

ADDRESSING ELEMENTARY CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM


Introduction

Chronic absenteeism has a significant negative impact on student success, and yet many parents underestimate the importance of good attendance in the early elementary grades.¹ In this research brief, Hanover Research provides partner districts with strategies for improving their attendance rates by engaging students, teachers, and parents around school attendance.


Key Findings

 **Experts recommend situating individual strategies to improve attendance within a broader school culture of positive attendance.**

School staff can improve the effectiveness of attendance improvement efforts by first establishing a welcoming school environment and developing trusting relationships with students and parents that motivate students to want to attend school. Teachers can build an attendance culture in the classroom by encouraging students to come to school and build good attendance habits, engaging students in the classroom, and teaching students to track their absences.

 **Research indicates that districts can improve elementary school attendance through a comprehensive approach to engaging and communicating with parents about attendance.**

Effective communications that promote attendance clearly state the school's policies and expectations for student attendance and emphasize the value of attendance and the negative impacts of chronic absenteeism in the early grades. Research also shows that sending personalized communication on the number of days a student has missed can effectively improve attendance, as parents of chronically absent students are often unaware of the total number of school days their child misses.

 **Districts often use incentives and recognition to encourage and reward positive and improved attendance.** Incentives may be material, financial, or recognition. Experts recommend

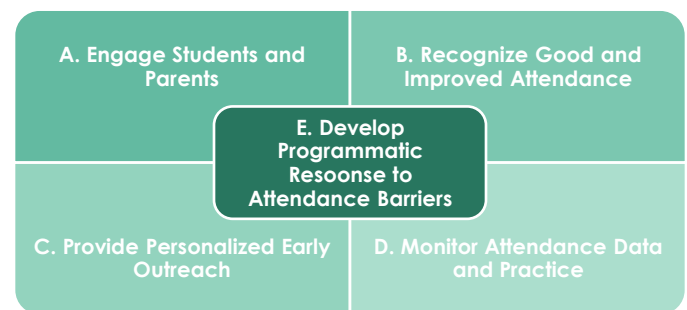
not focusing on perfect attendance and implementing an incentive program as part of a comprehensive approach to improving attendance and school-wide culture of positive attendance.



Districts can improve attendance among chronically absent students by reducing transportation barriers, as many students struggle with attendance due to inconsistent, unreliable, or unsafe transportation. Districts can reduce transportation barriers by offering school buses, offering public transportation programs, and implementing cooperative walking to school programs where adults walk with groups of students.

Creating a School Culture of Attendance

Schools can promote improved attendance by creating a school culture of positive attendance practices. Attendance Works, the premier organization focused on school attendance, recommends a five-part school-wide strategy for improving attendance, including:



Source: Attendance Works²

To create a positive environment for attendance initiatives, experts recommend that schools start by creating a welcoming school environment and developing trusting relationships with students and parents that motivate students to want to attend school.³ Schools and teachers can establish a school culture of attendance by communicating the importance of attendance and attendance expectations to students so that students see the value of good attendance and want to establish

good attendance practices.⁴ Sample talking points for students include:⁵

"School is your first and most important job."

"Students who attend school regularly are more likely to graduate and find good jobs."

"School only gets harder when you miss too much."

For example, schools can promote positive attendance starting at the beginning of the school year by participating in Attendance Awareness month, a nationwide initiative "to launch the school year off with a strong start and build awareness of the importance of attendance."⁶ In their list of [School Attendance Improvement Strategies](#), the California Department of Education recommends celebrating Attendance Awareness Month by raising awareness of the impacts of chronic absenteeism among all stakeholder groups.⁷

Strategies for Teachers

Teachers also play a critical role in promoting positive student attendance and creating a culture of attendance. Teachers can encourage students to come to school and build good attendance habits, engage students in the classroom, encourage attendance among students who struggle to come to school, and encourage students to track their absences.⁸ Additional practices that teachers can use to contribute to a classroom culture that promotes positive attendance include:⁹

