



GETSCHOOLED.COM

 /getschooledfoundation

 @getschooled

SKIPPING TO NOWHERE

Students share their views about missing school



A Letter from the Executive Director

For the last decade, American policymakers, business leaders and educators have been focused on improving student achievement. Billions of dollars have been invested to increase standards, strengthen curriculum and improve teaching and learning in the classroom. All of these reform efforts are necessary, but not sufficient. Americans will never be able to ensure rising generations receive the education they need unless we directly engage the children and families themselves. And that is especially true when examining the issue of school attendance.

As the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University and Attendance Works have been steadily reporting for the last several years, too many students are missing too much school to meet our ambitious education goals. Up to 15% of American students – or 7 million K-12 students - miss 18 or more days of school each year. Is it so surprising that it's been hard to move the needle on test scores or graduation rates?

Absenteeism issues plague almost every community in America. It is not a problem facing only urban low-income students; it is a problem facing middle class America – students and families who plan to go to college but simply are not in school enough to ensure they are prepared and ready to succeed once they get there.

Why do so many students miss so much school? As an organization that engages and inspires students, Get Schooled decided to go directly to young people with that question. We surveyed American middle and high school students who were missing school and asked them why they skip and

what they perceive the consequences to be. The results reveal the human side to the 7 million figure, and remind us that the most important things adults can do are to notice when students are absent and to make sure students understand the impact of missed days on their future plans.

Students need to be part of the conversation. We need to connect with them and inspire them to be active partners in their learning. They are clear about that. If we – parents, educators, and even celebrities - show them we truly care about them, their aspirations and frustrations, they will be more likely to care about making it to school.

In the two years since its launch, Get Schooled has become an important part of the solution. With a focus on connecting and motivating young people to take control of their education, we've engaged more than a million young people on education issues in the last two years and have built a network of hundreds of middle and high schools across the country. Because of our partnership with Viacom, we are able to connect with young people using the media platforms, creative content and messengers that influence where and how kids spend their time.

Together we are showing that these grim statistics of school absenteeism are penetrable, that youth respond when you connect with them using the messages, messengers and means that resonate. In the coming years, Get Schooled will continue to bring innovative solutions directly to students and adults – ensuring that the youth of tomorrow are part of the education reform solution set today.

Marie Groark, August 2012



Executive Summary

Seven million. That's the estimated number of K-12 students who miss 18 days or more of school each year.¹ Ground zero of the absenteeism epidemic is in American middle and high schools. In some states and school districts, as many as one in three high school students are absent on any given day.²

That's a staggering number, but what's more staggering is that few adults seem to notice, and few students feel any consequences for skipping school. But missing school does matter: student achievement can suffer even if a student misses just five days of school.³ Students who miss more than 10 days of school are more than 20 percent less likely to graduate from high school than their peers, and those same students have 25 percent lower likelihood of ever enrolling in any type of college.⁴ Those who do attend college are less likely to be prepared, more likely to enroll in remedial class, and more likely to leave college before earning a degree.⁵

¹ 'The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism on the Nation's Public Schools', Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes. Johns Hopkins University, Everyone Graduates Center.

² Ibid, page 19. Additional studies report similar high school attendance rate. 'Getting Teenagers Back to School.' The Vera Institute of Justice Policy. October 2010. The Center for New York City Affairs at The New School reported attendance data from the New York City department of Education, 38 percent of 9th–12th grade students had 20 unexcused absences during the 2008–2009 school year.

³ 'New York City Public School Indicators: Demographics, Resources, Outcomes, Annual Report, 2011'. New York City Independent Budget Office, page 31.

⁴ 'The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism on the Nation's Public Schools', Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes. Chart 9. Students with >= 10 absences have a 64% likelihood of graduating high school compared to 86% for all students. Students with >=10 absences have only a 53% chance of ever enrolling in post-secondary compared to 73% chance for all students.

⁵ New York City Public School Indicators: Demographics, Resources, Outcomes, Annual Report, 2011'. New York City Independent Budget Office, page 35.

As our national leaders continue to set necessarily ambitious educational goals for our children, one thing is clear: We will never reach these goals unless we reduce the number of students who skip school.

The everyday face of absence

Who are these young people? Students who were interviewed for this report represent every facet of modern American life. They live in rural, urban and suburban areas and are white, African American, Latino and Asian. About a third have parents who graduated from college and close to 60 percent grew up in a two-parent home. Two thirds of students interviewed report their household income to be "average or above average." These students' faces are those of every other young person. They just aren't seen.

