



Enhancing
School Engagement
and Attendance
for Students
With Disabilities



Introduction

It is important for all students, beginning in the earliest years of their educational experience, to attend school regularly. The U.S. Department of Education (2016) reported that students who were chronically absent (i.e., missing 10% of school days in a school year) in preschool, kindergarten and first grade were much less likely to be reading on grade level in the third grade. When students are not proficient in reading by the third grade, they are four times more likely to drop out of high school. Students who are chronically absent for any school year between the eighth and twelfth grades are seven times more likely to drop out of high school. National data reflect students with disabilities who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are 1.4 to 1.5 times more likely to be chronically absent as their peers without disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

In light of these national data trends, the critical connection between regular school attendance and graduation from high school is clear. There are a number of barriers; however, that can interfere with school attendance. Conversely, there are a number of practices and strategies grounded in evidence that can help educators and caregivers remove/reduce those barriers and improve school attendance for students with disabilities. This resource provides information for educators, families, caregivers, and other stakeholders about removing barriers interfering with attendance, as well as strategies to improve school engagement and attendance for students with disabilities.

Absenteeism

Absenteeism is a frustrating, long-standing challenge for schools and COVID-19 has made the issue more important and urgent. There are many reasons why a student is not actively engaged with school, or why they are absent from school right now. Any time a student misses 10% or more of school days in a given school year is cause for concern. Even before the pandemic there were as many as 8 million students reported as being absent. The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted already existing obstacles to consistent attendance for some students. Furthermore, the pandemic has brought the inequities that exist to

light such as access to connectivity, availability of technology resources and even inconsistencies in attendance policy. For example, a survey of 790 K-12 educators from early fall 2020, showed that schools that have more than half of students receiving free and reduced lunch were more likely (17%) to hold students back in response to unexcused absences than schools with fewer households meeting that threshold for free and reduced lunch program (7%) (Lieberman, 2020). The critical problem facing educators right now is how to balance the need for students to attend school with the flexibility for unique circumstances created by the pandemic.

Attendance Works

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Attendance Works, a national initiative working to improve school attendance through policy and practice, recommends that districts offer three tiers of intervention (strategies to encourage good attendance for all, early intervention for students at risk for chronic absences, and intense support for children facing the most obstacles to attending school (Dusseault & Makori, 2021).

Research shows that truancy, or absenteeism, is related to multiple factors. Risk factors of absenteeism during the COVID-19 pandemic include poor connectivity or no access to remote instruction, inconsistent participation, and chronic absenteeism prior to the pandemic. Some school districts have been able to support students and families by providing devices, WIFI hotspots, instruction provided through television broadcast, and providing other equipment. Once the technology access barrier is removed, other barriers must be investigated and remedied. When students do not log on, schools must investigate why. Schools must identify the unique needs of students and the community so the interventions provided will improve student attendance. Wellness-centered, trauma-sensitive approaches to attendance balance high expectations for students with accountability. Attendance Works, a national initiative working to improve school attendance through policy and practice, recommends that districts offer three tiers of intervention: strategies to encourage good attendance for all, early intervention for students at risk for chronic absences and intense support for children facing the most obstacles to attending school (Dusseault & Makori, 2021). Once the student is present in the learning environment, whether that is virtual or in person in the building, the next challenge is keeping the students engaged.

Contributing Factors to Absenteeism

Educators will need to be mindful of how the pandemic has compounded stress and exacerbated challenges families face. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) and parental stress that existed before the COVID-19 pandemic are amplified by school closures, social isolation, job loss, food insecurity, and housing insecurity. All these experiences can be barriers to consistent attendance and/or interfere with the students' participation in remote learning. This graphic serves as a reminder to consider the negative synergy

happening between adverse childhood experiences and adverse community environments during the pandemic. Educators will need to anticipate and plan for supporting families during ongoing hybrid instruction and as schools reopen.

*Adapted from Ellis, W., Dietz, W. (2017). A New Framework for Addressing Adverse Childhood and Community Experiences: The Building Community Resilience (BCR) Model, *Academic Pediatrics*, 17(2017), pp. 586-593. DOI Info: 10:1016/j.acap.2016.12.011.



