

Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

Addressing Barriers with Empathy and Support

When students miss school frequently, the impacts can extend beyond academics. Chronic absenteeism often signals underlying challenges. Addressing attendance concerns with compassion rather than punishment helps schools build trust, strengthen relationships, and better support students and families.

Root Causes

Chronic absenteeism is typically defined as missing 10% or more of the school year for any reason. While attendance data can identify students who need support, it rarely explains why they are missing school.

Students may be absent due to:

- Anxiety, depression, or other mental health concerns
- Chronic illness or medical appointments
- Family caregiving responsibilities
- Transportation challenges
- Bullying or peer conflicts
- Housing insecurity or family instability
- Lack of connection to adults or peers at school

Steps Educators Can Take

1. Build relationships first.

Strong relationships are one of the most effective tools for improving attendance. Students are more likely to come to school when they feel seen, valued, and connected. The goal is to help students feel that their presence matters.

Simple relationship-building strategies include:

- Greeting students by name each day
- Checking in after absences without judgment
- Identifying a trusted adult mentor in the school
- Celebrating attendance improvements, even small ones
- Providing opportunities for students to participate in clubs, activities, or leadership roles



2. Partner with families.

Families are essential partners in addressing attendance concerns. Conversations about absences should focus on collaboration rather than blame.

When reaching out to families:

- Begin with concern for the student's well-being.
- Ask open-ended questions about attendance barriers.
- Listen actively and avoid assumptions.
- Connect families with available school and community resources.
- Develop realistic attendance goals together.

3. Create a school environment where students want to be.

Improving attendance is not only about reducing barriers. It is also about creating an environment where students feel safe, engaged, and supported. When students experience a strong sense of belonging, attendance could improve naturally.

Schools can foster belonging by:

- Promoting inclusive classroom practices
- Recognizing student strengths and achievements
- Providing social-emotional learning opportunities
- Offering meaningful extracurricular activities
- Encouraging positive peer relationships
- Ensuring students have access to supportive adults



4. Use data with empathy.

Attendance data can help schools identify patterns and intervene early. Looking for trends, such as repeated absences on certain days or during particular periods, can help educators better understand student needs.

Data should serve as a starting point for supportive conversations, not just as a tool for punishment. Combining attendance information with relationship-building efforts creates a more comprehensive and effective approach.

Try This!

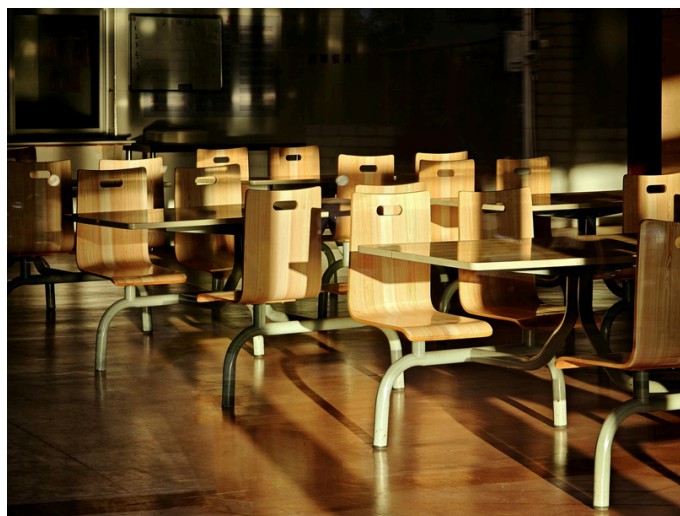
Attendance Check-In

Choose one student with attendance concerns and schedule a brief, positive check-in.

Ask: *"What is one thing that would make coming to school easier for you?"*

Use the student's response to identify one practical support or adjustment that can be implemented immediately.

Addressing chronic absenteeism requires a balance of accountability, support, and compassion. By seeking to understand the reasons behind absences, building meaningful relationships, and partnering with families, educators can help students reconnect with school and experience greater success both academically and emotionally.



Additional Resources

To view the resources used for this guide and more information, click on the links below.

<https://www.attendanceworks.org>

<https://www.aft.org/childrens-health-safety-and-well-being/childrens-access-care/chronic-absenteeism>