BACK-TO-SCHOOL

BLUEPRINT

PLANNING FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE AFTER COVID-19

REENGAGING STUDENTS

REENGAGING STUDENTS

Education is critical to each child's social, emotional, physical, and economic wellbeing. Students who do not complete school often face a range of personal and financial barriers, including fewer job opportunities, lower lifetime earnings, and increased involvement with the criminal justice system (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated significant inequities in the U.S. education system, making it more difficult for all students, particularly those from marginalized communities, to engage in school.

For a variety of reasons, many students have been disconnected from learning since schools closed this spring. The pandemic exposed a large digital divide, with many low-income students, students of color, and English Learners lacking necessary technology to access online assignments. Non-academic pressures including unstable housing, family medical trauma, and parental job loss made participating—and succeeding—in remote learning a struggle for many students. Even in affluent communities with access to necessary educational supports, families and educators struggled to provide meaningful learning experiences for children amidst abrupt school closures. Researchers predict devastating long-term consequences, including a sharp increase in dropout rates and declines in academic proficiency.

The factors that impact a child's ability to succeed and graduate begin in early childhood. Students need foundational academic skills, authentic relationships, non-academic supports, and relevant instruction in order to reach their potential. After a year of significant disruption, this guide focuses on what schools can do to prevent disengagement, intervene with struggling students, and reengage those who have left school. Each section includes a set of virtual recommendations that educators can use in the event of continued school closures.

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT INFLUENCES STUDENT ENGAGEMENT?

This section describes the **factors** that support or inhibit **student engagement**. These factors are described in further detail throughout this action guide.

In order to engage in schoolwork, students must be **physically healthy**, **emotionally safe**, and **academically challenged**. The section below provides an overview of factors that influence student engagement.

STUDENTS ENGAGE IN SCHOOL WHEN...

They Have the Opportunity to Attend

Unreliable transportation, chronic illness, community violence, and a lack of safe sidewalks keep many children out of school. Limited access to technology prevents student participation when classes take place online. Punitive discipline, such as suspension and expulsion, results in missed class time. Educators can help children succeed by working to address the environmental and policy factors that push students out of school.

They Feel Known and Valued

Every student deserves a welcoming, culturally responsive school environment that supports strong relationships among peers and adults. To engage in the classroom, students need to feel

that their full identity is welcomed and respected. Educators show students their inherent value by building relationships with each child and embedding cultural forms of learning into ongoing instruction.

They Experience Academic Success

Foundational academic skills, such as early literacy and basic mathematics, equip children with the tools they need for long-term academic success. Children learn in different ways and progress at different rates. A strong academic foundation, suited to individual strengths and needs, is critical to each child's academic confidence and ability to access rigorous material.

They Receive Rigorous, Relevant Instruction

Students often perceive their academic courses to be disconnected from their career aspirations. Educators can improve student engagement by providing opportunities for students to explore their career interests and identify short-term milestones that build towards long-term career goals. This includes creating advising structures that support students to select courses and extracurricular activities aligned to their goals.

They are Encouraged to Return

Students who drop out of school need proactive and comprehensive supports to bring them back. Educators should take time to understand each student's unique strengths and needs, including the factors that caused the student to disengage. Though some students may return to their previous school, many will benefit from a range of district- and community-based options for reentry. When educators address both academic and non-academic barriers, they create the conditions for student success.

Upcoming sections of this action guide include school- and classroom-based strategies to reengage students after a period of significant disruption. The topics addressed in this guide are aligned to early warning indicators, which serve as research-based predictors of long-term school success. An overview of key topics is listed below.

- **Prioritize Attendance:** Strategies to build a culture of attendance and intervene when attendance challenges arise

- **Build Relationships:** Strategies to build strong student-teacher, peer-to-peer, and family relationships

- **Support Academic Progress:** Strategies to build strong student-teacher, peer-to-peer, and family relationships

- **Rethink Discipline:** Strategies to shift from punitive discipline to restorative practices

- **Engage Disconnected Students:** Strategies to reengage students who are disconnected from school

RESHAPING THE NARRATIVE

Youth leave school when the structures that are designed to **support and protect** them, **fail** them instead.

WHO GETS TO GRADUATE?

High school graduation data reveal stark opportunity gaps, illustrating the impact of systemic inequities in Massachusetts classrooms and communities. The chart below explores graduation disparities across student subgroups.

4-Year Graduation Rates

Source: Massachusetts DESE Profiles, 2019
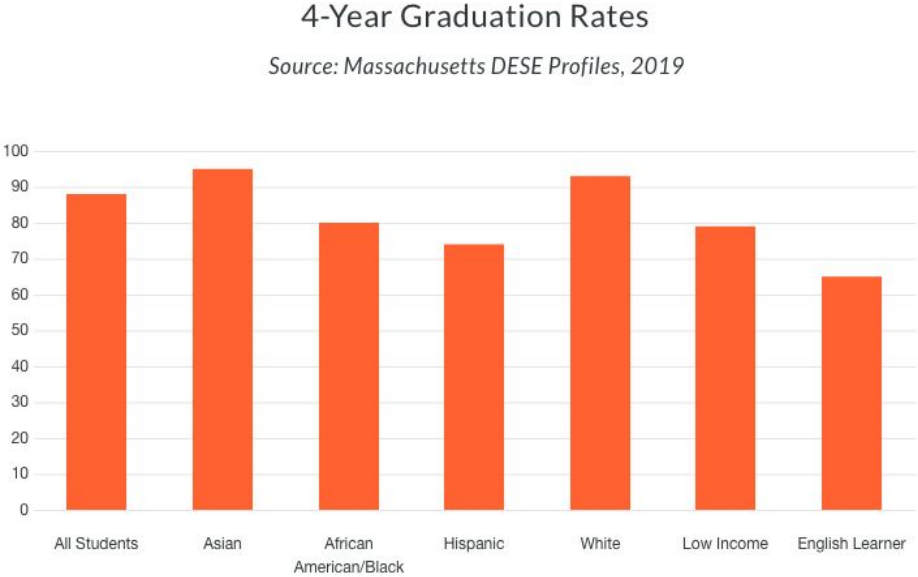
Research has established a set of predictors of whether a student will graduate from or drop out of high school. This includes academic milestones like reading proficiently in 3rd grade and passing all 9th grade courses. It also includes attendance rates and disciplinary events. Monitoring these kinds of early warning indicators is an important — but insufficient — component of a dropout prevention strategy. In order to create schools that allow every child to succeed, educators must reexamine structures that facilitate student success or failure.

STRUCTURAL INEQUITY AND DROPOUT RISK

Too often, educators and policymakers use early warning data to draw conclusions about individual students, ignoring the systemic factors that place students of color, English Learners, students with disabilities, and low-income students at disproportionate risk for disengagement. For example, the policies and norms that govern the U.S. education system remain dictated by

primarily white decision-makers, resulting in a schooling experience in which students of color must conform to white-dominant norms or risk falling behind.

The standard practice of labeling students "at-risk" places students and their communities at the center of the risk, putting the onus on the child to overcome the inequitable conditions that oppress them. Efforts to increase graduation rates require educators and policymakers to shift this practice by confronting the structural barriers that prevent academic success among marginalized students.

Some barriers are overt. For example, English learners are often given assessments that fail to distinguish between language acquisition and content knowledge, providing limited opportunity for students to show what they actually know. Others barriers are insidious but no less damaging. This includes implicit biases that impact teachers' expectations of Black and Brown children. In order to create opportunity, educators must directly acknowledge the role of systemic, interpersonal, and internalized racism in creating educational disparities between students of color and their white peers.

Reexamining the ABCs

Attendance, behavior, and classwork, summarized as the ABCs of disengagement, serve as key predictors of dropout risk. The section below examines the ABCs of disengagement through an equity lens, exploring how systemic barriers place marginalized students, and particularly students of color, at disproportionate risk for dropout.

Attendance

Absenteeism, beginning in early childhood, is linked to lower graduation rates. Students with less than 80% attendance are at highest risk of dropping out (Balfanz, Wang, & Byrnes, 2010).

Equity Implications

Racialized barriers place students of color at disproportionate risk for chronic absenteeism. For example, Black and Latino students are "disproportionately exposed to environmental conditions that trigger severe asthma – allergens, air pollution, and stressful circumstances" (Race Matters Institute, 2012). Asthma is the leading cause of health-related absences among children (Hsu et. al., 2016). Children living in neighborhoods with high rates of community violence are more likely to exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (Northwestern University, 2016). Too

often, attendance interventions fail to address root causes of absenteeism including chronic health concerns.

Behavior

Discipline referrals, suspensions, truancy, and substance abuse are correlated with higher dropout rates (Hoff et. al., 2015). Exclusionary discipline, such as suspension and expulsion, serves as a significant risk factor. Disciplinary challenges beginning in the early elementary years heighten the probability that a student will eventually disengage from school.

