Why Attendance Matters, Starting In the Early Grades

Succeeding in school requires developing good habits, and attendance is one of the most important. As early as kindergarten, too many absences can cause a child to start to fall behind academically, research shows. In the early grades, it is especially problematic for poor children whose families lack the resources to make up for time lost on task. For all children, learning to attend school regularly can help them develop the skills of persistence and perseverance which can help them succeed in school and, ultimately, in life.

Yet, research shows that one in 10 kindergarten and 1st grade students miss 10 percent of the school year, the point at which absences start to affect test scores. By middle school, chronic absenteeism can predict high school dropout rates. By 9th grade, it's a better predictor than past 8th grade test scores.

Sometimes it's hard for parents and teachers to recognize when a child is missing too much school. Absences don't always come in a row. Students can still get into trouble academically if they are miss a day or two every few weeks.

Absences are not just a problem for the children who aren't in class. Whole classrooms can be affected if the teacher has to slow down learning to help children catch up. Schools can lose money when state funding depends partly on attendance.

Parents play a key role in getting their children to school on time every day. Even with teenagers, parents should not underestimate the impact they can have by monitoring attendance and helping youth understand why going to school matters. Turn the page for some tips on getting your kids to school.
What Parents Can Do

1. Send your children to school every day, starting in kindergarten, to teach your children that attendance counts. Continue to monitor their attendance through high school.

2. Don't let your child miss school without a good reason. Try to avoid medical appointments during the school day or vacations when school is in session.

3. Create routines and stick to them. Set a regular bed time and morning routine to get ready for school. For older students, be sure they get enough sleep.

4. Keep an eye on what’s happening with your children’s education. Look for signs that they are bored, struggling with school work or having trouble with friends. Seek out tutoring, talk with teachers and encourage sports and other activities.

5. Learn about the school’s policies. What incentives do teachers offer for good attendance? What counts as an excused or unexcused absence? What are the penalties?

6. Find your own ways to reward good attendance. You know best what motivates your child.

7. Be open and honest with school officials. Make sure the school has your up-to-date contact information. Work with the teacher, counselor and principal on problems your children are experiencing.

8. Seek medical help when absences pile up. Anything from asthma to a bad bout of head lice can keep kids out of school. Work with your doctor or school nurse.

9. Turn to other families who can help you with dropping off or picking up children and with babysitting.

10. Seek help when you have a problem. If absences result from family issue—a sudden illness, a lost job, foreclosure or a broken-down car—the school can connect you to other families or to social service providers.

When do absences become a problem?

Chronic Absence
18 or more days

Warning Signs
10 to 17 days

Satisfactory Attendance
9 or fewer days absent

Note: These numbers assume an 180 day school year
Making the Case: How Good Afterschool Programs Improve School-day Attendance

It goes without saying that poor school attendance can lead to academic failure. The opposite is also true: students struggling academically often disengage from school and start skipping classes because they don’t see an avenue to success. Research shows that good afterschool programs can not only improve academic performance but also influence school-day attendance, even when most don’t appear to make it an intentional goal. They accomplish this by:

- Providing socialization and peer attention in a supervised venue.
- Re-establishing the link between effort and results—first in a non-school activity.
- Engaging students in challenging activities that help them develop persistence, a trait critical to later success in school and life.
- Providing consistent contact with caring, stable adults.
- Increasing the sense of belonging at school.

Consider the research:

- A 2009 study of 322 7th and 8th grade students at Boys & Girls Club for 30 months found that those attending afterschool programs skipped school fewer times, increased school effort and gained academic confidence. The first two indicators increased with the number of days attending afterschool programs. The Public/Private Ventures study focused on 10 clubs across the country. (Arbreton, Amy et al, Making Every Day Count: Boys & Girls Clubs’ Role in Promoting Positive Outcomes for Teens, May 2009)

- Middle-school students attending the Citizen Schools afterschool program in Boston attended school 11 more days than their peers who did not participate, according to a 2009 study. They also were more likely to attend high school regularly, even though the program stopped in middle school. For example, in the 11th grade, participants attended school 13 more days than their peers. (Vile, J.D., Arcaíra, E. & Reisner, E.R. Progress toward high school graduation: Citizen Schools’ youth outcomes in Boston. Washington, D.C.: Policy Studies Associates, Inc., 2009)

- L.A.’s BEST program found that students’ regular school-day attendance improved once they began participating in the afterschool program. That led to higher scores on standardized tests of math, reading and language arts. The June 2000 report summarized five studies and findings from tracking BEST students in 2nd and 5th grades in the 1993-94 school year. (Huang, D et al. A decade of results: The impact of the L.A.’s BEST after school enrichment initiative on subsequent student achievement and performance. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Center for the Study of Evaluation, Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, University of California, 2000)
- The California Afterschool Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnerships Program found that regular school-day attendance improved for students participating in its afterschool programs. Students who had previously missed 5 percent of the school year turned up an extra 5.6 days. Those absent 10 percent of the year came another 11 days, according to the 2002 evaluation. (Evaluation of California’s After School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnerships Program: 1999-2001; Department of Education, University of California at Irvine with the Healthy Start and After School Partnerships Office, California Department of Education, Feb. 2002)

