EBOOK

The Case for Coming to School:

Improving Attendance

With One Proven Approach

ATTENDANCE

MONDAY

TUESDAY

WEDNESDAY

THURSDAY

FRIDAY

3	1	1...
absences	infractions	calls completed

95%
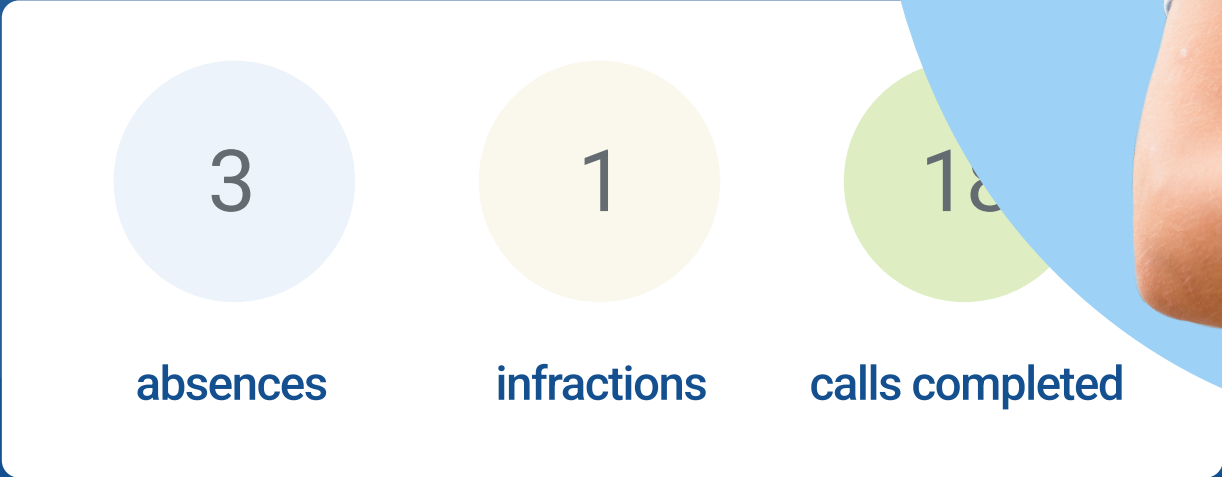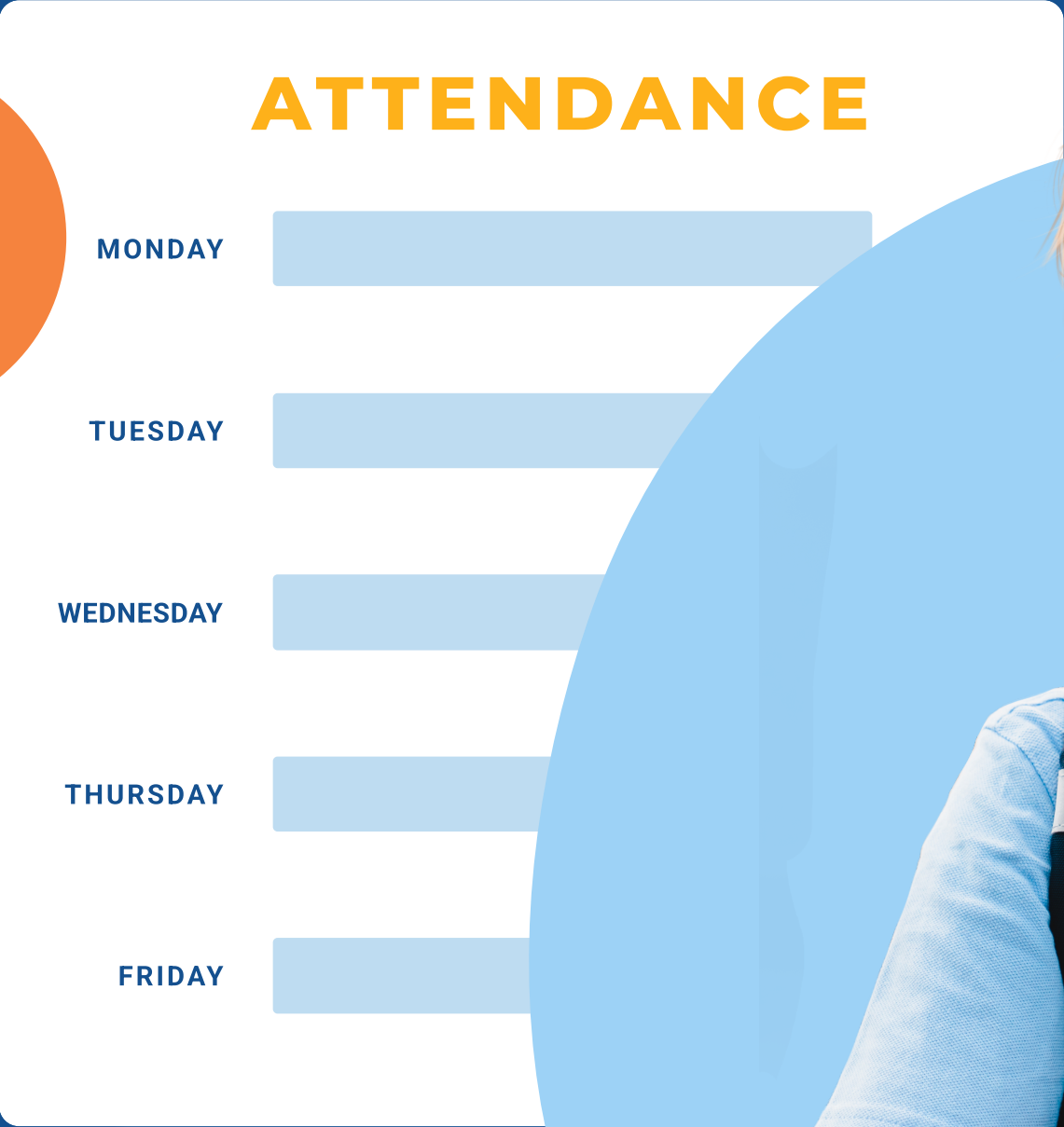
Why Attendance Matters

