



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

CENTER ON EDUCATION AND
TRAINING FOR EMPLOYMENT

Partnering with Families to Improve Student Attendance

Research-based Strategies for Educators

Developed by the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center
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Introduction

Student absence from school is an enduring challenge in education. Chronic absence is defined by a student missing 10% of the school year for any reason. Many schools are struggling to find effective solutions to high levels of student chronic absence. Nationally, chronic absenteeism spiked from 16.2% in 2018-19 to 29.7% in 2022-23, reflecting growing concerns exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ While national and state initiatives have raised awareness, family perspectives remain underrepresented in the conversation. A recent NPR poll showed only 5% of parents identified chronic absenteeism as a top concern for education, with 11 other worries rated at higher levels of concern including bullying, mental health and teacher salaries.⁷ There appears to be a gap in concern or awareness of the impact on student success. Addressing this gap requires not only communicating the importance of attendance but also considering the broader and interrelated concerns families have, such as mental health, safety, and future preparedness.

Why Does Chronic Absenteeism Matter?

Chronic absenteeism is associated in studies with a host of negative outcomes for students. Research consistently shows that stronger family engagement correlates with better attendance and student outcomes. Chronic absenteeism disproportionately affects students already underserved in schools, such as those from economically disadvantaged families, students with disabilities, and English Learners.²⁶ In Ohio, these groups have consistently faced higher rates of absenteeism compared to the state average over the past three years.¹⁷ A foundational first step to creating equitable access to academic and social opportunities for all students is ensuring that all get to school as much as possible.

Schools with robust partnerships with families in place before the COVID-19 pandemic saw better-than-expected attendance recovery.¹⁴ It stands to reason then that to reduce absenteeism, schools should strengthen their collaborations with families. This means schools support families as partners, ensuring that solutions to absenteeism and other issues reflect the diverse needs and experiences of students and their communities. This research brief outlines key strategies for school attendance teams, emphasizing four essential throughlines.

Four Essential Throughlines

According to Merriam-Webster, a “throughline” is a “common or consistent element or theme shared by items in a series or by parts of a whole.” In this way, we offer four throughlines associated with improving attendance, or four considerations that are always relevant when considering attendance strategies. These throughlines are not to be implemented in sequence, nor should schools consider some of them before paying attention

to others. Instead, schools should take account of these throughlines from the beginning of their partnership efforts, and these throughlines should become regular topics of meetings and plans as schools make progress implementing various strategies.

1. **Collaborative Approach:** Attendance teams should involve not only school staff but also families, students, and community partners to develop tailored, local solutions that address absenteeism at its root.⁸
2. **Diversity and Setting:** Each school's demographic and contextual diversity must be considered when designing attendance interventions. The challenges faced by families vary across cultural, economic, and geographic contexts.^{8, 9, 24}
3. **Intervention vs. Prevention:** While immediate intervention is crucial, fostering early, preventative engagement with families can create long-term improvements in attendance. Schools should communicate with families about attendance expectations early in a child's educational journey.³

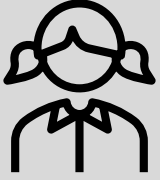
Questions To Consider:

- What shared expectations have been developed and/or expressed between home and school?
 - Are there opportunities for building relationships with families of future kindergarteners when children are three, four, and five years old?
 - How do early learning programs in your attendance area communicate about attendance?
4. **Multi-Tiered Approach:** Leveraging a multi-tiered approach can help ensure that strategies are in place to support all students and families as needed.⁶
 - A **universal** tier to provide all students and families with what they need to be successful; (e.g., all families receive an up-to-date attendance policy at the start of the school year; all families are notified early when their child is not at school, student absences are identified clearly on regular reports or other academic records sent home).
 - A **targeted** tier that tailors interventions to specific groups of families and students (e.g., providing a crossing guard for a neighborhood with less than safe walking conditions, including a student in a peer attendance intervention group, or conducting interviews with families of students who are missing school to unearth root causes the school may be unaware of); and
 - An **individualized** support tier that directs personalized strategies that support the success of a unique student and family (e.g., a student who is medically fragile, their families and staff develop an individualized student success plan, or

a staff member conducts home visits with a few students and families to build trust, clear communication, and offer support).

By considering these throughlines while planning and implementing strategies, attendance teams can strengthen family-school partnerships, address absenteeism, and support all students' success.

Now, we describe research-based strategies that can be leveraged by school attendance teams to ensure that all students are getting to school as often as possible. While we hope that these recommendations will be useful for all interested in supporting strong student attendance, these recommendations are shaped for the work of attendance teams -- the school staff and collaborators responsible for monitoring attendance data, identifying root causes of absences, coordinating the approach and implementation of strategies to improve attendance, and ensuring that these approaches meet student and family needs.⁵ These teams might consist of administrators, teachers, school nurses, and other staff well-situated to support school attendance efforts, as well as some students, families, and community members. These teams can apply the presented throughlines and strategies to their ongoing work, or as new tactics, that leverage and build on the perspectives of families, to form tailored approaches that reduce absenteeism.

