



# ***Attendance Counts!***

**AN INFORMATION GUIDE**

**FOR FAMILIES**







**FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION STEERING COMMITTEE  
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**ATTENDANCE COUNTS:  
An Information Guide for Families**

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# INTRODUCTION

This Information Guide was written to share information with parents and caregivers about the very important topic of student attendance.

- ▶ Everyone can play a role in making sure that all First Nations students have every opportunity for success by attending school as much as possible.
- ▶ It is most effective when families and schools work in partnership to promote good attendance.
- ▶ In fact, it is most helpful when entire communities encourage all students to arrive at school regularly and on-time.

**Some of the ideas in this Information Guide may work well for some families, but not others.**

**All of the suggestions are offered as options to consider and adapt, according to the needs and circumstances of each family, child, and teen.**

**Many people shared their thoughts and ideas to help inform this Guide. We appreciate all of the feedback we received.**

## Project Sponsors



The **BC First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC)** is committed to supporting First Nations in their efforts to improve the success of all First Nations students in BC. FNESC facilitates collaborative services in the areas of research, communications, advocacy, program administration, and networking, and FNESC strives to share up-to-date information about available programs, government policies and initiatives, and local, provincial and national education issues that affect First Nations learners.

See [www.fnesc.ca](http://www.fnesc.ca)



The **First Nations Schools Association (FNSA)** was formally established as a non-profit society with charitable status in 1996. The FNSA represents and works on behalf of First Nations controlled schools in BC and has a mandate to support those schools in creating effective, nurturing, and linguistically and culturally appropriate education environments that provide students with a positive foundation in all academic areas. More information is available at [www.fnsa.ca](http://www.fnsa.ca).

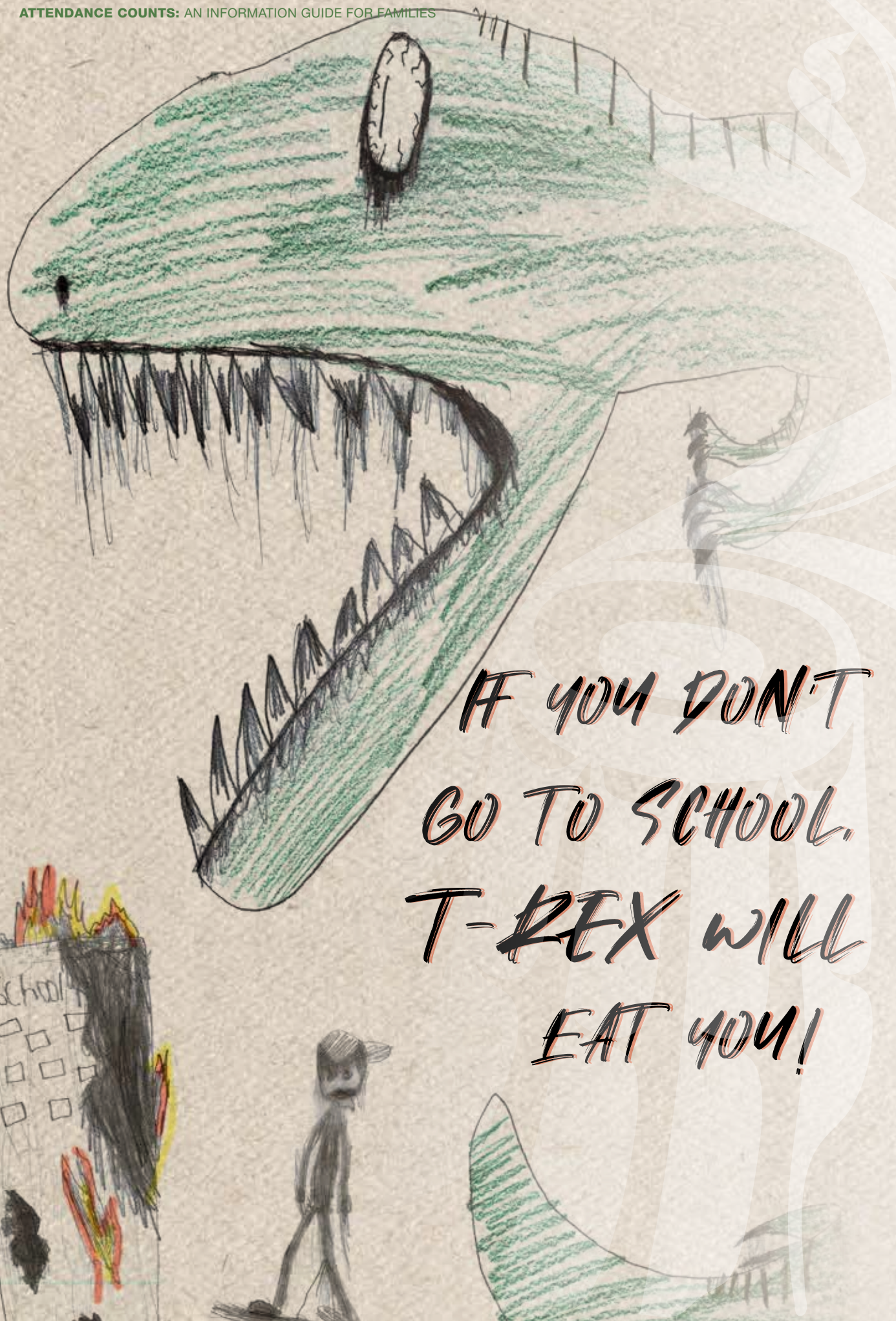
Comments and suggestions regarding this resource and other possible supports for raising student attendance rates are always welcome.

The beautiful artwork included in this Guide was submitted by students who participated in an Attendance Poster Contest in 2019.

## What Parents Can Say to Children and Teens To Help Promote Attendance

1. I care about your education. School is a priority for our family.
2. School is your first and most important job.
  - You're learning about more than math and reading.
  - You're learning how to show up for school on time every day, so that when you graduate and get a job, you'll know how to show up for work on time every day.
3. Students who attend school regularly are more likely to graduate and find good jobs.
4. School only gets harder when you stay home too much.
  - Sometimes it's tempting to stay home because you've got too much work or you don't understand what's going on in class.
  - But missing a day often makes that worse.
5. The more you attend, the easier school will be, and the better prepared you will be for lifelong success.





