

Student Engagement and Attendance Center

Action Planner for Reengaging Students to Support Everyday Attendance

May 2024

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Disclaimer

This resource was developed by Westat Insight (formerly Insight Policy Research) and American Institutes for Research under Contract GS-10F-0136X with the U.S. Department of Education. The contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education or endorsement by the federal government.

Suggested citation

Frazelle, S., and Gildin, M. (2024). *Action Planner for Reengaging Students to Support Everyday Attendance*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Student Engagement and Attendance Center.

Action Planner for Reengaging Students to Support Everyday Attendance

An estimated 230,000 students in 21 states have been identified as “missing,” meaning students whose absences are unaccounted for in school systems, since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020.¹ While the impact of this relatively new phenomenon is still unfolding, states and districts should consider examining their data to assess their context. The process of examining data is particularly important in schools and districts with inconsistent withdrawal codes.

This action planner provides an intentional process (see figure 1) for state education agencies (SEAs), local education agencies (LEAs), district and school leadership, educators, and families to collaboratively identify why students are missing. Students may not continue their enrollment in a district for four primary reasons: They enroll in a private or charter school, switch to home schooling, move to another district or state, or unenroll by disengaging from school completely.² Students who are missing due to unenrollment present the greatest concern to school systems due to legal responsibilities for the district and parents’ concern for students’ safety. Simply put, these students have fallen through the safety net of local and regional education and legal systems built to educate and protect the nation’s youngest, most vulnerable populations.

This tool provides school communities an action planning process for, first, collaboratively assessing the root causes of students’ disengagement and unenrollment and, second, collectively developing reengagement strategies and interventions for their students. Through the implementation of interventions that align with the root causes of disengagement, state, district, and school teams can create changes in their educational environment that welcome students back into public education. These same changes may help reengage students who have already exited the education system and provide them pathways for reenrollment.

Figure 1. Action planning process for reengaging missing students



1. Identify Partners

As with any initiative, it is important to engage a group of individuals who can provide the diverse perspectives needed for efforts to be effective and representative of school communities. This group should include students, families, communities, and educators. To start, develop a collaborative state team, or integrate this area of work into a current team's priorities. Consider the following questions:

- ▶ **Whose voices need to be present for the work to be effective and representative of school communities?** Consider including students, families, community partners, SEA departments, LEAs, district and school leadership, teachers, and school-based mental health professionals. Students who have had high rates of chronic absenteeism and students who have been reengaged may provide valuable insight into why they disengaged from school and what brought them back. Also consider how you can include community partners and departments that support student groups with disproportionately high rates of absence.
- ▶ **Does a current team or teams have capacity (e.g., personnel, resources, access to necessary data) to perform the additional role of identifying missing students?** If not, determine which team in your organization's structure would be most appropriately assigned to this necessary workstream. Because several school teams provide student supports (e.g., student support teams, school-based mental health teams, multitiered system of supports [MTSS] teams), this work will benefit most from a cross-team approach. Consider which team will be responsible for leading coordination efforts among student supports and communication with the other teams.
- ▶ **How can this team be set up to ensure all voices are valued, power is shared,³ and the work is accessible to all involved?** How can the team create an environment where participants feel safe discussing sensitive topics? Consider using the following tools: [Equity Discussion Guide](#), [Youth Engagement Tool](#), [Family Engagement Tool](#)
- ▶ **How can we compensate collaborators—for example, students, families, and community organizations—for their time and perspective?** While serving on a collaborative state team may be included in the job responsibilities of SEAs and LEAs, students, families, and community members have historically been asked to volunteer their personal time to share their lived experience and codevelop ideas that benefit the overall goals of the initiative. It is appropriate for non-SEA and LEA staff members to be financially compensated for the time they commit to the initiative for which others are paid through their normal work responsibilities.

