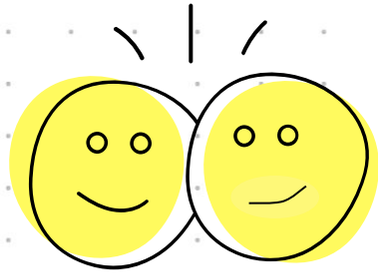
Turning ‘NO’ Into ‘GO’:

Helping Students Show Up, Even When They Don’t Want To

@characterstrong



We need to be
Reminded
more than taught

Sharon Bradley

Student Services Director

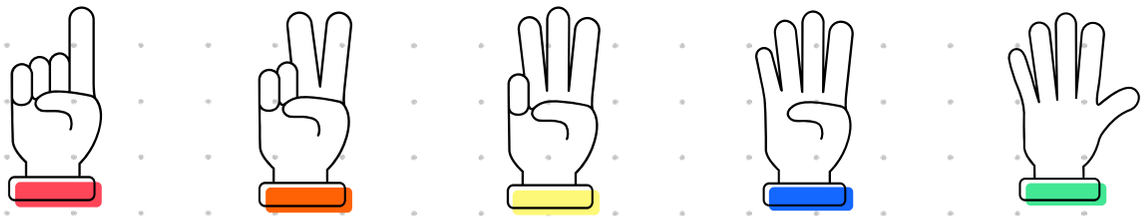
Julie Hinshaw

Senior Director of Content Development, CS

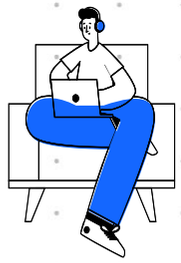
Character Strong

Temperature Check

How is your positivity level today?

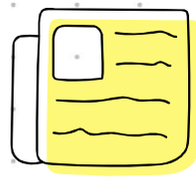


Objectives



Better understand chronic absenteeism

Learn 5 effective strategies to boost attendance



Collect ideas for putting these strategies into practice

Turn and Talk

What's one everyday item that best represents your personality? How?

- Pre-pandemic (2018–19), about **15%** of students were chronically absent
- Pandemic peak (2021–22) saw rates nearly double to around **28–29%**
- 2022–23 dipped slightly to **25–26%**
- 2023–24 is tracking at approximately **23–23.5% nationally**

Highest 2023–24 absenteeism rates by state:

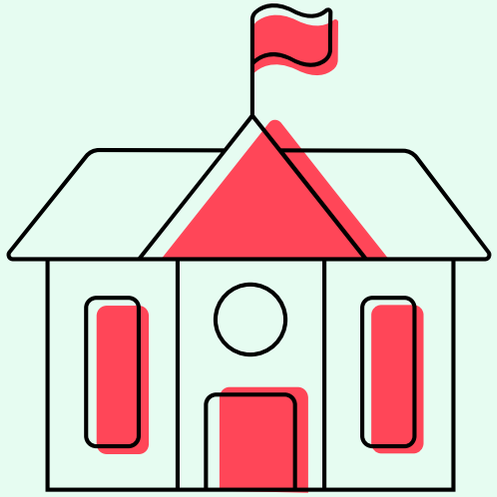
- Alaska: **43.4%**
- DC: **39.2%**
- Oregon: **34.3%**
- Florida: **31.4%**

Lowest:

- Idaho **~15%**
- Alabama **~14.8%**

School Refusal / Avoidance

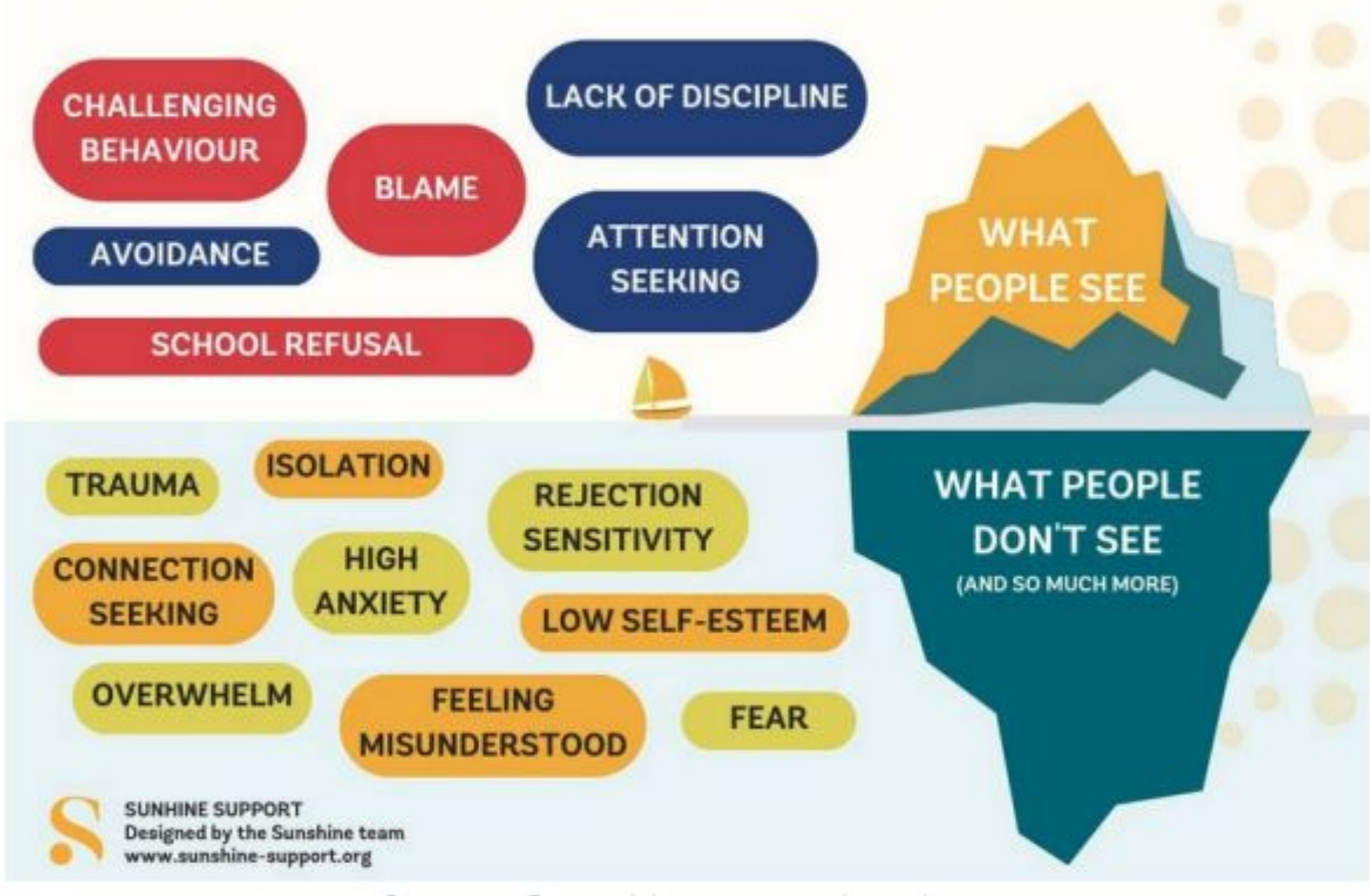
The Issue



“ Approximately **2–5%** of children **refuse** to come to school each year due to anxiety or depression.”

National Association for School Psychologists (NASP)

THE SCHOOL 'REFUSAL' ICEBERG



What's the Difference?

- **NOT** the same as truancy.
- Students facing truancy hide their excessive absences from their guardian(s).

Traditional Truancy Responses

- Calls
- Emails
- Letters
- Meetings
- Removal of privileges
- Detention
- Suspensions
- Revoked Driver’s License
- Truancy Court
- Fines
- Juvenile Detention (severe cases)

What's the Difference?

- **NOT** the same as truancy.
- With school refusal and avoidance, parents **ARE** aware of their absences.

