



School Social Work Association of America Resolution Statement

Guidance for Supporting Attendance

Every day in the United States over 56 million students attend school ready to learn (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Although attendance is expected, compulsory, and important, this is no small feat for some children and families. When supporting students and families who are experiencing barriers to attendance, it is imperative that school staff take a nonjudgmental, strengths-based, person-in-environment approach. Schools have been given the challenging task of identifying ways to support the whole child to ensure their ability to attend school safe, healthy, and ready to learn (e.g.: nutrition services, after school programming, nursing and social work services). Additionally, schools must reflect on barriers that they create to student attendance, especially those rooted in white supremacy that push Black, Indigenous, and students of color out of schools including disproportionate disciplinary practices, euro-centric curriculum that is not culturally responsive or anti-racist, and institutional and individual practices and microaggressions that create unsafe educational climates for students (Anyong, Zhang, & Hazel, 2016; Johnston-Goodstar & Roholt, 2017).

Schools cannot expect to be able to remove all barriers to attendance without the expertise of school social workers and other interdisciplinary team members. The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) notes that School Social Workers complement and enhance school districts' "ability to meet its academic mission, especially where home, school, and community collaboration is the key to achieving student success (n.d., para. 1)" Therefore they are well suited to take the lead to bring together school staff, students, families, and community organizations to work collaboratively in addressing the needs identified by students and families. This work must be done collaboratively with students and families, taking into consideration the current attendance trends at the national and local level. School Social Workers use Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) to create and implement evidence and practice based interventions across all three tiers of intervention. The prevention work is achieved through Tier 1 interventions that are provided universally and support all members of the school community. Intervention to support members of the school community experiencing barriers to attendance is achieved through selected and intensive interventions at the Tier 2 and 3 levels respectively. Throughout the year, evaluation is crucial to determine the effectiveness of the interventions and to adjust interventions when necessary. The academic school year 2021-2022 poses additional challenges to students, families, schools, and communities. As we re-enter schools and society after months of distance and remote learning, specific actions must be taken as postvention in response to unresolved grief, anxiety, fears and trauma.

Recommended Interventions to Support Student Attendance Using the MTSS Framework

The School Social Work Association of America provides guidance through the National School Social Work Practice Model to address attendance within an MTSS framework. It is crucial to address the issues underlying attendance by:

- Providing evidence-based educational, behavioral, and mental health services.
- Implementing multi-tiered programs and practices, monitoring progress, and evaluating service effectiveness.
- Promoting a school climate and culture conducive to student learning and teaching excellence such as effective and equitable school policies and administrative procedures, enhancing the professional capacity of school personnel, and facilitating engagement between student, family, school, and community
- Ensuring access to school-based and community based resources, such as promoting a continuum of services, mobilizing resources and promoting assets, and providing leadership, interdisciplinary collaboration, systems coordination, professional consultation, and connecting students and families to resource systems.

Examples of school social work multi-tiered system of supports include the following:

Tier I Approaches and Supports:

- Conduct needs assessments to determine resource barriers for the school community and institute appropriate services to prevent those barriers early in the school year (e.g. school resource closet, transportation assistance, homework help).
- Intentional focus on positive school climate and culture (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013).
- Work with staff, families and students to reflect upon the following questions:
 - Do I feel welcomed and safe at school?
 - Is school a joyful place for students and families to be?
- Consider the use of nationally-normed school climate and culture surveys to support planning.
- Psychoeducation for families and professional development for teachers on the statistical validity that attendance has a direct relationship to school performance.
- Intentional relationship-building practices among staff, students, and families.
- 5:1 positive:negative communication from teachers to families and students.
- Restorative practices (e.g. community building circles).
- Examination and reflection of impact of school-wide discipline practices and their correlation with attendance data. For example:
 - Are students who are often absent also often suspended?
 - Is a negative school climate, even for some students, creating a climate in

which students are not welcomed or supported at school?

- Consistent preventive attendance policies and processes.
- Daily greetings from administrators and teachers (Terada, 2018).
- Immediate, personalized response to a daily absence in addition to robo-messages (e.g. text from teacher: “we missed you!”).
- Establish a practice of proactive home visits to establish relationships, assess needs, and build trust early in the school year (Berkowitz & Sabatino, 2017).
- Inclusion of attendance and wellbeing into MTSS/RTI/Student Support Team practices.
- Utilize technology approaches to reduce barriers to access.
- Use of video conferencing to check in with families.
- Allowance of completion of remote or virtual work while barriers to physical attendance.