Equity Implications

Studies show significant racial bias in school discipline across grade levels and school settings. As early as elementary school, Black students are disciplined more severely and at higher rates than their white peers for the same behavior (Jarvis & Okonofua, 2019). Students of color are significantly more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled (Aud et. al., 2011). Students with disabilities are also more likely than their non-disabled peers to be disciplined at school. During the 2018-19 school year, 7.8% of Massachusetts students with disabilities were disciplined compared to 4.2% of all students (DESE Profiles, 2019).

Classwork

Beginning in early elementary school, reading and math proficiency serve as significant predictors of whether a child will graduate from high school (Sparks, 2013). Academic performance across grade levels, as measured by grades and GPA, is highly correlated with dropout risk (Hoff et. al., 2015).

Equity Implications

Students are most successful in learning environments that recognize, respect, and build upon cultural forms of learning. Most U.S. classrooms emphasize white-dominant cultural norms, such as learning independently and valuing the written word over other forms of expression. This disadvantages students from cultures that emphasize oral processing, collaborative decision-making, and a range of other forms of teaching and learning. Additionally, curriculum across subject areas privileges white authors and points of view, limiting the exposure of students of color to instruction that reflects their cultures and lived experiences.

Low-income students, students with disabilities, students of color, and English learners often have limited access to advanced learning opportunities. Studies demonstrate the impact of educator racial bias on teacher expectations, which directly influence course-taking patterns among students of color. A recent study found that when evaluating the same Black student, "white teachers expect significantly less academic success than do black teachers" (Rosen, 2016). Teacher expectations and biases also limit access to advanced coursework for students with disabilities and English learners.

ANALYZING AND ACTING UPON DATA

By analyzing school-wide early warning data, educators can address both individual and systemic barriers to graduation. When students are struggling, it is important to intervene early to get the child back on track. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's **Early Warning Indicator System** (EWIS) offers districts a free tool to identify students who need additional support. This data also helps educators identify broader trends among subgroups of students.

Analyzing and monitoring data serves as a critical first step in addressing systemic barriers to graduation. Once educators identify barriers, they can implement universal strategies to prevent future students from experiencing the same challenges as their predecessors.

This guide offers prevention, intervention, and reengagement strategies aligned to student engagement predictors including attendance, relationships, academic coursework, and discipline. The purpose of this guide is not to offer a full suite of resources aligned to each indicator. Instead, each section provides a limited number of ideas and strategies that educators can use to get started. It is important for schools to regularly monitor early warning indicators in order to focus time and resources on the areas in need of immediate support. Each section of this guide offers strategies to examine and address the inequitable conditions that continue to drive disparate outcomes among Massachusetts students.

SCHOOL-BASED STRATEGIES

PRIORITIZE ATTENDANCE

Attendance is a powerful predictor of long-term school success. This section shares strategies to build a **culture of attendance**.

WHY ATTENDANCE MATTERS

Students with high attendance rates perform better in school and are more likely to graduate on time. Students who miss more than 10% of the school year are considered chronically absent. Chronic absenteeism is associated with lower graduation rates, a decreased sense of belonging at school, and poorer academic performance. Below are statistics about chronic absenteeism:

- Students who are chronically absent in the early grades are **less likely** to read proficiently by third grade.

- Students who are chronically absent in a single year between 8th and 12th grade are **7x more likely** to drop out of high school.

- Students who live in communities with high levels of poverty are **4x more likely** to be chronically absent than those from more affluent areas. Often is this due to unstable housing, unreliable transportation, and a range of other systemic barriers.

BARRIERS TO ATTENDANCE

Before educators can implement strategies to improve attendance, they must identify the barriers that prevent students from regularly attending school. Once barriers have been identified, educators can partner with families and community organizations to alleviate these challenges. The reasons why students miss school are wide ranging. Some examples are included below:

Lack of Connection

Students are more likely to miss school when they:

- Lack trusting relationships with teachers
- Are bullied
- Are socially isolated
- Lack peer friendships

By prioritizing warm, authentic relationships, schools can increase attendance rates.

Basic Needs

Students who are hungry or tired are more likely to miss school — and are less engaged when they do attend. Food and housing insecurity serve as significant attendance barriers for many

children. Educators can address these barriers by connecting families with essential services in the community. Review the Rennie Center's **Accessing Essential Services action guide** for information on getting started.

Safety Concerns

Low-income students and students of color are more likely to live in communities where disinvestment has limited the creation of safe sidewalks, bike paths, and bridges over busy intersections. While 90% of high-income communities have sidewalks, only 49% of low-income communities have this resource **(Safe Routes Partnership**). Students from marginalized communities are also more likely to be exposed to neighborhood violence. In a 2015 survey, parents noted that violence and crime are among the primary factors that prevent children from walking or biking to school (Safe Routes Partnership, 2015).

To address safety barriers, schools may form a "walking school bus" where trusted adults and children walk to and from school together. Educators can also work with local elected officials and community-based organizations to support violence prevention efforts and lobby for improved infrastructure, such as safe sidewalks.

Health Conditions

Students suffering from physical or mental health conditions are more likely to miss school, particularly if they lack access to adequate medical care. Many schools in low-income communities do not have a full-time nurse, creating a barrier for children with chronic conditions such as asthma, diabetes, or epilepsy. Educators can improve attendance by working with a child's doctor or school nurse to develop an individualized action plan, such as a 504 Plan. **A 504 plan** provides children with disabilities, such as physical or mental health conditions, the legal right to accessible educational opportunities.

Family Factors

Caretaking responsibilities for younger family members, elderly family members, or family members with disabilities can cause students to miss school. During school closures, many older students faced difficult choices between prioritizing their own schoolwork and caring for younger siblings while parents were working. Students whose families lack access to appropriate childcare or eldercare services face similar difficulties when schools are open. Educators can support students by providing referrals to local childcare and disability resources.

CREATING A CULTURE OF ATTENDANCE

By improving school culture and addressing non-academic barriers, educators can create a culture of attendance. This starts by making school a place where children and families feel welcomed, cared for, and respected. The strategies below provide guidance on getting started.

1. **Start Early**

    As displayed in the figure below, absenteeism is particularly high in early childhood and high school (MA DESE, 2019).

Chronic Absenteeism by Grade

Massachusetts Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018
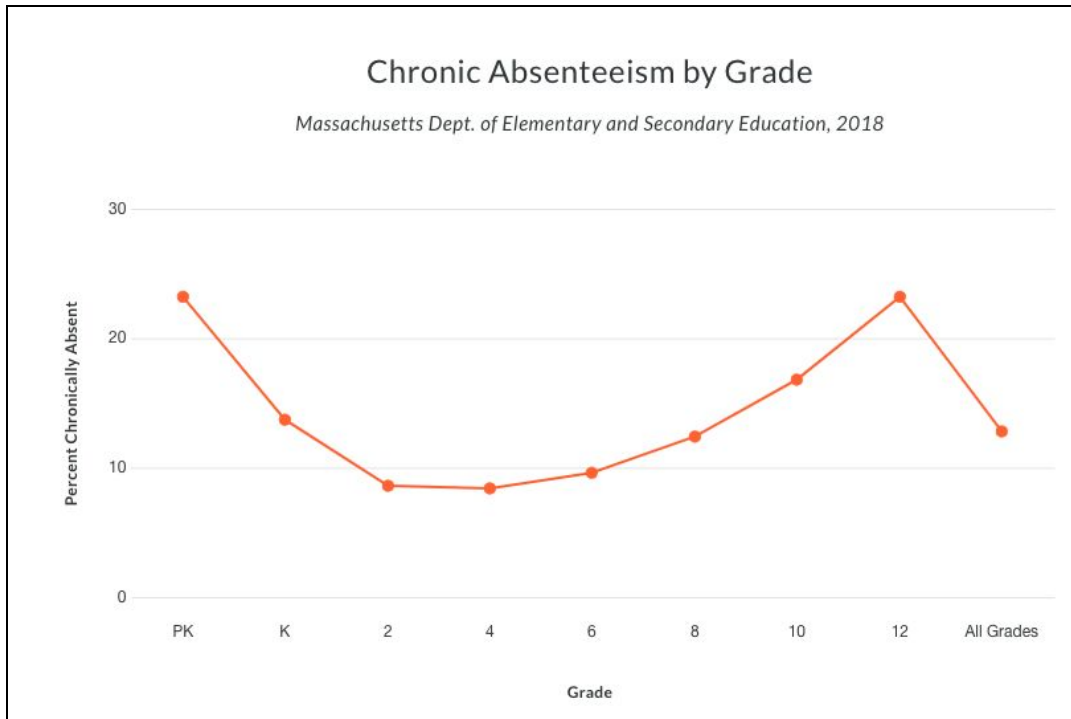
In the early grades, families may not recognize the consequences of missed school days. The following strategies encourage attendance in grades PreK-2.

