# Tackling Attendance in Alabama

# Session Overview

- Learn the difference between truancy and chronic absenteeism
- Understand the impact of absenteeism on academic achievement
- Look at root causes of absenteeism
- Determine how school boards can impact absenteeism
- Discuss successful models for improving student attendance

# The Brutal Reality

The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in huge losses in school-based learning opportunities .

Students tested in the spring of 2021 on the Curriculum Associates' i-Ready assessment were 10 points behind in math (five months) and 9 points behind in reading (four month).

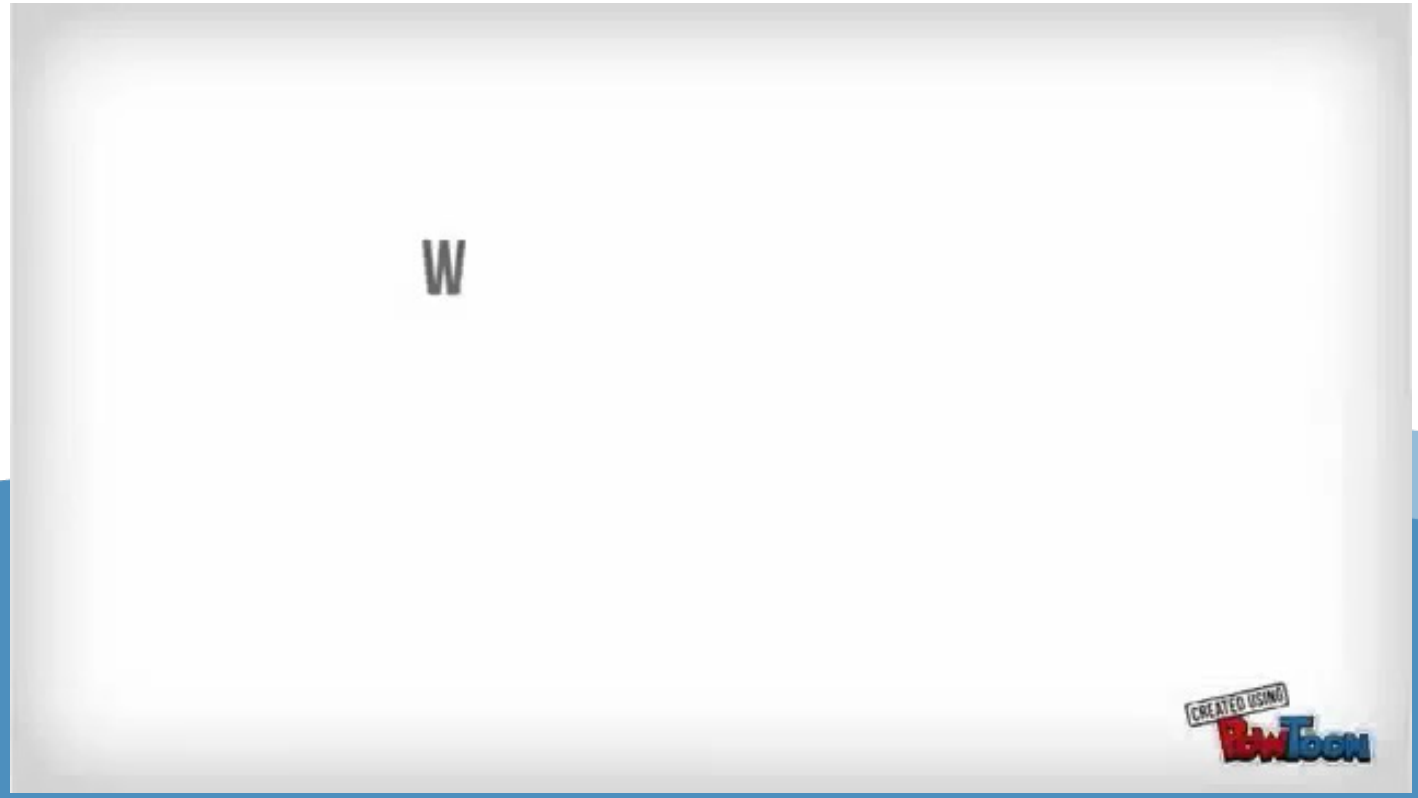
# The Brutal Reality

Students of color and poverty have been disproportionally affected.

