



Working Together to Engage Students and Reduce Barriers to Attendance: A Call for Data-Informed Collaboration

December 14, 2022

Dear County and District Superintendents and Charter School Administrators:

Absenteeism has been serious during the pandemic and beyond and has taken a great toll on many students in California and across the nation. The COVID-19 pandemic has expanded and deepened existing educational inequities. Attendance Works estimates that [chronic absence](#) (missing 10 percent of school) has **doubled** to nearly 16 million students nationwide. Students with disabilities, from communities of color, and from economically disadvantaged families experience substantially higher chronic absence rates. The adverse impact of chronic absence is greatest for students and families who lack the resources to make up for the lost learning opportunities in the classroom.

Left unaddressed, disparities in the root causes and the impact of chronic absence widen gaps in academic achievement in literacy, math, and science, as well as high school graduation. Focusing resources on students who have struggled to regain consistent attendance and quality learning opportunities can help counter the negative effects of extended absences.

Unfortunately, emerging data from the first few months of the current school year shows that chronic absence rates remain high. This reflects the current high rates of illness as well as the continued challenges facing students and families as a result of multiple years of disrupted learning and the ongoing social and economic impact of the pandemic. These persistently high levels of chronic absence reveal that reengaging students, especially those severely impacted by the pandemic, will require ongoing attention and a long-term investment. Working together, we can promote student engagement and prevent unnecessary absences while ensuring students stay home as needed for public health reasons.

Please find in the attached important resources prepared by the California Department of Education and Attendance Works to support efforts to combat chronic absence. As noted in the attached document, we also encourage you to participate in our new Attendance Webinar Series launching in January.

Sincerely,

Tony Thurmond

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State Superintendent of Public Instruction



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From the California Department of
Education and Attendance Works



Address underlying causes of absence

Reducing chronic absence requires partnering with students and families to understand and address the challenges—outside and inside school—that affect students’ ability to learn and, when left unaddressed, cause them to continue to miss more class. Better understanding the root cause of absences includes asking questions such as:

- Is housing stable? Is transportation reliable? Is the student experiencing food insecurity? What factors may be making it difficult for students to get to school as well as concentrate when they are present in class?
- What are student educational experiences? Are lessons engaging? What are the relationships with teachers and peers? Are there any factors that may be affecting students’ motivation to show up to school?
- Is there a lack of medical care causing students or their families to experience preventable illness?
- Are students staying home because they are experiencing anxiety and trauma and don’t have the mental health support to help them return to class?

Schools and districts can use their data along with insights from students and families to identify what is needed to improve attendance. Large numbers of students who are chronically absent often signify the need for programmatic or policy solutions.

Leverage existing initiatives to address chronic absence

In California, chronic absence will not be solved by creating a new initiative. Rather, chronic absence as well as data on achievement and behavior should be used to ensure existing initiatives help students, especially those with the least access to equitable learning opportunities, to connect to meaningful, joyful learning experiences that motivate showing up and overcome attendance barriers.

The good news is that more resources are available than ever before in California to help address the factors that cause chronic absence. These include, but are not limited to:

- \$7.9 billion Learning Recovery Block Grant from the 2022–23 fiscal year budget (LEAs can use it at their discretion to support learning recovery and the social–emotional needs of students.)
- Expanded learning time: Elementary school students from low-income households, foster youth, and English learners will have access to enrichment programs year round and nine hours per day. At full scale in 2025, the \$4-billion-per-year effort will serve an additional 1.5 million students per year. (Research shows that high-quality expanded learning improves school day attendance.)
- A 13 percent increase in Local Control Funding Formula funds (Chronic absence is one of the metrics that must be addressed in local control accountability plans.)
- \$4.1 billion in community schools funding (Chronic absence can serve as a unifying goal and easy-to-understand measure of progress for community schools, which can provide and better integrate academic, social, and health care services for students and family members.)
- \$2.7 billion in transitional kindergarten funding (High-quality early childhood experiences can help students establish a regular routine of attendance and reduce chronic absence in the early grades.)
- Training to help LEAs utilize Medi-Cal dollars to cover the cost of home-based outreach and counseling (These services can be used specifically to help address the needs of chronically absent students.)
- California’s \$4.7 billion Master Plan for Kids’ Mental Health: All young people ages zero to twenty-five will have ready access to mental health supports both inside and outside school.
- Funded through Proposition 47, the Learning Communities for School Success Program provides LEAs with funding to support evidence-based, nonpunitive approaches to keeping students in school.