Communicate the Importance of Attendance

When children are young, they rely on their family members to get to school each day. Many families are not aware of the impact of cumulative absences on academic and social success. Schools can share flyers, videos, and social media posts to ensure every family understands the importance of school attendance for young children. This **video from Attendance Works** features parents talking to other parents about reducing absenteeism.

Build Trust with Families

Attendance improves when families feel safe and welcome in the school building. Especially when the school experience is new, families need to be confident that their young child will be safe, happy, and nurtured at school each day. Educators can use the following strategies to build relationships with families:

1. **Conduct home visits** (whether virtually or in person) to meet families and begin to learn about students' home cultures
2. Call, text, or email families to share positive news from the child's day
3. Create an expectation of two-way communication, in which families can reach out at any time to discuss ideas or concerns
4. Personally invite families to engage in classroom activities

*For more strategies on creating a welcoming environment for families, review the **[Rennie Center's Rebuilding Community Action Guide](#)***

Notice Absences

Schools can reduce chronic absence by texting or emailing parents when children miss school. In one study, "teachers sent targeted messages to parents of kindergarten students on the day they missed school, expressing concern and offering assistance" (IES, 2019). Based on parents' responses, teachers offered connections to community-based resources including housing and clean clothes. This strategy reduced chronic absence by 11 percentage points.

2. Prioritize a Welcoming Environment

Students want to attend school when they feel valued, known, and cared for in the classroom environment. Students may avoid coming to school if they lack connections with their classmates, are nervous about their academic performance, or feel disconnected from their teachers. Research shows that positive peer and educator relationships have an impact on attendance. This topic is explored in greater detail in the *Build Relationships* section.

3. Get Kids Involved

Children play an important role in building a culture of attendance in their own schools. As students get older, they typically take on more responsibility for getting themselves to school by bus, on foot, on a bike, or via public transportation. Educators should ensure that students understand the impact of absences on their success in school. Efforts to get students excited about attendance are most effective when they involve or are led by youth. In Oakland, students worked with NFL player Marshawn Lynch (an Oakland Unified School District graduate) to **[create a video](#)** building excitement around attendance.

4. Avoid Attendance Awards

Many schools offer rewards, such as a pizza party or certificate, for perfect attendance. Recent research shows that these extrinsic motivators can lead to higher rates of absenteeism rather than boosting attendance rates. Awards inadvertently provide students with a "license to miss school" by suggesting that daily attendance is not an expectation.

Rather than **[offering awards for perfect attendance](#)**, educators should notice student absences. This includes checking in on students when they return to school and reaching out via text or email when students miss class. Personalized outreach reminds students of their value in the classroom community.

5. Develop an Attendance Improvement Process

Educators should track attendance data in order to prevent chronic absenteeism and intervene with struggling students. Instead of waiting until students are chronically absent, teachers should proactively connect with families at the first sign of attendance challenges. School staff can use the following process to get started.

1. **Form an Attendance Team**
   Form an attendance team to meet regularly to monitor data and address findings. The attendance team should be responsible for identifying attendance barriers and developing universal strategies to improve attendance rates for all students.

2. **Analyze Data**
   During each meeting, the attendance team should disaggregate data to identify trends by race/ethnicity, family income level, disability status, native language, grade level, and teacher. Team members should make all teachers and administrators aware of attendance trends.

3. **Meet with Students and Families**
   Once educators have identified attendance trends, they can meet with students and families to identify barriers. In partnership with families, educators can brainstorm solutions to address these barriers.

4. **Identify Universal Strategies**
   Based on data findings, educators should identify attendance supports. This could include offering safe transportation to school via a **walking school bus** or launching a handwashing campaign to prevent illness.

5. **Provide Targeted Interventions**
   Students who are at risk of becoming chronically absent need targeted interventions to address their unique attendance barriers. Educators should meet with families to identify causes of absence. For example, if a chronic illness is keeping a child from attending school, educators can connect the family with appropriate medical care. More information on tiered interventions is included below.

Attendance data equips educators with the information they need to provide tiered interventions. In addition to universal preventative strategies designed to build a schoolwide culture of attendance, educators should identify targeted supports for students who are frequently absent. Below is additional information about tiered attendance interventions.

- **Tier 1** includes universal strategies to encourage a culture of attendance for all students.
  - Example: Educators share a flyer and video with all families describing the importance of attendance.

- **Tier 2** includes early interventions for student who are at risk of chronic absence.
  - Example: Educators conduct home visits with students at risk of chronic absence. During the visit, educators and families discuss why the child is missing school. They identify supports to address attendance barriers.

- **Tier 3** includes intensive support for chronically absent students.
  - See the Success Mentor strategy below for an example.

Success mentoring is a school-based strategy to address chronic absenteeism through the power of relationships. This data-driven strategy connects youth with a caring adult who supports their college and career goals. This adult could be an educator, non-instructional staff member, or an employee of a community partner organization. Key components of success mentoring are highlighted below..

- An attendance team uses data to identify students who would benefit from a success mentor.
- Existing staff, such as teachers and coaches, serve as mentors. These individuals are trained in culturally responsive mentoring.
- Youth and mentors work together to identify underlying causes of absenteeism. Once challenges are identified, mentor-mentee pairs problem-solve together.
- Mentors and mentees meet regularly to build a trusting relationship, discuss personal and academic struggles, celebrate success, and connect students to community-based resources.
- Mentors meet regularly with a school-based team to discuss students' needs and identify necessary supports.

More information, including guidance on mentor training, is included in this **National Mentoring Partnership resource**.

ATTENDANCE IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

When school takes place virtually, students face added attendance barriers. Educators can use a blend of electronic, paper, and in-person communication strategies to encourage attendance.

1. **Stay in contact:** Reach out to students and families through phone call, text message, email, social media, and mail to provide attendance updates, including the number of missed online lessons. Students' friends and emergency contacts can also nudge children to participate in distance learning.

2. **Evaluate connectivity:** Determine whether students have access to the internet and an appropriate device. Students and families won't receive attendance nudges in the form of electronic communication if they are not connected to the internet. Partner with school leaders and community-based organizations to address connectivity gaps. In the meantime, reach out to students and families by phone to discuss ways to engage the child in learning opportunities that do not require technology.

3. **Examine participation:** Track students' participation in online classes. Are students turning in assignments on time? Are they asking questions and engaging with peers in the virtual environment? If you notice signs of disengagement, set up an individual meeting to check in with the child. Ask how they are doing both academically and emotionally. In an all-virtual world, it benefits children to know that their educators, administrators, and other school staff care about their wellbeing.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Students who have **strong relationships** with educators, mentors, and peers are more **engaged** in school. In order to succeed, students must feel **known and supported**. This section explores **strategies to build relationships** with and among students.

STUDENT-STAFF RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are the context in which all learning takes place. By investing time in strong relationships, school staff create the conditions for academic learning. The section below describes strategies to improve relationships between students, teachers, and non-instructional staff.

First Week of School

Relationships should be a priority throughout the entire school year. Educators set this expectation by prioritizing team-building activities during the first few weeks of school. This can include:

- Asking students about their hopes and fears for the year ahead
- Asking students about their expectations for you as a teacher
- Providing opportunities for students to **explore their identity** and share it with classmates

Individualized Conferencing

Individualized instruction strengthens student-teacher relationships and increases engagement. By conferencing with each student about their work, educators can embed individualized instruction in regular class periods. In addition to strengthening relationships, conferences help students take ownership of their learning. Read more about individualized conferencing on ASCD's ***Empower Students Through Individual Conferences***.

Storytelling

Students and educators share a desire to connect. Embedding storytelling in academic instruction can strengthen their relationships. Students form bonds by sharing their life experiences and learning about others' experiences. In many cultures, oral storytelling serves as a primary method of teaching. Educators can make instruction more culturally relevant by making space for storytelling in the classroom. EdSurge writes about ***Using Storytelling to Forge Unbreakable Bonds Between Teachers and Students***.

Body Language

Most communication is nonverbal, expressed through tone and body language. Studies show that "teachers unconsciously exhibit more favorable body language towards students that remind them of themselves" (IES, 2017). In Massachusetts, the educator workforce is 90% white, while students are increasingly diverse. In order to educate all students well, educators must be mindful of their body language around each child.

Many individuals experience difficulty recognizing their own body language. Teachers can address this challenge by asking a trusted colleague to observe their instruction and provide feedback. This is an important step in making sure all students see that their presence, questions, and ideas are valued.

Classroom Greetings

Welcoming students by name when they enter the classroom is a simple and effective method to show students that they matter. When greeting students, it is critical to pronounce their names correctly. This **article from Education Week** shares information about the significance of correct pronunciation. If you are unsure of the correct pronunciation, ask the child at the beginning of the school year.