IF YOU DON'T  
GO TO SCHOOL,  
T-REX WILL  
EAT YOU!



## PART ONE

# WHY FOCUS ON PROMOTING GOOD ATTENDANCE?

## Benefits for Students Who Attend School Regularly

Students who have the best chance to succeed in school are those who attend school regularly.

Being in school as much as possible is an essential part of the learning process.

- ▶ Students who regularly attend school receive more hours of instruction, and they usually stay in school longer.
- ▶ Studies show that students with good attendance have a greater chance of graduating, and they often finish high school with higher grades. That means they will have a wide range of options for post-secondary education and careers.
- ▶ Students who graduate from high school are more likely to be employed and earn more money later in their lives.
- ▶ Students who attend school regularly have more opportunities to build positive relationships with adults and other students in the school. School helps students practice and improve their behavioural and social-emotional skills.
- ▶ There is evidence that students who attend school more often are less likely to be negatively affected by challenges outside of school, such as substance abuse or other risky behaviours.

*This does not mean that students who experience attendance challenges cannot catch up and go on to graduate and be successful. They definitely can!*

It does mean that helping all students attend school regularly is very important.

It also means that students who are experiencing attendance challenges should be provided effective supports as soon as possible.

When schools have higher attendance rates, the achievement of all students improves, providing more role models and mentors to inspire and support the next generation of students in the community.

## Benefits for Schools and Communities Associated With Better Attendance

In addition to benefits for individual students, higher attendance rates benefit schools, classrooms, and entire communities, too.

- ▶ Fewer student absences is good for the overall learning environment.
  - When teachers spend less time organizing makeup work for students who have missed school, they have more time for other class preparations.
  - When teachers spend less time in review, the pace of instruction does not slow down and important instructional time is not lost.
  - Teachers are often more positive and energized when students attend regularly, which is good for whole classes and schools.
  - Teachers are better able to provide adequate attention to all students when they do not have to concentrate on students who have fallen behind due to chronic absences.
  - When classes use partner and group activities, absences can cause a number of challenges – leaving some students without partners, requiring students to change partners in the middle of assignments, and sometimes impacting the momentum of learning projects. When fewer students miss school, these types of challenges arise less often.
  - Some researchers suggest that absenteeism can become “contagious.” If some students are away day after day, other students may perceive attendance as less important. Encouraging all students to come to school unless they are sick can help prevent this problem.





Outma Squilx Cultural School



Kumsheen Secondary

## Related Benefits of Arriving At School On-Time

Research also shows that being on time for school helps promote success.

- ▶ Students who arrive on time do not miss the beginning of their morning classes, when important learning is taking place.
- ▶ Students who are not chronically late generally have higher test scores, higher graduation rates, and more success in high school.
- ▶ Students who are usually on time often feel more connected to school, which can lead to fewer behaviour problems and lower dropout rates.
- ▶ By regularly arriving on-time for school, students learn the importance of punctuality – a life skill that is needed for future employment and lifelong success.
- ▶ When students are on time, they do not negatively impact their teachers and other students. Late arrivals can disrupt instruction, require the teacher to reorganize lessons, and cause distractions for classmates. So more on time arrivals can help classrooms run more smoothly.

## Things to Think About

- ◆ Can you think of any other benefits of students attending regularly and on time?
- ◆ Are the parents you know aware of the value of good attendance, and its direct impact on student achievement and success at school?
- ◆ How can everyone help spread the message that good attendance is positive for all students?



All kids should go to school so they can learn about their culture and get an education so they can be a leader in their community.





**PART TWO**

## DEFINING AND UNDERSTANDING ATTENDANCE RATES

In order to fully understand attendance issues, it is helpful to know how attendance is often measured.

### Moving Beyond Measuring Truancy

In the past, schools and communities often measured what is called “truancy.”

Truancy refers to students deliberately missing school or arriving late – without a good reason and without parental permission. Sometimes people might talk about students “skipping school” or “cutting class.” People also refer to “unexcused absences” or “unexcused lates.” These terms all mean the same thing.

It is important to note, however, that truancy does not account for all (or even most) absences for many students.

- ▶ Some students may have many “*excused*” absences or lates – which means that they provide a reason and they have permission from their parents to miss school.
- ▶ Some students may have a moderate number of *excused* absences and a moderate number of unexcused absences, but when they are all added up, it may be a large number of days.

The important thing to remember is that being absent from school for any reason means lost learning time.

Therefore, just counting “truancy” (or unexcused absences) does not capture the full picture.

## What is Chronic Absenteeism?

A more current and commonly used term for discussing attendance is “chronic absenteeism.”

- ▶ Chronic absenteeism is usually defined as missing ten percent or more of a school year, including excused and unexcused absences added together.

OCTOBER						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT
		X	X	X	X	
	X	X	X	X	X	
	X	X	X	X	X	
	X	X	X	X		

For most schools, ten percent of the school year results in approximately 18 days, or about two days every month. *If that doesn't seem like very many days, think of this: it is almost one month of lost learning time!*

Chronic absenteeism is usually measured as a percentage of days missed so that absences are noticed before students miss 18 days. For example, if a student has missed six days of school by the end of September, people should be paying attention and trying to understand what is happening. Discovering that a student has missed 18 days of school at the end of the year is not as helpful. That is too late to respond effectively.

### TRUANCY

- Counts only unexcused absences
- Emphasizes compliance with rules

VS

### CHRONIC ABSENCE

- Counts all absences: excused and unexcused
- Emphasizes the academic impact of absence = missed learning opportunities



## What is Average Daily Attendance?

It is also important to be aware that the concept of chronic absence is sometimes confused with Average Daily Attendance (ADA). Many schools report ADA to parents.

**ADA is the total number of days students attend in a given period (such as each day, each week, or each month), divided by the number of days school was in session during that period. For example, if a school has a daily ADA of 90%, that means an average of 90% of students are in attendance each day.**

Many people assume that if a school has a high ADA, that means the school's students all have good attendance. But that may not always be the case.

- ▶ A high ADA could mean that most students attend regularly and only occasionally miss a day of school. That is to be expected. Most students miss school once in a while if they are sick or need to attend an important appointment.
- ▶ But with a high ADA, there could be a group of students who are missing many days. That would be more problematic – especially for the students who are away too much!

