



## RESOURCE GUIDE

A Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child

Approach to Improving Student Attendance

Truancy, Dropouts Homeless and Alternative Education Program

Office of School and Student Support

MAY 2018

## Maine Department of Education Comprehensive Attendance Plan

### Executive Summary:

The Unified Appropriations and Allocations Act for fiscal years ending June 30, 2018 and June 30, 2019 (Public Law 2017 Ch. 284 Section EEEEE-1 L.D.390) directs the Maine Department of Education (DOE) to “undertake a comprehensive attendance initiative, looking at a holistic approach to supportive services to children to ensure they are attending school and receiving the necessary supports for positive educational outcomes.” The act also directs the Maine DOE to review the work of the Count ME In program with regard to that organization’s work in supporting school attendance. This report describes the work to date of the Maine DOE in meeting these two charges

In 2017, the Maine DOE’s health team merged with other support services programs to form the new Office of School and Student Supports (OSSS). This office brings together resources in school health and wellness; health and physical education; school climate; behavior and discipline; bullying; homelessness and migrant student education; truancy and dropout prevention; school counseling; and alternative education. An overarching guiding principle of the OSSS is building an understanding within school communities of the ways in which education and health go hand in hand. This understanding is essential to improving attendance and academic achievement.

In order to advance a holistic approach to student outcomes, the OSSS has adopted the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model as a blueprint for its collaborative work. In particular, the OSSS is utilizing the model as the backbone of its comprehensive attendance initiative. A widely endorsed framework, the WSCC model is an expansion of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention’s Coordinated School Health (CSH) framework which incorporates the tenets of the Association for the Supervision of Curriculum Development’s (ASCD’s) whole child, unified approach to learning and health. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a national leader in health policy, recommends that States provide guidance to help schools and communities use the WSCC framework to address chronic absenteeism.

Utilizing the WSCC model, the Maine DOE has reviewed research and promising practices that address school attendance in the following ten areas: family engagement; community involvement; health education; physical education and activity; nutrition; health services; counseling and social services; school climate; physical environment; and staff wellness. This report outlines initial findings and recommendations in these areas and suggests accessible data tools that a school can use to understand why students are missing school and then select strategies to meet their community’s needs. The Office of School and Student Supports’ overall plan for this initiative is to: (1) create a comprehensive set of

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analytical and practical resources in all of the WSCC areas so that individual schools and districts have access to high quality tools for understanding and addressing chronic absenteeism in their communities; (2) organize and regularly update the resources on the Maine DOE website; (3) publicize the initiative so that schools, families and communities are aware of the supports available; (4) provide technical assistance and professional development to schools; and (5) establish a mechanism for strong collaboration among the Maine DOE, other state agencies, and community based organizations to enlist statewide support for improving school attendance.

Staff in the Office of School and Student Supports are familiar with the work of Count ME In and regularly participate in that organization's annual regional trainings. Early in the development of the office's work on its comprehensive attendance initiative, staff shared an outline of its work with Count ME In leadership and invited Count ME In to collaborate on elements of the model that relate to its core strategies. The Maine DOE attendance initiative in no way conflicts with the work of Count ME In but rather expands on Count ME In's approach of implementing universal strategies to create a welcoming school environment by helping a school recognize and address specific issues that may impact attendance in their local community. The Maine DOE views Count ME In as a critical ally in the its efforts to improve school attendance across the State.

### **Background:**

Regular school attendance is crucial for academic achievement at all grade levels. Chronic absenteeism in the early grades correlates with reduced literacy and mathematical achievement over multiple years, and the effect is especially pronounced for children from low income families. Improvement in elementary school attendance is a strong predictor of improved school achievement – not just for students who have been chronically absent but also for their peers with better attendance. At the middle and high school level, chronic absenteeism is one of the strongest predictors that a student will fail to graduate on time or will drop out altogether.

Maine school attendance statute (Title 20-A, Chapter 211) directs local school boards to develop policies for school attendance in general and only delineates a detailed, statewide policy for responding to truancy or unexcused absences. Research is clear, however, that all absences, excused and unexcused, contribute equally to the link between attendance and achievement.

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing more than 10% of a student's total days in membership, regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused. Because good attendance it is so strongly linked to academic success, attendance measures like chronic absenteeism are increasingly used as non-academic indicators for school accountability purposes. In response to the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, Maine DOE piloted statewide attendance data collection in 2016-17, and the rate of chronic absenteeism will be used in the state's accountability framework beginning in 2017-18.