Deeper Support

When students are struggling, relationships are critical to getting them back on track. The section below explores intensive support models for students who are at risk of disengaging from school. Adults need consistent professional development to implement these strategies well.

1. **School Intervention Specialists** and **graduation coaches** are school-based staff who form deep, authentic relationships with students and their families. They provide both academic and non-academic support, linking students to a range of school- and community-based resources. Students receive a text or phone call from their graduation

coach if they are running late to school. Coaches work closely with classroom teachers to promote student self-advocacy and engagement. Coaches and students meet regularly, developing a plan to recover missed credits. These relationships are often particularly effective when students are paired with coaches whose backgrounds and life experiences are relatable to their own.

2. **Check & Connect**, developed by the University of Minnesota, is a research-based dropout prevention intervention for students in grades K-12. The model uses the power of long-term, caring relationships to promote success in school. Mentors monitor student data related to grades, attendance, and other key indicators. Mentors and students connect regularly for a minimum of two years to identify school and community supports aligned to student needs. Check & Connect mentors work closely with families, serving as a liaison between home and school.

PEER-TO-PEER RELATIONSHIPS

As students navigate their educational careers, they often turn to one another for help - whether it be personal, social, or academic. Peer relationships have a profound effect on academic engagement, motivation, and school performance. When students lack strong peer relationships, they are more likely to disengage in their classes or drop out of school entirely (Furrer et. al., 2014). The section below describes strategies designed to strengthen peer relationships.

Welcoming Activities

Teachers can strengthen peer relationships by beginning each school day or class period with a welcoming ritual. These brief activities ensure each student's voice and perspective is "heard, respected, and learned from" (CASEL). Examples of welcoming rituals are included in **CASEL's Signature Practices Playbook**.

Peer Support Structures

Peer mentors and support groups help students who are struggling with difficult personal situations, such as a mental health condition or family trauma. In peer support groups, students find classmates who will listen, empathize, and ask questions about their experiences.

Peer support structures also have academic benefits. Peer tutoring has been shown to improve student relationships, motivation, and academic achievement (**National Education Association,** 2019). Studies show benefits for students who provide tutoring as well as those who receive tutoring.

Collaborative Learning

Teachers can promote student relationships by creating opportunities for students to work collaboratively in the context of daily instruction. For example, educators can arrange desks in pods or circles to promote discussion. Though collaborative seating arrangements are unlikely to be possible at the beginning of the school year due to COVID-related guidance, educators should still use grouping strategies wherever possible. This can include using virtual breakout rooms to promote student discussion.

During instruction, educators should offer opportunities for students to explore their identity and share their values with others. **The Value Lines strategy**, provides one example. This protocol encourages students to share their stance on a text-related topic. Students have the opportunity to listen to their peers' stances and change their own opinion if desired.

Weekly Circles

During **weekly circles**, students have structured opportunities to build and repair relationships. In many schools, circles begin with a check-in on how each student is feeling. Students can use this time to share high and low points from their week. This shared experience helps children build empathy and connect with their peers.

Peer Accountability

Peer accountability structures help students build a sense of community. St. Benedict's Preparatory School in Newark, NJ exemplifies the impact of peer accountability on students' academic and social success.

Adults at St. Benedict's intentionally step back, providing significant opportunities for students to run the school. Every St. Benedict's student is assigned to a student-led group for the duration of their academic career. Students elect group leaders who oversee personal and academic support systems. Leaders are responsible for reporting on and addressing their group's attendance and academic performance. For example, when a group member does not arrive at school on time, the elected leader calls both the student and family to check in.

More information about the St. Benedict's Group System is available **here**. **This Stanford University link** explores peer accountability groups in the public school setting.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Family-school relationships have a significant impact on a child's experience at school. When families trust educators, students are more likely to trust them too. It is important for educators to set a precedent for meaningful engagement at the beginning of the school year through family surveys, home visits, family events, or phone calls. Once the school year is underway, educators should follow up with families regularly to build and maintain relationships. The topic of educator-family relationships is addressed in depth in the Rennie Center's **Rebuilding Community action guide**.

VIRTUAL REENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

During extended school closures, students and families have relied upon technology to build relationships, connect with loved ones, and process collective trauma. This section explores virtual relationship-building strategies for the remote learning environment.

1. **Foster peer-to-peer relationships** across virtual settings through paired activities, chat prompts, and virtual mentoring structures such as reading buddies.

2. **Identify school staff who have existing relationships** with students and families. Invite every child to participate in a weekly small group check-in, such as a virtual lunch, with a trusted staff member and a group of peers.

3. **Engage established school and community partners** (educators, church leaders, barbers, etc.) to connect with each family in their home language.

4. If possible, **conduct socially distant home visits** with students and families.

SUPPORT ACADEMIC PROGRESS

Research shows that 3rd grade reading proficiency, 6th grade ELA and math scores, and 9th grade course passing rates all serve as key predictors of long-term student engagement. This section focuses on academic supports that help students stay connected to school through graduation.

In many cases, students struggle to meet academic milestones due to non-academic barriers. In other cases, challenges are related to academic difficulty. Students are more likely to engage in school when they feel successful and see the purpose of their education. The strategies below address **high-quality early learning**, **rigorous core instruction**, and **personalized academic intervention**.

PREVENTION

High-quality early learning is associated with higher graduation rates, lower grade retention, and fewer special education placements (Walsh, 2017). Early education, between preschool and grade 3, provides students with core academic and social-emotional skills that are critical to long-term success in school. Efforts to promote student engagement and improve high school graduation rates should begin with a focus on high-quality, culturally affirming early learning experiences.

School Readiness

Too few students, in Massachusetts and across the nation, have access to high-quality early childhood education. Young children of color, who are more likely to live in poverty, have the least access to quality, affordable learning experiences (Johnson-Staub, 2017). In Massachusetts,

44% of Latino 3- to 4-year-olds are enrolled in early childhood education, compared to 63% of their white peers (Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership, 2018). Children who lack access to high-quality early education often arrive to kindergarten without key academic and social-emotional readiness skills (Sanchez, 2017). Though this guide does not directly address preschool access and expansion, readers can learn key facts about the impact of early childhood education in this Strategies for Children brief.

In addition to addressing gaps when students arrive in kindergarten, educators can help build connections between early childhood learning and the K-12 system. For example, K-12 educators, out-of-school learning organizations, and early childhood providers can co-sponsor community-based informational sessions for families with young children or those who have recently moved to the neighborhood. During community-based sessions, educators can discuss ways to get children ready for kindergarten, including quality, affordable early childhood options. Events can also feature non-school-based offerings, such as read-alouds and playgroups held at a neighborhood library. Trusted community members such as pediatricians and religious leaders can help promote these events.

Grades K-3

In the early elementary grades, students gain core skills that serve as the foundation of further learning. High-quality literacy instruction in grades K-3 gives students the tools they need for later success across subject areas. Students who do not read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school than their peers who read proficiently (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010). In Massachusetts, too many students end third grade without the reading skills they need.

Brain science has proven that "reading does not develop naturally, and for many children, specific decoding, word-recognition, and reading comprehension skills must be taught directly and systematically" (Lyon, 1998). By explicitly and systematically teaching foundational literacy skills, educators prepare students for success across subject areas. **The What Works Clearinghouse practice guide** shares critical elements of foundational literacy instruction.

CORE INSTRUCTION

Active, collaborative, culturally relevant instruction is critical to student engagement. Across all grade levels and subject areas, educators can use the following core principles to ensure that learning is relevant to students' lives.

Core Principles

Peer Learning

Educators can make small changes to daily instructional practice to encourage students to learn from and with their peers. These instructional practices improve student engagement, give students a sense of agency, and strengthen peer relationships. Research shows that cooperative learning is particularly beneficial for English Learners (Colorin Colorado). By learning alongside English-fluent peers, English Learners improve their language development, self-esteem, and motivation (Avilés & García, 2013). This

Facing History and Ourselves resource provides an example of cooperative learning using a Socratic Seminar. Educators can find additional strategies in Edutopia's **How Learning Happens video series**.

Culturally Relevant Learning

Children bring cultural knowledge and life experiences with them into the classroom. Educators can and must build upon this knowledge to help children learn. Research shows that the way in which students process information is deeply influenced by culture. As stated by Zaretta Hammond, culturally responsive teaching requires adults to focus on "building brainpower by helping students leverage and grow their existing funds of knowledge."

For example, children from collectivist cultures emphasize the needs and learning of the group above that of the individual. Individualistic vs. collectivist cultural orientation exists on a spectrum. While the white-dominant culture in the United States is individualistic, cultures in Africa, Central America, South America, and Asia tend to be collectivist. Students from collectivist cultures benefit from opportunities to learn in relationship with and alongside their peers. This includes using classroom strategies that emphasize interdependent learning, cooperation, and discussion. Children also benefit from opportunities to mentor and teach younger peers through strategies such as reading buddies. This **video from Amigos School** in Cambridge, MA provides an example of how educators use students' existing cultural knowledge to strengthen their learning.