If a school reports ADA to parents, that can provide some general information about the school's attendance overall, but it might mask very serious challenges for individual students.

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## Chronic Absenteeism Versus Occasional Absences and Absences Due to Cultural and Traditional Activities

When discussing attendance issues, it is important to remember that occasional student absences due to illness, appointments, family issues, etc. are to be expected. Parents should keep sick children home from school when necessary – so the sick children have an opportunity to rest and recover, and to avoid spreading illness to others.

Chronic absenteeism, on the other hand, refers to long, regular, and/or repeated absences – which can negatively impact a students' educational success.

Also, students missing school because they are engaged in cultural or traditional pursuits is a unique kind of absence. Engagement in traditional activities is of course a meaningful and important form of learning. Students' success is nurtured by their participation in cultural activities, which makes students stronger and more confident in who they are.

If students are away from school because they are involved in traditional pursuits – *recognizing that doing so is very beneficial* – it is important to talk to the school and teachers about how students can stay up-to-date with any school-based learning they might miss as a result.



Cataline Elementary School

## Attendance Data After the COVID Pandemic

It is important for everyone to understand the serious effect of the COVID pandemic on student attendance.

- ▶ The rates of students attending First Nation schools who are chronically absent ***doubled*** between 2018/2019 (pre-COVID) and 2021/2022 (post-COVID).
- ▶ Data for First Nations students who attend public schools also worsened, with higher percentages of student absences after the COVID pandemic.
- ▶ This data is consistent with wider attendance trends. Schools and school districts throughout North America report that attendance rates still have not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

It is crucial that schools, families, and communities work together to monitor and improve student attendance rates – now more than ever.



## Things to Think About

**Do you keep track of your child's attendance? That is not always as easy as it sounds.**

Research shows that many parents underestimate the amount of school their children are missing.

- ♦ One large study found that parents had the best of intentions for supporting their children's education, but a large number of the parents underestimated the amount of school their children missed.
  - Parents were asked whether their children were absent an average of two or more days per month, and whether their children were absent more than ten days over the year.
  - 60% of parents said their child **was** absent an average of two or more days per month, but **not** 10 or more days per year
  - The math: if a student is absent an average of two or more days per month, they are absent more than ten days per year.
- ♦ In another large study, parents estimated that their children had missed about nine days of school in the previous year, when in fact they had all missed **at least** 17.8 days – right at the 18-day threshold for chronic absenteeism.<sup>2</sup>

It is very easy for chronic absenteeism to sneak up on busy families!

**Many schools show student absences and lates on report cards. If you receive that information on your child's report card, think about how the number compares to chronic absenteeism ... which is ten percent of days missed, or about 2 days per month of school.**

And consider whether lates are adding up. For some students, the time they miss due to being late would equal many days of missed school. Sometimes, time lost due to being late can add up to two or more days per month. Time missed from school can build quickly, sometimes without us realizing.

**Some families find it useful to use some kind of an attendance tracker. Perhaps putting a chart on the refrigerator can help everyone in your home notice how absences are adding up. See the sample tracker on page 14.**

**If you are concerned about your child's attendance, talk to the school. Find out if absences or lates are affecting your child's progress. Ask how you can work together to help your child succeed in school. Or talk to a community education worker for support.**

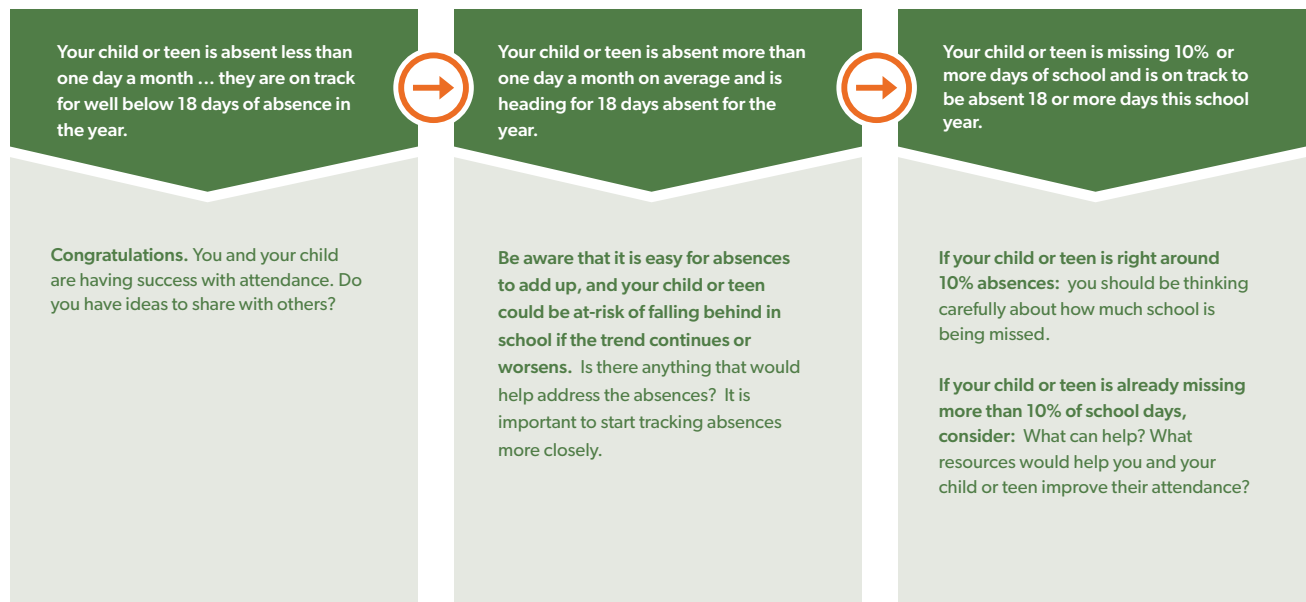
It is important for everyone to work together to overcome barriers to attendance. And remember that everyone needs help sometimes.

## Sample Home Attendance Tracker

ABSENCE NO.   DATE		REASON FOR ABSENCE
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		TEN ABSENCES – YOUR STUDENT IS AT RISK FOR CHRONIC ABSENCE
11		
12		
13		
14		
15		



## What Parents Can Think About



# School

is one of the most important  
things in the world.





