



The Power of Positive Connections

**Reducing Chronic Absence through PEOPLE:
Priority Early Outreach for Positive Linkages
and Engagement**

About the PEOPLE Approach

The growing body of research into school attendance makes two things clear: Students who miss too much school, in excused or unexcused absences, suffer academically. And, schools can predict who these students will be early in the school year. Several studies show that chronic absence—missing 10 percent of school days—in a previous school year is a signal that a student will be chronically absent again the following year.ⁱ Research now suggests that poor attendance in the first month of class can also predict chronic absence for the school year.ⁱⁱ

Given these early warning signs, Attendance Works recommends that schools and community partners work to prevent chronic absence by putting in place a priority early outreach for positive linkages and engagement (PEOPLE) strategy.

Common sense and research suggest that students are more likely to attend school when they feel connected to caring adults or fellow students who notice whether they show up and can help them overcome challenges to attendance.ⁱⁱⁱ A new study suggests that a lack of engagement with school is associated with a greater likelihood of chronic absence.^{iv}

The PEOPLE strategy identifies the students and families most at risk and helps them build positive relationships that promote regular attendance.

Priority: Focuses on at-risk students in grades, schools and neighborhoods with high levels of chronic absence

Early: Begins with the start of school

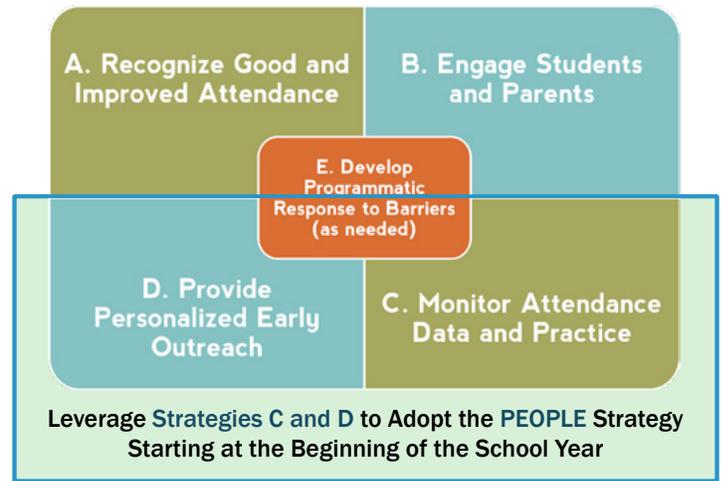
Outreach: Connects with students and their families

Positive: Promotes preventive, supportive approaches rather than punitive responses

Linkages: Taps the full community for support

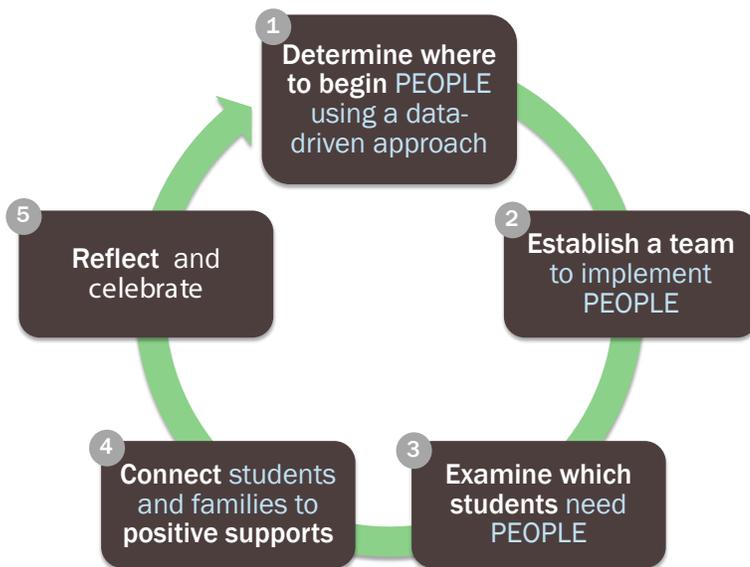
Engagement: Motivates showing up to class and offers students and families a role in improving attendance

Carried out in conjunction with a broader approach to nurturing a school-wide culture of attendance, the PEOPLE strategy targets resources to students who need the most encouragement, while ensuring those students and their families do not feel stigmatized because of the extra support. This extra support typically involves helping students and their families build strong relationships with school staff and other students; connect to engaging learning activities; and overcome any barriers to attendance.



When implemented early in the school year, this approach can help students, supported by their families, start the year with good attendance, rather than find themselves falling behind because of too many absences.