- Take roll regularly showing students that you care when they miss school.
- Reach out to frequently absent students to find out in a supportive manner why they are missing school and what would help them attend more regularly.
- Work with parents to stress the importance of early education and to learn about any barriers to good attendance.
- Create a nurturing, engaging classroom that will encourage children to come to school. Work with colleagues to develop and implement a school-wide system of incentives and reward for good attendance.
- Encourage families to partner with other school staff, such as social workers or nurses, as well as community agencies to get needed supports to help children and families solve a significant barrier to getting to school.

Engaging Parents About Attendance

Parent communication and engagement is crucial to improving attendance among elementary school students. Experts at Attendance Works note that:



*"[C]hronic absence can be reduced when schools work with families and communities to **debunk common myths about attendance, build a culture of going to school or preschool every day and address barriers to getting to class.**"¹⁰*

Parents are critical partners in ensuring appropriate student attendance, especially at the elementary level, and research supports the positive impact of parent involvement on attendance. Specifically, engagement practices that can improve attendance include:¹¹

- Orient parents on school policies and expectations for student attendance and on-time arrival.
- Provide parents with a school contact person.
- Communicate often (as needed) to provide all families with information on attendance.
- Reward students for excellent attendance.
- Make home visits.

Communicating the Value of Attendance and Expectations



Effective communications that promote positive attendance clearly state the school's policies and expectations for student attendance.¹² Attendance Works

recommends also noting that the district monitors student attendance, has staff available to assist with attendance challenges, and including resources for families struggling with attendance due to challenges such as transportation, health issues, and homelessness.¹³

Experts also recommend that districts intentionally communicate to parents the value of attendance and the negative impacts of chronic absenteeism in elementary school on student outcomes.¹⁴ Indeed,

research indicates that parents underestimate the importance of attendance in the early grades and believe that attendance matters more for students in middle and high school.¹⁵ Thus, schools should focus communications both before the start of the school year and throughout the year on the importance of attendance and the negative impact of absenteeism:

IMPACT OF ABSENTEEISM IN THE EARLY GRADES

Academic Impact

Chronic absenteeism in the early grades negatively impacts student academic outcomes.

- Chronic absenteeism in preschool is related to lower academic and social-emotional outcomes at the end of preschool, lower Kindergarten readiness scores, lower attendance in Kindergarten, and lower reading outcomes in Grade 2.¹⁶
- Chronic absence in Kindergarten is associated with lower academic performance in Grade 1.¹⁷
- Chronic absences in Kindergarten and Grade 1 negatively impact reading and math performance, especially in Grade 3.¹⁸

Non-Academic Impact

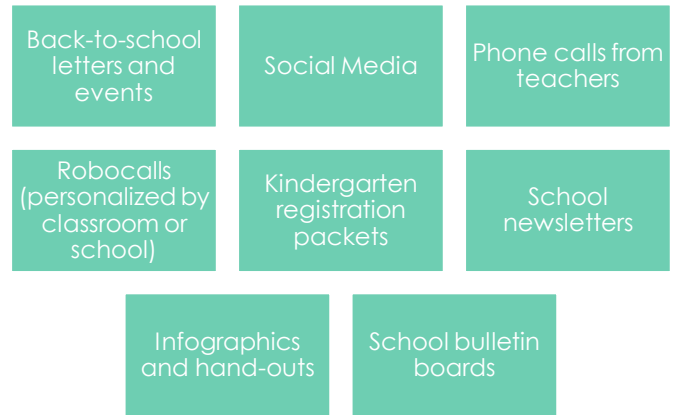
Chronic absenteeism in the early grades negatively impacts students' future attendance rates and social-emotional outcomes:

- Chronic absenteeism in preschool is related to lower social-emotional outcomes at the end of preschool and lower attendance in Kindergarten.¹⁹
- Chronic absences in Kindergarten and Grade 1 are correlated with poor attendance in later years.²⁰
- Poor attendance in the first month of school can predict chronic absence for the entire year.²¹
- Chronic absenteeism in Kindergarten is significantly correlated with lower educational engagement skills, including lower frequencies of approaches-to-learning behaviors and eagerness-to-learn behaviors, and social engagement skills, including higher levels of internalizing problem behaviors.²²

Source: Multiple

Communication Strategies

Schools can use both existing communication channels and those meant specifically for attendance to communicate with parents about attendance, when school starts, and appropriate arrival times. For example, sample communication methods for reminding parents of attendance include:²³



Notably, districts should offer communications, especially those that go directly to parents, in the parents' primary language.²⁴ The California Department of Education recommends that schools "Use bilingual aides to contact parents, guardians, or caregivers with limited English-speaking ability and send out school attendance notification e-mails or letters in the language appropriate to the family."²⁵

Strategies for engaging parents about attendance include starting outreach prior to the beginning of the school year, starting when students are in preschool or kindergarten, and taking advantage of existing communication channels:

Start Outreach Before School Begins	Before the school year starts, schools can focus communications on when school starts, what the school's attendance policies are, and the importance of attendance.
Engage families early.	Starting communications when students are in pre-K and Kindergarten builds an early base of positive attendance practices, engages and builds positive relationships with parents while they are most involved, and conveys the importance of attendance in the early grades.
Leverage Existing Activities	Districts can use common communication channels for consistent positive messaging throughout the year about attendance expectations and to offer support for families struggling with attendance.

Source: Attendance Works²⁶

Districts should prioritize ongoing two-way communication with parents about student attendance, including ensuring that parents are aware of resources for assisting with attendance barriers they may face.²⁷ However, schools should try to establish positive relationships with parents before discussing poor student attendance, as these relationships facilitate more positive parent

engagement than only focusing on negative attendance. Accordingly, “when parents feel welcome in a school and respected as an important partner in their children’s education, they are more willing to contribute and respond openly and positively.”²⁸

Teachers can also discuss attendance directly with parents through parent-teacher conferences, as both a conversation topic and when additional intervention is necessary.²⁹

Furthermore, Attendance Works offers the following strategies for getting in touch with hard-to-reach parents:

Start with the basics:

- ✓ Ask students for their home phone number, as well as any relevant cell phone numbers.
- ✓ Talk to a chronically absent student’s siblings if you can’t reach the actual student.
- ✓ Look at school forms – accurate phone numbers are often on free and reduced lunch forms.

Seek out the parents:

- ✓ For younger children, approach the person who picks up the child.
- ✓ Send a formal letter home informing parents of their legal obligation to provide up to date emergency numbers and contact information.
- ✓ Schedule a home visit to obtain accurate contact information.

Get creative:

- ✓ If an event is coming up that parents are likely to call about, such as school picture day, be sure to alert office workers to ask parents for their contact information.
- ✓ Use address information to find and get in touch with families who live near chronically absent kids whose parents you’re having a hard time reaching.

Source: Attendance Works³⁰

Personal Attendance Communications

Research finds that parents of chronically absent students are often unaware of the total number of school days their child misses, as well as how their students’ attendance compares with other students.³¹

Similarly, research shows that **schools can improve elementary student attendance by communicating with parents about their student’s attendance.** For example, two recent studies find that districts that mailed letters to families indicating the number of absences and that either asked for help improving attendance or highlighted the impact of

attendance reduced further absences. Specifically, a California district and the School District of Philadelphia reduced chronic absenteeism by 15 and 10 percent, respectively.³² Research shows that districts can also improve student attendance by communicating with parents about attendance through emails and text messages.³³

ATTENDANCE RESOURCES FROM ATTENDANCE WORKS:

- [Attendance Handouts for Families](#)
- [Parent and Community Attendance Infographics](#)
- [Video on “Bringing Attendance Home”](#)
- [Tips for Taking Advantage of Parent-Teacher Conferences](#)
- [Student Attendance Success Plan for Families](#)
- [Attendance Webinars](#)
- [Attendance Posters, Banners, and Social Media Tools](#)

Interventions for Improving Attendance

Attendance Incentives and Awards



Schools can use incentives to promote and acknowledge students and families with good and improved attendance.³⁴

Notably, experts do not recommend focusing incentives and awards on perfect attendance, as this approach may exclude those students who find good attendance most challenging and encourage the attendance of students who should remain home to avoid spreading illness.³⁵

For examples, the California Department of Education recommends the following school-wide incentive measures:³⁶

- Hold a drawing for special prizes for individual students or classes that show improved attendance.
- Send commendation letters to students and parents, guardians, or caregivers for improved school attendance and perfect attendance.
- Seek small or large financial incentives from the parent association to be awarded to the classroom with the best attendance record; allow teachers to spend financial rewards for any purpose selected by the class members of the teacher.

Alternatively, within individual classrooms, teachers can use the following practices to incentive positive attendance:

- Positive comments to children
- Positive notes home to parents that appreciate their efforts to get their children to school on time
- Extra time at the computer, PE, or recess
- Free homework pass
- First-in-line privileges for lunch or dismissal
- Pencils, pens, stickers, posters, book covers, book marks, etc.
- Team certificates for the best record or most improved record
- Name on the "Attendance Wall" in the classroom
- Chance to act as teacher's assistant

Source: *Attendance Works*³⁷

Notably, **schools can increase the effectiveness of incentives by implementing them as part of a comprehensive approach to improving attendance and school-wide culture of positive attendance.**³⁸

Experts also recommend prioritizing incentives in the form of school or peer recognition (e.g., certificates, recognition at assemblies, popcorn parties for classes with the highest attendance levels, etc.) rather than those that focus on material or monetary rewards.³⁹ Attendance Works offers the following additional best practices for implementing incentives:⁴⁰



- **Incentives don't need to be costly.** Simple rewards – recognition from peers and the school through certificates or assemblies, extra recess time, homework passes or even dancing in the hallways – go a long way toward motivating students. Ask students what they consider a meaningful incentive.
- **Keep the long-term goal in mind:** recognition and incentives are positive ways to help students internalize the value of showing up every day. Incentives are not meant to be bribes.
- **Interclass competition is a powerful motivator.** The sense of competition between classes (with rewards like a party for the class with the best monthly attendance) can be a powerful motivator. Such strategies encourage students to feel accountable to each other for attending class.
- **Reward timeliness not just showing up to school.** Since tardiness also has an adverse impact on learning, many schools only count on-time attendance toward rewards.

- **Send home information highlighting both the value of attendance and incentives and the consequences of poor attendance.** Ensure families know about the incentive program and the importance of attendance for academic success, as well as school policies in which poor attendance can result in failing a course or being retained. Sanctions should never be used without incentives.
- **Offer recognition for families, not just students.** Often, families appreciate access to resources such as food baskets, transportation passes, etc.
- **Implement incentives school-wide.** To foster a culture of attendance, every classroom needs to participate.

Transportation



Many students, especially those from low-income families, struggle with attendance due to transportation barriers.⁴¹ While some students may not have access to reliable or consistent transportation from their parents, others may struggle with not feeling safe traveling to school due to a lack of sidewalks or unsafe school routes.⁴²

Districts may be able to improve attendance among chronically absent students by reducing transportation barriers. Alternatives to increasing school buses include **offering public transportation programs** and **instituting a 'walking school bus,'** in which teachers and parents lead an organized walk to school every morning, collecting students en route.⁴³

Furthermore, providing transportation may have a positive on attendance beyond reducing barriers: A recent nationally representative study found that students in Kindergarten who take a school bus as their main form of transportation to school are absent fewer days over the year and are less likely to be chronically absent than students who took other transportation methods to school.⁴⁴

District Spotlights

The following spotlights demonstrate the practices two districts use to successfully increase attendance rates at the elementary level.

Sioux Falls School District, SD

When Terry Redlin Elementary School in Sioux Falls School District (SFSD) noticed a problem with attendance, starting in Kindergarten, they implemented a variety of strategies to address the problem. In SFSD's Attendance Action Plan report,

the district prioritizes the following strategies to improve attendance:⁴⁵

- ✓ Raise awareness of the importance of school attendance;
- ✓ Tiers of Intervention for schools; and
- ✓ Community partnerships and dialogue.

Demonstrating the district's commitment to emphasizing the importance of attendance, the Principal of Terry Redlin Elementary School meets students at the school door each morning to welcome students to school and highlight the beginning of a new school day and the importance of arriving to school on time.⁴⁶

SFSD focuses on relationships with parents and students and regular communication with parents, including attendance meetings. They use the communication tool KinVolved to "engage families through real-time, translated, text messaging" and provide attendance updates or check in.⁴⁷

As the Principal notes, "It's all about starting that conversation with families [...] At an elementary level, it's not necessarily the students who need to get to school on time. It's understanding and letting parents know the importance of school, that if you're not here at school, you're not learning."⁴⁸

Additionally, the district partners with community organizations to offer incentives for good attendance. For example, SFSD's "Strive for Five" campaign encourages students to attend the full five days of school each week, and students who attend all five days have their names entered in a drawing for a weekly \$50 gift card. Additional sample incentives include public recognition, a pizza party with the Mayor, or a chance to win prizes such as a bicycle or tablet.⁴⁹

After implementing these practices, attendance at Terry Redlin Elementary School improved by over 1,230 days of additional attendance compared to the prior two years.⁵⁰

Los Angeles Unified School District, CA

Since 2011, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has implemented an Attendance Improvement Program (AIP) in high-needs schools with the goal "to increase the percentage of students attending school at a rate of 96% or higher in Transitional Kindergarten Extended, Transitional Kindergarten, Kindergarten, and Grade 9."⁵¹ LAUSD experiences the lowest attendance rates in these grades.⁵²

The program's objectives include that all program schools will:⁵³

- ➔ Monitor and analyze attendance data trends and outcomes to guide prevention and early intervention efforts for targeted grade levels.
- ➔ Demonstrate increased staff, student, and parent awareness of attendance expectations and Performance Meter goals.
- ➔ Demonstrate an increased use of prevention and intervention programs to improve student attendance school-wide (incentive programs, community partnerships, parent support).
- ➔ Improve academic grades, as well as cooperation and work habit marks.
- ➔ Have at least a 5% increase in the percentage of students attending school at a rate of 96% or higher in the targeted grade level by the end of the school year, as compared to the previous year.

The AIP uses the following strategies to reach these objectives:

Analyze, track, and share student attendance data

Teach clear, positive expectations for student attendance

Reinforce attendance achievement and improvement through recognition programs

Implement absence prevention programs and campaigns

Identify, assess, and support students and families in need of early intervention services and resources to address barriers to regular school attendance

Source: Los Angeles Unified School District⁵⁴

A brochure for the program, available in both English and Spanish, notes the overall importance of attendance for student achievement, emphasizes the significance of Kindergarten attendance in particular, communicates the district's attendance policy and expectations, and recommends good attendance habits.⁵⁵

The district's Pupil Services page offers a variety of strategies and resources for district staff. While most of these resources require log-in credentials, LAUSD offers the School Attendance Month Campaign Toolkit (accessible [here](#)) to assist Pupil Services Counselors with preparing for the campaign.

Project Evaluation Form

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Endnotes

¹ "Bringing Attendance Home: Engaging Parents in Preventing Chronic Absence." Attendance Works, July 2018. p. 8. https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/AW_ParentToolkit_0718.pdf

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