

for
**Health Care
Providers**

Why Attendance Matters

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 that 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 health providers, 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 food, clothing and health care; unhealthy environmental conditions, unreliable transportation, housing instability or the lack of safe paths to school.

Why attendance matters to health care providers:

- Health providers are uniquely positioned to address chronic absence: Because of your expertise, you are crucial allies for conveying the importance of avoiding unnecessary absences. You also can use your knowledge of families and community health conditions to identify and develop solutions when health-related barriers are causing significant absences.
- Poor health and undiagnosed conditions can cause too many absences: Even when absences are excused, missing too much school can lead children to fall behind. Challenges related to poor physical, dental and mental health are leading reasons students miss too much school.
- Successful learners are healthier adults: Showing up to school is essential to graduating from high school and persisting in college. Higher levels of academic achievement are associated with lower incidence of disease and longer lives for adults.



How can health providers make a difference?

1. Help identify and address health-related causes of student absenteeism

- Call for school districts to share chronic absence data with the health community.
- Partner with a school nurse or attendance specialist to support families when they have health concerns.
- Help schools with high levels of chronic absence use health data to determine whether attendance is affected by chronic diseases or lack of access to physical, mental or dental health care.
- Work with schools on plans for ensuring a healthy environment at school – whether the concern is Covid-19 or asthma – so that families feel secure sending their children to school.
- Advocate for school-based and school-linked health supports to prevent children from missing too many days, especially in places with high levels of chronic absence. Explain to families the benefit of avoiding emergency room care.
- Work with community partners to ensure children have health coverage and access to medical care.

2. Help students avoid unnecessary absences.

- Offer in person or virtual appointments for school aged children before or after school, during evenings or weekends, and encourage parents to send their children to school for the remainder of the day if they need to miss part of school.
- Provide families with guidance on when a child should stay home when sick and how to avoid absences due to minor illness.
- Help families recognize and address when extreme anxiety is causing a student to avoid being in school.
- Use inappropriate requests for notes to justify absences as an opportunity to educate families about the importance of regular attendance.

3. Convey the importance of a regular routine of attendance for social and emotional well-being and academic learning.

- Put up posters or offer flyers encouraging good attendance in waiting and patient rooms.
- Talk to parents and students about the value of good attendance during back-to-school check-ups or any opportunity for interaction. Use these Handouts for Families.
- Ask about the number of days a student misses school as a routine part of medical examinations, and when those days seem excessive – averaging more than two days a month – explore the causes to determine whether there is a preventable health related reason. This is also an opportunity to uncover social determinants that are impacting health or learning.
- Lend your expertise to a coalition taking a community-wide approach to reducing chronic absence. See if your community is involved with the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.

*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.

