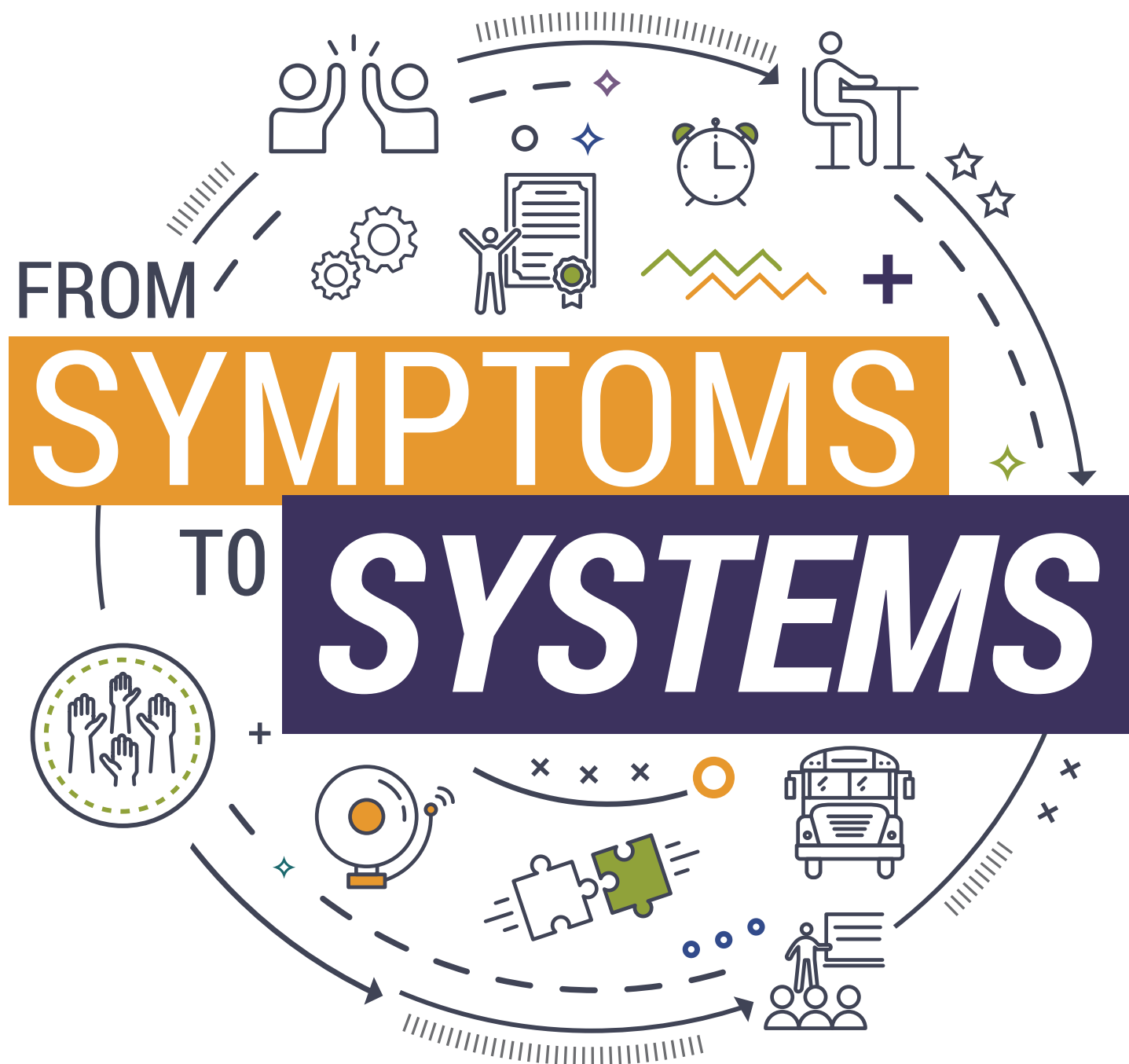




A PROACTIVE TOOLKIT
FOR ADDRESSING STUDENT
ATTENDANCE AND CONNECTION

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ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

Across the country, many school systems are grappling with rising levels of chronic absenteeism—defined as missing 10% or more of school days for any reason. Today, nearly one in three students is chronically absent, almost double the rate before the pandemic¹. The challenge is particularly acute for marginalized students: systems serving larger proportions of students experiencing poverty and students of color consistently report higher rates of absenteeism².

