LEADING ATTENDANCE

A Toolkit for Principals, Summary

Attendance Works

>> INTRODUCTION

PRINCIPALS AND SCHOOL LEADERS know from experience and common sense what research confirms: showing up for class matters. Students can't benefit from investments in high quality instruction and more engaging, rigorous curriculum unless they are in their classroom. As early as the first month of school, chronic absence (missing 10% or more of school days) can be an early warning sign of academic trouble, whether a student is in kindergarten or high school. In kindergarten and 1st grade, chronic absence can leave a child struggling to read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade. By 6th grade it becomes a key predictor that a student will drop out of high school.

While everyone can help ensure students show up to class every day, the leadership role that a principal plays is irreplaceable. Principals are uniquely positioned to ensure their school adopts a comprehensive, tiered approach to improving attendance that fits with their overall approach to promoting academic achievement. Such a tiered approach is easily incorporated into existing reforms, such as Response to Intervention or Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports that can be expanded to include specific attention to chronic absence data and support for building good attendance habits.

Principals make a difference when they:

1. **Cultivate a School Wide Culture of Attendance**
2. **Use Chronic Absence Data to Assess Need for Added Support**
3. **Develop Staff Capacity to Adopt Effective Attendance Practice**
4. **Advocate for Resources and Policies To Improve Attendance**

As a manager, you know your staff's capabilities. And as a principal, you know the community you serve and its unique challenges, whether it's a remote rural locale or an urban setting. We hope you will use your knowledge plus these resources to tailor a plan for reducing chronic absence that suits your school's strengths and adds to your capacity to respond proactively to chronic absence. You can inspire your school community to find positive, preventive approaches to improving attendance before turning to more costly punitive measures. With the right plan in place, your school team can improve student attendance and, with it, academic achievement.

>> ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

The Leading Attendance toolkit provides templates, tools and messaging you need to improve attendance in your school. It also features profiles of principals who are rallying their staffs to reduce chronic absence. This document is just a summary. Please go to www.attendanceworks.org/tools/schools/principals for the full toolkit.

>> VOICES

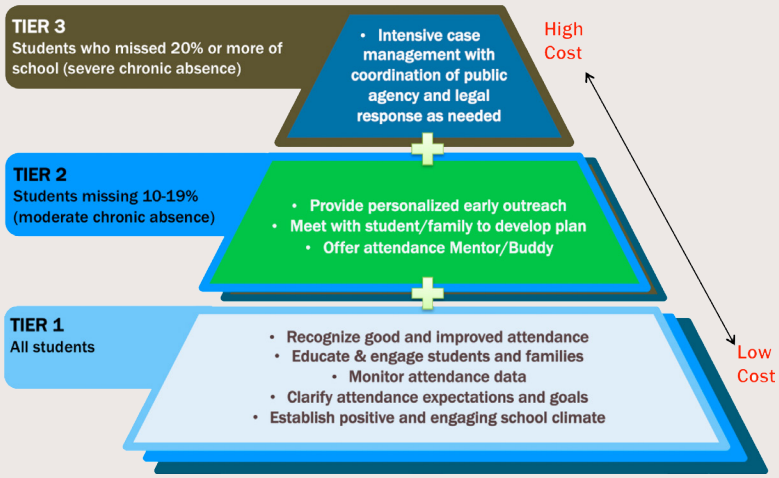
"By high school, a lot of kids feel like attendance is optional. That's what we're working on."

- Principal Joshua Solomon
Business of Sports School
New York, NY

"The bottom line is students miss out on instructional time and learning opportunities when they're not in school."

- Sarah Harris
Vance Village Elementary School
New Britain, Conn.

>> A TIERED APPROACH



>> CALL TO ACTION

Encourage your superintendent to join the Call to Action sponsored by Attendance Works and the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. Signing on helps demonstrate that chronic absence is a priority and ensures your district has timely access to the latest on-line resources. Go to: http://www.attendanceworks.org/join-our-call-to-action/ to sign up.