This toolkit outlines the following key steps for implementing Priority Early Outreach for Positive Linkages and Engagement (PEOPLE):



1. Determine where to focus positive priority early outreach
2. Establish teams to support the PEOPLE strategy
3. Examine which students most need the PEOPLE approach
4. Connect students and families to positive support
5. Reflect and celebrate

The Appendix and our [online resources page](#) offer specific tips for helping district, school and community leaders advance this approach.

Step-by-Step Process

Step One

Determine Where to Focus Priority Early Outreach for Positive Linkages and Engagement (PEOPLE)

School districts and communities should review school-level data to identify which schools, grades and neighborhoods might most benefit from a concerted effort to improve attendance.

We suggest the following criteria:

- Significant number of low-income students
- Elevated chronic absence rates especially in transitional grades (e.g., K/1, 6th, 9th grades)
- School leadership committed to making attendance a priority, adopting recommended practices and working with a priority outreach list
- Community partners—nonprofit, public or civic organizations focused on health, youth development, parent engagement, social services, volunteer mobilization, community building, economic development, etc.—that can help support the work through parent engagement and offer needed supports to students and families

Driving with Data

Data analysis is key to figuring out which schools, populations and students most need support. The first step is to use data to determine how many students have poor attendance. Attendance Works recommends looking at chronic absence—defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year for any reason (excused or unexcused)—by school, grade, student populations and neighborhood. Attendance Works offers these [free data tools](#) to help with calculating chronic absence.

Step Two

Establish a Team to Support the PEOPLE Strategy

Once it is clear which schools will participate in this effort, make sure there is a team in place to support the work. The team should include a site administrator, other key school staff and community partners— nonprofit, public or civic organizations focused on health, youth development, parent engagement, social services, volunteer mobilization, community building or economic development. The site administrator will need to determine whether to use an existing work group or form a new team to jump-start this effort.

Members of the team should be provided with information and support to ensure they understand how to review attendance data and advance best practices. The team should also ensure that this work is connected to and integrated with existing reform efforts, such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) or Response to Intervention (RTI).



Each member should be equipped to take a strength-based approach to partnering with students and families to improve attendance. If poor attendance is interpreted simply as an indication that families do not care about their children's education, then staff are likely to respond in ways that alienate students and parents, rather than build a positive relationship of trust that can motivate students to attend school every day.

Step Three

Examine Which Students Most Need the PEOPLE Approach

The best predictor of chronic absence is a history of poor attendance. If possible, the district should generate for each participating school a list of the students who were chronically absent in the past year. The list should be broken down by grade and subpopulation, identifying students who have had unusually high levels of chronic absence.

If prior-year data is not available, districts and schools can use attendance records from the first weeks of school to identify who is at risk, including new students and kindergartners for whom the district does not have past information. Research indicates that if a student misses two or more days during the first month of school, the pattern of absence can persist, and many of those students will end the school year chronically absent.^v

Identifying Who Needs Extra Support

Chronic absence (missed 10% or more of school) in the prior year, assuming data is available.

And/or during the beginning of the school year, student has:



Once students are identified, schools can develop site-specific strategies for engaging in early outreach. The data should reveal whether particular populations of students—for example, incoming kindergartners or ninth graders, students connected to the child welfare system, or students from a particular neighborhood—are at high risk. That information provides essential insights into how to tailor the approach. If a particular ethnic or linguistic group is identified, make sure that staff members are versed in the particular cultures, languages and common attendance barriers faced by that subpopulation.

Once a school community has identified students at high risk for chronic absence, it should look more closely to determine if any students have a history of severe chronic absence—missing 2 months or more of the prior school year—and why. Such severe absenteeism suggests a family or community challenge that requires additional layers of support for such issues as physical, mental or dental health problems; homelessness; domestic abuse or community violence. The key to Priority Early Outreach for Positive Linkages and Engagement (PEOPLE) is leveraging the opportunity to help students on the cusp of chronic absence—missing 10 to 15 percent of school—who are likely to respond to lower cost, less intensive interventions, while also recognizing the need to do more for those with more serious needs.

Step Four

Connect Students and Families to Positive Supports

Each school and its community partners should determine how they can use available resources to provide as rich an array of supports as possible that would motivate students and their families to attend every day. The emphasis on “positive” reflects findings that preventive, supportive approaches have proven more successful and cost-effective than punitive strategies.

