

Summary of Research on Effects of Programs that Involve Families to Improve Student Attendance

Joyce L. Epstein and Steven B. Sheldon
Johns Hopkins University
Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships

Improving student attendance is an important goal for schools because children who are at school have more opportunities to learn. Students with good attendance have higher achievement and better behavior in school, than similar students who are frequently absent (Chang, H., 2008; Gottfried, 2010; Nichols, 2003; Roby, 2004).

Improving student attendance requires a holistic approach that addresses student motivation, school and classroom factors, and school, family, and community partnerships. Although most schools have not collaborated systematically with families to reduce student absenteeism, many recognize home-school connections as an important strategy to increase student attendance. One approach, organizing **comprehensive, school-wide programs of school, family, and community partnership– and implementing them well** – has been shown to help more students attend school more often (Sheldon, 2007).

Early studies identified parents' behaviors (based on parents' reports) that improve attendance and reduce chronic absence. These include monitoring students' whereabouts, parent-child discussions about school, volunteering at school, and PTA/PTO membership as important predictors of lower levels of truancy among students (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Duckworth & DeJong, 1989; McNeal, 1999).

Other studies (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004) found that several specific school practices for family and community involvement were associated with better student attendance and less chronic absence. These studies suggested that schools should take a comprehensive approach to engage students, parents, educators, other school staff, and various community partners in ways that improve student attendance. Activities that increased attendance and reduced chronic absence included the following:

- ✓ **Orient parents on school policies and expectations for student attendance and on-time arrival.**
- ✓ **Provide parents with a school contact person.**
- ✓ **Reward students for excellent attendance; alert parents to the awards/lists of students with excellent or improved attendance**
- ✓ **Communicate often (as needed) to provide all families with information on attendance**
- ✓ **Conduct strong after-school (extra curricular) programs for students**
- ✓ **Conduct more of the list of 14 attendance-related activities to engage students, families, educators, and community partners**

Also, to reduce chronic absenteeism

- ✓ **Make home visits**
- ✓ **Refer chronically absent students to truant officer**
- ✓ **Refer chronically absent students to a counselor or mentor**

Other studies also recognized the importance of frequent and pertinent information for parents, including parents of high school students (Roderick, et al., 1997). Phone calls to parents of absent students were associated with improved student attendance (Helm & Burkett, 1989; Licht, Gard, & Guardino, 1991), and remain a common practice. When schools communicate with parents in systematic ways about their children's attendance, more parents are confident about their children's health and safety in school and are better able to monitor and supervise their children's schooling.

Family and community involvement to improve attendance is *one part* of a comprehensive program that also includes school, family, and community partnership activities that help students improve achievement, behavior, post-secondary planning, and other indicators of success in school (Epstein, et al., 2009). A full program includes activities for six types of involvement that enable parents and other partners to become engaged in different ways. See Table 1 for a few examples of how the six types of involvement may be activated to increase motivation about attendance at the school level and to enable all parents to support their own child's attendance at school.

Selected References

(See these references for full literature reviews.)

Chang, H. & Romero, M. (2008). *Present, engaged, and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades*. New York: National Center on Children in Poverty, Columbia University.

Epstein, J.L., et al. (2009). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action, third edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. See chapters 1 (reading 1.3), 5, 6, and CD for information on research and activities for involvement to improve attendance).

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Table 1
**Examples of School, Family and Community Involvement
 for the Motivational and Social Strategies that Improve Student Attendance**

Type of Involvement	Motivational Strategies for school-wide attention to improve attendance	Social Strategies to increase interactions with individual parents to influence student attendance
Type 1–Parenting	Provide families information on incentives to help improve their child’s school attendance.	Conduct parent workshops on how the home influences students and social services that are available.
Type 2–Communicating	Provide families with information on school attendance goals and strategies they can use to improve attendance.	Provide families specific information about their own child’s attendance records.
Type 3–Volunteering	Encourage more families to attend school and extracurricular events to support students’ activities and efforts.	Train parent volunteers to call other families with information on their child’s absence and to share ideas for helping absent students make up work that was missed.
Type 4–Learning at Home	Put general information on the school website so that parents know the rules and steps to take to ensure that children make up classwork, homework, and tests if they are absent.	Teachers provide parents with information to help their own child with class lessons and homework covered on absent day(s).
Type 5–Decision Making	Action Team for Partnerships refers to school improvement goal for attendance in planning family and community involvement activities for the year.	Obtain input from a variety of families on attendance goals, identify challenges that families face, and generate strategies to help families support student attendance.
Type 6–Collaborating with the Community	Community partners may donate gifts/incentive for student attendance prizes and/or provide mentors for chronically absent students	Connect families with mentors and with social service providers and organizations to support students’ health and education.

