

Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades: Risk Factors and What Schools Can Do

Chronic absenteeism—defined as **missing 10 percent or more of school days** in most states—is a problem across the nation. **In New Jersey, this means missing 18 days or more each school year, or about 2 days per month.** Students who are chronically absent in the early years often lack critical school readiness skills, are more likely to miss important academic milestones, and may lag behind their peers with social-emotional development. Recognizing the challenges and common risk factors is the first step. Next, school leaders must identify chronically absent students and examine the underlying risk factors and causes of chronic absenteeism in their schools.

What school leaders can do

Regularly reviewing attendance data can help identify patterns of students who are chronically absent, which can inform steps to improve attendance. New Jersey provides [explicit guidance](#) to schools on how to report student absences and calculate chronic absenteeism in grades K-12. This guidance includes determining acceptable reasons to excuse absences and making sure reporting systems meet a rigorous standard. The next step is to explore the root causes of why pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students are not coming to school.

Turn the page for ideas on connecting with families and assessing reasons for absenteeism.

Factors that lead to absenteeism

In the earliest grades, educators can help families recognize the importance of school attendance. Sometimes early learning is not valued as much as it is in the upper grades, so educators should take steps to ensure that families see the benefits of these earliest learning experiences.^{1,2} Educators should also recognize that many factors lead to absenteeism at any age including student, family, school, and community specific issues:

- **Student-specific factors** can include anxiety or fear associated with going to school, childhood trauma, illness, or chronic health problems, such as asthma.³
- **Family-specific factors** can include inconsistent or nonstandard work schedules, unstable housing, extended trips, stressful family events, and lack of social or economic resources. A family may not have access to reliable transportation, food, clothes, and health care. When children and families lack these resources, it may be more challenging to attend school.⁴



- **School-specific factors can include infrequent family–teacher interactions, difficulty with other children in class, and poor school climate.** For example, a 2016 study found associations between negative school climate and chronic absence in urban school settings, suggesting that factors such as connectedness with school, school safety, and absences may be linked.⁵
- **Community-specific factors** can include unsafe neighborhoods and lack of social and educational supports. For example, a 2017 study found that exposure to neighborhood violence is associated with chronic absence.⁶

Students most at risk

School leaders must pay special attention to students most at risk for being chronically absent from school.⁷ In New Jersey, students who are more often chronically absent tend to come from disadvantaged groups, including:

- Children of color
- Students living in poverty
- Students with disabilities
- English language learners⁸

