

*Briefing Memo*

# Strengthening School Attendance Policies and Practices

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## Executive Summary

Research demonstrates that chronic absenteeism has harmful and lasting impacts on students' academic success. Research also indicates that students can reverse their academic difficulties if they improve their attendance. The following memo provides information from research literature and resources from attendance improvement initiatives that schools and districts can use to strengthen their own attendance policies and practices. It identifies a three-tiered approach to effective attendance policies and practices:

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### *Tier One: Create Universal Prevention Efforts to Build a Habit of Excellent Attendance*

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#### A. Attendance Becomes a Community Priority

Communities should convene district- and school-level attendance work groups that bring together school staff, families, and community agencies from various sectors, such as social services, afterschool, and housing. These groups will revise local attendance policies, plan community-wide attendance awareness efforts, and meet regularly to review attendance data to better understand and address systemic issues that require change (e.g., snow removal, housing, new school support staff positions, etc.). Communities can also partner with schools to assist with individual cases of chronic absenteeism (e.g., recruit volunteers to serve as attendance mentors, partner with businesses to provide attendance incentives, etc.).

#### B. Parents are Educated about the Importance of Excellent Attendance for Academic Success and about School Attendance Requirements

Parent education efforts should strive to let parents know not only *what* the attendance rules are, but *why* it matters. Schools should make attendance information available to parents in multiple languages/low-literacy formats and in multiple ways (letters, posters, community presentations). Schools should focus on positive messaging and parent engagement to create high attendance expectations within families and help them know how keeping absences to a minimum is crucial to academic success.

#### C. Chronic Absenteeism is Clearly Defined

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of the school year for which a student is enrolled (the equivalent of 18 days for a full 180-day school year) regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused.

#### D. School Districts Establish Policies and Practices to both Encourage Attendance and Monitor Chronic Absenteeism

Schools should strive to encourage attendance by a) creating positive, welcoming school environments that motivate students to come to school every day; b) helping students and families

recognize how easily absences can add up and create academic risk; c) recognizing excellent and improved student attendance with certificates, assemblies, or other incentives; d) effectively responding to absences by clearly outlining in their policies how, when, and by whom families will be contacted about student absences (including plans for what to do if parents cannot be reached); and e) monitoring chronic absenteeism to enable early intervention. Schools should use the NYSED **SIRS-361** absenteeism report to easily monitor which students are chronically absent or at-risk. Regular data reporting and monitoring is key to this effort.

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*Tier Two: Promote Open Communication with Chronically Absent Students and their Families to Understand the Problem; Provide Appropriate Support(s) through School and/or Community Services.*

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Student absences may be caused by family factors, school factors, economic influences, or student variables. Understanding these underlying issues is key to providing meaningful supports. Therefore, this tier begins with establishing open communication with the chronically-absent student and his/her family. As soon as absences begin to accumulate, school staff should meet with the student and family to discuss the underlying challenges and identify what might help to motivate a student to attend school, so that they can then select resolution strategies. School-based interventions may include special education evaluations, referrals to the school social worker/psychologist, or a conflict resolution program. For older students, efforts may include schedule accommodations, vocational placements, or school transfers.

Some problems may require community services. School personnel may refer students to community-based organizations in such areas as: grief counseling, Social Security, busing, housing, and others. Calling 211, the human service equivalent of 911, is an effective way to identify community resources.

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*Tier Three: Provide Intensive School and/or Community Interventions*

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More intensive school services could include Child Find and additional evaluations, a Program Review, or a Functional Behavior Assessment leading to a Behavior Intervention Plan. Some families may be appropriate for referral to a Westchester County Department of Community Mental Health Network, which identifies family strengths and needs as a basis for planning with multiple community providers. As a last resort after all school and community resources have been

exhausted and the child's academic performance has been negatively impacted, school districts can consider intervention by Child Protective Services (CPS) or the Probation Department for a Person in Need of Supervision (PINS). These actions, however, can jeopardize parents' work opportunities and risk placement of a child in either the child welfare or the juvenile justice system. They should only be used as a last resort when collaborations with all school and community services and resources have been exhausted without success, and the child's academic performance has been negatively impacted.

The memo also reviews recent attendance improvement initiatives in Westchester County. Several districts, including Yonkers, Mount Vernon, the Rochambeau Alternative High School in White Plains, Ossining, and Peekskill, created work groups. In addition to school staff, these groups have invited participation from:

- government agencies including the Departments of Social Services, Probation, Community Mental Health, the Police Department, and the Office of the District Attorney;
- community agencies including the local Youth Bureau, Family Ties of Westchester, Family Services of Westchester, Big Brothers/Big Sisters and Student Advocacy.

In some of these districts, attendance policies and practices have been revised, incorporating elements of the three tiers outlined above. The full memo describes these efforts in greater detail, which may serve as an example to other Westchester districts.

## Attendance Resources for School Districts



- **NYSED SIRS-361 Year to Date Attendance/Absenteeism Verification Report**  
This report, generated from school-submitted attendance data, allows school staff to quickly check both overall school chronic absence rates and individual student attendance records. Report guide is available at: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/level2reports/SIRS-360--361-combinedReportGuide.pdf>.
- **Attendance Works**, <http://www.attendanceworks.org>  
This national attendance initiative offers free resources, including toolkits, handouts, and webinars, to help with attendance messaging, family engagement, data analysis, and other efforts.
- **Every Student Present**, <http://www.everystudentpresent.org>  
Every Student Present is a public awareness campaign launched by the New York State Council on Children and Families designed to help school staff, parents and communities understand the impact of chronic absences. Resources are provided for parents so they are able to address factors that impact their child's attendance; resources are available for educators and community coalitions to reduce chronic absence.

## Strengthening School Attendance Policies and Practices<sup>1</sup>

Research indicates that students can reverse their academic difficulties if they improve their attendance [Attendance Works, 2014]. When Chicago focused on attendance in ninth grade, graduation rates rose. When New York City reduced chronic absence rates through its success mentoring program, more students stayed in school until graduation. In the early grades, several studies suggest that children who arrive with the weakest skills and attend regularly see outsized gains in achievement. Improving attendance is also an essential strategy for reducing<sup>2</sup> achievement gaps. Studies indicate that low-income students who attend school regularly appear to benefit from instruction more than their higher income peers do. They gain 8% more literacy skills in Kindergarten and nearly 7% more in first grade. This narrows the reading gap between rich and poor by nearly a third [Attendance Works 2014]. Attendance improvement is vital!

