

April 2024

SOUTH CAROLINA

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

HANDBOOK ON ATTENDANCE





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Section I: Introduction

South Carolina Department of Education

South Carolina's four strategic priorities include Science of Reading alignment, increased math achievement, character/resiliency education, and mobilizing committed/consistent volunteers to amplify teacher efforts in the classroom. Addressing attendance plays a key role in supporting South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE)'s priorities. When more students are present and engaged, South Carolina can reach the goal that at least 75 percent of students are at or above grade level by 2030 and that every child will be college, career or military ready.

Attendance is a critical concern. Students need to be present to engage with learning, so South Carolina needs to address the obstacles that impede their ability to learn. South Carolina, like the rest of the United States, has an attendance crisis. In South Carolina, 24.7 percent of students are chronically absent, missing 10 percent or more of the school year for any reason. This is an increase from 13.75 percent in school year 2018-19 before the pandemic.

Attendance matters. Consistently attending school matters. Working together, schools, families, and communities can encourage and support students to attend school each day by focusing on prevention and early intervention. Chronic absenteeism is a leading indicator that predicts success for both literacy and workforce outcomes as well as graduation from high school. It is an early warning sign that students are at risk of not reading proficiently by the end of third grade, struggling academically in middle school, and dropping out of high school.

Part of today's high levels of chronic absence reflects the experiences students and families have had due to significant economic and health challenges. Students who may not have experienced barriers to attendance in the past are struggling to attend school regularly as a result of the pandemic. Chronic absence also exacerbates existing educational gaps among different student groups.

Purpose of the Handbook

SCDE, in partnership with Attendance Works, developed this guidance document in response to the attendance declines across the state. The document is designed to help districts and schools invest in a comprehensive tiered approach that starts with strengthening foundational whole school practices that promote positive conditions for learning, expand their prevention and early intervention efforts, and move beyond a focus on individual intervention plans for habitually truant students.

This guide seeks to provide a roadmap to promote districtwide systemic changes necessary to dramatically improve attendance and decrease chronic absenteeism. It is an opportunity to keep doors open and inspire lifelong learners who can navigate toward a future with endless possibilities. It includes

- common terms and definitions
- South Carolina laws, policies, and data
- best practices for district-level change
- best practices for school-level change
- tools and resources

Section II: Attendance and Chronic Absence

Why Do Attendance and Chronic Absence Matter?

Regular school attendance is a critical leading indicator of educational gaps. National research shows that at every age and every stage, chronic absenteeism erodes the academic and social skills needed to succeed in school, to be engaged and empowered as a learner and to reach goals that will inspire hope for a bright future. Regular attendance helps students reach educational milestones, whereas poor attendance contributes to lost learning time, lack of achievement, and increased dropout rates.

Studies have shown that people with more education live longer, healthier lives and earn higher wages than those with fewer years of schooling.

What Is Chronic Absence?

Chronic absence is defined as missing 10 percent (18 days) or more of the total number of days enrolled during the school year for any reason. It includes excused and unexcused absences as well as suspensions.

Chronic absence operates as an early warning metric. Identifying students who miss 10 percent of the school year at any point in the school year is an effective early indicator that a student is headed off track.

Students missing 2-4 days in September are 5 times more likely to be chronically absent throughout the school year.

The earlier attendance problems are identified, the sooner schools can reach out to determine and address barriers to getting to school before absences add up and a student falls behind academically.

A student's history of chronic absence is highly predictive of future chronic absence. That means providing support even before the first day of a new school year is critical to change a student's attendance trajectory.

Chronic absence is often overlooked because it can be caused by sporadic absences (or just missing an average of two days per month throughout the school year).

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Missing just 2 days a month can lead to chronic absence.

10 percent of the school year = 18 days of absence = almost a month of lost learning.

How Is Chronic Absence Different From Average Daily Attendance (ADA) and Truancy?

Average Daily Attendance (ADA)	Truancy	Chronic Absence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School-level measure (<i>not student level</i>) • Notice aggregate attendance at certain points in time (e.g., half days of instruction, holidays, bad weather) • Masks individual student chronic absences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counts ONLY unexcused absences • Emphasizes individual compliance with rules • Uses legal, typically more blaming, and punitive solutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counts ALL absences (<i>excused, unexcused, and suspensions</i>) • Emphasizes impact of missed days and benefits of being present • Uses preventative, problem-solving strategies • Cultivates family and student engagement

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Why Are Students Absent?

Increasing attendance and reducing chronic absence require partnering with students and families to understand and address the challenges that occur outside and inside school. These challenges affect their ability to learn and, when left unaddressed, cause them to continue to miss more classes. Better understanding the root cause of absences includes asking questions such as these:

- Are there **barriers** that make it difficult for students to get to school such as unreliable transportation, housing instability, lack of medical care, or lack of mental health supports for students who have experienced loss or death?
- Are students **averse** to attending school because they are struggling academically, because of an unwelcoming school climate, or a lack of peer or adult relationships?
- Are students **disengaged** due to the lack of meaningful adult relationships or because they don't see the relevance of the curriculum to their lives or their futures?
- Do families have **misconceptions** about the importance of regular attendance?

The reasons students are chronically absent are different from absence codes (excused, unexcused, suspensions, etc.) and can fall into four major categories:

Barriers	Aversion	Disengagement	Misconceptions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chronic and acute illness • Family responsibilities or home situation • Death and grief • Poor transportation • Housing and food insecurity • Inequitable access to needed services (including health) • System involvement • Lack of predictable schedules for learning • Lack of access to technology • Community violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggling academically and/or behaviorally • Unwelcoming school climate • Social and peer challenges • Anxiety • Harsh disciplinary and suspension practices • Undiagnosed disability and/or lack of disability accommodations • Caregivers had negative educational experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of challenging, relevant instruction • Bored • No meaningful relationships to adults in the school (especially given staff shortages) • Lack of enrichment opportunities • Lack of academic and behavioral support • Failure to earn credits • Need to work conflicts with being in high school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absences are only a problem if they are unexcused • Missing 2 days per month doesn't affect learning • Lose track and underestimate TOTAL absences • Assume students must stay home for any symptom of illness • Attendance only matters in the older grades • Suspensions don't count as absence

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How Can We Improve Attendance?

Significantly reducing chronic absence requires shifting mindsets, policies, and practices. An effective practice pathway begins with

- changing attitudes and beliefs
- strategically using data for proactive solutions
- creating a capacity building infrastructure
- implementing evidence-based strategies

SCDE is promoting a systemic approach to increase attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism by integrating attendance into existing practices and not creating a stand-alone initiative.

