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**Build Trust with Families Through Attendance Letters**

Every school in Ohio sends letters home to families every year. One such letter received by families lets a family know their child has “excessive absences,” which means the child was absent without a medical excuse for 38 hours in a month or 65 hours in a school year. School districts must notify a student’s family “within seven days of the triggering absence” in writing[[1]](https://usc-word-edit.officeapps.live.com/we/wordeditorframe.aspx?ui=en-us&rs=en-us&wopisrc=https%3A%2F%2Fbuckeyemailosu.sharepoint.com%2Fsites%2FOhioStatewideFamilyEngagementCenter41%2F_vti_bin%2Fwopi.ashx%2Ffiles%2F940efe1df94f41f6abfad6e793ea643d&wdenableroaming=1&mscc=1&hid=-21335&uiembed=1&uih=teams&hhdr=1&dchat=1&sc=%7B%22pmo%22%3A%22https%3A%2F%2Fteams.microsoft.com%22%2C%22pmshare%22%3Atrue%2C%22surl%22%3A%22%22%2C%22curl%22%3A%22%22%2C%22vurl%22%3A%22%22%2C%22eurl%22%3A%22https%3A%2F%2Fteams.microsoft.com%2Ffiles%2Fapps%2Fcom.microsoft.teams.files%2Ffiles%2F3221287622%2Fopen%3Fagent%3Dpostmessage%26objectUrl%3Dhttps%253A%252F%252Fbuckeyemailosu.sharepoint.com%252Fsites%252FOhioStatewideFamilyEngagementCenter41%252FShared%2520Documents%252FGeneral%252F1.%2520SFEC%252F6.%2520Marktg%252C%2520Comm%252C%2520Presentations%252F5.%2520News%2520%2526%2520Guidance%252FIssue%252023%25209.1.21%252FPolicy%2520into%2520Practice%2520Brief%2520Attendance.docx%26fileId%3D940EFE1D-F94F-41F6-ABFA-D6E793EA643D%26fileType%3Ddocx%26messageId%3D1628701527432%26ctx%3Dchiclet%26scenarioId%3D21335%26locale%3Den-us%26theme%3Ddark%26version%3D21052507800%26setting%3Dring.id%3Ageneral%26setting%3DcreatedTime%3A1628705871995%22%7D&wdorigin=TEAMS-ELECTRON.teams.chiclet&wdhostclicktime=1628705871386&jsapi=1&jsapiver=v1&newsession=1&corrid=11c8c8b0-3531-4f46-99c4-ae0e768f5aed&usid=11c8c8b0-3531-4f46-99c4-ae0e768f5aed&sftc=1&sams=1&accloop=1&sdr=6&scnd=1&hbcv=1&htv=1&hodflp=1&instantedit=1&wopicomplete=1&wdredirectionreason=Unified_SingleFlush&rct=Medium&ctp=LeastProtected#_ftn1). This letter, mandated in [Ohio Revised Code Section 3321.191(C)(1)](https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/section-3321.191), presents an opportunity to schools for setting a foundation for a partnership with families.

When a student has reached the threshold of “Excessive Absence,” schools may communicate this information to families in a way that opens the door to a partnership and a trusting relationship between home and school. A letter must be sent within seven days of a student reaching either 38 hours absent in a month or 65 hours absent in a school year. In addition, districts or schools may also provide information about appropriate intervention strategies that are in accordance with the district’s local attendance policy.

While certain ingredients are required, using the exact wording from the Revised Code is not. It is not hard to imagine the fear, confusion, hurt, and/or anger a family may experience receiving a letter that uses terms such as “excessive,” “chronic,” and “habitual.” Technical policy terms and attendance calculations are difficult for anyone except a professional educator to understand and should be avoided.

Schools can improve their communications to families about attendance to be more effective, student-focused, and collaborative. This can be done by using ordinary terms and language that is accessible to the family. Phone calls, postcards, and other outreach may also be useful and lessen the threat of a letter. The words used in communications can help families understand, feel supported, have a sense of hope and certainty that the school is committed to their child. It is an opportunity to build trust between home and school.

# **The Role of Trust in Family Engagement**

Schools, families, and the community all play unique and interconnected roles in partnership to support a child’s school attendance. Essential to this partnership is trust. What builds trust between the home and the school? Beliefs, actions, and feelings all contribute to trust. First, trust is built when schools and families collaborate in support of a child, like working together on a solution to the child’s attendance. Trust is also built when families and schools are actively engaged in this partnership, like when schools actively support families and students with attendance issues through personal communication or solving barriers to attendance such as transportation. By working together, collective trust grows. When families and school personnel both feel valued for their expertise in analyzing and solving attendance challenges, when the focus is on solutions, and when efforts seem to lead to improved attendance, collective trust grows. When families feel included, positive, and committed, rather than judged for their children’s attendance, collective trust grows. As a result of strong collective trust, families and school personnel each feel more effective in their separate roles - they each feel more confident in setting a high expectation for their children and students to attend school, they are resilient when they encounter difficulties with attendance, and they seek and use feedback for how to improve in their support for their children/students. In this way, trust is a keystone for partnerships between the school and the home, and ultimately the fuel that launches student success.

# **Communicating to Build Trust**

Use the tool below to reflect on how well your current attendance letters to families contribute to building trust with families. For each trust-building trait, reflect on the words of the current letter and determine if the trait is a strength or an area for improvement. When you are finished, revise your current attendance letters to align with the policy requirements outlined above while at the same time providing a powerful opportunity for building trust with families.

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| **Trust-building traits** | **Keepers:**  What is working? | **Polishers:**  What could be improved? |
| Is the **tone** collaborative, professional, and engaged? |  |  |
| Is the **focus** oriented to academics? |  |  |
| Does it **value families**’ expertise? |  |  |
| Is the **message** proactive, solutions-focused, and strategic? |  |  |
| Is the **mood** inclusive, positive, and committed? |  |  |