

Should Schools Reward Attendance? What the Experts Say



By [Lydia McFarlane](#) — July 11, 2023 ⌚ 7 min read



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Perfect attendance awards encourage students to come to school, even when they are not feeling well—either mentally or physically. However, the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to have shifted attitudes, with schools advocating for mental health days and encouraging students to stay home while they were sick to stop the spread of illnesses.

Attendance awards are not effective in motivating students to go to school—[some even call](#)

the practice outdated—and are not equitable to students of all backgrounds. Experts interviewed by Education Week say educators need to rethink how they view attendance, and how they can combat absenteeism without involving awards.

“While we think recognition of good and improved attendance can be helpful, we advise against awarding perfect attendance for a semester or the school year, since the children who struggle the most will soon be left out,” said Hedy Chang, the executive director of Attendance Works, a national nonprofit that conducts research and advocacy to reduce chronic absenteeism.

In interviews with Education Week, experts shared research and best practices they say educators need to know about using awards and other, more effective and equitable ways, to encourage attendance.

Attendance awards are not effective

Many researchers have attempted to answer the question if attendance awards are effective in the classroom and have overwhelmingly found that they are not.

Experts and leaders have previously pointed out the flaws in attendance awards and outlined how schools are sending poor messaging about attendance.

Todd Rogers is a professor of public policy at Harvard University who has conducted research on school attendance. As part of a research paper published in 2018 , which Rogers collaborated on, a survey of 15,000 students spanning from 6th to 12th grades across 14 West Coast school districts discovered a “demotivating effect” of attendance awards.

“Students randomly assigned to receive these attendance awards had worse attendance in the weeks after they were received compared to students who were not assigned to receive them,” Rogers said of the study. “It appears these awards convey to students that they attend school more than their classmates, so they are licensed to attend a little less.”

For this study, Rogers and his collaborators only observed the effects of traditional attendance awards, such as certificates or acknowledgment of attendance.

(The other collaborators on the research paper were Carly Robinson, senior researcher at Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education and the Director of Research for EdSolutions at the Stanford Accelerator for Learning; Jana Gallus, Associate Professor of Strategy and Behavioral Decision Making at the University of California Los Angeles; and Monica G. Lee, Senior Research Associate at Stanford University.)

How bad is chronic absenteeism?

Chronic absenteeism is generally defined as students who miss 10 percent or more of the school year—for any reason, excused or unexcused.

Before the pandemic, about 1 in 6 students in the country—more than 7 million—were chronically absent, according to data collected by the U.S. Department of Education.

The rates of absence are much higher for students of color than for their white peers, and absenteeism is 15 percent less likely among English-speaking students than among non-English-speaking students.

Since the pandemic, the problem has become more prevalent, as the number of students who are chronically absent has significantly increased. As of the 2020-21 school year, 10.1 million students were chronically absent, according to recent data from the U.S. Department of Education.

While the latest data from the Department of Education is from the 2020-21 academic year, Attendance Works has predicted that chronic absences will continue to rise post-pandemic based on state trends.

David Conrad, a professor of education at Governors State University, agreed with this prediction based on observations he has made from teachers following the pandemic.

“Educators tell me that remote learning conditions were demotivating to students and established unproductive learning habits,” Conrad said. “Educators at all levels are still helping students learn to ‘play school’ ... meet deadlines, show up on time and ready to learn, be focused and attentive, and follow other school norms.”

What are some factors that affect attendance?

There are many extenuating circumstances in students' lives that can lead to chronic absenteeism, making them ineligible for attendance awards such as those for perfect attendance.

Experts say homelessness or housing instability can be a large factor in chronic absenteeism. Students who are chronically ill, have caretaking responsibilities for younger siblings or older family members in multi-generational homes, or those who are working to support their households financially also may be chronically absent, according to [the National Center for Homeless Education](#) .

Additionally, climate change coupled with the housing crisis continues to displace even more people. Extreme weather events have the potential to displace entire communities, making attendance at school difficult for children affected by these events.

However, many low-income families of color have a difficult time rebuilding after a devastating weather event, [according to the Climate Reality Project](#), a nonprofit focused on advocacy related to climate change.

What is the problem with encouraging perfect attendance?

Due to extenuating circumstances in some students' lives, it's certain that kids who are struggling with family issues, poor health, and other issues are excluded from attendance awards, according to experts.

Chronic absenteeism can have serious negative effects on students, including missing important educational milestones such as developing critical literacy skills, according to [the U.S. Department of Education](#). Absenteeism can also be a better indicator of the likelihood of a student dropping out of high school than test scores.

Students who are chronically absent may feel overwhelmed at the thought of returning to school, due to an influx of information they have missed out on. Researchers and experts urge teachers to be understanding and ready to meet chronically absent students with

support and resources upon their return to the classroom.

“When chronically absent students return to school, they need tutoring and academic support,” Conrad said. “But many schools punish unexcused absences by lowering grades and refusing to support make-up work. Sending truant students back to class without support may exacerbate their absenteeism when the content is too overwhelming.”

What are alternate ways to encourage attendance?

Rogers and his collaborators found that “attendance nudge letters” are one of the most effective motivators to get students back to school. These are personalized letters to households addressing a student’s repeated absences.

“The experiments found that repeated rounds of customized mailings with asset-based language showing parents precisely how many days of school their students have missed is potent and scalable,” Rogers said.

Conrad suggested a two-pronged approach to addressing chronic absenteeism. First, he suggested tailoring the core curriculum in schools to be engaging to students and relevant to their lives. If students feel seen in the classroom and are interested in what they are learning, they will be more likely to come to school. Next, Conrad suggested that adults in the school make connections with their students.

“Every student needs a connection with at least one trusting adult in the school,” he said. “This could be their teacher, coach, advisor, a formal mentor, or any other staff member. Students are more likely to attend school when they feel connected.”

Chang and Attendance Works encourage an individualized approach to addressing chronic absenteeism. This approach would include gathering data on which schools in the district, as well as which student populations are experiencing the highest levels of chronic absenteeism.

As an alternative to attendance awards, Attendance Works suggests rewarding behavior, and collaborating with students and their families to see what would be motivating to get their students in the classroom. While attendance awards may not be effective, incentives may be.

“Offer incentives—[like] gas cards, grocery cards, food baskets—that help to address common barriers to getting to school,” Chang said. “Incentives also don’t need to be costly. Consider simple things—recognition through certificates or assemblies, extra recess time, being allowed to wear street clothes vs. a uniform, lunch with your favorite school staff person, even dancing in the hallways.”



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