Traditional approaches

DON’T WORK

Trauma

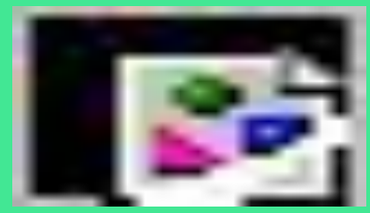
APPENDIX A: Risk Factors for Chronic Absenteeism

BARRIERS	AVERSION	DISENGAGEMENT
Students CANNOT attend school for these reasons	**Students WILL NOT attend schools as an avoidance strategy**	**Students DO NOT attend school due to disinterest, lack of connection, or parent mindset**
Illness / Chronic Disease • physical • behavioral **Family Responsibilities** • childcare/caring for siblings or other family members • difficulty supporting learning) • Parent incarcerated **Unmet Basic Needs (Maslow's)** • housing instability • poor transportation • no safe path to school • natural disasters/ property loss **Involvement with Juvenile Justice System** LSU Social Research & Evaluation Center	**Academic Struggles** • avoidance of challenging work (**student may be academically behind) **Social Struggles** • avoidance of embarrassment • fear of stigma or being teased • language barriers **Mental Health Struggles** • PTSD • acute anxiety • depressive or manic episode • trauma **School Climate** • avoidance of bullying • avoidance of unsafe conditions **Parent Concerns** • fear of COVID • parents' poor experiences with school	**Lack in Cultural Competence (Academic)** • irrelevant curriculum • unengaging curriculum **Poor Relationships and Climate** • no trusted adults • lack a sense of safety, belonging, and support in school • poor peer relationships **Discipline Patterns** • school discipline rates • frequent discipline referrals • personal experience with suspension **Questioning Value of Attending School** • no perceived consequences for skipping • peer pressure to skip • interest in entering workforce/trade **Student is Overage** © 2022 LSU, Social Research & Evaluation Center

Inspired by Attendance Works

Character Strong

Root Cause Questionnaire



Questionnaire to Determine Root Causes for Student Absences

Please share the following reasons as to why you are absent from school. (Check yes or no)	Yes	No
I have unreliable transportation to and from school.		
I travel out of town and/or the country.		
I am sick often.		
I stay home with my sick parent(s) and/or family member(s).		
I work a job outside of school.		
I stay home to take care of my child and/or younger siblings.		
I am tired and lack sleep.		
I feel unsafe at school, on the bus, while walking to school, etc.		
The students at school are unkind to me.		
I feel sad often.		
The weather is too bad to attend school.		
I am behind in my school assignments and homework.		
I don't think it would matter if I was absent from school/class.		
Test/exam days make me really nervous.		
My parent/guardian encourages me to come to school on a regular basis.		
I look forward to coming to school each day.		

Anxiety

Four Functions of School Refusal

Dr. Christopher Kearney

Function 1: School Refusal

To avoid school-related situations, areas and people that cause child unpleasant physical symptoms or distress.

Examples:

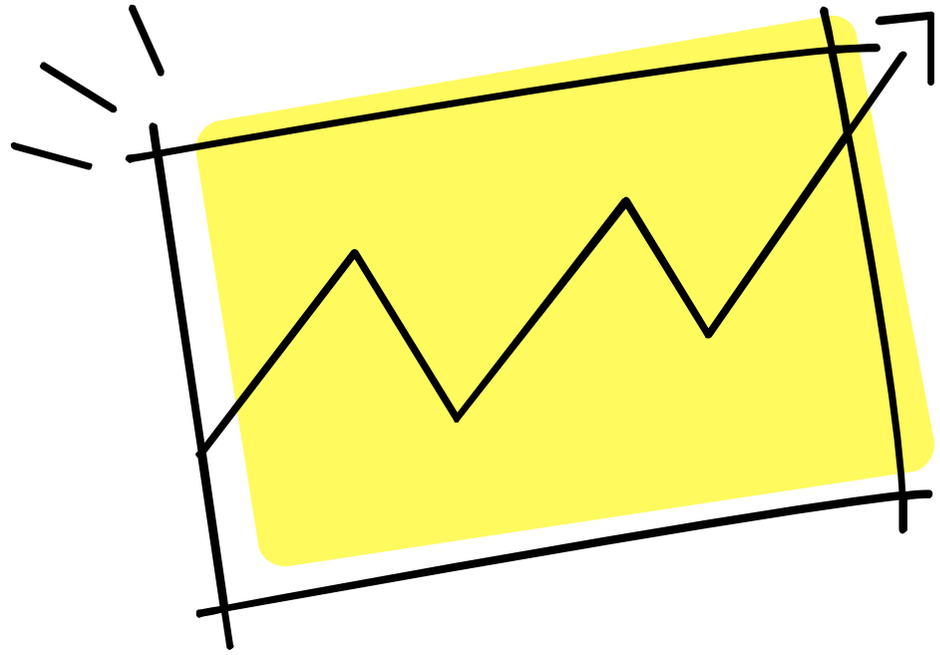
- **Negative interactions with campus staff**
  - Intentional Relationship-Building
- **Riding the school bus**
  - Arrange for specified pickup/dropoff/seating

Function 2: School Refusal

To avoid social or evaluative situations that are uncomfortable for the child (school-related performance tasks).

Examples:

- **Tests and exams**
  - Provide alternative to assess mastery and/or allow student to test in a small setting
- **Oral presentations in front of others**
  - Accept a video presentation and/or have student to present 1-on-1 with teacher.



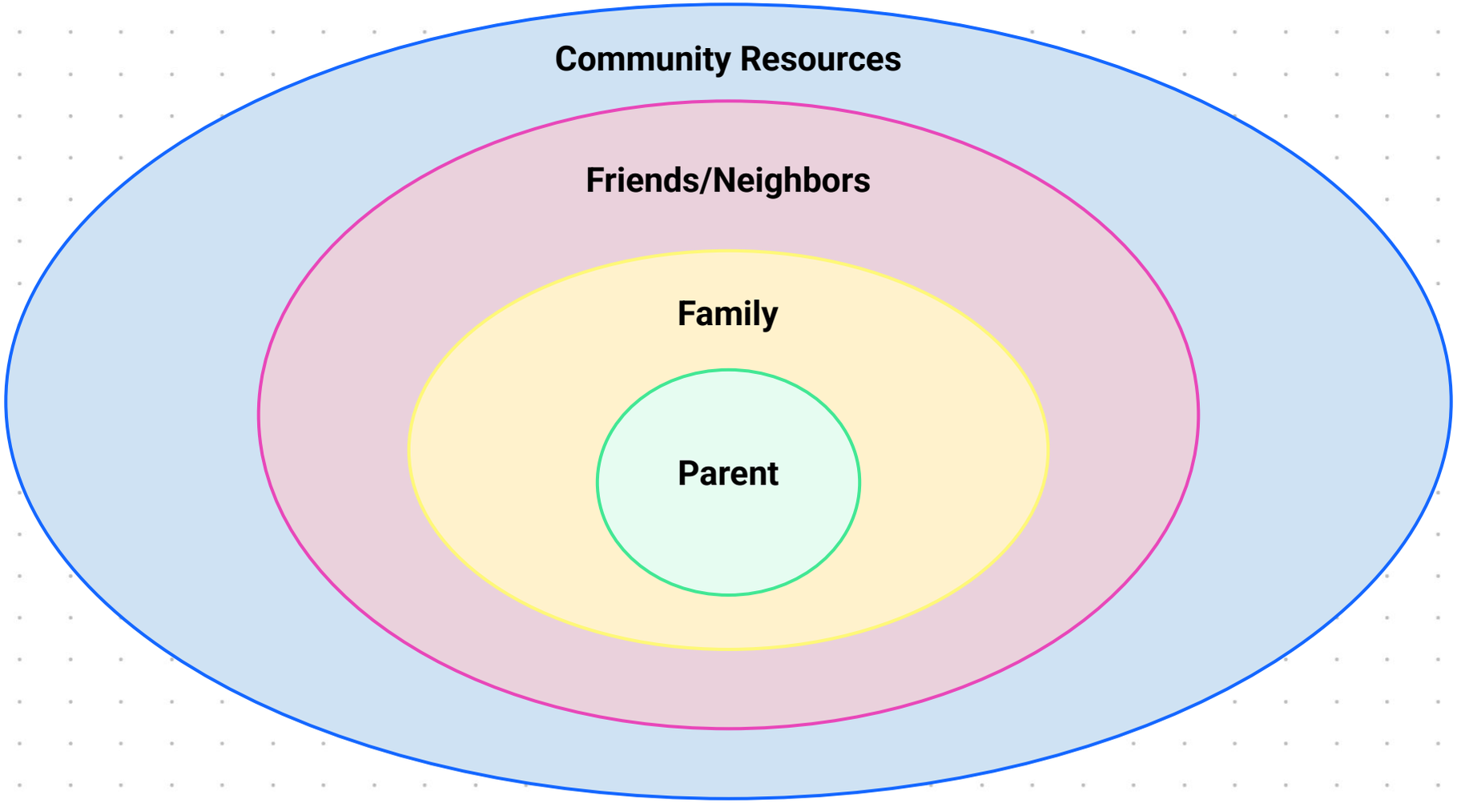
Function 3: School Refusal

To receive attention from a parent or guardian.

