The purpose of this document is to support district efforts to promote the wellbeing of students, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This document replaces the January 2021 **Promoting Student Engagement, Learning, Wellbeing and Safety** document and includes guidance previously released by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), as well as new and updated resources to help districts develop, strengthen, and implement comprehensive systems for engaging with students and their families, connecting students and families with additional supports they may need, and promoting student safety. While this document contains many resources and suggestions, it is not exhaustive and is meant to give school and district leaders ideas for building, strengthening, and/or adapting policies and practices in these areas.

This document also includes racial equity and cultural responsiveness considerations to support districts in ensuring the wellbeing of all our students. “Equity-Related Questions” are provided in each section for school leaders and teams to consider while developing and/or revising systems to support students.

In fall 2021, **all districts and schools will be required to be in-person, full-time, 5 days a week.** We have included some special considerations for students, who in exceptional cases (e.g., students with medical conditions, students enrolling in statewide or single district virtual schools, students enrolling in an approved district virtual program), continue to learn remotely. These recommendations are included as examples as they relate to engaging students. Please find more extensive information about remote learning [here](https://www.doe.mass.edu/cmvs/).

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Please contact achievement@doe.mass.edu with suggestions and/or questions.

# Engaging and Connecting with Students and Families

Engaging and connecting with students and families is ongoing and systemic work that is foundational to schools delivering high-quality educational experiences in safe and supportive learning environments. DESE offers numerous initiatives, grant programs and resources to support this work in schools and districts.

This section includes suggestions, tools, and resources focused primarily on building and implementing systems of universal (Tier 1) supports for all students (and adults). The strategies suggested are by no means exhaustive but intended to provide school and district teams with ideas for strengthening efforts, particularly as they consider the impacts of the pandemic and plan for reengagement and recovery. Schools and districts are encouraged to work collaboratively with students, families, school personnel and community partners to develop policies and practices that are shared and broadly accessible.

This section also aligns with Priority 1 (Foster a sense of belonging and partnership among students and families), outlined in the Department’s [Acceleration Roadmap](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/roadmap/). The Acceleration Roadmap is a tool for teachers and leaders in Massachusetts to support acceleration of student learning in the 2021–22 school year. It provides a focused and phased approach to supporting students as they return to school in fall 2021.

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| Engaging Families as Partners |
| **Resources for Engaging Families as Partners[[1]](#footnote-2):*** [Strengthening Partnerships: A Framework for Prenatal Through Young Adulthood Family Engagement Framework](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/family-engagement-framework.pdf) (DESE webpage)
* [Massachusetts Family, School, and Community Partnership Fundamentals - Version 2.0](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/fscp-fundamentals.docx) (DESE webpage)
* [Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family–School Partnerships](https://www2.ed.gov/documents/family-community/partners-education.pdf)
* [Engaging Families Using the MTSS Model: Love in the Time of COVID](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1p6FnPkU2kd0A9aieS4UA-B45MDNe2tQkVtUzora7x70/edit?usp=sharing)
* [Mass General Hospital COVID-19 Mental Health Resources for Families and Children](https://www.massgeneral.org/psychiatry/guide-to-mental-health-resources/families-and-children)
* [Engaging Families in Social Emotional Learning - Edutopia](https://www.edutopia.org/video/engaging-families-social-and-emotional-learning-strategies)
* [Learning Heroes](https://bealearninghero.org/)
* [MassSupport](http://www.masssupport.org)

