



PBIS Positive Behavioral
Interventions & Supports
OSEP TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

IMPROVING ATTENDANCE AND REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

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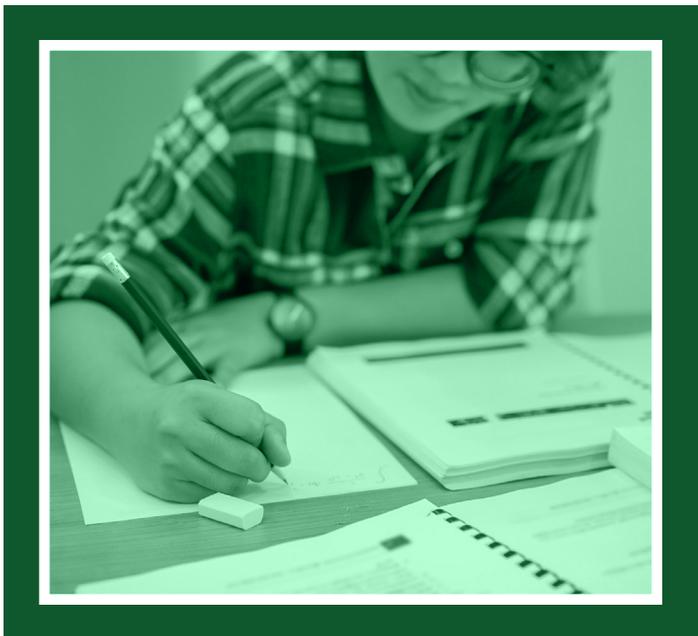


Improving Attendance and Reducing Chronic Absenteeism

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Introduction

For students to learn, they must be present and engaged in school. As a result, absenteeism is a concern for all schools. Poor attendance is associated with a host of negative short- and long-term outcomes, such as academic failure, disengagement, leaving school, and problem behaviors in school and community (Balfanz, 2016). Despite the challenges, evidence suggests that even small changes in attendance are related to meaningful outcomes for students (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).



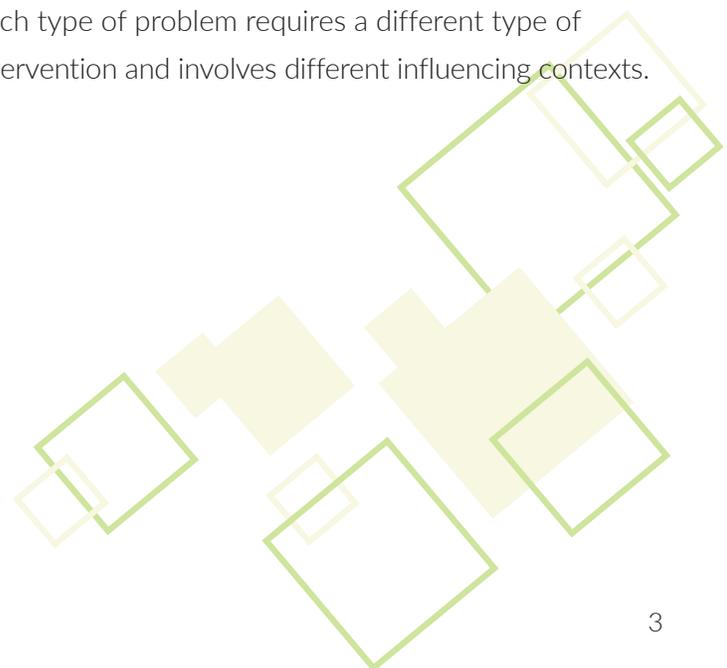
Interpreting these data may require additional examination of, for example, distribution of absent days over time (e.g., month, grading period, within and across years), number of days absent per episode, and/or in middle and high schools, by class periods or subject areas.

Reasons for Absenteeism

Absenteeism is a complex problem involving a variety of individual, family, school, community, and societal factors. The reasons for absences vary, and each reason for absence arises from a different type of problem (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

- Students cannot come to school due to uncontrollable circumstances, such as illness or other obligations.
- Students will not come to school in order to avoid aversive situations, such as bullying, unsafe conditions, or harassment.
- Students do not come to school, because they don't see the value of school or they have something else that they would rather do.

Each type of problem requires a different type of intervention and involves different influencing contexts.



Measuring Attendance

Attendance is most often measured using the metric of average daily attendance. However, this metric may mask underlying chronic absenteeism, especially at the individual student level. We recommend monitoring both number and percentage of students in each of the following categories (Attendance Works, 2017).