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) also collects and analyzes school attendance data and recently released this information for the 2013-14 school year. The OCR uses a different definition of chronic absenteeism (absent at least 15 days, which for most Maine students is 8.6% of the academic year), but data from that collection is instructive. Of the Maine schools that submitted data to the OCR, twenty percent had at least a fifth of their students chronically absent by the OCR's definition. Those schools were concentrated in a small number of districts, and most of the high

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rates of absenteeism occurred in middle and high schools. While these patterns are consistent with what we might predict, there were a significant number of Maine schools with data that was not included in this analysis. We anticipate that the Maine DOE's annual analysis will be more comprehensive and will provide a clearer framework for understanding and acting upon chronic absenteeism across the state.

### Why do students miss school?

The Maine DOE does not collect data on the reasons students give for missing school, but national research indicates that students are most frequently absent for the following reasons:

- **Respiratory health:** Asthma and other respiratory conditions are frequently at the root of student absenteeism. Students with asthma are 1.5 to 3 times more likely to miss school than their peers without asthma. The CDC estimated that, nationally, 14.7 million school days were missed in the U.S. in 2002 as a result of asthma related illness. According to the CDC's 2014 data, 11.6% of adults in Maine suffer from asthma, the country's third highest prevalence rate. We anticipate that asthma is therefore a major contributor to school absenteeism in Maine.
- **Other physical health issues:** Other chronic conditions, like diabetes and sickle cell anemia often lead to chronic absenteeism. Obesity is also a significant predictor of chronic absenteeism, as is dental pain that results from lack of access to dental care.
- **Mental health:** Depression, anxiety, and disruptive behavior disorders are predictors of chronic absenteeism.
- **School culture, climate, and safety:** A student's sense of connection to the school community is moderately associated with absenteeism. Students who experience bullying, harassment, or feel threatened at school are more frequently absent.
- **Condition of the school facility:** Poor school ventilation systems and exposure to pollutants exacerbate asthma and other respiratory conditions that lead to heightened levels of school absenteeism. There is limited evidence that students are more likely to be absent when they are in portable classrooms, when school buildings need structural repairs, and when janitorial services are understaffed.
- **Family factors:** Students who are homeless and children who are supported by child protective services miss more school than their peers.
- **Information factors:** Parents may be unaware of how frequently their children are missing school and may not understand the relationship between regular attendance and achievement.

Many of the primary reasons for student absenteeism qualify in Maine as excusable absences under Maine's attendance statute (e.g., illness, educational disruption due to homelessness). Others relate to issues of school culture and communication between schools and families. These are more likely to result in absences that are not excused and therefore contribute to student truancy. Again, whether excused or not, any absence as part of a chronic pattern can negatively affect student achievement.

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A comprehensive approach to school attendance should reflect an expectation that universal, low cost strategies to improve student health, school climate, and parent communication will likely yield significant gains but that more intensive interventions will be called for in specific instances. Students and families that are most at risk may not be reached by universal approaches, and schools risk deepening their disadvantage by not designing a tiered intervention approach to anticipate and respond to extraordinary needs.

### Existing National and Maine initiatives:

Nationally, the nonprofit Attendance Works has been a leading voice in calling attention to the issue of chronic absenteeism and providing broad access to quality research, data and analytics, professional development, and programmatic approaches through its extensive website and technical assistance programs. Most of these resources are available at no cost to local districts, and customized technical assistance/consulting services are available at a cost to local and state entities.

The Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University has been a national leader in the implementation of Early Warning Systems (EWS) that use school attendance as one of three simple indicators to recognize and respond to students who are at risk for dropping out prior to graduation.

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education launched a comprehensive attendance program, Every Student, Every Day. Every Student, Every Day is a cross-sector initiative involving the Departments of Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Justice and grew out of the Obama Administration's My Brother's Keeper initiative.

Closer to home, the Maine nonprofit Count ME In complements the resources of Attendance Works by sponsoring annual regional meetings around attendance improvement, offering direct technical assistance to a pilot group of school districts, working with the Maine DOE to provide an attendance data tool that aligns with the Maine DOE student information management system, and providing locally sourced messaging materials. Count ME In also provides free resources through its public website. Although the bulk of these resources are available from Attendance Matters' extensive library, Count ME In's site includes links to related Maine community organizations and data.

Count ME In does not provide any information on the location of or outcomes from its pilot projects, but the Attendance Works 2017 report, "[Portraits of Change](#)", highlights Count ME In's "prevention-oriented" collaboration with RSU 57's Line Elementary School, noting a 44% decrease in chronic absenteeism over the course of two years.

