



FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION STEERING COMMITTEE
FIRST NATIONS SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION



A TOOLKIT FOR

RAISING THE ATTENDANCE RATES OF FIRST NATIONS STUDENTS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

DRAFT FOR REVIEW AND FEEDBACK



FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION STEERING COMMITTEE
FIRST NATIONS SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION

#113 - 100 Park Royal South, West Vancouver, BC V7T 1A2
604-925-6087 | Toll-free in BC 1-877-422-3672

info@fnesc.ca
www.fnesc.ca | www.fnsa.ca

A Toolkit for Raising the Attendance Rates of First Nations Students in British Columbia - Draft for Review and Feedback

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► INTRODUCTION

This Toolkit is intended to help First Nations and First Nations schools consider issues related to student attendance at school, including why attendance is an important issue, some of the reasons why students might not be in school, and what can be done to help.

The information included in this Toolkit will ideally be of interest to people who work with First Nations students who are enrolled in a variety of education settings – public schools, First Nations schools, First Nations adult education centres, and independent schools. It is hoped that the information will be helpful to school staff, community members who support students, First Nations Parents Clubs, and any other people who support First Nations students.

Making sure that all First Nations students have every opportunity for success by attending school consistently is an issue that is best addressed collaboratively. It is not an issue that can be left to parents or schools staff alone. Many of the successful attendance intervention programs being implemented around the world – including those for Indigenous students – have involved entire communities focusing on ways to encourage students to arrive at school regularly and on-time.

By necessity, the information presented in this Toolkit is quite general, as it is meant to apply to a wide range of circumstances. Some of the suggestions will work well in some areas, but perhaps not in others. Some of the suggestions relate specifically to school-age students, while others may be relevant to adult students, as well. All of the ideas should be considered within specific contexts, as options to adapt and build upon as relevant for each community and school setting.

► **THIS TOOLKIT HAS BEEN INFORMED BY PARTICIPANTS IN TWO FOCUS GROUP MEETINGS ORGANIZED TO REVIEW EARLY DRAFTS OF THIS TOOLKIT. THE FEEDBACK SHARED HAS BEEN INCORPORATED INTO THIS DOCUMENT, AND IS GREATLY APPRECIATED.**

Project Sponsors



The **BC First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC)** is committed to supporting First Nations in their efforts to improve the success of all First Nations students in BC. FNESC facilitates collaborative services in the areas of research, communications, advocacy, program administration, and networking, and FNESC strives to share up-to-date information about available programs, government policies and initiatives, and local, provincial and national education issues that affect First Nations learners. See www.fnesc.ca

FNESC Mandate: “To facilitate discussion about education matters affecting First Nations in BC by disseminating information and soliciting input from First Nations.”



The **First Nations Schools Association (FNSA)** was formally established as a non-profit society with charitable status in 1996. The FNSA represents and works on behalf of First Nations controlled schools in BC and has a mandate to support those schools in creating effective, nurturing, and linguistically and culturally appropriate education environments that provide students with a positive foundation in all academic areas. More information is available at www.fnsa.ca.

FNSA Mission: “The First Nation Schools Association will collaborate with First Nation schools to create nurturing environments that will develop learners’ pride and competence in their First Nations language and heritage and will equip them to realize their full potential, within self-governing First Nations communities.”

► **COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS REGARDING THIS RESOURCE ARE WELCOME.**

PART ONE

▶ **DEFINING AND UNDERSTANDING ATTENDANCE RATES: A KEY PLACE TO START**

In order to address attendance issues effectively, it is necessary to carefully track absences and gather relevant data, which means that definitions related to “absences” and “attendance” must be thoughtfully considered and understood.

In the past, schools and communities often examined measures of “truancy” to identify school-age students who might be at-risk due to missing too much school. But truancy – meaning missing school without good reason and without parental permission – does not account for all, or even the majority, of absences for many students. Some students may have an inordinate number of excused absences (seen especially at the primary level). Some students may have a relatively low rate of absenteeism for any one type of reason (example excused or unexcused), but when the absences are combined, the students may be exhibiting patterns of problematic absences. Therefore, using truancy alone as a warning sign of an attendance problem can be misleading.

In fact, whatever the reason, an absence – even if a parent has given permission – means time missed from school and a lost learning opportunity. Therefore, a more current and commonly used term for discussing attendance is “chronic absenteeism.”

Chronic absenteeism is generally defined as missing ten percent or more of a school year, including excused and unexcused absences – which results in approximately 18 days a year, or about two days every month.

Chronic absenteeism is usually measured as a percentage of days missed rather than a simple number, so that students can be identified as being at-risk of chronic absenteeism before they hit the threshold of 18 days. If a student has missed six days of school by the end of September, for example, people should be paying attention and interventions may be warranted. Determining that a student missed 18 days of school in June may be too late to address the issue.

TRUANCY	VS	CHRONIC ABSENCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counts only unexcused absences 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counts all absences: excused and unexcused
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasizes compliance with rules 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasizes the academic impact of absence = missed learning opportunities

It is also important to be aware that the concept of chronic absence is sometimes confused with Average Daily Attendance (ADA).

ADA is the total number of days of attendance of all students in a given period (such as each day, each week, or each month), divided by the number of days school was in session during that period. Therefore, if a school has a daily ADA of 90%, that means an average of 90% of students are in attendance each day.

It is easy to mistakenly assume that a high ADA is an indicator of good attendance, but this may not always be the case. In order to meaningfully analyze ADA, it is necessary to understand whether absences are due to most students missing a few days – which is to be expected in any school situation, or whether a high ADA is due to excessive absences among only a small group of students – which is much more problematic. Excessive rates of absence by even a small proportion of a school’s student population can have extremely important consequences – especially for the students who are missing a large number of days. While ADA may be a reasonable broad measure of attendance, it provides little meaningful information about and can mask critical challenges for individual students.

It is also important to differentiate between “chronic absenteeism” and occasional student absences due to illness, appointments, family issues, etc. Infrequent, short-term absences from school are to be expected, and parents should be encouraged to keep sick children home from school whenever possible – so the sick children can have an opportunity to rest and recover, and to avoid spreading illness when students are contagious.

In contrast, chronic absenteeism refers to long-term, regular, and/or repeated absences that can impact a students’ educational success. Some students who have injuries or chronic illnesses may experience frequent absences, and schools should

know who those students are so that individual strategies can be designed to support them. Schools must also be attentive to all other students who miss an excessive number of days of school, recognizing that this problem can have lifelong impacts.

Finally, accurate definitions of attendance should be considered in consultation with First Nations in order to appropriately address the issue of student absences due to traditional pursuits. Engagement in traditional activities is of course a meaningful and entirely legitimate form of learning. The success of children is nurtured by their participation in cultural activities, which makes students stronger and more confident in who they are. Accordingly, some schools do not consider students “absent” when they are involved in such activities. Other schools mark students absent in these circumstances. Either practice is fine, but understanding whether these types of activities have a role in attendance rates is important for analysing attendance data and identifying students who could be considered “chronically absent.” Also, if students miss days of school because they are involved in traditional pursuits, even though this was actually very beneficial,

it is still important to be aware of whether supports are needed to help them stay up-to-date with any school-based learning they might have missed as a result.

All of these considerations are important to recognize because high rates of chronic absenteeism often pose significant challenges for both individual students and for schools overall, and strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism will likely require community support, as well as school-wide policy changes and targeted strategies to assist specific children and their families.¹ In order to inform discussions about these issues, careful tracking of absences is important, and community, schools / teachers should select a method for monitoring attendance to identify students who appear to be at-risk of chronic absenteeism. Periodically, other data to highlight trends and causes can also be considered, such as attendance rates at different times of the year, on specific days, for boys and for girls, etc. – always with a focus on identifying possible causes, with an aim to identify and inform solutions.

¹ Rates of absence are best considered within the context of each school. For example, for schools that operate according to a four-day school week, daily attendance may have an even greater impact on learning.

PART TWO

▶ WHY WORRY ABOUT CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?

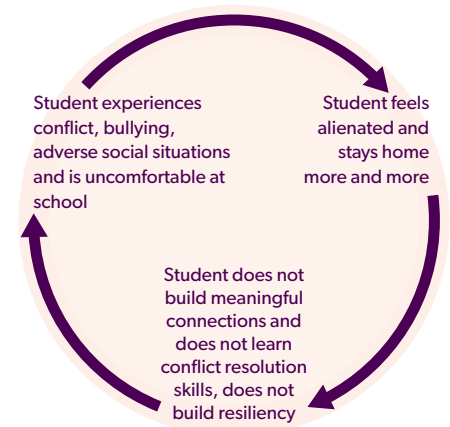
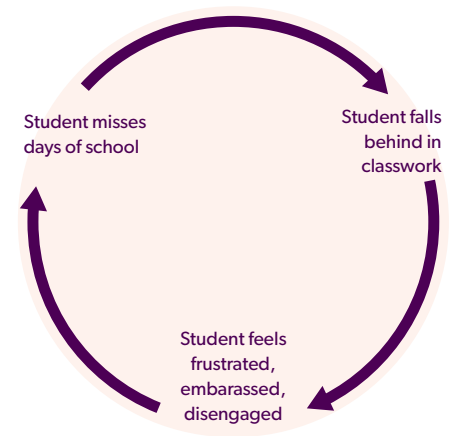
“Poor attendance is the canary in the coalmine, warning us of trouble ahead.”

(Attendance Works, 2014(2))

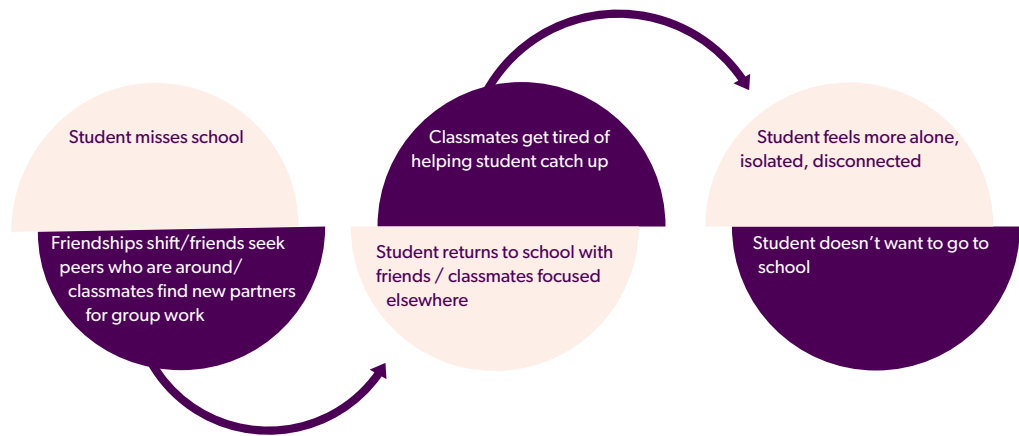
Challenges for Students Who Are Chronically Absent

In short, students who have the best chance to succeed in school are generally those who attend school on a consistent basis. Regular school attendance is an essential part of the learning process and crucial to graduating from school with a strong foundation for further studies and a successful career.

- ▶ Students who regularly miss school receive fewer hours of instruction, often leading to lower grades. In effective classrooms, instruction builds over time, and when students are not in attendance, they miss vital building blocks of information. Further, each absence, whether excused or unexcused, leaves students further and further behind, leading to the potential for more absences.
- ▶ Students who are absent also miss out on opportunities to grow and maintain important behavioural and social-emotional skills, and to create positive relationships with adults and other students in the school.



- In these, and many other ways, absenteeism can become a cycle



- Evidence shows a strong correlation between poor attendance and the possibility that a student will drop out of school before completing their secondary education, leaving affected students more likely to become long-term unemployed, homeless, caught in the poverty trap, dependent on welfare, and involved in the justice system.² Studies have shown that by 9th grade, students' chances of graduating from high school drop by 20 percentage points for every week of school they miss.³
- Chronic absence has been shown to be associated with a greater chance of students being involved in problematic behaviours outside of school, including substance abuse, early pregnancy, and disruptive or illegal activities – which often in turn leads to further attendance problems.⁴
- In the long term, even if a student who was chronically absent does graduate from secondary school, the lower grades that often result from chronic absenteeism can leave the student with fewer opportunities for post-secondary and fulfilling employment opportunities.

² Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012; Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008; Danielson, 2002; Rothman, 2001; Virginia Department of Education, 2005

³ Jordan, 2019

⁴ Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012; Epstein and Sheldon, 2012; Centre for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008; Danielson, 2002; Virginia Department of Education; 2005

- ▶ While empirical research about this issue is somewhat limited, some available evidence suggests that regular attendance of adult students is also important for achievement. For example, a study by Credé, Roch & Kieszczynka⁵ related to adult learners at college found that attendance is a strong predictor of grades, all else being equal.

Challenges For Schools and Communities Associated With Chronic Absences

- ▶ High rates of student absences can threaten schools' overall efforts to raise student achievement and the ability of schools to fulfil their missions. Also, some researchers suggest that tendencies toward absenteeism for adult learners can ultimately lead to attrition, which poses serious challenges for not only students, but also for program success rates and ultimately an ability to continue to offer effective adult education services.
- ▶ High rates of student absenteeism have an adverse effect on the learning of all students, as teachers must accommodate non-attenders within the classroom, affecting the learning environment overall.⁶ If teachers spend time organizing makeup work, they have less time for other class preparations. The pace of instruction may slow down and important instructional time can be lost when teachers need to spend more time in review. Teachers also can become demoralized in the face of chronic absenteeism, and other students receive less attention when teachers must concentrate on students who have fallen behind due to chronic absences.⁷

Reducing chronic absence can not only improve academic performance but boost morale for students, teachers and administrators as they see signs of progress. (**Attendance Works, 2014(2)**)

5 Credé et. al., 2010.

6 Rothman, 2001

7 Purdie and Buckley, 2010; Strick and Berg, 2019

- ▶ When classes use partner and group activities, absences can cause a number of challenges, leaving some students without partners, requiring students to change partners in the middle of assignments, and sometimes impacting the momentum of learning projects.
- ▶ Some schools suggest that absenteeism can become “contagious,” as peers may see school as less compulsory or attendance as less necessary if some students are regularly absent.
- ▶ Communities may also have to deal with problematic and/or delinquent behaviours that are often related to chronic absenteeism.

Decreases in academic performance that result from high rates of absenteeism may potentially extend a cycle of limited educational success, providing fewer role models and mentors to inspire and support the next generation of students.⁸

Related Challenges Associated With Excessive Late Arrivals

Research also suggests that tardiness is directly related to school success, and that students who are on time to school are generally more successful.

- ▶ Students who are late miss the beginning of their morning classes, when important learning is taking place.
- ▶ Chronic tardiness has been shown to be linked to lower standardized test scores, lower graduation rates, and failure in high school.
- ▶ Lateness can cause students to feel disconnected from school, leading to behaviour problems and dropouts.
- ▶ Students who are regularly late for school are not learning about the importance of being on time – a life skill that is needed for future employment and lifelong success.
- ▶ When students are late, they negatively impact their teachers and other students. Late arrivals can disrupt instruction, requiring the restructuring of lessons and/or causing distractions for classmates.

8 Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000

Recognizing the associated challenges of absences and tardiness, strategies to address these issues will ideally encompass both issues simultaneously, and many of the ideas included in this Toolkit may be adapted to address morning tardies, and even excessive absences due to early pick-ups before the school day ends, if that is a problem. The goal, overall, is to address the time students miss out on learning – whatever the reasons.

As stated by Professor Paul Hughes, an Indigenous educator in Australia, “we doom our children to failure if we do not make sure they attend.”⁹

Our best investments in instruction and curriculum won’t count for much if students aren’t in class to benefit from them. If we’re serious about improving our schools, we need to take attendance seriously. We need to ensure that all students are in class regularly so they have an equal opportunity to learn.
(Attendance Works. 2014(2))



► **SEE THE ATTACHED FACT SHEETS:**

Why Worry About Attendance Issues? and *Prevalence of Attendance Challenges* for a quick overview of this information.

9 Principals Australia Institute, undated

PART THREE

▶ **UNDERSTANDING WHAT LEADS TO ATTENDANCE CHALLENGES IN ORDER TO IDENTIFY WHAT CAN BE DONE**

There are many issues related to chronic absenteeism, often overlapping, and the case of each student can and should be considered unique. However, there are also many common issues that must be understood and addressed in order to reduce student absences.

Research highlights the following factors related to attendance issues.

