

# Developing an Effective School Attendance Program



THE SUPREME COURT *of* OHIO

In collaboration with

**Ohio** | Department  
of Education



# THE SUPREME COURT *of* OHIO

**Sharon L. Kennedy**  
Chief Justice

**Patrick F. Fischer**  
**R. Patrick DeWine**  
**Michael P. Donnelly**  
**Melody J. Stewart**  
**Jennifer Brunner**  
**Joseph T. Deters**  
Justices

**Robert W. Horner, III**  
Administrative Director

**Stephanie E. Hess**  
Deputy Administrative Director

---

## Office of Court Services

Stephanie Graubner Nelson, Esq., CCM  
Director

## Children & Families Section

David Edelblute  
Manager

Kyana Pierson, Esq.  
Policy Counsel

Anne Murray, Esq.  
Policy Counsel

Debra Copeland  
Court Improv. Prog Analyst

Jenna Fawcett  
Program Assistant

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## Workgroup Members

Hon. Robert Fragale, Retired  
Marion County Family Court

Hon. Elizabeth Gill  
Franklin County Court of Common Pleas, Domestic Relations  
and Juvenile Division

Jeff Gill  
Licking County Court of Common Pleas, Probate and Juvenile Division

Patrick Epler  
Fairfield County Court of Common Pleas, Probate and Juvenile Division

Heidi Kegley  
Delaware City School District

Jennifer Merritt  
Youngstown City School District

Brittany Miracle  
Ohio Department of Education

Anthony Palmer  
Ohio Department of Education

Hon. Lori Reisinger  
Champaign County Family Court

Doug Schonauer  
Coshocton County Court of Common Pleas, Probate and Juvenile Division

Immy Singh  
Bricker & Eckler

Hon. Michael Wehrkamp, Retired  
Paulding County Court of Common Pleas, Probate and Juvenile Division

Mag. Richard White, Retired  
Mahoning County Court of Common Pleas, Juvenile Division



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# Introduction

This toolkit provides resources for Ohio juvenile courts and local school districts to develop an effective school attendance program to better engage with students and families, identify barriers, and prevent youth from entering the juvenile justice system because of their failure to attend school.

Hedy N. Chang from Attendance Works<sup>1</sup> noted that “students have to be present and engaged to learn.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the simplicity of this statement, the reasons for student absences are complex and the consequences of student absences are far reaching.

Common barriers to regular school attendance include:

- Lack of food, clothing, and stable housing.
- Lack of transportation to school.
- Chronic illness of child or family member.
- Involvement with the child welfare system.
- Involvement with the juvenile justice system.
- Fear for safety at school.

Chronic absenteeism, as defined by the Every Student Succeeds Act, is missing 10% or more of the school year for any reason, which includes excused and unexcused absences. Students can be chronically absent from school for a wide variety of issues related to their physical, mental, and social health. Students with significant health problems – such as asthma, obesity, poor nutrition, lack of physical activity, and poor oral health – face numerous challenges and barriers to reaching their potential and achieving success in school. Depression, stress, social anxiety, and other mental health issues can make it challenging for students to feel comfortable attending school regularly. When children are exposed to significant stress or violence in their home or community, it can trigger mental health issues that cause chronic absence from school.

Additionally, trauma plays a significant role in academic performance, student behavior, and school attendance. Research has found 61% of adults experienced at least one childhood adverse experience, with one in six reporting four or more types.<sup>3</sup> Trauma oftentimes negatively impacts a student’s ability to learn, leading to focus and behavioral problems, poor academic performance, and potentially avoiding school altogether. Schools and courts need to recognize that school attendance problems may be related to trauma. Staff can be trained on how to identify and address trauma to be better equipped to work with families in need of services and resources.

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1 Attendance Works is a non-profit organization seeking to reduce chronic absence through research, capacity building, and technical assistance.  
2 Hedy N. Chang & Mariajosé Romero, *Present, Engaged and Accounted For, the Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades* (Sept. 2008), <https://www.nccp.org/publication/present-engaged-and-accounted-for-the-critical-importance-of-addressing-chronic-absence-in-the-early-grades/>  
3 Center for Disease Control and Prevention, *Adverse Childhood Experiences, Centers for Disease Control & Prevention*, CDC Vital Signs (Nov. 2019), <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aces/pdf/vs-1105-aces-H.pdf>

When schools, juvenile courts, and community partners work together, everyone benefits. Decreased school absences and increased student engagement result in higher graduation rates and post-secondary graduation, leading to increases in jobs, tax revenue, spending and investments, home and auto sales, as well as less crime, and decreased health care costs.<sup>4</sup> The societal implications of keeping students in school and fostering their success can compel courts, schools, and communities to prioritize student engagement.

It is crucial to support the needs of the whole child by using a multi-tiered system of support to remove barriers that prevent students from participating and engaging in learning, to mitigate negative learning experiences, address lack of engagement, and provide needed social-emotional support. The Ohio Department of Education's *Whole Child Framework* is a blueprint to meet the needs of the whole child, which is foundational to a child's intellectual and social development and necessary for students to fully engage in learning and school.

### Promising Practice

**Logan-Hocking Local Schools** (Hocking County) implemented the *Handle With Care* initiative whereby schools and communities provide critical supports to traumatized children. The district worked with the Ohio chapter of *Handle With Care* to create school-community partnerships to ensure that children who are exposed to traumatic events receive appropriate supports and interventions.

If law enforcement or another first responder encounters a child during a call, the child's name and three words, *Handle With Care*, are forwarded to the school or child care agency before the school bell rings to start the next day. The school implements trauma-sensitive strategies.

Program leaders ensure all staff—including teachers, bus drivers, nutrition services staff, counselors, and administrators—receive training on the program, trauma-informed care, and best practices for supporting students going through traumatic events. Children are not aware that staff are looking out for them, which helps them maintain a sense of normalcy in what may be tumultuous times.

District staff praise the program for empowering teachers, staff, and allowing them to be vigilant and proactive in supporting students. The program ensures staff who interact with students are informed and able to provide support. Staff are aware when behavioral incidents may have underlying causes that need to be addressed before disciplinary action is considered. See the *Resources* section of this toolkit for more information on this program.

<sup>4</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education, Economic Impact Map, [http://content.graduationeffect.org/app/uploads/pdf/OH\\_all\\_All\\_Students.pdf](http://content.graduationeffect.org/app/uploads/pdf/OH_all_All_Students.pdf) (Accessed Jun. 2, 2022).

