



STATE OF NEW JERSEY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Getting Students to School:
Strategies for Improving Attendance and Reducing
Chronic Absenteeism



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New Jersey Department of Education

Strategies for Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

Introduction

In order for students to learn and achieve their fullest potential, it is critical that they are in school and engaged in the learning process. Research shows that student absences impact a child's ability to succeed in school.¹ In addition, there is evidence that chronic absenteeism from school is a primary cause of low academic achievement and a powerful predictor of a student's risk of dropping out of school.²

To support schools' efforts to combat chronic absenteeism the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) has developed this document to provide schools and districts with proactive ideas and strategies to engage educators, families and the community in an effort to improve student attendance. Extensive resources regarding attendance are also available on the [NJDOE website](#).

Tiered System of Supports to Improve Daily Attendance

[Attendance Works](#), a leading national organization providing tools and resources for schools to reduce chronic absenteeism, recommends a tiered approach to improve student attendance. The [New Jersey Tiered System of Supports](#) (NJTSS) is New Jersey's own model of a tiered framework of supports based on Response to Intervention (RTI) and multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS) (see the NJTSS graphic and organization of supports in Appendix A). NJTSS, similar to both RTI and MTSS promotes the organization of academic, behavioral, and health supports and interventions into three levels offered to ALL students based on their individual needs. This framework will be used to present both proactive and reactive strategies to prevent chronic absenteeism and intervene when a student is at risk of being chronically absent. Key links to ideas and toolkits are included throughout the document and additional links are provided at the end of the document for school leadership teams, intervention and referral service teams, collaborative planning teams and/or school safety teams to use to address schoolwide patterns of absenteeism as well as the needs of individual students and families who need support.

¹ "10 Facts About School Attendance," [Attendance Works](#)

² Balfanz, R. and Byrnes, V. (2012). *The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.

Foundational Elements

Engaging families and creating a positive school climate are two key strategies for improving attendance. These elements are part of most tiered frameworks and serve as foundational components in the NJTSS model (see Appendix). Ideas for improving family relationships and school climate that can lead to improved attendance are provided below.

❖ **Establish Positive Relationships with Students and Families** ([from Attendance Works](#))

- Take attendance in a caring manner. Personalize taking attendance by greeting students by name and welcoming a student back after an absence. This practice both ensures accurate attendance data is collected and helps strengthen a student's positive sense of connectedness to the school community.
- Welcome each family and child at the beginning of the year. There are many good examples: a smile and a high five as students board the school bus, staff ready to greet families and students at drop-off points and offer directions, a friendly greeting to each family and student at the classroom door, a postcard or note welcoming the student to your classroom or a phone call before school begins. If your school has a web-based parent portal, add a warm message to your classroom's page. Choose a personal and positive way that says, "I'm glad you are here. I look forward to being your teacher and seeing you in school every day."
- When possible, start your relationship with your families on their home turf by offering a home visit. When educators invest upfront in relational home visits, attendance improves and schools can reap many other positive benefits. Ideally, school staff will get trained and then conduct voluntary home visits to families during summer or early fall. This helps open lines of communication and establish a positive home-school relationship before problems arise.
- With home visits, families are more likely to feel that educators really care about their children and often gain a deeper understanding of what their children are learning and expectations for their child's academic achievement. Educators gain insights into the hopes and dreams that families have for their children as well as the challenges a student faces in getting to school every day. In short, relational home visits help bridge the gaps that often exist especially when educators don't live in neighborhoods served by their schools or share the ethnic or class backgrounds of their students.

❖ **Establish Positive, Supportive and Engaging School Climate**

- Conduct an annual [school climate survey](#) to measure your school's conditions for learning, and develop and implement a school climate improvement plan to reinforce areas found to need additional attention.
- Ensure that the [materials and curricula](#) in your school reflect your students and their interests.

- Promote [culturally responsive teaching](#) and [social and emotional learning](#).
- Advertise on the school calendar events focused on student engagement and school spirit (e.g., [50 Ideas to Build School Spirit](#) and [A Year of Special School Events](#)).
- Provide a [safe, clean environment](#) and [asthma-friendly schools](#).
- Use the [Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child](#) framework to identify and share core health strategies.
- Provide [incentives for teachers](#) who attend school regularly and model good attendance.
- Implement [Positive Behavioral Supports in Schools Universal Strategies](#) to improve school climate and prevent student behavior that can negatively impact attendance.

Tier I: Universal Attendance Strategies

Tier 1 of any tiered support system includes schoolwide, universal strategies that support and encourage daily attendance for *all* students. The following strategies are meant to proactively promote good attendance for all students.

❖ Clarify Attendance Expectations and Goals

- Ensure that attendance expectations are clearly presented in your school and district code of student conduct.
- Use multiple media to publicize attendance goals in ways that are accessible to all students, families and the community (e.g., [posters, district and school web pages, morning announcements, parent-teacher organization meetings and email and school newsletters](#)).
- Make attendance an item for discussion in all school events including [back-to-school night](#), parent conferences and other opportunities to share goals with various stakeholders.

