



A Student Perspective On Chronic Absenteeism

Focus Group Learnings And Recommendations

July 12, 2021

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Overview

In March 2020, COVID-19 was declared a national emergency in America, and millions of lives changed forever. Students and teachers across the nation experienced the largest and most significant disruption to education systems in history. One of the many challenges schools faced over the last year was simply keeping students engaged with learning. In many schools, chronic absenteeism rates rose significantly — especially among historically marginalized students.

In Tennessee, reaching disengaged students became the central focus of school systems that entered a partnership with Tennessee State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE). Together, the districts and SCORE created the COVID-19 Innovative Recovery Network (CIRN). Between the fall of 2020 through the spring of 2021, this network partnered with TNTP to implement a series of innovation cycles designed to create high-impact solutions on student outcomes in the areas of strong restart, learning acceleration, and building bridges to postsecondary access.

During its work over the last year, CIRN made the critical observation that students across the network were engaging with school this year at significantly lower rates than last school year. The data showed that one-fifth of students across the network were considered chronically absent by the end of the Fall 2020 semester. CIRN's research partner, the Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) found that, across the CIRN network, there was an 88 percent increase in chronic absence among elementary students from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020, a 92 percent increase in chronic absence among middle school students, and a 33 percent increase among high school students. High schools, however, still had the highest chronic absenteeism overall with 28 percent of students being chronically absent this fall. English Learners were especially affected, with chronic absenteeism more than tripling between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 for this group.

To address a rise in absenteeism and disengagement among their students, CIRN districts decided to listen to the perspectives of a group that is often excluded from important conversations about education: students themselves. This report provides a narrative analysis of what we learned from a series of focus groups with critically absent high school students across CIRN to determine the impact that COVID-19 had on their engagement with school this year. Based on the discussions, we share emerging themes and recommendations that will help schools and systems eliminate the main factors that lead to disengagement.

This report summarizes the key themes and recommendations for how schools can support students critically absent from school this year. Looking to the future, we believe there are opportunities to support these students in each of CIRN's focus areas:

- **Learning acceleration** is attainable. While students in our focus groups did not have strong opinions about remediation vs. acceleration, they do offer insight on how engagement and connections in classes should be prioritized when thinking about content and delivery. Additionally, while virtual learning did serve a purpose, student responses suggest that they strongly favor in-person learning, especially when it comes to receiving more real-time teacher feedback and assistance.
- **Bridge to postsecondary** remains achievable for chronically absent students, however conversations about future and career goals may not have occurred as regularly as past years. In that same vein, students may need support around study skills, mental health techniques, and self-motivation to replace bad habits that arose during the pandemic.
- **Strong restart** is at the forefront of every district's mind as they head into the summer and fall. The reflections recorded and analyzed in this report can serve as reminders as well as cautionary tales for how instructional planning and implementation can affect not only academic outcomes but also the social-emotional well-being of our students.

We hope these insights can help leaders develop strategies to provide a strong restart for students as they return to school in the fall. Maintaining student engagement during the pandemic is a top priority for academic institutions

across the country. Now more than ever, schools must be clear about communicating plans to support students in engaging in coursework and promoting social development. As the nation transitions into a new school year, summer planning must include innovation options to increase inclusion and equity across students. During this momentous time of change, schools must adapt, remove barriers, and be innovative while in the process. To start this process for students, we have identified these recommendations:

1. Develop support systems that nurture authentic connections and support social-emotional development at school.
2. Provide systemwide structures that prepare teachers to build strong partnerships with students and families and communicate high expectations for all students.
3. Encourage student agency in course offerings to align with career goals.
4. Institute restorative policies that give students viable pathways to improving their GPA and attendance records.

The actions above are discussed in detail in the recommendations section of this paper.

Study Design

Our goal in this study was to learn the stories of students that schools had the hardest time reaching this year. To maximize participation and learning, we made four key design decisions:

1. **We chose focus groups as our method of data collection.** While districts were identifying important trends in attendance, we saw a need to hear directly from students. By capturing their voices and allowing students the opportunity to detail their experiences learning differently this year, we hoped to gain insight into what elements of school students valued the most. We wanted to give this student group the opportunity to have a significant impact on findings that could influence the way schools and districts invest in learning experiences as students enter schools in the fall.

Focus groups were approximately one hour in length, transcribed, and digitally recorded. We gathered permission slips, and informed-consent procedures were explained to student participants at the beginning of each focus group. The anonymity of participants in the focus groups is protected in this report.

2. **We spoke with high school students critically absent from school — defined as missing 20 percent or more of instructional days (including students who had dropped out of school altogether).** We wanted to go beyond the 10 percent mark used to define chronic absenteeism to hear the stories of students with significant challenges in engaging with school. In total, we conducted 12 focus groups with a total of 72 students across 5 school systems. Focus groups took place between March 24 and April 23 and included students in grades 9 through 12.

