Parent *and* Family Partnerships *to* Support Regular Attendance

A STATE OF THE FIELD BRIGHT SPOT BRIEF

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The Center on Early Learning Success (CELS) is a National Technical Assistance Center in the Comprehensive Centers Network that supports regional, state, and local educational agencies to strengthen systems and advance learning across the preschool to Grade 3 (PK–3) continuum. CELS is operated by the Arizona State University (ASU) in partnership with the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at University of Nebraska (NU); the Center X Mathematics Project at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA); the California Reading & Literature Project (CRLP) at the University of California, San Diego; New America; and the Department of Special Education at the University of Oregon (UO).

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Introduction

WHY PARENT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND ATTENDANCE MATTERS

Parent and family engagement has long been recognized as a vital component of student success. From the earliest years of a child's education, families play a critical role. Research consistently shows that when families are involved in their children's education, students perform better academically, socially, and emotionally. As a result, schools and districts across the country have invested heavily in strategies to increase family involvement.

Parent and family engagement is associated with higher early literacy and math skills, among other benefits.[1] This is reflected in federal mandates like Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act,[2] which requires schools receiving federal funds to actively promote parent involvement. In recent years, research has uncovered shifting conceptualizations of family engagement toward an approach that centers family experience.[3] It also incorporates home-based strategies such as giving families strategies and tools to support their children's learning at home, which research has shown is associated with improved student outcomes.[4]

Although the value of family engagement is widely accepted, there's considerable variation in how it is defined and measured. While many people think of family engagement as bringing parents into the school to volunteer or visit, high-quality parent and family engagement that yields positive benefits includes core competencies that involve both the family and educators in active collaboration and decision-making.[5] While parent-teacher conferences and back-to-school nights are part of the puzzle, they are not enough for meaningful engagement, and can in fact create barriers for families who cannot participate due to transportation, work conflicts, discomfort in school environments based on their own experiences, and other constraints. By better understanding families' perspectives, educators can better understand families' varying levels of engagement.[6]

One critical but often overlooked aspect of family engagement is school attendance, especially in the early grades. Regular attendance requires ongoing parental involvement and logistical support. Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of school days in a year, is a significant concern nationwide. Chronic absenteeism can have long-term impacts on students' health and academic achievement. It is particularly common among students from families with low incomes, children of color, and those with chronic health conditions. These students are often hit hardest by barriers such as lack of transportation, unstable housing, food insecurity, parental work constraints, and health issues or medical appointments.

Educators sometimes view chronic absence as a sign that parents do not value education. But this perception fails to account for the systemic challenges many families face. Research shows that school outreach initiatives like home visits and regular communication can improve attendance, showing that schools can influence this aspect of family engagement, even when external factors are at play.

At the heart of all effective family engagement is relationship-building. **When students and families feel known, respected, and supported, they are more likely to engage.**

Parent and family engagement requires understanding the barriers families face, valuing their contributions at home, and offering flexible, culturally relevant pathways for involvement. It also means seeing attendance not as a standalone metric, but as a window into a family's connection to the school and an opportunity for meaningful engagement. By reimagining family engagement as connective and relational, educators can help every child attend, achieve, and thrive.

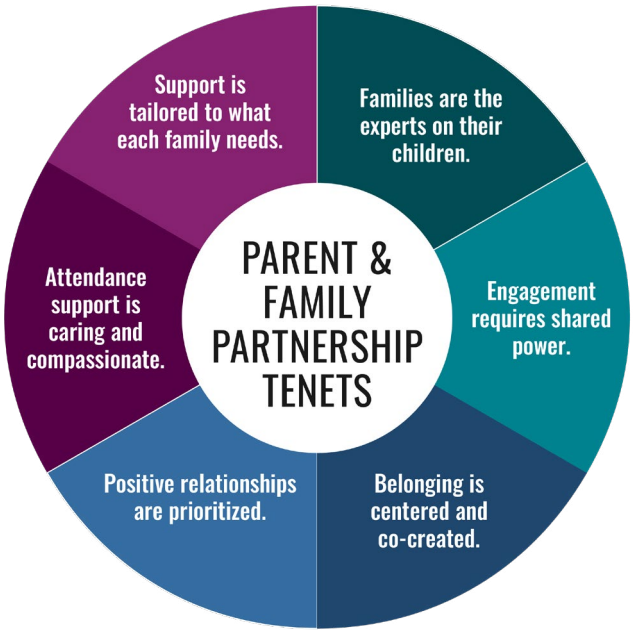
The Purpose

The purpose of this brief is to spotlight community-led innovations and promising approaches to supporting parent and family partnerships to support regular attendance from states, districts, schools, and programs across the United States that are working to align early learning experiences with the science of learning and development from preschool through the early grades.