When and why kids skip school

Skipping school is an established behavior by the end of 9th grade. Of current sophomores, juniors and seniors who skip, nearly three quarters of them started skipping in middle school or during their first year of high school.

The cause of all this school skipping? There is little keeping them at school – 61 percent of school skippers find it boring and uninteresting, and the most chronic school skippers have a real dislike for the school environment. They find little connection between what they learn and what they want to be and, most significantly, they feel disconnected from the school community.

What are they doing when they are not in school? "Hanging out with friends" is the most common activity (65 percent) when skipping school. Another 27 percent report surfing the Internet, watching television or playing video games. Of those surveyed, only about six percent skip because they are working or taking care of a child or other family member.



Going unnoticed

As much as students miss parents don't seem to notice. It didn't matter whether they skipped a lot, or only occasionally. It didn't matter if it was one class or an entire day missed, or whether once a month or once a week. The majority of teens believed that most of the time, their parents did not notice their absence from school: 42 percent of students said their parents "never" or "rarely" know when they skip school. This is despite the fact that 65 percent of these same students said their teachers, principals and others have talked to them about their skipping habits.

What, me worry?

Students also revealed that they see few or only minor immediate consequences for skipping school. This is especially true among students who cut class only occasionally. Only a minority think their schoolwork is affected, and most think they would have to skip school a few times a week before their grades took a hit or it began to affect their prospects of attending college. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of skippers plan on attending college after high school, even though that same amount (67 percent) fear they may not be ready for college if they continue to miss class.

Understanding the effects of skipping

The disconnect between the real consequences of skipping school (lower achievement, lower rates of high school and college graduation) stands in stark contrast to both the reactions from parents (ignoring) and the rosy view of the future from students. Bridging this divide is something that students asked for – in fact they proposed ways to tackle the problem.

1. **Highlight the importance of attendance.** Students suggest that if they understood the consequences of their absences, they'd be much

less likely to skip. Get Schooled has worked with more than 200 middle and high schools around the country to support attendance challenges where the entire school has focused on improving attendance. School leaders point to the effectiveness of making attendance a visible priority, to both students and their parents, in big and small ways as a means to improving attendance rates.

2. **Engage students.** Students want to be engaged in their education. They yearn for a connection between their 'real lives' and what they learn in school. Too often there is a complete disconnect between their lives outside of school, their dreams and hopes for the future and how they spend each day.
3. **Deliver the right message with the right messengers.** Often times, it's just the school principal or administrator that reminds students how important it is to go to school every day. Parents, a trusted teacher, and a respected artist, athlete or celebrity can have a dramatically stronger effect on student decision-making than can an authority figure more disconnected from a student's life.



Attendance: The Best Predictor of Student Success

Research shows a strong correlation between student attendance and student achievement and, ultimately, graduation rates. In fact, many studies have pointed to student attendance as the best predictor of high school graduation rates. Simply, if you don't come to school, you can't graduate. Students who miss 20 days of school a year (or just two days a month) have just a one in five chance of graduating from high school.⁶

In 2011, the New York City Independent Budget Office noted that student test scores begin to drop after just five days of missed school⁷. Additional research has suggested that attendance is eight times more predictive of failure than prior test scores.⁸

In the spring of 2012, Get Schooled joined Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins University to release "The Importance of Being in School." The report found that few states measure and report on chronic absenteeism, which researchers defined as missing at least 10 percent of school days per year, or about 18 days. The report estimates that 10 percent to 15 percent of students nationwide are chronically absent – meaning that 5 million to 7.5 million students miss enough school to be at severe risk of dropping out or failing to graduate. To put it in perspective, there is

roughly the same number of chronically absent students in the United States as there are K-12 students in the California.

Asking the Skippers

Get Schooled is focused on engaging and inspiring students to take control of their education and their future. We recognize the most important thing students can do is go to school "all day, every day." We recognize the importance of engaging students, school-wide, to focus on attendance. We aim to create opportunities to encourage students to feel connected to their community, and to inspire students by integrating pop culture into everything we do.