School is so much more than just a place to be.
It's a place to become.

Students who come to school regularly have far better options and opportunities open to them, as proven in study after study. Alongside graduation and college attendance rates, regular school attendance is linked to:

- Building trusting relationships
- A healthier lifestyle
- Less risky teen behaviors
- Better time management
- Improved mental health
- Better social capital
- Greater economic opportunities

Multiple studies estimate that **each additional year of school leads to an 8-10% increase in earnings over a student's lifetime**, on average. According to the World Bank, regular school attendance is associated with increased economic growth and development because students who attend school regularly are more likely to have the skills and knowledge necessary to contribute to the economy and society as a whole.

Whitney Houston said, *"the children are our future."* The World Bank agrees!

SchoolStatus

Chronic absenteeism stats are shocking

In short, kids aren't coming to school. In droves. Absenteeism rates have skyrocketed since schools returned to in-person learning post-lockdown. One estimate, from AttendanceWorks, is 14.7 million, K-12 public school students were chronically absent in 2021-2022 (defined as missing 10% or 18 days of school in a given school year for any reason.) We're talking 1 out of every 3 students. Compare that to data from the U.S. Department of Education in the 2018-2019 school year, when roughly 1 out of every 7, or nearly 14%, of K-12 public school students were chronically absent.

**Let's look just at one state. Mississippi had an absenteeism rate of 13% in 2018-19. In 2021-22 it was 28%, more than double in just two years.** Mississippi high school seniors are chronically absent at a rate of 45.3%. The Associated Press and Stanford recently conducted a study and found an estimated 230,000 children simply missing from the system–students who had been enrolled before the pandemic.

The positive outcomes of attending school are clear: chronic absences have significant ramifications for young people's long-term health, future prospects, and well-being.
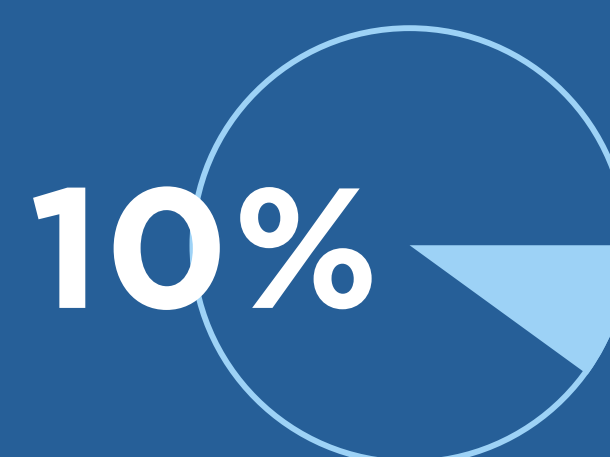
K-12 public school students were chronically absent in 2021-2022