School Related Factors

Past reports on student attendance issues tended to focus primarily on family and community socio-economic factors, and gave less attention to the role of schools in creating and addressing student absenteeism. But while it is certainly true that schools alone are not responsible for attendance challenges, studies increasingly emphasize the extremely important impact that schools and teachers have on student attendance. School-related factors that may contribute to high rates of absenteeism include the following.¹⁰

- ▶ A school environment that is not welcoming, safe, or inclusive, and that lacks personal connections between staff and students
- ▶ Poor communications between the school and parents, particularly in regard to the importance of showing up for the start of the school day

¹⁰ Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012; Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000; Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008; Epstein and Sheldon, 2002; Purdie and Buckley, 2010; Virginia Department of Education, 2005

- ▶ An absence of policies and procedures related to school absenteeism, and/or inconsistent tracking, reporting and following up on absences with parents
- ▶ Inadequate or ineffective attention to bullying, harassment or other issues affecting the safety of students
- ▶ A limited ability to address low or failing student performance and student discipline problems
- ▶ Negative attitudes of teachers and/or administrators and insufficient classroom management
- ▶ An absence of relevant teacher training and ongoing professional development
- ▶ Limited flexibility of staff and curricula in addressing the learning needs of students
- ▶ Limited support during times of transition when students are particularly vulnerable, such as their first year of school or first year of high school, and/or after a change to a new school

- ▶ Insufficient support for transportation, especially affecting families and adult students without cars or driver's licenses

Community Related Factors

Community services and support for education can also play a role in attendance challenges, and the following issues have been identified in the research as contributing to higher rates of student absence.¹¹

- ▶ A lack of support services for families and children
- ▶ Community violence or an unsafe living environment
- ▶ High unemployment rates, which can make achievement in education seem less relevant
- ▶ Limited community involvement in educational issues and limited support for schools
- ▶ An absence of community transportation services

- ▶ Absences can be a sign that a student is losing interest in school, struggling with school work, dealing with a bully or facing some other potentially serious difficulty.
- ▶ By 6th grade, absenteeism is one of three signs that a student may drop out of high school.
- ▶ By 9th grade, regular attendance is a better predictor of graduation rates than 8th grade test scores. (**Attendance Works, 2014**)

¹¹ Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000; Virginia Department of Education, 2005

Family Related Factors

While not focusing solely on these factors, it is important to note that parents/guardians and other family members do play a crucial role in influencing the willingness and ability of students to go to school. Consistent support, communication and encouragement from families, as well as the provision of the basic necessities for attending school, all help to ensure that students are physically and emotionally equipped to enjoy the challenges of education. In contrast, repeated studies have shown that where parents and families are unable to provide sufficient support, students are more likely to experience chronic absences from school.

Studies suggest that the following family issues can contribute to higher levels of school absenteeism, *emphasizing the critical need to support all families as comprehensively and effectively as possible*.¹²

- ▶ A lack of parental involvement in education and limited emphasis on the importance of school attendance within the family
- ▶ A lack of parental supervision and/or guidance for school-age students
- ▶ Physical/emotional abuse or neglect
- ▶ Parental substance abuse
- ▶ A range of issues directly associated with poverty, such as:
 - poor nutrition and inadequate money for lunch, shoes and clothing
 - an inability to purchase school supplies
 - parent(s) working multiple jobs
 - children required to take employment
 - children required to stay home to care for siblings and/or adult students required to stay home to care for their children
 - an absence of affordable/reliable transportation
 - housing instability

12 Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012; Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000; Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008; Virginia Department of Education, 2005

Factors Related to the Individual Student

While it is crucial to avoid simply blaming students for their own attendance difficulties, some of the reasons for chronic absenteeism can relate directly to the personality and experiences of individual students, some of which are interwoven with the factors above and some of which may be inherent to a specific person.¹³ Understanding the factors that can put students at risk, as identified below, can help to inform efforts to provide students every support possible.

- ▶ Emotional or mental health issues, including anxiety
- ▶ Learning or other disabilities
- ▶ Socialization problems or low self-esteem issues
- ▶ Chronic physical illness or poor physical health
- ▶ Substance abuse
- ▶ Teen pregnancy
- ▶ Time spent in court and/or jail
- ▶ Influence of truant friends
- ▶ Feelings of inadequacy, which can be shown in efforts to avoid the consequences of low performance – for example, skipping tests or class presentations to avoid failing or feeling embarrassed in front of the class

One First Nations school reported that the principal took non-attending students to lunch to ask the children why they weren't attending schools. Many of the answers came as a surprise. The number of students who said they didn't feel welcome at school was especially unexpected.

¹³ Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012; Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000; Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008; Virginia Department of Education, 2005

What Students Say

(Adapted from Department of Education and Children's Services. 2003 Attendance Improvement Package)

When asked what causes lateness or absence, students often identify one of the following reasons.

FAMILY	FINANCES	HEALTH
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Child care issues ▶ Parents are not concerned ▶ Needed to go shopping ▶ Slept in ▶ Had appointments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ No shoes or clothes ▶ No money for lunch ▶ No money for field trip ▶ No money for supplies or equipment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Headlice ▶ Stress/anxiety ▶ Depression ▶ Asthma ▶ Illness
CONFLICT	SCHOOL	EMBARRASSMENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Conflict in the school yard ▶ Conflict after or before school ▶ Family in conflict with the school ▶ Dealing with harassment / bullying at school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ They're bored in school ▶ Seems like a waste of time ▶ Don't like the teacher ▶ Don't value education ▶ Don't believe they can be successful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Behind in work ▶ Domestic violence issues ▶ Late for school already – don't want to stand out by coming in late ▶ No clean clothes or not enough food

Some adult learners, in particular, have specific challenges that affect their ability to attend school regularly, and they are also unique in that they have chosen to return to school to continue their education. Adult students can decide at any time to leave school, and they are not legally obligated to attend. This situation means that instructors need to balance encouragement of good attendance and establishing reasonable boundaries, with not making students feel pushed out of an education program. Additional unique concerns for adult students include the following.

- ▶ Some adult students have been out of the educational system for many years before enrolling in an adult program, and some may have faced struggles in their previous school experiences. In these circumstances, adult learners may have to deal with difficult memories of prior academic settings, negative dispositions toward school, and fragile confidence about improving their skills – all of which may affect their comfort and ability to regularly attend their learning program. Many First Nation adult learners also deal with issues of grief and loss, meaning that counselling services may be valuable.

- ▶ Adult learners may also face high opportunity costs to attending an education program. Relative to younger students, a key characteristic distinguishing adult learners is the high likelihood that they are juggling other life roles while attending school, including those of worker, spouse or partner, parent, caregiver, and community member. These roles can be assets, both through the social supports they provide and through the rich life experiences that adult learners bring to their education. However, given their other significant responsibilities, which often require their immediate attention, regular attendance may not be the highest priority for adult learners. Adults deal with sickness – not only their own, but their children’s, as well. Many adult students are busy with cultural pursuits and responsibilities – their own, and supporting their children’s. Balancing work, home life, and education is a pressure.
- ▶ It is important to note that challenges may impact each student differently and may or may not result in high rates of absenteeism. *This realization does **not** mean that students who react to difficult circumstances by avoiding school should be labelled as ‘bad’ or ‘troublesome,’ as was often the case in the past;* it just emphasizes the need to address the underlying causes of poor attendance by understanding and considering family and student needs holistically¹⁴.

[There is] “... no doubt that some of the issues come from children themselves – there are some children that will overcome the obstacles and have a natural resilience and some that are less likely to succeed when the least obstacle is presented. This does not mean that you can blame the victim...” (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008)

- ▶ **THE ONLY REASON FOR UNDERSTANDING ALL OF THE FACTORS IDENTIFIED ABOVE IS TO USE THE INFORMATION TO MATCH CHALLENGES WITH APPROPRIATE SOLUTIONS.**

14 Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000; Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008; Virginia Department of Education, 2005

In order to understand absences, some teachers use anonymous surveys to ask students about the causes of their absences. The sample survey included below could be adapted to the specific grade/age and circumstances of a class to make it relevant. It would be useful to emphasize to students that the survey is intended to help inform the teacher and school about overall reasons why students miss school. And just using the survey may be valuable for showing students that attendance is important enough to warrant measurement and attention. (Sprick and Berg, 2019)

Approximately how many days do you think you have been absent this year (CIRCLE ONE)				
0 - 1	2 - 5	6 - 9	10 - 18	
18 - 25	26 +			
Indicate how often the following reasons contributed to your absences		NEVER	ONCE	MORE THAN ONCE
I was seriously ill and had to go see a doctor.				
I had a cold, headache, stomach bug, or other minor illness.				
I was tired and wanted to sleep in.				
I had a doctor or dentist appointment.				
I felt anxious or depressed.				
I missed the bus or had no way to get to school.				
The weather was too bad for me to walk to school.				
I had to take care of my brother or sister.				
I didn't think it would matter if I was at school and didn't feel like coming.				
I didn't think anyone at school would care if I attended or not.				
I wasn't ready for a test.				
I didn't do my homework.				
School is too boring.				
I was being teased or picked on and wanted a break.				
I was afraid to come to school.				
I was having trouble getting along with a teacher or another adult at school.				
I was hanging out with my friends.				
I was somewhere out of the community with my family.				
I was using technology at home and I didn't want to stop.				
I was participating in a cultural / traditional activity.				
Another reason (describe please)				

PART FOUR

WHAT TO DO ABOUT CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?

Three critical themes are identified in the literature related to student attendance.

Address Attendance Early – Prevention is Key: It is important to address signs of irregular or poor attendance as soon as possible, providing supports before problems become more firmly rooted in student behaviour patterns, and before other associated challenges – such as falling behind in learning because of missed school – begin to make problems mutually reinforcing and therefore more difficult to solve. Research shows that half of students who miss 2 – 4 days in September go on to miss nearly a month of school.¹⁵

In fact, it is also more valuable to encourage regular attendance for all students, not just those who are showing signs of difficulty, to prevent challenges as much as possible.¹⁶

“When there is an attendance concern the school should intervene immediately and provide the necessary support. An effective attendance plan must act on the first unexcused absence and continue to act on each absence thereafter.”
(Alberta Education, 2014)

¹⁵ www.attendanceworks.org

¹⁶ Jordan, 2019

Address Attendance Young – Attendance Counts from the Start: Studies show that parents are twice as likely to say that attendance is a “big deal” in high school than in kindergarten. But in fact, good attendance is a habit that children need to form early; if they do not do so, attendance problems may worsen over time. Evidence shows that a significant majority of children who are chronically absent in kindergarten were chronically absent in pre-K. Also, literacy instruction is frontloaded in the early grades, so if children miss too much school, they fall behind their classmates in reading. Research has shown that children who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade have the lowest levels of attendance five years later.¹⁷

All children, regardless of socio-economic background, do worse academically in first grade if they are chronically absent in kindergarten. Further, going to school regularly in the early years is especially critical for children living in poverty, who are less likely to have the resources to make up for lost time in the classroom. Among poor children, chronic absence in kindergarten predicts the lowest levels of educational achievement at the end of 5th grade. (Bruner, Discher and Chang, 2011)

Attendance Is Best Addressed Together: Efforts to help students attend more school will ideally involve multifaceted, cooperative approaches. For instance, while programs to address attendance challenges must never focus solely on students or families, which would wrongly suggest that they are to blame, families will ideally be key partners in all campaigns to promote improved school attendance. The complicated interplay between the factors that contribute to chronic absences may make it difficult to identify which issues are the most significant in any particular case, and family and school partnerships are essential in order to fully understand students’ attendance patterns and causes.

17 Attendance Works, 2014

Additionally, involving parents and communities in a widespread campaign to emphasize the value of education – and attendance in particular – is invaluable in making it clear that everyone expects all students to be in school. It can also be beneficial for First Nations schools and adult education centres to collaborate in tackling attendance challenges, recognizing overlapping reasons for absences (e.g. children at home sick or having appointments leading to parents missing school, etc.), and strategizing together for ways to help family members attend their education programs.

Overall, given the number and complexity of underlying issues that can contribute to high rates of absenteeism, schools cannot be expected to correct attendance problems themselves. Many of the issues associated with attendance are beyond the immediate control of teachers and administrators alone. This does not mean, however, that schools are powerless to address the problem of absenteeism or that they should label the issue as too difficult to solve. For far too long, attendance has been viewed as something beyond the control of schools, exhibited in phrases such as: “it’s a parents’ problem,” or “that student is just not motivated,” or “what can we as schools do?” On the contrary, a major theme in the current literature on school attendance is the primary role that schools can and should play in making sure students attend regularly.¹⁸

By focusing attention on the factors that are within their control and by reaching out to parents and communities, administrators and teachers can make a significant contribution to increasing student attendance and thereby increase the potential for greater student, school, and community success.

There are proven strategies that schools can use – strategies that can be implemented quickly and cost effectively.¹⁹ Generally, schools should approach the issue of attendance with a balance of high expectations for both attendance and academic achievement, and with an understanding of the issues surrounding absenteeism and a commitment to provide ongoing support for students and families, especially those at risk.²⁰ Research has found that, perhaps not surprisingly, students have the best

18 Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012; Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000; Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008; Danielson, 2002; Epstein and Sheldon, 2002; Virginia Department of Education, 2005; Principals Australia Institute; Purdie and Buckley, 2010; Sprick and Berg, 2019

19 Jordan, 2019

20 Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012; Virginia Department of Education, 2005; Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008

attendance records in schools that make high demands and provide high levels of support.²¹

And again, prevention is key. The best way to address absenteeism is to make sure schools are places that students want to be – that is, safe, supportive, and engaging environments where students feel welcome and valued.

A First Nations adult education program leader noted that encouraging good attendance for adult students can inspire children. Seeing their parents attend school regularly offers children positive role models, with one child reporting “Mom’s cool; she’s going to school.”



► **SOME MORE SPECIFIC STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE ARE IDENTIFIED IN THE REMAINDER OF THIS TOOLKIT.**

21 Virginia Department of Education, 2005



Take Attendance Seriously

Schools should have or develop specific policies, procedures and structures that focus on chronic absenteeism

It is important for schools to carefully consider relevant policies and procedures that: 1. will provide for quick and consistent responses to unexplained absenteeism; and 2. include prevention measures and the early identification of at-risk students.²² Some of the items that can be considered when creating policies include the following.

- ▶ Whenever possible, students and parents should be involved in creating attendance policies to increase the perception that the policies are feasible and relevant, and to increase support for the policies that are developed.
- ▶ Relevant, effective policies should explicitly define what is considered to be a legitimate and/or explained absence, or the policy could be perceived as being inflexible and too difficult to follow, and/or it could potentially encourage students to come to school when ill, which is not good for sick students or their peers.²³
- ▶ It has been found that policies that simply mandate attendance and spell out increasingly harsh punishments for unexcused absences are not effective. Such policies fail to consider the range of underlying causes of attendance problems and the range of prevention, early intervention, and ongoing supports that are needed to more effectively address the problems.²⁴ In fact, there is a strong global movement beyond the traditional focus on punishing students for missing school – an approach that study after study has shown to fail in reducing absenteeism.²⁵

“We cannot punish students into wanting to attend school.”
(Sprick and Berg, 2019)

22 Epstein and Sheldon, 2002; Virginia Department of Education, 2005; Principals Australia Institute

23 Danielson, 2002

24 Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008

25 Jordan, 2019

- ▶ Any disciplinary procedures related to attendance must be clear and well defined, as well as consistently and equitably applied – *used only as a last resort, and always complemented with support*. Also, any related discipline should not be excessive; it should be based on an understanding of the issues that are related to chronic absenteeism, and policies must be flexible enough to take into account contributing circumstances (for example, if the student has to stay home to care for other students in the family). Critically, any consequence for chronic absence must not further drive students out of the school, such as suspension; it is far better to have consequences for truancy that keep students in school, such as requiring after-school or lunch-time sessions with school staff.²⁶
- ▶ Policies and procedures should reflect the fact that adequate student attendance tracking is vital to ensure early identification of emerging attendance problems and to equitably enforce follow-up.²⁷ Some schools track attendance each period, not just at the beginning of the day. This helps to identify when children are leaving school early or when an individual student is skipping a particular class. If a student is regularly missing the same class, extra tutoring or addressing a potential disconnect with a specific teacher may eliminate the absenteeism problem.²⁸

▶ **DESIGNING ATTENDANCE POLICIES CAN START WITH ASKING SIMPLE QUESTIONS:**

- What do we consider an absence? Is there an important difference between excused and unexcused?
- When should attendance be collected? What should happen when a student is absent?
- Must excused absences be verified by the school? Does parent notification need to be written or phoned in?
- How many absences can occur before the school should intervene?

