

Implications of Attendance Text Messaging and Communication

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Ankeny Community School District:

- Amy Dittmar, Assistant Superintendent
- Nicole Alpin, Executive Assistant to the Assistant Superintendent

Des Moines Public Schools:

- Renita Lord, Principal, King Elementary School
- Jocelyn (Josie) Sturgis, Director of Assessment, Data, and Evaluation

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I. Introduction

The Challenge

Absenteeism from school is a chronic, widespread challenge in education that has far-reaching consequences for students of all ages. Such consequences are [lower test scores](#) and [higher incidences of drop out](#). [National absenteeism rates have nearly doubled](#) from the pre-COVID-19 years, and they remain persistently high in many places. Research shows that after the pandemic, absenteeism is less chronic at schools with strong family¹ engagement than it is at schools with weak family engagement. Schools and districts across the U.S. are continuously looking for effective programs that can improve attendance and increase a student's chances of success.

Districts and schools that are addressing chronic absenteeism can adopt a variety of strategies to meet the needs of students and their families. Family engagement is a key strategy that can be leveraged to address chronic absenteeism. Studies show a strong connection [between family engagement and improvements in student attendance behaviors](#).

Communicating with families is one practice that schools can consider when assessing their family engagement practices. When families are meaningfully and continuously engaged, they can [positively affect their student's development, academic achievement, and well-being and can support students in making attendance a priority for themselves](#). In addition to text messaging, school communication with families can take many forms, including phone calls, family apps, newsletters, and in-person engagements.

ABOUT THIS REPORT | This report presents key insights and takeaways based on feedback from families about school-based text message communications. Families were asked general questions about what they hope to see in a text from their child's school about attendance. The family perspectives were gathered through focus groups. The report also offers strategies for schools and districts that use, or are considering using, text messaging to promote attendance.

Prior Knowledge About Using Text Messages to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism

A 2020 [federally funded report](#) and 2021 [how-to guide](#) from AIR found that texting families could be an effective way to reduce chronic absenteeism in elementary school. The study tested a messaging strategy with elementary school parents that started with basic messages and then adapted the strategy to provide intensified messaging for families whose children had high numbers of absences. The evaluation found that the adaptive messaging strategy improved attendance for all students. The greatest reductions in chronic absenteeism occurred among students who had a prior history of high absences. The 2021 [how-to guide](#) provides detailed instructions for school districts that want to implement a text messaging program to reduce chronic absenteeism.

¹ Per [Family Engagement: Collaborating with Families of Students with Disabilities](#) from the IRIS Center, "families are defined in a number of ways and may include biological parents, step-parents, and adoptive parents. This includes anyone serving in place of a biological parent, such as other family members (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins), guardians, foster parents, or court-appointed surrogate parents."

Motivation for Family Focus Groups

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered [attendance behaviors of students, and it introduced new barriers to education](#), such as reduced motivation for virtual classes, unreliable internet access, lack of quiet workspaces, and lack of daily in-person support from teachers. Although the AIR text message study demonstrated that text messaging could be used as an effective strategy to improve student attendance before the pandemic, the profound impact of the pandemic may have significantly shifted student and family attitudes toward attendance. The opportunity to discuss text messaging with families from two districts in Iowa explored how text messaging could be used as a communication and outreach tool for schools to connect with families. During the focus groups, families who had one or more students in the district were engaged in conversations to explore whether text messaging communication could remain an effective strategy to meet the needs of students and their families in a post-pandemic environment. As schools develop their family engagement strategies, the key insights and takeaways from this report provide considerations that schools and districts can use to understand the evolving perceptions that families have about attendance.

II. District Profiles

[Des Moines Public Schools \(DMPS\)](#) is located in Des Moines, Iowa. The city has a population of more than 214,000 residents. DMPS is the [largest public school district in Iowa](#), as nearly 5,000 teachers serve more than 30,000 students. DMPS works to meet the expansive needs of its student population, for which 75.1% receive free and reduced-price lunch, 25.6% are English language learners, and 14.8% are special education students. The percentage of English language learners in the district presented the opportunity to conduct an additional focus group with Spanish-speaking families to gather insights about communication preferences of non-native English speakers.