Examples:

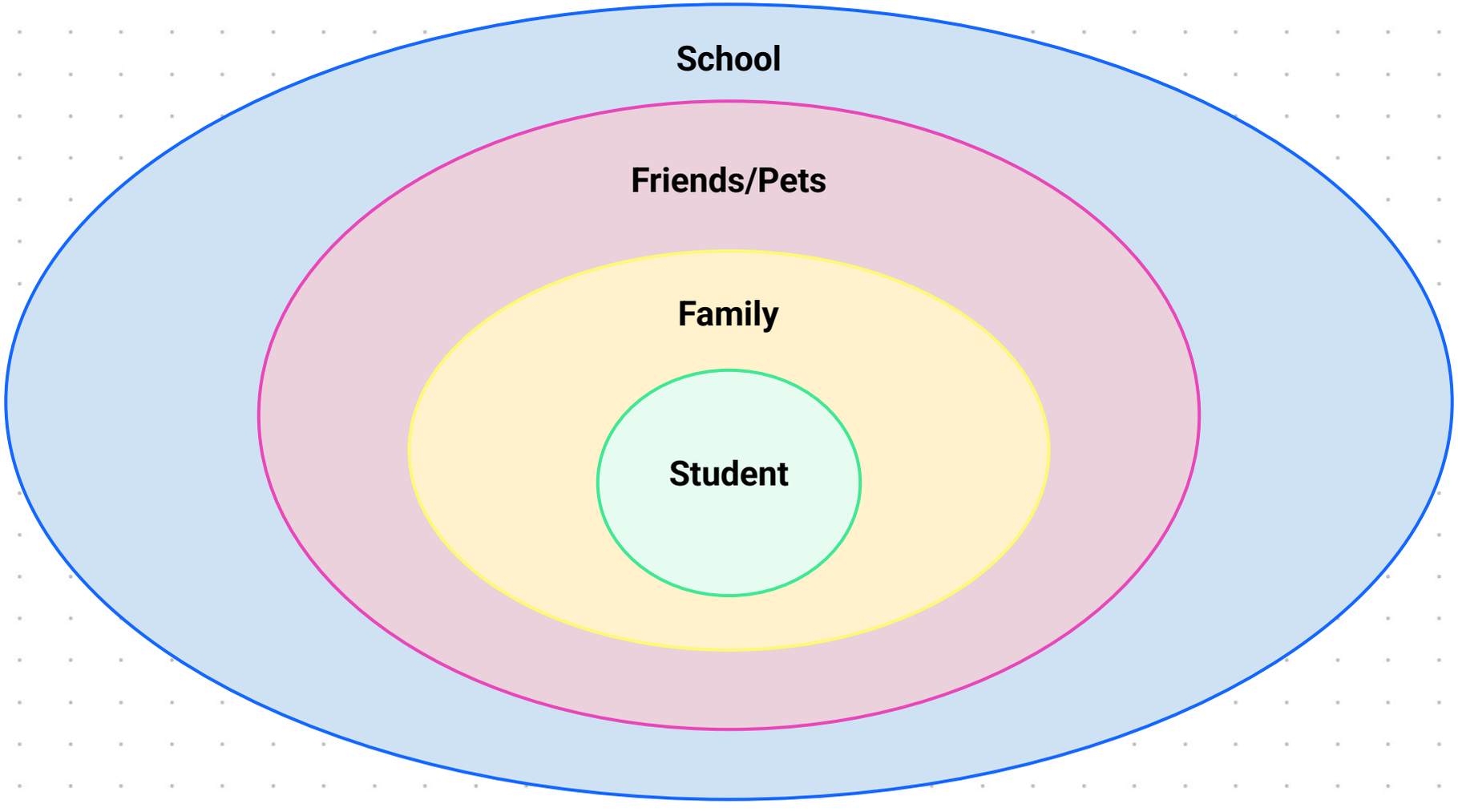
- **Difficulty separating from a parent, sibling, or caregiver**
  - transition item
- **Feeling like they are needed by a parent**
  - Family Stability/Support System

Family Stability/Support System



Who are the trusted individuals in your circle?

Student Support System



Who are the trusted individuals in your circle?

Function 4: School Refusal

To gain tangible rewards that are in the comfort and **safety** of their own homes:

For example:

- Staying home to play video games
- Watching TV or steaming
- Sleeping

Student Safe Place/Space

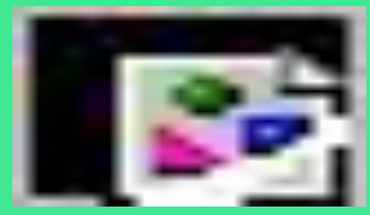
Where is your safe place?

What are the characteristics of your safe place?

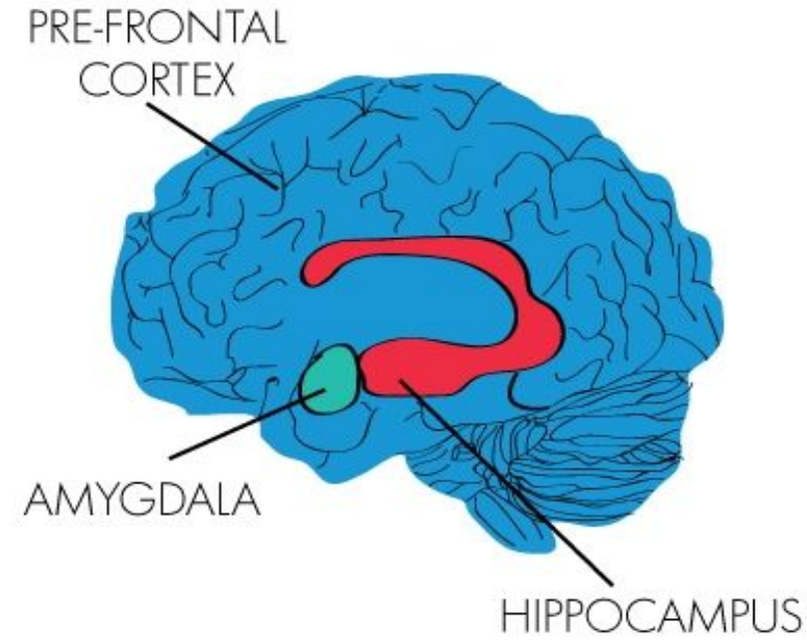
Strong Emotions

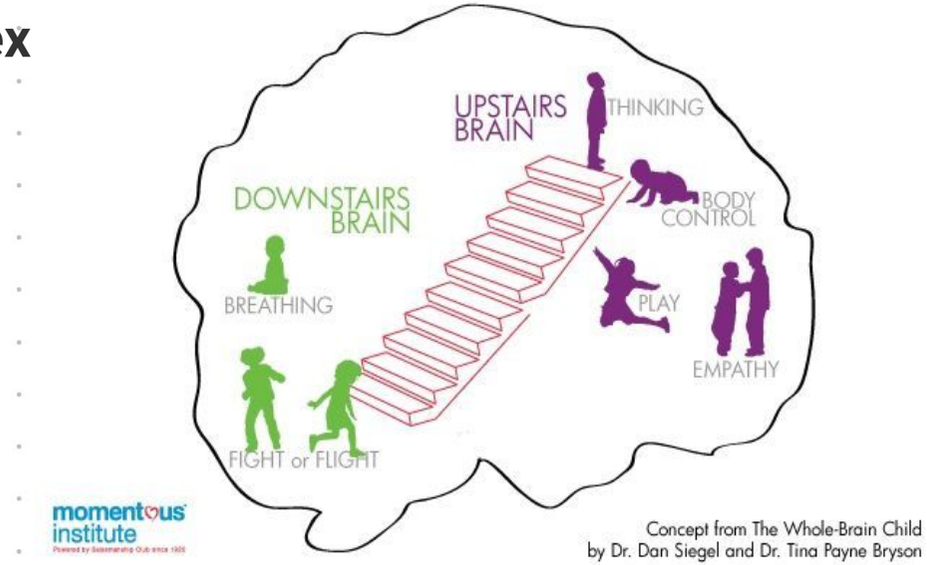
Character Strong

Teach About Anxiety and its Impact on the Brain

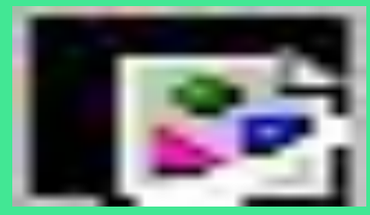


- Brain Stem
- Amygdala
- Hippocampus
- Prefrontal Cortex

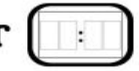
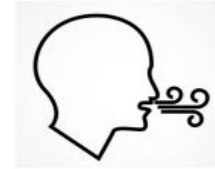
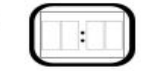




Calm Down / Break Area



Calm Down Area Procedures

	Take a comfortable seat
	Body Scan: How does my body feel? Set a timer 
	Choose a breathing technique
	Choose a calm down tool
	Repeat body scan Set a timer 
	Return to work

Character Development Skills	
Self Awareness	Identify triggers, strengths, motivators, embrace imperfection, etc.
Self Management	Teach coping and test-taking skills to manage anxiety and stress, “cool down” pass when overwhelmed and return
Relationship Skills	Adults interact with students in a way that creates school attachment and attunement (oxytocin and brain science)
Social Awareness	Overcome social fears
Responsible Decision Making	Each day is a new day/choice, break into small tasks, problem solving

Unresolved Issues Within Social Groups

Restorative Practices

Conflict Resolution

Responsive Restorative Practices is a relational approach based on processes that build healthy communities and **repairs harm and restores relationships.**

During a restorative dialogue, participants are asked:

1. To reflect on the conflict or problem
2. To identify their needs and interests
3. To make a plan

Bullying

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Kindness Initiatives

Have a grade level or schoolwide kindness board to show off how your students are showing kindness towards others.

