Attendance Evidence-Based Practices Brief

What are evidence-based practices?

Evidence-based practices are grounded in research and demonstrated to improve student outcomes. Using evidence-based practices means intentionally selecting methods that have been shown to be effective, implementing those practices with fidelity, and monitoring student learning so adjustments can be made.

Why is the use of evidence-based practices important?

When educators use practices and strategies grounded in high-quality research, they are more likely to meet students' diverse needs, reduce achievement gaps, and use instructional time effectively. Senate File 2435, and subsequent amendments, reflect the increased attention to and value of increasing student attendance. The Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism site summarizes required school, parent/guardian and student responsibilities related to school attendance.

Introduction

This brief is designed to support Iowa educators, school leaders, and partners in increasing attendance through practical, easy-to-use strategies.

Research from Attendance Works has identified five major “routes,” or practice areas, for proactively reducing chronic absence:

- Access to Learning
- Family Engagement
- Health, Well-Being and Safety
- Relevant and Engaging Learning
- Student Connectedness

This guide presents EBPs aligned with each of these five areas that educators can use to improve student attendance. These EBPs are universal, proactive strategies (Tier 1) within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).

Educators seeking to better understand why students are chronically absent or to provide more intensive supports (Tier 2 or Tier 3) may use the Root Cause Analysis Workbook from the Center on Great Teachers & Leaders (2019) and pair their findings with strategies from the Attendance Playbook (Jordan, 2023) developed by Attendance Works and FutureEd.

Each practice area summarizes key research and turns it into clear, classroom-ready strategies that emphasize what educators, students, and families are doing in practice. The brief also presents options for both schoolwide prevention and more targeted support.

District leaders can use this resource to align attendance policies and practices with improvement goals. School teams can choose a small set of strategies, integrate them into existing frameworks, such as MTSS, school improvement planning, and track early signs of progress along with attendance data.

How This Brief Is Organized

For each Practice Area table, the left column identifies strategies educators can implement, while the right column highlights related student strategies. These resources are only examples to support educator understanding and implementation. The practice areas are presented alphabetically rather than in order of importance, allowing school and district teams to focus on the areas most relevant to their local context.

How to Use This Brief

1. Use attendance and engagement data (such as patterns by grade level, student groups, time of year, setting) to choose one or two priority practice areas.
2. Pick a small number of strategies and define what they look like in your setting (classroom, hallway, arrival and dismissal, bus line, afterschool program).
3. Put simple routines and supports in place to make the strategies easy to use over time (planning prompts, templates, brief practice, peer observation, coaching).
4. Track progress and make adjustments by reviewing early signs of student engagement, such as participation and assignment completion, along with attendance trends.
5. Follow existing school and district procedures for communicating about absences and engage appropriate staff, such as attendance teams, counselors, family engagement staff, and 504 coordinators, when attendance concerns arise.

Successful implementation is strengthened by leadership support, consistent use of strategies over time, and collaboration through existing school, district, family, and community partnerships.

Practice: Access to Learning

Overview

Access to learning refers to whether students can participate in instruction consistently, either in person or online. Not all students have the same level of access. Barriers like unreliable transportation, limited internet access, and a lack of easy-to-use devices, can make it hard for students to participate regularly. When families have reliable transportation and the tools they need for learning, students are more likely to attend consistently.

Access to learning often depends on the availability of local supports that help students overcome barriers to participation. These may include transportation assistance, hotspot lending programs, access to community spaces with internet connectivity, or other resources identified through local resource mapping efforts. Because available supports vary by community, schools can work with families and community partners to identify and connect students with the resources they need to participate consistently in learning.

Every student should experience little to no barriers to attendance.

What can educators do?	What can students do?
• When needed, provide flexible ways to access learning, such as offline options or adjusted deadlines. • Offer flexible scheduling options, when possible, to support consistent participation. • Provide support to help students recover lost learning after extended absences. • Notice when transportation challenges affect attendance and connect students with available supports. • Ask students about their access to technology and plan for disruptions (such as bad weather or power outages). • Design assignments that can be completed without high-speed internet or advanced devices. • Support students with gaining access to hotspots from the local library or community-based organization.	• Map out three ways you can get to school and refer to those options when transportation challenges arise. • Use available transportation options (such as walking, biking, or public transit) to get to school when possible. • Communicate with teachers about barriers to learning, such as limited technology or lack of a quiet workspace. • Follow through on agreed-upon supports or flexibility, and communicate when something is not working. • Use school-provided technology to complete assignments and stay connected to learning. • Follow expectations for using technology safely, responsibly, and respectfully.

