# WHAT WORKS IN OUR COMMUNITY?

A toolkit for identifying promising local practice

**Attendance Works**

## INTRODUCTION

Analyzing your attendance data can help you not only determine your chronic absence levels and see patterns across students and schools, but also can enable you to identify schools that are positive outliers. What is happening in these schools that serve similar populations of low-income students, but are achieving better-than-average results? By investigating what works to help schools and educators improve student attendance, you can identify effective practices that others could replicate as well as innovative site leaders who can help to inspire others to make needed reforms. These site leaders could also offer insights into the actions the district might take to encourage more schools to adopt effective attendance practice. Finally, positive outliers serving students with similar demographics can demonstrate to other local schools that they too can improve outcomes for their own students.

## THIS TOOLKIT INCLUDES

- Tips for Identifying positive outliers
- Best practices for site visits
- Sample questions for site visits

# IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL POSITIVE OUTLIERS

## 1. Use your chronic absence data to identify positive outliers

Once you have calculated your chronic absence levels for all the schools in your district, compare them to see which schools stand out for having low levels of absenteeism. If you have used the DATT (District Attendance Tracking Tool) developed by Attendance Works to analyze your attendance data, you can use this template to easily rank order your schools according to their chronic absence levels.

Pay particular attention to those schools that have low chronic absence levels despite school characteristics and student demographic factors that are associated with high levels of absenteeism, such as having large populations of students in poverty. To help you analyze which positive outliers might be a result of effective attendance practices, rather than characteristics not under a school's control, consider these basic questions:

- Which schools have the lowest chronic absence rates?
- How do these schools' chronic absence rates compare to other schools with similar proportions of students living in poverty?
- What do the student populations of these schools look like?
    - What is the proportion of students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch?
    - What are the racial breakdowns of these schools?
- Are these schools large or small? What neighborhoods are they located in?

Also consider how the rates of chronic absence at these schools compare from year to year. Have they remained consistent? Have they made significant improvements?

## 2. Confirm the accuracy of the chronic absence levels at your positive outlier schools

Looking at previous years' data can give an indication of whether a significant decrease in the percent of chronically absent students for any given school is an anomaly, or even a reflection of inaccurate data. If you are concerned about the accuracy of the data, call the principal and/or attendance clerk to see if the data surprises them. Ask them about how the data are collected and what reasons there might be for significant changes in attendance patterns. Keep in mind that changes or vacancies in the attendance clerk position or recent shifts to direct submission of attendance data by teachers are red flags for problematic data. You may also want to reach out to third-party partners that work with the school, such as central office staff or staff at a community partner organization, who may have knowledge and objective insights into how the school works.

# CONDUCTING SITE VISITS

Once you have identified schools that you feel are worth investigating, making site visits to the schools are often an effective way to better understand site-level attendance practices and what works. Here are some questions you likely want to consider before going on a site visit:

**1. What do you want to learn from this site visit?** Are you looking for promising practices to share district-wide? Are you seeking to understand what works and what does not work? Are you seeking to understand what motivated the school community to become focused on the issue of attendance? Is the aim to identify how the district office can better support sites through providing additional resources, professional development or data? Clarity of purpose will help you ask the right questions and gather the right data.

**2. What schools will you visit?** How many sites should you visit? Which ones will help you answer your questions? If your aim is documenting effective practice, you might want to pick schools at each level (elementary, middle and high school) that are positive outliers.

**3. What preparation might be helpful for the site visit?** Talk to the principal to determine who the key stakeholders are and when your team can meet them. Does s/he have a functioning Attendance Team? Are there teacher leaders or a classified employee who plays an important role in curbing chronic absence in this school? Are there better times to meet with parents or students?

It is important to think about your relationship with the school staff and the expectations they may have about the intent of the visit and its follow-up and consequences. Be clear about the purpose of the visit. You are not visiting to evaluate or judge. This prepara-tory conversation with the principal can be a great opportunity to start out on the same page and feel out any concerns s/he may have and willingness to engage in mentoring or training in the future. It is also a great chance to learn about strengths and promising practices your team can explore while at the site.

**4. Who should go?** The site visit is a collaborative learning opportunity for the leaders in your district. It is also an opportunity to build capacity and buy-in, so consider including people such as key district leaders, funders, or a principal who is widely respected by her colleagues. Keep in mind, however, that if your goal is to leverage the site visit to build buy in with leaders, you may want to make a preliminary visit to make sure that the larger group will come away with the right insights and takeaways when they go.
Avoid bringing more people on the visit than the principal at the site feels comfortable hosting. There should be a team leader who sets the schedule and assigns roles.  If you plan on creating a formal write-up about the school, you probably want to include some-one who is a strong writer.

**5. Determine if you want a written product.**  Determine if you want to produce a written product, such as a case study or a PowerPoint summary, and who the audience will be for the product prior to the site visit. If you plan to disseminate a written product to the public, you may want to let those at the site know this ahead of time. For written products, ensure you have a strong writer involved in the process.  Clarify how others will contribute, particularly if they are expected to submit written notes, and determine how you will ensure the school administration has a chance to review a draft before publication. Get a sense of who will be important to interview and have questions in mind in advance so that you can be sure to cover them while you are there.

**6. What materials do you need?** At a minimum, each visitor should have the chronic absence data for the school, interview protocols, schedule, and a short blurb explaining why the team is visiting. It is also helpful to have a brief profile and a map of the school. You may also want to develop a simple template for notes. This is particularly helpful if you want one person to synthesize and write up the site visit.

**7. What questions should you ask?** The following links provide sample interview protocols that you can use as a foundation for your interviews. Think about how you may want to modify them based on your learning goals from the site visit.

- Long Principal Interview
- Short Principal Interview
- Interviews with Students and Parents
- CBO or School Staff Interview
- All Interviews

Embedded within the Principal Interview are the key elements of our school self-assessment. When we conduct site visits, we have generally found that a school's effective practices mirror the concepts underlying our school self-assessment. Sharing this self-assessment with those participating in the site visit may help orient them to what constitutes best practice.

**8. When will the group debrief the site visit?** Ideally, you can debrief with one another within a few days of the visit while everything is still fresh in your mind. At the debriefing, discuss what you learned and decide on any next steps.

**9. Determine how to share what you observed and learned back to the schools.** Sharing what you learned with the schools can be an important opportunity for obtaining additional information as well as validating your observations. It also can provide schools with a chance to learn and grow from the experience.

**10. Create opportunities for school site leaders to share information with other schools about what works.** Trainings and success stories can be particularly effective when they come from peers. Ask the school leaders and attendance teams at the sites you visited if they would like to help lead trainings and/or share information with their counterparts from other schools and how they would like to do so.

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