



PARTNERSHIP FOR  
*Student Success*

# THE SCHOOL-BASED SITE COORDINATOR'S GUIDE TO IMPROVING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

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This toolkit was developed and published by the Partnership for Student Success, based at the Johns Hopkins University Everyone Graduates Center.



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## About This Toolkit

The [Partnership for Student Success](#) (PSS), based at the Johns Hopkins University Everyone Graduates Center, is the organizer of a coalition of nonprofits, higher education institutions, and school districts working to enable all students to get the evidence-based student supports they need to succeed.

PSS currently engages a coalition of approximately 200 school districts, 230 nonprofit organizations, and 80 higher education institutions in efforts to bring more evidence-based and people-powered supports to students across the nation's communities. One way we do this is by developing publicly available tools and resources to aid those in positions to help schools in the implementation of evidence-based student supports.

Given the scale and scope of the current attendance challenge, large numbers of schools—in particular those who serve historically underserved student populations—find themselves with a hundred or more (and sometimes hundreds of) chronically absent students. Adults in key student support roles in these schools need the information, tools, and resources to champion and support their school in organizing and implementing a comprehensive, multi-tiered approach to improving attendance. Specifically, an approach aligned with the reasons students in their school are not attending regularly.

Community school models provide an evidence-based strategy that has strong potential to both address a range of student and family needs and help to reduce chronic absence. Within community schools, school site coordinators can be positioned to become the building champion and provide critical organizational support for comprehensive attendance solutions aligned to student and family needs, which combine prevention with problem-solving.

This toolkit is designed to support school-based site coordinators and those in similar holistic, wrap-around support roles, by providing additional information and resources to position them to help their schools organize a comprehensive, multi-tiered approach to improving attendance. This resource is an extension of PSS's [Attendance Solutions Network](#), an initiative designed to support school districts in addressing chronic absenteeism and improving student engagement through strategic collaboration, shared learning, and targeted support.

The toolkit utilizes and builds on a comprehensive attendance improvement [framework](#) first presented by Hedy Chang, Executive Director of Attendance Works, and Dr. Robert Balfanz, Director of the Johns Hopkins University Everyone Graduates Center in May 2024. It features promising practices from multiple schools, districts, and nonprofits committed to providing K-12 students with evidence-based student supports to improve attendance.



## Introduction

Over six years since the pandemic began, close to half of the nation’s K-12 students are still attending schools with chronic absenteeism rates of 20% or more. Research indicates that chronic absenteeism at these levels impacts the whole school, even students with good attendance.<sup>1</sup> While many communities have made progress in recent years, most are still facing significant challenges when it comes to chronic absence.<sup>2</sup>



A problem of this scale requires a comprehensive plan. Evidence indicates that schools need a layered approach that include prevention, problem solving, and mitigation to address the chronic absenteeism challenge. This approach begins with the mindset that improvement is possible. Then with an understanding of the barriers to regular attendance facing students in a community, a tailored, multi-strategy plan is developed and implemented. When budgets and staff capacity are strained, aligning resources to meet the caliber of today’s chronic absenteeism challenge requires prioritizing the systems and strategies the evidence indicates are doing the most to support students while finding community partners to help fill capacity gaps.

There are schools and districts making progress, but we also know that school leaders need help understanding the local drivers of high chronic absenteeism, and organizing, implementing, and progress monitoring a comprehensive approach tailored to the school and community. Community School Site Coordinators (SSCs) and similar school-based roles do this work; they provide holistic, wrap-around supports to students and their families. These individuals already navigate the complex challenges facing students. They are experts in understanding root causes to the challenges facing students; they use data to identify students and track progress; and they are strong relationship managers with families, and community partners.

Drawing on existing skills, school-based coordinators are well-positioned to help improve attendance schoolwide, and support school leadership to organize and implement a comprehensive response to chronic absenteeism. Combining the knowledge and resources they utilize in their day to day work, with a strong understanding of what evidence says are the most effective strategies for improving attendance, school-based site coordinators can help school leadership and school-based student attendance teams, MTSS teams, student success teams, etc., to develop and implement strategic actions aligned to local needs and resources.

