



BISA

Berks Initiative For School Attendance

2011-2021
DECENNIAL REPORT



VISION

The Berks Initiative for School Attendance (BISA) seeks to provide professionals working with children who are chronically absent a means to address the critical issue of school attendance rapidly, consistently, and successfully, within the schools and courts of Berks County. The BISA seeks to reengage students to increase graduation rates and better prepare them for their future. The BISA will focus on children who need the most assistance through periodic evaluation of the program to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of the schools and courts.

BISA

Berks Initiative For
School Attendance



MISSION

The mission of the Berks Initiative for School Attendance is to create a process and protocol that meets the needs of all school districts and courts and to provide a list of suggested intervention techniques that may be utilized by educators, Magisterial District Judges, and court personnel to improve school attendance in Berks County.

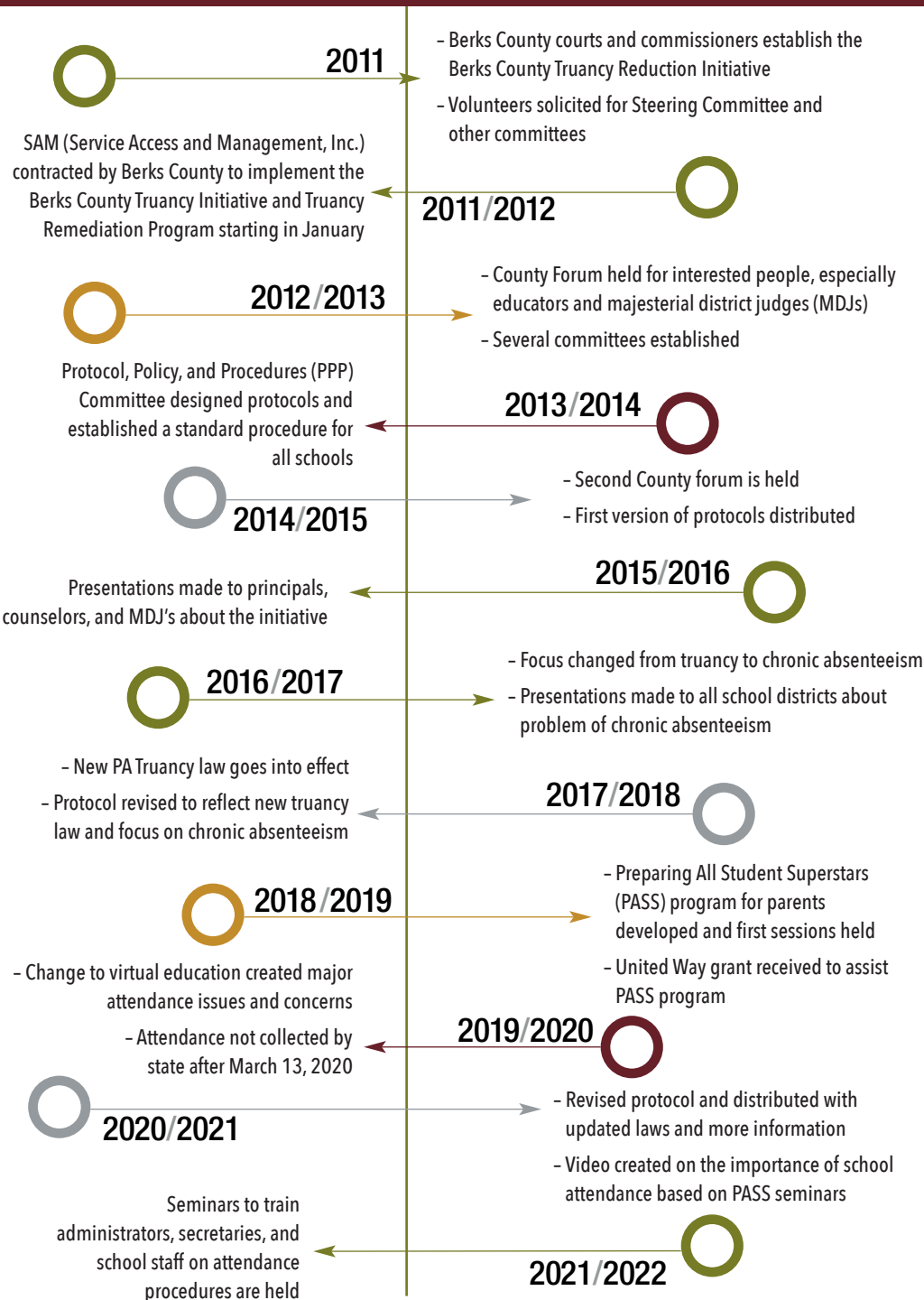
GOALS

The main goal of both BISA and ASAP (Advancing School Attendance Program) is to improve school attendance throughout Berks County and to decrease the number of students who are chronically absent or truant.

FUNDING

The Berks Initiative for School Attendance / Advancing School Attendance Program is funded through a combination of state and local monies. Due to the continued success of the program, Berks County has been approved to receive this grant since 2012. Because it is categorized as a special grant, the state portion of the grant is 90% and the County portion is only 10% of the total allocation.

HISTORY



In 2011, the Berks County commissioners and judges convened a series of stakeholder meetings to gather input on the problem of truancy in Berks County schools. From these meetings, the Truancy Reduction Initiative was created with a steering committee that included representatives from education, the court system, mental health agencies, Berks County Juvenile Probation Office, and the Berks County Children and Youth Services program. A Truancy Intervention Program was formed which enabled schools, Magisterial District Judges (MDJs), parents, and community partners to refer a student to a more intensive intervention with the goal of improving attendance, decreasing truancy, and increasing graduation rates.