In addition to adverse experiences, the following table highlights several additional factors contributing to chronic absenteeism. This is not an exhaustive list, rather, a snapshot of some of the most important considerations.

	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			•

*Adapted from OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2021). Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports [Website]. www.pbis.org.

Engagement

Given the barriers students, families and schools are facing, it is important to focus on strategies and approaches to help remove barriers while increasing student engagement and attendance. Student engagement refers to students being meaningfully active in their learning environment. Student engagement is related to students interacting with the content, instruction, teacher, and peers within the classroom. To be actively engaged, students must be involved in the learning process,

have positive relationships within the learning environment, and feel a level of interest or motivation to learn. When students are engaged, they are invested in learning and can internalize new material. Student engagement goes beyond task completion or compliance with adult directives. Engaged students feel safe and respected. They know that someone will notice if they are not present.

Student engagement is classified in three ways:

- **Emotional engagement** is how students feel connected to their teacher, classroom, and school. This includes finding value in their work and feeling a sense of community in class.
- **Behavioral engagement** is indicated by a student’s active participation and paying attention in class.
- **Cognitive engagement** refers to motivation to learn, self-regulation, and ownership of learning.

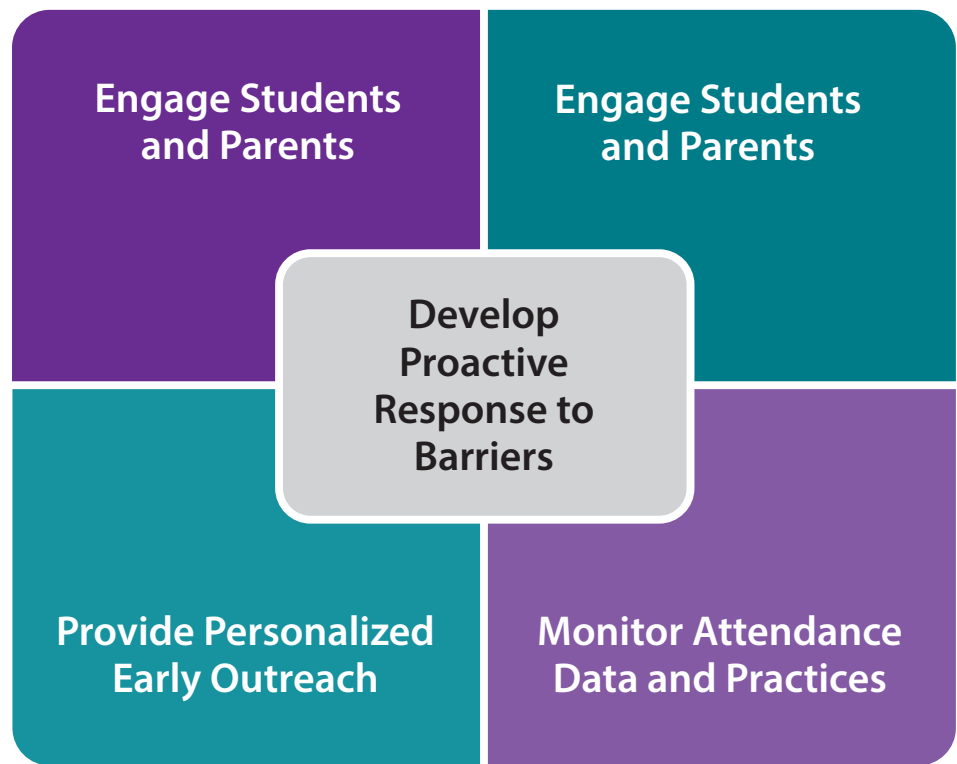
System-Level Strategies for Increasing Engagement

The Attendance Works initiative suggests several key strategies to reduce chronic absence. These strategies are useful during this time when fewer students are logging on for remote learning.

- Recognize good and improved attendance.
- Engage students and parents (family member supporting student learning).
- Monitor attendance data and practices.
- Provide personalized early outreach.
- Develop proactive response to barriers.

