



MORE Q&A FROM THE
**GETTING BEYOND NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS ABOUT PARENTS: KEY INSIGHTS ABOUT
ENGAGING PARENTS IN ENDING CHRONIC ABSENCE WEBINAR**
SEPTEMBER 30, 2015

1. How are schools in CA sharing and ensuring that parents understand attendance rules of the school or district at the beginning of the year?

The question implicates 2 out of the 3 California state priorities for engagement: parental involvement and pupil engagement (which is measured, in part, by school attendance and chronic absence rates). Schools vary in the way that they actually share attendance rules with parents. Long Beach Unified School District offers one model that we think other school districts might learn from. Through multi-tiered parental engagement, the district was able to reduce chronic absence rates from 23-26% in the previous three years to 9.6% in 2014-15. You can read all about their work here: <https://oag.ca.gov/truancy/2015#modal-long>.

2. What other research questions about tardiness were examined in this study?

Our research zeroed in on absence—especially chronic absence. Unfortunately, we did not examine tardiness or reasons for tardiness.

3. What are some best practices to work with parents who keep children home due to minor illnesses?

Two suggestions. First, make clear that absences carry negative effects. This might sound obvious, but our research found that parents were likely not to consider the downside (which is often long-term) of absences, and rather focused on the upside (which is often immediate). They thought to themselves, “If my child stays home, then I won’t have to worry;” and they did not think, “If my child stays home, then I won’t have to worry, but it also might mean that he falls behind and will have a hard time catching up.” Second, try to assure parents that children with mild/chronic illness will be treated properly if symptoms flare up. Our research found that many parents will keep their children home as a prophylactic measure—even if they’re well enough to attend school—because of anxiety that the school won’t properly attend to the child if he or she gets *really* sick. So, if a school sees a lot of absences due to mild illnesses (e.g. mild chronic asthma), then it might be time to revisit and reassure parents about the school’s policies regarding health interventions.

4. What roles do summer camps play in attendance in the school year?

Honestly, we haven't considered that! Obviously, summer camps are important both for enrichment and to stymie summer learning loss. Our research didn't touch on the issue, but it'd certainly be helpful if summer camp leaders reinforced the work of schools by emphasizing the importance of attendance. Unfortunately, this is just my intuition (as opposed to solid research), but a message like this might work: "While you're young, your brains are squishy and malleable, so it's important to start building up all the tools that you'll use for the rest of your life; at summer camp, each day, you're building up one set of tools and—likewise—at school, each day, you're building up a similar set of tools. So, it's important not to miss either!"

5. What are some practices for summer camps to improve their own attendance?

As with question #4, our research really focused on elementary school attendance. But, there are some lessons that are transferable. We can think of two. First, focus on the loss associated with absences, rather than the gain associated with attendance. It's important not to be too negative or to be alarmist. But our research found that parents were much more likely to respond when messages were framed around absence, rather than attendance. Second, be sure that parents understand the negative consequences of absences more fully. For example, in a perfect world in which teachers had infinite time, a very helpful practice would be to tell parents what their child missed that day when they were absent—e.g. "The day that Jessica was absent, we learned how to distinguish between numerators and denominators; it might be a little tricky for her to fully grasp tomorrow's lesson on adding fractions with common denominators." Parents—and humans generally—are better able to weigh pros and cons when they can operate off of concrete information.

6. How can we change perceptions about the importance of attendance?

As far as the importance of attendance goes, we think what needs to happen is that early attendance gets connected to later academic outcomes. This is based on three pieces of information that the research found to be true: (1) parents universally want their children to graduate from high school and go to college; (2) parents understand that in order to learn, you need to be present; and (3) parents are much less likely to think that attendance is a big deal in lower grades. So, our work is really to connect #1 and #3—that attendance in early grades **DOES** affect the child's likelihood of graduating from high school and going to college. Other research, including from Attendance Works and the Campaign for Grade Level Reading, draw a link between attendance in even the earliest grades and likelihood of graduation. Our work is to make that link known and to make it real.

7. Have findings been shared with school districts?

We will! That's our "ground game" that we could use help with. Specifically, we're releasing a toolkit in October that will make all of our research public and will offer resources that will make it easier to put that research to practice. We're trying to marshal as many partners as we can to help disseminate that toolkit to districts and other leaders.

8. How can we promote teacher buy-in to talk to parents about attendance?

Unfortunately, our research didn't investigate how to persuade/enlist teachers. But, we have two ideas. First, just as parents need to see the link between early attendance and academic performance, it'd be helpful for teachers to have that link laid bare as well. Personally, when I was a 3rd grade teacher, I was so overwhelmed with everything else that I was asked to do that I simply categorized attendance as a problem for school administrators and parents. It wasn't until we completed this research that I realized that—*in fact*—trying to improve attendance actually makes the teacher's job easier. For example, it reduces the need to re-teach concepts in small groups or during centers. Second, we can promote buy-in by making it easier for teachers. For example, school administrators can monitor for worrisome absence patterns (e.g. 4 absences in the first 2 months of school) and routinely notify teachers in those cases, which enables teachers to intervene early while removing the burden on them to actively track themselves. In terms of a bigger picture, our office is trying to work with private sector partners to develop a text messaging platform that automatically links to the school's student information system, which would again make it much easier for teachers to help act as messengers.

9. Was the list about reasons kids don't graduate generated by respondents or did participants select/rank reasons from a pre-populated list?

It was a pre-populated list, but that list was generated based off of our 24 ethnographic interviews. In other words, we conducted the intensive, exploratory, in-home interviews and used what we learned to design our surveys.

10. Are you providing parents with tools to help them track their own child's attendance?

We're trying to! Our research indicates that low-income parents prefer to receive communications via text messages, so we're in discussions with some private sector partners to develop a text-based tracking system. Ideally, this system would take as much of the onus off parents as possible, linking directly to student information systems. If this doesn't work out, there are many online-based tracking tools that parents can sign up for. We don't want to endorse any particular one, so we encourage folks to just Google it :)