

Discussion Guide: Equity as an Essential Component for Better Attendance



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Introduction

Many state and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs) are focusing on improving student attendance and engagement after an estimated 1.3 million students were missing from public school rosters in the United States in the 2020–21 school year.¹ For students who enrolled or returned to school, chronic absenteeism (typically defined as missing 10 percent or more of school, or about 18 days in most states) also increased. Up to 2.7 times as many students were estimated to be chronically absent in the 2021–22 school year compared with pre-pandemic counts.² Absenteeism rates for students from low-income backgrounds continued to worsen during the 2021–22 school year relative to patterns for students from high-income backgrounds. These patterns in attendance will likely contribute to disparate impacts on learning loss, academic achievement, and school completion if historical correlations between absenteeism and these outcomes hold.^{3, 4, 5}

To address these patterns, SEAs and LEAs are working to provide more equitable learning environments for all students. The Student Engagement and Attendance Center (SEAC) and Equity Assistance Center South (EAC-South), run by Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA),⁶ codesigned this discussion guide to help SEA and LEA teams answer a big-picture question at the intersection of attendance and equity: **How can attendance policies and practices improve equity for students of color, students with disabilities, or other student groups that have been historically marginalized?**

By providing general questions for discussion and reflection, this guide will help SEA and LEA teams identify and consider changes to attendance policies and practices to better align them with equity considerations. This guide invites teams to explicitly focus on one or more groups of students as part of increasing equity in attendance-related work. In addition to considering family income or socioeconomic status of student groups, the guide encourages consideration of other student groups that chronic absenteeism may disproportionately affect, including students grouped by racial/ethnic identity, physical or cognitive ability, and/or circumstances such as housing stability.

One note about using this guide: Equity work is both individual and collective.^{7,8} Individual work entails personal reflection, learning, and practice of equity principles. Collective work entails multiple team members contributing to organizational commitments to change. Therefore, each section includes questions for personal reflection in addition to questions for the team. Questions that invite teams to consider personal experiences may help identify a personal lens or viewpoint.

This work is also relational.

When introducing questions into processes and conversations, it is important to build trust and create space for meaningful engagement that is not transactional. This process may include asking open-ended and potentially uncomfortable questions to seed conversations that foster authentic connections and create a sense of psychological safety.⁹ When all interested parties feel connected and safe, especially historically marginalized groups that may have been excluded or even threatened, they can meaningfully shape more equitable attendance policies, data systems, and practices.

SEA and LEA staff may use this guide to proactively consider equity when they make changes in attendance policies, collect data on attendance, and develop practices related to communication with families about absenteeism, such as using automated messages and home visits. For example, this guide may help teams working on [attendance policies and implementation](#) to integrate discussion questions into presentations to school boards, families, or educators or into resources that explain excused and unexcused absences.

Questions related to [attendance data collection and analysis](#), including prompts about data fields used to disaggregate data and investigate root causes, invite teams to involve interested parties in activities often reserved for data “experts.” Finally, SEA and LEA teams may incorporate discussion questions when they choose, implement, or update [practices to support better attendance](#), including using automated communication such as text messages sent the day a student is absent or truancy notification letters. Choose one of the hyperlinked sections that relates to an area of focus as a starting point.

Attendance Policies and Implementation

Though SEAs and LEAs often develop attendance policies with the intention of fully engaging all students in school, a lack of clarity with these policies may lead to unintentional consequences, such as disparate implementation. A recent example in California frames the discussion of why asking equity-focused questions about attendance policies and definitions may be worthwhile.

