

## Dear School Support Professionals,

The Student Support Services Project wishes you continued success as you plan for the upcoming school year. Know that your work takes a team effort, including working with the school's multidisciplinary team, parents, students and community partners to bring about positive change.

As mental health services providers, we know that student's mental health needs are a collaborative work effort of the school- and community-based mental health providers, as well as family members. You can support our students who need help and create a safe, supportive space where they feel understood, validated and empowered.

We can positively change the lives of our students so that they can go on to be productive individuals in society. If you look back on your life, you can probably remember that one individual in school who made a big difference in your life. Therefore, as you work with your students, remember that one of the most outstanding achievements of being a school-based mental health provider/educator is the many opportunities to engage in student success and help positively impact our students' and families' outcomes. It is not an easy task, but we can strive to reach each student's full potential together.

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## Reducing Barriers to Foster Care

Students in foster care must be provided with access to a free and appropriate public education, including a public preschool education, as provided for other children and youth. To provide equal access, state educational agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) should remove all barriers that could cause students to miss critical learning opportunities. Barriers could

include policies and procedures that have unintended consequences for children and youth in foster care.

Nutrition programs are often asked to cite the requirements and guidance to provide students in foster care with nutrition services categorically. This requirement is in the "Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act" of 2010 (ESSA).

## Foster Care Resources

- **The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010** provides that students in foster care are categorically eligible for free school meals, even without an application.
- **Foster Care Children Eligible for Free School Meals**  
[https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public\\_interest/child\\_law/resources/child\\_law\\_practiceonline/child\\_law\\_practice/vol30/march\\_2011/foster\\_children\\_eligibleforfreeschoolmeals](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/child_law_practice/vol30/march_2011/foster_children_eligibleforfreeschoolmeals)
- **Florida Department of Education Foster Care Web Page**  
<https://www.fldoe.org/schools/k-12-public-schools/sss/foster-care.stm>

## Professional Development Opportunity

The Student Engagement and Attendance Center will host a webinar titled ***Fostering Student Belonging and Connectedness to Improve Attendance*** on Wednesday, August 14, 2024, from 2:00-3:00pm.

To register, visit [https://westat.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZcsdOGoq-jkrEt1w\\_DnzbVqbKtcGYO7Tq5iQ#/registration](https://westat.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZcsdOGoq-jkrEt1w_DnzbVqbKtcGYO7Tq5iQ#/registration).

## Seeking Training Ideas

We are seeking professional development training ideas for the 2024-2025 school year that will help expand your knowledge as a mental health services provider in the school setting. Please send your ideas to Beverley Wilks at [Beverley.Wilks@fldoe.org](mailto:Beverley.Wilks@fldoe.org).

## Chronic Absenteeism

This year’s major education issue is the alarming number of students who have missed many school days. We know that it is vital for students to attend school and be ready to learn. It takes a team effort to accomplish this because when students miss instructional time, their academics can be negatively impacted.

Below are some recommendations on steps that can be taken to improve student attendance:

- Using the previous school year’s attendance data, do a deep dive to identify which students, or groups of students, are at risk due to poor attendance and might need additional support. Once you identify which students are at risk, take note of what you know about why they’re not attending school.
- During attendance meetings, collect information on why students are not attending school. You can then compile these reasons into categories, create specific interventions to meet those needs, and implement a prevention plan to eliminate those barriers.
- If you find many chronically absent students, consider applying the strategy to a manageable number. Then, you can use the experience to determine how to help more students.

- In some cases, a particular reason for absence will affect many students. For example, food insecurity often affects large numbers of students, not just individual students. The solutions in this case could include evidence-based interventions such as Breakfast in the Classroom. Breakfast in the Classroom is a program where students can eat in the cafeteria, similar to a traditional breakfast, or take a bagged meal to be eaten in between classes or during the next period.
- As you examine your attendance data, dive deep into unexcused, excused, and suspension data. What is driving your chronic absenteeism data? Is it the suspension rate or excused absences? What is driving the chronic absenteeism rate?
- To help prepare for the upcoming school year, districts can start thinking about target populations based on their chronic absenteeism data.

