

# ***Guiding Principles for Improving School Attendance—A Practice Guide***

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## **Introduction**

In our current times in education, few challenges are as fundamental and far-reaching as the issue of student attendance. From the earliest days of organized school to the present, good attendance and time on task has been recognized as an essential component of a student's academic success and personal development. Attendance metrics, however, are a component of most school ratings and educators have struggled for years to improve and/or maintain high student attendance rates.

School attendance and truancy are complex issues. Attendance is an individual student issue but it is also a culture, climate, family, and community matter. Attendance has been addressed with strategies ranging from ice cream parties to legislation and court intervention. The issue is further complicated by differing opinions and beliefs of various stakeholders. Educators might assume that parents and the community approve of their attendance improvement strategies until hearing from parents (Steph Montgomery) who questioned traditional attendance wisdom in an editorial titled "Face It: Perfect Attendance Awards Are a Joke."

School attendance patterns have historically varied widely across schools and communities. Some schools and communities have enjoyed historic and sustained patterns of excellent attendance across most members of their student body (National Forum on Education Statistics). In many cases, schools and communities have assumed that these patterns were normal and permanent. Other schools and communities have struggled with poor patterns of student attendance and have been frustrated when their efforts to improve attendance produced minimal change. Since 1917, all states have mandated school attendance in legislation (Deffenbaugh and Keesecker) and most local school boards have enacted various policies intended to promote good attendance. Most state accountability systems include attendance metrics (Wilkins) and some schools and communities have managed to shift student attendance patterns from poor to positive.

Before the COVID pandemic, national attendance rates were a problem. More than 6.5 million students nationwide—or 13 percent of all students—were chronically absent, defined as being absent 15 or more school days during the school year. (American Academy of Pediatrics)

The 2020-21 pandemic and resulting school shutdowns disrupted school attendance patterns and norms and significantly changed student, parent, community, and educator assumptions about attendance. In March 2020, the attendance messaging from educators to students and

parents quickly shifted from “attendance is important and essential” to “attendance is dangerous and not allowed”. Societal assumptions about the importance of good attendance have not only changed in the school setting; work-from-home has become acceptable and even an assumed right in many professions. In Virginia, over 300 state employees recently resigned when the Governor imposed regulations that severely limited the work-from-home privilege they had enjoyed since the pandemic. (Mirshahi)

The *Guiding Principles for Improving School Attendance—A Practice Guide* is a comprehensive and invaluable resource designed to navigate the intricate landscape of attendance improvement strategies. In today’s educational landscape, where the lines between in-person and remote learning have blurred and a variety of factors can disrupt a student’s attendance, this guide serves as a framework for clarity and expertise. This guide is not just a collection of abstract theories, it is a practical roadmap for educators, parents, and community members who are committed to tackling the attendance challenges facing our students today. It is the collective wisdom of educators, researchers, and policymakers who have dedicated their careers to understanding and addressing this critical issue. In the pages that follow, we will explore the multifaceted nature of school attendance and delve into the factors that contribute to absenteeism. Most importantly, we will provide a comprehensive toolkit of strategies that have the power to transform attendance patterns and ultimately the lives of students.

### **Origin of the Guiding Principles**

Since its founding in 1986, the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) has worked, supported, and consulted with over 3,000 schools, districts, and state departments of education to improve student outcomes with a focus on reducing dropouts. The supportive actions by NDPC have included thousands of data analyses, on-site observations, and student and educator interviews. During this time, NDPC staff members and research fellows have collected volumes of data and produced hundreds of publications, all addressing various facets of the dropout issue.

Attendance and truancy were key components of the overwhelming majority of these field services, studies, and research reports. Over 37 years, NDPC’s senior leadership has compiled research findings, action research outcomes, best practices, and lessons learned to produce *Guiding Principles for Improving School Attendance*. Along the way, we have learned that there is no magical attendance improvement solution or strategy, but that success depends on locally appropriate and strategic solutions that are based on foundational principles. These *Guiding Principles* are not “what to do” but rather “what to consider when deciding what to do.” It should be noted that the *Guiding Principles* and resulting recommendations are founded on a combination of scholarly research, action research, professional observations, and the logic and even opinions of veteran educators.

