

Does Our School District Have a Systemic Approach to Reducing Chronic Absence?

A Tool for District Team Self-Assessment

The goal of this self-assessment is to help district leaders identify strengths and opportunities to develop a systemic approach to reducing chronic absence.¹ The tool is built around five key ingredients: **actionable data, positive engagement, capacity building, shared accountability, and strategic partnerships** all of which play an integral role in reducing chronic absence. While assessing your district across all five ingredients, think about the actions your district takes on its own, as well as whether you are making strategic use of community partnerships to advance your strategies.

A cross-functional district team should undertake the following steps at least annually:

- 1) **Complete the assessment:** Each person on the team should complete the assessment separately to reflect on strengths and opportunities for improvement. Consider adding district leaders from departments not represented on the team such as curriculum and instruction, special education, and operations who can offer valuable perspectives and suggestions.
- 2) **Debrief and set goals:** Convene the group to tally the individual results onto a single assessment and collectively review what the combined data reveal about strengths, gaps, and differences of opinion. Use the results to identify practices that should be continued as well as priority areas for improvement. See **Instructions for Using the Self-Assessment Tool** for additional guidance including how to use wall charts to tally collective results (<https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/self-assessment/>)
- 3) **Make a plan:** Once team members have agreed on priorities, assign responsibilities and establish timelines for completion. See the companion document **District and Community Planning Tool** (<https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/self-assessment/>)
- 4) **Communicate the results:** The cross-functional team should communicate the results of the assessment with district staff, and in some cases, schools and community partners, and engage them in executing the improvement plan.

Throughout this document, we refer to the importance of ensuring resources and strategies address the needs of **vulnerable student populations** and their families. Vulnerable populations are those which national and state data show are more likely to be chronically absent such as students with disabilities, living in poverty, from communities of color, facing high mobility or homelessness, involved in foster care or juvenile justice systems, and experiencing the stress of immigration. We particularly call out students with disabilities since they are found in every district and student population and experience disproportionately high levels of chronic absence.

¹ **Chronic absence** is missing 10% or more of school for any reason – including excused and unexcused absences as well as suspensions. It is different from truancy (unexcused absences) or average daily attendance (how many students typically show up each day) both of which can mask high levels of chronic absence.

ACTIONABLE DATA	Strength	OK for Now	Could Be Better	Urgent Gap	Don't Know	How Do You Know?
1. At least once a year, the district leaders and school board set districtwide goals for attendance and routinely report aggregate and disaggregated attendance and chronic absence data by school, grade level, and ESSA targets sub-groups to the public.						
2. At least every two weeks (ideally in real time), attendance data reports (with satisfactory, at risk, moderate and severe chronic absence) are produced and reviewed by a cross-departmental district level team that also ensures schools accurately enter daily attendance into the district student information system.						
3. At least every two weeks (ideally in real time), the district distributes attendance data to individual schools and their attendance teams broken down by grades, vulnerable student populations, zip codes and attendance categories (satisfactory, at-risk, moderate and severe chronic absence).						
4. The district ensures students and parents/caregivers have access to their own attendance data. It is easy to understand and alerts them when a student is academically at risk due to poor attendance.						

POSITIVE ENGAGEMENT	Strength	OK for Now	Could Be Better	Urgent Gap	Don't Know	How Do You Know?
<p>1. District leaders consistently and clearly promote awareness among district staff, parents, key stakeholders and the general public about chronic absence, why it matters, and how it can be addressed through a comprehensive approach via flyers, handbooks, back-to-school letters, and other communications.</p>						
<p>2. The district staff ensure that schools are equipped to engage students and families as partners in reducing chronic absence including identifying attendance barriers and putting in place meaningful solutions.</p>						
<p>3. The district has explicit attendance protocols for personalized, early and ongoing outreach to families when students are absent and routinely tracks and monitors implementation of the protocols.</p>						
<p>4. District leaders publicly recognize schools and community partners that demonstrate best practice strategies and achieve measurable reductions in chronic absences, including those that demonstrate how to improve attendance of different vulnerable student populations.</p>						