Early data show that chronic absences (missing 10 or more days) is likely to have increased from 1 out of 6 student to **1 out of 3** students.

**It is critical that we address this immediately!**

# School Attendance Does Matter



# Attendance Measures

## Absenteeism

Students aren't physically on campus and aren't participating in approved instruction or related activities off campus

### Chronic Absenteeism

Students are absent, either excused or unexcused, for more than 10% of the school year (15-18)

### Truancy

Students are absent for an unexcused reason or skipping school/class for an unexcused reason

# The Cumulative Effects of Absences

**Student A.**

Misses 10 days each year =
130 missed days

130 days = 6.5 months of school

**Student B.**

Misses 25 days each year =
325 missed days

325 days = 16.25 months of school

# The Extent of the Problem

**13%** (6.5 million students) miss **15** or more days of school

In some schools, up to **50%** of students are chronically absent

In Alabama, **11.17%** of students were chronically absent and **15%** of low-income students were chronically absent prior to the covid pandemic.

# Your Turn to Talk

"Attendance in school is eight times more predictive of academic failure than prior test scores."

Ehrlich & Johnson 2007

# Alabama's ESSA Accountability Plan

## Accountability

Alabama is one of 32 states factoring chronic absenteeism into its state report card.

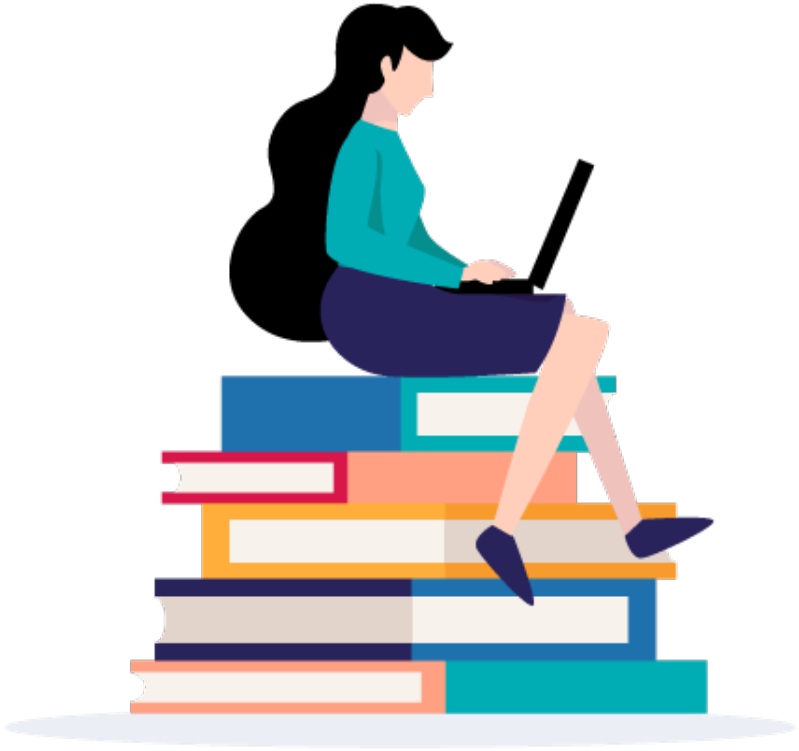
## Definition

Alabama defines chronic absenteeism as the percentage of students with 15 or more absences in a school year.

## Alabama's Goal

To decrease chronic absenteeism from 13% to 5% or less by 2030.

# Absenteeism Effects Everyone



Teachers lose valuable preparation and instructional time because of the need to deal with absences.

When students are chronically absent, instruction for ALL students is slowed and a significant amount of instructional time is lost.