Shift the System to Prevention and Early Intervention

Supporting prevention and early intervention strategies keeps absences from increasing and can promote more effective staff time and resources. Isolated programmatic responses and/or an emphasis on unexcused absences will not significantly reduce a district or school's chronic absence rate. Some of the prevention and early intervention system shifts:

- emphasizing the impact of missed days on learning
- understanding that attendance + engagement = success
- taking a positive problem-solving approach versus legalistic approaches and punitive actions
- seeing students and families as an important partner in the problem-solving process instead of the problem or people in need of rescue
- using an early warning system before absences add up

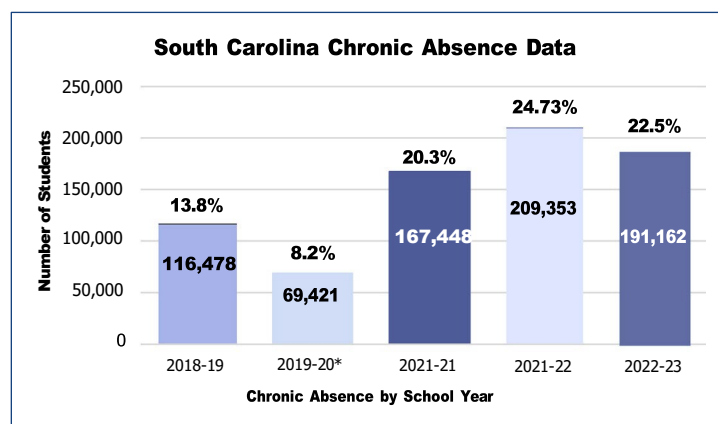
Section III: Data

What Do You Know About Chronic Absence in South Carolina?

During the 2022-23 school year, 22.5 percent (191,162) of South Carolina's students were chronically absent, meaning they missed 10 percent or more of the school year. Research has shown that attendance is an indicator that students who are chronically absent are more likely to not read proficiently by the end of third grade, experience course failure in middle school, and drop out of high school.

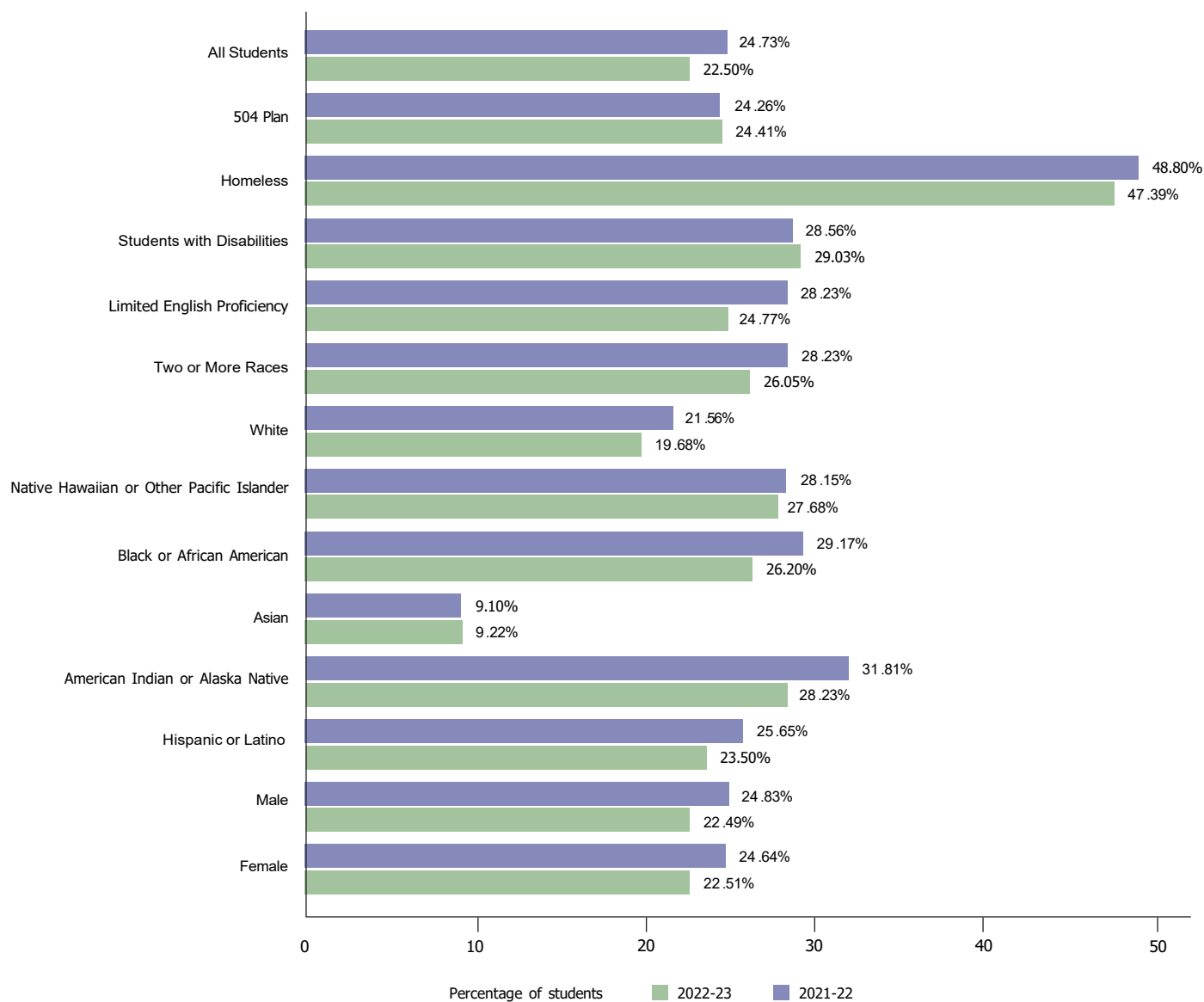
The COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected trends in attendance across the nation. Chronic absenteeism surged in 2020-21 as attendance and school engagement decreased. There are remaining concerns about chronic absenteeism still exceeding prepandemic levels.

This chart shows the number of students who were chronically absent and the chronic absence rate in South Carolina during the given years. Note: The attendance reporting in 2019-20 was disrupted by the start of the pandemic.

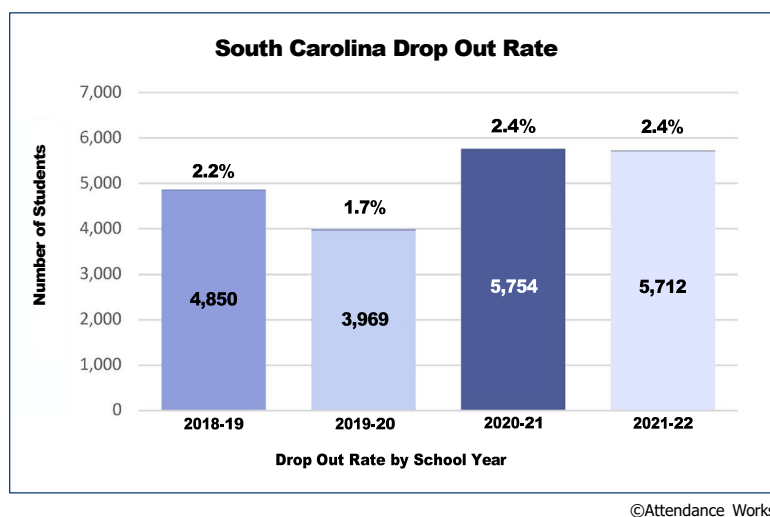


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This chart shows the percentage of chronically absent South Carolina students by different student groups.