The three building blocks for school success are attendance, attachment, and achievement [National Center for School Engagement 2005]. Students are more likely to become engaged when 1) they have positive relationships with school personnel, 2) a welcoming school climate exists, 3) school-based supports and resources are available, and 4) they feel safe because issues of bullying and student harassment are effectively addressed. Strong attendance and attachment are essential prerequisites for achievement.

The importance of attachment and achievement cannot be overstated and all school districts are urged to take steps to strengthen them. This statement, however, focuses on school attendance and chronic absenteeism. Although attendance problems can be difficult for districts to address, particularly for students who are chronically absent and/or older, school interventions can definitely improve attendance, especially when district efforts include early intervention. In fact, studies of dropouts show that leaving school is “merely the culminating act of a long withdrawal process from school, forecast by absenteeism in the early grades” [Sheldon and Epstein 2004]. Chang and Romero, in a 2008 report from the National Center for Children in Poverty: *Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades* state:

We intentionally use the term “chronic absence,” because the more frequently used term, “truancy,” only refers to unexcused absences and connotes inappropriate student behavior requiring a punitive response. Rather than blaming children, we want to broaden awareness that missing extended periods of school could be an early sign of distress in school, community or home that could respond to appropriate early intervention. Moreover, when children are 5, 6 or 7 years of age, they are not likely to be absent from school without their parents’ knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> The original version of this briefing memo was prepared in 2009 by Karen Blumenthal, Policy Advocate and Lisa Syron, Executive Director at Student Advocacy. The 2015 revision was written by Karen Blumenthal and Amberly Wilenski, a summer student intern from Cornell University. This 2017 update was prepared by Anna Canning, also a summer intern from Cornell University, Karen Blumenthal and Lisa Syron.

Responding to these indicators of distress is of vital importance, not only for the child's wellbeing, but also for his/her academic success. Research demonstrates that missing school in the early grades can weaken a student's academic foundation and have lasting effects on school performance. Analysis of national data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study found that chronically absent kindergartners gained 14% fewer literacy skills in kindergarten and 12% fewer mathematics skills in first grade than those with average attendance [Ready 2010]. Another study by the National Center for Children in Poverty also found that students who were chronically absent in kindergarten demonstrated weaker reading skills in first grade; for low-income children, the ill effects lingered through fifth grade [Chang and Romero 2008].

In order for students to meet grade standards, they need to be in class from early on, learning fundamental reading and math skills and having the opportunity to build a habit of good attendance that will eventually carry them into college and careers. For this reason, it is important to measure attendance in pre-school and pre-kindergarten, even though compulsory education begins at age 6. Compulsory education law may limit intervention strategies but should not eliminate all district efforts for students outside the compulsory school age. Good attendance habits begin at an early age, and it is important to make attendance a priority in a student's life as soon as the child begins his/her education [Ehrlich 2014].

In recent years, government agencies have recognized chronic absenteeism as an issue that cannot be ignored. In 2013, the New York State Council on Children and Families (CCF) launched a public awareness initiative called *Every Student Present* to educate schools, families, and communities about chronic absenteeism and provide strategies to combat it ["Governor Cuomo Announces 'Every Student Present' Campaign" 2015]. In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) launched a similar effort, called *Every Student, Every Day* ["Every Student, Every Day" 2015]). Appendix B of this memo includes resources created by these programs that may be useful to schools and districts in their own efforts to improve attendance.

Additionally, data on chronic absenteeism is being collected and used in new ways. The USDOE is requiring submission of data on chronic absenteeism for use in its annual *EdFacts* performance reports. On the state level, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) included chronic absenteeism as an indicator of school quality and student success in its state plan under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) [Rider, 2017]. These changes provide schools and districts with new tools they can use in their own data analysis, which will be outlined later in this memo.

Three basic principles underpin the literature relating to improving school attendance: 1) family involvement activities can improve school attendance [Chang and Romero, Virginia Department of Education]; 2) early and quick intervention after attendance problems are noted makes a difference [Chang and Romero, Center for Mental Health in Schools, Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, National Center for School Engagement, OJJDP Model Programs Guide, Virginia Department of Education]; and 3) everyone in the community has a role to play in this mission [Balfanz, R., Herzog, L., and D. MacIver].

Attendance policies and practices that effectively deal with chronic absenteeism share several key components incorporated into this three-tiered approach:

**Tier One: Create Universal Prevention Efforts to Build a Habit of Excellent Attendance**

- A. Attendance Becomes a Community Priority;
- B. Parents are Educated about the Importance of Excellent School Attendance for Academic Success and about School Attendance Requirements;
- C. Chronic Absenteeism is Clearly Defined; and
- D. School Districts Establish Policies and Practices to Both Encourage Attendance and Monitor Chronic Absenteeism.

**Tier Two: Promote Open Communication with Chronically Absent Students and their Families to Understand the Problem; Provide Appropriate Supports through School and/or Community Services**

**Tier Three: Provide Intensive School and/or Community Interventions**

In the remainder of this memo, we provide information about each of these tiers from current research literature and then report on the impact of local attendance initiatives.

**Tier One: Create Universal Prevention Efforts to Build a Habit of Excellent Attendance**

Creating a school community in which attendance matters and each student's efforts to attend school regularly are recognized and rewarded are the keys to prevention. This results from ensuring that

:

- A. Attendance becomes a community priority;
- B. Parents are educated about the importance of excellent school attendance for academic success and about school attendance requirements;
- C. Chronic Absenteeism is clearly defined; and
- D. School Districts establish policies and practices to both encourage attendance and monitor chronic absenteeism.

**A. Attendance becomes a community priority**

Convening a local work group on student attendance will ensure that it is an explicit priority in the community [Balfanz and Byrnes]. Many successful attendance efforts have relied on the creation of two different work groups: one at the school district level and one at the school building level.

