EveryDay Labs™

2022–2023
Back-to-School
ToolKit

Re-Establishing a
Culture of Attendance
and **Engagement**
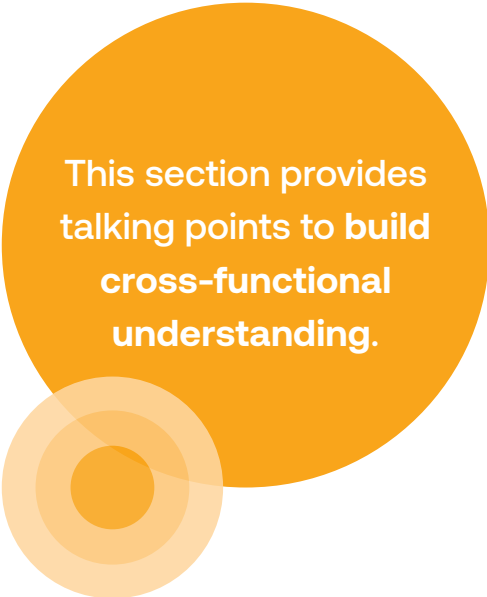
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About This Toolkit

To reduce equity gaps that have been exacerbated by the pandemic, rebuild vital relationships, and sustain flourishing school communities, students must first be present and engaged. For that to happen, both students and families must know that they are valued members of a school community and that educators care deeply about them and want to be co-creators of their school experience.

This will require a concerted effort to reestablish a culture of engagement and attendance for all students and families from the start of the new school year. This toolkit was developed to inform and guide back-to-school planning and communication to ensure that all students and families understand the importance of attendance and recognize it as a shared priority this school year.

Understanding the Scope of the Challenge

This section provides talking points to **build cross-functional understanding.**

A Complex and Growing Set of Issues

Since the spring of 2020, nearly every element of public education has been disrupted and is still in flux. Students have lost access to consistent learning opportunities, and educators have had to adjust to new ways that learning is measured, defined, and created. Stable patterns and normal operating procedures were rendered impossible and learning amid a tumultuous landscape was a challenge.

As we enter the third school year affected by Covid, many educators and families hope that we will finally break free from the stranglehold of the pandemic. Plans reflect a desire to go back to normal—to return to a time when decisions and behaviors were not entirely dependent upon health and safety concerns.

However, it is impossible to just return to where we left off prior to the pandemic. Individuals, families, and systems have been forever changed.