The support could take the form of:

- **Personalized welcome-to-school** calls or home visits from teachers to students and families with a history of chronic absence or within a subpopulation that has high absenteeism rates.
- **Attendance buddies** for students with a history of chronic absence. These buddies—school staff, older students or community volunteers—can check in with students daily, call home for each absence and refer students and families to needed resources.
- **Out-of-school-time activities** targeted to students with a history of chronic absence. Research shows that engaging programs before and after school can improve school-day attendance.
- **Community walk-to-school programs or buddies** for students living in neighborhoods with high concentrations of chronic absence, high levels of community violence, family members who have difficulty managing the walk or dangerous traffic patterns.
- **Health support inside or outside of school** for students and families with medical, dental or mental health challenges.
- **Connection to social services and case management** for students who missed more than 20 percent (two months) of school in the prior year and show signs of continued challenges.

For additional resources

See our [online resources pages](http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools-people/) (<http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools-people/>) **for tools and materials to help implement these positive approaches.**

Success Mentors



To improve attendance, New York City schools assigned success mentors to chronically absent students in 100 schools. Students with mentors attended school an average of nine more days than similar students at other schools. This effort serves as the prototype for what we are calling attendance buddies. [Read more](#)

Step Five

Reflect and Celebrate

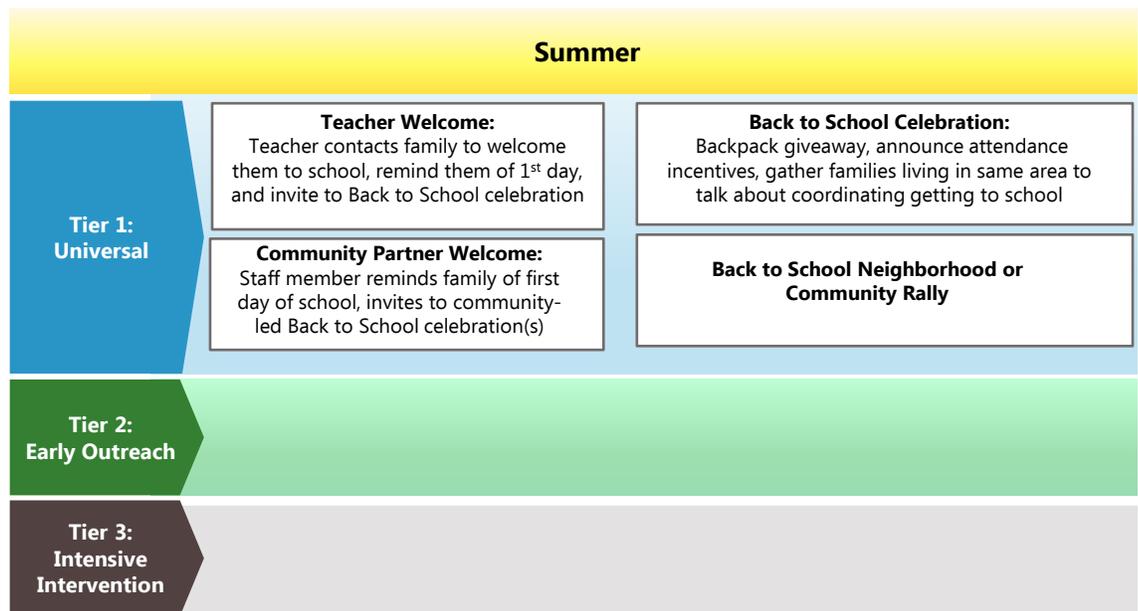
Schools and communities should take time to periodically examine how well they are carrying out this approach. Attendance teams can use their data as well as insights from teachers, students, families and partners to identify what seems to be working well, what is not so effective and what could be done to improve. Ideally such assessments would occur on a quarterly basis and insights would be used to inform the overall development of a school's plans for improving outcomes for its students.