In order to better understand why so many students are so quick to skip school, we partnered with Hart Research to survey self-identified "school skippers" from 8th to 12th grade. These students reported skipping school at least once a month. We asked them:

- Who knows they are not in school?
- What do they believe are the consequences of missing so much school?
- What would encourage them to go to school more?
- Who could encourage them to go to school more?
- Why do they miss school?
- What are they doing when they are not in school?

⁶ David Silver, Marisa Saunders, and Estela Zarate, What Factors Predict High School Graduation in the Los Angeles Unified School District: California Dropout Research Project Report #14 (UCLA/IDEA and UC/ACCORD, 2008), 15.

⁷ New York City Public School Indicators: Demographics, Resources, Outcomes, Annual Report, 2011'. New York City Independent Budget Office, page 31.

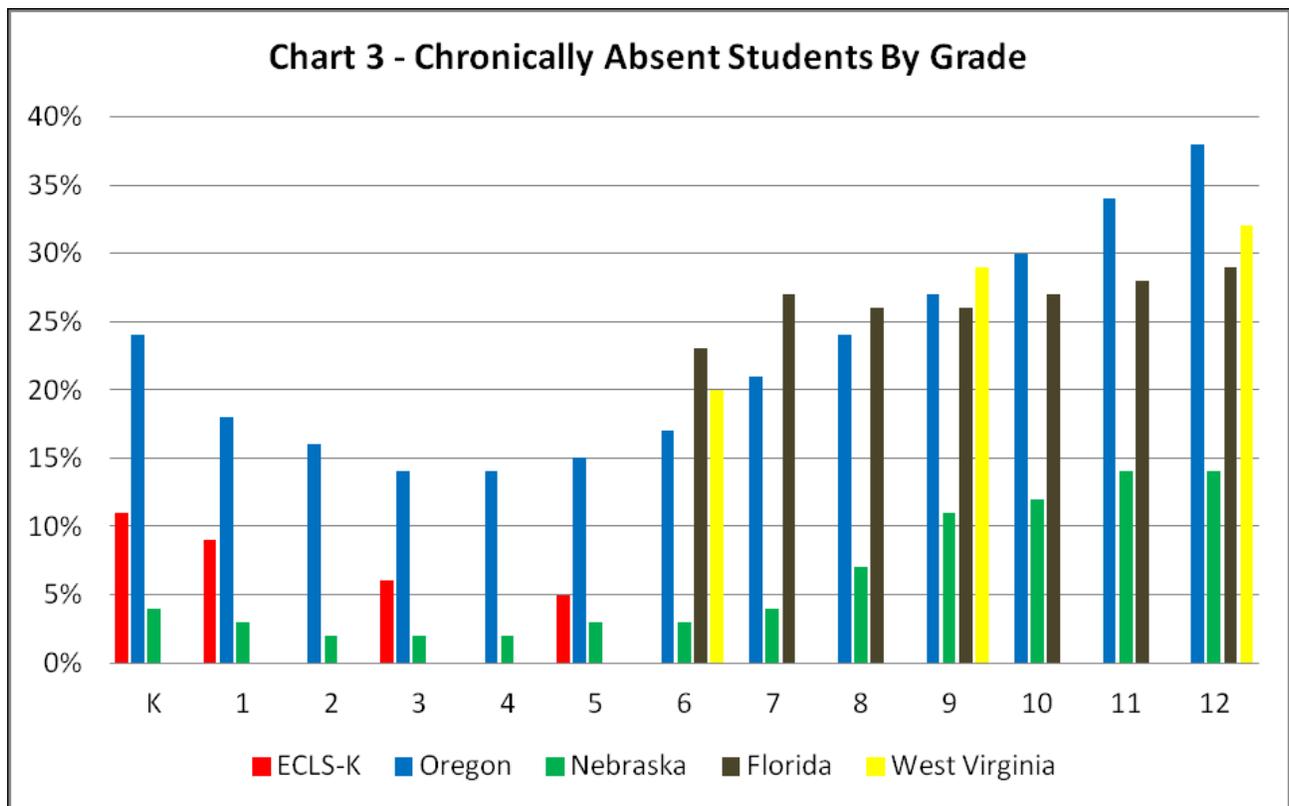
⁸ Elaine Allensworth How Do You Measure College Readiness? CRIS Webinar Series, 2011. 7. <http://annenberginstitute.org/cris/webinars/cris-webinar-how-do-you-measure-college-readiness>



It Starts in Middle School

Not all students are equally susceptible to chronic absenteeism. While chronic absenteeism doesn't vary much by student, gender or race, grade level does make a big difference. American students have relatively high rates of absenteeism in kindergarten, but attendance stabilizes through the rest of elementary school. Researchers believe that many parents largely support school attendance once their children reach first grade.

