



Step One: How to Organize an Effective School Team to Improve Attendance

School leaders and educators know from experience and common sense what research confirms: showing up for class matters. Students can't benefit from investments in high quality instruction and engaging curriculum unless they are present and engaged. While everyone can help ensure students show up to class every day, the leadership role of a principal is irreplaceable. Principals are uniquely positioned to ensure their school community adopts a comprehensive, tiered approach to improving attendance that fits with their overall goal of promoting academic achievement.

What is the purpose of such a team? Organize and facilitate a schoolwide attendance strategy and ensure it is an integral component of the school's plan to improve outcomes for all students.

The five functions of an attendance team:

1. **Organize a [multi-tiered attendance strategy](#) that begins with prevention and early intervention.** Reducing chronic absence requires a comprehensive, whole school strategy that begins with evidence-based prevention and early intervention.
2. **Examine attendance and absenteeism data to assess which groups of students have higher or lower levels of absence.** Use data to channel support to individual students as well as specific student groups.
3. **Identify assets, barriers and strategies that affect attendance.** Use both qualitative and quantitative data to gain insight into why students attend school as well as reasons for absences.
4. **Mobilize everyone in the school community to address attendance.** Help everyone in the school building and in partner organizations understand what they can do to encourage and support student attendance.
5. **Determine if you are making a difference.** Results count. Take a close look at whether students are better off as a result of your team's efforts.

The Attendance Strategy should be led by the school principal and the leadership team.

Teams working on improving student attendance could include the school's:

- Nurse
- Counselor
- Social worker
- Administrative support staff
- Special education staff
- Teachers
- Early education staff
- Expanded learning program staff

Members should be able to relay the perspectives of the student demographics.
Teams should incorporate input from families, students and the community.

What makes an effective team? Teams are successful when they involve the right people, have established group norms, defined roles and responsibilities, and regularly scheduled meetings with a standard meeting agenda. As the team leader, the principal should set the parameters for the team members, and either serve as the team facilitator or identify another skilled facilitator who will serve as the attendance team leader.

Group norms: Effective teams have established group norms which are negotiated and established as the first step in the team process. Norms define the habits and expectations for how the team will function, including how to share resources, processes for communication and accountability for follow through on team action items.

Roles and responsibilities: Effective teams ensure that each team member has a clearly defined role and has the capacity to perform their role. The core roles include: team leader, meeting facilitator, data coordinator and note taker. All team members should have access to a common system that monitors student outcomes, records interactions and interventions, and tracks progress on agreed upon tasks. This can be an existing districtwide database (e.g., PowerSchool) or a simple Google document created for the team that all team members can access during the meeting.

Ensure the Team Composition is Reflective of the School Community

Can an existing team address attendance? Principals and school staff should determine, based on local conditions, if a new entity needs to be established to monitor attendance data and practice, or if the work can be successfully incorporated into the responsibilities of an existing team. The principal should [conduct an assessment](#) of what teams already exist in their school (e.g., PBIS, school climate, RTI, Instructional Leadership Team, etc.), what is each team's purpose, how frequently they meet and who participates on each team. Based on this assessment, the principal will need to decide how the attendance functions will be implemented in their school.

Principals can consider dividing up the functions across multiple teams, adding all of the functions to an existing team or establishing a new team. For example, a school climate team can be responsible for Tier 1 strategies which focus on whole school strategies such as establishing a positive and engaging school climate and promoting good and improved attendance. An existing team that looks at academic data and/or behavioral or health issues can become responsible for Tier 2 and Tier 3 strategies which focus on the needs of students, since poor attendance may be a factor for low academic achievement and behavioral health issues. If the attendance strategy is implemented across different teams, it is important to have a system for communication between the teams.

How to establish a team to improve school attendance? Once the principal has determined how the team will be organized and the composition and the roles of the team members, they are ready to begin work. There are a series of steps that the principal should take to ensure team success.

Steps to organizing the school team with responsibility for attendance

1. Determine whether an existing team will take on the work of attendance improvement or if a new team will be established.
2. Hold the first meeting and ensure team members understand chronic absence and how it contributes to students falling behind academically, the distinction between chronic absence, average daily attendance and truancy.
3. Review and agree on the group norms and roles and responsibilities.
4. Review the standard meeting agenda and set a regular meeting schedule for the year, ideally weekly.
5. Review the school's chronic absence data, including year-to-date, year-over-year and subgroup rates.
6. Review and understand the district's regulations, guidance, protocols and practices around attendance.
7. Map the school's [tiered intervention strategy](#) for preventing and reducing chronic absence. Use the blank planning tool found on this webpage.
8. Assess the school's attendance practice using the school self-analysis tool found [on this page](#), [existing tiered strategies](#), and develop an attendance improvement plan.
9. Use the school data to set school wide and student subgroup goals for attendance improvement.

Attendance Works has developed a school team functioning rubric and practice [self-assessment](#). This tool can help principals assess how well the team is carrying out the five functions and determine how to strengthen the team.

Lay out the work of the team for the year. By planning ahead, the team can start out the school year strong and have strategies in place to address dips in attendance that happen over the course of a school year. Attendance Works has developed a School Year Attendance Activities planning tool. Download a [blank planning tool found on this webpage](#). Use the School Year Attendance Activities tool with sample yearly activities to help you get started.

Avoid common pitfalls

- × Establish a team that operates in isolation.
- × Fail to rally the whole school to support prevention and early intervention.
- × Focus only on students with the most absences.
- × Case management as the sole strategy.
- × Jumping to solutions without sufficient understanding of factors behind absences.
- × Team composition does not reflect the demographics, perspectives or cultural realities of the student population.

Sample agenda for the school team

The team should meet regularly (ideally weekly when chronic absence rates exceed 10%) to review the school's attendance data and coordinate schoolwide efforts to reduce chronic absence. The team agenda should ensure that there is time to review and monitor the team's attendance strategy so that the team does not become overly focused on individual students with the highest levels of absence.

The sample agenda below will help your team avoid common pitfalls that render teams less effective. Often teams spend most of their time discussing individual students with the highest level of absences (Tier 3) and/or students who are truant. This does not allow enough time for the team to discuss prevention or early intervention strategies for students who are at risk of becoming chronically absent. These early prevention strategies could reduce the number of students who become seriously chronically absent. Exclusively focusing on individual students also takes away from the team's time to examine trends and common attendance barriers for groups of students. Consider reserving Tier 3 students for a sub-committee of members who are directly responsible for their intervention plans if the team does not have longer than 60 minutes to meet.

Sample Agenda

	Aggregate data trends
	High-level picture of all students by tier and by attendance categories (satisfactory, at-risk, moderately chronically absent, severely chronically absent, extremely chronically absent). Is it getting better or worse?
	Unpacking Patterns
	Identify any patterns or trends across <u>groups</u> of students. What insights does the team have about common barriers or what might be contributing to positive outliers?
	Tiered System of Support
	Strategies for strengthening your tiered system of support. Take a year-long approach. Discuss possible solutions to the barriers students are experiencing and identify systemic interventions (e.g., walking school bus).
	Students Needing Tier 2 or Tier 3 Supports
	Review individual students as a team; determine who follows-up with individual or groups of student(s) and/or families. Outreach to students and families to determine barriers/causes for absence; assign interventions and offer appropriate resources.
	Meeting Decisions and Next Steps
	Summarize decisions and assign responsibility for next steps.