The consequences are far-reaching. Students with strong attendance are **seven times more likely** to read on grade level by fourth grade and **nine times more likely** to graduate on time.³ At the system level, high absenteeism disrupts instruction, strains interventions and undermines progress toward equity. Improving attendance is not only about boosting daily participation but also strengthening student connection, belonging and long-term success.

In response, Education First, in partnership with [Equal Opportunity Schools](#), launched the **All in Attendance Collaborative**, a national initiative that equips district leaders with equitable and proactive strategies to improve student attendance. This toolkit builds on lessons from the collaborative and provides district teams with practical tools to take systemic and sustainable action.

Who Should Use This Toolkit?

This toolkit is designed for district and CMO leaders who want to take a systemic approach to improving attendance. It helps leaders look beyond surface-level data to understand chronic absenteeism through the lens of the broader student ecosystem, identify root causes and translate insights into actionable strategies. Superintendents, chief academic officers, chief information officers, curriculum directors and principals will find practical guidance for shaping districtwide efforts.



In This Toolkit:

- **Frameworks** to understand the student ecosystem and root causes of chronic absenteeism
- **Practical tools and templates** to support with systemic actions
- **Models and initiatives** that illustrate how districts and partners are approaching attendance at scale



UNDERSTANDING THE STUDENT ECOSYSTEM

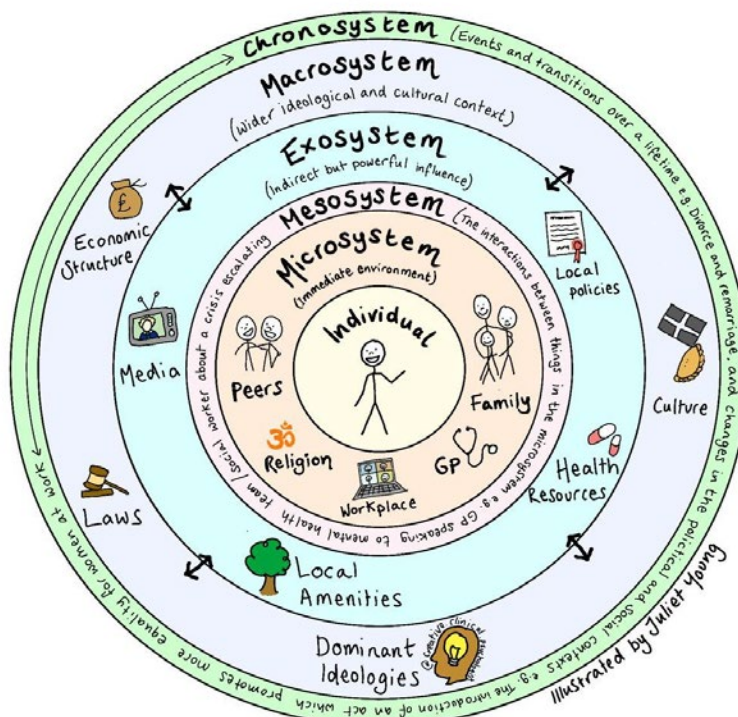
Student attendance cannot be understood in isolation. Each learner exists within an ecosystem of influences shaping their ability and willingness to attend school.⁴ These include:

- **Individual Needs:** Students require safety, belonging and purpose before they can fully engage.
- **School Conditions:** Climate, relationships and instructional relevance strongly influence whether students feel welcomed or alienated.
- **Family & Community:** Caregiver expectations, transportation, health services and local culture affect daily attendance decisions.
- **Policy & Systems:** District priorities, state regulations and broader socioeconomic conditions set the context within which schools operate.

When these layers are out of alignment, absenteeism rises.⁵ Understanding the attendance ecosystem highlights why absenteeism occurs and reinforces that effective solutions must address conditions across multiple levels—not just individual student choices.