- During the 2018-2019 school year, two Proving Ground district partners piloted a postcard intervention program to reach the parents of early grade students. The postcards aimed to reduce absenteeism by addressing parental misconceptions about cumulative student absences and the academic content missed in pre-kindergar-



- ten through second grade. Over a school year, Proving Ground district partners found that an early grades postcards reduced absences by 7.9% across the districts that sent out postcards to parents.
- Other interventions that can be implemented are the Learnfare Program and the implementation of attendance requirements for minors to maintain their driving privilege.



## Involuntary Examination (IE) Data

When you enter the IE data for the upcoming school year, please remember to add the student’s Florida identification information correctly. If the student does not have Florida identification, as you enter the student’s name in the system please enter the spelling of the student’s name

correctly because the total number of students for whom an IE was initiated is required by section (s.) [394.455](#), Florida Statutes (F.S.). If a student’s name is entered twice in the system, differently each time, and no Florida identification is entered, the system will count it as two different students.

***Check out Education Week’s article, [A Universal Prevention Measure that Boosts Attendance and Improves Behavior](#)***

## September is...

### Attendance Awareness Month

Attendance Awareness Month brings awareness to the issue and works to improve student attendance by developing strategies that motivate students to attend school.

### Suicide Prevention Month

Suicide Prevention Month is a time to raise awareness of this stigmatized and often taboo topic. We use this month to shift public perception, spread hope and share vital information to people affected by suicide. Our goal is to ensure that individuals, friends and families have access to the resources they need to discuss suicide prevention and to seek help.

Your school can receive the designation “Suicide Prevention Certified School” by completing the following requirements:

- All instructional personnel are required to complete two hours of department-approved Youth Suicide Awareness and Prevention training every three years;
- The Youth Suicide Awareness and Prevention training must be included in the district’s continuing education or master in-service plan;

- The school has at least two school-based mental health services providers that are qualified to conduct a suicide risk assessment using a department-approved screening instrument; and
- The school or district has a policy requiring the use of an approved suicide risk assessment instrument administered by a school-based mental health services provider prior to requesting or initiating an IE due to concerns about a student’s suicide risk.

Visit <https://www.fldoe.org/schools/k-12-public-schools/sss/suicide-prevent.stml> for additional information.

## Q&A

### Attendance

**Is an absence excusable if the parent does not provide a specific reason for the absence (e.g., sends an email saying that their child will be out)? Do we need a specific reason?**

Per s. [1003.24](#), F.S., each district school board shall establish an attendance policy that includes but is not limited to the required number of days each school year that a student must be in attendance and the number of absences and tardinesses after which a statement explaining such absences and tardiness must be on file at the school. Each school in the district must determine if an absence or tardinesses is excused or unexcused according to the criteria established by the district school board.

**What can a school do when parents go on extended trips around winter holidays? We have families that will travel out of the country for three weeks after the holidays. They do tell us they are going.**

As noted above in s. [1003.24](#), F.S.

**What is the difference between habitual truancy and chronic absenteeism?**

Section [984.151](#), F.S., defines a habitual truant as a student who has 15 or more unexcused absences within 90 calendar days. Chronic absenteeism is defined as attendance below 90%.

**Is chronic absenteeism found in the early warning statute?**

Yes. It is defined in s. [1001.42\(18\)\(b\)](#), F.S., Early warning system.—

1. A school that serves any students in kindergarten through grade 8 shall implement an early warning system to identify students in such grades who need additional support to improve academic performance and stay engaged in school. The early warning system must include the following early warning indicators:

a. Attendance below 90 percent, regardless of whether absence is excused or a result of out-of-school suspension.

- b. One or more suspensions, whether in school or out of school.
- c. Course failure in English Language Arts or mathematics during any grading period.
- d. A Level 1 score on the statewide, standardized assessments for English Language Arts or mathematics.
- e. For students in kindergarten through grade 3, a substantial reading deficiency under s. [1008.25\(5\)\(a\)](#), F.S., or for students in kindergarten through grade 4, a substantial mathematics deficiency under s. [1008.25\(6\)\(a\)](#), F.S.

**Can a school meet with a parent if the absences are excused?**

Section [1003.26\(1\)\(b\)](#), F.S., Contact, Refer and Enforce.— “If the child study team finds that a pattern of nonattendance is developing, whether the absences are excused or not, a meeting with the parent must be scheduled to identify potential remedies.