Attendance and Student Achievement

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) defines chronic absenteeism "as missing ten percent or more of the academic year for any reason, including excused absences, unexcused absences, and suspensions."[1] The concept of chronic absenteeism is distinct from truancy. Chronic absenteeism includes all absences and focuses on the academic effects of missed learning, while truancy refers only to unexcused absences and focuses on compliance. [2] A truancy-focused approach to attendance typically includes students with the most severe levels of absenteeism, failing to support students whose absenteeism rates may not meet the legal threshold for truancy or those who are excused but learning is impacted.[3] The figure below illustrates the difference between chronic absenteeism and truancy.

Comparison of Chronic Absence to Truancy

Truancy	Chronic absence
• Counts only unexcused absences • Emphasizes compliance with school rules • Relies on legal and administrative solutions	• Counts all absences: excused, unexcused, and suspensions • Emphasizes academic impact of missed days • Uses community-based, positive strategies

Source: Attendance Works[4]

A substantial body of research finds serious negative effects of chronic absenteeism on academic, social-emotional, high school completion, and postsecondary outcomes.[5] Research also suggests that chronic absenteeism in earlier grades increases the risk of absenteeism in later grades, compounding the challenges of absenteeism over time.[6] For example, a study of the Head Start program finds that children who are chronically absent in Prekindergarten make fewer gains in math and literacy skills than their peers.[7] The figure below summarizes major consequences of chronic absenteeism across grade levels identified by the U.S. Department of Education. By reducing the likelihood of high school completion, chronic absenteeism may be correlated with poor health outcomes in adulthood, including increased risk of tobacco use, diabetes, unhealthy weight, and premature death from chronic disease.[8]

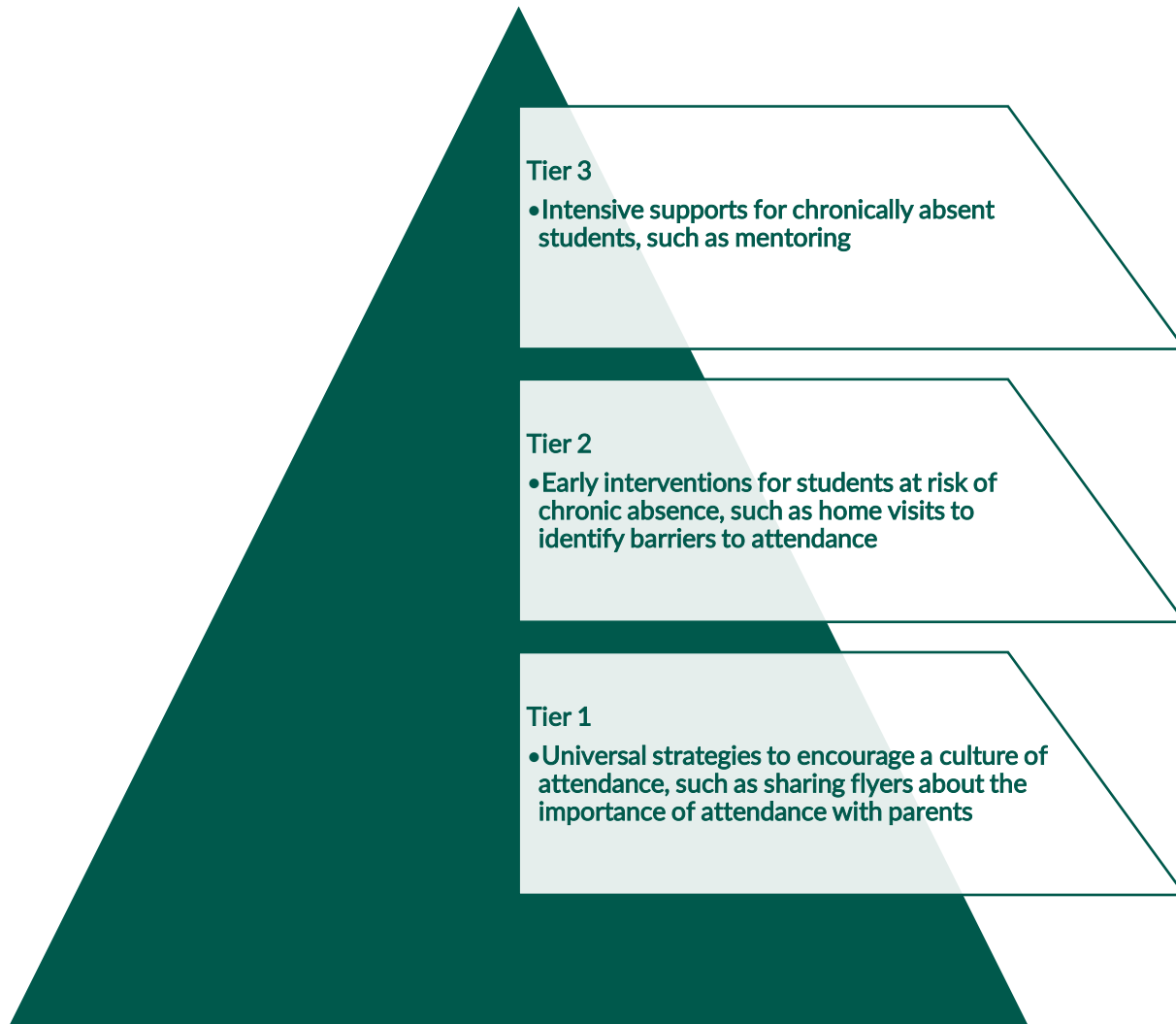**Consequences of Chronic Absenteeism Across Grade Levels**

Elementary Grades	Middle and High School	Postsecondary
• Students who are chronically absent in Prekindergarten, Kindergarten, or Grade 1 are less likely than other students to read proficiently by the end of Grade 3, which in turn predicts high school dropout.	• Research finds that chronic absenteeism in any grade between Grade 8 and Grade 12 significantly increases the risk of high school dropout.	• Chronic absenteeism predicts high school dropout, which in turn predicts a variety of negative outcomes, including poverty, poor health, and involvement in the criminal justice system.

Source: U.S. Department of Education[9]

Addressing Absenteeism through Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

A systematic, division-level strategy to address chronic absenteeism includes a tiered system of school-wide and targeted prevention strategies to reduce the risk of chronic absenteeism as well as interventions for students with high absence rates, as shown below.[10] The VDOE endorses a tiered approach to interventions for chronic absenteeism aligned to the Virginia Tiered Systems of

Supports (VTSS). The VTSS are data-driven intervention frameworks designed to enable schools and divisions to provide all students with the supports they need for positive academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes.[11] Using a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) aligns the interventions provided to each student with that student's needs and ensures that interventions are evidence based.[12]

Tier 3
- Intensive supports for chronically absent students, such as mentoring

Tier 2
- Early interventions for students at risk of chronic absence, such as home visits to identify barriers to attendance

Tier 1
- Universal strategies to encourage a culture of attendance, such as sharing flyers about the importance of attendance with parents

Source: Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy[13]

Tier 1 Prevention Strategies

Tier 1 prevention strategies for chronic absenteeism include strategies to create a positive climate, emphasizing the importance of attendance for all students, and addressing barriers to attendance that are widespread within the school or division.[14] These strategies ensure that all students can reach school safely, understand the importance of attendance, and anticipate a safe and welcoming environment at school. Empirical research on the effectiveness of specific Tier 1 strategies in reducing absenteeism rates is limited. However, individual schools and divisions across the United States have achieved success in reducing absenteeism using the strategies listed below.[15] These strategies are often less expensive than Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, enabling schools and divisions to efficiently promote attendance for most students and concentrate resources on students most in need of support.[16]

Promising Universal Supports for Attendance

Community Awareness Campaigns

- Divisions such as the New York City Department of Education and the School District of Philadelphia have created public awareness campaigns using advertisements and phone calls to reinforce the importance of attendance.

Attendance Monitoring and Data Use

- Divisions with effective universal prevention strategies regularly monitor data to identify students who may need Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions and identify trends in attendance data to improve Tier 1 supports.

Family Engagement

- Divisions such as Pittsburgh Public Schools use family engagement strategies to build strong family-school connections and proactively reach out to families every time a student is absent.

Relationship-Building

- Divisions across the country have used multiple strategies to build positive relationships among students and staff, including mentoring, targeted supports for Grade 9 students, bullying prevention programs, and efforts to diversify the teaching workforce.

Transportation

- Divisions need to ensure that all students have safe routes to school, whether through division-provided busses or strategies to improve safety such as crossing guards and improved public transportation.

Community Coordination

- Divisions such as Los Angeles Unified School District and Detroit Public Schools coordinate absenteeism responses with community partners to leverage additional resources.

Source: Research for Action[17]

Tier 1 prevention strategies should include strategies to create a welcoming and supportive school climate and a school culture that encourages attendance. In many cases, climate-related challenges such as bullying, social isolation, or poor student-teacher relationships contribute to chronic absenteeism.[18] For example, a study of an anonymous high school in Florida finds that the school substantially reduced chronic absenteeism from 2014 to 2019 through an initiative that combined direct support for attendance through clearly communicating attendance policies, monitoring absences, and issuing consequences when needed with a targeted strategy to build supportive relationships with students and their parents.[19] A 2017 study drawing on surveys of 25,776 middle and high school students finds that chronic absenteeism rates are significantly lower in schools with climates rated as positive by students than in schools with climates rated negative or marginal, suggesting that improving school climate can reduce chronic absenteeism.[20]

School climate improvements are most effective when implemented as part of a systematic and comprehensive approach that aligns with MTSS.[21] The National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments identifies five key activities for improving school climate, listed below.[22]

Key Activities for Improving School Climate

- Planning school climate improvements
- Engaging constituents in school climate improvements
- Collecting and reporting school climate data
- Choosing and implementing school climate interventions
- Monitoring and evaluating school climate improvements

Source: National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning[23]

Tier 2 and Tier 3 Interventions

Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions for chronic absenteeism include early interventions for students with developing attendance problems and intensive interventions for chronically absent students. Although empirical research supporting the effectiveness of specific interventions in reducing chronic absenteeism is limited, researchers have identified several interventions with promising evidence of effectiveness. In general, effective supports combine multiple strategies to address the multiple risk factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism.[24] The figure below lists interventions identified in a 2018 literature review by the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota as meeting the strong or moderate criteria for evidence-based interventions under Every Student Succeeds Act. Interventions with strong evidence are supported by at least one well-designed experimental study in which students are randomly assigned to treatment or control groups, while interventions with moderate evidence are supported by at least one well-designed quasi-experimental study.[25]

Evidence-Based Interventions for Attendance

INTERVENTION	DESCRIPTION
Strong Evidence	
Afterschool Programs	Afterschool programs provide students with a safe and supportive environment after the end of the school day. Research finds positive effects of afterschool programs offered by both schools and community partners on chronic absenteeism.
Mentoring	Mentoring assigns students to an adult mentor who supports connections to school and provides a caring adult presence. Research finds that mentoring reduces chronic absenteeism when mentors are appropriately trained and matched to the same student over multiple years.
School Refusal and Anxiety Interventions	Some students experience chronic absenteeism due to school-related anxiety. Research finds that individualized interventions to reduce anxiety, including therapy, desensitization training, relaxation or meditation, parent training, and social skills interventions can reduce absenteeism for these students.
Moderate Evidence	
School Breakfast	School breakfast programs provide free or low-cost breakfasts to students at school, either in the cafeteria before the school day starts or integrated into the school day.
School Nurses	School nurses address chronic absenteeism through preventative action plans, health and nutrition education, and case management. Several studies have found a reduction in chronic absenteeism when a full-time nurse is assigned to a school.
Bus Passes	In urban areas where students rely on public transportation to get to school, providing students free or low-cost bus passes can reduce transportation barriers to attendance. Empirical research on bus passes presents mixed results, with several studies in California finding minimal effects on student attendance and one study in Minneapolis finding a 23 percent reduction in chronic absenteeism for schools participating in a bus pass program.

INTERVENTION	DESCRIPTION
Bus Service	As with bus passes, research finds that providing a traditional bus service can reduce chronic absenteeism. Specifically, a study using national survey data finds that chronic absenteeism rates for kindergarten students who ride a bus to school are lower than those for students who rely on other means of transportation.[26]
Attendance Incentives	Research shows that providing students with rewards for strong attendance such as token economies, homework passes, or public recognition, can improve attendance when combined with other strategies such as behavioral contracts, group meetings, and phone calls to parents.
Community Partnerships	Collaborating with community partners to develop wraparound supports can help schools and divisions address root causes of absenteeism. Empirical research finds positive effects of school-community partnerships on attendance rates.
School Start Times	Research finds that delaying school start times in middle and high school to align with adolescents' sleep needs reduces tardiness and absenteeism.

Source: Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement[27]

In addition to targeted supports directly intended to reduce chronic absenteeism, some research suggests that targeted supports for students with academic or behavioral needs may improve attendance outcomes. For example, a 2021 study examines the impacts of participation in a voluntary mentoring program for middle and high school students in need of academic support on attendance rates.[28] The study finds that students who participated in the program throughout middle and high school were absent significantly less often during high school than students who only participated during middle school, and suggests that mentoring by community members may have increased students' sense of connection to school.[29]

Collecting and Reviewing Data to Support MTSS

To address chronic absenteeism, the VTSS require disaggregated data to support schools and divisions in identifying trends in chronic absenteeism and their root causes, which may include the causes listed below, as well as progress monitoring data to monitor the effectiveness of interventions to address chronic absenteeism and support continuous improvement.[30] Regularly reviewing trends in data is important to ensure that attendance teams are aware of trends in the overall rate of chronic absenteeism and the specific student populations for which absenteeism is a challenge. Student data can uncover trends in absenteeism that attendance teams were not previously aware of. For example, the attendance team at San Francisco Unified School District in California expected chronic absenteeism to be concentrated in the high school grades but discovered that 14 percent of kindergarten students were chronically absent after reviewing attendance data. Examining the data enabled the team to develop interventions supporting attendance in the early elementary grades.[31]

Identifying the root causes of chronic absenteeism for specific students and schools is essential to develop interventions and supports that will prevent chronic absenteeism.[32] Attendance teams will need data from multiple sources to identify root causes, including quantitative data such as the number of chronically absent students from specific schools or background and qualitative data on the factors in individual students' lives contributing to absenteeism. Attendance teams can collect qualitative data by engaging students and families through surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews.[33]

Potential Root Causes of Chronic Absenteeism

Myths	such as a parent's belief that only unexcused absences are problematic
Barriers	such as chronic disease, lack of food or housing, and lack of access to health care
Aversion	due to issues such as academic difficulties, poor school climate, or being bullied
Disengagement	due to factors such as lack of meaningful relationships in school or lack of engaging and relevant instruction

Source: Virginia Department of Education[34]

Progress monitoring data enables attendance teams to support continuous improvement by collecting ongoing attendance data. If progress monitoring data show an increase in attendance, the team should continue the current intervention. If progress monitoring data do not show an increase in attendance, the team should review data on the fidelity of implementation to determine whether additional supports are needed to improve fidelity or whether the intervention is ineffective when implemented with fidelity and needs to be revised.[35]

Disaggregating attendance data is important because research suggests that the risk of chronic absenteeism varies across demographic groups and grade levels. Nationally, chronic absenteeism rates are highest in the high school and early elementary grades. Students with disabilities, students from certain racial or ethnic backgrounds, and students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to experience chronic absenteeism than other students.[36] Students experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity have a particularly high risk of chronic absenteeism, with a statewide study in Michigan finding a chronic absenteeism rate of 40 percent for homeless students during the 2016-2017 school year compared to 24 percent for all economically disadvantaged students.[37] A study drawing on a national sample of 58,765 students finds that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) increase the risk of chronic absenteeism, which may contribute to disproportionate rates of chronic absenteeism across demographic groups.[38] Low-income students and students of color also face inequitable access to health care, which may contribute to health-related attendance barriers.[39] Research also finds that the negative effects of chronic absenteeism are stronger for students from low-income backgrounds than for other students.[40] After collecting disaggregated data, attendance teams should review data to identify trends across schools and student groups. The figure below presents guiding questions that attendance teams can use to structure their inquiries during the review process.

Guiding Questions for Reviewing Attendance Data

To what extent is chronic absence an issue throughout the district and where is it concentrated?
How does satisfactory attendance and chronic and severe chronic absence vary across schools, grades, subgroups, or neighborhoods?
What does the concentration and scale of chronic absence suggest about likely causes of chronic absence?
What is the relationship between overall attendance patterns and academic performance?
What is the relationship between attendance patterns and disciplinary (e.g., suspensions) data?

Source: Connecticut State Department of Education[41]

To identify students at risk for chronic absenteeism, attendance teams should review attendance data from the previous year and the first month of school.[42] Reporting absenteeism data as a percentage of total days missed so far in the school year rather than as the number of days missed allows attendance teams to track absenteeism throughout the school year and identify students at risk of chronic absenteeism before they reach that threshold for the school year. Early identification in turn enables attendance teams to begin providing interventions before the number of absences becomes insurmountable.[43] A statewide study of an initiative to improve graduation rates in Oregon finds that implementing an early indicator and intervention system to identify at-risk students and provide timely interventions reduces the rate of chronic absenteeism.[44]

In addition to collecting data on absenteeism, attendance teams need data on potential root causes of chronic absenteeism to identify which factors are correlated with chronic absenteeism in their school or division. The figure below identifies data indicators that attendance teams can collect to identify the potential root causes of chronic absenteeism.[45] Teams can collect this data from schools' and divisions' existing student information systems, as well as publicly available data from other sources in the community such as public health data systems. Community data sources are particularly valuable for identifying potential health-related barriers to attendance.[46]

Data to Collect to Identify Root Causes of Chronic Absenteeism

- Chronic absenteeism data disaggregated by grade, demographic groups, and if possible, by classroom
- Information about the health status of students
- School climate and safety data, including data from climate surveys
- School discipline policies
- Data on rates of office disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and expulsions
- Student mobility data
- Data on school health policies and practices (consider using the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's School Health Index or the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's School Health Assessment to collect data)
- Environmental health needs of school buildings
- Staffing patterns, including student support staff such as school nurses, social workers, and counselors
- Data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey if available
- Data on the quality and availability of out-of-school-time (OST) programs
- Data on strategies used to promote family and community engagement
- Data on participation in school breakfast programs
- Data on access to physical activity, including recess and physical education

Source: Alliance for a Healthier Generation, Attendance Works, and Healthy School Campaign[47]

Using Attendance Teams to Review Data and Identify Interventions

Schools and divisions can assign a team of staff members to review attendance data and plan interventions to address chronic absenteeism. These teams may be formed specially to address attendance or serve as extensions of other teams such as school improvement teams or multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), but should include leaders responsible for academic instruction, health, student supports, and early childhood education as well as representatives from community partners and school leaders.[48] Attendance teams are most effective when they include staff members who regularly interact with families, such as family engagement specialists or mentors.[49]

Suggested Process for Division and School Attendance Teams

Routinely Unpack, Analyze, and Utilize Data
- Produce school-level reports on a regular basis (preferably every 10 days) that disaggregate attendance data by grade, race or ethnicity, gender, lunch status, disability status, English learner status, and any other areas of concern to the division

Organize a Division-Level Response
- Ensure that the division as a whole is addressing chronic absenteeism systematically and developing a culture of attendance through positive engagement strategies, capacity-building for staff, and strategic community partnerships
- Use a self-assessment process and student surveys to support continuous improvement

Promote Shared Accountability and Continuous Improvement
- Ensure that all constituents understand their role in supporting attendance
- Publish targets and goals for attendance, and regularly report progress toward goals

Source: Connecticut State Department of Education[50]

Engaging Families and Communities

A systematic approach to absenteeism engages families and communities in promoting school attendance across the settings each child encounters. Although school factors such as climate and safety play an important role in attendance, risk factors for chronic absenteeism exist across the school, community, family, and individual domains.[51]

Engaging families in supporting attendance is crucial to preventing chronic absenteeism, particularly in the elementary grades when caregivers have the most control over students' attendance. However, parents of young children may incorrectly believe that only unexcused absences are problematic or that regular attendance in the early elementary grades is not essential for academic success.[52] A 2018 study in which parents of students in Grades K-5 at 10 California school districts were mailed letters with information about their children's attendance and the importance of attendance for learning finds that family engagement significantly reduces absenteeism when outreach includes information about supports families can access to improve attendance.[53] Parents of students in the high school grades are typically more aware of the importance of attendance, but may not be aware of how many days their children are absent. Research conducted by the advocacy organization Attendance Works in partnership with the Ad Council finds that engaging families around the importance of attendance and strategies to encourage attendance improves attendance outcomes. The figure below presents Attendance Works' guidelines for family engagement to support school attendance.[54]

Guidelines for Effective Family Engagement to Support School Attendance

Engage families beginning in the early elementary grades	Establish positive relationships with families	Communicate clear expectations and supports	Adopt a strengths-based approach	Check for understanding of chronic absenteeism and its consequences
	Communicate in families' preferred language	Offer supports to address barriers to attendance when needed	Support sustained, ongoing family engagement	

Source: Attendance Works[55]

Schools should use multiple outreach and communication strategies to ensure they engage all families around attendance. For example, conducting family home visits improves family-school connections and reduces chronic absenteeism.[56] Notably, research finds that a systematic school-wide home visiting program reduces chronic absenteeism even for individual students who do not receive a home visit.[57] A 2021 study examines an attendance initiative at Providence Public Schools in Rhode Island that combined mentorship programs for students with outreach to parents using phone calls and text messages. The study finds that chronic absenteeism decreased in schools with high levels of implementation and increased in schools with low levels of implementation, suggesting that the initiative may have contributed to reductions in chronic absenteeism.[58]

Community Engagement

Effective absenteeism prevention initiatives often engage partners across multiple sectors in the community.[59] Schools and divisions can partner with a wide range of constituents across the community, including those listed below, to support a systematic community-wide approach to attendance. The effects of absenteeism are felt across communities, and community partners can support schools in addressing barriers to attendance such as health challenges or unstable housing.[60] Attendance Works recommends that school divisions engage in an asset-mapping process to identify potential community partners and recruit interested partners for a community-wide coalition to improve attendance.[61]

Potential Community Partners for Attendance

▪ Businesses	▪ Community Schools
▪ Family Support Organizations	▪ Early Childhood Education Programs
▪ Faith Based Organizations	▪ Health Providers
▪ Housing Agencies	▪ Hunger Relief Organizations
▪ Institutions of Higher Education	▪ The Juvenile Justice System
▪ Local Governments	▪ Parent and Youth Leadership Organizations
▪ Volunteers and National Service Members	▪ Out of School Time (OST) Programs
▪ Philanthropy	▪ Social Service Agencies
▪ Population-Specific Services	▪ Civic Organizations

Source: Attendance Works[62]

Health-care providers and other community partners involved in public health may be particularly beneficial partners, as health challenges often serve as barriers to school attendance and failure to graduate high school in turn contributes to negative adult health outcomes.[63]

Potential Roles for Community Health Partners in Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

Communicating the importance of attendance	Creating data sharing protocols that increase access to chronic absenteeism data while maintaining student privacy and confidentiality	Utilizing chronic absenteeism data in decision making

Flagging health factors that are preventing children from attending school	Bolstering the resources schools have to meet the health needs of their students

Source: Healthy Schools Campaign[64]

Supplemental Resources

The following resources provide additional information on continuous improvement beyond those already included in this info brief.

Resources on Yearly Planning for Continuous Improvement

Resource	Publisher	URL	QR Code
Addressing the Health-Related Causes of Chronic Absenteeism: A Toolkit for Action	Healthy Schools Campaign	https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED617426.pdf	
Communities Supporting Youth Attendance Toolkit	Communities Supporting Youth Collaborative	https://multco-web7-psh-files-usw2.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/sun/documents/csyattendancetoolkit_version_1.0_final.pdf	
District and School Self-Assessment Tools	Attendance Works	https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/self-assessment/	
Interactive Exercises for Family Engagement	Attendance Works	https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/exercises/	
Sample Parental Notifications and Forms	California Department of Education	https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ai/sb/sarbhandbook.asp	
School Climate Improvement Resource Package	National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments	https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/scirp/about	
Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education	Institute of Education Sciences	https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Publication/3767	
Understanding the Root Causes for Student Absenteeism Worksheet	Attendance Works	https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/teacher-attendance-strategy-worksheet-rev-10-16-19.pdf	

Source: QR Code Generator[65]

Endnotes

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