All of that changes once kids hit middle school. Beginning in sixth grade, the number of chronically absent students increases each year of school, with 11th and 12th graders posting the highest absentee rates. Johns Hopkins researchers found that in states with available data, 30 percent of middle and high school students miss an average of 15 or more days per school a year.⁹



⁹ Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes, The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools. Johns Hopkins University, 2012. 18.

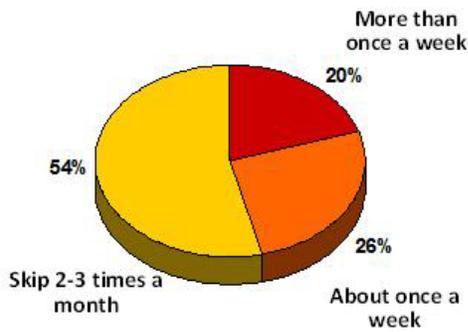


Profile of Student Skippers

The interviews revealed that skipping school is an established behavior by the end of 9th grade. Of current sophomores, juniors and seniors who skip, nearly three quarters of them started skipping in middle school or during their first year of high school. Further, they skip a lot: Nearly half (46 percent) of skippers are absent about once a week or more.



How often do you skip school or class?



How often do you skip school or class?		
	8 th Grade	11 th -12 th grade
Skip school once a week or more	33%	50%
Skip school 2-3 times per month	67%	50%

Characteristics of the school skippers' households include:

- 57 percent grew up in a two-parent home; 33 percent have been raised by a single mother
- 39 percent have moved in the last year; 19 percent have moved at least twice in the last year
- 34 percent have one or more parent who graduated from college
- 33 percent have a parent who dropped out of high school—14 percent say neither parent graduated high school and 19 percent say that only one parent graduated high school
- 23 percent cite their households as having a lower than average income; 24 percent cite their households as having a higher than average income; 44 percent cite their household as having an average income



Two Kinds of Skippers

Across age and ethnicity, there are similarities in students' future aspirations, why they skip school, what they are doing when they are not in school. Yet the data also reveals two very different types of school skippers: *The Habitual Skipper*, and *the Occasional Class Cutter*.

- *Habitual Skippers* miss at least one day of school per week. These students are more likely to live in a single-parent home, and are more likely to report having gotten into trouble with the law. These students are more likely to live in urban areas. Only about a third of Habitual Skippers plan to attend a four-year college. Another third plan to work or join the military directly after high school. These students acknowledge that they are at risk for dropping out of high school.
- *Occasional Class Cutters* skip a few times a month. These students are more likely to live in two-parent homes, and are more likely to have at least one parent who graduated from college. Occasional Class Cutters are more likely to live in a small town or a suburb. More than half of these students strongly believe they will attend a four-year college, and they report earning primarily A's and B's in school. Only about 20 percent of these students report that their parents are "always aware" of their skipping habits. These students have faced few consequences for skipping school beyond earning a detention or failing a test.



Both groups of skippers are "at-risk". Habitual Skippers are most at-risk for dropping out of high school – a decision more than one quarter of American high school students will make¹⁰. They are slowly disengaging from school and falling behind academically in the process.

Occasional Class Cutters are more likely to graduate from high school, but have little understanding that missing school is directly affecting their preparation for college. Many will face a slate of remedial classes upon enrolling in college¹¹, and may grow disillusioned and drop out before earning a degree.¹²

¹⁰ America's Promise Alliance. Dropout Crisis Facts. 2012. <http://www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Grad-Nation/Dropout-Facts.aspx>

¹¹ New York City Public School Indicators: Demographics, Resources, Outcomes, Annual Report, 2011'. New York City Independent Budget Office, page 35. In examining Regents results – an indicator of college readiness – the New York City Independent Budget Office found a "strong relationship" between school attendance and success. "High school students who were absent five or fewer days in the year had a total passing rate of 86 percent in English and 65 percent in math....[This is compared to the] 28 percent of Regents takers who had been absent 21 or more days during the school year. These students had woefully low performance on these exams – 57 percent passing in English and 38 percent in math."

¹² Thomas Bailey, *Rethinking Remedial Education in Community College*, CCRC Brief No. 40 (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2009).