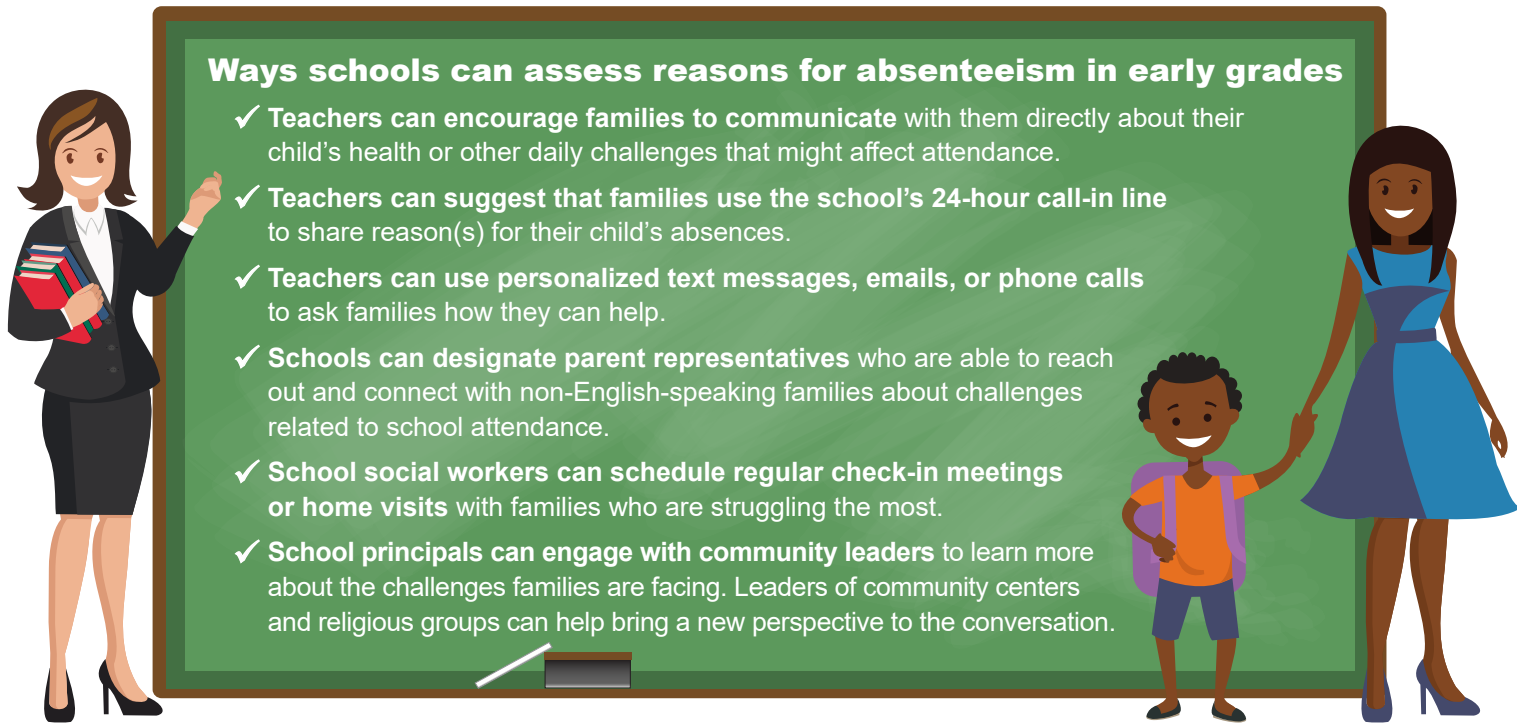
Connecting with families is critical

When schools partner with families, they can help parents and other family members become advocates for ensuring children come to school every day, ready to learn. Educators should engage regularly with families about the importance of coming to school.⁹ They should begin these conversations early, during pre-kindergarten and kindergarten registration, open houses, back-to-school nights, and individual conversations designed to get to know the children and families.

Districts should also encourage schools to gather information from families and teachers to understand attendance patterns and challenges. This information can help inform schools' corrective action plans, and link families with community resources when appropriate.¹⁰

Next steps

Once schools identify students who need support and gather information about root causes, the next steps are to identify, implement, and evaluate interventions to reduce rates of chronic absenteeism.



Ways schools can assess reasons for absenteeism in early grades

- ✓ Teachers can encourage families to communicate with them directly about their child's health or other daily challenges that might affect attendance.
- ✓ Teachers can suggest that families use the school's 24-hour call-in line to share reason(s) for their child's absences.
- ✓ Teachers can use personalized text messages, emails, or phone calls to ask families how they can help.
- ✓ Schools can designate parent representatives who are able to reach out and connect with non-English-speaking families about challenges related to school attendance.
- ✓ School social workers can schedule regular check-in meetings or home visits with families who are struggling the most.
- ✓ School principals can engage with community leaders to learn more about the challenges families are facing. Leaders of community centers and religious groups can help bring a new perspective to the conversation.

This fact sheet is part of a three-part series aimed at understanding and combating chronic absenteeism among New Jersey's youngest students. An additional fact sheet addresses the association between chronic absenteeism and critical school readiness skills and academic milestones. Another fact sheet provides evidence-based examples of what schools can do to monitor and improve levels of chronic absenteeism, and how to assess whether attendance improves.

References

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