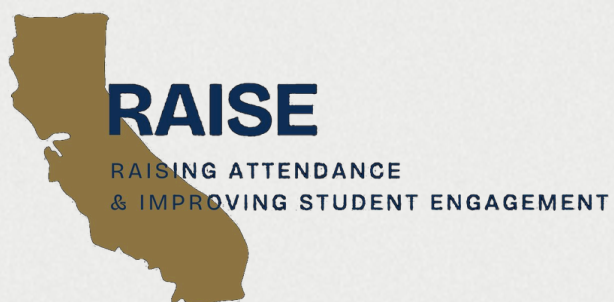




FOUNDATIONAL PRACTICES TO REDUCE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

A relationship-centered approach to attendance for district and school leaders

FOUNDATIONAL CHANGE PACKAGE 2.0 · JUNE 2026

PUBLIC VERSION

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INTRODUCTION

Chronic absenteeism is one of the clearest signs that a student is disconnected from school — and one of the strongest early warnings for academic risk.^{1,2} While there is no shortage of guidance on how to address it, the multifaceted nature of the problem can make the volume of suggested strategies feel overwhelming.



"I've read all the guidance and I still don't know where to start."

— L. TAYLOR, SEASONED MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

This change package is designed to **help teams start**. It highlights *four foundational practices* that schools and districts can put in place right away — while building a deeper understanding of local patterns and root causes.

These practices are just the beginning. They provide concrete routines to help teams "see their system," surface meaningful insights, and create momentum. From there, the work can deepen — focusing on the specific barriers facing particular student groups and testing targeted responses that fit local context.

What is a change package?

A **change package** is a focused set of evidence-based practices designed to help teams jumpstart improvement on a specific outcome. Change packages don't offer a step-by-step script — they are meant to be tested, adapted, and refined in local contexts. As the RAISE community tests these foundational practices, this package will evolve, building a practical knowledge base other schools and districts can draw on.

Where these practices came from

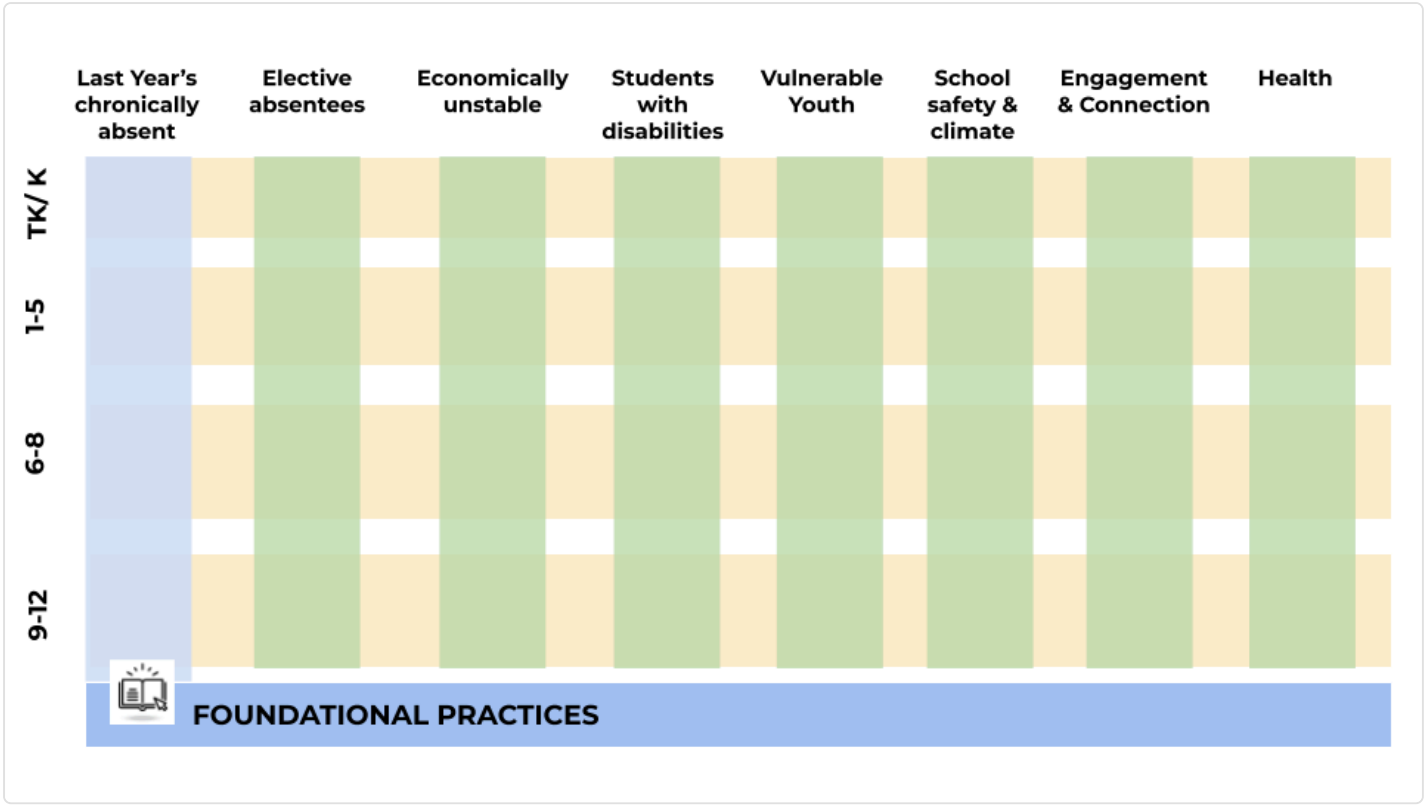
The practices in this package were drawn from ["bright spot" schools and districts](#)³ — places that have measurably reduced chronic absenteeism and have evidence to show for it. Across interviews with these schools, four practices consistently emerged as foundational.