System-specific root causes of chronic absenteeism are highly contextual but tend to fall into four main categories: **Barriers, Misconceptions, Aversion** and **Disengagement**.⁶ For example, barriers can include poor transportation or housing insecurity, while aversion may stem from bullying or biased disciplinary practices. A lack of meaningful relationships or unchallenging instruction can cause disengagement. By integrating insights from the student ecosystem with an understanding of these root causes, leaders can direct efforts toward targeted, practical strategies to promote attendance.

A Student's Ecosystem⁷

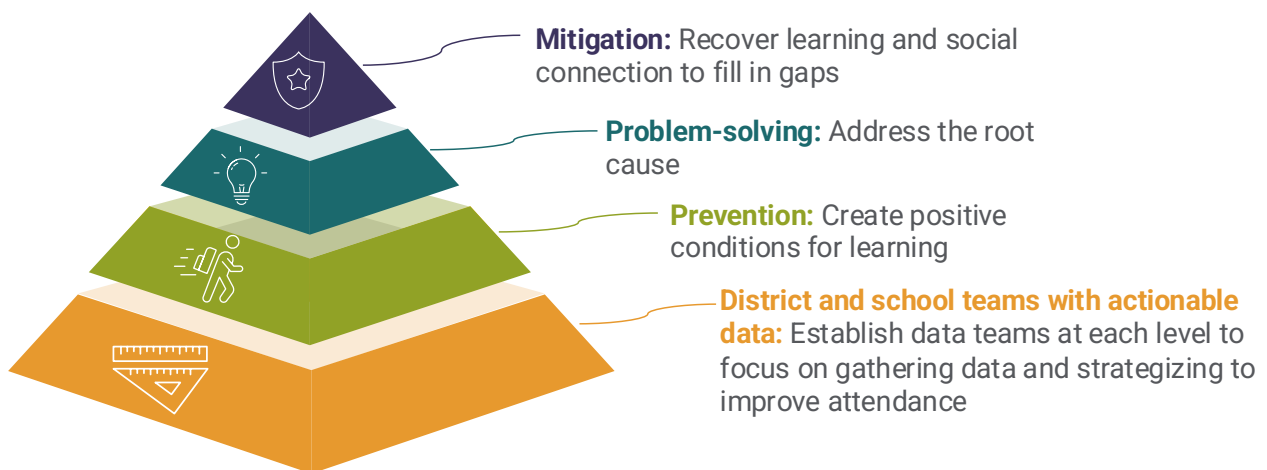




FROM ECOSYSTEM TO STRATEGY: District Levers for Change

If the **ecosystem** explains **why** students attend or not, the **strategy buckets** define **how** systems can take action. Each bucket represents a systemic lever that schools and district can pull to reshape conditions and support attendance at scale:

1. **Data Teams** – Building the systems and policies to gather, analyze and act on attendance data.
2. **Prevention** – Creating the conditions where students feel connected, safe and engaged.
3. **Problem-Solving** – Partnering with families, students and community to address root causes (barriers, misconceptions, aversion, disengagement).
4. **Mitigation** – Closing gaps for students who have already missed significant time through recovery and re-engagement.



Together, these buckets form a coherent, proactive approach to combating chronic absenteeism. They translate complex ecosystem challenges into actionable levers that you can plan for and sustain over time.

A first step in planning this includes using an implementation chain to identify key actors and their behaviors needed to implement the attendance strategy successfully.⁸ Districts can use implementation chains to break these big levers into concrete steps, clarifying who does what, when and how. This ensures that responsibility, capacity and feedback loops are aligned, enabling strategies to transition from ideas into consistent practice across schools.



DATA TEAMS: MEASURE AND REPORT WHAT MATTERS

Improving attendance starts with seeing the problem clearly. Too often, data is fragmented, delayed or used punitively. Districts that make progress establish systematic, team-based approaches to gathering, analyzing and acting on attendance information.

Why it Matters

1. Data teams provide a comprehensive view of attendance patterns across schools, grade levels and student subgroups.
2. Actionable data surfaces root causes (e.g., transportation barriers in one neighborhood, disengagement in another).
3. Transparent reporting builds shared accountability across staff, families and community partners.

Systemic Actions Districts Can Take

- ☐ Establish consistent daily attendance data collection policies.
- ☐ Develop district-level dashboards disaggregated by school, grade and demographics.
- ☐ Create a monthly meeting cadence for data teams to review progress and make adjustments.
- ☐ Conduct surveys to surface student and family perspectives on attendance barriers.
- ☐ Analyze findings to identify specific subgroups or grade levels in need of support.

