

2026

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IMPROVEMENT PLAYBOOK



Core Playbook for School-Based Practitioners



WE ARE
WASHINGTON
DC GOVERNMENT OF THE
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
MURIEL BOWSER, MAYOR

Executive Summary

Attendance is one of the strongest predictors of student success. Students must be present to benefit from instruction, develop relationships, access services, and engage in school life.

The District of Columbia has made meaningful progress in reducing chronic absenteeism, decreasing from approximately 48% in SY2021-22 to approximately 39.5% in SY2024-25. However, attendance challenges remain significant, particularly in high school and among students facing transportation, health, housing, caregiving, and other structural barriers. Schools continue to see elevated risk among students experiencing economic hardship and during key educational transitions, especially the transition into ninth grade.

This playbook provides a practical framework for improving attendance through:

- Positive school climate
- Strong relationships
- Early identification of attendance concerns
- Rapid barrier removal
- Data-informed decision making
- Continuous improvement
- Equity-centered support

The framework is organized through a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) approach.

Tier 1: Universal Prevention

Support all students through positive climate, belonging, and strong attendance habits.

Tier 2: Targeted Support

Provide mentoring, outreach, and early intervention for students who begin showing attendance risk.

Tier 3: Intensive Support

Coordinate individualized case management and barrier removal for students experiencing chronic absence.

This playbook is intentionally non-punitive. Attendance improvement occurs when schools remove barriers, strengthen relationships, and create environments where students want to be present.

Attendance Theory of Change

Why Attendance Improves

Students are more likely to attend regularly when they:

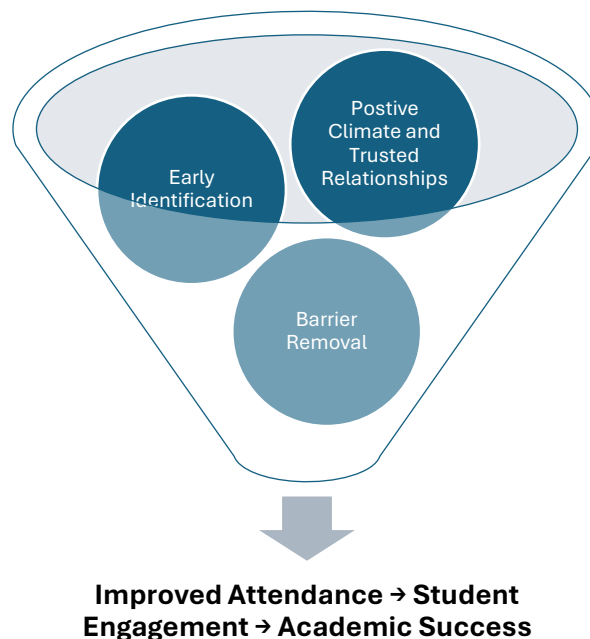
- Feel connected to adults;
- Experience belonging;
- See relevance in school;
- Have barriers removed quickly;
- Receive coordinated supports, and;
- Experience success.

Schools improve attendance when adults:

- Monitor attendance consistently;
- Respond early;
- Build relationships;
- Coordinate interventions, and;
- Use data for improvement

Theory of Change Statement

If schools create welcoming environments, identify attendance concerns early, build trusted relationships, and rapidly remove barriers, then students will attend more consistently, leading to improved engagement, achievement, graduation outcomes, and long-term success.



Attendance Improvement Principles

Every strategy in this playbook is built upon six principles.

1. Every Student Needs Belonging

Students attend when they feel known, valued, and connected.

Examples:

- Greeting
- students by name
- Classroom check-ins
- Mentoring
- Advisory periods
- Student leadership opportunities

2. Attendance Is a Vital Sign

Attendance is an early indicator of student wellbeing.

Attendance concerns may signal:

- Transportation barriers
- Health concerns
- Housing instability
- Caregiving responsibilities
- School avoidance
- Safety concerns
- Disconnection from school

Rather than asking:

"Why isn't this student coming?"

Ask:

"What barriers are preventing attendance?"

3. Earlier Action Produces Better Outcomes

Attendance interventions are most effective before chronic absence develops.

