

*Support schools and child care programs in implementing best practices to create a welcoming environment, provide opportunities for families to form relationships with staff, engage in respectful, two-way communication with families, practice shared decision-making in planning services for children, and recognize and build family strengths and leadership.*

# STRENGTHENING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT to IMPROVE ATTENDANCE

**Strong relationships with families in early learning and education settings promotes family well-being, positive parent-child relationships, and the ongoing learning and development of children and parents, particularly for families living in overburdened and under-resourced communities. Family engagement happens when educators and families participate in an interactive process of relationship-building that is mutual, respectful, and responsive to each family's language and culture. When families are engaged children are more likely to miss fewer days of school. Meaningful relationship-building is ongoing, and requires time and attention. Schools and child care programs need training and support in developing these relationships with families.**

## WHAT WE KNOW

Parental or family engagement in a child's education contributes to improved test scores and academic achievement, attendance, and social skills. Research informs us that connecting with families early, such as during the transition to kindergarten creates strong parent-school relationships that fosters engagement. In addition, engagement early on empowers caregivers to advocate on behalf of their children, particularly in school and grade transitions.

Child care and school partnerships with families can take many forms including outreach from teachers or staff members to discuss student progress, relational home visits, and meetings with families in communities during the summer to ease the transition into the following year. All of these serve to strengthen attendance for students, a key factor in academic performance and learning.

## **APPROXIMATELY 30% OF NC'S ELEMENTARY STUDENTS WERE CHRONICALLY ABSENT**

during the 2021-22 academic year. This is a critical issue because students' physical presence in school is a critical precursor to learning.

## Dive Into the Data

Chronic absenteeism affects all students because when a few students' in the class are chronically absent it takes time for the teacher to review missed assignments and catch them up, which limits their ability to keep the whole class moving forward. There are **substantial racial and ethnic differences in chronic absenteeism** that indicate the need for targeted examination of the challenges that families face: 45% among Native American and Pacific Islander; greater than 30% among Black, Hispanic, and Multi-Racial, 27% among White, and 16% among Asian students. Explore the [Pathways Data Dashboard](#) to learn more.

## WHAT WE NEED

A holistic and **equitable approach to family engagement** involves meeting families where they are and utilizing a **wealth of strategies** to involve caregivers meaningfully in their children's learning. This includes taking a strengths-based approach, communicating in the parents' primary language, creating opportunities for ongoing dialogue with caregivers, engaging families early, and establishing a positive relationship such that communication doesn't only occur when there is something to be addressed.

Additionally, cultivating a **school-wide culture of respect and care** so students know that someone cares when they miss school creates the sense of belonging that research has **connected to increased attendance**. This may look like greeting children and families at drop-off and taking roll in a sensitive manner. Establishing a system of attendance incentives that recognize good/improved attendance in addition to perfect attendance helps incentivize parents and children to prioritize consistent attendance.

## HOW TO SUPPORT

To ensure a transparent measure of **chronic absenteeism**, the NC State Board of Education approved a state definition of chronic absence in February 2018: a student who misses 10 percent of school days in a year, or about 18 days total. Following this, the NC General Assembly passed a bill during the 2018 short session encouraging school districts to adopt student attendance recognition programs to promote regular attendance. You can learn more in this report on [How Schools And Local Communities Are Reducing Chronic Absence In North Carolina](#) and in the [AttendaNCe Counts Community Toolkit](#).

Many parents don't realize the critical importance of attendance during the earliest grades and that **missing just 10% of the academic year makes it difficult for students to keep up with learning**. A problem solving approach is the best way to engage parents as partners in reducing absenteeism.

Schools and communities can further these efforts by joining in and promoting National Attendance Awareness Month activities during September.

## INITIATIVES WORKING IN THIS AREA



**Read to Rise**, an initiative of Down East Partnership for Children, provides support to elementary schools to identify school needs, strengthen family engagement, and connect schools to resources to help meet the needs of all children and families. In addition, the summer learning network provides technical assistance, planning support and learning materials to support sites in providing learning opportunities during the summer months.



**The WHOLE Dad Lab**, at NC State University, seeks to highlight the experiences of fathers in support of healthy and happy families. Their team examines barriers and facilitators to father involvement across a variety of domains with the goal of understanding how these factors impact fathers' health and well-being, child outcomes, community supports, and overall family functioning and engagement.



**Guilford Education Alliance (GEA)** is an independent nonprofit that galvanizes the community in support of quality public education for all students. They are an alliance of people and organizations investing time, talent and resources in support of Guilford County Schools. GEA has several programs and initiatives including the Did You Know series that provides information, graphics and videos and the Bright Futures podcast that offers 25 minute episodes to bring listeners into conversation with educational change-makers.

**Visit the Pathways Action Map to learn more about these and other initiatives leading efforts in this area.**