

# Ad Council

## California School Attendance Research Project



C&C Multicultural  
Strategic Research



June, 2015

C&C Multicultural, LLC  
Strategic Research

# Key Findings

## Parent Attitudes and Behaviors:

- All parents want what is best for their child.
- Level of parent involvement in child's education varies significantly.
- Parents understand that attendance is important.
- Parents do not keep track of absences.
- Parents have many reasons for absences-- they see some are more permissible, but all are "excused" and can be rationalized.

## Barriers:

- 100% attendance is not a realistic goal for parents.
- Current communication efforts from the school (e.g. letters, voicemails) are ineffective in changing attitudes or behaviors.
- Parents are not motivated by school/class rewards (despite their effectiveness in motivating students).
- Parents do not connect absences with a missed opportunity to learn.

## Motivators:

- Messages about absences are more motivating than messages about attendance.
  - It is news to parents that 18 days missed, whether consecutive or sporadic, can cause children to fall behind.
  - Asking parents to save absences for when they are unavoidable (i.e. sick) is realistic.
  - The fear of their child ditching later motivates parents to reconsider allowing absences today.
  - Parents trust their child's teacher and are open to hearing from them regarding absences (texting is preferred).
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# Methodology and Objectives

## Stage 1: Expert Interviews

Objective: Understand the issue of truancy in California and what is currently being done to combat chronic absenteeism.

Methodology: Telephone interviews in CA

Respondents: School administrators, teachers, school/parent liaisons, advocates, policy experts

## Stage 2: Exploratory

### Objective:

- o Gain a deeper understanding of parents' attitudes and behaviors surrounding school attendance and truancy.
- o Observe parent and student behaviors to identify key attitudes and behaviors that need to change.
- o Understand how difficult it would be to make necessary changes to prevent truancy.
- o Gain a better understanding of what would move parents to act (i.e. ensure their child regularly attends school)
- o Identify motivators and resources that will help parents get their kids to school

### Methodology:

- o In home ethnographies with English and Spanish-speaking parents (with and/or without their children)

Research Configuration				
	Los Angeles	East Bay	Fresno/San Joaquin	Total
General Market	5	5	5	15
Hispanic	3	3	3	9
Total Ethnos	8	8	8	24
Expert Interviews	3	2	2	7

# Detailed Findings



Education  
Experts

# Experts cite many factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism



Parent stressors	Parents who struggle with unemployment, childcare, illness, lack of transportation, community violence, substance abuse or domestic abuse also struggle with getting their child to school. In relation to these issues, education becomes less of a priority.
Parents' lack of familiarity with the education system	Parents who did not grow up in the US, had their own challenges in school or went through subpar schools often do not understand the impact of absences on learning.
School/Neighborhood Safety	For kids who are bullied and/or live in an area with high rates of violence, parents may not feel that the school can adequately protect their child.
The child has a chronic illness (Asthma)	Parents often keep children with asthma home for fear the child will have an asthma attack in school and school will not know how to react.
The sibling effect	If a child is absent, there is a higher likelihood that a sibling will also be absent.
Lack of community in the school	If parents or children do not feel like they are part of their school community (because of race/ethnicity, language, disability), they are less likely to feel motivated to improve attendance.

# Experts believe parents have many misconceptions about absences

Education  
Experts

Attendance is not important in the early grades	School at this level is perceived to be more of a daycare where kids just play. They do not understand that the early grades lay the foundation for their child's education.
Child can easily make up what has been missed in school	They do not understand the importance of sequential learning to achieve exponential learning (e.g. learning grows in the same way that money grows exponentially.) Parents feel that they can play the teacher's role at home.
Attendance is more of a compliance issue and less about an opportunity to learn	Parents will send children to school when they receive threatening letters about their child's absence because they do not want to go to court, and do not think about the learning the child is missing.
Absences in early years do not have an impact on HS graduation.	Parents do not understand they are establishing bad attendance habits that will stay with the child for the rest of his/her life and that good attendance is an opportunity to build a life skill that will help them in HS and beyond.
All absences are excusable and justifiable, as long as parent allows	Many parents perceive all absences, whether excused and unexcused, as justifiable reasons to keep a child home. Parents do not understand what constitutes a good reason to be absent (e.g. absent because of a fever vs. a runny nose).
Only consecutive absences have a negative impact on the child	They do not understand that absences, even when excused and sporadic, add up and will impact that child's learning in school.
Do not know what is considered 'chronic absenteeism'	Parents often do not have a good idea of how off track their children are in terms of absences. For some, attending 3 out of 5 days per week is considered acceptable.