The package is also grounded in two findings from research: the reasons for student absences are highly individualized,⁴ and a student who was chronically absent last year is very likely to be chronically absent again.⁴ These insights underscore the importance of combining proactive routines with attention to root causes.

INTRODUCTION · CONTINUED

Student and family voice—a central principle throughout this work—has also been integrated throughout the practices.

Finally, this package was designed with a sequenced approach in mind. Chronic absence is a complex, multifaceted challenge. These are high-leverage practices that can jumpstart progress — particularly for students with moderate attendance issues — while making specific aspects of the challenge visible so teams can decide where to focus next. Future change packages will focus on changes to address the needs of specific groups of students (see figure below).



This isn't a checklist. It's a shift from *compliance* to *connection*.

WHAT CHANGES

A **compliance frame** treats attendance as a rule to enforce: track absences, notify families, escalate through SART/SARB, apply consequences. A **relational frame** treats attendance as a signal of connection — notice who's missing, get curious about why, respond with care, and use what you learn to remove barriers. Both frames still require accurate data and follow-through. The relational frame doesn't mean abandoning accountability — it means leading with connection and using systems in service of students rather than in place of relationships.

COMPLIANCE MINDSET	RELATIONAL MINDSET
"Why aren't they here?" (with frustration)	"What's getting in the way?" (with curiosity)
Letters, calls, and meetings escalate toward consequences	Letters, calls, and meetings build toward understanding
Attendance is the student/family's responsibility	Attendance is a shared responsibility across the system
The goal is documentation	The goal is connection that leads to action
Families are informed	Families are partners

WHAT THIS SOUNDS LIKE

When messaging is relational, it sounds like this — language a school is willing to say out loud, to the people it's about.



TO STUDENTS

You matter here. We notice when you're here, we notice when you're not, and we want to know what's going on when something gets in the way.



TO FAMILIES

We are your partners. When your child is absent, we'll reach out to understand, not to blame. When you have questions or concerns, we want to hear from you.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

These practices rest on a set of guiding principles that shape what it means to take a **relational approach** to attendance.

1 Relationships first

Trusting relationships — between and among students, families, and school staff — are the foundation for showing up and staying engaged. Belonging and trust are as essential as logistics.

2 Center student & family voice

Every absence has a story. We begin by listening with curiosity and respect, recognizing that students and families bring essential insight. Over time, the goal is shared problem-solving.

3 Shared responsibility

Attendance is a system responsibility, not an individual failure. No single actor — school, district, family, or agency — can solve this alone.

4 Stay curious & open

Treat attendance as a learning problem, not just a technical one. Question assumptions, and focus on understanding what's truly getting in the way.