1. Give students a piece of paper that will be put up on the kindness board.
2. Have students write one or two ways they are showing kindness towards others.
3. Post it on the kindness board.
4. Post kindness notes on lockers.

Kindness Initiatives

Have a grade level or schoolwide kindness board to show off how your students are showing kindness towards others.

1. Give students a piece of paper that will be put up on the kindness board.
2. Have students write one or two ways they are showing kindness towards others.
3. Post it on the kindness board.

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Community Agreements

What are Community Agreements?

They are a list of norms we **co-create,** agree to follow, and hold each other accountable to in any given setting.

Why does this matter?

Each of us needs different things to feel safe and successful in this space. It’s important to hear each other and have a shared understanding of the expectations within this community.

“People support a world they help create.”

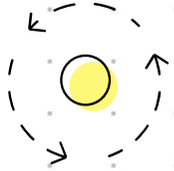
– Dale Carnegie

Community Agreements

Personal Reflection

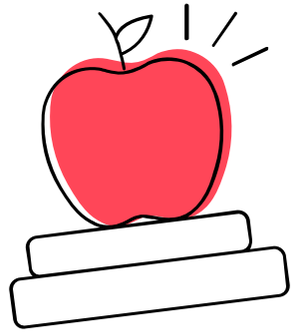
Group Brainstorm

Value Vote



Regular Reminders

Academic Struggles



Provide Tutoring and Academic Supports

Loneliness

School Connectedness

School Connectedness and Belonging releases oxytocin that send messages to the brain that creates attachment and attunement.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzvm1m8zq5g

- Trusted Adults
- Peers
- Clubs/Activities
- College/Career

Return on Investment (ROI)

Approach attendance work with the end in mind.

Communication

How do we send a powerful message collectively that a child is not just absent, they are missed?

Reflection

When a child enters your school, how do you want them to feel?

What do you have in place to make that happen each day?

Collaborative Attendance Improvement Planning w/ Mental Health Professionals

Sample Attendance Improvement Plan

Gradual Exposure Towards Reintegration

- Effective routine the night prior
- Solid morning routine
- Meet with teacher, counselor, “go-to” adult
- Attend some classes
- Attend ½ day
- Attend full day
- School grounds/parking lot
- Inside the school building
- Hallways
- Inside the classroom

Considerations

- Accommodations
- Modifications
- Online Learning
- Homebound Services
- Homeschooling
- Intensive Therapy
- Outpatient Treatment
- Inpatient Treatment

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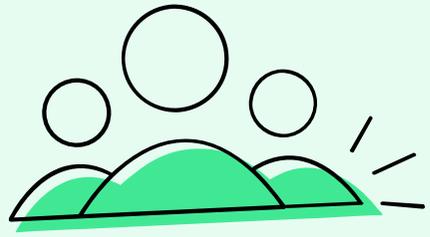


The C's that Build Trust and Boost Attendance

- Engage with **curiosity,** not assumptions.
- Listen to students and families with **care**
- Accept **collective responsibility** and **commitment**
- Provide **clear communication** and expectations.
- Focus on **connection**

Success Story:

Rhode Island

- Posting attendance rates
- Family education
- Leadership involvement
- Team effort

Result: Decreased the SE attendance gap by 33%

Which strategy did they focus on?

- ❑ Increasing Family Engagement,
- ❑ Promoting Student Connectedness
- ❑ Ensuring Health, Well-Being, & Safety
- ❑ Investing in Relevant & Engaging Learning
- ❑ Supporting Access to Learning

Success Story:

Alamosa School District, CO

- “Every Day Matters” campaign
- Voice Visits with families

Result: Increased attendance rates nearly 10% in 1 year

Which strategy did they focus on?

- ❑ Increasing Family Engagement,
- ❑ Promoting Student Connectedness
- ❑ Ensuring Health, Well-Being, & Safety
- ❑ Investing in Relevant & Engaging Learning
- ❑ Supporting Access to Learning

Success Story:

Alamosa School District, CO

- Data-driven approach (by grade level)
- Tiered approach
- Positive messaging and support for families

Result: Norton High School reduced chronic absenteeism from 36.9% to 2.3% in one school year.

Which strategy did they focus on?

- ❑ Increasing Family Engagement,
- ❑ Promoting Student Connectedness
- ❑ Ensuring Health, Well-Being, & Safety
- ❑ Investing in Relevant & Engaging Learning

Character Strong

What will your success story be?

Character Strong

Strategy #1:

Increase Family Engagement

Character Strong

Strategy #2:

Promote Student Connections

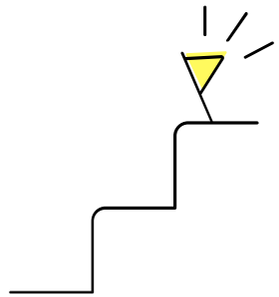
Strategy #3:

Ensuring Health, Well-Being, & Safety

Character Strong

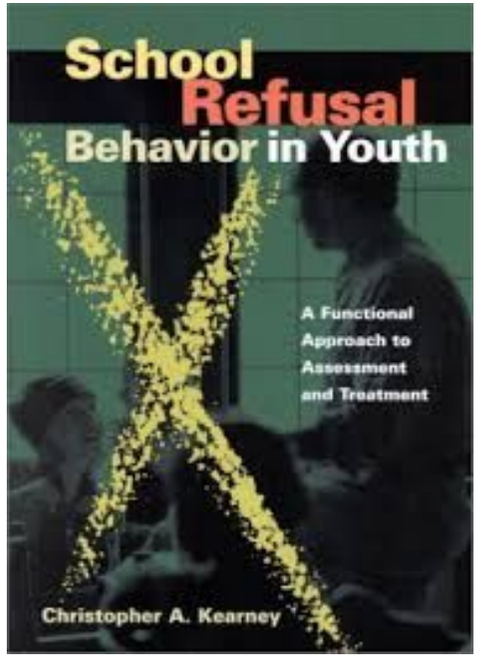
Strategy #4:

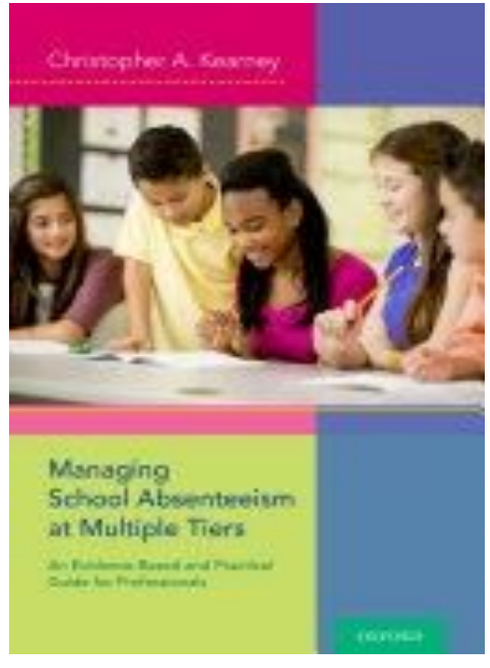
Invest in Relevant, Engaging Learning

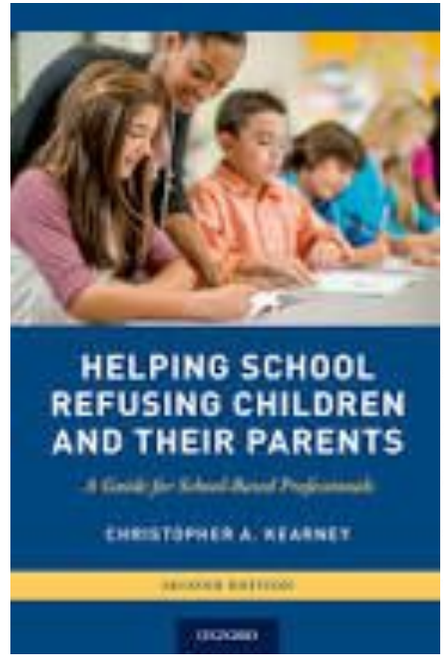


Goal: To increase students' physical, mental, social, emotional presence in school.

Resources







SCHOOL AVOIDANCE ALLIANCE

Resources

NPR National Professional Resources

COMBATING
Chronic Absenteeism
THROUGH ATTENDANCE IMPROVEMENT PLANS

By Sharon Bradley, M.Ed.