- ▶ Careful attention should be given to the question of when and how to contact parents. Effective policies may require informing parents at the first and each

26 Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008; Epstein and Sheldon, 2002; Virginia Department of Education, 2005

27 Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008; Virginia Department of Education, 2005

28 Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012; Principals Australia Institute

subsequent unexplained absence from one or more classes, to ensure that parents are informed early, not just when student grades are slipping or when the problem has become very serious. It can be useful to adopt procedures that involve making personal contact with parents, such as personal phone calls instead of texts or emails. Making direct contact with parents will ensure that they are aware of the issue and can also open the door to dialogue about relevant challenges and potential cooperative efforts to resolve the attendance issue.

When you have identified where concerns about chronic absenteeism lie, you may recognize that certain groups of students have attendance issues that you can work to address as a school community. However, be prepared to take a student by student approach to addressing attendance, helping individual students overcome the unique and specific barriers they face in coming to school (for example, housing instability, a lack of effective transportation options, child-care issues, bullying concerns and more). Your school [and community] may want to form an attendance team that meets regularly to discuss at-risk students and follow-up on plans to improve their attendance. (Edutopia, 2013)

- ▶ Any school policies related to tardiness should be reviewed to ensure they are not contributing to school absenteeism. If students perceive that there is a total lack of tolerance for circumstances in the case of lateness, and/or if the consequence for tardiness is considered too punitive, students may decide to skip the whole day if they are going to be late.²⁹
- ▶ For adult education, while it is important to be flexible enough to respect adult learners' multiple commitments, it can help to establish policies / guidelines that emphasize the importance of regular attendance. Some programs have adult learners sign a document that refers to expectations for attendance, advising students of their responsibility for attending as much as possible. But it also is often useful to create a program atmosphere in which there is no stigma associated with participating irregularly or returning to the program after a break, including supporting students with information about how to continue their learning during periods when their participation may be intermittent, limited, or impossible, and using systematic follow-up when their participation becomes too erratic. An overly rigid or judgmental approach to attendance could result in adults feeling uncomfortable and leaving a program permanently.

29 Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012; Danielson, 2002

► **SAMPLE ATTENDANCE GUIDELINES FOR AN ADULT EDUCATION CENTRE**

- We expect students to prepare for and attend each class, but we know that absences may be unavoidable at times. When that happens, students are responsible for making up all missed work.
- Attendance will be recorded for each class and reviewed regularly. If a student has continuing poor attendance, program staff will contact the learner to determine the reasons for the absences, whether the learner plans to continue in the class, and – if so – how more regular attendance might be achieved.
- When life circumstances make it too difficult for students to commit fully to classes, learners will be welcomed and encouraged to join classes in another session when they can attend more regularly.

- Structures and procedures for adult education programs can also encourage attendance by addressing specific and practical barriers faced by adult learners – such as appropriately scheduling courses and providing child care, if possible. Transportation issues can also be addressed, such as having a bus or van make runs as needed in order to pick up adults at various times of the day. That way, if an adult student will miss some school due to an appointment, or for another reason, they will not miss the entire day of school.
- Some First Nations adult education centres offer students a living allowance while they are participating, and those allowances may be linked to an established attendance policy. The attendance focus group participants shared that 80% attendance is required by one centre, while another allows students one sick day per month, after which some of the living allowance amount is deducted.
- Evidence suggests that for many adult students, policies and procedures related to grade placement and ongoing performance assessments can impact students' feelings about their learning. Generally, adult learners want to feel confident that assessments have accurately determined they are studying at the appropriate level, and that ongoing monitoring is effectively measuring their progress. Providing learners with continuous progress reports can also sustain students' motivation and help them to analyze and recognize their own improvement.
- For adult students, learning plans may also be a way to support persistence. By incorporating any available tutoring classes, homework, and other learning activities, learning plans can serve as a path to guide students and link their participation and attendance to their desired educational outcomes. Some researchers suggest that establishing clear expectations and learning goals gives students a sense of purpose and direction in their studies, which may lower their anxiety about any unpredictable steps in the learning process. Learners especially should be allowed to provide input into the planning of their own learning goals and processes.



- **SEE APPENDICES 1 -3** for more about messaging and **APPENDIX 4** for further ideas for school planning.

Where to Start: Designing an Attendance Improvement Plan

(adapted from Department of Education and Children's Services, 2003)

Organize a meeting with school, parents' club, and community representatives, and begin by asking: "Why should we be concerned about student attendance? What opportunities will better attendance rates provide to us and our students?" Consider whether it is necessary to increase understanding and better emphasize the negative effects of chronic absences. Explore the following questions.

How does focusing on attendance relate to our school's mission?

How much do we know about attendance in our school?

- ▶ What data do we have?
- ▶ Have we reviewed attendance in our School Assessment Process reports? What did we find?
- ▶ Would other data be useful? If yes, how can we gather it?
- ▶ How often do we / should we review our attendance data? Once a year? Monthly?
- ▶ Does student voice contribute to our knowledge about attendance? Should it?

What are our attendance trends and specific attendance issues for our school?

- ▶ Is there a particular grade at which attendance is a problem? A particular class?
- ▶ Is the attendance of a specific group of students a concern?
- ▶ Which individuals are particularly impacted by this issue?
- ▶ At what point do we consider student absence a concern? E.g. number of days absent, pattern of absences, combination of days absent and student achievement? Is this appropriate?

How well do our student attendance policies and procedures work?

- ▶ Do we have clear policies and procedures? Are they implemented consistently?
- ▶ Do students and families understand and support our policy?
- ▶ Do we alert parents about absences in a timely and effective way?
- ▶ Are we sure that our lateness policy is not promoting more absences?

How do we follow-up on poor attendance?

- ▶ Do we discuss reasons for poor attendance with students?
- ▶ How do we communicate with and engage parents in addressing attendance challenges?
- ▶ Do we have plans to assist students whose attendance suggests they are at-risk for educational difficulties?

What messages are we giving our students, families, and the community about attendance?

- ▶ Do people know about the importance of attendance? Are we communicating this effectively?
- ▶ Are we encouraging the community to address attendance issues with us in genuine partnership?
- ▶ Have we communicated with our School Governing Authority / Chief and Council about attendance?
- ▶ What else should we be doing to encourage more support for our efforts?

Who should we involve in addressing attendance issues?

- ▶ How can parents, community members, community leaders, and other community agencies help?
- ▶ What is our collective action plan? What are our proposed solutions?

Have we thought about how we can track this issue over time and ensure we are making the progress we want to achieve?

Make Schools Places Where Students Want to Be

Create a positive, welcoming environment for students in which they feel supported, and encourage feelings of connection between students and staff

It is extremely important for all students to have strong interpersonal relationships in their lives, and many studies have shown a positive correlation with attendance rates when schools create opportunities for students to develop bonds with teachers, other staff, and each other.³⁰

To really connect with a student, school personnel need to get to know the student both inside and outside the classroom. Involving students in discussions about their learning and goals is important to understand them. This allows for identification of the student's strengths and needs and can enhance the experience the student has both in the classroom and outside. This way the student will want to attend school and not feel that they have to. **(Alberta Education, 2014)**

³⁰ Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012; Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000; Epstein and Sheldon, 2002; Virginia Department of Education, 2005; Purdie and Buckley, 2010

The teacher / student / parent relationship is the foundation of each student's success at school. Teachers need to provide a caring and inclusive atmosphere in their classrooms, and those who use a demanding but warm and personal style generally succeed in challenging their students' intellectual abilities while making them want to be in school. Offering kindness and a positive awareness of students' families and culture sets the stage for students to feel welcome and makes them choose to attend regularly. In addition, student learning is enhanced by a safe, comfortable classroom environment, and students do their best work when they experience:

- ▶ a sense of belonging as respected and valued students;
- ▶ the spirit of mastery that comes through encouragement of their gifts and competencies;
- ▶ independence developed through opportunities to show responsibility and contribute to decision-making; and
- ▶ opportunities to share and contribute to a community of learning.³¹

These types of issues are commonly referred to by researchers as "school connectedness" – students feeling that there are adults at the school who care about their education and well-being as individuals, and feeling a strong sense of belonging and community-like atmosphere.³²

School connectedness has been shown to be a marker not only for increased attendance, but also for higher student performance and reduced likelihood of "risky behaviours" such as drug/alcohol use, violence, delinquency, or early sexual activity.³³

31 Alberta Education, 2005

32 Virginia Department of Education, 2005

33 Virginia Department of Education, 2005

Some ways to encourage school connectedness include the following.

- ▶ Make sure each student in the school has a personal relationship with at least one supportive adult at school (teacher, administrator or other staff as appropriate).³⁴

▶ **COMMIT TO SILENT MENTORING**

- Staff meet in a room with a list of all students posted on the wall.
- Staff are given stickers to apply to the name of every child they feel they have a relationship with.
- When done, if there are any names without stickers – talk about those children and identify a staff member who will volunteer to build a relationship with each of them.

Note: Students should not learn about this process, as it may make some feel singled out or targeted. (Virginia Department of Education, 2005)

One First Nations school in BC uses an approach called “I See You.” Each staff person is assigned a number of students as “buddies.” It is expected that staff will connect with their buddies at least once a week – maybe even with a simple “high five” and “how are you doing?” The staff also send their buddies holiday cards. The school is committed to focusing on connectedness.

- ▶ Communicate to all staff and other students the importance of making every student feel respected and valued.³⁵
- ▶ Make sure that the school is a secure environment with clear and consistently applied anti-bullying and harassment policies and procedures.³⁶
- ▶ Provide a welcoming and personal environment for students; make school a place where they feel visible and where they want to be. Especially for students at risk due to problems in their home or community life, make sure school is a safe haven. Feeling connected and noticed will reduce the chance that students might feel that

34 Virginia Department of Education, 2005

35 Principals Australia Institute

36 Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000

their absences are meaningless or will go undetected – which is a common feeling for students who struggle with attendance issues.³⁷

“As schools attempt to identify and bring back individual students with frequent absences, it is essential that the affected students feel as if the school is their oasis, not their holding cell.” Elias, 2019

► **HOLD A CONNECTEDNESS STAFF MEETING**

- Provide a brief overview of the importance of connectedness
- Ask the faculty to fill out a brief survey on connectedness, such as rating 1 to 5 for the following statements about the school:
 - Each student is connected with at least one caring adult at school
 - Staff treat one another with respect
 - Staff know about their students’ lives outside of school
 - Student discipline practices and policies are fair
 - The school environment is safe for students and staff
 - Staff value what students have to say
- Ask people to describe key obstacles they face in building relationships with students, such as:
 - Needing to use teaching time for classroom management
 - Any external circumstances that affect relationships
 - Not having enough time to get to know students as individuals
 - Differing cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds
 - Other (explain)
- Discuss how the responses are linked to connectedness
- Ask what areas of connectedness need to be addressed
- Identify actions and assign staff to follow through
- Commit to follow up in future staff meetings.

(Virginia Department of Education, 2005)

- Institute a mentoring or tutoring program among students. Parents can be enlisted to nominate an older sibling or other relative (such as a cousin) who will pro-actively encourage students to attend school.³⁸

37 Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000; Virginia Department of Education, 2005

38 Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000

► **LITTLE THINGS CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE**

- Have principals stand outside each day and greet students by name
- Have teachers stand outside their classrooms between classes and greet students
- Have the school bus driver and secretary greet students. They are often the first people to see students in the morning. A welcome environment often starts with them.
- Everyone can make a difference.



► **SEE THE ATTACHED FACT SHEET:**

Reasons to Greet Students at the Door. What the Research Says

- Some research³⁹ also suggests the value of “sponsorship programs” for adult learners, in which students are matched with “sponsors” – i.e. individuals who can support their persistence and learning. Fostering this approach ideally will involve identifying sponsors, involving sponsors in education program activities, and educating sponsors about how to support adult students.
- Evidence suggests that students in extra-curricular programs attend more school than their peers.⁴⁰ One study found that *before-school* activities and clubs particularly increased student engagement and attendance and increased on-time arrival of students who were previously tardy.⁴¹
- Pro-active efforts to promote pride in the school makes students feel good about belonging and want to be a part of the school community.⁴²

39 Porter, et al., 2005.

40 Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000; Epstein and Sheldon, 2012, Virginia Department of Education, 2005, Edutopia, 2013

41 Examples of Attendance Strategies and Interventions: A Comprehensive Data-Driven Approach. countmeinmaine.org.

42 Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000; Virginia Department of Education, 2005

- In New York City, a corps of Success Mentors were each assigned 15 to 20 chronically absent students. If the students didn't turn up for school, the mentor gave them a call to find out where they were. If they were struggling with class work or social dynamics, the mentor was there to help. Students who had mentors saw their absenteeism rates fall by 25.3 percent for elementary school students, 16.4 percent for middle school students, and 2.8 percent for high school students, according to city data.

To test which model worked best, schools used mentors including retired professionals, college students who got course credit for the role, school staff members, and high school seniors. The results found that the age or source of the mentors didn't matter as much as other factors:

- Mentors had a consistent, year-long relationship with students
 - Mentors had a connection to the school
 - Mentors and the schools celebrated attendance gains
- (Attendance Works, www.attendanceworks.org)**

In one program, chronic non-attenders have lunch with the principal once a week in grade-level groups. Students with perfect attendance during the week (no absences, tardies, or early dismissals) receive a treat along with lots of praise. At the end of each month, students with improved attendance earn a pizza lunch. At the weekly meetings, the principal and students talk about the importance of school. The participants with improved attendance share how their week went and the benefits of being in school each day. The kids receive support, caring, and encouragement from the principal and from each another. The principal has daily contact with the program members who have the greatest attendance concerns, possibly including a morning check-in, visit to the classroom, or a call home if the child is absent. If the child isn't legitimately ill, parents are asked to bring the child to school or allow the school to pick them up.

Some students remain in the program for the entire year, while others graduate when attendance concerns are resolved. The principal sends a letter to parents to explain the program goals and get permission for the kids to be involved.

"Kids love being in the program and feel they are a part of something special. ... They love the special attention during lunch and are very proud when they reach their attendance goals. Several kids have shown improvement in self-esteem and a more positive attitude, as well." (www.educationworld.com)

- ▶ Social factors, such as creating a sense of community and building a support network amongst learners, can also prove to be effective in encouraging regular attendance for adult students. Addressing this issue may include providing team-building activities that encourage classmates to discuss their learning experiences and share successes with each other, and using social media networks to help students interact with their peers. One First Nation adult education program in BC strives to establish positive rapport in the beginning of each school year, using a “week of welcome” with land-based learning opportunities, Elders’ circles, and other positive activities – eliminating all intimidating barriers from the first few days. Some adult education programs also relate that having face-to-face instruction seems to encourage better attendance than on-line, self-paced learning, as a more fun and livelier classroom with mutual support is created when students are learning together.
- ▶ Many adult students will also need personal attention before they can feel a sense of belonging in an education program and to build their self-confidence for learning. Establishing rapport can sometimes be achieved by spending private time with each new student to discuss problems and solutions. Additionally, adult students often are not aware of their strengths and how these can positively impact their learning capacity, and identifying their abilities and learning preferences can help them to be successful learners who want to be in class.

“... education is about opening the doors to learning and citizenship for all. Meeting this sacred responsibility is possible when our schools work to have a positive school culture and climate. If we build this, kids will come. And when they can’t, once we help them with hurdles and they do come, they are more likely to stay.” (Elias, 2019)

► **ADAPTED FROM TEACHING ADULT LEARNERS. HOW TO HANDLE ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS. WWW.BUSYTEACHER.ORG**

DO: Be Sympathetic. Understand that students have lives outside of class and that they cannot always easily control their attendance behaviour.

DON'T: Lecture. Telling students over and over again the importance of attending class is not going to make a huge difference in attendance. While it may help to inform students about the importance of attendance, repeatedly lecturing is unlikely to improve the situation and will only waste even more class time. Lecturing can also feel like a punishment to the students who attend regularly and arrive on time.

DO: Help. You should help students catch up after missing a class so that you will not have to review all the material you covered in the previous lesson. Email students who do not attend class to help them understand the material they missed. You can also encourage students to buddy up so that if one of them misses class, someone else can share notes.

DON'T: Get Frustrated. It can be extremely frustrating when students miss class regularly. The best thing you can do is stay positive about the situation and devote extra attention to the learners who do attend. Continue to teach lessons as planned and do your best to help students catch up when necessary. If you are frustrated during lessons, you won't perform your best and it could affect students' moods, too.

DO: Advise. Perhaps the class is too easy or hard for students missing class so they are uninterested in the material you are discussing. The class could also just meet at a particularly inconvenient time. You can explain that missing class repeatedly means not getting the full benefit of taking the course and it may be useful to suggest taking a different class at a different time, or exploring other kinds of learning options. No one will benefit from an adult being unsuccessful in an infeasible learning situation.