Appendix

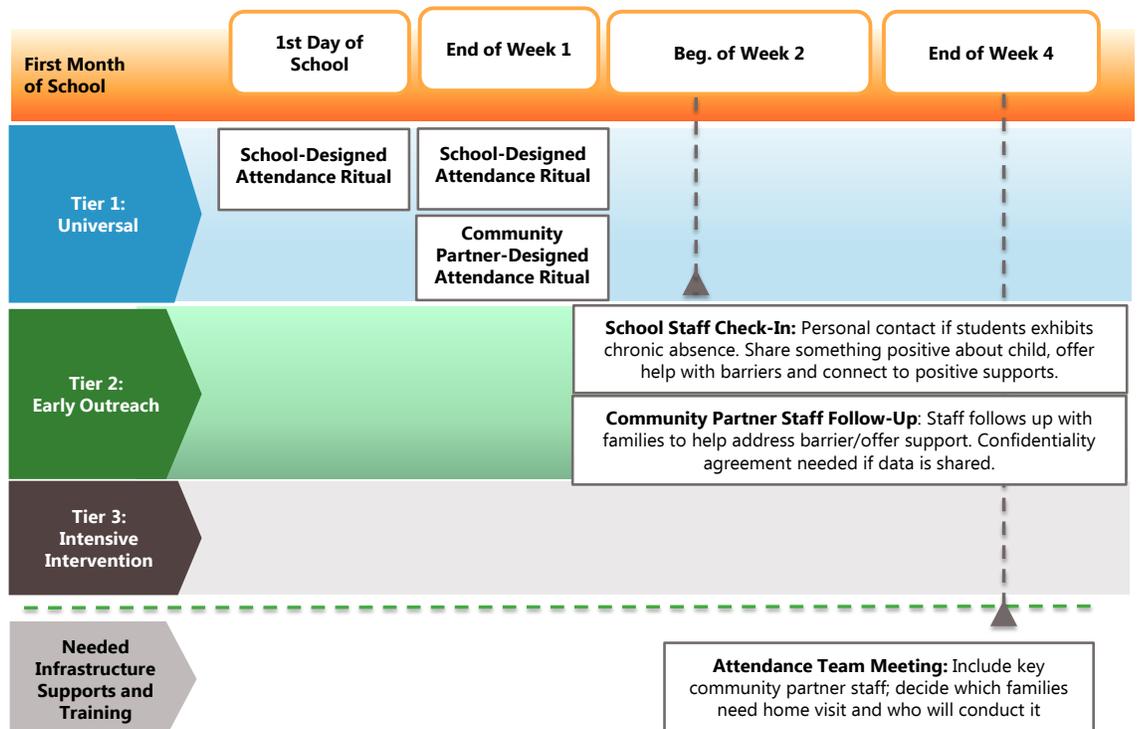
Playing a Leadership Role in Priority Early Outreach for Positive Linkages and Engagement (PEOPLE)

The PEOPLE strategy ideally includes a combination of supports provide by the school as well as by the community. These graphics reveal how and when both schools and community partners can take action in the first few months of school.

Tier 1
Details



Timing
Details



Implementation of this approach involves leadership from the district, the school site and the surrounding community.

Listed below are tips and tools for helping these leaders advance this approach.

District Leader:

1. **Crunch your chronic absence data:** Use your attendance data to look at how many students miss 10 percent of the school year in excused and unexcused absences. Then identify which students, subpopulations and schools are most at risk for chronic absence. Share this data with schools. Read this handout on [How to Conduct a Successful Data Analysis](#) and use Attendance Works' [free data tools](#) to get started.
2. **Cultivate district support:** Use your insights and knowledge to cultivate buy-in from key district leaders, whose support is critical to implementation. Use data as needed to help them see that chronic absence is a problem that needs to be addressed.
3. **Identify a priority set of schools:** Identify a priority set of schools to target to engage in this approach. Key factors to include are:
 - a. High levels of chronic absence.
 - b. Site leadership who are willing and able to take on this work.
 - c. Community partners who can offer additional supports.

Prioritize schools that have a higher than district average rate of chronic absence in the early grades or in transition years such as 6th and 9th grades.

4. **Engage and support site leaders in adopting this approach:**
 - a. Determine the best way to reach out to the principals—a conference call, individual calls, or a meeting that may already be happening—to secure their involvement.
 - b. Disseminate [this toolkit and a list](#) of priority students.
 - c. Schedule group or individual check-ins to discuss how each school site will develop and implement a plan for engaging in PEOPLE. Identify opportunities for principals to share their strategies and challenges with each other.
 - d. Track progress

Principal/School Site Leader:

1. **Make attendance a school-wide priority:** Convey the importance of attendance to all your students and families. Consider drawing upon these strategies appearing in the Attendance Works [Bringing Attendance Home](#) and [Count Us In!](#) toolkits.
2. **Determine your outreach strategy for at-risk students:** Decide whether you will use letters, robocalls, teacher calls or home visits to connect with students and families at risk for chronic absence. Use these [key messages](#), [parent handouts](#), and template letters and robocalls [found here](#). Review [tips for outreach before school starts](#).
3. **Establish your attendance team:** Identify at least 1 or 2 key staff members who can help you organize and develop your school's approach to positive priority outreach. See these [tips for attendance teams](#). Draw from an existing school team working on attendance if one already exists. As part of this approach, consider taking the following steps:
 - a. Develop a school-specific list of supports that could be available to your students and their families. Build off the ideas offered in this toolkit.
 - b. Identify who should be part of a small team of adults who are doing the outreach to these students. Keep in mind that being discreet is important so as not to stigmatize the students who are chronically absent. Train the team on the PEOPLE strategy, emphasize that the goal is positive and supportive outreach. Use this [PowerPoint](#) on our tools page for training.
 - c. Assign groups of students to attendance buddies—staff members, and in some cases, community partners who have been recruited to help. Those involved should be caring, empathetic and nonjudgmental, and should know what resources are available for families struggling with barriers to attendance. See this sample recruitment letter, outline of responsibilities and worksheet for determining which students to assign to attendance buddies on our [tools page](#).
 - d. Meet weekly or bi-weekly with the team reaching out to the targeted group of students to check on progress and overall needs of the families.
4. **Secure current contact information for families:** Read [Tried and True Tips for Reaching Families](#).
5. **Examine systemic barriers:** Determine whether health, transportation or other issues are affecting a large number of your students, and brainstorm how to address these challenges. Read this [handout on attendance barriers](#) and review these [Healthy Readers resource guides](#).

6. **Identify community partners:** Recruit current or potential community organizations who can help build a culture of attendance or offer positive supports:
 - a. Talk to afterschool providers about making attendance a specific focus of their program. Share these [tools for afterschool providers](#).
 - b. Enlist volunteers who will serve as buddies. [See these resources and confidentiality forms](#) for buddies.
 - c. Work with public safety agencies and volunteers to develop safe routes to schools. See these materials on the [walking to school safely](#).
 - d. Identify local health providers that can both help educate families about why going to school matters and resolve health-related barriers to getting to school. See [attendance resources](#) for health providers.
7. **Celebrate success:** Find ways to acknowledge and notice students, families and staff who improve or maintain good attendance. See these [tips for providing incentives](#). Download these [posters, banners and badges](#).
8. **Seek support from the district:** Advocate for needed data from the district as well as access to community partners or public agencies that can help provide services. Collaborate with the district on harder-to-reach families including partnering to advocate for the appropriate supports.

Community Partners

1. **Contact your school district:** Find out if your school district is working to monitor and address chronic absence. If not, introduce leaders to the resources available at [Attendance Works](#) and this toolkit. If your district is working on this issue, ask them for an introduction to schools with whom your organization could partner.
2. **Engage school site leaders:** If you are already working at a school site, ask the principal about the approach to reducing chronic absence and implementing the priority early outreach for positive linkages and engagement strategy. Find out about the school's plan and how you might help.
3. **Leverage your own programs to nurture a culture of attendance:** Incorporate positive messaging about the importance of attendance into the activities you currently offer to students and families. Establish your organizational plan to encourage and support good attendance among the students you serve. Use these [key messages](#).
4. **Encourage your staff to notice daily attendance:** Encourage your staff to notice when students show up for program activities and ask what happened if they are absent. If they have a concern about absences, encourage them to reach out to the school to engage in joint support and problem-solving.

All stakeholders can benefit from getting involved in [Attendance Awareness Month](#) in September and using the [Count Us In!](#) toolkit to identify school-based strategies for promoting the importance of attendance.

View this toolkit online: <http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools/assessments/power-positive-connections-toolkit/>

See our tools page online: <http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools-people/>

Endnotes

¹ Sanchez, Monika., *Truancy and Chronic Absence in Redwood City*. John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities. Palo Alto, Calif. April 2012

² Olson, Linda S., *Why September Matters: Improving Student Attendance*, Baltimore Education Research Consortium, July 2014

³ Balfanz, Robert and Vaughan Byrnes, *Meeting the Challenge of Combating Chronic Absenteeism: Impact of the NYC Mayor's Interagency Task Force on Chronic Absenteeism and School Attendance and Its Implications for Other Cities*, Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University School of Education, November 2013

⁴ Gottfried, Michael A., Chronic Absenteeism and Its Effects on Students' Academic and Socioemotional Outcomes, *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, In Press

⁵ Olson



**Attendance
Works**

Attendance Works is a national organization dedicated to improving the policy, practice and research around attendance. Its website offers materials, research and success stories about reducing chronic absence. Attendance Works also offers technical assistance to school districts and communities.

www.attendanceworks.org

Attendance Works thanks the Annie E. Casey Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading for their support of our national work and The California Endowment for its continuing support of our intensive work in California.