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Promising Partnership Practices to Increase Student Attendance
from Schools in the National Network of Partnership Schools

Joyce L. Epstein
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Some schools in the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University are focusing (or have focused) on improving attendance. It should be noted that these activities were planned and implemented by the schools' Action Teams for Partnerships (ATP) as one part of a comprehensive Action Plan for Partnerships that also included activities for family involvement to improve the school climate and to increase student achievement in academic subjects.

Below are a few activities conducted by NNPS schools over the years to improve student attendance. (Note: These activities have not been formally evaluated. Schools may have conducted the activities in the past; they may not continue the same activity from year to year.) The activities illustrate how schools are addressing topics in Chang's (2008) list of school, family, and community factors that may affect absence, and how activities are organized.

Help parents understand school policies, including attendance.

The Parent Involvement Planning Team at **Carstens Elementary School** in Detroit, MI, established a *Parent University*, where the parents of at-risk children could brush up on or acquire skills they need to be true partners in their children's education. The Parent University offered 16 weeks of classes on relevant parenting topics, school policies and procedures, and opportunities to be involved in school governance through the PTA and School Improvement Team. Before Carstens Parent University began, the school was expelling 40 to 50 students per year. After the program, none of the university graduates' children was expelled or even reprimanded for fighting. The school has also experienced a sharp decrease in student expulsions, chronic absenteeism, and delinquency. One Parent University participant commented, "Now I get the help so I can calm down and really show my daughter discipline that is firm, yet kind and fair."

From: *Promising Partnership Practices 2006*

Share information with parents, provide incentives for students, involve the community and create a comprehensive approach to improve attendance.

At **Frost Elementary School**, Frostburg, MD, the Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) and PTA collaborated on the *Attendance Roundup* to provide information to parents on the importance of attendance. The school also increased school monitoring and reporting on attendance and initiated many student incentives to recognize and reward excellent and improved attendance at the class level and for individual students. The relatively simple program of better accounting and communications was evaluated and provide successful. Between January and March, the average daily attendance increased by 2%, with a 5% increase among students receiving free- and reduced-meals. At the end of the year, the school was no longer in danger of failing to meet its AYP goal for attendance. Parents were more aware of the connection of good attendance and better student achievement.

From: *Promising Partnership Practices 2009*

Stonehurst Avenue Elementary School in Sun Valley, CA, wanted to improve students' attendance and on-time arrival to school. Many students took the bus to school, and if they missed the bus, they stayed home. The Action Team for Partnerships developed *In Line On Time: Increasing Student Attendance*, to encourage students to be at school everyday. The program included a two-minute bell to remind students to line up. Teachers waited at their class lines to count their students at the official school bell. If all were present, the class was on its way to 5-stars, which earned the class a popcorn party, sponsored by the PTA or extra time in the computer lab.

The ATP sent a letter to all parents and others explaining the district attendance policy, the new program, and the importance of children being in class every day, on time. The principal held an assembly at the beginning of the year to explain the new program. A simple sign *In Line On Time* was hung in each classroom, the office, and other locations. Almost all classes earned five stars at least once during the year and many earned multiple awards. Student attendance increased by 2% during the year. One parent told a teacher, "My son just does not want to be late; he keeps telling me to hurry up." This practice fostered a positive atmosphere at school and rewarded students for being at school on time. In addition, teaching time increased because everyone was in line before the official bell rang.

From: *Promising Partnership Practices 2003*

Robert Frost Elementary School in Pasco, WA, serves highly diverse students whose families speak many different languages at home. The school's Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) reaches out to involve all families and the community in productive ways. One activity—the *Trimester Perfect Attendance* program—aimed to improve student attendance all year long. Teachers connected with families and recognized students with perfect attendance each semester. At the end of each period, athletes from two local sports leagues, high school sports teams, and/or a local hockey team mascot came to individual classrooms to deliver certificates of excellence to the Attendance All-Stars. Some students asked the athletes for their autographs and some took pictures with them. In addition to the certificates, winners were given a coupon for a free item at McDonald's and a letter of recognition to take home to their parents. The letters were written in English, Spanish, and Russian – the languages of most families. With this program, 197 perfect attendance certificates were awarded in 2008. Average daily attendance is 93% and growing.

From: NNPS Partnership School Award, 2008

Two activities aimed to *Improve Attendance* at **Francis Howell Middle School** in St. Charles, MO. Students with many absences in the prior school year were given personal "attendance goals" and were recognized quarterly if their goals were met. The recognized students received a letter for their parents in their Character Connection (CC) classes along with a "mini certificate" and an invitation for the student to pick up a treat —Popcorn, Pretzels, or Popsicles for Perfect Attendance—during his or her lunch break. CC teachers were encouraged to talk with the students about attendance goals at the end of each quarter when the certificates were awarded. Parent volunteers, recruited through the school's daily ENEWS bulletin, popped and bagged the popcorn or purchased and prepared the other treats. They also assisted with the distribution of treats to the award winners.

