

Count Us In! Toolkit - 2019 - Executive Summary

Working Together To Show That Every School Day Matters



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Chronic absence is a problem we can solve. We must because it is preventing millions of children from benefitting from an education that prepares them for success in school, work and life. 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](#).

Chronic absence is preventing too many children from having an opportunity to learn and succeed. [National data](#) collected for the 2015-16 school year found nearly 8 million students, or 15 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 and setting – urban, suburban and rural – and found in every state. Stemming this crisis is essential to our nation’s economic and educational future and closing equity and achievement gaps. When we launched the Attendance Awareness Campaign chronic absence was an alarming, largely overlooked problem. Today the [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#) requires all states to report on chronic absence. The vast majority (36 states and D.C.) adopted a chronic absence metric in their state plans.

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.

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Attendance Works

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: <https://awareness.attendanceworks.org/resources/count-us-toolkit-2019/>

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2019 marks the seventh Attendance Awareness Campaign 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.



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 - We all Belong in School!



What are the Key Messages 2019?

Throughout the country, we see a growing consensus that improving student attendance is an essential, cost-effective strategy for ensuring student success and reducing achievement gaps. Nationwide, as many as one out of seven students are chronically absent. When students are chronically absent, they are missing on average two or more days a month, or 10 percent or more of school days over the academic year. Chronic absence is a sign that students and families may be experiencing barriers to getting to school or are disengaged because their school experience makes them feel unsafe and unsupported. Attendance reflects whether what happens in school encourages students to show up every day or exacerbates the negative impact of challenges experienced in the community or at home.

Chronic absence is a problem we can and must solve if we want all children and youth to benefit fully from an education that prepares them for success in school, work and life.

Below are key messages that everyone—districts, schools, preschools, health providers, public agencies, advocates, expanded care programs, community organizations, faith-based institutions, elected officials, businesses and families—can use to rally their communities to take action on attendance.

- 1. Good attendance contributes to students doing well in school and eventually in the workplace.** The early school years are essential for laying a foundation for strong attendance and academic success in future years. By middle and high school, poor attendance is even more predictive of dropout. Each absence represents a preventable lost opportunity to learn in the classroom. We can't afford to think of absenteeism as merely a lack of compliance with school rules.
- 2. Students are at risk academically if they are chronically absent (missing just two days a month or 10 percent of the school year).** When 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.
- 3. Prevent absences whenever possible.** Some absences are unavoidable, for example, when students have a serious or a contagious illness. But many absences can be prevented by identifying and resolving barriers to attendance. These can be related to transportation, bullying, inadequate supports for students with disabilities or a lack of engaging instruction.
 - » Reducing health related absences, such as chronic disease, lack of access to care, undiagnosed illness and anxiety, is key because illness is the top reason students and families give for missing school. Health professionals, particularly pediatricians and nurses, are allies for communicating with parents and schools about the importance of preventing school absences and connecting families to needed supports.

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 [Share Your Story](#) for a chance to appear on our website or in our outreach. 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](#).