Schools should act after:

- Emerging patterns
- Attendance bursts
- Partial day absences
- Tardy clusters

Do not wait until a student becomes chronically absent.

4. Relationships Drive Improvement

Strong relationships are among the most powerful attendance interventions.

Every at-risk student should be able to identify at least:

- One adult who knows them
- One adult they trust
- One adult who checks on them

5. Equity Matters

Attendance barriers are not equally distributed. Some students need additional supports.

This includes students facing:

- Economic hardship
- Health concerns
- Housing instability
- Language barriers
- Transportation challenges

Equity means providing resources proportional to need.

6. Improvement Matters More Than Perfection

Recognize growth.

Avoid systems that exclusively reward perfect attendance.

Celebrate:

- Attendance streaks
- Improved punctuality
- Reduced absences
- Return after challenges

Quick Start Guide

What To Do When Attendance Concerns Have Emerged

On the school day a student reaches a concern threshold

Identify the issue	Contact the family
Review: • Daily absences • Tardy clusters • Partial day absences • Attendance bursts	Use a warm, supportive approach. Sample message: "We noticed your student was not in school today. Is everything okay? We want to help if there is anything getting in the way."

By the second school day after a student reaches a concern threshold

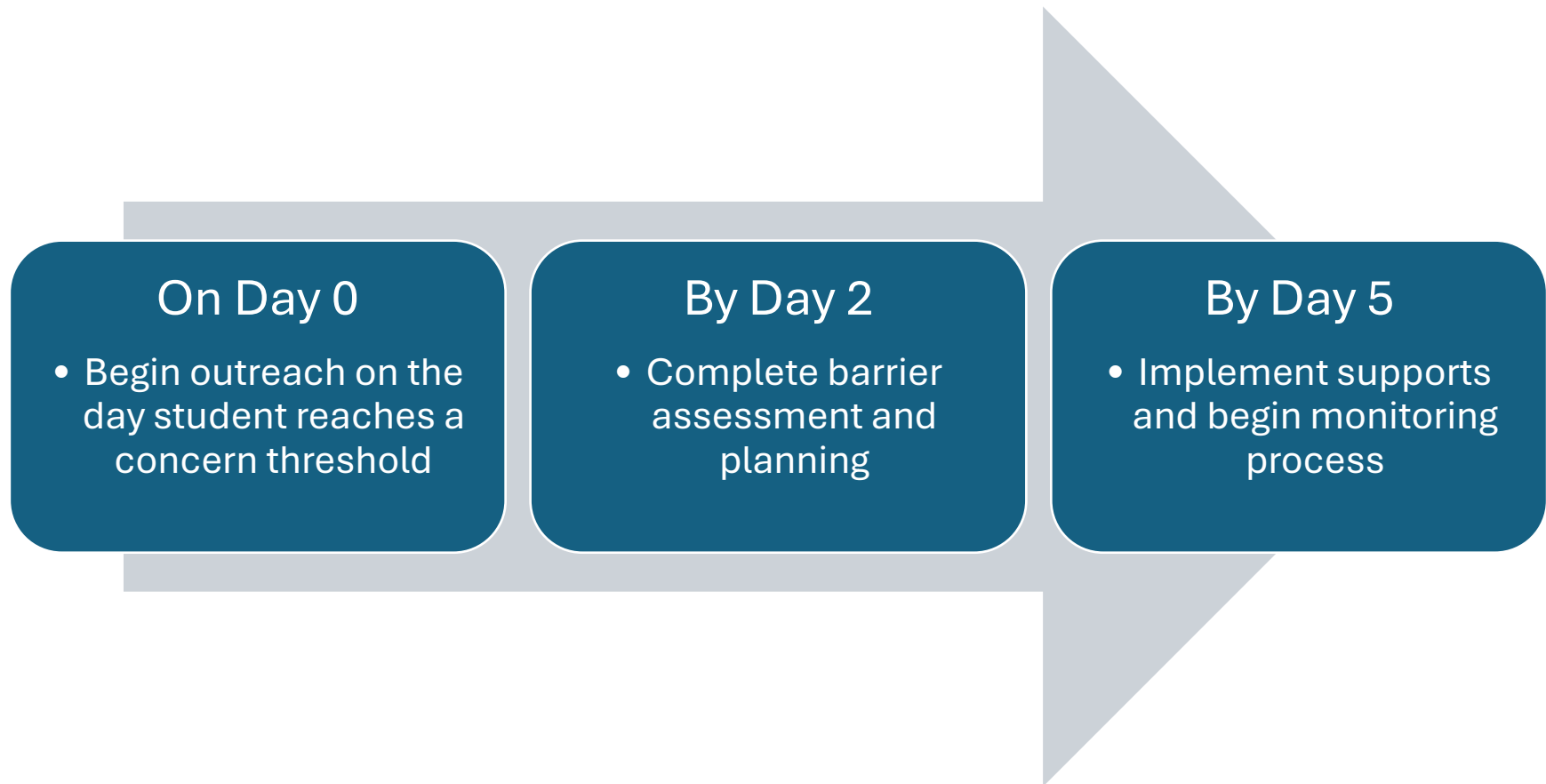
Identify barriers	Assign support
Determine whether concerns relate to: • Transportation • Health • Housing • Food access • Safety • Caregiving • School engagement	Determine: • Lead staff member • Needed intervention • Follow-up schedule

