Put an End to Chronic Absence

Experienced principals know that students arriving at school on time every day sets a solid foundation for learning. They also know—and a mounting body of research backs them up—that when students are chronically absent (missing 10 percent or more of the school year, or just two days every month), they are less likely to hit key educational milestones. Starting as early as preschool and kindergarten, chronic absence can reduce a student’s chances of reading proficiently by third grade. That, in turn, sets students up for academic struggles in middle school and leaves them more likely to drop out of high school.

In *Absences Add Up*, Attendance Works found that fourth graders who reported missing three or more days of school in the month before taking the National Assessment of Educational Progress scored 13 points lower on the math section and 12 points lower in reading than students who reported no absences. Researchers who interpret NAEP data consider a 10-point difference the equivalent of one grade’s worth of skills.

What can you do? As a principal, you can ensure that students, families, and faculty understand that every day in school counts, and inspire them to take practical steps to make sure that absences don’t add up. You are uniquely positioned to promote a comprehensive set of strategies that have proved to reduce chronic absence. Here are a few approaches.

### Recognize Good and Improved Attendance

An easy first step is to make sure your school moves beyond recognizing students with perfect attendance to motivating students to improve their attendance. Recognition does not need to be costly.

Some principals hand out certificates at assemblies to students who have perfect attendance for a month. Others post pictures of students with perfect weekly attendance on a bulletin board or distribute raffle tickets to students who arrive on time that can be used in a student store to purchase holiday gifts for family members. One principal conducted a special after-lunch activity each week for the classroom with the best attendance while the teacher enjoyed an extra-long lunch break.

### Engage Students and Parents

As principal, you can connect the dots between good attendance and success in school. Families, and even faculty, may not realize how easily absences for excused as well as unexcused reasons can add up to too much lost time in classroom instruction. Convey the key message that attendance matters early and often.

Leverage different communication vehicles to send this message: back-to-school night, in-person meetings, informal one-on-one talks, memos, bulletins, school newsletters, or your school’s website and Facebook page. Encourage families to help each other get students to school and tell you about common barriers to attendance.

### Monitor Attendance Data and Practice

Data can enable you to target resources, uncover causes of absenteeism, and establish realistic goals for improvement. Ask your district for a data report that shows how many and what percentage of students are chronically absent (defined as missing more than 10 percent of the academic year for any reason) by grade and student populations. Attendance Works offers free data tools on its website that can help.

Chronic absence shows how many students are academically at risk because they have missed too much school. It is different from average daily attendance, which shows how many students show up each day, or truancy, which reflects only unexcused absences. Both can mask high levels of chronic absence. Often, educators are surprised to find that chronic absence is highest in kindergarten and first grade. Unfortunately, when children are chronically absent at the beginning of their school careers, this lack of a strong foundation can compromise their ability to read proficiently at the end of third grade.

Remember to review your school’s data for accuracy. If the numbers do not match your perceptions, examine attendance-taking procedures to identify how to improve the quality of your data.
Identify a team to carry out the work that includes staff familiar with attendance data, parent engagement activities, student behavior, and family supports, as well as those with the ability to help engage other teachers. This could be a team devoted exclusively to attendance or an existing team that has attendance added to its responsibilities.

Provide Personalized, Early Outreach
A caring, personal relationship is a proven strategy for motivating students to attend school every day. Provide school staff and community partners with strategies to identify and reach out to students most at risk for poor attendance—those who were chronically absent in the prior year or missed several days in the first month of the school year. Teachers or staff at community partner agencies can make an extra special effort to connect with these students through, for example, a personal phone call welcoming students to a new school year, a postcard previewing the exciting lessons ahead, or a home visit just to get to know a student’s family. Teachers can leverage their relationships with students and families to encourage better attendance during key points like parent-teacher conferences. The 2014 Attendance Works toolkit, Teaching Attendance, provides a menu of these everyday strategies (http://bit.ly/1xpkwcO).

Develop Programmatic Responses to Barriers
Use your data to identify where chronic absence is concentrated and then gather additional information to identify if a broader response is needed. Find out, for example, if asthma and the lack of health or dental care are keeping students from attending school. If so, enlist community partners to offer on-site health services. Or ask parents about transportation challenges.

One school opened an early morning breakfast club after discovering children missed school because their parents worked the night shift and fell asleep before dropping their children off. Another principal shifted registration to her school site when she found out families without cars were not starting school on time because they could not get to the school district headquarters downtown to complete the needed paperwork.

As a principal, you are uniquely positioned to use these proven strategies to create a plan that is tailored to your own school’s strengths and realities. You are essential to improving your school’s attendance and, with it, student achievement.

Hedy Chang is the director of Attendance Works.

Cecelia Leong is the associate director of Attendance Works.

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