The CDE will also seek the input and recommendations of the State School Attendance Review Board (SARB) at their next scheduled meetings in January and April. SARB members include practitioners from school sites, districts, and county offices of education as well as representatives from other city and county offices that can support families with consistent attendance.

Participate in our Chronic Absence Webinar Series

To help schools and districts take steps to reduce chronic absence, the California Department of Education and [Attendance Works](#) are launching a series of webinars. Each webinar will explore how chronic absence can be woven into a key area of existing work and will include the voices of practitioners offering concrete examples of how they combat chronic absence in their own schools and communities. The first webinar, *Rising to the Challenge*, will be held on Wednesday January 18 at 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Adopt key cross-cutting steps

Across the webinars, we will emphasize these five key steps for schools and districts to consider:

1. Examine how much chronic absence is a challenge in your school or district.
2. Take a team approach to attendance and engagement (at both the district and school level).
3. Recognize that students are more likely to attend when positive conditions for learning are in place.
4. Use a multi-tiered approach to support student attendance and engagement using attendance, behavior, and academic data.
5. Work with partners to provide additional support for students and families.

1

EXAMINE AND MONITOR DATA

Accurate, actionable, and available data on attendance and absenteeism is essential to understanding how much chronic absence is a challenge for your school or district as well as for prioritizing action.

Attendance data from the prior year and first weeks of school can be used to identify which students were chronically absent and need additional support. Analysis of chronic absence data, for example, typically reveals that students experiencing a transition—such as entering kindergarten, going to middle school, or starting high school—can often benefit from extra outreach, engagement, and assistance with overcoming attendance barriers. It can also show the need to pay extra attention to marginalized and often under-resourced students, such as students of color, students from low-income families, English language learners, and students with disabilities.

Data can also be used to identify bright spots—particularly schools, classrooms, grades, or programs—that appear to be helping students show up to school more often. When this is the case, it is important to take time to find out what is working so it can be shared and adopted by other educators and community partners.

[DataQuest](#) can be used to find out how much chronic absence was a problem in prior years for any school or district. If a district does not have ready access to current chronic absence reports that show which schools, student groups, and individual students are chronically absent, they can download the [Attendance Works District and School Attendance Tracking Tools](#) free of charge.

2

TAKE A TEAM APPROACH TO ATTENDANCE AND ENGAGEMENT

As districts face ongoing challenges affecting attendance, adopting a comprehensive approach to ensure students do not fall further behind academically is critical. Addressing high levels of chronic absence requires a team approach. Schools and districts may want to consider establishing attendance teams to address all absences (excused, unexcused, and suspensions). Team functions include:

- Organizing a multi-tiered attendance strategy that begins with prevention and early intervention using attendance, behavior, and academic data
- Examining attendance and absenteeism data to assess which groups of students have higher or lower levels of absence
- Identifying assets, barriers, and strategies that affect attendance
- Mobilizing everyone (teachers, social workers, attendance clerks, home visitors, family engagement specialist, nurses, expanded learning staff, paraprofessionals, etc.) in the school community to address attendance
- Continuously determining whether activities and supports are making a difference

These functions can be added to the functions of existing teams that address academics and/or behavior, such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) or Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). While the attendance clerks, social workers, and counselors who have traditionally been charged with addressing attendance remain essential, the high levels of chronic absence requires ensuring many more members of the school community are prepared to play a role. (As long as appropriate steps are taken to [protect student privacy](#), external partners can contribute to solutions.)

Use these resources to guide the development of your teams:

- [How to Organize an Effective School Team Handout](#)
- [How to Organize an Effective District Team Handout](#)
- [School and District Team Self-Assessments of Practice](#)

3

RECOGNIZE THAT STUDENTS ARE MORE LIKELY TO ATTEND WHEN POSITIVE CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING ARE IN PLACE

Relationships are essential to the [positive conditions for learning](#) that lead to students being engaged and attending regularly. Attendance is higher when schools:

- Are organized to promote students' physical and emotional health and safety
- Promote a sense of belonging, connection, and support
- Make learning challenging and engaging so students don't want to miss class
- Invest in adult and student well-being and emotional competence

The following image is of a Venn diagram with four circles intersecting at the center. Clockwise from top, the four circles are: (1) Physical and Emotional Health and Safety; (2) Belonging, Connection, and Support; (3) Academic Challenge and Engagement; and (4) Adult and Student Well-Being and Emotional Competence. The area in which they all intersect is labeled: Relationships are Essential to Positive Conditions for Learning.

