

How to Improve Your School's Response to Chronic Absenteeism

May 2024

Included in this Action Planning Tool

1. **Brief summary** of the latest chronic absenteeism research.
2. **Discovery Protocol** to guide an optional team activity to foster insights and empathy.
3. **Guiding Questions** for your school-based team to use in developing action plans for understanding chronic absenteeism in your local context, mitigating the risks and outcomes for your students and community, and strategizing for designing interventions to meet your specific needs.
4. **Workbook** format options: electronic (fillable version), or a printable pdf.

Chronic Absence Defined:

Missing 10% or more of school days due to absence for any reason~ excused and unexcused absences, and suspensions

Tips for Using This Tool

- **Engage with a group.** Consider inviting content teachers, ELL teacher, special education teacher and paraprofessional, front office support staff, nurse, dean, admin, counselor, social worker, students, family members, community partners.
- **Spend time.** Plan for approximately 1-2 hours.
- **Be curious.** Set aside the things you think you know, the arguments in which you feel entrenched, the assumptions you may hold and set a stage of discovery. Engage by asking questions, an openness to dive deeper, humility to be wrong, or at least incomplete, a commitment to a judgment free zone, and a mindset for growth.
- **Create a plan.** Use these guiding questions to identify needs and next steps.
- **Take action.** Implement your plan, monitor the results, and adapt as needed.

Chronic Absenteeism Summary

- Chronic absenteeism is at an all-time high. In 2021-22, two-thirds of enrolled students attended a school with high or extreme levels of chronic absence, where at least one in five students missed almost four weeks of the school year.
- Nearly 14.7 million students (30%) were chronically absent in 2021-22. Roughly 6.5 million more students were missing 10% or more of school days, when compared with the school year prior to the pandemic.
- High levels of chronic absenteeism impact the entire school community: teachers and students are unable to progress through academic and curricular requirements.
- To find out more about the rates in your state, use this [interactive map](#).

Notable Findings and Lessons Learned

- Understanding the complexities of chronic absenteeism is essential for matching strategies and interventions with the need.
- Strong relationships in school are fundamentally important to student success.
- Sense of belonging and connectedness matter. In fact, school connectedness is the closest thing we have to universal prevention. Students must believe that there is an adult at school who knows and cares about them as a person, feel welcome at school for who they are, have a supportive peer group and be engaged in activities they find meaningful and that help others.
- Students are engaged in school work when they are interested in the topics and have agency in their learning.

How to Improve Your School's Response to Chronic Absenteeism: *Companion Discovery Tool*

Priming Curiosity: Discovery Protocol

Summary: This Discovery Protocol is designed to engage a team's thinking beyond the first and usual explanations or ideas about the cause of chronic absence. Team members arrive to the process with their own experiences and may hold preconceived notions about attendance; this is an exercise of imagination, noticing, wonderings, and stretching our curiosity, understanding, and responses.

We begin by acknowledging and drafting our first several explanations, the “easy” answers that were top of mind when you arrived and then... dive deeper... persist... think again, more broadly, and take on a new perspective from a different persona, process, location, time, or purpose.

Time: 20-30 Minutes

Phase 1: Current Thinking (3 minutes)

- Write down the reasons you currently hold for why students are chronically absent. (use stickies, stop timer after 2 minutes)
- Now take 30 seconds to add others.
- Share with a shoulder partner.

Phase 2: Perspectives in a Hat - Five Sprints (20-30 minutes)

Facilitation Process: Each participant draws a perspective from the hat and spends 2 minutes jotting down how this person or element might impact or be related to attendance or chronic absence. At the end of each round, post your stickies and spend 2 minutes in a gallery walk- check mark items that resonate with you, exclamation points (!) to something that is a new idea, question marks (?) for any questions, and star items you would like to pursue further; finally, add any other ideas you would like to add.

Below are ideas for items that might be included in the hat, modify based on your specific context.