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# Engagement is key

A theme throughout this toolkit is *engagement*. Engagement is key to any successful prevention or intervention strategy. Families, schools, community partners, and courts all play a role in keeping students engaged. These stakeholders work together to address school attendance issues when they arise, but more importantly, they collaborate to prevent these issues from occurring.

## A. Strategies for Family Engagement

The school-family connection is critical to a successful school attendance program. Schools can develop a positive relationship with families through regular communication with parents and guardians on the importance of regular school attendance and the long lasting impact of missing school on future academic achievement. A day of missed school every two weeks can add up to over a year of school missed over a child's school career.<sup>5</sup>

Family engagement can occur even when students are not in session. Schools can promote positive school attendance messages at back-to-school events (e.g., open houses, meet-the-teacher events, curriculum nights) and parent teacher organization meetings. These forums provide opportunities for the district to communicate its expectations and discuss the benefits of regularly attending school.

When seeking to engage families, it is important for schools to:<sup>6</sup>

- Engage with the families when the children are young, as early as pre-kindergarten.
- Establish a positive relationship with families before addressing the attendance issue.
- Communicate school policies and expectations for student attendance.
- Understand what steps the family has taken to encourage regular school attendance.
- Understand the root cause of absence issues for each family.
- Discuss what supports the family needs to address the cause of absences.
- Include the youth's voice when exploring interventions.
- Create ongoing opportunities to communicate with families.

### Promising Practice

At **Delaware City Schools** (Delaware County), school officials conduct home visits with families to help them better identify what resources may be needed such as rent and utility assistance, food, transportation, clothing, and counseling services. Additionally, they provide a phone number for families and students to use when students need a ride to school.

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5 Community in Schools, *Improving Attendance in Our Schools: A National Review of the Issues & a Look at Interventions from Communities in Schools* (Aug. 2017), <https://www.communitiesinschools.org/our-data/publications/publication/research-brief-improving-attendance-our-schools>.

6 Attendance Works, *Bringing Attendance Home: Engaging Parents in Preventing Chronic Absence* (Jun. 2015) [https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/062215\\_AW\\_ParentToolkit-1.pdf](https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/062215_AW_ParentToolkit-1.pdf).

## Strategies for Family Engagement

- Provide personalized outreach before problems arise.
- Use creative forms of communication to regularly engage with families.
- Share information with families on the impact of absenteeism on academic success.
- Provide access to community resources within the school setting.
- Provide opportunities for parent support groups and parenting skills education.
- Conduct family events to spark engagement.

## Promising Practice

**Whitehall City Schools** (Franklin County) identified a need to increase family engagement and assist students and families who were new to the district and in many cases had recently arrived in the United States. To ensure these families enrolled their children in school, Whitehall City Schools partnered with community organizations to hold a Multilingual Family Night at Whitehall-Yearling High School. The district invited trusted community organizations, as well as interpreters for Spanish and Amharic speakers.

The district also invited English Language Learner (ELL) teachers and support organizations including Ohio Guidestone, the YMCA, The Center of Hope, Heart of Ohio Family Health, and Ethiopian Tewahedo Social Services to increase awareness of family support in the community. Families learned about the mental health, physical health, and material resource assistance available to them. ELL teachers noted that the targeted approach made the beginning of the school year smoother than in previous years when staff spent the first weeks of classes ensuring families and students had the basic supports needed to succeed. This program increased the likelihood of success for students and families and ensured that multilingual families had access to available resources.



## B. Engaging Community Partners

Effective community partnerships are essential to the success of school attendance prevention and intervention strategies. School districts and courts need the assistance of multiple community partners to be able to holistically address the needs of students and families. Partners provide insight into what services and resources may be available for youth within their community allowing for a wider range of interventions to be offered.<sup>7</sup>

There are a variety of barriers to regular school attendance. Accordingly, the involvement of community partners must be equally diverse. Community partners may include:

- Mental health counselors.
- Drug and alcohol counselors.
- Family and Children First Council.
- Children’s services agencies.
- Domestic violence providers.
- Faith-based organizations.
- Local businesses.
- Public transportation organizations.
- Juvenile justice systems (e.g., courts, prosecutor’s offices, law enforcement).
- Local government agencies.
- Other support services identified by family.

### Promising Practice

Family and Children First Council serves as a resource for many types of supports. It can provide respite services, case coordination, and family-centered and directed support to the identified individual or family. It can also provide a link to many services available in the community that aid in wrap-around services.

Support to families can be provided either at school or in the home. Providing services in a school can reduce the barrier of transportation and increase the likelihood of success for the family or student. For example, arrangements can be made for drug, alcohol, and mental health treatment providers to meet with the student during regular school hours thus lessening any issues relating to the students attending the appointment. When services are provided in the home, the treatment provider can interact with many members of the family which can provide additional insight. There are specific counseling modalities that provide in-home counseling. Two of the most widely used are Multisystemic Therapy for Juveniles (MST) and Integrative Family and Systems Treatment (IFAST).

Opportunities to engage community stakeholders can occur through many different avenues. There may be existing relationships with either schools or courts based upon prior initiatives. Additionally, the court’s involvement or judicial encouragement can be a driver for bringing local organizations to the table.

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<sup>7</sup> The Ohio Department of Education’s Community Partnership Resources Toolkit can be used to identify, build, and sustain community partnerships in the areas identified in the Whole Child Framework. (These community partnership resources are attached to the Framework tenets and can be accessed in the *Resources* section of this toolkit.)



Strategies to encourage dialogue include:

- School attendance and success collaboration meetings.
- Family and Children First Council executive board meetings.
- Local school system superintendent meetings.
- Educational Service Center meetings.
- School open houses.
- Student recognition ceremonies.
- Community mentorship programs.
- Community service projects.
- Other community forums that meet regularly.

### Promising Practice

The Early Warning System program led by the **Mahoning County Juvenile Court** is an example of community collaboration. The Early Warning System program is a partnership among the juvenile court, local school districts, and community providers where the multi-disciplinary teams monitor and provide case management services to families of students that are experiencing difficulties attending school or achieving academically. The court has assigned staff to provide informal intervention and support to students who are referred by their schools. The behavioral health provider conducts screenings when needed and refers students and families to other social services. Court staff make home visits and assist the family with necessary resources to assist in getting the child to school. See the *Resources* section of this toolkit for more information on this program.

