

Electronic attendance register (eAR)

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is eAR?

- A new type of attendance software available through your Student Management System (SMS).

Who developed it?

- The specification for the software was drawn up by the Ministry's Student Management System project team in association with Resourcing Division roll auditors and a range of school representatives and vendors.
- The software itself is developed by individual vendors and incorporated into their SMS packages. It must pass Ministry of Education approval testing before being offered by your vendor.

Why did we need a new computer based attendance system?

- The older permissions (Alternative Attendance Register guidelines) to use a computer for attendance were very 'loose' and not being followed.
- The roll auditors frequently found serious anomalies while verifying the funding roll.
- The new standardised codes being introduced with the eAR packages in January 2008 provide schools with assistance in clarifying attendance, absence and truancy terms.
- More valid data will be available, as a base for national strategies, to help schools improve student participation in learning.

How can a school implement eAR?

- The application form requesting permission to use eAR can be found at:
<http://www.minedu.govt.nz/educationSectors/Schools/SchoolOperations/Resourcing/ReferencesResourcesAndForms/ResourcingForms.aspx>
- The school's SMS vendor must be accredited, or from 2008, *data sharing approved* and the eAR software must have been tested and approved by the SMS test team. Approvals can be seen on the Ministry website at:
<http://www.minedu.govt.nz/educationSectors/Schools/Initiatives/ITAdministrationSystemsForSchools/StudentManagementSystems/DataSharingServices/SummaryTable.aspx>

Schools previously approved to use Alternative Attendance Registers

- These permissions were rescinded in January 2008.
- You must apply for permission to use eAR instead. Fill out and send an application form to Resourcing Division.

Schools that haven't used a computer based attendance system in the past

- Fill out and send an application form requesting permission to use eAR.
- The application form can be used as a guide to identify the attendance processes required for approval.
- The web page from where you downloaded this document includes resources to help you develop attendance policies and protocols.

How many vendors have their eAR software approved?

- As at November 2008 nearly all vendors have received eAR approval. Schoolmaster (previously approved for the 2007 software specification) and Karant software are currently being tested and Phoenix is expected to be available for testing shortly.

What about any other attendance software?

- It is mandatory for data sharing approved (SMS) vendors to include eAR in their student management system offering, although it is not mandatory for schools to use it. However if a school is using a computerised attendance package as its primary source of attendance data then the school must use one of the approved eAR software packages.

So what does a school do that doesn't want to use eAR?

- They continue with the use of the E19/1 roll registers.

Has eAR been improved as a result of school use?

- eAR has been available to schools using approved vendors since the start of 2007.
- During 2007 we have made small but important changes to the absence code set and provided lots of examples of how the codes are applied.

What are the advantages of using eAR?

- eAR software has numerous built in statistical calculations* to help you analyse trends and patterns of attendance.
- Attendance objectives can be measured and related back to school targets.
- Over time, links can be made between attendance, behavioural and achievement data.
- The time taken per teacher to enter data is minimal.
- Teachers no longer have to fill out the E19/1.
- The attendance data operator in the school has a clear set of guidelines informed by school policy.
- Attendance information is available more quickly.
- Information is more reliable.
- Casual truancy and therefore students at risk of serious truancy can be identified quickly.
- Student retention should improve – truants will be identified quickly.
- Easier, more accurate targeting of where resources are required.
- The level, or richness of information is much better.
- The attendance process is faster.
- Comparisons can be made between schools anywhere in the country.
- The biennial attendance survey will be able to be done at the touch of a button.

*What is the rationale behind the statistical calculations?

- Many New Zealand schools have high rates of non attendance.
- The Minister of Education has approved a five year plan to reduce truancy.
- This focus is expected to have beneficial flow-on effects, on student achievement.
- *Electronic attendance software will provide schools a comprehensive tool set to analyse the factors that influence student attendance.*
- In turn, this will enable schools to take appropriate corrective action.

Do the statistics offer any new ways of looking at attendance?

- The analysis not only provides traditional details about variation in attendance by days of the week and times of the year, gender, year-level and ethnicity, but also provides comparative analysis across subjects and teachers.
- This will enable schools to examine the influence of teachers and subjects on student attendance.
- Some of the rates can be calculated by either ½ day or period-by-period attendance and some only on period-by-period attendance. They are expressed in percentages.

Does attendance have to be recorded every period in a secondary school?

- The biggest change in eAR is the definition of a ½ day as 2 hours of accumulated time. Because of this, a secondary school would have to record attendance every period.