# Research in Early Education Absenteeism

Absenteeism in Kindergarten is link to lower academic achievement and socioemotional development at the end of that year. (Gottfried 2017)

Chronic absentee rates in Kindergarten are equivalent to those at the end of middle school and the beginning of high school. (Balfanz & Byrnes 2012)

Students who eventually dropped out of school missed an average of 16 days in first grade. (Alexander 1997)

# Additional Research Findings

- 3rd grade reading proficiency is negatively affected by K and 1 absenteeism.

  A recent study in California found:
  - Regular attendance in K and 1 = 64% Proficient
  - Chronic absence in K and 1 = 17% Proficient
  - (Bruner, Discher, & Chang 2011)

- Three signs visible by 6th grade that a student may drop out of high school:
  - Chronic absenteeism
  - Poor behavior
  - Failing grades in math and/or English
  - (Attendance Works 2014)

# 9th Grade Absences Dramatically Reduce Graduation Rates

| Absences in 9th Grade | Chance of Graduating on Time |
|---|---|
| 0-4 | 87% |
| 5-9 | 63% |
| 10-14 | 41% |
| 15-19 | 21% |
| 20-24 | 9% |
| 25-29 | 5% |
| 30-34 | 2% |
| 35-40 | 1% |

# Why Students Don’t Go to School

**Barriers – Can’t Attend**

Something prevents them from going

**Aversions – Won’t Attend**

They’re avoiding something at school or on the way to/from school

**Myths – Don’t Attend**

They and/or their parents don’t see the value

# Barriers

## Can’t Go To School

- Chronic health problems
- Exposure to Covid
- Parent illness
- Care for a sibling
- Transportation
- Work

## **Aversions/ School Refusal**
## Won’t Go to School

- Fear of susceptibility to Covid
- Difficult social situations (bullying, racial biases, etc.)
- Disengaged
- Avoidance of problems
- Academically behind

**Myths**

## Don’t Go to School

Students who do not attend school because:

- They or their parents do not see the value in being there
- They have something else they would rather do
- Nothing stops them from skipping school

