

A Guide to Using, “Attendance Playbook: Smart Strategies for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in the Covid Era”

As schools and communities devise strategies to address chronic absence, it is imperative that they draw from evidence-based strategies. It is even more imperative that they build on and adapt what works in the era of Covid-19 in which students and families face even greater challenges to education and may need a higher level of support. As protests over systemic racism and its impact on Black Americans demonstrates, our public schools have not adequately addressed the systemic barriers that limit access and equitable opportunities.

Over the past decade, a growing body of knowledge of what works to improve attendance for groups of students with disproportionately high rates of chronic absence has emerged due to the hard work of a practitioners and researchers across the country. With nearly eight million students chronically absent nationwide, we can’t afford to waste time and resources doing business as usual. Our students and families deserve better.

Why this guide?

In 2019, Attendance Works and FutureEd partnered to release the first edition of the [Attendance Playbook](#). It was a much-needed resource that was immediately downloaded by thousands of users. The Attendance Playbook has a range of tiered strategies with levels of evidence from strong to emerging. (Tier I attendance strategies encourage better attendance for all students. Tier II interventions add targeted support for students at greater risk of chronic absenteeism. Tier III intensifies support to the students who experience multiple barriers to daily school attendance, which often require collaboration between schools and community and/or government agency partners.) This guide will help you determine what interventions to try with students and their families whether in person or at a distance. The Covid-19 considerations included with the strategies show ways to adapt evidence-based practices when you cannot meet face-to-face. If you are familiar with the improvement science approach, you know that testing and adapting what is likely to work makes more sense than taking a “best guess” approach to improving attendance.

Who is this for?

This guide is for school leaders and their teams, district teams and leaders, and their community and agency partners. As readers of the Attendance Playbook will note, many strategies require community and agency partners to execute the strategy.

What steps should you take?

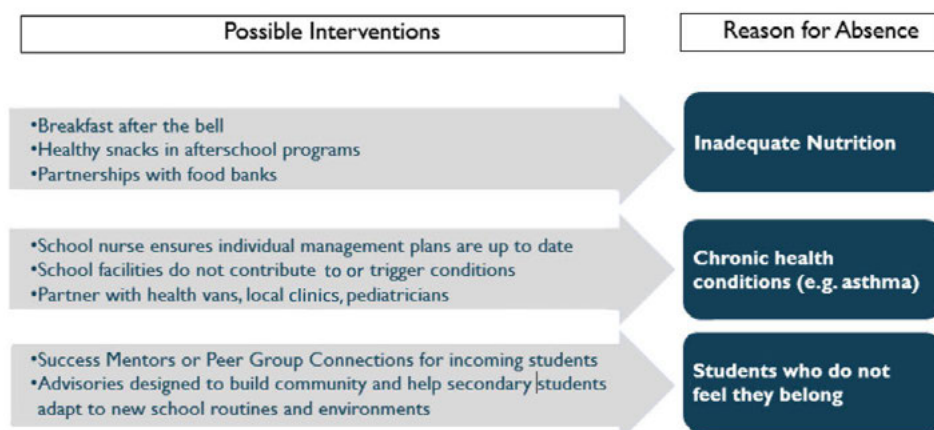
Here are some general ideas and tools to help you select and apply the strategies described in the Playbook and tailor them for your school or community. This guidance is meant to assist you and your team in thinking through key questions for selecting, prioritizing and implementing strategies.

- 1) **Start with a team.** At the school level, it may be an attendance team, an MTSS team or a PBIS team. At the district, it may be a Student Support Services team or an interdepartmental planning group such as a district attendance team. At the community level, it may be an interagency workgroup. Make sure you get the right people with the right skills, resources and authority to implement the strategies. Read Attendance Work's [tips for building effective school teams](#). Teams can meet in person or virtually.
- 2) **Analyze your data before selecting strategies.** How extensive and intensive your Tier I school-wide strategies need to be should be determined by your prior year's rate of chronic absence. As a general rule of thumb, the higher the rate of chronic absence, the more you should invest in Tier I strategies, as this will lessen the need for more costly, intensive Tier II and Tier III strategies. Also use your data to assess and track the number of students that require early intervention support and how many need intensive supports.

Also consider the time of year. Mid-year, schools and districts should be looking at Tier II supports for students to prevent additional absences in order to have an impact on their end-of-year data. In addition to chronic absence data, schools and districts will need to find new ways to monitor which students are missing too much school, regardless of whether schools are in person, virtual or a hybrid. Whether it's a list of students that had no contact during school closure, or those who had little or no participation in distance learning, these new data are essential to detecting equity gaps that need to be addressed and for identifying schools or student groups that might need more support.

- 3) **Consider the reasons for absences.** What are the reasons for absences in your school and community that you need to address for individual students and groups of students? Make sure you check with families and students so that you understand their perspectives about what makes it challenging for them to attend school every day. Assess what supports you already have in place, how well they are working and where the gaps are. Then go through the Attendance Playbook and select the strategies or interventions that may address the reasons your students are absent. (see Figure 1 below for examples.)

Figure 1. Match Interventions to Reasons for Absences



- 4) Explore possible interventions with your team. Use the following questions to assess how well specific interventions suit your students and determine your capacity to implement each strategy.

Questions About Your Capacity to Implement	Questions About the Strategy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can we implement this strategy during distance learning? Yes ___ No ___ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can this strategy be accessed by all students virtually? Yes ___ No ___
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do we have the capacity – budget, staff, time – to execute this strategy for every student who needs the support? Yes ___ No ___ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well does the strategy address the reasons for absence for the students you have identified? Yes ___ No ___
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do we have the capacity to train staff in new strategies? Are there upcoming staff training and/or professional development opportunities that can be utilized for training? Yes ___ No ___ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What evidence is there that this strategy works? Yes ___ No ___
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whose buy-in do we need to implement this strategy? Principals? Teachers? Families? Yes ___ No ___ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is this strategy suited for our students? Has it worked for students from the same grade spans, ethnicity, life circumstances? Yes ___ No ___
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can we implement the strategy consistently? Yes ___ No ___ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do we have interventions for our most vulnerable student groups? Yes ___ No ___
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do we need help to select and implement strategies? Yes ___ No ___ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we ensure it works universally for all students whether they are differently abled or speak languages other than English? Yes ___ No ___
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well does the strategy align with other initiatives? Yes ___ No ___ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the strategy culturally responsive to the student groups you want to reach? Yes ___ No ___
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does it compete with other initiatives? Yes ___ No ___ • Do we have the capacity (e.g., weekly team meetings and data review) to track and monitor the impact and efficacy of the strategy? Yes ___ No ___ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How might the strategy change over the course of a school year? Yes ___ No ___
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What other considerations do we need to take into account before moving forward? Yes ___ No ___ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What role should each partner play in executing the strategy? Yes ___ No ___

You may also find questions from the National Implementation Research Network helpful for your discussion. (see Figure 2 on page 7)

- 5) Select the strategies you will implement first based on your ability and capacity. You may have chosen more strategies than you can implement immediately. How do you determine what to do first? Sort your strategies into four quadrants: Are strategies high impact (affect many students) or low impact (affect a few students)? Are they high effort (requiring a lot of coordination, people power, resources, time) or low effort?

Here's a tip: When choosing which strategies to implement first, pick strategies that are likely to have high impact for low effort. Next, consider strategies that might take more effort but have high impact. Needless to say, avoid strategies that are high effort, low impact.

- 6) Determine the steps you need to take to implement each strategy.

Once you've decided on which strategies to add, lay out a plan for how you will implement the interventions over the course of the year. You can incorporate your ideas into your school improvement plan or use Attendance Works' yearly calendars, if appropriate. You can also use a simple chart like the one below to organize your work. See the chart on the next page.

The result of your work will be a written plan for implementation that all stakeholders in your school's community and beyond can refer to and understand the approach you are taking to address the issue.

- 7) Finally, determine when and how you will assess whether the strategy is successful. What data will you collect and review to ensure it works for every student group as well as overall? How will you decide if you want to adopt and expand it? Adapt it so that it works better? Or abandon it because it did not work? This last step is critical as you use your own experience to determine if there is sufficient evidence that a strategy works to improve attendance.

Figure 2. The Hexagon: An Exploration Tool

The Hexagon can be used as a planning tool to guide selection and evaluate potential innovations for use.

IMPLEMENTATION INDICATORS

SYSTEM INDICATORS

CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT

Staff meet minimum qualifications

Able to sustain staffing, coaching, training, data systems, performance assessment, and administration

- Financial capacity
- Structural capacity
- Cultural responsiveness capacity

Buy-in process operationalized

- Practitioners
- Families

FIT WITH CURRENT INITIATIVES

Alignment with community, regional, state priorities

Fit with family and community values, culture and history

Impact on other interventions & initiatives

Alignment with organizational structure

NEED

Target population identified

Disaggregated data indicating population needs

Parent & community perceptions of need

Addresses service or system gaps

INNOVATION INDICATORS

EVIDENCE

Strength of evidence—for whom in what conditions:

- Number of studies
- Population similarities
- Diverse cultural groups
- Efficacy or Effectiveness

Outcomes – Is it worth it?

Fidelity data

Cost-effectiveness data

USABILITY

Well-defined innovation

Mature examples to observe

Several replications

Adaptations for context

SUPPORTS

Expert Assistance

Staffing

Training

Coaching & Supervision

Racial equity impact assessment

Data Systems Technology Supports (IT)

Administration & System