In 2016, the initiative changed its name to the Berks Initiative for School Attendance (BISA) to reflect the goal of improving student attendance in all grades and decreasing absences for any reason. In partnership with Service Access and Management, Inc. (SAM), the Truancy Remediation Program was renamed the Advancing School Attendance Program (ASAP).



STEERING COMMITTEE

The Steering Committee oversees the entire initiative and determines the priorities of BISA and ASAP and assists in directing both programs. The committee has a diverse membership reflecting many organizations impacted by school attendance.

Judge Scott E. Lash

Berks County Common
Pleas Court, Judge

Dr. Betsy Adams

Coordinator,
Berks Initiative for
School Attendance

Wynton Butler

Social Services Director,
Reading School District

Ashley Chambers

Senior Vice President,
Community Impact,
United Way of Berks County

Stephanie Esser

Director,
Advancing School
Attendance Program

Judge Sandy Fegley

Berks County Magisterial
District Judge,
Exeter Township

Greg Gerdeman

CASSP Coordinator,
Berks County Mental Health /
Developmental Disabilities
(MH/DD) Program

Jeffrey Gregro

Deputy Chief,
Berks County Juvenile
Probation Office

Leah Henisey

Intake Supervisor,
Berks County Children
and Youth Services

Judge Carissa Johnson

Berks County Magisterial
District Judge, Reading

Amber Kazmierczak

Manager,
Advancing School
Attendance Program

Elizabeth Monick, LSW

In-Home Services Manager,
Berks County Children
and Youth Services

Lindsay Paduano

In-Home Services Supervisor,
Berks County Children
and Youth Services

Dr. Michelle Reichard-Huff

Director, Office of Early
Childhood and Student Services,
Berks County Intermediate Unit

David Schmaldienst

Assistant Principal,
Boyertown West Middle School,
Boyertown Area School District

Wendy Seidel

Executive Director,
Greater Reading
Mental Health Alliance

Steve Weber

District Court Administrator,
Berks County Court
of Common Pleas

Judge Ann Young

Berks County Magisterial
District Judge,
Sinking Spring

ADVANCING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE PROGRAM (ASAP)

Berks County contracts with Service Access and Management, Inc. (SAM) to provide the Advancing School Attendance Program (ASAP). The ASAP assists all schools and students / families in Berks County with improving school attendance by working efficiently and effectively with students and their families. The program utilizes a case management model to complete assessments and interventions to provide individualized, person-centered, family-focused services with the goal of improving the student's attendance.

