GUIDE TO
GREAT ATTENDANCE

Proven Strategies for Engaging Families and Improving Student Success

About ParentPowered

ParentPowered is a team of diverse, knowledgeable individuals dedicated to helping educational and community-based organizations build strong partnerships with families in order to collaboratively:

- Address long-standing educational inequities
- Boost academic achievement
- Support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people
- Increase readiness for kindergarten, middle school, high school, and college & career
- Increase the engagement of children and young people in school and other learning opportunities
- Strengthen communities

Why We Do What We Do

We believe all children deserve the opportunity to thrive, and families play a powerful role in their development. Families want their children to succeed, and research shows they will eagerly use tools that support their parenting journey when available.

The problem is, high-quality parenting solutions are often limited, expensive, and hard to access, leaving many families without the tools they need. ParentPowered fills this gap by creating accessible, evidence-based family engagement solutions.

By partnering with education providers and equipping all families with easy-to-use tools, we tap into the power of a caregiver's love to help ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive in school and life.

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Partnering with Families for Student Engagement

From kindergarten through high school, regular attendance at school lays the foundation for students to engage in academic learning, build relationships with peers and teachers, and develop important life skills. And yet, K12 attendance remains a challenge for many schools and districts.

Family Engagement & Attendance

Families are core members of the school attendance team. Research shows that when educators engage families as active partners in their students' learning and attendance, absenteeism rates can decrease by up to 15% (Robinson et al., 2019). Educators crafting strategies to improve school attendance benefit from effective family engagement.

One study estimates that, between the 2018–2019 and 2021–2022 school years, an additional 6.5 million students became chronically absent (Dee, 2023), putting them at serious risk of falling behind peers academically.

Educators are expanding their breadth of resources and tools to ensure each child is physically and actively included within the school community. Among the most effective strategies gaining momentum, in both empirical studies and practical implementations, is family engagement (Islam & Shapla, 2021). Engaging families as partners in student learning improves K12 attendance, cultivates a positive school climate, and ensures all students have the opportunity to thrive.

Understanding School Attendance in K12 Education: Why It Matters

A student's physical presence in a classroom is just one facet of the rich, full picture of student learning. Behind this lies student engagement, the "degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education" (The Glossary of Education Reform).

The two are closely connected. The more engaged and present (physically and otherwise) a student is, the more positive outcomes they experience. The more disengaged, the less attentive a student may be — and this pattern begins early in their school journey.

Below are just a few of the many research findings showing how important attendance is for long-term success:

- Children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who regularly attend school gain literacy skills more successfully than peers during kindergarten and first grade (Ready, 2010).
- A statistical analysis by the Georgia Department of Education in 2011 found that just a 3% improvement in attendance — five additional days of students being in school — would have led more than 55,000 students to pass end-of-year standardized tests in reading, English, or mathematics in grades 3 to 8.
- High attendance rates also impact students' social and emotional learning (SEL) which in turn improves student learning, including increased academic achievement, graduation rates, and sense of belonging in school (Taylor et al., 2017).
- Frequent absences during kindergarten result in lower academic performance later on in their learning career (Ansari & Purtell, 2018).
- Feelings of loneliness and disconnecting from the school community can make it difficult for a student to want to attend school, creating a challenging cycle in which students become further and further isolated from the classroom.
- The more prolonged absences become, the greater the impact on student achievement and the less likely students are able to close such achievement gaps (Balfanz & Byrnes 2006).

Absences are a key risk factor for other health concerns and challenges, such as substance use and mental health challenges (Kearney, 2008) as well as referrals to the juvenile justice system (Zhang et al., 2017).

Missing instructional time ultimately affects a student's well-being in adulthood, beyond K12 classrooms. At worst, chronic absenteeism and its negative effects increase the likelihood of a student dropping out of school — an outcome with heavy economic and personal consequences for both the individual and an entire classroom cohort.

Improving K12 attendance is crucial in ensuring students have equitable access to quality education and better prospects for their future.

FAMILY RESOURCES

Get Ready for GREAT ATTENDANCE!

Set up your families for successful school attendance by sharing these guides! Available in English & Spanish.

Download

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Challenges & Inequities with Attendance: Why Kids Miss School

At some point during a student's educational journey, they will miss instructional time, whether it is due to a family emergency, unexpected illness, a religious holiday not included in the school calendar, or something else. However, there are also numerous barriers that differently impact attendance for different students— and many of these factors are beyond a family or student's direct control to change.

Illness and Health

The most common reason a student misses instructional time is due to sickness. There are hidden inequities that impact attendance and student illness.