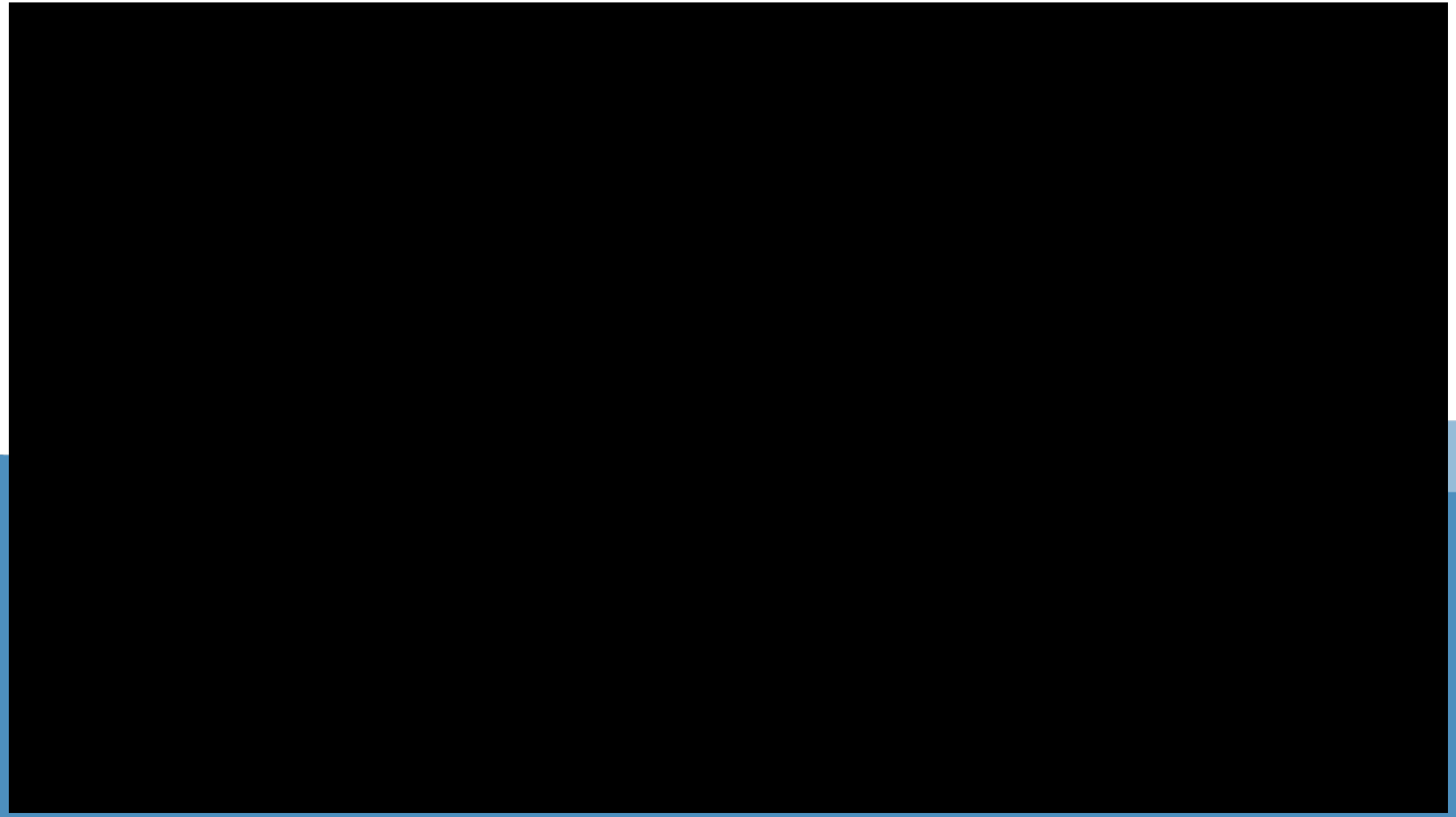
# Your Turn to Talk

- Read over the worksheet: Understanding the Root Causes for Student Absenteeism

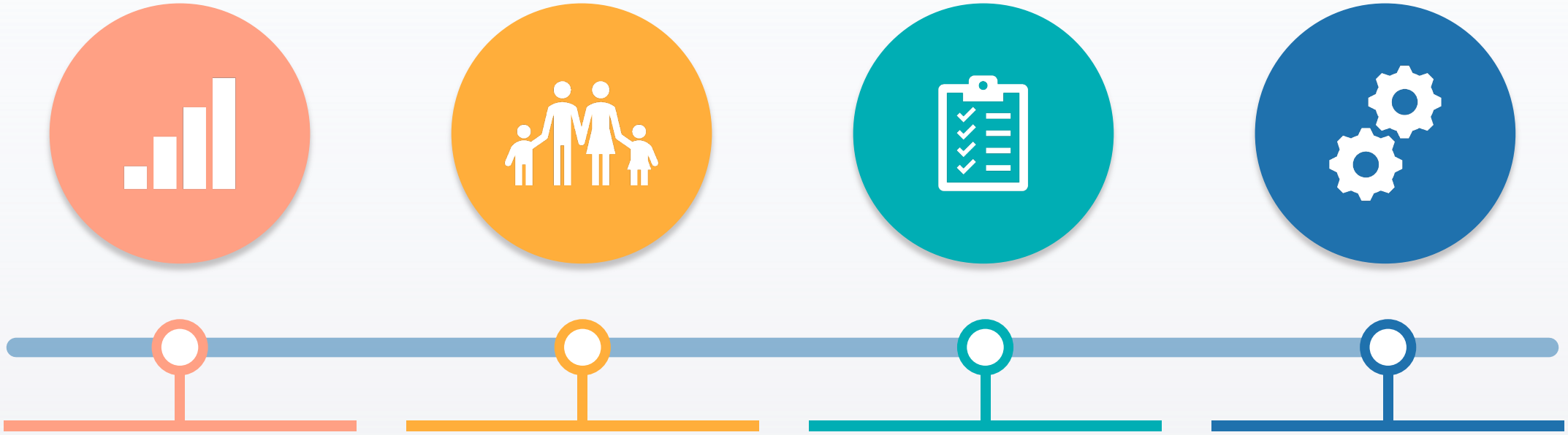
- Which one of these do you feel are most prevalent in our system?