In 2020, the California Department of Education released data breaking down absenteeism rates by the reasons students missed school in the 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 academic years. The findings revealed Black students missed an average of 13.2 school days in 2018–2019, while White students missed an average of 9.1 school days.¹⁰ Schools marked 52.7 percent of those absences for Black students as unexcused compared with 29.4 percent of White students’ absences. Unexcused absences often result in disciplinary action, even though most are the result of unavoidable circumstances, such as a lack of reliable transportation or a responsibility to take care of family members—issues more likely to affect students from low-income households. In California, students who have more than 18 unexcused absences in an academic year are labeled “chronically truant,” may not be given the opportunity to make up work, and could face referrals to law enforcement, activating the school-to-prison pipeline.^{11,12} On the other hand, students with excused absences often receive opportunities to make up missed work and do not interact with law enforcement. This example shows the value of asking data-based questions that are sensitive to unique contexts that disproportionately affect historically marginalized student groups.

The best policies are built with the inclusion of interested parties, especially individuals who implement and experience the impact of these policies, such as teachers, families, and students. Characteristics of equitable policies and implementation include a shift from negative consequences to proactive interventions, consideration of contexts and obstacles for different groups, and recognition that sometimes a one-size-fits-all approach (equal rather than equitable) may disproportionately affect some students. The questions in this section of the discussion guide invite analysis of intent versus impact when defining policies and categories related to attendance (e.g., doctor's note for excused absences, number of unexcused absences that lead to the truancy label and related actions).



This discussion guide may be used alongside other tools SEAC and IDRA EAC-South published.

SEAC's *Attendance Plan Reflection Tools* guide [SEAs](#) and [LEAs](#) to identify opportunities to strengthen attendance plans following COVID-19 pandemic disruptions to traditional learning. These tools pair well with the discussion guide's focus on historically marginalized student groups in sections on continuity of learning and community engagement.

[Promising Practices Brief: Improving Student Engagement and Attendance During COVID-19 School Closures](#) from SEAC explores emerging findings for measuring and promoting engagement across institutional levels.

The four federally funded equity assistance centers jointly created the [Equity-Based Framework for Achieving Integrated Schooling](#) to provide a structure for identifying areas of need and support to ensure equal access to integrated schooling.

IDRA EAC-South created the [Six Goals of Educational Equity](#) infographic (available in English and Spanish) as a foundation for school and district equity audits. Communities and school personnel may use these goals as a yardstick for measuring progress and a lightning rod for galvanizing change.

Questions to Ask Attendance Policies and Implementation



Policy

- What are some reasons students do not come to school? How do these reasons relate to attendance policies?
 - How do issues such as transportation or chronic health conditions relate to attendance policies? Are there other common root causes related to attendance policies to consider?
- How do traumatic events (e.g., school violence, climate disasters) and ongoing challenges (e.g., COVID-19) affect attendance? How do these events and challenges relate to attendance policies?
- Who defines excused and unexcused absences?
 - Who is included? Who is missing?
 - What impact does group composition have on these definitions?
- Based on data review and analysis, do the current attendance policies affect historically marginalized groups disproportionately?



Implementation

- How are policies defining excused and unexcused absences communicated to educators, families, and students?
- Who makes daily decisions about tardiness and absence at schools: administrators, teachers, attendance clerks, front office staff, or other staff? How and when are these decisions shared with the district and/or state?
- What types of training or supports are available to equitably implement policies and avoid unintended consequences that may lead to disparate impacts? Are there differences by groups? Which groups may be overlooked?
- Do committees/groups (e.g., student attendance review boards) review chronic absence or truancy cases? Who is included? Who is missing?



Personal reflection

- What personal experience informs your beliefs about excused and unexcused absences?
- What are some reasons for missing work or school, based on personal experience?

Equitable Examples From the Field

The Crowley (Texas) Independent School District attendance policy¹³ employs a behavioral intervention model instead of taking punitive actions for students who have more than three unexcused absences in a 4-week period. In addition to requesting a conference between the parents and school administrators, the district engages in truancy prevention measures, which include a behavior improvement plan, school-based community service, and referrals to counseling or other social services. Shifting to prevention and intervention rather than punishment is a hallmark of more equitable policies, especially when proactive measures are associated with known root causes of unexcused absences.