This chart shows the number and percentage of South Carolina students who dropped out over a four-year period.



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Monitor Attendance Using a Holistic Metric

By monitoring attendance as a holistic metric, the focus goes beyond surface issues to examining underlying systemic barriers, better understanding the story behind the data, and aligning interventions to the reasons for absence, which increases a school's ability to achieve positive outcomes.

Reducing chronic absence requires not just looking at barriers but examining whether schools are effectively engaging students in learning. Researchers have described school engagement as encompassing three areas: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive.

- **Behavioral engagement** includes attendance and participation in school-related activities, involvement in academic and learning tasks, positive conduct, and the absence of disruptive behaviors.
- **Emotional engagement** consists of relationships with teachers, peers, and academics.
- **Cognitive engagement** consists of an investment in learning and a willingness to go beyond the basic requirements to master difficult skills.

Use Data Strategically

Using real-time data, district and school teams can see how many and which students are in a particular attendance band (satisfactory, at-risk, moderate, and severe chronic absence) that can reveal the patterns and trends so that the team can respond with the appropriate level of supports.

Looking at chronic absence data biweekly can tell district and school leaders which schools or student groups need more resources. It can also be used in combination with other data to assess how well specific programs or interventions are working or to identify systemic issues and barriers. Academic, behavior, and attendance dashboards allow decision-makers to use quantitative and qualitative data to

- make decisions about the allocation of resources
- analyze the connections among attendance, academics, and behavior
- address the systemic causes of absences for groups of students

DAYS MISSED IN SCHOOL YEAR
Satisfactory Attendance Missed less than 5% (fewer than 9 days in a 180-day year)
At-risk Missed 5-9% (9-17 days in a 180-day year)
Moderate Chronic Absence Missed 10-19% (18-35 days in a 180-day year)
Severe Chronic Absence Missed 20% or more (36 or more days in a 180-day year)

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Section IV: South Carolina Laws and Policies

In South Carolina the term “absent” is used to identify students who are chronically absent.

As part of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), districts and schools are required to report to the SCDE the number of students who are chronically absent each year. Chronic absence is defined as

- any student in grades K–12 who misses 50 percent or more of the instructional day for any reason for 10 percent or more of the enrollment period

EDFacts, the U.S. Department of Education initiative to collect and analyze K-12 data, requires states to report the number of students in each district and school who are absent at least 10 percent of the time they are enrolled in a particular school or district. More specifically, students who are enrolled in the same school for an entire academic year and miss 18 or more days (10 percent) will be considered chronically absent. The total number of chronically absent students will be included on district and school report cards and reported to EDFacts.

An increased focus on prevention and early intervention can decrease the number of absence intervention plans that schools will need to develop. Addressing attendance is most effective when using a multitiered system of supports (MTSS) with three tiers. Fewer habitually truant students enable school staff to concentrate on students with Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions.

The chart below aligns the chronic absence with tiers. *Chronic absence is defined as 10 percent of days enrolled.* (For example, if a student is enrolled for 30 days and misses 3 days, the student is considered chronically absent.)

Chronic Absence: missing 10% for any reason — excused, unexcused, or suspensions (18 days/year based on 180 days).	
Tier 3: Intensive Intervention	Students missing 20% or more for any reason
· Extreme chronic absence	Absent 50% or more: 10 days+/month
· Severe chronic absence	Absent 20%–49%: 5 to 9 days/month
Tier 2: Early Intervention	Students missing 10%-19% for any reason
· Moderate chronic absence	Absent 10%–19%: (2-4 days)/month
Tier 1: Universal Prevention	All Students and Families
· At risk of chronic absence	Absent 5%–9%
· Satisfactory attendance	Absent 5% or less

Definitions

Chronic Absence: any student in grade K–12 who misses 50 percent or more of the instructional day for any reason for 10 percent (or more) of the enrollment period.

Truant: a student between the ages 6–17 who has accumulated unexcused absences on three consecutive days or has accumulated a total of five or more unexcused absences during the academic year. (Attendance Intervention Plan developed).

- Only full-day unexcused absences contribute to truancy.
- Excused absences and suspensions do not affect truancy.

Habitual Truant: A “habitual” truant is a child ages 12 to 17 who fails to comply with the intervention plan developed by the school, the child, and the parent(s) or guardian(s) and who accumulates two or more additional unlawful absences. This child may need court intervention, and an initial truancy petition may be filed. The written intervention plan, and documentation of noncompliance, must be attached to the truancy petition asking for court intervention.

Chronic Truant: A “chronic” truant is a child ages 12 to 17 who has been through the school intervention process, has reached the level of a “habitual” truant, has been referred to Family Court and placed on an order to attend school, and continues to accumulate unlawful absences. Should other community alternatives and referrals fail to remedy the attendance problem, the chronic truant may be referred to Family Court for violation of a previous court order. All school intervention plans existing to this point for this child and family must accompany the Contempt of Court petition as well as a written recommendation from the school to the court on action the court should take.

Tardy: According to State Board Regulation 43-279, schools must address tardies. Tardiness has an impact on attendance and lost learning time. Students will be counted tardy when they are not present at the designated beginning time for school. The hours that a student misses due to arriving to school late contribute to the hours not in attendance. If a student arrives just 1 hour late every day over 5 days, that equates to 5 hours of lost learning time in a week.

Compulsory Attendance: Parents or guardians shall require their children, who are 5 years of age before September 1, to attend regularly a public or private school or kindergarten of South Carolina that has been approved by the State Board of Education according to State Statute 59-65-10. A parent or guardian whose child is not 6 years of age on or before the first day of September may elect to not send the child to kindergarten but must sign a written waiver with the school district where the parent resides.

Lawful and Unlawful Absences: In South Carolina the Student Attendance Regulation 43-274 outlines lawful absences and unlawful absences as listed below. Chronic absence includes all absences.

