

January 17, 2008

Tim Grimes, Director of Student Services
Hampton City Schools
One Franklin Street
Hampton, VA 23669

Subject: Official Recommendations for changes to the 2008-09 Students' Rights and Responsibilities Handbook

Dear Mr. Grimes,

Thank you again for involving the PTA in your review of the HCS Students' Rights and Responsibilities Handbook for the 2008-09 school year.

Per our initial meeting, follow-up discussions and our Hampton Council PTA meeting, the following are our official recommendations for changes to the Handbook. These recommendations were voted on and officially adopted (unanimously) by our PTA general membership representing PTAs at all HCS public schools at our January 10, 2008 meeting.

The five recommended changes are specifically in regard to the attendance and cell phone policies. Note that current wording is from the current 2007-08 Handbook.

CHANGE #1:

Reword the sentence specifying that after 5 written notes from parents, additional notes will be considered unexcused.

As currently written, page 13:

Absences are classified as unexcused whenever a student fails to report to school and no verification of that absence is provided that the parent is aware of and/or supports the student's absence. Absences due to suspensions are also classified as unexcused. Repeated absences due to minor illnesses without medical documentation may be considered unexcused. After five written notes from parents, additional absences with parent notes will be considered unexcused.

Proposed New Wording:

Absences are classified as unexcused whenever a student fails to report to school and no verification of that absence is provided that the parent is aware of and/or supports the student's absence. Absences due to suspensions are also classified as unexcused. Repeated absences due to minor illnesses without medical documentation may be considered unexcused. *After five written notes from parents, additional absences may be considered unexcused without written excuses from physician, court, etc.*

Rationale for change:

By having the comment that “After five written notes from parents, additional absences with parent notes will be considered unexcused” discourages parents from sending in notes explaining their child’s absence after 5 since they’re unexcused anyway. HCS intent is to ensure parents do not habitually keep their students out of school for minor illnesses and that absences are both necessary and unavoidable. By rewording the five written notes from parent’s requirement with the words “may be considered unexcused”, it will ensure parents continue to send in notes explaining absences and will still give administrators policy to support them in cases of students with numerous unnecessary absences.

CHANGES #2 & 3:

Reword the sentence specifying that written verification by parents is limited to 5 per year and also the statement that students can’t be dismissed from school during the last twenty (20) minutes except in case of an emergency.

Tardies/Early Dismissals as currently written, page 14:

Students are expected to be on time to school, to all classes, and attend all classes in full. A student is considered tardy if not in class when the class is scheduled to begin. HCS discourages early dismissals except for required medical needs. Appointments should be made on student holidays, half days, or after school whenever possible. However, when this is not possible, written verification is required upon the student’s return to school. Written verification from parents are limited to five per year.

For safety reasons, students may not be dismissed from school during the last twenty (20) minutes of the school day except in an emergency.

Proposed New Wording:

Students are expected to be on time to school, to all classes, and attend all classes in full. A student is considered tardy if not in class when the class is scheduled to begin. HCS discourages early dismissals except for required medical needs. Appointments should be made on student holidays, half days, or after school whenever possible. However, when this is not possible, written verification is required upon the student’s return to school. *After five written notes from parents, additional tardies/early dismissals may be considered unexcused without written excuses from physician, court, etc.*

For safety reasons, students requiring early dismissal should be released 30 minutes prior to dismissal, except in case of an emergency.

Rationale for Changes:

Change #2: Reword the sentence regarding 5 written notes. By having the comment that “written verification by parents is limited to 5 per year”, this discourages parents from sending in notes explaining their child’s tardiness or early dismissal after they’ve already had 5. By rewording this line, it will ensure parents continue to send in notes explaining

why their student misses time from school and will still give administrators policy to support them in cases of students with numerous unnecessary tardies/early dismissals.

Change #3: Reword the clause regarding the last 20 minutes of the day. Dismissal is a very difficult time and it is understood that releasing students outside of standard dismissal procedures during this time can be a safety issue. This poses a safety issue because it interferes with standard routing of buses & parent pick-ups during this time as well as staff having time to confirm that person is authorized to pick-up the child and teachers having time to get a specific child dismissed in the midst of others being called for buses & standard parent pick-up. However, current wording is very strong and can put parents on the defensive, since they are being told that they can not have their child. The proposed wording still provides the policy for the administrators but is also placatory and more acceptable sounding for parents. You'll also note that the 20 minutes was increased to 30 minutes per our discussion at the January 10th meeting where administrators expressed that 30 minutes is really what is needed.