Count ME In describes itself as an affiliate of Attendance Works and offers a set of 9 key strategies for success that were adapted from Attendance Works' strategic framework. Count ME In's strategies emphasize universal approaches (e.g., encouraging positive relationships, monitoring schoolwide attendance data, engaging families and community resources). Attendance Works articulates an approach that builds on the same prevention/early intervention strategies, but also guides schools to evaluate their data for regularities and trends in order to identify and address systematic barriers to good attendance.

Because we know that the reasons for chronic absenteeism are varied and, in a large percentage of cases, are directly related to distinct personal and environmental health issues, it is the view of the Office of School and Student Supports that an optimally effective school attendance initiative should encourage the use of diagnostic data and the development of appropriate responses to systemic

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barriers to attendance. The universal, prevention-oriented approach exemplified by Count ME In's work provides useful tools and perspective that can be incorporated into a more comprehensive set of strategies.

### Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child

The Office of School and Student Supports has adopted the ASCD/CDC Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model to frame its work on global issues such as school attendance.



The WSCC framework directs policy and program developers to attend to the following ten components or domains:

1. Health Services
2. School Climate
3. Family Engagement
4. Community Involvement
5. Counseling, Psychological, and Social Services

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6. Physical Environment
7. Health Education
8. Physical Education and Physical Activity
9. Nutrition Environment and Services
10. Employee Wellness

Below, we highlight strategies in the WSCC domains that relate to the nationally identified main causes of student absenteeism. Schools can develop a refined strategic plan for improving school attendance by adopting strategies that are relevant to their local community. Strategies include universal approaches that can and be implemented at the full school or district level at minimal or no cost and more intensive approaches that may require a higher level of resourcing. Intensive strategies may be those that a school implements after reviewing disaggregated data and finding that there is a subset of chronically absent students in need of a particular intervention.

**Overarching Policies and Practices:** The following recommendations are not specific to any WSCC domain but form the foundation of any program that addresses student attendance.

**1. Attendance Monitoring:** Schools interested in reducing chronic absenteeism can begin by reviewing their historic data to uncover trends and patterns and by implementing a system that allows for real time review of student attendance during the year. Monthly whole school checks to capture students who have missed 10% of the days that school has been in session (an average of 2 or more days per month) can facilitate early intervention and minimize the accrual of additional absences.

All Maine schools are now asked to review and analyze their historic student attendance data as part of a comprehensive needs assessment for federal education funding. Maine DOE staff from the ESSA team and Office of School and Student Supports are available to help schools analyze their data, and this review can serve as a starting point for identifying demographic groups with specific attendance challenges.

Count ME In has collaborated with the Maine DOE's data team to offer a simple attendance tracking tool for schools that use Infinite Campus as their student data management system. Attendance Works also provides spreadsheet-based data tracking tools for individual schools and districts through its website. All of these tools are available at no cost, although schools using tools from Attendance Works are asked to share their aggregate, de-identified data with the organization in exchange for their use.

**2. Create a school attendance team.** The work of reviewing attendance data and designing interventions is not the work of a single person. Good school attendance teams have strong principal involvement and can be a focal point for collaboration between student support staff, including school social workers and counselors; the school nurse; and the attendance coordinator. Other staff and community members may fulfill ad hoc roles for discussions focused either on strategy development or the needs of specific students. [Attendance Works](#) offers excellent resources for developing a team to lead comprehensive school attendance improvement initiatives.

### **Determining areas for targeted school-level intervention:**

Schools and school districts have access to several sources of data that may help them assess whether there are broad-based factors that are contributing to absenteeism.

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The Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey: Every other year, Maine DOE and Maine CDC partner to administer the Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (MIYHS) to students and families at all middle and high schools that choose to participate, along with a sample of elementary schools. A school's MIYHS data can offer a useful picture of student social, physical, and mental health circumstances that may be impacting attendance. Questions differ according to grade level, but schools can get a snapshot of the number of students who are experiencing bullying; who engage in risk taking behaviors; have mental health or substance use challenges; have absenteeism risk factors related to weight, nutrition, and physical activity concerns; and who are experiencing housing/family instability. Currently, approximately 80% of Maine middle and high schools participate in MIYHS. Elementary schools participate through a sampling process, but all middle and high schools are invited to administer the MIYHS.

