
Addressing Attendance Problems

The New York Times (9/5) asks: *Where are the students?* and notes that attendance “has come to feel more optional than it once did, and absenteeism has soared, remaining high even as Covid has stopped dominating everyday life.”

Given how long school attendance has been a problem, most schools have been working on the matter.

Our Community of Practice Practitioner last addressed the problem in 2018. See

>Addressing underlying causes of attendance problems
[https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mhpractitioner/2018/practitioner\(8-22-18\).pdf](https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mhpractitioner/2018/practitioner(8-22-18).pdf)

Also see the Center’s Quick Find on *Attendance* <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/attendance.html>

Here are some comments shared by colleagues in response to three basic questions we frequently are asked about attendance:

What do you think are the major causes of missing school?

(A) There are so many things that contribute to absenteeism/truancy. We’ve seen instances of older siblings having chronic truancy issues because they walk their younger siblings to school each day. We’ve had students that are chronically truant because setting an alarm clock isn’t a family norm, and we’ve seen teens who aren’t connected to school and don’t/won’t attend.

(B) Many major causes of missing school stem from parent limitations. At the elementary level, many parents (in low-income and minority areas) struggle getting their child to school consistently and on time. This can be for various reasons. One, ... lack of transportation. They might not have the financial means needed to take the bus each and every day. Second, parents might work long hours and might not have an adult present to drop students off for them. Oftentimes, parents leave their children with other siblings because they have no other option. ... Students also might feel a lack of motivation for school. This can stem from a hostile home-environment, an uninviting school-life, etc. When there is a lack of parent involvement, the student is not held accountable for truancy. ...

(C) Unfortunately, looking only at attendance is like watching an eclipse of the sun through a pinhole in a piece of paper. You can tell something going on, but you’re missing a lot of what’s really happening. Typically, kids with chronic absenteeism have a host of issues that are not easily dealt with unless there is a system of supports in place. In my experience, the major issues related to problems in elementary have to do with parenting and bullying. For parenting — there could be a host of problems that keep parents from making sure their child gets off to school on time. This could have to do with work issues or even drug and alcohol problems. In most cases, getting a social worker or appropriate services involved is about all the school can do. As for bullying, the school is responsible to deal with the issue and make a safe environment for the student. For middle and high school youth, the problems can be more varied and difficult to pin down. Again, bullying can contribute to the problem, as well as other types of social relationships, lack of supervision in off-school hours, poor academic performance, substance abuse, etc. They could feel that school is a hostile place or go through an

entire day without an adult speaking to them. Research shows that one positive student/adult relationship at school increases the likelihood of that student graduating by 50%. Simply assigning an adult to interact with a student on a daily basis could make a difference.

(D) "Most common reasons:

- > Physical illness, doctor's appointments, mental/emotional stressors; suspensions
- > Some others: willful skipping; hardships such as homelessness or parent mental illness
- > For some high school students, employment to earn money"

What have you seen tried that does not work (may make the problem worse)?

(A) Our legislature changed parts of the School Code to remove punitive, disciplinary responses to truancy. For example, beginning next school year, schools will no longer be able to place students in Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth programs for truancy. Instead, schools must focus on providing interventions and supports to help students and their families.

(B) When teachers refer to parents as pajama parents (parents who come to school in their sleep attire) or address parents through a deficit lens, they show their lack of empathy and understanding. This type of communication is usually hostile and involves a lot of judgement. Parents find a distrust in the school and a lack of support for their child. Schools cannot blame parents for the limitations they experience in their everyday lives.

(C) I believe that the emphasis on attendance as a "behavior" issue is sorely misplaced. I look at attendance as the symptom and schools MUST find out what the true cause is. I've seen so many elaborate extrinsic motivation strategies put in place to get students to come to school. They may work for a brief period, but they aren't solving the root cause of what is going on. And often the students put on these incentive programs are not ever weaned off. How many times have we heard, "every time I ask them to do something they ask--what will I get?" We did that to ourselves by not understanding how to develop intrinsic motivation. Through relationships (the key) between school staff and students and families they must find out the cause--is it academic?--(ex. does the student not have the foundational skills he/she needs to be able to be successful in class so always feels stupid); is it behavioral?(and if so, what is the functional basis for the behavior?-- personally I've never found that the cause is a purely behavioral problem--there's always more behind it). Is it cognitive? do they just not comprehend the correlation between being at school and learning--or for high school the difference in gaining credits toward graduation vs just going through the motions and being passed through middle school) or...is it affective? does the child have no sense of belonging, no real connection to the school, feeling like no-one cares anyway so why go, etc.

