Addendum 14

Adapt, Advance, Achieve: Connecticut's Plan to Learn and Grow Together

Connecticut State Department of Education

Supporting Student Attendance and Engagement during Hybrid or Remote Learning

September 21, 2020

Regular school attendance and overall student safety and well-being are always vital for laying a foundation for success during the school year. Paying attention to attendance is even more essential this year, given the unique challenges created by COVID-19 for schools, families, students, and community providers. Working together to cultivate student engagement and develop regular attendance habits, whether school is offered in person or remotely, ensures that students benefit from the learning opportunities offered. Noticing absences as soon as they begin to add up ensures preventive action is taken to address barriers before a student has lost out on so much learning that it is difficult for them to catch up. Ongoing tracking and monitoring of absenteeism — by school, grade, and student population — ensures the ability to identify and respond, as soon as possible, when the new learning models may not be working as planned. Additionally, this focused attention provides for the identification of "bright spots" or successful practices for student engagement that should be taken to scale. This Addendum describes how schools, districts, and their partners can work collaboratively to make a difference by supporting students' attendance, engagement, and safety.

Tracking Student Attendance during Hybrid or Remote Learning Models

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) is requiring attendance be taken and tracked for each student each day. Student attendance in all learning models should be consistent with the State Board of Education's definition for attendance that, "A student is considered to be 'in attendance' if present at their assigned school, or an activity sponsored by the school (e.g., field trip), for at least half of the regular school day." Please use the CSDE guidance for tracking attendance on remote days for state reporting purposes during the 2020–21 school year. This guidance applies to students who have opted-in to full-time remote learning, are learning remotely during the week as part of a hybrid model, or are learning remotely because the entire school is operating remotely.

Supporting Students and Families during Hybrid or Remote Learning Models

Supporting students and families during hybrid or remote learning models requires strong and ongoing relationships with teachers, support staff, students and parents. Trusted community providers can also play an important role to support the connection between families and schools.

Recommendations for ensuring a strong relationship is formed between home and school include:

- Listening to, understanding and addressing issues that families are facing that may interfere with student attendance, including: health, transportation, child care, housing, and employment.
- Starting the year by intentionally building strong and trusting relationships with families. See Beginning of the Year Relationship Building Toolkit.

- Understanding the psychological and physical impact on students, families, and staff, especially when it comes to societal disparities, and prioritizing supports for students' social-emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs in order to have consistent engagement and school attendance. Visit the CSDE Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) webpage.
- Providing training opportunities for families on device use and access to school platforms.
- Planning ways to engage families at the beginning of the school year, recognizing that families may not be able to access training online.
- Implementing high-impact family engagement strategies by applying the guiding principles in Connecticut's Framework for Family Engagement.
- Communicating with families and students, in a variety of modes, clear attendance and participation expectations during remote learning early in the school year and continuously during the period of time that students are learning remotely. See Engaging Parents Through Better Communication Systems.
- Identifying special populations of students that may require additional supports and connect with school or community partners that can assist them (e.g., students with a history of chronic absence; English learners; students with chronic health issues; students with disabilities).
- Keeping lines of communication open and accessible by providing parents with an email or phone number they can use to easily address issues related to attendance or connectivity during remote learning.
- Launching a local campaign as part of the national 2020 Attendance Awareness Campaign with Attendance Works.

Strengthening Schools to Support Attendance during Hybrid or Remote Learning Models

Districts must ensure that schools are prepared to support families and students in remote learning by:

- Equipping educators with realistic self-care strategies is essential to supporting student wellness and the well-being of the overall school community, particularly during a time of isolation due to school closures and social distancing restrictions. See Healthy Schools Start with Healthy Adults.
- Training and supporting teachers and school support staff on how to engage families and accurately track attendance during remote learning (e.g., estimating the amount of time to complete an assignment; understanding of attendance codes; and accurate data entry).
- Ensuring that systems are in place for: early identification of students who are chronically absent or at-risk of becoming chronically absent; detecting the root causes; and implementing and monitoring effective tiered interventions for reversing a pattern of absenteeism.
- Engaging the McKinney-Vento Coordinator to support families that may be experiencing homelessness.
- Implementing Child Find protocols that require promptly referring any student whose attendance is considered unsatisfactory or at a marginal level of acceptance to a planning and placement team (PPT) process.
- Developing approaches to discipline that consider educator input and avoid setting unreasonable expectations for staff or students/families as outlined in Addendum 10: Reframing and Reopening: School Discipline Amidst COVID-19 Guidance.
- Ensuring a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to each student determined eligible for special education service and for whom the parent has provided written consent for the provision of special education and related services as described in Addendum 6: Reopening Guidance for Education Students with Disabilities.
- Working with families and health care providers to ensure that school health assessments and immunization requirements are completed prior to missing deadlines that could result in school exclusion for noncompliance. The CSDE resource, Improving Attendance by Addressing School

Health Assessments and Immunizations, outlines best practices for working with key partners, including school personnel, families and community-based providers.

- Engaging the school nurse to connect with families where health or COVID-19 are barriers to participating in remote learning.