❖ Educate and Engage Students and Families About the Impact of Attendance on Achievement

- Launch a schoolwide Attendance Campaign for all families during the first 30 days of school. Include a kickoff event with a parent speaker, a catchy slogan, and branded items distributed to students and caregivers (pencils, pens, notepads, noisemakers, etc.)
- Host events to celebrate great attendance and improved attendance for parents and students.

- Participate in [Attendance Awareness Month](#) activities throughout the month of September.
- Use social networking tools to inform stakeholders of the impact of missing school throughout the school year.
- Post daily student attendance percentages conspicuously (e.g., in the cafeteria, in a major hallway, on the website).

❖ **Ensure Accurate Data Collection and Reporting and Monitor Attendance Data Regularly**

- Develop a system and use data to monitor chronic absences (e.g., [Every School Day Counts](#)).
- Collect accurate attendance data and follow the [Guidance for Reporting Student Absences](#) provided by NJDOE.
- Use either your SIS or an electronic system to monitor and track student attendance. If your SIS does not provide a means of monitoring student attendance, [NJ SMART](#) provides tools on how report attendance data as well as including a feature in the [At-Risk Report](#) to identify students who are chronically absent and monitor the school’s chronic absenteeism rate.
- Include attendance records on report cards and progress reports.
- Provide parents with a comparative analysis of their student’s attendance with the average student attendance in the building (e.g., [Tacoma Public School’s “Nudge” letter](#)).

❖ **Recognize Good and Improved Attendance**

- Provide [recognition](#) to individual students, rewards for students with excellent attendance, or improvement on attendance that reversed an at-risk trajectory and groups (i.e., classes with excellent monthly attendance.)
- On three to five occasions per semester, provide unannounced door prizes to randomly selected students entering the building in the morning (e.g., [Trenton Public Schools Student Attendance Improvement Guide](#)).
- Conduct major yearly pro-attendance events.

Tier II Intervention Strategies for Students At-risk for Chronic Absenteeism

Tier 2 strategies are for students and families who need additional support beyond what is provided for all students. Tier 2 supports supplement high quality Tier 1 strategies already in place. While it is critical in Tier 1 to build strong, positive relationships between school staff, students and families to create an overall positive school climate, Tier 2 strategies involve building caring supportive relationships through programs and practices targeted to some students whose attendance after a month or two of school puts them at risk for chronic absenteeism. For example, the school team monitoring attendance data may determine that a student is missing more than two days of school in a month. Discussion with his or her teacher and the principal might reveal that the student has been bullied or is struggling with academics. Small group counseling or a small group academic intervention might be needed to address the root cause of the absences. Tier 2 supports address other barriers to strong attendance including unreliable or no transportation, unsafe paths to school and unmanaged chronic health conditions.

If a school is using a tiered system like NJTSS for prevention, intervention and enrichment, the collaborative problem-solving team, or the team that reviews student-level data and makes decisions about interventions, can be utilized to review attendance data and make determinations about supports. Criteria can be established with regard to absences that the team can use to determine which students are in need of Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports. Administrators, teachers and paraprofessionals representative of all student subgroups are essential to implementing Tier 1 and Tier 2 strategies; creating a welcoming environment that makes students and families feel connected to school; and taking positive and early action when a student is absent. While a welcoming first impression helps all students, it is vital for helping the most vulnerable students feel safe and supported, especially if they are in an unfamiliar school setting.

❖ **Develop Personal Connections with Students Who Are in Danger of, or Are Currently Chronically Absent**

- Make personal calls to families of at-risk students if a student is absent 2 or more days in a month.
- Make home visits for students who have excessive absences.
- Create and send personalized “We missed you!” postcards home when a student is absent.

❖ **Support Families Facing Additional Barriers to Daily School Attendance**

- Share and connect families with community resources to fill a pressing need that may be hampering school attendance; e.g., need to find transitional housing, need to combat food insecurity, need to get counseling referrals for parent and/or student(s), need to provide interpretation for limited English proficient family members.
- Connect students with appropriate medical care and/or homebound services when needed.

❖ Develop a [Mentoring Program](#) in Your School

- Place students with mentors (e.g., [Success Mentors](#)) based on attendance records from prior year(s). Assign mentors at a ratio of 4:1, students to mentors.
- Review the [What Works Clearinghouse](#) for evidence-based interventions such as “[check and connect](#).”