### **The Guiding Principles for Improving School Attendance**

An overarching lesson learned over 37 years is that improving school attendance is not dependent on any given program or strategy. It is dependent on two critical factors:

- Strategies must be locally selected and owned by those who will implement them.
- The strategies selected must consider the root causes of truancy and the overarching principles of attendance improvement that are offered herein.

Stated differently, “It is the process, ownership, and logic that make attendance programs effective.”

It is important to note that these *Guiding Principles* are not attendance programs, strategies, or action steps. They are concepts and understandings that should guide and underpin locally determined strategies and actions. The National Dropout Prevention Center recommends that schools and districts use the *Guiding Principles* in a three-step process.

1. Convene a school attendance task force to inventory all the attendance and truancy programs and initiatives that are currently in place.
2. Have the task force review the *Guiding Principles* and assess existing programs and initiatives considering the *Guiding Principles*.
3. Instruct the task force to modify existing practices to better match the understandings of the *Guiding Principles* and then develop new strategies and action steps to address gaps revealed by review of the *Guiding Principles*.

We strongly encourage schools and districts use [NDPC Resources](#) to assist in the steps.

### **So what are the *Guiding Principles* and their implications for local action?**

#### **1. External events influence attendance.**

We are all painfully aware of how the COVID pandemic negatively impacted student attendance in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years and we are now seeing that pre-pandemic attendance patterns are slow to recover. We must also consider that school attendance is impacted by incidents, events, fears, media, and politics. Educators cannot ignore the fact that student attendance, both locally and nationally, is impacted by incidents such as a school shooting, even if it occurs in a faraway place. A school lockdown or evacuation due to a threat, even if false, will cause some parents to keep their kids at home. A brief health-related closure of one classroom can negatively impact school and district attendance for weeks. At any point in time, there are local and national public moods about the safety of schools and the more anxious parents and students are about the matter, the less likely they are to attend.

Political events, such as parental or media challenges to administrative actions or the curriculum, can also impact the attitude of parents toward the local school and inadvertently impact attendance patterns. To sum up the obvious, the safer schools are perceived to be and the more trusting parents and the community are of school, the more likely parents are to send their children to school. Naturally, the more educators can build trust and confidence in schools, the better attendance is likely to be.

## **2. Parents and families control the attendance of young children.**

Any strategy that intends to change school attendance patterns should logically target the attendance decision-makers. Yet many attendance interventions use a scattered approach without targeting those who control attendance. It is commonplace for elementary and middle schools to offer attendance incentives directly to individual students. These range from pizza parties to field trips to perfect attendance certificates. While these lower grade initiatives have value and hopefully shape the attendance attitudes of younger students, they may not be the highest impact strategy for that age group because they do not reach those most in control of school attendance, the parents and guardians.

While it is good that young children want to attend school, it may be even more important that their parents, guardians, caregivers, and family members want them to attend. This is because, ultimately, parents of young children communicate the importance—or unimportance—of school attendance. They agree with—or resist—the child’s reluctance to attend on a given day and often control the physical and transportation factors of school attendance.

While attendance strategies that target parents and guardians of younger students are more difficult to implement and take longer to produce results, they can be expected to yield more significant and longer-term outcomes. Examples of targeting strategies might include parent and family messages about the importance of attendance, home visits by educators, and direct communication by the school when students are absent. Other voices may be mobilized to communicate the school attendance message to parents and families such as those from the local media and faith community. In Ware Shoals, South Carolina, Rev. James Davis, pastor of Dunn Creek Baptist Church, collaborated with local educators to communicate the responsibility for school attendance to parents, grandparents, and extended family members. The district’s percentage of students chronically absent dropped from 32.24% in 2020-21 to 25.18% in 2022-23. (National Dropout Prevention Center et al.)

## **3. Older children control their attendance.**

As students age, the tools that parents must use to influence attendance diminish in number and strength. One parent in New York stated, “As they get older, you can’t physically pick them up into the car—you can only take away privileges, and that doesn’t always work.”

Most parents of teenagers have experienced their child’s efforts to insert communication barriers between the home and school. These include not informing parents of school events and progress reports, reducing conversations about school, and discouraging parents from attending school events.