By the fifth school day after a student reaches a concern threshold

Launch Supports	Schedule monitoring
• Mentor assignment • Transportation assistance • Attendance success plan • Counseling support • SST referral	• Place an implementation check on the next attendance team agenda • Set the six-week review date

Core Rule

Students who meet Tier 3 criteria should have an attendance support plan developed within five school days. If a student hits the threshold on Monday, the support plan should be in place by Friday.



DC Context, Equity Stance, and Public Health Framing

Where DC Stands Now

A few patterns in attendance data stand out to us. DC chronic absenteeism declined from 48% (SY21–22) to ~39.5% (SY24–25). This is significant progress sustained in a demanding context. High school, and specifically 9th Grade, consistently shows the highest CA and truancy burden citywide. Short, concentrated absence windows demonstrably arise from immunization noncompliance and from observable patterns of early dismissal / partial day coding. Schools should keep these in mind for proactive intervention with students more at risk for absenteeism backsliding. Economically disadvantaged students are roughly three times more likely to be chronically absent and ward level data persistently show higher CA among populations living ‘east of the River’ relative to those ‘west of the Park’. Granular attention to student’s home address and economic status can help LEAs target the right supports to the right schools, and help schools target the right supports to the right students and families

These patterns justify treating attendance as a public health vital sign, mobilizing prevention and cross sector response so supports meet families where risk concentrates.

Equity Stance

Exclusionary discipline and coercive sanctions tied to attendance do not deliver durable improvements and widen inequities. Therefore, DC’s stance prioritizes relationship rich, skill building, and barrier removal approaches. Equity and limited resources require that we focus tiered supports where structural barriers are highest. In DC, the most common barriers cluster around issues related to income inequality, e.g., transportation reliability, health access, and housing and food security. Additional barriers are evident at transitions such as from PreK to K and from 8th to 9th grades. On a District level, we will use disaggregated, public dashboards to surface subgroup gaps, verify coding integrity, and track barrier closures.

Public Health Framing: Attendance as a Vital Sign

Attendance patterns are early signals of unmet needs. A public health posture pairs universal prevention (Tier 1 climate and messaging) with early warning systems (EWS) and targeted treatment (Tier 2 mentoring/nudges; Tier 3 integrated services).

System actions we recommend:

Stand up public dashboards with Early Warning System Flags

- In Seat Attendance, Chronic Absence risk-tiers and risk tier movement, truancy rates, partial day patterns, immunization days to return, SST activity, and barrier closure rates

Supports-First approaches

- Require interagency case huddles before legal escalation for Tier 3 students to ensure supports were offered and barriers addressed.

Focus on 9th Grade

- Resource 9th Grade “Start Strong” cohorts with daily advisory, mentor matching, flexible scheduling and credit recovery where appropriate, and focused Safe Passage coverage.