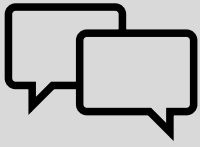


Strategy 1: Start Early

Attendance habits and family expectations about attendance begin early. Families changing these habits and expectations may require the support of an intervention.² On average, chronically absent students in kindergarten perform worse academically both in kindergarten and future grades.³ Young children who attended out-of-home prekindergarten are less likely to be chronically absent in kindergarten relative to their peers.¹¹ Attendance patterns set in this early education experience matter. Students and families who begin primary school chronically absent are likely to continue this pattern in later grades. Therefore, it is crucial for schools to collaborate with families, early childhood programs, and community partners to help families establish attendance habits early.

Try it!

- Partner with early childhood educators and families they serve to develop attendance awareness and expectations early.
- Identify early childhood programs from which students matriculate. Invite discussion with those organizations about attendance expectations and, when possible, collaborate to reinforce expectations and messages about attendance.
- Identify community spaces where families and their children gather. Leverage locations like doctor's offices, grocery stores, libraries, and worship spaces to garner the support of health professionals, faith leaders, and others as they speak with families about regular attendance.
- For students already in school, engage families about attendance at the end of the school year or in the summer months so that students and families have the information, support, and resources they need for starting strong the next school year.



Strategy 2:

Practice effective and predictable two-way communication

Communicating effectively, predictably, and in a way that invites feedback and input from families is foundational to combating chronic absenteeism.^{21,23} Communication is effective when it is proactive, understandable, positive, and accessible to the family receiving the communication. Effective communication is not just providing families with information. It also includes listening to families, which can improve trust between home and school.²⁵ Predictable communication means limiting how many places a family needs to check for communication. Though in many places, notifying families after a certain number of absences is required, the content of those notifications often is not. Teams preparing communications should consider if they are being delivered in an accessible medium and understandable language.

Try it!

- Use tools like *AI for Busy Readers*, a web-based aid that rewrites messages using “principles of effective practical writing” developed by authors of *Writing for Busy Readers*, Todd Rogers and Jessica Lasky-Fink²², and reflection tools like The Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center’s *Build Trust with Families Through Attendance Letters* tool, a guide for reframing communications with positive and understandable language.¹⁸
- Consider the attendance postcard intervention developed by Harvard’s Proving Ground Network¹⁹ to establish positive, predictable, and understandable communication about a child’s absences.
- Ask families directly, like at parent-teacher conferences, or in a survey through what means they prefer to receive communication.
- Give families easy access to ways of communicating with the school to ask questions, share concerns, or request resources and supports.



Strategy 3:

Engage families in equitable and collaborative leadership

Families can fulfill the following roles to address absenteeism, and schools can support each one.

- Families provide support to their child through activities like helping their child get ready in the morning, talking to their adolescents about the families' expectations for daily attendance. Families may arrange for a carpool with other families or walk with children to provide supervision and safety on the way to school.
- Families are also receivers of support from schools. For instance, families may receive tips from the school counselor for talking with children about the importance of getting to school. Families may also receive the support of a mentor at the school who works with them and their teen to improve their attendance pattern.
- Families are leaders with the school when they take an active role on a school's attendance committee, participate in townhalls, and surveys, or provide suggestions for other ways the school can prevent and address absenteeism.
- Families can co-design with schools like when they participate in family advisory groups for school attendance policies, serve on attendance teams, or help design non-punitive attendance plans for their own child.
- Families also serve as evaluators of prevention and intervention efforts as they provide feedback through surveys or focus groups about policies, supports, and practices.

Considering leadership and collaboration equitably also requires respect for a family's funds of knowledge. Funds of knowledge are the essential cultural practices and knowledge embedded in the daily practices and routines of families.¹⁶ Each family has interests, skills, knowledge, and traditions that are separate and apart from the school. These funds of knowledge are a source of learning for students and can inform and strengthen school approaches and policies when they are incorporated by the school.

Try It!

- Identify each role a family might fill to support attendance, including those both in and out of school. Ensure that all families have access to at least a selection of these roles.
- Build awareness of the important religious, cultural and historical beliefs of the families in the community. Consider how the school can incorporate the dates, practices and beliefs into the school calendar or programs.
- Identify how to engage a family's funds of knowledge and prioritize building upon them when seeking opportunities to improve attendance. Using [this toolkit](#) from the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction can help.



Strategy 4:

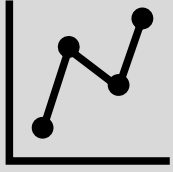
Develop intentional and collaborative community partnerships informed by family interest

Families have a variety of concerns regarding school that might affect how communication from the school is received. Schools can benefit from developing intentional and reciprocal relationships with partners in the community.⁸ Intentional partnerships address a student-centric need or opportunity efficiently and collaboratively. A reciprocal partnership benefits both parties, is grounded in shared goals, and requires a mutual contribution.²⁷ In a school in which students have shared an interest in video games and families have expressed interest in career exploration, an intentional and reciprocal partnership might look like identifying a local software engineering group with an explicit commitment to education and co-creating a series of learning experiences for students. Intentional and reciprocal partnerships can aid in the development of shared expectations and language across sectors, streamlining the messaging around school-based initiatives like improving attendance.⁸

Partnerships should be developed with family and student input. Accordingly, students and families should be engaged in the on-going evaluation of any partnerships through opportunities such as surveys and focus groups.⁶

Try It!