Tools You Can Use

SYSTEMIC ACTIONS	ALIGNED TOOLS TO USE
Establish consistent daily attendance data collection policies	Data Inventory Worksheet
Develop district-level dashboards disaggregated by school, grade and demographics	Data Needs Analysis Template Dashboard Effectiveness Checklist
Create a monthly meeting cadence for data teams to review progress and make adjustments	Data Review Protocol
Conduct surveys to surface student and family perspectives on attendance barriers	Sample Data Collection Surveys



PREVENTION: CREATE POSITIVE CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING

Prevention is the cornerstone of this work, focused on creating policies and environments where students, caregivers and community members feel valued, welcome and safe.

The strongest predictor of attendance is a student's sense of connectedness.⁹

Why it Matters

- Prevention strategies build a positive school culture where students, parents and staff feel they belong.
- Proactive prevention helps identify and mitigate the underlying issues that lead to absenteeism, such as a lack of engagement, bullying or an unwelcoming environment.
- When students feel valued and secure, they can better focus on their academics.

Systemic Actions Districts Can Take

- Ensure every student has a positive connection with at least one caring adult in the school.
- Implement curricula that reflect diverse experiences and real-life applications.
- Provide supports for safety and well-being (meals, transportation, anti-bullying).
- Create consistent communication pathways with families to share positive news.
- Offer professional learning for staff on asset-based approaches to attendance.
- Expand extracurricular and after-school opportunities to strengthen belonging.

Tools You Can Use

SYSTEMIC ACTIONS	ALIGNED TOOLS TO USE
Ensure every student has a connection with at least one caring adult	School Climate & Safety Policy Checklist
Implement curricula that reflect diverse experiences and real-life applications	
Provide supports for safety and well-being (meals, transportation, anti-bullying)	
Create consistent communication pathways with families to share positive news	Teacher-to-Family Communication Templates
Offer professional learning for staff on asset-based approaches to attendance	Sample Professional Learning Modules on Asset-Based Language¹⁰ <i>Note: Page 9 of the resource includes decks, facilitation guides and other materials</i>
Expand extracurricular and after-school opportunities to strengthen belonging	Checklist for Implementing After-School Clubs



PROBLEM-SOLVING: ADDRESS THE ROOT CAUSE

Problem-solving strategies require a holistic view of your student attendance and should be planned collaboratively with students, caregivers and the community. Remember, the root causes of absenteeism often fall into four categories: Barriers, Misconceptions, Aversion and Disengagement.

Why it Matters

- Problem-solving encourages collaboration among the ecosystem—working with students, their families and the community—to create a complete picture of the situation.
- It offers a holistic view that leads to more effective, tailored solutions considering the student’s unique circumstances.
- By addressing the root cause, systems aren’t just applying a temporary fix.

Systemic Actions Districts Can Take

- ☐ Develop a diverse, student-led attendance task force.
- ☐ Implement home visits and provide additional support services to families to address barriers to attendance.
- ☐ Create local attendance task forces that strategize how community entities can support increased attendance.
- ☐ Actively listen to students to identify barriers, misconceptions and reasons for disengagement.
- ☐ Form interagency task forces to coordinate efforts among schools, juvenile courts and community organizations.
- ☐ Incorporate caregivers and community organizations into attendance improvement efforts.

Tools You Can Use

SYSTEMIC ACTIONS	ALIGNED TOOLS
Create diverse, student-led attendance task forces	Stakeholder Engagement Plan & Protocol
Establish local and interagency partnerships to coordinate supports	Sample Community Partnership Outreach Guide
Actively listen to students to understand barriers and misconceptions	Sample Student Feedback Surveys
Incorporate caregivers and community partners into long-term planning	Problem-Solving Discussion Protocol



MITIGATION: RECOVER LEARNING AND SOCIAL CONNECTION

Mitigation strategies fill the gaps that arise as your district scales its long-term attendance work. They focus on identifying and addressing current needs in your district to foster engagement and academic recovery.

