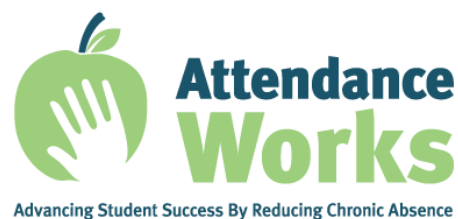




Spring Attendance: Early Action Toolkit

Division of Student Support and Federal Programs

April 2025



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Attendance Works (www.attendanceworks.org) is a national nonprofit initiative that advances success in school and beyond for all students by inspiring and catalyzing policies and practices that prevent and reduce chronic absence. Its website offers a wide array of free materials, tools, research and success stories to help schools, districts and communities work together to reduce chronic absence.

Taking Action in the Spring

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), in partnership with Attendance Works, has developed a Spring Action Toolkit to support local education agencies (LEAs) in taking immediate, focused action to reduce student absences before the end of the school year. As we face the challenges of chronic absenteeism across the state, it is critical to act swiftly, particularly as we approach the end of the academic year. Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of school days, has long-term negative effects on students' academic performance, emotional well-being, and long-term success. This toolkit is designed to help LEAs address these issues in a practical and effective way.

The goal of this toolkit is to provide LEAs with actionable strategies that can be implemented immediately to reduce chronic absences, specifically focusing on preventing the spring attendance slide and engaging students at the cusp of chronic absenteeism. It builds upon existing efforts in schools and LEAs, offering additional resources for early intervention during the last few months of the school year.

Recognizing that LEAs and the schools they support vary in terms of experience and infrastructure for addressing attendance, the toolkit includes guiding questions to help users assess where they are and determine next steps.

Why Tackling Chronic Absence Matters

Student attendance is highly associated with on-track indicators including grade level performance, connection to the school community, and the acquisition of social-emotional and executive functioning skills. When students attend regularly, by showing up to school at least 95% of the time, they are more likely to achieve academically and do well in school and life.

Research shows that when students become chronically absent, they are significantly more likely to fall off track.

- Early absences, starting in prekindergarten and kindergarten, correlate to poor attendance patterns in later years and reduce the likelihood of students reading proficiently by third grade.¹
- By the secondary level, absenteeism becomes a predictor of high school dropout rates.²
- Poor attendance also adversely affects educational engagement, social-emotional development, and executive functioning.³

In Maryland, a student is chronically absent if the student has been in membership in a school for at least 10 days and is absent 10% or more of the school days while enrolled at that school.

Chronic absence can also indicate inequitable treatment or access to resources. Students who are eligible for services, students who are economically disadvantaged, multilingual, as well as Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic students disproportionately experience conditions in their community and in their schools that lead to higher levels of absences.

¹ [Chang and M. Romero, "Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades." \(New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, September 2008.\)](#)

[S. Ehrlich et al., "Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences." \(Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, May 2014.\)](#)

² [Allensworth et. al., Looking Forward to High School and College: Middle School Indicators of Readiness in the Chicago Public Schools, University of Chicago, Consortium on School Research \(November 2014.\)](#)

³ M. Gottfried, "Chronic Absenteeism and Its Effects on Students' Academic and Socioemotional Outcomes," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 19(2) (2014): 53-75; M. Gottfried and A. Ansari, "Detailing New Dangers: Linking Kindergarten Chronic Absenteeism to Long-Term Declines in Executive Functioning," *The Elementary School Journal*, 121(3) (2021): 484-500; L. Santibañez and C. Guarino, "The Effects of

Absenteeism on Academic and Social-Emotional Outcomes: Lessons for COVID-19." (Stanford, CA: PACE policy brief, October 2020.)

Organizing a Spring Attendance Strategy

This toolkit is organized around the four steps below.

Step One. Leverage and strengthen your LEA attendance team

Most LEAs already have a team in place that oversees the systemwide strategy for attendance improvement. However, the team may benefit from adding additional members to fully leverage the resources that would allow it to have a greater impact. This toolkit helps LEAs to consider how to strengthen existing teams or put a team in place if one does not already exist.