“We’re treating attendance like a vital sign. When a student’s risk tier rises or we see a streak of absences, we respond with care: climate routines, mentoring, health access, and barrier removal. We track barrier closures around transportation, housing, and health scheduling, not just calls.”

OSSE Attendance Risk Categories and the MTSS Overview for Attendance

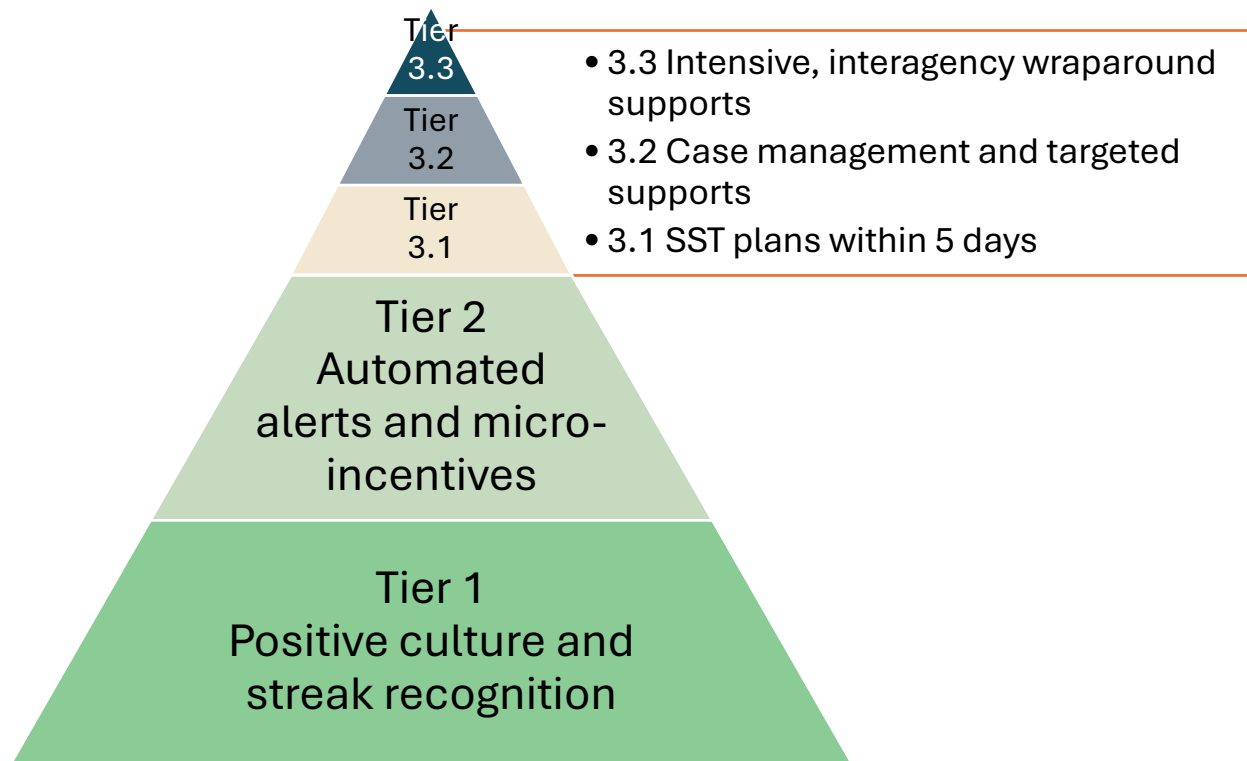
Attendance Risk Categories

Schools should monitor attendance continuously.

OSSE Attendance Risk Tiers	Satisfactory Attendance	At-Risk Attendance	Moderate Chronic Absence	Severe Chronic Absence	Profound Chronic Absence
Percent of Days Missed	0-4.99%	5-9.99%	10-19.99%	20-29.99%	30%+

These categories help determine intervention intensity.

MTSS Tiers



MTSS Logic for Attendance

MTSS organizes supports by increasing intensity, from universal climate to targeted mentoring and nudges to integrated health and case management, guided by risk tiers and by readiness as indicated by the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) of behavior change.