Keep these principles visible — name them out loud, return to them when a routine starts to feel rote or when a hard case has the team stuck. Use them as a north star: when a decision gets hard, the principle is what points the way.

THE FOUR FOUNDATIONAL PRACTICES AT A GLANCE

A relationship-centered approach to attendance for district and school leaders

1

DISTRICT

District Focus

1a Set the tone early. Open the year with clear, consistent messaging to staff, students, and families about why attendance matters and what a relational approach looks like.

1b Resource the work. Dedicate time, staff, and funding to site-level efforts.

1c Connect schools to each other. Build routines for cross-site learning and shared problem-solving.

1d Make attendance a standing agenda item. Review attendance data at key district meetings (e.g., cabinet meetings, monthly principal meetings).

2

SCHOOL

Warm Communication

2a Align beginning-of-the-year messaging. Ensure school messaging to students and families about attendance is consistent with district messaging.

2b Audit and warm up family messages. Review current letters, texts, and calls with families who've struggled with attendance. Make sure messages feel caring and invite a response.

2c Communicate number of absences to students and families quarterly. Raise awareness of attendance patterns to prompt action.

2d Welcome back students with caring, consistent language. Use shared school-wide language to greet students returning from an absence.

3

DISTRICT

First Faces

3a Prepare staff who greet students and families daily. Provide staff — front office, bus drivers, attendance clerks, custodial staff, etc. — shared language, training, and ongoing support for building relational connections.

3b Involve students and families in the work. Gather input from those most impacted to improve strategies and interactions over time.

4

DISTRICT AND SCHOOL

Data-Informed Supportive Outreach

4a Maintain an up-to-date, by-student outreach list. Create and update a working list of students needing follow-up. Decide threshold and/or any focus groups.

4b Establish and prepare an outreach team. Identify who will lead and participate; support them to hold warm, relational check-ins with students and families.

4c Meet weekly or biweekly. Review the list, identify who will reach out to whom, and document next steps.

4d Connect and engage with students and families with warmth and curiosity. Listen to understand barriers and problem-solve together.

4e Document reasons for absences and analyze. Capture reasons for absences and look for patterns.

DISTRICT FOCUS

District leaders establish a district-wide focus and promote a relational approach to attendance.

-
- 1a** **Set the tone early.** Open the year with clear, consistent messaging to staff, students, and families about why attendance matters and what a relational approach looks like.

 - 1b** **Resource the work.** Dedicate time, staff, and funding to site-level efforts.

 - 1c** **Connect schools to each other.** Build routines for cross-site learning and shared problem-solving.

 - 1d** **Make attendance a standing agenda item.** Review attendance data at key district meetings — e.g., cabinet meetings, monthly principal meetings.
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DISTRICT FOCUS

District leaders establish a district-wide focus and promote a relational approach to attendance.

WHY?

When district leaders clearly name attendance as a priority, they signal a commitment — and activate the attention, resources, and alignment needed to make progress. District leadership plays a key role in ensuring a relational approach to attendance — shifting the frame from compliance to connection, understanding, and support.

WHO?

Superintendent, cabinet, principal supervisors, communications lead.

WHAT DO WE DO?

1a Set the tone early

Open the year with clear, consistent messaging to staff and families about why attendance matters and what a relational approach looks like.

WHAT

- **Clear.** The message names attendance as a priority, explains why, and tells people what to expect.
- **Consistent.** The same core messages show up across channels — superintendent communications, principal meetings, back-to-school events, family letters, social media.
- **Relational.** The message says how the district will approach attendance — leading with connection, curiosity, and partnership rather than compliance and consequences.

CORE MESSAGE FOR STAFF

Attendance is a priority this year, and we're taking a relational approach. Start by listening, assume good intent, and treat every absence as a signal worth understanding.

Attendance is a system responsibility — and no single actor can solve this alone. We will work together across our entire district to support students and their families.

STEPS

1. A senior leader from the district messages a shift from compliance to connection with all principals before the school year begins.
2. Gather all beginning-of-year communications.
3. Test them against “clear, consistent, relational.”
4. Revise language to communicate a relational approach and share with staff.
5. Share with families during the first week of school through various channels.
6. Hold the focus.

1b Resource the work

Dedicate time, staff, and funding to site-level efforts.

