Engaging Stakeholders to Improve Student Attendance

Partnering with families and the community is critical and necessary to improving students' attendance and engagement in school. Schools with strong Family, School, and Community Partnerships (FSCP) systems in place report higher attendance and lower rates of chronic absenteeism compared to schools without these supports.

This guidance document provides district and school staff with ideas about how to partner with families and the community to improve student attendance. The partnership strategies in this document are grounded in the Colorado Department of Education's FSCP Framework[1] and incorporate research from the Flamboyan Foundation,[2] The Engagement Advantage, [3] and the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University.[4]

Essential Element 1: Create an Inclusive Culture

Essential Element Definition: An inclusive culture honors the lived experience of families in early childhood programs and/or the school community.

Goal: Transform the school into a place where every student feels valued, missed when absent, and welcomed when they return.

Key Actions:

- **Positive Re-entry:** Greet students at the door by name. Normalize re-entry with affirming language: *"We missed you yesterday; we're so glad you're back because your voice matters to our lesson."*
- **Inclusive and Reflective Environment:** Ensure curriculum, visuals, and school events reflect the diversity of students. Conduct periodic culture audits to assess representation.
- **Positive Attendance Messaging:** Shift from compliance language (e.g. required, truancy) to value-based messaging (e.g. every day counts). Reinforce how attendance supports relationships and long-term academic and non-academic goals.
- **Recognition of Growth:** Replace perfect attendance awards with "Most Improved" or "Striving for 5" (≤5 absences) to highlight persistence, not perfection.
- **Student Connection and Voice:** Use advisory periods or relationship-building circles to ensure every student is known by at least one adult.

Why It Matters

A strong sense of belonging is one of the most powerful drivers of consistent attendance. Belonging is not accidental—it must be intentionally cultivated through daily practices, messaging, and systems. When students feel disconnected, even small barriers lead to absence. When students feel connected, they develop the social-emotional resilience to overcome challenges to attend.

Essential Element 2: Build Trusting Relationships

Essential Element Definition: Trusting relationships enable families and programs/schools to partner about the educational outcomes for children and youth.

Goal: Establish authentic partnerships between families and educators built on trust, respect, and shared power.

Key Actions:

- **Culture:** Build a school culture where students feel missed when they are gone and welcomed when they return.
- **Relational Home Visits:** These voluntary, non-disciplinary visits ideally occur early in the school year. The goal is to listen to the family's hopes and dreams for their child, positioning staff and families as a partner for student success.
- **Care Calls:** Replace automated truancy letters with personal communication. *"We noticed [Student] was out today; we value them and want to make sure your family has what you need to get them here tomorrow. Is everything okay?"*
- **Family-to-Family Networks:** Encourage families to build support networks. For example, when parents are connected, they can form "attendance pods" to help with emergency childcare or carpooling when a neighbor's car breaks down.
- **Consistent, Non-Judgmental Communication:** Train all staff to use asset-based language and avoid blame regarding family circumstances.

Why It Matters

When school staff establish authentic partnerships with families, they move from a reactive stance to a proactive one. Trusting relationships create the conditions necessary to identify and address underlying challenges—such as transportation, health, or housing—before they escalate into chronic absenteeism. When families feel respected and empowered as partners, students are more likely to thrive both socially and academically.

Essential Element 3: Design Capacity-Building Opportunities

Essential Element Definition: Capacity-building opportunities for staff and families promote shared leadership about educational outcomes for children and youth.

Goal: Ensure every stakeholder—from the front office to the classroom—understands their role in supporting student attendance.

Key Actions:

- **Professional Learning on Root Causes:** Provide workshops for school staff on the root causes of chronic absenteeism. Equip staff to support families in crisis.
- **Create Common Language:** Develop a shared understanding between staff and families about chronic absenteeism (i.e. missing 2 days/month = 10% of the school year).

Why It Matters

Attendance is a shared responsibility that requires every staff and family member to speak a common language. By building capacity across the entire team, schools ensure that absenteeism is recognized early as a symptom of deeper challenges rather than a simple clerical issue. When staff, families, and students are equipped with attendance literacy and data-driven insights, they can move from merely processing paperwork to providing proactive support that keeps students in school.

