

Customizable Email to Teachers

Chronic Absenteeism in California

Dear _____,

As a teacher, you know first-hand that absences impact not only the absent student, but your entire classroom.

School attendance is essential to academic success, but parents and students often do not realize how quickly absences add up. Missing just two days of school per month can lead elementary school students to fall behind in reading, writing, and math. For example, over 4 out of 5 students who miss more than 10% of both kindergarten and first grade are unable to read on-level by third grade. By 6th grade, chronic absenteeism is a critical warning sign that a student will not graduate high school.

This past summer, the Office of the California Attorney General and the Ad Council conducted research on how best to talk to parents about their elementary school students' absences. The research showed that parents are well intended and understand that attendance is important. They believe they are doing all they can to make sure their child attends school, yet they are not really tracking their child's absences, and they keep their kids home for reasons other than illness. Ultimately, parents don't think it's a big deal if their child misses school, especially in elementary school.

The good news is that the research showed that parents trust teachers more than anybody else when it comes to hearing about their child's absences, and are open to receiving more information directly from teachers on this topic. In order to maintain consistency in talking to parents, we are emphasizing that every absence matters. Here are some considerations for you, as a teacher:

- **Refer to absences by month, rather than year.** Parents systematically underestimate absences on a yearly basis, but can more accurately reflect on absences if they are presented on a month-by-month basis.
 - **Example:** *"Missing 2 days a month is too much" instead of "missing 10+ days a year is too much."*
- **Highlight the downsides of absences, not the upsides of attendance.** Conversations framed around attendance cause the parents to think about what they are already doing, not what they are missing.
 - **Example:** *"Missing too many days can be harmful" instead of "attending every day is beneficial."*
- **Emphasize that there is no perfect replacement for attendance.** If a child is absent, a homework packet or take-home assignment might be helpful, but be sure to clarify that the assignment does not fully "make up" for the absence.
 - **Example:** *"Make sure the student completes these assignments, but he will still need to work extra hard to catch up once he returns to school."*
- **Connect elementary school absences to later academic performance.** Surveyed parents were much more likely to say that high school attendance was more important than elementary school attendance. Help them connect the dots between the two.
 - **Example:** *"Students who are absent in elementary school miss out on key concepts that they will need for later grades, including high school."*
- **If possible, connect absences to the missed opportunity to learn specific class curriculum/content.**
 - **Example:** *"We are learning to identify numerators and denominators this week. Please make sure your child does not miss school because his/her understanding of this lesson will make him better prepared for next week's lesson on adding fractions with common denominators"*
- **Avoid compliance-based messaging.** Parents are not motivated to improve their child's attendance by threatening or court-centric messaging, particularly from teachers.
- **Use text messages to communicate with parents about absences, as one component of ongoing and regular school-to-parent communications.** The vast majority of parents said that they trust teachers most when it comes to communicating about absences. Since many parents rely on text messages more than any other form of communication (including phone calls and emails), it can be used to help build trust and regular communication between parents and the school. If you're considering this approach, take into account these [tips for texting parents](#).

To learn more about the research conducted and for more information about how to communicate with parents about attendance, please visit www.oag.ca.gov/truancy/toolkit.

Thank you for your help in making this school year a great one by encouraging all our students to be in school every day.

Sincerely,