- Regular attendees: miss 5 or fewer days a year (less than 1 day per month)
- At risk: miss 5%-9% of school (about 9 days a year, 1-2 days per month)
- Chronically absent: miss 10% or more of school (about 18 days a year; more than 2 days per month)
- Severely chronically absent: miss 20% or more days of school (about 36 days a year; more than 4 days per month).



Contributing Factors for Chronic Absenteeism

Factors Contributing to Absenteeism	Possible Influencing Contexts		
	School	Family	Community
Avoid uninteresting or engaging instruction	•		
Deficit academic skills leads to avoiding instruction	•		
Avoid fear regarding lack of security (e.g., not feeling safe)	•		
Avoid bullying behavior	•		•
Obtain peer rewards for truancy	•		•
Lack of communication regarding absenteeism	•	•	
Lack of transportation	•	•	•
Poor health care (e.g., untreated asthma)		•	•
Poor mental health care (e.g., untreated anxiety)		•	•
Providing care for siblings (e.g., bring funds to family)		•	
Poor routine to wake, get ready, and go to school		•	
Unsafe pathways to school			•

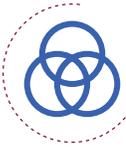
Understanding the reason/s behind chronic absenteeism may require examination of other data sources, including office discipline referrals, student surveys, academic performance, and medical history which may be obtained through record reviews or student and family surveys and interviews. Addressing multiple contributing factors will require collaboration between schools, families, and communities.

Addressing the Problem

A Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS), such as PBIS, can be useful for organizing a continuum of intervention supports for attendance. Many of the factors contributing to chronic absenteeism are directly and indirectly addressed by PBIS, such as developing

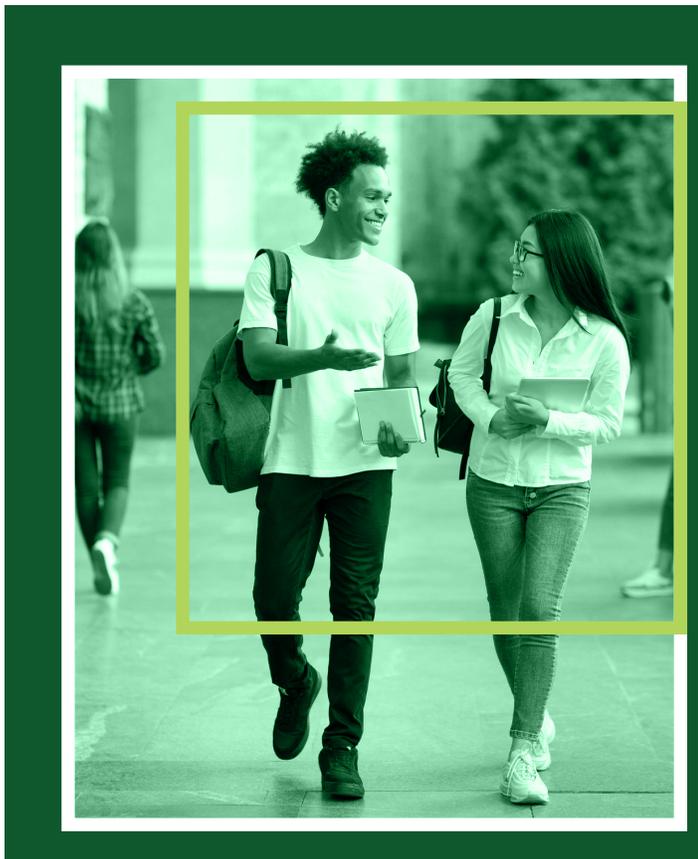
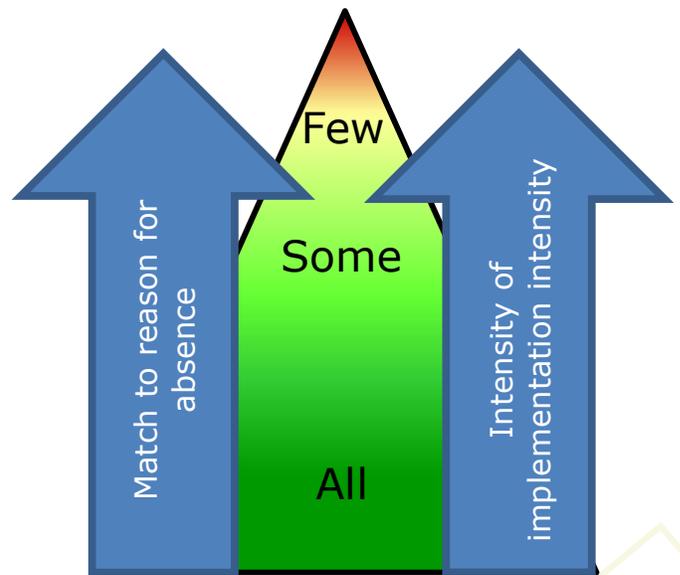
a safe and respectful school climate, teaching critical social skills (e.g., self-regulation, problem solving, conflict management), establishing an engaging relationship with a peer or adult, and implementing individual and small group positive behavior support plans. Rather than developing standalone and parallel interventions or initiatives for addressing attendance, MTBF provides a team-based decision-making system to take advantage of existing resources, merge and integrate practices aimed toward a common outcome, and enhance a continuum of practices that support all students as well as those with chronic attendance challenges.