**PART THREE**

## **UNDERSTANDING WHAT LEADS TO ATTENDANCE CHALLENGES CAN HELP IDENTIFY THE BEST RESPONSES**

There are many issues that lead to chronic absenteeism. Often those issues overlap and are very complicated. The reasons why each student misses school are unique.

This section outlines some common factors that cause chronic absenteeism.

**Why is thinking about potential causes useful?**

**Because understanding causes may help to identify the best solutions.**

## School Related Factors

When many people think about attendance challenges, they think primarily about families and students. However, schools can also have an important impact on student attendance.

Schools encourage better attendance when they:

- ▶ Are welcoming, safe, and inclusive, with personal connections between staff and students.
- ▶ Communicate effectively with families – including helping families know what steps are being taken to keep the school safe and healthy, and sharing clear information about when students should stay home because of illness.
- ▶ Have effective attendance policies and procedures, including following up with parents in helpful ways.
- ▶ Pro-actively address bullying.
- ▶ Expect and promote high student achievement and positive student behaviours.
- ▶ Consistently show positive attitudes about learning, students, and families.
- ▶ Offer culturally relevant courses and resources, and use teaching strategies that students find interesting and relevant.
- ▶ Support students through important changes, such as beginning in a new school or moving on to high school.
- ▶ Provide adequate transportation options.

## Community Related Factors

Studies show that communities can also play an important role in addressing attendance challenges.

- ▶ Attendance rates can be impacted by the availability of community support services for families and children.
- ▶ It is especially important for communities to help address the anxiety and stress that many people still feel following the COVID pandemic, which continues to have a significant impact on student attendance.
- ▶ Families and communities can work together to help students believe that a good education will provide them meaningful options for post-secondary education and careers.
- ▶ A community-wide emphasis on the value of education can positively affect students' attitudes about school, and their attendance.



## Family Related Factors

Parents and other family members are not solely responsible for attendance. However, they do have a vital influence on the willingness and ability of students to go to school.

Families can provide invaluable support and encouragement. They are also key to ensuring that their children are physically and emotionally equipped to attend school and enjoy their education.

Studies suggest that families can contribute to good attendance by:

- ▶ Being involved in education and the school.
- ▶ Helping students who are feeling anxious about going to school – especially after the pandemic.
- ▶ Emphasizing to children and teens the importance of getting to school each day ready to learn.
- ▶ Eating meals together whenever possible, talking about the benefits of education and the many opportunities that are available to students who graduate from grade 12 and attend post-secondary.
- ▶ Making sure students are eating nutritious foods and getting enough sleep.
- ▶ Controlling the amount of time children and teens are gaming and using electronics.
- ▶ Helping children and teens stay organized, get ready for school on-time, and stay on top of their school-work.

Research is clear that just reminding students that you value education makes an important difference to their success in school.

## Factors Related to Individual Students

While it is crucial to **never blame students** for attendance difficulties, some of the reasons for chronic absenteeism can relate directly to students themselves. Understanding the factors that can make students more likely to miss school may help to inform efforts to get each student the supports they need.

Studies show that students are more likely to miss school when they:

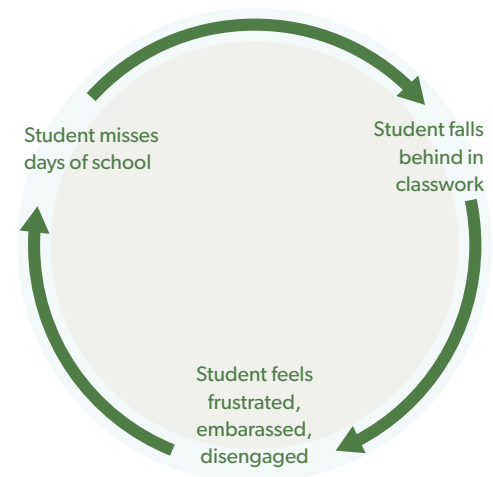
- ▶ Are experiencing anxiety, stress, or other emotional and mental health challenges – which may be increased for some students due to the COVID pandemic.
- ▶ Are addicted to electronics.
- ▶ Find it difficult to make friends / have lost connections to other students (which may have happened during the pandemic).

- ▶ Are being bullied or experience conflicts at school, making them feel unsafe.
- ▶ Don't feel welcome and secure at school.
- ▶ Have friends who are missing school regularly.
- ▶ Find it difficult to keep up with their schoolwork / are worried about tests, assignments, and grades.
- ▶ Find school boring and not relevant to their lives.
- ▶ Don't understand the value of education, or think school is a waste of time.
- ▶ Don't feel that they can be successful / need to build their sense of self-esteem and self-confidence.

**Sometimes, being absent from school can become a cycle for students.**

- ▶ Learning builds over time and from grade to grade.  
For example:
  - what students learn in November is built on what students learned in September and October; and
  - what students learn in grade 4 builds on what students learned in grades 1, 2 and 3.

When students miss too much school, they miss out on important foundational knowledge. Then they may feel frustrated or embarrassed, and they may want to stay home from school. But that may leave them further and further behind their classmates.



- ▶ Sometimes students might stay away from school because they feel bullied or they do not feel like they fit in. But missing school means that problems cannot be addressed. Students also may feel even more uncomfortable returning to school after missing several days.