The district-level work group brings together senior leadership from the school district with representatives from the schools and various community agencies across a range of disciplines: early childhood, family engagement, social services, public safety, afterschool, faith-based, philanthropy, public housing, and transportation. This group reviews and revises the district's attendance policy. It also collects and analyzes district attendance data to efficiently identify persistent problem areas and monitor the impact of interventions. How to promote excellent attendance from the beginning of the school year through community events and campaigns can also be discussed.

At the building level, each school in the district should convene another work group to review its own attendance data and procedures. This could be a team devoted exclusively to attendance or a pre-existing team that has attendance added to its broader responsibilities. In any case, it should include various members from the school community. This group will be responsible for determining how to use the attendance data that the school collects to identify students who are at risk of becoming, or already are, chronically absent. It will work to ensure that the school's attendance procedures incorporate these identification strategies and provide effective interventions to get students back in school. In addition, the work group should analyze the school's attendance data to look for patterns that reflect systemic issues that contribute to absenteeism and should be addressed.

Both work groups should meet regularly and seek input from stakeholders including teachers, students, families, and community partners. The building level groups, which will monitor individual cases of chronic absence that require timely intervention, should meet frequently: at least once a month. The district level groups may meet more infrequently: once every 1-2 months. The time and effort of both groups will pay off in improved attendance, especially for vulnerable low-income students. Research shows that low-income students are 15% less likely to be chronically absent if attending a school with an attendance-focused work group than a school without one [Balfanz and Byrnes].

Community volunteers can also play an important role in attendance efforts. Recruiting an extra shift of adults to mentor chronically absent students can be an effective measure to improve attendance habits and attitudes. Volunteers and National Service programs can provide mentors to monitor attendance and reach out to families when students are struggling with attending school. When New York City schools assigned success mentors to chronically absent students in 100 schools, students with mentors attended school an average of 9 more days than similar students at other schools [Jacobs, Mader, Nauer, and Robinson].

## **B. Parents are educated about the importance of excellent school attendance for academic success and about school Attendance requirements**

Districts must ensure that parents understand the standard for excellent attendance. The literature on improving school attendance emphasizes the importance of having effective attendance policies and ensuring that families are aware of them [Chang and Romero, Kopperud and Weaver, Railsback, Sheldon and Epstein, Virginia Department of Education]. Due to the increasing immigrant population in local school districts, notification of compulsory school attendance laws



is an essential first step. Many families come from countries where the compulsory school age laws are different; mandatory education may start later and end earlier. In light of that, information should be provided to all families, in languages other than English, in a low-literacy format and in multiple ways (letters, pamphlets, posters, community presentations).

Parent education efforts should strive to let parents know not only *what* the attendance rules are, but *why* it matters. Research links strong attendance with a reverse of academic difficulties, higher graduation rates and narrowing of the achievement gap for low-income students. A useful tool to show how missed days will affect a student's chances of graduating from high school on time can be found at <https://getschooled.com/dashboard/tool/343-attendance-counts?type=tool> Parents who believe attendance is important for academic success tend to have children with better attendance rates. One Chicago study found that families who value attendance had children with absenteeism rates averaging 7.5%, compared to the 13.2% absenteeism rates for children of parents who did not think attendance mattered [*Attendance in the Early Grades*].

There are several ways in which school districts can insure that parents know the importance of regular school attendance. These include:

- Launching a public awareness campaign to convey that every day counts. An “attendance awareness month” in September, speeches, and billboards can reinforce this message.
- Hosting special events, such as a back-to-school night for parents and assemblies for students, to build a culture of attendance early on.
- Holding small meetings as the school year begins, especially for families new to the district or those whose children have already had attendance problems, reviewing why regular school attendance is so important.
- Sending a summary of the attendance policy by mail at the start of the school year, and asking parents to sign and return a statement indicating that the attendance policy has been read and is understood. Emphasize the link between attendance and student achievement.
- Encouraging families to help their children understand the impact of excellent attendance on their success in school.
- Highlighting that it is the family's responsibility to ensure that their children arrive at school each day on time, remain in school for the full day, and attend school consistently throughout the year, including prior to and following school vacations.
- Encouraging families to seek clarification from a specified school official of any aspect of the school's attendance policy when anything is unclear.
- Clarifying that families should notify the appropriate school official by phone on the morning of the student's absence and provide a written excuse when the student returns to school.
- Emphasizing that families need to respond immediately to any call or letter from their child's school regarding absenteeism.
- Presenting information to families about absences in a timely fashion can help parents recognize a developing problem, because families often do not realize how many absences their child has accumulated.

Two great resources for parent education about attendance that school districts can use are:

**Attendance Works**, <http://www.attendanceworks.org>

**Every Student Present**, <http://www.everystudentpresent.org>

Research illustrates that successful attendance improvement programs share several common characteristics: a greater level of parent engagement; a focus on more positive perceptions of, and higher expectations for, parents and students; and a shared belief that everyone has a role to play in improving attendance and should consequently work together. The goal of positive messaging is to help parents and students realize that daily attendance is a key requisite for academic success. An intentional shift from using the threat of fines, court action or other punitive means to compel attendance to encouraging families to take advantage of the opportunity for their children to learn helps to change attitudes and behavior [Ehrlich].

Two elementary-level model truancy programs, the Chronic Truancy Initiative and Abolish Chronic Truancy, found that attendance improved significantly after families received a letter from the principal describing the attendance problem [Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, National Center for School Engagement]. In studies of similar school communications to parents published earlier this year, researchers observed the same positive effects [Rogers, Duncan, et al.; Rogers and Feller]. The most impactful communication strategy examined reduced chronic absenteeism by 10% across all grade levels [Rogers and Feller].

Schools should not inadvertently create attendance problems by asking parents to pick up from school a child who is having a behavior problem before the school day ends or prohibiting a misbehaving child from going on a class trip so that the child stays home from school. Situations like these send the wrong message to parents and students. Some parents start to proactively keep their child home from school if they fear that the child will just be sent home. In these situations, other steps should be taken, such as involving the Child Study Team and the Committee on Special Education, and making community referrals, rather than encouraging irregular attendance.

### **C. Chronic Absenteeism is clearly defined**

In order to effectively prevent chronic absenteeism, schools and districts must regularly monitor absences and be proactive in making early interventions. Making the definition of chronic absenteeism clear is the first step in this effort.