❖ Identify Resources Available to Improve Chronic Absenteeism Rates Among Various Student Populations

- Utilize your [Intervention and Referral Services](#) or collaborative problem solving (NJTSS) team for individualized strategies and interventions for responding to absences due to learning, behavior or health difficulties.
- Connect with community organizations that may help with creating a more culturally responsive school environment.
- Institute school programs that promote daily attendance. For example, you may consider instituting [school breakfast programs](#) and [safe walk to school programs](#).
- Provide students with [resources to launder clothes or uniforms](#), or exchange clothes or uniforms when necessary.
- Offer access to health care through a school nurse or other health and dental providers who can come to the school.
- [Engage community partners](#) and/or connect to existing coalitions to see if they can aid in filling noted gaps in resources.
- Train teachers with the most effective, [research-based practices for English language learners](#).
- Allow non-English speaking parents/guardians to submit necessary school [documentation](#) in their native language, if possible.

Tier III Intervention Strategies for Chronically Absent Students

Tier 3 offers more *intensive*, individualized interventions and supports for students and families determined by the school data, intervention and referral services or collaborative problem solving (NJTSS) team. Tier 3 strategies complement tier 1 and 2 strategies and complete the continuum. These strategies should be necessary for only a few students who are already chronically absent or have a history of chronic absence. The school team can develop an inventory of school and community resources for supporting individual students and their families. These may include

family counseling agencies, afterschool programs, recreation programs, social service agencies and the court system. Tier 3 interventions often require a coordinated response among agencies (e.g., the school, Department of Children and Families, law enforcement, and Department of Human Services) and/or [wraparound services](#). If a disability is suspected, the child should be referred to the school's child study team. If the student has an IEP, an IEP meeting may be needed to discuss and identify supports and services to improve attendance. Specific tier 3 strategies are listed below.

❖ **Utilize Student Support Staff to Identify Individual Barriers to Satisfactory Attendance**

- If permitted by the district, screen students for childhood trauma and make evidence-based treatment available to them.
- Refer students for additional support and evaluation as needed. For instance, if a student is dealing with anxiety, a school support person such as a social worker, mentor, counselor or psychologist may be able to assist the student or suggest outside resources to parents that they may utilize.

❖ **Utilize a “[check-in check-out](#)” system or other interventions to prevent behavior that may lead to extended absence or suspension.**

❖ **Refer the Student and Parent/Guardian to Outside Agencies and Legal Intervention**

- Have the school counselor, social worker or appropriate school personnel refer the student and family for additional services, such as through the Department of Children and Families' [Children's System of Care](#), [The Children's Home Society of New Jersey](#), and other community organizations.
- Have appropriate school personnel refer the student and family to applicable legal intervention. As a last resort, districts are required to have policies related to truancy regarding legal intervention for families having students with excessive, unexcused absences.

Additional Resources

- NJDOE's [Attendance, Truancy & Chronic Absenteeism](#) webpage. This site features additional resources schools can utilize to prevent address chronic absenteeism.
- [Absences Add Up](#)
 - Helps increase a student's chances of success in school through mentorship and out-of-school time programs.
- [Attendance Works](#)
 - Provides resources, research and technical assistance to schools for monitoring, understanding and addressing chronic absenteeism.

- [Every Student, Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism](#)
 - Provides community stakeholders with information, resources and action steps to help ensure that students are in school every day and reduce chronic absenteeism.

- [Health Schools Campaign: Chronic Absenteeism](#)
 - Offers resources regarding the impact of student health on chronic absenteeism, the importance of addressing chronic absenteeism in the early grades and other related reports and briefs.

- [What Works Clearinghouse](#)
 - Offers evidence-based practices to prevent behavior that may lead to extended absences and address other root causes of chronic absenteeism.

- You may also contact the Office of Student Support Services at attendance@doe.state.nj.us with any questions.

New Jersey Tiered System of Supports to Improve Attendance

Tier 2: Intervention Strategies for Students At-risk for Chronic Absenteeism
(Students missing 5-10%)

Tier 1 plus:

- Develop personal connections with students who are currently, or in danger of being chronically absent;
- Support families facing additional barriers to daily school attendance and increase engagement;
- Develop a mentoring program in your school; and
- Identify resources available to improve chronic absenteeism rates among various student populations.

Tier 3: Intervention Strategies for Chronically Absent Students
(Students missing 10% or more of school)

Tiers 1 and 2 plus:

- Utilize student support staff to identify individual barriers to satisfactory attendance;
- Offer students opportunities to reengage with the school community and reconcile credits and curricular content they may have missed due to missed classes;
- Offer students and families alternative educational structures to best accommodate barriers to school attendance; and
- Refer the student and parent/guardian to outside agencies and legal

Tier 1: Universal Attendance Strategies
(All students)

- Clarify attendance expectations and goals;
- Educate and engage students and families about the impact of attendance on achievement;
- Ensure accurate data collection and reporting and monitor attendance data; and
- Recognize good and improved attendance.

Foundational Elements

- Establish positive relationships with students and families; and
- Establish positive, supportive and engaging school climate.