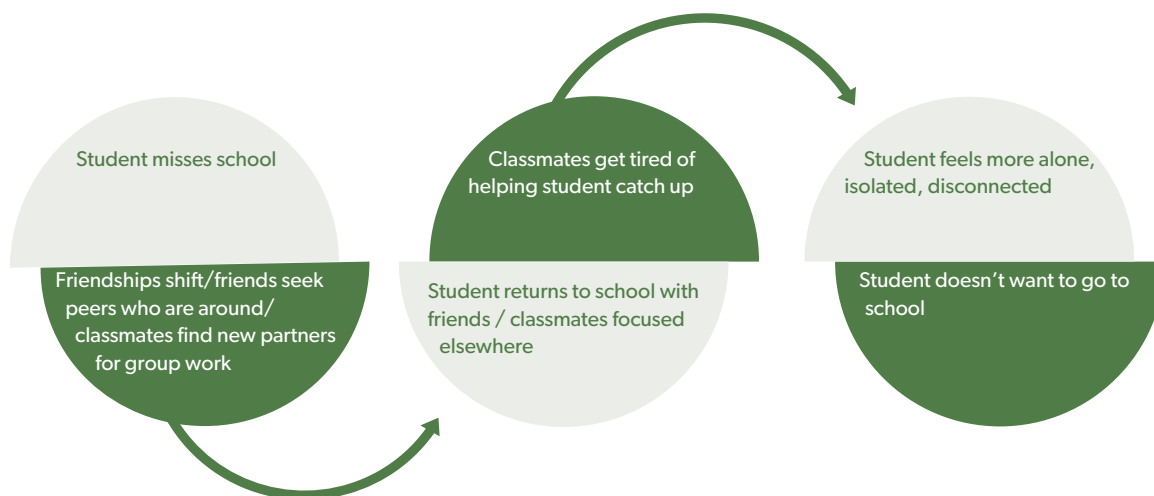


Boston Bar Elementary



Barriere Elementary

- ▶ Students develop important relationships and friendships in school, but when they miss too many days, they might find that friendships have changed when they return.



If they feel left out, students often avoid being in school – leading them to feel increasingly isolated and lonely, causing more attendance challenges.

It is important to note that challenges may impact each student differently and may or may not result in high rates of absenteeism.

*Each student is unique, and responses must be individualized.*



## Why is it important to consider the reasons why students might be missing school?

- ▶ It is **not** meant to imply blame.
- ▶ It is **not** meant to suggest that the reasons are too complicated to solve.
- ▶ Instead, considering some of the common reasons why students are absent is intended to help everyone find and use the right strategies – to reduce the amount of time students miss out on learning, whatever the reasons.

The Voices of First Nations Parents:

### What parents say about why students miss school

Input from Participants at the February 2023 FNEESC and FNSA Parents Conference

- ◆ COVID fears and lingering anxiety from COVID isolation and stress.
- ◆ Mental health issues, including students not feeling emotionally well enough to go to school, sometimes due to bullying or other issues, and parents needing mental health supports, as well.
- ◆ Socio-economic challenges, including students not having lunch, students and families feeling embarrassed about not having food, trendy clothes, fancy sneakers, etc. – issues that have been worsened by high inflation rates.
- ◆ Gaming addictions, leading to lack of sleep and directly causing missed school.
- ◆ The need for better scheduling and healthy routines at home.
- ◆ Lack of adequate transportation options.
- ◆ The time required for families in remote communities to travel for medical appointments, etc.
- ◆ Limited awareness of the impact of attendance on student success.

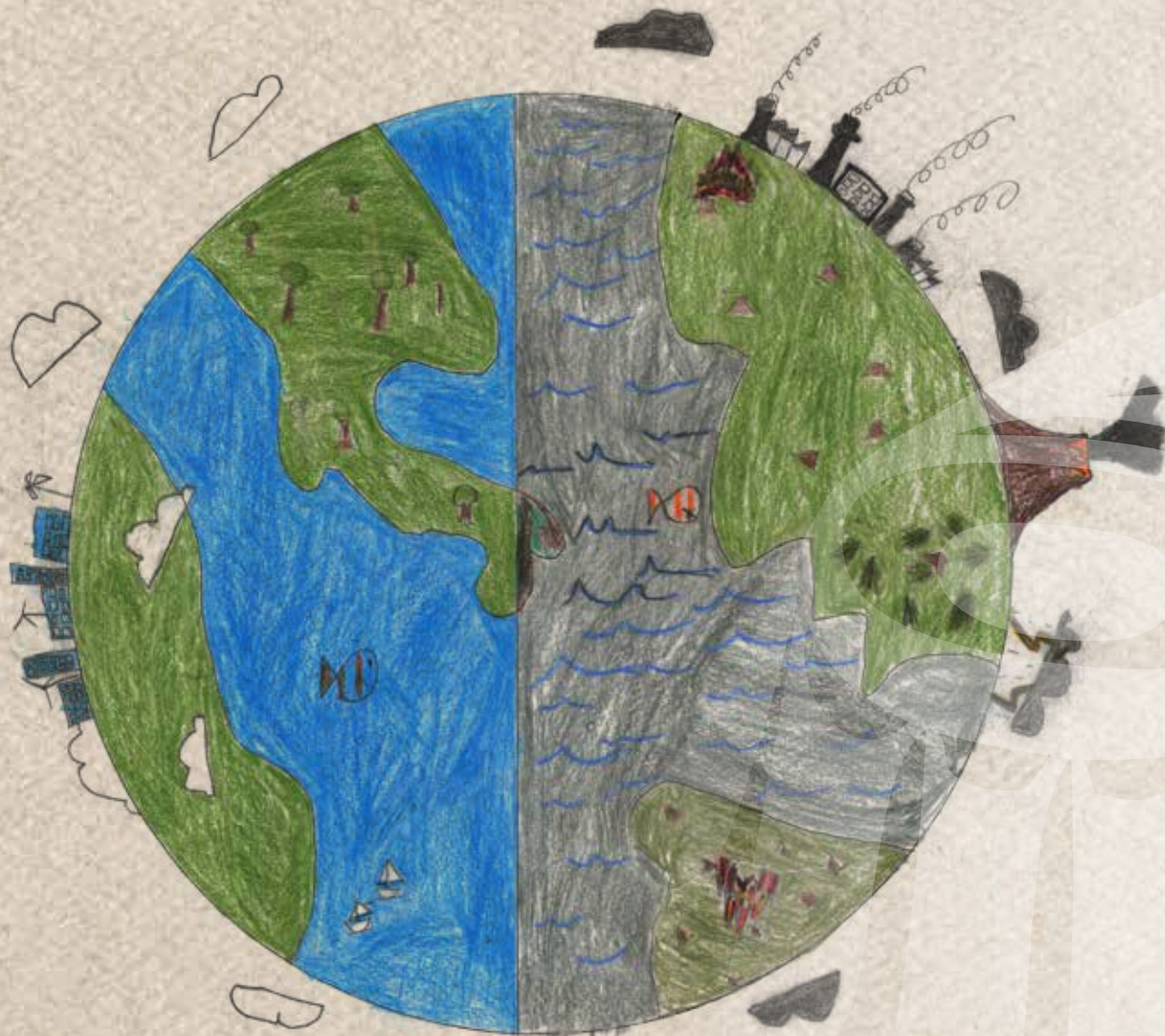
## Things to Think About

- ♦ Why do you think students you know are missing school?
- ♦ What do you think families can do to help children and teens know that education is a priority? What messages would help students know that everyone in their family and community wants them to be in school?
- ♦ Do you know if attendance challenges are impacting your child's progress? If you want to know more, reach out to the school.
  - Remember that each missed day equals missed learning.
  - You should always feel comfortable asking for help and sharing your ideas. You are the expert about what works best for your child or teen. Your voice is crucial.
  - The most important goal for schools and families is working together to get all students to attend. Blame is not important and is never helpful.





