



# Attendance Works

Advancing Student Success By Reducing Chronic Absence

## Making the Most of Your Parent-Teacher Conference

### A Step-By-Step Guide for Teachers

At their best, Parent-Teacher Conferences can provide a foundation for a trusting relationship and help both you and the parents learn how to partner together to best support their child. While your conferences will cover a number of topics, integrating the topic of attendance into your conversations is a great way to educate parents on its importance and discuss it in a non-threatening setting.

The following framework can help guide your Parent-Teacher Conferences regardless of the topics covered, and the suggestions for questions and issues to cover are by no means exhaustive. Those suggestions related specifically to attendance are marked in a blue box.

#### 1. Learn

Learn something about your student's family. After welcoming the parent, ask them what their vision is for their child's future. What things do they want their child to accomplish in life? What things do they want their child to accomplish this year? What things should you know as their child's teacher that will help their child succeed in your class?

#### 2. Share

Share the positive things about the child that you have observed so far. This can be academically or socially. Share your vision for student learning and the experiences you want your students to have in the classroom. Describe what you want your students to accomplish this year.

Explain that one of your goals is helping all your students acquire a good habit of attendance in order to ensure that they benefit from the learning opportunities in the classroom. Make sure parents are aware of any activities that you are planning for the classroom or that are taking place in the school to acknowledge good attendance. Take this chance to point out the opportunity in your school for students to earn an additional dollar in their college savings account for every week of good attendance.

#### 3. Inform

Inform the parent about the progress you've seen their child make. Start off with the positives. Point out the areas in which the student is excelling or improving. Be specific. Parents need to know that you are sincere and that you have taken the time to think about their child.

Share areas where the child can improve or is struggling. Remember that parents are not credentialed teachers. They often do not know the academic language that comes so naturally to teachers. As you share challenges that the student is having, explain the skill and give examples. Share examples of grade-level work and encourage the parent to ask questions if anything isn't clear.

**Review the student's report card and update parents on their child's attendance data.** Prior to the parent teacher conference, review the attendance data on the report card in order to determine how you want to have that conversation. Here are three possible scenarios:

1. **Good Attendance:** In this case, a student has missed less than 5% of school days or less than 4 days during the first semester. Congratulate the parent on making attendance a priority and encourage them to keep it up.
2. **At Risk Attendance:** This is the situation if a student missed 5-10% of the school year (between 5- 8 days of the first semester). Let the parent know that you are a little concerned about attendance since it is easy for absences to add up.
3. **Chronic Absence:** This is the situation if a student has missed 10% or more of school (9 days or more in the first semester). If a child has been chronically absent, let the parent know that their child has missed so many days of school that they are academically at risk. If possible, offer concrete examples of what a child may have missed in the classroom due to their absence.

When you talk about the issue of attendance, remember that parents may not be aware of the importance of regular attendance in the early grades and the impact it has on their child's learning as early as PreK and Kindergarten. Have a copy of the [general parent flyer](#) available and be ready to walk through the key points. Be specific with parents about what their child is missing when they don't make it to school. For example, if a student frequently is absent on Fridays, inform parents of the lessons and activities that their child is consistently missing out on.

For all areas where the child can improve—including attendance—connect it back to the parent's hopes and dreams for their child. How will consistently missing school impact their ability to read? To get a good job? To go to college? Help parents see how what's happening now can affect reaching these goals.

## 4. Discuss

Talk with the parents about the challenges they face in helping their child as well as the strengths that they can build upon. Make sure the parents are informed about how to help their child at home and resources available to them if they need additional help.

**If a child has been chronically absent**, be prepared to spend some time finding out what might be making it difficult for a child to get to school and what supports might help a child and family come to school. Consider asking a colleague such as an attendance liaison or school social worker to join you for the conference and help identify supports for the family, especially if a child has been missing a significant number of days.

**What makes it hard for parents to get their child to school every day?** What can they do to address these issues? Listen to parents and try to get a clear understanding of the barriers they face. Try to begin your response by highlighting a strength or something positive you heard. For example, if a parent is struggling to get their child to wake up on time even with an alarm clock, point out that it's great that they have an alarm clock. Then offer suggestions for how they can manage these issues. If their child is sick often, recommend that they still come to school unless they have a fever, and promise to call home if the child gets worse throughout the day. If they are having problems getting their child to school on time, work through adjustments they could make in their daily routine. Help parents do the problem-solving that they often don't have time for.

*Some families face serious situations and barriers that are beyond the scope of what you as a teacher can help solve, such as community violence, illness in the family, and trauma. Don't avoid having conversations with these families about these serious challenges; instead be ready to connect these families to a social worker or other community resource.*

## 4. Discuss (continued)

**How can parents reinforce classroom lessons at home?** Ask parents if there are particular areas that they themselves see their child struggling with, or excelling at. Give parents “learning at home” activities to support their child’s progress. For example, if a child is struggling in reading comprehension, give the parent a few questions to ask their child while reading with them at night. If a child is struggling in several areas, do not overwhelm the parents with activities in each area. Start with one or two content areas and let them know you will be checking in to see how things are going. Encourage them to initiate contact as well.

**How can parents stay connected?** Let the parents know how to keep track of their child’s progress. Discuss how they can get in touch with you if there is a question or concern and when they should expect to hear back. Are there ways to find out how their child is doing on a regular basis (e.g. progress reports, notes home)? Does this particular family need more consistent

## 5. Ask & Arrive at a Plan

Ask if there is anything you can do to support a partnership between home and school. Ask if there are any additional questions or comments. Let the parent know what you need from them. Don’t be afraid to be clear about what you need.

If the child is having attendance issues, consider using the [Attendance Worksheet](#) to guide a conversation about improvement planning. Before the end of the conference, review the agreements that have been made. What have you as the teacher agreed to do? What has the parent agreed to do? Set a timeline to check in. Encourage parent-initiated contact.

## Differentiated Support: Tailoring Parent Teacher Conferences to Each Student

When it comes to attendance, the conversations you’ll have will be very different if the child is regularly attending versus if the child is missing a couple days every month (borderline chronically absent) versus if the child has severe attendance problems and is missing weeks of school.

Despite the fact that the challenges and solutions will vary significantly for these different families, always start the conversation in the same way—learn about the hopes and goals of the parent, and share your vision for helping their child succeed. Doing so will help build a relationship of trust, which is vital regardless of the child’s situation. When it comes down to reviewing the child’s progress and attendance data, congratulate, encourage, and problem-solve as appropriate. For families with particular challenges, it might be helpful to invite a social worker or the school Attendance Liaison to join the conference for additional support.