Decision routine

SST / SAC WEEKLY

1. Review EWS flags: monthly risk tier, partial day and tardy clusters, and streaks of more than 2 or 3 absences within a 10day period.
2. For students at Tier 3, launch an action plan within 5 days. Assign owners for actions and barrier mitigations, and route to barrier lanes (transportation, housing and food insecurity, and health scheduling assistance).
3. Match supports to TTM stage and continuous readiness indices of decisional balance and self efficacy), normalizing relapse and restaging as needed.

Tier 1: Universal Prevention (Climate and Belonging)

Goal: Create a school environment where attendance is expected, supported, and celebrated.			
What Strong Tier 1 Looks Like			
Positive Greetings	Strong School Climate	Family Communication	Recognition
Every student receives: • A hello • Eye contact • Recognition by name from at least one adult each morning.	Provide: • Inclusive routines • Student voice opportunities • Restorative practices • Social-emotional supports	Communicate regularly with families through: • Texts • Calls • Newsletters • Family events	Celebrate: • Improvement • Consistency • Effort • Growth not only perfection.

Tier 2: Targeted Support (Mentoring and Stage Matched Nudges)

Goal: Prevent students from becoming chronically absent. Focus on students who: • Miss 5-9.99% of school days • Demonstrate attendance decline • Show attendance bursts • Exhibit repeated tardiness			
Core Tier 2 Strategies			
Success Mentors	2 x 10 Relationship Strategy	ABC Check-Ins	Personalized Outreach
Assign a caring adult who: • Meets regularly • Reviews attendance • Encourages progress • Connects with families	Spend: • 2 minutes • For 10 school days engaging in non-academic conversation.	Weekly review of: • Attendance • Behavior • Course performance	Use: • Specific attendance data • Supportive language • Concrete offers of help

Tier 3: Intensive, Integrated Case Management

Goal: Address persistent attendance challenges through coordinated support for students who: • Miss 10% or more of instructional days • Experience significant barriers • Require multi-agency coordination		
Tier 2 Practices		
Student Support Team Case Planning	Barrier Removal	Interagency Coordination
Develop plans that include: • Attendance goal • Barriers • Assigned roles • Support actions • Follow-up schedule	Common focus areas include: • Transportation • Health • Housing • Food access • Safety • Mental health • Caregiving responsibilities	Coordinate assistance through: • School staff • Community organizations • Health providers • Social service providers when appropriate.