As we prepare to return to school, it is vital that we pause to understand the experience of students and families and make plans informed by their current challenges. We must take stock of where teachers, families, and students are—honoring the incredible efforts that this time has required, yet acknowledging the persistent impacts of the pandemic.
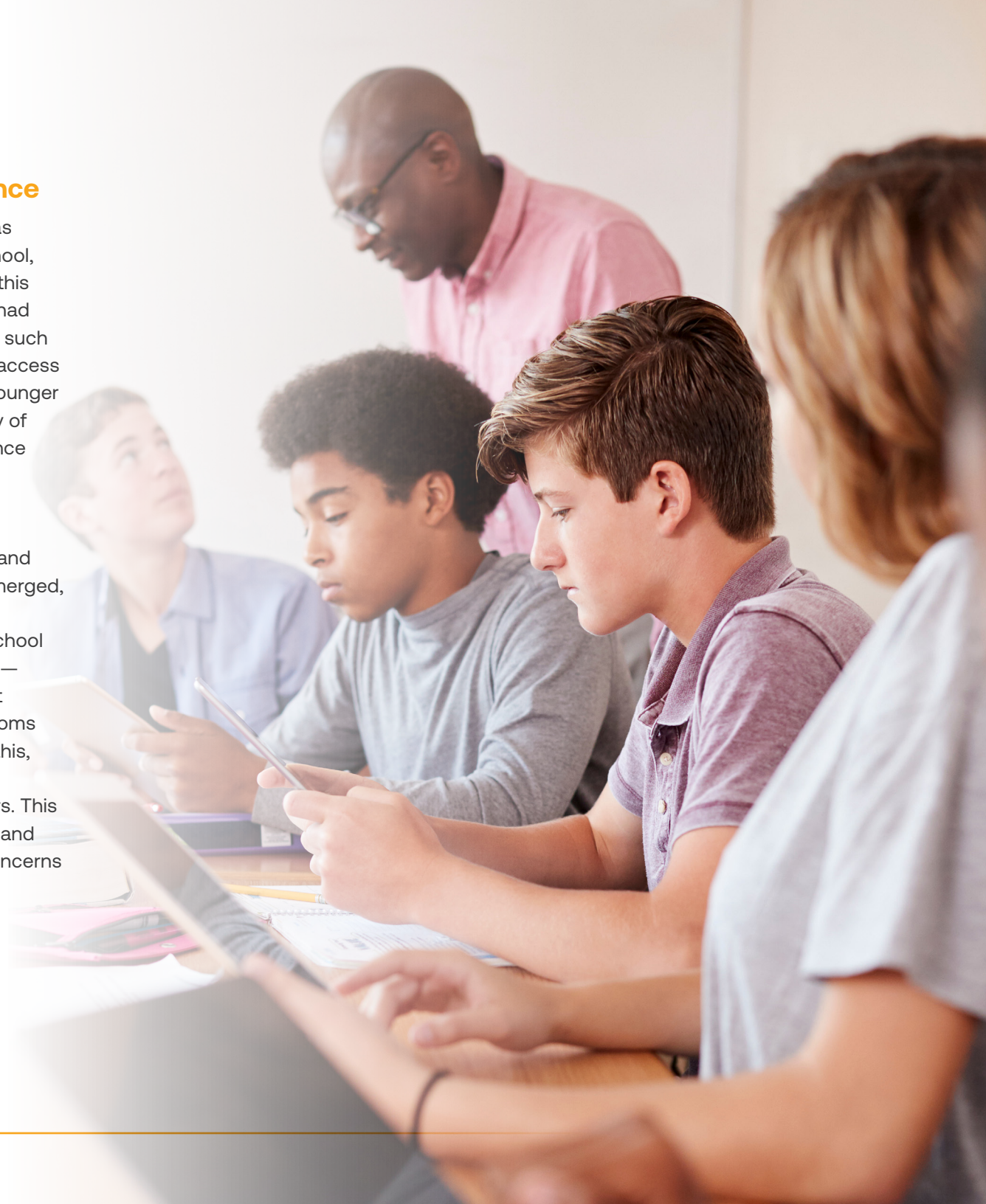
The 2022–23 school year cannot be a return to 2020, nor be a repeat of 2021. The next school year will once again be unprecedented: we have the opportunity to operate schools more normally, but with students, families, and educators who have been, and still are, profoundly affected by the pandemic.

Exacerbated Previous Causes of Absence

Since March 2020, nearly every student's experience was punctuated by periods of disruption, time away from school, or longer stretches of absenteeism. For some students, this was part of a shift to online learning. Many families who had previously struggled with chronic absence due to issues such as housing instability, lack of transportation, insufficient access to medical care, or a need for older siblings to care for younger siblings saw these barriers to attendance increase. Many of these students have continued to struggle with attendance since the outbreak of the pandemic.