Be In It Together

Create positive and strong relationships between the school and parents / families

Research is very clear about the critical importance of the home environment for student success. Parents and families can play a fundamental role in the education of their children, and no one has a greater influence on getting a young person to go to school every day. While in no way discounting schools' responsibilities for and impact on student learning, there is overwhelming evidence that parents can make a valuable difference to their children's learning, and that when they are involved in education, children do better in school and schools improve. Parents can emphasize the value of a good education and help their children understand the importance of regular participation in all school activities. Therefore, one of the best foundations for students' successful education, including the probability of consistent attendance at school, is the development of a strong partnership between schools, parents, caregivers, and families.

Further, school practices to encourage family engagement are more important in determining whether parents become involved in the school than are family characteristics such as parental education, family size, marital status, socioeconomic level, or student grade level. To help overcome barriers to parental engagement, it is critical that schools understand the challenges that exist for families and communities, but then focus inward – on the school's beliefs and assumptions that shape its practices with parents – and identify and implement relevant activities that the school can control. And in doing so, schools must always take an honouring and respectful approach, asking parents about their needs and ensuring that the school responds to what families are saying.

“We find it useful to reach out to parents and tell them: ‘You love your child. We love your child. And we are the adults. We need to work together to figure out how to get your child to school, and to make sure your child feels safe, loved, and welcome at school.’” **2019 Focus group participant**

Specific measures that can foster partnerships for promoting strong student attendance include the following.

- Teachers can use introductory phone calls and emails with all parents in (or close to) the first week of school, which provides a positive foundation for regular communication throughout the year. The initial contact should be followed up with regular meetings and/or progress reports as the year progresses, as well as ongoing phone calls acknowledging parents for any assistance they provide.⁴³ Early and regular communications with parents will be very beneficial if attendance becomes an issue of concern sometime in the future. And if phone calls home related to attendance problems eventually become necessary, they should be welcoming and supportive (see sample script attached in appendix 2). Then, if the student’s attendance improves, teachers should quickly follow-up with phone calls to provide positive feedback and express appreciation for the family’s understanding and commitment.

Positive Communications

One of the critical factors for working with parents as partners in your attendance initiative is to build and maintain positive relationships with them, and this comes from your communication style and from making frequent overt efforts to provide positive acknowledgements of students. It is easy to fall into the trap of calling on parents only when there is a problem ... but this tends to break down positive relationships. **(Sprick and Berg, 2019)**

43 Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000; Virginia Department of Education, 2005; 2019 attendance focus group participants

Sample Teacher Phone Log

NAME	DATE	REASON FOR CONTACT	NOTES
John	10/12	Positive email	John was really helpful to a classmate who was struggling with a math problem.
Sara	10/14	Concern phone call	Sara was late several days in a row and she is falling behind in her science project. Said I'm worried about her. Mom said she would follow up.
Charlie	10/14	Positive phone call	Charlie has been working really hard in Language Arts. He wrote his best story in class today.
Dylan	10/15	Concern phone call	I had to talk to Dylan three times yesterday about not listening. I asked Dad if there is something I need to know.
Sara	10/15	Positive email	Said I was glad to see Sara today. She came to school happy and seemed really engaged in class.
John	10/17	Positive email	John did really well on the math test today. He must have studied hard. Thanks for the help at home.
Dylan	10/18	Positive email	Dylan has been listening really well. I thanked mom and dad for their help.
Sara	10/19	Positive call	Sara hasn't been late for days. Thanked mom. Said, "I know she is trying really hard. Let me know if I can help at all."

- If possible and *if supported by the community*, teachers can make home visits to connect with students' lives – bringing a community member or another person well known to the family along for the visit, if appropriate. Although teachers should not let any insights revealed through home visits negatively affect their expectations or ongoing interactions with students, when teachers build relationships with families and have a chance to learn more about any obstacles students might have to overcome to get to school, they can be of greater help to students and families. In several case studies, home visits have been shown to raise achievement for at-risk students,⁴⁴ and an evaluation of one Parent Teacher Home Visits program found that students whose families received at least one visit from teachers each year were 21 percent less likely to be chronically absent than other students.⁴⁵ In that program, teachers visited homes to build connections, not to explicitly target the issue of attendance. The 2019 attendance focus group

⁴⁴ Wooleyhand et. al., 2008

⁴⁵ Jordan, 2019

participants also noted that home visits, when possible, are an excellent way to build trust, and that having community members accompany school staff who are not from the community can be beneficial. And as one participant noted, “if we can’t get past the front door at our first visit, we invite the parents to join us for coffee at Tim Horton’s. If this doesn’t work, we try again. Or someone else will try. We don’t give up if there is initial resistance.”

Begin Relationships On a Positive Note

The way parents and other family members are received the first time they come to the school can set the tone for the duration of their relationship. Families who feel ignored or slighted by the adults in the building are unlikely to come back, especially if they had been hesitant to come to the school in the first place. ... Oftentimes, the only time parents have contact with the school is in crisis situations, such as when the student has violated school regulations. With no previous contact ... these situations often lead to non-trusting interactions and, subsequently, non-optimal results for the student. ... Teachers whose contacts with family members are positive — notes or phone calls about something good the student did in class, for example — demonstrate to families that the school is interested in and values their child. (Brewster and Railsback, 2014)

- Schools should pro-actively encourage parents to visit, and families should be welcomed in hallways and classrooms.⁴⁶ Parents should be asked for their advice and expertise as it relates to their children – on a regular basis, not just when there are problems.⁴⁷ Parents who are comfortable in the school and feel part of a school community will be more aware of the school’s goals and efforts – including those that relate to attendance. The 2019 attendance focus group participants further suggested the importance of offering meals for parents who come to school events, with one school holding a dinner to pass out report cards, and others holding dinners and literacy nights with book give-aways. These events, it was noted, are perfect opportunities to emphasize the importance of attendance.

46 Virginia Department of Education, 2005

47 Alberta Education, 2014

Some schools hold weekly or monthly principal-led attendance meetings, which involve teams of adults, including school staff, families, and other partners, examining current attendance data, devising ways to get more students to attend regularly, and monitoring progress. (Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012)

- ▶ Parents should be encouraged to volunteer at the school, recognizing that practical, specific requests can be more inviting than vague suggestions of “volunteers needed.”⁴⁸ Parents should be offered opportunities to come to schools in an inviting and positive atmosphere, such as being asked to come in and help with cooking projects, art projects, cultural activities, etc. – practical projects that complement family’s skills and knowledge and allow them to feel confident in helping.
- ▶ One focus group participant reported that she approached the parent of a child who was not attending school regularly. She asked the parent to help chaperone a field trip. It allowed the parent to feel more connected, and eventually the relationship developed and the child’s attendance started to improved.
- ▶ All policies related to attendance should be pro-actively shared with parents, including why attendance is a priority and how they can help the school with this issue. Encouraging letters or flyers explaining the policies should be sent home at the start of each school year, with suggestions for getting students to school every day and on time. Attendance charts can be shared with parents to help them to track their children’s absences, ideally colour coding absences – such as absences one to nine green, absences ten and up turning to yellow, and transitioning to red to indicate the increasing risk. The goal of the chart should be to provide a tool for busy students and families to easily track the number of absences the student is accumulating throughout the year.⁴⁹

Sample Home Attendance Tracker

DATE	DATE	DATE	DATE	DATE	DATE	DATE	DATE	DATE	DATE	DATE	DATE	DATE	DATE	DATE
Absence 1: Reason	Absence 2: Reason	Absence 3: Reason	Absence 4: Reason	Absence 5: Reason	Absence 6: Reason	Absence 7: Reason	Absence 8: Reason	Absence 9: Reason	Absence 10: Reason Your student is at risk for chronic absence now	Absence 11: Reason	Absence 12: Reason	Absence 13: Reason	Absence 14: Reason	Absence 15: Reason

48 Virginia Department of Education, 2005

49 Sprick and Berg, 2019

► **RESEARCH SHOWS THAT MANY PARENTS UNDERESTIMATE THE AMOUNT OF SCHOOL THEIR CHILDREN ARE MISSING.**

For example, the Ad Council – CA Attorney General (*Reducing Chronic Absence by Informing Parents*) conducted extensive research about parents' awareness of attendance issues, finding that parents had the best of intentions for supporting their children's education, but a large proportion of the surveyed parents underestimated the amount of school their children missed.

- When asked whether their children were absent an average of two or more days per month, and whether their children were absent more than ten days over the year:
 - 60% of parents said their child was absent an average of two or more days per month, but *not* 10 or more days per year
- The math: if a child is absent an average of two or more days per month, he or she is absent more than ten days per year.
- Another study surveyed parents who estimated that their children had missed about nine days of school in the previous year, when in fact they had all missed *at least* 17.8 days – right at the 18-day threshold for chronic absenteeism (Jordan, 2019).

- Schools can ask parents what information might be helpful to them as they support their children's education,⁵⁰ and parents can be invited to join in discussions about how home and school can work together to set and maintain high expectations for academic achievement, school completion, and attendance.⁵¹ School staff can discuss with parents whether they would be interested in any classes or workshops to help them feel more confident dealing with educational issues and creating structures and routines in the home that will help with attendance and show their children they value education.⁵² Including parents in school decision-making can also be valuable to parents and schools. A combination of efforts is needed to address attendance issues.

50 Principals Australia Institute

51 Virginia Department of Education, 2005

52 Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000; Principals Australia Institute

The 2019 attendance focus group participants who contributed to this Toolkit emphasized the need to make genuine, personal connections with parents, including through home visits. They emphasized that attendance can only be addressed one conversation at a time, through relentless attention and communications. One participant noted that they have been working to promote this issue with parents and the community for almost three years, through constant reaching out and support. As a result, the school is beginning to see improvement, and the school will continue to reach out.

- ▶ Research suggests that parents sometimes want more information about a range of issues that might affect attendance, such as:
 - Tips on technology and social media use, including how staying up late in front of screens impacts sleep and attendance, or how cyberbullying can make students less likely to come to school;
 - Knowing how sick is too sick to attend, and what minor conditions are not serious enough to keep students at home
 - Suggestions for improving students' sleep habits so they are well rested and healthy enough to attend
 - Strategies for helping students manage anxiety – which is a growing problem among young people nation-wide and can make school very difficult for students
 - Recommendations for establishing routines that make getting to school on time a little easier
- ▶ Parents of individual students who are experiencing attendance problems can be invited to join in pro-active, encouraging discussions about how to address the issues.⁵³ The discussions should avoid any suggestion of blame, and should focus on ways to work together for the benefit of the student.

In one initiative, staff members took turns arriving at the school early to call families who were struggling, to make sure the students were awake and getting ready to come to school on time.

- ▶ Research suggests the value of “nudges” to remind parents about absences.

53 Epstein and Sheldon, 2002

- Researchers at UC Berkely sent five postcards to families of more than 40,000 high-risk students – one group getting generalized messages about the value of good attendance, and the other group receiving individualized information about how many days *their* children had missed. Alerting parents about how many days their children had missed proved to be most effective.
- In another study, parents were sent weekly texts about their children’s absences, and attendance increased by 17 percent among the families who got the texts compared to other students.⁵⁴
- In a third study in 2014, postcards with different messages encouraging families to improve their student’s attendance were sent to the homes of students in grades 1–12, finding that a single postcard reduced absences by roughly 2.4 percent.⁵⁵

Nudges alone likely won’t solve attendance challenges, but they can be a relatively easy-to-implement component of a broader attendance campaign.

In Pittsburgh, an AmeriCorps member who served as a liaison with parents in two kindergarten classes sent a text message every week about attendance or available resources to help families. During the year, parents started responding to the weekly texts with requests for help. One mother needed ideas for addressing her son’s anxiety about going to school. Home visits and extra attention in the classroom helped improve his attendance. ... In the wake of the regular text messages and support, chronic absenteeism in the classrooms plunged from 30 percent of students to 13 percent (**Jordan, 2019**).

- One study out of the United Kingdom⁵⁶ presents evidence from a large-scale field experiment showing that texting motivational messages and organizational reminders to adult students also can have a positive effect on adult students’ attendance rates, using messages drawing on insights from behavioural economics. In that study, the intervention messages tried to help students remain attentive to their classes and ongoing learning, encouraged students to engage with their classmates on Facebook to increase their sense of belonging, and provided encouraging messages – such as “keep up the hard work.”

54 Jordan, 2019

55 Rogers et. al. 2017.

56 Chande et. al.. 2017

Sample Text Messages Used in the Study Shown to Improve Adult Learners' Attendance

For Advance Planning

- ▶ Hi (name). It never hurts to plan ahead. Don't forget that your [assignment/test/homework] is due in two weeks.

For Motivation (i) The course is of value to learners

- ▶ Hi (name). How will what you've learned in our program help you at home or at work? We'll be talking about this at our next class. Please think of some examples to share.

Motivation (ii) Learners are making progress and can succeed

- ▶ Hi (name). Well done, you've reached the mid-term break! Don't forget to stay connected: (Class Facebook link).

Motivation (iii) Ability improves with effort

- ▶ Hi (name). Did you know, learning improves your brain power? Keep up the hard work. We know you will succeed.

Motivation (iv) The class is for people like the learners

- ▶ Hi (name). Please remember that at [program name] you're among friends. Support each other through your studies. Post your support on Facebook: (Class Facebook Link).

- The 2019 attendance focus group participants noted that recognizing and celebrating parents seems to be an especially important component of attendance strategies. One community had a parent award night at the end of each year, providing gifts and prizes to parents of students with excellent and improving attendance. Donated prizes expanded to include barbecues and kayaks. The initiative grew and grew. Meat draws were also suggested as a way to provide a main protein for holiday meals, with parents provided a raffle ticket for each day their child was in school. One school even gave prizes of paper towels, laundry soap, dish soap, etc., which the parents really appreciated. One student was heard to say, “I went to school every day so I could earn my dad a chance to win a prize.”

Share the Message, Share the Message, Share the Message

Promote awareness of the importance of school attendance with students and within the school and community. Make reducing absenteeism a consistent and common goal

School staff should implement deliberate and thoughtful efforts to make students aware of the negative, long-term consequences of absenteeism and the wide-ranging benefits of staying in school.⁵⁷ Teaching students about the importance of attendance can include both formal lessons and more informal strategies. An example of a formal lesson is attached as Appendix 7. Informal strategies that schools might consider include the following.

- ▶ Let students know that the school cares about the rate of absenteeism. Involve students in regular class discussions about attendance and in setting class rules for lateness or skipping class. Communicate with students about the difference between acceptable, occasional days at home versus avoidable, problematic absences, as well as the consequences of absenteeism. When a student has been absent for more than two days in a row, a staff member can call the student to say “we notice you aren’t here and we are looking forward to you coming back.” This can be especially important in high school, when students might think no one will notice when they are away from school. All students should feel that school staff authentically care when they are absent. And of course, when absences become a serious pattern, more in-depth discussions and early interventions may be needed.

⁵⁷ Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000

It is very important for school staff to greet students who have missed school, telling them “we miss you when you are gone,” “the class really noticed that you weren’t with us yesterday / the last few days,” “is everything ok? I notice you missed a few days.” Although this sounds simple, it can be surprisingly effective in making students feel noticed and appreciated. It also provides a subtle accountability mechanism if there is a pause after to allow the student time to respond – which they usually do by offering a reason for their absence. This can make students feel responsible for explaining their absence. Then it is important to offer kind words *without judgment* and never questioning the veracity of the student’s reason, saying instead “well I am really glad to have you back,” or “let me know if I can do anything to help” – simple but powerful messages (Sprick and Berg, 2019).

In one program, at-risk students signed a contract pledging not to have unexcused absences and agreed to have their teachers sign a daily attendance card. Participants earned one ticket for each signature and for each positive comment from a teacher. Tickets could be exchanged for prizes.

- Intentional interventions with First Nations adult students who miss school are also important. When a student is away from school for a week or more, it can be difficult for them to reconnect. For that reason, it can be very useful to follow-up with adult learners who have been away for a few days, using a phone call or an email, to help them feel comfortable returning to school.
- Many attendance campaigns include an incentive component that recognizes and rewards group and individual achievements and improvements. If doing so, it is important to recognize ‘good’ or ‘improving’ attendance, not just ‘perfect’ attendance. And a challenge facing schools that use incentive rewards for high attendance is encouraging students who are well to attend school while at the same time advising those who are truly ill to stay home. How do they meet this challenge? Some distinguish between absences for different reasons; a student can miss a couple of days for illness and still be celebrated and eligible for prizes. Other schools have monthly incentive programs so students who miss a couple of days for illness can start fresh the next month. It is also valuable to monitor the impact of incentive programs.⁵⁸ How is the intervention working? Is it working better for some students than others? Does it need to be changed or adapted at all?