Additionally, courts and districts can encourage community organizations to sponsor back-to-school events, backpack and school supply collections, or adopt-a-school or classroom projects. These types of events assist in removing barriers to school attendance by providing necessary supplies and clothing students may need to return to school. Many civic organizations are willing to help provide resources for students.

### Promising Practice

The Hilliard Kiwanis Club, through a partnership with the Hilliard United Methodist Church, packs and delivers weekend food bags for students in the **Hilliard City School District** (Franklin County) experiencing food insecurity. These bags are delivered to students at school weekly, throughout the school year.

*Safe Routes to School* (SRTS) is an approach that promotes walking and bicycling to school through infrastructure improvements, enforcement, tools, safety education, and incentives. Nationally, 10% to 14% of morning rush hour commutes are for school travel.<sup>8</sup> SRTS initiatives improve safety and increase physical activity for students. SRTS programs can be implemented by a department of transportation, metropolitan planning organization, local government, school district, or even an individual school or parent-teacher organization. In Ohio, this program is administered by the Ohio Department of Transportation that awards \$4 million annually.<sup>9</sup>

### C. School & Court Collaboration

Schools and courts share a common goal and a vested interest in students attending school regularly as absenteeism can increase the likelihood of juvenile court involvement. Schools and courts can work collaboratively to address attendance issues before they become serious enough for a truancy filing to be made.

### Promising Practice

The Warren County Educational Service Center (ESC) collaborates with the juvenile court and local school district staff to coordinate county-wide school attendance efforts. Together they provide education about the requirements for attendance and techniques for getting organized, setting up a routine, and creating a stress-free morning to improve attendance. The ESC has developed an online education course providing strategies for overcoming barriers to attendance, for adults to establish house rules, set appropriate consequences, and more. Additionally, the ESC conducts monthly Truancy Education Groups for those ordered by the juvenile court to attend. See the *Resources* section of this toolkit for more information on this program.

Regular communication between schools and courts is essential to share trends in attendance, discuss efforts being made to prevent truancy, and identify community resources available to assist youth and families. This became particularly evident early in the COVID-19 pandemic when schools were faced with implementing non-traditional classroom learning models. Tracking school attendance was challenging and subject to change throughout the course of the school year for many districts, as districts adapted to changing health and safety guidance. Those counties where the court, schools, and county prosecutor engaged in regular dialogue effectively managed the added difficulties of school attendance.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Transportation, *Safe Routes to School Programs*, <https://www.transportation.gov/mission/health/Safe-Routes-to-School-Programs> (Accessed Jun. 2, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Ohio Department of Transportation, *Safe Routes to School*, <https://www.transportation.ohio.gov/programs/safe-routes-srts#page=1> (Accessed Aug. 19, 2022).



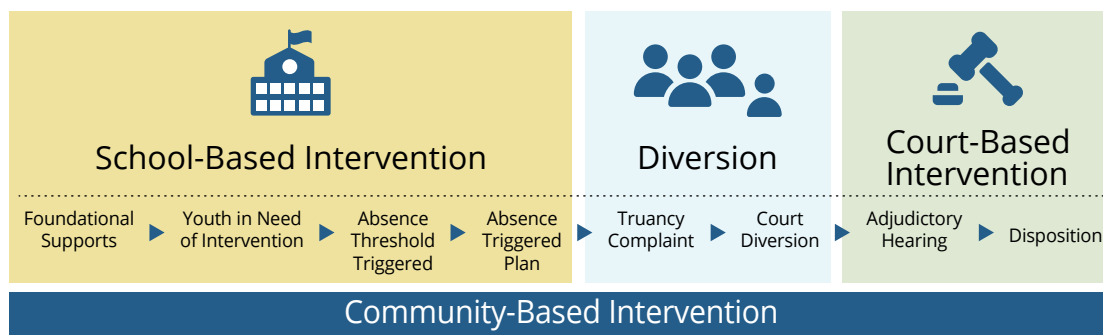
### Promising Practice

In **Marion County**, juvenile judges and school districts regularly discuss localized common barriers as well as interventions to overcome those barriers. They identify gaps and overlaps in services, reasons students are missing school, successful efforts, results, statistics, disconnected messages, and ways for courts and schools to send consistent messages. Additionally, a school liaison becomes involved when an absence intervention plan is developed. This informs the court of the intervention strategies that have been employed so the court, if it must become involved, will not duplicate efforts.

Courts and schools are encouraged to meet at a minimum annually, if not more frequently. Additionally, schools may assign a staff member within the district to collect and share attendance data with courts. If possible, a designated court employee (e.g., truancy interventionist or school liaison) would have access to the district's attendance data through a student management system.

# School Attendance Continuum

Preventing school attendance issues begins before a student even starts kindergarten. Schools and community stakeholders employ strategies aimed at promoting the benefits of regularly attending school. It is recommended that school leadership teams review attendance data regularly to support consistent student attendance for all students. If attendance issues arise, the need for tiered intervention strategies will be necessary. Certain interventions may be triggered by statutorily required events which may lead to the eventual involvement of the juvenile justice system. The continuum below illustrates the attendance triggers and various intervention categories that can be used to resolve attendance issues. It is important to reiterate community partners are equally as important as schools and courts in preventing and addressing school attendance issues.



## Preventing Chronic Absenteeism & Truancy

Prevention efforts (e.g., foundational supports) are a community’s first line of defense against chronic absenteeism and truancy. It is not solely the responsibility of the school to promote the benefits of regular school attendance. These strategies can be a combination of school-based and community-sponsored programs. Prevention practices are designed for the whole district or school building to prevent student absenteeism by establishing a strong school community, building relationships, regular attendance monitoring, and ensuring effective communication.

### School-Based Prevention and Intervention

An intervention strategy employed by a school district that aims at addressing or ameliorating student absences.<sup>10</sup>

### Diversion

An intervention that redirects youth from the formal processing of the juvenile court that occurs prior to the youth’s initial appearance before the judge.<sup>11</sup> Diversion utilizes community resources to address the youth’s behavior.

### Court Based Intervention

A pre-disposition intervention (imposed prior to disposition and if successful, the complaint is dismissed per Juv.R. 29) or post-dispositional intervention (imposed by the judge) aimed at increasing school attendance.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> R.C. 3321.191

<sup>11</sup> See *Juvenile Diversion Toolkit for Judicial Use* (May 2021), <https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/JCS/CFC/resources/juvenileDiversionToolkit.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

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# Establishing an Effective School Attendance Program

Attendance improves when a school community offers a welcoming environment. When students are healthy, feel safe, engaged in learning, supported through strong systems and relationships, and experience success, they are more likely to want to attend school, enjoy learning, develop positive social skills, and achieve greater success.