>> WHAT PRINCIPALS CAN DO

1. Cultivate a School Wide Culture of Attendance

All schools should have a welcoming and engaging school environment that emphasizes building relationships with families and the importance of going to class every day. Principals can model this approach and engage staff in consistently sending the message that attendance matters.

Principals and school staff are well positioned to help families understand what their children are learning in school and what the children will miss if they are absent. Parents and students may not realize that even excused absences, if they accumulate, can lead to falling behind in the classroom. Few families realize that absenteeism is a problem as early as kindergarten and preschool.

Principals can:

- Start outreach to families before the school year begins
- Leverage existing activities to communicate the importance of good attendance
- Nurture a school-wide system of attendance incentives
- Get involved in Attendance Awareness Month

2. Use Chronic Absence Data to Assess Need for Added Support

While a strong school-wide culture of attendance is essential, it may not always be sufficient. Some students, especially those who are chronically absent, may need a higher level of intervention.

The best predictor of chronic absence in the current year is poor attendance during the prior year and/or the first month of school. The good news is chronic absence can be turned around if data is used to identify and connect them — as early as possible — to positive, engaging supports that help motivate them to attend school and address challenging barriers.

Principals can:

- Secure your school's chronic absence data
- Review your school's data for patterns
- Identify individuals and groups of students who are missing 10% of their days on roll
- Use data, both quantitative and qualitative, to provide additional supports for chronically absent students
- Set goals and monitor progress

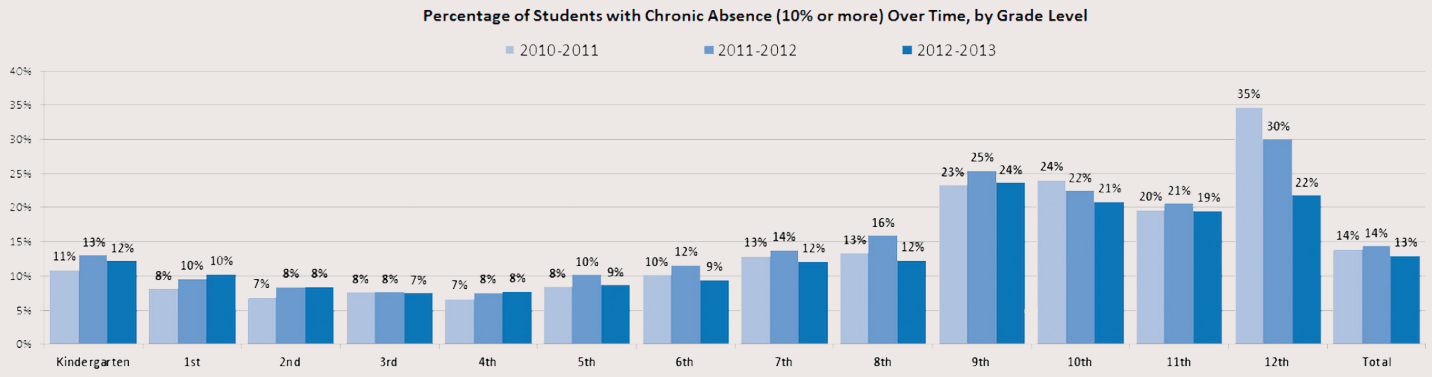
>> VOICES

"We learned a great deal about our students and their families as we uncovered reasons for absences and developed solutions. The progress also became a reason for celebration and a point of team unity, which motivated staff."

-Cliff Hong, Roosevelt Middle School, Oakland, Calif.

>> FREE DATA TOOLS

Attendance Works' free data tools can reveal patterns in chronic absence.
Go to www.attendanceworks.org/tools/ tools-for-calculating-chronic-absence/



3. Develop Staff Capacity to Adopt Effective Attendance Practice

While principals are crucial to launching the work, sustaining attendance improvement depends upon the support and buy-in of the whole school.

