



Quick Start Guide for Districts to Improve Attendance

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Chronic absence is typically defined as missing 10 percent or more of school for any reason, including excused and unexcused absences as well as suspensions. It is one of the early warning indicators for school and district personnel to track and monitor over the course of a school year to identify students, student groups, and schools in need of intervention and support. Left unaddressed, chronic absence can translate into students having difficulty learning to read by grade 3, achieving in middle school, and graduating from high school.

Be intentional about which students and families you reach out to. Look at both the *number* and *percentage* of chronically absent students by grade, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, as well as by students designated as English language learners (ELL students), students with disabilities, and students experiencing homelessness. Prioritize outreach and engagement with groups that have the *highest rates* of chronic absence and *largest numbers* of chronically absent students so you can learn more about their particular community assets and barriers to attendance.

Here are six things district leaders can do to improve student attendance, reduce chronic absence, and close gaps in access to education:

1. Drive with data.

Using accurate, actionable, and available data on attendance and absenteeism can inform a multitiered response to chronic absence. But chronic absence is different from truancy (accumulating too many unexcused absences) and average daily attendance (how many students typically show up each day). Relying solely on these other measures can mask high levels of chronic absence.

For measuring chronic absence, attendance data reports are useful in describing how many (% and #) and which students fall into the following bands of attendance: satisfactory attendance (miss less than 5% of school), at-risk attendance (miss 5%–9% of school), moderate chronic absence (miss 10%–19% of school), severe chronic absence (miss 20%–49% of school), and extreme chronic absence (miss 50% or more of school). These reports help schools and community partners understand how much support particular students and their families are likely to need.



Data are most useful when available by school, grade, student group, and if possible, zip code. When school and district personnel review data and attendance patterns on at least a quarterly basis, they are able to identify students in need of supports.

[Attendance Works district and school attendance tracking tools](#) are available free of charge. These resources may assist school and district personnel in refining their reports to show which schools have high levels of chronic absence and which student groups and individual students are chronically absent.

2. Take a team approach to attendance and engagement at both the district and school levels.

Addressing high levels of chronic absence requires a team approach. School and district attendance teams may address all absences (excused, unexcused, and those due to suspensions). Integrating attendance data and discussions about attendance strategies into existing teams—such as a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS), and Response to Intervention (RTI) teams—is a wise practice for sustaining a systemic focus on attendance.

District teams that address attendance

- examine and monitor quantitative and qualitative data to understand who is absent and what factors drive attendance;
- set districtwide attendance and positive engagement policies and practices;
- provide supports for and access to evidence-based attendance strategies, interventions, and supports;
- establish strategic community partnerships;
- promote shared accountability and continuous improvement;
- allocate resources to address attendance issues by providing supports to students who need them the most; and
- build school-level capacity to address chronic absence and implement a tiered support system.

District support enables school teams to

- organize a multitiered attendance strategy that begins with prevention and early intervention, using attendance, behavior, and academic data;
- examine attendance and absenteeism data to assess which groups of students have higher or lower levels of absence;
- identify assets, barriers, and strategies that affect attendance;
- mobilize everyone in the school community to address attendance;
- implement evidence-based attendance strategies, interventions, and supports; and
- determine whether activities and supports are making a difference.

Use these resources to guide the development of your teams:

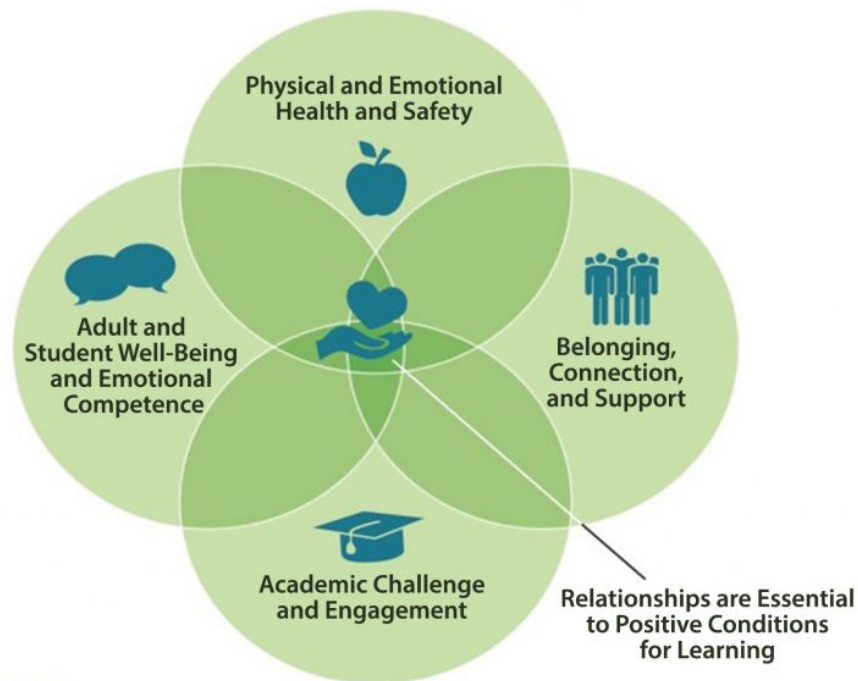
- [How to Organize an Effective School Team to Improve Attendance](#) handout
- [How to Organize an Effective District Team to Improve Attendance](#) handout
- [School Team Self-Assessment](#) and [A Tool for District Team Self-Assessment](#)

3. Recognize that students are more likely to attend when positive conditions for learning are in place.

Relationships are essential to the [positive conditions for learning](#) (Figure 1) that lead to students being engaged and attending regularly. Attendance is higher when schools

- are organized to promote students' physical and emotional health and safety;
- promote a sense of belonging, connection, and support;
- make learning relevant, challenging, and engaging so students do not want to miss class; and
- invest in adult and student well-being and emotional competence.

