# Facilitator Cheat Sheet: Attendance Practices

# *The following provides background information and talking points about why each of the nine practices highlighted in the What Helps Students Feel Visible handout improves attendance for students who have been chronically absent.*

## Motivate by Showing You Care

**Greeting:** The moment a student enters the school building sets the tone for their experience and perception of school itself. While it is an important aspiration to make every single part of the school day welcoming, there is good evidence that making the very first moment in the school day welcoming is absolutely critical. Someone or, better yet, multiple people who are important and know how to be warm, smile, make eye contact, and genuinely make every student feel welcome should stand at the door every morning greeting them.

**Morning check-in:** If students do not show up at school, a call at the end of the day helps, but may serve most of all as a reminder that they are failing. Instead, it is valuable to have time as early as possible in the day when a phone call home can instead send the message: get on in now because you can make it, and you can make the most of today! This is best if it occurs as quickly as possible within the first 45 minutes of the school day—as soon as you know students are not in. Even for students who are in the building, this morning connection is valuable. Counselors or teachers who know individual students well, and who know which students have been struggling with attendance, do well to find those students and take 15 seconds to personally welcome them into the school, re-emphasizing the care and respect for being there.

**Daily personal connection:** Whether a student is in school or not, schools that build strong connections ensure that students never feel invisible. This means that someone in the school talks to the student every single day of the week, whether that student is in school or not. If they are in school, this is done by taking one minute to find them between classes, at lunch, or at the beginning or end of the day. If a student is not in school, then call home, texting, and trying again and again until the student gives a reply. A phone message, an unanswered text, or a reply from someone else is not contact. A reply from the student is. Sometimes those conducting outreach calls may need to accept that a student may not be able to be in school that day and simply ask how they are doing, without adding new pressure or judgment.

**Meaningful feedback:** Much of attendance is affected by what happens in the classroom. A classroom that is welcoming and cares about students encourages good attendance. One in which genuine, challenging learning is occurring does, too. What Eskolta has heard most from students, supported by the research, is that teachers who simultaneously care about and challenge them show this through meaningful, goal-oriented feedback. Teachers who are able to build feedback into their practice not only help students learn, but also help them to know that if they don’t show up, the teacher notices and cares. This classroom feedback need not explicitly address attendance at all. Rather, the mere fact of feedback that points out to a student what they have accomplished and what they can accomplish helps them feel the personalized attention of school drawing them in.

## Motivate by Leveraging Others

**Home outreach:** Eskolta’s studies have found that one of the strongest influences on student attendance is holding a meeting with a parent. This may come as little surprise but holds true even in high school, where parents are often less involved than in elementary school. This cannot be done all the time, but it needs to be done especially for students for whom attendance has become a concern. Putting together a pair of staff to go on a home visit, showing up together at a home to knock on the door and leave a note if no one responds, can be a powerful message. But so can calling a parent to come into school in person to discuss a student’s absence and think together about how attendance can be improved. In both cases, however, this can backfire if there is no existing relationship between adult and child or if that relationship is abusive, so assess this before conducting this outreach.

**Connection outside of class:** When students talk about what helped them turn around attendance, sometimes it is peers, not adults, that have had the most dramatic impact. Students who find a new experience that motivates them and a new peer group around that experience suddenly have a reason to go to school when this was never present before. Extracurricular activities that give students room to be themselves, to pursue interests in a positive way, and to see the connection between learning and what they love are all a great way to create that positive peer pressure.

## Motivate by Showing the Impact

**Effects on graduation:** The conversations that occur when a student isin school can have a dramatic impact on whether they decide to come back. One experience that students have reported making a clear impact is when an adult who they know cares about them reviewed with them what they needed to do in order to graduate and helped them see that improving their attendance would have a dramatic effect on the possibility of earning a high school diploma. Schools have done this by keeping an individual card that tracks students’ earning of credits and experiences that contribute to eventual graduation. Counselors or teachers can use these cards to identify what has been missed and make connections to attendance data to see how absences might have played a role.

**Future-oriented discussions:** One of the most impactful interventions on attendance is one that ostensibly has nothing at all to do with attendance: discussions of college and career. Not only discussions—that is, when a counselor intentionally sits down with a student to talk with them about their college and career options—but authentic experiences make an impact as well. Students who turned around attendance talk about the college visit or the talk with an employer that lit the spark for them to realize what awaits them after graduation. These experiences and conversations, rooted in a constructive and attainable connection between student interests and postsecondary aspirations, helps students to become motivated. Schools that can not only light this spark, but then also keep track of it help students connect their future aspirations to their academic attendance.

**Noticing patterns together:** A counselor Eskolta worked with once found that showing students a graph of their attendance over the year yielded dramatic insights from students as they saw how the peaks and troughs of attendance mirrored their performance in school as well as their mood. The counselor did this by showing, for any single day of the year, their percent attendance for the 20 days around that day (the 10 days before and 10 days after). At another school, students were given a slip of paper with their attendance for the last 40 days and asked to write a note to another student about how to improve from that number. This opened the door for students to reflect more deeply on how attendance was both a contributor to, and a result of, the student’s own life and choices. Taking a look at these patterns, as long as it is done in a caring and respectful environment, can give students the chance to arrive at new insights that are not available without the data.

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