Director – **Stephanie Esser**
Manager – **Amber Kazmierczak**

ATTENDANCE ROUNDTABLE COMMITTEE

Attendance Roundtable is an open discussion about school attendance facilitated by **Dr. Betsy Adams**. School personnel, MDJ's, ASAP attendance specialists, and others discuss issues regarding school attendance. Attendees share information, ideas, and policies. Roundtables are held approximately once a month during the school year and membership is open to anyone interested in attending.

PROTOCOL, POLICY, AND PROCEDURES COMMITTEE

This committee meets as needed to revise the protocol and discuss any changes needed. Committee members are drawn from interested members of the Steering Committee and Attendance Roundtable.

38

TRAININGS /
STAFF DEVELOPMENT /
SEMINARS HELD
BETWEEN 2011–2021.
TWO COUNTY-WIDE AND
TWO AT EACH OF THE
18 SCHOOL DISTRICTS.

10

SEMINARS
HELD AT READING
AREA COMMUNITY
COLLEGE (RACC)*

87%

OF STUDENTS IN
2017-18 WHOSE
ATTENDANCE
IMPROVED AFTER
ATTENDING THE
SEMINAR

75

NUMBER OF
ATTENDEES

BISA 

Berks Initiative For School Attendance

BY THE NUMBERS

*Details on RACC and PASS seminars are on page 9.

17

PASS SEMINARS HELD*

130

NUMBER OF
ATTENDEES

65%

OF STUDENTS
WHOSE ATTENDANCE
IMPROVED IF
PARENTS ATTENDED
THE SEMINAR

ATTENDANCE STATISTICS

**2009
2010**
school year

*Prior to the start of the
Berks County Truancy
Reduction Initiative*

**2017
2018**
school year

*Statistics from the federal
government; the latest
available in 2021*



Comparison of Berks County schools to similar size counties

2nd	5th	7th
highest percent of dropouts (1.89%)	highest percent of habitual truants (6.9%)	lowest average daily attendance (ADA) percentage rate (86.5%)

Comparison of Berks County schools to all of Pennsylvania

	Berks County	All of PA
Low or Modest Chronic Absence	65%	49%
Extreme or High Chronic Absence	5%	22%

Statistics from the 2009 / 10 School Year, prior to the start of the Berks County Initiative are shown above and compare Berks County to other similar size counties (Class 3). The common attendance statistic until the 2016 / 17 school year was Average Daily Attendance (ADA). ADA is the percentage of students attending school on an average day.

This statistic was included in state information and available, but not especially helpful. In the 2015 / 16 school year, all elementary schools in Berks County had ADA between 93.5% and 97.1%.

As Attendance Works has shown, even in a school of 200 students with 95% average daily attendance, 30% (or 60) of the students could be missing nearly a month of school over the course of the school year.

As the federal government advocated for using chronic absentee data, PA switched their attendance statistics to the percentage of students in a school who were attending school regularly. Regular attendance is defined as students who attend 90% of the days or 162 days or more in the school year. **Note:** Chronic absenteeism is considered missing 18 or more days. If a school has 85% attending regularly, they have 15% chronically absent.

In 2018 / 19, the Regular Attendance percentage for elementary schools in Berks County ranged from 80% to 98%. For middle schools it ranged from 75%–96% and high schools from 72%–93%.

Attendance statistics are becoming more reliable, but discrepancies exist because schools have technology errors or define days of absence differently. For example, one Berks County school district seemed to have extremely poor attendance with their high school attendance at only 72% regular attendance in 2016 / 17. After finding and correcting the technology error, their attendance in 2018 / 19 was 90%.

Middle school student in 8th grade refused to go to school. This student has been involved with the ASAP program for more than a year. His mom met with the specialist regularly.