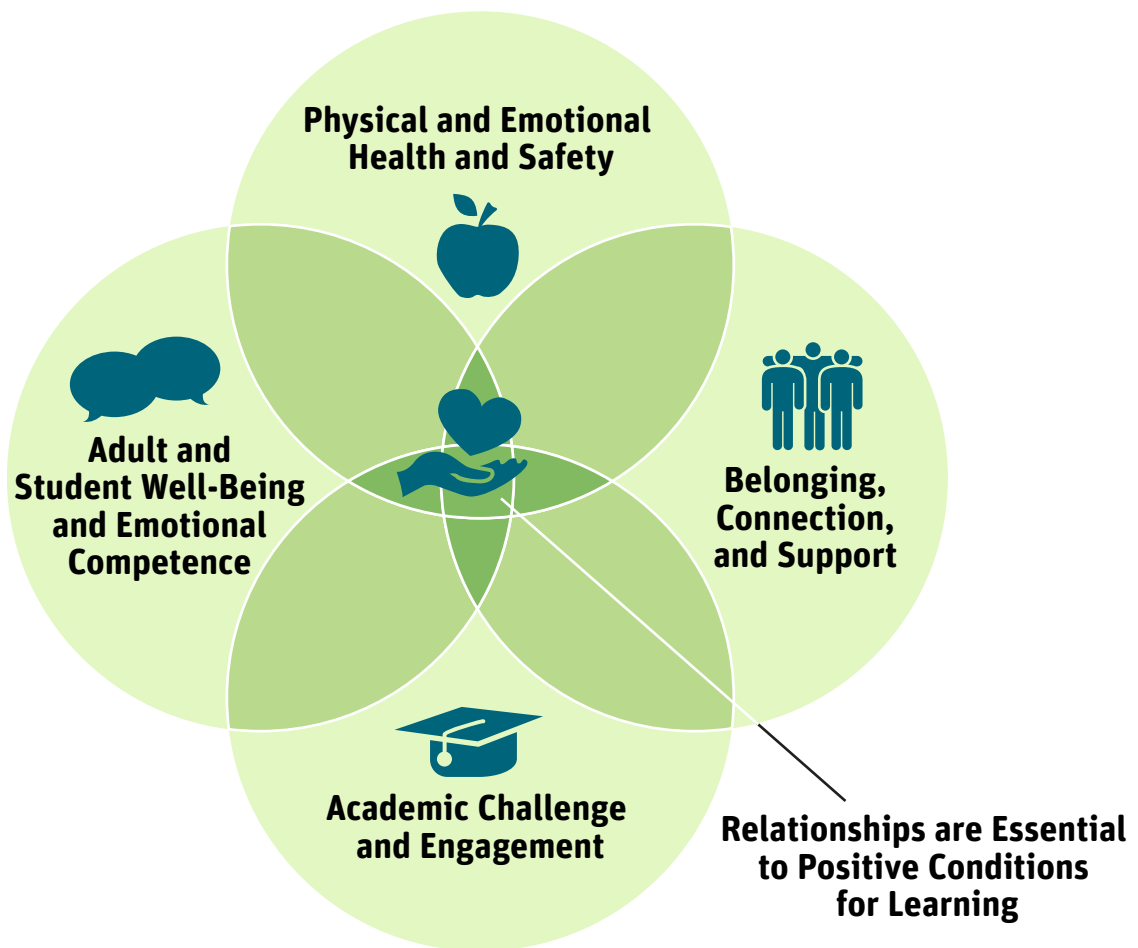


Image provided by Attendance Works and AIR

Building strong relationships is helpful for all families but is essential for working with children and family members who have experienced any form of trauma. The goal is to integrate attendance, engagement, and belonging into existing practice.

- Harvard’s [Relationship Mapping Strategy](#) offers an intentional process to make sure every student in the school is connected to at least one caring adult in the building.
- Turnaround for Children has developed a [relationship building toolbox](#) that school staff can use in their everyday work. It includes the 2x10 Strategy where educators spend two minutes every day for ten consecutive school days with a student in need of extra support.

4

USE A MULTI-TIERED APPROACH TO SUPPORT STUDENT ATTENDANCE AND ENGAGEMENT

The idea behind a [multi-tiered approach](#) is that the majority of students will respond to schoolwide strategies for improving attendance and engagement (known as Tier 1 supports) but that these strategies won’t be sufficient for all students. Some students require more personalized support (Tier 2) and an even smaller number may need more intensive measures (Tier 3) to reengage them with school. Schools and districts may also want to consider how their tiered approach to attendance is aligned with or integrated into existing teams such as PBIS and MTSS.