(D)

- > Suspensions for excessive absences
- > Not addressing root cause when it is social-emotional and/or academic
- > Discussing the attendance problem only with the student and not also the parent/guardian
- > Not explaining the relevance of the absences to the student and family"

What are the best ways to address students/families/school related to attendance?

(A) We have some counties that have created Truancy Task Forces that work with students and their families to get the student back on track, picking the student up and transporting to school, etc. Some districts send attendance officers out to knock on doors and escort kids to school. I think for these efforts, the focus has to be on providing positive support to the student — making sure he/she knows that the adults are helping, not punishing.

(B) It is important to have a open line of communication. Many teachers often comment, "Well I called....." or "I sent an email." It is important for teachers and other school staff to realize that phone calls and emails may not be options for parents who come from low-income households. ... Teachers should be active in their communication even if the communication is not reciprocal. It is important that parents, no matter their form of involvement, see that there's a support system for their child at school. ...

(C) The context of the situation and the feelings of the child are critical to understanding why the student is missing school. It may not be a student issue at all -- adding more consequences when the child is chronically

absent can't improve a situation that isn't a student issue. Example: not showing up or not showing up on time because the child is with a non-custodial parent and they don't get the child back; they don't have transportation (or feel safe using what is offered); and sometimes family isn't making school a priority and the student doesn't know any better.

Where adults develop strong relationships and make sure the students know they care that they are at school, there has been success--for example: Check & Connect--a comprehensive student engagement intervention. The community has to be involved in solving chronic absenteeism. The court systems and the consequences for truancy can work against what is in the best interest of the child. I've also worked with a community where the judicial consequences for students left families and students in a financial bind to pay fines for being truant--a panel of students shared that they couldn't go to school because they had to work to pay off their fines for not going to school! In the same community, some parents are begging for help--they've tried all the suggestions and don't know what more to do to try to get their child to school. I also am a Youth Mental Health First Aid Trainer--the trends for anxiety, suicide, and other mental health issues in our children are frightening. We know we need more services and supports yet the funding for these supports isn't keeping pace (at all) with the needs. If the student can't identify or articulate what is happening and why they don't want to be at school, then they need the supports to assist them to figure that out. Consider it a partnership--including the student in an authentic role. Build relationships, build relationships, build relationships. Refrain from using consequences that "push" students and their families away. Collect and use your data.

(D) Schools are skilled at writing intervention plans for all types of problems and could try involving the student and their parent(s) to problem solve. They can develop agreements for getting to school on time and developing possibilities for what to do should the student have these problems in the future. Naturally, these plans need to include the types of supports needed to help the student be successful and need to be regularly revisited to make sure things are working as intended. In the best of scenarios, a school could monitor absenteeism and develop a system to check up on students. There could be "levels" whereby occasion absenteeism is dealt with differently than more chronic absenteeism.

Regardless of the system or plans, the school needs the resources to follow through. Adding to the assignment of a single staff member is not an effective solution — there needs to be an intervention team that has the time and resources to develop a system, meet with stakeholders to develop student support plans, and have the ability to follow through with those plans. And, a good administrator will monitor the health and wellbeing of that team to ensure their effectiveness. And finally, as the team begins to work they may begin to find trends or common causes for absenteeism. These could have to do with transportation, needed services or even simple changes in school policies. (For example, a young mom I worked with wanted to attend high school part-time but school policy didn't allow her to do so. Unfortunately, she dropped out because she didn't have childcare for the full day.) These types of opportunities allow the school to partner with the community as well as raise issues with the board of education to support students and ensure they have what they need to get to and be successful in school. The best ways to address students/families/school issues? Head-on. The students and families know what the issues are — even if they don't want to talk about them. Get them involved, don't place blame and provide support. Working with everyone involved is the only way to wrap-around the supports that are needed.

Please share with us what you have found works to address attendance problems; we will include them in our weekly Community of Practice *Practitioner*.