Student engagement goes hand-in-hand with school attendance. When students are engaged emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively, feel safe, and experience success, they want to attend school. Engagement fosters a sense of belonging and enhances relationships with both peers and teachers. In this way, engagement contributes to a positive school climate. This allows students to feel safe to ask questions and contribute to classroom discussions. Active engagement allows students to feel like part of the learning community. To foster student engagement, teachers recognize and acknowledge student success in real time, as well as identify needs for additional support and promote student self-regulation. This in turn enhances academic achievement.

Building a positive climate is not only important for student engagement in physical school buildings,



*Adapted from Attendance Works. Chronic Absence: Strategies for School Sites. [Website]. www.attendanceworks.org

but also for remote learning. Implementation of *School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports* (SW-PBIS), an evidence-based, systems approach, helps schools establish the social culture needed for a school to be an effective learning environment for all students. SW-PBIS eliminates barriers to learning, creates and maintains a safe and effective learning environment in schools, and ensures that all students have the social and emotional skills needed to succeed in school and beyond. Some essential components of a PBIS approach include clearly defined, positively stated expectations that are taught, practiced, and reinforced, and the use of data for decision making. A three-tiered approach includes universal interventions (for all

students and settings), secondary interventions (targeted supports for at-risk students), and tertiary interventions (individualized support for students with intensive needs). Learn more about PBIS in Pennsylvania at [Pennsylvania Positive Behavior Support Network](#). For distance learning, schools can create a remote SW-PBIS remote teaching matrix to explicitly define expectations for remote learning, teach those expected behaviors, and reinforce those expected behaviors to increase student engagement. Just as SW-PBIS is implemented in a physical school building, these practices can be adapted for remote learning to promote positive behavior and increase student engagement ([Center on PBIS Remote Teaching Matrix](#)).

These system-level strategies are instrumental in creating a climate that supports student engagement and adult responsibility (Batsche, 2021). A supportive learning climate facilitates productive learning and student success. The climate and culture value respect and collaboration between all members of the school community. Teachers structure their classrooms using Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) strategies, use culturally responsive practices, and teach social-emotional learning in the classroom. The classroom structure should include predictable schedules, clear behavior expectations, thus establishing positive behaviors as the norm. This structure and predictability create a safe place to learn and fosters participation and taking risks while learning. Student and adult rules are clearly stated, are consistent across tiers and there is consistency in message. The learning environment is motivating, fair and well managed. Within this environment, educators influence how students learn important skills and ways of relating that strengthen their connection to school and prepare them to succeed when they graduate.

Instructional Strategies for Increasing Engagement

There are specific instructional strategies that increase engagement during learning activities. Leveraging these specific strategies during instruction helps ALL students. According to Lane et al. (2015), there are seven strategic behavior supports including opportunity to respond (OTR); behavior specific praise (BSP), active supervision, instructional

Do students feel welcome?

Culturally relevant and sustaining educators:

- Take responsibility for the climate in their classrooms, schools, departments etc.
 - Teachers avoid sarcasm and create a positive, uplifting classroom climate.
 - Clarify classroom expectations, create positive environments where students feel safe to explore and learn.
 - Less emphasis on punitive strategies.
 - Be aware of one's own perspective, implicit bias and privilege.
- Take responsibility for their student's sense of belonging.
- Create environments that are respectful, inclusive, and foster the appreciation of peer's culture.
- Communicate in culturally affirming ways so students and families feel supported and welcome to participate in schools.

*Adapted from the Pennsylvania Culturally Relevant-Sustaining Education (CR-SE) Competencies

feedback, high probability request sequences, pre-correction, and instructional choice. These strategies can be used during virtual or face-to-face instruction ([Comprehensive Integrated Three-Tiered Model of Prevention](#)). Below, three of those high-impact strategies are highlighted along with free open-access tools to assist with their implementation.

Behavior-specific praise (BSP) can increase student engagement because specific praise indicates

to the student what behavior to replicate in order to find success. Behavior-specific praise is an acknowledgement that is either spoken or written that names the exact behavior occurring. This allows the student to understand that their behavior met expectations. By being specific, the student has a clear picture of what behavior should be repeated. For example, instead of saying "Good job", the teacher could say, "Thank you for turning in your assignment on time."