# The harm inflicted by the pandemic goes beyond academics

**In a recent survey, 35% of parents said they were very or extremely concerned about their child's mental health.**



# The Solution



Data-driven

Prevention as well as reaction

Engagement of students and families

Comprehensive

# It Can Be Fixed

## The Key

Use data to diagnose where prevention and early intervention are needed.

## The Challenge

Don’t assume chronically absent students or their parents simply do not care.

# How Can School Boards Make a Difference?

1. Study – and own – your system's data.
2. Ensure data is accurate and use it.
3. Examine you polices.
4. Hire social workers and licensed professional counselors (LPCs).
5. Ask the superintendent for a plan.
6. Set expectations for the culture and climate.

# 1. Study Your Own Data

## Review Data Trends

Using multiple years' data, look at trends by school, by grade across the system, by different demographic groups. Look for patterns and trends over time.

## Own Your Data

Resist the urge to explain it away or make excuses. If your numbers are high, focus on solutions.

# 2. Ensure your data is accurate and consistent

Alabama Attendance Manual (Revised 2019)

| Absence Reasons, Types, Levels and Coding | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reasons | Types Excused/ Unexcused | All Day/Period | Half Day/Period | Tardy Check In/ Out | All Day Other | Half Day/ Period Other |
| Reason Titles | E/U | A | H | T | AO | HO |
| Administrator Approved | E | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Absence | Both | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Alternative Placement | E | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Legal | E | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Doctor's Excuse | E | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Field Trip | E | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Funeral Day | E | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Homebound | E | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| IEP/504 Exception | E | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| In-School Suspension | E | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Religious Observance | E | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| State of Emergency | E | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Skipping | U | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Suspended | E | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Tardy | Both | | | ✓ | | |
| School Activity | E | | | | ✓ | ✓ |

# 3. Examine Board Policies

Look for unintended consequences in policies related to:

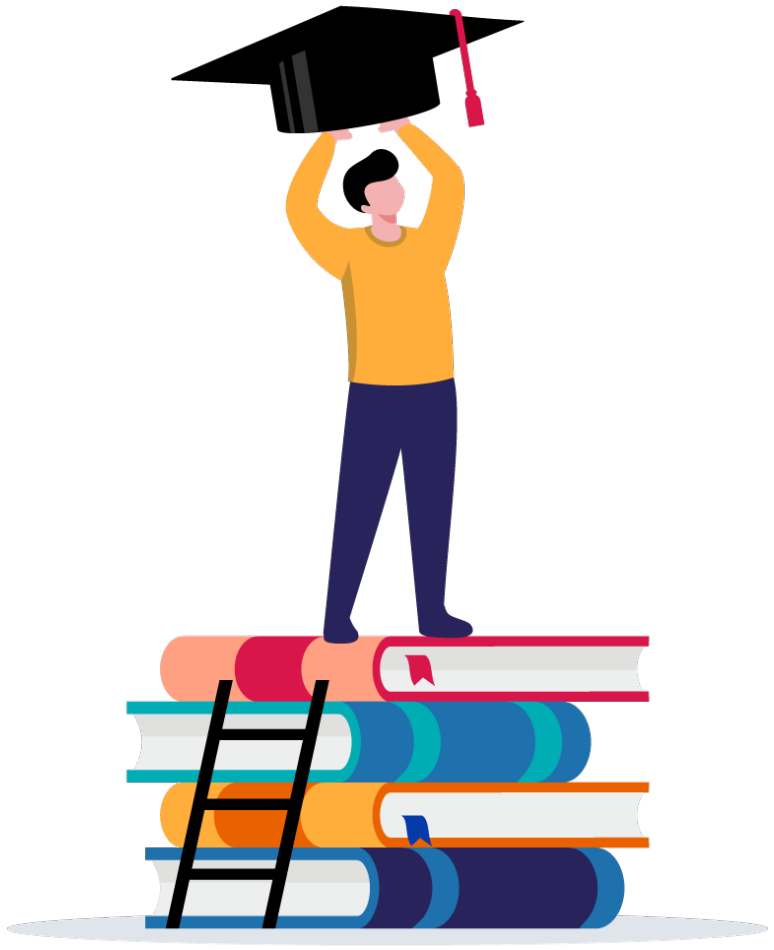
- Suspension and expulsion
- Make-up work
- Transitions/grade configuration
- Attendance/tardies and discipline