58 Jordan, 2019



- **SEE APPENDIX 6** for a more thorough description of incentive program possibilities.

One First Nations school puts the names of all attending students into a bin each day. With the daily announcement, a name is drawn. Kids know if they are at school they have a chance to win a prize.

- If a student does not respond to general classroom and schoolwide efforts to encourage attendance and if absences become serious, teachers should have a focused meeting with the student at a time that is free from distractions and interruptions. A private meeting with the teacher can convey the importance of the attendance issue, and during the meeting the teacher should sensitively communicate concerns about the student's absences and/or lateness, *never attaching blame or accusing the student of bad behaviour*. Instead, the meeting should be used as an opportunity to gently explore whether there are any issues that the teacher should be aware of, such as potential bullying, difficulties keeping up with schoolwork, or problems with friendships / relationships with other students. If the student is reluctant to discuss the situation, looking at the attendance records together to show patterns may help to brainstorm ways the student, teacher, the student's family, and the community – if relevant – might be able to help. If possible given the student's feelings, it may also be helpful to make a plan with the student identifying actions and timelines for follow-up.

School staff and parent groups can also ...

- Host community meetings or information sessions on student absenteeism and involve families and community members in discussions of ways to address the issues.⁵⁹ It might be useful to begin by communicating information about the potential consequences of absences and possibly some anecdotal stories about how attendance issues effect classrooms and schools. During this time, it might also be useful to share tips and tools for improving attendance.



- **SEE APPENDIX 5** for some notes to use in a presentation.

59 Epstein and Sheldon, 2002; Sprick and Berg, 2019

- ▶ If the school is large enough, it is often helpful to identify a school contact person for parents who want to discuss attendance issues and to help parents deal with attendance concerns.⁶⁰
- ▶ Advertise the issue, within both the school and the community. Communicate what the school / community is doing to promote attendance and the goals for improvement. Create a title or a slogan for an attendance campaign.

Attendance: our school's key to success

It's cool to be in school

Be an Attendance "HERO" – Here, Everyday, Ready, On-Time

Attend Today: Achieve Tomorrow

On Time: On Target for Success

- ▶ T. shirts with the slogan can be made, and students, instructors, adult students, community members and leaders can be asked to wear the t. shirts to demonstrate their support for a community-wide attendance campaign.
- ▶ Social media that includes parents can be used to regularly provide relevant information. For example, it would be possible to share: "In two days, we are holding a school assembly focused on attendance. Lots of surprises to be shared. Come join us and stay tuned for more information." Share pictures of students holding attendance posters. Generate enthusiasm about the school and community's attendance goals.
- ▶ One First Nations school in BC holds attendance assemblies every six weeks. Prizes are given to students with the most improved attendance, made possible through donations from the community. Year-end grand prizes have included bicycles. At the assemblies, the students with improved attendance are wildly celebrated by everyone. Their improvement is publicly recognized, they get an award, and the school staff and students cheer them on. And it seems to be making a difference. One mother of a student who previously missed school regularly called the principal to say, "My daughter refuses to miss school today but I have to take her to the doctor. Please get on the phone and tell my daughter it is ok for her to miss part of the day."

60 Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000; Epstein and Sheldon, 2002

- Flyers and posters can be put up in the school and community, announcements can be made at assemblies and meetings, and the issue can be raised with the school governing authority for help. School principals can meet with Chief and Council to let them know what the school is doing to help improve attendance, promote the efforts in the community newsletter, and talk about it openly at Parent Advisory Council meetings and Band meetings. *See Fact Sheets attached for information that may help promote awareness.* Attendance campaigns can be launched by inviting a special guest speaker to talk to students about the importance of being in school on time every day. Previous school graduates can be invited to come and tell students how their success depended on attending school regularly.

One 2019 attendance focus group participant reported on a young parent who was found looking at an attendance awareness poster in the school. The poster included statistics about the importance of attendance for student achievement. The young parent said: “why didn’t anyone tell me about this when I was a student? I never knew that missing school was so important. I am glad I know now.”

- The local community can be included – perhaps asking for assistance from community leaders and local businesses in promoting and supporting good attendance and/or helping to curb truancy, such as imposing restrictions on the activities of students who are outside of the school during school hours.⁶¹ The key is to limit areas where students can congregate while they are away from school during the day.

61 Virginia Department of Education, 2005

In Arnhem Lands in Australia, community shops do not serve children during school hours unless they have a note or pass. **(Korff, 2014)**

- Elders and community leaders can be invited to mentor students who appear to be at-risk of chronic absenteeism.⁶²

► Understand the Link Between Attendance and Achievement

Provide the best possible atmosphere for learning and insist on high teaching standards in schools

Generally, educational literature makes it clear that using research-based, effective, and culturally-relevant instructional practices will improve achievement in all areas – including attendance. Cole (2008), for example, refers to “a pedagogy of plenty,” and he states:

When we integrate proven, research-based strategies into daily classroom practice and use them to help children transcend their situations outside school, we enable students to reach their highest potential and, in the process, to acquire a range of resilient behaviours that lead to success both in school and in life. What might all children attempt if they knew they could not fail? We know that the stronger children’s self-esteem is, the more likely they are to capitalize on their strengths. This is why some children do well despite the many obstacles in their lives.

According to Cole, a pedagogy of plenty ...

- Allows students to have their cultures, languages, heritages, and experiences acknowledged and incorporated into their schooling.
- Helps students make connections between their learning and their day-to-day experiences in their homes and communities.
- Offers authentic tasks that give students real purposes for schoolwork and real audiences for that work.
- Provides a literacy-rich learning environment containing a wide variety of high-quality resources.
- Offers experiential, problem-based, active learning opportunities.
- Engages students in working collaboratively on issues of deep concern to them.

- ▶ Exposes students to an inquiry-based approach to instruction that emphasizes making meaning, not just getting the right answer.
- ▶ Engages students in substantive dialogue, discussion, and debate to help them learn, understand, and apply the content of a given subject area.
- ▶ Presents students with cognitive and metacognitive problems within the context of purposeful activities.

Cole further states:

Teachers who succeed in bringing diverse learners to high levels of achievement have a considerable degree of expertise in subject-specific learning strategies. Yet they also recognize the importance of using a set of universal, research-proven teaching and learning practices that provide students with multiple avenues for academic success. These practices help teachers successfully implement content-specific strategies and, more important, are adaptable and proven to work with a broad range of students with varied backgrounds, abilities, and perspectives.

The literature related to raising attendance rates also highlights the following suggestions for schools.

- ▶ Implement culturally-relevant curriculum, which has been shown to be positively correlated with a range of positive educational outcomes, such as academic achievement, engagement, and including – according to research – improved attendance.⁶³
- ▶ Hire the best possible teachers and monitor staff to ensure good performance.⁶⁴
- ▶ Provide training and professional development, including specific training on dealing with absenteeism. Recognize good teaching as a cornerstone in the fight against absenteeism and provide as much support as possible to teachers.⁶⁵

63 Jordan, 2019

64 Virginia Department of Education, 2005

65 Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000; Virginia Department of Education, 2005

- ▶ Provide teachers with training for the identification of learning challenges.
- ▶ Encourage flexibility in teaching to meet different abilities and learning styles.
- ▶ Establish well-developed and understood policies and procedures for dealing immediately with any potential harassment by teachers or other staff.
- ▶ Look for patterns in absences that may suggest concerns related to a particular subject or teacher.
- ▶ Provide educational supports outside of classes, such as computers for doing homework, etc.⁶⁶

Professor Dough Willms, Professor of Education, University of New Brunswick, has published numerous articles maintaining that discussions of attendance should move to broader discussions of engagement with school. Willms asserts that one of the most important aspects of engagement is students' sense of belonging and students' sense of attachment at school, which has to do with feelings of being accepted and valued by their peers and others at the school. Strategies to increase engagement and reduce absenteeism should include early intervention, reducing academic failure, altering classroom practice, improving school climate, and monitoring well-being. **(Willms, 2008)**

Studies of adult learning also suggest that effective instruction and program design will have perhaps the greatest impact on encouraging attendance.

In particular, because adult learners typically juggle numerous priorities and responsibilities beyond their schooling, their motivation must be maintained in order for them to continue to attend. Some adult students may doubt their own competence, especially if they have had their self-concept undermined in earlier school experiences. In these cases, building an expectancy of success and enhancing students' perceptions of self-efficacy can contribute to greater motivation, and teachers can facilitate this by taking steps to ensure students' comfort and feeling of confidence in the classroom, especially by providing regular feedback about progress. It is also beneficial to provide tasks that allow learners to succeed within the contexts of their limited time and demanding lives.

66 Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000

Other related suggestions for making adult learning settings effective and motivating identified by Peterson include the following.⁶⁷

- ▶ **Support Self-Directed Learning:** Some adult learners may be mature and self-confident enough to quickly gain an understanding how they learn best, what their areas of strength and weakness are, and how to go about learning. In these cases, adult educators can grant those students space and be there to support, and guide, rather than tell.
- ▶ **Use Students' Experiences as a Resource:** No matter how old adult learners are or what type of life they have led, every adult student will have acquired an extensive cache of experiences that can be drawn on to make the most of what everyone brings to the table. Moments of authenticity and spontaneity that come from allowing students to share with one another usually prove to be some of the most powerful learning opportunities. Instructors should tap into the wealth of wisdom of the class as much as possible.
- ▶ **Relevance of Materials:** Adult students are most likely to want to learn about subjects that will have immediate relevance to their lives. Cultural relevance of the learning setting and materials are obviously key considerations in this regard. It is also important to always keep in mind that older students are usually enrolled in a class in order to accomplish something and they have busy lives. The goal of adult education is to fit the needs of students, who are often opting to be there because they have identified an area of need. Ask and listen to them about what they want from the experience. Listen carefully for teaching moments and take advantage of them. When a student says or does something that cues a new topic, be flexible and discuss it, even briefly, to show students that their interests are important.
- ▶ **Problem-Centred Instruction:** Most adult learners do not want to learn about material that doesn't have meaning for their goals and they do not generally want their learning to be too abstract.
- ▶ **Motivation to Learn:** For some, returning to school after several years can be intimidating and a certain degree of apprehension should be expected in adult learners. Getting past the initial uneasiness of adult learners can be a challenge. But once initial concerns have been dealt with, most adult educators find that their students are eager to expand their knowledge. Ideally, the teacher will help to encourage continued motivation, ensure students remain positive, and assist students to move past any initial discomfort they might feel returning to school.

67 Peterson, D. 2019. 5 Principles for the Teacher of Adults. www.thoughtco.com

Work Together As a Community Support System

Provide collaborative programs or services whenever possible through liaison with outside service agencies

The challenges faced inside the school are connected to and compounded by things that are happening outside, and without the connections, support, and expertise that come from interacting with the communities in which they are embedded, schools cannot achieve the highest level of success possible.⁶⁸ Therefore, while attempts to improve attendance must include a significant focus on things that happen in the school, such as setting high expectations, maximizing time on task, ensuring a safe climate, and providing a challenging curriculum, out-of-school factors can be addressed collaboratively with the community's social service agencies. In fact, research shows that success is more often achieved when communities undertake the work of collectively understanding the extent of any chronic absenteeism problem and then demonstrate the power of coordinated community action in making sure that every student has the necessary support to stay on track for success in school and in life.⁶⁹

Areas for collective support may include the following.⁷⁰

- ▶ Arranging student or family counselling through school counsellors or community/private counsellors. The 2019 attendance focus group participants who contributed to this Toolkit in particular noted the importance of focusing on family mental

68 Hatch, 2009

69 US Dept. of Justice et. al. 2015.

70 Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000; Virginia Department of Education, 2005; Jordan, 2019; Principals Australia Institute

health and emotional health, including understanding the principles of trauma informed practice.

- ▶ Providing support programs for students who are making transitions (e.g. moving from school to school etc.), with specific follow up for students who are identified as having particular difficulty with transition situations.
- ▶ Implementing breakfast and/or lunch programs, which have been shown in some studies to improve not only school attendance, but also school achievement – for school-age and adult students.

“We strongly believe that every child deserves to be fed. Everyone in the school knows our policy: that every student will know “you’ll never be hungry here.””

2019 Attendance Focus Group Participant

- ▶ Sponsoring a school health worker.
- ▶ Sponsoring tutoring programs.
- ▶ Organizing community-based youth engagement programs that seek to promote problem solving, self-control, emotional regulation, and a stronger sense of self – as these programs have been shown to reduce school absenteeism.
- ▶ Exploring possibilities for flexible learning programs for students who might have issues at home, chronic illness, or who become pregnant.
- ▶ Implementing community-based substance abuse programs – for students and families.
- ▶ Providing school transportation or working with the community to develop transportation alternatives such as carpools, walking school buses (supervised groups walking together), buddy systems organized with Parents Clubs or Parent Advisory Councils, etc.

One First Nation school in BC bought a van to pick up students who have babies, equipped with car seats to help students be able to attend. Another community buys bus passes for students who are attending the nearby public school to help them attend.

Bus policies may also help with attendance. One community found that some students were regularly using the district school bus to get to town, but they were not attending school when they got there. When those students were told they could no longer ride the bus if they didn't start going to school, they missed being with their friends and they started attending so they could get back on the bus.

Another First Nations school gives all parents the cell phone number of the school bus driver so that they can call or text the driver if the family is running late. The bus driver tries to make adjustments to the bus route to make sure all students have every possible opportunity to get on the bus each morning.

Several communities are also experimenting with different pick up locations. One community has found it useful to have students from neighbouring communities picked up at the Band office, so that if school is closed due to weather or another emergency, the students are all located in a safe place. Other communities found that approach infeasible. Ideally, schools, families, and communities will collectively determine bus policies that are designed with attendance in mind.

- Establishing parent counselling programs.
- Implementing an initiative to support access to laundry equipment, recognizing that some students miss school simply because they do not have clean clothes. Some First Nations schools report having clothing available in a variety of sizes so that they can give them to students when necessary, telling students that they should swap clothes for a while so their old ones can be cleaned. Other schools have bins of winter boots, toques, and mittens for students to take when they are needed. Another First Nation school collects donated clothing and sets them up so that students can “go shopping,” which the students really enjoy.



CONCLUSIONS

As clearly described in this Toolkit, attendance is a complicated issue. There are numerous reasons why students – both school age and adult students – may not attend school, and the multifaceted nature of the related challenges can make it very difficult to implement immediate and simple solutions. As with almost all education issues, it is almost impossible to identify specific factors as exclusively predicting attendance. Instead, a variety of issues can be the cause of attendance patterns, often including numerous external influences that are beyond the immediate control of teachers and program administrators. No one strategy will work in isolation and identified approaches will not work every time and in every circumstance. But research is clear about the important role that schools, in partnership with families and communities, can and must play in addressing inconsistent patterns of attendance.

What is clear is that purely punitive approaches are not successful in changing behaviour, and waiting for a severe problem to arise before intervening is the least effective approach to attendance issues. The key is often finding out what is preventing students from being in school – individually and systemically – and working as a coalition of school staff, families, and community members to apply responses that are positive and proactive, making immediate and consistent efforts to help all students attend school regularly and on time.

As the project focus group participants noted, there is no magic bullet to solve challenges related to chronic absence. The work will always be ongoing. It is important to be relentless, and also to celebrate small successes; what may seem like minor improvements are meaningful and they *will* make a difference for students.

APPENDIX ONE

▶ **SAMPLE MESSAGES TO USE WHEN PROMOTING THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD ATTENDANCE**

WITH STAFF

Let's Count Everyone In

We should focus our energy and attention on helping students to regularly attend and get to school on time because ...

- ▶ It is consistent with our school's mission, vision, and goals.
- ▶ We will be showing all of our students that we value them, and that they are important members of our school community.
- ▶ It will improve learning outcomes for all students.
- ▶ It is an important part of our responsibility to the students in our care.
- ▶ It will make our classroom management less complex, and we will not need to re-teach to students who were absent when we taught something new.
- ▶ We will be making an important difference to our students – helping them to develop lifelong positive habits such as punctuality, self-discipline, and organization.
- ▶ We will be supporting the community's goals for its children and youth.

WITH PRIMARY STUDENTS

We Want You Here!

- ▶ You matter to us.
- ▶ Our school is better when you are here.
- ▶ We want to learn with you every day.
- ▶ What you learn at school is important. It will help you all through your life.
- ▶ You can be with your friends when you come to school.
- ▶ School is harder when you stay home too much.
- ▶ Your community wants you to be in school.
- ▶ We all want you to have fun and try new things by being with us every day.

WITH ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

Why We Want You Here!