Why it Matters

- Mitigation strategies serve as a crucial check-and-balance for a district's larger attendance plan, helping schools and districts recognize where existing prevention and problem-solving efforts are falling short so they can adapt and address specific current needs.
- Mitigation focuses on addressing students' current needs, such as academic recovery and disengagement, by using interventions such as tutoring, mental health support and re-engagement activities to help students catch up and feel connected to the school community again.
- For districts, mitigation ensures that attendance work remains a continuous, responsive process by using data to identify emerging issues and creating new, targeted strategies that are relevant and effective over time.

Systemic Actions Districts Can Take

- ☐ Implement high-dose tutoring for students who need it.
- ☐ Provide high school credit recovery opportunities.
- ☐ Assign designated attendance support mentors (adults and students).
- ☐ Make individual and group counseling available for any student who needs it.
- ☐ Increase during- and after-school activities (e.g., dances, pep rallies, movie nights).
- ☐ Develop engaging summer learning programs.

Tools You Can Use

SYSTEMIC ACTIONS	ALIGNED TOOLS
Identify students in need of immediate support through data review	Data Review Protocol
Provide targeted interventions such as high-dose tutoring and credit recovery	Evidence-Based Academic Intervention Resources
Assign mentors and build re-engagement plans for individual students	Sample Mentor Program Guidance ¹¹ Reengagement Activities Calendar Template
Expand counseling and mental health services	
Offer structured opportunities to rebuild community (after-school, summer programs)	
Engage families directly through home visits and outreach	Sample Community Partnership Outreach Guide

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Showing Up, Together: A systems story of attendance and engagement

When Miami-Dade set out to strengthen attendance, leaders began with a simple premise: *if schools can see accurate patterns every day, they can act every day*. From that starting point, a cross-functional district team brought together leaders from data, school operations and family engagement to design a **coherent playbook** that moved beyond compliance to focus on data accuracy, systematic workflows and family-first supports, creating a replicable model for keeping students engaged.

Notable Practice: District Attendance & Engagement Playbook



1. Clean Data to ensure actions are based on accurate information

Mid-day bulletins, end-of-day reviews and clear routines for correcting codes helped principals distinguish excused from unexcused absences and spot emerging patterns. These routines led to clean data that was now ready to feed district dashboards, giving regional leaders a consistent, real-time view of where to lean in next.

2. Systematic Workflows to make the work clear and manageable for schools

Dr. Michelle Ulysses-Grant (District Director of Community Engagement Education) and Miriam Stewart (Assistant Superintendent, Educational Services) structured routines to make the work doable for schools: providing clear guidance on who pulls which report, when and what happens next. Regular convenings of principals and APs allow teams to compare what's working, while short "step-backs" every 6-9 weeks keep the focus on continuous learning. Pilots begin in contrasting schools—mega-campuses and highly transient settings alike—so solutions can be tested and codified before scaling.



3. Tiered Supports to provide restorative, family-centered help

Together with social workers, schools schedule parent conferences, make home visits, connect families with transportation or health supports and celebrate progress. The tone is restorative: identify the barrier, solve it and keep students connected.

The Basics

Location: Miami-Dade County, Florida



Locale: Large urban

District size: ~335,840 students

Team: Dr. Michelle Ulysses-Grant, Niesha Mack Massingill, Robin Atkins and Miriam Stewart

% of Economically Disadvantaged Students: ~57%

% of Race/Ethnicity: Hispanic 76%, Black 16.5%, White 5.9%, Asian 1%¹²

Attendance Strategy Highlights

- Daily data bulletins
- District dashboards
- ARC [Attendance Review Committees] + H.E.R.O. [Here Everyday and Ready On Time] case-management
- Social worker home visits
- Pilot-then-scale routines
- Recognition and awards

Current district programs that reinforce the work include the Truancy Intervention Program (TIP) with escalating services and school-based committees, annually updated TIP procedures and compliance/referral guidance for schools and families.

Future priorities include expanding H.E.R.O. (Here Every Day and Ready On Time) and ARC (Attendance Review Committee) coverage in highest-need schools; standardizing parent-facing explainer templates (e.g., excused vs. unexcused, how to request support); and growing community partnerships that address transportation, afterschool engagement and health so “attendance” conversations are about belonging, not just compliance.