Consistent school attendance is crucial for student success and development. Both academic and social-emotional growth rely on regular attendance and involvement in school activities. Chronic absenteeism affects all student populations, especially students of color, those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those who move frequently, and students with disabilities. To effectively address chronic absenteeism and reduce excessive absences, the entire school community, along with students, their families, and community partners, must work together as a problem-solving body to implement actionable strategies and practical solutions that address barriers to attendance.

This guide provides educators with the tools and guidance they need to take a unified, problem-solving approach that directly tackles obstacles to learning, re-engages students in school, and reconnects families with the school community. This is accomplished by developing student-focused attendance improvement plans that consider the unique circumstances and needs of individual students and provide personalized support and interventions that address the underlying causes of their chronic absenteeism.

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year for any reason. Students who are chronically absent are at a higher risk of falling behind in their studies, repeating grade levels, or dropping out of school. Chronic absenteeism encompasses all types of absences: excused, unexcused, suspensions, expulsions. Chronic absenteeism affects not only the individual student and family, but may also have broader societal consequences, such as contributing to criminal activity and an ill-prepared workforce.

Many students and families today are facing significant challenges, such as family responsibilities or financial difficulties, that make regular school attendance difficult. Issues such as bullying or social concerns, homelessness, chronic illness, teen pregnancy/parenthood, and transportation difficulties are other common contributors to student absenteeism. The good news is that by developing personalized attendance improvement plans and making appropriate referrals to support students and families, schools can successfully combat the problem of absenteeism and achieve excellent student outcomes.

SHIFTING FROM PUNITIVE TO PROBLEM-SOLVING

Schools often rely on reactive disciplinary actions to address attendance issues. Families may receive notifications about potential truancy charges before a collaborative effort is made to understand the reasons for absences and offer support. Attendance improvement plans are a better, more restorative way to deal with chronic absenteeism. They are a key element of a collaborative, problem-solving approach that engages students and their families/caregivers to ensure students are consistently present and actively participating in their education.

Collective Responsibility Towards Collective Change

By collectively accepting responsibility for the attendance and success of all students and taking an active, unified approach to addressing absenteeism, schools can create a schoolwide culture of attendance and prioritize practices, procedures, and systems that promote meaningful engagement and regular attendance for all students.

Effectively addressing chronic absenteeism requires a collective effort involving some or all of the following:

- *Student
- *Parent/guardian
- *Administrator
- *General education teacher
- Counselor
- Special education teacher
- Social worker
- School nurse
- Front office staff
- Translator
- Representatives of community agencies (e.g., Communities in Schools (CIS), Community Counseling Center (CCC), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Boys and Girls Clubs)
- Community member(s) with an established relationship with the family (e.g., mentor, pastor, coach)

Asterisk (*) indicates mandatory participants

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Chronic Absenteeism:
PREVENTION & INTERVENTION STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOLS, FAMILIES, & COMMUNITIES

By Sharon Bradley

Chronic absenteeism is a growing concern among schools throughout the country, from early childhood through high school. In order for students to achieve their optimal potential, it is vital that they are in school and engaged in learning. School absenteeism directly affects students' academic and behavioral outcomes. Additionally, chronic absenteeism has a ripple effect on the school, family, and community.

This resource guide provides a practical toolkit of concrete, proactive, and responsive strategies that engage the student, family, school, and community in attendance efforts. In order to be effective, these strategies cannot be implemented in silos. It is highly recommended that school-based and district-based teams have shared goals and a unified commitment to identify and implement solutions to help address school absenteeism concerns.

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM VS. TRUANCY

Although the strategies and interventions presented in this guide are effective at proactively decreasing rates of both truancy and chronic absenteeism, it's important to recognize that the terms have different meanings and should not be used interchangeably.

WHAT IS CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?

Chronic absenteeism means missing 10% or more of the school year for any reason. Chronic absenteeism incorporates all absences: excused, unexcused, and suspensions. This is a more discrete issue as isolated absences tend to accumulate over time and could result in poor academic and social performance. To prevent and break the pattern of absenteeism, a proactive approach is needed to respond early when students miss days of school.

WHAT IS TRUANCY?

Truancy is defined as a certain number of unexcused absences within a certain amount of time per local and state attendance requirements and compulsory laws. Absences occur without parental permission or an excuse. Responses traditionally tend to emphasize compliance and rely on reactive and legal interventions. A student-centered, restorative approach, included strategies listed in this guide, is more effective at curbing and preventing truancy.

APPROACH

Addressing school absenteeism—including cases classified as chronic absenteeism and truancy—should involve a multifaceted, student-centered, social services approach. Such an approach has been proven to be more effective at decreasing absenteeism than a punitive approach. The process of intervening with students and families to identify and support the root causes that lead to absenteeism, and working alongside them to share the importance of attendance, can make a huge difference.

Early intervention is key. This includes putting supports in place to engage students and families before attendance patterns become more problematic. Building a school community culture of attendance as early as early childhood and kindergarten can positively change the trajectory of a child's K-12 school experience. Each stakeholder has an important role in this work.

COMMON CAUSES OF STUDENT ABSENTEEISM

- Lack of understanding on the part of student and/or parents about the importance of school attendance
- Desire to escape or avoid something at school (e.g., conflict with teacher or other students, bullying, harassment, struggles with schoolwork)
- Desire to obtain or access something outside of school (e.g., TV/video games, sports/activities unrelated to school, spending time with peers who are also not attending school)
- Need to work at hours that conflict with school due to family's financial insecurity
- Need to provide childcare for siblings/family members or their own children
- Illness (e.g., asthma, diabetes, severe allergies, other chronic illnesses)
- Housing instability (e.g., homelessness, foster care)
- Dental issues
- Mental health concerns (e.g., anxiety, depression, school/social phobia)
- Lack of safe, reliable transportation
- Access to clean clothing/uniforms
- Substance abuse
- Poor school climate
- Perceived lack of safety

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So… What's Effective?

- Increasing Family Engagement,
- Promoting Student Connectedness
- Ensuring Health, Well-Being, & Safety
- Investing in Relevant & Engaging Learning
- Supporting Access to Learning

	% Schools SY 17-18	% Schools SY 21-22	% Schools SY 22-23
Extreme Chronic Absence (30%+)	14%	43%	36%
High Chronic Absence (20-29.9%)	14%	22%	25%
Significant Chronic Absence (10-19.9%)	35%	23%	28%
Modest Chronic Absence (5-9.9%)	24%	8%	8%
Low Chronic Absence (0-4.9%)	13%	4%	3%