# 4. Hire Social Workers and LPCs

Elementary School is a critical stage for addressing barriers to attendance.

Students with mental health issues face unique challenge as well.

Social workers and licensed professional counselors can help address some of the barriers.



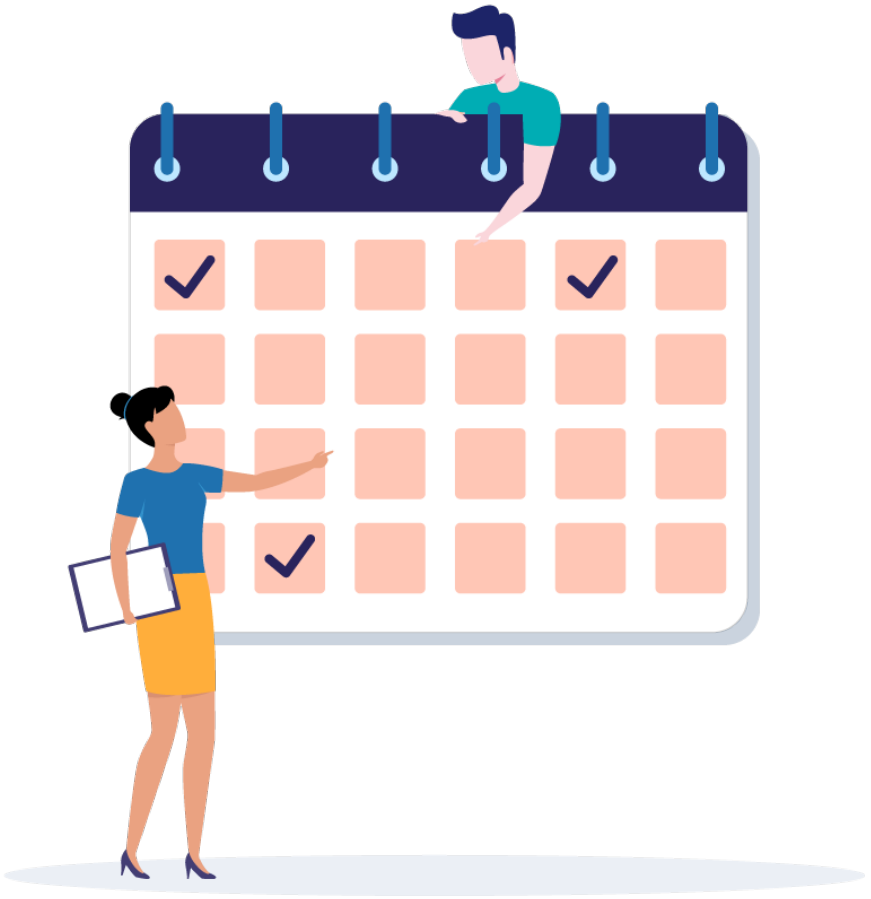
## 5. Ask Superintendent For an Early Intervention Plan

Only **17%** of children who are chronically absent in the early years read at grade level in third grade (and 3rd grade reading level is predictive of later school success).

