to improve student attendance. Students who qualify for exemptions, such as those with legitimate medical reasons, are not subject to these thresholds.

Scenarios Provided by the Iowa Department of Education

A student is present per SF2435:

- Participating in state athletic competitions, show choir, art show, attending community college courses, CTE placement, school-directed/supervised activity (e.g., FFA Conference, Art Show, Class Trip), medically homebound but completing work

A student is absent and not exempt per SF2435:

- Family vacation, funeral, "out of town," helping family (e.g., planting, harvesting, working shift at family business), arriving to school then skipping classes, college visit, the student is not at school, and there is no parent contact, or the parent does not give a reason, watching classmates in competition, car trouble, vehicle accident

A student is absent but potentially exempt per SF2435 based on the information/documentation provided:

- Planned medical treatment, Medical appointment; Home ill, Parent or sibling medical emergency

A student is absent but exempt per SF2435:

- Religious service, holiday, or education, Court-directed activity, Jury Duty, IEP that restricts attendance, Section 504 plan that restricts attendance