

Establishing School-wide Attendance Incentives

School attendance is a simple, easily understood measure of student performance. One strategy for improving attendance is engaging students, parents, educators and community members in a campaign that offers positive rewards for getting to school on-time.

What to Remember:

- Attendance incentives are most effective when part of a comprehensive approach that includes outreach to families with more significant challenges to attendance. Incentives should be part of creating a school-wide culture of attendance and accompanied by a deep commitment to ensuring students are engaged in the classroom once they show up.
- Incentives don't need to be costly. Simple rewards—recognition from peers and the school through certificates or assemblies, extra recess time, homework passes or even dancing in the hallways—go a long way toward motivating students. Ask students what they consider a meaningful incentive.
- Interclass competition is a powerful motivator. The sense of competition between classes (with rewards like a party for the class with the best monthly attendance) can be a powerful motivator. Such strategies encourage students to feel accountable to each other for attending class.
- Avoid recognizing only perfect attendance. Perfect attendance is not always the goal since it is not wise to encourage children to come to school when they're sick. Students should be rewarded for improved attendance, not just perfect records. Offering weekly perfect attendance awards can allow students to still have a chance to succeed the next week if they are absent.
- Reward timeliness not just showing up to school. Since tardiness also has an adverse impact on learning, many schools only count on-time attendance toward rewards.
- Send home information highlighting both the value of attendance and incentives and the consequences of poor attendance. Ensure families know about the incentive program and the importance of attendance for academic success, as well as school policies in which poor attendance can result in failing a course or being retained. Sanctions should never be used without incentives.
- Offer incentives for families, not just students. Often, families appreciate access to resources such as food baskets, transportation passes, etc.
- Implement incentives school wide. To fostering a culture of attendance, every classroom needs to participate!!

Ideas for Incentives

Teachers can offer:

- Positive comments to children
- Positive notes home to parents
- Extra time at the computer or PE
- Free homework pass
- First-in-line privileges for lunch or dismissal
- Pencils, pens, stickers, posters, book covers, book marks, etc.
- Team certificates for the best record or most improved record
- Name on the “Attendance Wall” in the classroom
- Chance to act as teacher’s assistant

Administration, PTAs and Boosters can provide:

- Recognition during morning announcements
- Certificate/award at student assembly
- Breakfast/lunch with the principal, superintendent, school board president, mayor, etc.
- School supplies, i.e. pencil with logo
- Food coupons redeemable in school cafeteria
- Smoothie/pizza party for class with best attendance
- “School money” for the school store
- Choice of donated product (movie, tickets, gift certificate)
- Traveling trophy for grade-level homeroom with best monthly attendance
- Attendance T-shirts/hats/buttons
- Age-appropriate rewards for most improved attendance
- Parking space near building for student with most improved attendance

Good attendance helps kids succeed in school and bolster their self-esteem. Improving attendance requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond sanctions and includes incentives.

Here are some steps schools are taking:

When students at Michigan elementary school achieve perfect attendance for a month, they become a STAR (Studios, Thoughtful Accountable and Respectful) student. They earn a gold T-shirt saying “I am a STAR student.” Their picture is displayed on the television in the school lobby.

A California elementary school improved its on-time attendance with an interclass competition that promised a pizza party to the first class with enough days of perfect attendance to spell out the words “Perfect Punctuality.”

Another California elementary school awards the class with the best attendance an extra 15 minute recess on Fridays supervised by the principals. The students enjoy the attention from their principal and the teacher gets an extra-long lunch break.

An Oklahoma elementary school issues “school dollars” to students with good and improved attendance. Students can use the dollars at the school store to buy Christmas presents for family.

A Georgia middle school recognizes good attendance on a weekly, monthly and semester basis. Students who attend for a full week receive popcorn passes. The homeroom class in each grade level with the best attendance each month receives milk and doughnuts. Students with fewer than two absences can enter end-of-semester drawings for prizes.

A Georgia high school comes down hard on students who skip school: Seven unexcused absences a semester can mean course failure. But the high school also offers incentives: Those with fewer than two excused absences can receive 10 extra points on final exams.



Attendance Works is a national and state initiative working to improve the policy and practice around attendance.