- ▶ You are important to us. Having you here matters!
- ▶ Doing well in school will make a positive difference in your life.
- ▶ What you learn at school will help you.
- ▶ Students who come to school can find good jobs in the future.
- ▶ Being in school will let you spend time with your friends.
- ▶ The more you attend, the more you learn. The more you learn, the more you will like school!
- ▶ School is harder when you stay home too much.
- ▶ You might want to stay home if you are having trouble. But missing school will only make things worse. Ask for help, instead! We want you to enjoy school.
- ▶ Your community wants you to succeed. You can make your community proud by doing your best in school – and that means being here!

WITH MIDDLE AND SECONDARY STUDENTS

Attendance Counts!

- ▶ You are an important part of this school. Your contributions matter!
- ▶ Making the most of your school experience will increase your life choices.
- ▶ Every day absent from school matters. Missing a day here and there may not seem important, but absences quickly add up.
- ▶ Students who attend school regularly are more likely to graduate and find good jobs. And over a lifetime, a high school graduate makes, on average, a million dollars more than a dropout.
- ▶ At school, you're learning important things that will help throughout your life. Attending school regularly will help you develop key lifelong skills, such as self-discipline, punctuality, organization, and the ability to stick to a routine.
- ▶ Attending regularly will help you make friends and maintain relationships.
- ▶ Being in school helps to develop social skills you need to live and work successfully with others.
- ▶ Being in school gives you opportunities to socialize with your friends.
- ▶ The more you attend, the more you learn. This will make you like school more.
- ▶ School only gets harder when you stay home too much. It can be tempting to stay home because you have too much work or you don't understand what's going on in class. But missing a day only makes things worse. Ask for help, instead.
- ▶ Your community wants you to succeed. You make your community proud by doing your best in school – and that means being here! You also have the power to encourage your friends and classmates to attend school. You can take action and create change – for yourself and others.

WITH PARENTS

Attending school regularly helps children feel better about school – and themselves. You can help your children start building this habit early so they learn that going to school on time, every day is important. Good attendance will help your children do well in school, post-secondary, and at work.

Did you know?

- ▶ By encouraging good attendance, you will make an important difference to the education of your children. Regular attendance is key to educational success.
- ▶ It's understandable that challenges to daily attendance are unavoidable – like illness and emergencies. But try not to let absences add up! Studies show that students who miss 18 or more school days each year usually suffer academically!
- ▶ It doesn't matter if absences are excused or unexcused. They all mean lost time in the classroom, and that means a lost opportunity to learn.
- ▶ Attendance matters as early as kindergarten! Studies show that students who miss too many days in Kindergarten and Grade 1 are more likely to struggle with reading by third grade.
- ▶ Students with good attendance are more likely to graduate from high school.
- ▶ Children who have poor attendance rates are more likely to be involved in behaviours that will get them in trouble. Studies show that students who attend school regularly are less likely to break the law and go to jail later in life.
- ▶ Children are safer in school than out on the street.

WITH PARENTS

What families do is key.

- ▶ A regular bedtime and morning routine can help your children make it to school on time and ready for the day ahead.
- ▶ Get to know your children's teachers! Learn about the school's attendance policies. Keep in regular touch so you know how your children are doing.
- ▶ Let your children know that attendance matters to you. By learning how to show up for school every day, your children are learning how to show up for work every day later in their lives.
- ▶ Encourage your children to go to school unless they are truly sick.
- ▶ Try to avoid having older children stay home from school to care for their younger siblings.
- ▶ Try to avoid booking medical appointments during school hours if you can, and try not to schedule any family trips on school days unless you have to.
- ▶ Ask for help if you need it. What services are available in your community? Can the school help you access the resources you might need?
- ▶ Join with other parents to make an attendance commitment. Agree to help one another if something comes up that will make getting to school difficult.
- ▶ Contribute to your school's efforts to address absenteeism. Help out if you can. Help improve attendance for all of the children in our community.

WITH THE COMMUNITY

High Attendance Rates Are a Win for Us All. Please Be Part of the Solution!

- ▶ Improvements in education are impossible if children are not in school.
- ▶ We need to make sure that every child has an opportunity to learn, and that means making sure they come to school regularly.
- ▶ Students who attend school regularly achieve greater educational success.
- ▶ Students must be in school in order to learn.
- ▶ By helping to encourage good attendance, you can make a positive difference to the future of all students and our community.
- ▶ Improved attendance rates can help our entire community. Studies show that students with higher attendance are more likely to graduate and get good jobs.
- ▶ Studies show that students with low attendance rates are more likely to be involved in behaviours that will get them into trouble – including breaking the law.
- ▶ Our school needs you to help us achieve our goals. We all want students to come to school regularly.
- ▶ We need to work with parents and join together to get kids to school.
- ▶ Our school needs help from mental and medical health providers, social workers, and others – everyone can contribute to make higher attendance happen.

What are we doing to address this issue?

- ▶ Our school is carefully tracking the right data.
- ▶ We are pro-actively addressing these critical issues.
- ▶ We are making sure that all children are getting the attention they deserve.

Please help us spread the word about the importance of attendance, so we can all make sure that our students are spending their days safely and productively.

APPENDIX TWO

▶ **SAMPLE COMMUNICATIONS WITH PARENTS RELATED TO ATTENDANCE**

Sample Congratulations Letter

Dear Parent / Guardian Name,

I am writing to say a big thank you and congratulations to you and [child's name]. [Child's name] attendance at school has been excellent! {He/She} has had __ absences in the past two months, and has been late only __ times, which is on track for regular attendance this year.

As you know, our school is committed to helping our students attend school every day they can. I know it is not always easy to get to school on time every day, but research is clear that missing only a few days each month can have significant negative effects on learning.

In recognition of you and your child's efforts, we are happy to be entering [child's name] into a draw [if an incentive program is in place describe it.]

We love having [child's name] in our school and we are so happy you have been sharing [him/her] with us every day.

Thank you again for your commitment to attendance, and to your child's educational success.

Sincerely,

Principal or teacher name

Sample Letter Offering Support

Dear Parent / Guardian Name,

I am writing to connect with you about your child's current attendance rate. I want to reach out to see if we can partner with you to help your child attend more often.

[Child's name] has missed ___ days of school in the last three months, and [he/she] has been late ___ times. We are worried that [child's name] is missing so much school, because research shows that attending school regularly is important for learning and student success.

I know that getting kids to school every day and on time can be challenging, but we love having [child's name] in school with us. Please let us know if we can do anything to help bring your child to school. I will be calling you in the next few days to discuss this more, as our school is committed to making good attendance a priority. By working to ensure that your child is in school every day when not seriously ill, you will be helping [him/her] have success in school and have the very best chance of achieving [his/her] goals after graduation.

Thank you again for sharing [child's name] with us. We value your family being part of our school.

Sincerely,

Principal or teacher name

Sample Letter Specific for a Student

(generously shared by a 2019 attendance focus group participant)

Date

Dear Parents/Guardians of [Child's Name]

As a condition to enrolling in school for the 2018-2019 school year students are required to attend school on a regular basis. Kindergarten to grade three are very critical years for literacy in a child's life. Research demonstrates that those reading at grade level by the end of grade 3 sets the bar for successful graduation from high school with a Dogwood (B.C. Diploma) and for further success at the college and university levels.

Our Kindergarten to grade 3 students receive 100 minutes of literacy instruction per day for a total of at least 500 minutes of literacy instruction per week.

It is essential that [child's name] attends school every day so that [he/she] can make great advances in [his/her] ability to read.

As of the above date, [child's name] has missed [# of] minutes of literacy instruction – not to mention instruction missed in math and other subjects. We miss [child's name] at school and want to do everything that we can to help. Please contact the school to let us know how we can help remove barriers that may be preventing [child's name] from attending school.

Yours Sincerely,

Sample Script for Phone Call Home

(adapted from Sprick and Berg, 2019)

Hello _____

“This is [student’s name] teacher. How are you today?”

I am calling because I’ve noticed that [student’s name] has been absent ____ times in the last month, and I want to make sure that everything is okay and there are no reasons [student’s name] might not want to come to school.

We really miss [student’s name] when she isn’t here, and I would be happy to help if there is anything I can do.”

- ☐ **If the parent is reluctant to talk about the issue ...**
end the call by reiterating “it is a real pleasure having [student name] in class, and don’t hesitate to reach out if there is anything our school can do to help [student name] get to school each day.”
- ☐ **If the parent mentions a challenge that you can help problem solve ...** spend time discussing the issue and/or schedule a meeting if the parent wants to. Offer any information you can. For example, if the child has been feeling anxious about attending, offer to meet together with the student and family to talk about anything at school that might be challenging. If the child is feeling overwhelmed with school work and can’t face feeling behind, talk about what the school can do to help address the situation and relieve some stress.
- ☐ **If the parent mentions challenges that are beyond your capacity to problem solve ...**
be clear that you are on the family’s side, ask if you can talk to your colleagues about ideas to find support, and promise to do everything possible to make sure the student feels welcome at school while you are working collaboratively to address any challenges.

APPENDIX THREE



ENGAGING PARENTS: MESSAGING DOS AND DON'TS

Adapted from Attendance Works. www.attendanceworks.org

Parents do want their children to do well in school, but parents might lose track of how many days their student is absent each year, and not all parents understand the connection between strong attendance and achievement. Talk with parents, guardians and families about absences – using the right messaging.

DO

1. **Approach conversations with concern and optimism**, not by telling families what they're doing wrong. Almost all families want their child to be in school. Assume that with the right information, they will make better attendance a priority.
2. **Build upon families wanting the best for their children**. Families want their children to succeed in school and after they graduate. Help them connect that dream to evidence about the importance of being in school.
3. **Help families understand what students miss when they are absent, even in the early grades**. Remind families that lessons build on one another — absent students miss the chance to learn something that they will need in order to understand more difficult material later. Explain that some things taught in the classroom can't be learned at home.
4. **Let families be your best allies for getting students to school every day**. Together, discuss what barriers might be keeping their children from getting to school. Consider approaches to address challenges. Find out if families need resources to address issues such as recurring illness, anxiety, transportation difficulties ... Try to identify with families any school staff, neighbours or other support people who could help get their child to school.

5. Help families recognize the importance of monitoring and tracking absences.

Research shows that many parents often aren't aware of how absences are building up. Yet parents are often willing to track absences and take steps to improve attendance if they have the right help.

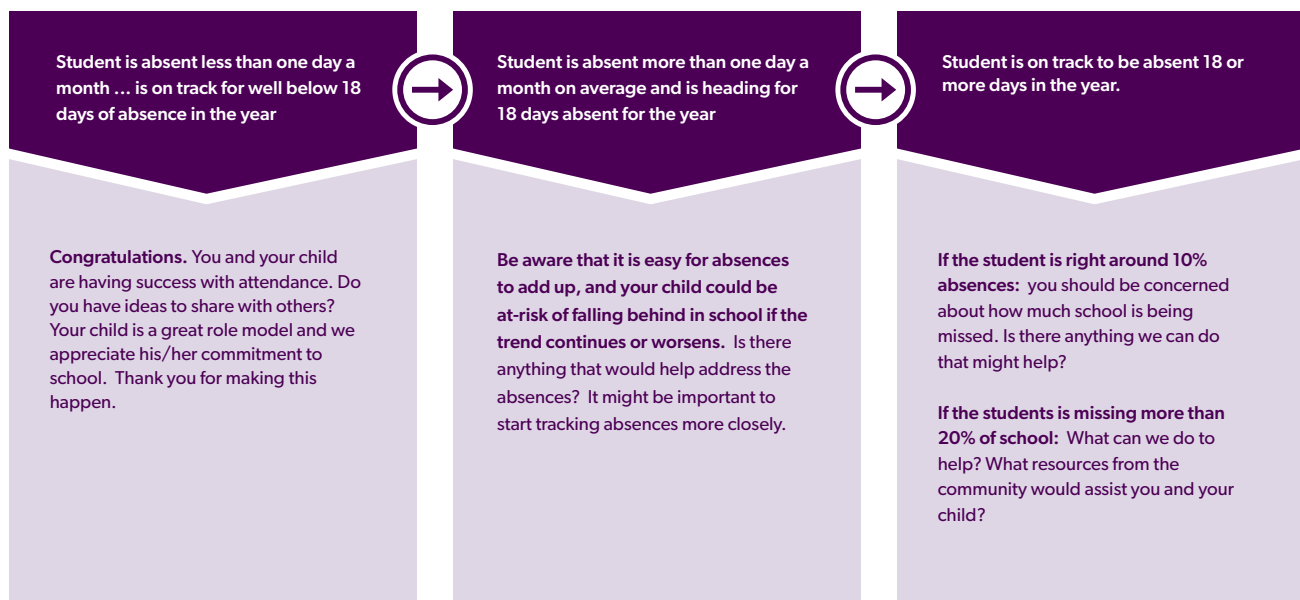
6. Involve trusted messengers with strong relationships to families. Ask families if they would like to involve other people in conversations about attendance so they feel supported and more comfortable.

7. If families ask for more support, help them identify other community services that can assist in overcoming any challenges that are impacting on their children's attendance.

DON'T

- ▶ **Don't assume families know what good attendance is.** Many, many families and students don't know that missing two days a month over the course of a school year is considered a problem.
- ▶ **Don't just rely on robocalls** to let families know that their children have missed school.
- ▶ **Don't send impersonal, threatening letters** home which could add to the impression that no one at school cares about their children.
- ▶ **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 families of 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.

WHAT PARENTS SHOULD KNOW



APPENDIX FOUR

► IDEAS FOR DEVELOPING AN ATTENDANCE ACTION PLAN

Adapted from Department of Education and Children's Services.
Government of South Australia. 2003

Step One

Work with a group to discuss: *What actions can we take to improve our school's attendance rate?*

Step Two

Have all members of the group individually brainstorm ideas and/or issues related to attendance in your school. Then work in small groups to discuss the individual ideas and record them on stick-on notes, one idea per note. Teams randomly place their notes on a large piece of paper underneath the question.

Examples:

Teachers discuss with students and families / caregivers why attendance is important	Make roles clear for students, staff, and parents/caregivers	Develop a policy	Provide pro-active support to students at-risk for chronic absenteeism
Work with parents / caregivers to ensure they always supply a note for absences	Make lessons relevant and engaging	Talk with students with attendance problems and ask what would make a difference	Intervene early – before it is too late!
Teachers follow attendance procedures consistently	Ensure students understand their responsibilities	Ask Chief and Council to put up a billboard promoting this issue	Promote this issue in the community newsletter

Step Three

Work together to sort the ideas into related groupings / “like” categories. Rearrange the post-it notes under headings. Continue until all members of the group are comfortable with the categories.

Sample category headings: Procedures; Policy; Curriculum; Communications

Step Four

Discuss strategies for the key ideas, identifying who will lead the activity and when it will be done.

APPENDIX FIVE

▶ INFORMATION TO SHARE IN A MEETING
FOCUSED ON ATTENDANCE

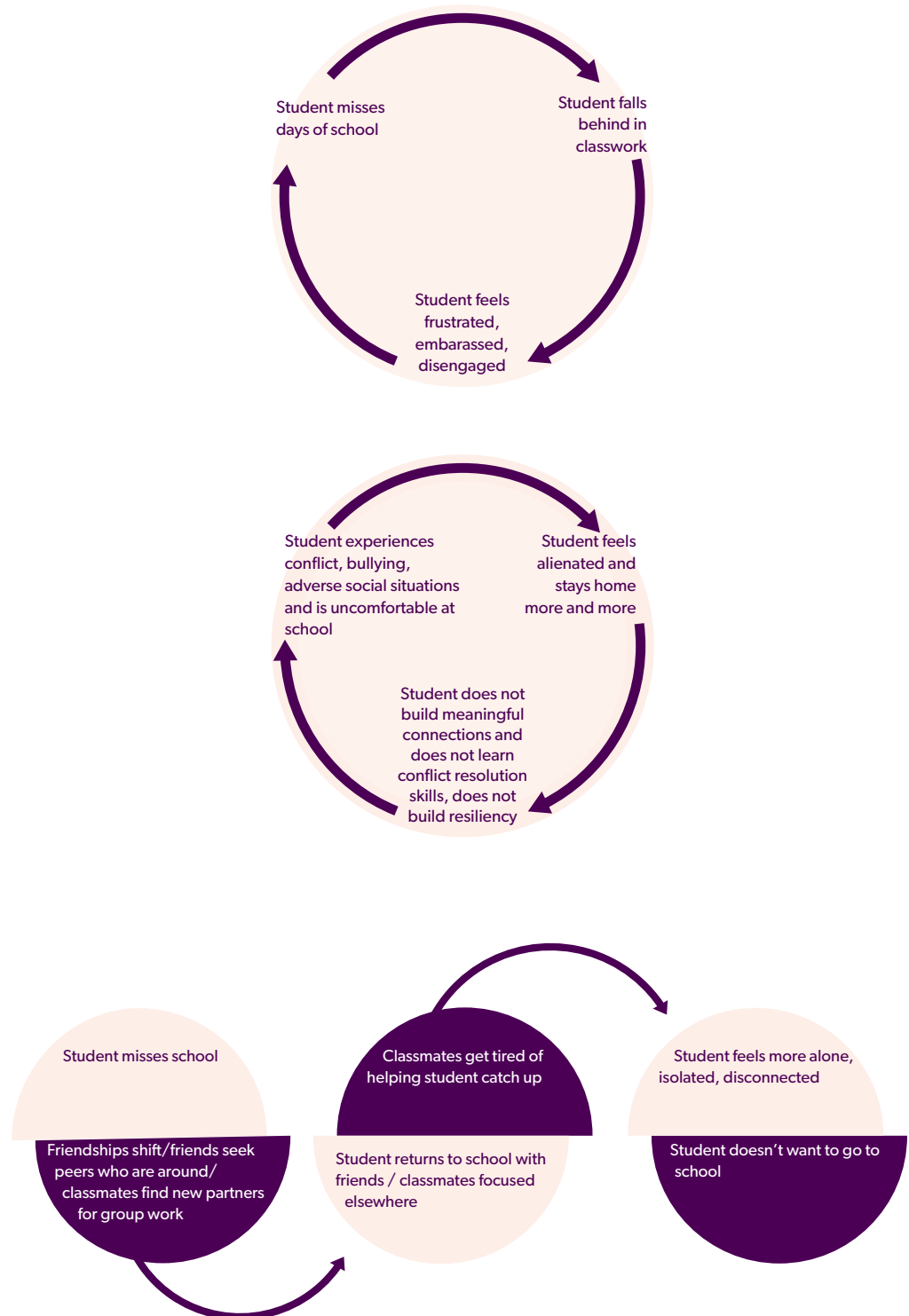
Step One

Begin by brainstorming some negative effects of absenteeism.