New Causes of Absence

With the pandemic's overwhelming impact on students and families, new causes of absence and disengagement emerged, greatly expanding the pool of students and families who have crossed the threshold into chronic absenteeism. School health protocols dictated that a runny nose or headache—symptoms that previously would not have kept a student home at all—required students to stay home until symptoms subsided or they had a negative Covid test. Because of this, significant portions of the student population have been absent for numerous days over the past two school years. This has resulted in widening opportunity gaps, learning loss and regression, and increases in behavioral and discipline concerns across student groups.
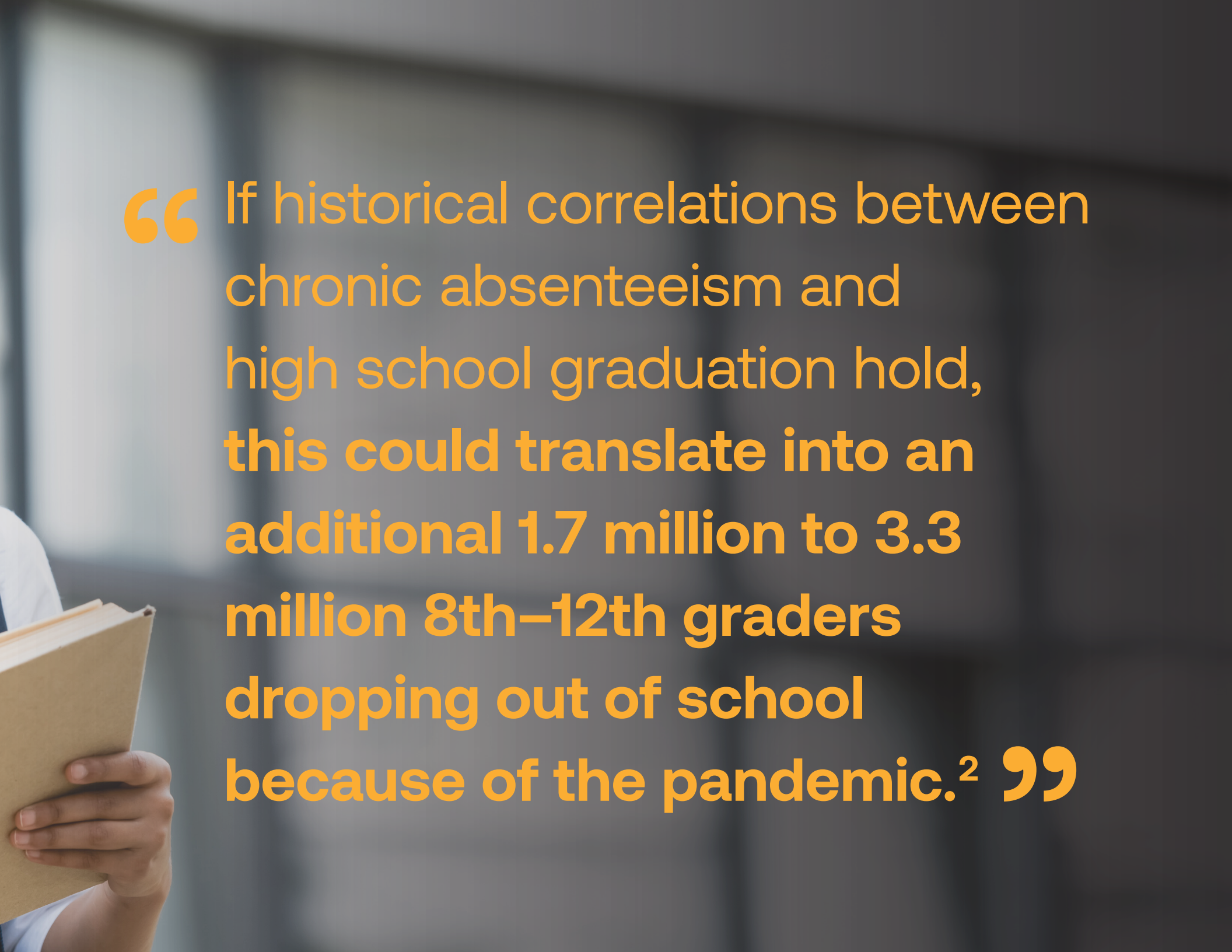
A National "Attendance Crisis"

Hedy Chang, Executive Director of Attendance Works, has described our schools as experiencing a national "attendance crisis."[1] A report from December 2021 found that chronic absence had more than doubled since the pandemic. Moreover, while chronic absence was continuing to rise among students from families struggling economically, it was starting to decrease among students from more affluent families. And the report projected the dire future consequences this portends for students:

[1] "'We Are Having an Attendance Crisis as a Country': Chronic Absences Double Nationwide since COVID-19 Pandemic," CBS News. www.cbsnews.com/news/chronic-absences-pandemic. [2] Dorn, Emma, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg. "Covid-19 and Education: An Emerging K-Shaped Recovery." McKinsey & Company. www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-an-emerging-k-shaped-recovery.