Step Two. Address the spring attendance slide

To prevent the spring attendance slide, the LEA team can begin or reinforce positive messaging and targeted action to convey the valuable learning that is happening through to the end of the school year. The spring slide refers to the fact that during the weeks before and after a school's spring break as well as in the final weeks of school, drops in attendance often occur.

Step Three. Reach out to students at the cusp of chronic absence

These are students who have missed between 6% and 10% of their days on roll, or 10 - 14 days of school by April 1st. Steps can be taken to prevent these students from being chronically absent by the end of the school year. LEAs and schools can use this outreach to identify and provide support by learning what motivates students to attend school along with finding out what is getting in the way of attendance.

Step Four. Identify and address common barriers to attendance

Understanding common root causes of why students are missing too much school can help teams determine the best course of action. Identifying the right strategies, and steps for implementation require ensuring that teams take a problem-solving approach that meaningfully addresses the major barrier(s) and is implemented with fidelity. The team must also determine if the strategies adopted effectively reduce absences.

Step One: Leverage and Strengthen Your LEA Team

Ideally, every LEA in Maryland already has a team responsible for implementing the systemwide attendance strategy and supporting school attendance teams. These teams can utilize this toolkit to provide additional ideas and resources to enhance existing efforts.

Ideally teams at both the LEA and school levels are cross-functional and cross-departmental so they can advance a coordinated approach to improving student attendance. Cross-functional teams that unite departments and unique roles within the LEA or at the school level provide the teams additional capacity to strategize the best approaches to improve attendance and make available an array of resources across health, community schools, arts, or otherwise. If teams are already in place, consider using these LEA and school self-assessments found [on the Attendance Works website](#) to determine how they might be strengthened.

If teams are not already in place either at the LEA or school level, consider if there is another existing team, with a designated organizer, that can carry out this work or if a new one is needed. Consider these [Attendance Works tips for organizing LEA and school teams](#). Your LEA can then use the work this spring to launch attendance teams that function all year long.

The LEA team is responsible for:

- identifying the school level contact and teams that will implement the strategies in this toolkit;
- providing data to school teams to inform action and provide capacity to monitor results;
- providing materials and support for implementation; and
- engaging community partners.

Each LEA should identify a point of contact charged with organizing the spring actions to reduce chronic absence. This person should have the knowledge, skills, and authority to guide the systemwide approach, with the support of a team.

Practice Questions

- **Does your LEA have a team responsible for organizing a systemwide approach to attendance improvement?**
 - If so, who on the team can serve as point of contact?
 - If not, is there an existing team that could take on this responsibility through the end of the school year? Or who could quickly be designated to assume this function?
- **Does your LEA support and monitor school teams responsible for improving attendance?**
 - Is the school team led by the school leader?
 - Is there training for the members of the team to put in place an attendance multi-tiered system of support?
 - Are the teams provided with protocols to guide decisions about when outreach, engagement, and interventions should happen? If you don't have a protocol, here's an [example](#).
 - Is there school guidance for school leaders on team membership to ensure that teams are capable of a multidisciplinary approach?
 - Are school teams provided differentiated strategies for attendance improvement such as engaging families in elementary school and students in secondary school as part of the attendance improvement strategy?
- **Does the LEA examine attendance data and provide school leaders and members of the team with comprehensive, timely and actionable data?**
 - Does the LEA team regularly meet and review attendance data to examine trends across the LEA by school, student group, grade, geography, time of week?
 - Has the LEA determined which schools have the highest rates of chronic absence and what support might be necessary for those schools to meaningfully address the reasons that students are missing school?
 - Can schools examine data on attendance by day so they can identify when strategic actions might make the most difference given typical dips (e.g. worse attendance during particular days of the week, after or before vacations, at the end of the school year)?
 - Do schools have access to reports that give them information about students by attendance band including the percent and number of students who are at-risk of chronic absence? (missing 6% - 10% of their days on roll)?
 - Can that data be organized by grade, class, geography, and federally recognized student groups?
- **Could teams at the LEA or school level be strengthened by recruiting additional members?**
 - Could teams benefit from including additional school or LEA staff who can offer different perspectives and resources to reduce chronic absence?
 - Is this an opportunity to engage community partners at the school or LEA level in improving attendance?