Lawful absences include but are not limited to

- absences caused by a student’s own illness and whose attendance in school would endanger his or her health or the health of others
- absences due to an illness or death in the student’s immediate family
- absences due to a recognized religious holiday of the student’s faith
- absences due to activities approved in advance by the principal

Unlawful absences include but are not limited to

- absences of a student without the knowledge of his or her parents or
- absences of a student without acceptable cause with the knowledge of his or her parents

South Carolina Model Policies

Guiding Questions When Creating a Policy

- Do you have a value statement?
 - E.g., *The board believes that attendance and engagement in school benefit our entire society. Students who attend school regularly are more likely to read on grade level by the end of third grade, graduate ready for postsecondary learning and career opportunities, and contribute to civic life. It is the policy of the district to remove barriers to full participation in learning and address educational inequities by reducing chronic absence.*
- Is there a section that defines chronic absence as any student in grade K–12 who misses 50 percent or more of the instructional day for any reason for 10 percent (or more) of the enrollment period? Chronic absence includes excused, unexcused, and out-of-school suspensions.
- Is there a section that describes the difference between ADA and chronic absence?
- Is there a section on the district's approach to improving attendance that specifies using a multitiered approach that starts with prevention and early intervention? Is the tiered system of supports described in the administrative rules?
- Is there a statement that encourages the superintendent to align the district's attendance-improvement strategy with existing district initiatives and teams?
- Is there a section on data and accountability requiring the superintendent to create and maintain public real-time attendance reports that educators and the community can access? Does the policy or administrative rules describe how data should be analyzed at the district and school levels such as by grades and student population groups?
- Is the superintendent asked to provide the board periodic updates on the district's progress in improving student attendance and meeting district goals?
- Is there a statement that requires the superintendent or a designee to develop administrative practice guidance for implementing the attendance policy and administrative rules?

Section V: How Districts Can Improve Attendance

Effective Pathway: How Can We Improve Attendance?

Significantly reducing chronic absence requires shifting mindsets, policies, and practices. An effective practice pathway begins with

- changing attitudes and beliefs about attendance
- strategically using data for proactive solutions
- creating capacity-building infrastructure
- implementing evidence-based strategies

School districts need to take a systemic approach to increase attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism by integrating attendance into existing practices and not create a stand-alone initiative.

Acknowledge That Everyone Has a Role to Play

Districts, teachers, families, and communities working together can get kids to school. A districtwide approach leads to more sustainable outcomes. All too often, attendance is seen as the responsibility of social workers and student support staff, and it is siloed or not aligned with existing academic and behavioral improvement strategies. A districtwide, systemic approach to reducing chronic absence includes [six key ingredients](#):

Actionable Data	Collect and report accurate quantitative and qualitative attendance and chronic absence data that are accurate, accessible, timely, comprehensive, and understandable .
Capacity Building	Provide professional development to all staff and community partners so they have the skills and knowledge to take a data-driven and multitiered approach to supporting student attendance and engagement.
Positive Engagement	Create a culture of attendance by taking a positive problem-solving, not punitive, approach to absenteeism that is centered on belonging and engagement. Help everyone understand why daily attendance matters.
Strategic Partnerships	Strengthen and expand partnerships among the district, school, families, and community to provide for a full range of resources and supports to address barriers to attendance.
Adequate Resources	Resources and funding are sufficient to ensure students, from all backgrounds and circumstances, receive a quality education and similar opportunities to thrive and achieve in school, career, and college.
Shared Accountability	Absenteeism is a cross-cutting issue and cannot be solved by any one person, department, or agency.

Sustainable implementation requires an “all hands on deck” approach that crosses departmental boundaries (e.g., communications, data, accountability, teaching and learning, equity, family engagement, transportation, special education, health, student supports).

Embedding attendance into all district-level practices can reduce overload on building leaders and staff.

Use Data Strategically

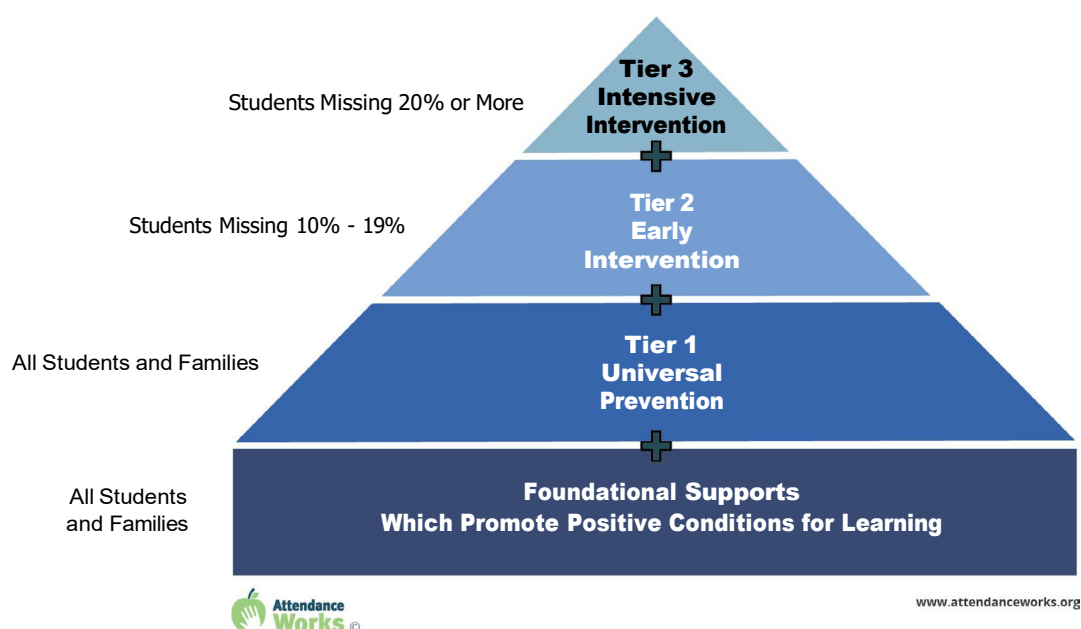
Looking at chronic absence data biweekly can tell district leaders which schools or student groups need more resources. It can also be used in combination with other data to assess how well specific programs or interventions are working or to identify systemic issues and barriers. Academic, behavior, and attendance dashboards allow decision-makers to use quantitative and qualitative data to

- make decisions about the allocation of resources
- analyze the connections between attendance, academics, and behavior
- address the systemic causes of absences for groups of students
- assess student groups with high attendance and chronic absence; this includes reviewing data by grade, student disability status, economic disadvantage status, ethnicity, and race.

Adopt a Multitiered Approach to Support Student Attendance and Engagement

Improving student attendance and engagement starts with a multitiered approach. The majority of students respond to schoolwide strategies for improving attendance and engagement, and some students require more personalized support and more intensive measures. Addressing attendance is most effective when using a multitiered approach grounded in the four positive conditions for learning.

Foundational Supports	Whole school practices promote four <u>positive conditions for learning</u> . When positive conditions are in place, students are more likely to attend and be engaged.
Tier 1	Universal strategies to encourage good attendance for all students.
Tier 2	Early interventions for students who need more support to avoid chronic absence.
Tier 3	Intensive interventions for students facing the greatest challenges to getting to school.