> "If historical correlations between chronic absenteeism and high school graduation hold, **this could translate into an additional 1.7 million to 3.3 million 8th–12th graders dropping out of school because of the pandemic.**[2]"

Significant Learning Loss across the Nation

Though the data is murky due to disruptions to testing schedules throughout the pandemic, researchers have found that students are significantly behind pre-pandemic achievement levels in both reading and math, with decreases in math the most severe. Thomas Kane of the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University has estimated that students "missed the equivalent of seven to ten weeks of math learning."[3] Reading declines have been about half that of math's.[4]

Very notably, these trends have hit students living in high-poverty areas the hardest, widening opportunity gaps across the nation. High-poverty schools have shown a much greater decrease in achievement, estimated to be 13.5 weeks compared to eight weeks for low- and mid-poverty schools.[5] These trends have also increased racial opportunity gaps throughout districts. The McKinsey report cited above showed that "students in majority-Black schools remain five months behind their historical levels in both mathematics and reading, while students in majority-White schools are now just two months behind their historical levels, widening prepandemic achievement gaps."[6]

Disrupted Relationships

As teachers adapted to new modalities of teaching and learning—often moving instruction online and shortening instructional time–opportunities to build and sustain relationships were greatly diminished. Many students did not even set foot on school campuses for more than an entire year. Once students did return to school, they were required to wear masks and be physically distanced from peers and teachers for their safety. And if they were even exposed to Covid, they were required to stay out of school for extended periods of time to mitigate virus spread.

These dynamics compromised the ability of teachers, students, and families to forge positive connections, establish consistent communication, and ultimately build supportive learning communities. Students could not easily play or collaborate with peers. Families lost organic ways to connect with teachers and school staff at school drop-offs, pickups, or face-to-face meetings and conferences—and therefore opportunitiess to feel connected to or comfortable at their child's school. Teachers, administrators, and school support staff were unable to learn students' and families' unique circumstances as they would during typical years, constraining the kinds of support that schools would normally provide.
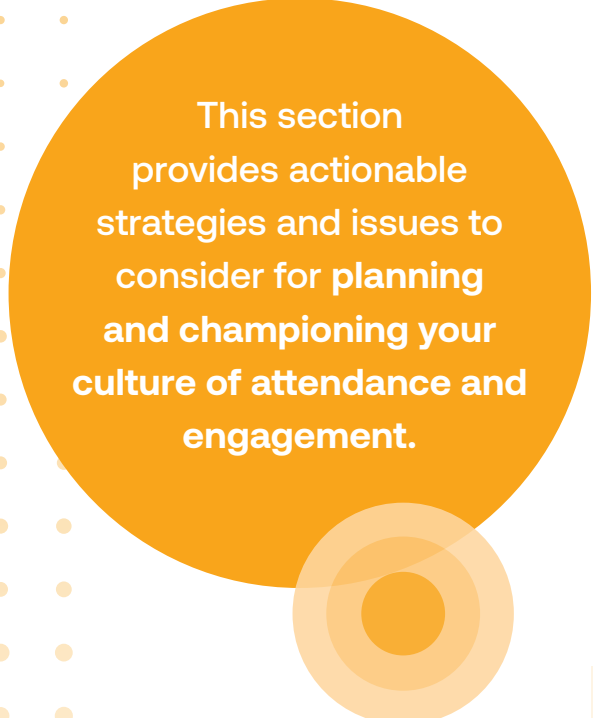
[3]Turner, Cory. "6 Things We've Learned about How the Pandemic Disrupted Learning." NPR. NPR, June 22, 2022. [4]Kuhfeld, Megan, James Soland, and Karyn Lewis. "Test Score Patterns across Three COVID-19-Impacted School Years." Educational Researcher, 2022. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x221109178. [5]Leonhardt, David. "'Not Good for Learning'." The New York Times. The New York Times, May 5, 2022. [6]"Covid-19 and Education: An Emerging K-Shaped Recovery."

Going Forward

The bottom line is clear: unless schools put a concerted, intentional, and systematic effort into rebuilding a culture that prioritizes relationships, engagement, and attendance, the immediate impact of the pandemic will become a permanent deficit of achievement and well-being and a reduction of students' ability to learn.