	Participants
Total Students	72
Grade Level	9 th Grade (19) 10 th Grade (22) 11 th Grade (20) 12 th Grade (11)

3. **We developed focus group questions to get feedback on eight key drivers of engagement.** A facilitation guide served as the blueprint for the focus group session. To explore emerging themes, there were occasions when tangential discussions emerged organically and led to useful and interesting insights.

Drivers of Engagement	
Access	Do students have the instructional and/or technological resources needed to meet school expectations?

Drivers of Engagement	
Clarity	Do students understand what is expected of them and how to deliver on it?
Connections	Do students feel connected to their school communities and the students and adults in it?
Environment	Do students have an environment conducive to learning?
Learning Supports	Do students have the academic supports they need to meet grade-level expectations?
Relevance	Do students see reason and purpose in their school experience?
Social-Emotional	Are students in an emotional and mental place to engage in learning?
Time	Do students have sufficient time to meet school expectations?

4. **We incentivized student participation and partnered closely with schools.** Our goal was to speak with the students that schools faced challenges reaching this year. To increase participation, we took the following steps:
- We worked through schools to identify and communicate with students and supported communications with families and students to explain the process, purpose, and schedule.
 - We gave \$25 gift cards for students who participated in the focus groups and ensured food was provided during focus group sessions.
 - We worked with schools to tailor logistics to their needs. Ultimately, all focus groups took place during the school day, with no schools opting to conduct them after school. Many of them were hosted during Personalized Learning Time.

Schools collectively reached out to a total of 110 students, and 65 percent of these students (for a total of 72 students) ended up participating.

Data Analysis Methodology

To begin the data analysis process, facilitators debriefed after each focus group to discuss session content. Discussion included what was learned and which themes students frequently raised. Facilitators also used the debriefing session to process compelling findings. Once the individual syntheses for each group were complete, a compilation of facilitator notes and focus group transcripts were combined into a single database to conduct a qualitative analysis.

Our analytical process was grounded in both the constant comparative method¹ and semantical content analysis.² We selected a multi-method approach so that we could not only measure importance of each pre-identified drivers, but also identify and categorize underlying trends using several different lenses:³

- **Frequency:** *How often was a topic mentioned?*
- **Extensiveness:** *How many different participants mentioned this topic?*
- **Specificity:** *How much detail was provided?*
- **Intensity:** *How much passion or force was present behind the comments?*
- **Participant Perception of Importance:** *Did participants explicitly call out the topic as important?*

¹ B.G. Glaser and A.L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. (New York, 1967); Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey, "Analyzing Focus Group Results," in *Focus Groups a Practical Guide for Applied Research*, 5th ed. (Sage, 2015), 157. The constant comparative method is an analytical framework typically used to identify patterns and relationships in data and theory development.

² David W. Stewart, Prem N. Shamdasani, and Dennis W Rook, "Analyzing Focus Group Data," in *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed., vol. 20 (Sage Publications, 2015), 119. Semantical content analysis is a technique used to examine the frequency with which certain objects are used and, subsequently, how they are described.

³ Krueger and Casey, 147.

Our analysis unearthed significant interaction between student responses and the eight drivers, and we have woven our findings into overarching themes and recommendations for future practice.

Findings And Student Stories

1. Connections to peers and teachers impact student engagement as much as or more than environment.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, school district officials and educators scrambled to create plans for a safe instructional model to mitigate any unfinished learning. Naturally, with the technology available, schools landed at virtual instructional models hoping that a strong mixture of synchronous and asynchronous learning would finish the 2019-20 school year off strong. Coordinated efforts between curriculum, technology, operations, and even child nutrition departments focused those initial weeks around distributing technology and access points to ensure all students would be able to log onto virtual classrooms and complete their coursework. These efforts should be applauded; creating consistent structures and handling logistics amid so many unknowns are the natural work of an educator. However, when schools restarted in Fall 2020, these same instructional models were employed to varying success.

One of the most prevalent topics to come up during the focus groups were issues with virtual learning. When asked if students had an environment conducive to learning this past year one student responded, "In the first semester, when I was at home and online, I wasn't really learning much. I didn't have much motivation because I was at home and I didn't want to get up."⁴ This type of comment was common in all focus groups and was representative among all demographics. Upon closer analysis of the transcripts, one of the main things that students felt that was lacking in virtual and socially distanced instructional models was connections with other students and teachers. Responses largely pointed to a lack of engagement at school this year, both at home and within school buildings.

"I didn't have much motivation because I was at home and I didn't want to get up."

For virtual learning, while students found that accessing content was easy enough, there were multiple challenges in terms of communication and engagement among them and their teachers and peers. First, with students learning at home and in socially distanced classrooms, group work and social interactions were limited. Second, teachers found themselves splitting time between devoting attention to students online and in their classrooms. Finally, even when all students were brought back to schools to take in-person classes, students expressed that this return did not fully repair the feeling of connectedness to their peers. This perceived lack of connection and its effects on student engagement will be a common theme in subsequent stories, but it is an important driver to point out by itself.