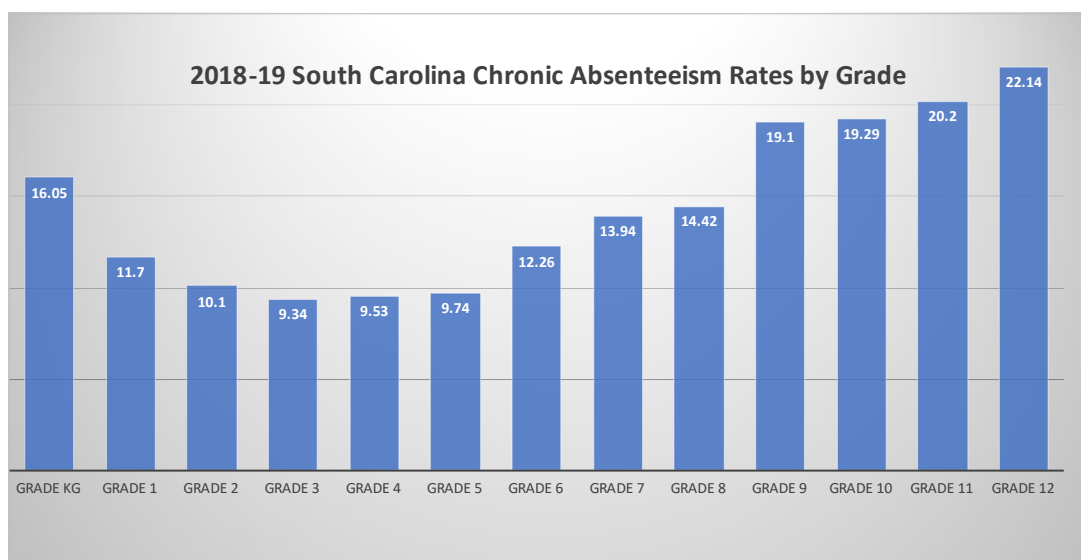
Dr. Bill Daggett, Founder of the Successful Practices Network, states that “students today are different than that for which the 20th century school system was designed. They have different beliefs, experiences, and expectations. Much of which has to do with the rapid

advancements in technology and A.I.” In 2005, for the first time, students listed “school was not interesting” as the primary reason for dropping out. Dr. Daggett believes that the education system suffers from an instructional design problem. According to Dr. Daggett, “the 20<sup>th</sup> century model of ‘Command and Control’ needs to transition to ‘Engage and Inspire’.” Increasingly, today’s students perceive themselves as consumers of education who should have choices about what they learn, when they learn it, where they learn, and how they learn. If students engage with instruction that is relevant to their everyday lives and inspires them to be creative and develop the skills that interest them, they will more likely want to attend school.

These factors, coupled with teens becoming more autonomous decision-makers, becoming more mobile and more responsible for their transportation, add up to older students being more able to control their school attendance. NDPC recommends that educators recognize the autonomy of older students and structure their upper-grade attendance improvement strategies to directly address the students and their increased independence and sense of education choice. (Gailer et al.)

#### 4. Attendance patterns tend to deteriorate as students age.

Most data sources show a deterioration of attendance rates as students age and progress through grades. School districts and states show higher absentee rates in upper grades than in lower grades. This is illustrated by the chart below representing the 2018-19 (pre-pandemic) chronic absenteeism rates for all South Carolina students. Note that the chronic absentee rates tend to be similar for elementary grades (9% to 10%), middle grades (12% to 14%), and high school grades (19% to 22%).



It is noteworthy that attendance patterns tend to change for the worse at critical transition points between school levels (elementary to middle and middle to high). It is recommended that attendance initiatives include transition supports between school levels and that transition supports should pay particular attention to the importance of attendance and the maintenance of attendance patterns of the previous school levels.

## **5. External barriers are not always the primary cause of truancy.**

A common approach to improving attendance is to identify barriers to student attendance and to reduce or remove those barriers by specific targeted actions. Examples include:

Barrier:	Students have transportation challenges.
Action:	Provide free bus and public transportation passes.
Barrier:	Students have childcare challenges.
Action:	Provide at-school childcare.
Barrier:	Students have necessary jobs.
Action:	Provide flexible attendance hours and remote learning options.
Barrier:	Students do not adjust to the traditional school environment.
Action:	Provide virtual learning options.