Strategies for Addressing the Challenge

This section provides actionable strategies and issues to consider for **planning and championing your culture of attendance and engagement.**

Reestablish Positive Attendance and Engagement Norms

Because of the context outlined in Section 1, schools and districts are facing unprecedented challenges as they work to get students academically on track and implement supports to close equity gaps. Additionally, there is a renewed call to ignite enthusiasm for learning and build stronger connections with students and families to create a school climate that is conducive to growth.

The foundation of student and school success is attendance and engagement. If students are not present and engaged in learning, school or district curricula and supports cannot have their intended impact. And at a time when schools are building in additional learning opportunities to get students back on track, having a student present for each instructional minute is even more important than ever. Though it is critical to consider how to support students with a history of chronic absences, it's also vital that schools and districts recognize that most families will require guidance on positive attendance behaviors.

This school year, in order for schools to meet their academic, behavioral, and social goals for students, educators must work to build connections with families and students, fortify relationships, and reset norms for attendance. To do this, they must have an intentional, explicit, proactive approach as part of their strategic planning. Attendance and engagement must be viewed by all stakeholders as foundational to student success.

Consider Families' Experiences

The number of families with students experiencing attendance challenges grew substantially over since the outbreak of the pandemic. On average, the students and families who have struggled with attendance continue to have challenges attending every day.

Additionally, a new population of students began to miss large amounts of school time. Some students stayed home for large numbers of days based on Covid-related health and safety guidance. Some took up new responsibilities at home—providing care for siblings or working for additional income. Many felt uncomfortable attending school after the continuity had been disrupted while others fell behind academically and did not know how to reengage with school and learning.

Differentiate Messaging

It is important to consider how to adapt the messaging to fit this more diverse set of students, families, circumstances, and reasons for absence. Schools and districts should consider how to best communicate to families based on students' ages, home languages, and their specific causes of absence or disengagement.
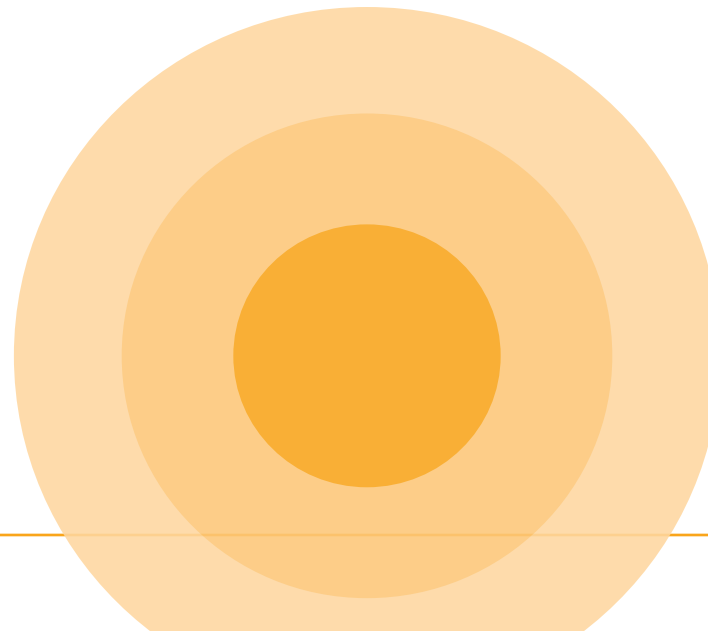
Respect Student and Family Voice

It is vital to create opportunities to connect with families to understand the causes of disengagement and inform subsequent messaging, outreach, and intervention. When schools and districts create a welcoming and open dialogue, it communicates to families that schools want to hear from them and are invested in working with them to support their students. This leads to families reaching out as problems arise rather than waiting for the issues to magnify and require much more substantial interventions.

Create School Connectedness

In order to meaningfully engage families and students, it is essential that families feel connected to their school, their teachers, and one another. Schools should take special care at the beginning of the year to find ways to introduce key staff, teachers, and resources—with video messaging, photos, or screenshots when applicable—to create personalized connections and a familiarity with the school community. Events that allow families to interact and get to know one another in a low-pressure environment are tremendously worthwhile for promoting feelings of belonging and connectedness.