- **Empower Frontline Staff:** Equip front office staff—the first point of contact—to respond compassionately to families in crisis rather than just processing paperwork.
- **Host a *Bring Your Family to School* Day:** Invite families to attend part or all part of the school day with their children. This highlights the importance of being at school.

Essential Element 4: Dedicate Necessary Resources

Essential Element Definition: Necessary resources integrate and elevate partnering practices to scale.

Goal: Address external, systemic barriers to attendance through community partnerships.

Key Actions:

- **Identify Starting Points:** Have a school-based attendance team partner with the School Accountability Committee (SAC) to identify what resources already exist to support student attendance and where there may be gaps.
- **Strategic Partnerships:** Leverage community resources to address the external barriers that keep students from attending school.
- **Community Mapping:** Identify local resources (e.g. health clinics, transit authorities, food banks). Map these to levels of need (Universal, Targeted, Intensive). Districts cannot solve root causes like housing or transportation alone.
- **Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Partner with local businesses to message the importance of attendance to the broader community. Coordinate with social services to support families in crisis without immediately resorting to legal or court intervention.
- **Legal Diversion:** Coordinate with social services to support families without defaulting to court intervention or punitive consequences.

Why It Matters

Chronic absenteeism is rarely just a school-level issue; it is often a reflection of systemic barriers like housing instability, lack of transportation, or limited healthcare access. By dedicating resources to strategic partnerships and community mapping, districts acknowledge that they cannot solve these root causes in isolation. Aligning community assets ensures that support is targeted where it is needed most. This shift from punitive measures to resource-rich, data-driven collaboration allows schools to fix the attendance gaps that keep children from the classroom.

References

1. Colorado Department of Education (2020). *P-12 family, school, and community partnerships (FSCP) framework*. https://www.cde.state.co.us/uip/p-12_fscp_framework
2. Flamboyan Foundation (2026). *The family engagement roadmap*. https://roadmap.flamboyanfoundation.org/
3. Berman, E. and Riddick Z. (2026) *The Engagement Advantage*. https://bealearninghero.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/LH-26_Family-Engagement-Study_FULL-REPORT_V7.pdf
4. Epstein, J. L. (2018). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action* (4th ed.). Corwin Press.

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Engaging Stakeholders to Improve Attendance: Team Worksheet

School/District: _____ **Date:** _____ **Team Members:** _____

Element 1: Create an Inclusive Culture

How do we make sure every student feels missed when they are gone and excited to return?

Welcoming Students Back: How will we greet returning students with positive words instead of making them feel guilty for missing a day? _____

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Better Messaging: How can we change our attendance talk from rules and legal warnings to showing the true value of being at school? _____

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Celebrating Effort: How can we celebrate students beyond those with perfect attendance?

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Other Ideas:

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Element 2: Build Trusting Relationships

How do we build honest, respectful partnerships with parents and caregivers?

Care Calls: When a student is out, how can we replace automated calls with personal phone calls from a staff member? _____

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Home Visits: What is our plan for optional, friendly home visits to listen to families' hopes and goals for their kids? _____

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Parent Networks: How can we help parents connect with each other to create a strong support network?

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Other Ideas:

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Element 3: Design Capacity Building Opportunities

How do we make sure all staff and families understand how to support attendance?

Understanding the "Why": When and how will we train teachers and staff to understand the root causes of why students miss school? _____

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Empowering the Front Office: How will we train front-office staff—who talk to parents first—to respond with kindness and support rather than just filling out absence paperwork? _____

_____

Sharing a Common Language: How will we teach everyone that missing just 2 days a month adds up to missing 10% of the school year? _____

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Other Ideas:

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Element 4: Dedicate Necessary Resources

How do we partner with our community to solve challenges like housing, healthcare, and transportation?

Finding Gaps: What resources do we already have to help families with basic needs? What are we missing?

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Community Mapping: Which local groups (health clinics, food banks, bus systems) can we team up with to help families in need? _____

_____

Common Messaging: How can we work with local businesses to share common language about the importance of being in school? _____

Other Ideas:

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