



Resources for Identifying Assets and Challenges for Attending School

Any strategy for helping students get to school needs to be grounded in an understanding of the challenges they face in getting to school, as well as the assets students have that might be leveraged to help address them. It is also important to keep in mind that if you see a large number of chronically absent students in a school or neighborhood, or from a particular group, it often indicates that there are systemic challenges that need to be addressed.

Ground Solutions in an Understanding of the Factors that Contribute to Absences

Reasons for absences typically fall into four broad categories: barriers to attendance, aversion to school, disengagement from school and misconceptions about the impact of absences. See figure below.

| Barriers | Negative School Experiences | Lack of Engagement | Misconceptions |
|--|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illness, both chronic and acute – physical and mental • Lack of health, mental health, vision, or dental care • Family responsibilities • Trauma • Depression or anxiety • Unsafe path to/from school • Poor transportation • Housing and food insecurity • Frequent school changes • Involvement with child welfare or juvenile justice systems • Inequitable access to resources due to bias and discrimination. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggling academically and behaviorally • Ineffective or harmful interventions • Bored • Social challenges • Bullying • Suspensions and expulsions • Harsh, biased disciplinary practices especially for students of color • Negative attitudes of parents due to their own school experience • Undiagnosed disability • Lack of appropriate accommodations for disability • Pressure for academic success | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of or inequitable access to challenging, culturally responsive, engaging instruction and enrichment • Lack of or ineffective academic, emotional and behavioral support • No meaningful or negative relationships to adults in the school • Stronger ties with peers out of school than in school • Unwelcoming school climate • Failure to earn credits/ no future plans • Many teacher absences or long-term substitutes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absences are only a problem if they are unexcused • Missing 2 days per month doesn't affect learning • Sporadic absences aren't a problem • Attendance only matters in the older grades • Suspensions are not relevant |

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What Barriers Related to Covid-19 Can Your Team Anticipate?

The pandemic and distance learning has added nuances related to the barriers students and families face in getting to school, as well as the types of strategies that can be used to address the barriers. See figure below.

| Key Events | Reasons for Absences? | Strategies to Prevent Absences |
|--|--|---|
| Economic distress | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loss of income Unstable housing Food insecurity Students working | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legal aid to avoid evictions Food banks Alternative schedules for working students |
| Ongoing challenges of distance learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Zoom fatigue Connectivity issues Students feeling discouraged about not keeping up or not passing courses Lack of supervision at home | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add art, music, movement options that do not rely on Zoom Enlist partners such as afterschool programs to provide enrichment or learning hubs Adult or peer mentors to encourage students Online tutoring Study buddies Encourage use of help bank to identify support |
| Spike in illness-related absences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> More cases of flu or Covid-19 Mental health challenges Trauma | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vaccinations Telemedicine Support Groups |
| Holidays (families leave early and return late) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Desire for more time with family that live far away | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Messaging Group project on day before break Engaging lessons on first day back |

Quantitative information, (e.g., health conditions, Covid-19 transmissions, student mobility, housing evictions, etc.), especially when disaggregated by ethnicity and income, can shed light on the size and scale of systemic barriers.

And, since everything is not easily summarized by numbers, the team should gather qualitative, not just quantitative data, using interviews, focus groups and surveys. It helps to look for patterns in information collected from families by case managers or teachers as they meet with students. To make analysis less onerous, ideally such information would be captured electronically, either through a tool such as survey monkey, or by using a survey that is linked to a district's student information system.

Below are links to examples of tools developed to generate qualitative data about reasons for absence.



Assessment by Professionals of Chronically Absent Students (Sacramento): The Sacramento City Unified School District collaborated with the University of California Davis Center for Regional Change and a local nonprofit to develop this assessment used by professionals who work closely with chronically absent students. The assessment was not administered as a survey directly to the students, but rather through conversational observations that the professionals, (social workers and educators participating in the Parent Teacher Home Visiting Project), then entered into an online system. [This 2014 brief](#) shares a copy of the survey and summarizes insights gained.

Flamboyant Student and Family Surveys: Building upon its rich experience in family engagement, the Flamboyant Foundation offers [these tips](#) for surveying and reaching out students and families about their experiences

Phone Banking (Cleveland): Cleveland Metropolitan School District created a phone bank to reach out to and support chronically absent students and their families. Volunteers including staff, administrators and community partners received an attendance phone script and survey to gain a better understanding of the opinions and perceptions of parents throughout the district. Download [CMSD's phone script](#) and the [parent survey](#). See this PBS [News Hour story](#).

Panorama: Panorama offers free access to surveys especially aimed at checking in on well-being as well as examining the school climate and environment. Panorama has updated their tools to reflect distance and hybrid learning conditions. Learn more: <https://www.panoramaed.com/surveys>.

Pulse Surveys: In rural Butte County, California, the County Office of Education invested in an app called [Kelvin](#) which makes it possible for district and school staff to generate short-pulse surveys that students are reminded to fill in any time they log on for learning.

Student and Family Surveys developed by the University of South Florida: Found [here](#), these include nationally validated surveys for chronically absent students (grades 6-12) and parents of chronically absent preschool/Head Start students. Researchers also created this [version](#) for use with 6-12th graders engaged in virtual or blended learning.

Please contact info@attendanceworks.org if you have tools or resources that you have found valuable for gaining insights about challenges and assets for ensuring students attend school every day in both distance and in-person learning.