[Ankeny Community School District \(ACSD\)](#) is located in Ankeny, Iowa. The city has a population of more than 73,000 residents. ACSD is the [seventh largest school district in Iowa](#), serving more than 12,600 students. ACSD is guided by a strategic plan that is structured around [three pillars](#): rigorous and relevant academics, talented people, and supportive environments, which includes family engagement strategies.

III. Key Insights and Takeaways

Families can receive a substantial amount of information from their children's schools. The amount of information can be overwhelming, particularly for families with multiple children who attend different schools. Effective communication platforms and strategies are essential for helping schools to best organize their outreach efforts efficiently. A component of these strategies can be text messaging programs that focus on addressing chronic absenteeism. Such messages should be personalized to ensure messages are relevant to the specific context of each child and their family. The messages should also offer a direct channel for families to contact the school for more information or for adjustments to inaccurate records. The following sections present key insights and takeaways from the focus groups. They emphasize the importance of being intentional when using text messaging.

Key Insights on General Communication Preferences About Attendance

- **Communication in multiple modalities:** Schools often use multiple methods to communicate with students and families—including email; automated text messaging; automated and personal phone calls; and school-specific platforms, such as SNAP! Connect, a centralized hub for information and two-way messaging, Infinite Campus, a student information system, and Canvas, a learning management system. Families stressed the importance that schools have a specific purpose for each modality. For example, emails are valued for detailed information or linked resources, and text messages are useful for immediate notifications, like tardiness. Families reported wanting the option to unsubscribe from nonpreferred communication modalities and **a preference for communication that identifies a clear point of contact**, with whom families can connect to clarify potential errors or get more information about a message.
- **Communication platforms for tracking missed academic assignments following absences:** Tracking missed academic assignments through communication platforms, such as texting a hyperlink to missed work, can help to improve school engagement by ensuring students stay aware of, and accountable for, instructional content—even when they are absent. This supports families’ desires to be more connected with the academic performance of their children and to maintain relationships with teachers and the school. Because of this, families want to know the type of communication platform preferred by their child’s teacher so they can receive the quickest responses to best support their children at home. Families also want more consistency in how teachers communicate and update information about missing assignments. Finally, families expressed a desire for consistent communication when a teacher is absent and a substitute is in place.
- **Trust in communication:** Trust is fostered through responsive and consistent updates by teachers and school representatives. Families appreciate receiving messages from familiar and trusted sources, such as teachers or counselors, and show some preference for messages that contain links to the school’s website instead of to external ones. Families are most likely to click on links that lead directly to missing assignments; trusted sources; and local, low-cost, or free resources. Families also prefer messages that provide context for why they are receiving links but they did not prioritize reviewing links that included long policies. In general, families expressed that delayed communication erodes trust and emphasized the need for timely and responsive updates. One family member commented, “I personally [want to know] the quickest way I can get a hold of them

ALERT | Schools and districts should be cautious with using automated methods, such as robocalls or text messages in mass, to contact families and students. Given the quantity of automated communication people receive daily, recipients of automated messages can easily confuse them for spam. In November 2024 alone, people received [more than 19.2 billion spam messages](#) through text—an average of approximately 63 spam messages per person.

“

I think it is good [to receive missed assignments] when our children are . . . missing a lot and they [the school] send them [the assignments] to us because they [our children] missed two or three days. It serves as a reminder or a motivation [to catch up on the assignments].

”

regarding my child. There's been times I've messaged them on their SNAP! Connect, and it's like a few days later, they'll reply.”



Key Insights on Specific Communication Preferences About Text Messages

- **Real-time text messages:** Families prefer timely, child-specific texts, which can help them to act promptly on absences and tardiness. Immediate notifications allow families to excuse absences or address inaccuracies, fostering trust and reducing a reliance on end-of-day reports. One family member said,

“

I like that the messages [about tardiness] are short. I don't want to read something too extensive, especially if I'm in the middle of a work call.

