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## Establishing School-Wide Attendance Incentives

School attendance is a simple, easily understood measure of student performance. One strategy for improving attendance is engaging students, parents, educators and community members in a campaign that offers positive rewards for getting to school on time.

### Overarching Issues to Consider:

- **Attendance incentives are most effective when part of a comprehensive approach** that includes outreach to families with more significant challenges to attendance. Incentives should be part of creating a school-wide culture and emphasis on attendance and accompanied by a deep commitment to ensuring students are engaged in the classroom once they show up.
- **Incentives don't need to be costly.** Simple rewards—recognition from peers and the school through certificates or assemblies, extra recess time, homework passes, even dancing in the hallways—go a long way toward motivating students. Ask students what they consider a meaningful incentive.
- **Interclass competition is a powerful motivator.** The sense of competition between classes (for example, a party for the class with the best monthly attendance) can be a powerful motivator. Such strategies encourage students to feel accountable to each other for attending class. To broaden awareness and involve more of the community, schools should also consider launching inter-school competitions for best attendance.
- **Avoid recognizing only perfect attendance.** Perfect attendance is not always the goal since it is not wise to encourage children to come to school when they're sick. Students should be rewarded for improved attendance, not just perfect records. Offering weekly perfect attendance awards can allow students to still have a chance to succeed the next week if they are absent.
- **Reward timeliness, not just showing up to school.** Since tardiness also has an adverse impact on learning, many schools only count on-time attendance toward rewards. Consider taking this approach to ensure children are arriving to class on-time.
- **Send home information highlighting both the value of attendance and incentives and the consequences of poor attendance.** Ensure families know about the incentive program, why school attendance matters for academic success and understand school policies when poor attendance results in failing a course or being retained. Sanctions should never be used without incentives.
- **Offer incentives for families, not just students.** Often, families appreciate access to resources such as food baskets, transportation passes, etc.
- **Implement incentives school wide.** In order to foster a culture of attendance, every classroom needs to participate!





## Ideas for Incentives

### Teachers can offer:

- Positive comments to children
- Positive notes home to parents
- Extra time at the computer or PE
- Free homework pass
- First-in-line privileges for lunch or dismissal
- Smoothie coupon
- Pencils, pens, stickers, posters, book covers, book marks, etc.
- Team certificate for the best record or most improved record
- Name on the "Attendance Wall" in the classroom
- Chance to act as teacher's assistant

### Administration, PTAs and Boosters can provide:

- Recognition during morning announcements
- Certificate/award at student assembly
- Breakfast/lunch with the principal, superintendent, school board president, mayor, etc.
- School supplies, i.e. pencil with logo
- Food coupons redeemable in school cafeteria
- Food gift certificate for Jamba Juice, etc.
- Lunch/smoothie or movie party for class with best attendance
- "School money" for the school store
- Choice of donated products, like movie tickets, gift certificates, discounts and passes to local activities or venues
- Traveling trophy for grade-level classroom with the best monthly attendance
- Attendance T-shirts/hats/buttons
- Age-appropriate rewards for most improved attendance

Source: New York State Department of Education Student Support Services

## Promising Approaches

Good attendance helps kids succeed in school and bolster their self-esteem. Improving attendance requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond sanctions and includes incentives. Here are some steps that schools are taking:

### Brookfield Elementary School

Oakland, Calif.

Brookfield has dramatically improved its attendance, in part through an institutionalized system of incentives that has the buy-in of students, parents, and teachers. Elements of their incentive program include weekly movie parties for the class with the best attendance, a chance to be nominated for Popcorn with the Principal for students who have attended every day in a week, and even a yearly bike raffle.

### Burton Elementary School

Grand Rapids, Mich.

When Burton students achieve perfect attendance for a month, they become a STAR (Studious, Thoughtful Accountable and Respectful) student. They earn a gold T-shirt saying, "I am a STAR student." Their picture is displayed on the television in the school lobby, and they join in an ice-cream social with the principal.

### Julian Elementary School

San Diego County, Calif.

Julian has improved its on-time attendance with an interclass competition that promises a pizza party to the first class with enough days of perfect attendance to spell out the words "Perfect Punctuality."

### Gladden Middle School

Murray County, Ga.

Gladden recognizes good attendance on a weekly, monthly and semester basis. Students who attend for a full week receive popcorn passes. The homeroom class in each grade level with the best attendance each month receives milk and doughnuts. Students with fewer than two absences can enter end-of-semester drawings for prizes.

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## Getting in Touch with Hard-to-Reach Parents & Guardians

Often, it is difficult to make and maintain contact with the parent or guardian of students who are chronically absent. Here are some tips that may be helpful when trying to get in touch.