Chronic absenteeism means missing 10% or more of the school year for which a student is enrolled (the equivalent of 18 days for a full 180-day school year) regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused [NYSED]. Both excused and unexcused absences are counted since both can contribute to academic problems. While school districts may have used varying definitions of chronic absenteeism in the past, the USDOE and NYSED have recently adopted this definition as the standard and are requiring its use in current and future data collection and other efforts [Rider, 2017].

## **D. School Districts establish Policies and Practices to both encourage Attendance and monitor Chronic Absenteeism**

### a. Encouraging Attendance with Incentives

Teachers and administrators can motivate students to come to school by recognizing excellent and improved attendance—not just perfect attendance. This should happen daily in small ways. Simple incentives -- such as praise, certificates, assemblies, extra recess, or popcorn parties -- can encourage students and help build a stronger culture that celebrates attendance.

### b. Effectively Responding to Absences

The literature on improving school attendance emphasizes the importance of paying prompt attention to any absences [Chang and Romero, California Department of Education, Kopperud and Weaver, Railsback, Sheldon and Epstein, Virginia Department of Education]. In order to effectively respond to absences, attendance policies should be clear and comprehensive.

Does your attendance policy

- Ensure that families provide all phone numbers where they can be reached during the day, updating them as appropriate, to be kept on file at the student's school?
- Indicate that a specific school staff member will attempt to reach the family whenever the parent has failed to contact the school first when the student is absent? A sample phone script is included in Appendix B.
- Describe the steps, including actions and time frames, that will next be taken by school personnel if the family does not respond to the phone calls (for example, a letter from the principal is sent after 3 unexcused absences, a home visit is scheduled, or a meeting is offered which will connect the parents to school personnel)? A sample letter is included in Appendix B.
- Indicate what will be done if no family member responds to these efforts (for example, providing information on community-based organizations to the family or contacting the appropriate school official to verify if the family is still residing at the same address)?
- Establish a system for timely notification to the family of middle and high school students when poor attendance jeopardizes the loss of course credit or the ability to attend summer school?
- Discuss how all efforts to contact families, and the content of these efforts, are to be documented?

### c. Monitoring Chronic Absenteeism for Early Intervention

In addition to dealing with individual absences, attendance policies should provide a strategy for monitoring potential or existing cases of chronic absenteeism. At the beginning of each school year, schools should review the previous year's attendance data to see which students were chronically absent in the past. This can immediately identify students likely to need attendance supports. Schools should also review the NYS Student Information Repository System for the most timely information regarding student attendance status (i.e., not at risk, at risk, chronically absent). This will allow schools to identify students in need of intervention earlier. Using the 10%

definition, a student who is enrolled on the first day of school would be considered at risk of being chronically absent after accumulating a total of 2 days absent by the end of September, a total of 4 days absent by the end of October, and a total of 6 days absent by the end of November. Attendance data must be carefully monitored at least monthly to identify these students.

As part of a recent statewide attendance initiative, NYSED has created new resources to make the job of data monitoring easier for schools and districts. Specifically, NYSED is using attendance data collected in the Student Information Repository System (SIRS) to generate new attendance and chronic absenteeism reports, available in L2RPT. One of these reports, the **SIRS-361 Year-to-Date Student Attendance/Absenteeism Summary Report**, offers a particularly helpful snapshot of chronic absenteeism within a school. The report presents:

“by grade or by student subgroup, a year-to-date summary of attendance days, students enrolled during the school year, the number and percentage of students absent between 0-4% of enrolled school days, 5-9% of enrolled school days (at-risk of becoming chronically absent), and 10% or more of enrolled school days (chronically absent). As with other summary reports in L2RPT, designated staff can “drill through” from the summary report to a student detail report that shows for each student, the number of days enrolled, present, and absent, and start and end enrollment dates.” [Rider, 2016]

This report will allow designated staff to easily check both the overall rates of chronically absent and at-risk students in the school and the personal attendance records of individual students. For each individual student, the report clearly indicates whether he/she is a) chronically absent, b) at risk, or c) not at risk, as well as the number and percentage of days he/she has been absent. Because this report is generated using attendance data reported in SIRS, the more frequently and completely school staff report their data, the more useful they will find it to be. More information about this report is available in an online guide, which may be accessed at: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/level2reports/SIRS-360--361-combinedReportGuide.pdf>. Two example reports, one summary report and one student detail report, are also included in Appendix A of this memo.

A system of regular monitoring based on a cumulative number of days absent will encourage early intervention to prevent chronic absenteeism. It will also help schools avoid scenarios where students cannot secure course credit or attend summer school because of poor attendance. The success of this approach depends on the consistent effort of school staff to report and check their data and proactively intervene with chronically absent or at-risk students.

### **Tiers Two and Three: When Prevention is not Enough**

In a school community that fosters excellent attendance, chronic absence should be addressed as a potential symptom of more serious issues. Within this framework, Tiers Two and Three offer increasing intervention to support students who are chronically absent. Meaningful interventions are based on understanding the reasons for chronic absenteeism.

## Understanding the reasons for chronic absenteeism

In order for schools to provide effective early interventions, it is necessary to determine the reasons for a student's absences. The causes are often divided into four broad categories: family factors, school factors, economic influences and student variables [Chang and Romero, Center for Mental Health in Schools].

Family factors include:

- Lack of parent awareness that multiple absences impact on children's academic achievement regardless of the student's age;
- Lack of familiarity with school attendance policies;
- Lack of parent supervision and/or guidance;
- Ambivalent attitudes about the importance of education;
- Fears related to being undocumented;
- Domestic violence;
- Substance abuse in the home;
- Serious mental health or medical issues; and
- Involvement in the criminal justice system.

School factors include:

- School safety issues (e.g., bullying);
- School climate issues;
- Lack of flexibility in meeting the diverse cultural and learning styles of students;
- Assuming that a student is lazy or unmotivated instead of fully exploring underlying problems;
- Failure to successfully notify families about each absence; and
- Inconsistent enforcement of attendance policies.