- 1. Personas:** student, friend, classmate, top of class, struggling student, second language learner, student with a disability, middle of the class -B/C student, student interested in the topic, student who is scared, student who is bullied, teacher, parent, neighbor, oldest child in family, guest teachers, substitutes.
- 2. Process:** absence reporting, school entry, parking lot traffic pattern, morning routine at home, school start routine, tardy, turning in assignments, re-entry after absence, re-entry after suspension, re-entry after illness, coming back to school after being absent yesterday, coming back after 2 days of absence, coming back after 1 week of absence; returning after 3 week absence.
- 3. Location:** front entrance, parking lot, back door, school address and neighborhood, bathroom, counseling office, community park close to school, cafeteria, gym, classrooms, mountains, city, country roads.
- 4. Time:** during class, lunch, morning arrival, all day, half day, full period, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday Friday, long weekends, before holidays, after holidays, late start, extended periods, assemblies, weather day, assemblies, special events.
- 5. How:** transportation to/from school; attendance procedures, virtual, in person, schedule, clubs, sports, class, field trip.



Discovery Reflections

How to Improve Your School's Response to Chronic Absenteeism: Key Questions to Ask



Data: Understanding Your Challenge

- **Access to Data:** Do we currently have access to chronic absence data and how will we ensure that staff, students, and families have access to this metric in a timely, simple, and accurate format?
- **Holistic Data Integration:** In what ways might we take a holistic view by including data for social emotional wellness, connectedness and belonging, classroom experience, attendance, behavior, course performance and career interests and post-secondary planning?
- **Data Analysis:** How will we ensure the data is analyzed and flagged for aligning supports? How might we schedule this activity and how often?
- **Inclusive and Equitable Engagement:** How might we include all perspectives and experiences within our community to broaden and strengthen our understanding and planning? Whose voice is not at the table and how might we invite and include everyone through surveys, focus groups, design sprints, community circles, problems of practice, etc.?
- **Building Data Knowledge and Resources:** How might we plan workshops and training to ensure that stakeholders have the tools, knowledge and skills to analyze the data and identify root cause and support needs?



Motivation: Leveraging Connections to Increase Engagement

- **Understanding Student Absence:** How might we understand what motivates or demotivates students to attend school regularly? What avenues for communication are offered to students and families to share concerns or issues?
- **Learning about Students and Families:** How are adults learning about the joys, interests and goals of students and their families? How is this information communicated to others connected to the student and family?
- **Recognizing Attendance:** How are we recognizing students and families for improved attendance? How might we gather input on ways that students want to be celebrated and co-design recognition activities with students?
- **Extra-curricular Engagement:** How might we increase offerings and connect students to extra-curricular activities, and service, leadership and work-based learning opportunities? What structures or systems might be barriers to involvement and how can we mitigate these barriers?
- **Planning for a Student's Return:** How might we help students recover what they missed while they were absent, academically and socially?
- **Communicating the Impact of Attendance:** How might we share information about the importance and impact of attendance with students and families?



Relationships: Foundation For Success

- **Prioritizing Relationships:** Are there specific relationships (e.g. student/teacher, student/student, teacher/families) we want to prioritize for improvement?
- **Connecting through Shared Interests:** How might we invite, connect, and build relationships between those who share interests, career goals, or hobbies?
- **Connectedness and Belonging:** How might we measure and improve connectedness and belonging for students and staff in our school? Establish baseline and measure improvement.
- **Involving Students in Improving Relationships:** What surveys or other tools are we using to gather student input? How might we involve student voice and leadership to co-design strategies for improving relationships and attendance?
- **Supporting Students to Advocate for Attendance:** How will we train, prepare, and support students to advocate for good attendance?
- **Improving Communication:** In what ways can we leverage two-way dialogue, and other communication strategies to increase attendance supports?



Problem Solving: Designing Community Solutions

- **Identifying Common Barriers:** Are there challenges or barriers that are common across a number of students or classes? What is this trend across groups, ages, grade levels, demographics, groups of students, neighborhoods, etc.?
- **Examining Policies and Practices:** What policies or practices may be impacting attendance rates?
- **Collaborating with Community Partners:** How might we join efforts with our community partners and neighborhood to increase school attendance and mitigate barriers?
- **Recognizing our Biases:** In what ways might our preconceived ideas, bias, and experiences be impacting our understanding and curiosity?



Student Success Team: Organizing to Support Students

- **Schedule for Collaboration:** How might we create a schedule that includes consistent time for teachers who share common students to meet together?
- **Data and Protocol:** How do we ensure that teams have the timely, actionable data and a protocol to analyze the data and create an intervention to support each student?
- **Intervention Strategies:** How might we support all students through climate and culture strategies and universal/tier I interventions? What group interventions might also help?