Section VI: District and School Teams

How to Support a Districtwide Effort: The Role of District Administration

If a school district has a chronic absence rate above 5 percent, there are dozens or hundreds of students who are at risk of falling behind academically.

While attendance improvements can begin in a single classroom or school building, the most effective and sustainable approaches are led by and supported at the central office level by the board of education, the superintendent, the executive leadership team, and regional leadership.

Reducing districtwide rates of chronic absence and increasing attendance requires the district-level administration to use **existing teams** where possible. This ensures that attendance teams, or the functions of an attendance team, are intentionally connected to existing collaborative team structures as part of a continuous improvement process.

An integrated districtwide approach is necessary for the following reasons:

- Attendance is integrally linked to academic outcomes and reflects lost learning time.
- Chronic absence can be decreased only through internal and external partnerships.
- Attendance improvement efforts need to be aligned with existing social, emotional, and behavioral support initiatives within a district.
- District personnel have different levels of authority and influence over school-level practices.
- Many causes for absence are systemic and require policy and practice solutions.

Assemble a Cross-Departmental District Team

This cabinet-level, cross-departmental team is responsible for ensuring that attendance is aligned with all existing initiatives to improve academic outcomes and includes central office and building-level staff. If a district has an existing district leadership team as part of its continuous improvement process, it does not need to create another team. The team should meet at least monthly.

District Team Functions

1. Routinely examine and monitor quantitative and qualitative data to inform action.
2. Organize a systemic, districtwide effort including supportive, nonpunitive practice/policy and a positive school climate.
3. Build the capacity of principals and school staff to address chronic absence and implement a tiered support system.
4. Develop and implement a year-round communications campaign.
5. Promote shared accountability and continuous improvement.
6. Allocate resources equitably.

Each of the district team functions is further described below with a set of implementation questions that districts can use to guide their efforts.

District Team Membership Considerations

- Who is responsible for principal performance?
- Who can create and customize school-level data reports?
- Who supervises social work and guidance staff?
- Who is responsible for specific student populations (e.g., early learning, students with disabilities, English learners)?
- Who are the district's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) liaisons responsible for ensuring educational stability and attendance for students in foster care, students involved in the justice system, and students experiencing homelessness?
- Who oversees health and mental health services (e.g., school nurses, health centers)?
- Who is responsible for community partnerships and family engagement?
- Who oversees the MTSS and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) work?
- Who is responsible for the district's attendance communication and messaging?

1) Examine and Monitor Data

The district team should routinely review (ideally every two weeks) disaggregated student attendance data by school, grade, and subgroups to understand districtwide attendance patterns and trends.

It should also ensure that school leaders and teams have access to disaggregated data and are analyzing patterns and trends weekly to inform their schoolwide strategies.

Areas for District Team Inquiry About Data

- Do the district data systems “talk to each other”?
- Does the district have accessible data dashboards that display student attendance, behavior, and academic data?
- Have building administrators been trained to analyze data patterns and trends?
- Do schools routinely collect information from students and families to understand attendance barriers?
- Are the reasons for absence being systematically documented?

2) Establish Attendance and Positive Engagement Policies and Practices

A comprehensive attendance improvement manual should provide implementation guidance and protocols that specify consistent expectations and minimum protocols for all absences (excused, unexcused and suspensions) and specify the attendance-related roles and responsibilities of all district and school-based staff.

The attendance manual should minimally include the following:

- a. definitions of regular attendance and chronic absence
- b. a multitiered system of attendance supports framework that begins with prevention and early intervention
- c. attendance-related roles and responsibilities for all central office and school-based staff
- d. protocols for integrating and aligning attendance into existing district and school teams.
- e. data utilization requirements and metrics
- f. examples of best practices for tiered strategies and interventions
- g. district’s commitment and chosen approach to Foundational and Tier 1 supports
- h. positive, personalized early intervention protocols
- i. root cause analysis tools and resources
- j. attendance-taking and -recording procedures

Areas of District Team Inquiry on Attendance and Positive Engagement Policies and Practices

- Do we have clear definitions for excused and medically excused absences?
- Do we have early outreach protocols to families before absences add up?
- Do we provide guidance on attendance that can be aligned and integrated into school teams?
- Does our policy articulate a multitiered approach, including our approach to districtwide foundational and Tier 1 supports?
- Do we promote a culture of attendance on a year-round basis?
- Do we provide attendance messaging resources to schools?
- Do we have a districtwide recognition system for promoting good and improved attendance?

3) Build School-Level Capacity to Address Chronic Absence Using a Tiered System of Support

The district team needs to ensure that systematic, cross-functional professional development opportunities are in place to help principals, school staff, and community partners gain the knowledge, skills, and capacity to reduce chronic absence.

They need to understand what chronic absence is and why it matters and have the tools to take a data-driven, tiered approach to support student attendance, participation, and engagement.

The professional development system would include training, communities of practice, coaching, and the regular sharing of best practices among all staff and schools.

Areas for District Team Inquiry on Building Capacity

- Have school leaders and teams been trained in the multitiered system of attendance support?
- Do we assist building leaders in the development and alignment of school-level teams?
- Is attendance embedded in the district's annual professional development plan?
- Do we systematically hear from school teams about their needs, resource gaps, and common reasons for absence?
- Are all schools able to implement a nonpunitive, positive school climate?

4) Establish Strategic and Sustainable Community Partnerships

Community partnerships are essential to the success of school attendance, engagement, prevention, and intervention strategies. All community partners working in the district should be striving toward the same goals identified in the district strategic plan.

Community partners present valuable opportunities for input through their unique expertise and viewpoints. Community partners often have valuable information and data that can inform decisions and maximize the impact of selected strategies. Engaging community partners — such as business leaders, faith-based organizations, community-based organizations, philanthropic partners, and neighbors — can help to connect the goals of the district to the goals of the community.

The district team should use data from schools about the factors affecting attendance to strengthen and expand partnerships among the district, schools, and community partners to ensure there is a full range of strategies to address the barriers to attendance and engagement.

Areas for District Team Inquiry on Strategic and Sustainable Partnerships

- Has our team mapped community-based resources that promote attendance and engagement by school?
- Do our community partners align their work with multitiered attendance and engagement strategies?
- Does our team have mechanisms to identify needs from school leaders that require the assistance of community partners?
- Is there a clear process for school teams to connect to external partners?

5) Promote Shared Solutions, Accountability, and Continuous Improvement

Improving attendance requires each person within the district and community partners to understand the shared goal and their own role in achieving it. For each group to be successful in doing its part to improve attendance, it must have clear expectations, be equipped with the knowledge and skills to do the work, and be held accountable for both adult measures and student outcomes.

The district team must create systems and cross-departmental infrastructure supports for attendance and remind all stakeholders (students, families, educators, and community partners) of their responsibility to help boost attendance and reduce chronic absence. This may include providing additional support to school teams to help them identify effective, evidence-based attendance interventions to adopt and adapt.