Figure 1. Conditions for Learning





Building strong relationships is helpful for all families but is essential for working with children and family members who have experienced any form of trauma. The goal is to integrate attendance, engagement, and belonging into existing practice.

- Harvard's [Relationship Mapping Strategy](#) offers an intentional process for making sure every student in the school is connected to at least one caring adult in the building.
- Turnaround for Children has developed a [relationship-building toolbox](#) that school staff can use in their everyday work. It includes describing the 2 x 10 Strategy in which educators spend 2 minutes every day for 10 consecutive school days with a student in need of extra support.

4. Use a multitiered approach to support student attendance and engagement, including using attendance, behavior, and academic data to see the whole child.

The idea behind a [multitiered approach](#) is that the majority of students will respond to schoolwide strategies for improving attendance and engagement (known as Tier 1 supports) but these strategies will not be sufficient for all students. Some students require more personalized support (Tier 2), and an even smaller number may need more intensive measures (Tier 3) to reengage them with school. Teams should use multiple sources of data to determine which students would be best served by the different tiers on at least a quarterly basis. Schools and districts may also want to consider how their tiered approach to attendance is aligned with or integrated into existing teams and frameworks such as PBIS and MTSS.

The key to successful attendance improvement strategies lies in how well the interventions address the root causes of absences. Do the interventions remove barriers or motivate a family or student to change behaviors? Do they leverage existing strengths and available supports? Use the chart on [reasons for absence](#) and the [Guide to Using the Attendance Playbook](#) to select effective evidence-based interventions. [Here are examples of tiered interventions.](#)

5. Cocreate solutions with students and families.

Developing solutions requires talking with students and families about [the barriers](#) they face, whether those occur in the community or within schools, and what helps motivate students to be in school. Consider using these [qualitative tools](#) to tap into their insights and then use that knowledge to tailor activities and interventions to address local realities and build upon assets.



6. Work with partners to engage and provide additional support for students and families.

Addressing high levels of chronic absence requires an all-hands-on-deck approach. While district and school personnel have essential roles to play, their impact is more effective through partnerships with community organizations. Community partners can be the extra set of hands to support school staff who have been stretched thin during and following the pandemic. Community partners can help to reach out and engage families as well as offer critical supports and interventions. [This resource](#) from Attendance Works is helpful for exploring what community partners can do.

Links for Resources Named in This Document

- Attendance Works district and school attendance tracking tools
<https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/data-tools/calculating-chronic-absence/>
- How to Organize an Effective School Team to Improve Attendance
<https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Attendance-Works-Guidance-for-SCHOOL-Attendance-Teams-1.14.2023.pdf>
- How to Organize an Effective District Team to Improve Attendance
<https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Attendance-Works-Guidance-for-District-Teams-1.14.2023.pdf>
- School Team Self-Assessment
<https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/School-Team-Self-Assessment-rev-2-8-21.pdf>
- A Tool for District Team Self-Assessment
<https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/District-SELF-ASSESSMENT-Tool-rev-4-18-22.pdf>
- Report on positive conditions for learning
https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Attendance_Works_Using_Chronic_Absence__091619.pdf
- Relationship Mapping Strategy
<https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-educators/relationship-mapping-strategy>
- Relationship building toolbox
<https://turnaroundusa.org/toolbox/corepractices/trust-building-interactions/>
- Multitiered approach to addressing chronic absence
<https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/addressing-chronic-absence/3-tiers-of-intervention/>



- Chart on reasons for absence
<https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/toolkits/teaching-attendance-2-0/use-data-for-intervention-and-support/strategy-2-consider-needed-supports/why-are-so-many-students-missing-so-much-school/>
- Guide to Using the Attendance Playbook
<https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/attendance-playbook/>
- Examples of Tiered Practices
<https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/addressing-chronic-absence/examples-of-tiered-practices/>
- Barriers to attendance
<https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/addressing-chronic-absence/3-tiers-of-intervention/root-causes/>
- Qualitative tools for learning about the factors affecting attendance
<https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/qualitative-data/>
- Attendance Works resource on what community partners can do
<https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/messaging/making-the-case/>

Main Sources for Information in This Document

Romero, M., & Lee, Y. (2017). *A national portrait of chronic absenteeism in the early grades*. National Center for Children in Poverty. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/A-National-Portrait-of-Chronic-Absenteeism-in-the-Early-Grades-Oct-2007.pdf>

University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. (2017a). *Five key findings for middle grades from Looking Forward to High School and College*. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/5-Key-Findings-MG-Final.pdf>

University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. (2017b). *Four key findings for high schools from Looking Forward to High School and College*. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/4-Key-Findings-HS-Final.pdf>