This student struggled to work with his resource teacher, which caused him to skip school. Together, they tried to come up with a solution to improve this student's attendance. The ASAP specialist worked to get this student into a classroom with a resource teacher that he could connect with and helped the family obtain Multisystemic Therapy. Now, this student goes to school each day. After several meetings with his specialist, the student began to demonstrate respect and develop goals for his future. He has been attending each day and hopes to attend the career and technology center next year.



CASE STUDY



MAJOR CHANGES 2011–2021

1

FROM TRUANCY TO CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

The original programs, The Berks County Truancy Initiative and the Truancy Remediation Program, were created to reduce truancy in Berks County. However, following a federal initiative, the programs changed to an emphasis on chronic absenteeism. The goal was to improve attendance at all levels whether the absence was legal or illegal. The program names were changed to Berks Initiative for School Attendance and Advancing School Attendance Program.

The impact of this change can be seen in the referrals to ASAP. Originally only 13% of referrals were for elementary students, but it has grown to 33% of referrals. This increase reflects the goal of trying to resolve the problem when students are younger. High school referrals decreased from 52% to 7%.

2

NEW PA TRUANCY LAW

In 2017, Pennsylvania implemented a major revision in the truancy law that now requires schools to work with parents and students to determine why the student is absent and try to correct the problem before filing truancy citations. BISA revised its protocol to incorporate those changes and trained all Berks County schools and MDJ's to use the new process.

3

COVID-19

Beginning in March 2020, school buildings closed due to COVID-19, and attendance was not kept by the state or many of the schools. In the 2020 / 2021 school year, instructional models varied across Berks County. Some were in-person, some virtual, or followed a hybrid schedule. School attendance in Berks County and across the nation deteriorated. Schools had to decide what criteria to use to determine if a student was present or absent when they were learning virtually. Few districts used the same criteria.

Virtual learning was impacted by problems with obtaining and using technology, finding an appropriate place to learn, developing and sticking to a schedule, and being motivated without being in classrooms with teachers. Even when students were in person, students often needed to quarantine creating major attendance problems.

All of those problems made it extremely difficult for schools to follow the normal procedures when students were not attending school regularly. Schools worked hard to try to resolve problems, but overall attendance was poor and failures increased dramatically.



ATTENDANCE COMPARISONS

The federal government began collecting chronic absence data from states and released data for the 2017–18 school year. This is the latest year for which the federal data is available for Berks County schools to be compared with other schools in the state.

Berks County schools

- had fewer schools with extreme chronic absence and more with low absence;
- fared better than the state average overall and in all other comparisons; and
- did well regardless of the level of poverty.

DEFINITIONS:

Chronic Absence: Missing 18 or more days in a school year for any reason.

Schools with Extreme Chronic Absence: 30% or more of the students are chronically absent

Schools with Low Chronic Absence: Less than 5% of the students are chronically absent

Chronic Absence Levels Across Pennsylvania Schools	Percentage of Schools School Year 2017–18	Berks County 2017–18
Extreme Chronic Absence (30%+)	10%	3%
High Chronic Absence (20–29.9%)	12%	2%
Significant Chronic Absence (10–19.9%)	29%	30%
Modest Chronic Absence (5–9.9%)	30%	34%
Low Chronic Absence (0–4.9%)	19%	31%

Berks County Schools had better attendance at all levels of education.	Elementary Schools		Middle Schools		High Schools	
	PA	Berks	PA	Berks	PA	Berks
Extreme Chronic Absence (30%+)	6%	0%	6%	5%	22%	11%
High Chronic Absence (20–29.9%)	9%	0%	9%	5%	22%	5%
Significant Chronic Absence (10–19.9%)	23%	24%	33%	24%	43%	58%
Modest Chronic Absence (5–9.9%)	34%	31%	40%	48%	12%	26%
Low Chronic Absence (0–4.9%)	28%	45%	12%	19%	2%	0%



GRADUATION STATISTICS

For the five-year cohort in the 2019 / 20 school year

89.5%
State Average
Graduation
Rate

Berks County Graduation Rates

17 high schools have
a graduation rate of:

90+%

8 high schools have
a graduation rate of:

95+%

While **Reading High School** is the only county high school below the state graduation rate, **it has raised its graduation rate from 60% to almost 77%!**



CASE STUDY

A fifth grade elementary school student was referred to the ASAP program multiple times. He repeatedly refused to go to school and would not get out of the car when his mother would try dropping him off at school.

