

Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades: How to Choose and Implement Proven Strategies to Improve Attendance

Chronic absenteeism—defined as **missing 10 percent or more of school days in most states**—is a problem across the nation. Students who are chronically absent in the early years may lack critical school readiness skills, miss important academic milestones, and lag behind their peers in social-emotional development. Once school leaders identify chronically absent students and the risk factors in their schools, it is time to select and test strategies to improve attendance among the earliest learners.

Selecting the right strategy

School leaders, teachers, and support staff can work together to identify and implement strategies to decrease chronic absenteeism. Helpful approaches include working with families to understand challenges that impact many chronically absent students, selecting strategies based on these challenges, and providing personalized supports to families who are struggling the most. Use proven strategies when possible. However, given that most of the scarce evidence on reducing chronic absenteeism is based on studies of older children, consider implementing and testing new or less proven strategies based on the specific needs of your students.

Research shows that:

Informing families about the importance of attendance in the early grades can help improve attendance rates.

- Families may not understand why regular attendance during the early years is so critical. A recent report revealed that informing families about the importance of attendance through **messages on public buses and recorded wake-up calls** improved attendance for New York City public school students.¹

Families may not know that their child is chronically absent.

- Parents tend to underestimate their children's absences and think they have missed the same or fewer days than classmates.
- A recent study showed that **sending a postcard to families** improved attendance rates.² Both a postcard with a general message about the importance of school attendance and a specific one about the number of days that student missed were effective.
- Another study showed the effectiveness of **sending text messages to parents**.³ Teachers sent targeted messages to parents of kindergarten students on the day they missed school, expressing concern and offering assistance. Based on parents' responses, teachers linked families to resources, such as transportation, temporary housing, or clean clothes. These messages reduced chronic absenteeism rates by 11 percentage points.

Offering transportation alternatives can help get children to school.

- Schools or neighborhoods can organize [walking school buses](#), where students walk to school in a group with at least one adult.

Tips for communicating with families

- **Habits start early!** Help families understand how to get into the routine of going to school every day during pre-kindergarten and kindergarten.
 - **Remind families** why pre-kindergarten and kindergarten are so critical to their child's success. Share information about critical skills students learn in the early grades or about what they missed on a specific day.
 - **Share ideas and resources** with parents to help them become part of the team, rather than placing blame on them. Mutual trust helps families and schools work together to solve problems.
 - **Teachers can provide families with tools** such as [attendance trackers](#) to help monitor days missed and stay on target for attendance goals.
- Schools can help arrange regular transportation to help families without reliable access.⁴ For example, schools can provide buses themselves or partner with community organizations such as local churches that have vans or buses.

Coordination between families and school staff can help decrease illness-based absences.

- Coordinate with a school nurse or a child's doctor to help determine whether a student is too sick for school. Most illnesses do not require children to stay home, unless the illness prevents the child from participating in activities, requires more attention than staff can provide, or poses a risk of spreading germs to others.⁵

- Use preventative measures such as helping children wash their hands and cover their mouths when coughing or sneezing, discouraging them from sharing food and drinks with others, and arranging wellness visits with school nurses to reduce absences due to illness.^{6,7}
- Home visits by school staff for families who are struggling can improve attendance for students who have a chronic illness, such as asthma, because school staff can learn what supports children might need at school.⁶

Help build community partnerships through resources

- Linking families that are stressed by household instability, food insecurity, or financial challenges to housing agencies and other community supports can help them obtain the resources they need to get students to school.
- Resources provided to families should be culturally and linguistically responsive and build on existing relationships that may already exist in the community.
- Translate materials into additional languages, as necessary, or find a trusted person who lives in the community who can help schools share important information with families.

Implementing and testing your strategies

The work is not over after the strategy is selected! It is important to test whether strategies are being implemented as expected by tracking all the steps in the process, and to collect data to determine how well the strategies are working to improve attendance. This way, if the strategy is not being adopted consistently in your school, or if attendance is not substantially improved, you will know about it and have valuable data to help inform changes to your strategy.

This fact sheet is part of a three-part series aimed at understanding and combating chronic absenteeism among New Jersey's youngest students. Another fact sheet addresses the association between chronic absenteeism, school readiness skills, and academic milestones. An additional fact sheet shares information on how school leaders and teachers can identify chronically absent students.

References

¹ Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2013). *Meeting the challenge of combating chronic absenteeism*. Baltimore, MD: Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University School of Education.

² Rogers, T., Duncan, T., Wolford, T., Ternovski, J., Subramanyam, S., & Reitano, A. (2017). *A randomized experiment using absenteeism information to "nudge" attendance (REL 2017-252)*. Washington, DC: Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic.

³ Smythe-Leistico, K., & Page, L. C. (2018). *Connect-Text: Leveraging text-message communication to mitigate chronic absenteeism and improve parental engagement in the earliest years of schooling*. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 23, 139–152.

⁴ Gottfried, M. (2017). *Linking getting to school with going to school*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(4), 571–592.

Step-by-step guide for tracking progress:

- ✓ **Record attendance rates** prior to implementing any change
- ✓ **Create standard procedures** for implementing the strategy
- ✓ **Check throughout the intervention period to make sure the strategy is implemented as expected**
- ✓ **Obtain feedback** from those implementing the strategy about challenges
- ✓ **Provide feedback** to educators/schools if there are issues with implementation
- ✓ **Record follow-up attendance data** to compare pre- and post- attendance rates

School leaders can help expand the range of proven strategies

We are still learning about ways to combat chronic absenteeism for New Jersey's youngest learners. School leaders and educators can help by trying and testing strategies. For example, although attendance awards were once believed to encourage attendance, research now shows they have a negative impact in the early grades.⁸ Testing new strategies can provide important information about what works for improving attendance for young learners.

⁵ American Academy of Pediatrics (2011). *Caring for our children: National health and safety performance standards: Guidelines for early care and education programs (3rd ed.)*. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; Washington, DC: American Public Health Association.

⁶ Kerr, J., Price, M., Kotch, J., Willis, S., Fisher, M., & Silva, S. (2012). *Does contact by a family nurse practitioner decrease early school absence?* *The Journal of School Nursing*, 28(1), 38–46.

⁷ Azor-Martinez, E., Yui-Hifume, R., Muñoz-Vico, F. J., Jimenez-Noguera, E., Strizzi, J. M., Martinez-Martinez, I., ... Gimenez-Sanchez, F. (2018). *Effectiveness of a hand hygiene program at child care centers: A cluster randomized trial*. *Pediatrics*, 142(5).

⁸ Robinson, C. D., Gallus, J., Lee, M. G., & Rogers, T. (2019). *The demotivating effect (and unintended message) of awards*. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.

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