# School efforts addressing absenteeism

## What works

- **Peer-pressure:** Providing rewards to classes for not having any absences in 20 days (e.g. reward with a popcorn or ice cream party).
- **Honoring parents who struggled with attendance:** 96% attendance is goal – honor improvement.
- **Breaking down the wall between the school and home:** Making home visits and having counselors check on a child sends a powerful message. It helps both parent and student to have someone at school with whom they can talk to and build a bond.
- **A tiered approach that involves:** Early intervention, changing the culture (e.g. through peer-pressure, parent community) and case management.
- **School campaigns promoting attendance:** Raise awareness and are effective at improving attendance levels.
- **Communicating with parents via text messages:** Most parents prefer and are very receptive to this type of communication from the teacher.
- **Connecting parents to the class curriculum:** Helps them understand what their child may be missing and makes them less likely to keep them home.
- **Absentee letters:** Brings the issue to parents' attention and provides opportunities for conversation.

## What doesn't work

- **Calling meetings with groups of parents whose kids are chronically absent:** Generates mistrust and makes them feel cornered. An individualized, conversational approach is important.
- **Case management in the later grades:** Unsuccessful without early intervention and building a community that encourages attendance.
- **Starting communication with threatening letters and court intervention:** Makes parents defensive and feel they are being accused of bad parenting.
- **When teachers/administrators view absenteeism as a compliance/court issue:** Teachers do not feel empowered to educate parents about absenteeism.
- **Being reactive (rather than proactive):** Identifying kids who are already excessively absent is less effective than catching it early and preventing future absences.
- **High turnover of staff:** Contributes to inaction toward absenteeism.
- **When schools are inconsistent:** Policies, enforcements and approaches to absences need to be consistently promoted and enforced.
- **Absentee letters from the school:** Can be easily ignored or dismissed and do not change parents' behavior.

# Expert Recommendations/Considerations

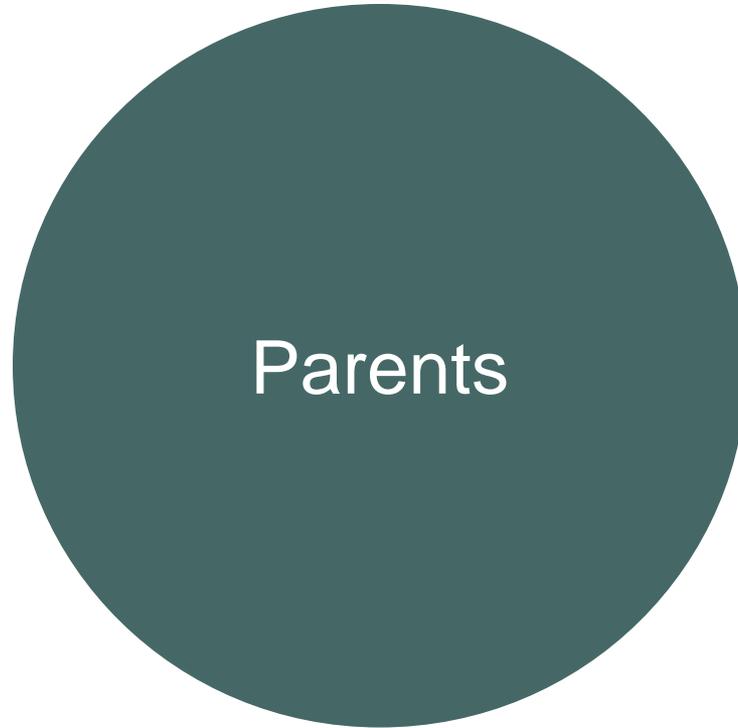
## For Communication to Schools:

- Rewarding attendance via positive reinforcement and class wide incentives establishes social norms among students.
- Acknowledge and celebrate milestones for parents whose children show improved attendance.
- Make home visits to build relationships and break down walls between school and home.
- Ensure both child and parent have someone at school with whom they can talk to and build a bond.
- Encourage teachers to educate parents on the importance of attendance early on in the school year, but ensure teacher is not alone in the struggle.
- Early intervention is critical and teachers play a big role; do not wait until middle school.
- Consider alternate forms of communication in addition to letters, like sending texts to parents about absences.
- Consider using 'parent ambassadors' to raise awareness and help educate parents.
- Give teachers tools that help them articulate to parents why they should minimize their child's absences.