Areas for District Team Inquiry on Shared Solutions, Accountability, and Continuous Improvement

- Is attendance a focus area in the district's goal or district's improvement plan?
- Do we ensure that school leaders have a data-driven plan to improve attendance and reduce chronic absence?
- Do we have ways to identify and replicate effective practices across the district?
- Do we have memoranda of understanding with community partners that specify roles, responsibilities, and outcomes?
- Do we monitor the attendance improvement strategies across the district to determine the impact?

6) Allocate Resources to Meet the Needs in Each School

At the district level, chronic absence data can inform the budget process and be used to distribute staff and resources more efficiently and adequately. For example, by moving resources to prevention and early intervention, district teams should be able to reduce the cost of more intensive interventions over time.

Areas for District Team Inquiry to Allocate Resources Effectively

- What percentage of the district budget supports prevention or early intervention in all schools?
- Does our district prioritize the distribution of resources to schools with higher rates of chronic absence and large populations of vulnerable students?
- Does the way we compensate staff recognize the importance of building relationships with students and families (e.g., paid for home visits)?

How Schools Can Improve Attendance: Building/School Teams

Chronic absence operates as an early warning metric. Identifying students who miss 10 percent of the school year at any point in the school year is an effective early indicator that a student is headed off track. Schools can improve attendance when they

- prioritize attendance and engagement
- promote a schoolwide climate of attendance
- shift the focus to prevention and early intervention
- see students and families as an important part of the solution instead of the problem or people in need of rescue
- take a data-driven team approach led by the building administrator
- engage every person in the school building

Characteristics and Role of School-Level Teams

The primary purpose of a school team is to organize and facilitate a schoolwide attendance strategy and ensure that it is an integral component of the school's plan to improve outcomes for all students.

Schools improve attendance when they use a team approach led by the principal and supported by other building-level staff.

The team should reflect the population of the school and district community. If the team does not reflect the diversity of the school community, the school or district leadership may consider the following questions:

1. Are there recruiting strategies to help the school team better reflect the community?
2. How can we incorporate teachers, parents, students, or community members to participate on the team who reflect the demographics of the school community?

School Team Functions

1. Organize a multitiered attendance strategy that begins with prevention and early intervention.
2. Examine attendance and absenteeism data to assess which groups of students have higher or lower levels of absence.
3. Identify assets, barriers, and strategies that affect student attendance.
4. Mobilize everyone in the school community to address attendance.
5. Determine whether you are making a difference.

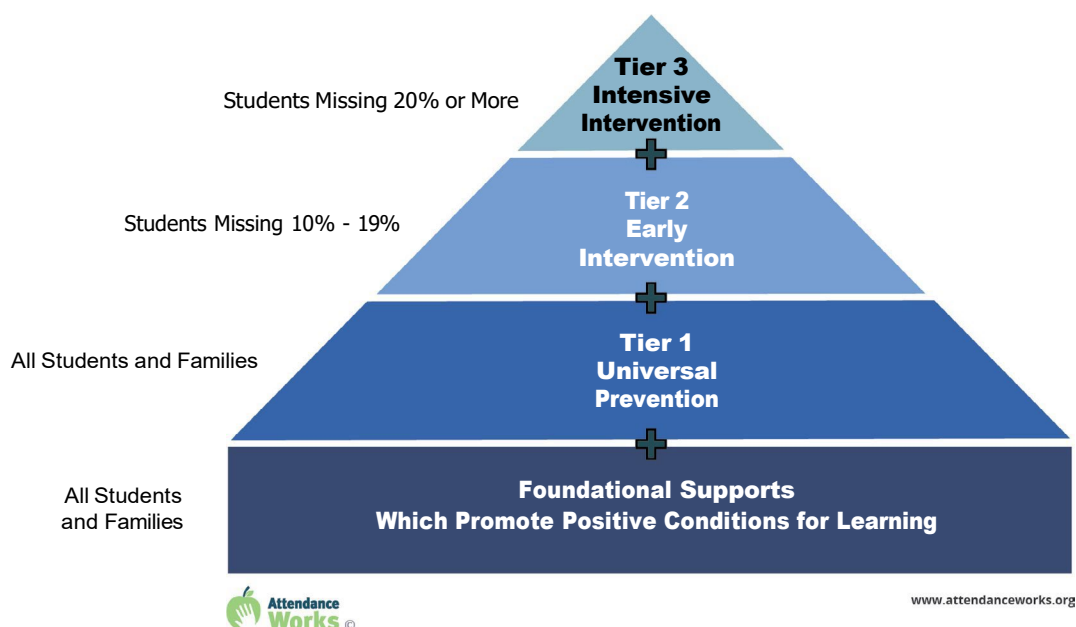
Each of the school team functions is further described below with a set of implementation questions that districts can use to guide each school's efforts.

Considerations for Establishing or Aligning Attendance in School Teams

- What teams already exist in the school? Is there overlapping membership?
- Can the work of facilitating a schoolwide attendance strategy be incorporated into the responsibilities of an existing team (e.g., MTSS or PBIS)?
- Can the attendance strategy functions be divided up with strong coordination across different teams?
- Does the school team reflect the school community population?

1) Organize a Multitiered Attendance Strategy That Begins With Prevention and Early Intervention

The idea behind a multitiered approach is that the majority of students and families will respond to schoolwide strategies for improving attendance and engagement (known as Tier 1 supports) but that these strategies won't be sufficient for all students. Some students require more personalized support (Tier 2) or intensive measures (Tier 3).



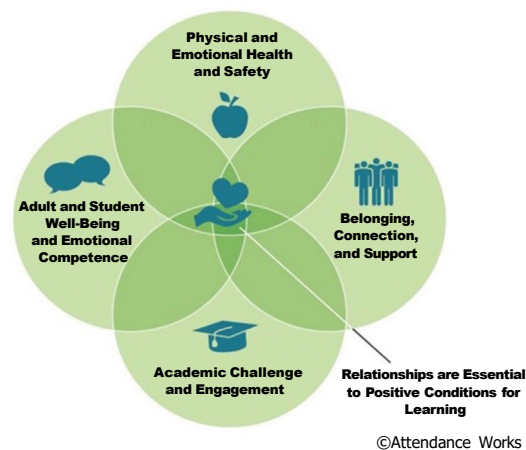
Areas for School Team Inquiry for Organizing a Multitiered Strategy

- Is our regular team agenda aligned to a multitiered system of support?
- Do we proactively promote an engaging school climate?
- Have we defined when Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports should be offered?
- Do we have a protocol for early personalized outreach to families?
- Do we align our attendance efforts with PBIS and MTSS?

Foundational Supports

Engagement and positive relationships are foundational supports and need to be the primary focus of a systemic attendance improvement strategy. Foundational strategies are practices that promote the four positive conditions for learning. When positive conditions are in place, students are more likely to attend and be engaged. At the center of the foundational strategies are positive connections and relationships.