BSP can be delivered in person verbally or by writing a note. Virtual resources for delivering behavior-specific praise include the chat feature on a platform like Zoom or Google Meet, sending an email, or using a virtual delivery system such as [Class Dojo](#).

Instructional choice promotes engagement. Instructional choice involves giving a student two or more options of how they can complete an assignment, increasing a sense of control in their decision making. Some examples of instructional choices include allowing students to decide if they would rather work independently or with a partner, deciding what

essay topic to write about, or deciding to either read or listen to the recording of a text.

Instructional choice can be offered to students attending school in-person or in a virtual environment. In person, a menu of options or a BINGO board with choices can be displayed in the classroom or given to students. Areas for independent or small group work can be set up within the classroom. In a virtual environment, a list of choices can be displayed on the screen. Students can work with partners in breakout rooms, on platforms such as Zoom, or collaborate with one another on documents such as *Google Docs* or [Padlet](#).

Frequent opportunities to respond (OTR) to questions and prompts of the content being taught increases engagement and decreases off-task behavior. When students have numerous opportunities to respond, they are more focused and receive more immediate feedback and additional support.

Opportunities to respond in a face-to-face classroom include students holding up response cards or [Plickers](#), writing answers on whiteboards, and chorally responding to answers. In a virtual environment, opportunities to respond can include online tools such as [Kahoot](#) or [Quizizz](#), the chat feature, or the reactions feature on platforms such as *Zoom*.

Additional Engagement Tools and Resources

PaTTAN Supporting Students with Disabilities in Virtual Environments (SSDVE)

This tool contains resources curated for use by educators and related service providers as they support students with disabilities in virtual environments.

<https://tinyurl.com/SSDVETool>

Digital Tools for Engagement—SchoolVirtually

Resources, including help on designing instruction, on using technology, supporting students with disabilities, as well as English learners, are located here from the University of Kansas.

[Digital Tools for Engagement – SchoolVirtually](#)

Nurturing and Responsive Environments That Promote Social and Emotional Wellbeing

EDTalks video by Dr. Clay Cook, the John and Nancy Peyton Fellow in Child and Adolescent Wellbeing at the University of Minnesota and Associate Professor in the School Psychology Program.

tinyurl.com/EDTalks-ClayCook

Plickers

A free card activity to use with students to check for understanding and a fun way to increase engagement.

[Plickers](#)

ISTE's 30+ Tools for Diverse Learners

Tools and ideas to engage students in virtual learning environments from the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE).

tinyurl.com/ISTETools

Check and Connect's Attend, Engage, Invest

The two hyperlinks below provide access Check and Connect's *Attend, Engage, Invest* blog entries on student engagement.

tinyurl.com/KeepStudentsEngaged

tinyurl.com/StudentConnectionsOnline

Establishing Effective Home-School Partnerships

Improving attendance is the responsibility of the school, the parents/caregivers, and the community. Cooperation, trust, and connection between schools and families will help to identify and eliminate the barriers to consistent attendance. The time invested in building relationships with families is paramount. When communication between school and home is open there can be problems solving. Schools have a role in supporting families by having awareness of challenges at home and the community, by celebrating

successes and always keeping the focus on the student. If the only time the parent or guardian hears from the school is when the child is absent there is not a relationship or trust. Positive communication and positive calls home demonstrate that the student is a valued member of the school community. Similarly, responding to notes, phone messages in a timely way indicates respect and value for the parents. Treating the parent or guardian as the Subject Matter Expert (SME) on the child by asking questions, listening, and valuing

parent input. When educators are visible in the community at sporting events, art and music performances, fundraisers and social gatherings, the school and school staff are part of the community. Teachers greeting students by name and sharing about their own families, hobbies, and interests create a classroom where students feel connected. Educators who create inclusive, positive welcoming classrooms use culturally relevant teaching strategies and culturally responsive classroom management.