<sup>1</sup> Bailes, L.P., May, H., & Riser, D. (2025) “New research: Schoolwide chronic absence affects all students,” Attendance Works Blog. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/new-research-schoolwide-chronic-absence-affects-all-students/>

<sup>2</sup> Balfanz, R. (2024). Meeting the chronic absenteeism challenge: What do we know? Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University School of Education. <https://www.gradpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/EGC-GP-NPSS-May-2024-Brief.pdf>



## Know Your Challenge: Understanding the Causes of Chronic Absenteeism in Your Community

Creating a plan begins with recognizing that the reasons students miss school are complex, evolving, and rooted in the local challenges. Chronic absenteeism can vary by time, place, grade level, and other factors. What was true before might be different now. There are generally four broad categories used to talk about why students miss 10% of school days or more.

1. **Barriers** - Obstacles that get in the way of a student attending school. These may include caring for family members, having a job to help with family expenses, inadequate transportation from home to school, mental health challenges, and more. While many of these barriers existed before the pandemic, many have been exacerbated in recent years. Increased levels of trauma and mental health are evident, and now there are pressing community safety concerns that prevent students from feeling physically and mentally safe to attend school regularly.
2. **Aversion** - With less social cohesion, many students avoid school and social situations where there are too many unknowns and people or experiences are unfamiliar. In some cases, when a caregiver has had a negative experience at school, this can fuel ongoing aversion by their child. Addressing bullying and creating a welcoming school environment can mitigate some of the social anxiety students might feel.
3. **Disengagement** - Lack of school connectedness continues to be an area of concern. High levels of chronic absence in a school can disrupt the social cohesion of the school. Students that are unsuccessful in classes or feel a lack of purpose in their school day are likely to disengage without any meaningful relationships to motivate them to be at school. Ensuring students are connected to at least one adult in the school to improve engagement.
4. **Misconceptions** - Many parents and students are not aware of how much school they missed, what constitutes a student as chronically absent, or the full impact of missing school. Parents and students underestimate by half the number of days they were absent from school.<sup>3</sup>

School-based coordinators and people in similar roles have expertise in identifying root causes of absence for individual students on their caseload. Connecting these practices to schoolwide attendance planning can help an entire team properly identify barriers to attendance and focus efforts. Missing this step might mean an entire schoolwide plan misses the mark. However, driven by a sense of urgency, schools too often skip this step. Thus, one critical role for site coordinators is being the champion for finding out why students are not attending.

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<sup>3</sup> "How Parents Really Feel About Attendance," Attendance Works Blog Post, February 18, 2026, <https://www.attendanceworks.org/parents-really-feel-attendance/>.



Many tools exist to help schools identify their challenges. Beginning with the students and families they serve, schools that have made progress often begin by soliciting feedback. Gathering feedback using surveys, focus groups, and interviews as well as hosting community forums are just some of the ways to identify actionable root causes of attendance challenges and understand the local context. Schools have also enlisted students to help with finding out why. Students can help identify root causes. Involving a diverse group of students ensures that perspectives from different grade levels, backgrounds, and attendance histories are represented, including those who are frequently absent.

[The Student Connectedness Project](#), also based at the Johns Hopkins University Everyone Graduates Center, supports student-led teams to solve the biggest challenges facing their school communities. Similarly, Attendance Works also offers the following related resources:

- [Gathering qualitative data to understand root causes for chronic absenteeism in your community.](#)
- [Scan of Environment and Attendance Tool](#)
- [Year-long Planning Tools](#)
- [Examples of Tiered Practices](#)



## Use Actionable Data in a Team Approach

Organizing a response begins with access to multiple forms of **actionable data** about students, families, and local challenges to inform a plan. School-based site coordinators already analyze a wide range of student data to identify which students need which supports. A natural next step is to include site coordinators in a **team approach** with other people in the school and/or district working to address chronic absence. This can enhance cohesion between the various stakeholders working to address the challenge and bring additional resources, such as relationships with community partners, to the table.

