

1. What is your message?

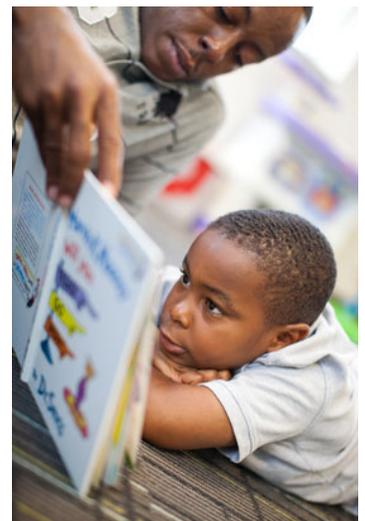
Parents and students need to understand the importance of attendance, starting in the early grades and continuing through high school. It's important to stress a few key messages:

- Attendance matters for doing well in school and life starting in kindergarten and even in pre-kindergarten.
- Absences can add up before you know it.
- Poor attendance is not just about unexcused absences or children willfully skipping school – excused absences can affect performance, too.
- As a parent you are responsible for making sure your child develops the habit of regular attendance.
- If you are facing tough challenges related to access to health care, unstable housing, poor transportation or lack of food, you can and should seek out support from the school and community.
- It's important to know the school-wide chronic absence rates, since too many absences can slow down instruction for all students.

A. WHAT TO SAY TO PARENTS:

Stress that good attendance will help your children do well in high school, college and at work.

- **Your children can suffer academically** if they miss 10 percent of school days or about 18 days. That can be just one day every two weeks, and that can happen before you know it.
- **It doesn't matter if these absences are excused or unexcused.** They all represent lost time in the classroom and a lost opportunity to learn.
- **Attendance matters as early as kindergarten.** Studies show many children who miss too many days in kindergarten and first grade can struggle academically in later years. They often have trouble mastering reading by the end of third grade.
- **Preschool is a great time to start building a habit** of good attendance. Studies show that poor attendance in preschool can predict absenteeism in later grades.
- **By middle and high school, chronic absence is a leading warning sign** that a student will drop out.
- **Too many absent students can affect the whole classroom,** creating churn and slowing down instruction.



Stress that families can make a difference.

- **Families should avoid extended vacations that require your children to miss school.** Try to line up vacations with the school's schedule. The same goes for doctor's appointments.
- **For younger children, you can set a regular bedtime and morning routine.** Make sure they get 9 to 11 hours of sleep. You can lay out clothes and pack backpacks the night before.
- **For older children, you can help set homework and bedtime routines** that allow for 8 ½ to 9 ½ hours of sleep. Make sure that when the lights go out, so do the cell phones, video games and computers.
- **Get to know the teachers and administrators.** With younger children, make sure you introduce your child to teachers before school starts and keep in touch with the teachers. For older students, school officials can help you stay on top of academic progress and social contacts to make sure your child is staying on track.
- **Above all, set an example for your child.** Show him or her that attendance matters to you and that you won't allow an absence unless someone is truly sick. Don't ask older students to help with daycare and household errands.
- **You can turn to the school for help.** Many schools offer services for the whole family.
- **You can ask your principal to calculate chronic absence rates for the whole school.** Even if your child attends regularly, it's important to know how many students in your child's school are missing 10 percent or more of the school year.

B. WHAT TO SAY TO STUDENTS

Beyond the talking points for parents, you should add in some messages targeted to students of all ages. As they grow older, they need to hear this message from peers, as well as teachers and parents.

- **School is your first and most important job.** You're learning about more than math and reading. You're learning how to show up for school on time every day, so that when you graduate and get a job, you'll know how to show up for work on time every day.
- **Students who attend school regularly are more likely to graduate and find good jobs.** In fact, a high school graduate makes, on average, a million dollars more than a dropout over a lifetime.
- **School only gets harder when you stay home too much.** Sometimes it's tempting to stay home because you've got too much work or you don't understand what's going on in class. But missing a day only makes that worse.

C. WHAT TO SAY TO POLICYMAKERS, EDUCATORS AND BUSINESSES:

While this toolkit focuses on parents and students, there are additional messages to convey when speaking to a school board, city or state officials, business leaders and the media.

Make the social and economic case for why attendance is so important:

- Too many students are missing too much school, causing them to fall behind academically. This exacerbates achievement gaps and dropout rates.
- Chronic absence not only affects the absentee students. It disrupts learning for an entire classroom when teachers have to repeat lessons for students returning to class.
- Chronic absence can drag down standardized test scores and thwart school improvement efforts.
- Improvements in classroom teaching and curriculum won't yield results unless students are actually in school.
- Chronic absence can affect our economy. Dropouts are less likely to succeed in a career. And even those who do graduate won't do well at work without good attendance habits.
- Student absences can cause their parents to miss work, affecting local employers. In some states, better attendance rates translate into more state aid.

Emphasize how the community can play a role:

- We need to get past blaming parents and instead help them get their children to school.
- We need to use community resources – mental and medical health providers, social workers and others – to address the problems contributing to chronic absence.
- We need to provide the right incentives and an engaging curriculum that will bring students to school.
- We need to make sure that every child has an opportunity to learn and that means making sure they come to school regularly.

Emphasize what your community is doing right:

- We are now tracking the right data – chronic absenteeism – so that we know which schools and which students have a problem with absenteeism. That way, we can intervene to turn the problem around.
- We are increasing resources at schools that need extra help. That can mean a health clinic to help kids suffering from asthma, mentors to help track at-risk students and counselors for those who need more help.
- We are engaging the whole community. From the Health Department to the Housing Authority, from the Chamber of Commerce to the United Way, we are all working together to bring kids back to school.