Economic influences include:

- Single-parent households and teenage motherhood;
- Poverty;
- High rate of mobility or relocation;
- Parents who work multiple jobs;
- Families that lack healthcare and/or use emergency room as primary care;
- Families that lack affordable transportation and/or child care; and
- Severely distressed neighborhoods.

Student variables include:

- Academic problems and learning difficulties;
- Persistent failure or difficulty based on an unidentified disability that is affecting learning;
- Limited social and emotional competence/behavior problems;
- Inadequate school supports when a student has poor physical health/chronic medical issues;
- Serious social or emotional issues;
- Lack of understanding of attendance policies; and
- Substance use.

Only after understanding the reasons for chronic absences is it possible for school personnel to take steps to appropriately address the problem. To be effective, the response must be tailored to the unique problems that the student is facing.

**Tier Two: Promote Open Communication with Chronically Absent Students and their Families to Understand the Problem; Provide Appropriate Support(s) through School and/or Community Services.**

Modify school services based on conversations with students and families

As soon as school personnel recognize that a student is accumulating absences, a school-level meeting should be held with the family and possibly the student (depending on age) to discuss why the absences are occurring and to select strategies that try to resolve the attendance problem. Since this conversation can touch on difficult underlying issues, it may be necessary to ask a school staff member who has a close relationship with the student to have the initial conversation. Extra support will help students and their families build strong relationships with school staff, and connect them to engaging learning activities. Other school participants should include the school attendance officer, school social worker, guidance counselor or psychologist, and any other person designated by the school administration, such as the CSE chair or the Pupil Personnel director. When medical reasons explain the absenteeism, it is also advisable to convene such a meeting so that the situation can be clearly understood by the school, and meaningful planning for the provision of services can occur. The school nurse should participate in these meetings, since physical health issues like asthma and Lyme's disease may often be at the root of the problem [California Department of Education, *Mapping the Early Attendance Gap*].

Potential interventions might be school-based, especially if it is determined that student factors are at the root of the absenteeism problem. These could include [California Department of Education, Children's Law Office, Kopperud and Weaver, Sutton Public School]:

- Providing the necessary evaluations for possible placement in a special education program or for the development of a 504 plan.
- Using the services of the school nurse in conjunction with the family's physician to investigate any physical reasons that might be a barrier to the student's education.
- Referring the student for counseling with the school social worker or psychologist.
- Using a school-based conflict resolution program.

Schools must take systematic steps to reach out to the student and family to encourage regular school attendance when dealing with an older student who is chronically absent. Often, chronic absenteeism has snowballed to create more complex problems, including a poor attitude. However, when underlying problems are addressed, even older students can be pulled back into regular school attendance. Serious efforts to respond using different levels of school services should be made before involving the child welfare or juvenile justice systems. Every effort should be made to keep youth in school by providing services in a collaborative fashion. Some additional strategies to consider for older students include [Kopperud and Weaver]:

- A flexible class schedule in which students can take early and late classes.
- Using vocational placement or enrichment at a work site as a school alternative to regular classroom instruction.
- Changing the student's schedule and/or instructors to best match student needs with available course offerings.
- Requesting an intra- or inter-district transfer for the student to give the student a fresh start.
- Arranging for a student transfer to an alternative educational program that will better meet a range of needs.

### Seek Additional Help from Community Services

Schools will be unable to resolve all problems that contribute to chronic absenteeism. In this case, the best way to resolve an attendance problem could be a referral to a community-based organization. Among the many resources to consider are:

- Community service agencies and their specific areas of services, such as grief counseling, charitable interventions (utilities, donations of food and clothing), parenting skills classes, Social Security, busing, food stamps, housing project associations, economic development groups, single-parent groups, and drug or alcohol counseling. Calling 211 is an effective way to identify appropriate community resources for a particular family. 211 is the human service equivalent to the 911 emergency system.
- Health referrals to agencies that offer techniques for dealing with head lice and clinics that offer low-income services.
- Legal services by lawyers and consumer credit counselors.
- Agencies that offer shelter, counseling, mental health services, and suicide or other hot lines.
- Youth organizations, which offer mentoring, tutoring, boys and girls clubs, youth centers, child-care, and after-school programs.

### **Tier Three: Provide More Intensive School and/or Community Interventions**

If a variety of school-based interventions have proven unsuccessful in improving the attendance of a chronically absent student, schools can pursue more intensive interventions such as:

- Additional evaluations to better understand underlying problems;
- A Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) to better understand the purpose of the student's chronic absence;
- A Program Review if the student is receiving special education services to determine if a change in the Individualized Educational Program (IEP) is needed; and
- More intensive services from the school psychologist or social worker.

If a family becomes involved with a variety of community service providers, it may be helpful to have a case manager who can oversee the planning process and the provision of services, and work very closely with school personnel. This is best accomplished by referral to a Westchester County

Department of Community Mental Health Network. At a Network meeting, families participate in the process. Strengths are identified and supports that are needed are discussed. This is the basis for planning with community providers to ensure that families have access to the supports that they need. To access Network, call (914) 995-4666.

As a last resort, Child Protective Services (CPS) or Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS) interventions for educational neglect can be used to address chronic absenteeism if collaborations with all school and community services and resources have been exhausted without success, and the child's academic performance has been negatively impacted. These interventions can jeopardize parents' work opportunities, risk placement of a child in either the child welfare or the juvenile justice system and undermine an effective working relationship between parents and teachers.

In some district offices of the Department of Social Services (DSS), a differential response allows CPS to respond to a report of educational neglect by using the Family Assessment Response (FAR). This is a voluntary approach offered to families when their cases meet FAR eligibility requirements. The focus is on identifying, assessing and addressing a family's needs. While safety is still of utmost concern, workers use family engagement and partnership rather than investigation techniques that identify a "victim" and a "perpetrator." FAR allows DSS to provide services without a formal determination of neglect. FAR workers are trained on how to ask solution-focused and strength-based questions, and partner with families in making decisions, setting goals and achieving desired outcomes.

If a CPS or PINS intervention is deemed necessary, this involvement should occur in a timely manner, beginning when the student has accumulated 18 absences. Too often, school personnel wait to involve CPS until there is a far greater number of absences and when it is very late in the school year. Additionally, a large number of potential cases are filed at the same time. This overwhelms CPS and makes it less likely that the situation can be effectively evaluated before the school year ends.

