

FOR MAYORS AND CITY LEADERS:

Why Engagement and Attendance Matters

The Attendance Imperative: Attending school regularly is essential to students gaining the academic and social skills they need to thrive. Chronic absence - defined as missing 10% of the academic year - has more than doubled since the start of the pandemic, from 8 million to an estimated 16 million students nationwide, and absenteeism is especially high among students and families most adversely impacted by the pandemic. Chronic absence, no matter its cause, has real life consequences for students, families, and society as a whole. Research shows that starting as early as preschool and kindergarten, chronic absence can leave third graders unable to read proficiently, sixth graders struggling with coursework, and high school students off track for graduation.

City leaders can play a role in addressing this issue by examining the hurdles that keep children and youth from getting to school every day, which include lack of food, clothing, and health care; unhealthy environmental conditions; unreliable transportation; housing instability; and the lack of safe paths to school.

The good news is that chronic absence can be significantly reduced and engagement increased when mayors and city leaders, schools, families, and community partners work together to monitor data, nurture belonging in school, and promote regular attendance and routines. Reducing absenteeism and increasing engagement in school is a vital strategy for responding strategically to the academic and social loss experienced by millions of students.



WHY STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND ATTENDANCE MATTERS TO MAYORS AND CITY LEADERS:



Stronger Economy: Good schools are key to creating a healthy and vibrant city that attracts businesses as well as new residents. Chronic absenteeism can undermine efforts to improve school performance and can contribute to higher dropout rates.



Better Schools: School quality is an important consideration for families thinking about where they will live. Students who feel safe in school, are engaged, and attend more regularly have better mental and physical health, higher test scores, and increased opportunities to achieve their dreams.



Safer Communities: Better attendance and engagement in school means safer streets in our cities. When students are in school, they are more likely to be in settings that support learning and nurture positive relationships with peers and adults while keeping them out of harm's way.

How Mayors and City Leaders Can Improve Student Engagement and Attendance

Mayors and city leaders are in a unique position to partner with school districts and community-based organizations to address chronic absenteeism in their communities. Broadly, city leaders can use the bully pulpit to draw attention to the issue; use their convening powers to spearhead partnerships and collaborative efforts; tap an array of resources such as public safety, early childhood programs, and community health clinics that can address significant barriers to school attendance; and engage residents and youth in crafting solutions. City leaders can:



Convene a task force on attendance and engagement in school to ensure that it becomes a community priority. Work in conjunction with school districts to bring together senior leadership from a range of disciplines: early childhood, K-12 education, family engagement, social services, public safety, afterschool, faith-based, philanthropy, public housing, and transportation. Include leaders of parent and student organizations, and invite individual students and families to describe their challenges and propose solutions.



Monitor and utilize data. Find out how many students and schools are affected by chronic absence - the first step to reducing absences is understanding the depth and scope of the problem in your community. City leaders can collaborate with school districts to gather and examine chronic absence data. These data can guide investments in childcare and early education as well as afterschool and summer programs. For guidance, refer to Attendance Works' [free data tools](#).



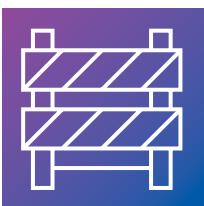
Launch a public awareness campaign to explain the value of being in school for well-being and learning - especially given the challenges experienced during the pandemic - for students, families, and the community. Speeches, proclamations, billboards, and public service messages can reinforce that message, as can family summits at the start of the school year.



Recognize and appreciate good and improved attendance in connection with a broader school or district wide attendance effort. Be sure not to focus on perfect attendance which can encourage sick students to show up for school and discourage those who struggle with attendance. Mayors can showcase students in newsletters or social media, help link schools to businesses that can provide incentives, and connect schools with local celebrities or athletes who can appear at attendance rallies.



Forge partnerships to ensure easy access to physical and mental health services. Asthma and dental problems are leading causes of chronic absence in many cities, especially when students have limited access to health care; city leaders can assist in addressing these issues by facilitating conversations with health departments and community-based providers to provide preventative care in easily accessible locations. Encourage health departments and districts to work together to offer consistent guidance about when students should stay home due to illness along with tips for staying healthy and avoiding absences due to anxiety.



Work with families, schools and community members to identify barriers to attending regularly and co-create solutions. If transportation or a lack of safe passages to school are barriers, consider adjusting city or school bus lines, providing students with public transit passes, or creating walking school buses. And collaborate with community groups to provide access to basic needs support such as clothing, food, and school supplies.



Recruit adults to mentor chronically absent students. Recruit businesses or provide city staff to mentor youth or otherwise support school efforts to engage students and families. Or collaborate with local nonprofit volunteer organizations or national service programs offering mentors to support and connect with students.

Addressing today's high levels of school absenteeism is a smart strategy for improving a city and its schools. Attendance is a simple, common-sense metric already recorded by teachers and understood by parents and is essential to other education reforms; addressing chronic absenteeism is a winnable strategy. When local governments work with schools, districts and communities to address barriers to showing up, student attendance and engagement improves.

RESOURCES

As a non-profit initiative, Attendance Works collaborates with schools, districts, cities, states, communities, and organizations to ensure that everyone recognizes that chronic absence is a serious issue that can be addressed using a positive, problem-solving approach grounded in an understanding of educational inequities. Free tools and resources are available on the [Attendance Works website](#), which city leaders can use to partner with school districts using these strategies:

- ◆ Share and monitor chronic absence data
- ◆ Make student attendance a community priority
- ◆ Nurture a culture of attendance
- ◆ Identify and address barriers to school attendance
- ◆ Advocate for stronger policies and public investment