### Keep Updated Records

- ✓ At the beginning of each school year, make sure a new emergency card is filled out AND that the updated information is recorded in your computer system.
- ✓ When meeting with parents at a conference, SST, SART or other setting, make it a practice to ask the parent if the address, phone number and e-mail address are current and update any changes with the school office.
- ✓ When parents fill out forms for the school (for free/reduced lunch; permission slips; after-school programs; sports programs, etc.) make note of the address, e-mail and phone number provided.

### Try More Than One Method

**Increasingly, communication can come in many forms. If letters are returned as undeliverable, don't give up!**

- ✓ Try calling AND texting to all phone numbers provided by the parent. If a phone number is turned off the day you try calling, give it a try a few days later. Often cell phones will not accept calls if bills are overdue, but the number will be active again later in the week or month.
- ✓ Use e-mail and social media. Does the family have a Facebook page or Twitter account where you could send a message?
- ✓ Make a home visit to the last known address; often a landlord or neighbor will be a great source of information.

### Be Creative in Who You Call; Cast a Wide Net

**If all else has failed, you may want to think about other people who could help you contact the parent or guardian.**

- ✓ Ask the student where he/she is living and if there is a working phone number
- ✓ Check to see if there are siblings in the school district and contact them
- ✓ Call all of the contacts listed on the emergency card
- ✓ Contact the student's doctor's office and ask for help in reaching the family
- ✓ Reach out to the school community—does the family attend a local church, participate in sports or other activities? Enlist the community to help you
- ✓ Does the parent receive public assistance? If so, a social worker may be able to help you locate the family.
- ✓ Speak to your school resource officer to find out if law enforcement can partner in contacting the parent.

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## Resources and Tips for School and Afterschool Staff

Too many Oakland students are missing so much school that their academic futures are at risk. As a member of the school or afterschool staff, you have a unique opportunity to send the message to students and families that regular school attendance is critically important and to help build a culture of attendance at our school.

### Key Messages for All School and Afterschool Staff to Convey

**Parents need to understand why they should care. Start by spreading the message that...**

- ✓ Children can suffer academically if they miss just 10% of school days. This is just a couple days every month and can happen before you know it.
- ✓ Absences add up! Both unexcused AND excused absences represent lost time in the classroom and a lost opportunity to learn.
- ✓ Attendance matters as early as kindergarten. Children who miss too many days in kindergarten and first grade can struggle academically in later years and often are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade.
- ✓ Attending school regularly helps children feel better about school—and themselves. Start building this habit early so they learn that going to school on time, every day, is important.
- ✓ Good attendance will help children do well in high school, college, and at work.
- ✓ Too many absent students can affect the whole classroom, slowing down instruction. Getting to school late also disrupts class, and can lead to children missing important parts of the school day.

### How and When Do I Get These Messages Across?

#### Ideas for Teachers

**Teachers have a particularly important role in educating families about the importance of on-time attendance. Tips for reinforcing this message include:**

- ✓ Welcome each student (and when possible, their parent) when they come into your classroom every morning. Notice when a child is absent and when they return, tell them you missed them and ask why they weren't at school.
- ✓ Make sure both students and families feel welcome and comfortable in your classroom. Relationship building is fundamental to any strategy for improving attendance.
- ✓ Incorporate daily and/or weekly rituals that celebrate attendance and being a part of the class community every day.
- ✓ Implement incentives in your classroom that celebrate good and improved attendance.
- ✓ Discuss the importance of attendance at parent teacher conferences and give parents an update on how many days their child has been absent. Let parents know that if they need to be away for extended periods of time, they should let you know beforehand to make sure their child can keep up as much as possible.





## Ideas for School and Afterschool Staff

**But teachers aren't the only ones who play a key role in building a culture of attendance. Other school and afterschool staff can reinforce messages about attendance through their daily interactions with families and students. In particular you can:**

- ✓ Take advantage of Back to School events. Distribute flyers, put up posters, and advertise incentives to get families thinking about attendance from the start of the year.
- ✓ Reinforce the messages and incentive programs that teachers are incorporating into their classrooms. For afterschool staff, consider setting up attendance incentives in your own program.
- ✓ Get the community involved. Help your principal by distributing the Community Partner Flyers included in the Every Day Counts Attendance Toolkit.