Notes

2. Collect and Examine Data

Teams can use data to understand which students have not shown up to school, even though they were scheduled to be enrolled at the last tracked time period. This information can be used to identify trends, such as racial or other disparities in attendance and enrollment patterns.⁴ Collecting both quantitative and qualitative data can help create a more nuanced and accurate landscape that helps contextualize student chronic absenteeism, disengagement, and contributing factors. Disaggregating data by student groups can help teams identify equity issues that may reflect differing barriers to access or ways that students experience school. In this section, consider the data the SEA/LEA currently collects and changes teams may need to make to work toward accurate and consistent data collection. Consider the following questions:⁵

- ▶ Is SEA/LEA data collection accurate, consistent, and timely regarding students who were enrolled in the previous years but do not currently attend school?
- ▶ Is SEA/LEA data easily accessible for key partners, and are secure measures in place to share the data?
- ▶ Are both quantitative and qualitative data available and used?
- ▶ Are data available in reports or formats that help the team draw conclusions about the issues of concern?

Data examples	
Quantitative data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Chronic absenteeism data ■ School Climate Surveys that assess sense of belonging ■ Exclusionary discipline ■ Academic performance measures 	Qualitative data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Disciplinary referral forms ■ Interviews ■ Artifacts (e.g., notes from coaching meetings, school improvement plans, applications for funding) ■ Focus groups and listening sessions ■ Student-focused Inside/Outside Fishbowl^a

^a See U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, Regional Educational Laboratory Program. (n.d.) *Speak Out, Listen Up! Tools for Using Student Perspectives and Local Data for School Improvement*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Region/west/Resource/3605>.

What data are currently available to your team? Describing the data can help the team create a complete picture of what data are accessible and where gaps may occur. Use the following definitions as a guide when completing the data collection table:

- ▶ Data source: the name of the data to be collected
- ▶ Summary: a description of the type of data and how the data will be used
- ▶ Data collection type: where the data will be stored and accessed
- ▶ Population (or participant group): whom the data will be collected from

- ▶ Goal of data collection frequency: the ideal frequency of data updates to enable the teams to make decisions
- ▶ Actual data collection frequency: how frequently the data are currently collected
- ▶ Years of collection: the years the team will examine to help identify trends and changes in the data
- ▶ Link to dataset or tool: a link to the data or report for quick access
- ▶ Confidence in data quality (high, medium, or low): an assessment of data consistency and accuracy

Current Data Collection

Data source	Summary	Data collection type	Population	Goal of data collection frequency	Actual data collection frequency	Years of collection	Link to dataset or tool	Confidence in data quality (high, medium, or low)
Example: Exclusionary student discipline	School-level data for suspension, expulsion rates. We will use these data to assess racial disparities and examine connections between discipline and attendance rates	Student information system	Prekindergarten–grade 12 (PK–12) students	Once a semester	Annually	2010–current year		Medium—data are not regularly updated
Example: Chronic absenteeism data	Number of days absent divided by number of school days. We will use these data to identify chronically absent students in need of support	Chronic absence report	PK–12 students	Weekly	Three times per year	Current school year		Medium—teachers do not take daily attendance consistently
Example: Student listening session	Inside/Outside Fishbowl with groups of students who have missed more than 2 days in a month. We will use what we learn to develop in-school supports	We will save the results in our team folder	Middle school students	October	October	2023		High

After identifying current data sources, consider how your SEA/LEA can improve the quality. For example, what processes need to occur if the ideal data collection frequency does not match the actual frequency of data collection? If confidence in the data is rated as low or medium, what other data can you use to triangulate findings about the potential inaccuracies?

Finally, identify additional data your SEA/LEA can collect to provide further insight into student absence, especially as it relates to issues of equity and identifying needs and trends for different student populations. Consider how you can draw on partnerships and the different data (i.e., student, family, and community voice) that various collaborators can share. Ensure the initial groups that were consulted are involved in the process of identifying data sources within their locus of control.

Data source	Summary	Data collection type	Data audience	Goal of data collection frequency	Actual data collection frequency	Years of collection	Link to dataset or tool	Confidence in data quality (high, medium, or low)

3. Complete Root Cause Analysis

The team members can begin their root cause analysis after they collect their data. Root cause analysis can facilitate the identification of the “why” behind student absence and inform the interventions and supports the team will select to address the root cause. Root cause analysis can also help the team identify challenges or barriers to attendance for specific student populations, providing an opportunity to address disparities. The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education provides [common approaches to root cause analysis](#) that range from simple brainstorming activities to more in-depth analysis.⁶ The Student Attendance and Engagement Center also offers tools for SEAs and LEAs to reflect on attendance plans.

