

As a teacher, you know first-hand that absences impact not only the absent student, but your entire classroom. School attendance is essential to academic success, but parents and students often do not realize how quickly absences add up. Missing just two days of school per month can lead elementary school students to fall

behind in reading, writing, and math. For example, over 4 out of 5 students who miss more than 10% of both kindergarten and first grade are unable to read on-level by third grade. By 6th grade, chronic absenteeism is a critical warning sign that a student will not graduate high school.

Ultimately, parents don’t think it’s a big deal if their child misses school, especially in elementary school. The good news is that the research showed that parents trust teachers more than anybody else when it comes to hearing about their child’s absences, and are open to receiving more information directly from teachers on this topic. In order to maintain consistency in talking to parents, we are emphasizing that every absence matters. Here are some considerations for you, as a teacher:

* **Refer to absences by month, rather than year**. Parents systematically underestimate absences on a yearly basis, but can more accurately reflect on absences if they are presented on a month-by-month basis. · Example: “Missing 2 days a month is too much” instead of “missing 10+ days a year is too much.”
* **Emphasize that there is no perfect replacement for attendance.** If a child is absent, a homework packet or take-home assignment might be helpful, but be sure to clarify that the assignment does not fully “make up” for the absence. · Example: “Make sure the student completes these assignments, but he will still need to work extra hard to catch up once he returns to school.”
* **Connect elementary school absences to later academic performance.** Surveyed parents were much more likely to say that high school attendance was more important than elementary school attendance. Help them connect the dots between the two. · Example: “Students who are absent in elementary school miss out on key concepts that they will need for later grades, including high school.”
* **If possible, connect absences to the missed opportunity to learn specific class curriculum/content.** Example: “We are learning to identify numerators and denominators this week. Please make sure your child does not miss school because his/her understanding of this lesson will make him better prepared for next week’s lesson on adding fractions with common denominators”
* **Avoid compliance-based messaging**. Parents are not motivated to improve their child’s attendance by threatening or court-centric messaging, particularly from teachers.

Attendance Do’s and Don’ts:

* **Make sure to approach the conversation with concern and optimism rather than telling families what they’re doing wrong**. Almost all families want their child to be in school, but many don’t understand the connection between too many absences and poor achievement. Assume that once they know better, they will do better.
* **Build upon the hopes and dreams of families for their children.** Families want the best for their children, including success in school and, for many, a college education. Let them know that strong attendance will enable their child to do well in school, graduate ready for the work force or college. Consider sharing your hopes and dreams for their children so families see that you care about their child’s success.
* **Ensure families and students are aware of what they miss when students are absent, even in the early grades.** Help families understand that lessons build on one another-an absent student misses the chance to learn something that he will need in order to understand more difficult material later in the school year.
* **Families can be your best allies when it comes to getting their child to school every day.** Help them to identify the barriers that might keep their child from getting to school. What approaches can help them address these challenges? Consider how you can provide families access to or information about resources that address challenges such as recurring illness, mental health and transportation challenges.
* **Help families recognize the importance of monitoring and tracking absences.** Research shows that parents with children missing more than two days a week often didn’t know the number of absent days. Yet the same parents are often willing to track absences and tack steps to improve attendance.
* **Leverage trusted messengers with strong relationships to families.** Parents and students say they most trust teachers to talk with them about attendance. If you need support, consider reaching out to other members of the school staff who have developed a friendly relationship with the family who can talk with them about absences. If the family comes from a different cultural or language background, the school can contact a community partner for assistance.
* **Draw on the knowledge of social workers, community services providers.** They can help you understand a student’s past attendance patterns if she has transferred from another school. You’ll also find out if the student is missing school because of court dates or other required appointments. These individuals can advocate that such appointments take place during non-school hours.

Don’t

* **Don’t assume families know what good attendance is.** By and large, families and students don’t know that missing two days a month over the course of a school year puts a student off-track for graduation.
* **Don’t just rely on robocalls to let families know that their children have missed school.** Studies show that parents often don’t listen to recorded phone calls from school.
* **Don’t send impersonal, threatening letters home which could add to the impression that no one at school cares about their children.** Parents can be turned off by notices that use jargon or cite legal codes.
* **Don’t jump to the conclusion that students miss school because their families don’t care.** Most families believe their student is on track for graduation, even for students who are chronically absent.
* **Don’t assume families are aware of the number of days their child has been absent**. Surveys show that almost all families underestimate their children’s absences by half.