WHAT

- **Named district-level leadership.** Someone at the district has attendance work as a clearly assigned part of their role, with protected time.
- **Concrete structural adjustments at sites.** The district has made at least one real change — to schedules, caseloads, staffing, or funded positions — that creates protected time for site-level attendance work.

STEPS

1. Name the district lead.
 2. Take stock of who is already doing attendance work and how much time they have for it.
 3. Create protected time for school-site staff.
 4. Check on the time allocation mid-year and debrief at year-end.
-

1c Connect schools to each other

Build routines for cross-site learning and shared problem-solving.

WHAT

- **Recurring meetings where schools share what they are learning — not just what they are counting.** Cross-site learning is not a progress report on attendance rates. It's a structured conversation about what schools are trying, what they're seeing, and what's getting in the way. These happen on a predictable rhythm (at minimum quarterly), have clear facilitation, and invite real talk — not performance.
- **District decisions that visibly respond to what schools are saying.** Cross-site learning only has value if the district acts on what it hears. Schools need to be able to trace decisions back to what they raised — resource shifts, policy changes, messaging updates, or removed obstacles. Without that feedback loop, sites stop investing.

STEPS

1. Schedule cross-site meetings and location.
 2. Follow a set protocol with clear time allocations and clear roles.
 3. Facilitate for learning, not reporting.
 4. Act on what is shared within the next quarter.
-

1d Make attendance a standing agenda item

Review attendance data at key district meetings (e.g., cabinet meetings, monthly principal meetings).

WHAT

- **Attendance data shows up regularly in the rooms that matter.** Cabinet meetings, monthly principal meetings, leadership team check-ins, board updates — a standing agenda item, tied to the district's ongoing work.

STEPS

1. Put attendance on the standing agenda for cabinet and/or principal meetings.
2. Build one simple, repeatable display.
3. Share an additional display focused on a specific slice of the data.
4. Share student and family story.

WARM COMMUNICATION

Communication with students and families about absences is warm, consistent, and two-way.

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- 2a** **Align beginning-of-year messaging.** Ensure school messaging to students and families about attendance is consistent with district messaging.
-
- 2b** **Audit and warm up family messages.** Review current letters, texts, and calls — especially with families who've struggled with attendance. Make sure messages feel caring and invite a response.
-
- 2c** **Communicate the number of absences quarterly** to students and families — to raise awareness of attendance patterns and prompt action.
-
- 2d** **Welcome students back with caring, consistent language.** Use shared school-wide language to greet students returning from an absence.
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WARM COMMUNICATION

Communication with students and families about absences is warm, consistent, and two-way.

WHY?

Norms have changed and misunderstandings are common.

- Families often underestimate their student's absences by half.
- Most families believe their child's attendance is average or better.
- Many families think missing a few school days monthly doesn't affect learning.

Trust is built through warm, two-way communication. When communication with families feels respectful, comes from someone they know, and invites them into partnership, it builds trust.

WHO?

Superintendent or designee, communications staff, school leaders, attendance officers, counselors, students, families.

WHAT DO WE DO?

2a Align beginning-of-year messaging

Ensure school messaging to students and families about attendance is consistent with district messaging.

WHAT

- **Clear, consistent, and relational messages.** Beginning-of-year communications explain why attendance matters, set a threshold for concern, offer practical guidance about when to keep a child home, and tell families what to expect from the school.
- **Alignment across levels.** School messaging matches what the district is saying. Mixed signals between district and school communications erode trust before the year even begins.

STEPS

1. Ensure that beginning-of-year messages are “clear, consistent, and relational.”
2. Include key information.
3. Reach families through at least two channels, in their languages — with a named person to reach and student voice where possible.

2b Audit and warm up family messages

Review current letters, texts, and calls — especially with families who've struggled with attendance. Make sure messages feel caring and invite a response.

WHAT

- **Revised messages that feel caring and two-way.** Review every communication a family might receive for tone, clarity, and whether it invites a response.
- **The goal:** A relational approach holds through the whole year, not just the first letter.

STEPS

1. Walk through a year.
2. Check tone against a simple standard.
3. Test with a few families for feedback, especially those who have had attendance challenges.
4. Revise language to feel welcoming and two-way.
5. Coordinate across staff to avoid message overload.

2c Communicate number of absences quarterly

Raise awareness of attendance patterns to prompt action.