These approaches assume that, typically, students who desire to attend are prevented from attending by barriers and will attend if barriers are removed. Barrier removal is a valid attendance improvement strategy and may yield results for individual students who otherwise desire to attend school. However, schools and districts should be careful not to over rely on barrier removal as the sole or primary attendance intervention. A broader approach is usually warranted to include addressing other root causes of truancy, such as a lack of:

- parental support for attendance
- positive student engagement with school
- community support for attendance.

While these external barriers may impede the good attendance of some students who desire to attend, they are seldom the real root causes of truancy. There are abundant instances of students who face attendance barriers, who desire to attend, and who manage to overcome those barriers, attend school, and graduate. There are also numerous instances of schools that have directly addressed external barriers by strategies such as free city bus fares and flexible hours to accommodate working students, but that have seen minimal attendance improvement.

Examples and research indicate that barrier removal as an isolated strategy produces minimal improvement in student attendance metrics unless other strategies are also utilized. A study

published in the Journal Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis found that providing students with bus passes did not have a significant impact on attendance. However, when bus passes were combined with other strategies, such as parental involvement and attendance incentives, the impact on attendance was significant and positive. (Edwards)

NDPC's recommendation on this issue is to certainly consider external barriers to attendance but do not rely on it as a single or primary strategy. There are likely many other and more powerful influences that must be addressed to achieve better student attendance.

## **6. Attendance is about more than instructional time on task.**

Traditionally, educators have assumed that less time in class means less learning, so good attendance must be important to achieve learning. This is valid to some degree but is far from the whole story. Self-paced and competency-based learning has to some degree eroded that line of logic. Virtual instruction, on-demand Google information, and learning offered outside public schools have convinced many learners and their parents that seat time, on the public-school calendar and in a brick-and-mortar school, is not the only way to learn. This perception shift has reduced the impact of our traditional arguments for good attendance.

Educators have traditionally thought of 'student engagement with school' as engagement with curriculum content and classroom learning. Students, however, typically have a broader perception of engagement that includes peer and staff relationships and enjoyment of non-academic school activities. Attendance of middle and upper-grade students is an indicator of positive engagement with school but not necessarily an indicator of engagement with instruction. For students, engagement with school is a matter of engagement with people at school, with various activities at school, and hopefully with instruction. There is a positive correlation between high levels of student engagement with school and low absentee rates. A meta-analysis of 87 studies found a moderate positive correlation ( $r = .31$ ) between student engagement and attendance. (Fredricks et al.)

The implications of this principle are twofold:

- First, attempts to "sell" good attendance as "essential" for student learning will not always be believable for students and parents.
- Second, we may be successful in promoting good attendance as important for personal and social development, for character building, for peer and adult role model contact, and for enjoyment of the activities that school offers.

## **7. Relationships impact attendance.**

Attendance is often driven by the student's desire to enjoy positive relationships with adults and peers at school. Most of us have observed well-attending students getting along well with adult staff members and enjoying time at school with friends. Conversely, we have seen a correlation between students who interact poorly with school staff members and who have

few friends with poor attendance. The pandemic negatively impacted student-teacher and student-student relationships. In New York, Marisa Kosek remarked that her son James lost the relationships fostered at his school prior to the closures and, along with them, his desire to attend class altogether. (Toness)

We have a good chance of improving the attendance of our most at-risk students if we can improve their connections with adult educators and with peers. Most educators have good attendance-promoting relationships with many of their students, but the most at-risk and truant-prone students are sometimes missed through random positive student connections because they are the most difficult to connect with. We recommend that counselors and grade-level teams inventory positive adult-student connections within classes and grades to identify the students not benefiting from these relationships and deliberately assign adults to cultivate positive connections with those students.

While we cannot form friendships and peer relationships for students, we can make sure that they have structured and guided time during the school day for enjoyable peer connections. We must also make sure that our schools offer a wide range of extracurricular and sports activities, with easy student access and ample student slots, so that all students can form the peer connections that attract them to school. With sophisticated student record systems, it is relatively easy to identify the students who are not connected to any sport or extra-curricular group and then recruit or encourage their participation. (Gailer et al.)

#### **8. Culture, climate, and student satisfaction impact attendance.**

School climate from the student's perspective is his or her perceptions of the norms, values, practices, and relationships associated with school life. (Daily et al.) School climate largely determines student satisfaction with school, which can be thought of as their contentment or "happiness" with school life as well as their sense of connection and belonging.