Intensification of Supports

Intensifying Supports

Universal and targeted approaches grounded in research are an important foundation for ensuring student success and engagement. Some students encounter multiple barriers that interfere with regular school attendance. Individualized, intensive approaches to help address barriers will be necessary to provide essential support. There are multiple factors to consider when offering attendance support. For young students, strategies to support partnership and collaboration focus on family support and communication. For older students, family engagement continues to be critical. Additionally, efforts can focus on direct student engagement strategies, skill building, and peer leadership opportunities for older students.

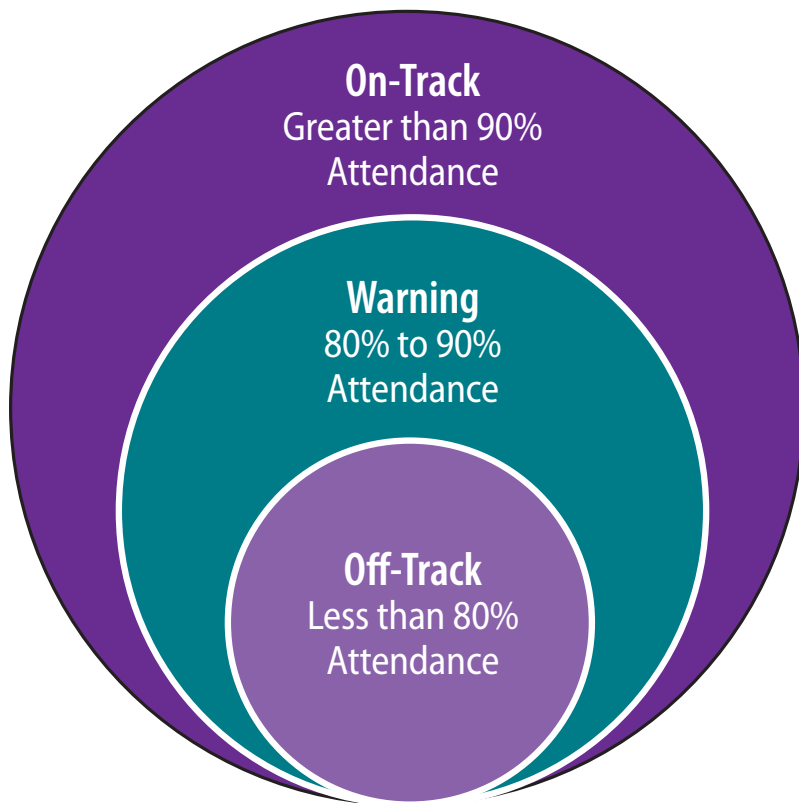
Data Teaming and Analysis

The process starts with a universal team who evaluates school-wide data on a regular basis, identifies school-wide trends, and develops precision plans based upon data to address any issues. An advanced tier team evaluates data on a regular basis and identifies students at risk. Additionally, a referral process can serve as a supplemental avenue to help provide students with access to support. Advanced tier team members may include administrators, specialists (e.g., school nurse, school counselor, school social worker, home-school visitor, school psychologist), special education teachers, general education teachers, and community agency members. The team needs to be able to access and analyze attendance data. Having local

criteria easily accessible to identify students at risk is essential to drive further data analysis and decision making. Pennsylvania's Early Warning System's research-based metrics for attendance, behavior, and course performance (ABCs) provide school teams with guidelines for when students may be off-track for graduation.

The following guidelines regarding attendance are:

- On-Track – Greater than 90 percent attendance
- Warning – 80 percent to 90 percent attendance reflects that a student is beginning to get off track
- Off-Track – Less than 80 percent attendance indicates significant concern



When reviewing individual student attendance data consider examining the following attendance trends across:

- Days or weeks
- Class periods or times during the day
- Subject area
- Types of activities (e.g., synchronous whole class meetings, asynchronous activities; Freeman et al., 2020; 2021). For students with disabilities, it is important for teams to examine data at deeper levels, which may include convening the IEP Team. There is significant heterogeneity among students with disabilities as well as the variance in the way these students are served across schools, based upon the findings of the Gottfried et al.