FOR THE STUDENT	FOR THE CLASS / SCHOOL	FOR PARENTS / FAMILIES / THE COMMUNITY
Inside School	The teacher	Parents
Outside School	Other students in the classroom	Families
Later in life	The school	Our community

Step Two

Share some examples.



What Does This Mean?

- ▶ By 6th grade, chronic absence becomes a leading indicator that a student will drop out of high school.
- ▶ When students improve their attendance rates, they improve their academic prospects and chances for graduating.

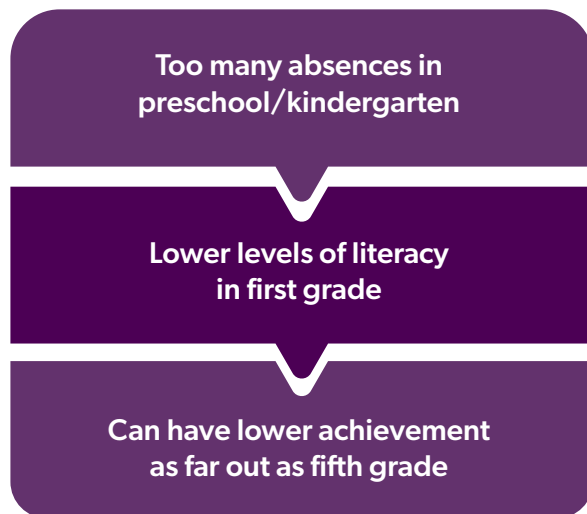
Research says that students who attend school regularly and on time...

- ▶ have lower rates of involvement in risk-taking behaviours – including drugs and alcohol and gang activities
- ▶ develop important life and employment skills, such as dependability and punctuality, positively impacting their later employment
- ▶ are less likely to experience negative outcomes later in life, and often have higher-paying jobs, increased likelihood of employment, and even lower rates of incarceration

- ▶ See a slider tool that provides a visual demonstration of the impact absences can have on students. Just one day every so often can add up to months of missed learning time. Missing school can lower math and reading scores and leave students less likely to graduate. See <https://getschooled.com/dashboard/tool/343-attendance-counts?type=tool>

Absences are important even at the early grade levels. Research shows ...

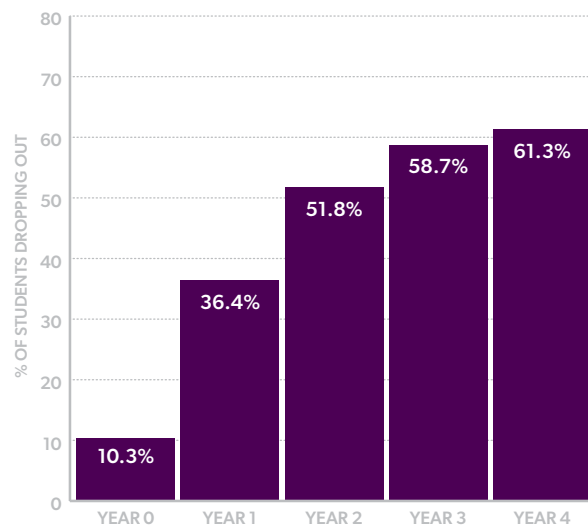
- ▶ As early as kindergarten, regular and repeated practice of skills is critical for ongoing success.
- ▶ Skills build from the foundation set in early grade levels.
- ▶ Early absenteeism predicts later absenteeism.



And research shows the negative effects of absenteeism continues through high school.

Data from the US shows that with every year of chronic absenteeism, a higher percentage of students dropped out of school. <http://www.utahdataalliance.org>

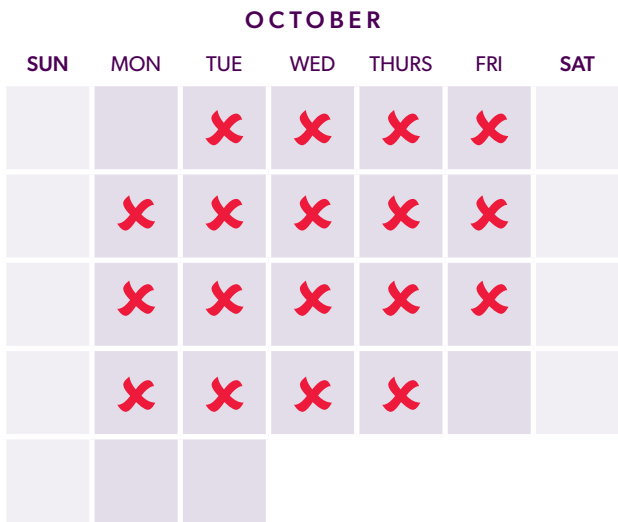
Proportion of Students Dropping Out by Number of Years the Student was Chronically Absent from 8th-12th Grades



How Do We Know When Absences Are a Problem?

Many researchers use the term “chronic absenteeism.” That means a student missed 10% or more of the days school is open for any reason. That represents approximately 18 days for most schools.

If that doesn’t seem like very many days, think of this– 18 days is almost a full month of school:



MYTHS AND FACTS



MYTH	FACT
Absences are only a problem if they are unexcused.	Being away from school means lost opportunities, whatever the reason.
Sporadic absences (versus consecutive absences) are not a problem.	Learning time is impacted regardless of when absences occur.
Attendance only matters in older grades.	Significant research shows attendance at early grade levels has important consequences.
Attendance is a family’s problem.	Students miss school for many reasons, and it is best addressed collectively – by students, families, schools, and the community together.

APPENDIX SIX

▶ **CLASSROOM INCENTIVE PROGRAM SUGGESTIONS**

Adapted from Sprick and Berg, 2019

Evidence shows that simple classroom motivational systems can be surprisingly effective for maintaining momentum for attendance campaigns. Alone, attendance incentives won't be enough, but they can be a valuable part of a more comprehensive approach. When possible, incentive approaches should reward families, not just students, or at least should keep families informed of the initiatives and successes.

Ideally, reinforcements systems will be engaging and fun, and they should be designed and implemented with the following principles in mind.

- ▶ Any motivational system should be based on reasonable yet challenging goals – encouraging students to do more without feeling like the goals are so far out of reach there is no hope for success. Set short-term goals that are slightly higher than current levels of attendance, and once students have met that goal, move up the goal an incremental amount.
- ▶ Allow students to earn rewards quickly at first so they are excited about the initiative. If, over time, the students no longer need rewards to attain consistently good attendance rates, continue to provide positive feedback.
- ▶ Avoid arbitrary time limits / goals that require consecutive attainment, such as 90% average daily attendance in the next five days, or for five days in a row. In these circumstances, students could come close to meeting the goal again and again but then fail – which would be discouraging. Instead, provide rewards based on accumulating a set goal with no specified time limit, such as just 5 days of 90% average daily attendance – no matter how long that takes.
- ▶ Seek student input on possible rewards. Spend a few minutes of class time brainstorming no or low-cost and easily implementable rewards, such as positive letters home, extra recess time, crazy sock day, a pajama reading party, etc.

- ▶ Use surprise to generate more excitement, such as offering a mystery reward or using a spinner to make a game of which reward will be earned.
- ▶ Pre-plan to mitigate any unexpected pitfalls. For example, it is possible that classes will continue to miss a goal because of one or a few students missing school. Anticipate this possibility and make sure that the motivation system will not depend on every individual student's behaviour. For example, make the goal 90% attendance, not 100% attendance.
- ▶ Explicitly teach students the expectations for the system, clarifying details such as whether tardy students will be counted as present or absent.
- ▶ Maintain energy for the system by showing your own excitement and providing feedback on how much progress has been achieved, not on how much more there is to do.
- ▶ Make a graphic to show the class progress and cheer on the students every day.

SAMPLE REWARD SYSTEMS

- ▶ Use a special invisible ink marker to randomly place x's on a wall calendar. Each day, have a student use the invisible marker to reveal whether an x is marked on that day, and offer a reward to students present that day.
- ▶ Randomly select days each month and distribute raffle tickets to students in attendance that day. At the end of the month, draw a ticket to select a reward winner.
- ▶ Award prizes for the most improved attendance in a month.

SAMPLE REWARDS

Classroom

- ▶ Have a class game period
- ▶ Send home postcards to congratulate the class on their achievement
- ▶ Extra recess time
- ▶ Read aloud a book of a students' choice
- ▶ Class party – a pajama reading party, or a flashlight reading part, or ...
- ▶ Free time at end of class
- ▶ Extra class time in the gym or library

Individual

- ▶ Sit where you want for the day ... even the teacher's chair
- ▶ Have lunch with the principal
- ▶ A recognition phone call home
- ▶ First in line for the day
- ▶ A small item (a temporary tattoo, or a Mad Lib game, or a sticker ...)
- ▶ Lunch with the principal

APPENDIX SEVEN

▶ SAMPLE LESSON FOR TEACHING THE IMPORTANCE OF ATTENDANCE

Adapted from Sprick and Berg, 2019

Sample 1: Grades K – 2

Materials	Copy of the book or video of <i>Berenstain Bears' Trouble at School</i> (video is on youtube).
Step 1	Explain to students that attendance at school is important, and the class has a goal of being at school every day, unless you are too sick to come.
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Students will identify why Brother Bear had trouble when he came back to school after being sick.▶ Students will discuss how missing school impacts on learning.▶ Students will identify ways Brother Bear could avoid these problems in the future.
Step 2	State the Goal of the Lesson and Its Relevance Today we are going to [watch/read] <i>Berenstain Bears' Trouble at School</i> . In this story, Brother Bear stays home from school when he is sick and has trouble when he comes back to school. We are going to identify what made it hard for Brother Bear when he came back after being absent, and how he could avoid these problems in the future.
Step 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Read the book or watch the video, pausing to ask questions to check for understanding.▶ When finished, have students discuss the following questions with a partner:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why did Brother Bear stay home from school? Was this an ok reason to miss school?• When Brother Bear came back to school what problems did he have? Why?• What could Brother Bear do differently next time?▶ For each question, have each pair share their responses with the class.
Step 4	Close the lesson by emphasizing how important it is to attend school regularly, and what important opportunities students miss when they stay home – learning, and having fun with their friends.

APPENDIX EIGHT

SAMPLE HANDOUTS FOR PARENTS

- 8.1 Establishing a Routie to Help Get to School On Time
- 8.2 How Technology Use Can Affect Attendance
- 8.3 What to Say When Your Child Does Not Want to Go to School
- 8.4 Tips for Getting to School Regularly and On Time

ESTABLISHING A ROUTINE TO HELP GET TO SCHOOL ON TIME

- ▶ Give yourself and children enough time to get ready. No TV on school mornings can help.
- ▶ Provide students their own alarm. Teaching kids to set and use their own alarm can help them learn responsibility for their own personal practices.
- ▶ Try setting the alarm 30 minutes earlier for students who need more time to get ready for school.
- ▶ Plan ahead the night before, such as: identifying and pre-prepping breakfast, having kids choose their clothes and shoes the night before, and packing backpacks with completed homework and snacks/water.
- ▶ Set a regular bedtime schedule. Age should be a consideration in making decisions.
- ▶ Get proper rest and go to bed early yourself. Your health and well-being are important, too.
- ▶ Have your child go to bed 10 minutes earlier and get up 10 minutes earlier.
- ▶ Have kids bathe or shower in the evening.
- ▶ Help your child relax before bedtime with a story, instead of the stimulation of television.
- ▶ Have schoolwork and lunch ready and laid out, ready to go. Create a special folder for completed assignments.
- ▶ Provide regular study times and a quiet, clean area for doing homework so your children don't avoid school because their assignments are not complete.
- ▶ Have your child walk to school or the bus stop with another child who is always on time.
- ▶ Limit / balance extra-curricular activities.
- ▶ Have a back-up plan for cold weather and organize cold weather gear the night before.

HOW TECHNOLOGY USE CAN AFFECT ATTENDANCE

In a world where children are “growing up digital,” it’s important to help them learn about healthy digital use so that they are safe and healthy, and so they are able to attend school regularly, on-time, and ready to learn. *Parents are especially important in teaching these skills.*

Make your own family media use plan.

Technologies should work for your family. When used thoughtfully and appropriately, media can enhance daily life. But when used inappropriately or without thought, it can displace many important activities such as face-to-face interactions, family-time, outdoor-play, exercise, unplugged downtime and sleep. Some ideas for a technology use plan are outlined on the following page.

Remember:

Children who get enough sleep have a healthier immune system, and better school performance, behaviour, memory, and mental health.



1-3 Years Old	12 - 14 hours per day
3-6 Years Old	10 - 12 hours per day
7-12 Years Old	10 - 11 hours per day
12-18 Years Old	8 - 9 hours per day



FAMILY MEDIA USE PLAN

SCREEN FREE ZONES

Keeping screens outside the bedroom can be very beneficial.

- ☐ Incoming messages and calls will interfere with sleep; both audio and vibrating alerts can wake up children and teens.
- ☐ It is good to help children avoid the temptation to use or check devices when they should be sleeping – during the night or too early in the morning
- ☐ Emitted light from TVs or mobile screens can affect the quality of your child's sleep.

Our Plan

Mobile devices and TVs are not allowed in the following screen-free zones in our home:

- ☐ At the table where we eat
- ☐ In bedrooms
- ☐ Other _____

SCREEN-FREE TIMES

Using a mobile device or watching TV before bed can interfere with a child's sleep. When using screens in the evening:

- ☐ Turn the brightness on the screen down
- ☐ Don't play or watch media that are intense or scary

Our Plan

Mobile devices and TVs are not allowed:

- ☐ One hour before bedtime
- ☐ At dinner time
- ☐ At breakfast when I should be getting ready for school
- ☐ Other _____

SCREEN-FREE SICK DAYS

Some children and teens may want to stay at home so they can use their screens.

Our Plan

Mobile devices and TVs are not allowed:

- ☐ When we stay home on a regular school day
- ☐ Other _____

WHAT TO SAY WHEN YOUR CHILD DOES NOT WANT TO GO TO SCHOOL

Your child says...	What might be going on?	What you can say?
"I don't feel like going."	It's possible your child is having a hard time at school. The problem could be something very recent or something that's been building for a long time.	"I wonder if you want to stay home because things aren't going well at school. When you get home, let's talk about what's going on and if we can do something to make things better. Is there something we can ask the school to do to help us?"
"School is boring."	Kids might say they find school boring for a number of reasons. They might not feel challenged, they might not see their education as connected to their lives, they might not feel connected to their peers or their teachers, or they might not feel prepared for their school-work, which may make them lack the confidence needed to try hard things.	"What do you find boring? Do you enjoy the topics you are learning? Do you find the activities you are doing too easy or too hard? Would you be less bored if school was different? Can we talk to your teacher about how to make school more interesting?"
"I have a stomach-ache / a head-ache."	Sometimes not feeling well can be a sign that a child feels anxious. Many kids feel anxious about going to school – especially if something hard is happening that day, like a big test or a presentation. Kids can also worry if they haven't finished their homework or they aren't getting along with the other kids or an adult in the school.	"Is anything special happening today? Do you have a test or a big assignment due? Do you have to make a presentation? Everyone feels worried about those kinds of things, but they always get easier with practice. Are you getting along with everyone at school? Lots of people feel sick when they are worried about things." You might also be able to share some times in your life when you felt worried but you got through it. "I used to feel that way and I understand, but I'm glad I kept trying. Just not doing things doesn't make things easier."