**Sample Ideas and Strategies*** ***Maintain strong, consistent, ongoing, two-way communication with families using culturally and linguistically responsive practices.*** Engage with families and caregivers to create a safe space and to provide multiple and equitable opportunities for them to voice concerns, questions, needs, insights, and ideas. Many schools and districts experimented with new methods for communicating and connecting with families during the pandemic. Rather than “return to the way things were,” take time to reflect on and identify successful practices to carry forward and build in opportunities to gather input and learn from families about their experiences with communication with the school. Document these practices in a communications plan and make the communications plan readily available to staff. Review the communications plan annually to determine if updates are needed, and make the plans readily available for ongoing reference.
	+ Start with a conversation with each family about the best way to communicate ([Sample Questions for Individualized Family Communication Plan](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/familyplan.docx)s provides example protocols).
	+ Use multiple and equitable strategies to connect with families (email, phone, text, social media, online tools, etc.).
	+ Ensure that all families know how they can communicate in their preferred ways (e.g., primary language, chosen method, etc.) with educators.
	+ Consider continuing to use strategies employed during remote and hybrid learning, for example: offering Zoom meetings, posting short videos with information or quick tutorials parents and caregivers can watch on their own time, holding online office hours, providing teachers with Google Voice numbers, collaborative communication using team-based text chains/chats focused on an individual child and their family, etc.
* ***Gather information and feedback about family strengths and support needs.***Use various methods and tools to gather valuable feedback from students and families about student’s and families’ social, emotional, and physical well-being and what families need to help students stay engaged in learning throughout the year. The pandemic underscored the importance of the partnership between educators and families and the critical role families play in supporting student learning. Families have also had an unprecedented window into the internal workings of the classroom and instruction. Schools can harness these experiences and momentum of the pandemic period to continue to keep families involved. Without overburdening families, check in with them at differing time intervals to talk about any evolving successes and needs related to their child’s learning experience, what family members need to support their child, and the school’s or district’s family engagement efforts.
* ***Set common expectations among staff about roles and responsibilities to support families.*** Establish policies and protocols and provide training and support for all school personnel to understand the role they play and the impact this collaboration has on effectively supporting student learning.
	+ Identify schoolwide expectations for connecting with families (and providers at other settings and programs, where applicable), when families have access to staff, return communication response times, and other responsibilities. Clearly identify who will play lead roles for communicating and following up on social emotional, mental health, attendance, or other concerns, and with whom.
	+ Provide tools (e.g., messaging templates, talking points, professional development, resources) that facilitate engagement with families in welcoming and culturally and linguistically responsive ways.
	+ Identify ways bilingual/multilingual staff or parent volunteers will engage with families who prefer communicating in a language other than English. Communicate when and how translation and interpretation services can be made available and when they are required.
	+ Provide families with clear, easy-to-understand information about goals related to their child’s academic and social emotional development and resources they can use to support their child at home (e.g., easily accessible technology support available in home languages).
	+ Offer opportunities for family members to engage as partners with teachers and the school more broadly. Document family engagement efforts and information gathered about family strengths, needs, and communication preferences. Use the data regularly and in accordance with privacy considerations, to work with stakeholders to improve family engagement strategies and identify when additional supports may be needed.
	+ For students and families with more intensive needs, school staff should work in close collaboration with the student and family, and with their consent, other community partners and family members/relatives to ensure there is a proactive system in place to support the student. This system may include, among other things, regular and direct interaction with the student and family, follow-up on the effectiveness of supportive services, and clear lines of communication, and accountability. See [*Supporting More Intensive Needs*](#_Supporting_Students’_More) for additional recommendations and resources.
* ***Collaborate with community leaders and connectors.*** Partnership with leaders, including individual parents and community organizations, can significantly boost a district’s or school’s ability to reach and engage with all families. Schools can identify people and organizations in the community that families already feel connected and comfortable with and ask them if they can support outreach, host some family-school activities, or provide supportive services.
* ***Connect families to resources.*** Districts and schools often play an important role connecting families with community-based resources. Schools can facilitate referrals to connect families with [Family Resource Centers (FRCs)](https://www.frcma.org/locations) and other local organizations that can help families access supports and services, reduce stress, and strengthen their working relationship with the school or district. Families and educators can call [Mass 2-1-1](https://mass211.org/), a 24/7 service for information about critical health and human service needs, and access [HandholdMA.org](https://handholdma.org/), a new family-friendly website designed for parents of school-aged children in Massachusetts who are worried about their child’s mental health. The [MassSupport](http://www.masssupport.org) Network provides community outreach and support services to residents of all ages statewide in response to COVID-19. When sharing these resources, staff should be sensitive to the stigma sometimes associated with mental health and other services. Share the resources with all families, so individuals do not feel singled out. This approach may also support families that you did not realize could benefit from certain resources.

***Equity-Related Questions*** *(for school and district teams to consider as they establish, adapt, or strengthen student support systems)****:*** * How and when do families and caregivers have a voice in student and school matters? What happens to the input they provide? How are improvements and changes communicated back to them?
* Are there clear and private channels of communication for families to report incidents or situations where they felt they were not treated fairly or equitably?
* Are family communication, support, and care coordination systems designed with the most marginalized families in mind, rather than the mythical “typical parent”?
* Is training available to all staff who interact with families on effective communication methods and approaches that bridge race, class, and cultural differences, including training on identifying cultural strengths and understanding common communication pitfalls (e.g., microaggressions that may be unintended but are nevertheless damaging)?
* Are regular conversations occurring with all staff responsible for family outreach about the fears and realities that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) families are experiencing and how these may be affecting learning and the school experience?
* Are a family’s many strengths being considered using an assets-based approach for engagement?