First, each organization sets its own policies for when an unwell child should stay home and when they may return to school. In some cases, schools require a note from a healthcare professional for extended absences due to illness, in order to consider those absences as "excused." For some families, this requirement may not be accessible due to socio-economic reasons or past challenging experiences with medical care professionals that impact their trust in such services.

With a severe or chronic health condition, inequities grow further. Medication can be costly, making it difficult for some families to afford care that may quicken a student's recovery from illness, resulting in more days of school missed. Further, among students with disabilities, chronic absenteeism is disproportionately higher than their peers, especially in urban settings (Gottfried et al, 2019).

Basic Needs (Food, Shelter, Community Safety)

When a person has their most basic needs met, they have greater space and wellness to devote energy towards their job, studies, families, children, and more. Conversely, when fundamental needs like food, shelter, and safety are not present, a person understandably struggles to give attention to other parts of their life.

Housing instability is a large contributor to chronic absenteeism, a challenge compounded by poverty for many families. Just as with student illness, inequities in socioeconomic status come into play here as well.

In their 2012 study examining state-wide patterns of chronic absenteeism and poverty, Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes found that chronic absentee rates were significantly higher among economically disadvantaged students, students in special education classes, and students from specific ethnicity groups. Another study found that kindergarteners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who were chronically absent later performed less well than their peers when they were in fifth grade (Chang and Romero, 2008).

Transportation

Another common barrier to school attendance is transportation itself. Not all families have the same access to modes of transit to and from school. Some use their own vehicle if they can afford it, while others may rely on public options such as buses or trains. Families with varying socioeconomic situations may not always have access to certain types of transportation. Further, the schedule and reliability of public transportation methods are beyond a family and a student's control — yet can be the crux for missed instructional time.

Sense of Belonging

Every family (and by extension, their children) comes to a school community with diverse experiences, perspectives, and expectations about education. Some families have had unpleasant experiences in classrooms or teachers in their past. As a result, parents and caregivers may struggle to put their trust in schools.

There may also be varying perspectives on whether student attendance is actually important for learning or not, which can stem from differing cultural backgrounds or personal experiences. Educators' cultural competency and responsiveness makes a big difference for welcoming all families and students.

Students may feel less inclined to attend school when they do not feel like they belong within the school community. The need to belong is especially powerful in middle and high school as pre-teens and teens develop social relationships in parallel with strengthening their sense of self.

Positive peer and adult relationships strengthen a student's sense of community, encouraging more regular attendance.

Belonging can also relate to how learning in the classroom connects meaningfully with students' personal goals. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation found that 74% of high school students who dropped out of school actually had passing grades. When asked why they quit, students reported that they did not feel that what they were learning was relevant to them. They had career ideas in mind — but no one had discussed with them how what they learned in school connected with and supported their future goals.

Shifting From Absenteeism To Participation & Engagement

Remember, ALL of these factors are beyond a family or a student's full control or responsibility to shift on their own. As Hedy Chang, executive director at Attendance Works, puts it, "The key to improving attendance is identifying, understanding and addressing the things that cause kids to miss school in the first place."

With broader community support attendance can thrive. Organizations and schools together can support families who face these challenges by becoming true partners and allies in their students' attendance at school. From reforming educational disciplinary practices around attendance to shifting emphasis in the narrative from "absenteeism" toward "participation", schools and families together can work together to promote student success (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2020).

It Takes A Village: Engaging Families in Student Attendance

Research shows that family engagement positively impacts everything from reading and math test scores to teacher satisfaction. K12 attendance is no exception. Empirical studies have repeatedly found that targeted parent and family engagement efforts can significantly increase student attendance.

In fact, strong family engagement was a critical buffer in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic for reducing chronic absenteeism. A 2023 research study found that schools with high levels of family engagement before pandemic shutdowns saw significantly lower rates of chronic absenteeism, even while schools across the country largely witnessed an increase in chronic absenteeism following extended school closures in 2020.

Examining the "Key Ingredients to Systemic Changes" Framework

The nonprofit organization Attendance Works offers a comprehensive, community-based model to improve student attendance through systemic changes. Within this framework, teachers, parents and caregivers, administrators, and community partners collaborate together to take a systems-based approach to encourage student engagement and attendance in school.

- Capacity Building involves supporting district and school staff to build the skills and knowledge they need to take a multi-tiered approach to student engagement and attendance.
- Actionable Data encourages schools to collect, analyze, and leverage attendance and chronic absenteeism data to inform intervention and prevention strategies — and not for punitive action.
- Positive Engagement emphasizes building a culture of attendance centered on student and family belonging.

