

Count Us In! Toolkit - 2017 - Executive Summary

Working Together To Show That Every School Day Matters



Poor attendance is an alarming, largely overlooked problem that is preventing too many children from having an opportunity to learn and succeed. Chronic absence – missing 10 percent of the school year, or just 2-3 days every month—can translate into third-graders unable to master reading, sixth-graders failing courses and ninth-graders dropping out of high school. Low-income students, who most depend on school for opportunities to learn, are especially harmed when they miss too much instruction. Read this [research summary](#) for more details.

Chronic absence is preventing too many children from having an opportunity to learn and succeed. [National data](#) collected for the 2013-14 school year found 6.8 million students, or 14 percent of all students, were chronically absent. This is not just a problem in middle and high school. It starts in kindergarten and preschool. It is a problem in districts of every size, urban, suburban and rural and found in every state. Stemming this crisis is essential to our nation's economic and educational future and closing the achievement gap. Growing recognition of its importance throughout the country led to the inclusion of chronic absence in the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#), which reauthorizes federal funding for public schools as well as the launch of the [Every Student, Every Day Initiative](#).

The good news is chronic absence is a problem we can fix when schools and communities work with students and families, starting in the early grades to identify and address barriers to getting to school, and cultivate a culture of attendance that encourages showing up every day even when it isn't easy. This starts with everyone in the community recognizing they have a stake and a role.

The Count Us In! Toolkit is an essential resource for improving attendance in your schools and communities. Use it to plan your involvement and enlist stakeholders in the work. Ideally planning starts in the Spring to be ready by the beginning of the next school year. Count Us In! offers a variety of options for promoting good attendance. Choose which options work best for you and tailor the strategies to reflect the strengths and assets of your community. Browse the links below and click on what interests you.

- » [How to Use this Toolkit](#)
- » [Why Attendance and Chronic Absence?](#)
- » [Who Should Use This Toolkit?](#)
- » [What are the Key Messages?](#)
- » [How Can We Deliver the Message?](#)
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- » [How Can We Identify & Help Students with Poor Attendance?](#)
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Attendance Works is a national organization dedicated to

improving the policy, practice and research around attendance. Our website offers materials, studies, and success stories about reducing chronic absence. Sign up to receive updates: <http://www.attendanceworks.org/>

This document is just a summary, for the full toolkit with links to many more resources, visit: <http://awareness.attendanceworks.org/resources/count-us-toolkit-2016/>

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2017 marks the fifth Attendance Awareness Month and tremendous progress in reducing chronic absenteeism in schools throughout the country. To continue this momentum, we're inviting everyone to continue Attendance Awareness All Year and to keep up the drumbeat. Schools, families and communities can work together to identify and overcome barriers to attendance while building a positive culture of attendance and an engaging school environment that motivates daily attendance.

Who Should Use this Toolkit?

This toolkit is designed with four main audiences in mind:

1. **National organizations** can build attendance into their own communities as well as encourage their members to address this issue. Groups can also sign on as coordinating partners.
2. **Teachers, principals, superintendents and school boards** who see the corrosive effects of absenteeism in their schools. The toolkit provides tailored materials for dealing with attendance in back-to-school letters, meetings and at parent-teacher conferences.
3. **Any community group or agency** that works with families and can deliver positive messages about why going to school every day is so important for success in school and life. Our hope is that you will use this toolkit to determine how to build these messages into your communications and everyday interactions starting in September.
4. **Local leaders and organizations** can convene and engage the entire community in working together to address school attendance. If the resources and conditions are ripe for a community campaign, collaboration can lead to greater impact.

What to Do When: At a Glance



Let's get started!

- Convene coalition
- Recruit partners
- Meet with district
- Enlist health care providers
- Launch poster contests and other marketing campaigns

Early Summer

Getting into specifics

- Distribute talking points
- Enlist elected officials & celebs
- Line up incentives
- Analyze data



Late Summer

It's Go Time

- Tape PSAs
- Begin media outreach
- Print banners & posters
- Plan assemblies and Back-to-School events
- Launch door-knocking campaigns

Back to School!

- Release proclamations
- Host Back-to-School events
- Host press conferences
- Share data
- Spread the word!



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How Can We Deliver the Message?

Positive messaging is to help parents and students realize that daily attendance is key to reaching their dreams of a successful future. Spreading the message about good attendance at the start of the school year can get everyone off to a good start.

Here are four key steps for messaging about good attendance:

- 1. Incorporate information about attendance into daily interactions:** Too often students and families do not realize how quickly absences add up to academic trouble. A key strategy for improving attendance is using attendance messaging to help families understand the impact of missed days and avoid missing school whenever possible.
- 2. Attendance Incentives and Contests:** The opening of school is an excellent time to put in place a strong system of incentives to encourage better attendance or to make sure an existing system recognizes improved attendance, not just perfect attendance.
- 3. Host Special Events:** Back-to-school night and assemblies are ideal times to convey the link between absenteeism and student achievement and to build a culture of attendance.
- 4. Cultivate Media:** Every year, print and broadcast reporters turn up looking for back-to-school stories. Suggest that this year's pieces focus on school attendance.