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| Re-envisioning School Culture and the Conditions for Learning |
| **Resources for Re-envisioning School Culture and Conditions for Learning:*** [Safe and Supportive Schools](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/safety/) (DESE webpage)
* [Social and Emotional Learning in Massachusetts](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/sel/) (DESE webpage)
* [Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfss/mtss/) (DESE webpage)
* [Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading](https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/crdw/) (DESE webpage)
* [Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Schools and Classrooms (DESE webpage)](https://www.doe.mass.edu/odl/e-learning/culturally-resp-sust/content/index.html#/)
* [Re-Imagine and Rebuild: Restarting School with Equity at the Center](https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/reimagine-and-rebuild)
* [How Schools Can Help Kids Heal After a Year of Crisis and Uncertainty - NPR](https://www.npr.org/2021/04/21/989056927/how-schools-can-help-kids-heal-after-a-year-of-crisis-and-uncertainty)
* [No More Easy Button: A Suggested Approach to Post-Pandemic Teaching](https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/easy-button/)
* [What Does Good Classroom Design Look Like in the Age of Social Distancing](https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-06-22-what-does-good-classroom-design-look-like-in-the-age-of-social-distancing)?
* [Four Core Priorities for Trauma-Informed Distance Learning](https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/55679/four-core-priorities-for-trauma-informed-distance-learning)
* [Remote Learning Practice Profile: Relationship Mapping to Support Positive School Connections](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/remote-learning/relationship-mapping.pdf)

**Sample Ideas and Strategies*** ***Continue to allocate time for culture and community building.*** It is important to continue to acknowledge the range of experiences, narratives, and emotions members of the school community experience and bring to school. Districts and schools should continue to have explicit strategies for building a welcoming, safe, and supportive learning community for all students and families, and should look for opportunities to have students and families from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds help co-create the vision for this culture. In the near term, particularly as we emerge from the pandemic and head into a new school year, schools may want to consider organizing community rebuilding activities that help families and educators regroup, reconnect, and celebrate the return to a more routine in-person experience. Schools can also build awareness among staff about how to recognize how different student experiences in and out of school can manifest in behaviors (withdrawal, overwhelm, disengagement) – individual or related to classroom/school culture – that communicate an underlying need that teachers and other school staff can help address.
* ***Focus on relationship-building.*** Building a strong positive school culture includes being intentional about ensuring positive relationships among students and educators and among students. Relationships thrive where authentic two-way conversations thrive. [Relationship mapping](https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-educators/relationship-mapping-strategy) strategies can help schools create a caring environment and systematically assess the extent to which students and educators feel connected and supported at school, particularly after a period of significant isolation during the pandemic. Beyond relationship mapping, there are various effective practices that schools can use to promote student-to-student, student-to-adult, and adult-to-adult relationships; for example, thoughtful pairing of students for collaborative work, team building, mix and mingle activities, and cross grade mentoring or “buddy” strategies.
* ***Make social emotional well-being and collective care a normal and visible part of the school – for students, staff, and families.*** Life inside and outside of school can be challenging, even in a typical non-pandemic year. School leaders and classroom educators can look for opportunities to talk openly about what is working and what is hard, the impact challenges can have, and ways to support oneself and each other. This is particularly crucial for staff and families who support students with disabilities or who have experienced trauma.

**Equity-Related Planning Question***(for school and district teams to consider as they establish, adapt, or strengthen student support systems)****:*** * Norms for school culture and conditions for learning should reflect an understanding of the impact that events, institutions, and other circumstances have on communities of color and other historically marginalized student groups. What methods are being used to create emotional safety and support for students and families of color? What steps have been taken to get student and family feedback about this question?

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| Cultivating Positive Behavior |
| **Resources for Supporting Positive Behavior:*** [Returning to School During and After Crisis: A Guide to Supporting States, Districts, Schools, Educators, and Students through a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Framework during the 2020-2021 School Year](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__assets-2Dglobal.website-2Dfiles.com_5d3725188825e071f1670246_5eece8935e4d8010fea193d9-5FReturning-2520to-2520School-2520During-2520and-2520After-2520Crisis.pdf&d=DwMGaQ&c=lDF7oMaPKXpkYvev9V-fVahWL0QWnGCCAfCDz1Bns_w&r=gFycvxqmzWMLgUSf201wdpnHDdNG7v03Nl_gnqyMdlY&m=KVnj3nGurqWhGQK3s8p_Eo7gAc2un3xtdzjJ0tOKlGQ&s=bQFo46xhcQ7omWmz8uj0tU1ffmIc87Y71kD8tjBz97E&e=)
* [COVID-19 Resources: General Restorative Practices](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__www.rjcolorado.org_covid-2D19&d=DwMGaQ&c=lDF7oMaPKXpkYvev9V-fVahWL0QWnGCCAfCDz1Bns_w&r=gFycvxqmzWMLgUSf201wdpnHDdNG7v03Nl_gnqyMdlY&m=KVnj3nGurqWhGQK3s8p_Eo7gAc2un3xtdzjJ0tOKlGQ&s=KlRz7Lmy7_hpFDmI7DA39A9Iy35-j3sgPhxoxWTiP20&e=)
* [Center on Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports](https://www.pbis.org/)