The goal is to integrate attendance, engagement, and belonging into existing practice.



- Harvard's [Relationship Mapping Strategy](#) offers an intentional process to make 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 the 2x10 Strategy where educators spend 2 minutes every day for 10 consecutive school days with a student in need of extra support.

Tier 1 Universal Prevention

Strategies are aimed at encouraging better attendance for all students and at preventing absenteeism before it affects achievement. Strategy examples:

- connection and relationship to a caring adult in the school
- personalized outreach and communication to families and students; see this [guidance for texting](#) or look at Proving Ground's [how-to guide for personalized postcards](#)
- [recognition of good and improved attendance](#), not perfect attendance
- messaging about the benefits of attendance for the whole child; Attendance Works has developed the [Showing Up Matters for R.E.A.L. Toolkit](#), which is filled with free, ready-to-use messaging resources for families and students.

Tier 2 Early Intervention

Personalized supports for students who missed between 10 percent and 20 percent of the past school year as well as those who miss 10 percent to 20 percent of the current school year. Strategy examples include the following:

- **Mentoring:** Mentoring is a [proven strategy](#) for reducing absenteeism. This free tool provides safe and monitored mentoring platforms for mentors and mentees to continue their relationships when they need to be home for health reasons. [Peer Group Connections](#) is a peer mentoring strategy that is effective for secondary students.
- **Expanded learning programs:** Schools can help students by making sure they enroll and participate in expanded learning programs offered after school during the traditional school year or during the summer months. Research^{1, 2, 3} shows that these programs significantly improve attendance during the school day, especially for English learners.
- **Mental health:** Anticipate the need for greater levels of mental health supports.
- **Student success plans:** Schools should create opportunities to partner with students and families to craft proactive [success plans](#) as soon as absences (for any reason) start to add up. Success or early intervention plans are different from the absence intervention plans required under South Carolina's attendance laws. These plans outline what engages the student in learning; address barriers to getting to school or class; and build on family strengths, supports, and aspirations for their student. Ensuring that students and families have a voice in crafting plans is critical to tailoring solutions to their realities and nurturing ownership.

Tier 3 Intensive Intervention

Tier 3 supports may be needed to improve outcomes for students who are or were severely chronically absent (missing 20 percent or more of school) in the prior school year and those who did not show up during the first few weeks of school.

Strategy examples include the following:

- **Interagency case management:** Students involved in the child welfare or justice system can attain their educational goals with the support of a team of champions working across schools, families, and public agencies.
- **Housing stability supports:** Housing insecurity is a reality for many living in South Carolina. Students experiencing hardship who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence may need help with transportation or wraparound services to attend school. Whether they have lost their primary nighttime residence or are living in a motel, shelter, or campsite; or are doubled up with another family, these students are eligible for support as students experiencing homelessness.

District McKinney-Vento liaisons are responsible for coordinating these supports. Schools and districts ensure that students experiencing homelessness meaningfully participate in school by removing any barriers to regular attendance. Schools and districts can fund these supports by using Title I funding, Title I set-aside, or McKinney-Vento subgrants to provide support for students experiencing homelessness.

- **Court as the last resort:** Juvenile courts are required to consider using intervention strategies to divert youth from the court system before adjudication. The court shall consider the complaint only as a matter of last resort.

Court referral or intervention seldom results in behavior change, and court involvement does little to solve the impediments to regularly attending school, especially those involving basic needs and mental health issues. Courts should offer a menu of intervention strategies including diversion interventions, mentoring programs, truancy mediation, and court-school liaisons.

2) Examine Attendance and Absenteeism Data to Assess Which Groups of Students Have Higher Levels of Absence

School team meetings should be data-driven and use real-time data such as:

- attendance data
- chronic absence data disaggregated by grade, student subgroups, and attendance bands (satisfactory, at-risk, moderate, and severe chronic absence)
- suspension and other behavior data
- truancy data
- ADA

The principal or another administrator should serve as the data lead for the team, review data in advance of team meetings, and present an analysis of patterns and trends by tiers, grades, and student groups.

Teams should use data to identify priority groups of at-risk and chronically absent students (e.g., first-time kindergarteners, students in transition grades, students who were chronically absent the previous year, students with disabilities, and English learners) and use qualitative data from their annual school climate survey.

Areas for School Team Inquiry on Data

- Does our team look at attendance data on a biweekly basis?
- Is our data broken down by grade, race or ethnicity, home language, disability, and zip code (or neighborhood)?
- Does our team monitor attendance and chronic absence data, trends, and patterns every week?
- Does our team use chronic absence data to identify students in need of early intervention supports?

3) Identify Assets, Barriers, and Strategies That Affect Attendance

A key role of the school team is to identify attendance barriers and reasons for absence. The key to successful strategies lies in how well the interventions address the root causes of absences, remove the attendance barriers, and motivate a family or student to change behaviors.

School teams should ensure a **positive personal outreach to students and families that begins as soon as a student misses two days of school to**

- partner with each family to determine why a student is absent
- explain how absences can result in lost learning time
- understand what motivates the student to learn and attend
- empower families to help their children be successful
- identify systems issues (e.g., transportation, homelessness)

Areas for School Team Inquiry on Assets, Barriers, and Strategies

- Does our team use qualitative information from students and families to understand both positive and negative factors affecting attendance?
- Does our team examine whether school policies, procedures, or practices contribute to poor attendance?
- Does our team align interventions to the reasons for absence?
- Does our team communicate attendance patterns and trends and systemic barriers to the district team?

4) Mobilize Everyone in the School Community to Address Attendance

Within the school building, everyone, including families and teachers, has a role to play in improving attendance. Addressing attendance is a team approach.

In the community, it means bringing in external partners, with district support as needed, to provide services to remove barriers and more caring adults to build connections with students and families.

Areas for School Team Inquiry

- Does our school have professional development that equips school staff and partners to address attendance?
- Do building leaders routinely communicate attendance expectations to staff and families?
- Does our school have a yearly school attendance plan that galvanizes the school community and partners?
- Do our building leaders use existing meetings to promote attendance (parent-teacher conferences or staff meetings for example)?

5) Determine whether you are making a difference

School teams should periodically assess whether their interventions are making a difference, taking stock of their efforts and whether they are helping students improve their attendance and become more engaged in school.

Sample Areas for School Team Inquiry

- Do we track interventions and identify implementation challenges?
- Do we monitor the efficacy of interventions? How frequently?
- Do we adopt, adapt, or abandon interventions based on evidence of their impact?

Section VII: Partnering With Families and Students All School Year

Engagement and attendance go hand in hand. Attendance improves when, starting in preschool and continuing throughout high school, families (parents, caregivers, and children) feel a sense of belonging and connection to the school and directly experience the benefits of showing up every day.