You Can Make  
A Difference...



If You Stay  
IN School



## PART FOUR

# WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP PROMOTE GOOD ATTENDANCE

Many, many studies provide a range of suggestions for promoting better attendance.

FNESC and FNSA have also consulted with numerous representatives of First Nations, schools, and parents' clubs to discuss what is working well for First Nations students in BC.

The ideas shared in this section of the Guide are based on research, as well as the input that has been shared.

### FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS CAN ...

## Address Attendance Early

It is important to promote good attendance as soon as possible – especially because attendance challenges can become a cycle.

- ▶ Research shows that half of students who miss 2 – 4 days in September go on to miss nearly a month of school.<sup>2</sup>

Attendance also counts from the earliest grade levels.

Studies show that parents are twice as likely to say that attendance is a “big deal” in high school than they are in kindergarten. But good attendance is a habit that children need to form early, and if they don't, attendance problems may worsen over time.

Studies show:

- ▶ children who attend more regularly in pre-kindergarten are less likely to be chronically absent in kindergarten.
- ▶ children who attend more regularly in kindergarten and first grade usually have higher levels of attendance five years later.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ children do better academically in first grade if they were not chronically absent in kindergarten.<sup>4</sup>

As early as kindergarten, children learn and practice skills that are critical for ongoing school success. Skills build from the foundation set in early grade levels.

This **does not** mean that students cannot catch up if they are behind! Of course they can.

It **does** mean that promoting good attendance while children are young is useful.

It also means that if a student is chronically absent in the early grade levels, schools and families should pay close attention to the student's progress and provide any supports they need.

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3 Attendance Works, 2014

4 Bruner, Discher and Chang, 2011

## Considerations for Decision-Making: Myths and Facts About Attendance

MYTH		FACT
Absences are only a problem if they are unexcused.	➡	Being away from school means lost opportunities, whatever the reason.
Sporadic absences (versus consecutive absences) are not a problem.	➡	Learning time is impacted regardless of when absences occur.
Attendance only matters in older grades.	➡	Significant research shows attendance at early grade levels has important consequences.
Attendance is a family's problem.	➡	Students miss school for many reasons, and it is best addressed collectively – by students, families, schools, and the community together.



## What Parents Can Say When Their Child Does Not Want to Go To School

YOUR CHILD SAYS...	WHAT MIGHT BE GOING ON?	WHAT CAN YOU SAY?
"I don't feel like going."	It's possible your child is having a hard time at school. The problem could be something very recent or something that's been building for a long time.	"I wonder if you want to stay home because things aren't going well at school. When you get home, let's talk about what's going on and if we can do something to make things better. Is there something we can ask the school to do to help us?"
"I'm too tired to go."	School can be exhausting. That's especially true if kids are struggling in some way. It takes a lot of energy to try to keep up or hide difficulties.	"It surprises me you're tired. I thought you were sleeping well. Is there something you've been working extra hard at or that's using up a lot of your energy? Is there something keeping you up at night?"
"I hate school."	Sometimes a specific bad experience or trouble with one aspect of school can cast a cloud over everything else.	"I know there's a lot that you like at school. Is there something in particular that's making you so unhappy that you want to stay home?"
"The kids are mean."	It can be tough for some kids to understand social situations and fit in. Making friends can be hard. And kids are sometimes the targets of bullying.	"I'm sorry kids are being mean. What are they doing? Can you tell me about it? Would you like me to talk to your teacher and come up with a plan to help?"
"School's too hard."	School isn't always easy, even when kids seem to be doing OK. Sometimes kids might find it hard to meet class expectations, and they often worry about falling behind or failing.	"It sounds like things aren't going as well as you'd like at school. What's the most challenging thing about school right now? Let's talk to your teacher or principal about how you are feeling."
"I forgot to do my homework again."	For some kids, keeping track of assignments and managing time is really tough, no matter how hard they try. And if it happens a lot, they might feel embarrassed or fear they are going to get in trouble.	"You seem to be having trouble staying on top of your work. Do you feel like that's a challenge for you? Should we ask about some resources and different ways to help you stay organized?"

**FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS CAN ...****Address Attendance Issues Together**

The evidence is clear – cooperative approaches to addressing attendance issues work best.

- ▶ The factors that contribute to student absences are complicated and interconnected.
- ▶ This means that family, school, and community partnerships are essential.
- ▶ It is very valuable to emphasize that everyone expects all students to be in school.

There are a number of proven attendance strategies that schools and families can implement together in quick and cost effective ways.

- ▶ Families can work with schools to communicate high expectations for both attendance and academic achievement, balanced with an understanding of challenges students may be facing.
  - Research shows that students have the best attendance records when families and schools encourage students to strive for high goals, and also provide students with high levels of support.
- ▶ One of the best ways to address attendance is to make sure schools are places that students want to be. Schools should be safe, supportive, and engaging, where students feel welcome and valued. And there is a wealth of evidence that family involvement in the school is invaluable for achieving those goals.
  - When students see their parents and family members in the school, volunteering or attending special events, they feel more connected to the school. They also are more likely to perceive the school as a safe, secure environment – which is especially important as students adapt to being back at school after the prolonged COVID disruptions.
  - When parents and caregivers are involved, schools are usually more representative of all families, and students know that their families value the school and education.
  - Families can provide meaningful support for school activities, such as helping out with field trips and learning activities, and sharing their unique talents and understandings to make schools more interesting and exciting places to learn.

- ▶ Parents and families can make important contributions to school decision-making ... including making school attendance policies and procedures work well for everyone.

