



Improving Attendance Through Human-Centered Leadership Practices

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Regular attendance is a strong predictor of academic success and is also associated with better health and social development (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2024; Attendance Works, 2025). Although there are many ways to address attendance challenges, effective approaches depend on leaders who understand that relationships and connection are essential for success (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Nurlina et al., 2024; Sheldon, 2007). Human-centered leadership practices prioritize empathy, flexibility, and collaboration to understand and address barriers while strengthening the conditions that enable consistent attendance. Rather than relying on a top-down approach, leaders can create conditions that enable school staff, students, and families to engage with and address attendance together.

Human-Centered Practices by Level: Individual, Collective, and Systems

Improving attendance can involve action at individual, collective, and systems levels. Figure 1 defines each level and illustrates how human-centered practices can strengthen efforts within and across them. Across the levels, prioritizing human connection and responsiveness over rigid processes can improve how students and families experience, engage with, and respond to attendance interventions.

Figure 1. Individual-, Collective-, and Systems-Level Actions to Improve Attendance



A leader's beliefs and mindsets shape the messages and impressions students and families receive about attendance. Leaders can reflect on their assumptions and interpretations of absences to better understand how they interpret and respond to absences. This awareness and understanding can help leaders act with greater intention, empathy, and care.



Improving attendance is collective work. It begins with leaders who can work across differences to build trust, understand strengths, and address barriers to attendance while also meaningfully involving other interest holders, such as parents, coaches, and students themselves. Shared ownership and collaboration are essential to bridging perspectives and learning together about how to support attendance in responsive and meaningful ways.



Attendance patterns and interventions are shaped by systems. Leaders can take action within their spheres of influence to adapt systems, routines, and responses so that they are more aligned with the priorities and needs of staff, students, and families, especially those who have not been served well by current systems.

In this brief, these human-centered leadership practices are defined in more detail and paired with reflection questions to help education leaders examine their own mindsets, work in partnership with others, and adapt systems to address the root causes of attendance challenges. Each section also offers practical ideas to try when applying a human-centered approach.



INDIVIDUAL: Examining Mindsets

Human-centered practices	Reflection questions
Strengthening Self-Awareness is the ongoing practice of noticing and understanding how your own experiences, beliefs, and emotions shape the way you interpret situations and respond to others. It includes pausing before reacting and then making a deliberate choice about how to proceed.	› How do my own experiences and beliefs shape how I understand attendance challenges? › How do my assumptions influence whether I focus on strengths or deficits, and how can I shift my interpretation to identify assets that we can build on? › When I am experiencing stress, how do my language and behavior change the environment of my colleagues, my students, or their families?
Understanding Leadership Presence means noticing how your words, actions, and decisions affect others and then making adjustments so that staff, students, and families feel understood, acknowledged, and respected.	› How might my role and related power dynamics influence what students and families tell me about barriers to attendance? › How do I adjust my language or reactions to ensure that others feel safe to share? › How do I build trust with others?

Try It Out

- Before an attendance-related conversation, pause to reflect on the perspectives of the individuals you will be speaking with. Write down the facts, two possible explanations, and two questions you can ask to learn more about their perspectives.
- The next time you are in an intense attendance conversation, take a moment to breathe deeply or practice a mental reset. Notice how it changes the interaction.
- Choose one or two students or families you do not know well and engage with them intentionally through informal, positive interactions outside of attendance conversations.





COLLECTIVE: Working Together

Human-centered practices	Reflection questions
Bridging Diverse Perspectives involves engaging in conversations to understand others' experiences and viewpoints, offering multiple ways for people to explore and share about attendance challenges, and taking time to discuss the nuances that impact student attendance.	› What burdens are being placed on families and/or staff to address attendance challenges without recognition of conditions that are outside their control? › Who is most impacted by attendance challenges, and how are we currently engaging with them to explore root causes and solutions? › What individual, family, community, or cultural strengths can support attendance, and how are we currently leveraging them in our strategies for supporting students?
Learning Together means collaboratively examining attendance successes and setbacks and continuously seeking additional data or feedback to better inform decisions.	› What is one thing we've tried that has improved attendance? What did we learn? › Whose perspectives are missing from our understanding of why students are absent, and how can we bring those perspectives in? › What data do we review together (quantitative and qualitative), and how do we use those data for improvement rather than for accountability or the assignment of blame?

Try It Out

- Review available quantitative and qualitative data (e.g., attendance, academic, school climate survey data) to identify two or three priority questions. Then, work with your team to develop a plan to investigate further and deepen your understanding of attendance patterns.
- Use a root cause analysis tool, such as a [5 Whys](#) or a [Fishbone Diagram](#), to identify why students are missing school. Anchor the analysis in lived experience by incorporating staff, student, and family perspectives gathered through conversations, interviews, or focus groups.
- As a team, choose one new strategy to strengthen connections with students and families who have been difficult to reach. Use the strategy consistently for a set period of time, and then reflect on what you are learning and how your approach could improve.





SYSTEMS: Creating the Right Conditions

Human-centered practices	Reflection questions
Adapting Routines, Policies, and Practices involves reviewing and adjusting attendance policies or routines to better understand and meet the needs of students and families.	› How do our current approaches to tracking and addressing attendance shape the experiences of students and families? Where might they create barriers? › How do I create conditions whereby staff, students, and families feel seen, heard, and supported without judgment? › How can we foster a school climate that reinforces student connection and encourages consistent attendance? › How are roles and responsibilities structured to ensure consistent and coordinated supports for students and families? Where might we need improvement?
Fostering Transparent Communication and Ongoing Improvement involves sharing information, goals, and expectations clearly and consistently; inviting honest feedback; and using what you learn to strengthen practices and outcomes over time.	› How can we test attendance improvement ideas and learn what works for whom and under what conditions? › How are we making our attendance goals and strategies visible, and how are we inviting feedback? › In what ways do we make it possible for students, family members, and staff to share feedback about attendance processes and interventions without fear of shame?

Try It Out

- Choose one attendance improvement strategy to try that is responsive to staff, students, or family input. Determine what change(s) you hope to see, and set a timeline to check in, review progress, and reflect on results.
- In your communication about attendance, include opportunities for gathering feedback and have a plan for how feedback will be used. Be sure to close the loop by sharing back how input informed a decision or change.
- Create opportunities to regularly share about attendance work. This could be set time in existing meetings, a section of a newsletter or website, or a dashboard of activities and outcomes. Include ways for families to respond with their feedback, such as an email (that is checked regularly) or a QR code linking to an anonymous survey.





In Conclusion

A human-centered approach to attendance calls on educational leaders to cultivate empathy and trust and to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of staff, students, and families. By engaging those most impacted, working with them to explore data and design solutions, leaders can identify root causes, elevate perspectives, and create responsive supports to overcome attendance barriers.

References

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