14.7
MILLION
students

OR

1 out of every 3 students

10%
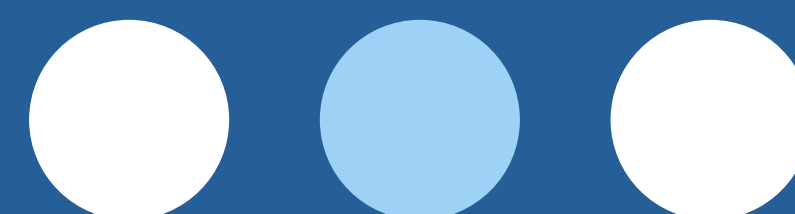
Missed 10% or 18 days of school in one year

How is chronic absenteeism distributed?

Chronic absenteeism disproportionately impacts specific groups of students.

Students of color, students from low-income families, and students with disabilities are particularly at risk. In fact, a recent study found that **students from low-income families were four times more likely to be chronically absent than their peers from higher-income families.**

Patterns of absenteeism often start in the elementary years with reasons that constitute excused absences: primarily the kinds of health issues that impact children living in poverty or in historically marginalized communities.

Intervening early is critical since early chronic absenteeism is strongly linked to lower academic achievement and predictive of a higher dropout rate in high school. And dropping out of high school leads to a higher likelihood of entering the juvenile or criminal justice system.

How School Communications Can Help

At the micro level, school communications are about sharing information. At the macro level, they're about building relationships.

Study after study points to school-home communication as an essential component of student success. **When teachers and building leaders keep families informed on a consistent basis, it leads to improved student:**

- Achievement
- Attendance
- Behavioral outcomes
- Social & emotional functioning
- Drop-out rates
- College attendance rates

It boils down to trust. The more home adults hear from their child's teachers & building leader, the more they feel in the know about what's happening with their child at school. The more home adults feel involved in school life, the more they trust the adults in the building. And *that's the key*. The more home adults trust the school adults, the more they support their child's learning.

This makes school communications as integral to a student's educational progress as choice of curriculum or instructional method.

School Communications & School Climate

One critical entry point to attendance is the concept of belongingness, or school-connectedness. School-connectedness is the belief that you are welcome and included in the community. This is the "I" in a district DEI plan—ensuring that everyone is included—and an essential step in reducing absenteeism.

So, if we want families to feel included, we have to remove barriers to participation.

SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

★ IMPROVED ATTENDANCE

EQUITABLE POLICIES AND PROCESSES
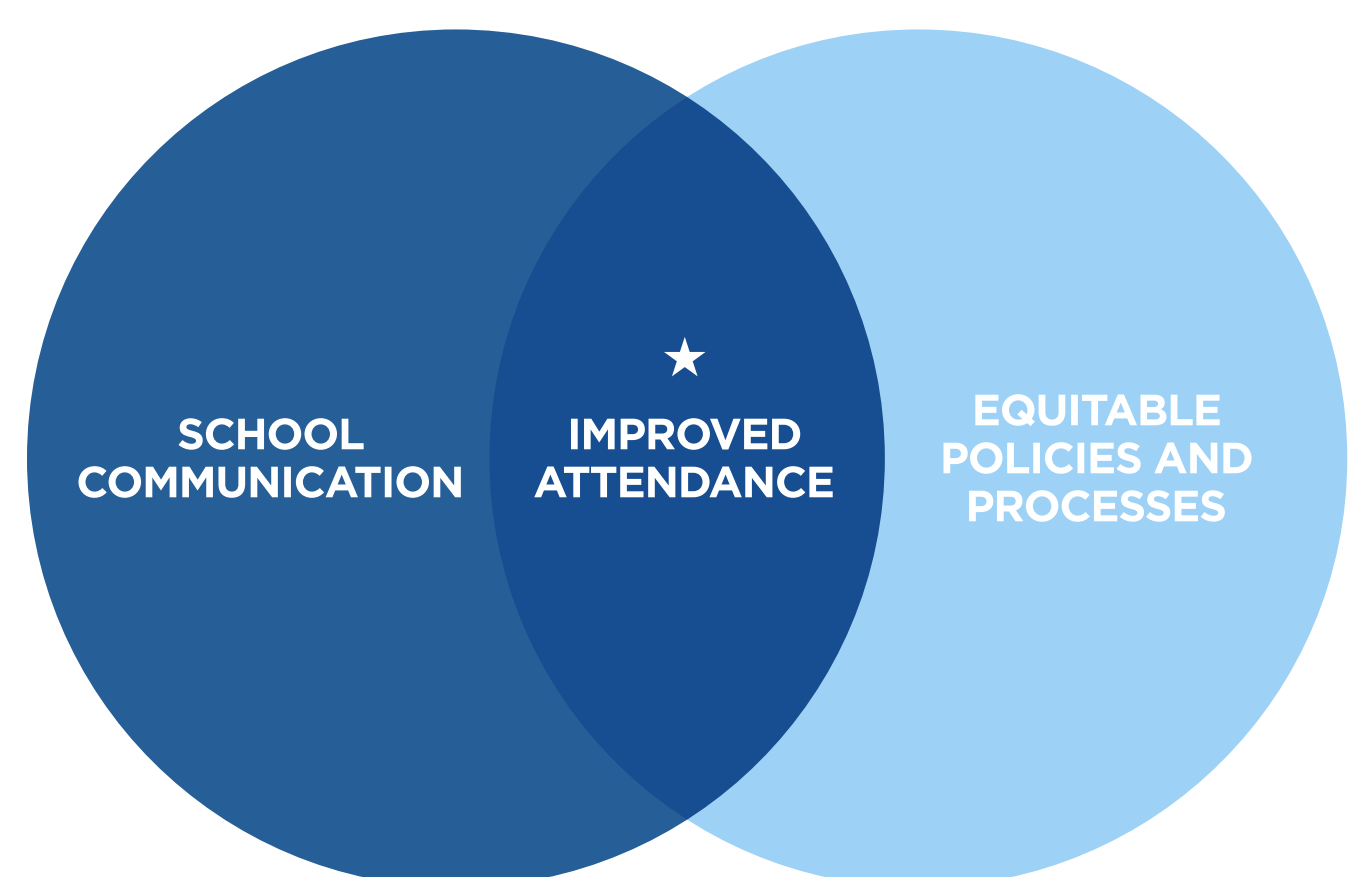
What are the barriers to participation when it comes to school communications?

For starters, families need to be able to read any and all communications that arrive home from school in their preferred language. How can a parent or caregiver support an IEP, for example, if they can't read it or it takes 8 months for the translation to be completed?

If teaching successfully is about meeting students where they are, communicating successfully is about meeting home adults where they are. And that means communications have to be device agnostic, posted across multiple channels, and accessible without extra steps like an app to download or a form to complete by hand.

This isn't just important for families new to the US, but also for millennial parents and caregivers, whose communication style demands a shift to digital, and who will soon be the majority parent body in the US public school system.

Middle-class, public school-attending families are attuned to the rhythms of the school year. They anticipate health forms, parent conferences, and report cards. They know how to work the system, who to reach out to when there's an issue, and how to advocate for their child.