The key to successful intervention strategies lies in how well the interventions address the root causes of absences. Do the interventions remove barriers or motivate a family or student to change behaviors? Use the [Reasons for Absence chart](#) and the [Guide to the Attendance Playbook](#) to select effective interventions.

Tier 1: Universal Prevention

These are strategies aimed at encouraging better attendance for all students and preventing absenteeism before it affects achievement. Strategy examples include:

- Connection to a caring adult in the school, such as a [mentor](#)
- Personalized outreach and communication to families and students: See this [guidance for texting](#).
- [Recognition of good and improved attendance](#)
- Messaging about the benefits of attendance for the whole child: Attendance Works has developed the [Showing Up Matters for R.E.A.L. Toolkit](#) that is filled with free, ready-to-use messaging resources for families and students.

Tier 2: Early Intervention

Tier 2 supports are personalized supports for students who missed between 10 to 20 percent of school during the last school year as well as those who miss 10 to 20 percent of school during the current school year. Research-based strategies for supporting these students include:

- **Mentoring:** Mentoring is a [proven strategy](#) for reducing absenteeism. The National Mentoring Partnership, in collaboration with partners, has released the [Virtual Mentoring Portal](#). This free tool provides safe and monitored mentoring platforms for mentors and mentees to continue their relationships while they may be separated due to COVID-19.
- **Expanded learning programs:** Schools can help students by making sure they enroll and participate in an expanded learning program, which, [research](#) shows, significantly improves attendance during the school day, especially for English language learners.
- **Mental health supports:** Many LEAs anticipate the need for greater levels of mental health supports given the stress and impacts on students and families since school closure. Kaiser Permanente's [Planning for the Next Normal at School](#) playbook offers ideas to expand services.
- **Student success plans:** Schools should create opportunities to partner with students and families to craft [plans](#) that outline what engages the student in learning, addresses barriers to getting to class, builds upon family strengths, and supports ongoing monitoring of attendance data. Ensuring students and families have a voice in crafting plans is critical to tailoring solutions to their realities and nurturing ownership.

Tier 3: Intensive Intervention

Tier 3 supports may be needed to improve outcomes for students who were severely chronically absent (missing 20 percent or more of school) in the prior school year, for those who did not show up during the first few weeks of school, and for those experiencing homelessness. Schools and districts often collaborate with agencies that might have current or past contact with a family and secure the resources of community partners to address identified gaps. Ideally, support would begin as soon as possible to ensure the year starts on a positive note. Examples include:

- **Interagency case management:** Students involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice system can attain their educational goals with the support of a team of champions working across schools, families, and public agencies. For example, the [National Center for Youth Law Compassionate Systems Framework](#) provides a research-based model for agency collaboration and coordination to ensure that all young people involved in state systems are supported to attain their educational goals.
- **Housing stability supports:** Housing insecurity is an enormous challenge in California. Students with insecure housing may need help with transportation or

wraparound services to attend school. Schools and districts can use federal COVID-19 relief funds in the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) to provide support for students experiencing homelessness, whether they have lost their primary nighttime residence, are living in a motel, shelter, or campsite, or are doubled up with another family.

- Additional [examples of tiered interventions](#)

5 WORK WITH PARTNERS TO PROVIDE ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

Monitoring and addressing chronic absence as an integral part of community schools efforts is essential. Community partners can be the extra set of hands to support school staff that have been stretched thin during the pandemic. Community schools can create the infrastructure to help schools identify and cultivate partnerships that expand their ability to engage students and overcome barriers. Examples include:

- Expanded Learning providers that provide another set of caring adults as well as engaging enrichment activities that stimulate excitement in learning
- Health providers that can ensure access to needed health services and provide critical advice about when to keep students home due to contagious diseases or emphasize showing up and developing a regular attendance routine to decrease anxiety
- Business leaders who can help provide meaningful work opportunities during non-school hours, funding for supports most needed by students and families, and attendance recognition resources

For ideas on other community partners, see these [resources](#).

Consider including community partners in your attendance team while still [protecting student privacy](#).

If you need help identifying community partners, use the [United Way 211 system](#). To expand the number of partners that can help with specific services such as temporary housing, food, or medical care, use [FindHelp.org](#).

A call to data-driven collaboration

California has a wealth of resources that can be leveraged to create meaningful educational experiences and address barriers to getting to school. Working together and using data to inform action, we can ensure these resources are used to ensure every student has the support needed to show up to school, learn, and thrive.

For more information or to get help with your strategies to reduce chronic absence, please contact attendance@cde.ca.gov or visit www.attendanceworks.org.