**It’s Back to School, Yet Some Students Are Already Missing Too Many Days**

On the opening days of the school year, buildings are filled with students who rush past bulletin boards with new welcome messages to greet friends they haven’t seen all summer, before the bell rings and they step into class.

But even in these early days of the new school year, some students already are heading toward academic trouble: they’re missing too many days of school. Data released in June 2016 by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) revealed that more than 6.8 million students missed 15 or more days – almost a full month – of school during the 2013-14 academic year.

The national data confirmed what has long been suspected, schools across the country are dealing with chronic absenteeism, a hidden crisis that is undermining student achievement as early as kindergarten. The data show the unsettling reality that millions of students are missing so much school that they are struggling to read proficiently by third grade and are more likely to drop out of high school.

[In our community, ADD IN CHRONIC ABSENCE RATES, DROP OUT RATES, OR BOTH]

With these stark numbers, we can’t afford any longer to think of absenteeism as simply an administrative matter for a clerk in the front office. Good attendance is central to student achievement and our broader efforts to close the achievement gap. Common sense tells us that all of our investments in curriculum and teacher preparation won’t improve academic success if students aren’t showing up to benefit from them.

That’s why [NAME OF OUR SCHOOL DISTRICT and NAME OF MAYOR or COMMUNITY PARTNER] are joining forces to engage the entire community in working together to address school attendance. By making attendance a priority in our schools, we are demonstrating our commitment to partnering with schools to improve educational outcomes. It’s clear that students come to school when educators and community partners join with families to identify and address the challenges, work to create a more welcoming school environment, and help everyone understand the importance of avoiding unnecessary absences.

Problems with absenteeism start surprisingly early. Research conducted in Chicago shows that preschoolers who miss 10 percent or more of the school year, in excused or unexcused absences – arrive at kindergarten with lower levels of school readiness skills. If young children, especially, are chronically absent for more than one year, they are less likely to read proficiently by the end of third grade and more likely to be retained in elementary school. They are also more likely to be chronically absent in later years, since they never developed good attendance habits.

Chronic absences can have dire consequences, particularly for students living in poverty.

These children are most likely to face challenges such as poor health, unreliable transportation and unsafe neighborhoods that often keep them from being in school every day. For many children in poverty, their parents don’t have the resources to make up for lost time from school with after school lessons, tutors or field trips to a museum or zoo.

So how do we turn this around? TAILOR THIS WITH SPECIFICS FROM YOUR COMMUNITY and PARTNER or use these paragraphs:

Our first step will be letting families know about the critical role they play in getting children to school on time every day. Surveys about parental attitudes show they want the best for their children, including success in school and a college education. But many simply don’t understand how missing just two days a month can put a child academically at risk, starting in the early grades. Teachers will reinforce these messages and, when they can, offer fun incentives to encourage students to show up every day on time to class.

We are going to take a closer look at our attendance numbers in our schools to see how many students are missing 10 percent or more of school days and who those students are. We’ll set attendance goals for our principals and schools, particularly those schools we’re working to improve. We can’t begin to address chronic absence until we find out where it is a problem. These numbers will be an early warning sign that can be used to trigger action and support before students miss so much school they begin to fall behind.

But schools can’t do this alone.

We’re going to call on the whole community to help. We know that recurring illnesses such as asthma and diabetes, and dental and mental health problems often contribute to absences, especially among children from low-income neighborhoods. Sometimes a parent or sibling has health problems that keep a student from school. So we will work with health care providers and city agencies to come up with solutions for students and families.

If concerns about traffic safety or community violence are keeping children home, we will work with parents, police and traffic officials to develop safe routes to school. Volunteers from businesses, faith-based groups and nonprofits can provide that extra shift of adults we need to mentor chronically absent students and reach out to parents.

Today we’re sending a clear and consistent message to families, students, and the community: Getting to school every day possible matters for student success and achievement. Please join us in our effort to make every day count!