This brief is designed for state and local education leaders, educators, and school and program staff seeking practical examples, lessons learned, and considerations for strengthening early learning systems, transition practices, and instructional approaches to support children and families across the preschool to Grade 3 (PK–3) continuum.



Parent and Family Partnerships to Support Regular Attendance Tenets



The examples highlighted in this brief are grounded in the tenets of parent and family partnerships to support regular attendance. These tenets include six interconnected principles drawn from the research base that together outline what parent and family partnerships to support regular attendance look like in practice. These tenets, developed as part of the Center on Early Learning Success State of The Field Research Brief Series, are:

Families are the experts on their children.

Families bring essential knowledge about their children's strengths, needs, experiences, and circumstances and are often the first to notice changes that may affect attendance.

Engagement requires shared power.

High quality engagement occurs early and is sustained over time. Strong family–school partnerships move beyond one-way communication to ongoing, bidirectional relationships that share responsibility and begin before attendance becomes a concern.

Belonging is centered and co-created.

Families and schools can create environments where children and families feel welcomed, valued, cared for, and connected—conditions that contribute to children wanting to be at school.

Positive relationships are prioritized.

Trusting relationships among children, families, educators, and other school staff provide the foundation for communication, connection, and addressing barriers to regular attendance.

Attendance support is caring and compassionate.

Responses to absence should be grounded in curiosity, empathy, and an understanding of what may be getting in the way, rather than simply notifying families that a child has missed school.

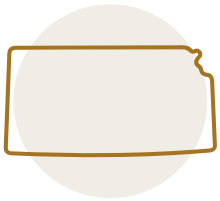
Support is tailored to what each family needs.

Because reasons for absence vary across children, families, and communities, supports should respond to the specific barriers and circumstances each family faces in supporting their child's regular attendance.

Bright Spots in Practice

This brief offers a closer look at three places working to embrace one or more of the tenets of parent and family partnerships to support regular attendance: Kansas City, Kansas, the state of Rhode Island, and the state of Connecticut.

Each of these bright spots provides opportunities and lessons for leaders of schools, local education agencies (LEAs), and state education agencies (SEAs) interested in making changes in preschool and the early elementary grades to strengthen access to high-quality parent and family engagement opportunities and improve attendance outcomes.



KANSAS CITY, KANSAS

Kansas City Public Schools in Kansas City, Kansas serves about 22,000 students who speak 65 languages across 50 schools and programs.[7] The district's Attend to Achieve program takes a proactive, positive, and trauma-informed approach to chronic absenteeism. At its core, Attend to Achieve strengthens the systems, relationships, and supports that encourage students to come to school, with notable results. For example, the program resulted in districtwide chronic absenteeism falling from 50% in 2021–2022 to 34.5% in 2025–2026. In elementary schools, it dropped from 33.3% in 2022–2023 to 25.5% in 2025–2026.[8]

District leaders started by taking stock of what was and was not working across schools, weighing each school's particular strengths and challenges. They standardized the data each school collected and how it was analyzed, tracking which students were absent, how many days they missed, and whether patterns emerged. The data showed that absenteeism looked different from community to community, so schools needed tailored approaches built on shared expectations and foundational practices. Leaders also talked with families to understand the barriers driving absences. Each school then formed an attendance team to turn that data into targeted interventions.[9]

Rather than starting from scratch, leaders built attendance into frameworks that schools already had in place, including trauma-informed practices and social and emotional development , through Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). Tier 1 focuses on a welcoming climate and a culture of belonging. Tier 2 fosters positive relationships throughout the building. Tier 3 offers more intensive interventions, such as a student success mentor or navigator who provides daily check-ins, encouragement, and goal-setting, or calming and regulation breaks in low-stimulation spaces that make school feel more comfortable. For chronically absent students, schools also build student success plans in partnership with families, strengthening shared support for the interventions.

Attend to Achieve has also driven an intentional mindset shift from a punitive view of absenteeism to a proactive, positive one. That shift looks different depending on the school and the role, but professional development and direct coaching have built staff knowledge and skills across the board. The result is a shared, districtwide understanding of why this approach matters.