Exercises to assess root cause analysis can be done in person or virtually. Both modes are typically easiest in a collaborative brainstorming space that enables the team to group or move ideas around to identify themes or patterns; physical or virtual sticky notes are helpful tools in this exercise. Regardless of the chosen mode, the team should be able to determine the central issue being explored and, ultimately, the underlying causes of the issue that, if resolved, would support improvement of the desired outcomes. Below is one example of a root cause analysis tool teams can use to organize and keep track of their findings for the issue being explored.

Root Cause Analysis

	Component	Data to support component
Problem statement What is the central issue or problem related to missing students? Be specific about who is missing		
Underlying causes What are the potential causes that may be contributing directly to the problem you identified?		
Contributing causes What are the causes that may contribute indirectly to the problem (i.e., are not central to eliminating or preventing the problem)?		
Root causes What are the deepest underlying causes that, if resolved, will eliminate the problem or substantially reduce the symptoms of the problem?		

Source: Adapted from U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. *Approaches to Root Cause Analysis*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://oese.ed.gov/resources/oese-technical-assistance-centers/state-support-network/resources/approaches-root-cause-analysis/>.

4. Identify Strategies

After the team members identify the root cause, they can pinpoint strategies to address the root cause to potentially solve the central problem they identified. The interventions or strategies the team selects should be evidence-based and aligned with the root cause, and the SEA/LEA should have the capacity, resources, and supports to effectively implement the solutions.⁷ Teams should consider consulting other teams supporting students, such as an MTSS, to create a coordinated response. Because missing students is a relatively new issue, identifying evidence-based strategies for finding and reengaging missing students who have disengaged is an emerging need. The following resources focused on reengaging students who are chronically absent serve as a starting point and may help with reengaging missing students.

Resources to support selection of evidence-based practices

[What Works Clearinghouse](#)

[Attendance Works](#)

[Attendance Playbook: Smart Strategies for Reducing Student Absenteeism Post-Pandemic](#)

[An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Home Visits for Re-Engaging Students Who Were Chronically Absent in the Era of Covid-19](#)

[The Hexagon: An Exploration Tool](#)

- a. Write the root cause identified in step 3.

- b. Assess the team's current strategies. Before brainstorming new ideas, consider the team's current strategies and interventions and whether they are effective and aligned with the identified root cause.

Root cause	Current strategy or intervention	Is it evidence-based?	Does it align with the root cause(s) we identified?	Do we have the capacity, resources, and support to effectively implement it?	Does it fit with the values and culture of our community and our other initiatives?	What action should we take (keep, improve, eliminate)?

- c. Assess the need to improve the team's current strategies or add interventions to better address the root cause. Consider gaps that may need to be filled, especially as they relate to specific student populations and reducing disparities.

Root cause	Effective strategies and interventions currently in place	Gap to fill

- d. Brainstorm new strategies that align with addressing the root cause. The resources linked in the previous text box include potential strategies to use.

- e. Narrow your brainstorm list to three to five strategies, and assess their fit and feasibility. Once the team has assessed, pick one or more strategies to implement.

Potential strategy or intervention	Is it evidence-based?	Does it align with the root cause(s) we identified?	Do we have the capacity, resources, and support to effectively implement it?	Does it fit with the values and culture of our community and other initiatives?	What action should we take (implement, save for later, improve, eliminate)?

5. Implement and Assess Strategies

For each strategy, complete a Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle.⁸ Using this cycle, the team can intentionally plan, implement, and assess the effectiveness of the strategy.

Strategy 1:				
Plan	Alignment with root cause		Intended outcome	
			What are you hoping will happen as a result?	
			How will you know whether it is working?	
			What data can you collect to assess?	
	Action steps for implementation			
	Action step	People responsible	Resources needed	Timeframe
	1.			
	2.			
	3.			
	4.			
5.				
6.				
7.				
8.				
Do	What did you notice? (What happened or what did you observe while implementing this strategy?)			
Study	What did you learn? (What was the result? Did it meet your intended outcome?)			
Act	What can you conclude? (What do you need to do next? Adapt, adopt, or abandon?)			