## What Advice Can I Offer to Parents and Families?

**In some cases, working one-on-one with families is necessary for helping them break down the barriers to their children's attendance. But there are also general tips you can offer them to help strengthen their children's attendance. Make use of the Parent Flyer from the Every Day Counts Attendance Toolkit and make suggestions like...**

- ✓ Set a regular bedtime and morning routine. Put out clothes and pack backpacks the night before.
- ✓ For older children, help set homework routines. Stay on top of academic progress to make sure your child is staying on track and encourage meaningful afterschool activities that will help your child feel more engaged in school.
- ✓ Plan medical appointments and vacations when school is closed or not in session.
- ✓ If your child seems anxious about school, talk to teachers, school counselors, or other parents for advice on how to make your child feel comfortable and excited about learning. Keep in mind that complaints of a stomachache or headache can be a sign of anxiety and isn't a reason to keep your child home from school.
- ✓ Develop back-up plans for getting to school if something comes up. Call on a family member, a neighbor, or another parent.
- ✓ Turn to the school and community agencies if you need help! Oakland schools offer services for the whole family often in collaboration with community partners.

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## Joining Forces to Improve Student Attendance: How Community Partners Can Help!

As members of the Oakland community, we all have an interest in seeing our young people succeed in school. Each of us benefits when children thrive, and every one of us wants to see each student in our city attend school every day, graduate from high school and go on to a successful college or work experience. Yet, too many of our students miss school too often and too many fail to graduate. Experience tells us that if our schools can work together with families as well as the community, we can make a difference in the lives of the children living here.

Whether you are a sports coach, a local business owner, a librarian, a leader in the faith community or an outreach worker, you have a unique relationship with an opportunity to influence parents and students when it comes to going to school, every day and on time.

Please partner with us in sending the message—loud and clear—that every day counts. If students attend today, they will achieve tomorrow!

Here are some points that you can cover with parents of local students:

### STUDENTS SUFFER SOCIALLY AND ACADEMICALLY WHEN THEY ARE ABSENT

- ✓ If students miss just 10% of the school year – even a few days every month—they will suffer academically and won't be able to keep up with their peers.
- ✓ Attendance matters as early as Kindergarten. Studies show that children who miss too many days in kindergarten and first grade are more likely to struggle academically in later years. Often, these students have trouble mastering reading by the end of third grade.
- ✓ When children come late to school on a regular basis, they often completely miss the morning lesson—which is often reading and/or math. Think about it—if a child comes 20 to 30 minutes late to school every day, he or she may never be present to learn how to read!
- ✓ When kids miss too much school, they are less likely to make friends, bond with their teachers or feel comfortable in a classroom setting.

### STUDENTS THRIVE WHEN THEY ARE IN SCHOOL EVERY DAY!

- ✓ Attending school regularly helps children feel better about school--and themselves.
- ✓ Regular, on-time attendance is a good habit that is learned at a very early age, beginning in kindergarten or pre-school.
- ✓ Good attendance in the early years actually helps children succeed in high school, college and work.
- ✓ Students who are in school every day are less likely to become victims of crime, or to commit a crime themselves.





## HOW YOU CAN HELP—MAKE IT YOUR BUSINESS!

**We need your commitment, your voice and your partnership to make sure that the youngest citizens of our community are in school every day.**

**Whenever you find yourself in a position to speak with a parent about his or her child, touch on the topic of the importance of regular school attendance.**

- ✓ Ask the parent how his/her children are doing in school. If you are told that a student is struggling, ask about attendance.
- ✓ You may be able to help a parent who is struggling to get his or her child to school on time.
- ✓ Get to know the kids who live in your neighborhood, play in your local parks, come to your library. Get to know their parents or guardians and their siblings, too.
- ✓ Talk to the kids—ask them if they miss a lot of school. Try to find out why—are there issues with transportation, safety, bullying, academic struggles? Identify what would help motivate them (for example, connecting better with their teacher, participating in sports or attending an afterschool program) to go to school more.
- ✓ Think about creating incentives, prizes or awards for kids with good or improved attendance.

**Ask yourself: can you assist to organize a walking school bus, help in creating a safe route to school, or mentor or tutor a student?**

**If you would like to volunteer to work in an OUSD school contact:**

**Phone: (510) 273-1580**  
**FAX: (510) 273-1581**  
**E-mail: [volunteers@ousd.k12.ca.us](mailto:volunteers@ousd.k12.ca.us)**





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## Does Attendance Really Count in Our School? A Tool for Self-Assessment