While schools cannot always prevent risk factors, they do have the opportunity to provide a variety of protective factors to support students, staff, and families. Schools and districts may also consider how their students' basic physiological and psychological needs are being met before fully engaging in complex learning and social activities. A student's basic needs (e.g., housing and food stability) must be met before the introduction of complex supports.

**Protective Factors** are proactive actions and interventions put in place to help reduce or lessen the negative impacts from risk factors. Even though students face many risk factors, schools can help by providing protective factors in their school day and school experience. Using *Whole Child* supports places the whole child at the center, with the district, school, family, and community supporting the needs of the whole child using a comprehensive approach. Schools, families, and communities can work together to ensure students' safety and security needs are met first.

**School Connectedness** is the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals.<sup>13</sup>

## Strategies to Increase School Connectedness

- Create decision-making processes that facilitate student, family, and community engagement; academic achievement; and staff empowerment.
- Provide education and opportunities to enable families to be actively involved in their children's academic and school life.
- Provide students with the academic, emotional, and social skills necessary to be actively engaged in school.
- Use effective classroom management and teaching methods to foster a positive learning environment.
- Provide professional development and support for teachers and other school staff to enable them to meet the diverse cognitive, emotional, and social needs of children and adolescents.
- Create trusting and caring relationships that promote open communication among administrators, teachers, staff, students, families, and communities.

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<sup>13</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *School Connectedness Helps Students Thrive*, [https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/school\\_connectedness.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/school_connectedness.htm) (Accessed Oct. 12, 2022)



Schools can create consistent and predictable learning environments. During the first few weeks of the school year, schools teach students schoolwide expectations, rules, and routines. These practices and routines then become habits throughout the year. Along with teaching and modeling behavior expectations, it is important for school teams to provide tiered interventions and supports to assist students struggling with attendance expectations and displaying mental health symptoms. Schools can then monitor the frequency, intensity, and duration of student behavior and attendance patterns. It is important to track what changed, how these compare to other peers of that age, and how often these occur.

Schools are required by Ohio law to implement Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to create a consistent, safe, and positive school climate.<sup>14</sup> PBIS is a multi-tiered, evidence-based framework providing support to students', families', and educators' health and safety, social and emotional needs, and behavioral and academic growth. The framework also helps support students by focusing on their strengths and building their confidence to succeed. PBIS utilizes a positive approach to discipline, which leads to a reduction in office referrals, in-school suspensions, and out-of-school suspensions that decrease instructional time for students. Schools implementing PBIS develop three to five schoolwide behavioral expectations.<sup>15</sup> These clear and consistent behavioral expectations create a predictable learning environment for students. Once selected, expectations can be explicitly taught and reinforced.

### Promising Practice

**Forest Hills Local Schools** (Hamilton County) created a predictable learning environment by modifying their PBIS expectation matrices for remote learning and taught students the new expectations. Schools disseminated information to parents to implement PBIS expectations at home during remote learning. Some schools offered the use of an acknowledgment system that provides immediate, intermittent, or long-term rewards to recognize and encourage students for engaging in positive behavior.

<sup>14</sup> R.C. 3319.46

<sup>15</sup> Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports, *Tier 1*, <https://www.pbis.org/pbis/tier-1> (Accessed Jun. 2, 2022).

## Strategies to Prevent Absenteeism

- Create an environment that enables students to feel safe, respected, and successful.
- Make students and their parents/guardians feel welcome.
- Help families understand what their children are learning when they are in school and recognize the negative effect chronic absenteeism has on academic progress and social emotional learning.
- Recognize and reward good or improved attendance, rather than perfect attendance.
- When a student is absent:
  - Empathize with the student and their family situation and avoid confrontational words.
  - Reach out to the parent or guardian using their preferred form of communication.
  - Touch base with the student when they return to school; let them know you are aware and that you care when they are not in school.
- Empower teachers to act when they think a student may be having attendance issues.
  - Encourage personal notes, emails, or calls to the family about the student missing school.
  - Share what academic programs and standards were missed due to the absence and why it will be important to be in school to build on those academic standards in the future.
- Forge relationships with local businesses where students may congregate when not in school; encourage businesses to direct students to school during school hours.
- Develop a relationship with local law enforcement and empower officers to return youth to school.

National Center for School Engagement<sup>16</sup>

The first step in designing a strong and effective school attendance program is to identify the critical components of programs that have demonstrated success. The National Center for School Engagement compiled its research along with assessment work conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the National Dropout Prevention Center, and the Washington State Institute for Public Policy. It identified various elements of programs that withstood the test of time and helped students attend school daily and be on time.



<sup>16</sup> National Center for School Engagement, *10 Things Your School Can Do to Improve Attendance*, <https://schoolengagement.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/10ThingsYourSchoolCanDo.pdf> (Accessed Jun. 2, 2022).





Successful school attendance programs incorporate community capacity, family involvement, and quality programming to help reduce the pattern of absenteeism. These programs embrace W.E.B. DuBois’s notion that “[e]ducation is that whole system of human training within and without the school-house walls, which molds and develops [people].” This is most effective as a community-based effort, where local stakeholders partner to provide programming and resources not only to the child but also the family. This holistic approach helps address the underlying root cause of school absences and increases the likelihood of long-term success. Because a student’s educational success (or lack thereof) impacts the community, schools are encouraged to design their school attendance programs in a way that fosters collaboration among schools, families, and as a last resort, courts.

### Supporting the Whole Child

The Ohio Department of Education’s *Whole Child Framework* places the whole child at the center, with districts, support services, and community partners surrounding the child with a comprehensive approach to care. A whole child approach broadens district and school focus beyond academics to include meeting students’ social, emotional, physical, and safety needs. The *Whole Child Framework* meets these needs which are foundational to a child’s intellectual and social development and necessary for students to fully engage in learning and school. Together schools, families, and community partners can provide the conditions essential for children to learn, thrive, and achieve their greatest potential.

### Using Data to Provide a System of Support

An effective attendance team is made up of a multi-disciplinary group responsible for monitoring and improving student attendance and providing supports for attendance resources and interventions. The attendance team can be part of an established collaborative team, such as the district or building leadership team, a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) team, or a PBIS team. Community partners and parents, guardians, or caretakers can also be members of the attendance team. Attendance teams review both overall student attendance data and individual students who are chronically absent or at risk of becoming chronically absent. The attendance team is also responsible for ensuring chronically absent students’ needs are being met and determining available resources for the student and family.