Barrier Matched Intervention Examples

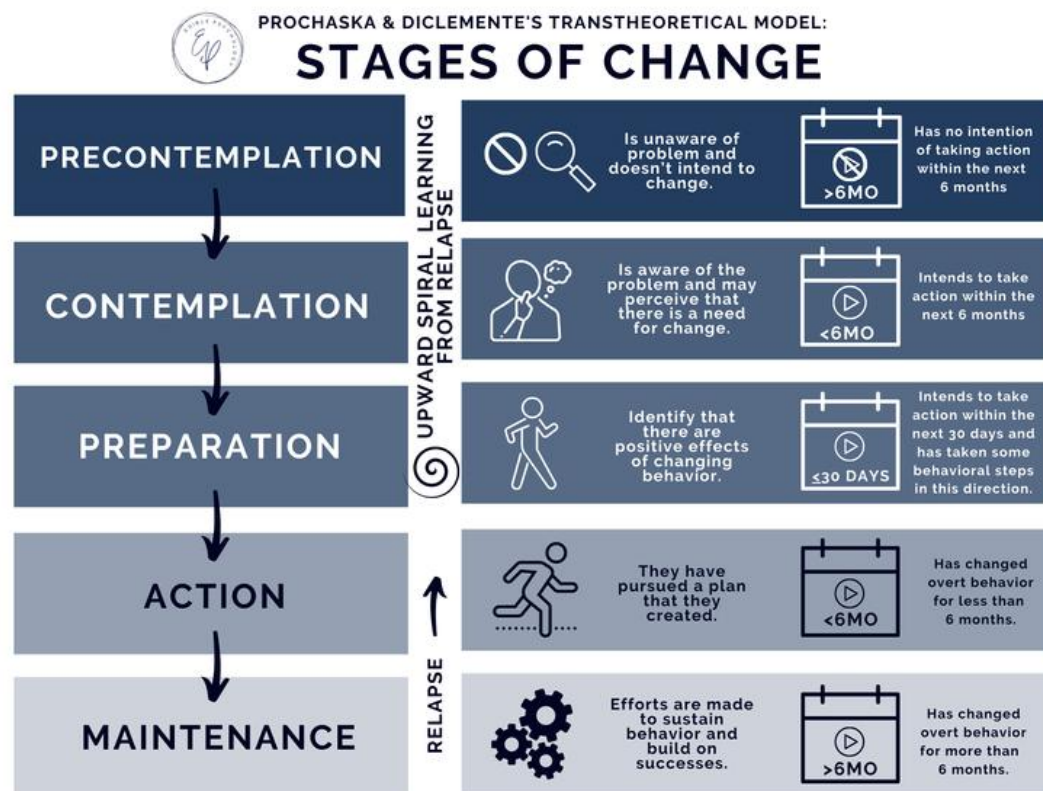
Barrier Type	Example Intervention	Staff Owner	Typical Duration	Outcome Tracked
<i>Transportation</i>	KRF replacement and backup ride plan (public transit or micro-transit where eligible)	Attendance Office / Transportation Liaison	Set up 2–4 weeks	Arrival reliability rising; days missed decreasing
<i>Health Scheduling</i>	Telehealth hours before / after class, school nurse coordination	Nurse / SBHC	15–30 min per visit	Days to return decreasing; health related absences decreasing
<i>Housing / Food Insecurity</i>	McKinney-Vento eligibility and case management	Social Worker / Liaison	4–12 weeks	Stability supports delivered; attendance trajectory increasing
<i>Caregiving</i>	Flexible scheduling / credit recovery for work / family duties	Administrator / Counselor	12–24 weeks	On-track credits; ISA increasing

Early Warning Systems and SST / SAC Operating Rhythm

- **Weekly SST / SAC reviews of the EWS:**
 - Review monthly risk tier groupings and movement, not just a Chronic / Not-Chronic binary.
 - Identify partial day and tardy clusters.
 - Identify streaks of more than 2 or 3 absences in a 10-day period.
- **For students at Tier 3: immediate interventions with a plan in place in fewer than 5 days.**
 - Pick barrier lanes and assign owners.
 - Schedule mentor and health / transportation supports.
 - Set a weekly check-in.

Student Readiness and Motivation

The Transtheoretical Model and Stage Matched Supports



¹ Image from Edible Psychology. (2021, January 22). Stages of change. Edible Psychology. <https://www.ediblepsych.com/the-collection/stagesofchange>.

What TTM means for attendance

The Transtheoretical Model (TTM) of behavior change describes change across Precontemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, and Maintenance, with relapse as an expected occurrence in the process of change. Attendance behavior and attitudes toward that behavior can change over time based on what is happening in the student's and family's life. Teams should adjust to those changes to support the student and family, not just focus on attendance.

Check in with families, ask:

"Right now, how ready do you feel to improve attendance?"

Possible Response Options:

Response type	TTM Stage	Staff Response
<i>I'm not really thinking about it</i>	Precontemplation	Build trust, listen, identify root cause barriers to attendance, connect to resources
<i>It's a problem, but don't know what to do</i>	Contemplation	Explore barriers and responses, discuss medium- and long-term student and family goals
<i>I have ideas of how to improve</i>	Preparation	Help students and families create a plan in response to specific barriers and build routines of attendance
<i>I'm trying to improve</i>	Action	Reinforce progress and troubleshoot problems in the plan
<i>I've made several weeks of improvement</i>	Maintenance	Sustain supports, prepare for relapse, and plan for re-staging when relapse occurs

Core Principles for Communication at All Stages

Be Supportive: Avoid blame and lead with curiosity and problem solving. No one wants to work with people who look down on them.

