Attendance Works

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Teaching Attendance:

Everyday Strategies to Help Teachers Improve Attendance and Raise Achievement

www.attendanceworks.org

Introduction

As a teacher, you know first hand that too many absences can disrupt learning, not just for the absent student but for the entire classroom.

School attendance is essential to academic success, but too often, parents and students do not realize how quickly absences — excused as well as unexcused — can add up to academic trouble. Chronic absence — missing 10 percent of the school year, or just 2-3 days every month — can translate into third graders unable to master reading, sixth graders failing courses and ninth graders dropping out of high school.

Your ability to convey the importance of attendance from Day One will go a long way toward setting the tone for the school year. This is as true in the early grades as it is in high school. It's important to emphasize to students and parents that not only is plenty of learning happening in these early grades, but that these are pivotal years for laying the foundation for good attendance habits and school success throughout a child's academic career.

To help you build a culture of attendance and maintain it throughout the school year, we at Attendance Works have created this Teacher Toolkit, "Teaching Attendance: Everyday Strategies to Help Teachers Improve Attendance and Raise Achievement." We encourage you to draw from the resources we have developed to help drive up attendance in your classroom and throughout your school community.

This toolkit is designed for elementary school teachers, but the strategies work for students of all ages. The premise is that teachers can teach attendance by infusing attention to this critical issue into their every day classroom activities. We also know that teachers have to juggle many demands on their time so we purposely designed this Teacher Toolkit to give teachers easy access to time-saving resources to nurture a habit of attendance so students can truly benefit from what is being taught in the classroom.

How can teachers teach attendance? This toolkit calls for teachers to:

A. Emphasize attendance from Day One

B. Use parent teacher conference to talk about attendance

C. Promote a culture of attendance all year long

A. Emphasize Attendance from Day One

We know from research and experience that attendance improves when a school community offers a warm and welcoming environment that engages students and families and offers enriching learning opportunities. Teachers are essential to creating that environment and conveying the importance of attendance.

Here are 4 things you can do:

1. **Talk with parents early in the school year or, if possible, during the summer to share the value of good attendance and let them know that you are there to help support them.**

   - Talking points for interacting with families
   - Tips for outreach before the first day of school
   - Tips for contacting hard-to-reach parents

2. **Send home handouts and infographics with information and tips about attendance.**

   - Sample Back-to-School letter
   - Fliers for parents: English, Spanish and Chinese
   - Infographic poster
   - School district calendar showing holidays

3. **Consider showing a video, using an exercise to demonstrate the importance of attendance, or asking parents to sign a pledge card.**

   - Parent Video
   - Illustrating the gap

4. **Get involved in Attendance Awareness Month. Throughout the month of September, 40 national organizations come together to celebrate Attendance Awareness Month. Join the schools and communities hosting events, launching contests or spreading the word.**

   - Count Us In Toolkit

B. Use parent-teacher conferences to talk about attendance

Parent-teacher conferences are an ideal time to talk to parents about the importance of regular attendance (starting as early as kindergarten and even in prekindergarten). Use this one-on-one time to update families on their child's attendance and make sure they are aware of programs in place, or school activities, that promote attendance. Since most teachers already hold conferences with parents and families once or twice a year, this approach helps you infuse attendance into your work without adding in a new activity. It helps make talking about attendance as normal as discussing academic performance and classroom behavior.

It's important to help families learn about the positive impact of good attendance and the negative effects of chronic absenteeism on realizing their hopes and dreams for their children. Parents may not realize that even excused absences, if they accumulate, can cause their children to fall behind and that building the habit of attendance in the early grades can influence their children's chances of graduating from high school.

Help families brainstorm how they can establish habits and routines at home that will put them on the right track to good school attendance, such as having a regular bedtime and laying out clothes and backpacks the night before.

You can use parent-teacher conference meetings to help establish and maintain ongoing two-way communication with parents to recognize good and improved attendance as well as identify barriers – such as transportation issues, job loss, unstable housing arrangements or health concerns. If appropriate, you can connect families with the school social worker or community partners who can help.

Here are materials to help you make the most of these meetings:

- Tips for taking advantage of parent-teacher conferences
- Preparing for parent-teacher conferences: A step-by-step guide
- Attendance worksheet
- Promoting attendance through one-on-one communication
- What to say to parents
- Pledge cards for parents: English, Spanish

C. Promote a culture of attendance all year long

Teachers, in partnership with other adults in a school and the community, can help build a culture of attendance by communicating about it throughout the year and showing students that they are valued members of the class. If students continue to struggle with attendance, teachers can partner with the school's attendance liaison and attendance team to find out what is going on and identify what might help a child get to school.

When parents realize that you are paying attention to attendance – and that you really do want to see their children in school every day and enjoy teaching them – they will want their children to be there as often as possible to learn from you. And when students know you and their classmates miss them when they are out, they will feel special and want to be there more often.

Here are 3 things you can do:

1 Promote good attendance habits among students by:

- **Greeting students warmly in the morning, taking attendance daily and asking about them when they come back after an absence**
  - » Talking points for students
- **Engaging the students in tracking their own attendance**
  - » Sheet for tracking
  - » Perfectly Punctual Resources
- **Hanging posters**
  - » Attend Today, Achieve Tomorrow banner
  - » Infographic poster
  - » Color-in banner
  - » Attendance Poster
- **Offering incentives for good or improved attendance, whether a good star, a certificate or a monthly celebration. Make sure to let the parents know, so they can feel proud of their children!**
  - » Establishing Attendance Incentives
  - » Attendance Certificate

2 Make data work for you

- **Review your attendance data to look for patterns in who is absent and what days are most frequently missed. Look at excused as well as unexcused absences**
- **Look for an absenteeism spike, which often come around holidays**
  - » Holiday messaging
- **Encourage your principal or superintendent to track chronic absence data more broadly and look for systemic problems**
  - » Free data tools

3 Use community partners

- **Evaluate possible barriers to attendance that lie beyond the classroom, such as health, transportation and housing problems**
  - » Assessing barriers to attendance
- **Engage community partners who can help. Encourage your school to develop a sheet of resources for families who need support.**
  - » Who Can Help handout

All of the materials included can be found on the Attendance Works website, some of which are in Spanish. You can also review:

- **Bringing Attendance Home toolkit**: This toolkit provides strategies, handouts and interactive exercises for engaging parents in improving their children's attendance.
- **Attendance and Early Literacy**: This research brief outlines the connection between chronic absence and early reading difficulties.
- **Count Us In! toolkit**: This toolkit outlines what schools and communities can do to participate in Attendance Awareness Month in September.
- **Hidden in Plain Sight**: This research brief demonstrates how average daily attendance can mask a problem with chronic absence.

Attendance Works

Attendance Works is a national organization dedicated to improving the policy, practice and research around attendance. Its website offers materials, research and success stories about reducing chronic absence. Attendance Works also offers technical assistance to school districts and communities.

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