It is best practice to routinely discuss, analyze, and utilize attendance data. This includes accurate, specific school data reports that identify student attendance data by grade and subgroups such as race, ethnicity, gender, free or reduced lunch, students with disabilities, and English learners. In addition to tracking the basic number of hours of school missed, it is important to identify absence patterns. While some students miss school randomly, others have patterns that may indicate the cause of absence.

Regular data collection and monitoring help districts identify patterns and provide key information as to why a student may be absent. Many student management systems feature attendance tracking reports or dashboards. Not only will these reports identify the number of absences students have, but they also will identify students who may be at risk for having attendance issues.

### Uniform Absence Reasons

Schools may consider using uniform absence reasons to track absences such as:

- Familial issues involving parent or guardian.
- Child having problems with other students.
- Child does not get up on time.
- Child has difficulty getting to school on time.
- Child does not feel safe at school/parent fears child is not safe at school.
- Child is suffering from illness, health-related problems, learning disabilities.
- Academic concerns.
- Diminished value of education.

Once the data are captured, schools can share the results with juvenile courts and other interested stakeholders to see how community resources can be allocated to help reduce common barriers to attendance. For example, court staff can be given limited, read-only access to attendance information in the district's student management systems. Data should only be shared in a manner that ensures the student's privacy.

“Attending school” can be accomplished in a variety of different ways depending on the learning format a district or a building offers. In addition to the traditional classroom format, districts may offer online or blended learning models. The tracking mechanisms for these non-traditional options will be different and vary depending on the format. For that reason, it is important that courts understand the methodology used. The accountability expectations for attending school in an online or blended learning format remain the same as they are for those in a traditional classroom setting. Districts and schools can continue to focus on the importance of student engagement in all educational settings.

# A Multi-tiered System of Support to School Attendance Issues

Successful school attendance programs incorporate a multi-tiered system of supports for attendance. These interventions include foundational supports, Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III interventions.

## A. Foundational Supports – Whole School Supports

Foundational supports are the building blocks that promote regular student attendance. They are whole school supports provided to all students and utilized year-round, including the months students are not in school. Schools using a multi-tiered system of support begin personal connections with all families when they return in August and work with local partners to ensure community-wide recognition and understanding of available school supports. Such supports often include meals, clothing, and medical and social well-being supports. Schools can also create student attendance campaigns based on their local data to target key student demographics while continuing to emphasize the importance of regular school attendance for all students.

Foundational “Whole School” Supports		
Physically healthy learning environment	Access to learning supports	A schedule of classes and where/how they are held
Access to tech equipment and connectivity	Home rooms and/or advisory supports (with virtual options)	Support for all families to facilitate learning at home
Welcoming, socially-emotionally safe, trauma-informed school environment	Positive relationships between school staff, students, and families	A culture of continuous improvement
Enrichment activities and clubs (with virtual options)	Predictable daily routines, rituals, and celebrations	Active engagement of parents and students in planning problem solving

[www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org)



### Promising Practice

The **Cleveland Metropolitan Schools** (Cuyahoga County) launched an attendance campaign in partnership with the Cleveland Browns Foundation's *Stay in the Game! Network*. The community-wide effort features billboards, yard signs, school posters, parent engagement coffees, and attendance celebrations.

As a signature partner, the Cleveland Browns support the campaign by providing student incentives throughout the year and incorporate Browns players by having them convey the importance of attendance through recorded phone calls, videos, and school visits. To remove attendance-related barriers, the foundation also supports a local clothing drive to provide students facing economic hardship greater access to uniforms and basic clothing packages. See the *Resources* section of this toolkit for more information on this program.

## B. Tier I Interventions – Universal Prevention

Tier I interventions are universal prevention strategies to encourage regular attendance for all students before there is a direct impact on student learning. A positive school culture promotes a sense of safety, respect, and personal responsibility. When students are healthy, feel safe, are engaged in learning, are supported through strong systems and relationships, and are challenged and experience success, they are more likely to want to attend school, enjoy learning, develop positive social skills and achieve greater success. This environment can be reinforced by community stakeholders sharing similar messaging with families by sponsoring events that promote attendance, supply drives, or other collaborative events.

It is also important to recognize when a student is succeeding in attendance. Schools and districts could incorporate student attendance into their PBIS or MTSS programs. They can also offer incentives where students receive recognition or rewards for regular attendance.

Tier I interventions ensure effective communication to families and community partners is occurring with clear expectations about attendance. Surveys can be provided regularly to families and community partners to ensure effective communication is occurring. Phone calls to the home are not always effective and schools may use text messaging, emails, and social media in addition to phone calls to provide families with reliable communication related to events and activities going on in the school.

Sample Tier I Interventions	
<p>Student-Focused Interventions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Addressing attendance with compassion and empathy.</li><li>• Personalized outreach for student absences.</li><li>• Recognize and reward improved school attendance.</li><li>• Review of attendance data through school-based teams (teacher-based teams, building leadership teams).</li></ul>	<p>Family-Focused Interventions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Attendance campaigns.</li><li>• Clear and consistent communication about schedules and school expectations.</li><li>• Community events.</li></ul>

## C. Tier II Interventions – Early Intervention

Tier II interventions are more targeted interventions for a student who has shown signs of risk of chronic absenteeism. Tier II provides early intervention for students who need more support to avoid chronic absences. It is important for schools to address each of these interventions on a case-by-case basis to ensure that they are first identifying specific barriers facing the family, and then providing the family with adequate resources to overcome these barriers.

Contact with families is more effective when it is personalized and made when students are absent, especially if the trend in absenteeism is increasing. This outreach can be completed for both excused and unexcused absences. It is important to present a positive message while using a variety of communication formats as it may take multiple attempts to reach the family or other relatives/caregivers.

### Dispute Resolution Processes

Dispute resolution processes are strategies schools can employ to help prevent or resolve school attendance issues. These strategies, such as *facilitation* and *mediation*, seek to create a collaborative relationship between families and schools by encouraging open communication. Dispute resolution processes promote effective problem-solving and workable, individualized solutions to school attendance issues.<sup>17</sup>

#### Tier II Interventions

- Individualized and age appropriate to meet the unique needs of the youth and family.
- Establish realistic goals designed to improve attendance.
- Utilize incentives and graduated responses to foster long-term behavioral change.
- Avoid mandatory attendance orders and compliance checks.