Through its partnership with Project Unicorn’s Every Day Counts initiative, PSS has identified three core priorities to help a team translate data into responsive supports:

1. Establish consistent systems for documenting reasons for absence in a detailed way by going beyond “excused” vs. “unexcused” to identify patterns and root causes.
2. Use early warning approaches to flag students who are beginning to show attendance risk (i.e. monitoring attendance monthly and intervening before patterns become entrenched).
3. Strengthen capacity to interpret and act on attendance data, such as through regular data-focused meetings or professional learning communities where trends are reviewed and intervention strategies are refined.



## **District Spotlight: Turning Attendance Data into Action in Washoe County School District**

In Washoe County School District (NV), a clear vision drives attendance work: data should be actionable and easily accessible. Data Analytics Coordinator Dr. JT Stark presented their efforts in Washoe at a recent Attendance Solutions Network peer-to-peer learning community. Serving roughly 60,000 students and 4,000 teachers, the district has invested in a robust data warehouse that powers a near-real-time attendance dashboard, refreshed nightly. This system allows school-based leaders and staff to move beyond static reports and into continuous improvement cycles grounded in actionable data. The emphasis is on team-based data use, where educators regularly review and respond together.

[Listen to the full recording to learn more.](#)

High-level takeaways include:

- **Not all Absences are Equal:** For school-based staff, the district combines average daily attendance (ADA) with chronic absences and provides a dashboard rich with year-over-year comparison data. ADA helps to monitor day-to-day while student level data can identify which absences are consecutive, and which require intervention before a student is absent 10% of days at any point in the school year. They are also discovering that absenteeism by class period is also a really helpful tool and allows a school to examine school schedules and the cadence of a school day to maximize learning.
- **Connect Data to Intervention:** The data alone is not the strategy. Led by a team approach, the critical question that should guide the work is whether the interventions are working. The data supports monitoring intervention effectiveness, adjusting supports in real time, and of course, celebrating progress with students. Washoe has been building its data and data visualization tools for over ten years, including:
  - Tracking student-level attendance progress year-to-date
  - Documenting interventions (e.g., Check & Connect, near peer mentoring, family housing resource)
  - Linking strategies to outcomes



## Organize Your Response

Once a school knows the challenges at hand that are preventing students from attending school regularly and are using data that is available to them to drive decision-making, it is time to organize a response to these challenges and determine a systemic approach. Schools that have reduced chronic absence post-pandemic are not just implementing one program. Instead, they are using a comprehensive approach which combines prevention with problem solving and mitigation strategies. School-based coordinators can collaborate with teachers, counselors, social workers, and family engagement staff to align interventions, monitor student progress, and ensure that supports are delivered consistently. At the same time, coordinators can support the overall vision for a comprehensive attendance strategy by partnering closely with school leadership. In this role, coordinators act as both implementers and strategists.

Rather through a team approach or by working with school leadership site coordinators can be the champion of comprehensive approach which includes,

- Prevention
- Problem Solving
- Mitigation





Below is a description of each of these components paired with some of the strategies that are utilized by school-based site coordinators. Many strategies cut across the tiers, implemented to meet the needs of students as more intensive support or different supports are needed as indicators (including attendance) signal when students need more intensive or different supports. For example, peer mentoring can be utilized as a school prevention to support the transition to high school, or it can also serve as a mitigation strategy to support students as they return to school and create social connections after long absences.