Be Consistent: Reach out to families before problems become serious. Be clear that attendance is important and that you can be of greater help if students are at school.

Be Culturally Responsive: Communicate in language that is accessible to the families, either through translation or interpretation.

Be Asset Focused: Celebrate progress at least as intensely and as often as you highlight concerns.

Early Warning Systems and Practice Levers

Introduction - Why EWS, Data Fidelity, and Practice Levers Matter

Attendance is one of our most practical, real-time “vital signs” for student and community wellbeing and for student readiness to learn. In DC, chronic absenteeism has improved overall since SY21–22, but it remains high. We need reliable signals and supportive responses to keep students from slipping into higher risk tiers.

Practice Levers Linked to CA Reduction

Research shows three that an engaging school climate, a culture of continuous improvement, and access to accurate data consistently align with lower CA:

- **Engaging Climate:** belonging, warm daily greetings, recognition for *improved* in addition to “perfect” attendance, and routine SEL / advisory check-ins) shows the largest association with CA reduction.
- **Continuous Improvement:** regular data meetings focused on tier movement and intervention effectiveness and implementation fidelity.
- **Accurate Data:** consistent review of data dashboards from OSSE, such as QLIK and the OSSE Attendance Dashboard, from EveryDay Labs, and from your school’s SIS.

Together, they create a virtuous cycle: valid signals, timely action, and a school experience students want to return to each morning.

We also know what to avoid. High-volume, generic outreach and broad partner activity without barrier closure tend to be associated with CA increases. The fix is not less communication, but better communication: personalized nudges and problem-solving calls that log resolution outcomes (KRF card issued, health appointments scheduled and completed, or housing referrals activated) rather than raw contact counts. In practice, this means using monthly EWS flags to trigger targeted supports and tracking whether barriers are actually closed.

Across the city, we see these levers at work in ways that are rooted in local culture, data discipline, and wraparound care:

Tier 1 (Universal): Culturally responsive morning routines.

At Richard Wright PCS for Journalism and Media Arts, the school day opens with “Family Matters,” a daily community meeting that blends goal-setting and shout-outs with an aesthetic immediately recognizable in the Black communities from which the majority of its

student body comes: live music, motivational messages, birthday celebrations, and the school song. By making belonging visible and joyful from the curb to the classroom, Richard Wright turns climate into a habit that students feel before first bell. The school's published schedule and communications foreground Family Matters and frequent community programming, anchoring the climate lever in routine.

Tier 2 (Targeted): Mentor routines organized by the ABCs.

For students flagged At-Risk or Moderate Chronic, ABC meetings, brief, structured check-ins organized around Attendance, Behavior, and Course performance, help adults and students focus on what's slipping and why, then align supports (transport, tutoring, SEL groups) to those signals. The ABC frame is a widely used early-warning backbone that keeps meetings concrete and actionable.

At DCPS's EXCEL Academy for Girls (Ward 8), staff pair weekly ABC-style meetings in middle grades with a weekly mentor check-in from a CBO partner for students in At-Risk or Moderate tiers, making sure that each flag leads to an adult relationship and a barrier closing step. The school's public data show ISA improvement from 86% (SY23–24) to 90% (SY24–25), consistent with a climate plus data approach and routine, student-level follow through.

Tier 3 (Intensive): Wraparound services that replace escalation with help.

When flags point to persistent, compounding barriers, teams escalate to interagency case management rather than punishment. The DHS Truancy Reduction Program is one such lane: schools refer after 15 full-day unexcused absences, DHS contacts families, identifies barriers, and offers supports without court involvement. Year-one reporting frames the pilot and its supportive posture; locally, schools have seen DHS cases mitigate year-over-year truancy recurrence at 20 percentage points better than the citywide average.

Quick wins (put the levers to work):

Morning belonging, **every day**. Stand up a 10 to 15-minute Family Matters-style routine: music or school chant, student and staff shoutouts, one clear message about today's goal, and recognition for improved attendance streaks. Track belonging measures monthly.

ABC check-ins, **weekly**. For students in Tier 2, run short ABC meetings: "How many days this week? Any behavior or peer conflicts? Which assignments need support?" Pair with a mentor who texts or calls between meetings.