Facilitation is a process that promotes focused and organized discussions so that schools can have productive absence intervention plan meetings. A neutral third-party facilitator focuses the absence intervention team, student, and family on collaboratively finding an alternative to a truancy adjudication by identifying the steps needed to successfully reengage the student in school.

School attendance mediation is another strategy that utilizes a trained mediator to assist parties in developing a voluntary agreement to address the student's school attendance issues. Truancy prevention through mediation is used either before or while the absence intervention plan is being implemented. Early intervention and identifying the barriers to attendance are the focus. Once these barriers are known, the absence intervention team can work together to find solutions. See the *Resources* section of this toolkit for more information on school mediation programs.

<sup>17</sup> See *School Attendance Toolkit* (2018), <https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/docs/JCS/disputeResolution/resources/schoolAttendance/schoolAttendanceToolkit.pdf>, for information on school mediation programs.

Peer mediation is another intervention strategy schools can use to address attendance issues. Peer mediation is a process by which two or more students involved in a dispute meet in a private, safe, and confidential setting to work out problems with the assistance of a trained student mediator. School-based programs instructing youth in mediating peer conflicts provide youth participants with communication, anger management, leadership, and decision-making skills that help them to remain resilient against crime, violence, and substance abuse – all potential barriers to school attendance.

### Sample Tier II Interventions

#### Student-Focused Interventions

- School-based peer mediation.
- School-based truancy mediation.
- Mentoring programs.
- Transportation assistance.
- Basic needs assistance.
- Community outreach and attendance messaging.
- Recognize good attendance.

#### Family-Focused Interventions

- Parent education.
- Calls to the family from the school.
- Warning letter to parents, guardians, or custodians indicating potential future court involvement if attendance does not improve.
- Meet with parents, guardians, or custodians to determine the cause of absences.
- Conduct home visits.
- Recognize improved attendance (e.g., send an email thanking the family for getting the child to school that week).





#### D. Tier III Interventions – Intensive Intervention

Tier III interventions are intensive supports for students facing the greatest challenges getting to school. These interventions include an intensive outreach to locate the student and assess their family situation. Tier III interventions are often coordinated with outside resource providers, including child welfare, mental health, health, housing/homelessness, and juvenile courts. These tiers are additive. A student needing Tier III supports, still needs Tier I, Tier II, and foundational supports.

Habitual truancy interventions, as defined in House Bill 410 of the 131st General Assembly, are examples of Tier III interventions. When a student meets one of the attendance thresholds of excessively absent or habitually truant, the school can provide intensive attendance interventions. Schools and districts can use the absence intervention plan as an intervention, rather than a consequence or a means to a consequence. Families and the student can provide insight to identify barriers and find solutions to overcoming absenteeism. Schools can monitor the success of their individual plans and review these within teacher-based teams, building leadership teams, or district leadership teams. This data can help determine whether the plans being created are producing positive results.

Not all students in Tier III will be considered truant since chronic absenteeism includes absences that are both excused and unexcused.

Sample Tier III Interventions	
<p>Student-Focused Interventions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counseling referral.</li> <li>• Mentoring programs.</li> <li>• Absence intervention plan.</li> </ul>	<p>Family-Focused Interventions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent education.</li> <li>• Family support services.</li> <li>• Counseling referral.</li> <li>• Food pantry referral.</li> <li>• Clothing assistance.</li> <li>• Rental and utility assistance.</li> </ul>



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# Implementing Tier III Interventions Under Ohio Attendance Laws

School attendance laws changed in 2017 with the passage of House Bill 410 of the 131st General Assembly. The legislation requires school districts to take a supportive approach to preventative measures, including collaboration with families to identify attendance barriers and interventions to address the regular student attendance concerns before filing a complaint in juvenile court. House Bill 410 also prevents a school from suspending, expelling, or removing a student from school based solely on absences.<sup>18</sup> Districts and schools can engage both the student and family in Tier I and Tier II interventions before a student becomes habitually truant (Tier III).

**Habitually Truant Student**

Any child of compulsory school age who is absent without a legitimate excuse for:

<b>30</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>72</b>
or more consecutive school hours	or more hours in one month	or more hours in a school year



*R.C. 2151.011(B)(18)*

When a student is habitually truant, the following will occur:<sup>19</sup>

- Within seven school days of the triggering absence, the district will:
  - Select members of the absence intervention team; and
  - Make three meaningful attempts to secure the participation of the student’s parent, guardian, custodian, guardian ad litem, or temporary custodian on the absence intervention team.
- Within 10 calendar days of the triggering absence, the student will be assigned to the selected absence intervention team.<sup>20</sup>
- Within 14 school days after the assignment of the team, the district will develop the student’s absence intervention plan.
- Within seven calendar days after the plan is developed, the district must make reasonable efforts to provide written notification to the student’s parent or guardian.

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<sup>18</sup> R.C. 3313.668

<sup>19</sup> R.C. 3321.16

<sup>20</sup> R.C. 3321.19(D)(1)



### When a Complaint Must be Filed in Juvenile Court

A student has 60 calendar days to participate in and make satisfactory progress on their absence intervention plan. The absence intervention team determines if satisfactory progress has been made.

1. If the student does not participate or makes satisfactory progress on the plan, the attendance officer must file a complaint on the 61st calendar day after the implementation of the absence intervention plan.<sup>21</sup>
2. If at any time during the implementation phase of the absence intervention plan the student is absent without legitimate excuse for 30 or more consecutive hours or 42 or more hours in one school month, the attendance officer must file a complaint against the student unless the absence intervention team has determined the student has made substantial progress on the absence intervention plan.<sup>22</sup>
3. The attendance officer must file a complaint in juvenile court against a student on the 61st day after the implementation of an absence intervention plan if:
  - The student was deemed habitually truant under R.C. 2151.011;
  - The school district has made three meaningful attempts to re-engage the student through an absence intervention plan or other intervention strategies; or
  - The student has refused to participate in or failed to make satisfactory progress on the plan.<sup>23</sup>
4. If a student is deemed habitually truant during the implementation phase of the absence intervention plan or any other intervention strategies, the attendance officer must file a complaint unless the student has made substantial progress on the plan.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> R.C. 3321.16(B)(1)

<sup>22</sup> R.C. 3321.16(B)(2)