Resources to Support Educator Understanding

- Safe Routes to School by the Numbers (Lieberman & Zimmerman, 2016)

Tools to Support Implementation

- Safe Routes to School, Iowa (Iowa Safe Routes to School, n.d.)

Practice: Family Engagement

Overview

Family engagement is a partnership between families, educators, and community partners to support students' learning and development. It involves working together to build shared understanding, strengthen relationships, and support students in getting to school regularly. When families have meaningful opportunities to share their experiences and see the value of school for their child's future, they are more likely to ensure their students attend.

Effective family engagement often focuses on six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaboration. While communication systems can support engagement, strong relationships and direct communication remain critical. Consistent outreach and personal follow-up help ensure families receive attendance information and know how to access support.

Every family should feel connected, informed, and valued as a partner in education.

What can educators do?	What can students do?
• Build trust with families by reaching out and, when possible, conducting structured home visits that focus on building relationships. • Communicate regularly with families using accessible tools (such as texting or school-approved apps). • Report student attendance consistently, including both excused and unexcused absences. • Reach out early to families, beginning in the early grades, to build strong attendance habits. • Work with families to address attendance challenges by recognizing and building on their strengths. • Make regular positive phone calls to caregivers and share strengths-based updates about students. • Collaborate with counselors and family engagement staff to share strategies and respond to attendance needs. • Train parents in the use of Parent Square or other relevant communication platforms.	• Communicate with teachers and share information about their child's needs and strengths. • Participate in school events and activities to support a welcoming school community. • Track their child's attendance and notice when absences begin to add up. • Help their child understand how schoolwork connects with life outside school. • Support daily routines at home that help students get to school on time (such as preparing the night before and setting consistent morning routines). • Attend conferences and school events focused on college and career readiness and postsecondary opportunities to stay informed and aligned with the school.

Resources to Support Educator Understanding

- The Parent Teacher Home Visit Model (Parent Teacher Home Visits, 2022)
- Strengthening Families Program: Goals and Contracts to Change Behavior (Kumpfer & Brown, 2011a)

Tools to Support Implementation

- Absenteeism Prevention Plan (Iowa Department of Education, n.d.)
- Family Development & Self-Sufficiency (FaDSS) (Iowa Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.)

Practice: Health, Well-Being and Safety

Overview

Student health, well-being, and safety focus on creating learning environments that support students' physical, behavioral, and social needs. When these conditions are in place, students are more likely to feel safe, stay engaged in learning, and build habits that support long-term health and success.

A healthy and safe learning environment includes access to health services, nutritious meals, physical activity, and opportunities to learn about wellness. School safety efforts also support a positive school climate in which students feel protected and supported. This helps to reduce the impact of negative experiences. As learning and social interactions increasingly occur online, students also benefit from developing digital skills that support safe, responsible, and healthy technology use.

Every student should learn in a safe and healthy environment.

What can educators do?	What can students do?
• Teach and review expectations for safety, bullying, and respectful behavior. • Create a classroom environment that supports focus and well-being (such as flexible seating, lighting, and noise levels). • Build in regular routines that support well-being, such as movement breaks or reflection activities. • Model and teach skills for health and well-being, including self-regulation, stress management, empathy, and conflict resolution. • Notice patterns in attendance that may be related to health or safety concerns and communicate with support staff and families. • Identify safe spaces students can go to if they feel overwhelmed or dysregulated (such as a calm or quiet area). • Connect families with available health and wellness supports. • Adjust instruction and support based on students' developmental needs and experiences. • Teach students the digital skills they need to use online tools safely and independently. • Teach and reinforce positive habits for using technology to support learning and well-being.	• Report safety concerns to a trusted adult or through school systems. • Take part in student groups, surveys, or discussions to share ideas about safety and well-being. • Participate in physical activity, nutrition programs, and health learning opportunities. • Join clubs, mentoring programs, or school activities to build positive peer connections. • Share information from school with their families about available supports and resources. • Communicate with family and school staff about their needs to stay healthy and ready to learn. • Reflect on how technology and media affect their learning and daily habits. • Build and practice habits for using technology to support learning and well-being.

Resources to Support Educator Understanding

- Healthy Schools (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.)

Tools to Support Implementation

- Student Supports (Iowa Department of Education, n.d.)
- Your Life Iowa (Iowa Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.)

