



# BEING PRESENT

How a  
Middle School Counselor  
Is Improving Attendance

 DEPARTMENT of  
**EDUCATION**  
Louisiana Believes



Louisiana law requires children to attend school for at least 167 days each year to earn credit or to be promoted to the next grade. Schools monitor student attendance to ensure every child is meeting this requirement. But there's more to tracking student attendance than tallying who is present and who is not.

Just ask Donneisha Wilson, a Communities in Schools site coordinator and counselor at Morris Jeff Community School in Orleans Parish. In her two years there, Wilson has implemented school-wide attendance incentives, created peer-to-peer accountability programs, and formed one-on-one relationships with students and parents to curb absences. She's also purchased alarm clocks for chronically late students, stocked school uniforms for students who didn't have clean clothes, and even crawled into a parent's car in the drop-off line to convince a reluctant new student to attend class.

We sat down with her to discuss her strategies for tackling truancy, why those strategies are important, and what others can do to boost attendance at their own schools.

**Q: How and why has your school focused more attention on student attendance?**

**A:** Last school year, our average daily attendance rate was about 85 percent, which is pretty low. So starting this year, our counseling team created a tiered system that could both address chronic absenteeism and celebrate student attendance.

One tier, for example, focuses on identifying the students who have the highest number of absences and working with them to understand the barriers they face and how to overcome them. In middle school, specifically, we have a huge issue with tardiness. We often find the students who are chronically late have parents who work overnight, and they are responsible for getting themselves up and ready for school. Sometimes, the solution is as easy as buying them an alarm clock or mapping out a new and easier transportation route for them. Sometimes it requires extensive counseling, including home visits.

Another tier includes attendance incentive programs that award classes with the highest attendance with pizza parties or "Dress Down Days" where they do not have to wear their school uniform. These are cost-effective ways to get students excited.

**Q: How do you engage teachers and families in this work?**

**A:** Teachers work with us to celebrate students with perfect weekly attendance by honoring them at school assemblies and awarding them special passes that let them bypass a homework assignment. We also make sure we recognize students who come to school by saying things like, “I’m so happy to see you!” or “It’s great to have you here!”

We also engage parents. We put information about the importance of attendance in our weekly parent newsletters, and we send letters to parents regarding attendance on a quarterly basis, offering one-on-one assistance to those who have students who are missing too many days.

**Q: What has been the result so far?**

**A:** School attendance has gone up to 95 percent, which was our goal at the start of the school year.

**Q: What advice with you give to others who want to adopt similar strategies at their schools?**

**A:** First assess your daily attendance and set a goal. Then, start small, focusing first on the students who are chronically absent to understand and address the barriers keeping them from attending school and then working your way toward encouraging and celebrating attendance for all students through incentive programs. Along the way, find ways to create buy-in from your school community.

**Q: Why is student attendance so important?**

**A:** Consistency is key for our students’ academic performance and for their overall well-being. School is a safe place for many students, and sometimes it’s the most consistent thing in a student’s life. Forming connections, developing routines, learning every day—it’s all so important.

**Q: How do you relay that message to your middle school students?**

**A:** For each unique student, I find out what drives them and figure out how I can connect that to their attendance. If they are only coming to school for social reasons, I will pair them with another student and encourage them to hold each other accountable for attendance. If they have a long-term goal for a specific career, I will walk them through how they can use their education, starting in middle school, to achieve that goal.

**Q: So, what drives you?**

**A:** I’m from New Orleans. I grew up in the New Orleans public school system. I’ve seen many of my peers never overcome the barriers in their lives. I’ve seen how not having a supportive person can impact someone’s life. I want to be that supportive person.

“I want my students to know, if you feel like no one else cares about you, I do. I care about you, and I care about your success.”



*Donneisha Wilson*  
Morris Jeff Community School, Orleans Parish