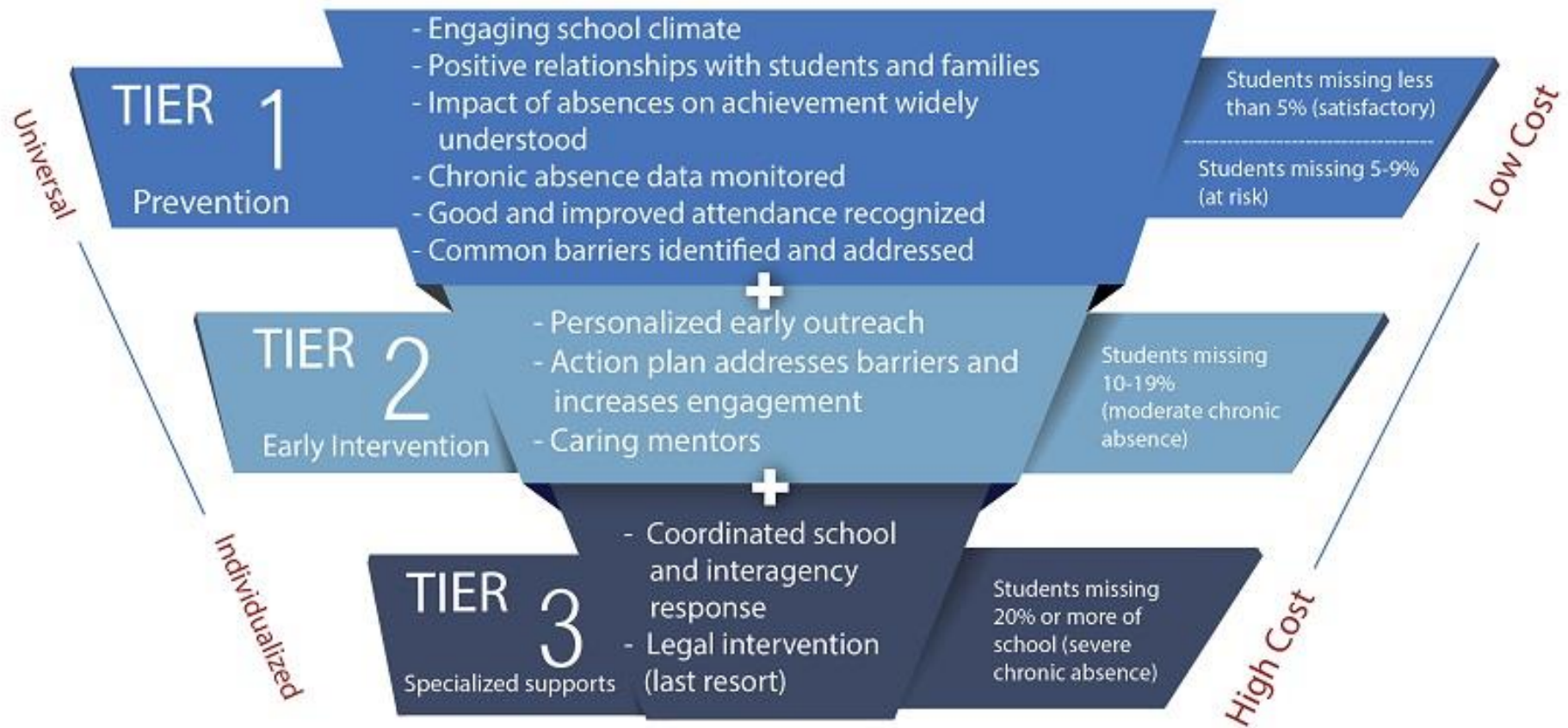
CAPACITY BUILDING	Strength	OK for Now	Could Be Better	Urgent Gap	Don't Know	How Do You Know?
<p>1. The district has a widely disseminated, comprehensive attendance policy and practice manual that reflects state regulations, clearly lays out why attendance matters, describes what schools can do to build a positive culture of attendance and outlines multi-tiered strategies for reducing chronic absence.</p>						
<p>2. A cross-departmental district level team, led by a high-level administrator, is in place to implement a systemic, tiered approach (see appendix A) to improving attendance that aligns with existing strategies to improve academic outcomes.</p>						
<p>3. The district team builds school level capacity to reduce chronic absenteeism. This includes equipping schools to have functioning teams to address attendance by providing guidance, resources, and materials to identify and remove attendance barriers and support implementation of interventions tailored to the realities of each school and their students and families.</p>						
<p>4. The district team ensures that school staff receive professional development and resources to ensure sensitivity to cultural differences and challenges that vulnerable students and their families may experience when seeking to reduce absenteeism.</p>						

SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY	Strength	OK for Now	Could Be Better	Urgent Gap	Don't Know	How Do You Know?
<p>1. The district team ensures that school leaders have the appropriate supports and are held accountable for: having a data-driven plan to address chronic absence, setting measurable targets for improvement, and monitoring and reporting progress.</p>						
<p>2. District leaders prioritize the distribution of financial and staffing resources to schools with higher rates of chronic absence and large populations of vulnerable students.</p>						
<p>3. The district team responds to structural attendance barriers identified by schools and negotiates contracts or MOUs with community organizations that outline how they can partner with the district and schools to address attendance barriers.</p>						
<p>4. The district makes easy-to-access, annually updated, online chronic absence reports by school, grade and sub-population so families and community stakeholders can monitor progress.</p>						

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS	Strength	OK for Now	Could Be Better	Urgent Gap	Don't Know	How Do You Know?
<p>1. The district team ensures that cross-sector partnerships are established by creating opportunities to share relevant data and district attendance plans with community partners to support efforts to improve school attendance and support vulnerable populations.</p>						
<p>2. The district team creates materials, resources and opportunities to help public agencies, non-profit organizations and civic groups work together with schools and the district to promote Tier 1 positive messaging and engagement about the importance of daily attendance for academic success and the availability of community resources.</p>						
<p>3. The district team facilitates community and agency partnerships to implement Tier 2 early intervention strategies and personalized outreach to connect students and families to needed supports and resources.</p>						
<p>4. The district team facilitates community and agency partnerships to implement Tier 3 intensive intervention that prioritizes and coordinates provision of case management and service delivery to students who are severely chronically absent. Resources are tailored to address the strengths and needs of vulnerable student populations.</p>						

Appendix A:

Tiered System of Supports for Improving Attendance



<https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/addressing-chronic-absence/3-tiers-of-intervention/>