How Can Educators Improve Attendance?

- » **Teachers** and **Early Education Providers** play a key role in reducing chronic absence by teaching children – and reinforcing to parents – the value of attendance
- » **Principals** set the tone for the entire school, ensuring that students, parents and teachers know that attendance matters. They can call for the district to provide the data needed to identify at-risk students in need of support, help address systemic barriers and provide professional development to teachers.
- » **Superintendents** play a pivotal role in monitoring and improving school attendance. Local superintendents can proclaim their support and help launch their local attendance awareness efforts by signing on to the **Superintendents Call to Action**.
- » **School Boards** can make reducing chronic absence a key policy objective and hold superintendents accountable for taking action to improve attendance.

Help Send the Message that Going to School Every Day Matters for Success in School and Life

Key Concepts & Core Messages 2017

Improving student attendance is an essential, cost-effective but often overlooked strategy for ensuring our students are on-track to learn and succeed. Nationwide, as many as one out of 10 students are chronically absent, missing 10 percent or more of school days, or nearly a month. Chronic absence is a leading, early warning indicator of academic trouble and later dropout.

The good news is that chronic absence is a problem we can solve. While addressing some attendance barriers – such as health, poor transportation, and unstable housing – can require longer-term strategies, everyone can make a difference by helping students and families understand that going to school every day and avoiding absences whenever possible is critical to realizing their hopes and dreams. Too often, we don't realize how quickly absences add up: Missing just two days every month can cause a child to fall behind.

Below are key messages that everyone – districts, schools, preschools, public agencies, community organizations, faith-based institutions, elected officials, businesses and parents themselves – can use to help spread the word about this important issue. Students and families are most likely to hear and respond when these messages are consistently delivered across the community and combined with an emphasis on building caring relationships that help students know we care about them and their future.

These messages are the foundation of Attendance Awareness Month and can be used to keep up the drumbeat about the importance of attendance throughout the year. What can you do to help get these messages out in your agency, community or school?

- 1. Good attendance helps children do well in school and eventually in the workplace.** Good attendance matters for school success, starting as early as prekindergarten and throughout elementary school. By middle and high school, poor attendance is a leading indicator of dropout. Developing the habit of attendance prepares students for success on the job and in life.
- 2. Excused and unexcused absences quickly add up to too much time lost in the classroom, starting in kindergarten and even pre-K, especially for the most vulnerable populations.**
- 3. Students are at risk academically if they miss 10 percent of the school year, or about 18 days.** Once too many absences occur, they can affect learning, regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused.
 - » Sporadic, not just consecutive, absences matter. Before you know it – just one or two days a month can add up to nearly 10 percent of the school year.
 - » Avoid unnecessary absences. Some absences are unavoidable. Occasionally, children get sick and need to stay home. What is important is getting children to school as often as possible.
- 4. Relationship building is fundamental to any strategy for improving student attendance.** Students are more likely to go to school if they know someone cares whether they show up. Trusting relationships – whether with teachers, mentors, coaches or other caring adults – are critical to encouraging families and students to pay attention to absences adding up and seek out help to overcome barriers to attendance.



How Can We Engage the Community?

A broader approach that engages the full community in your attendance campaign can amplify your efforts. Whether you have a coalition or not, find ways to put tools in the hands of other agencies and organizations.

If your community is participating in an existing effort focused on academic achievement or dropout prevention, such as Campaign for Grade-Level Reading or Grad Nation, tap the coalition in place to engage the community in improving attendance. Reach out to other existing networks already organized to reform schools, promote literacy, reduce dropout rates, address health needs and improve communities might offer enthusiastic leadership around addressing chronic absence.

How Can We Identify & Help Students with Poor Attendance?

The best way to identify students with poor attendance is to use the attendance data that schools are already collecting to calculate how many and which students are chronically absent. Use the data to trigger early caring outreach to families and students. Outreach is essential for motivating students to show up every day and identifying barriers to attendance – hunger, health, shelter, transportation or other challenges

- Step 1. Organize and train volunteers or national service members** to reach out to absent students and families. Schools can assemble or reconvene attendance teams and host a first meeting in September
- Step 2. Ensure that every school identifies students at risk of chronic absence** and reaches out to parents
- Step 3. Use data to determine where and how to target resources** that can address common challenges of getting to school and build a local culture of attendance.
- Step 4. Develop strategies to address common barriers** such as chronic illnesses and mental health problems that keep them from attending school regularly.

Let us know what you're doing!

We're asking all schools and districts that are planning an event to pin on our [Attendance Action Map](#) shows who is participating in Attendance Awareness Month. Since this is a living toolkit and is continuously updated, we encourage schools, partners and communities to contribute ideas for improving attendance and to share your successes, [here](#).