Tier II Approaches and Supports:

Social supports and outreach

- Check-in/check-out: provides a familiar face every day, a person to connect with; reinforces relationships and connectedness; assists students in being prepared for next steps.
- Phone contact with the family – other than classroom teacher: another voice (administrator, nurse, mental health) to stress the importance of attendance in learning and to offer support.
- Home visit for hard to access families – typically a tier III intervention, hard to access families may appreciate affirmative outreach from the school by way of a visit from school personnel.
- Using a core group of students for social outreach and engagement: addresses social isolation.
- Restorative Practices – address issues of equity, justice and reintegration following disruption.

Physical health supports

- Provide breakfast for students – addresses nutritional needs and prepares students for learning.
- Provide free or reduced price lunch certificates to ensure that students whose family are facing financial difficulties have their nutritional needs met.
- Offer health clinics to provide inoculation and physical evaluations required for attendance or sports participation.
- Collaborate with the local Youth Service Bureau to provide push-in or pull-out group services for students.
- Identify space in your school for a “support zone” where mindfulness and support activities can take place.

Academic supports

- Mentorship programs (both as mentor/mentee) offer learning and advisement opportunities which can be led by school staff, community organizations or business-supported volunteers.
- Work-study programs in the community provide opportunities to learn leadership and responsibility. These can provide exposure to a variety of skills and tasks that help to make the abstract learning (i.e. mathematics) concrete.
- Work-study programs within the school district provide leadership opportunities, contribute to the school environment, allow for experiences offering responsibility, accountability and authority.
- Small group tutoring for subject areas of need that addresses specific curricular and learning needs.

Parent supports

- Parent workshops on topics including study habits, current performance measures, community resources, discipline policies, etc.
- Psychoeducational supports addressing internal disruption, e.g. anxiety or depression.
- Regular outreach to parents through emails, letters, a note sent home with the student, or phone calls – best practice is a minimum of three prosocial interactions around their child’s performance for every one call about problems or needed corrective actions.
- Regular updates to parents on the current curricular focus, expected learning challenges and recommendations for additional subject support, if necessary.
- Access to parent liaisons that match parents culturally and linguistically.
- Access to interpreters/translators to ensure language access for parents and communication between parents and the school.

Tier III Approaches and Supports:

- Establish a protocol for addressing chronic absenteeism of non-attendance of students in your school, state, or school district which may include the following:
 - Identify the child/children engaging in chronic absenteeism according to state, local, and district standards and definitions. In most instances it is missing 10% of required school days.
 - Conduct parent, teacher, and child interviews. Seek information as to the student’s current status, possible functions of school avoidance, ways they have sought to deal with the problem, and possible reasons behind the absenteeism.
 - Hold parent meetings with teachers, administration, and guidance

personnel. Establish a formal and prescriptive plan to improve a child's attendance and share data-based information as to likely consequences of chronic absenteeism.

- Choose school-based interventions and community resources that address the students needs and minimize the barriers to regular attendance which may include one or more of the following:
- Daily check-in/check-out meetings with guidance personnel. Developing a close relationship with a caring adult is one of the strongest predictors of improved behaviors in youth.
- Engage individual counseling to promote improved self-esteem, social skills, use of mindfulness techniques and cognitive behavioral therapy to address anxious and depressive symptoms and encourage healthy lifestyle choices. Adhere to national, state and district policies that relate to crisis interventions and FERPA requirements.
- Addressing gaps in learning due to distractions in the classroom, bullying issues, missed learning opportunities, trauma at home, illness, chronic fatigue from irregular and inconsistent sleep patterns, mental health disorders, and addiction.

Here are some practice resources that are easily accessible:

- Attendance Works. Key Research: *Why Attendance Matters for Achievement and How Interventions Can Help*:
<https://awareness.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/Research2016.pdf>
- Blonsky, H. (2019). *The Dropout Prevention Specialist Workbook*. Oxford Workshop Series.
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School Social Workers have the expertise and training to lead a collaborative effort to address barriers to attendance that centers the experiences and assessment of students and families. This important work requires cultural humility, a systematic MTSS approach, thoughtful assessment of individual and macro barriers, and evaluation of interventions.

SSWAA is proud to offer a network of professionals and tools to support your practice such as the above recommendations. Continue to access the SSWAA website, SSWAA professional development opportunities and SSWAA Board to meet your needs.

References

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