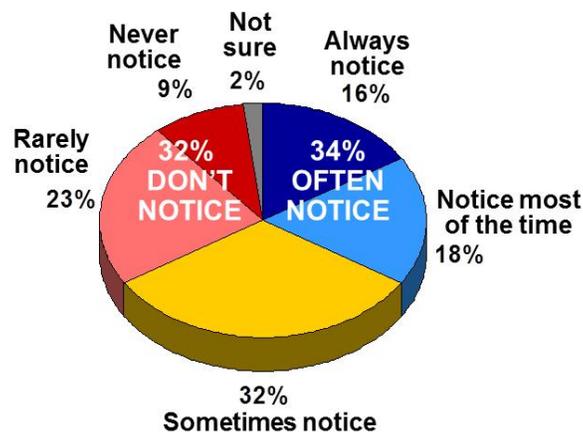


Kids: No One Even Notices

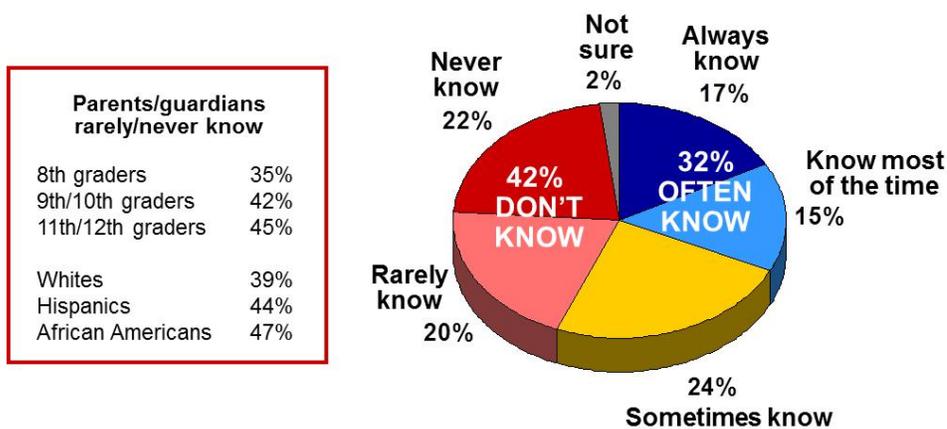
Students who skip school and/or a class largely believe that few people at school or home notice their absence. While it is likely that the schools track all absences, students say there is just a 50-50 chance (or less) that school officials notice.

And they believe that their parents are even less likely to notice. These students are making choices every week that have long term consequences on their future, and the students believe no one knows.

When you skip school or a class, how often do adults at your school, such as teachers, administrators, and attendance officers notice?



When you skip school or a class, how often do your parents or guardians know you skipped?



Parents/guardians rarely/never know	
8th graders	35%
9th/10th graders	42%
11th/12th graders	45%
Whites	39%
Hispanics	44%
African Americans	47%