Service Learning

Students benefit from the opportunity to apply their academic knowledge and skills to real-world settings. Research shows that students who participate in service learning see improvements in grade point average and declines in high school dropout rates (Glenn, 2001). In addition to strengthening academic engagement, service learning provides opportunities for students to develop critical 21st century skills such as teamwork, perseverance, and critical thinking.

Service learning can take place within school. For example, this **_Listen Up!_ task** describes how students research and raise awareness of a student-selected anti-bias theme by launching a digital media campaign. Educators can also create opportunities for students to engage in service learning outside the classroom. For example, after learning about climate change, students can participate in a **community-based environmental protection project**.

Career Exploration

As students progress through their education, they increasingly seek opportunities to connect academic learning to their career and personal goals. Beginning in the elementary grades, educators can strengthen engagement by offering opportunities for career exploration and planning.

Career Exploration

Children generally strive towards careers that they know about or can see in their community. Educators can support students by exposing them to a range of potential careers. Equipped with knowledge about students' career goals, educators can make instruction more meaningful by articulating connections between academic learning and career-readiness skills.

Middle school educators can use the **Possible Futures curriculum**, a free resource from Jobs for the Future, to facilitate career exploration. In addition to structured curricula, educators can integrate career exploration into regular instruction. For example, educators may invite a local carpenter to speak to students during a math unit. When studying chemistry, students can visit a local biotechnology company to learn how scientists use chemistry skills when researching medical treatments.

The Rennie Center's **Postsecondary Readiness action guide** will explore career readiness strategies in greater detail.

College and Career Planning

By taking ownership of their college and career goals, students prepare for life after high school. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's **My Career and Academic Plan (MyCAP)** provides a tool to facilitate student-driven postsecondary planning. In partnership with a caring adult, students serve as the lead authors of MyCAP plans. Plans begin as early as 6th grade, offering a structured process in which students select courses, work experiences, and extracurricular activities aligned to their career goals. Educators can use **MEFA Pathway**, a free online platform for Massachusetts students, to support the implementation of MyCAP plans.

Schools with an existing career advising structure will be better prepared to implement MyCAP. Schools without this structure can convene a team of administrators, teachers, specialists, and students to develop an implementation plan. Additional guidance is included **here**.

INTERVENTION AND ACCELERATION

There are many reasons why students disengage from school. Academic difficulty, when left unaddressed, is one cause of disengagement. The process below describes research-based academic acceleration strategies. Educators can use these strategies to build academic confidence and help students catch up to grade-level proficiency after COVID-related school closures.

Personalized Support

When students are struggling, it is the school's responsibility to intervene before students fall behind and lose academic confidence. Interact with this process to learn key acceleration strategies. Additional academic acceleration strategies are included in the Rennie Center's **Accessing Grade-Level Content action guide**.

Monitor Key Indicators

In addition to regular progress monitoring across academic subjects, it is critical that educators understand the warning signs that jeopardize a student's on-time graduation. As noted in the introduction to this section, students who do not read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade are less likely than their peers to graduate from high school. Students who do not pass all 9th grade courses are at similar risk. Educators can use **Massachusetts' Early Warning Indicator System (EWIS)** to intervene promptly when students show signs that they are struggling.

Remote Assessment

Assessment serves as a critical first step in identifying which students need intervention and the type of intervention they need. If school buildings close at any point during the 20-21 school year, it is critical that educators continue to monitor student progress. This does not mean that students need to complete paper and pencil tests. Instead, educators should seek **opportunities to authentically assess** student knowledge. This includes assigning performance tasks in which students can demonstrate and apply their learning in novel contexts. Educators can also participate in conversations with students via Google Classroom or Zoom to check student understanding on a range of key topics.

Just-in-Time Intervention

If performance assessments or student conversations reveal a gap in student understanding, educators should identify **"just-in-time" interventions**. Rather than reteaching prior grade content, educators can use scaffolds to provide access to grade-level content. For example, if students lack the reading skills to access a grade-level text, educators can preview the text in a small-group setting. This small-group intervention will allow students to practice core literacy skills while gaining an understanding of the plot.

Acceleration Academies

Students who are struggling benefit from extra time with the district's highest-impact instructors. In Lawrence, Acceleration Academies have contributed to improvements in academic skills and confidence. During school vacation weeks, struggling learners participate in personalized, project-based, standards-aligned learning. **In this video**, Lawrence educators share the impact of Acceleration Academies on student engagement and academic growth.

Out-of-School-Time Partnerships

Schools are only one setting where meaningful learning takes place. In identifying academic acceleration strategies, it is critical that educators do not ignore after-school and summer learning opportunities.

Research shows that summer learning loss disproportionately impacts students from low-income communities and communities of color who have the least access to summer enrichment programs. In this **Boston After School & Beyond video**, students and adults

share the impact of summer learning. The Rennie Center's **Accessing Essential Services action guide** explores school-community partnerships in greater depth.

Supporting the Whole Child

The causes of academic struggle are diverse and wide-ranging. In identifying appropriate interventions for a particular child, it is important to review the entire context. All students can make progress when given access to an engaging, culturally relevant education. Every child has both strengths and areas where they need additional support. The *Think Bigger* section of this guide explores the promise of competency-based approaches to meet the unique needs of each student.

VIRTUAL REENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES: FOSTERING ACADEMIC CONFIDENCE

Educators build students' academic confidence by using asset-based language, affirming student strengths, and providing voice and choice in learning activities. The following strategies are designed to build academic confidence during a time of remote learning.

1. **Provide positive feedback on virtual assignments**. This includes setting up one-on-one or small-group meetings to share specific examples of student success.

2. **Give students choice and voice in their remote instruction.** This includes providing a range of assignment options.

3. **Offer multiple modes of demonstrating competency**. For example, students can write an essay, create virtual art, or deliver an oral presentation to demonstrate their learning.

4. **Utilize school social media platforms** to highlight students' remote work.

5. For younger grades, **continue to implement "classroom jobs."** Even if schooling is virtual, students can still report on the weather, go over the agenda, or help to present daily content.

6. **Support virtual collaboration**. When schools are closed, students still benefit from opportunities to learn with and from their peers. Educators can support collaboration by organizing student-led study circles or virtual group projects.

RETHINK DISCIPLINE

Student who are **suspended or expelled** are far **less likely** than their peers to graduate from school. This section focuses on **alternatives to punitive discipline**.

WHAT IS EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE?

Punitive and exclusionary discipline has long been used as a means to punish and discourage student misbehavior. Exclusionary discipline, defined as in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, probation, and expulsion, produces a complex range of academic and social-emotional barriers for students.

The Impact of COVID-19 on School Discipline

When students return to school following COVID-related closures, many will bring significant trauma with them. Trauma manifests in various ways, from academic difficulty to behavioral changes (Resler, 2017). Students who have experienced trauma often have difficulty managing overwhelming emotions, causing behavior that adults may mistake for aggression.

As a result, many trauma-exposed students are punitively disciplined in school (Ablon & Pollastri, 2018). Given the trauma caused by COVID, which has disproportionately impacted marginalized communities, it is particularly critical that educators reexamine disciplinary practices during the 2020-21 school year.

Discipline and Racial Equity

School discipline serves as a driver of educational inequity, impacting students of color at far greater rates than their white peers. This section explores key statistics, describing the need for student-centered discipline.

Subjective Offenses

Black and Brown children receive more discipline referrals for subjective offenses such as insubordination, defiance, disruption, and non-compliance than their white peers (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Ritter & Anderson, 2018). Read more on the uneven brunt of discipline from **Education Week**.

Impact of Discipline

Exclusionary discipline has a negative impact on academic outcomes, resulting in missed class time, lower levels of engagement, peer group challenges, and lower-quality educator relationships (Jones et. al., 2018).

Graduation Implications

Students who are disciplined are less likely than their peers to graduate from high school. In a 2016 study, researchers found that only 71% of 10th graders who were suspended between 2001 and 2002 graduated from high school two years later (Rumberger and Losen, 2016).

A Time for Change

As educators strive to create a more equitable education system amidst a pandemic that has disproportionately impacted Black and Brown communities, it is critical to tackle the barriers, including punitive discipline, that prevent students of color from engaging in school.

The Long-Term Impact

"Suspending students just once triples the likelihood they will end up in the juvenile justice system, and doubles the chance they will drop out. High school dropouts are 75 percent of state prison inmates."
— Dr. Fania E. Davis

Harsh school discipline policies push children out of school and into the criminal justice system. The following section explores aspects of the school-to-prison pipeline, which serves as one route to mass incarceration.