WHAT

- **A direct, empathetic message with the actual absence count.** Families receive their child's total accumulated absences at least three times a year — stated clearly with a specific action they can take.

STEPS

1. Pull each student's accumulated absence count quarterly and include it in communication.
2. Draft tiered messages aligned to those thresholds.
3. Communicate in a way that lands.
4. Track who responded — and hand non-responses to the outreach team for warm follow-up.

2d Welcome students back with caring, consistent language

No matter which adult a student encounters first, the message is consistent: you were missed, we're glad you're back, we're here to help you catch up.

WHAT

- **A warm greeting that every staff member uses with returning students.** The message should be consistent no matter who a student encounters first.
- **Connects to First Faces (Practice 3):** First Faces and a classroom welcome are two halves of the same handoff — the office, the bus, the gate sets the tone for the arrival; the teacher completes it at the classroom door, especially when a student is returning after an absence.

PRINCIPLES TO ANCHOR THE LANGUAGE

- **Lead with welcome, not interrogation.**
- **Separate welcome from logistics.** Makeup work, tardy slips, and documentation are real, but they shouldn't be the first thing a returning student navigates.
- **Avoid public accounting.** Conversations about the absence happen privately.
- **Make re-entry routine, not remarkable.** A small, predictable, warm acknowledgment students can count on.

SAY THIS — NOT THAT

INSTEAD OF	SAY
"Where were you?"	"Good to see you! Welcome back."
"You missed a lot."	"Here's what we covered. Let's figure out where to start."
"Nice of you to join us..."	(nothing public — a private "glad you're here" works better)
"You need to bring a note."	"Welcome back. When you have a minute, stop by the office."
"Another absence?"	"I noticed you've been out — just checking in. How are things?"

STEPS

1. Communicate why this is important.
2. Draft shared language.
3. Test against tough circumstances for staff to use as problem-solving and revision.
4. Provide staff with agreed-upon sentence starters or a reminder sheet.

FIRST FACES

Ensure that "First Faces" provide a warm welcome to the building.

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- 3a** **Prepare staff who greet students and families daily.** Provide front office, bus drivers, attendance clerks, custodial staff, and others with shared language, training, and ongoing support for building relational connections.
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- 3b** **Involve students and families in the work.** Gather input from those most impacted to improve strategies and interactions over time.
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FIRST FACES

Ensure that “First Faces” provide a warm welcome to the building.

WHY?

A student’s sense of belonging is shaped long before they reach a classroom — at the bus stop, the front gate, the office, the hallway. First Faces are anyone students and families regularly encounter in those transitions — often classified staff, doing relational work whether or not anyone has named it that way. A single warm interaction can tip the day toward showing up again tomorrow; a cold or shaming one tips it the other way.

WHO?

First Faces are also the adults families see most. When those interactions feel warm and respectful, families pick up the phone, show up, and partner on problems. When they feel cold or judgmental, families pull back — and attendance work gets harder. This practice is about two things: recognizing this work as central rather than peripheral, and equipping the people doing it with the support, training, and authority to do it well.

WHAT DO WE DO?

3a Prepare staff who greet students & families daily

Provide front office, bus drivers, attendance clerks, custodial staff, and others with shared language, training, and ongoing support for building relational connections.

WHAT

- **A prepared First Face greets students and families warmly and predictably, and knows and uses names.** They welcome returning students with “good to see you” before asking for a note, explain things in plain language, and know which families to offer extra encouragement to. They have a clear way to pass along what they notice — a withdrawn student, a stressed family, an emerging pattern — so everyday observations become early intervention.

STEPS

1. Name First Faces as core work in district communications and at principal meetings.
2. Build shared materials once at the district level.
3. District provides PD for classified staff.
4. Act on the patterns that emerge from family and student experiences (3b).

3b Involve students & families in the work

Gather input from those most impacted to improve strategies and interactions over time.

WHAT

- **Structured ways to learn about student and family experiences.** When we center their experiences, we understand their needs more deeply and can adjust our strategies accordingly. When they see their feedback lead to real changes, trust grows. When they help co-create those changes, the impact is greater still.