(2017). Schools can analyze data at deeper levels by reviewing student absences at the disability category level as well as by the settings in which students with disabilities are being served. When student absences are connected to a student's disability, consider the need for an IEP meeting to work quickly to partner with families and make necessary adjustments to add or revise attendance information. Some students with disabilities may have chronic health conditions that interfere with school attendance, and the IEP team should include documentation including actionable steps to address lack of progress toward IEP goals. It is important for teams to identify the root cause of chronic absenteeism to effectively intervene.

Intensive, Individualized Supports

School teams can mobilize individualized, intensive supports and interventions to help remove barriers and improve attendance for students with disabilities. Intensive supports and interventions will be customized, dependent upon data, to address the root cause of the chronic absenteeism.

There are several educational professionals with specialized skill sets who can provide indirect and direct support to improve student attendance through systems-level consultation, participation on data teams, and by partnering with educators and families to provide individualized interventions to students. School social workers, home-school visitors, school counselors, school psychologists, and school nurses each work within unique service delivery models; however, each of these educational specialists can serve a distinct role in providing intervention. For example, school social workers and home-school visitors are well-trained in effective attendance practices and policies. They may make home visits and work directly with families and students on plans and goals for improving attendance or help connect a family with a needed community resource. School counselors may provide short-term counseling support or partner in developing intervention plans with goals to improve attendance. School psychologists, in partnership with the IEP team, may facilitate a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) to inform a Positive Behavior Support Plan (PBSP) to address behavioral functions of chronic absenteeism, or even provide psychological counseling as a related service.

School nurses can partner with students, educators, and families to help develop supports to address the needs of students experiencing health issues. This is not an exhaustive list of what each educational specialist can provide; rather, a brief overview. Consult with the educational specialists in your school to learn about the comprehensive services they can provide.

Special education teachers and related service providers, such as speech-language pathologists, physical therapists, and occupational therapists, working with the student can provide valuable information to help inform potential approaches and interventions to address chronic absenteeism. Engaging these professionals in data analysis, planning, and implementation of action steps is a critical component of helping improve attendance for students with disabilities.

Specialized programs designed for the most at-risk youth have been found to be effective in improving attendance and academic performance through structured mentoring, monitoring, or facilitation of engagement approaches. Essentially, the job of a mentor is to help ensure connection between the student, their school, and home contexts that enhance the students' engagement with school. There are several evidence-based programs including [Check and Connect](#) from the University of Minnesota and [RENEW](#) from the University of New Hampshire. School teams can research specific programs, determine which program would best meet the needs of students and be an appropriate contextual fit for their school structure (e.g., resource capacity, targeting needs of students, designed for age and grade levels).

When the student with a disability is displaying behaviors interfering with school attendance that have an adverse impact upon their educational performance, a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) should be considered. The FBA is a process of gathering information to understand the function (purpose) of behavior in order to write an effective Positive Behavior Support Plan (PBSP). The PBSP becomes part of the child's IEP and includes antecedent (or prevention) strategies, replacement behaviors (behavior to be taught as a replacement to the behavior of concern), consequences for reinforcement when the child performs the replacement behavior, and consequences for correction procedures when the child performs the behavior of concern.

Family and Caregiver Role in Supporting Attendance

Families and caregivers know their children best. They have a powerful impact to foster regular school attendance for their child. They can make school attendance a priority and talk to their children about the importance of attending school every day. They can help children establish consistent routines such as bedtime, homework, and morning procedures before school. When possible, avoid scheduling appointments during the school day. Families can also familiarize themselves with the school's attendance policy.

Family members can communicate any concerns their child experiences to school personnel to address any barriers. Families should immediately report any concerns if their child is not feeling safe at school. Families should work with school personnel if their child does not feel a sense of belonging at school, is feeling disengaged, or is having trouble with schoolwork. Regularly checking attendance and grades can keep families informed about their student's progress and give them an opportunity to intervene if they notice significant changes. They can share current contact information and notify

school personnel of any changes in contact information.

When students have been out of school for a period of time, it will be essential to reestablish routines that promote regular school attendance. Revisiting bedtime, homework, and morning routines will be necessary steps in getting students back to school. Additionally, new routines such as mask-wearing, frequent handwashing, and physical distancing skills will need to be taught, practiced, and reinforced. Just as it took time to adjust to remote learning routines, it will take time to adjust to re-entering school on a regular basis.