**Sample Ideas and Strategies*** ***Clearly define what positive behavior looks like and proactively and creatively update the entire school community regarding expectations and student development strategies related to positive behavior.***Schools create a culture and climate that is predicated on a set of social and behavioral norms, and these norms are often correlated to a set of positive behaviors that reflect understanding of the norms. Schools are encouraged to regularly (and particularly at times of transition, like the start of a new school year, when shifting schedules or learning modes, etc.) reexamine the norms and values they aspire to uphold and whether corresponding behaviors are clearly defined, communicated, and supported. This is most effectively done in collaboration with students, families, staff, and community partners. For example, the school community may consider together what respect for self, others, community, and property should look like in our current context. While the specific language regarding positive behavior may vary across districts and schools, what is most important is that the expectations for positive behavior are shared regularly throughout the school year. In addition, schools can consider multiple modes of sharing and teaching these expectations, including through student handbooks.
* ***Prioritize teaching and modeling behavioral expectations in the classroom and at home****.* To help students acclimate to school culture values and behavioral expectations, adults need to both teach and model them with consistency. Additionally, teachers and support staff may find it helpful to identify students who are struggling with expectations and proactively brainstorm with students and their families, as well as community partners (a coach, afterschool program staff member, or someone the student is close to), to plan collaborative strategies that will help adults understand underlying issues and help students build the stamina and skills they need to participate fully in the classroom.
* ***Take proportionate and contextualized responses to deviations from behavioral expectations.*** Norms and behavioral expectations should be understood and addressed in the context of adult-child relationships, child and adolescent development, cultural responsiveness, ability/disability, and awareness of racial and/or cultural biases, the impact of trauma on the brain, and behavior as a means of communicating an unmet need. Taking these dimensions into account, educators and families are better positioned to determine the most appropriate response to breaches of classroom norms, which may include [restorative practices](https://www.suffolk.edu/cas/centers-institutes/center-for-restorative-justice/restorative-justice-in-schools). There are numerous restorative models used across the country; many focus on practices to create and sustain community, resolve conflicts, and attune individuals to the community of people around them. These practices encourage human connection, vulnerability, caring, compassion, empathy, and positive relationships. Exclusionary discipline should be used as a measure of last resort, after alternatives to suspension have been tried, and only as appropriate after considering the underlying reasons for the student’s behavior and making efforts to address the student’s needs.

***Equity-Related Questions*** *(for school and district teams to consider as they establish, adapt, or strengthen student support systems)****:**** Are the school’s behavioral expectations aligned with and reflective of the norms and values of all students’ backgrounds and identities? What steps have been taken to get student and family feedback about this question?
* Is the school regularly disaggregating data (by race, gender, disability status, English Learner status, etc.) to determine whether specific student groups are being disciplined more frequently than others or experiencing disproportionate consequences for the same violations?
* Will new behavioral expectations and consequences disproportionately impact specific student groups (e.g., students with disabilities, students who have experienced trauma)? What restorative measures can be taken to support students in the adoption of behaviors required for health and safety reasons?
* Are schools supporting students to find productive ways to express their emotions about issues of social and racial justice?
* What data or input does the school have about the quality of instruction and level of engagement of students from different backgrounds and identities? To what extent might behaviors be related to instructional choices (e.g., engaging instruction/deeper learning, student voice and choice, culturally responsive pedagogy and materials)?

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# Supporting Students’ More Intensive Needs

Schools are reporting increased rates of chronic stress, anxiety, and depression among students due to the pandemic, social isolation, a weakened economy, and the [racial trauma](https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/lynch-school/sites/isprc/isprc-advisory-board.html) that many students have experienced. As students return to in-person learning, districts and schools may need to enhance systems for proactively identifying students’ needs and addressing them with the appropriate Tier 2 (individualized, tailored to specific student needs) and Tier 3 (intensive) supports. The subsection below includes suggestions, tools, and resources focused on implementing Tier 2 and Tier 3 strategies and systems that can be critical for supporting students and preventing the need for more drastic interventions (e.g., filing with the Department of Children and Families (DCF), etc.).

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| **Supporting More Intensive Needs** |
| ***Resources for Supporting More Intensive Mental Health Needs:**** [DESE-Sponsored Youth Mental Health First Aid Training](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/ymhfa/)
* [Mental and Behavioral Health Resources (DESE webpage)](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/mental-health.html)
* [Massachusetts CBHI Services](https://www.mass.gov/childrens-behavioral-health-initiative-cbhi)
* [Network of Care Massachusetts](https://massachusetts.networkofcare.org/mh/)
* [Handholdma.org](https://handholdma.org/)
* [Supporting the SEL and Mental Health Needs of Students and Educators in the COVID-19 Era](https://matoolsforschools.com/resources/covid-19-sel)
* [DPH Suicide Prevention Program](https://www.mass.gov/suicide-prevention-program)
* [Behavioral Health Integrated Resources for Children Project (BIRCh) Online Learning Modules](https://www.umb.edu/birch/online_learning)