- Strategic Partnerships extend collaborations beyond the school building and into the community to make a broader range of resources available for student attendance, including support with the school enrollment process and family outreach.
- Adequate, Equitable Resources means that students from all backgrounds and regardless of circumstances receive a quality education and opportunity to thrive in school and beyond.
- Shared Accountability aligns stakeholders — including students, families, educators, and community partners — to prioritize reducing chronic absenteeism as a collective effort in school improvement.

Putting The Framework Into Practice

This framework offers educators numerous opportunities to collaborate with their family community to promote great attendance.

Schools may craft Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) models that utilize a team-based approach to address attendance challenges. They may collaborate with community mental health professionals within schools, revise hybrid truancy court practices, and link preschool supports with early grade accommodations, especially for students with disabilities (Kearney, 2016).

Even simple strategies to loop in families can make a difference. One study found that mailing letters to parents that explained the value of school attendance and shared their children's current absence count resulted in 15% decrease in chronic absenteeism in a Pennsylvania school district (Robinson et al, 2019).

Text messaging is another highly effective mode of correspondence with parents and caregivers that encourages positive attendance. A 2020 study by the American Institutes for Research found that "an adaptive text messaging strategy reduced chronic absence." This intervention with families was especially impactful for students with a prior history of high absences. Technology beyond text messaging also has the potential to make a powerful change to students' attendance rates.

This is why the best family engagement programs support multiple components of the Attendance Works framework.

Additional Ways Families Help Improve Attendance in Schools

Even in school-centric approaches to student engagement and attendance, families can still play an active role. Take a look at these three attendance interventions and how educators can collaborate with students' parents and caregivers.

Strategy 1

Strategy	What It Looks Like	How To Loop In Families
Craft Personalized Learning and Support for students to meet their unique, evolving needs for success	• Explore ways to offer mental health and counseling supports that nurture student well-being; these may be provided one-on-one, through group settings, or baked into a curriculum itself • Provide English Language Development services to reduce language barriers to learning • Create flexible schedules for student learning to ensure they receive additional support as needed while also minimizing missed instructional time (e.g. Tier 2 instructional supports, counseling, etc)	• Cultivate trust with families and educators to create personalized learning support for students • Dialogue regularly with families to understand how their child is doing beyond school walls, calibrating strategies to meet students' evolving needs. • Connect families with community resources through digital programs like ParentPowered Trauma-Informed.

Strategy 2

Strategy	What It Looks Like	How To Loop In Families
Implement Mentoring Programs that promote a sense of belonging by cultivating positive relationships either between students and caring adults, or among students themselves	• School personnel mentor students, fostering positive connections with teachers, custodians, and administrative staff on campus. • Peer mentoring relationships are formed between older students and younger students within a school through structured activities. • Schools facilitate mentorship between students and members of the surrounding community, such as local business owners, leaders of cultural or community centers, and members of faith-based organizations.	• Invite caregivers in the community to offer mentorship to teens and preteens as they prepare for the world beyond the classroom. • Bring mentorship programming into the community where families already gather (e.g. public libraries, cultural centers, etc).

Strategy ③

Strategy	What It Looks Like	How To Loop In Families
Improve Data Practices among educators to understand patterns of absenteeism, identify their primary causes, and craft equitable solutions	• Use modernized data mining and analysis tools to better understand causes of absence in school (Kearney & Childs, 2023) • Examine absence and attendance data against other information that impacts attendance, such as available city or school bus routes	• Collect family input and feedback about ways to address attendance needs using surveys, town halls, and even individual conversations with parents • Share back out with families what data and feedback influenced decisions or solutions implemented to boost attendance

Tips for Supporting Caregivers and Students At All Ages

ParentPowered takes a whole student, whole family approach to support strong attendance through text messages for parents and caregivers aimed at increasing parent-child communication and students' sense of connection to and belonging in school. We also educate families on the importance of attendance, habits that support attendance, and ways to reach out should families have concerns or questions about fundamental school workflows like the enrollment process.

From our team to yours, here are caregiver and parent engagement strategies and resources that cultivate positive attendance and student learning from birth through high school.

For All Ages

Connect Families with Resources
When families have access to the fundamentals — food, shelter, and safety — attending and engaging in school becomes easier, too. Connecting families with community resources helps to eliminate many of the traditional barriers to attendance such as lack of transportation and issues related to health and wellness. Programs like ParentPowered Trauma-Informed address inequities in access to resources that may prevent families and students' engagement in school.