RHODE ISLAND

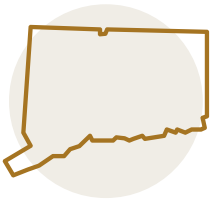
Governor Daniel McKee established the LEARN365RI education policy blueprint in 2023, which prioritizes attendance as one of the top three educational focus areas for the state. Thirty-eight of the state's 39 mayors or municipal leaders signed a compact agreeing to take part in the effort.[10] Since its launch, the state has granted over $11 million across 32 municipalities, which each use funding in unique ways to address LEARN365RI's goals.[11]

As part of this effort, the Governor and the Rhode Island Department of Education created a first-of-its-kind Student Attendance Leaderboard[12] that posts real-time absenteeism data for every school. The dashboard displays the percentage of chronically absent students in every public school in the state and updates nightly.

Principals have their own dashboards that they check every morning. Built-in tools allow them to communicate directly with families. Principals can send text messages from the dashboard to specific parents and caregivers. They can also print out letters from the dashboard to send home in students' backpacks. Principals are able to track a specific student's attendance patterns over multiple years through the dashboard. At the same time, a separate effort from the governor's office sends automated text message reminders to families in their home language.

As part of a statewide effort called AttendanceMattersRI,[13] a local children's hospital shows videos to parents about the importance of attendance just before children are discharged. Businesses funded 25 public service messages on local television, radio, and websites featuring well known Rhode Islanders such as a sports reporter and congressional representatives.

The results are encouraging: in the 2023–2024 school year, Rhode Island's chronic absenteeism dropped from 28.9% to 24.%. Nearly 90% of districts improved, and the attendance gap between students from families with lower and higher incomes narrowed by nine percentage points. A 26-state analysis found that from 2018 to 2025, Rhode Island was the only state for which English learners had lower absenteeism rates than before the COVID-19 pandemic.[14]



CONNECTICUT

Governor Ned Lamont and the Connecticut State Department of Education launched the Learner Attendance and Engagement Program (LEAP) in April 2021 to address worsening chronic absenteeism and disengagement from school following the COVID-19 crisis.[15] LEAP began in 15 districts with high absenteeism rates and partnered with six Regional Education Service Centers to train school personnel and community organization staff as home visitors. The state used $10.7 million of federal COVID-19 relief funding for the program.

Nearly 9,000 chronically absent students received home visits in the program's first phase. Attendance rates rose by nearly 15 percentage points in the six months or more following students' home visits during the 2021-22 school year.[16] In the program's second year, increased attendance persisted, with a particularly strong impact on students in grades nine through twelve.[17] LEAP has since expanded to 25 districts.

Staff composed of school personnel and other community members scheduled voluntary home visits with families of frequently absent students and asked families what support would help increase attendance. Pairs of school staff met with parents or guardians in their homes to build trust and learn from families, rather than enforcing attendance policies. Their conversations focused on each family's strengths and aspirations for their child. Home visitors helped families find additional learning opportunities for their children such as summer and afterschool programs.

District leaders reported that participating in the program offered helpful opportunities to collaborate and learn from other districts. They appreciated that the state offered districts flexibility in how they implemented the program. Home visitors and families reported that participating in the program had several positive effects such as improved family–school relationships and increased student engagement, student achievement, and access to resources for families.[18]

Key Lessons

The bright spots profiled in this brief used a variety of strategies to address chronic absenteeism and strengthen family engagement. All three approaches relied on buy-in from school and community members and rigorous data collection and analysis. Connecticut's home visits used a supportive, problem-solving model rather than a punitive, truancy-driven one. Kansas City Public Schools used data to understand attendance patterns and tailor supports to each school community, while embedding a proactive, relationship-based approach to attendance within existing systems and practices. Rhode Island's approach used positive messaging from a variety of statewide leaders to emphasize that school engagement is important to the whole community.

Instead of asking families why a child is not in school, these strategies sought to understand what children and families needed and what support could help make attendance more consistent and support student success.



Resources

Attendance Works, Early Education Toolkit: Using Attendance Tiers and Data
https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/toolkits/early-education-toolkit/using-attendancetiers-data/

Institute for Education Sciences, Resources for Supporting Student Engagement and Attendance
https://ies.ed.gov/learn/blog/ies-resources-supporting-student-engagement-and-attendance

New America, Chronic Absenteeism: Not Just an Issue for Older Students
https://www.newamerica.org/insights/chronic-absenteeism-not-just-an-issue-for-older-students/

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