If parents and caregivers are able to provide input into school attendance policies, the following questions may be helpful to think about.

- Do the policies clearly explain what is an excused or unexcused absence? Will they help families understand “how sick is too sick” to attend school?
- Do the policies balance high expectations with compassion? It is best when students are clearly expected to attend, but are not punished if they have unexcused absences.
  - As study after study has shown, policies that impose punishments for unexcused absences are not as effective.
  - If there are consequences for unexcused absences, they must be reasonable and they must not keep students out of school more.
  - For example, suspending students for being absent is not helpful. It would be better to require students who have a large number of unexcused absences to spend their lunch period catching up on school work.
- Do the policies identify how and when parents will be informed about absences – including alerting parents when attendance issues are impacting their children’s progress?
- Do the policies focus enough on preventing attendance challenges?
- Is it clear how schools will partner with families to help students who are struggling to attend school?
- ▶ It is very valuable when families and schools work together to build “school connectedness.”
  - When schools have a feeling of “connectedness,” students believe that there are adults in the school who care about their education and well-being.
  - Connectedness means students have a strong sense of belonging.
  - School connectedness has been shown to increase attendance, and to also raise student achievement and reduce the likelihood that students will be involved in “risky behaviours.”<sup>5</sup>

Schools – **working with families** – can increase the feeling of connectedness in many ways, including the following.





Tl'etinqox School



Senpaq'cin School

- Make sure that the school is a secure environment, with clear and consistently applied anti-bullying strategies.
- Show students their attendance is noticed. Parents and schools can work together to identify school staff, relatives, family friends, and community education staff who can urge students they know to attend school.
- Encourage students to be involved in extra-curricular programs, which is very beneficial for increasing attendance. Some studies have found that **before-school** activities and clubs are especially helpful for improving attendance and on-time arrival of students who were previously late.
  - Participating in language and culture opportunities is especially meaningful. It helps build students' self-identify and self-confidence – which is crucial for helping them come to school regularly.
  - When families are able to help with extra-curricular opportunities, schools are often better equipped to offer a range of relevant options.

The Voices of First Nations Parents:

## What parents say schools can do to help with attendance

Input from participants at the February 2023 First Nations Parents Conference and 2024 Attendance Capacity Building Sessions With First Nations Parents

- ♦ Address student achievement – provide strong instruction, as well as tutoring supports and after school academic programs
- ♦ Avoid jargon; share information with families using language they can understand
- ♦ Create a sense of belonging and make sure students feel safe at school, and help all students feel wanted – including students who experience behaviour challenges
- ♦ Build positive connections with students so they know you are coming from a place of genuine caring
- ♦ Work with families to have older siblings act as role models for their younger siblings, and have students mentor others to help them feel safe and build a sense of belonging
- ♦ Acknowledge the real struggles some students experience and show them you appreciate how hard they have worked to get to school and make it through the day
- ♦ Tell students you are happy to see them at school; use positive affirmations
- ♦ Implement programs and activities that will help students feel excited about attending school, including: extra-curricular activities; language and culture activities; more on-the land opportunities; special field trips; spirit weeks; summer programs for fun activities like drama and dance; movie nights ... activities “kids don’t want to miss”
- ♦ Address student mental health and wellness, including providing nutrition programs and efforts to help with teen anxiety, ideally with counselling supports and adequate resources for students who have high anxiety and who are scared or bullied
- ♦ Provide families alarm clocks, so kids don’t need to bring phones into their bedrooms to wake them up



Sk'il Mountain Community School

- ♦ Assign staff to support students who are experiencing challenges, and encourage vulnerable students with special gatherings / extra activities
- ♦ Make efforts to ensure all students know what supports are in place, and make sure students never feel shame reaching out for the help that is available
- ♦ Consider creative ways to keep students engaged in learning when they aren't in school
- ♦ Teach students “financial literacy;” help them understand the importance of education for earning a good living
- ♦ Host an Elders-in-Residence program / create culturally safe spaces for students, with traditional foods and teas, etc.
- ♦ Host presentations by graduates from the school to encourage students to value education
- ♦ Create a pleasant, constructive environment students want to be a part of
- ♦ Encourage students to join in extra-curricular activities
- ♦ Provide professional development so teachers understand who First Nations people are, and First Nations' educational rights
- ♦ Make sure there is positive energy in the school



The Voices of First Nations Parents:

## What parents say families can do to help with attendance

Input from participants at the February 2023 First Nations Parents Conference and 2024 Attendance Capacity Building Sessions With First Nations Parents

- ◆ Tell their children they value education and want to support them in school
- ◆ Start each school day in a positive way; share positive messages before children leave for school in the morning
- ◆ Set positive routines at home so kids are healthy and well rested
- ◆ Share the message with students that “education = independence”
- ◆ When possible, try to avoid having older children stay home from school to care for younger siblings and try not to book medical appointments or trips during school hours
- ◆ Limit screen time and take away phones at bed time (not always easy)
- ◆ Talk with other families and the school about how to help address students’ anxiety about attending school
- ◆ Regularly check in with teachers
- ◆ Contact the school (for younger students) or help students reach out to their teachers when days are missed, so children and teens don’t fall further behind
- ◆ Text each other when they need or can share help, such as transportation supports, and encourage each other on the rough days when their children don’t want to go to school
- ◆ Text the teacher, when appropriate, to share “my child is having a rough day today,” so everyone is aware when students might need some extra attention, patience, and support

“How can we help our students attend and succeed in school? We can share our stories about our traditions and experiences, which will help our students build resilience and grow into strong leaders in our communities.”

Input at a 2024 Attendance Capacity Development Session with First Nations Parents

## FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS CAN ...

## Share Information For the Benefit of Students

Research is very clear about the critical importance of the home environment for student success. Parents and families have fundamental rights and responsibilities for the education of their children, and no one has a greater influence on getting a young person to go to school every day.

- ▶ While schools of course make a direct impact on student learning, there is overwhelming evidence that parents can make a valuable difference to their children's school success.
  - Parents can especially emphasize the value of a good education and help their children understand the importance of regular participation in all school activities.
- ▶ Families set the stage for students attending and succeeding at school. What they do matters!

Families and schools can foster strong partnerships in many ways, including the following.