Step Two: Address the Spring Attendance Slide

The spring attendance slide refers to the fact that drops in attendance are common toward the end of the school year and absences typically increase during the last few weeks of school. The shift to warmer temperatures, expanding time off during spring break, increases in asthma, allergies, or other health problems, half-days and anticipating summer vacation, can make attendance plummet.

Stop the spring slide through messaging and engagement that explicitly helps motivate students and their families to sustain or improve their attendance through the end of the school year with a particular emphasis on days where attendance typically declines. Get everyone (school staff, parents, caregivers, and community partners) involved in supporting these activities.

MESSAGING

Start by agreeing upon the key messages your LEA will use to communicate to the whole school community that regular student attendance matters through the end of the school year and is a major priority. A [recent study](#) by the Ad Council of 5,000 parents revealed the following insights about what messaging resonates. It found parents were more receptive if it:

- Is positive in tone.
- Communicates the opportunities associated with in-person learning, not just the consequences of missing school.
- Focuses on how school develops children holistically, beyond academic performance.
- Includes realistic goals for parents to work toward not being chronically absent, such as to attend as much as possible vs. citing a specific number of days or saying, “every day.”
- Acknowledges their hesitations and avoids chastising or shaming parents by telling them what is acceptable or not.

Messaging should be tailored based on the age of the students. In elementary school, parents and other caregivers who often have responsibility for getting young children to school are an especially key audience. As students get older, invest in messaging that speaks directly to students and what can motivate them to show up to school.

MESSENGERS

LEA teams can identify who is well positioned to deliver the messages and then provide schools with resources to recruit and equip such messengers to spread the word about why showing up to school matters. For students of all ages, teachers are especially trusted messengers. For younger students, enlist messengers (e.g. school nurses, pediatricians, other parent leaders, faith-based leaders) who are well positioned to reach parents. For older youth, other trusted messengers can include after-school program providers, sports coaches, and peers.

MESSAGING MODES

LEAs can also make messaging easier by identifying multiple modes to disseminate the messages and then creating materials that make it easy for schools to utilize. Messages include:

- **Pre-Recorded Messages:**
 - Create engaging messages from local celebrities and community leaders emphasizing the importance of attendance through to the end of the school year.
 - Schedule these messages to be played on key dates known for lower attendance (e.g., after holidays, on Mondays).
- **Public Service Announcements (PSAs):**
 - Film/tape PSAs featuring the value and importance of attending school regularly.
 - Distribute PSAs on social media, public transportation, doctors' offices, barber shops, salons, local TV, public agencies, and during school events.
- **Social Media:**
 - Share infographics and short videos highlighting the impact of attendance on academic success.
- **Attendance Phone Banks:**
 - Organize a phone bank to call families of students with high levels of absences, leverage LEA personnel, and document the areas of needs and resources that will be provided. (This can also serve as a school-level activity.)
- **Community & Clergy Engagement:**
 - Create announcements for clergy and community partners to share with their networks.
- **Wake-Up Calls & Encouragement:**
 - Organize wake-up calls or encouraging messages to motivate students to attend school, especially on days that students are less likely to attend, or to remind students and families that certain days are in session like the return after spring break, or the last day of school.
- **Morning Messages:**
 - Feature daily and weekly messages about attendance, including shout-outs to students with excellent or improved attendance.
- **Handouts:**

Provide information for family members. Here are possible resources available from Attendance Works.

 - [Handouts for Families](#)
 - [Health Handouts](#)
 - [Student Attendance Success plans](#)

- [Sample chronic absence letter](#)

ENGAGEMENT

Scheduling engaging activities and personally connecting with students and their families who have struggled with attendance can encourage students to attend and help ensure that families feel supported. A clearly communicated calendar of activities can help families understand the value of sustaining attendance through to the end of the school year. Using daily attendance data from prior years can help LEAs and schools to anticipate when to intensify or offer school activities that promote attendance.