**Sample Ideas and Strategies*** ***Ensure that staff and families know what to look for.*** Provide professional development and other resources to help staff and families know the signs of increased mental health needs, or neglect and abuse, and not mistake them for willful non-compliance, low engagement, or truancy. Students can then be connected to more intensive mental health supports and services. (See [list of common symptoms of exposure to trauma and strategies to address them in the classroom](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/appalachia/events/materials/04-8-20-Handout3_common-trauma-symptoms-and-helpful-strategies-for-educators.pdf).)
* ***Use mental health screeners to identify students who need targeted and intensive supports (Tier 2 and 3).*** In addition to looking for symptoms of trauma and other mental health challenges, schools should also consider using universal mental health screeners – questionnaires administered to all students that are designed to identify mental health needs such as anxiety and depression. Schools should search for and select the right mental health screening tool(s) for their community, and ensure that screeners are administered by trained professionals, information about individual students remains confidential, and schools are prepared to support students identified with mental health challenges with high quality interventions and services. For more information about how to select the right screener, see [SAMHSA’s Ready, Set, Go, Review: Screening for Behavioral Health Risk in School.](https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/ready_set_go_review_mh_screening_in_schools_508.pdf)
* ***Identify and use research-based Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports and services.*** Some students will need more sustained, targeted, and/or intensive supports.
	+ Tier 2 supports typically provide interventions that prevent problems from getting worse and support students “at-risk” of not reaching Tier 1 (universal) social and behavioral expectations. Effective Tier 2 interventions are evidence-based, matched to student needs, readily and quickly available, and include systems for progress monitoring that are communicated to students, staff, and families (See [Examples of Research-Based Processes and Interventions for More Intensive Student Support](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/safety/research-based-processes.docx)).
	+ A small number of students need sustained, intensive (Tier 3) supports. Some of these students may be served through more therapeutically oriented supports and approaches (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy, applied behavioral analysis, trauma-informed) to address social emotional disabilities. However, it is critical to note that Tier 3 supports and special education are not synonymous. Students with and without individualized education programs (IEPs) may require Tier 3 social emotional and mental health services provided through the general education program.
* ***Anticipate student*** ***needs, adjust methods of delivery, and make referrals accordingly.*** For students who are presenting with more intensive needs, also consider the following:
	+ Rely on the Student Support Team (also called student success, whole child review, or building based support team) to assess a student’s strengths, challenges, and [lagging skills](https://www.edutopia.org/discussion/challenging-student-behavior-moving-boot-root?utm_campaign=node_author_alert&utm_source=edutopia&utm_medium=email), then collaboratively identify intervention strategies that maximize school, family, and community-based supports, including social emotional, academic, positive youth development, supportive relationships, etc.
	+ When and if additional Tier 2 and 3 supports are not fully meeting a student’s needs, if the student does not already have an IEP consider referring the student for a special education evaluation, or convene the student’s special education team to re-assess the student’s services and needs.
	+ Refer the student/family to other supports/services.
		- Community-based organizations that offer [Children’s Behavioral Health Initiative](https://www.mass.gov/childrens-behavioral-health-initiative-cbhi) (CBHI) services are positioned to meet the full range of students’ mental health needs, both within and outside of school. These services include intensive care coordination, in-home therapy, in-home behavioral services, therapeutic mentoring, and family partners.
		- The recently launched [Network of Care portal](https://massachusetts.networkofcare.org/mh/) contains links to information about a host of child, youth, and family services offered by community-based organizations across the Commonwealth.
		- The [Office of the Child Advocate (OCA)](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/office-of-the-child-advocate) has partnered with the Department of Mental Health and the Executive Office of Health and Human Services to launch [Handholdma.org](https://handholdma.org/), a family-friendly website designed for parents of school-aged children who are worried about their children’s mental health.
	+ Consider possible adjustments or alternatives to the student’s learning options (e.g., consider the possibility of home/hospital instruction, as appropriate).