Data: Understanding Your Challenge

1. Access to Data: Do we currently have access to chronic absence data and how will we ensure that staff, students, and families have access to this metric in a timely, simple, and accurate format?

2. Holistic Data Integration: In what ways might we take a holistic view by including data for social emotional wellness, connectedness and belonging, classroom experience, attendance, behavior, course performance, and career interests and post-secondary planning?

3. Data Analysis: How will we ensure the data is analyzed and flagged for aligning supports? How might we schedule this activity and how often?

4. Inclusive and Equitable Engagement: How might we include all perspectives and experiences within our community to broaden and strengthen our understanding and planning? Whose voice is not at the table and how might we invite and include everyone through surveys, focus groups, design sprints, community circles, problems of practice, etc.?

5. Building Data Knowledge and Resources: How might we plan workshops and training to ensure that stakeholders have the tools, knowledge and skills to analyze the data and identify root cause and support needs?

Data Reflections:

List 1-2 highest leverage activities to improve attendance with data strategies.
Who will lead the work?
How and when will we measure and monitor the impact?



Relationships: Foundation for Success

1. Prioritizing Relationships: Are there specific relationships (e.g. student/teacher, student/student, teacher/families) we want to prioritize for improvement?

2. Connecting through Shared Interests: How might we invite, connect, and build relationships between those who share interests, career goals, or hobbies?

3. Connectedness and Belonging: How might we measure and improve connectedness and belonging for students and staff in our school? Establish baseline and measure improvement.

4. Involving Students in Improving Relationships: What surveys or other tools are we using to gather student input? How might we involve student voice and leadership to co-design strategies for improving relationships and attendance?

5. Supporting Students to Advocate for Attendance: How will we train, prepare, and support students to advocate for good attendance?

6. Improving Communication: In what ways can we leverage two-way dialogue, and other communication strategies to increase attendance supports?

Relationships Reflections:

List 1-2 highest leverage activities to improve attendance with relationship strategies.
Who will lead the work?
How and when will we measure and monitor the impact?



Motivation: Leveraging Connections to Increase Engagement

1. Understanding Student Absence: How might we understand what motivates or demotivates students to attend school regularly? What avenues for communication are offered to students and families to share concerns or issues?

2. Learning about Students and Families: How are adults learning about the joys, interests and goals of students and their families? How is this information communicated to others connected to the student and family?

3. Recognizing Attendance: How are we recognizing students and families for improved attendance? How might we gather input on ways that students want to be celebrated, and co-design recognition activities with students?

4. Extra-curricular Engagement: How might we increase offerings and connect students to extra-curricular activities, and service, leadership, and work-based learning opportunities? What structures or systems might be barriers to involvement and how can we mitigate these barriers?

5. Planning for a Student's Return: How might we help students recover what they missed while they were absent, academically and socially?

6. Communicating the Impact of Attendance: How might we share information about the importance and impact of attendance with students and families?

Motivation Reflections:

List 1-2 highest leverage activities to improve attendance with motivation strategies.
Who will lead the work?
How and when will we measure and monitor the impact?



Problem Solving: Designing Community Solutions

1. Identifying Common Barriers: Are there challenges or barriers that are common across a number of students or classes? What is this trend across groups, ages, grade levels, demographics, groups of students, neighborhoods, etc.?

2. Examining Policies and Practices: What policies or practices may be impacting attendance rates?

3. Collaborating with Community Partners: How might we join efforts with our community partners and neighborhood to increase school attendance and mitigate barriers?

4. Recognizing our Biases: In what ways might our preconceived ideas, bias, and experiences be impacting our understanding and curiosity?

Problem Solving Reflections:

List 1-2 highest leverage activities to improve attendance with problem solving strategies. Who will lead the work? How and when will we measure and monitor the impact?



Student Success Team: Organizing to Support Students

1. Schedule for Collaboration: How might we create a schedule that includes consistent time for teachers who share common students to meet together?

2. Data and Protocol: How do we ensure that teams have the timely, actionable data and a protocol to analyze the data and create an intervention to support each student?

3. Intervention Strategies: How might we support all students through climate and culture strategies and universal/tier I interventions? What group interventions might also help?

Student Success Team Reflections:

List 1-2 highest leverage activities to improve attendance with student success team strategies. Who will lead the work? How and when will we measure and monitor the impact?