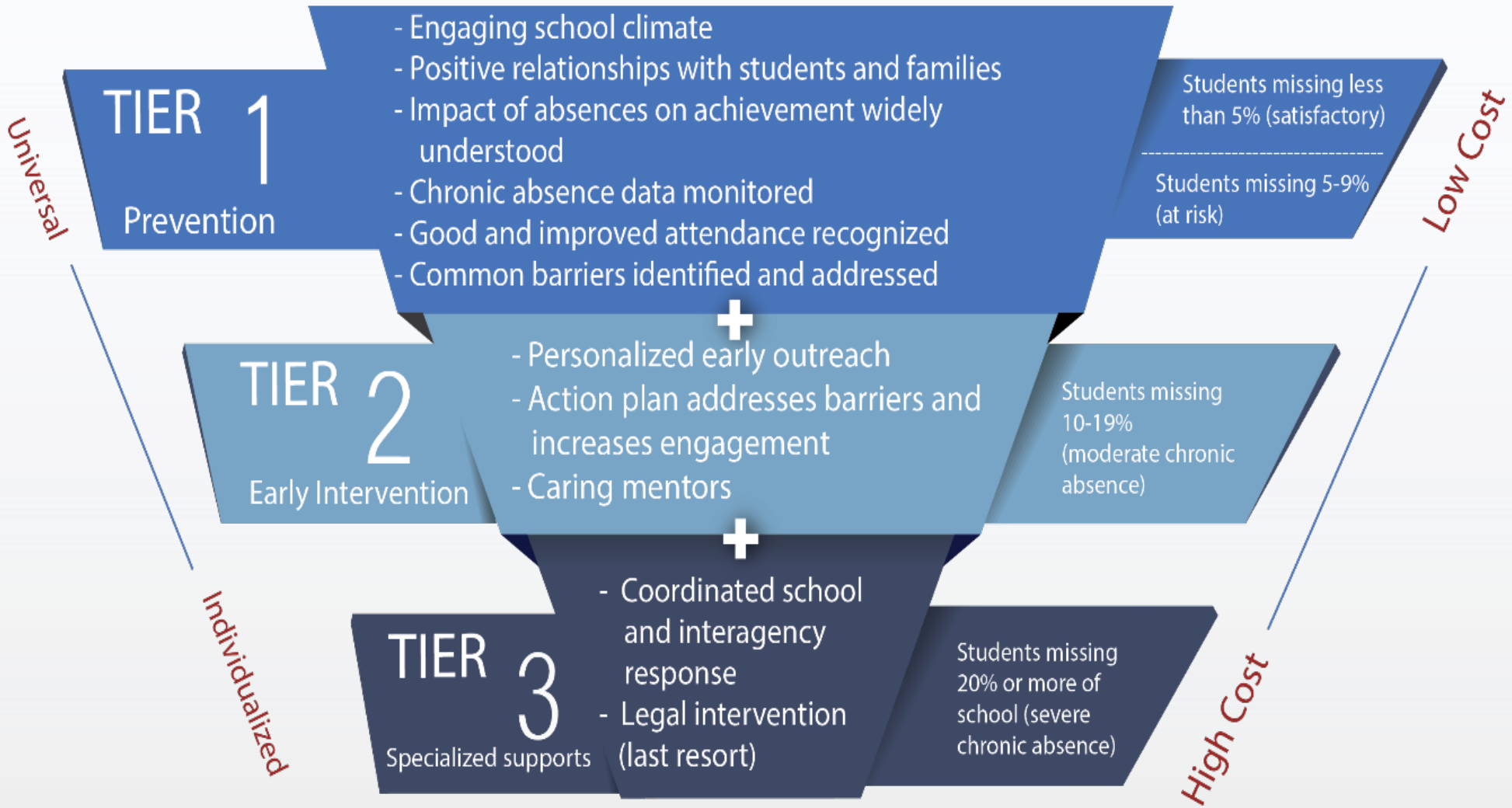
# 6. Set Expectations Regarding Attendance