Promoting Culturally Responsive Engagement
Cultural and linguistic diversity is essential within a school community! Educators can provide materials in families' home languages and ensure they reflect cultural identities found within the local community. When students see themselves in learning resources, it promotes that sense of belonging that underpins student engagement and attendance.

Language accessibility is only the beginning of the pathway to partnership! Read our recent article for more insights about culturally responsive family engagement.

Early Childhood

Supporting Transitions

The preschool years are a huge transition for both parents and children. Families are adjusting to the system and environments of school, and educators are coaching families as budding advocates for their children's longer learning journeys.

ParentPowered provides tips and strategies to caregivers for navigating transition time. Here's an example message that shares how creating certain routines help parents and kids separate in a healthy manner.

Connecting educators and families

Preschool parents and caregivers sometimes come to school with assumptions about what a teacher thinks about them, affecting their sense of belonging. This in turn impacts their willingness to connect with the teacher, ask questions, and collaborate. But these activities promote attendance both in early childhood and in older grade levels!

ParentPowered provides caregivers with context about the importance of reaching out to their child's teachers and why the parents' voice matters so much in early childhood education. Our messages also offer practical tips and conversation starters to families to help get the ball rolling!

Sample message: a goodbye routine

➤ FACT: Transitions, like going from home to school, can be hard for children. Giving your child extra love and attention during goodbyes can make things easier.

➤ TIP: Try creating a goodbye ritual, like always sharing a big hug and a funny face before you go. Assure your child: "I will always come back! I love you!"

➤ GROWTH: Keep comforting your child during goodbyes. Before saying goodbye, let your child choose a book that you'll read together when you return.

Sample message

➤ FACT: You are an expert on your child. Sharing insights with the teacher helps them welcome your child to school and meet your child's needs.

➤ TIP: Let the teacher know about things your child loves to do. You might share about activities they love and things that make them happy and excited.

➤ GROWTH: Now share about your child's emotions. Are there ways the teacher can tell if your child's feeling nervous? Things that help your child feel calm?
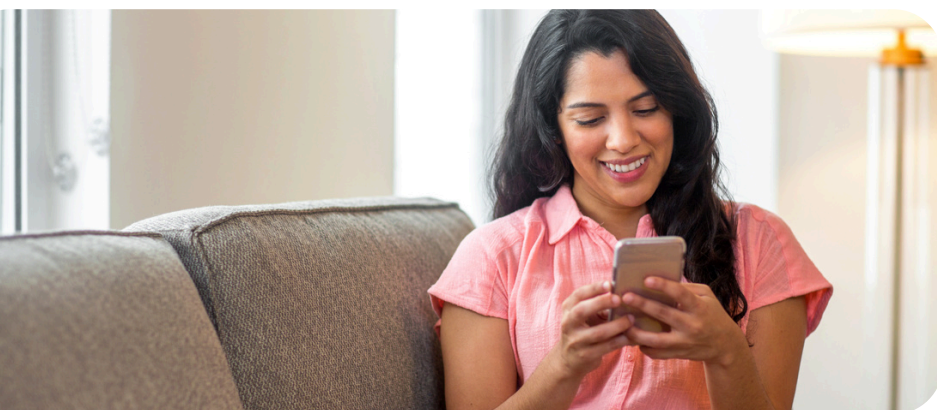
Elementary School

Build Structure and Routines

In elementary school, missing school days has an even more profound impact on learning. Crafting daily routines can help keep students engaged and growing.

Educate Families About Core Education Systems

Educators can directly communicate the importance of strong attendance and orient parents around the "how-tos" of school based systems. For example, how and when do parents reach out about an absence? Where do they go to ask for help with attendance? How do they access the school calendar and daily schedules, so that families can plan ahead for planned absences like wellness check-ins or schedule transportation or childcare on half days?

ParentPowered programs scaffold families for the exciting world of elementary school by guiding families through steps to uncover those systems unique to their school.

Middle School

Guide Shifting from Captain to CoPilot

During student adolescence, caregivers may have a lot less visibility into school. Students may also be pulling back as they work to individuate and find belonging with peers.

But caregivers still offer so much to student learning during this period. Educators can coach families to shift into more developmentally supportive ways to stay in the loop with their child, so that they can address issues that may affect attendance.

Take a look at this example message, educating families about practical ways to engage in indirect learning support, also called academic socialization.

Cultivate positive parent/child communication skills

Healthy parent-child communication during adolescence is important to keep information flowing between them. Caregivers who know about their child's life and learning can better support when challenges arise that could impact student engagement and school attendance.

Sample message

▶ FACT: When teens feel a sense of belonging in high school, it boosts their motivation and effort. Joining school clubs and activities helps build this connection.