***Equity-Related Planning Questions*** *(for school and district teams to consider as they establish, adapt, or strengthen student support systems)****:**** What data is collected and analyzed to identify trends in students who are referred to more intensive supports and services? Are data collection tools culturally responsive and/or being used in a culturally responsive way? What additional data might be needed?
* What systems and practices are in place to determine the efficacy of services, including trends in efficacy by populations of students?
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# Attendance as a Tool for Engagement and Safety

As part of ongoing student and family engagement efforts, it is important to regularly communicate with students, families, and the community about the connection between regular attendance and student’s personal, social and emotional wellness, and academic success. Attendance policies and procedures are an important tool for monitoring student attendance and assessing when and how schools and districts provide higher levels of support to re-engage those students who are chronically absent. Often, chronic absenteeism is indicative of unmet needs or barriers the student is experiencing, which schools can provide support to help address. Schools should have student attendance policies and protocols that set clear expectations and include these elements:

* Clearly define terms related to absence (e.g., excused/unexcused, chronic absenteeism, etc., DESE’s  [Attendance Policy](https://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/data/sims/reporting-guidance.docx)).
* Convey the importance of regular attendance and engagement.
* Establish when and how attendance is reported and documented, by whom and to whom (e.g., parents and classroom teachers).
* Outline the circumstances for when schools will check-in with students and families (e.g., after 1 day with no contact from the student or family, after 3 days of parent-reported absence), how this will take place (e.g., phone, text, video, home visit, etc.) and be documented, and with whom schools will conduct check-ins during and following absences (e.g., students, families, providers at other settings and programs, where applicable), including establishing clear expectations about when the school requires direct contact (virtual, by phone, etc.) with students themselves.
* Identify the school personnel responsible for following up with students and families to identify and address factors contributing to chronic absences.
* Ensure communication about the student’s attendance status among those who are engaged with the student (e.g., classroom teacher, Student Support Team, special education team, etc.). Consider the method(s) that school personnel will use for such communications.
* Provide tools to help staff, including support staff, understand their roles and to facilitate tracking, monitoring, and following up when students are absent, particularly for chronic absence.
* Establish clear, predictable consequences for absenteeism that support student reengagement.
* Identify available supports and services, including and when and how referrals will be made – e.g., to a [Family Resource Center (FRC)](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__www.frcma.org_locations&d=DwMFAg&c=lDF7oMaPKXpkYvev9V-fVahWL0QWnGCCAfCDz1Bns_w&r=dyrILXzQGyRBVOrYdceiBv8-c5iUxog9IXKvoa_J6w8&m=4U_juaTSxAN3CGLruWjeODr8Yb27dplD1ynAgBn-fis&s=cuW067_G36fFb3Lu658ffxCLsSLXEkpmiEoF00Guj68&e=).

***Equity-Related Planning Questions*** *(for school and district teams to consider as they establish, adapt or strengthen student support systems)****:***

* What data is collected and analyzed to identify trends in students who are chronically absent?
* What systems and practices are in place to determine the efficacy of services, including trends in efficacy by populations of students?

***Resources for Addressing Absenteeism and Chronic Absenteeism:***

* [Student Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism (DESE webpage)](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/attendance/)
* [Pathways to Engagement: A Toolkit for Covid-19 Recovery Through Attendance](https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/toolkits/pathways-to-engagement-a-toolkit-for-covid-19-recovery-through-attendance/)
* [Guidance on Amendments to Student Learning Time Regulations](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/slt-regulations-guide.docx) (DESE webpage)

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# Recognizing Abuse and/or Neglect & Fulfilling Mandated Reporter Responsibilities

As noted throughout this document, schools and districts can build and implement comprehensive, multi-tiered systems of support for students and their families to prevent the need for more drastic interventions in most circumstances. Many concerns that educators have about students and their families can be addressed and supported through ongoing efforts and referrals to community resources (e.g., mental health, food/nutrition, housing services, etc.). However, when there is reasonable cause to believe that a child is suffering physical or emotional injury resulting from abuse or neglect, educators must fulfill their [responsibilities as mandated reporters](https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2017/08/28/can-mandated-reporters-guide.pdf) and report these concerns immediately to the Department of Children and Families (DCF).

Schools and districts should clearly communicate and make readily available policies and processes to support individual school staff in fulfilling their mandated reporter responsibilities. A mandated reporter who is professionally licensed in Massachusetts must receive training annually on recognizing and reporting suspected child abuse and neglect. This requirement applies to teachers and administrators licensed by DESE, as well as school psychologists, nurses, and other clinicians licensed by the Commonwealth. Additionally, under G.L. c. 71, §37L, school committees must inform teachers, administrators, and other staff of requirements and duties as mandated reporters under G.L. c. 119, §51A(k). Designating a specific member of school personnel or a team to consult with staff and review 51A reports before they are filed can help to ensure filing is appropriate.

School personnel should contact the district’s legal counsel if they have questions about whether a specific situation triggers the mandatory reporting duties under the law.

It is *not* the job of a mandated reporter to conduct an investigation about the circumstances or context for the suspected abuse and neglect. This responsibility falls to DCF and is built into the response process following a 51A report.