The student said he was anxious and did not feel comfortable while in school. An Attendance Specialist assigned to his case helped his mother enroll him into a different school.

Since the transition to his new school, this student has not missed a day. The Attendance Specialist advocated for this student by attending his school meetings and counseling appointments. The specialist's involvement helped in the success of this student's attendance.



ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

BISA has developed two programs that schools or MDJ's can use instead of issuing citations or to prevent the need for citations:

Preparing All Student Superstars (PASS) is a 90-minute program for parents (and students at the middle school level) to educate them on the importance of school attendance.

Reading Area Community College (RACC) hosts a two-hour seminar for students who are 16 or older and accompanied by an adult. The seminar includes information about curriculum, special programs, future earnings, difference between a diploma and a GED, admissions, financial aid, and a tour of the campus.

ASAP

Advancing School Attendance Program

Berks County contracts with Service Access and Management, Inc. (SAM) to provide the Advancing School Attendance Program (ASAP). The program utilizes a case management model to complete assessments and interventions to provide individualized, person-centered, family-focused services with the goal of improving the student's attendance.

STATISTICS

Referrals increased from 181 in 2011-12 to 879 in 2020-21.

Staff increased from four to nine members.

Referrals come from all 18 Berks County school districts, private / parochial schools, magisterial district judges, and other agencies.

Of the students and families who engaged in the process,

71%
improved their attendance!

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Stephanie Esser | ASAP Director
Advancing School Attendance Program
Service Access and Management, Inc.
610-301-7918 | sesser@sam-inc.org

BISA

More than 70 training sessions were held for educators, parents, and social services staff on the problem of chronic absenteeism, the importance of school attendance, and truancy law and procedures.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Dr. Betsy Adams | BISA Coordinator
Berks Initiative for School Attendance
610-488-0744 | BISAba@comcast.net



"Your presentation was incredibly helpful and will lead to some changes with how our school deals with attendance issues."

– Educator

"I would recommend this program so other parents would know and be more conscious about absences."

– Parent



“I have worked with ASAP for the past three years. They provide quick and proactive communication and have done a wonderful job supporting our students and families through identifying barriers to attendance and assisting with creating solutions and connecting to local resources when needed.”

– Educator
Reading School District

“The SAM ASAP Program is excellent to work with. Their staff are friendly, consistent, reliable, and very supportive of my family. Over the years, my family has worked with many programs; this one is very involved with not only the parents, but with the student! Thank you SAM for all that you have done for my family.”

– Parent

“In you we found a true advocate! Someone unjaded by past experiences that could look at our case for what it is.”

– Parent

FUTURE GOALS

Berks Initiative for School Attendance

1. Continue educating and supporting school districts as they work to reduce chronic absenteeism.
2. Continue and increase use of alternative programs: such as Preparing All Student Superstars (PASS) and the two-hour program seminar held at Reading Area Community College (RACC).
3. Work with the entire community to improve attendance especially organizations such as the United Way of Berks County, Olivet Boys and Girls Clubs, local government, religious, and community organizations, etc.
4. Implement programs for students on the importance of school attendance.
5. Assist schools in developing and implementing their own programs to increase attendance.

Advancing School Attendance Program

1. Continue success improving attendance for students referred to the ASAP program.
2. Improve cooperation rate of families so more families referred to ASAP participate in the program.
3. Build better partnerships with schools and MDJ's to increase appropriate referrals and improve the cooperation of families.



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ASAP
Advancing School
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 **SAM**
Service Access & Management, Inc.