## Prevention

Implementing broad-based, prevention strategies are critical. Pre-empting the need to address individual attendance challenges in many cases, schools can begin by identifying strategies that can be adopted school-wide to reduce the number of students becoming chronically absent in the first place. Prevention strategies can include:

- [School connectedness](#) is as close to a universal prevention measure we have. School teams should determine how many students have strong connections to school and then decide how best to increase this number. This ensures that school is a place where all students and families feel welcomed and a part of the solutions.
- Engaging families as true partners in the collective responsibilities to help our young people be successful.
- Ensuring clear communication and shared goals at transition points (entering Kindergarten, elementary-to-middle school and middle-to-high school).
- Making community resources readily available to students and their families and conveniently located near the school (medical, dental, etc.).
- Summer outreach activities designed to prevent those students who were at risk or who were chronically absent the prior year.

FutureEd and Attendance Works created a [chronic absence resource](#), outlining even more prevention strategies.

## Problem Solving

Even when prevention strategies are working, there will still be young people that are chronically absent and school communities will need to problem solve appropriate strategies to support them. Site coordinators are often responsible for engaging students and families. They are keenly aware of the strategies to build trust, facilitate partnerships, and create relationship-based solutions. Applying many of these same strategies to engage students and families in identifying scalable solutions to support attendance may include:



- Nudge letters and other communication tools that help families understand what chronic absence means for long term well-being of their children.
- Progress monitoring that is embedded in weekly attendance conversations among school-based coordinators, teachers and administrators.
- Revisiting those root cause conversations and following up with families throughout the academic year to check in and examine best practices that are working (in the district, in the school community as a pilot, etc.).
- Student success planning for every student, aligned to evidence-based practices that support the whole child and is personalized to an individual student's assets and needs.
- Success coaching and mentoring partnerships with community organizations that offer opportunities for young people when they face modest or moderate barriers and opportunities like these can make a difference.

## Mitigation

Knowing that many students are already chronically absent, it is crucial for schools to implement strategies that mitigate the negative impacts of chronic absence on students and the school community. Mitigation strategies may include:

- Highly engaging summer learning opportunities to close academic gaps and build student connections
- Meaningful high school credit recovery opportunities, like ones that incorporate career connected learning or pathways to additional work-based learning.
- High-Impact Tutoring and/or other enhanced academic supports to help students feel engaged and successful in school.
- Peer mentoring to support social re-integration for students who have been chronically absent and who indicated they do not yet have a peer or a friend at school (through surveys, student success planning, etc.).
- Connecting families with resources to remove or bypass barriers, (housing, childcare, mental health resources, etc.).

The Learning Policy Institute published a report, "[Reducing Chronic Absenteeism: Lesson from Community Schools](#)" which provides further evidence of strategies that community schools utilize to reduce chronic absenteeism.



## **School Spotlight: A Community School Approach to Attendance at West Oakland Middle School**

At West Oakland Middle School in Oakland, CA, improving attendance starts with a simple but powerful belief: students show up when they feel safe, supported, and connected. Serving a high-needs community, Community School Manager Emilio Ortega has embraced a [community school model](#) built on three core elements—**connection, collaboration, and celebration**—to address chronic absenteeism in a holistic way. This approach recognizes that when students miss school, they're not just missing academics, but also critical social and emotional experiences like friendships, mentorship, and access to health and wellness supports. By working in close partnership with school administrators and staff, the school-based team uses actionable data to identify needs, co-develop attendance success plans for every student, and compare progress across prior and current years. The results are striking: a 45% reduction in moderate and severe chronic absenteeism, and nearly a 60% drop in severe absenteeism.

Central to this success is a shift in how the school engages families and students. Mr. Ortega is a consistent, visible presence on campus, building trust so that when attendance challenges arise, conversations are grounded in partnership rather than compliance. Supports also extend to integrating counseling, resource coordination, and community partnerships, so families receive help addressing root causes before attendance becomes a barrier. By leading with relationships and wrapping services around students and families, West Oakland Middle School demonstrates how a community school approach can turn attendance improvement into a shared, achievable goal.