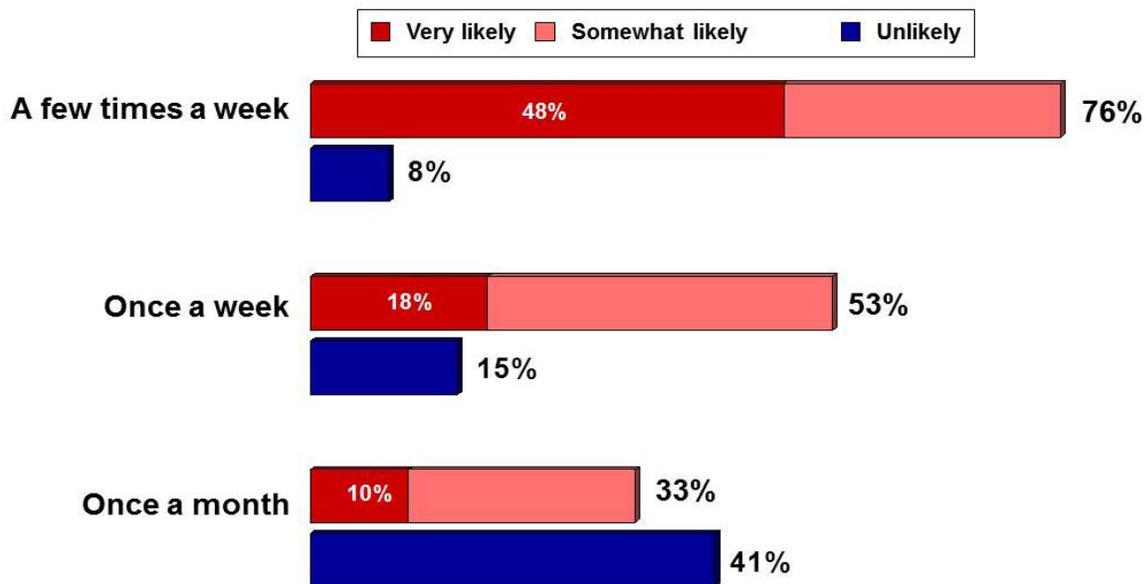


No Real Consequences

While the majority of students who skip have faced mundane consequences – they got detention, failed a test, or got grounded – few students see any real life consequences for skipping school. Students who skip school 2-3 times per month don't believe their success in school will suffer because of it. They mistakenly believe that their grades and ability to graduate will only be in jeopardy if they skip once or more per week. Few teens see any real issue with skipping school 2-3 times per month.

Despite this, most students who skip school plan to attend college: 46 percent told us they plan on attending a four-year college and 18 percent plan to attend a two-year or community college.

How likely is it that you personally will fall behind in your classes if you skip this much?



“School is Boring”

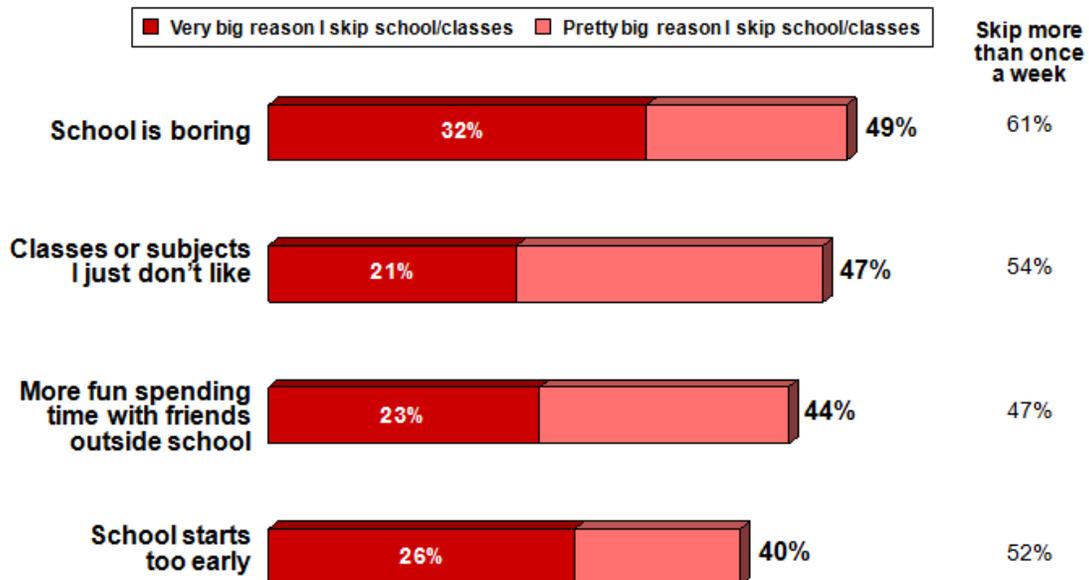
We asked students to tell us, in their own words, why they skip all or part of a school day. The most commonly volunteered reason for skipping school is that “school is boring.” Nearly half cite being bored at school or uninterested in their classes as an important reason why they skip and three quarters said these factors impacted their decision to skip in some way.

For many teens, school simply starts too early. Two in five teens (40 percent) noted the early start times as a key reason for why they miss school or class.

Ultimately, many students prefer to hang out with their friends than go to school. Nearly 45 percent of all students said a key reason for skipping school is that it is “more fun spending time with friends” than it is going to school.

Other reasons students cited as very big and/or pretty big reasons for skipping school include: avoid a test/homework (23 percent), have other work/family responsibilities (18 percent), bullying (11 percent), and transportation issues (9 percent).

What are the reasons why you skip school?