Bolstering these efforts is a new \$5.6M multi-year grant to expand arts access across schools. This investment acts as a powerful tailwind for the district’s engagement agenda, as it is directly justified by the link between arts programs, improved student attendance and a stronger sense of belonging.

The Results

The focus on persistence is yielding results. M-DCPS reached record graduation highs—91.8% in 2023–24, with subgroup gains for Economically Disadvantaged students—suggesting stronger student persistence alongside broader improvement efforts.¹³



Lessons Learned & Playbook Elements

Across the work, several through-lines have emerged that guide the district’s strategy:

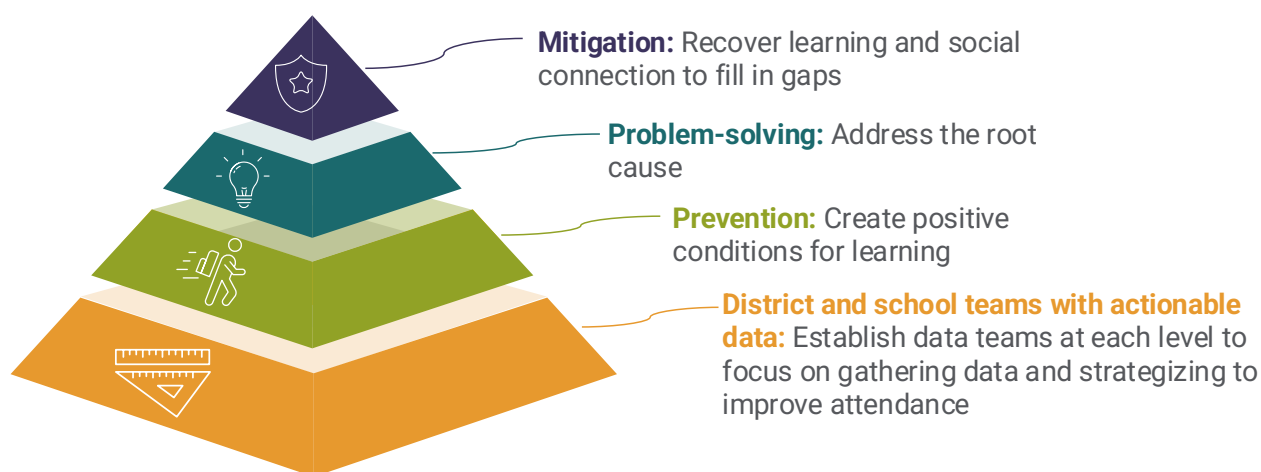
- **Lead with belonging.** Many absenteeism drivers are adult-level barriers; trust-building and flexible, multilingual outreach move the needle.
- **Make the work doable for schools.** Clarify who pulls which report, when and what happens next so principals and APs spend time intervening, not chasing data.
- **Pilot, codify, scale.** Try it in two different contexts, write the playbook, then expand.
- **Staff the backbone.** Where H.E.R.O./ARC capacity is consistent, follow-through rises and case plans don’t stall.

CONCLUSION

Addressing chronic absenteeism requires a comprehensive approach beyond truancy enforcement—one that tackles systemic conditions within the student ecosystem. Understanding why students miss school is the first step, but real improvement comes from coordinated action across four **key areas: prevention, problem-solving, mitigation and data teams**. By strategically using these levers, leaders can create environments where every student feels safe, connected and supported.

The challenge of chronic absenteeism is significant, with nearly one in three students now affected. However, systems can drive real improvement by leveraging the tools and strategies outlined in this toolkit. Starting with a data team to get a comprehensive view of attendance patterns, leaders can develop targeted strategies that respond to the unique needs of their communities.

Taking these first steps lays the foundation for a more supportive and equitable education system—one where every student has the conditions they need to thrive.



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ABOUT EDUCATION FIRST

Education First is a national, mission-driven strategy and policy organization with unique and deep expertise in education improvement. Our mission is to deliver exceptional ideas, experience-based solutions and results so all students—particularly Black, Indigenous and other students of color and students living in low-income communities—are prepared for success in college, career and life. We envision a world in which every student is prepared to succeed—a world in which income and race no longer determine the quality of education. Our mission is lived through our solutions and strategies by working with funders, states, policymakers, nonprofits, local education agencies and more.