## **School Spotlight: Deliberate Efforts to Increase Buy-In & Transform Attendance at Samara Community School**

At Samara Community School in the Bronx, NY, a partnership with [Children's Aid](#) shows how deep community engagement can shift attendance outcomes in meaningful ways. As part of a broader network supporting 20–30 community schools across New York City—including the Bronx, Washington Heights, East Harlem, and Staten Island—Children's Aid centers its work on supporting families by providing access to community resources. At Samara, that focus has led to remarkable results: while the surrounding district reports chronic absenteeism rates near 45–48%, the school has reduced its rate to just 16%. This progress is rooted in providing comprehensive access to Children's Aid resources and embedding a full-time community school director who works alongside school leadership to align supports with student and family needs.

A critical lesson from this work is the importance of addressing what Community School Director Gary Perez calls the “ghosts in the classroom”—the generational experiences of families who attended this same school decades earlier. Building trust required starting with adults: helping staff better understand and connect with families, while also demonstrating to school leadership that partnership-driven attendance work is both worthwhile and achievable. This was not a quick fix, but a deliberate process grounded in shared goals and mutual respect. By “leading with love” and “moving at the speed of trust”—two mantras used at Samara Community School—the work is focused on full buy-in, from teachers and parents to cafeteria staff and school safety teams, making attendance everyone's responsibility. The result is a unified, community-wide effort where relationships come first, and improved attendance follows.



## Spotlight on High-Impact Tutoring as an Attendance Strategy in Washington, DC

The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) in Washington, DC has demonstrated that when implemented with fidelity, [High-Impact tutoring \(HIT\)](#) can do more than accelerate learning, it can also significantly improve student attendance. As a panelist at the Attendance Solutions Network's Virtual Showcase & Learning Community, OSSE's Director of HIT Jess Sobin defined HIT as a structured, in-school intervention delivered multiple times per week, over consecutive weeks, by consistent, well-trained tutors using high-quality curriculum. This is not ad hoc homework help or occasional after-school support; it is deliberately designed as a tier 2 and tier 3 strategy embedded into the school day. By setting a clear definition and funding only programs that meet these criteria, OSSE has been able to scale tutoring while maintaining quality, supported by twice-yearly observations and ongoing professional development through a nonprofit partner.

Grounded in years of data collection with research partners, what emerged is a powerful insight: the same elements that make HIT effective academically also [increase attendance](#). Students build strong, trusting relationships with tutors and peers, increasing their sense of belonging and motivation to show up. The impact is especially pronounced among middle school students and those with the highest absenteeism rates. HIT see the greatest attendance gains when they maintain low student-to-tutor ratios, meet 3–5 times per week, and take place during the school day. These findings have helped OSSE engage schools in more strategic conversations. HIT may require greater upfront resources to be implemented to yield greater returns on investments in both academic outcomes *and* addressing chronic absenteeism. Ultimately, the initiative underscores that consistent relationships, structured supports, and trust-building are central to getting students back in the classroom and keeping them there.



## Spotlight on City Connects Personalized Approach to Student Supports

City Connects is an evidence-based approach to student support that results in every student in a school receiving a personalized set of resources, relationships, and opportunities designed for their unique combination of strengths, needs, and interests.

The City Connects Coordinator—a master’s-trained school counselor, social worker, or mental health professional—gets input from students about their interests and meets with each classroom teacher and others in the school to discuss the strengths, needs, and interests of every child and youth. They consider four domains of development: academic, social/emotional/behavioral, physical health, and family. Working closely with community partners, school staff, and families, City Connects Coordinators secure resources for each student, helping to address the root causes of challenges and providing opportunities for growth and engagement. Evidence shows that students in City Connects schools are more likely to attend, engage, improve their grades and test scores, and feel seen by their teachers and connected to their peers. Even after they leave City Connects schools, students are less likely to be chronically absent or drop out. City Connects works primarily with schools serving pre-k through grade 8 students, encompassing public, private, charter, and community schools across urban, suburban, and rural settings.

