



California School Attendance Communication Strategy September 2015

Background

California is facing an attendance crisis, with dire consequences for the economy and the academic achievement and safety of its children. Truancy and chronic absence occurs in elementary schools across the state, at rates that are deeply troubling; and it has long-term negative effects:

- In the 2012-2013 school year, 1 out of every 5 elementary school students were truant.
- 90% of elementary school children with the most severe attendance problems are estimated to be from low income families.
- One California study found that only 17 percent of students who were chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade were reading proficiently in third grade, compared to 64 percent of those with good attendance.
- By the 6th grade, chronic absenteeism (20 days missed in a school year) is a critical warning sign that a student will not graduate high school.

Despite these statistics, parents are not aware how important the early grades are to their child's future. They often believe that their child is smart and can easily make up any missed work at home. They therefore are more likely to excuse absences in the early grades for a variety of reasons*. Parents do not understand that the accumulation of missed days has long-term and severe consequences for their child.

**illness, bullying, vacation, rest, reward, appointments, help at home & parent scheduling conflict*

Communications Objective

Improve elementary school attendance in California by informing parents and motivating them to take action.

Target Audience

Low-income and minority parents/caregivers of kids in grades K-5.

Mindset

What I want most is to see my child happy and grow up to be a successful adult. I know that the key to their success is education and that they shouldn't miss too much school. But right now they are in elementary school and it's not that big of a deal if they miss from time to time. I am not really keeping track of how many days they are missing but I am sure they are not in danger of falling behind. My child is smart and I can help them make up any missed work.

Main Message

Every Absence Matters:

Even in elementary school, just 2 days missed per month adds up and threatens the educational foundation that is critical to their academic success.

Challenge: What is the shift in parents' mindset we're trying to achieve?

Parent Journey	Truth		Desired Belief
Awareness	"I'm not aware of the impact that absences have"	To	"Just 2 days missed per month will cause them to fall behind"
Attitude	"It's no big deal if my child misses school"		"I don't want my child to miss an opportunity to learn something they will need later"
Behavior	"I don't think about or track my child's attendance"		"I am going to track their absences and do everything I can to ensure they do not miss"

Call to Action

Keep track of and limit your child's absences.

Support/Reason to Believe

1. Learning in elementary school is sequential – each day builds on earlier learning. So, each day absent is a missed opportunity for your child to learn something they will need in order to understand more difficult material later.
2. Students who miss more than 18 days of school are less proficient in reading, writing and math compared to their peers with good attendance.
3. Students who do not learn the fundamentals of reading, writing and math by third grade are more likely to fall behind and are less likely to graduate high school.
4. Absences make it very difficult for your child to keep up academically because make up work and take home assignments cannot replace the everyday learning your child loses by being absent from school.

Tone

Concerned, empathetic, and respectful, but also urgent.

Avoid: accusatory, condescending, finger wagging

Other Considerations

- Frame the issue by highlighting absences rather than attendance.
- Tactical advice and solutions are more motivating than vague statements.
- Be clear that just a couple of days each month adds up (even in elementary school) and can put their child at risk of falling behind and not graduating.
- Avoid inferring that missing "fewer than 18 total" is okay
- Avoid implying that it's ok to send their kids to school when they are sick
- Avoid complicated statistics, hyperboles and metaphors
- Consider literacy level of target audience and avoid policy/academic-sounding jargon

Best ways to connect with audience?

Key influencers:

- Teachers (via text message, email, class communications, personal letters, newsletters, parent/teacher conferences)
- Children (via word of mouth)
- School and District Communications (via website, blogs, newsletters, social media, direct mail, and events)

Media:

- TV, Social media and OOH (bus shelters and public transportation)

Success Metrics

- Increase awareness "Just 2 days missed per month can allow them fall behind"
- More parents understand the importance limiting absences
- More parents are tracking their child's absences