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Improving your attendance rates

It's a simple truth: students can't learn if they're not in school. Yet more than eight million students across the United States miss so many days of school each year that they are academically at risk.

It's a serious problem, and no state is immune. Oregon and Washington, for example, both have rates of chronic absenteeism that rank among the highest in the nation. In 2015-16, about 23% of students in Oregon and 27% of students in Washington missed three weeks of school or more.

People sometimes blame negligent parents for not caring enough to make sure their children get to school, or older students choosing to skip school. But many times the absences are tied to health problems, such as asthma, diabetes and mental health issues, or family circumstances, such as lack of a car, the need for daycare for younger siblings or job instability.

Whatever the reason, absenteeism from school has serious consequences that can impact children's future success. Did you know...

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- Absenteeism in the first month of school can predict poor attendance throughout the school year? Half the students who miss 2-4 days in September go on to miss nearly a month of school.
- Poor attendance can influence whether children read proficiently by the end of third grade or will be held back.
- By sixth grade, chronic absence becomes a leading indicator that a student will drop out of high school.

Why should we care?

While it's easy to think chronic absenteeism is a parent problem or a school problem, it's actually a community problem. It should matter to all of us whether the children in our community are in school and getting a good education.

Business leaders understand this and support efforts to keep students in school. They know:

- Absenteeism contributes to high school dropout rates. If students aren't in school, they're not acquiring the knowledge and skills they need to compete in the modern workforce.
- School helps teach students the "soft skills" — such as punctuality, dependability and stick-to-itiveness — that are critical for success in the workplace.
- When children miss school, their parents often miss work in order to care for them. So employers have a real stake in reducing the number of days that children stay home.

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Many states have started aggressive campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of regular school attendance and to reduce chronic absenteeism. The state departments of education list a variety of resources for both parents and educators on their websites. Another good source is Attendance Works, a state and national initiative to reduce chronic absenteeism. Its website, attendanceworks.org, offers strategies and tools for addressing chronic absenteeism. Among the resources listed is a parent engagement toolkit.

Strategies for reducing absences

By working together with parents, businesses and communities, schools can make a positive impact on reducing absenteeism and keeping students in school and learning. Here are a few ways educators can help prevent or reduce absences:

Make school a welcoming place. One of the best ways to combat absenteeism is to ensure that school is a place where students want to be. Assign staff members to stand in the entrance each morning to warmly greet students and their families and make them feel welcome. Plan fun and educational activities throughout the year that motivate students to come to school. Establish positive behavior expectations that encourage students to be kind and act appropriately. Implement anti-bullying strategies so that students feel safe and welcome.

Communicate attendance expectations. Reach out to families before the school year begins to stress the importance of regular attendance. Use your “welcome back” letters and social media to communicate about how important attendance is for student achievement. Emphasize why being on time and in school matters. Hang posters that illustrate the importance of regular attendance for student success.

Form an attendance team, and intervene early. An attendance team can play a critical role in helping schools reduce the number of student absences. Attendance should be monitored daily, and criteria set for when the attendance team is notified. For example, the criteria might be to notify the team if a student is absent more than two days in a row or a certain number of days in a quarter. With early intervention, the team can step in before attendance becomes a bigger issue, and meet with parents and offer additional resources if needed.

Celebrate successes. Set school goals for attendance, and then celebrate progress toward those goals throughout the year. Create ways to celebrate successes along the way, such as school assemblies or monthly pizza parties for the class that has the highest attendance. Offer individual rewards to students who meet attendance goals.

Don’t forget the parents. Parents want the best for their students, but sometimes they don’t understand the negative impact of too many student absences, especially in the early grades. Keep them informed about your attendance strategies and school goals, and offer resources to help them improve their child’s attendance.

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant