

Tips for Working with Your Child's School when Chronic Conditions Cause Absences

School attendance plays an important role in academic success. Children often fall behind in school if they frequently miss part of or an entire school day. You can help your child succeed in school by understanding how schools define absences. You can also help by supporting your child's school attendance as much as possible.

Chronic absenteeism is not the same as truancy. **Truancy is typically defined as a certain number or certain frequency of unexcused absences.** Truancy numbers typically underestimate total absenteeism.

Chronic absenteeism is often defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days. In practical terms this translates into 18 days a year.

Excused Absence

If you expect that your child will have multiple absences for medical appointments or chronic illness, it helps to be proactive and plan ahead as much as possible. Early and frequent communication with the school can prevent problems later on. Here are some ways to start the conversation:

- Reach out to the school nurse. This person can become an advocate and work with you to make sure the absences are excused without problems.
- Talk to teachers about developing a plan so your child can catch up on school work. Some ideas include planning for catch-up lessons, having homework delivered to your home, or arranging for educational services at home. Whenever possible, plan ahead so that your child can have materials before the absence.
- Know the Ann Arbor Public Schools attendance policy on excused absences, and follow the policy or an alternate written plan you have developed with the school.

When your child is absent for a medical reason, contact the school office or attendance line as early as possible on the day of the absence. Give your child's name, grade level, and reason for the absence. Tell the school when you think your child will return. When your child returns to school, write a note that explains your child's absence.

Send a health provider's note verifying the absence. If you have worked out a written plan with the school early in the year, you may not need to provide a note, but make sure you include in the plan information about when a health care provider's note is required.

Many health care providers will write a letter to the school at the beginning of the school year, when your child changes schools, or at first diagnosis. This letter can be kept on file at school

and included in the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) or Section 504 plan (federal law supporting accommodations for your child's success as identified by parents or guardians and the school staff), if your child has an IEP or 504 plan. The letter could explain:

- The diagnosis in general, and what impacts it may have at school
- How often the child will be having doctor's office visits or may be absent for illness
- What accommodations may be helpful

If your child has an IEP for special education or a Section 504 plan, you can be proactive with educators about absences by discussing:

- the potential of having a modified school day
- the possibility of assigning someone, such as the school nurse, to monitor absences
- the educational impact of the absences and working together to develop a written plan to address that impact
- accommodations for managing make-up work
- writing IEP goals and objectives so older children and youth will build skills to keep track of missed lessons and assignments by themselves

If your child does not qualify for an IEP, work with your school to obtain a Section 504 plan or develop an Individual Health Plan to support your child with special health care needs that require frequent absences. The tips above may help too.

Unexcused Absence

In some cases, it can be difficult for schools to tell the difference between students who are absent with a valid excuse and students who are truant. This is especially true for frequent absences due to chronic mental and physical health conditions. Additionally, AAPS has policies and procedures for recording absences, and sometimes absences with a valid excuse under Michigan law are still recorded as unexcused. If a student has multiple unexcused absences, the school is required to try to improve that student's attendance. Sometimes those efforts include notification to parents that the child is truant. A child can become truant under Michigan law if he or she has multiple absences that the school does not record as excused.

Truancy and other school issues can be avoided, however, if you know your school's policies and plan ahead. If your child must often miss school because of a medical condition, being proactive and working with the school can help support your child at school.