

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

Key Concepts & Core Messages 2016

Improving student attendance is an essential, cost-effective but often overlooked strategy for ensuring our students are on-track to learn and succeed. Nationwide, at many as one out of 10 students is chronically absent, meaning they miss 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 student 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 – schools, preschools, public agencies, community organizations, faithbased institutions, elected officials, businesses and parents themselves—can use to help spread the word about this important issue. 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 easily 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 have occurred, 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. Chronic absence, missing 10 percent of the school year or more, does not just affect the students who miss school. If too many students are chronically absent, it slows down instruction for other students, who must wait while the teacher repeats material for absentee students. This makes it harder for students to learn and teachers to teach.



5. Educators and families need to monitor how many days each student misses school for any reason— excused, unexcused or suspensions— so we can intervene early. Districts and schools should use data to identify how many and which students are chronically absent so they can target extra supports that can improve attendance and interrupt a pattern of chronic absence. Families should track how many days their children have missed so they are aware of when they should be concerned and take action. We can't afford to think of absenteeism as merely a lack of compliance with school rules or a loss of funding. Absences represent lost opportunities to learn in the classroom.



6. Chronic absence is a problem we can solve when the whole community, along with to parents and schools, get involved in improving attendance. All of us can make a difference by helping students and families feel engaged in learning and their schools, setting the expectation that school attendance matters and working together to identify and help families overcome barriers to getting to school. Community partners are especially important for helping schools and families address and overcome tough barriers, such as limited access to health care, unstable housing, poor transportation or neighborhood violence.



7. 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 seek out help to overcome barriers to attendance.



8. Reducing chronic absence can help close achievement gaps. Chronic absence especially affects achievement for low-income students who depend more on school for opportunities to learn. Because they are more likely to face systemic barriers to getting to school, low-income children, many of whom are children of color, have higher levels of chronic absence starting as early as prekindergarten. Chronic absence data can be used to trigger interventions so high-risk student populations receive the supports they need, ideally before they fall behind academically. Especially among older students of color, chronic absence could signal the need to reform inappropriate and biased student discipline policies and practices that are pushing students out.



9. Map and address the attendance gap. Data can show us where absenteeism is most concentrated) by school, grade, ethnicity, geography, income, etc.) and help us unpack the major causes and identify potential causes. This information can then be used to ensure resources are targeted to improve outcomes especially for the students who currently have the least access to an opportunity to do well in school.