## **Local Attendance Initiatives**

Attendance improvement initiatives in Westchester school districts have also proven effective in recent years. Since our Attendance paper was first issued in 2009, Student Advocacy has participated in several collaborative efforts directed at improving attendance and more effectively addressing and reducing chronic absenteeism. Work groups have existed in Yonkers, Mount Vernon, the Rochambeau Alternative High School in White Plains, Ossining and Peekskill.

Usually, these work groups have been convened by the local school district, with a local consulting business, Program Design and Development, sometimes playing a leadership role. The groups always include school administrators. Often representatives from the Department of Social Services, the Probation Department, the Department of Community Mental Health, the local Police Department, and the Office of the District Attorney are asked to participate. Community agencies, such as the local Youth Bureau, Family Ties of Westchester, Family Services of Westchester, Big



Brothers/Big Sisters and Student Advocacy, are also included since they can provide critical services to address attendance problems. The optimal attendance improvement work group consists of all of the above. It is also essential that key school administrators, including a high level technology staff member, and a representative from each school building are at the table.

Some initiatives chose to focus on absenteeism in grades one through eight. Pre-K and Kindergarten were often excluded because children are not yet of compulsory school age. Grades one through eight were targeted to address problems earlier before issues compound. More recently, work groups have included work on Pre-K and Kindergarten because there is research that demonstrates that students who miss too many days of school at those levels are less ready for the academic rigors of first grade and are less successful readers by third grade. In fact, some efforts cover students from Pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Including high school students is seen as essential since the highest rates of chronic absence are typically in grades nine through twelve.

All efforts recognized the importance of collecting attendance data to determine the extent of chronic absenteeism in the district. Often, the first step taken was to determine the number of students with more than 20 unexcused absences during the previous school year (in light of the new standard definition, this number would now be 18 absences, excused or unexcused). A surprisingly high number of chronic absentees prompted the districts to create a protocol with the following key elements:

1. A commitment to carefully monitor the number of unexcused absences on a regular basis was made (regular is usually monthly, though sometimes quarterly). Teams have been formed at both the building level and for the whole school district to undertake review of data, red flag problem situations sooner and initiate interventions before the number of absences increases.
2. The school district's attendance policy was carefully examined and revised. Changes largely involved clarifying parent responsibilities regarding absenteeism, but also discussed what school personnel will do to help resolve underlying problems behind the absences. Also, time frames for reaching out to parents, via phone calls, emails, letters and visits, have been established.
3. There was some grappling with the issue of whether to focus only on unexcused absences or whether to monitor all absences, excused and unexcused. Although doing the former is easier, Attendance Works argues that all absences impact learning and academic success, so it is just as important for schools to address chronic excused absences. In the time elapsed since these work groups met, new state and federal government initiatives have standardized this more inclusive definition of chronic absenteeism.
4. Many work groups have strengthened their attendance practices using materials made available through Attendance Works, particularly toolkits for promoting attendance awareness in August and September, as well as attendance toolkits for parents and for teachers. They are using positive messaging strategies about why it is so important to attend school every day, on time and for the entire day. Community partners like government officials, faith-based institutions, youth-serving agencies, and health and mental health services have been enlisted to reinforce positive messages about attendance.
5. It is clear that after a specified number of absences (this can range anywhere from 3 up to 10 days), families are to be invited to the school for a meeting so that school personnel can demonstrate concern and understand the reasons for the absences. The meetings are

focused on trying to resolve the problems behind the absences using appropriate interventions. The message being communicated to the family is that the school is committed to their child's regular attendance to help them learn and succeed. Documentation of these meetings is essential.

6. If interventions offered by school personnel do not reduce absenteeism, involvement of community resources must be considered, and referrals made as appropriate.
7. Initiating either CPS or PINS interventions based on chronic absenteeism can only occur when the school district has demonstrated that their efforts to work with the family, including the use of community resources, have failed, that the family has not cooperated, and there are negative impacts on the child's academic performance.

## **Conclusion**

Attendance improvement is a process, and positive changes are not always seen immediately. It can take time to measure a drop in chronic absence, and still longer to see improvements in students' academic performance, one of the ultimate goals of the effort. But if these changes are slow in coming, it does not make them any less important. Additionally, attendance improvement initiatives can have many positive impacts in the shorter term. They help families to understand attendance requirements better and demonstrate that school districts care about their children, want to support their school success, and will try to help resolve issues behind chronic absence. To that end, they also connect students and families with school and community resources, which can improve not only students' attendance, but also their school experience. In the ideal case, attendance improvement initiatives will dovetail with efforts toward improved attachment and achievement to create school success.

Student Advocacy is available to provide technical assistance to any attendance improvement workgroup. Contact Karen Blumenthal, Policy Advocate, at [Kblumenthal@studentadvocacy.net](mailto:Kblumenthal@studentadvocacy.net).

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Appendix A: Example Reports from the SIRS-361 Year to Date Attendance/Absenteeism Verification Report

Summary Report

# Attendance and Absence Summary

District Name: [REDACTED]  
 School Location: [REDACTED]  
 School Year: 30-JUN-16  
 Data Refresh Date: Mar 5, 2016

Subgroup Name a	Attendance Days to Date b	Students Enrolled for at Least One Day During the School Year c	Number and Percentage of Students Who Were Absent						Average Number of Days Absent to Date	
			0 - 4% of Enrolled School Days Number d	0-4% of Enrolled School Days Percent e = (d/c) * 100	5-9% of Enrolled School Days (At-Risk of becoming Chronically Absent) Number f	5-9% of Enrolled School Days (At-Risk of becoming Chronically Absent) Percent g = (f/c) * 100	10% or More of Enrolled School Days (Chronically Absent) Number h	10% or More of Enrolled School Days (Chronically Absent) Percent i = (h/c) * 100	All Students j	Chronically Absent Students Only k
All Students	110	2,060	1,028	50 %	576	28 %	456	22 %	6.56	17.46
Female	0	1,012	504	50 %	279	28 %	229	23 %	6.70	17.74
Male	0	1,048	524	50 %	297	28 %	227	22 %	6.42	17.19
American Indian/Alaska	0	5	3	60 %	1	20 %	1	20 %	4.40	12

Column b includes the cumulative number of instructional school days to date for this school year (the total number of school days that students were expected to attend school).

