

for
**Mayors and City
Leaders**

Why Attendance Matters



The Attendance Imperative: Attending school regularly is essential to students gaining the academic and social skills they need to succeed. Reducing absenteeism is a simple, cost-effective, but often overlooked strategy for improving academic performance. Starting as early as preschool and kindergarten, chronic absence—missing 10 percent of the academic year—can leave third graders unable to read proficiently, sixth graders struggling with coursework and high school students off track for graduation. Chronic absence is especially problematic among students living in poverty who are most likely to have poor attendance over multiple years and least likely to have the resources to make up for the lost time in the classroom. In some communities, chronic absence affects more than one out of four children.

Unfortunately, many schools and communities don't realize the extent of the problem because districts don't look at all the right data. They're paying attention to how many students show up every day and how many skip school, but not how many miss so much school in excused and unexcused absences that they're at risk academically.

The good news is chronic absence can be significantly reduced when schools, families and community partners work together to monitor data, nurture a habit of regular attendance and address hurdles that keep children from getting to school every day such as lack of access to health care, unhealthy environmental conditions, unreliable transportation, housing instability or the lack of safe paths to school.

Why we should care: Chronic absence is a solvable problem, especially if mayors and city leaders work with schools, parents and communities to improve student attendance. We should get involved for the following reasons:

- **Stronger Economy:** Good schools are key to creating a healthy and vibrant city that attracts businesses as well as new residents. Chronic absenteeism can undermine our efforts to improve school performance and can contribute to higher dropout rates, meaning more youth are unable to hold good jobs or make enough to support their families.
- **Better Education:** Students who attend school more regularly have better grades and higher test scores. When too many students miss too much school, chronic absenteeism can be a drag on entire classrooms, as teachers slow down instruction to help absentee students.
- **Safer Communities:** Students who aren't in school are more likely to be involved in a crime, either as victims or perpetrators. Better attendance means safer streets and safer children in our cities.



How we can make a difference:

Use the bully pulpit

- **Launch a public awareness campaign** to convey that every day counts. You can send a clear message about the importance of school attendance and the adverse impact of missing too much school. Your speeches, proclamations and billboards can reinforce the message to students and parents. See these [key messages](#).
- **Recognize and appreciate good and improved attendance.** Lend your voice and clout to efforts to recognize students and families who are turning the corner on attendance.

Use the conference table

- **Convene a task force on student attendance** or work with an existing local coalition to ensure attendance becomes a priority communitywide. Include senior leadership from a range of disciplines: afterschool, early childhood, faith-based, family engagement, health, K-12 education, philanthropy, public housing, public safety, social services and transportation. See if your city is involved with the [Campaign for Grade-Level Reading](#).
- **Host a community forum** to discuss the need to reduce chronic absence and build support for community solutions.

Leverage city or county resources

- **Use chronic absence data to shape budget priorities.** Use the data when deciding where to invest in child care, early education and afterschool programs, all of which can help families build good attendance habits and bring absenteeism under control.
- **Use chronic absence as an accountability metric.** Make sure data on chronic absence is shared with you and your agency chiefs and ideally included in data dashboards. Ask programs applying for funding to explain what they will do to improve attendance. Use evidence of reduced chronic absence to identify which programs should continue to receive funding.

Tackling chronic absence is a smart strategy for improving a city and its schools. Attendance is a simple, common sense metric already recorded by teachers and understood by parents. It's essential to other education reforms: The best investments in instruction and curriculum won't matter much if students aren't showing up to benefit from them. And it's a winnable strategy. Schools, districts and communities that work together to reduce chronic absence often see attendance increase quickly.

For more information, go to Attendance Works at www.attendanceworks.org.