Another activity at the same school, *School-Friendly Business Program*, also addressed attendance goals. The PIT Crew (the Action Team for Partnership at this school) wanted to decrease the number of *excused* absences, usually associated with students' visits to a doctor, dentist, or orthodontist. Via the ENEWS bulletin and the monthly *Crusader* newsletter, parents at

Francis Howell were asked to identify professional offices that offered “school-friendly hours” for appointments by staying open for business before and after school and on the weekends. Parents nominated and awarded signs to 16 offices that supported visits during non-school hours as *School-Friendly Businesses*. These professionals also were listed in the ENEWS bulletin, the *Crusader*, and on the school webpage. The PIT Crew stressed that the school was not endorsing these businesses, but that parents were appreciative of their help in allowing students to remain in class during the school day.

From: NNPS Partnership School Award, 2009

Be Cool, Pack the School! was the attendance campaign at **St. Paul High School** in South St. Paul, MN. Sponsored by the Partnership Action Team, the purpose was to increase student attendance for the school year by educating students, parents, staff, and the community about attendance policies and issues. Parents were guided to understand legal issues and obligations, and to send notes when students were absent. Mailings home included an outline of attendance processes, an attendance magnet with a 24-hour call-in number; and business cards with attendance numbers. Each month, the principal’s newsletter for parents’ contained an attendance fact. The attendance page in the student/parent handbook was revised to list simple attendance steps.

Students were very much involved. Students in the desktop publishing class developed the slogan, *Be Cool, Pack the School!* with a double reference to the school’s mascot—the Packers. They also designed posters for the school and classrooms. Morning announcements to students included an attendance fact or “motivational” quote. Students received awards for perfect attendance. The student newspaper, *Packer Pipeline*, included an article about attendance.

Teachers were included with two forms to keep better attendance records and reminders in the weekly in-house staff memo, *In the Loop*. The high school held an instructional focus day for teachers on attendance with a half hour presentation on attendance and comments from teachers who worked in the attendance office. “Good News Notes” were used by teachers to send notes to parents when students had perfect or improved attendance.

The community was alerted to the program in an article by the principal for the local newspaper. Local businesses were given signs that said “If you’re skipping school, skip this place.” Student rewards for perfect attendance were donated by local businesses.

Student attendance for September and November 1999 was 92.5%, as compared with 90% for these months in 1998. This translates into 42 more students in school every day, which has financial consequences for the school. About 485 students received awards for perfect attendance in Term I.

From: *Promising Partnership Practices 1999*

Improve health to improve attendance.

At **Oconto Falls Elementary School** in WI educators knew that students’ health and well-being were linked to student attendance and achievement. The Action Team for Partnerships instituted *Open Gym*, after school, twice a month for 75-minute sessions to increase family and community involvement in maintaining and improving student health, attendance, and achievement. Parent volunteers and school staff supervised activities. Parents not only had to give students’ permission to attend, but also came to observe games, talk with teachers and other parents, and pick up their children at about 4:30 p.m.

From: *Promising Partnership Practices 2009*

Health and Wellness Fair at **Eastern Greenbrier Middle School** in Ronceverte, WV, set students in motion on many activities, including a Dance Dance Revolution tournament (based on a rhythm and dance video game) for all students who brought a family member to the event. Many parents of students in this school work in the health care industry. Some of these parents (e.g., dentists, physical therapists, and hospital workers) developed booths with information on many topics for parents and students, including immunizations and healthy lifestyle choices. They also conducted free health screenings.

Students and parents participated in various contests including dance and basketball jump shot tournaments. The Action Team for partnerships advertised the activity in the local newspaper, school website, flyers home, email reminders, and automated phone messages to increase student and parent attendance and participation.

From: *Promising Partnership Practices 2008*

At **Lincoln Elementary School** in Wausau, WI, students biked, hiked, tagged, and swam their way toward a healthier lifestyle during *Lincoln's Fitness Challenge* – a year-long series of events designed to teach the importance and the benefits of physical activity. Based on a fitness program run by the Governor's Office, the school created its own program to support wellness throughout the school in three 6-week challenges in fall, winter, and spring. The goal was for all children to have 60 minutes of activity per day, five days a week. Adults were encouraged to have 30 minutes of activity, five days a week. Everyone kept an activity log, which the school provided, and submitted their weekly logs for prize drawings, leading to a grand prize for those who met their fitness goals every week. The prizes, donated by the community, included a bicycle, sports equipment, or gift cards. "This got me moving and I love the time I spend with my kids. We make it part of our day, and we look forward to it," one parent reported