Conclusion

There are many supports available to assist students with disabilities. Schools, families, caregivers, and community partners can collaborate to provide comprehensive,

integrated support to improve school attendance. These supports fall along a continuum of universal approaches grounded in evidence and become increasingly intensive

and targeted dependent upon student need. The goal of these supports is to assist all students, including students with disabilities, to be successful.

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Additional Resources

Pennsylvania's Early Warning System Metrics

The Completion for All Pennsylvania Students (CAPS) link will take you to Pennsylvania's Early Warning System metrics. Tracking this data can help school teams identify students who are off-track for graduation. tinyurl.com/ewsmetrics

PaTTAN Family Engagement

Visit the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network's (PaTTAN's) Family Engagement webpage for information and resources to help families and schools work together. www.pattan.net/Supports/Family-Engagement

Students with Disabilities & Chronic Absenteeism

Students with Disabilities & Chronic Absenteeism from the National Center on Educational Outcomes highlights research and practices to support students with disabilities. tinyurl.com/NCEOBrief

Creating a PBIS Behavior Teaching Matrix for Remote Instruction

This resource from the Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) serves as a guide to help school teams create a PBIS Remote teaching matrix.

tinyurl.com/PBISTeachingMatrix

Psychological Counseling as a Related Service

PaTTAN's Psychological Counseling as a Related Service publication provides highlights on a continuum of options that can be provided to students with disabilities needing these supports.

www.pattan.net/Publications/Psychological-Counseling-as-a-Related-Service

Check and Connect

Check and Connect is a dropout prevention intervention from the University of Minnesota.

www.checkandconnect.umn.edu/

RENEW

RENEW is a structured school-to-career transition planning and individualized wraparound process for youth with emotional and behavioral challenges. The model focuses on supporting each youth to design and pursue a plan for the transition from school to adult life. RENEW has substantially increased the high school completion, employment, and post-secondary education participation rates among our most vulnerable youth.

tinyurl.com/RENEWImplementation

Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA)

PaTTAN's Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) resources help guide school teams through the FBA process.

www.pattan.net/Publications/Functional-Behavioral-Assessment

Annotated Positive Behavior Support Plan (PBSP)

PaTTAN's Annotated Positive Behavior Support Plan (PBSP) provides school teams with a resource for assisting with the development of a PBSP based upon the results of a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA).

www.pattan.net/Publications/Annotated-Positive-Behavior-Support-Plan

Improving Attendance and Reducing Chronic Absenteeism

A National Center resource for PBIS and Virtual Attendance, this document discusses the Gap Analysis on contributing factors to Absence and Truancy.

tinyurl.com/PBISAttendance

Improving Attendance in a Remote Learning Environment

This Center on PBIS brief provides strategies for improving attendance in a remote learning environment.

tinyurl.com/PBISBrief

CI3T: Responding to COVID-19

The ci3t website provides free, evidence-based resources to assist educators with establishing comprehensive, integrated multi-tiered system of supports. This link outlines seven specific strategies to improve engagement in virtual learning environments.

www.ci3t.org/covid

Resources for Families

Addressing Attendance Barriers In COVID-19

A PowerPoint presentation on addressing attendance barriers during COVID-19. This is housed on the PA Parent and Family Alliance website. They have additional resources regarding attendance issues.

tinyurl.com/AttendanceBarriers and www.paparentandfamilyalliance.org/

Attendance Works: Handouts for Families

Handouts about the connection between chronic absenteeism and academic achievement for families. Handouts can be customized by grade, school etc. and have been updated for COVID-19. Also, there is an attendance infographic handout.

<https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/handouts-for-families/>

HUNE

HUNE is a Community Parent Resource Center.

www.huneinc.org

PEAL (Parent Education and Advocacy Leadership Center)

PEAL (Parent Education and Advocacy Leadership Center) is a Parent Training & Information Center servicing family across Pennsylvania with offices in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

www.pealcenter.org/families