Be Proactive and Intentional

A central component of back-to-school messaging is that regular attendance is of utmost importance; it must be part of the overall strategic vision and not buried in attendance policy communications. Schools and districts should include this message on website home pages, in welcome back letters from school leaders, and initial communications from teachers. Don't wait until students are chronically absent to begin outreach. When families and students hear the message multiple times and in multiple ways, positive habits and culture form.

Be Clear that Attendance Matters and Why

Schools and districts should communicate that they are actively working to build positive attendance behaviors across the community. As part of this messaging, schools should educate families on why regular attendance at school is critical and how it connects to achievement and students' social and emotional well-being. Districts and schools might consider using resources from Attendance Works to help families better understand how attendance affects student success at various grade levels. Attendance Works' latest toolkit, Showing Up Matters for R.E.A.L., emphasizes that attendance matters because it offers opportunities to build routines, increase engagement, access resources, and receive support for learning. District and school messaging must help families realize that one of the best things they can do for their children is ensuring that they attend school regularly.

Clearly Define Absence Protocols

As students head back to school, it is important that schools and districts not assume that families will simply revert to pre-pandemic attendance behaviors and norms. For most, these habits are far removed from recent memory; for those with children in the early primary grades, these norms were never established, as their children have yet to experience a typical, non-pandemic school year. And since Covid illness and associated protocols will undoubtedly still affect attendance during this coming school year, schools and districts must clearly articulate when students should stay home and have that information easily accessible for when families are making decisions. Doing this thoughtfully and strategically will work to reestablish norms for attendance for all families.

Engage during Quarantine or Isolation

It is likely that schools and districts will still have students out for periods of Covid isolation during the coming school year. It is essential that districts are clear about how students should interact with content and learning during this time. Districts should share opportunities for quarantined students to attend remotely, if any, and how that works. If virtual attendance is not possible, districts and schools should provide tips and advice for how to keep students engaged and in a routine of learning so long as they are not seriously ill.

Align Plans and Communications across the District

As you make decisions about plans and protocols, work to establish alignment across the district. Families often have students at different schools within the same district, and it is critical that schools are cohesive in their plans, protocols, and messaging since contradictory information will lead to frustration and confusion.

Share Information with Relevant Stakeholders

When families have questions, they are most likely to connect with those they have established relationships with—most often, classroom teachers. Ensuring that teachers and others who regularly interact with families have access to correct and up-to-date information is important so that families can make decisions accordingly.

Connect with and Support Families to Rebuild Habits of Attendance

It is important that schools work to build relationships with families that feel supportive and productive for all involved. This allows schools to reach out to families as soon as attendance concerns begin to emerge and help find ways for to students to attend regularly. Schools might build into their protocols that a school nurse or counselor make a phone call after two or three absences and check in on the student and family. This allows someone at school to help identify the cause of the absences and provide resources and guidance so families can take steps to return their children to school as quickly as possible. When open communication channels exist, families are much more likely to reach out to the school for support as they encounter challenges, and the school and family can work together on finding ways to overcome barriers to attendance.

Fostering Attendance and Engagement: A Checklist

Use these checklists to plan for and **stay on track for success.**

Defining Policies and Protocols

☑ Determine district and school policies and protocols regarding attendance. This should include specific guidance for when students should stay home. Work with other administrators to ensure alignment on plans, messaging, and timing.

☑ Update the district and school website with information about Covid-related absences and quarantines, and ensure that it remains updated with any changes. Include:

   ☑ District- or school-specific protocols for assessing symptoms, testing, and quarantines

   ☑ Resources for testing with hours and contact information

   ☑ A point person at either the school or district for questions

☑ Consider tracking all missed learning time rather than just "unexcused" absences, since all time away from school affects students' learning and development.

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District Communication with Families

☑ As part of all back-to-school messaging, include language on why attendance matters. Create a plan across the first weeks and months of school to send regular messaging about the importance of student attendance. This messaging should be proactive and build a case for why attendance is important.