▶ TIP: Ask your teen if there are any clubs or activities they may be interested in. If they aren't sure try, "Is there a friend or teacher you could ask?"

▶ GROWTH: Attending school events like games and concerts can help your teen discover activities they might want to join. Being in the audience can also boost belonging.

High School

Loop In Families For College And/Or Career Planning

In the high school years, teens need to see all the ways that their passions and interests map onto what they are learning in the school day. This connection can have a profound effect on attendance and graduation rates.

Remember the study conducted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation? Families can drive crucial conversations with teens about how their classroom learning connects with their postsecondary future! Here's one example of a ParentPowered message that helps caregivers initiate a chat about career planning with their high school students.

Cultivate Awareness of Student Mental Health

Strong attendance in high school is also closely connected to supporting student mental health. When caregivers and parents have developmentally supportive ways to check in with their teens, they are better positioned to step in and help if needed. Families are a key student mental health resource when empowered with such support.

This ParentPowered message helps parents to attune to their teens' experiences with change by spending quality time together and finding space for connection.

Sample message

> FACT: Research shows that teens get more out of school when they feel connected to at least one adult in the building. Encourage connection by asking questions!

> TIP: Check in with your teen. Try, "Which of your teachers seems to know you well?" or "Is there someone at school you feel good about asking for help?"

> GROWTH: Connections count for you too! Look at the school calendar. Is anything coming up that you might attend? Sporting events? Workshops? Online meetings?

Sample message

> FACT: Change, like starting high school, can feel both exciting and overwhelming. Pausing to connect with your teen offers support. It can ease anxiety too.

> TIP: Tonight, carve out 10 minutes to do something relaxing with your teen. It can be anything! Listen to music, shoot hoops, walk. Just enjoy time together!

> GROWTH: Keep connecting. Find a quiet moment to chat together. Ask how school is going. Is your teen worried about anything? Excited? Need support?

Book a Free Demo of ParentPowered's Family Engagement Programs

Ready to explore high impact family engagement?

✓ **Evidence based**
Rigorous studies show the ParentPowered approach works

✓ **Standards Aligned, from Day 1 to Graduation Day**
Curricula align to state and federal standards, as well as the Dual Capacity Building Framework

✓ **Easy for Families and Educators**
Designed to fit into the busy lives of parents and school staff

BOOK NOW

See What Partners Are Saying About ParentPowered

"ParentPowered is the best approach to family and community engagement I've seen."
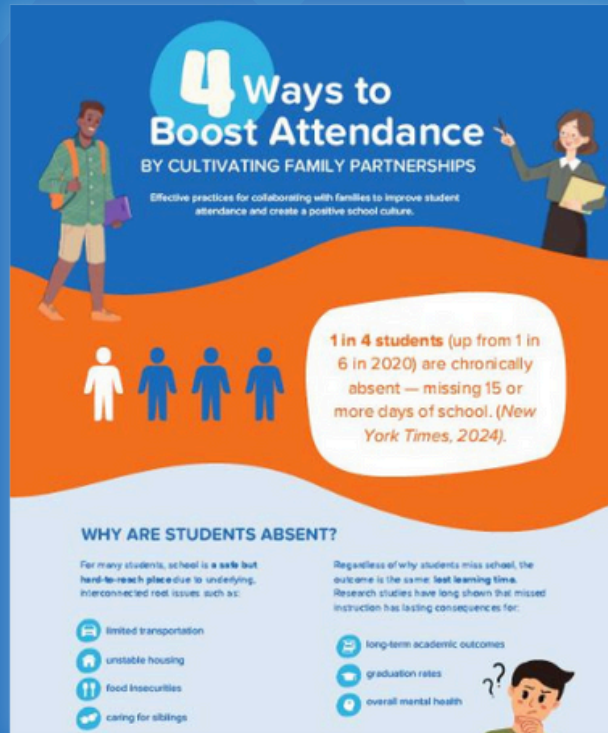
Dr. Christine Ivey
Principal, Heritage Academy

"I think ParentPowered fills a need that no other program I've been able to find to date can fill."

Dr. Wai'ale'ale Sarsona
Vice President, Hi'ialo Group for Kamehameha Schools

Don't Forget Your Attendance Infographic!

Effective Practices for Collaborating with Families to Improve Student Attendance Chronic absenteeism is a persistent problem schools nationwide face. However, research shows daily attendance rates increase when families become active partners in their students' success.

Download this infographic to learn four ways your team can help reduce barriers to school attendance while fostering trust with families across the school community.

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