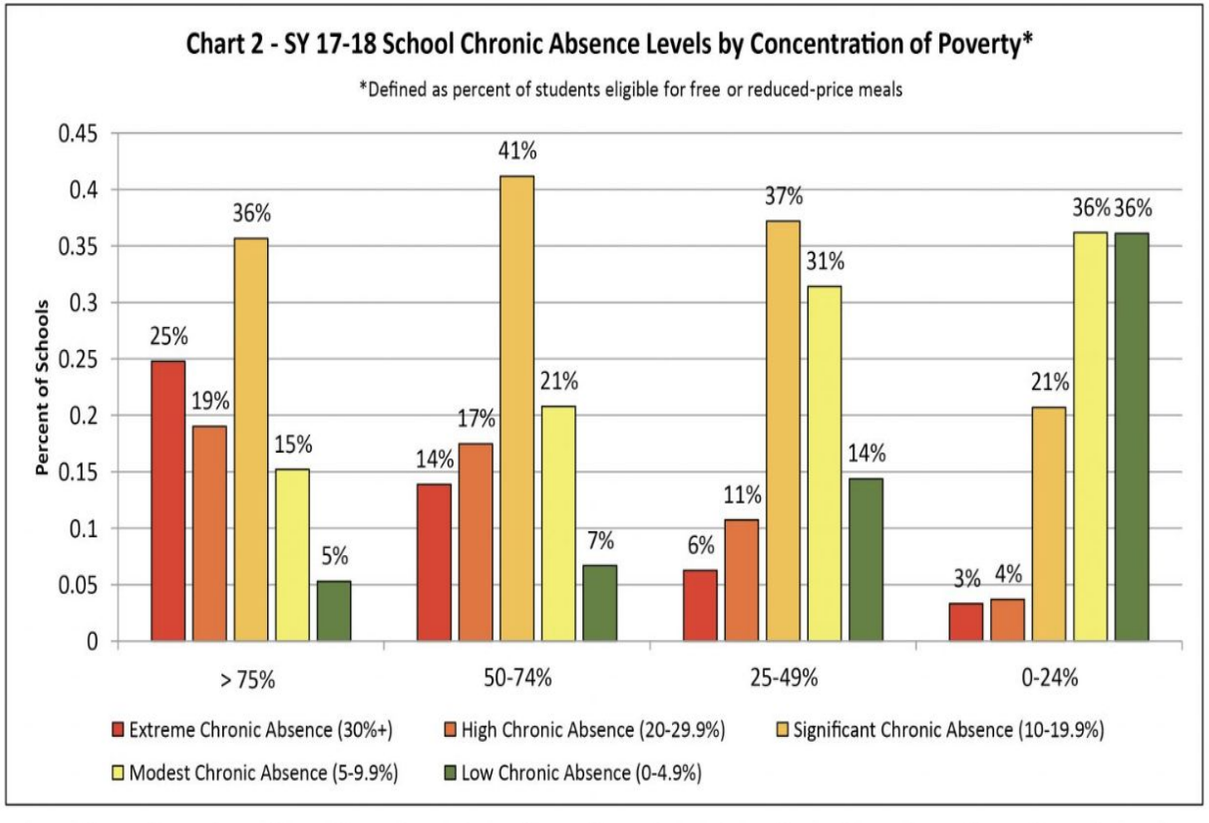


Chart 2 - SY 17-18 School Chronic Absence Levels by Concentration of Poverty*
*Defined as percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals
Percent of Schools
0.45
0.4
0.35
0.3
0.25
0.2
0.15
0.1
0.05
0
25%
19%
36%
15%
5%
14%
17%
41%
21%
7%
6%
11%
37%
31%
14%
3%
4%
21%
36%
36%
> 75%
50-74%
25-49%
0-24%
Extreme Chronic Absence (30%+)
High Chronic Absence (20-29.9%)
Significant Chronic Absence (10-19.9%)
Modest Chronic Absence (5-9.9%)
Low Chronic Absence (0-4.9%)

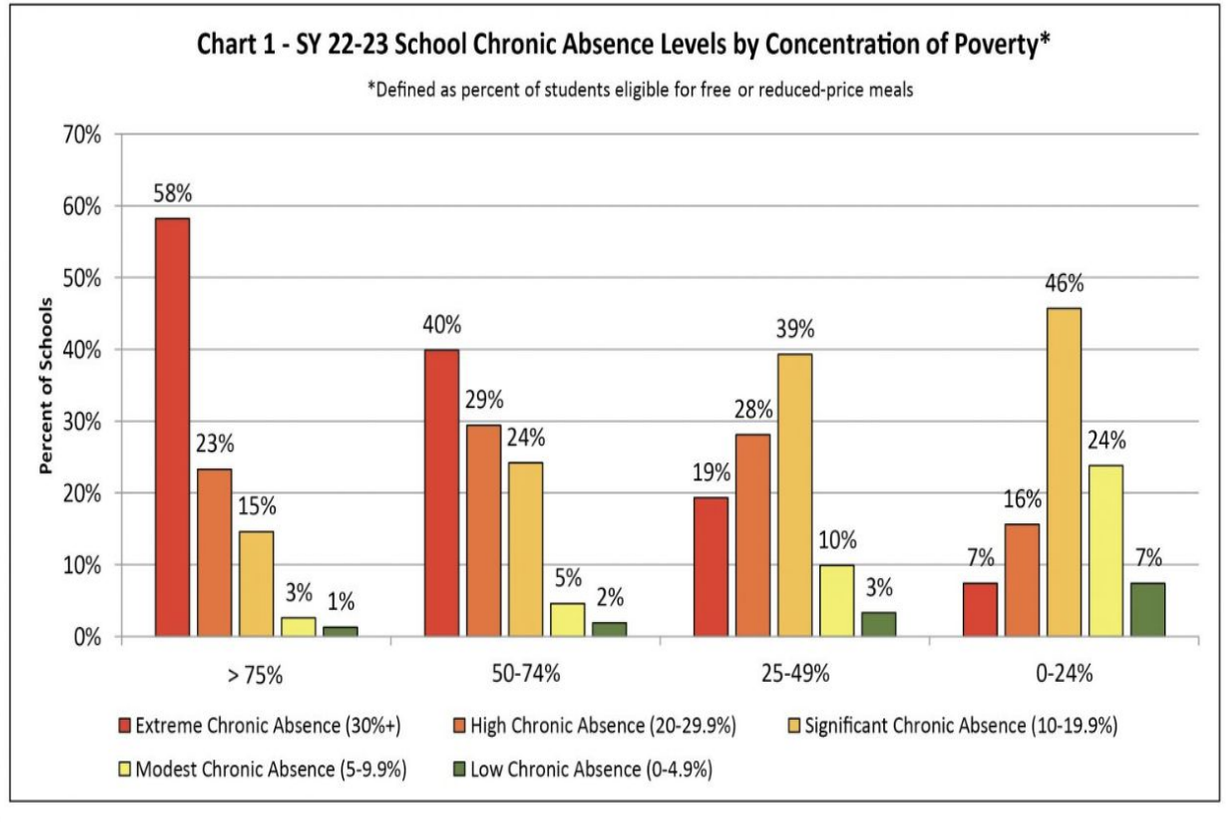


Chart 1 - SY 22-23 School Chronic Absence Levels by Concentration of Poverty*
*Defined as percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals
Percent of Schools
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
58%
23%
15%
3%
1%
40%
29%
24%
5%
2%
19%
28%
39%
10%
3%
7%
16%
46%
24%
7%
> 75%
50-74%
25-49%
0-24%
Extreme Chronic Absence (30%+)
High Chronic Absence (20-29.9%)
Significant Chronic Absence (10-19.9%)
Modest Chronic Absence (5-9.9%)
Low Chronic Absence (0-4.9%)

Chronic Absenteeism = Missing 10% or more days of school for any reason.