☑ In back-to-school communications, include links to up-to-date information about when students should and should not attend school, and encourage families to save relevant information or bookmark pertinent school or district webpages to reference as needed. Include information for how families will be notified if protocols change.

☑ Use social media channels to share that attendance is a priority of the district and vital for student success and well-being. Include links for resources that support students and families in overcoming barriers to attendance.

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School Communication with Families

☑ In all communications to students and families, lead with transparency, understanding, and compassion. Schools and educators need to work to rebuild trust with families and establish that they are partners in supporting student learning, growth, and development.

☑ Encourage school administrators to take time during schoolwide back-to-school meetings with teachers to articulate both the importance of student attendance as well as school policies and protocols. Encourage teachers to share similar messaging with families, and provide language for them to use.

☑ In letters welcoming students back to school, have school principals share with families that attendance is a priority and reinforce the importance of regular attendance for student success.

☑ Take steps to proactively get ahead of issues that commonly cause absences early in the school year. These might include:

    ☑ **Vaccines:** Ensure that families are aware of vaccine requirements and share resources for accessing vaccines free of charge.

☑ **School Uniforms:** Ensure that schools communicate uniform requirements. Share community resources for any relevant uniform drives.

☑ **Transportation:** Communicate in multiple forms how families can register for bus transportation for their students. Ensure that families know bus stop locations and times for pickup.

☑ **School Start Times:** Share expectations for school arrival and encourage families to make plans to prepare their children to wake up on time and to transport them to school.

☑ Ensure that families know how to check their children's attendance online. Include information for where they can access login credentials and encourage them to check this regularly to keep track of their children's absences.

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Building Relationships

☑ Before the start of the school year, encourage educators at all grade levels to send messages introducing themselves along with pictures or video messages so that students and families can get to know them. Include introductions to additional school support staff and information about key resources so families feel connected to the school community and know how to access support when needed.

☑ Consider holding schoolwide or district-wide events (such as "bike to school day" or "before-school donuts with a caring adult") that promote attendance, build community, and establish group-based social norms for regularly attending school.

☑ Have a plan to share tips and resources with families about how to manage emotions during high-stress periods of the school year such as transitions between breaks, new quarters, exams, or state testing windows.

☑ Have schools determine which school-based staff member or team will contact families after students miss a certain threshold of absences—but before missing school has become a consistent pattern. Equip this person or team with resources to support families in overcoming barriers to attendance.

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Supporting Students and Families

☑ Encourage educators to have a regular routine of informally checking in with families throughout the year, even when there is no obvious issue or concern. This personalized outreach provides an opportunity for parents and families to ask questions, share concerns, or offer relevant information about their children that could affect learning, allowing educators to identify students and families in need of additional support.

☑ Be aware that feelings of disconnection or declines in mental health can be a major cause of student absence. Districts and schools should find ways to monitor shifts in student behavior, grades, or other measures of student well-being and have mechanisms in place to check in with students and families when issues arise.

☑ Regularly share resources for mental health supports with families. This might include links to digital resources to help students with anxiety, information about initiatives for emotional well-being, or steps for how to access services with trained counselors for support.

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Empowering Students and Families with Hope through Engagement

To encourage families to see a future of student success and well-being, districts, schools, and educators must empower students and families with hope. Educators must focus on connecting and building trust so families feel confident that schools are a strong ally and advocate for their children. They must equip families with actionable and accessible steps that they can take to benefit their children. They must nurture relationships with students and between students so they know they are part of a mutually supportive network working toward collective success. And they must inspire families and students to believe that by taking small positive steps every day—by attending school and engaging in learning—big dreams and aspirations are achievable. This school year, for schools to meet their academic, behavioral, and social goals for students, they must work to build connections with families and students, fortify relationships, and reset norms for attendance. To do this, they must have an intentional, explicit, and proactive approach as part of their strategic planning. Attendance and engagement must be viewed by all stakeholders as foundational to student success.

For more information about how we can support your attendance and engagement initiatives, visit everydaylabs.com or email us at info@everydaylabs.com.

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