Column c is the cumulative number of students who were enrolled in this school to date for at least one day during the school year.

Columns d to i include the count and percentage of students absent less than 5%, 5-9%, and 10% or more of enrolled school days based on: the number of instructional days that have occurred to date for this school year, the number of days that each student has been enrolled, and the number of days that each student has been absent.

## Student Detail Report

# Attendance and Absence Details

Student ID a	NYSSIS ID b	Student Name c	Race/ Ethnicity d	Gender e	Disability Status f	Economically Disadvantaged Status g	LEP Flag h	Grade i	Not at Risk (Abs 0-4% of Enrolled Days) j	At Risk C.A. (Abs 5-9% of Enrolled Days) k	C.A. Flag (Abs 10% or more of Enrolled Days) l	Date of First Enrollment for this School Year (September 1 - June 30) m	Date of Last Enrollment to date for this School Year (September 1 - June 30) n	Number of Days Enrolled for this School Year o	Number of Days Present (Not Absent) p	Number of Days Absent (Excused and Unexcused) q	Percentage of Enrolled Days Absent r = (q/o) * 100	Number of Days Absent Excused s	Number of Days Absent Unexcused t	Number of Days Tardy (Present/ Not Absent) u
██████	██████	██████	White	Female		YES		██	█	█	█	Sep 8, 2015	Mar 4, 2016	130	96	14	13%	4	10	20
██████	██████	██████	White	Male				██	█	█	█	Sep 8, 2015	Mar 4, 2016	130	110	0	0%	0	0	0
██████	██████	██████	White	Male		YES		██	█	█	█	Nov 23, 2015	Feb 5, 2016	44	9	35	80%	2	33	3
██████	██████	██████	White	Male		YES		██	█	█	█	Sep 8, 2015	Feb 3, 2016	93	83	10	11%	3	7	16
██████	██████	██████	White	Female		YES		██	█	█	█	Sep 8, 2015	Feb 3, 2016	93	79	14	15%	3	11	59
██████	██████	██████	White	Male				██	█	█	█	Sep 8, 2015	Mar 4, 2016	130	100	10	9%	8	2	36
██████	██████	██████	White	Male		YES		██	█	█	█	Sep 18, 2015	Mar 4, 2016	102	79	23	23%	6	17	12
██████	██████	██████	White	Female		YES		██	█	█	█	Sep 8, 2015	Mar 4, 2016	130	107	3	3%	0	3	3
██████	██████	██████	Hispanic or Latino	Male		YES		██	█	█	█	Sep 8, 2015	Mar 4, 2016	130	102	8	7%	0	8	0
██████	██████	██████	White	Female		YES		██	█	█	█	Sep 8, 2015	Mar 4, 2016	130	60	50	45%	7	43	54
██████	██████	██████	White	Male	Learning Disability	YES		██	█	█	█	Sep 8, 2015	Mar 4, 2016	130	94	16	15%	5	11	47
██████	██████	██████	Hispanic or Latino	Female		YES		██	█	█	█	Sep 8, 2015	Mar 4, 2016	130	109	1	1%	0	1	71
██████	██████	██████	Hispanic or Latino	Male	Learning Disability	YES		██	█	█	█	Sep 8, 2015	Mar 4, 2016	130	103	7	6%	2	5	55
██████	██████	██████	White	Male		YES		██	█	█	█	Sep 8, 2015	Mar 4, 2016	130	104	6	5%	2	4	18
██████	██████	██████	White	Male				██	█	█	█	Sep 8, 2015	Mar 4, 2016	130	110	0	0%	0	0	1
██████	██████	██████	White	Female				██	█	█	█	Sep 8, 2015	Mar 4, 2016	130	108	2	2%	1	1	1
██████	██████	██████	White	Male				██	█	█	█	Sep 8, 2015	Mar 4, 2016	130	104	6	5%	5	1	0
██████	██████	██████	White	Female				██	█	█	█	Sep 8, 2015	Mar 4, 2016	130	104	6	5%	1	5	3
██████	██████	██████	White	Female				██	█	█	█	Sep 23, 2015	Mar 4, 2016	99	92	7	7%	3	4	26

umns (j), (k) and (l) contain an indicator \*\*\* for students whose year to date absences in (r) are: (j) between 0 and 4%, (k) between 5 and 9% (at-risk), (l) 10% or more (chronically absent), of enrolled school days.  
 umns (m) and (n) reflect the first and last date of enrollment, respectively, for this student in this school and school year as recorded in SIRS.  
 umn (o) is the year to date calculated number of days enrolled, based on the start and end enrollment dates reflected in (m) and (n) for the student, and the school calendar as reported in SIRS.  
 umns (p) and (q) are the year to date number of enrolled days the student was (p) not absent (excused or unexcused) and (q) was reported absent (excused or unexcused) in SIRS.

## Appendix B

### Sample Script for School Districts' Initial Call to Parents of Chronically Absent Students (from Every Student Present)

#### Initial Contact:

Hello [Parent's name]. • I am [caller's name] from [school name]. How are you doing today? • First, let me say it is a pleasure having [child's name] as a part of our [grade level]. o

If caller knows child, include a comment about a quality the child has (e.g., [child's name] has a wonderful smile, is always willing to help other children, etc.) •

I'm calling because, just like you, we want to do all we can to be sure [child's name] is successful in school and one way we can help make this happen is to be sure [s/he] gets to school each day. • When [child's name] misses school [s/he] also misses valuable learning time and this can make [her/him] fall behind in [her/his] school work. •

Our attendance records show that [child's name] has missed [number] days of school. • Sometimes these absences add up before we know it so I thought I'd call to see if you might be able to help us out. • How can we work together to get [child's name] to school each day and on time? o

Give parent time to talk; parent may begin to talk about ways the parent can do things differently do get child to school o Open discussion; depending on how the conversation is going and how open the parent is, the caller may want to add a comment about how we all face daily pressures and we want to help support you any way we can •

My staff and I are here to help and we look forward to working with you. • Please don't hesitate to let me know how we can be helpful to you and [child's name] so [s/he] doesn't miss more school. •

Thanks for taking time to talk today. I look forward to seeing [child's name] soon!