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) compulsory attendance policy¹⁴ instructs school districts to adopt truancy prevention measures if students have three or more unexcused absences for 3 or more days or parts of days in a 4-week period. Instead of applying a blanket policy for truancy, TEA requires the school to offer counseling to the student instead of sending them to truancy court if the absences are a result of pregnancy, being in the state foster program, homelessness, or being the primary income earner for the student's family. School districts must have a truancy prevention facilitator or juvenile case manager to oversee these truancy prevention measures.

Attendance Data Collection and Analysis

While LEAs and SEAs have long tracked daily average attendance, collecting and reporting chronic absence data have become more widespread since 2015, with the introduction of accountability indicators of school quality or student success (SQSS) under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).¹⁵ Data systems and analytic tools needed to be improved or built when many SEAs chose chronic absenteeism as an SQSS indicator. For example, LEAs and SEAs needed the capacity to analyze rates of chronic absenteeism overall and for designated subgroups of sufficient size for LEAs to create tiered supports for better attendance and for SEAs to meet ESSA reporting requirements.¹⁶ Subgroup analysis is an important tool for equitably addressing chronic absenteeism, but additional equity-focused tools (e.g., [Equity-Based Framework for Achieving Integrated Schooling](#)) and qualitative and quantitative data are also needed. These needs are amplified, given the spike in chronic absenteeism since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with estimated rates of chronic absenteeism tripling between 2019 and 2022 and even higher among vulnerable populations, such as students from households with low incomes.¹⁷



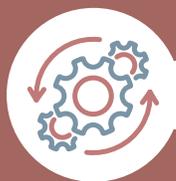
Data collection activities, such as community walks, provide insight into potential root causes of chronic absenteeism and lead to community-based solutions. The types of attendance-related data collected, the collection methods, and the analysis can benefit from the involvement of individuals beyond staff responsible for accountability measures.

Educators in Long Beach, California, where chronic absenteeism doubled in 2022 compared with pre-pandemic rates, conduct “community walks” in the communities surrounding their schools to ask about concerns related to COVID-19 and ways to address those concerns and other barriers to school attendance. For example, the pandemic may have worsened access to reliable transportation and child care for many families, and families with low incomes may lack the resources to buy clothes and school supplies.¹⁷



Questions to Ask

Attendance Data Collection and Analysis



Data systems (sources, process)

- Who is missing from the data? Which groups may be under- or overrepresented?
- What types of demographic data and additional student characteristics can be used for analysis of subgroups, including intersectional groups (e.g., students from families with low incomes and students identified with disabilities)?
- How are data collected and shared between LEA and SEA levels? Among educators, students, families, and communities?
- Which sources of data may contribute to root cause analysis? Which sources of data are needed for root cause analysis?



Data use (access, sensemaking, decisionmaking)

- Which sources of data help examine the effect of excused and unexcused absences on students?
- What are the possible root causes of the attendance issues?
- Who is involved in analyzing and interpreting data?
- Do students believe disciplinary action is applied equitably? How can we ensure we obtain an accurate, representative sample of student perspectives on the implementation of disciplinary actions?



Personal reflection

- What is surprising about data collection and use by the SEA or LEA?
- Are there any concerns about data collection and use in the SEA or LEA?



Equitable Examples From the Field

Getting to 'Y' from UP (Unleashing the Power of Partnership) for Learning¹⁸ is an action research program focused on empowering middle and high school students and adults engaged with youth health and wellness to interpret their own local data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). UP for Learning trains leadership teams of youth and adults from over 80 Vermont middle and high schools to organize a student-led data

analysis retreat in their school or community to bring meaning to the YRBS findings. At the retreat, the leadership teams work with larger peer groups to identify existing supports, agree on areas of strength and concern in their local data, and create a preliminary action plan to address the root causes of their concerns. The leadership teams then host community dialogue events to present their local data analysis findings and discuss how they can implement their action plan to improve the health and wellness of their school community with ongoing coaching from UP for Learning.