School Climate Survey: For schools concerned about a potential role of school climate on student attendance, the U.S. Department of Education's [School Climate Survey](#) is available to schools to download, administer, and analyze at no cost. While this tool focuses on issues of social and emotional climate, it provides metrics in the following areas:

- Cultural and linguistic competency
- Relationships
- School participation
- Emotional Safety
- Physical Safety
- Bullying
- Substance Use
- Emergency Readiness
- Physical environment
- Instructional environment
- Physical Health
- Mental Health
- Discipline

Local records: Schools and districts that retain records on the reasons families provide for absences may want to review this information and to look for any demographic patterns in attendance data. A review of de-identified health information may reveal health issues that impact attendance.

### Strategies for the WSCC Components

**Health Services:** Because health is such a critical factor in student attendance, school based health services and programs have the potential to significantly reduce absenteeism, especially in communities with limited access to health resources.

1. **Engage the school nurse in the school's attendance initiative.** Student health records may provide important clues about the reasons for student absences. Student health information is only available to instructional and administrative staff when there is a demonstrable need for this information to be shared. When school nurses are aware that specific students are frequently absent, it would be appropriate to consider health information that could be relevant. Because health issues are so frequently the trigger for attendance challenges, the school nurse's involvement as a key participant in attendance initiatives is critical.

Maintaining and reviewing student health records can contribute greatly to school attendance. Having current individualized health plans in place for students with chronic conditions can reduce absences related to those conditions. Noting increases in physical complaints may be a clue to emergent health issues.



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2. **Address respiratory health.** A focus on asthma and other respiratory health issues may be warranted, especially given Maine’s unusually high rates of asthma.

The American Lung Association’s [Asthma-Friendly Schools Initiative Toolkit](#) provides a comprehensive set of strategies for addressing respiratory health at the school level, including an asthma checklist for school nurses, a model Individualized Health Plan for students with asthma, and case management tools for students who are missing school frequently as a result of their illness.

3. **Educate parents and staff as well as students.** Misconceptions about the risk of communicable diseases may lead to unnecessary absences. School policies, for example, should reflect accurate information on the low likelihood of students transmitting lice at school so that students do not miss school for that reason.

**School Climate:** Children are more likely to stay home from school if they do not feel physically and emotionally safe. If a school’s MIYHS, school climate, or local behavioral data indicates that bullying, teasing, fear of physical violence, or lack of acceptance are issues, the following strategies may be effective.

1. **Create a welcoming school environment that expects and celebrates good attendance.** Count ME In advocates for schools to adopt a set of simple practices to make sure that students, especially those who have a history of chronic absenteeism or tardiness, are greeted each day with positive, welcoming messages. Greeting students by name each day and telling them you are happy they made it to school rather than commenting on the fact that they are “late again” can encourage students to continue attending. Recognition of good attendance and attendance improvements can be an incentive to attend more regularly.
2. **Enhance training around and enforcement of the school’s bullying policy.** Title 20-A §6554 outlines detailed requirements for the design and implementation of local policies on the prohibition of bullying and cyberbullying in schools, and the [Maine DOE Bullying Prevention Program](#) webpage provides a model policy and procedures. Schools submit annual data on the prevalence of bullying in their schools, and a simple comparison of a school’s data with student self-reports and perceptions from surveys can be a good check on the effectiveness of existing actions in this area. The Maine DOE and CDC, in collaboration with Columbia University, Temple University, and the Universities of Minnesota and Iowa, have recently embarked on a research study evaluating the effectiveness of antibullying policies.
3. **Implement a multitiered program to teach and reinforce positive social and behavioral skills.** Explicitly teaching the social and behavioral skills that are needed in school ensures that all students understand school expectations. Multitiered programs provide more intensive instruction and support to students who need a higher level of intervention. [PBIS](#) (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports) is an example of an evidence-based, multi-tiered approach to teaching social, emotional, and behavioral skills and providing more intensive group and individual interventions when needed. Maine DOE supports PBIS implementation through its [special education program](#).

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For additional strategies to address bullying and other issues related to a school's climate, the [National Center of Safe, Supportive Learning Environments](#) is an excellent resource.

**Family Engagement.** Especially for younger children, parents and caregivers play a crucial role in determining whether students attend school regularly; however, parents may not understand the importance of regular attendance for their children in pre-K, kindergarten, and 1<sup>st</sup> grade. Yet, children who are chronically absent in their earliest school years are less likely to be reading at grade level by third grade and, in turn, are much more likely to drop out before graduating from high school.