Consider these end of the year activities as you develop a plan:

- **Recognition and Incentive Programs:**
 - Acknowledge students with good, or improved attendance, through certificates and public recognition.
 - Highlight educators who make a difference.
 - Celebrate families that improve attendance and acknowledge their efforts.
 - [Go here](#) for more information and research on effective incentive programs.
- **Family Fun Days:** Host events such as broadcasting local sports games to reinforce positive attendance behavior.
- **Spirit Week:** Engage students through activities and themed days.
- **Spring Education Events:** Such as Read Across America Day, Million Word Challenge, Pi Day, or Earth Day.
- **Outdoor Field Day:** Get students and staff moving! Older students can be trained to lead movement or mindfulness activities.
- **Multicultural Day:** Create a world music dance party or potluck meal: Invite students and families to share from their own cultures or from an area of the world they are interested in.
- **Shows and Showcases:** Hold in-person performances, spotlight activities, or showcase upcoming summer or after-school expanded learning programs.
- **Field Trips:**
 - Organize opportunities for community connected learning by visiting planetariums or local farms.
 - Ensure policies are inclusive so that all students can participate.
- **Breakfast Bunch:** Arrange for a small group of students to have breakfast with the principal or select favorite administrators or teachers.
- **College and Career Spirit:**

- Host a photo day for students and families for graduation.
- Invite teachers to share with students about the colleges they attended and their career journeys.
- Create an experiential career day that includes role-playing, guest speakers, and shadow days.

Appreciation Days: Everyone thanks a particular type of person, (parents/caregivers, teachers, custodial staff, students, etc.).

To create your Spring Sprint Week Calendar [Use this sample worksheet to develop ideas](#)

Practice Questions:

- At what points during the last quarter of the school year and what days of the week are students most likely to have a higher risk of missing school? Are there differences between schools? Offer schools information about timing activities and messaging for those points in the calendar when there are higher rates of absenteeism.
- Given the strategies that will guide school level efforts, what resources do schools need to implement such as messaging materials, or resources for end of the year activities like track and field day?
- Are there grants or funding streams that can be provided to schools to support year end activities?
- Are there partners or strategies to encourage and help teachers to sustain an active learning environment through to the end of the year, such as partnering with out-of-school time providers?
- What communication resources will be provided to community partners to reinforce the messages?
- What is the plan and data to be collected to monitor implementation and effectiveness?

Step Three: Reach Out to Students at the Cusp of Chronic Absence

By the Spring, students who are on track to chronic absence are those who are missing 6% -10% of the school year. These are students who have missed between 10 days - 14 days of school by April 1st, which means that steps can be taken to prevent them from being chronically absent by the end of the school year. By working with families, school staff, and providers to address barriers to attendance, schools can help prevent students from ending the year chronically absent.

The focus of the outreach effort should be to encourage improved attendance, identify, and resolve barriers to attendance, and identify what motivates the students to show up.

IDENTIFY WHICH STUDENTS ARE MODERATELY CHRONICALLY ABSENT

To better understand who is missing and to focus your outreach efforts, use your student management system to organize student data by student group, grade level, school, and geography, to identify patterns and understand where the greatest needs are at a systemic level. Ensure that each school can similarly access the same breakdowns that provide them with information about which students to focus on for this effort. Equip schools with school level data reports and data inquiry prompts to assist school teams with data analysis.

ENGAGE IN OUTREACH

To ensure that schools have the resources they need to engage students at-risk for chronic absence, LEAs should help schools to carry out the following tasks.

- Ensure a team (ideally an existing attendance team) led by the school principal (or another administrator operating with the strong support of the principal) organizes this outreach;
- Identify and recruit staff who can take responsibility for reaching out to each student and possibly their families. (If possible, find a staff person who already knows the student and has a positive, trusting relationship with them and their family.);
- Provide scripts, with a timeline, for reaching out to families in a caring, engaging way;
- Document and capture reasons for absenteeism (see, for example, [this worksheet](#)), ideally in your student management systems so that the information can be aggregated;
- Share resources for students and families including, for example, [student success plans \(with help banks\)](#) and [guidance for avoiding unnecessary health related absences](#).
- Assign and track interventions; and
- Examine whether attendance is improving or if the support needs to be adjusted.