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| ***Important Considerations Relating to 51As***[[2]](#footnote-3) ***(particularly for issues related to engagement, truancy, and absenteeism):**** Has the school/district explored and documented all possible opportunities to support and assist the student and their family to overcome barriers to engagement and attendance (e.g., technology access if the student is learning remotely, support, etc.)? What additional supports might be needed and how can students and families get connected to those supports? What alternative learning opportunities might be available to support engagement?
* Has the school/district reviewed data to identify whether there is an over-reliance on 51A filings as an intervention for specific student groups (e.g., students of color, students with disabilities, etc.)?
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Concerns that may require contacting DCF to report an allegation of abuse or neglect (“filing a 51A”), include, but are not limited to the following:

* When there is a legitimate concern about abuse or neglect and students and/or families are non-responsive to ongoing, multiple, and varied efforts to connect and engage.
* Chronic truancy or absence from school programming that, despite attempts at intervention and support, without improvement that also calls into question student safety.
* Observation of unexplained or suspicious bruising, welts, cuts, or other injuries on a child.
* Observation of or reasonable cause to believe the child, adult, or caregiver is providing care while under the influence of drugs or alcohol that could be resulting in abuse or neglect.
* Observation of or reasonable cause to believe there are hazards that create safety concerns in the home (e.g., weapons within reach).
* Observation of or a student discloses abuse or neglect.
* Any other time there is reasonable cause to believe that a child(ren) is being abused or neglected. (This reasonable cause can be based on expertise as an educator and/or past experiences with this child or family.)

All reports of suspected child abuse or neglect must be communicated by telephone to DCF. During regular business hours (8:45 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. M-F) educators may call the [DCF area office](http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/dcf/contact-us/dss-directory.html) that serves the city or town where the child lives. Nights, weekends, and holidays, educators may dial the Child-at-Risk Hotline at (800) 792-5200. More information is available at <https://www.mass.gov/how-to/report-child-abuse-or-neglect>.

Once a report has been filed with DCF, a response may take up to 15 business days to complete. Mandated reporters should receive information about the screening decisions made by DCF as a result of a filing and can call their DCF Area Office to follow-up in the event they do not. In some situations, DCF may be able to resolve any concerns quickly and not need to open a case. In other cases, DCF may open a case and provide supports and services to a family in an effort to improve the situation for the family and child. In the most severe situations, to keep a child safe, DCF may seek custody of the child and remove them from their home. No matter the outcome of an investigation, schools and districts can provide ongoing support and educational stability for these students. In addition, district [foster care points of contact](http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/search/search.aspx?leftNavId=11239) and [DCF Area Office directors](http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/dcf/contact-us/dss-directory.html) can establish and facilitate lines of communication and processes to provide ongoing and consistent supports to students and families served by DCF.

***Resources for Addressing Persistent Concerns:***

* [DCF's Reporting Abuse and Neglect webpage](https://www.mass.gov/how-to/report-child-abuse-or-neglect)
* [DCF Mandated Reporter Guide](https://www.mass.gov/doc/dcf-mandated-reporter-guide/download)
* [Middlesex County District Attorney’s Office - 51A Online Mandated Reporter Training](http://51a.middlesexcac.org/)
* [Promising Approaches: Working with Families Child Welfare and Domestic Violence](https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2016/07/pm/promising-approaches-publication.pdf)
* [Safe Kids Thrive](https://safekidsthrive.org/build-your-toolkit/how-to-use-safe-kids-thrive/)
* [Joint Advisory Regarding School District Officials' Duty to Report Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect](https://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/advisory/082010childabuse.html)(an update to this advisory is forthcoming)

DESE will continue to provide information and resources to promote student learning, engagement, wellbeing, and safety, many of which will be posted to the DESE [COVID-19 Mental and Behavioral Health Resources](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/mental-health.html) and [DESE’s Safe & Supportive Schools](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/safety/) pages.

Please contact achievement@doe.mass.edu with suggestions or questions.

Appendix: Special Considerations for Students Learning Remotely

This fall, all schools and districts are required to resume [full, in-person learning](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/covid19-guide-updates.pdf), but in exceptional cases remote learning may continue to be an option. For example, remote learning may be appropriate for [students with medical conditions who may need educational services in the home or hospital setting (requires Physician’s Affirmation)](https://www.doe.mass.edu/prs/ta/hhep-qa.html), students attending in-district [virtual schools](https://www.doe.mass.edu/cmvs/), or students attending approved district virtual programs). For students learning remotely, please consider the following strategies for promoting engagement, learning, wellbeing, and safety. The strategies in this Appendix are intended to supplement the guidance above, not to replace it.

In addition, as set forth in the DESE [Guidance on In-Person Learning and Student Learning Time Requirements](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop.html) (April 27, 2021), please recall that,

**[S]chools and districts are required to include a visual component as part of the daily “live check-in” that is needed to support students whose families have selected a remote model of instruction for the remainder of the school year**. As provided in the definition of remote learning in the Department’s regulations, remote learning requires that students have opportunities to interact with a teacher each school day. The daily live check-in provides the district with key information about student engagement and well-being. The Department is now updating its guidance to require using video conferencing or other methods of seeing students as part of the daily live check-in. Schools and districts need to assess how to use video conferencing in a way that is respectful of individual student’s needs. For example, if a student is reluctant to be seen in their home by classmates, a teacher might meet with the student in a breakout room with a virtual background for a short period of time to conduct the live check-in. In situations where the district or school has concerns about a student’s attendance or level of engagement, they should employ additional levels of support to re-engage the student.