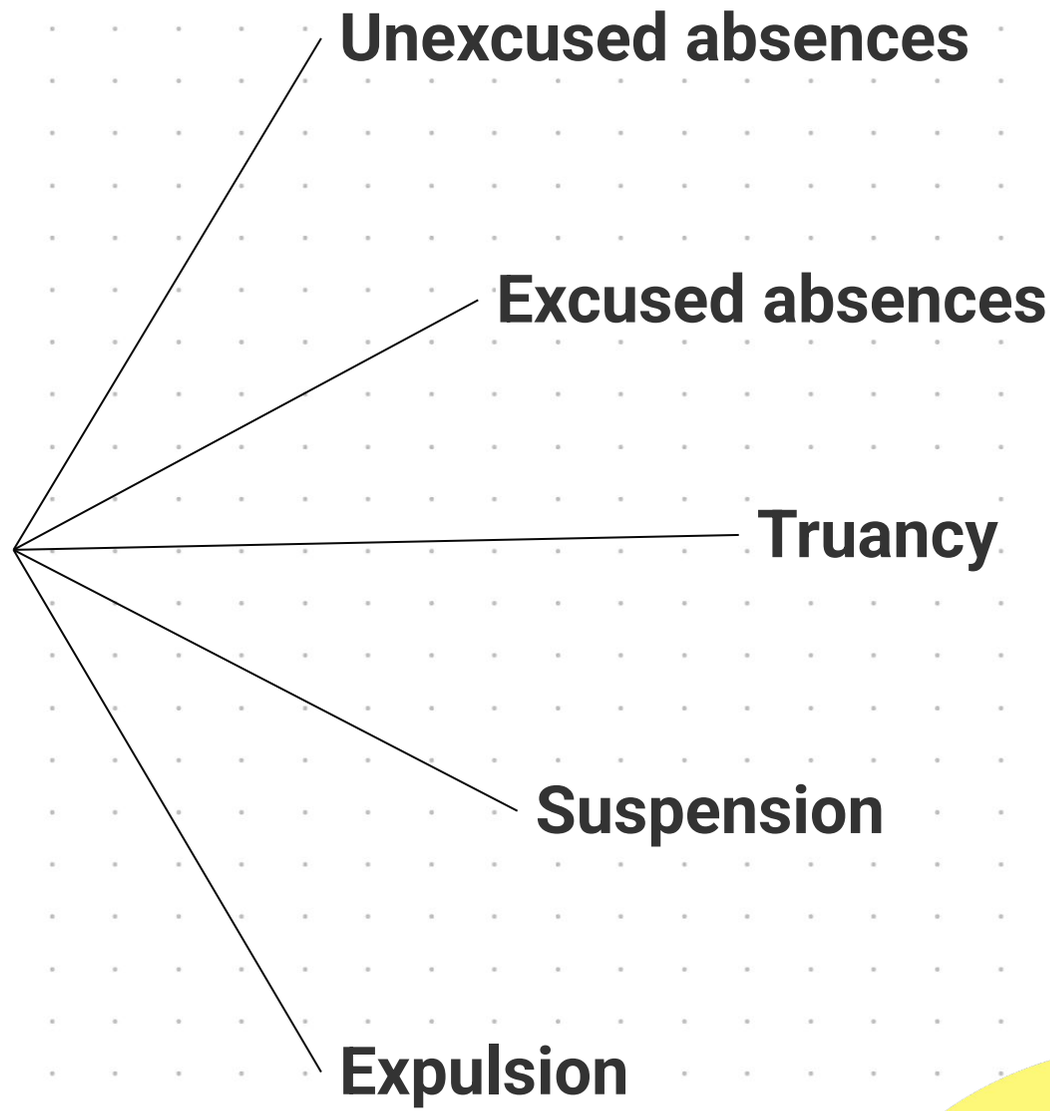
Chronic Absenteeism is

Missing about **2 days** per month

OR

Missing about **1 day** every other week

Any Reason


Unexcused absences
Excused absences
Truancy
Suspension
Expulsion

Proactive Detection

Percentage of School Missed

10-19%

Moderately Chronically Absent

- 9-17 days in a semester
- 18-35 days over the course of a school year

≥20%

Severely Chronically Absent

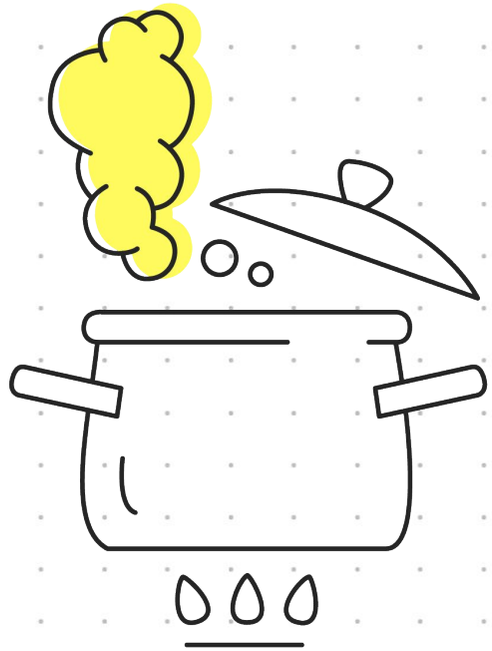
- 18 or more days in a semester
- 36 days over the course of a school year

Calculate the Gap

A student who misses roughly 2 days a month will end up missing an entire year of **instruction** & opportunities for **social experiences**

Implementation boils down to…

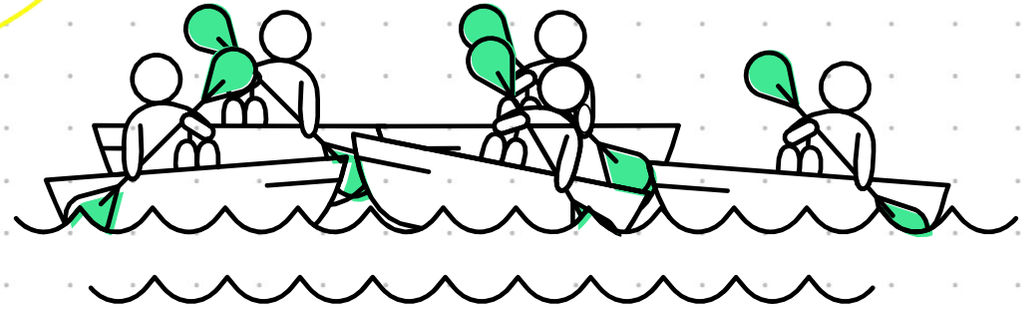
Adult behavior change



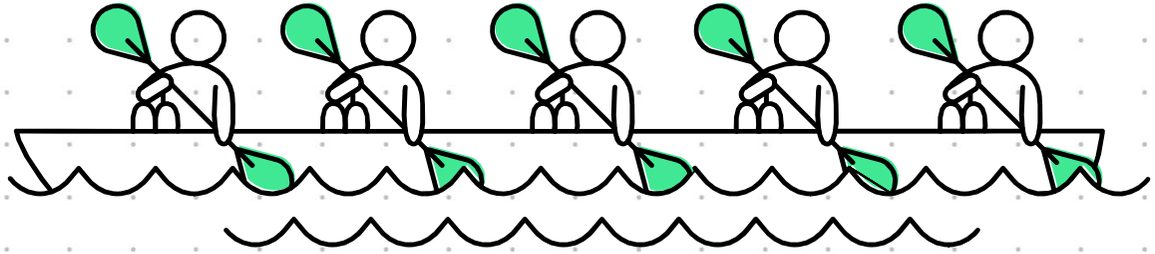
Undeniable Truth

All the positive outcomes we want to achieve for students is built on the well-being, energy, and shoulders of educators.

Going from this…



To this!



Everyone in the same boat and rowing in the same direction with paddles to achieve optimal attendance for all students

Character Strong

The **hope** is in the proactive.

Campus Resources > Admin & Coaching

Go Back

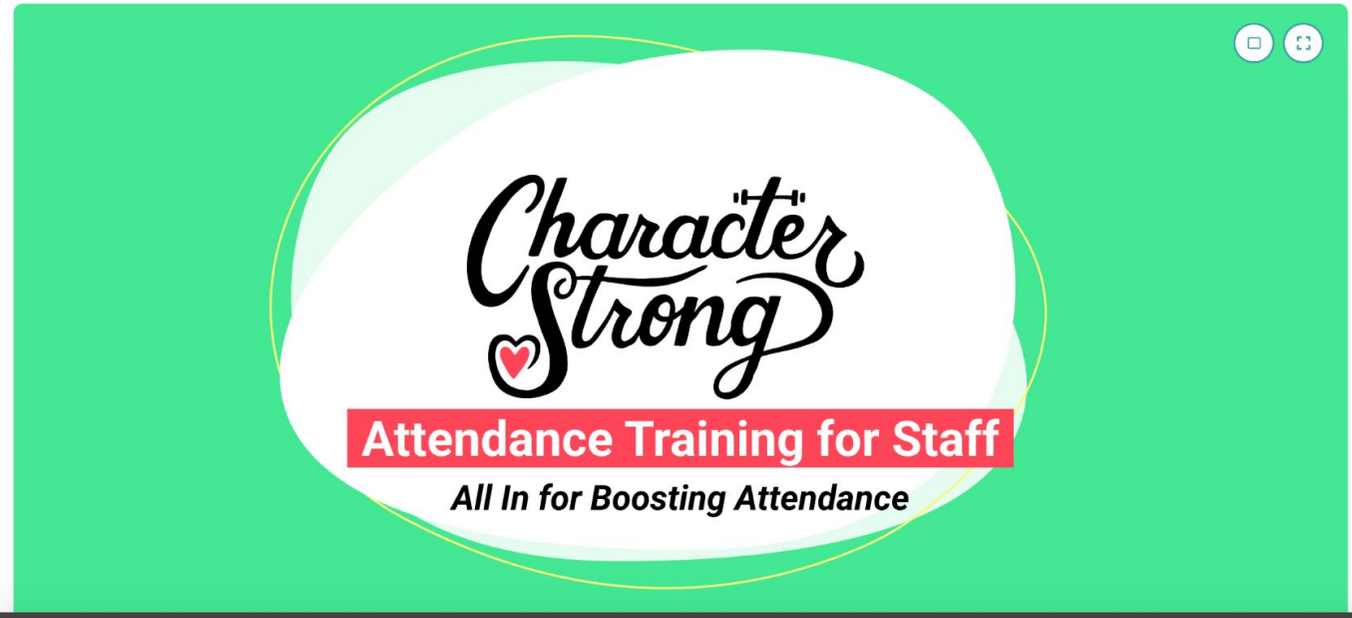
Attendance Toolkit

Chronic absenteeism continues to be a major challenge schools are facing across the country. The good news is there are a few solutions that are within our control. We address these solutions by providing proactive resources and strategies in our Attendance Toolkit! Designed to be low-burden, high-impact, these resources are rooted in building relationships and strong school culture. The Attendance Toolkit includes staff training slides, slides for admin and counseling teams, and one-page resources for various roles on campus.

Staff Training Slides

An interactive 30-minute training session to address root causes of chronic absenteeism together. (Tip: Print the one-pager tools below prior to the training.)

Note: Click here to make a copy of the presentation and view the speaker notes within each slide.