Schools and districts may consider including the following practices within their PBIS continuum of practices and systems (Freeman et al., under review):



- Direct instruction on skills related to greater success getting to school (e.g., transportation, sleep and eating routines, homework completion) or at school (e.g., academic study, requesting assistance, conflict management, problem solving, managing bullying and other harassment),
- Incentives for attendance (e.g., token economies, monetary incentives, social recognition, community access),
- Academic remediation supports (e.g., peer-tutoring, small group and/or individual instruction, instructional accommodations),
- Mentoring programs (e.g., Check and Connect, Success Mentors),

- Family supports (e.g., positive home-school communication, access to community resources, training on home-based strategies, school-home-community behavior support planning),
- School-based mental health supports (e.g., integrated community mental health supports, interdisciplinary mental and behavioral health planning) for chronic challenges (e.g., substance use, school avoidance/phobia, juvenile delinquency, homelessness, and gang involvement), and
- Chronic physical health supports (e.g., asthma, diabetes, obesity).



School and district teams work to develop a continuum of supports by identifying and aligning interventions needed by ALL, SOME, and a FEW students.

As the chronicity of the attendance problem intensifies, the alignment between the reason (i.e., function) for student absences and the features of behavior support becomes increasingly more precise and specific.



At all tiers, but especially tiers 2 and 3, behavior support development and the participation of family, school, and community increasingly becomes interdisciplinary.

Adapting Supports

For younger children, attention is focused on supporting families to positively encourage children to attend school.

For older children, attention is shifted toward enhancing (a) students' skills that increase their success at school and (b) school strategies that establish positive, safe, and supportive classroom and school climates, which, in turn, encourage school attendance.

Local school and district information can be reviewed on a frequent and regular basis to identify and address other systemic barriers to school attendance (e.g., safe routes to school, consistent public transportation, neighborhood violence, gang activities, homelessness).

Getting Started

Consider these basic steps to prevent and respond to attendance challenges:

1. Use an existing school-wide team (e.g., PBIS, MTSS, mental health) to meet regularly and to facilitate an examination of the status of attendance.
2. Collect existing and new data that enable answering attendance related questions, for example, (a) What is current attendance rates? (b) Which and how many students are attending and not attending? (c) When and how often are students not attending? (d) What percent of students are chronically not attending school?

3. Set desired attendance rates (outcomes) based on answers to the previous question.
4. Identify what existing practices, strategies, etc. could be adapted and (re)implemented to achieve the desired attendance rates (outcomes). If existing supports are not available or appropriate, identify what other evidence-based supports might be adopted and integrated into current implementation plans.
5. Develop an implementation plan that includes monitoring of student progress and responsiveness and of implementation fidelity.
6. Develop adaptations and enhancements based on student responsiveness and implementation fidelity.

The Bottom Line

Educators have important opportunities and responsibilities toward making classrooms and school positively reinforcing and safe places for all students and includes delivering effective instruction, developing contextually and culturally relevant and positive relationships, modeling student expected behaviors, and delivering frequent, overt, and regular positive reinforcement. Rather than increasing punishment for students who have chronic attendance challenges, educators can intensify the precision and intensity of our data, positive practices, and preventive systems for students who present increased needs.



Resources

Attendance Works. (2017). Portraits of Change: Aligning School and Community Resources to Reduce Chronic Absence, Attendance Works and Everyone Graduates Center, Retrieved from www.attendanceworks.org

Balfanz, R. (2016). Missing school matters. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 98, 8–13.

Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). *Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know from Nationally Available Data*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.

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