Policy Implications

A range of current and former education policies have pushed students out of school and into the criminal justice system. For example, zero tolerance policies have led to school-based arrests for minor infractions, including arguing with peers and teachers.

Police Presence in School

Black students are more likely than their white peers to attend schools with police. Across the U.S., two-thirds of high school students attend schools with onsite police officers. Schools that serve mostly Black and Latino students are more likely to employ onsite police than schools serving mostly white students (Lindsay, 2018). This contributes to higher rates of school-based arrests for students of color.

Youth who Struggle

Too often, youth who are arrested have significant unmet needs (Mental Health America, 2020). For example, a large percentage of arrested youth are diagnosed with emotional

disorders, have learning disabilities, struggle from drug dependencies, or have attempted suicide. Instead of harsh discipline, these students should receive support to address their basic needs.

The Cycle

A large percentage of formerly incarcerated youth never complete high school (Aizer & Doyle, 2015). Those who do are far more likely than their peers to drop out. Many are re-incarcerated within five years, perpetuating a cycle of lost opportunity.

Critical theorists have begun to describe this phenomenon as the school-to-prison nexus. The concept builds upon the better-known school-to-prison-pipeline to describe the many practices that schools and prisons have in common, grounded in a perception of people of color as "inherently dangerous and in need of constant monitoring" (Stumbo, 2019). The section below describes strategies that educators can use to rethink school-based discipline and reverse this damaging cycle.

The actions below are designed to support educators and school leaders in a shift towards student-centered discipline.

EXAMINE IMPLICIT BIASES

"Implicit racial bias is part of the ground water we drink, the smog we breathe, and it is baked into the foundation on which we stand. Implicit racial bias permeates every institution, including education, in this country."
— Dr. Dana Thompson Dorsey

Implicit biases, which refer to unconscious stereotypes and perceptions, drive inequitable discipline among Black and Brown youth. **This video from Bustle**, which focuses on the experiences of Black girls, describes the lasting impact of educator bias on students' educational experiences. The bullet points below unpacks several forms of bias in further detail. Each of these biases serves as a driver of inequitable discipline for Black and Brown children.

- **Adultification —** As young as age 5, Black girls are seen as older than their white peers. In classroom and out-of-school-settings, adults perceive young black girls to need less nurturing, protection, and support than their white classmates (Epstein, 2019). According to a Georgetown Law School study, adults also perceive young black girls to "know more about adult topics and know more about sex than young white girls" (Epstein, 2019). This translates to higher rates of discipline, as Black girls are suspended five times as often as their white, female peers. The link from **End Adultification Bias** shares the stories of Black women and girls on adultification bias.

- **Criminalization —** Like Black girls, Black boys are perceived as older than their white peers. As young as preschool, their play is perceived as dangerous and violent (Wright, 2019). This translates to significantly higher suspension rates for Black boys. In preschool, Black children make up 19% of enrolled students and 47% of suspensions (Office of Civil Rights, 2016). Early discipline experiences harm students' relationship with school, sending students a message "that school is a place where they are watched, not

welcomed" (Wright, 2019). Read more from NAEYC on **_Black Boys Matter: Cultivating Their Identity, Agency, and Voice_**.

- **Othering —** Othering refers to "human behavior that divides people into 'us and them' by singling out some for aggression once they are branded as the despised 'other'" (Lesser, 2014). In schools, othering leads to feelings of alienation and prevents students from experiencing a sense of belonging. Othering is one reason why a majority white teaching force disciplines students of color at alarmingly high rates. **In this poem**, a Black mother bears witness to othering "by recasting her white interlocutor as the racial 'other'" (Othering and Belonging, 2018).

In order to adjust discipline practices, educators must examine the implicit biases that affect their interactions with students. Educators can take the **Implicit Association Test** to gain an understanding of their implicit biases. Unpacking these biases is critical to strengthening student-educator relationships and making a shift towards supportive discipline practices.

REVIEW LOCAL AND STATEWIDE DISCIPLINE DATA

In order to understand areas of improvement, educators should review state and local discipline data. In analyzing data, it is important to compare findings across subgroups including race, ethnicity, disability, native language, and family income. This allows educators to examine bias in current disciplinary practices.

- **Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Student Discipline Data Report** analyzes disciplinary incidents by district and student subgroup
- **ProPublica's Miseducation Tool** examines racial disparities in educational opportunities and school discipline
- **Education Commission of the States** offers **individual state profiles** as well as 50-state comparisons of school discipline policy

BEGIN A SHIFT TOWARDS RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Rather than emphasizing punishment, restorative practices seek to repair harm. Based in indigenous practice, restorative approaches bring "together persons harmed with persons responsible for harm in a safe and respectful space, promoting dialogue, accountability, and a stronger sense of community" (Davis, 2014).

Replacing punitive discipline with constructive, healing dialogue is a long-term process. All staff need training in restorative approaches, and schools are most successful when they identify a cross-disciplinary team to oversee implementation. Recognizing that a shift towards schoolwide restorative practice is a longer-term commitment, educators and school leaders can get started immediately with the practices below.

Classroom Circles

A classroom circle "gives everyone a rare chance to share what they are feeling and experiencing. Over time, circle becomes a safe space where everyone feels that they are heard and that they belong" (McClure, 2016). Circles are most effective in classrooms where educators

invest time in strong relationships with and among students. The **article from Edutopia** describes steps to get started with classroom circles.

Collaborative Class Agreements

Students experience a deeper sense of belonging when they work alongside peers and educators to **develop class norms**. This process allows students to hold themselves and their peers accountable for inclusive classroom behavior.

Affective Statements

By using affective statements, students and adults express how they are feeling as a result of their own or someone else's actions. Educators can model the use of "I statements" to help children understand the positive and negative impact of their actions. For example, a teacher may tell students that she felt proud when one of her students helped a younger peer who was hurt on the playground. Educators can begin by engaging children in a role play activity, in which students tell each other how they feel after a make-believe classroom conflict or positive interaction. Role play helps students develop skills that they can use when experiencing real emotions in their interactions with peers and educators. Read more on ***Role-Play as an SEL Teaching Tool*** from Edutopia.

Peace Path

Educators can support students in identifying their own emotions, recognizing their peers' experiences, and resolving their own conflicts by building a Peace Path on a school sidewalk or playground. The Peace Path serves as a visual reminder of key steps in resolving peer conflict. **The Recess Lab** guide describes key elements of a Peace Path.

Staff Circles

In staff circles, educators create "space for listening deeply and taking care of one another" (Pranis, 2019). This practice strengthens staff community, which directly impacts the student experience. The **article from Mindful Schools** describes the benefits of Healing Circles for adults.

CHANGING PRACTICE

Student-centered discipline represents a fundamental shift in school power dynamics, student-teacher interactions, and peer relationships. This shift requires community input, discipline policy changes, and dedicated time for staff training. It requires educators to look beyond discipline-specific practice to examine the range of factors that contribute to students' school experience. This includes family engagement, relationships, student supports, and teacher expectations. The **REL Northwest resource** outlines practical, iterative strategies that school teams can use to examine current practice and shift towards equitable discipline. Additional guidance is included in the Going Deeper section of this guide.

ENGAGE DISCONNECTED STUDENTS

This section explores strategies to **reengage students** who have not returned to school.

When schools reopen after COVID-related closures, researchers predict that an increased number of high school students will not return to school (Dorn et. al., 2020). Students may begin working full-time due to family financial hardships. Others may be concerned that they've fallen behind academically due to an inability to access online learning. Districts need proactive approaches to connect with students, rebuild trust, and address the out-of-school barriers that inhibit student success.

CONDUCT PERSONALIZED OUTREACH

The first step for schools is to identify each student who has not returned to school. The reasons why students decide not to return will be unique and wide-ranging. As a result, it is critical that schools take time to get to know each student, their strengths, their dreams, and the unique barriers they are facing.

Get in Touch

Educators can't wait for students to return to school. Before the school year begins, districts must develop a plan to contact each student who does not return by phone, mail, text message, or a home visit. **This EdWeek video**, featuring Lawrence Public Schools, shares the importance of personalized outreach in the reengagement process.

As shown in the video below, strong relationships are critical to student reengagement. From the beginning, the message from school staff must be one of care. Students must be assured of their value in the school community. They need to know that someone believes in their ability to reach their goals. Often, efforts to reengage students may not be successful on the first try. Administrators may choose to hire recent graduates to serve as mentors, supporting students in the reengagement process. Schools can also partner with trusted community organizations to reach out to disconnected students.

Partner with Caregivers

Families are critical partners in bringing students back to school. If a student does not return to school, educators should make efforts to reach out to both youth and their caregivers. The quote below from Back Together Again describes the necessity of meaningful family engagement. As the article states, caregivers often recognize that a child is struggling but do not have access to resources needed to support their child.

