



WHY ENGAGEMENT AND ATTENDANCE MATTERS FOR CITY AND COUNTY LEADERS

The Attendance Imperative: Attending school regularly is essential to students gaining the academic and social skills they need to thrive. Chronic absence – defined as missing 10% of the academic year – has more than doubled since the start of the pandemic, to an estimated 16 million students nationwide, and absenteeism is especially high among students and families most adversely impacted by the pandemic. Chronic absence, no matter its cause, has real life consequences for students, families, and society. Research shows chronic absence can leave 3rd graders unable to read proficiently, 6th graders struggling with coursework, and high school students off track for graduation.

City and county leaders can play a role by examining hurdles that keep youth from getting to school every day, which include lack of food, clothing, and healthcare; unhealthy environmental conditions; unreliable transportation; housing instability; and the lack of safe paths to school. But chronic absence can be significantly reduced and engagement increased when city and county leaders, schools, families, and community partners work together to monitor data, nurture belonging in school, and promote regular attendance and routines. Reducing absenteeism and increasing engagement in school is a vital strategy for responding strategically to the academic and social loss experienced by millions of students.

Why Student Engagement and Attendance Matters



Stronger Economy: Good schools are key to creating a healthy and vibrant community that attracts businesses as well as new residents.



Better Schools: School quality is an important consideration for families thinking about where they will live.



Safer Communities: Better attendance and engagement in school means safer streets as youth stay in school and out of harm's way.

How Leaders Can Improve Student Engagement and Attendance



City and county leaders are in a unique position to partner with school districts and community-based organizations to address chronic absenteeism in their communities. Leaders can draw attention to the issue; use their convening powers to spearhead partnerships; tap an array of resources such as public safety, early childhood programs, and community health clinics that can address significant barriers to school attendance; and engage residents and youth in crafting solutions. City and county leaders also can:

Convene a task force on attendance and engagement in school to ensure that it becomes a community priority. Work in conjunction with school districts to bring together senior leadership from a range of disciplines: early childhood, K-12 education, family engagement, social services, public safety, afterschool, faith-based, philanthropy, parent organizations, public housing, and transportation.

Monitor and utilize data. Find out how many students and schools are affected by chronic absence; the first step is understanding the problem in your community. City and county leaders can collaborate with school districts to gather and examine chronic absence data. For guidance, refer to [Attendance Works' free data tools](#).

Launch a public awareness campaign to explain the value of being in school for well-being and learning for students, families, and the community. Speeches, proclamations, billboards, and public service messages can reinforce that message, as can family summits at the start of the school year.

Recognize and appreciate good and improved attendance in connection with a broader school or district-wide attendance effort. Be sure not to focus on perfect attendance which can encourage sick students to show up for school and discourage those who struggle with attendance. Cities and counties can showcase students in newsletters or social media, help link schools to businesses that can provide incentives, and connect schools with local celebrities or athletes who can appear at attendance rallies.

Forge partnerships to ensure easy access to physical and mental health services. Asthma and dental problems are leading causes of chronic absence in many communities; leaders can assist in addressing these issues by facilitating conversations with health departments and community-based providers to provide preventative care in easily accessible locations. Encourage health departments and districts to offer consistent guidance about when students should stay home due to illness along with tips for staying healthy and avoiding absences due to anxiety.

Work with families, schools, and community members to identify barriers to attending regularly and co-create solutions. If transportation or a lack of safe passages to school are barriers, consider adjusting city or school bus lines, providing students with public transit passes, or creating walking school buses. And collaborate with community groups to provide access to basic needs support such as clothing, food, and school supplies.

Recruit adults to mentor chronically absent students. Recruit businesses or provide staff to mentor youth or otherwise support school efforts to engage students and families. Or collaborate with local nonprofit volunteer organizations or national service programs offering mentors to support and connect with students.

Addressing today's high levels of school absenteeism is a smart strategy for improving a community and its schools. Attendance is a simple, common-sense metric already recorded by teachers and understood by parents and is essential to other education reforms. Addressing chronic absenteeism is a winnable strategy. When local governments work with schools, districts, and communities to address barriers to showing up, student attendance and engagement improves.

Resources

As a nonprofit initiative, Attendance Works collaborates with schools, districts, cities, counties, states, communities, and organizations. Free tools and resources are available on the [Attendance Works website](#).



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