It is easy to conclude that the happier and the more satisfied an individual student is with school, and the more he or she feels a sense of belonging at school, the more likely they are to attend. A research report by the National Library of Medicine found a strong correlation between positive school climate, student satisfaction with school, and high attendance rates at the middle and high school levels. (Daily et al.)

It is typically easier for us to write a new attendance policy or purchase a new attendance program than it is to change a school's climate and raise student satisfaction levels, so we often set about to improve attendance apart from the school climate. In an environment where school and/or community culture and climate disregard or even discourage school attendance, these efforts are likely to be futile. To quote Paul Moore, "Culture always trumps strategy process and controls". It is recommended that an analysis of the school and community attendance culture and school climate should occur before reviewing current strategies and developing new attendance initiatives.



## **9. Community influences attendance.**

The outside school community can influence students and families to improve attendance or can ignore the issue and be relatively ineffective for attendance improvement.

Many educators are familiar with high-performing schools that are in the shadows of large universities. We often speculate that well-educated parents and family members who are affiliated with universities exert positive influence on children within the home and community, and thus contribute to high levels of student achievement and graduation outcomes. Examples of this parental and community influence are easy to find. In South Carolina, rural Colleton County is home to Colleton County High School. The county's largest town is Walterboro with a population of 5,500 and the county's only higher education institution is the Salkehatchie Campus, a branch of the University of South Carolina, which has 91 employees. Also in rural South Carolina, Pickens County is home to D.W. Daniel High School located just outside the small town of Clemson, SC. The town of Clemson has a population of 12,000 and contains Clemson University with 5,100 employees. In 2022, D.W. Daniel High School had one of the state's highest graduation rates at 91.3% and a chronically absent rate of 27.6%. That same year, Colleton County High School had one of the state's lowest graduation rates, 72.8%, and a chronically absent rate of 41.1%. (South Carolina Department of Education)

Positive community influence on school attendance may not always exist organically but is powerful and can be created. Educators can explain the importance of attendance to the public through advertisements, press releases, editorials, and community presentations. Community leaders such as political figures, business owners, and faith leaders can be recruited to carry the school attendance message to parents and residents. Educators can capitalize on school events and forums such as parent meetings, sporting events, and social media to repeat and popularize the school attendance message. In the 1980s, the Anderson, South Carolina, Chamber of Commerce made sure that local employers knew when report cards with grades and attendance data went out to parents so that they could ask parent employees about their child's school attendance. In the small town of Hartwell Georgia, the administration of Hart County High School utilized football game half-time ceremonies to reinforce the importance of attendance and graduation.

## **10. Laws and policy alone will not solve the problem.**

If compulsory attendance legislation and local policy alone would solve our current attendance problem, they would have done so by now. Even in colonial times, some colonies and townships had school attendance requirements and all states have had compulsory attendance legislation for over a century. Massachusetts was the first state to mandate school attendance by law in 1852 and Mississippi was the last to do so in 1917. (Levey Friedman)

School attendance is also addressed across the nation by a wide range of state education agency (SEA) policies, local education agency (LEA) policies, and school-specific rules. School attendance laws, policies, and rules typically prescribe mandatory enrollment to a certain age, specify attendance days required to earn credit and be promoted across grades, define actions of school personnel in certain absentee scenarios, and often prescribe parent and student penalties for truancy.

Legislation and policy are relatively effective mandates for school enrollment but are less effective in promoting good attendance. When attempting to improve attendance, law and policy are sometimes the default strategies of school leaders. While it is necessary and important to focus parent and public attention on the issue, attendance laws and policy alone will not solve the problem. Law and policy are of interest and concern to adult educators and adult parents but are of less concern to students. Our recommendation here is simple: Schools must identify and utilize other strategies beyond law and policy to improve attendance.

#### **11. Teachers play important roles in attendance improvement.**

The teacher has several important roles in promoting good attendance These are:

- Establish and maintain positive relationships with individual students.
- Make instruction and school experiences relevant, interesting, and enjoyable for students.
- Encourage attendance. Monitor and follow up on individual student absences.
- Model good attendance themselves.