<sup>23</sup> R.C. 3321.16(B)(1)

<sup>24</sup> R.C. 3321.16(B)(2)

## The Juvenile Court's Role

On the presentation or filing of a truancy complaint, juvenile courts are required to consider using intervention strategies to divert youth from the court system before adjudication.<sup>25</sup> “The court shall consider the complaint only as a matter of last resort.”<sup>26</sup>

If a student is adjudicated unruly for being habitually truant, in addition to or in lieu of imposing any other order of disposition authorized by R.C. 2151.354, the court may require the student to do any of the following:

- Attend an alternative school (if one has been established in the student's school district).
- Participate in an academic program or community service program.
- Participate in a drug-abuse or alcohol-abuse counseling program.
- Receive appropriate medical or psychological treatment or counseling.
- Make any other order the court finds appropriate to address the habitual truancy, including an order requiring the child to participate in a truancy prevention mediation program.<sup>27</sup>

Upon adjudication of a student to be unruly for habitual truancy, if the court determines that the student's parent, guardian, or caregiver has failed to cause the child's attendance at school the following apply:

- The court may require the parent, guardian, or caregiver to participate in a community service program.
- The court may require the parent, guardian, or caregiver to participate in a truancy prevention mediation program.
- The court must warn the parent, guardian, or caregiver that any subsequent adjudication of the child as an unruly or delinquent child for being habitually truant or for violating a court order regarding the child's prior adjudication as an unruly child for being a habitual truant, may result in a criminal charge against the parent, guardian, or caregiver.
- The court may order any other disposition authorized by R.C. 2151.354.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> R.C. 2151.27(G)

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> R.C. 2151.354(C)

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

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## Court as a Last Resort

Juvenile courts are charged with providing for “the care, protection, and mental and physical development of children... (and) separating the child from the child’s parents only when necessary for the child’s welfare or in the interests of public safety.”<sup>29</sup> School absences are not typically a threat to public safety, yet youth who miss too much school are often treated in the same manner as those who committed a much more serious crime, even ending up in detention.

The number of truancy cases far exceed other status offenses. Because truancy cases in Ohio are not uniformly reported by courts, reliable statewide data are unavailable. Nationally, in 2018 roughly 61,000 truancy cases were filed in juvenile courts as compared to just over 31,000 other status offenses.<sup>30</sup> When juvenile courts get involved in truancy cases there is less time and fewer resources to dedicate to high-risk offenders who need court services and supervision.

Punitive responses to absentee issues can drive youth deeper into the juvenile justice system, decreasing the likelihood of educational success.<sup>31</sup> The Council of State Governments Justice Center found that youth placed on probation had more school absences during their first year of supervision than before being placed on probation.<sup>32</sup> Court hearings, probation appointments, and other compliance-based supervision conditions can lead to missed time in school. Courts should attempt to schedule such appearances during after-school hours. Additionally, courts should use remote technology as an option for youth and family participation in court proceedings.

Courts should evaluate their current policies for handling truancy cases, both initial complaints and those that result from a violation of court order to determine if interventions can be used to divert the youth from formal court processing.<sup>33</sup> If resources allow, courts can hire a truancy intervention specialist or mediator to handle these specific types of cases. When possible, these cases should be referred to community-based diversion for resolution outside of the formal court system. The court should attempt to identify the cause of school disengagement and provide needed resources and referrals to appropriate services. Sometimes, however, minimal response is all that is needed to spark behavior change.

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29 R.C. 2151.01

30 Council for State Governments, *Rethinking Juvenile Justice & Schools: Truancy*, <https://csgjusticecenter.org/publications/truancy/> (accessed Jun. 2, 2022).

31 *Id.*

32 Council for State Governments, *Rethinking the Role of the Juvenile Justice System: Improving Youth’s School Attendance & Educational Outcomes* (Sep. 10, 2020), <https://csgjusticecenter.org/publications/rethinking-the-role-of-the-juvenile-justice-system-improving-youths-school-attendance-and-educational-outcomes/>.

33 Juvenile Rules of Procedure 9 and 29 allow courts to utilize interventions in lieu of adjudication and disposition.

## A. Diversion Interventions

The purpose of diversion is to redirect youth from involvement in the formal juvenile court process.<sup>34</sup> Diversion from truancy filings increases the likelihood of success in school and future opportunities for higher education. Courts should offer a menu of intervention strategies to address school attendance issues ranging from light contact to high-risk interventions.<sup>35</sup> The type of intervention strategy used is most often determined first by the circumstances of the situation and later by the needs of the youth. Courts should consider the least-restrictive option first.

Ideally, diversion intervention should be community based to avoid formal interaction with a judicial officer or court staff, if possible. For example, interventions led by law enforcement seek to improve school attendance and reduce any subsequent delinquent behavior.

### Promising Practice

**Springfield Township Police Department** (Summit County) operates a Truancy Program through its Community Youth Division. Officers conduct home visits, participate in meetings with parents, and refer to counseling as needed. They also direct families to community resources.

The diversion strategy should be individualized to meet the needs of the youth and family and be designed to address the underlying cause of the school absences. Additionally, it should utilize incentives and graduated responses to foster long-term behavioral change and avoid mandatory attendance orders and compliance checks.

### Sample Diversion Interventions

#### Student-Focused Interventions

- Community-based diversion.
- Truancy diversion.
- Referral to community services.
- Attendance and education reengagement workshops.

#### Family-Focused Interventions

- Parent education (e.g., Parent Project).
- Warning letter from the court indicating next steps by the court if issues are not addressed.
- Counseling referral.
- Food pantry referral.
- Clothing assistance (Goodwill voucher).
- Rental and utility assistance.

<sup>34</sup> Supreme Court of Ohio, *Juvenile Diversion Toolkit for Judicial Use* (May 2021), <https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/docs/JCS/CFC/resources/juvenileDiversionToolkit.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> See *Juvenile Diversion Toolkit for Judicial Use* (May 2021), <https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/docs/JCS/CFC/resources/juvenileDiversionToolkit.pdf>, for examples of intervention strategies.

## Promising Practice

**Greene County Juvenile Court** responded to HB 410 requirements by establishing a truancy intervention program that diverts youth away from formal court involvement. The court works with local school districts and community providers to address attendance barriers and connect students and families to available resources. The court also offers mediation and parent education as part of its intervention strategies.