Principals can:

- Identify or establish a team to address attendance
- Develop an initial plan of action
- Create a tiered system of supports
- Invest in professional development
- Tap community partners for help

4. Advocate for Resources and Policies To Improve Attendance

As a trusted school leader, you can recommend changes in policy and allocation of resources that will make it easier to improve chronic absence. From the School Board to the State House, there are policy and budget levers at every level of government.

Principals can:

- Call for your district to provide every school with real-time data
- Advocate for coordination and sharing of best practices across schools
- Encourage district leadership to act on this issue
- Support using chronic absence to allocate resources
- Learn about current local or state attendance policy and join with other administrators and professional associations to advocate for better policy.

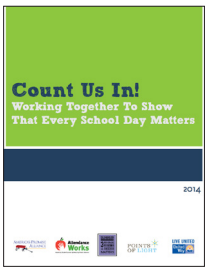
"If there are problems that prevent students from coming to school, we let parents know … we will do what we can as a school to try to support them."

-Joe Manko, Liberty E.S., Baltimore, MD

"My role is messaging constantly. But talking isn't enough. When teachers could see the list of students by name and hear what the attendance team has done in each case, it shifted their attitudes."

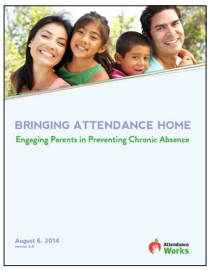
- Nima Tahai, Garfield E.S., Oakland, Calif.

>> ATTENDANCE WORKS RESOURCES



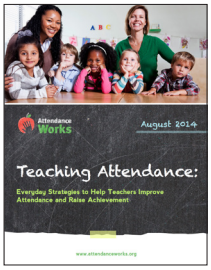
Count Us In! Working Together to Show That Every School Day Matters

If you are recognizing September as Attendance Awareness Month, use our toolkit to start planning what activities you want to pursue. Look for: An explanation of the importance of attendance and chronic absence; Ideas for community partners & coalitions; Proclamations, press releases & media tools; Suggestions for incentives, contests & events; Advice for tracking data to identify & intervene with students; and more.



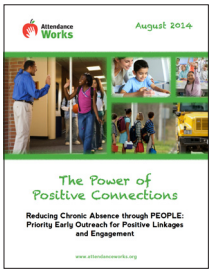
Bringing Attendance Home: Engaging Parents in Preventing Chronic Absence

Created with the help of practitioners who have worked successfully with families to improve attendance, this toolkit is filled with ideas, activities and materials that you can use to spark conversations with parents about how good attendance can help them fulfill their dreams and aspirations for their children's futures.



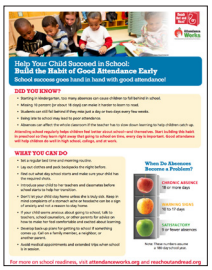
Teaching Attendance: Everyday Strategies to Help Teachers Improve Attendance and Raise Achievement

To help you build a culture of attendance and maintain it throughout the school year, we have created this teacher toolkit. We encourage you to draw from the resources we have developed to help drive up attendance in your classroom and throughout your school community.



The Power of Positive Connections

This toolkit calls for using absenteeism records from past years and from the first month of school to connect the most at-risk students to personal relationships and positive supports that motivate them to show up to class every day. As students head back to school, the toolkit provides a step-by-step guide to a data-driven strategy known as PEOPLE — Priority Early Outreach through Positive Linkages and Engagement.



Parent Handouts

Our Parent handouts for elementary school and high school come in several languages. Use the handouts each school year to build the habit of good attendance.

All of these resources and additional free tools can be found at www.attendanceworks.org/tools

Attendance Works
www.attendanceworks.org

Attendance Works is a national organization dedicated to improving the policy, practice and research around attendance. Its website offers materials, research and success stories about reducing chronic absence. Attendance Works also offers technical assistance to school districts and communities.

For more information on our principal toolkit, visit: www.attendanceworks.org/tools/schools/principals
Sign up for updates at http://www.attendanceworks.org/