Your child says...	What might be going on?	What you can say?
"I'm too tired to go."	School can be exhausting. That's especially true if kids are struggling in some way. It takes a lot of energy to try to keep up or hide difficulties.	"It surprises me you're tired. I thought you were sleeping well. Is there something you've been working extra hard at or that's using up a lot of your energy? Is there something keeping you up at night?" Also, if your child does seem extra tired, it might be useful to consider an earlier bed time or other things you can do to improve sleep habits.
"I hate school."	Sometimes a specific bad experience or trouble with one aspect of school can cast a cloud over everything else.	"I know there's a lot that you like at school. Is there something in particular that's making you so unhappy that you want to stay home?"
"The kids are mean."	It can be tough for some kids to understand social situations and fit in. Making friends can be hard. And kids are sometimes the targets of bullying.	"I'm sorry kids are being mean. What are they doing? Can you tell me about it? Would you like me to talk to your teacher and come up with a plan?"
"School's too hard."	School isn't always easy, even when kids seem to be doing OK. Sometimes kids might find it hard to meet class expectations, and they often worry about falling behind or failing.	"It sounds like things aren't going as well as you'd like at school. What's the most challenging thing about school right now? Can we ask your teacher or principal for help?"
"I forgot to do my homework again."	For some kids, keeping track of assignments and managing time is really tough, no matter how hard they try. And if it happens a lot, they might feel embarrassed or fear they are going to get in trouble.	"You seem to be having trouble staying on top of your work. Do you feel like that's a challenge for you? Should we ask about some resources and different ways to help you stay organized?"

TIPS FOR GETTING TO SCHOOL REGULARLY AND ON TIME



The Importance of a Good Night's Sleep

Almost all families can relate to the challenge of getting everyone out of bed and ready to get out the door on time every day.

How can we help our kids get up ready for the important learning that lies ahead?

Making sure everyone is well rested is a great start.

In fact, sleep is vital whether you are 8 days or 80 years old, and children especially need enough.

Remember: Children who get enough sleep have a healthier immune system, and often have better school performance, behaviour, memory, and mental health.

Children learn new skills at an enormous rate, and our kids' growing brains really need adequate sleep to keep up, behave well, and focus in school.

And enough sleep usually makes people less cranky – which is a benefit we can all enjoy.

What is recommended? In general, *about* ...

1-3 Years Old	12 - 14 hours per day
3-6 Years Old	10 - 12 hours per day
7-12 Years Old	10 - 11 hours per day
12-18 Years Old	8 - 9 hours per day

How we can help make that happen? Setting good sleep habits isn't simple, but with time the following tips may help.

- ▶ Teach your kids the importance of sleep and make it a priority for your family. Given everything else we have to do, sometimes it is easy to forget about the importance of sleep. Schedule time for it – just like everything else.
- ▶ Set a regular bedtime, considering your kids' ages when making decisions.
- ▶ Start your bedtime routine early enough. If bedtime is 9:00 pm, you might have your children start getting ready for bed at 8:00 or 8:30, so they are ready to actually fall asleep at 9:00.
- ▶ Keep screens out of the bedroom.
 - Incoming messages and calls interfere with sleep; both audio and vibrating alerts can wake up children and teens.
 - It is good to help children avoid the temptation to use or check devices when they should be sleeping – during the night or too early in the morning
 - Emitted light from TVs or mobile screens can affect the quality of sleep. Our brains naturally produce hormones that help us sleep. The glow from our electronic devices confuses our brains and stops those normal processes.

If your children say they need the phone to wake them up, is it possible to buy an alarm clock, instead?

- ▶ When using screens in the evening:
 - Turn the brightness on the screen down
 - Don't play or watch media that are intense or scary

Or help your child relax before bedtime with a story, instead of the stimulation of television.

- ▶ This can be hard sometimes, but try to keep the same sleep routines on weekends and vacations. You can be a little bit flexible at times, but it is easier to keep regular sleep habits when we don't make big changes too often.
- ▶ Get enough exercise during the day! Being active helps everyone sleep better at night.

- ▶ Have your kids avoid caffeine. Soda, energy drinks, and coffee (even decaf) can ruin a good night's sleep. And avoid chocolate in the evening ... it also has caffeine.
- ▶ Consider that most people sleep well in a cool, dark, quiet space.
- ▶ Watch for signs of sleepiness in your children. Do they wake up easily in the morning? Are they energetic all day long? If tiredness is a problem, can you add a few more hours of sleep to the schedule?

And get proper rest and go to bed early yourself. Your kids may pay more attention to what you do than what you say. You can be a sleep role model – and feel better, too.

APPENDIX NINE

FACT SHEETS ON ATTENDANCE RELATED ISSUES

- 9.1 Fact Sheet: Reasons to Greet Students at the Door
- 9.2 Fact Sheet: Why Worry About Attendance Issues
- 9.3 Prevalence of School Attendance Challenges

FACT SHEET:

REASONS TO GREET STUDENTS AT THE DOOR



What Does the Research Say?

Studies show an effective way to increase student connectedness, student attention to learning (on-task behaviour), and teacher rapport with students: simply greeting students at the classroom door.

It may be tempting for teachers to use the time that students are entering the classroom and getting settled to undertake administrative tasks – such as taking attendance, checking off homework, firing off an email ... But taking that time to set up students for success can be important – for them, and for teachers.

- ☐ Positive greetings at the classroom door can increase students' academic engagement by 20% and decrease disruptive classroom behaviour by 9%, according to a study published in the *Journal of Positive Behavior (Positive Greetings at the Door: Evaluation of a Low-Cost, High-Yield Proactive Classroom Management Strategy)*. "The results from this study suggest that teachers who spend time on the front end to implement strategies such as positive greetings at the door will eventually save more time on the back end by spending less time reacting to problem behaviour and more time on instruction," the study authors write.
- ☐ Earlier studies (reported in *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 2007 and 2011) showed the practice of greeting students resulted in an increase in student engagement and students getting on task faster, in comparison to a control class that was not greeted (Wong and Wong, 2015).
- Greetings at the door set an immediate and positive tone. The approach promotes a sense of belonging in the classroom; it gives students social and emotional support and helps them feel invested in their learning. It also can reduce students' and teachers' stress levels as the day / class begins.
- By starting the day on a bright note and with a warm greeting, honouring and acknowledging students' presence from the moment they step up to the door, students will feel happier about coming to school and approach learning with a more optimistic mindset.

- ▶ Greetings at the door help build relationships between students and teachers, which is an important part of making connections to enhance learning throughout the rest of the day. Special things — a secret handshake, greeting song or poem, an interesting quote or thought-provoking question to spark discussion — can set a relaxing and positive tone for the class. Even older students who change classes throughout the day can benefit from time to pause and connect about how their day is going when they arrive at the classroom. They may want to take a few moments to talk about things happening in the world and they may not have another adult willing to take the time to hear their perspectives on things. These few moments don't need to drag on and take away from learning time; just a few very short interactions can make a surprisingly important difference.
- ▶ The practice also builds a sense of community in the classroom. Students need to feel that school is a safe refuge for them — a place where they are loved and wanted. By supporting these feelings, teachers are encouraging students to engage more fully in the learning process.
- ▶ The first few minutes of class are often the most chaotic, as students transition from busy areas such as the hallway or playground. Left unchecked, disruptions can become difficult to manage, but a proactive approach to classroom management can help students get focused and ready to learn. For students who have trouble switching classes, greeting them at the door with explicit directions can be helpful, giving students a sense of purpose with a task to do as they enter the room. This can be a whole-class activity, such as preparing their desks for the day, or a few students each day can be asked to take on helping roles, providing everyone an opportunity as the year progresses. For example, the teacher can use reminders of what to do at the start of class, such as “spend the next few minutes reviewing what we covered yesterday.” If a student struggled with behaviour the previous day, the teacher can share a positive message to encourage improvement and suggest a fresh start.
- ▶ Classroom door greetings provide a chance to connect with every student and to gauge their emotional state. Although brief, it's a chance to have a one-on-one conversation with each student. Sometimes directing a small, simple gesture toward a student can help to see if they have something on their mind.
- ▶ The practice provides an opportunity to model (and for students to practice) positive social behaviours that are expected in the classroom, as well as adult behaviours often expected outside of school.

- ▶ In greetings, teachers can ask each student a question to formatively assess their understanding of the previous day's lesson.
- ▶ This simple practice can be a time saver. Even if a consistent classroom routine has been established, greetings at the door allows the teacher to cue students to something that may be different ("please be sure to turn in your homework," or "please pick up the work you missed yesterday from the absent folder").

▶ **TIPS:** When greeting students at the door, use students' names, give a few words of encouragement, and ask how their day is going. Nonverbal interpersonal interactions, such as a friendly handshake or a thumbs-up, can help make greetings feel authentic and build trust — taking care if students feel uncomfortable with physical contact. While remembering that not everyone likes attention focused on them, even a very subtle gesture can let a reluctant scholar know that you see them and value them. It is just necessary to be attentive to students' varying preferences.

Establishing a positive classroom climate in which students feel a sense of connection and belonging is invaluable, given the research demonstrating that motivation, achievement and STUDENT ATTENDANCE can all increase as a result.

And a welcoming classroom environment doesn't benefit students alone; it can improve the teacher's mental health as well. Many teachers feel stressed by student disengagement or disruptions, and many teachers report classroom management to be one of their greatest concerns. Too often, time and energy spent responding to misbehaviour are exhausting and time consuming. It is much better for both student and teacher well-being to instead focus on no-cost, easy-to-implement strategies that can help to prevent problems from arising.

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FACT SHEET:

WHY WORRY ABOUT ATTENDANCE ISSUES

Each year, data collected from First Nations schools that receive funding through the British Columbia Tripartite Education Agreement (BCTEA) shows that approximately 1/3 of students in those schools would meet the definition of chronically absent – absent 10% or more days in the school year.

Why is this important?

- ▶ Chronic absenteeism is a primary cause of low academic achievement and a powerful predictor of which students may eventually drop out of school. *And it does not matter if absences are excused or unexcused. Missing school for any reason means lost learning.*
- ▶ If children don't show up for school regularly, they miss out on fundamental reading and math skills, and each successive year of chronic absenteeism means the risks of reduced learning compound. Affected students also lose the chance to build a habit of good attendance that will carry them into college and careers.
- ▶ Poor attendance can influence whether children read proficiently by the end of third grade or will fall behind.

Who can read at grade level by the end of third grade? 64% of students who had good attendance at kindergarten and first grade, versus 17% of students who were chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade.

- ▶ As students progress through school, those who are chronically absent have consistent lower grades and test scores.
- ▶ By 6th grade, chronic absence becomes a leading indicator of whether a student will drop out of high school and be left without the academic credentials and skills needed to move on to post-secondary education and compete in a 21st century workforce. One study found that a student who is chronically absent in even a single school year between the eighth and twelfth grades is over seven times more likely to drop out of school than a student who has not been chronically absent.

- ▶ Students who experience chronic absenteeism are more likely to find it difficult to build meaningful connections at school, so they may struggle with behavioural and emotional skills that are critical for school success.
- ▶ Studies show that students who are frequently absent have higher rates of involvement in risky behaviours.
- ▶ Research demonstrates that completing high school is not only a strong predictor of adult success but also of adult physical and mental health outcomes and involvement with the criminal justice system.
- ▶ Regular attendance helps students develop “soft skills” that employers expect, such as dependability and punctuality. Students who don’t develop the habits associated with good attendance in the early years often find it difficult to develop them as adults.
- ▶ Chronic absenteeism is a problem that affects the whole community, not just the students who are chronically absent and their parents.
 - When too many students miss too much school, chronic absenteeism can be a drag on entire classrooms, as teachers slow down instruction to help absentee students.
 - Chronic absenteeism can undermine a community’s efforts to improve school performance and can contribute to higher dropout rates, meaning more young people are unable to hold good jobs or make enough money to support their families.

Data strongly suggests that the long-term consequence of chronic absenteeism is a population that is less educated, less healthy, underemployed, and less financially stable – effecting entire communities.

The good news is that chronic absence can be significantly reduced when schools, families and community partners work together to monitor data, nurture a habit of regular attendance, and address hurdles that keep children from getting to school every day.

For more information, see the First Nations Education Steering Committee and First Nations Schools Association publication: **A Toolkit For Raising the Attendance Rates Of First Nations Students In British Columbia.**

This fact sheet was adapted from information found at attendanceworks.org and in Sprick, J. and T. Berg. 2019. *Teacher’s Guide to Tackling Attendance Challenges*. ASCD

FACT SHEET:

PREVALENCE OF SCHOOL ATTENDANCE CHALLENGES

What Does the Research Say?

Data collected from First Nations schools that receive funding through the British Columbia Tripartite Education Agreement (BCTEA) shows that approximately 1/3 of students in those schools would meet the definition of chronically absent – absent 10% or more days in the school year.

This data is consistent with widespread research findings that make it clear that chronic absenteeism is an equity issue.ⁱⁱ

- ▶ Poverty and socio-economic circumstances have been shown to have a significant impact on whether students choose and are able to attend school, and wide-ranging research finds that chronic absenteeism is significantly more common among economically disadvantaged students.ⁱⁱⁱ
- ▶ Overall, children living in poverty have been shown to be two to three times more likely to be chronically absent.^{iv}
- ▶ Numerous studies show that districts and schools with higher rates of poverty, regardless of other demographics, are more likely to experience higher rates of chronic absences.^v
- ▶ According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (www.nctsn.org), poverty, trauma and health concerns are all associated and are shown to impact student attendance.

Further, rates of absenteeism appear to be higher for Indigenous students worldwide, likely linked to socio-economic disparities.

- ▶ In the United States, Indigenous students exhibit higher rates of absenteeism across grades.^{vii} 2005 US data found higher rates of absence for American Indian students at the 4th and 8th grades.^{viii} Data collected by Minneapolis public schools showed that district-wide, 60% of all students met the goal of 95% attendance in the school year, but the rate for American Indian students was only 30% – half that of the overall population.^{ix}

- Evidence shows that school attendance rates of Indigenous students in Australia are considerably lower than non-Indigenous students, with the number of days absent among Indigenous students reported to be up to three times greater than among non-Indigenous students.^x

But while there can be no doubt that poverty puts children at a tremendous disadvantage, no research says poverty is fatal to educational success. In fact, “it would be a terrible mistake to conclude that growing up in poverty is an irrevocable blow to one’s future.”^{vi}

The issue can be addressed.

- Schools cannot by themselves solve problems of poverty, nor should they be held solely responsible for them. But a considerable body of research indicates that schools can contribute in important ways to alleviating poverty’s effects through strong links with families and communities.^{xi}

For more information, see the First Nations Education Steering Committee and First Nations Schools Association publication: **A Toolkit For Raising the Attendance Rates Of First Nations Students In British Columbia.**

ⁱ Bourke, C., K. Rigby, and J. Burden July 2000 *Better Practice in School Attendance. Improving the School Attendance of Indigenous Students.* Commonwealth Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs.

ⁱⁱ US Department of Education. 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/chronic-absenteeism-an-old-problem-in-search-of-new-answers>

^{iv} Attendance Works. Attendanceworks.org

^v Sprick, J. and T. Berg. 2019. *Teacher’s Guide to Tackling Attendance Challenges.* Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development; Balfanz, R. and V Byrnes May 2012 *The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation’s Public Schools.* Everyone Graduates Center, John Hopkin’s University School of Education. www.new.every1graduates.org; Attendance Works, attendanceworks.org

^{vi} Levin, B. 1995. Educational Responses to Poverty. *Canadian Journal of Education.*

^{vii} Sprick and Berg, 2019.

^{viii} Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA 2008 update. *School Attendance Problems: Are Current Policies and Practices Going in the Right Direction?* Los Angeles, CA.

^{ix} Attendance Works. Attendanceworks.org

^x Bourke, C., K. Rigby, and J. Burden July 2000 *Better Practice in School Attendance. Improving the School Attendance of Indigenous Students.* Commonwealth Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs.

^{xi} IBID



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