”

- **Direct and relevant text messages:** Families prefer to (a) receive texts that are clear, actionable, and specific to their children's needs and (b) avoid receiving repetitive or redundant messages, particularly when they have more than one student attending school in the district. One family member said, “[I like it because] in a few words, the message is telling us what we should do.”

General text messages about chronic absenteeism, whether positively or negatively framed, often made families feel that schools presumed to know what was best for their children, rather than trusting the family’s perspective. One family member mentioned, “You're saying that my kid is going to be a failure because he's [absent] this many days. . . . Just because [my] child missed this many days, doesn't mean [that my] child [is not] on the same level as this child over here [who has missed fewer days].”

- **Accuracy of information:** Trust is built when teachers and schools accurately track and communicate information about absences and missing assignments. Families noted their frustration with inaccurate information:

“

I just want [accurate] communication – period – attendance-wise because I had an incident happen that my child was supposed to be here [at school], but he got mad and he [left school and] was on his way home. And there was no communication. [Another time] I got a [message] saying that he was absent or tardy when he was actually in the building.

”

Families prefer messages about absenteeism or tardiness to be tailored to specific situations and needs of their children. For example, when families have already informed the school about their child's extended absence (e.g., for hospital stays, funerals, vacations), schools should avoid sending repetitive automated messages. Such refrain shows respect for the initial communication, which is particularly important when families are in stressful or traumatic situations.

Families expressed annoyance with potentially receiving text messages about attendance if their children have perfect or near-perfect attendance. One family member of a student with perfect attendance shared, "When our children are not missing, I would not find meaning in receiving a text message [reminding us that attendance is critical to academic success]." This highlights the importance of receiving accurate information, because receiving irrelevant messages can undermine trust.

A Shift From One-Size-Fits-All Text Messages | Families considered generalized messages to be helpful before the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, however, families often perceive such messages as being condescending, as they feel schools are implying to know more about their children than the families do.

- **Belonging and connectedness:** Including contact information in communications helps families feel personally connected to the school and makes it easy for them to follow-up with specific school staff. Shifting from pre-pandemic sentiment, families now want the option to respond to texts, allowing them to interact more often with and connect directly to staff in the schools. In addition, families perceive messages that include specific actions, such as a request to contact a teacher or click a school link to see missing assignments, more favorably than they perceive messages with general information that is not directly actionable.

Key Insights From the Spanish-Speaking Focus Group

The focus group with Spanish-speaking families provided valuable insights that highlight the preferences of families that are non-native English speakers. This section offers actionable recommendations to enhance engagement and support through effective text message communication.

- **Using text messages to introduce attendance policies or remind families of changes:** Using text messages for quick and friendly reminders of significant changes at school can enhance families' awareness of updates that affect their children, particularly when initial notices are provided in formats that are challenging to translate. Families expressed a preference for being informed of attendance policies via text messages or emails before their child misses too many days instead of learning about such policies as a consequence. This preference emerged during discussions about how some families were unaware of the district's new policy about chronic absenteeism (i.e., missing 10% or more days of school), whereby they were directly notified about the change only after their child approached the chronic absentee threshold. Families also noted that take-home flyers for students can be lost easily or misunderstood if the content is not written in the native language of the students and their families. Therefore, text messages should be simple and straightforward and created to leverage translation features that are available on many smartphones to ensure the information is accessible in the recipient's language of choice.
- **Positive framing of messages:** Messages conveyed with a friendly tone can significantly benefit families who are non-native English speakers. A friendly tone fosters trust, builds connections with families, and promotes a collaborative atmosphere that is essential for their child's success. Families shared that friendly tones felt "motivational," "positive," "informative," and "encouraging." Families also expressed that a

friendly tone made them feel like the school is “also worried about their [students] when they are not attending school.” Additional feedback noted that messages in a friendly tone serve as valuable reminders of the importance and benefits of school attendance.

- **Preference for information in a native language:** Communication with families should be done in their native language, when possible. When this is not possible, schools can use tools—like emails, text messages, and browser extensions—that connect with online translation services so that families can better understand the messages and support their children. Ideally, families would like for schools to provide the contact information for a school-approved interpreter when seeking more information or needing clarification about a potential error. One family member shared,

“

I feel more confident because I speak directly with the interpreters and they explain very well [the policy or situation]. . . . And for me, [I can] also express to them [the situation directly], [as opposed to] by a message [where] I feel disconnected.

”

- **Links to academic resources:** Families might face challenges in assisting their children with homework, especially when their native language differs from the language of instruction. For instance, families may find it difficult to help with subjects like mathematics because the teaching methods and terminology could differ from how and what they learned. This can lead to confusion and frustration for both families and students. Families expressed a need to have access to resources and guidance that can help them to understand the current educational methods so they can better support their children. In this way, families can effectively support their children with assignments when they are absent from school. This guidance is crucial because it can bridge the gap between the caregiver’s knowledge and the student’s learning, ensuring that students receive the necessary support at home despite a language barrier.
- **Fostering a sense of connection through community resources:** Families generally appreciated receiving text messages that identified community resources on how to support their children. For instance, they find it helpful to be aware of alternative plans for missing the bus or information about low-cost medical providers. Having access to this information allows families to ensure students consistently attend school. This information is particularly valuable for families who are new to an area. By providing these resources, schools help families to feel more connected and supported. One family member mentioned,

“

I see it as a support from the school that is giving us this information . . . and having information on hand, we are more informed. Sometimes there are even programs offered by the school that we don’t know about, like afterschool care, and sometimes we don’t know. So yes, of course, there is a lot of information, and sometimes we don’t know.

”

IV. Updated Considerations for Crafting Text Messages

Research from both the [2020 AIR Study](#) and the [Ad Council Research Institute and Overdeck Family Foundation](#) found that families respond better to messages that highlight whole-child development and positive outcomes of attending school, as opposed to messages that focus on the negative consequences of absenteeism. Given post-pandemic realities and current research on family engagement techniques, AIR conducted an in-depth literature review to summarize strategies for writing text messages to families about school attendance. Pre-pandemic text messages that are provided as examples below are generalized from the literature review.

- **Align messages with [Attendance Works’ R.E.A.L framework](#).**

- Build **Routines**: Establishing a daily attendance routine helps to reduce stress at home and lays the foundation for good attendance habits that will benefit children of all ages in their daily lives.
- Increase **Engagement**: Attending school helps students to get to know each other and school staff and builds relationships that can motivate participation in learning.
- Provide **Access** to Resources: Providing access to valuable school resources—such as meals, health care, and mental health care—and to fun enrichment activities, such as sports, clubs, music, and other afterschool and summer programs, helps to foster a positive learning environment for all students.
- Support **Learning**: Attending school regularly supports hands-on learning and meaningful interactions with teachers and other students, helps students perform better academically, and supports the overall educational journey of students from early childhood through high school graduation.

- **Personalize messages and include a point of contact.**

When possible, messages should mention the name of the student, family member, and/or teacher. To reinforce this person-to-person connection, text messages should be sent from a trusted adult in the school, such as a teacher, counselor, or principal.

Effective messages should also indicate a point of contact with whom families can respond or contact with questions. [According to research from the Ad Council Research Institute and the Overdeck Family Foundation](#), families prefer mostly to speak directly with the teachers of their children. If a teacher is unavailable, then a principal or counselor is preferred next. Families who are non-native English speakers prefer to speak with interpreters.

PRE-PANDEMIC | Your child was missing from school today. Going to school every day helps children learn important study skills.

POST-PANDEMIC | We missed [CHILD NAME] in school today. If this absence is a mistake, then please contact [name of teacher/staff] at [phone number].

- **Ensure that messages are informative and not judgmental.**

Use a professional tone when writing messages and include factual information. Improper tones in messages to families can cause unintended harm by implying what families should or could be doing better. A critical tone will not build trust or goodwill between families and schools.

PRE-PANDEMIC | Your child can still go to school even if they have a simple cold. Go to [LINK] to learn how to spot the differences between a cold and the flu.

POST-PANDEMIC | We missed [CHILD NAME] in school today. If you kept [CHILD NAME] home to protect their health or the health of our school community, then please go to [SCHOOL LINK] to learn how to reduce the spread of germs at school without being absent.

- **Clearly identify the sender and caller.**

When possible, work with text message providers to set up identification for the sender of messages and for automated phone calls. This will help families to determine whether text messages and phone calls are legitimate or are potential spam. If this is not possible, start the message by identifying the name of the sender, such as, “This is [ADULT’S NAME] from [SCHOOL NAME]: We missed [CHILD NAME]. . . .”

- **Create simple text messages.**

- **Use number of days absent instead of percentages:** When mentioning absences, avoid confusion by identifying the number of days absent instead of the percentage of days absent. Report the number of days that a student has been absent for the quarter, semester, or year—not for shorter periods of time. Shorter time frames can lead to push back from families who may argue that their child was “just having a bad week.”

PRE-PANDEMIC | [CHILD NAME] has an X% attendance rate this month. How can [SCHOOL] support and encourage [CHILD NAME] to come to school every day? Please contact us at [NUMBER/EMAIL] to let us know.

POST-PANDEMIC | [CHILD NAME] has missed a total of [X] days of school this school year. How can [SCHOOL] support and encourage [CHILD NAME] to come to school every day? Please contact us at [NUMBER/EMAIL] to let us know.

- **Keep messages short and to the point:** Aim for a maximum of 160 characters to ensure the message is easily readable and does not overwhelm the recipient.
- **Use simple language:** Choose words that do not exceed an 8th-grade reading level to ensure that all families can read and understand the message. Avoid using idioms or abbreviations that might confuse readers.

Appendix A. Steps for Implementing a Text Messaging Attendance Campaign

As detailed in the [2021 how-to guide](#), districts and schools wishing to set up an effective attendance texting strategy should follow six key steps. The steps are summarized below, but the how-to guide presents more detailed information.

Step 1: Form a district- or school-level team to gather background information

If a campaign is meant to be implemented either district-wide or across several schools, form a district-level team that includes district leaders, school leaders, attendance and community outreach experts, district information technology (IT) staff, student information system (SIS) staff, and additional representatives from schools and the community, as applicable (e.g., families, caregivers, and relevant community organizations).

For school-level campaigns, form a team that includes school leaders (including a principal or assistant principal), attendance administrators, teachers, IT staff, family or community liaisons, and school community members. If text messages are designed to go directly to students, then teams at secondary schools might also include student representatives. Remember to include district representation at key meetings where district approval is necessary.

Step 2: Assess the quality and capabilities of district and school data systems

Accurate and timely student-level attendance data are needed to carry out an effective attendance texting strategy. To add any kind of personalization or notification prompted by attendance data, districts and schools ultimately must have (1) a systematic process for collecting accurate daily attendance, (2) clearly defined daily attendance measures, (3) a clear threshold for when students are considered chronically absent, and (4) a system for sending out the text messages.

To assess SIS capabilities, the planning team should seek answers to the following questions:

- Can the existing SIS send texts?
- How can attendance variables (e.g., student's name, number of days absent, etc.) be programmed into the district's or school's SIS?
- Can the SIS (or the chosen short message service [SMS] vendor) automatically translate messages into languages that are relevant to family preferences throughout the district or school population?

Step 3: Consider resources that are required for a text messaging campaign

Resources and associated costs depend on the types of messaging that the district or school want to implement. For all types of messaging, districts or schools should consider the costs and time for district, school, and IT staff to (1) set up and license the text messaging system, (2) consult families about the new text messaging strategy, (3) train district- and school-level staff on direct communication with families, and (4) inform families about the new outreach strategy. Planning teams should also consider the cost of an external SMS vendor, if one is required.

Step 4: Develop a specific blueprint for text messaging

At the district or school level, having a specific and detailed blueprint that lists when and to whom each text message will be sent is critical for fast and accurate programming of text messages in the messaging platform. If districts are implementing a campaign district-wide or across several schools, each school should customize the text messages in their blueprint to fit the context of their building. [Page 65 of the 2020 how-to guide](#) presents an example of a text messaging blueprint.

Step 5: Communicate with families and staff

Communicating with families and staff about the attendance text messaging system before it starts is critical. Families must be informed if they are going to be sent attendance texts, how to unsubscribe at any time, and about the potential cost of receiving text messages. The type of message determines whether districts and schools must collect consent from families to send them messages. The Telephone Consumer Protection Act (TCPA) of 1991 regulates the need for consent. [Page 98 of the 2021 how-to guide](#) presents a sample letter to families. Additionally, staff members should know about the system and understand their role in recording attendance accurately.

Step 6a: Conduct a pilot test of and scale up the campaign with ongoing monitoring

Districts and schools should pilot test the attendance messaging strategy before scaling it up. They should also monitor the strategy continuously to ensure that it is making progress toward its goals. To determine whether families feel bothered by the text messages, districts can track—at ongoing intervals and as preferences change over time—the rates at which families unsubscribe from the service.

Step 6b: Determine needs and set priorities

District or school planning teams should use attendance data and/or collect new data to better understand the scope and potential root causes of chronic absenteeism in the district or at a school. After the planning team clarifies one or more potential root causes of absenteeism, it should identify priority schools, grades, or populations (depending on district or school level) on which to focus. Next, the planning team should co-create Strategic, Measurable, Ambitious, Realistic, and Time-bound (S.M.A.R.T.) goals to guide the attendance texting strategy for the long term.

Before deciding to implement an attendance texting strategy, remember that text messages on their own will not address root causes of absenteeism, such as severe bullying, anxiety about school, chronic illness, mental health, homelessness, or lack of transportation. To reduce chronic absenteeism on a large scale and in a sustainable manner, districts should seek a holistic strategy that identifies and addresses the root causes of absenteeism in their schools. These strategies might employ other tools—such as professional development around family engagement, initiatives to build trust with families, or working with community organizations and local public entities—to support families' healthcare, transportation, economic, and housing needs.

Appendix B. Additional Resources for Attendance Text Messaging

1. [Can Texting Parents Improve Attendance in Elementary School? A Test of an Adaptive Messaging Strategy Evaluation Report](#) (Research Study)

This study tested four versions of an adaptive text messaging strategy to reduce chronic absenteeism among 26,000 elementary school students. All four strategies successfully reduced rates of chronic absenteeism, but none of the strategies improved academic achievement after one school year.

2. [Handouts and Messaging](#) (Article)

This document from Attendance Works provides resources to help educators, families, and community leaders convey the importance of regular school attendance. Their materials aim to build a culture of attendance by offering strategies and sample messaging to reduce chronic absenteeism.

3. [Getting in Touch With Hard-to-Reach Parents](#) (Article)

This document from Attendance Works provides strategies for educators to connect with hard-to-reach families and caregivers of chronically absent students, emphasizing the importance of accurate contact information and creative outreach methods. It includes tips for establishing communication, such as home visits, leveraging school events, and using siblings or community members.

4. [What Mom and Dad Don't Know, Might Hurt Me: Messaging Parents to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism](#) (Research Study)

This study examined a randomized controlled trial in South Africa where weekly text messages were sent to low-income families about their children's attendance in an afterschool program. This approach resulted in an increase in attendance and a reduction in chronic absenteeism. This study highlights the effectiveness of using existing data collection systems to reduce information gaps between educators and families, thereby improving student attendance in resource-constrained environments.

5. [Back to the Classroom: How to Overcome Chronic Absenteeism and Encourage Parents to Send Kids to School Consistently](#) (Toolkit)

This toolkit gives school leaders and teachers guidance on writing messages to families and caregivers that will motivate them to send their children to school consistently. The toolkit is rooted in evidence from a research study conducted by the Ad Council Research Institute and with funding from the Overdeck Family Foundation.

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AIR® Headquarters
1400 Crystal Drive, 10th Floor
Arlington, VA 22202-3289
+1.202.403.5000 | **AIR.ORG**

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