When families and students are part of the process of tracking attendance and coming up with solutions, everyone benefits. Listen to family experiences to understand the barriers to attendance at home and in their communities and schools as well as what motivates showing up to class. Families are important advocates for addressing the needs of an individual student, a group of students, or the whole school.

Family engagement needs to be emphasized and supported all year round. Districts and schools can work together to ensure that these practices are in place .

Build Relationships Through Positive Communication

Engage in positive communication with the family before you need to contact them about a problem. The beginning of the school year is a great time to reach out to the family about their child.

- **Send periodic messages to families** about what the class is doing and what their child has done well or activities the child enjoys. The purpose is to build a reciprocal relationship with the family. Focus on the student's achievements and interests .
- **Use technology and texting to promote real-time, positive personalized communications with families** . Use parent-teacher communication apps to ensure timely and clear messaging about what a child is learning, opportunities for engagement, what the student is doing well, and information about a child's attendance, ideally in family home languages.
 - Apps typically allow for teachers and parents/caregivers to communicate via text without revealing personalized phone numbers.

Positive Communication About Attendance

Start with a positive contact, and avoid blame when communicating about absences. Here's a [graphic](#) on tailoring conversations based on the students attendance .

- **Initial absences for students**: Start with a positive (not blaming) note or call, communicating that the school or teacher noticed the absence and missed the child's presence . Mention a positive statement about the child and something staff have noticed the student enjoys. Here is a script for a call and an [example of a note](#) .
- **If absences are adding up**: Express concern for what's happening and how school can help support the family. Tailor our sample chronic absence letter [found here](#) .

- **If a student is moderately chronically absent (Tier II).** Send a letter to Inform the parent(s) or caregiver of the number of days absent and ask them if it's correct. As a school team reviewing attendance, determine who has the best connection with the family. Consider having that staff follow up with the family before or after the letter is sent.
- **If a student is out for an extended period due to health:** Reach out to the family to provide activity ideas and books so the child can remain engaged in learning while recuperating. Districts can create standard communications that school staff can use and tailor as needed. Consider using our [health handouts](#).
- **Communicate with families before school vacations.** Download one of the [sample letters](#) from Attendance Works and personalize it for your school or districts.

Student and Family Voice Matters

Student and family perspectives are key to developing solutions. Students and families can offer important knowledge and information (i.e., assets, insights into culture, and an understanding of attendance barriers) that key decision-makers might not otherwise know. Addressing the challenges that students and families experience requires considering their specific realities. Recognizing when many students and families experience similar challenges allows for the creation of scalable solutions. Tapping into student and family voices helps ensure that the engagement strategies are effective and recognize students' and families' cultural norms.

Here are some qualitative tools that schools and districts can use. Check the [Attendance Works](#) website for more information on tools you can use.

- **Hold focus groups with students and/or families.** It's an opportunity to learn from students and/or families why absences occur in the school and some solutions to address barriers.
- **Disseminate surveys.** Another example of asking families for their perspective on what they like about the school, challenges, and ideas to improve attendance.
- **Host an attendance café for parents and caregivers.** Adults discuss attendance in welcoming small group settings guided by questions and a facilitator. It's an effective way to engage and affirm families as partners to address absenteeism in the community.

Create opportunities for families to support the district and school's approach to improving attendance.

There are multiple resources that can be used at district- or school-level community events.

- **Integrate attendance into parent-teacher conferences.** Including attendance as a topic at parent-teacher conferences is a useful opportunity to discuss how regular attendance supports student achievement and well-being, acknowledge parents' efforts, and explore what might be hindering attendance. Here are some [tips from Attendance Works for leveraging parent-teacher conferences](#).
- **Highlight attendance briefly during a larger community event.** Give families a choice of messages they think schools should use to communicate about the importance of attendance. They can put a star sticker on the ones they like.
 - Consider using videos or short interactive activities that can be introduced during the event.

Equip all staff, especially teachers, paraprofessionals, and front-office workers, to engage families and promote attendance.

Use professional development to ensure that staff are aware of and comfortable with tools and resources available for partnering with families to improve engagement and attendance. Help everyone understand that staff can help families feel connected to the school, build awareness of why establishing a routine of daily attendance matters for children's learning and well-being, and offer resources to overcome barriers. Introduce these concepts in school-based as well as districtwide professional development.

State Resources

South Carolina Laws and Regulations

[SBE Regulation 43-274:Student Attendance \(Absences and Excuses\) \(sc.gov\)](#)

[Code of Laws - Title 59 - Chapter 65 - Attendance of Pupils \(scstatehouse.gov\)](#)

South Carolina Resources

[Chronic Absenteeism](#)

[Fostering Care Guidance](#)

[South Carolina Family Engagement K–12 Framework](#)

[SCMTSS Framework and Guidelines](#)

[Truancy Intervention Guide: Training and Resource Manual for Responding to Truancy in South Carolina – School of Law](#)

[University of South Carolina](#)

[Truancy School Attendance Intervention Plan.pdf](#)

[Carolina Family Engagement Center](#)

South Carolina Attendance Posters/Brochures

[Attendance Brochure](#)

[Attendance Every Day Poster](#)

South Carolina Statewide, District, and School Data

[Truancy, Suspension, and Expulsion Data](#)

[Discipline-Related Reports](#)

[Dropout Data](#)

[South Carolina McKinney-Vento Data](#)

District Team Resources

[District Self-Assessment Tool](#)

[Postcard Writing Campaign Guide](#)

[Text Writing Campaigns](#)

School Team Resources

[Team Self-Assessment](#)

[Student Family Attendance Success Plans](#)

[Relationship Mapping](#)

Other Resources

Systemic Approach and Tiered Interventions

[Three Tiers of Absence Interventions](#)

[Examples of Tiered Interventions](#)

[Positive Conditions for Learning Using Chronic Absenteeism Data](#)

[Systemic Approach to Addressing Chronic Absenteeism](#)

End Notes

1. California Department of Education, "Expanded Learning in CA: Fostering Success Among High-Need Students – 2017 Executive Brief," <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ex/documents/fostersuccessrpt.pdf>
2. K. Lynch, L. An, Z. Mancenido, "The Impact of Summer Learning Programs on Low-Income Children's Mathematics Achievement: A Meta-Analysis," (EdWorkingPaper: 21-379). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/da7r-4z83>
3. Concentric Research & Evaluation, "Examining the Long-Term Effects of the Horizons National Student Enrichment Program on Student Academic Outcomes," (2018), <https://www.horizonsnational.org/program/results/research/>



Attendance Works (www.attendanceworks.org) is a national nonprofit initiative that promotes equal opportunities to learn and advances student success by inspiring and catalyzing policies and practices that prevent and reduce chronic absence. Its website offers a wide array of free materials, tools, research and success stories to help schools, districts and communities work together to reduce chronic absence.

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