Strength	OK for Now	Could be Better	Urgent Gap	Don't Know	How do you know?
1. Attendance is accurately taken and entered daily into the district data system in all classrooms.					
2. Our school has a clear and widely understood attendance policy.					
3. A team including the site administrator reviews attendance data on a regular basis to identify chronically absent students and monitor attendance patterns by grade, student sub-groups and classroom.					
4. Our school offers rich and engaging learning activities, keeping students from not wanting to miss school.					
5. Our school recognizes and appreciates good and improved attendance.					
6. Our school informs parents about the importance of attendance and encourages parents to help each other get their children to school.					
7. Our school identifies and reaches out to chronically absent students and their families in a caring manner to see how attendance could be improved.					
8. Our school partners with community agencies that offer resources (pre-K, afterschool, health services, volunteer mentors, transportation) that can help engage students and their families and remove barriers to getting to school.					
9. Individual learning plans are developed for high-risk students that address poor attendance along with low academic performance.					
10. Our school discipline policy and practice ensure students do not miss instruction due to suspensions for non-violent behaviors.					
11. Our strategies for supporting student attendance are reflected in our school improvement plan.					
12. Our school has made use of the Every Day Counts toolkit and integrated the tools and materials into our standard practice.					
13. Our school has communicated with surrounding businesses and community partners to engage them in supporting attendance.					

School Name: \_\_\_\_\_

(Note: Chronic Absence is missing = > 10% of school over a year including any type of absence; Satisfactory Attendance is missing = < 5% of school over a year)





# Instructions for Conducting Self-Assessment with a Team

*This self-assessment tool can be used by an individual to help gain a deeper understanding of what is and could be happening to improve attendance at their school. It is also an excellent tool for laying the foundation for a team of key stakeholders to begin working together to reduce student absences. Whether filled out individually or as a team, we recommend completing the exercise early in the year so that schools can identify priorities and have time to implement strategies.*

*Below are suggested guidelines for engaging a team. If possible, identify one person who will assume responsibility for facilitating this process and dialogue.*

1. Bring together a team of key stakeholders in your school to complete this self-assessment. Participants should include the principal, attendance personnel, classroom teachers, staff from partnering community agencies, and if possible, active parents. Feel free to expand this list to include others that you think might have valuable insights to offer about student attendance in your school.
2. Ask each participant to spend 10 minutes completing the tool.
3. Hand out an extra copy of the tool and ask participants to add in their responses with a hatch mark. Make copies of the version with everyone's responses. (An alternative option is to put up an enlarged copy of the tool on the wall and ask participants to add their responses using a marker. This approach allows everyone to see the collective responses without the need for additional copies.)
4. As a group, review the collective results. Encourage participants to identify and explore where there appear to be differences in how stakeholders have ranked a particular element. Use this as an opportunity to find out why the other person might have different perspectives. Keep in mind that the goal is to deepen understanding of why the differences of opinion might exist; agreeing upon a rating is not essential.
5. After comparing results, participants should discuss what they see as the biggest gaps or priorities to address in the near future. If needed, use dots or take a hand vote to agree upon the top three next steps. For each one, discuss who needs to be involved in advancing this priority? What are immediate next steps? Who can take responsibility for ensuring follow-up occurs? Determine how to stay in communication with each other about progress on the next steps and decide whether a follow-up meeting is needed.

School Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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**Help Your Child Succeed in School:**

## **Build the Habit of Good Attendance Early**

*School success goes hand in hand with good attendance!*

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

- ✓ Starting in kindergarten, too many absences can cause children to fall behind in school.
- ✓ Missing 10 percent of school (about 2 days a month or 18 days a year) makes it harder to learn to read.
- ✓ Students can still fall behind if they miss just a day or two days every few weeks.
- ✓ Being late to school disrupts the start of class and can make your child miss important lessons.
- ✓ Absences can affect the whole classroom if the teacher has to slow down learning to help children catch up.
- ✓ Good attendance will help children do well in high school, college, and at work.

***Attending school regularly helps children feel better about school – and themselves. Start building this habit early so they can learn right away that going to school on time and every day is important.***

### **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

- ✓ Set a regular bed time and morning routine.
- ✓ Lay out clothes and pack backpacks the night before.
- ✓ Find out what day school starts and make sure your child has the required shots.
- ✓ Send your child the message that school is a fun place. Introduce your child to his/her teachers and classmates before school starts to help her transition.
- ✓ Bring your child to school unless he/she is truly sick. Keep in mind complaints of a stomach ache or headache can be a sign of anxiety and not a reason to stay home.
- ✓ If your child seems anxious about going to school, talk to teachers, school counselors, or other parents for advice on how to make him/her feel comfortable and excited about learning.
- ✓ Develop back-up plans for getting to school if something comes up. Call on a family member, a neighbor, or another parent for help.
- ✓ Plan medical appointments and extended trips when school is closed or not in session.
- ✓ Keep track of how many days your child has missed and how many times they've been late.

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FOR GOOD AND/OR IMPROVED ATTENDANCE THIS SEMESTER

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