From: *Promising Partnership Practices 2008*

Visiting Nurses, **Byrd Middle School** in Sun Valley, CA, recognized that when students are healthy and attending school regularly they have more opportunities to succeed and do well in class. To increase student attendance, the school Parent Center welcomed a visiting nurses program through which students could get necessary immunizations. Two local school district nurses were invited to work at the Parent Center twice a month to help parents get the immunizations their children needed for school and to make sure immunization records were up to date. This service ensured that students who needed particular vaccinations were quickly back in class—no missed days for parents or for students. Younger children or siblings in other schools could come for the same service. School volunteers could receive the test for tuberculosis required to work with children in school. "It is always busy here," said the Parent Center director. The visiting nurses' administration of immunizations enabled the school nurse to continue to provide everyday medical attention to students. The school believes that this program helped more students reach the goal of higher attendance, which will benefit them academically.

From: *Promising Partnership Practices 2003*

Health Fair, at **Edward D. Sadler, Jr. Elementary School** in Gastonia, NC, was based on beliefs that student health directly influences academic achievement. The Action Team for Partnerships wanted to promote wellness throughout the school and help students and families lead healthier, happier lives. The school serves students with diverse backgrounds and over 90 percent of its students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. The surrounding community has disproportionate rates of preventable diseases such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity. Many families do not have adequate health insurance. *Health Fair* provided Sadler families with some tools to reverse these trends. Families received free access to medical screening procedures along with information about such topics as preventive medicine, stress management, oral hygiene, and exercise techniques.

From: *Promising Partnership Practices 2010*

Give attention to attendance in the earliest grades – successful transitions to kindergarten.

Kindergarten Transition Program, at **MacDonough School** in Middletown, CT, wants to ensure healthy transitions from preschool to kindergarten. On the first day of school, parents and children felt comfortable because of the many preparatory activities starting in the spring and continuing to the first day of school in September. This included: *Parent/Caregiver Tour*: Small group tours of the school with stops for conversations at key areas. *Kindergarten Arts and Crafts*: The first of several activity visits, when the children meet the arts teacher, hear a story, and do a project. *Kindergarten Music and Movement*: Another activity visit when the children meet the music teacher, enjoy music, and have a snack. *Kindergarten Read-Aloud*: Children visit the library, meet the staff, and receive a book to take home. *Raising Readers Program*: A six-week summer program to help families promote literacy at home. *Back to School Bash*: Kindergarten students receive their school T-shirts at the annual get-together just before school starts, and parent-teacher conferences about starting school. On the first day of school, parents drop off their youngsters, have breakfast in the school cafeteria, and, with students and staff attend a First Day assembly. Family and youngsters may attend all some or all activities. Some of the later activities were better attended because word of mouth promoted the program. About 80 parents and 40 children participated. Local businesses donated funds and materials, as the school's parent-teacher organization. It's no wonder one youngster was quick to say, "This is *my* school," after the many get-acquainted activities.

From: *Promising Partnership Practices 2009*

Little Coyote Kinderbags, at **Wilkenson Elementary School** in Willison, ND, welcomed kindergarten students and their parents by distributing nylon backpacks filled with storybooks, a get-ready-for-kindergarten CD, word games, and other summer activities for parents and children. Each family (more than 180 students) attending the Spring Kindergarten Open House received a coyote bag or could pick up a bag at the school. Instructions explained how to do the activities, use the materials, or use information on community resources also tucked in the bag. This acquainted parents with the kindergarten curriculum and summer activities to prepare their children for school. The bag also contained a stamped, addressed postcard for parents to send back with their reactions and opinions. About half of the parents did so, and "those responses were overwhelmingly positive," said school officials. Teachers reported that many of the youngsters carried the bags as backpacks throughout the school year.

From: *Promising Partnership Practices 2009*

Focus on school and community safety to increase attendance.

Safe Routes to School, at **Nellie Stone Johnson School** in Minneapolis, MN is designed to increase physical activity, strengthen a sense of community, reduce traffic congestion, and promote pedestrian and bicycle safety – for all students, their families, and teachers. With grant funds, the school launched a three-year program that encourages students to walk and bike to school along specific routes to help students and adults to be more physically active. Other than the obvious benefits of more exercise, the program produced some other positive developments. The community has two new caution signposts with lights to alert drivers to students walking. Several business and community partners provided a walkability map that shows the relative safety of different routes and marks safe places to stop. School staff noticed a difference in the behavior and learning students who were exercising more and parent involvement is on the rise.

From: *Promising Partnership Practices 2010*

For many more field-tested activities for family and community involvement to improve attendance and other school improvement goals for student success, visit www.partnershipschoools.org and click on the section Success Stories.

Contact information:

Joyce L. Epstein, Ph.D. jepstein@csos.jhu.edu
Steven B. Sheldon, Ph.D. ssheldon@csos.jhu.edu