Practice: Relevant and Engaging Learning

Overview

Relevant and Engaging Learning focuses on instruction that connects content to students' real-world interests, communities, and experiences. When learning feels meaningful and appropriately challenging, rather than rote or disconnected, students are more motivated to attend school. These approaches often include project-based learning, interdisciplinary instruction, and opportunities for students to apply what they learn in real-world ways. Students are more likely to attend when they see the value of school in their lives and futures.

Every student should feel school is interesting and worthwhile.

What can educators do?	What can students do?
• Design lessons that connect learning goals to real-world topics and student interests. • Set up group work with clear roles, routines, and success criteria. • Teach lessons that connect ideas across subjects and make those connections clear. • Check for understanding often and give timely, specific feedback. • Build in regular reflection and opportunities for students to take ownership of their learning. • Plan project-based units with clear goals and checkpoints. • Offer consistent, engaging learning opportunities beyond the school day based on student interests. • Use student questions about why learning matters as an opportunity to make meaningful connections rather than giving brief or surface-level answers. • Partner with programs (such as Career and Technical Education; Work-Based Learning; or Science, Technology, Engineering, & Mathematics [STEM]) to connect learning to careers and real-world applications.	• Connect their learning to real-world problems and community issues. • Work with peers to plan and create shared products. • Apply ideas from different subjects to solve problems or explain their thinking. • Use feedback to improve their work and track their progress. • Reflect on how they learn and set goals for improvement. • Explore real-world problems by asking questions and guiding their own inquiry. • Share what they are learning with families and connect school with life outside of school. • Participate in meaningful after-school learning tied to goals. • Take part in service-learning projects that connect with their schoolwork. • Share their learning with peers or younger students to support others. • Engage in Career and Technical Education, Work-Based Learning, or STEM activities that connect learning with careers.

Resources to Support Educator Understanding

- Aligning Learning With Local Careers (Midwest Regional Comprehensive Center, 2026)
- Meaningful Work (Meaningful Work Guide, 2025)
- What Works Brief #2: Opportunities for Meaningful Participation (O'Malley & Amarillas, 2011)
- Relate Lessons to Students' Lives Final Toolkit.pdf (PERTS, n.d.)
- Well-Organized Classroom Guide (PERTS, 2025)

Tools to Support Implementation

- Iowa STEM Teachable Moment (IDE, n.d.-d)
- Iowa STEM Career Videos (IDE, n.d.-c)
- Career-Connected Learning (Career Exploration & Work-Based Learning) (IDE, n.d.-a)
- Career & Technical Student Organizations (IDE, n.d.-b)
- Sustained Project-Based Learning in Partnership with an Employer Toolkit (IDE, n.d.-e)

Practice: Student Connectedness

Overview

Student connectedness refers to how connected students feel to their school and their experiences in it. Students build strong connections when they feel cared for by adults and peers, believe they are valued, and feel supported in their learning and well-being. These strong connections act as a protective factor, supporting positive academic, social, and health outcomes.

Many factors strengthen students' sense of connectedness, but relationships with adults are especially important. Students who have at least one trusted adult at school are more likely to feel connected and engaged. They are also more likely to attend school when they believe their presence matters and contributes to the well-being of others. Student surveys can provide valuable insights into students' sense of belonging and connectedness but should be administered in alignment with state and local guidance.

Every student should feel valued and connected with their school community.

What can educators do?	What can students do?
• Build relationships by greeting students by name and showing interest in their lives. • Check in regularly with students through brief one-on-one conversations. • Establish clear, predictable routines so students know what to expect each day. • Set and revisit classroom norms that promote respect, belonging, and shared responsibility. • Ask for student input and use it to adjust classroom practices. • Recognize student effort, growth, and contributions, both publicly and privately. • Create opportunities for student voice and leadership (such as leading discussions or taking on roles in group work). • Acknowledge students' lives outside school and offer flexibility when appropriate. • Encourage participation in extracurricular activities that build connections with peers and trusted adults.	• Build relationships with teachers through regular daily interactions. • Participate in classroom routines and activities that create a sense of safety and belonging. • Help create and follow classroom norms that support respect and shared responsibility. • Share feedback about their classroom experiences and help shape how the class operates. • Use feedback to improve their work and focus on growth, not just grades. • Take on leadership or active roles in discussions, group work, or projects. • Seek support from teachers or staff when challenges arise rather than disengaging. • Work with a range of peers and build relationships by joining clubs or activities to meet new people around a shared interest.

Resources to Support Educator Understanding

- What Works: School Connectedness (California Safe and Supportive Schools, 2023)
- Connecting Students with School Activities (GRAD Partnership, 2023)

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What are evidence-based practices?

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