#### Follow-up to Call:

Track days present the following week and send postcard to parent; the postcard is written at a 3.3 grade level. o [Child's name] was in school x out of 5 days this week. Keep up the good work and please let us know how we can help you keep [child] on the path to learning!



**Sample Letter for School Districts' Initial Letter to Parents of Chronically Absent Students (from Every Student Present)**

School Name  
School Address Line 1  
School Address Line 2  
School Phone Number

[Date]

Parent/Guardian Name  
Parent/Guardian Address Line 1  
Parent/Guardian Address Line 2

Dear [Guardian's name]:

Let's work together so [child's name] can do well in school!

Children who get to school each day have a better chance of learning and succeeding in school. When they miss school they also miss valuable learning time and this can make them fall behind in their school work. Based on our attendance records, [child's name] has missed [number] days of school.

[Information showing the dates of absences will be inserted here by school attendance system.]

Since too many days away from school can lead to poor grades, I am writing to see how you and I can work together to be sure [child's name] gets to school each day and on time. My staff and I are here to help.

You can call the school at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or stop by my office when you are at the school so we can talk about how we can work together so [child's name] is present each day.

Thank you for your help with this. We look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Principal's Name

## Appendix C: Attendance Resources for School Districts

The following resources are from the Attendance Works website:

<http://www.attendanceworks.org>

1. **Portraits of Change: Aligning School and Community Resources to Reduce Chronic Absence**

This September 2017 publication is written in conjunction with the Everyone Graduates Center. Attendance Works asked its researchers to use available data to examine three key questions: 1. What are the chronic absence levels in schools across the country? 2. How do levels of chronic absence in schools vary across states? 3. Is there a relationship between particular school characteristics (e.g., ages of students, type of locale and presence of poverty) and higher or lower levels of chronic absence?

<http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Attendance-Works-Portraits-of-Change-Main-Documents-Final-Sept.-1.pdf>

2. **What Works**<http://www.attendanceworks.org/teaching-attendance-2-0-introduction/>

This section provides information on successful programs and practices from around the country. Information is provided about strategies for school sites:

- Recognize Good and Improved Attendance.
- Engage Students and Parents.
- Monitor Attendance Data and Practices.
- Provide Personalized Early Outreach.
- Develop Programmatic Responses to Barriers.

<http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/>

3. **Bringing Attendance Home: Engaging Parents in Preventing Chronic Absence**

This downloadable toolkit is filled with ideas, activities, and materials that can be used to spark conversations with parents about how good attendance can help them fulfill their dreams and aspirations for their children's futures.

<http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools/for-parents/bringing-attendance-home-toolkit/>

4. **Teaching Attendance: Everyday Strategies to Help Teachers Improve Attendance and Raise Achievement**

This is a downloadable toolkit which gives teachers easy access to time-saving resources to nurture a habit of attendance so students can truly benefit from what is being taught in the classroom. Although designed with elementary school teachers in mind, the strategies can work for students of all ages.

<http://www.attendanceworks.org/teaching-attendance-2-0-introduction/>

5. **The Power of Positive Connections: Reducing Chronic Absence through PEOPLE:**

- Priority: Focuses on at-risk students in grades, schools, and neighborhoods with high levels of chronic absence.
- Early: Begins with start of the school year.
- Outreach: Connects with students and their families.
- Positive: Promotes preventive, supportive approaches rather than punitive responses.
- Linkages: Taps the full community for support.
- Engagement: Motivates showing up to class and offers students and families a role in improving attendance.

This downloadable toolkit outlines the key steps for implementing the PEOPLE strategy.

<http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools/schools/power-positive-connections-toolkit/>

6. **Tiers of Intervention to Reduce Chronic Absence**

This handout is intended to help a school or district think about alignment between its strategies and level of student need. The list of strategies is not exhaustive but suggestive and intended to inspire a school district's own ideas about what could be in place.

<http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Classic-pyramid-Revised-3.15.17-01-1.pdf>

<http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools/schools/3-tiers-of-intervention/>

7. **Webinars:** The Attendance Works website includes information about and linkages to webinars that the organization has sponsored. Included are the PowerPoint used, the recording of the webinar, discussion guide, and/or toolkit and other resources.

- Safe Routes to School as a Tool to Address Chronic Absenteeism.
- The Power of Positive Connections: Reducing Chronic Absence through PEOPLE.
- Can You Hear Us Now?: Amplifying Key Messages about the Importance of Attendance.
- Reducing Chronic Absence: A Key Element for Student Academic Success, and more.

<http://www.attendanceworks.org/peer-learning-resources/>

8. **Count Us In!: Working Together to Show That Every School Day Matters**

This toolkit provides a step-by-step guide for promoting excellent attendance during September by partnering with community resources.

<http://www.attendanceworks.org/new-toolkit-count-us-in-3-0/>

**Additional resources:**

9. **Absences Add UP!**

Use the slider tool to chart the impact absences can have on a child. Missing school can lower math and reading scores, and leave a child less likely to graduate.

<https://getschooled.com/dashboard/tool343-attendance-counts>

10. **Every Student Present**

*Every Student Present* is a public awareness campaign launched by the New York State Council on Children and Families designed to help school staff, parents and communities understand the impact of chronic absences.

<http://www.everystudentpresent.org>

11. **Every Student, Every Day: A National Initiative to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism**

*Every Student, Every Day* was launched in 2015 by the White House and the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Justice. Its efforts involve states, local communities, and nonprofit, religious, and philanthropic organizations in a cross-sector approach to eliminating chronic absence.

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/chronicabsenteeism/index.html>

12. **Every Student, Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism**

This *Every Student, Every Day* toolkit, which aims to promote coordinated community solutions to chronic absenteeism, includes information and resources for students, parents, mentors, school staff, and agencies in various sectors including health, human services, housing, and law enforcement. In addition to a general Community Toolkit, it offers specialized Community Action Guides tailored to each of these specific groups.

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/chronicabsenteeism/toolkit.pdf>