As more and more families fall into the at-risk category, it's important to move away from the assumption that most folks just "know how to do school." A report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that the percentage of households with children reporting difficulty meeting basic needs such as food, housing, and healthcare increased from 14% to 29% between 2019 and 2020.
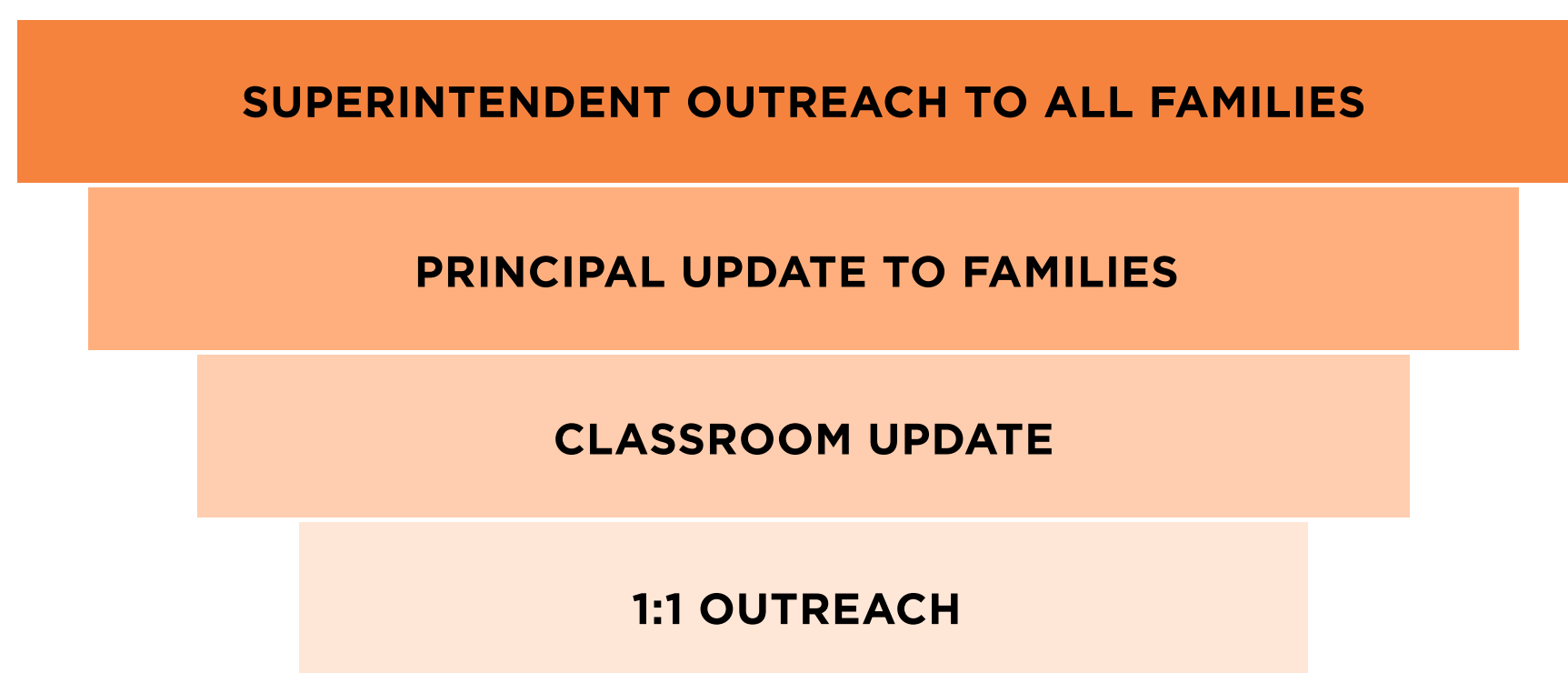
When poverty, stress, violence, hunger, or unemployment strike a family, basic systems break down. Not completing health forms can be the reason a child doesn't come to school. Hourly work can be the reason a parent doesn't come to conference day. Falling behind and feeling lost academically and stressed socially logically follow, and many caregivers don't know where to turn for help. A district that anticipates this, that builds safeguards into systems of communications for exactly these reasons, and has other options for parents who can't show up in person, is a district where families feel supported.

And families who feel supported send their children to school.

A Funnel Approach to School Communications

We can think of the practice of building up attendance like a funnel.

| SUPERINTENDENT OUTREACH TO ALL FAMILIES |
| PRINCIPAL UPDATE TO FAMILIES |
| CLASSROOM UPDATE |
| 1:1 OUTREACH |

Communications from the Superintendent

Building school-connectedness has to start at the top, with the superintendent. It's important for parents and caregivers to see the leader promoting attendance as a community value, and it's essential for setting the tone for faculty and other administration.

Communication from the superintendent could look like a letter going out to the entire district community at the start of the year welcoming everyone and explaining the importance of attendance in positive terms. It could also be congratulatory letters mailed home to students with exemplary attendance at the end of each term and school year.

The important thing is that this type of communication sets up schools as a place students want to be.

Building Leader Communications

When building leaders communicate with families on a weekly basis, they're accomplishing multiple things at once:

- Modeling communication for faculty

- Setting the tone for families

- Establishing the school's mission and values

- Giving families an opportunity to get to know them as educators and leaders

Weekly updates from the principal are a great way to establish the value of attendance and communicate procedures, important events and updates. More importantly, they are a great way to *be seen and known by families*.

Classroom Communications

A key ingredient to student success is regular outreach from a classroom or homeroom teacher or advisor. **The more home adults know about what's happening in school, the more supportive they are of their child's teachers.** In fact, a recent underline nation-wide survey noted that 84% of teachers said a top priority for communications is building trust with parents. An easy and effective way to build strong communication channels with home adults is via a regular digital, translatable update.