The Kansas Parent Information Resource Center (KPIRC)¹⁹ promotes authentic family and youth engagement across all grade levels and provides information and resources to support schools, families, and communities. KPIRC has developed a series of tools, such as the [family engagement survey](#).²⁰ This assessment tool is designed to gauge whether families feel welcome, heard, and supported by staff at their student's school. If families do not feel welcome, their student might not feel welcome either. Adding families' voices to the data collection helps schools identify metrics to determine whether schools resonate with families, understand potential root causes, and ultimately share the power in making decisions that prioritize students' academic success.

Practices to Support Better Attendance

From small actions (e.g., greeting students by name, “nudge” communications) to big actions (e.g., school-based health centers, early warning indicator systems), a range of practices seek to improve student attendance. One example of a nudge communication is a simple, informative postcard that “encouraged guardians to improve their student's attendance.” These messages reduced absences by approximately 2.4 percent, according to one study of Philadelphia schools.²¹ School-based health centers address health gaps and the root causes of chronic absenteeism related to health by providing mental and physical health services to students in or near their school.²²

No single practice or initiative will improve attendance for everyone, so LEAs often use an integrated system, or a multitiered system of supports (MTSS), as a framework for academic or behavioral supports. MTSS organizes actions into three tiers: Tier 1 includes universal preventions for all students; tier 2 focuses on early interventions for some students (e.g., students missing 10 to 19 percent of school); and tier 3 focuses on intensive interventions for a few students (e.g., students missing 20 percent or more of school). By incorporating attendance into MTSS at the school level, LEAs may provide more holistic supports to students and help address educational inequities by layering targeted supports for smaller groups (including individual students and their families) on top of universal prevention to meet their specific needs.

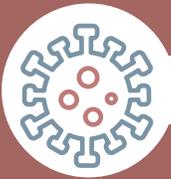
Whether individual practices or integrated into MTSS frameworks, attendance supports that shift the focus from deficit-based to asset-based benefit all students, especially those from marginalized communities. For example, some LEAs are shifting from labels such as English as a Second Language to English learners or multilingual learners to describe students' developing proficiency in several languages. These shifts in language may help educators and other adults who work with students who have been historically marginalized to begin to recognize student and family assets, sparking changes in the ways they interact with these students and families.

Questions to Ask Practices to Support Better Attendance



Authentic engagement

- How are schools and districts engaging with families and students about attendance?
 - How do students and families describe engagement about attendance and absences (consistent or inconsistent, one- or multi-directional, positive or negative)?
 - What types of communication (e.g., text, email, letters, phone calls, meetings) about absences work best for students and their families? Think about different groups of students and families in your communities, such as students with disabilities, students from immigrant families, students from families with low incomes, and students from racial/ethnic groups.
 - How does the SEA or LEA manage multilingual communication?
 - What are the typical next steps teachers, school leaders, or school counselors take following communications with students and their families?
- Reflect on the intent and impact of automated messages (e.g., texts, robocalls, form letters) using data (e.g., open rates, number of family-initiated calls).
- What does the school culture look and feel like when staff, students, and families enter the building?
 - Who feels safe? Welcome? A sense of belonging?
 - Are climate (policies) and culture (feeling) aligned? What do the policies say? What do people do? Who is included in the policies? In practice?



Learning from the COVID-19 era

- Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools tried numerous ways to engage and reengage students and their families out of necessity. Should any strategies be retained because their flexibility or creativity serves students and families who have typically been marginalized or underserved? Examples may include
 - uses of technology, such as asynchronous learning or hybrid learning;
 - online evening classes for students who need to work to supplement their families' income; and
 - expanded options for 504 plans (i.e., formal plans schools develop to give students with disabilities the support they need), including for people with long-term illnesses related to COVID-19 or students with children of their own.
- How are LEAs and SEAs addressing lasting COVID-19 impacts on students' and families' physical and mental health?