- Can community partners articulate the current status of student attendance and chronic absence and their role in addressing it? Can school leaders provide each community partner with an expectation for how they will contribute to student attendance? In the example above, does the partner know your school's attendance goals and that attendance can affect the preparedness of future workers? Do they know that their efforts to create meaningful experiences aligned to student and family interest is in service of attendance goals?
- Engage families in forming community partnerships to improve attendance.
- Create a feedback system for families to evaluate school-community partnerships. This might look like families participating on planning and leadership teams that oversee community partnerships or providing families with survey about their experience and interests.



Strategy 5:

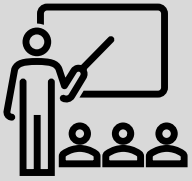
Establish data systems that address questions generated by chronic absenteeism

Every strategy shared in this brief requires data to guide what practices are put in place in a given school community (i.e., data on attendance, family engagement, transportation, demographics, and the effectiveness of partnerships and interventions). Knowing what data to collect and how to present it to staff members, families, students, and other stakeholders in a way that addresses pressing questions is critical. This can be challenging for attendance teams because the existing school data systems may not include metrics beyond basic attendance/absenteeism data, and data rarely include specific data from families or on collaboration with families.

To address these challenges requires a shift towards a “greater focus on unique local conditions and student/family circumstances” to improve the utility of such data systems.¹³ This means going beyond the rate of attendance or absenteeism and digging into data about student health, transportation, and family satisfaction among other metrics unique to your school. In doing so, attendance teams and their collaborators can select measurements that more closely reflect the outcomes they hope to achieve. For instance, if you identify school climate as a root cause driving absenteeism and identify peer mentoring as a solution, measure outcomes associated with the implementation of that program—not just regular attendance data. Families not only stand to be counted in these data systems but can also inform the data being collected and receive updates on data to which they contribute.

Try It!

- Reach out to staff members that may be overlooked as sources of attendance data, such as school nurses who observe patterns in visits and spreads of illness.²⁰
- Generate more specific data with families and community partners such as out-of-school time participation data and other community factors impacting attendance. This data might not be readily available in a school’s data system, or not normally a part of attendance discussions.
- Reflect on how your team communicates data with students, families, and the community. Clearly define the actions you want them to take with this information. Empower families by creating accessible pathways for them to provide feedback or contribute their own insights.



Strategy 6:

Include chronic absenteeism in staff professional learning

Like all important change and advancements in education, improving student attendance requires professional development for school personnel. Each member of the school staff should understand their role and the expectations for their practice to support attendance. This applies to teachers and administrators, but also to bus drivers, front office staff, paraprofessionals, nurses, school counselors and all other support staff. Research consistently shows that professional development for educators can improve their practice.^{12,15} Further, educators can unknowingly exacerbate individual factors that lead to chronic absenteeism.¹⁰ Successful professional development programs provide long-term support, involve educators as collaborators, and recognize that they have knowledge and expertise for solving problems. It is important to consider how school staff will be prepared to meet attendance goals.

Try It!

- Prior to implementing a new strategy for addressing chronic absenteeism, plan professional learning for those staff who will be involved with the strategy to learn and practice.
- Listen to staff as they identify potential barriers to implementation and work together to determine approaches to overcoming each one.
- Include teachers in learning and implementing classroom-based behaviors and strategies that strengthen student belonging and relevant curriculum.

Conclusion

A key to preventing and intervening in student absenteeism and improving school attendance is through collaborating with families. Too often, students' families are left out of planning and prevention efforts to improve attendance. In this research brief, we have described six strategies and four throughlines attendance teams can use to strengthen their partnership with families for addressing chronic absenteeism. It is our hope that schools can create supportive learning environments for each and every student.

Reflections

Use the tables below to reflect on how your selected attendance strategy aligns with essential throughlines.

Select an Attendance Strategy (or more than 1)
<input type="checkbox"/> Strategy 1: Focus on the early years. <input type="checkbox"/> Strategy 2: Practice effective and predictable two-way communication. <input type="checkbox"/> Strategy 3: Engage families in equitable and collaborative leadership opportunities. <input type="checkbox"/> Strategy 4: Develop intentional and collaborative community partnerships informed by family interest. <input type="checkbox"/> Strategy 5: Establish data-systems that address questions generated by chronic absenteeism. <input type="checkbox"/> Strategy 6: Include chronic absenteeism in staff professional learning.

Essential Throughline	Reflection
Collaborative Approach	How do you currently collaborate with families and community partners to advance the selected strategy? How could you improve?
Diversity & Setting	How do you currently consider diversity and setting in your work? How could you improve? What data could you use?
Intervention vs. Prevention	In applying this this strategy, is the focus on prevention or intervention? Explain.
Multi-Tiered Approach	How does this strategy fit into a multi-tiered approach?

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