

Increasing Student Attendance: Strategies from Research and Practice

It goes without saying that coming to school regularly is key to high student academic achievement. We know from decades of research that absenteeism for reasons other than illness increases with each grade, starting in Grade 8. What is more, poor attendance is an indicator for gradual disengagement and eventual drop out from school.

Why don't students attend school regularly? While the established risk factors include family background, past school performance, personal characteristics, school and neighborhood features, perhaps the most telling set of reasons are gauged from students themselves. When asked in focus groups as to what would encourage them to stay in school, students reveal that the quality of teacher-student relationships—having teachers who care, who have high expectations for student achievement, and who help them when they have difficulty—mattered more than anything else.

Experts caution that addressing poor attendance requires a multi-pronged approach, as the issues surrounding the problem are often complex and inter-related. Strategies to increase student school attendance include the following.

- *Attendance Policies* –The purpose should be to change behavior, not to punish. The authors discourage “zero tolerance” policies in favor of those that set clear limits, involve family, and are in line with district goals.
- *Early Interventions* – Interventions that start in the elementary grades are more effective than those begun in middle or high school, because there are often early warning signs indicative of student disengagement. Strategies should center on forming a sustained connection with students and their families, with the help of daily counseling, home visits, and incentives for attending school.
- *Targeted Interventions* – A continuum of supports that involve in-school and out-of-school programs appears to have positive effects on disaffected students. From academic tutoring, counseling, mentoring, and substance-abuse programs, to collaboration with community-based organizations and the juvenile justice system, successful interventions have long-term consequences for at-risk students.
- *Strategies to Increase Engagement and Personalization* – Since parents are the school's main source of support for getting children to school, their participation in attendance improvement efforts is indispensable. The creation of small learning communities (academies, house plans, schools-within-schools, and magnet schools, and alternative schools) provides the necessary culture for personalized learning. There needs to be a focus on maximizing learning both in the classroom as well as through community service learning opportunities.

The authors conclude by encouraging teachers to create a school climate of high expectations, in which students are recognized for good attendance and where families are supported in their efforts to promote the same. Sample profiles of community and school attendance improvement programs are provided.

The complete report upon which this research brief is based can be found at <http://www.nwrel.org/request/2004june/Attendance.pdf>