If teachers understand these important contributions to student attendance and are acting on those understandings, their school is well underway to improve attendance. If all teachers do not understand and act on their roles in attendance improvement, action steps are warranted to a) inform them of their important roles in attendance improvement, and b) support and reinforce them to play out these important roles.

#### **12. Policy and practices may create barriers to attendance and graduation and have unintended consequences.**

States, districts, and individual schools typically have a wide range of laws, policies, and practices that directly address attendance but indirectly influence student motivation to attend. Typically, these have to do with issues such as attendance requirements to earn credits or be promoted to the next grade, achievement levels required for promotion, number of credits required for a particular grade assignment, grades and behavior standards for extra-curricular and sports participation, and types of absences that allow for makeup academic work. These laws, policies, and practices are almost always well-intended but may have an unintended negative influence on student attendance. Examples might include:

- A policy requiring that a high school student must attend 170 of 180 school days per year to earn a high school course credit will likely result in some students not earning certain credits, being retained in grade, and eventually dropping out because he or she is no longer in classes with peers.
- A policy requiring a certain standard of attendance to participate in sports may deny a student access to sports, which was a reason that the student was motivated to attend school at all.
- A policy that does not allow students to make up work missed from a suspension absence may result in poor grades which discourage some students from attending school.
- A policy requiring certain attendance standards to qualify for high-interest CTE courses may prevent the most at-risk students from enrolling in the high-interest courses that would motivate good attendance.

It is recommended that critical thought be given to current and proposed laws, policies, and practices that are intended to enforce or motivate good attendance and student performance to make sure that no unintended negative student outcomes occur.

### **13. Students look at attendance differently than adults.**

Students (particularly at-risk students and poorly attending students) do not look at school attendance through adult eyes. As adult educators who think happily about our own school experience, we tend to make assumptions about the school, and base our selected attendance improvement strategies on our own assumptions. Examples might include:

- Good school attendance is good practice for good workplace attendance.
- The more you attend the more you will learn.
- Attending classes that you do not particularly like is good for broadening your horizons.
- Attending, performing, and graduating will help you get into college and increase your earning power.

Students, however, often think differently than adult educators, and this inconsistency of assumptions and thought patterns sometimes renders our attendance strategies less effective. Examples of student values and assumptions that run counter to those of adult educators might include:

- Students think in terms of short-term goals and immediate gratification as opposed to long-term goals and deferred gratification.
- Students tend to value school for relationships and activity experiences rather than for academic content and learning.
- Students tend to think of school in terms of day-to-day experiences rather than in terms of school as a whole grade or overall academic experience.

- Students are not nearly as knowledgeable of or concerned about laws, policies, and rules as school adults.

It is recommended that educators take care to not overly rely on adult educator logic when adopting attendance improvement strategies; that they carefully consider how students think and perceive matters of attendance and adopt practices and messaging that are most likely to resonate with student thought patterns and assumptions.

#### **14. Reasons that students and parents give for absences are not always accurate.**

Considerable research has delved into reasons that students give for their truancy. While student voice and student perceptions of school are important and even though our attendance improvement interventions should certainly target student reasons for school absences, we must temper stated student reasons for truancy with our professional understandings. Two primary points should be considered.

First, students tend to report reasons for school absences in terms of their immediate day-to-day situations and what they think may be acceptable to educators. A student may attribute a given absence as a need to be at home with a younger sibling (a reasonable excuse to a responsible educator) as opposed to the real reason, which could be that the student had no peer-approved clothes to wear (an embarrassing excuse to give to a teacher) or the student feared being bullied.

Secondly, students will seldom drill down to the bottom-line root causes of truancy. Instead, they will offer more superficial reasons for absences. A student may say, “Ms. Beasley, my math teacher, doesn’t like me” when a deeper root cause for repeated absences may be that Ms. Beasley’s class is not interesting or that the family back home places little value on attendance.

Similar caution should be used when assessing reasons for absences that are offered by parents. Parents, particularly those who distrust school or who are not convinced that good school attendance is important, may offer reasons for absence that are most likely to be accepted by educators such as illness or transportation problems when the real deeper and harder-to-articulate reasons are things like dysfunctional families or substance abuse.

The recommendation is to listen to and consider reasons for absences that are offered by students and parents, but temper that consideration with professional skepticism, look for root causes of truancy, and select interventions and strategies that are most likely to directly address root causes.