Learn how two City Connects Coordinators are strengthening their communities through a personalized, evidence-based approach:

- [Blog: Inside a School Powered by City Connects: A photo essay](#)
- [Blog: The Work We Do: Omega Robinson Creating Pathways at Sankofa School of Success](#)



## Align Your Resources to Support Identified Needs

School-based site coordinators are uniquely positioned to drive improvements in chronic absence because building partnerships and aligning resources are already central to their role. Supporting attendance is not a new responsibility, but rather an opportunity to leverage existing and emerging community partnerships more intentionally. Through recruiting, organizing, and aligning external partners, including nonprofits, businesses, and community-based organizations, site coordinators can help bring critical resources directly to students and families in ways that remove barriers to regular attendance.

A key part of this framework involves helping coordinators take stock of what already exists, integrate attendance into ongoing efforts, and form strategic partnerships where gaps remain. Schools and their existing partners often have more people-powered resources than they realize, but those assets are frequently siloed across initiatives (such as out of school time partners, and extracurricular programming). By intentionally weaving attendance goals into these efforts, site coordinators can ensure that attendance is addressed as a shared priority rather than a standalone initiative. Attendance is the foundational condition for impact, and no matter how strong an intervention may be, it cannot succeed if students are not present.

Even with strong internal alignment, unmet needs will remain, and this is where partnerships become essential. Local higher education institutions, for example, can be powerful partners through the Federal Work-Study (FWS) program, which provides a dedicated funding stream to support additional people power at the school site. By tapping into these existing systems and relationships, a school community can strengthen attendance supports while sustaining the work through thoughtful coordination rather than as an added burden.

Resources from the Partnership for Student Success on how districts can partner with higher education institutions include:

- [Federal Work-Study Toolkit for Districts and Nonprofits](#)
- [Training resources](#) for mentors, tutors, success coaches and more



## **District Spotlight: Expanding Student Supports Through Higher Education Partnerships & K-12 Alignment in Hempstead, NY**

In Hempstead Union Free School District in Hempstead, NY, a dynamic partnership with Hofstra University Service Corps demonstrates how higher education institutions can strengthen Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports for students at risk of or already chronically absent. What began as a small Honors College initiative at Hofstra University has grown into a robust program placing college students across schools and libraries in Hempstead. Service corps members provide tutoring, science enrichment, and targeted attendance support through 1:1 and small group engagement throughout the school day. Their presence helps students feel both academically supported and socially connected, reinforcing the idea that school is a place they want to return to each day. At the same time, Hofstra students gain meaningful field experience, while K-12 students benefit from relatable mentors whose encouragement boosts confidence, motivation, and ultimately attendance.

School site coordinators also spend time internally to align their K-12 wrap-around community school supports between the coordinators at the elementary, middle and high school. This allows for a coordinated, family-centered approach that addresses root causes of absenteeism such as health needs, transportation barriers, housing instability, and food insecurity. Rather than fragmented supports, the district creates a seamless experience across grade spans, ensuring families do not have to start over as students transition between schools.

Combined, Hempstead's long-term, proactive planning reflects a commitment to equity by building systems that anticipate challenges and deliver consistent support. Hofstra's partnership brings a unique asset: enthusiastic, accomplished young adults, some with shared lived experiences of the K-12 students they serve. Through mentorship and even visits to the Hofstra campus, students begin to see tangible pathways to college and careers, deepening engagement and strengthening their connection to the present day as well as what's possible for the future.



## Spotlight on Summer Planning to Align Resources

At the Fairmont and Samara Campuses in the Bronx, [Children's Aid](#) partners with school leadership to put the [community school strategy](#) into practice, coordinating supports and services to help students return to school connected and excited to learn. In the weeks leading up to the school year, youth advocates and school staff welcome students back through personalized outreach, building on existing relationships and fostering new ones. Community school directors guide school teams, working with families to surface and address barriers and take a strengths-based approach—recognizing students with positive momentum and offering additional support to those facing challenges. It is about creating a sense of belonging before the school year even begins. Summer and school-year programming, including efforts like success planning, keeps students connected to caring adults and the school community. Taking a full-year approach has supported both campuses in improving early-year attendance and reducing chronic absence.



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