PRINCIPLES OF THIS APPROACH

- **Stay curious and open to learning.** Question your assumptions.
- **Transparency, humility, and collaboration over convincing or selling ideas.** Don't push pre-conceived notions or pre-designed solutions.
- **Build the conditions for honest feedback.**
- **Prioritize hearing from and involving students and families who have been most impacted by the current system.**
- **Let families and students know the impact of their feedback or involvement.**

STEPS · DISTRICTS CAN SUPPORT SCHOOLS BY

1. Helping choose and supporting schools to implement one or more feedback strategies.
2. Facilitating collective sense-making of information from stakeholders.
3. Updating First Faces professional learning materials.
4. Supporting “refresher” learning sessions for First Faces with what's been learned from and with students and families.

DATA-INFORMED SUPPORTIVE OUTREACH

A maintained by-student list, a regular team meeting, and check-ins that lead with curiosity — not absence counts.

4a **Maintain an up-to-date, by-student outreach list.** Create and update a working list of students needing follow-up; decide thresholds and any focus groups.

4b **Establish and prepare an outreach team.** Identify who will lead and participate; support them to hold warm, relational check-ins with students and families.

4c **Meet weekly or biweekly.** Review the list, identify who will reach out to whom, and document next steps.

4d **Connect and engage with warmth and curiosity.** Listen to understand barriers and problem-solve together.

4e **Document reasons for absences and analyze.** Capture reasons and look for patterns over time.



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DATA-INFORMED SUPPORTIVE OUTREACH

A maintained by-student list, a regular team meeting, and check-ins that lead with curiosity — not absence counts.

WHY?

- Early intervention can prevent chronic absence — but only if schools have the data to quickly and regularly identify students at risk.
- Warm and empathetic check-ins let students and families know they are missed while surfacing the underlying reasons for absence — leading to more effective, targeted support.
- Consistent documentation of reasons for absences turns individual absences into school-wide patterns — shifting the response from case management to systemic problem-solving.

WHO?

Data lead, school principal or designee, attendance lead, attendance clerk, counselor, student support office, community liaison, community schools lead, social worker.

WHAT DO WE DO?

4a Maintain an up-to-date, by-student outreach list

Create and update a working list of students needing follow-up. Decide threshold and/or any focus groups.

WHAT

- **A single shared document, updated weekly or biweekly.** One list, one owner, one location — with team members assigned, reasons for absence, and supports provided.

STEPS

1. Name a designated person(s) to pull the attendance data from SIS and create/update the list.
2. Set a consistent time weekly or biweekly to create/update the list — and protect it.
3. Build the list as one shared document with the structure the team needs to act.
4. Set the thresholds for adding and removing students from the list.

4b Establish and prepare an outreach team

Identify who will lead and participate; support them to hold warm, relational check-ins with students and families.

WHAT

- **A small team with the right mix of roles and a named team lead, ready to engage in warm, relational outreach.** Team lead owns the routine: calls the meeting, keeps the list current, maintains the rhythm. Other members chosen strategically — those who have access to data, strong relationships with families, authority to act.

STEPS

1. Name an Outreach Team Lead.
2. Build a small team (3–5 people) around the work.
3. Prepare the team to conduct effective, relational check-ins.

4c Meet weekly or biweekly

Review the list, identify who will reach out to whom, and document next steps.

WHAT

- **A consistent, protected meeting time with a set protocol.** On the calendar before the year starts, with interruptions proactively minimized. Each meeting follows the same structure: learning from interactions since last time, list review, and decisions about who follows up with whom. Updates are short, action steps are specific.

STEPS

1. **Set a consistent meeting time and protect it.**
 2. **Follow a set protocol with clear time allocations and roles.**
-

4d Check in with students and families with warmth and curiosity

Listen to understand barriers and problem-solve together.

WHAT

- **An empathy-first approach to checking in with students and families facing attendance challenges.** Prepare and support the adults doing outreach so check-ins are warm and surface root causes. Document what you learn so the team can focus improvement where it impacts the most students.

STEPS

1. **Find a time and place — 10–15 minutes, based on their schedule.**
 2. **Use a common check-in protocol.**
 3. **Reflect and refine over time.**
-

4e Document reasons for absence and analyze

Capture reasons for absences and look for patterns.

WHAT

- **A process for surfacing root causes and patterns behind absences.** Without this, we make assumptions or see only symptoms rather than uncovering actual barriers.

