



Dear Neptune Community,

The opening days of school conjure up images of backpacks stuffed with notebooks and unsharpened pencils, bulletin boards freshly decorated by teachers, and students showing off new clothes to old friends.

But even in these early days of the new school year, some students already are heading toward academic trouble: They're missing too many days of school. Across the country, as many as 7.5 million students miss nearly a month of school every year—absences that can correlate with poor performance at every grade level.

This trend starts as early as kindergarten and continues through high school, contributing to achievement gaps and ultimately to dropout rates. In our community, approximately 18 percent of our students are absent for 10% of the school year.

This year, Neptune Township School District is recognizing September as Attendance Awareness Month, part of a nationwide movement intended to convey the message that every school day counts.

We can't afford to think of absenteeism as simply an administrative matter. Good attendance is central to student achievement and our broader efforts to improve schools. All of our investments in curriculum and instruction won't amount to much if students aren't showing up to benefit from them.

Problems with absenteeism start surprisingly early: National research shows that one in 10 kindergarten and first-grade students are chronically absent, meaning that they miss 10 percent of the school year, or about 18 days of instruction, because of excused and unexcused absences.

Chronic absence can have consequences throughout a child's academic career, especially for those students living in poverty, who need school the most and are sometimes getting the least. Children who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are less likely to read proficiently by third grade, and students who don't read well by that critical juncture are more likely to struggle in school. They are also more likely to be chronically absent in later years, since they never developed good attendance habits.

By middle school, chronic absence becomes one of the leading indicators that a child will drop out of high school. By ninth grade, it's a better indicator than how well a student did on eighth grade tests.

Chronic absence isn't just about truancy or willfully skipping school. Instead, children stay home because of chronic illness, unreliable transportation, housing issues, bullying or simply because their parents don't understand how quickly absences add up—and affect school performance.

After all, 18 days is only two days a month in a typical school year. This is true whether absences are excused or unexcused, whether they come consecutively or sporadically throughout the school year.

So how do we turn this around?

A key step will be letting families know about the critical role they play in getting children to school on time every day. It's up to parents to build a habit of good attendance, enforce bedtimes and other routines and avoid vacations while school is in session. Teachers will reinforce these messages. Businesses, faith leaders and community volunteers can also convey this message.

We are also going to take a closer look at our attendance numbers to see how many students are missing 10 percent or more of school days and who they are. We'll set attendance goals for our principals and schools, particularly those schools we're working to improve. Just as we use test scores to measure the progress that students and schools are making, we will look at chronic absence rates.

But schools can't do this alone.

We're going to call on the whole community to help. If concerns about traffic safety or community violence are keeping children home, we will work with parents, police and traffic officials to develop safe routes to school. Volunteers from businesses, faith-based groups and nonprofits can provide that extra shift of adults we need to mentor chronically absent students and reach out to parents.

Think about what you can do within your own family and your own neighborhood to help get more kids to school. And join us in our effort to make every day count.

Educationally Yours,
Dr. Crader, Superintendent