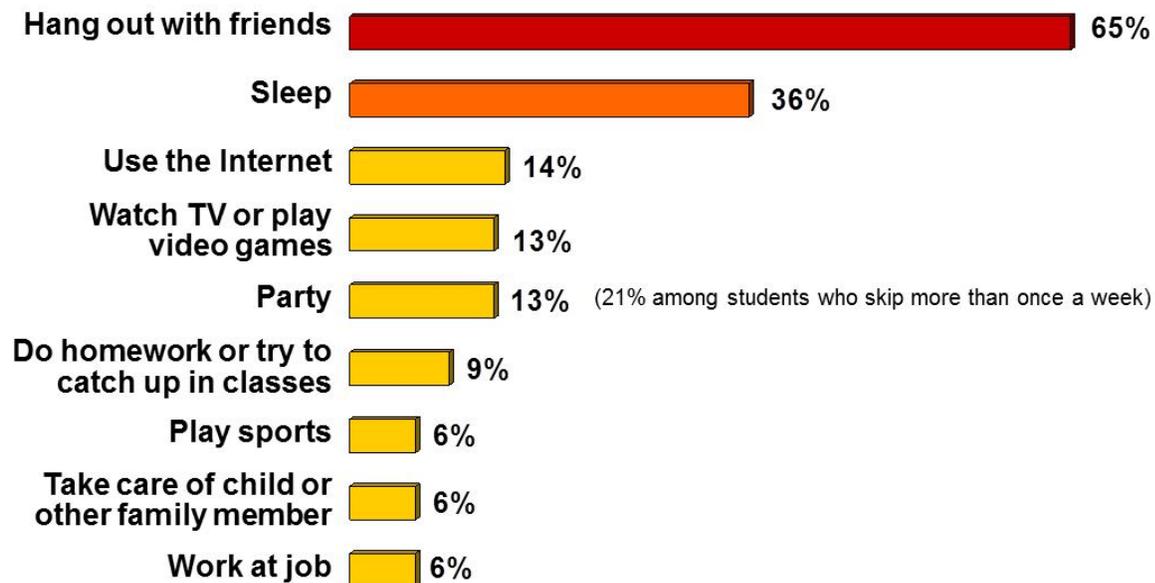
Casual Decision: "Hanging Out"

When students miss school, they most often show up for some portion of the day. Only about 28 percent of students reported skipping an entire day of school. Many report cutting a class or two. Where do they go, and what are they doing while ditching class?

Nearly two-thirds of students reported that they spend most of their time hanging out with their friends. Other students cite sleeping or watching television and/or surfing the Internet at home as common activities when they are not in school.



What are the top one or two things you do when you skip school or classes?



The Messenger Matters

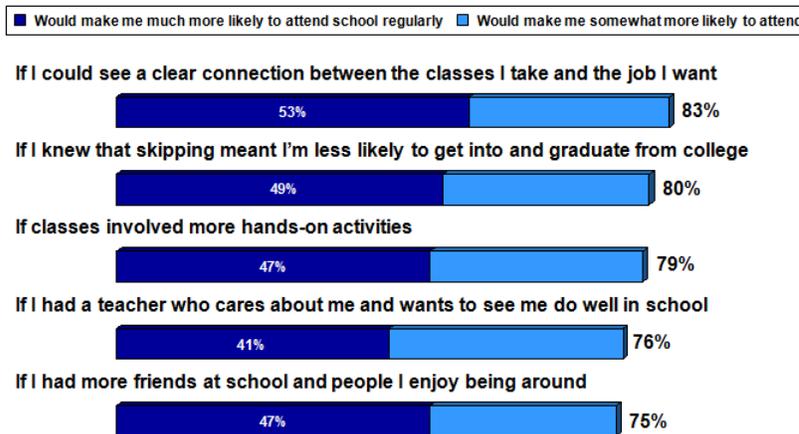
When we asked students what would encourage them to come to school more often, they told us they wanted to be more engaged in school. Students believe they'd attend school more regularly if their classes were more connected to their lives and aspirations.

Students also believe that chronic absenteeism can be stemmed if we simply make clear the impact skipping school will have on future success in a way that connects with them.

While students report school administrators have admonished them to go to school more often, the message doesn't seem to have much effect.

Thus, the messenger matters. Students want to be encouraged to go to school by somebody they feel a personal connection with, whether that's a parent, a teacher or coach they trust, or a celebrity they respect.

What would make you attend school more regularly?



Who would encourage you to stay in school and attend class more regularly?