Strategy 2:

Plan	Alignment with root cause		Intended outcome	
			What are you hoping will happen as a result?	
			How will you know whether it is working?	
			What data can you collect to assess?	
	Action steps for implementation			
	Action step	People responsible	Resources needed	Timeframe
	1.			
	2.			
	3.			
	4.			
5.				
6.				
7.				
8.				
Do	What did you notice? (What happened or what did you observe while implementing this strategy?)			
Study	What did you learn? (What was the result? Did it meet your intended outcome?)			
Act	What can you conclude? (What do you need to do next? Adapt, adopt, or abandon?)			

Strategy 3:

Plan	Alignment with root cause		Intended outcome	
			What are you hoping will happen as a result?	
			How will you know whether it is working?	
			What data can you collect to assess?	
	Action steps for implementation			
	Action step	People responsible	Resources needed	Timeframe
	1.			
	2.			
	3.			
	4.			
5.				
6.				
7.				
8.				
Do	What did you notice? (What happened or what did you observe while implementing this strategy?)			
Study	What did you learn? (What was the result? Did it meet your intended outcome?)			
Act	What can you conclude? (What do you need to do next? Adapt, adopt, or abandon?)			

6. Iterate as Needed

Once you have completed one PDSA cycle, you will have determined how you want to iterate or what to do next. If you

- ▶ determined you need better data, return to step 2;
- ▶ determined you have misidentified your root cause, return to step 3;
- ▶ determined your strategy or intervention did not align or work as planned, return to step 4; or
- ▶ determined your strategy or intervention is effective, continue implementing! Continue to monitor. You may also want to revisit your collaborators because missing students/families that have been located and reengaged could provide valuable lessons from their firsthand experience.

Repeat the process as needed to work toward effective strategies for addressing chronic absenteeism that align with the root cause you have identified.

¹ Vázquez Toness, B., and Lurye, S. (2023). *Thousands of Kids Are Missing From School. Where Did They Go?* Associated Press. Retrieved from <https://projects.apnews.com/features/2023/missing-children/index.html>.

² Vázquez Toness and Lurye. (2023.) *Thousands of Kids*.

³ Mapp, K.L., and Bergman, E. (2021). *Embracing a New Normal: Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement*. New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York. Retrieved from <https://www.carnegie.org/publications/embracing-new-normal-toward-more-liberatory-approach-family-engagement/>; Aguilar, E. (2016). *The Art of Coaching Teams: Building Resilient Communities That Transform Schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. (2012). *Authentic Youth Engagement: Youth Adult Partnerships* (Issue Brief #3). St. Louis, MO: Author. Retrieved August 2, 2022, from <https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/JCYOI-AuthenticYouthEngagement-2012.pdf>; and Okun, T. (2020). *White Supremacy Culture*. Dismantling Racism Works. Retrieved August 2, 2022, from https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun_-_white_sup_culture_2020.pdf.

⁴ Belsha, K. (2022). *Why Are Students Missing So Much School? The Answer May Lie in the Chronic Absenteeism “Black Box.”* Chalkbeat. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2022/10/13/23403250/chronic-absenteeism-pandemic-attendance-quarantines>.

⁵ Attendance Works and Everyone Graduates Center. (2021). *Using Chronic Absence to Map Interrupted Schooling, Instructional Loss and Educational Inequity: Insights from School Year 2017-18 Data*, p. 12. Retrieved from https://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/20210202_EGC_UsingChronicAbsenceReportFINAL.pdf; and Fong, P. (2022, September 12). *Using Data and Evidence to Tackle Chronic Absence*. REL West. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, Regional Educational Laboratory Program. Retrieved from <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Blog/100845>.

⁶ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. *Approaches to Root Cause Analysis*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://oese.ed.gov/resources/oese-technical-assistance-centers/state-support-network/resources/approaches-root-cause-analysis/>.

⁷ Metz, A., and Louison, L. (2018). *The Hexagon: An Exploration Tool*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, National Implementation Research Network. Retrieved from https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/sites/nirn.fpg.unc.edu/files/imce/documents/NIRN%20Hexagon%20Discussion%20Analysis%20Tool_September2020_1.pdf.

⁸ The W. Edwards Deming. (n.d.). *Plan-Do-Study-Act*. Ketchum, ID: Author. Retrieved from <https://deming.org/explore/pdsa/>.