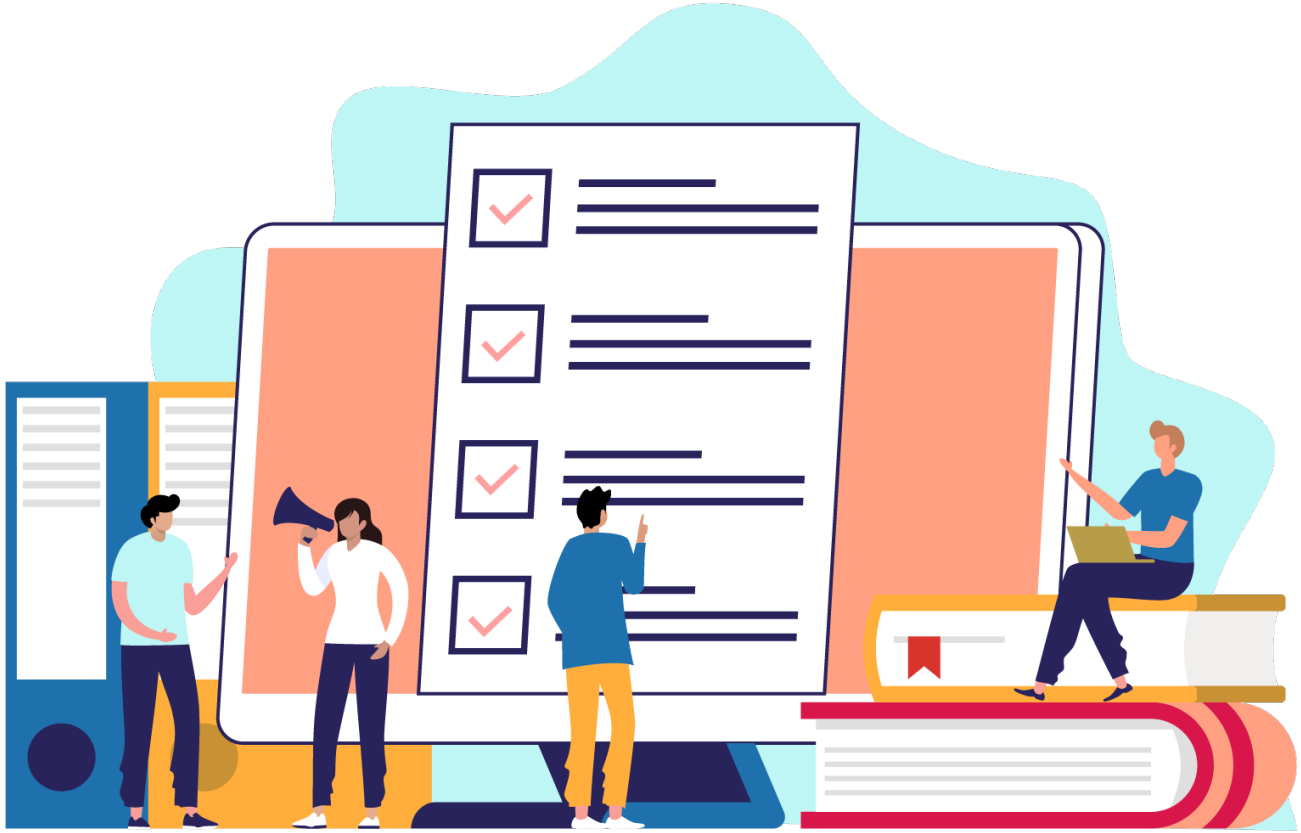
Effective boards focus on the outcomes they expect by:

- Setting Goals
- Receiving regular updates on the efforts being made to meet the goals
- Discussing data regarding the outcomes
- Cheerleading the successes and asking the hard questions about failures



# Models That Work





# Questions?