

for
**Health Care
Providers**

Why Attendance Matters

The Attendance Imperative: Attending school regularly is essential to students gaining the academic and social skills they need to thrive. Chronic absence, no matter its cause, has real life consequences for students, families and society as a whole. [Research shows](#)* that starting as early as preschool and kindergarten, chronic absence—missing 10% of the academic year—can leave third graders unable to read proficiently, sixth graders struggling with coursework and high school students off track for graduation. Equally important, it affects personal and emotional development and makes it hard to gain the habit of showing up, which is crucial to success in the workplace.

In 2018, 8 million students (one out of 6 students) were affected by chronic absence. During the pandemic chronic absence nearly doubled. While it has started to decrease, it remains elevated. Although chronic absence rose for students of all backgrounds and in all regions, students of color, those living in poverty, those with disabilities and English language learners experienced the highest levels. When schools experience high levels of chronic absence, it affects everyone—making it harder for teachers to teach and set classroom norms as well as for students to learn. Chronic absence, which involves monitoring when and which students miss too much school, is different from truancy (unexcused absences) or average daily attendance (how many students typically show up each day to school).

Reducing absenteeism is an essential, but often overlooked, strategy for responding strategically to the academic, social and emotional loss experienced by millions of students. School and district attendance data can be used to identify which student groups have lost out the most on opportunities to learn and ensure they are prioritized in planning. At the same time, effective strategies to improve engagement and attendance can benefit the entire community.

The good news is that chronic absence can be significantly reduced when schools, families and community partners work together to monitor data, nurture engagement, promote regular attendance and routines, and address hurdles that keep children and youth from getting to school regularly. Partners can help to remove these barriers, such as a lack of food, clothing and access to physical and mental health care; unhealthy environmental conditions, unreliable transportation, housing instability or the lack of safe paths to school.

Why attendance matters to health care providers:

- **Health care providers are uniquely positioned to address chronic absence:** Because of your expertise, you are crucial allies for conveying the importance of avoiding unnecessary absences. You also can use your knowledge of families and community health conditions to identify and develop solutions when health-related barriers are causing significant absences.
- **Poor health and undiagnosed conditions can cause too many absences:** Even when absences are excused, missing too much school can lead children to fall behind. Challenges related to poor physical and mental health are leading reasons students miss too much school.
- **Successful learners are healthier adults:** Higher levels of academic achievement are associated with lower incidence of disease and longer lives for adults.



How can health care providers make a difference?

1. Help identify and address health-related causes of student absenteeism

- Call for school districts to share chronic absence data with the health community.
- Work with schools to raise awareness around appropriate health-related reasons to send a child home from school.
- Partner with a school nurse and/or attendance specialist to support families in managing health and social challenges that may be contributing to missed school days.
- Help schools with high levels of chronic absence use health data to identify existing health access barriers and determine how physical and behavioral health conditions are impacting student attendance.
- Work with schools on plans for ensuring a healthy environment at school, focusing on things like indoor air quality, hygiene programs, access to healthy foods and physical activity, so that families feel secure sending their children to school.
- Advocate for school-based and school-linked health supports, especially in places with high levels of chronic absence.
- Work with community partners to ensure children have health coverage and access to medical care.

2. Help students avoid unnecessary absences.

- Offer in person or virtual appointments for school aged children before or after school, during evenings or weekends, and encourage parents to send their children to school for the remainder of the day if they need to miss part of school.
- Provide families with clear guidance on when a child should stay home when sick and how to avoid absences due to minor illness.
- Help families recognize and address when extreme anxiety is causing a student to avoid being in school.
- Collaborate with schools and families of students with chronic health issues or disabilities to ensure they receive appropriate support and services.
- Use inappropriate requests for notes to justify absences as an opportunity to educate families about the importance of regular attendance.

3. Convey the importance of a regular routine of attendance for social and emotional well-being and academic learning.

- Put up [posters](#) or offer flyers encouraging good attendance in waiting and patient rooms.
- Talk to parents and students about how good attendance impacts school performance and future wellness during back-to-school check-ups or any opportunity for interaction. Use these [Handouts for Families](#).
- Ask about the number of days a student misses school as a routine part of medical examinations and praise patients for good attendance.
- When absences seem excessive – averaging more than two days a month – explore the causes to determine whether there is a preventable health related reason. This is also an opportunity to uncover social determinants that are impacting health or learning.
- Lend your expertise to a coalition taking a community-wide approach to reducing chronic absence. See if your community is involved with the [Campaign for Grade-Level Reading](#).

*A growing body of research has shown the prevalence of chronic absence, its critical role in student achievement and how it can be addressed. Access a research summary: <https://awareness.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/Research2016.pdf>

Click here to find a full list of research: <https://www.attendanceworks.org/research/>

For additional information and resources go to the American Academy of Pediatrics *School Attendance* blog post. <https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/school-health/school-attendance/?srsltid=AfmBOopJj44zU5pnR99KIoSeM75f3G7mXBqFHxa487pMSN1-0uHtdYv>

For more information, go to Attendance Works at www.attendanceworks.org.