- A 2002 evaluation of The After-School Corporation (TASC) programs found improvements in both school attendance and academic achievement for students who participated for two consecutive years. The study compared attendance and school achievement for participants to students who were not involved in the afterschool programs, which were offered in 143 public schools in New York City and 73 others elsewhere in the state. (Walsh, Megan et al; Promoting Learning and School Attendance Through After-School Programs: Student-Level Changes in Educational Performance Across TASC’s First Three Years, October 2002)

- The Ohio Urban School Initiative School Age Child Care Project found that students who joined the program in 1st grade missed three days of school, compared to an average eight absences in kindergarten. Eighth graders joining the program went from missing 18 days in the previous year to 5 days in the 1998-1999 year. (Evaluation: 1998-99 School-Year Program Evaluation, Urban School Initiative School Age Child Care Expansion, College of Education, University of Cincinnati, 1999)

- Pathways to Progress in Minneapolis and St. Paul public schools found “dramatically better school attendance,” with afterschool participants coming to school an average 18.4 more days than their peers, according to a 2004 report. (Wahlstrom, Kyla, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Pathways to Progress, Saint Paul Public Schools, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, University of Minnesota, March 2004)

Attendance Works is beginning to partner with afterschool providers to determine what could happen if providers make improved school-day attendance a stated goal and priority for their programs. As we learn more, we will post what we are learning on www.attendanceworks.org

Version: February 2011
Pay Attention to Attendance: Keep Your Child On Track in Middle and High School

Showing up for school has a huge impact on a student’s academic success starting in kindergarten and continuing through high school. Even as children grow older and more independent, families play a key role in making sure students get to school safely every day and understand why attendance is so important for success in school and on the job.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Students should miss no more than 9 days of school each year to stay engaged, successful and on track to graduation.
- Absences can be a sign that a student is losing interest in school, struggling with school work, dealing with a bully or facing some other potentially serious difficulty.
- By 6th grade, absenteeism is one of three signs that a student may drop out of high school.
- By 9th grade, regular and high attendance is a better predictor of graduation rates than 8th grade test scores.
- Missing 10 percent, or about 18 days, of the school year can drastically affect a student’s academic success.
- Students can be chronically absent even if they only miss a day or two every few weeks.
- Attendance is an important life skill that will help your child graduate from college and keep a job.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Make school attendance a priority
- Talk about the importance of showing up to school everyday, make that the expectation.
- Help your child maintain daily routines, such as finishing homework and getting a good night’s sleep.
- Try not to schedule dental and medical appointments during the school day.
- Don’t let your child stay home unless truly sick. Complaints of headaches or stomach aches may be signs of anxiety.

Help your teen stay engaged
- Find out if your child feels engaged by his classes and feels safe from bullies and other threats. Make sure he/she is not missing class because of behavioral issues and school discipline policies. If any of these are problems, work with your school.
- Stay on top of academic progress and seek help from teachers or tutors if necessary. Make sure teachers know how to contact you.
- Stay on top of your child’s social contacts. Peer pressure can lead to skipping school, while students without many friends can feel isolated.
- Encourage meaningful afterschool activities, including sports and clubs.

Communicate with the school
- Know the school’s attendance policy – incentives and penalties
- Talk to teachers if you notice sudden changes in behavior. These could be tied to something going on at school.
- Check on your child’s attendance to be sure absences are not piling up.
- Ask for help from school officials, afterschool programs, other parents or community agencies if you’re having trouble getting your child to school.
Help Your School and Community Improve School Attendance:

**PUSH FOR BETTER TRACKING OF CHRONIC ABSENCE DATA**

Every report card includes a box showing parents just how many absences their children have. But does your school look at absenteism numbers for the whole student body? And can the principal tell you how many students are missing so much school that it interferes with their academic performance? Keep in mind, too much absenteism isn’t just a problem for the students missing school but can disrupt learning for the whole classroom.

All parents should know this sort of information about their children’s school. But many schools and districts don’t track or release what’s known as chronic absence data – the percent of students missing 10% or 18 days over an entire school year. They look at the average number of students who show up for school, rather than at the number who are missing too much school due to any kind of absence, excused or unexcused. Average figures can mask large numbers of chronically absent, at-risk students.

*Parents can make a difference!

**WHAT YOU CAN DO**

**In Your Community**

- **Get the data:** Ask your school and district to calculate chronic absence rates and share them with parents, teachers and principals.
- **Identify barriers to attendance:** Work with your school to find out from parents and students what prevents them from getting to school.
- **Make a plan:** Encourage your school to make a plan and partner with community agencies to address identified attendance barriers.
- **Create incentives:** Help your school recognize students and families for good and improved attendance. Assist with award ceremonies and certificates or even reach out to local businesses to contribute incentives like gift cards or food items.
- **Educate parents:** Help all parents in your school understand the importance of attendance and who to call for the health, transportation or social services resources they need.

**In Your State**

- **Encourage tracking:** State regulations or laws should ensure that more school districts track chronic absence data and report it to the state.
- **Urge better reporting:** Your state education department should release chronic absence data statewide, just like they release test scores for districts and schools.
- **Advocate for accountability:** Your state department of education and districts should hold schools accountable for addressing chronic absence in their school improvement plans.