Questions to Ask

Practices to Support Better Attendance (continued)



Practices and programs

- Who designed attendance practices and/or programs used in the LEA? For whom, specifically, were the practices or programs designed?
- Consider the experience of students and their families related to attendance. Are the supports they receive integrated or fragmented? Do students and families have a choice and a voice?
- Consider all the attendance practices and programs available to the SEA or LEA. Some may focus on prevention, or foundational supports, for all students. Others are designed as interventions, responsive to student needs. Still others focus on reengaging students, ideally using restorative approaches. What is the balance between prevention (foundational), intervention (responsive), and reengagement (restorative) practices and programs?
- If the LEA has attendance committees (e.g., school attendance review boards), what is their demographic composition? What is the demographic composition of the students who interact with those committees? Do members represent students with disabilities, multilingual learners and their families, and families with low incomes?
- What types of practices are in place to welcome students back to school and help them overcome the harmful effects of absences? How is the impact or effectiveness of these practices measured?



Personal reflection

- What makes students want to show up at school?
- What makes people want to show up at work?



Equitable Examples From the Field

Greater Omaha Attendance and Learning Service (GOALS)²³ offers tier 2 and tier 3 interventions (based on MTSS levels) involving intensive in-home case management and engagement outreach services to prevent criminal justice system involvement. Social workers, counselors, teachers, and principals can refer chronically absent students to GOALS Family Advocates, who work with the students and their families for 6 to 12 months to help reengage them with school. Through home visits designed to build relationships with the students

and their families, Family Advocates develop strategies to meet families' basic needs and coordinate with community agencies to provide services, such as therapy and transportation. At the end of the program, Family Advocates give schools and families a short-term service report detailing their progress and facilitate a school reengagement meeting for the students. By building relationships and providing needed services, the program can make students and families feel like equal partners in their success while reducing absenteeism.

The Model School Attendance Review Board (SARB) Recognition Program²⁴ is sponsored by the California Department of Education and the California Association of Supervisors of Child Welfare and Attendance. It recognizes school districts that have implemented successful school attendance improvement programs. The model SARBs share common attributes of engaging in early intervention, investing in staff professional development, and working with families to communicate the importance of attendance and connect them with community resources to overcome barriers to attendance. Early interventions are tier 1 efforts by school attendance review teams to address patterns toward chronic absenteeism, truancy, and suspension. Investments in staff professional development include enhanced social-emotional learning, increased cultural competencies, and training to address student mental health needs. Some model SARBs also hired more counselors and social workers to focus on reengaging students. Model SARBs reached out to families through newsletters and attendance presentations to ensure they were a part of the conversation and helped direct them to community partners that could offer resources to meet their needs.

Check & Connect²⁵ was first developed in the 1990s by a collaborative group of researchers and practitioners from the Institute on Community Integration, the University of Minnesota, and Minneapolis Public Schools. With continued development and research, Check & Connect has strong evidence of positive effects on dropout prevention, according to the What Works Clearinghouse.²⁶ This tier 3 intensive intervention works for students with disabilities to improve persistence, enrollment, access to relevant educational services, and attendance.²⁷ A mentor builds a trusting relationship with a student and their family through a long-term commitment focused on learning and success at school. For students with disabilities, the mentor is most commonly the case manager who manages the student's individualized education program (IEP) to ensure the "connect" interventions align with IEP requirements. The mentor is also crucial for the systematic monitoring of timely data and the "check" component.

Conclusion

After using this guide, consider **how attendance policies and practices can improve equity for students of color, students with disabilities, or other student groups that have been historically marginalized.** Continue to reflect and embed questions like these in day-to-day activities. Share more equitable advances from the field by participating in SEAC events, or contact SEACenter@insightpolicyresearch.com.

Endnotes

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