Can a secondary school still use a computer to store attendance and not use eAR?

- Any previous permissions granted to use a computerised attendance package (Alternative Attendance Register) have been rescinded.
 - The only way to get permission to use the computer as a record of attendance is to apply to Resourcing Division for permission to use eAR.
 - On a practical level, all vendors will have the new codes and eAR functionality in their system, so schools using an SMS for recording attendance will only see the new (eAR) codes.

Does whanau/group time count for attendance?

- Some secondary schools have an extended whanau/group time and may use it as a teaching session. The SMS software includes this time as a session to be marked and accrued towards attendance.

How many times a day does a primary school have to mark attendance?

- The legal requirement is that attendance must be marked twice a day. E.g. just after the start of morning school and after lunch. A number of primary schools intend to mark three times daily by marking another session between playtime and lunch.

Does a school have to have a computer/laptop in every room?

- It would be good to be in that situation, but many schools are not there yet and it's not essential.
- A school's process to capture attendance needs to accommodate the availability of computers, the school's geography, the use (or non-use) of an attendance data operator, the use (or non-use) of runners etc.

Why does eAR use 'justified' and 'unjustified' when schools use 'explained' and 'unexplained'?

- The looseness and variation around 'explained' meant it would be impossible to get consistent mappings of certain absences to truancy – e.g.:
 - some schools said a note from home re sickness was 'explained'
 - the same schools may have also said 'slept in' or 'shoplifting' were explained.
- For consistency we are saying all schools have to use the same codes.
- The examples given (on the code sheet) of when to use the various codes have been trialled and accepted by many schools.
- To get comparable and consistent data we had to establish rules around the use of codes and the codes themselves.

Does a student have to bring a note for absence?

- That is a matter for the school to establish with its board and communicate to its community.
- Many schools now contact the family on the first day of absence and depending on school policy may or may not require a note on the student's return.
- Regulations are being considered that will require a school to follow up unexplained absences on the day of the absence.
- We suggest that all schools should have an attendance policy that is known by all staff, students, parents/caregivers and the community.
- The ultimate responsibility to decide if a reason for absence is a justifiable cause to take the student off school is the principal's – a clear school policy that is communicated to staff, students and the school community makes this easier.

Surely the challenge will be to get teachers to remember to do the attendance marking every session?

- Yes. Several factors will help this:
 - The school needs a clear policy
 - The end-to-end process the school develops needs to be robust
 - It must be led from the top – policy, job descriptions, processes and practices clearly communicated and implemented
 - It must be reviewed regularly
 - Consequences must be followed up
 - Teachers must understand the drivers for better attendance
 - Induction processes for new staff need to be in place.

Even the best intentioned staff following good process will have lapses – what happens then?

- One of the challenges for a school will be the way it monitors the timeliness and accuracy of teacher attendance returns.
- The eAR software can be set to notify the attendance data operator as to what returns are still outstanding each session.
- The intention should be to continue to monitor the threshold of what is acceptable for the rate of attendance returns.
- Even with a few missing returns per day, the data will be better than it was in the past.

What are the main improvements for 2008?

- The code to be used when a student is not in class and the teacher doesn't know why, is now a question mark '?'.
- This means a student's attendance record showing a question mark has yet to be followed up for an explanation.
- The question mark will be changed to one of the other attendance codes as information about the non attendance is received.
- The system will have an option that the school can configure to change the question mark to the Truant code 'T' after a specified, elapsed period of time. It is at the school's discretion to enable this feature.

How is the privacy of the student protected if parents/caregivers can see the school codes?

- Reasons for absence that may be sensitive are included in a code that also contains a number of other reasons. An example would be code 'I' – Internal school appointment. This covers numerous reasons for absence including 'nurse' or 'counsellor'. This means the actual reason is not obvious, as numerous other reasons are included in code 'I'.

Is it expensive?

- Most vendors have included eAR software at no extra cost to those schools already using their current package.
- However some costs may be incurred if eAR has to be purchased rather than being made available as an upgrade – check your vendor for details.

What about training costs?

- Training requirements have been minimal but this is dependent on staff familiarity with the SMS software and knowledge of the attendance process.
- The development of any training materials and associated documentation will be the responsibility of the vendors.
- For the implementation to be successful the school needs to consider its attendance objectives and the end-to-end attendance process – this is part of a school's self review process.
- We recommend putting time and effort into this which in most cases will include a training budget.