84%
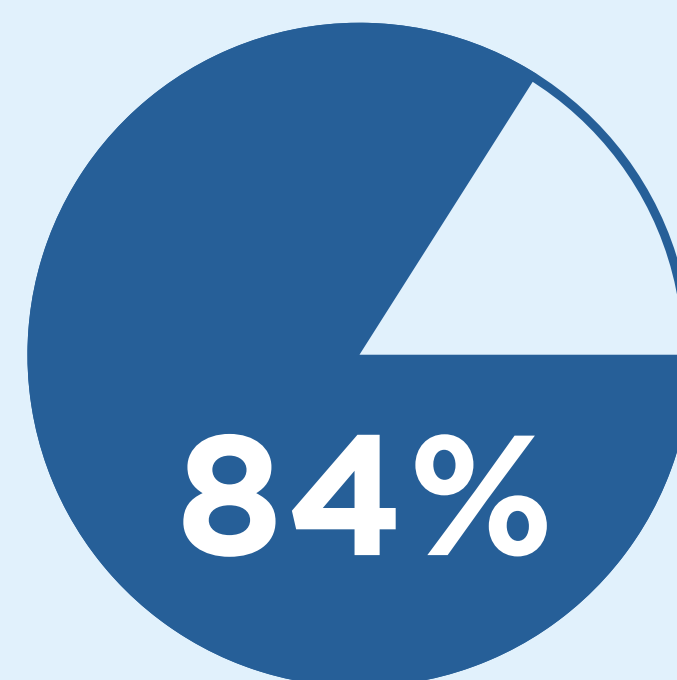
84% of teachers nation-wide said building trust with parents is a top priority for communications

Communicating basics like classroom and homework policies, assignments and due dates, and reminders for upcoming events are helpful for busy adults leading stressful lives. Suggesting "Ask your child about…" questions are a great way to help parents and caregivers connect with their children. **Sharing a parenting resource communicates your awareness of the challenging job of raising a child.** Sharing your contact info and the names and contact info of counselors reinforces that folks are on hand to help. Most importantly, celebrate students for being at school. Have a shout-outs section or a props section, whatever works best for your particular age group.

When this update arrives week in and week out at the same time, parents begin to anticipate it. This type of communication is a key part of strong home-school relationships.

1:1 Outreach

It's not enough to send off weekly communications. We have to examine the response. This data tells us a valuable story: which parents and caregivers are engaging, which aren't, and whether that aligns with attendance data.

When a pattern emerges, it's time for 1:1 outreach with a text message or a phone call. The most important thing is that this outreach is personal, friendly, positive and in a language the parent is comfortable with. Even if the pattern persists, and further interventions are required, **maintaining a supportive, caring tone rather than a punitive one will be more effective in encouraging the change you hope to see.**

Students and home adults need to know someone cares.

Keep the big picture in mind

Implicit in all the building work is the understanding that the principal sets the tone, models appropriate communication for faculty both in weekly family updates and in weekly faculty updates, and reviews and evaluates faculty for successful communication practices. Building back enrollment requires everyone to be in lockstep:

Working together to build a school community where every student's presence matters, and every student knows it.

Tools That Can Help

Chronic absenteeism is a problem, but it's one we can work on.

When teachers, counselors, coaches, and building leaders communicate consistently, it says, *"We care. We want you to know what's going on. Your child's presence matters!"* When it's followed up with 1:1 outreach, it reinforces the message, *"Our community is only complete when your child is here."* This sets the conditions for attendance.

Research is clear about the relationship between school climate and attendance: when students feel connected to their school, and believe their teachers care about their well-being and success, they are more likely to attend school regularly.

Let's get kids back in school by making it a place that matters to them. Kids are smart. They want all those positive outcomes for themselves!

Here are some tools that can help improve attendance:

SchoolStatus

Translatable 2-way text-messaging from any device that doesn't require an app with comprehensive data organized into an accessible Student Card.

operoo

Easy-to-complete digital, customizable multi-language school forms & workflow.

Attention2Attendance®

A year-long, district-wide universal attendance campaign from the superintendent focused on positive participation.

smore

Easy, engaging, translatable digital newsletters.

SI&A School Innovations & Achievement

Attendance All-Stars: A year-long district-wide personalized letter campaign from the superintendent.

TeachBoost

A streamlined system of teacher observation and evaluation.

SCHEDULE A MEETING