Wraparound supports on a clock. For students at Tier 3, create an SST plan within 5 days, then route to transportation, housing and food insecurity, health scheduling, or behavioral health lanes. Use DHS Truancy Reduction Program where eligible, and track days-to-return and % barrier closed ≤ 10 days.

When schools stitch these pieces together – welcoming climate, ABC-guided mentoring, and fast wraparound for the hardest barriers – the monthly flags become opportunities rather than alarms. Students experience school as a community that notices, cares, and acts. Adults see dashboards that reflect valid data and real progress. Families feel supported rather than judged. That is how the levers turn, month after month, and why they consistently align with lower CA across our survey and practice evidence.

Monthly EWS Flags and Thresholds (What to track, and why)

Flag Types (flag monthly):

- **Monitor OSSE Attendance Risk Tiers and movement, not a Chronically Absent / Not Chronically Absent binary.** Students entering, exiting, or slipping across OSSE tiers. Show net movement by grade band (K–2, 3–5, 6–8, 9–12). This helps us focus on change and differentiated intervention impact.
- **Partial day / tardy clusters.** Repeated late arrivals or early dismissals by day or period (e.g., Mondays or first period). Early dismissals are associated with higher annual absences; track them and address proactively.
- **Burst patterns.** Two or more absences in a ten-day period. Maintaining positive behavior change relies on consistency and support from a caring community.
- **Compliance windows.** Track median days-to-return from immunization exclusion windows to coordinate nurse / SBHC support and reduce avoidable absence spikes.

Action Triggers (route within 5 school days):

- **Tier 3.1 (Moderate Chronic). Build an SST plan within 5 days**, assign owners, and route to barrier lanes.
- **Tier 2 (At Risk). Preventive coaching** and adaptive messaging. Monitor clusters and bursts to avoid slippage into Tier 3.
- **9th Grade “Start Strong.”** Daily advisory, mentor matching, flexible scheduling and credit recovery, and safe passage coordination. Track Tier movement weekly.

Publishing monthly flags and acting within 5 days prevents tier slippage and supports equity.

Draft Weekly SST / SAC Meeting Agenda

Attendees: AP / Dean (facilitator); Counselor / Clinician; Attendance Clerk / Front Desk; Data Lead; Teachers / Mentors as needed.

Agenda (60 min):

0:00 – Opening frame (nonpunitive and equity-centered; Liberatory Mindsets are a good tool for openings). Celebrate improvements, normalize relapse, and commit to barrier closure.

0:05 – Early Warning System flags review. New Tier movement, partial day and tardy clusters, absence burst alerts, and 9th Grade Start Strong (if applicable) updates.

0:20 – Case routing and plan SLAs. For students at Tier 3, confirm SST plan within 5 days, owners, and next actions, assign barrier lane, and set due dates.

0:50 – Climate quick wins. Add and adjust daily greetings, advisory SEL checks, and recognition routines; assign to grade teams.

0:55 – Close. Confirm two-way caregiver communications scheduled; log outcomes (**resolution**, not contacts).

1:00 – End.

Additional meetings and work time will be necessary to carry out the tasks identified during this weekly meeting.

Monthly Attendance Dashboards

A public monthly attendance dashboard turns attendance into a visible “vital sign,” giving staff and families timely views of in-seat attendance (ISA), risk tier movement, and truancy so concerns are caught early and students are routed to supports quickly.

Dashboard Requirements

Core Tiles (state / LEA / school):

- **ISA (In-seat Attendance)** by month.
- **Risk tier rate and movement** (entries, exits, and net change) by grade bands K–2 / 3–5 / 6–8 / 9–12 and by month.
- **Truancy** (including partial day unexcused) and partial day and tardy clusters by day and by period.
- **Burst alerts** (number of students with two or more absences in a tenday period over the past month) with time-to-first contact and time-to-return metrics.
- **Early dismissals:** monthly number of early dismissals.
- **SST activity:** Number of Tier 3 plans created, implementation within 5 days compliance, and barrier closure outcome counts.