#### **15. Recovering and re-engaging dropouts is complex and difficult.**

Though a bit different from attendance improvement, recovery of lost and missing students is a similar task and is usually the responsibility of the same school personnel. Student recovery has been particularly challenging after the COVID-19 pandemic. Lost student

recovery (in reality dropout recovery) is often thought of as finding lost students, making direct contact with them, and inviting or bringing them back to school. This is only the first step of a very difficult process that is complicated by three important considerations.

First, we must remember that lost or dropped-out students have made a decision, either consciously or unconsciously, to end school attendance and enrollment. When we “find” them and make contact, they perceive themselves as no longer a part of the school. They have likely moved on to spend their time in other ways that could range from positive (gainful employment) to negative (gang membership). They have likely rationalized their leaving school and may have explained their dropping out to peers and family. Approaching these youths and inviting them back to school is asking them to abandon their rationalizations and public justifications for leaving. Dropout recovery personnel cannot assume that these students are sitting in wait for a school reentry invitation and must offer them good reasons for reentry that will allow them to both make a good decision and possibly save face with family and peers.

Second, missing students left school for one or more reasons—valid or invalid—and will likely perceive re-enrollment as a return to the same school circumstances. Re-enrollment is most likely achieved by offers of a different school experience. Different school experiences may be offered in terms of an alternative program of study, more engaging courses, different teachers, a different schedule, and even a different school location or environment.

Third, achieving school re-enrollment is of little value to the student or the school unless active and regular attendance is also achieved. Academically low-performing students may tend to be low-performing after re-enrollment, marginally behaving students may be marginally behaving after re-enrollment, and truant students may continue to be truant after re-enrollment. It is recommended that recovered students be provided with strong academic, behavioral, and attendance support if lost student and dropout recovery efforts are to be successful.

### **Applying the Guiding Principles to Improve School and District Attendance**

All schools and districts are concerned about student attendance and almost always have existing attendance improvement initiatives. It is common, however, for attendance efforts to be somewhat unplanned, not strategic, and result in random acts of attendance improvement. To be more effective, school and district attendance efforts must be carefully thought out, strategically selected, and implemented with purpose and forethought.

It is recommended that school and district leaders assess current attendance circumstances and initiatives to determine how closely the current practices align with the *Guiding Principles* and take steps to plan and structure initiatives to produce the best possible outcomes.

The *Attendance Improvement Self-Assessment Instrument* below is intended to help schools, districts, and communities assess current efforts and move from random acts of attendance

improvement to the development of sound and strategic attendance improvement actions that are most likely to produce desired results.

This *Practice Guide* and *Attendance Improvement Self-Assessment Instrument* are not intended to prescribe specific attendance action steps because the most effective action steps are locally determined, by local leaders, and in consideration of local contexts.

The school or district must be guided by proven research and experience from the *Guiding Principles* to choose and implement their own locally appropriate action steps to achieve the best results.

### **Attendance Improvement Self-Assessment Instrument**

**The following self-assessment process is recommended for local application of the *Guiding Principles*.**

Step 1. The Attendance Taskforce will list all initiatives, strategies, and/or action steps that are currently in place to address attendance improvement and rate the current effectiveness of each item. Use the following or a similar template for this step.

#	Name or Description of Current Initiative	Effective	Ineffective	Not Sure

Step 2: After reviewing the *Guiding Principles*, The Attendance Taskforce will respond to the following questions, determine if current practices are consistent or inconsistent with the Guiding Question, and note comments and recommendations relative to the Guiding Question.

#	Area	Guiding Question	Yes	No	Comments
1	Events	Do we consider and address, or are we prepared to consider and address, the influence of external events and perceptions on student attendance?			
2	Parent Control	Do we consider the fact that parents and family control the attendance of younger students?			