- 1. Implement parent education and incentive programs in the early elementary grades.**  
Attendance Works has created several tools geared toward engaging families of young children in the work of improving early elementary and pre-K attendance. [The Perfectly Punctual Campaign](#) playfully engages children daily in monitoring their own attendance and honors parents monthly for getting their children to school on time. The Attendance Works [The Early Education Toolkit](#) provides additional family engagement resources especially geared toward pre-school settings.
- 2. Share attendance information with parents regularly.** Research consistently indicates that parents routinely underestimate the frequency of children's absences from school. Sharing information with families regularly about their children's attendance can be helpful in and of itself. There is no need to wait until a student reaches the statutory level of chronic truancy before notifying a family. By then, it may be too late. [Count ME In's](#) website offers a collection of postcard and letter templates for keeping parents apprised of their child's attendance, using positive language that invites collaboration.
- 3. Develop everyone's capacity for better communication and collaboration around attendance.**  
Schools may inadvertently discourage families from engagement when staff is unaware of cultural differences that affect communication. Likewise, data-driven arguments may be confusing to parents who have not developed the skills to interpret their meaning or relevance. Effective family engagement programs develop staff cultural competency, identify effective communication strategies, and build parent skills. Several organizations provide resources that help meet these criteria. The U.S. Department of Education's [Dual Capacity Building Framework for Family School Partnerships](#) provides a conceptual framework for helping schools develop the insight and skills needed to engage diverse families and tools for hosting parent camps on topics like attendance. Attendance Works offers a [comprehensive family engagement toolkit](#) containing research findings, core family engagement principles, and materials that can be used in attendance-related family engagement activities. [The Maine Parent Federation](#) offers information, guidance, and training opportunities for families navigating communication with schools.

**Community Involvement.** Schools are only able to meet the physical health, mental health, and family stability needs that affect attendance if they work in partnership with other providers and agencies that focus on those respective areas. At the same time, providers in areas other than education are unlikely to think about school attendance as an outcome of their services. Community involvement strategies include public messaging and the creation of strategic partnerships to reduce barriers to regular school attendance. Schools have improved attendance using attendance mentoring programs, an approach that requires the recruitment and support of community volunteers.

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- 1. Educate the broader community about the importance of school attendance and opportunities to support your work.** The [Absences Add Up](#) campaign, part of the U.S. Department of Education's school attendance initiative (Every Student, Every Day) has tools for engaging community leaders. The [Attendance Works](#) website contains many useful messaging and informational resources that can be used to educate the community about chronic absenteeism.
- 2. Implement an evidence-based mentoring program to mobilize community members.** [Check and Connect](#), a dropout prevention program that consistently improves attendance, utilizes community monitors as a bridge between school, family, and student. Monitors keep track of student attendance and other variables, meet regularly with students to provide feedback on their engagement, help them develop skills for good decision making, and connect them with outside activities. [The Success Mentor](#) model, from the My Brother's Keeper initiative, utilizes community mentors to provide encouragement and support, respond to each student absence, and leverage their relationship with students to understand the cause of chronic absenteeism and find effective interventions.
- 3. Adopt a collective impact approach to addressing health and socioeconomic issues that impact attendance.** The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Health Policy Snapshot: [The Relationship Between School and Health](#) highlights several such initiatives that improved school attendance through a coordinated community approach to asthma, homelessness, and poverty.

**Counseling, Psychology, and Social Services.** Student support personnel are optimally trained to recognize, respond, and access resources for children who are missing school due to family instability, mental health issues, and social/emotional concerns. They may play key roles in determining which students require intensive interventions and are critical to the work of maintaining effective communication with outside providers.

- 1. School Counselors and Social Workers should be core members of the school attendance team.** School counselors and social workers should have a leadership role in a school's attendance team so that, like the school nurse, they can offer appropriate insight into situations that may be related to a student's chronic absenteeism. The link between family instability factors, mental health conditions and school attendance means that the school's intervention, support, and referral processes will often be critical resources for specific students. Social workers and counselors may be the most appropriate people to lead family and community engagement initiatives.
- 2. Adopt a collaborative approach to student mental health.** Schools frequently rely on counselors for crisis intervention, limiting the number of students that they can serve. [Mental health screening](#) and [Youth Mental Health First Aid](#) can extend the reach of student support staff, help students connect with resources before mental health related absences pile up, and enlist the broader school community in work that has traditionally been relegated to counselors.
- 3. Link attendance to support services through the attendance coordinator.** District attendance coordinators in Maine are required to be "certified or registered in the mental health, social welfare, or education systems." They are charged with interviewing students and parents to determine the cause of chronic absenteeism. A qualified attendance coordinator with strong interviewing skills can be a critical member of the attendance team.

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4. **Take a universal approach to identifying highly mobile families:** Children entering foster or kinship care, migratory families, and those experiencing homelessness are unlikely to self-identify, so schools that wait for families to ask for assistance can see high rates of absenteeism due to unstable living situations. Accessible, easy to understand notification about supports for highly mobile students should be provided to all families during enrollment and several times a year. This can reduce the number of days that students miss school when they lose housing and/or move.

**Physical Environment.** Monitoring and addressing school air quality issues can reduce absenteeism by improving the respiratory health of students and staff.

1. **Implement an indoor air quality program.** The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's [Indoor Air Quality in Schools](#) program offers a comprehensive kit of assessment, management, engagement, and problem solving tools to address school air quality issues. These are now available in the form of a free, downloadable mobile app that can simplify the process of identifying indoor air quality problems, finding and implementing solutions, and continual monitoring.

**Health Education.** Because health concerns so frequently lead to student absences, a robust school health education program is a powerful tool for improving attendance.

1. **Make Comprehensive Health Education a core element of the curriculum.** The Maine Learning Results include health education standards at all grade levels, and the [Maine DOE's Health Education Program](#) provides a wealth of resources for implementing quality, skills-based programming and for selecting educational tools to address specific health issues relevant to a school community.

Best practices in developing a curriculum that addresses the needs of the community include a review of the school's MIYHS data, along with other local health-related data sources. The health education curriculum is most effective when delivered by qualified, trained teachers who guide students in acquiring the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to make health-promoting decisions, achieve health literacy, and adopt health-enhancing behaviors.

**Nutrition Environment and Services.** For families experiencing economic challenges, school meals can be an important incentive for regular attendance.

1. **Implement a universal free breakfast program.** Several [research studies](#) indicate that student attendance improves in schools that offer a universal free breakfast program. In addition, school breakfast program participants appear to be at lower risk for obesity (a risk factor for chronic absenteeism), to consume higher levels of key nutrients overall, and to experience lower levels of anxiety, depression, and behavioral incidents. The positive impacts of school breakfast programs are maximized when the breakfast program is universally available at no cost and is served in the classroom.
2. **Improve student access to nutritious food.** The [Maine DOE Nutrition Program](#) provides information and resources for implementing a school breakfast program (SBP) along with a

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range of other resources for improving the nutritional quality of the food available to students in school and in the community. Improving access to nutritious food may help mitigate health problems related to poverty that are reflected in significant disparities in chronic absenteeism between families living in poverty and middle income families.

**Physical Education and Physical Activity.** A direct link between attendance and school-based physical activity is not well documented; however, there are documented connections between attendance and variables that are positively influenced by physical activity, such as cardiovascular fitness and healthy weight maintenance. Schools can create an environment that offers many opportunities for students to be physically active throughout the school day

1. **Ensure students have at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day by making physical activity a part of school culture.** [Maine Health's 5210 Let's Go](#) program provides separate elementary and middle/high school toolkits with easy to implement strategies for promoting increased physical activity during the school day. The [Maine DOE's Physical Education Program](#) can assist schools in designing and implementing programs and interventions that address attendance improvement goals by increasing physical activity. The [US Center for Disease Control and Prevention](#) has many resources to support the research behind and implementation of physical activity and physical education.

**Employee Wellness.** No research is currently available that shows a direct link between school employee wellness and student attendance. However, school employees who embrace healthy practices model positive behaviors and attitudes for students and create a more inviting atmosphere for student attendance. Individual schools or districts may wish to review their local attendance data to determine whether staff well-being may be influencing student attendance.

1. **Assess workforce wellness in your school and respond to potential links between staff well-being and student attendance.** [Healthy Maine Works](#) offers a simple survey tool to assess workforce wellness, along with direct links to strategies for addressing areas of concern. Rates of staff absenteeism may also be a useful variable for assessing staff well-being.

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### Statutory considerations

Maine attendance statute emphasizes chronic truancy (*excessive unexcused absences*) as a trigger for school and community intervention. The focus on truancy tacitly invites schools and families to accept high levels of absenteeism for reasons deemed excusable without attempting to intervene.

It will be instructive to be able to analyze truancy data from Maine schools in relation to overall student attendance, now that the department will have access to both. The Office of Truancy and Dropout Prevention proposes reviewing that data over the course of two to three academic years to determine whether Maine students would be better served by revising statute to focus on overall chronic absenteeism rather than truancy.