

The Attendance Imperative: Attending school regularly is essential to students gaining the academic, social and emotional skills they need to thrive. Chronic absence, no matter its cause, has real life consequences for students, families and society as a whole. Research shows starting as early as preschool and kindergarten, chronic absence—missing 10% 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.*

Prior to the pandemic, 8 million students were affected by chronic absence. Today chronic absence has more than doubled. Students of color, those living in poverty, those with disabilities and English language learners have tended to be especially affected. Chronic absence, which involves monitoring when and which students miss too much school for any reason, is different from truancy (unexcused absences) or average daily attendance (how many students typically show up each day to school).

Reducing absenteeism is an essential, but often overlooked, strategy for responding strategically to the academic and social-emotional loss experienced by millions of students. School and district attendance data can be used to identify which student groups have lost out most on opportunities to learn during the pandemic and ensure they are prioritized in recovery planning. Effective strategies to improve attendance can benefit the entire community.

The good news is that chronic absence can be significantly reduced when schools, families and community partners, including faith-based organizations, work together to monitor data, nurture a culture of engagement, promote regular attendance and routines, and address hurdles that keep children and youth from getting to school every day, such as lack of access to food, clothing and health care; unhealthy environmental conditions, unreliable transportation, housing instability or the lack of safe paths to school.

Why student attendance matters to faith communities: Faith communities and schools – despite different missions – share a common goal: whether it's Friday night, Sunday morning or a regular school day, they all care about preparing children for the future. Local congregations are well positioned to help because they are often the first place families turn to for support.

Chronic absence represents both a symptom and a cause of many problems that faith leaders are already working to solve. High rates of absenteeism can:

- Signal a community in distress, whether the issue is loss of income, food insecurity, unstable housing, violence or little access to healthcare.
- Reflect a breakdown in family functioning, particularly in communities where parents and caregivers have died or gotten sick from Covid-19.
- Erode initiatives to improve schools and improve graduation rates.
- Stall efforts to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty or to boost the local economy.



This is a problem we can address. We can build a strong culture of attendance in every community. And we can marshal resources that many churches, synagogues, temples and mosques already offer to support student learning and engagement, such as mentoring, tutoring, childcare or afterschool programs. Faith communities also can address the challenges that may be keeping many students from getting to school: food, clothing, physical or mental health illness, transportation problems, housing instability and concerns for community safety.

How faith communities can make a difference:

Build public awareness

- **Support a public messaging campaign to convey that every school day counts.** Faith leaders can share the pulpit and invite school leaders to speak about the local attendance campaign. Congregations can distribute posters, handouts and stickers to promote attendance and share the benefits of school.
- **Join with your superintendent, mayor and others in a community-wide coalition to reduce chronic absence.** See if your community is connected to the [Campaign for Grade-Level Reading](#).
- **Recognize and appreciate good and improved attendance.** Support school efforts to recognize students and families who are turning the corner on attendance.

Help students and families in your congregation make attendance a priority

- **Encourage students to attend school regularly.** If you work directly with children, youth and families, you have opportunities every week to ask how school is going, share the connection between regular attendance and academic achievement, and help families overcome barriers to good attendance.
- **Talk with parents about absenteeism.** Use your regular interactions with parents to talk about any problems with attendance and to share why it matters. This is a natural extension of caring for the student's well-being.

Provide an extra set of adults

- **Volunteer in schools.** Encourage your congregation members to serve as attendance buddies or mentors for chronically absent students. Use your own experience, skills and connections to work with young people and parents. Help organize events to recognize good and improved attendance and encourage local businesses to donate prizes as attendance incentives.
- **Work with school districts.** At the planning table, bring your knowledge about the needs and the resources available to help students and families struggling with health, housing or other issues.

*A growing body of research has shown the prevalence of chronic absence, its critical role in student achievement, and how it can be addressed. Access a research summary: <https://awareness.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/Research2016.pdf>

Click here to find a full list of research: <https://www.attendanceworks.org/research/>

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