"They want their children to do well in high school, learn something valuable so that they can go to college or get a good paying job. They don't know whom to talk with or where to go. They may not speak English fluently. They may have been made to feel embarrassed by school staff. They need a welcoming, knowledgeable ally to work with them to find a school that is a good fit for their child."
— Rennie-Hill, 2018

Assess Student Needs

Once students have decided to come back to school, it is important to assess their academic and non-academic needs. A case manager should meet with each student to identify:

- Credits required for high school graduation
- Social-emotional strengths and needs
- College and career goals
- Non-academic barriers (work responsibilities, caretaking responsibilities, housing needs, food insecurity, etc.)

Ideally, the case managers who assess student needs should be the same individuals who conduct outreach, as described in the *Get in Touch* section above. The **article from Next Generation Learning** focused on Boston's Reengagement Center shares key components of an initial student assessment.

Each student who reenrolls in school has unique strengths and needs. Case managers serve as allies and advocates for youth as they navigate the reentry process and persist towards a diploma. After assessing students' strengths, understanding their goals, and gathering information about their needs, case managers connect youth with an appropriate educational option. They also provide referrals to community-based resources to address non-academic needs. A case manager provides a powerful support system as students navigate the reentry process.

REBUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Strong relationships are essential to bringing students back to school. In order to reengage, students need case managers and educators who take the time to get to know them, ask about their goals, acknowledge their strengths, and understand their struggles.

Research shows that students with a "web of supportive relationships" are more likely to graduate (America's Promise Alliance, 2015). This web of support includes family members, peers, school staff, and adults outside of school. In order to access a web of support, students benefit from "at least one stable, anchoring relationship" (America's Promise Alliance, 2015). The guidance below is designed for school-based staff, including case managers and educators, seeking to provide anchoring relationships for youth. ***Don't Quit on Me*** is a mini documentary on what young people who left school say about the power of relationships.

Components of Trust

Rebuilding trust takes time. This is particularly true for students whose previous schooling experiences have failed them. This section describes critical factors in authentic adult-student relationships. Many of the themes in this section draw upon research from America's Promise Alliance's 2015 report Don't Quit on Me. These themes are relevant for case managers, advisors, and educators working to reconnect youth to school.

1. **Invest Time —** Relationships are not built in a single meeting. When reengaging students, it is critical that schools identify case managers or advisors who have capacity to meet with students on an ongoing basis. In addition, all teachers must dedicate time to get to know students. This is particularly critical for students who are re-enrolling in school. Educators can meet with students for lunch or take a few minutes after class to connect one-on-one.

2. **Don't Judge —** Each student has a range of reasons for leaving school, many of which are based in difficult life circumstances. Students may drop out due to negative social pressures, the need to support their family, or because they gave birth to a child. Instead of looking critically upon students' decisions, adults should make an effort to understand them. By being curious and asking questions, adults show students that they care about both personal and academic success.

3. **Recognize Culture —** Culture influences the way individuals from different backgrounds develop trust and engage in relationships. In order to develop strong relationships with students from different cultures, educators must first explore their own culture and the way it influences their actions, expectations, and privileges.

   This video explores the importance of cultural humility in authentic cross-cultural relationships. In Massachusetts, 90% of educators are white. These educators serve a richly diverse student population. It is critical that educators explore their own culture and make an effort to understand the cultures of the students they serve. Cultural humility allows educators to recognize norms rooted in white-dominant culture, and to adjust the ways in which they respond to and interact with students from different backgrounds.

4. **Empathize —** In determining appropriate staff to educate and advise students, schools should prioritize those who share students' backgrounds and can empathize with their lived experiences. Studies report that a demographic match between role models and students has a profound effect on student outcomes (Gershenson et. al., 2017). When students decide to return to school, it is critical that they have a connection with a trusted adult who can empathize with their experiences. This adult may be an educator or a staff member from a community-based organization. Adult allies help students visualize a path to success despite the struggles in their lives.

5. **Provide Support in Difficult Times —** Many students who disengage from school do so because of significant out-of-school barriers. They may struggle with mental health problems, lack a safe place to live, or have parenting responsibilities for their own children.

   Young people need someone they can call when life gets difficult. School-based advisors or out-of-school mentors provide emotional support and connect youth with community-based resources. For this support to be meaningful, students should have the ability to connect with a mentor on a consistent basis, and not just during scheduled meetings.

CONNECT STUDENTS TO RESOURCES

A lack of basic resources, such as childcare and housing, often serves as a barrier for youth interested in returning to school. Case managers and other trusted adults can unlock opportunity for youth by providing connections to community-based resources. The Rennie Center explored this topic in detail in our **Accessing Essential Services action guide**.

OFFER FLEXIBILITY

Students who have left high school may not be interested in returning to the school they previously attended. Negative social influences, poor connections with teachers, or a lack of basic support services can serve as continued barriers to student success. In large districts with multiple schools, students may benefit from the option to enroll in a different school than the one they previously attended. If the district has only one high school, educators can connect students with resources in the community. Examples of community-based educational programs are

included below. The next section explores opportunities for school- and district-based flexible pathways.

Care Center

High schools often lack the flexibility that young parents need to care for their children. The **Care Center in Holyoke** offers a multi-generational approach in which infants and toddlers receive high-quality childcare while their parents attend school. The Center "embraces the power of arts, education, and culture to build a different support system that offers greater socioeconomic mobility" (Mass Cultural Council, 2020). Students receive medical care from an onsite nurse practitioner, door-to-door transportation, and the opportunity to finish high school and progress to college. Within the Care Center, young mothers can attend the Bard Microcollege, where they receive an Associate Degree based in arts, humanities, and critical thinking. Many mothers go on to attend 4-year college after graduating.

Gateway to College

For some students, traditional high school is not the best option for continuing their education. **Gateway to College** provides the opportunity for students to finish high school by focusing on dual-credit courses located on a college campus. Many Massachusetts community colleges offer Gateway programs in partnership with local high schools. When students graduate from the Gateway program, they can choose to continue onto a 4-year college or enter directly into the workforce. Gateway programs provide comprehensive supports that address students' non-academic barriers to success.

YouthBuild

YouthBuild, a national organization with programs in several Massachusetts communities, provides educational and career support in a community-based setting for disconnected youth ages 16-24. Students learn job skills necessary for a career in construction while progressing towards a high school diploma or the equivalent. Learning is personalized and hands-on, providing students with the opportunity to either enter the workforce or continue onto postsecondary education. Case managers work directly with students to address personal obstacles, while supporting the job and college placement process. In **this link**, YouthBuild graduate Maria Valdez shares her story.

VIRTUAL REENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES: ENGAGE DISCONNECTED STUDENTS

If schools close again due to COVID-19, caring adults must continue efforts to connect with every student, particularly those who have disconnected from school. When reengaging students virtually, educators need to adapt traditional re-engagement strategies.

The following resource, **Strategies for Connecting with Students and Families**, contains guidance for educators looking to connect with students and families across multiple modes of communication. This includes leveraging networks and relationships, as well as social media, to reengage students and families with the virtual learning community. The strategies are summarized below:

1. **Use multiple modes of outreach:** This includes assigning staff to conduct outreach via email, phone, text, and social media at different times of the day and days of the week. Staff can also offer virtual meetings through Zoom or other online services. If technology-based communication is not working, educators should send a letter to ensure the school has the student and family's correct contact information.

2. **Media:** Record public service announcements and place them on popular radio shows. Leverage social media platforms to check in with students. Create school social media pages to disseminate information and offer resources like food or healthcare.

3. **Leverage personal and social networks:** Have all staff (including social workers, secretaries, counselors, school liaison officers, etc.) maintain one-on-one contact with assigned students. Educators should also engage out-of-school partners and community organizations to keep in contact with youth.

4. **Identify reasons behind disengagement:** Are students disengaged and disconnected because of a lack of culturally relevant curriculum or social-emotional support? Is internet access and connectivity the issue? Create a plan with administrative and grade-level teams to address these barriers.

THINK BIGGER:
COMPETENCY-BASED APPROACHES

WHY COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION?

When the traditional academic path does not meet students' needs, educators should explore opportunities to offer flexibility within school and district offerings. Rather than focusing on seat time or course credits, many students benefit from competency-based approaches that allow them to progress based upon demonstrated mastery of standards-aligned competencies. A competency-based approach can benefit any student, and provides critical flexibility for students who lack the credits necessary for on-time graduation.

Rather than a one-size-fits-all educational model, **competency-based approaches** ensure each student is held to the same high expectations, while offering individualized instruction and assessment.

MASSACHUSETTS EXAMPLES

The following bullet points share examples of Massachusetts competency-based education programs. Though none of these examples represent a short-term solution, they provide models that Massachusetts educators can aspire towards.