## B. Court Based Interventions

In accordance with the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 (reauthorized in 2018), juveniles who are charged with an offense that would not be criminal if committed by an adult, also known as a status offense, including truancy, should not be placed in secure detention facilities, absent certain exceptions.<sup>36</sup> Placing low-risk youth in facilities along with other juveniles detained for serious offenses provides an easy opportunity to share bad habits. Moreover, detention does little to solve the impediments to regularly attending school, especially those involving basic needs, mental health issues, or fear of violence while on school grounds.

### Mentoring Programs

Mentoring programs can positively impact school attendance and overall academic success when they focus on targeted skill building and specific outcomes. Mentoring programs allow mentees to develop skills and access to resources through positive relationships with mentors. Research has shown that internal and external skills coupled with resources lead to positive outcomes on school attendance and academic performance.<sup>37</sup> Mentoring can range from a structured program with defined activities to those that are more tailored to the individual needs of the youth. A successful mentoring program generally involves the student's family and allows for flexibility and coordination with the school partners.

### Dispute Resolution Processes

Truancy mediation is another effective intervention strategy that can be employed by courts after a youth has been referred by a school. A trained mediator facilitates communication with the family to identify barriers to attending school and ways to overcome them.

<sup>36</sup> Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, as amended through Public Law 115-385 and enacted December 21, 2018. See also Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *An Overview of Statutory and Regulatory Requirements for Monitoring Facilities for Compliance with the Deinstitutionalization of Status Offenders, Separation, and Jail Removal Provisions of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act* (Sep. 2019), <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/library/publications/overview-statutory-and-regulatory-requirements-monitoring-facilities>.

<sup>37</sup> Lyons and Chan, *Mentoring for Enhancing School Attendance, Academic Performance, and Educational Attainment* (Dec. 2021), <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/nmrc-mentoring-enhancing-school-attendance.pdf>.



### Promising Practice

**Erie County Juvenile Court** has the successful Truancy Erie County Mediation Program (TEMP) that excels at recognizing good and improved attendance. TEMP was designed as a bridge to help schools and families foster communication without formal court involvement. A team is composed of the student, a parent, a representative from the student’s school (e.g., guidance counselor, principal, teacher), an attendance officer, and a trained mediator. Individuals offering community support, like grandparents, extended relatives, and mental health case managers, are often included on the team. During mediation, the student’s team meets to jointly craft a plan addressing attendance barriers. After the mediation concludes, team meetings serving to examine and address student success continue to be held at the school, progressing from weekly, to bi-weekly, to monthly. TEMP uses incentives such as gas cards, restaurant gift cards, clothing, and books to remove barriers and to motivate students and families.

Courts may also employ other dispute resolution strategies such as facilitation and school attendance coordination to help resolve school attendance issues. School attendance coordination is a child-focused dispute resolution process for juvenile courts in which a mental health or legal professional with mediation training assists families by facilitating the resolution of their school attendance disputes, educating parents about children’s needs, and referring families to community resources. School attendance coordination is a multi-disciplinary process to promote school attendance, decrease chronic absences, reduce habitual truancy, and address underlying issues that prevent students from attending school.

#### Court-School Liaisons

Dedicating court staff to serve as liaisons between the court and the school is also beneficial, as they get to participate in efforts related to school attendance and academic achievement. Oftentimes, these staff members attend absence intervention team meetings so that they are familiar with the student and the family when they become court involved.

## Promising Practice

**Lucas County Juvenile Court** employs educational specialists to work with students struggling with attendance. These specialists provide support and services to students and families involved in the judicial system. The specialists also consult with school staff regarding individualized education and behavior-management plans.

**Greene County Juvenile Court** has truancy interventionists housed at the court and funded by the schools. The truancy interventionists travel to the schools according to pre-arranged schedules to meet with the absence intervention teams to assist in formulating absence intervention plans.

## Sample Court Based Interventions

### Student-Focused Interventions

- Court truancy mediation.
- Mentoring programs.
- Designated staff member to work on truancy intervention.
- Designated staff member to serve on absence intervention teams.

### Family-Focused Interventions

- Parent education (e.g., Parent Project).
- Intervention meeting with court and children's services if other issues are suspected.
- Designated staff member to work on truancy intervention.
- Designated staff member to serve on absence intervention teams.
- Counseling referral.
- Food pantry referral.
- Clothing assistance (Goodwill voucher).
- Rental and utility assistance.



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# Resources

## Schools

- [21 Ways to Engage Students in School](#), National Center for School Engagement
- [Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#), The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
- [Parental Engagement Podcast](#), Podcast featuring Adonis Bolden, Ph.D., Assistant Principal at Rutherford B. Hayes High School, and April Nelson, staff mediator for the Delaware County Juvenile Court
- [Bringing Attendance Home: Engaging Parents in Preventing Chronic Absence](#), Attendance Works
- [Mentoring for Enhancing School Attendance, Academic Performance, & Educational Attainment](#), Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
- [Stay in the Game! Network](#), The Cleveland Browns Foundation, Ohio Department of Education, and Proving Ground partnership at tackling chronic absenteeism in Ohio
- [Ohio Attendance Laws](#), The Ohio Department of Education attendance resource page.
- [Attendance Works](#), Attendance Works is a national and state initiative that pushes for better policy and practice to improve school attendance
- [Community Partnership Resources Toolkit](#), Ohio Department of Education
- [Ohio's Attendance Laws FAQs](#), Ohio Department of Education
- Example: [Excessively Absent Written Notification to Families](#), Ohio Department of Education
- Example: [Habitually Truant Written Notification for Families](#), Ohio Department of Education
- Example: [Absence Intervention Plan Template](#), Ohio Department of Education
- [Handle With Care](#), Ohio Department of Education
- [Handle With Care Ohio](#)
- [Safe Routes to School Programs](#)

## Courts

- [Ohio Supports Attendance: A Community Collaboration of the Supreme Court of Ohio & the Ohio Department of Education](#)
- [Parental Engagement Podcast](#), Podcast featuring Adonis Bolden, Ph.D., Assistant Principal at Rutherford B. Hayes High School, and April Nelson, staff mediator for the Delaware County Juvenile Court
- [Mentoring for Enhancing School Attendance, Academic Performance, & Educational Attainment](#). Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
- [A Practitioners' Guide to Implementing Early Warning Systems](#), Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance
- [Ohio's Attendance Laws FAQs](#), Ohio Department of Education
- [Handle With Care Ohio](#)
- [Early Warning System](#), Mahoning County Juvenile Court
- [Student Attendance Enforcement](#), Warren County Educational Center



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