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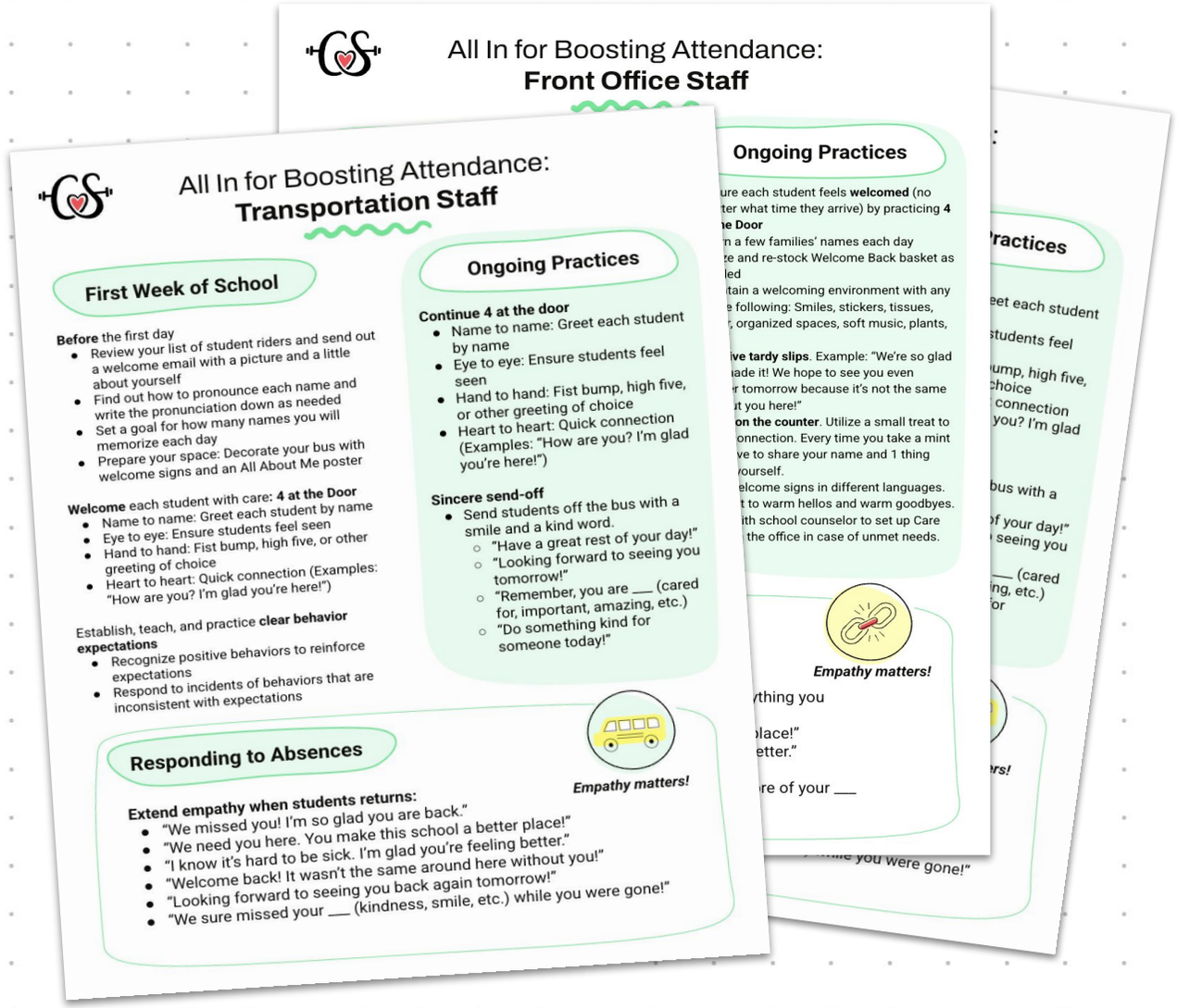
Edit Page

Proactive Tools



All In for Boosting Attendance:
Transportation Staff

First Week of School

Before the first day
- Review your list of student riders and send out a welcome email with a picture and a little about yourself
- Find out how to pronounce each name and write the pronunciation down as needed
- Set a goal for how many names you will memorize each day
- Prepare your space: Decorate your bus with welcome signs and an All About Me poster

Welcome each student with care: **4 at the Door**
- Name to name: Greet each student by name
- Eye to eye: Ensure students feel seen
- Hand to hand: Fist bump, high five, or other greeting of choice
- Heart to heart: Quick connection (Examples: "How are you? I'm glad you're here!")

Establish, teach, and practice **clear behavior expectations**
- Recognize positive behaviors to reinforce expectations
- Respond to incidents of behaviors that are inconsistent with expectations

Ongoing Practices

Continue 4 at the door
- Name to name: Greet each student by name
- Eye to eye: Ensure students feel seen
- Hand to hand: Fist bump, high five, or other greeting of choice
- Heart to heart: Quick connection (Examples: "How are you? I'm glad you're here!")

Sincere send-off
- Send students off the bus with a smile and a kind word.
  - "Have a great rest of your day!"
  - "Looking forward to seeing you tomorrow!"
  - "Remember, you are ___ (cared for, important, amazing, etc.)
  - "Do something kind for someone today!"

Responding to Absences

Empathy matters!

Extend empathy when students returns:
- "We missed you! I'm so glad you are back."
- "We need you here. You make this school a better place!"
- "I know it's hard to be sick. I'm glad you're feeling better."
- "Welcome back! It wasn't the same around here without you!"
- "Looking forward to seeing you back again tomorrow!"
- "We sure missed your ___ (kindness, smile, etc.) while you were gone!"

All In for Boosting Attendance:
Front Office Staff

Ongoing Practices

Empathy matters!

Proactive Family Engagement

- ❑ Meet families where they are
- ❑ Create a welcoming environment
- ❑ Be on their team!
- ❑ Normalize positive phone calls home
- ❑ Host family-centered events

Health Well-Being & Safety

- ❑ Embrace proactive bullying prevention
- ❑ Normalize emotion regulation tools
- ❑ Build safe and supportive classroom culture
  - ❑ Community agreements
- ❑ Offer opportunities for student voice and choice

Promote Student Connections

- ❑ Academics + 2
- ❑ Trusted Adults
- ❑ Share insights: Starfish room
- ❑ Prioritize relationships in all spaces
  - ❑ 4 at the Door
  - ❑ Bus greeters
  - ❑ Reading buddies
  - ❑ No phone lunch with conversational games

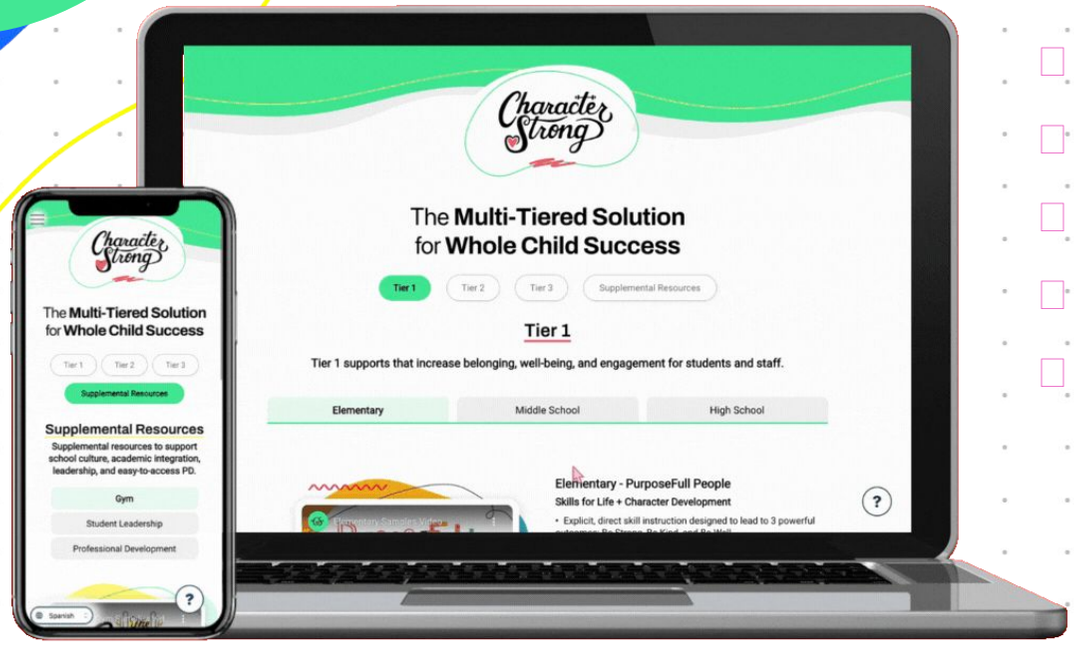
Relevant, Engaging Learning

- ❑ Collaborative learning opportunities
- ❑ Student-led learning opportunities
- ❑ Progress monitoring
- ❑ Tiered support as needed

Character Strong

60 Second Feedback

Tier 1 Curriculum



- PreK - 12th Grade Vertically Aligned Curriculum
- Designed by Educators for Educators
- Every lesson is unique and does not repeat
- Research-Based Lessons
- Plug and Play Resources

Scan to Learn More

Tier 2 Solution

Tier 2

- Elementary, Middle, or High School Level Curricula
- 6 Evidence-Based Interventions
- Screening and Intervention Matching Tool
- Progress Monitoring and Intervention Fidelity Tools
- Monthly Professional Learning & Coaching Access
- Library of On Demand Training and Resources

Scan to Learn More:

Tier 3 Solution

Tier 3

- Elementary, Middle, or High School Level Curricula
- 6 Evidence-Based Interventions
- Screening and Intervention Matching Tool
- Progress Monitoring and Intervention Fidelity Tools
- Monthly Professional Learning & Coaching Access
- Library of On Demand Training and Resources

Scan to Learn More: