How to Organize an Effective District Team to Improve Attendance

District office leaders and school-based educators know from experience and common sense what research confirms: showing up for class matters. Students can't benefit from investments in high quality instruction and engaging curriculum unless they are in attendance. The Covid-19 pandemic not only laid bare existing inequities for marginalized students and families; it further exposed the frailty of the systems that need to be in place to support positive conditions of learning for all students. Whether working in a district office or in a school building, everyone has an obligation and an opportunity to assist with cultivating a culture of high attendance.

Given the high levels of absenteeism and disengagement from learning experienced by students nationwide, districts must give significant attention to districtwide infrastructures to ensure schools are equipped to take a trauma-informed and restorative approach to meet the needs of students and families. It will require an "all hands on deck" approach working from the same goals in separate roles.

Why A District-Level Approach?

While everyone has a role to play in helping students show up to class every day, the role of district office leadership is to establish effective policies and create systems that support school staff in taking and promoting positive problem-solving practices. The primary purpose of a district team is to establish a system of aligned district-level policies, practices and supports to facilitate and sustain improved attendance, engagement and academic achievement.

What Are the Functions of a District Attendance Team?

There are six ingredients of systemic change that form the foundation for the functions of a district team.

1. **Capacity Building:** Build the capacity of school leaders, staff and teams to implement a multi-tiered approach to support a culture of high attendance.
2. **Actionable Data:** Provide accurate, timely (ideally weekly), actionable attendance and absenteeism data to district and school leaders.
3. **Positive Engagement:** Equip schools with evidence-based strategies to positively engage students and families.
4. **Strategic Partnerships:** Mobilize community partners to address barriers to attendance.
5. **Adequate, Equitable Resources:** Ensure resources are sufficient and equitably allocated to schools with the greatest needs.
6. **Shared Accountability:** Establish systems to hold district and school staff accountable for doing their part to reduce chronic absence.

What Makes an Effective District Team?
Teams are successful when they are cross-functional and cross-departmental, are led by a cabinet-level administrator, and include diverse perspectives from across the district. Teams should have regularly scheduled meetings (at least every two weeks) with a standard meeting agenda and a process for consistently getting feedback from and communicating with district and school staff.

Systemic approach: Effective teams annually conduct an analysis to help district and school leaders identify strengths and opportunities to develop a systemic approach to reducing chronic absence. Attendance Works has developed district and school self-analysis tools that can be used to facilitate this work. Find the self-analysis tools on this website page.

Group membership: Attendance does not belong to any one individual or department. The team should bring together district-level and school-based staff from across the district that may not often work together or work in silos. The team is ideally inclusive of individuals with positional power (e.g., the individual who principals are accountable to); individuals with specific expertise (e.g., special education, communication, homelessness, data management); individuals who have direct contact with students and families (e.g., principals, teachers, family engagement staff), and members of your community (e.g., parent leaders, early childhood providers, health providers, community partners) that reflect your school's demographics.

The Attendance Strategy should be led by the school principal and the leadership team. Teams working on improving student attendance could include the school's:

- Nurse
- Counselor
- Social worker
- Administrative support staff
- Special education staff
- Teachers
- Early education staff
- Expanded learning program staff

Members should be able to relay the perspectives of the student demographics.
Teams should incorporate input from families, students and the community.

Roles and responsibilities: Effective teams ensure that each team member clearly understands their role both during and outside of a team meeting. Each team member is responsible for promoting improved attendance within their role; embedding attendance strategies into ongoing practices and bringing their role perspectives to the district-level attendance team.

Year-round attendance plan: Lay out the work of the district and school teams for the year by quarters and be at least two quarters ahead (e.g., by August their attendance plans for quarters 1 and 2 are complete). By planning ahead, the team can start out the school year strong and have strategies in place to address dips in attendance that happen over the course of a school year. Attendance Works has developed a yearly calendar planning tool customized to the roles

and responsibilities of both district and school teams. District teams should support school teams in aligning their year-round work with the district work. [Download](#) Attendance Works' District Team Yearly Attendance Activities tool with sample yearly activities, or the blank planning tool.

Tracking and monitoring system: All team members should have access to a common system that monitors student outcomes and tracks progress on agreed upon tasks. This can be an existing districtwide database (e.g., PowerSchool) or a simple Google document created for the team that all team members can access during the meeting.

Can an Existing Team Address Attendance?

District office administrators should determine, based on local conditions, if a new team needs to be established to monitor attendance data and practice, or if the work can be successfully incorporated into the responsibilities of an existing team. Considerations should include: what teams already exist (e.g., School Climate and Safety, Instructional Leadership, MTSS, etc.); what is each team's purpose; how frequently they meet; and who participates on each team? Based on this assessment, the district office administrators will need to decide how the attendance functions will be implemented in their existing systems.

The District Team should also work with school leaders to similarly map the teams in their school and determine if a new team needs to be created, if attendance can be incorporated into existing teams or if existing teams can be consolidated to ensure that attendance and academic success efforts are aligned and integrated. Attendance Works has developed a [blank team mapping tool](#) to support this work.

What Are Some of the Common Pitfalls?

Establishing a district-level team is not just an obligation, it is an opportunity for collective action and districtwide improvement. Below are some of the common pitfalls that district leaders should be aware of.

- × District leaders are silent on how good attendance is essential for student achievement
- × Failure to make attendance a top priority
- × Fragmented approach with departments and initiatives operating in isolation.
- × Not allocating sufficient resources to support prevention & early intervention.
- × Low accountability and lack of support to schools on effective attendance practices.
- × Only tracking ADA or truancy data rather than who is missing too much school for any reason (chronic absence).
- × Focus only on students with most absences with case management as the only strategy.
- × Not drawing upon the experience or knowledge of school teams in designing systems or solutions.
- × Team composition does not reflect the demographics, perspectives or cultural realities of the student population.