Practice Questions:

- What resources will be dedicated at the systemic level in support of this outreach?
- What resources will be provided to schools to implement outreach efforts?
- What materials need to be developed? Who and/or what office will lead?
- How will the LEA monitor implementation and effectiveness?

Step Four: Identify and Address Common Barriers to Attendance

While educators may have a sense about why some students are missing school, often the full range of stories and barriers about the reasons behind the absences are not well understood or documented. In addition to identifying what gets in the way of student attendance, it is equally important to find out what motivates students to attend school or helps families support their child's regular attendance. Understanding motivations, and the families' support network can assist schools with developing approaches to attendance improvement that align with student interests and leverage family, school, and community assets.

IDENTIFYING COMMON BARRIERS

In order to more deeply understand common barriers to attendance, school staff need to go beyond staff perception or the most well-known acute cases of absences. Developing a comprehensive understanding of why students are missing and what makes a difference to help them to attend usually requires implementing an effort that deepens listening and expands who staff engage to learn more. Here are a few tools and strategies that LEAs can encourage schools to use to gain a deeper understanding of students and families' motivations and challenges.

- Review and utilize notes (e.g. included in case management, student information systems, etc.). Notice similarities and differences across students with different levels of absenteeism (e.g. students who are moderately chronically absent versus more severe levels of chronic absence - missing 20% or more of the school year).
- Empathy Interviews: These involve targeted, one-on-one conversations with a small sample of people (i.e. students or parents/caregivers) to learn from their lived experience. See this [interview template](#) from the High-Tech High Graduate School of Education.
- 2 X 10: This simple relationship and trust building strategy involves spending two minutes per day for 10 days in a row talking with a student about anything she or he wants to talk about. See this [guidance from Turn Around for Children](#).
- Student Focus Groups: Focus groups are moderated discussions held with a small number of students that help to explore experiences and perspectives. See this [Sample Attendance Focus Group Protocol doc](#).
- Attendance Café: This strategy involves using a welcoming café setting to engage parents in discussions about attendance. Participants can learn from each other as they share common experiences and successes. Find the guidance [here](#).
- Student Surveys: Surveys can be used to ask a large number of students about the reasons behind their absences. See this survey for [PreK Head Start Students](#) and this [survey for secondary students](#) developed by the University of Florida.

- Shadow a Student: See school through your student's eyes, identify opportunities to improve, and take action to create change at your school site. Find the toolkit [here](#).

Ensure that the information that is gathered can be disaggregated for different populations of students to allow for analysis of causes by student group or grade or otherwise the challenges and barriers associated with why different student populations (demographics, grades, as well as levels of absenteeism) miss school are not always the same.

Analyze the data to detect common themes. One approach is to review these [Root Causes for Absence](#). Go through the list of Barriers, Aversion, Disengagement or Misconceptions and highlight the ones your team is finding affects the students and families in your school. Use insights gathered about barriers and motivators to inform what strategies will be put in place to reverse the Spring attendance decline.

Possible questions to offer the school team include:

1. What are the issues affecting a large number of students? How would you describe it?
2. How do you know?
3. How many students is a problem for?
4. What are the students' shared characteristics that contribute to why this issue is directly affecting them? (Such as grade level, homeroom, friend group, neighborhood, or otherwise)
5. Why is it a problem?
6. Who else is involved?
7. What else do we know about the issue and how it is affecting the students?
8. What are the root causes? Identify at least three.

ALIGNING STRATEGIES TO BARRIERS AND ASSETS

LEAs can then encourage school teams to use the insights about root causes of student absenteeism to identify supports and interventions to address the reasons why students are missing school. Schools can use the insights from students and families to consider adding new strategies or garnering additional resources in order to better address current realities.

Documenting the reasons for absenteeism provides LEAs and schools with the information they need to ensure the systems of support and interventions directly address the reasons for absence.

LEAs should also assist school teams with adopting a continuous improvement approach to reducing student absences. Through continuous improvement school teams develop a theory of action, put in place strategies to reduce student absences, study the result of their effort, and learn whether the interventions are making a difference. The use of a continuous improvement cycle or a plan, do, study, act, model equips schools to meaningfully address why students are missing and learn from their efforts.

