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# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## Communicating about chronic absenteeism

Student absenteeism is a problem in schools around the country. Attendance plays a large role in student success — many say the biggest role. This is true for students in all grades. Students can't learn if they don't show up.

An estimated eight million students — about 16 percent of public school students — were chronically absent in the 2015-16 school year. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to report chronic absenteeism rates. States, districts and nonprofits have started initiative campaigns and public information programs to combat this growing problem.

### What is chronic absenteeism?

Chronic absenteeism is a measure of how many students miss a defined number of school days (usually between eight to 15 or more days) for any reason. Research shows that chronic absenteeism is associated with many negative consequences for students, including lower achievement, disengagement from school, course failure, and increased risk of dropping out.

Chronically absent students miss many days of school during the school year for both excused and unexcused absences. States define the measure they use for school absentee rates. Generally, it is defined as more than 10 percent of the school year, or a specific number of days, such as 15 or 18 days in a school year.

### The cost of absenteeism

High absentee rates affect the performance of your schools. Students who miss school usually struggle academically. California State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson stated that “students who miss just two or three days each month in kindergarten and first grade may never catch up.” (<http://bit.ly/2QG0LyA>). Those students start their early school years already behind — about 83 percent of them are not reading at grade level at the end of third grade, making them four times more likely to drop out of school before graduation.

Chronic absenteeism also has a financial impact on schools. School funding is generally distributed based on a per-student formula for average daily attendance. In some states, funding is reduced for each day a student misses during the school year. These budget formulas are complicated and include funding sources from the federal, state and local levels. For more information about the impact of attendance on school funding, read “The High Costs of Chronic Absenteeism.” <http://bit.ly/2QG0LyA>

### Intervention strategies

FutureEd, an education think tank at Georgetown University and Attendance Works, a national attendance awareness campaign, released its Attendance Playbook in 2019 to share in-

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ervention strategies to combat chronic absenteeism, which they say dramatically undermines student success and school performance.

*“School absenteeism represents an enormous threat to many students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. By 9th grade, students’ chances of graduating from high school drop by 20 percentage points for every week of school they miss.*

*Such findings have led the federal government to require all states to report chronic absenteeism rates, and they have led 36 states and the District of Columbia to hold schools accountable for chronic absenteeism rates under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Nearly 8 million students—16 percent of the nation’s public-school population—are chronically absent.*

*But there are proven strategies that states and school districts can use to address the problem, strategies that policymakers and educators can implement quickly and cost-effectively. These are interventions that move beyond the traditional focus on punishing students for missing school, an approach that studies show has failed to reduce absenteeism.”*

*[www.future-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Attendance-Playbook.pdf](http://www.future-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Attendance-Playbook.pdf)*

### **Proven strategies**

This topic is getting a lot of research, and several strategies are showing promise for reversing the trend. Most tactics include sharing information about the value of attendance and the impact multiple absences can have, connecting with students, parents and community partners, removing barriers to attendance and improving the school climate.

The Attendance Playbook’s three tiers of interventions are research-based. Tier I offers cost-effective and relatively easy-to-implement tactics. They shift from a discipline-based strategy to stress the importance of positive messaging. Recommendations in Tiers II and III are more intensive and more expensive. Social supports are recommended as part of the efforts to remove barriers to attendance and improve school climate.

#### **Tier I Interventions:**

**Effective Messaging and Engagement:** nudging parents and students, home visits, positive messaging, incentives

**Removing barriers to attendance:** school-based health services, school buses and public transit, safe walks to school, breakfast for all, laundry at school.

#### **Tier II Interventions:**

**Effective Messaging and Engagement:** Early warning, mentoring, youth engagement

**Removing barriers to attendance:** Addressing asthma, targeted transportation

**Tier III Interventions:** Truancy courts, interagency case management, housing.

For more information about these interventions, read recommendations, considerations and research for each tier. [www.future-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Attendance-Playbook.pdf](http://www.future-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Attendance-Playbook.pdf)

### **Resources**

#### **For parents:**

**Chronic absenteeism: What you need to know**

Tips for parents with information about what chronic absenteeism is, why kids miss school

and what the impact is and how parents can track and reduce their child's absences.  
<https://u.org/2MU0dEb>

### **Parent Handouts: Attendance Works**

Free flyers are available for download for different grades and in different languages. These informational materials are a good starting point for families who want their children to succeed in school but don't fully understand how absences can affect academic achievement. The focus is on how to build good habits for attendance and specific tips for parents.

Topics include:

- Preschool handout
- Elementary handout
- Middle and high school handout
- Infographic fact sheet
- How sick is too sick?

[www.attendanceworks.org/resources/handouts-for-families/](http://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/handouts-for-families/)

### **For schools:**

#### **Attendance Awareness Campaign: Attendance Works**

Everybody plays a role in ensuring children attend school regularly. In the section, "What you Can Do," find tips for afterschool and early education providers, businesses, families and parents, healthcare providers, local philanthropy groups, elected leaders, principals, school board members, superintendents and teachers.

#### **Sample "nudge" letter: Oregon Department of Education Every Day Matters Campaign**

Research has found that low-key reminders to parents and caregivers about absences can improve attendance. Letters are simple reminders; they do not blame or shame. They are effective because many parents are not aware of the total number of days their child has missed. Many districts use them. Find Nudge Letter Guidance from the Oregon Department of Education, <http://bit.ly/2SUtcLZ>

#### **Student absenteeism: Three studies to know: Education Week**

Research for schools on tactics that may help them combat high absenteeism:

- Students who follow a routine that includes being ready to catch a bus for school are less likely to be absent.
- High school students who regularly skip class can contribute to high absenteeism, which may be mitigated through scheduling adjustments.
- Early warning systems can catch and predict some absences, allowing schools to connect with the students who are at risk of high absenteeism.

<https://awareness.attendanceworks.org/>

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*Contributed by Marcia Latta, communications consultant*