CHANGES #4 & 5:

Reword the cell phone policy to allow middle school students to carry cell phones and to allow cell phones to be used within the school building before & after school hours.

As currently written, page 29:

High school students may possess beepers, cellular telephones or other portable two-way communication devices. The presence of these devices must not interfere with the instructional program or activity. These devices must be stowed and secured in lockers or personal vehicles and must remain turned off during the school day (7:50 a.m. - 2:39 p.m.) or during school-related activities. The devices may only be used outside the school building or facility before and after regular school hours or school-related activities.

Elementary and middle school students are not permitted to bring cell phones, other communication devices, or look-a-likes to school. Any beeper, cellular phone or similar portable communication device possessed or controlled in violation of this policy shall be subject to seizure by school officials or law enforcement officers. Such devices will be returned to the parent only.

Proposed New Wording:

Middle and High School students may possess beepers, cellular telephones or other portable two-way communication devices. The presence of these devices must not interfere with the instructional program or activity. These devices must be stowed and secured in lockers or personal vehicles and must remain turned off during the school day, such that calls can not be made or received and no additional features such as text messaging, camera or internet can be used. The devices may only be used before and after regular school hours or school-related activities. HCS is not responsible for missing or stolen devices.

Elementary school students are not permitted to bring cell phones, other communication devices, or look-a-likes to school.

Any beeper, cellular phone or similar portable communication device possessed or controlled in violation of this policy shall be subject to seizure by school officials or law enforcement officers. Such devices will be returned to the parent only.

Rationale for Changes:

Change #4: Allow middle school students to carry cell phones. Parents/guardians consider cellular telephones to be a safety device now and find it necessary that their middle school student(s) be able to carry one. Middle school students have after-school activities, ride HRT buses, walk to/from school & ride bikes to/from school. For all of these instances, students may need a cell phone for assistance (examples: see stranger when walking home, get off bus at the wrong stop, parent doesn't pick them up, etc...). Pay phones are no longer available at most schools or throughout the community in general, plus most school offices are closed by the time after-school clubs end.

Wording is included to ensure students know that phones are to be turned off during the school day or there will be disciplinary action. Plus wording includes notifying parents that HCS is not responsible for missing or stolen phones. An additional step could be to add this wording to the form that parents/guardians and students sign.

In reality, many middle school students are bringing cellular telephones to school. Parents feel that in this case, their child's safety is more important than abiding to the HCS policy. This puts students in an awkward situation with differing messages from their parents versus their school administration. In addition, by allowing cellular telephones in middle schools, this will teach students at an earlier age how to use this privilege responsibly and hopefully will reduce number of problems at High Schools.

Change #5: Allow students to use cell phone inside school building. As long as it is after school hours and not during a school activity such that it would distract a program, then students should be able to use their phone inside the school building. This is helpful for many situations, like if it is raining outside, student is in a club not near an exterior door or the student needs to wait inside until their ride arrives.

This completes all the recommendations for changes that were approved at our Hampton Council of PTA/PTSAs general membership meetings. Please note that one issue was tabled and that was changing the cell phone policy to allow students to possess such devices in their book-bags or pockets during school day as long as they are off.

Tabled Recommendation: We discussed a recommendation for eliminating the requirement that these items be stowed in a locker or outside in car because cell phones are small enough to fit in a pocket or book-bag so that they can be protected from being stolen or misplaced. Plus, it was noted that some students don't have a car or locker (or don't have a chance to go to their

locker first thing in the morning). As long as they are required to be off, parents didn't think this should be a concern. If a phone is found in a security sweep then there would be no action needed by the school unless the phone was found to be turned on. It would be clear that if a phone is on or seen being used during the school day, then disciplinary action will be taken. However, if students were able to physically carry the phones, there was the concern that phones could be used for taking inappropriate photos or for cheating (taking photos of tests). With the requirement that phones not only be turned off but stowed in lockers, that would keep that from happening. We did not come to a consensus on this so the issue was tabled. However, I did want to note that issue in this letter for information in future discussions.

Per your suggestion at the January 10th Hampton Council of PTA/PTSAs general membership meeting, we agree that it would be beneficial to discuss cell phone changes further in a small group setting with PTA members, Middle School principals and yourself to help reach a consensus on making these recommendations work. I will be glad to put together a small group of parents and get with you on when we can arrange such a meeting. In addition since the meeting, I have researched cell phone policies in neighboring school systems on the Peninsula which do allow cell phones at Middle Schools. The wording for each varies and may help in our discussions. I will send you that information under separate cover.

Thanks again to HCS and you for your support and consideration of these proposed changes.

Sincerely,

Monica Smith
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