



The Attendance Imperative: Attending school regularly is essential to students gaining the academic and social skills they need to succeed. Reducing absenteeism is a simple, cost-effective, but often overlooked strategy for improving academic performance. Starting as early as preschool and kindergarten, chronic absence—missing 10 percent 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. Chronic absence is especially problematic among students living in poverty who are most likely to have poor attendance over multiple years and least likely to have the resources to make up for the lost time in the classroom. In some communities, chronic absence affects more than one out of four children.

Unfortunately, many schools and communities don't realize the extent of the problem because districts don't look at all the right data. They're paying attention to how many students show up every day and how many skip school, but not how many miss so much school in excused and unexcused absences that they're at risk academically.

The good news is chronic absence can be significantly reduced when schools, families and community partners work together to monitor data, nurture a habit of regular attendance and address hurdles that keep children from getting to school every day such as lack of access to health care, unhealthy environmental conditions, unreliable transportation, housing instability or the lack of safe paths to school.

Why we should pay attention to chronic absence

- **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.
- **Health providers are uniquely positioned to address chronic absence:** Because of your expertise and respected stature, you are especially 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.

How health providers can make a difference?

1. Convey the importance of going to school every day

- Put up [posters](#) or offer flyers encouraging good attendance in waiting room and patient rooms.



- Talk to parents and students about the value of good attendance during back-to-school check-ups. Use these [parent handouts](#).
- 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 2 days a month explore the causes of the absences to determine whether there is a preventable health related reason

2. Help students avoid unnecessary absences

- Make available medical appointments for school aged children before or after school. If this is not possible, schedule toward the beginning or end of the day and encourage parents to send their child to school for the remainder.
- Provide firm guidance on when a child should stay home sick and how to avoid absences due to minor illness or anxiety. Consider this [example](#).
- Use inappropriate requests for medical notes to justify absenteeism as an opportunity to educate families about the importance of regular attendance.

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

- Call for school districts to share data on chronic absence with the health community.
- 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](#).
- Partner with a nearby school or school district officials to support families.
- 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.
- Ensure schools have asthma plans in place so that families feel secure sending their children to school.
- Advocate for providing school-based and school-linked health supports to prevent children from missing too much school, especially in places with high levels of chronic absence. Help justify these investments by explaining the benefit of avoiding costly emergency room care.
- Work with community partners to ensure children have health coverage and access to a medical home, which is particularly important for asthma management and less costly sick care.

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