STEPS

1. **Document reasons for absences in the by-student outreach list.**
2. **Use a small shared taxonomy alongside detailed notes.**
3. **Review the list for patterns monthly at the team meeting.**
4. **Share patterns during cross-site meetings (1c).**

RELATIONSHIPS, NOT REWARDS.⁷

Many schools have responded to concerns about chronic absenteeism by ramping up incentives — prizes, parties, and privileges — intended to draw students back. The intention is caring. But research and practice point to a fundamental mismatch: **the primary causes of absence cannot be solved with rewards.**

The RAISE Network is committed to a relational approach that builds the trust needed to understand and address what students actually need. Instead of creating and managing extensive extrinsic reward programs, we believe resources are better spent on strengthening students' connections to school and rekindling their joy in learning.

Why incentives fall short

They don't address root causes. The most common drivers of absence — illness, transportation gaps, housing instability, economic hardship — have little to do with individual motivation and cannot be addressed with prizes.

They exclude the most vulnerable. Classwide incentives or rewards contingent on a particular attendance rate publicly shame and undermine belonging for students who miss school for legitimate health or family reasons.

They send the wrong message. When students are rewarded for showing up, they learn the reason to attend is the reward — not the learning and relationships school provides.

They consume precious time and energy. Managing reward programs diverts staff attention from understanding and addressing the real reasons why students are absent.

Their effects don't last. Research shows incentive-driven behavior returns to baseline once rewards are removed. Pre-announced attendance awards have shown no impact; surprise awards have even reduced later attendance among already-present students.

What to do instead

Address systemic barriers directly. Use outreach to identify what students need — transportation, health access, supplies, stability — and connect families to resources before absence becomes chronic.

Create daily rituals and joy. Morning circles, personalized greetings, student leadership roles, and engaging learning experiences make school itself the reward — accessible to every student.

Assign a trusted adult anchor. Pair students with a go-to adult for brief, warm check-ins. Sustained mentoring relationships reduce absenteeism, especially for older students.

Maintain warm family touchpoints. Regular positive contact — texts, calls, home visits — builds the trust families need to share what's actually getting in the way.

Cultivate peer connection. Students come to school to see their friends. Clubs, affinity groups, buddy systems, and peer-led routines give students a community they don't want to miss.

“*The central challenge is not how to motivate students to show up, but how to build the relationships and routines that help educators understand and respond to what students need. An absence is not just a behavior to correct — it is a signal to investigate and act on.*

— MEYER & FRANKOWSKI (2026)

Rethinking attendance incentives shifts the focus from individual motivation to the environments schools create. Students are more likely to attend when they feel safe, seen, connected, and engaged in meaningful learning. Strong relationships with students and families also help educators identify and respond to barriers such as transportation, health needs, or housing instability. For more examples of relational approaches in action, see the article ["Want to Raise Attendance at Your School? Prioritize Relationships, Not Rewards."](#)

❓ QUESTIONS TO BRING TO YOUR TEAM

- 1 *What role have incentives typically played in our attendance improvement strategy? What barriers to attendance do our incentives address, if any?*
- 2 *How do we know if and how well incentives are working, and for whom? What might be the unintended consequences of the incentives we offer?*
- 3 *If we stopped giving attendance incentives and rewards starting next week or next month, what would we predict might happen? What data would tell us if our predictions were correct?*
- 4 *How much time do we spend talking about, planning for, and obtaining and executing incentive plans? What is something more impactful that we could do if we invested this energy elsewhere?*
- 5 *Which of the relationship-based approaches recommended here resonate most? What new or different ideas do these suggestions spark?*

A BEGINNING, NOT AN ENDPOINT.

These four practices are foundational, not exhaustive. They are designed to help schools and districts *start* — to put concrete routines in place that surface what's actually happening for students and families, and to build momentum for the deeper work that follows.

As the RAISE community tests these practices, this change package will continue to evolve. Future packages will go deeper on specific student groups and the barriers they face — informed by what schools surface through Practices 1c, 3b, and 4c. The system gets smarter when sites share what they learn.

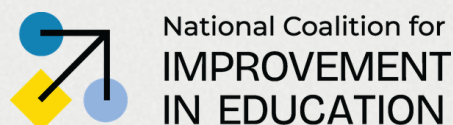
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RAISE IS AN INITIATIVE OF



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 Foundational Practices to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism
This is a working document. Feedback welcome.