- ▶ **Build relationships early.** Parents and caregivers can reach out to school staff at the beginning of the school year to share important information about their children.
  - It is very helpful when parents tell school staff about their child's strengths, special talents, and any challenges that can be addressed together.
  - Parents have critical advice and expertise about their children – such as what will help their child attend regularly and ideas about what helps their child learn best.
- ▶ **Tell school staff what information families would find helpful.** Some parents might appreciate suggestions for how homes and schools can work together to set and maintain high expectations for academic achievement, school completion, and attendance. Many schools will offer classes or workshops to help parents feel more confident creating effective structures and routines in the home. Families can let schools know what topics are of interest, such as:
  - Tips on technology and social media use, including how staying up late in front of screens impacts sleep and attendance, or how cyberbullying can make students less likely to come to school.
  - Knowing how sick is too sick to attend, and what minor conditions are not serious enough to keep students at home.
  - Suggestions for improving students' sleep habits so they are well rested and healthy enough to attend.
  - Strategies for helping students manage anxiety – which is a growing problem among young people nation-wide and can make school very difficult for some students.
  - Recommendations for establishing routines that make getting to school on time a little easier.



Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw School

**FNESC and FNSA have created a Parents Toolkit that includes a series of short, reproducible papers that provide information about topics in three general areas.**

- ♦ Appreciating the importance of parental involvement in education
- ♦ Understanding the structure of the school system, how to build positive relationships with school staff for the benefit of students, and what to do if difficulties arise
- ♦ Thinking about how to create healthy and supportive learning environments at home
  - The Importance of Regular School Attendance
  - The Link Between Sleep and Success in School
  - Eating Together Can Help With School Success
  - The Benefits of Extra-Curricular Activities
  - Tips for Creating a Family Technology Use Plan
  - Keeping Up With Technology Use
  - What To Know About Vaping
  - How to Talk to Your Children About Drug and Alcohol Awareness
- ♦ The Toolkit can be found at [www.fnesc.ca](http://www.fnesc.ca) and [www.fnsa.ca](http://www.fnsa.ca)





Gwa'sala-Nakwaxda'xw School

► **Meet with school staff to talk about what supports will help if students are facing any attendance barriers.**

- If approached for help, school staff should be non-judgmental and helpful.
- If they are not, parents should ask to speak to someone else.
- Schools and families must support students who are struggling together, never coming from a place of blame.

► **If possible, consider ways for families to support other families.** Research suggests that parents sometimes prefer hearing information and seeking advice from other parents with similar experiences, rather than talking with school staff only.

- Families can provide meaningful emotional support to each other, and share practical solutions and strategies.
- Bringing people together to share their experiences and successes can help families feel less alone.
- How can families support one another? It is helpful when they can:
  - Telephone or text each other in the morning to make sure everyone is on track to get to school on time.
  - Talk about difficulties and successes related to parenting. Parenting is a tough job! Sharing ideas is great.
  - Organize car pools to help overcome transportation challenges. Or some families organize “walking school buses” or “bike buses” – gathering students together and taking turns helping them arrive at school safely and on-time.

**FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS CAN ...****Help Promote Awareness About the Importance of School Attendance**

- ▶ Many attendance campaigns include an incentive component that recognizes and rewards group and individual achievements and improvements. Some families may be able to help with recognition efforts. For example:
  - If the school holds an attendance assembly or other similar event, it is great when families attend to help cheer on students.
  - Sometimes incentive initiatives include special events for classes that meet their attendance goals, like a field trip, a special lunch, a “flashlight reading party” or a “wear your pajamas to class day.” It is very valuable when families are able to volunteer to help with special activities and celebrate attendance improvements with students.
  - School staff and families can brainstorm together to come up with fun incentive rewards that students will find exciting.

School staff and parent groups can also:

- ▶ Host community meetings or information sessions to raise awareness about the importance of attendance and collectively discuss ways to address the issue.
- ▶ Help communicate what the school and community are doing to promote attendance and the goals for improvement. Sometimes schools and parent groups might create a title or a slogan for an attendance campaign.

**Examples ...**

**Attendance: our school’s key to success**

**It’s cool to be in school**

**Be an Attendance “HERO” – Here, Everyday, Ready, On-Time**

**Attend Today: Achieve Tomorrow**

**On Time: On Target for Success**

- ▶ Families may also be able to volunteer and help with:
  - School breakfast and/or lunch programs, which often help to improve not only school attendance, but also student achievement more broadly.
  - Tutoring programs (helping to hand out snacks to students, as well as listening to students read, helping them use the computer ...).
  - Community-based youth engagement programs, which have been shown to reduce school absenteeism.

## Things to Think About

- ♦ Do you know your school's policies and procedures related to attendance? Do you think they work well? If not, tell someone at the school what can be improved.
- ♦ Do you know what your school is doing to promote attendance? Does the school use incentive programs? Are your children benefitting? Do you have creative ideas to share?
- ♦ Can the school offer informational materials or workshops on topics that will be of interest to families? What information would help parents support their children's success? Let the school know what would be useful.
- ♦ Does your school or Parents Club help organize family-to-family support programs? What might be possible?
- ♦ Does the school talk regularly with students, families, and the community about why students need to be in school?
- ♦ Can you help?



## CONCLUSIONS

As described in this Guide, attendance is a complicated issue. There are many reasons why students are absent, and it is not always easy to find immediate and simple solutions when students are missing too much school. No one strategy will work every time and for every student.

But research is clear about the importance of students attending school regularly and on-time, and about the value of families, schools, and communities working in partnership to help make that happen.

The key is often finding out what is preventing students from being in school and working as a team of school staff, families, and community members to identify and use responses that are positive and proactive. Everyone can help all children and teens attend school regularly and on time, so that all students have every opportunity possible to achieve their dreams.

### How can we address attendance?

- ♦ **Define it** – choose data and tracking that works for you
- ♦ **Explain it** – promote its importance using a range of mechanisms
- ♦ **Build excitement about it** – involve students, families, and the community
- ♦ **Reward it** – use incentives to celebrate attendance and on-time arrivals
- ♦ **Celebrate it** – recognize improvements ... including individual, class, and school improvements

Input from a March 2024 Attendance Capacity Building Session for First Nation School Staff

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