***Special Considerations for Engaging the Families of Students Learning Remotely:***

Engaging with families is always important, and even more so when students are learning remotely from home or in other settings. Schools should develop a protocol for daily visual check-ins, home visits (when appropriate) and other forms of communication with families whose children are learning remotely. In addition, schools should provide clear information about the types of supports the district will provide even when students are learning remotely, such as special education services, EL services, and mental health supports. Schools should also consider assigning one or more point people at the district who are responsible for regular communication and coordination with families of students learning remotely. Finally, schools should also consider strategies for creating a sense of community and connection among families learning remotely. During 2020-2021, many creative examples emerged in this area; for example, virtual celebrations and, continued access to in-person activities (sports, extracurricular, drop-in social hours, etc.).

***Special Considerations for Re-envisioning School Culture and Learning Conditions for Students Learning Remotely:***

If students continue to learn remotely, schools should identify practices that build the culture and make the remote learning space safe and supportive, for example:

* Establish clear schedules and easy access to teacher-facilitated (synchronous), independent learning (asynchronous), and teacher office hour opportunities.
* Offer activities that build a sense of community and belonging and provide a clear support system (advisories, peer support activities, social activities, online class and breakout room practices).
* Engage in explicit work with students on the social emotional aspects of remote learning including social emotional skills they need to manage learning, screen time management, strategies to combat isolation, self-advocacy skills, goal-setting, etc.
* Employ strategies for orienting families and students on all aspects of remote learning (the remote experience, participation expectations, technology tools, technical support, technical support for students and families, family partnership, etc.) and for checking with families and students on a regular basis to gather input on their experiences (daily student check-in (visual check-in) and check-out (CICO) routines, family feedback meetings, regular survey and/or focus groups).

***Special Considerations for Cultivating Positive Behavior among Students Learning Remotely:***

Consider how the school can proactively support students and their parents/caregivers to set up positive routines and behaviors while learning at home. In doing this, it can be helpful to share and/or co-construct language and terms that will be used at home and school to create a more coherent experience for students. It is also very important to establish, teach, and practice norms for remote learning (e.g., breakout room etiquette, how and when to take a break, responsible use of technology, etc.). In addition, work with support staff and families to proactively identify students who might struggle in a remote environment and co-develop a plan to support them.

***Special Considerations for Students Learning Remotely with More Intensive Needs for Support:***

Often, educators find visual cues to be most helpful in identifying if/when a student needs additional support. School should: ensure regular virtual face time and/or conduct home visits when needed; consider using a mental health screener; be sure that families are aware of their rights to mental health and/or special education services even if their children are learning remotely, and work collaboratively with the family to identify if services are most effectively done in-person and what options are available. Establish a frequent and routine (daily, weekly) protocol for monitoring the use and effectiveness of services (including monitoring by staff beyond direct service providers). Connect with the student support team and family immediately to problem-solve if school attendance or participation in services lapses.

***Special Considerations for Use of Attendance as a Tool for the Engagement and Safety of Students Learning Remotely:***

Schools may experience challenges defining the terms “present and engaged” for remote learners. Such definitions, however, are critical for the effective use of attendance data as a tool for monitoring if student can access all aspects of their educational programs and to prevent students from falling through the cracks.

Schools and districts should consider the many factors that may contribute to a student’s participation and attendance in remote learning:

* Does the student have access to the necessary technology (e.g., devices, internet access, etc.) to fully participate?
* Does the student or their family need technical support (e.g., accessing needed apps or software, troubleshooting camera/audio issues, etc.)?
* Does the student have access to appropriate space for learning (particularly for students in congregate care settings, homeless students in shelters or “doubled-up”) and/or supports to help mitigate space limitations (e.g., noise cancelling headphones, etc.)?
* Are accommodations needed related to a disability?

By employing the support and intervention strategies highlighted throughout this document, including daily live check-ins (among others), schools can engage with students who continue to learn remotely and their families and community providers to understand and address attendance and safety concerns, maximize participation, and facilitate reengagement when needed.

1. This document includes links to tools and resources to support educators. DESE is providing this information as a service to educators and may revise or supplement these lists from time to time. Inclusion in this document does not represent an endorsement or recommendation by DESE of any resource or product. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Reporting to DCF is referred to as “filing a 51A,” after the section in the law (M.G.L. c. 119, s. 51A) that covers mandated reporting of child abuse and neglect. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)