- **Brookline High School —** The Alternative Choices in Education (ACE) program at Brookline High School provides a competency-based option for students seeking an alternative approach to their education. Students take two courses at a time that emphasize deep, experiential learning. Instead of typical tests, educators use performance assessments to gauge student mastery of key competencies in English, Math, History, and Science. In addition to school-based learning, students have many opportunities to learn in the community. In the few years since its inception, the program has already shown positive results. Unexcused absences have declined dramatically while students' grades have increased. The **Brookline Public Schools website** provides additional detail about the ACE Program.

- **Charlestown High School —** In 2009, educators at Boston's Charlestown High School recognized a dropout crisis. Specifically, the school was not meeting the needs of youth who were over-age for their grade level and missing necessary credits. Rather than ask students to continue on a pathway that was not meeting their needs, the school partnered with Diploma Plus to form a small learning community within the high school. Diploma Plus students receive rigorous, personalized instruction, allowing them to master competencies and progress towards graduation at their own pace. In the **video from the**

Nellie Mae Education Foundation, students and educators share the impact of Charlestown High School's Diploma Plus program.

● **Melrose Public Schools —** Competency-based education is not only for high school students. In Melrose, educators are in the midst of a multi-year effort to embed competency-based elements across classrooms. **Melrose educators** began the shift in an effort to deepen learning and improve student engagement. Through a competency-based approach, students have more influence over how they learn. They also play a lead role in assessing and monitoring their own progress.

KEY PRINCIPLES

A full transition to a competency-based system is a long-term change for any school. Educators and school leaders must engage the community to understand their priorities for the school. In order to design a school aligned to community needs, leaders will likely need to shift school policy related to seat time requirements.

In some districts, educators choose to create a competency-based program within a traditional school. In others, educators begin a shift towards a fully competency-based model. Educators in any school can begin this shift by embedding competency-based practices in the classroom. The section below shares smaller-scale options to incorporate key principles of competency-based learning into an existing academic program.

Student Ownership

Teachers do not need to wait for major school policy changes to provide students with ownership over their learning. Educators can begin by embedding opportunities for student ownership in daily instruction. This includes:

● Devoting time for students to set learning goals and self-assess their progress towards each goal

● Reframing mistakes as an integral part of the learning process

● Providing opportunities for students to research, read, write about, and present on a topic of their own choosing

● Engaging students as teachers for their peers through peer-tutoring and collaborative learning

Read more from Next Generation Learning on **How Competency-based Learning Can Support Student Agency**.

Flexible Assessment

"Assessments should be a meaningful learning experience for students, provide rich information to educators so they can provide targeted support to students, and send students and parents clear signals about students' readiness for next steps." **— Achieve, 2015**

Too often, assessments provide valuable information for educators but fail to provide a meaningful learning experience for students. Helping students understand and assess their own progress is a cornerstone of competency-based learning. Educators can promote learning by swapping out traditional tests for performance assessments, which provide valuable information about students' ability to apply what they've learned. **Teaching Tolerance** provides a range of standards-aligned performance tasks which "ask students to rely on textual evidence when responding to writing prompts about identity, diversity, justice and action." For example, through the "I'll Be the Judge" task, students analyze speeches and craft arguments about the most effective means of bringing about social change.

Learning Beyond School Walls

In competency-based schools, students have flexibility in the way they earn credit. As a result, students can pursue learning experiences that align with their interests and passions. For example, middle school students can learn about democracy by completing an action civics project in the community. High school students can choose to intern at a local hospital or enroll in a science course at a local college instead of taking a school-based course. Schools can start small by engaging in a hybrid model, wherein students complete parts of their coursework in school and other parts in the community. For example, several Boston-area high schools partner with the **HMS MEDscience program** at Harvard Medical School, which offers students the opportunity to apply biology skills in a medical simulation lab.

The *Going Deeper* section of this guide includes resources for school-based teams looking to begin a planning process for a competency-based system.

TAKE ACTION

ACTION STEPS

This section includes a **checklist** for educators and school leaders seeking to **reengage students**.

FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

To Do Now:

The following actions can be implemented immediately, or early on in the school year, to support student reengagement.

- ❏ Devote time in a staff meeting to **make all educators aware of the academic, social-emotional, and environmental factors that influence student engagement**. Provide time for educators to reflect on the way that structural inequity influences engagement.
- ❏ Regularly **monitor early warning indicator data**. Follow up promptly with students who exhibit signs of disengagement. Analyze data to identify community- and school-level barriers that impact student attendance, academics, and behavior.

- ❏ Share information with all families about **why attendance matters**. This could take place in the form of a mailing, phone call, video, or social media post.
- ❏ **Avoid offering awards for perfect attendance**. Instead, ask teachers to notice when children are absent by calling or texting families to check in.
- ❏ **Prioritize family-school relationships**. Create a culture of two-way communication. Consider asking teachers to begin the year with virtual home visits for students who are new to the school.
- ❏ Encourage teachers to **devote significant time to building relationships** with and among students at the beginning of the school year.
- ❏ Provide information to all staff regarding the long-term impact of punitive discipline on student success. **Support educators in a shift towards restorative practices**. Begin by integrating circle practices at staff meetings. This will help educators gain familiarity with a core element of restorative practice.
- ❏ Develop a plan to **conduct personalized outreach** to all former students who do not return to school. This should include a combination of mailings, social media outreach, home visits, phone calls, and text messages.

To Do Later:

The following long-term and more resource-intensive actions will support school and district efforts to reengage students.

- ❏ Partner with students and teachers to d**evelop a schoolwide plan to address chronic absenteeism**. Develop a protocol to intervene with individual students at risk of chronic absenteeism. Create a menu of available school and community supports to address student needs.
- ❏ **Connect struggling students with trained mentors** with whom they can build strong, authentic relationships. Consider models such as graduation coaches or success mentors.
- ❏ Partner with early childhood educators and community-based organizations to **develop a community-wide school readiness plan**. Identify strategies to expand access to quality early childhood education.
- ❏ **Examine your school's foundational literacy instruction**. Ensure that all students receive explicit, systematic instruction to build foundational reading skills in grades PK-3.
- ❏ Develop a structure for **student-led postsecondary planning**. Begin by exploring **My Career and Academic Plan**, a free planning tool offered by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
- ❏ Convene a team of educators, students, and families to **revise the school discipline policy**. Develop a plan to support staff in a shift towards student-centered discipline.
- ❏ Partner with community organizations to **develop a comprehensive dropout reengagement strategy**. This should include a plan to assess student needs and connect students with appropriate school- or community-based educational options.
- ❏ Engage a group of stakeholders, including educators and students, to **explore the potential of competency-based learning**. Get started by reaching out to another school that has made the transition to competency-based learning to learn about the implementation process.

FOR TEACHERS

- ❏ **Notice when students are absent.** Call or text families to check on their child when students miss school.
- ❏ **Incorporate individualized conferencing and storytelling** in classroom instruction to strengthen relationships with students.
- ❏ **Be mindful of your body language** in the classroom. Ask a trusted colleague to observe your class to offer feedback on body language, which can be difficult to notice yourself.
- ❏ Incorporate **community-building activities** into ongoing instruction. Begin each class with a brief welcoming ritual. Integrate this work further by offering regular opportunities for cooperative learning in the context of academic instruction.
- ❏ **Incorporate career exploration activities** into regular instruction. Consider asking parents and community members to visit your classroom to share their careers with students.
- ❏ Shift towards **authentic student assessment** in the virtual classroom. Identify ways for students to assess their own and their peers' work.
- ❏ Consider **incorporating capstone projects** to boost engagement and strengthen ownership in late elementary, middle, and high school. Begin by reading this **Getting Smart article** about the promise of capstone projects amid school closures.
- ❏ If you teach grades PK-3, **examine your literacy instructional practices.** Ensure students receive explicit, systematic instruction in foundational literacy skills. **What Works Clearinghouse** provides guidance for getting started.
- ❏ Begin to **incorporate restorative practices** in daily classroom instruction. **Read this article** for guidance on getting started. Connect with your school administrator to determine whether your district employs a restorative justice coach.
- ❏ **Meet individually with each child who shows signs of disengagement** during virtual or in-person classes. Once you have identified reasons behind disengagement, work with school administrators to address the child's unique needs.

GOING DEEPER

This section includes **in-depth resources** focused on reengaging students.

1. **Improving High School Graduations Rates for All**, REL Northwest
2. **Closing the Opportunity Gap**, Learning Policy Institute
3. **High School Graduation and College Readiness Indicator Systems**, UChicago Consortium on School Research
4. **Restorative Practices: A Guide for Educators**, Schott Foundation
5. **Achieving a 90 Percent Graduation Rate,** America's Promise Alliance
6. **Every Student, Every Day: A community Tookkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism**, US Department of Education
7. **Critical Practices for Anti-Bias Education**, Teaching Tolerance
8. **Creating Sustainable Career Pathways for Disconnected Youth**, America's Promise Alliance
9. **Competency-Based Education Toolkit,** Digital Promise