#	Area	Guiding Question	Yes	No	Comments
3	Student Control	Do we consider the fact that the attendance of older students is controlled by the individual student?			
4	Age and grade level trends	Do we consider the typical attendance patterns and trends of student cohorts and grades as we develop interventions for truant students?			
5a	External Barriers	Do we consider and address external barriers to school attendance, and do we realistically assess the importance of those barriers?			
5b	External Barriers	Do our initiatives overly rely on removing external barriers to attendance while inadequately considering other influences on attendance?			
6	Instructional Time on Task	Do we understand that the importance of attendance extends beyond instructional time on task?			
7	Relationships	Do our initiatives consider the importance of staff and peer relationships in attendance?			
8	Culture/Climate	Do we consider the importance of a culture of good school attendance and an inviting school climate as foundational elements of attendance?			
9a	Community Influences	Have we evaluated and considered community attitudes and norms about school attendance?			

#	Area	Guiding Question	Yes	No	Comments
9b	Community Influences	Do our initiatives identify and mobilize community resources and influencers to promote school attendance?			
10	Law and Policy	Do our efforts overly rely on attendance laws and policies to enforce and improve school attendance?			
11	Role of Teachers	Do our teachers and other staff members understand their importance in attendance patterns and do they consciously work to improve attendance?			
12	Policy and Practices	Are there policies, rules, procedures, or practices that inadvertently deter or discourage school attendance?			
13	Student Perspective	Do we adequately consider student perceptions and perspectives of school attendance?			
14	Real Reasons and Root Causes	Do we look beyond initially stated reasons for truancy to accurately identify and target the root causes of individual and sub-group truancy?			
15	Truant Recovery	Do our attendance initiatives include strategies to recover lost and truant students and to facilitate their renewed school attendance?			



Step 3: The Attendance Taskforce will develop new or modified initiatives or action steps that are needed to address gaps between current practices and the *Guiding Principles*. Use the following or a similar template for this step.

#	Guiding Principle Not Adequately Addressed	Action Steps Needed

The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) offers the *Guiding Principles* and the recommended self-assessment process to support local schools and districts. NDPC also acknowledges that local circumstances such as limited personnel, limited time, insufficient attendance expertise, and the need for external validation may sometimes require the assistance of external attendance experts.

NDPC employs many experienced attendance specialists who can assist local schools and districts in addressing this complex issue. NDPC's support for attendance improvement, while always customized to meet local needs, may include:

- Guidance and coaching to apply the Guiding Principles
- Facilitation of Attendance Task Force work to develop new and more effective attendance strategies and action steps.
- Expert evaluation of current and new attendance initiatives and reports of findings.
- Analysis of local truancy problems and recommendations for improvement.
- Ongoing guidance and coaching of the local Attendance Task Force to monitor, improve, and sustain local initiatives.
- Professional development for leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders to establish and sharpen attendance improvement skills.

For support or more information, email NDPC at [ndpc@dropoutprevention.org](mailto:ndpc@dropoutprevention.org) or call 518-723-2063.

## Appendix

### **Possible Action Steps**

There are hundreds of potential attendance improvement strategies that local schools and districts could consider as the best fit for their local circumstances. NDPC does not recommend a selection of strategies without careful local analysis because only random acts of attendance improvement will result and few will be meaningful. NDPC recommends that local attendance teams first inventory existing initiatives, then consider the *Guiding Principles for Improving School Attendance*, and finally adopt new initiatives. This practice guide offers a listing of possible strategies... NOT recommendations but rather as options to consider.

### **The National Association of Secondary School Principals recommends 10 Action Steps for high-yield student attendance:**

1. Create a culture in which all teachers and staff purposefully develop relationships with students.
2. Create a mentor program.
3. Monitor attendance and follow up on students with weak attendance.
4. Minimize obstacles to attendance.
5. Create opportunities for meaningful involvement.
6. Treat kids with dignity and respect—as if they were your own.
7. Consider alternatives to suspension.
8. Teachers should model excellent attendance.
9. Tap community resources to help.
10. Use the juvenile justice system, if necessary.

### **Other strategies that might be considered, if most appropriate locally, include:**

- Students monitoring and reporting their attendance
- Individual student reward programs targeting those most at risk of truancy
- Parent information campaigns
- Business and employer information campaigns
- Public service announcements
- Editorials and op-eds
- Support of political leaders
- Support of faith leaders
- Report-card awareness campaigns with local employers
- Attendance reporting to employers of student workers
- The absence of schoolwork make-up opportunities
- Promotion of school attendance at school sporting events
- Connect attendance to the school “brand” (mascots, slogans, cheers)
- Student body recognition of perfect attendance staff members.

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