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Bring them back: Reengaging students after COVID

School absenteeism was a problem before the pandemic started and has doubled during the last two disrupted school years. According to a survey conducted by Education Week, an average of five percent of students were absent on a typical day before the pandemic. The estimated number is now 10 percent, with higher rates of no-shows at the secondary levels.

“According to the survey, absenteeism rates are higher for schools and districts that have stuck with full-time remote learning, but they’re also up in schools doing full-time in-person instruction or a mix of remote and in-person learning. In fact, absenteeism rates appear to have nearly doubled between this fall and before the pandemic across the board, regardless of whether remote learning is in place or not.”

www.edweek.org/leadership/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-student-absences-during-covid-19/2020/10

Absenteeism affects student achievement

Schools can’t be effective at helping students succeed if they can’t reach the students. High drop-out rates and low scores affect the reputation and community support of schools. This is a problem that has a wide-reaching effect on community partnerships and election support for finance measures.

There are many reasons students miss school. Remote learning was challenging, and there were technology access issues for some students. Many older students stepped in to help with family obligations; the younger students struggled with virtual classrooms. In some cases, the actual absentee rates may not be accurate due to the difficulty in taking attendance for remote sessions.

The why of the absences does not matter as much if those issues have been resolved and are no longer preventing school participation. Schools that avoid blame and punitive action for those students may be more likely to entice them back in the fall.

“Some states, like Washington, have advised schools that attendance data should not be used in a punitive manner but rather to inform schools about students missing opportunities to learn. The nonprofit Attendance Works recommends using attendance data to partner with families to develop plans reflecting a student’s situation, including health, academics, and relationships.” *www.edweek.org/leadership/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-student-absences-during-covid-19/2020/10*

Targeting, finding and communicating with absent students

There is already concern over potential learning loss — the “COVID” slide — that may change teaching and learning when school resumes in the fall. Combined with a focus on absenteeism, districts may need to shift the focus and some funding to address these concerns.

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(Over)

Experts recommend a number of interventions, but the most effective ones are based on targeted support, not blame. Many students report feeling extra stress and a lack of confidence. Reaching them will require a commitment to positive interactions.

Reports by Edutopia and Georgetown University's think tank, FutureEd, recommend several strategies to reverse absenteeism:

1. **Home visits.** Focus on relationship-building through in-person or virtual visits with a student's family. Reach out to the students to show concern and interest in their school success. Consider developing an initiative or campaign to set expectations for these home visits, such as Mobile Mondays, where home visits are planned every Monday.
2. **Nudges.** Send letters and texts to alert parents about absences. Often, parents are not aware of the total number of absences their children have.
3. **Tutoring and mentoring.** Start or publicize a tutoring or mentoring program. Some students may need a confidence boost if they are discouraged about their progress. Helping them catch up with their studies could be the key to getting them back on track.
4. **The right school climate.** Schools with a welcoming messaging campaign about attendance create positive climates for students and parents.
5. **Leveraging community partnerships.** Community partners are essential to school success, and they can expand opportunities for students. Joint projects could include: finding additional volunteers to support students, prize campaigns for attendance from restaurants and stores, or transportation options from transit companies.
6. **Data.** Sharing data reports with all teachers and administrators can paint a clear picture of the scope of attendance and absenteeism issues. Regular reports can show patterns of absenteeism and pinpoint students who need interventions.
7. **Intervene at registration.** School registration is a great time to target students who need extra help and give them support. Another effective way to reach students is to assign a staff contact to all students. Staff could send periodic encouraging messages to their group and be available to lend a supportive ear if needed.

Edutopia: <https://edut.to/3wdnrZV>

FutureEd: <https://bit.ly/3AdvkSa>

Communicating your absentee efforts

For some schools, absenteeism interventions will require significant resources and support. It is important work that should be shared through communications channels as a program highlight or update.

Keep the attention on this priority focus through messages and feature stories about the district's efforts to:

- Prioritize students and help ensure the success of all students.
- Continue to point a laser-like focus on achievement.
- Share the community's pride in their schools.
- Partner with parents and community members to support young people in the community.

Including these efforts in your communications channels will help parents, staff, business leaders and community members understand funding allocations, operational decisions and special programs, good stewardship of resources and the dedication of school staff to student success.

In addition to committing to transparent communication, these messages could help support or find community partnerships to persuade hard-to-reach students to return to school.