Consider offering schools the following continuous improvement problem solving steps:

- Identify the reason(s) for the absences, preferably beginning with common causes of absence for a group of students. For the spring attendance slide consider focusing on students at the cusp of chronic absence for this initial effort. (refer to the root causes work done previously)
- Gather information about students and the attendance barriers and what motivates them to come to school.
- Understand the problem by learning as much as possible about it.
- Identify the root causes and determine the underlying conditions contributing to the root causes.
- Develop possible solutions. Endeavour to include students and families who are affected by the challenges to help co-create the solutions.
- Choose a solution or set of solutions, identify the steps for implementation and who will be responsible.
- Monitor implementation and results.
- Evaluate whether the interventions were effective in removing the barriers to attendance and/or effectively engaging the student in school.

Ideas for research-based approaches to reducing absenteeism can be found in the [Attendance Play Book](#) from Attendance Works and FutureEd that includes specific strategies for prevention and intervention. This resource is inclusive of more than two dozen effective, readily scalable approaches covering topics ranging from family engagement to the value of attendance incentives, as well as students' social and emotional well-being, a high priority for educators post-pandemic. In the playbook, we explain each

Feeling Ambitious?

Laying groundwork for longer-term approaches:

While most effective if used starting at the beginning of the school year, teams could use this opportunity to begin using one or more of these strategies that can make a significant difference. The first two, Success Mentors and LEAP Home visits, could be used with students at the cusp while the third, SEAT, is a process aimed at supporting a more positive climate of attendance for everyone.

Success Mentors: This strategy involves connecting a student to a caring adult in the school who reaches out three times a week.

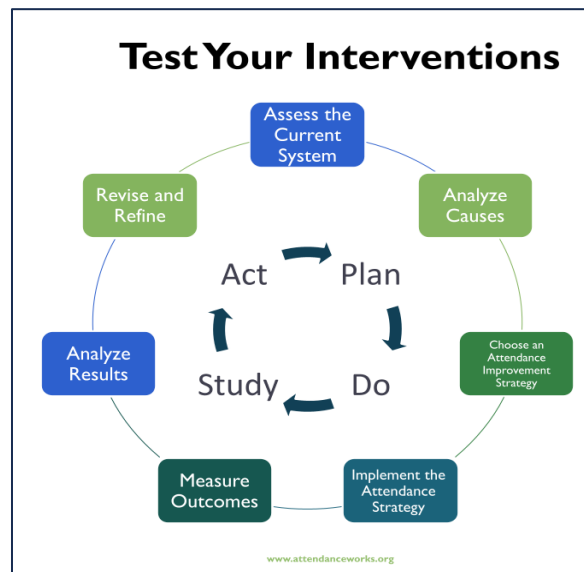
[National Success Mentor Toolkit](#)

[Attendance Works Elementary Success Mentor Toolkit](#)

LEAP Home visits: Developed in Connecticut, this relational home visit strategy used data to reach out to students and their families over time and yielded significant improvements in attendance. Online professional development to learn about the model is available for free. Learn more [here](#).

SEAT: [The Scan of Environment and Attendance Tool \(SEAT\)](#) is designed for school leaders to engage school staff, students, parents and community members to identify strengths and opportunities to promote positive school culture and strong attendance. Using the SEAT, schools can identify strengths and opportunities to shape the underlying issues that contribute to student attendance, including climate, culture, and the physical environment. Equipped with information about building-level practices that influence attendance, schools can take actionable steps to address some of the causes, not just the symptoms, of chronic absence.

intervention, identify the problem it solves, summarize supporting research, and highlight schools or LEAs that have used the strategy successfully.



In conclusion, the Spring Action Toolkit provides LEAs with actionable strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism as the school year comes to a close. Focusing on addressing the spring attendance slide, engaging students at the cusp of chronic absenteeism, and tackling barriers to attendance, this toolkit offers resources to enhance and build upon existing efforts. By offering practical, focused solutions and guiding questions for assessment, the toolkit empowers LEAs to take immediate, effective action and make a meaningful impact on student attendance.

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