Structures and Systems of Support are Paramount to Preventing Chronic Absence

It is important that structures and systems are re-established and in place to intervene early if a student is not connecting to school during remote learning. Priority should be given to providing supports to those students who are higher risk or may require additional assistance, including but not limited to those who were not engaged consistently during remote learning in the spring, have a history of chronic absence, are identified as English learners, are experiencing homelessness, or are students with disabilities. Similar protocols and procedures for early identification of students during a typical, in-person school year should be followed during remote learning, including:

- Convening district and school administrator-led attendance teams.
- Monitoring attendance early and often. See Monitoring Attendance in Distance Learning, Attendance Works.
- Assigning roles/responsibilities to team members to connect with families immediately to ascertain the root causes and implement solutions or interventions to assist with improving attendance.
- Pinpointing common barriers or causes of students missing school and collaborating with community partners to assist with solutions.
- Reviewing and revising the school's tiered system of interventions to better align with the remote learning model. See Attendance Playbook: Smart Solutions for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in the COVID Era and User's Guide.
- Promptly referring any student whose attendance is considered unsatisfactory or at a marginal level of acceptance to a PPT.
- Continuously tracking and monitoring the effectiveness of all interventions.
- Partnering with your regional Department of Children and Families (DCF) office and local Youth Service Bureau (YSB) to develop strategies to address attendance issues ***prior*** to the need for an official referral for educational neglect (DCF) or truancy (YSB).

Connecticut's Reducing Chronic Absence in Connecticut Schools: A Prevention and Intervention Guide for Schools and Districts provides additional information related to establishing systems of support including: definitions, examples of root causes, local intervention models, strategies for districts and schools, and state and national resources.

Addressing Student's Safety and Well-being during Hybrid or Remote Learning Models

A trauma-informed approach that is sensitive to the family's needs should be taken prior to considering a student to be truant or a family to be suspect of educational neglect. Districts should prepare staff, including staff working directly with families, to identify issues related to abuse and neglect in the context of the pandemic and comply with all mandated reporting requirements.

It is important that districts and schools ensure that the following efforts to improve attendance occur prior to filing a referral:

1. Meeting(s) held with parents and the student to understand family's needs and reasons behind missing school, including making and documenting multiple efforts to contact the family if the family is not immediately responsive.
2. PPT meeting held or scheduled.
3. Appropriate interventions determined, implemented, and monitored to support improved attendance.
4. Services and/or referrals are made with community agencies providing student and family services.

Given the trauma the community has experienced during this pandemic and its effect on our students, referrals for educational neglect should be considered only after all supports and resources have been exhausted. "Educational neglect" occurs when a school-aged child has excessive absences from school through the intent or neglect of the parent or caregiver. For children older than 12, excessive absenteeism through the child's own intent, despite the caregiver's efforts, is truancy, which is handled through the school district. Additional information on truancy referrals can be found on the CSDE Truancy webpage.

While rigorous efforts are encouraged to facilitate student attendance, ultimately lack of response to school contacts raises concerns about the overall safety and well-being of families during these challenging times. CSDE, in partnership with DCF, share the considerations below to mitigate the risk of students being unsupported and in unsafe situations.

A call to DCF should be made only in those circumstances where there is a "reasonable suspicion" that child abuse or neglect has occurred. Although each family circumstance is different, lack of contact with a particular child during the COVID-19 crisis does not necessarily indicate child maltreatment. Alternatively, it is important to be able to recognize when a child may be in need of protection. Attached are the documents for filing a non-emergent report online, as well as an FAQ and guidance regarding DCF's operational definitions of educational neglect. Consider the following:

- In a situation where there are concerns regarding a student under the care of DCF or the family is actively working with DCF, school staff should contact the assigned DCF worker. The DCF staff are teleworking and can be reached by state email address or state cell phone. State cell phone numbers for staff can be obtained by contacting the local DCF office.
- A student's nonparticipation in remote or hybrid education learning models does not immediately constitute educational neglect and would not inherently warrant a referral to DCF. However, if there is evidence that the parent/caretaker has access to the necessary resources to participate, is responsible for the child's educational participation (defined as a child under the age of 12 or a child is functionally dependent on a parent/caretaker), and multiple and diverse attempts have been made to engage the parent/caretaker/other resources without success, a referral to DCF may be warranted. In this situation, it is recommended that school staff make every effort to first outreach via phone calls and letters and access other individuals that may be able to assist, such as the student's emergency contact. It is important to take into consideration that parents/caretakers may need to prioritize a variety of needs to ensure safety, well-being and the overall functioning of the family unit during these stressful times.
- Virtual engagement with a student should include a general assessment of their overall well-being. If a concern is raised that suggests that a child has been abused or neglected, or a child is presenting with a justified fear of safety in the home, a referral to DCF may be warranted. Age appropriate and solution-based safety planning, when appropriate, should also occur in interactions with the family.

DCF is continuing to pilot its Electronic Reporting Process with school districts. More information can be found in the FAQ for DCF Electronic Reporting Update. An additional resource from DCF includes When to Make a Referral to the DCF Careline.

The CSDE is committed to working together towards a collective goal to ensure that all of our students are engaged, supported and attending classes whether in-person, in a hybrid environment, or through remote learning. In consultation with stakeholders, the CSDE will continue to support local educational agencies in developing and sharing strategies and best practices for engaging and educating students and families on the importance of consistent, regular attendance. If you have any questions on the PSIS reporting of your students, please contact Kendra Shakir. For all other inquiries about this guidance, please contact Kari Sullivan.