## For Communication to Parents:

- Approach them out of concern for their child, rather than threatening them with consequences for noncompliance.
- Educate parents about the short-term and long term impact that absences have on learning (e.g. developing math skills, reading).
- Emphasize the importance of building habits and life skills such as attendance, organization and punctuation to help kids build work ethic and self-esteem that will serve them throughout school and life.
- Help parents understand what the child is missing in school by pointing out missed opportunities for learning – shifting the focus away from the parent and onto the impact it has on the child.
- Frequently update parents on material that is being covered in class, reminding them how important it is that their child attends each lesson.
- If children are facing issues such as bullying or health conditions such as asthma, help parents feel the kids are safe at school.
- For immigrant populations in particular, emphasize the importance of minimizing absences due to travel to their countries of origin and encourage parents to travel when the children are out of school.

# Detailed Findings



# Parents' involvement in their children's education varies.

Parents

## Low Involvement

- Many parents face challenges, such as single parenthood, poverty, crime, disability – education becomes a lower priority for these parents.
- May be motivated by compliance, more than child's missed opportunity to learn in school. If on assistance, these parents fear losing their benefits as a result of a child's excessive absences.
- Greater reliance on community to help with kids' homework (e.g. after school programs, relatives).
- Child likely in schools with high absence rates and high staff turnover rates.

## Medium Involvement

- School is important and HS graduation considered a key path to a better job.
- Strong desire for child to fare better than they did. Strong emphasis on developing a work ethic/sense of responsibility early on.
- Minimal communication with teachers/school – parent may not understand how to help child.
- Child may be in schools with high absence rates.

## High Involvement

- School is important – desire for child to go to college.
- Strong emphasis on developing a work ethic/sense of responsibility.
- Parent may communicate with school, ensure child completes homework and is able to help him/her complete it.
- May have more economic resources.
- Child likely in schools with high parent involvement.

# Parents know that attendance is important, yet rationalize absences



Values/Beliefs

Parents want their kids to do finish HS  
Understand absences can negatively impact student performance

Inconsistency

Behavior

Yet parents are permissive of their children's absences

Dissonance

Parents' Justifications

- "My child is doing well in school"
- "Absences do not matter as much in early years"
- "My child can make up for the absence with homework provided by teacher"
- "Missing one day here and there is less harmful than consecutive absences"
- "He can catch up within the year"
- "She is not doing well because she just doesn't like or is not good in school."
- "Others in my child's class miss as much school as my child"

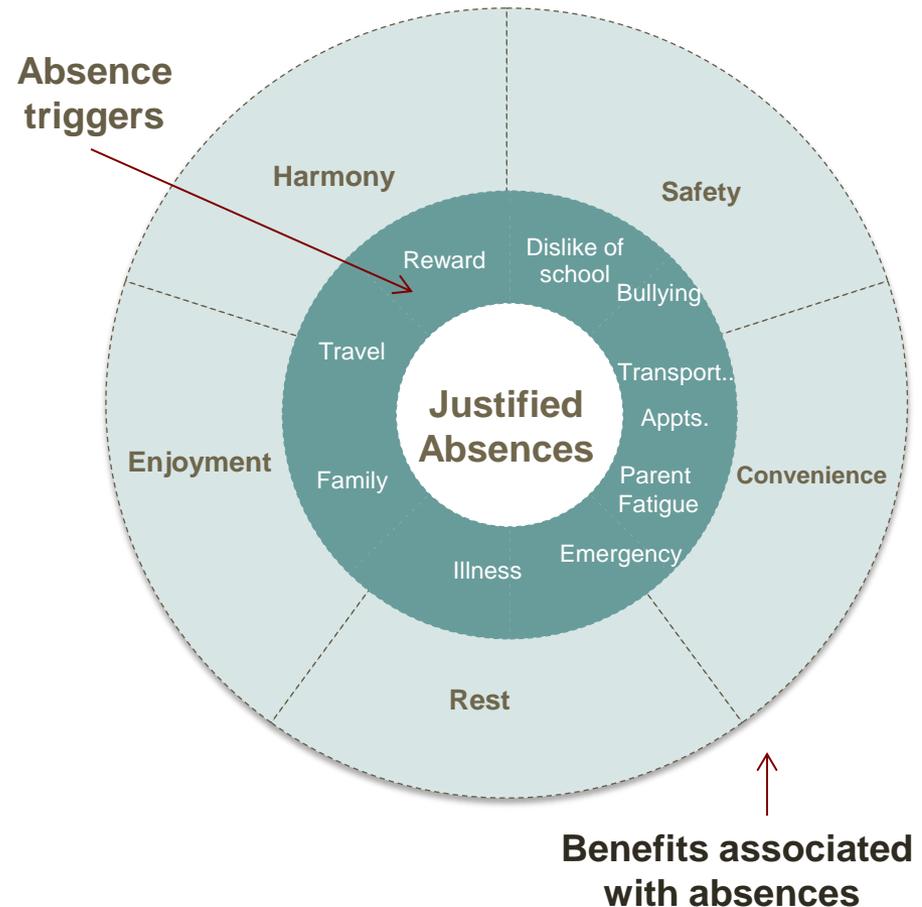
# Absence triggers and associated benefits

Children miss school for a variety of reasons and many parents feel all of these absences are justified and should be excused by the school.

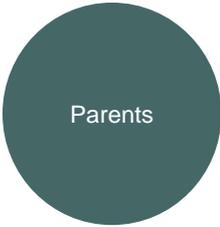
Parents associate each of these absences with the benefits they (as parents) or their child gain from it, and do not consider the impact it has on the child's learning, particularly if these absences are sporadic.

Whether it is for an illness or a doctor's appointment, parents consider all absences they authorize to be justifiable, and do not think about minimizing absences that are in their control.

'Bullying' was a particularly strong reason for not sending their child to school. A few parents whose kids were experiencing this mentioned they do not feel safe with their kids at school and/or walking to school. Therefore, safety took a priority over school.

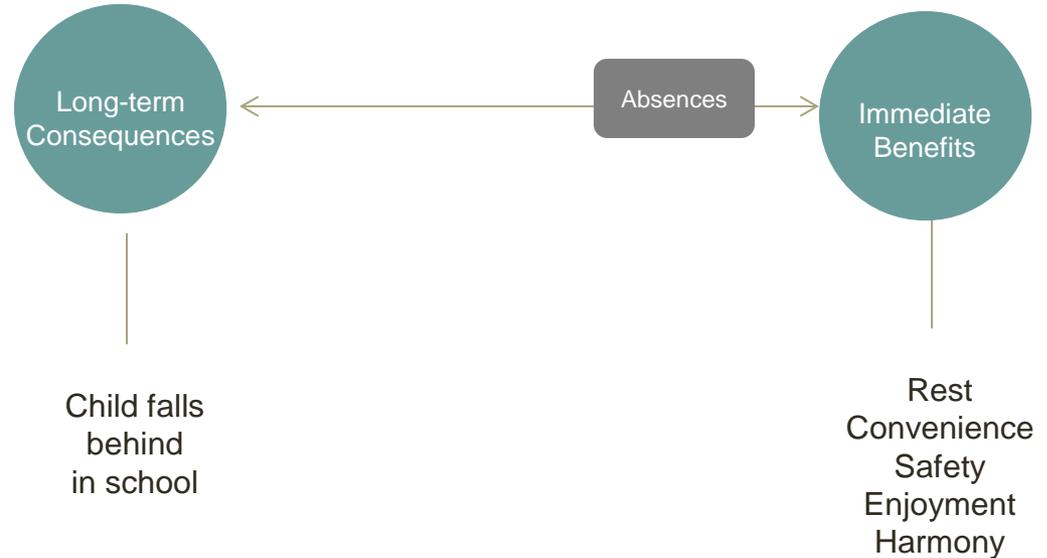


# Most parents associate absences with their short term benefits



While most parents mentioned that 5-10 days of missed school is acceptable, most parents we talked to said their children had missed more than 10 days. Some have missed up to 20 days for a variety of reasons. And in some cases, the parents had lost count of the absences.

The more absences the child had, the less likely that the parent associated missed days with negative consequences for the child. The fact that 18 days can lead to negative consequences was very surprising to these parents in particular.



# Schools unknowingly reinforce existing negative behaviors

Schools are reinforcing existing behavior, through:

- **Impersonal letters:** These are easy to disregard because they are standardized. And they often lead to frustration on the part of the parent who feels that school does not understand them.
- **Teachers send work home when child is absent:** Reinforces perception that as long as child does work at home, absences are OK.
- **Teachers do not address absenteeism with parent:** Not one parent mentioned a teacher had voiced concern to them about their child's absences.
- **Parents do not feel safe in school:** Bullying is a big issue for some parents who feel that schools are not doing enough to protect the child.
- **Absenteeism in the class:** Parents cited that all kids in their child's class miss a lot of school; they do not perceive their child to be missing more school than the norm.

School Activities that:

## Reinforce Attendance

Rewards to classrooms with the best attendance, generally consisting of ice cream or DJ parties.

Big motivators for kids, but not the parents

## Reinforce Absenteeism

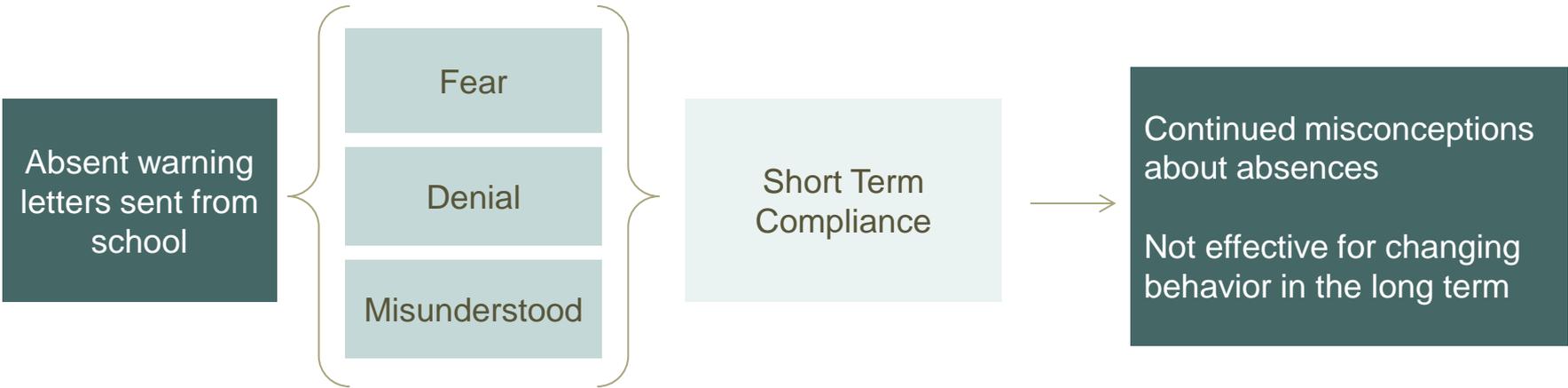
- Impersonal letters
- Teachers send work home in response to absences
- Teachers do not address absenteeism issue with the parent
- Parents do not feel their child is safe in school
- High levels of absenteeism in the class

Reinforces parents' existing attitudes and behaviors toward absences

# Absence warning letters alone are not effective at impacting attendance

Many mentioned having received warning letters from the school about absences. Some felt these letters were unjustified because they considered all of the absences they authorized to be legitimate. Others reacted in fear, complying only because they feared they would either be taken to jail or would have benefits discontinued. This was particularly true for Hispanics.

## Parents' Reactions to Absentee Letters Received From School



Aside from letters, none of the teachers had raised any concerns about their child's absences. Yet, these are the people that parents trust most at the school to talk to about their child. This lack of communication, combined with the letters, appears to reinforce compliance based on fear, rather than an understanding of the importance of attending school.

# Absences now (when excused) are perceived to have less impact on students

Parents

Absences in middle and high school are perceived to have a greater impact on student performance. And parents get upset and angry when they consider their child having unexcused absences (e.g. ditching) later. They do not connect excused absences in early grades to unexcused absences in later grades.

## Parents Perceived Impact of Absences

### Elementary School:

The perceived impact of absences on academic performance is low.

*Most think their child will catch up within the year.*

### Middle and High School:

The perceived impact of absences on academic performance is high.

*Most worry their child will fall behind.*

## Actual Impact of Absences

Excused absences in early grades



Low academic performance

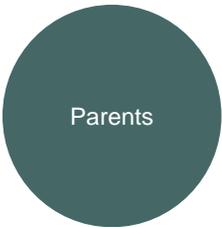


Aversion to school

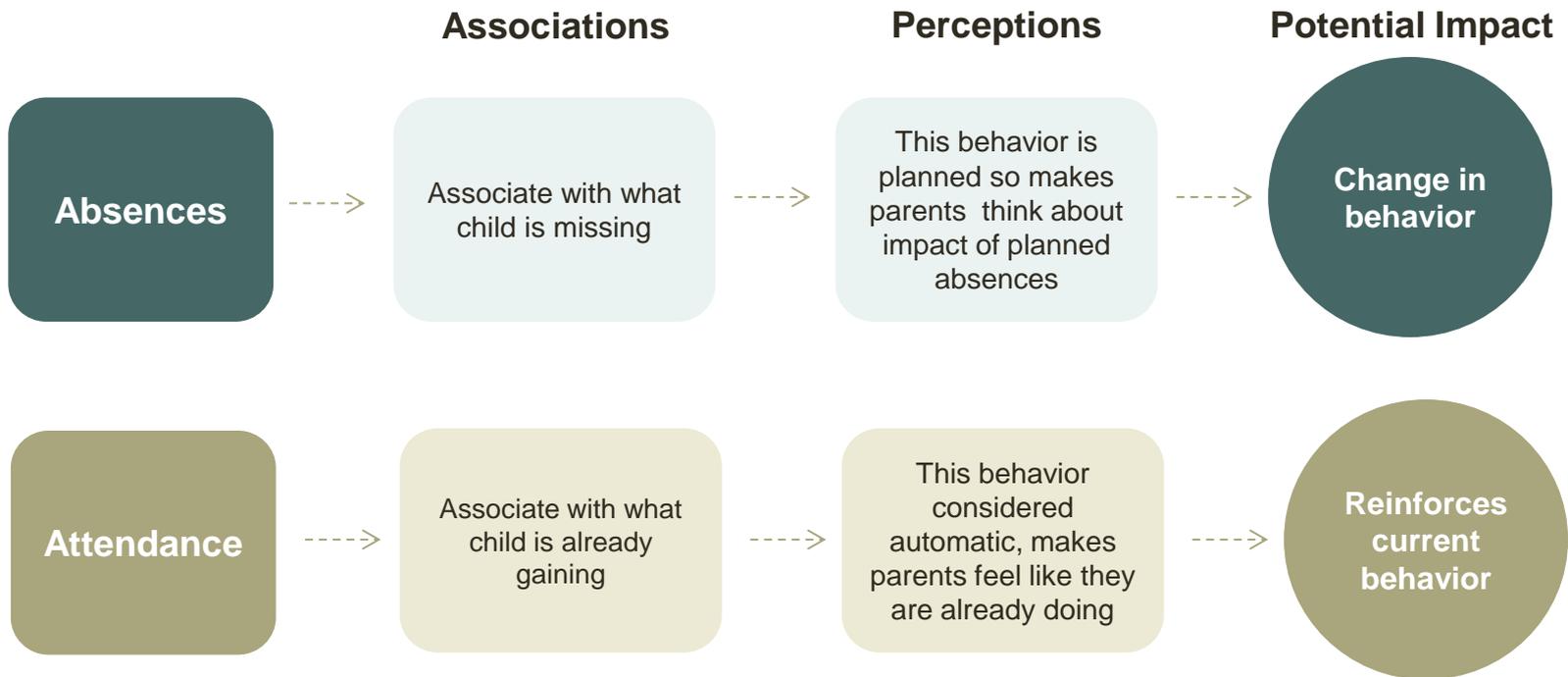


Unexcused absences in high school

# Messages about absences are more motivating than messages about attendance.



Parents easily associate 'absence' with what child is missing when not in school. But the word 'attendance' is associated with what kids are normally doing (90% of the time) – it does not appear to prompt parents to think differently about their child missing school.



# **Conclusions & Implications**

# Together, both public service advertising and school efforts have the potential to positively change parents' behaviors and attitudes toward absenteeism

## Advertising with a focus on negative consequences

Messaging must emotionally impact parents and generate a sense of urgency. Messaging that emphasizes what is lost when a child is absent, instead of what is gained by attending school appears to most resonate with parents.



## School efforts with a focus on positive reinforcement

Early engagement of parents through education and relationship building. Use positive reinforcement through rewards and acknowledgement as stepping stones toward improved attendance.

**Potential Impact:**  
Change parents' attitudes and behavior toward absences in the early years of their child's education.

**Messaging should emphasize what the child is missing when absent, instead of what the child is gaining by attending school.**

Focus on “attendance”	Focus on “absences”
Low Motivation	High Motivation
“Building a foundation” each day.	“Child misses opportunities to learn when absent which can’t be replaced by homework or makeup assignments”
“It is important to establish good habits today so they have good habits later”	“By letting your child miss today, you give them permission to ditch later”

# Insights and Recommendations for School Efforts

## Insights

- Absentee letters from school, without additional outreach, appear to be ineffective at changing parents behaviors. These letters generate feelings of fear, denial or misunderstanding. Hispanics in particular respond with fear, while general market parents are more likely to rationalize the absences or feel misunderstood.
- Rewarding classes for good attendance encourages kids, but has little impact on parents' attitudes toward absences.
- Parents do not hear from teachers about attendance, but they are in contact with the teacher generally.
- Parents (particularly those who are single parents and face many financial, safety, transportation challenges) rely on the community to provide their children with support, care and guidance.

## Recommendations:

- Educating parents about the impact of early absences and providing support (through concern, rewards and acknowledgement) is the first step toward improving attendance.
- Teachers are in a position to take an individualized approach with parents that helps drive home the message about the negative consequences of absenteeism. Schools should also support teachers with this outreach.
- In addition to parents, consider targeting others in the community who play critical roles in the lives of children to reinforce the message to parents and kids (e.g. coaches, after school counselors, church leaders, etc.).
- Consider notifying parents of absences in real time, via text. In our expert interviews, at least one teacher we spoke to is already using text to communicate with parents and finds that parents are exceedingly open to this approach.

# Considerations Moving Forward

What Parents Value and Want for their Children

Parents want their children to accomplish their goals, and understand that graduating from high school is critical to achieving them.

Barriers - What Parents Don't Realize:

They are establishing poor attendance habits that can lead to absences in HS.

School, even in the early years, is critical to building a strong academic foundation that will help them in HS and beyond.

Absences – even when sporadic– can add up and impact their child's reading, writing, and math skills.

Supporting Messaging Elements

- Recognize that some absences are unavoidable because kids get sick and family emergencies happen.
- Use data points in messaging to lend credibility to the statement that even absences today lead to unexcused absences later.
- Educate parents that making up work at home does not substitute for what children are missing at school (professional instruction, friendships, and experiences) and connect absences to the long term consequences on their school experience (e.g. socialization, aversion to school, etc.)
- Define what is considered to be a valid reason for an absence (e.g. uncontrollable absence), and emphasize the importance of ensuring child is absent only when absolutely necessary to minimize overall number of absences.
- Use the word 'absence' vs. 'attendance' to further emphasize what the child is losing by missing school, rather than gaining by not going to school.
  - Emphasize that 18+ absences are considered excessive to help define too many absences; however, ensure that message does not give parents permission to allow up to 18 absences.
  - Help parents connect the notion that excused absences now could lead to unexcused absences later (i.e. ditching)
  - Remind parents that early elementary school helps build a foundation of learning and that any day of missed learning makes subsequent learning difficult for the child.

# Areas to explore in quantitative research

## Message Frames:

**Attendance matters**

**Absences add up**

**Establishing poor attendance now has long-term consequences**

**All absences are equal**

## Call-to-action

- Keep track of your child's absences.
- Save absences for when your child really needs them.
- Do not let your child fall behind because they are not in school.

## Proof points:

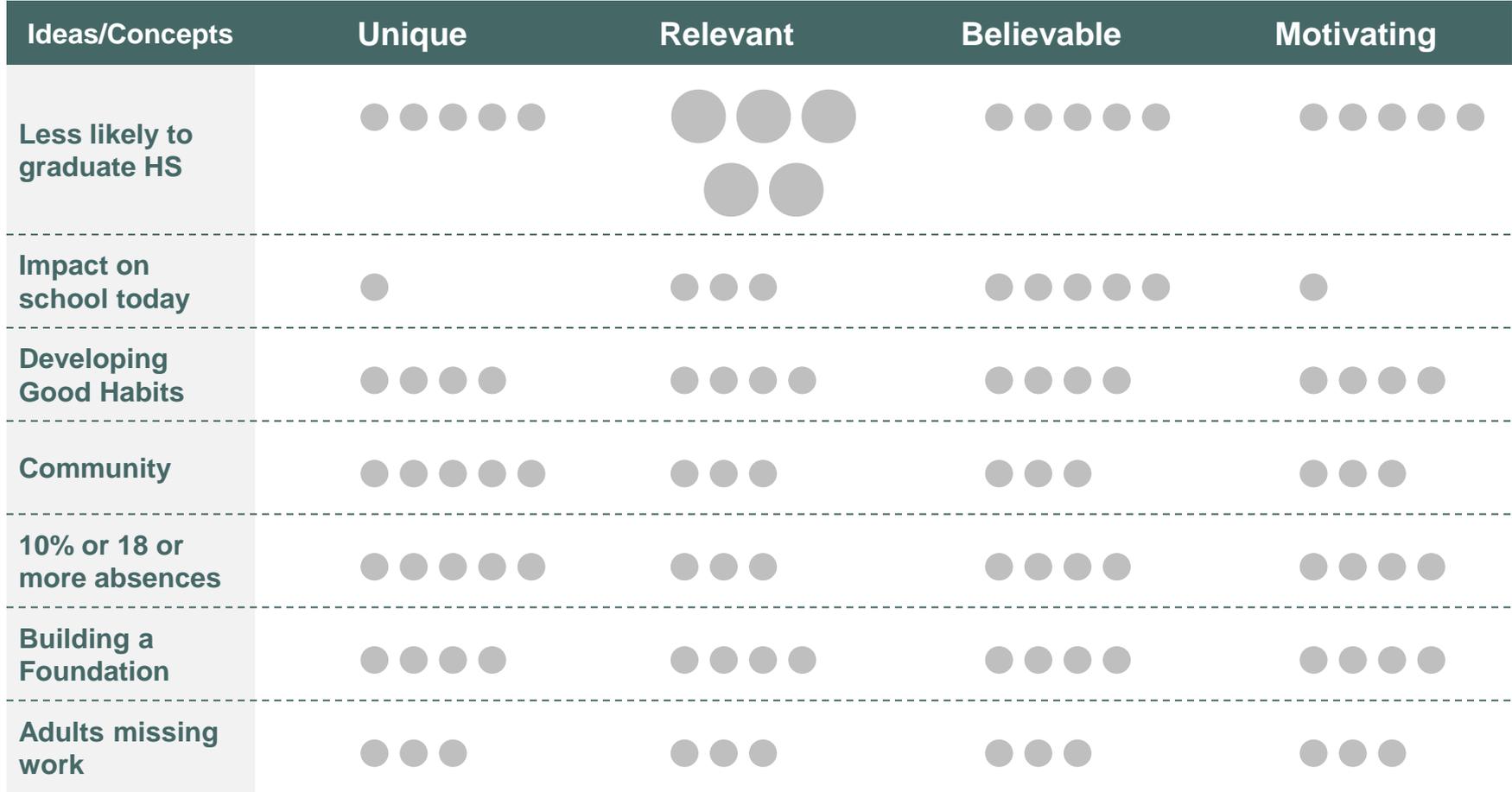
- 18 or more days of school missed, even in elementary school, can make your child fall behind in reading and math which makes them less likely to graduate high school.
- Allowing your child to miss too many days of school today is giving them permission to ditch in middle and high school.
- Each day your child misses, they have missed an opportunity to learn real content or have an experience that can make them successful in their future.
- The impact of missing school is the same whether your child is sick, ditching or taking some time off. Each day missed makes it harder for them to keep up with the everyday learning that is needed to grow and succeed.

# Appendix

# Message that absences reduce chances of graduating from HS is most impactful to parents

Message that 18+ absences can have a negative impact is also new to parents. Messaging around building a foundation and building new habits is not entirely new, but still motivating and relevant and further reinforces idea that absences should be minimized.

## Overview of reactions to messaging ideas



Low ● ● ● ● ● High  
→

# Reactions to concepts/ideas

Ideas/ Concepts	What worked	What did not work
<b>Less likely to graduate HS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This idea was new to most parents and many had not even thought about the long term impact of absences.</li> <li>Message highly relevant as most expressed a strong desire for kids to graduate from HS and fear they may not. Taps into these desires and fears by showing the impact of today's actions on the future of their children.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most parents assume that the average number of days a child misses school is about 5 to 7 days so it is not surprising when the average is mentioned in the concept; therefore does not seem to add a lot to the idea.</li> </ul>
<b>Impact on school today</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most knew this and accepted this idea</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does not appear to motivate parents to change behavior, as many believe that impact on school today is in the short term and can be remedied by completing work at home. Needs further support to make it credible.</li> </ul>
<b>Developing Good Habits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not new, but few had previously made this connection to HS.</li> <li>Resonates with their work values.</li> <li>Although some had heard about this already it was still a good reminder.</li> <li>Most parents understand that forming good habits today leads to good habits in future – and perceive it needs to start at a young age.</li> <li>Resonates with Hispanics in particular.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The “consequences” of absences as presented (“educational pursuits”) seems vague and far away, which limits the impact the concept has on parents’ behaviors.</li> </ul>
<b>Community</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides a different perspective on absences that parents had not thought of.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does not resonate with parents and not considered believable as most do not perceive their child’s absence to impact the school community.</li> </ul>
<b>10% or 18 or more absences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relevant and believable to parents who admit their child has missed 18 or more days of school.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Less motivating to parents who deny absences.</li> <li>Less relevant to parents who have kids who are in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and beyond or who have kids that have good grades and are good readers.</li> </ul>
<b>Building a Foundation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The idea that learning in Pre-K and elementary is building a foundation is believable.</li> <li>Message that a child is getting incomplete learning if absent, resonates strongly.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some do not readily understand how absences keep children from building a foundation as many believe that completing the work at home will make up for lost time in school.</li> </ul>
<b>Adults missing work</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>None</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not relevant or believable. Missing school is not perceived to be the same as missing work, specially in the early grades.</li> </ul>