⁴ This is a quote from a student focus group.

Robert's Story

Robert¹ was a sophomore in high school when COVID-19 first forced schools to shut down in the spring of 2020. Like most students across the nation, his day-to-day life as it related to attending school had drastically changed. As the doors of the school were abruptly closed, exchanging conversations in the hallway and planning to sit together at lunch with his friends was no longer possible. He considered the early release of school in March an extended summer break and assumed that everything would return to normal in the fall.

Flashing forward to August 2020, Robert was given the news that school would begin but that students would have to attend class virtually. What once was enthusiasm about an early release for summer, became concern about the structure of beginning school in the fall. Robert wondered how he would see Mr. Williams, his favorite math teacher. He knew that he would not receive reminders from Mrs. Carpenter, the school clerical assistant about important events at the school. More importantly, Robert's mother left for work at 6:30 a.m. and would wake him to catch the bus to school; now after his mother left for work, who would be there to help keep him focused with his classes online? Attending classes online meant less social interaction with teachers and students in his classroom. In fact, the way that he would interact with his peers and teachers had completely changed. Robert was now faced with having to adjust to learning in a new environment with fewer resources. Despite the shift from learning in person to remote learning, all course requirements would remain the same, but his connections with peers and teachers had become dramatically different.

2. When disengaged students believe their teacher is invested in their success, they report a stronger sense of self-efficacy and are more motivated to complete their work and improve their grades.

When working in education, a question that is often asked during the countless hours of training and culture building is "Who is the teacher that believed in you the most and helped you reach your potential?" This question points to one of the key functions of a teacher: investing emotionally their students' success. The focus groups raised some questions to try to unearth information of why students were so disengaged this year, and especially more than past years. When asked how connected students felt to adults in their buildings this year, one student remarked, "There's no relationships or bonds between the teachers and the students this year. Last year, they had the connections and took the effort. I just think they're really stressed out now."⁵

One can be struck by the grace given to teachers by students this year; they recognize that, like themselves, teachers have been overwhelmed by this radical change to instructional models or methods. Teachers and school staff across the nation simply do their best with the information and situations presented to them. What has resulted is not just an increase of stressful and overwhelming feelings but also a decrease in authentic opportunities to connect with each other. However, there were pockets of success found in some students' responses, highlighting teachers and school leaders who continued to hold their students accountable to high expectations, not let them fail without support, and not allow students to simply pass with a lower bar.

"There's no relationships or bonds between the teachers and the students this year. Last year, they had the connections and took the effort. I think they're just really stressed out this year."

⁵ This is a quote from a student focus group.

What we found about these specific situations was that when districts and schools prioritized proactive communication and created systems for teachers and staff to stay abreast of students' progress, students continued to stay on track to complete their work and, more importantly, felt that someone was invested in their success. Although students did note that connections were harder to make during social distancing, they also made the positive impact of an adult constantly checking up on them known. "If my teacher wasn't always (checking) on me or calling me like he does, I wouldn't be successful."⁶

Jamiyah's Story

Entering high school as a freshman during the COVID-19 pandemic proved challenging for Jamiyah. As a middle school student, she was used to taking class with the same group of students each year and every teacher knew every student by his or her first and last name. In middle school, Jamiyah walked to school each day with a group of her friends and when they arrived at school, they entered the doors together, but they went through separate hallways to get to their homeroom classes. Now, as a high school freshman, Jamiyah had seven classes per day, and they were remote. She found herself not really recognizing students that took classes with her and though her new teachers smiled and showed up on camera each day, she could not make a genuine connection with them. Jamiyah finished the first semester as a virtual student. At the end of the first semester, Jamiyah's grades and attendance were below average, Jamiyah's parents sensed this as a cause for concern and set up a meeting with the school administration. During the meeting, Jamiyah and her parents learned that the school district would allow students the option to return to classes in person. Jamiyah's parents opted into face-to-face classes, and Jamiyah would begin her second semester as a high school freshman inside of the school building.

In January 2021, Jamiyah resumed classes in person. She was assigned to Mrs. Hughes, a second-year teacher who was full of high energy. Mrs. Hughes made it a common practice to greet each student every morning with a positive affirmation. She allowed discussion during homeroom so that students could talk about current events. Each quarter when report cards were issued, Mrs. Hughes personally checked each student's progress and provided feedback on how each student could improve. For Jamiyah, Mrs. Hughes' actions made a large high school with unfamiliar faces seem intimate and small. Each night, Jamiyah would watch the news or check social media to have the latest headlines so that she could be included in the day-to-day discussion in homeroom. During report card grading cycles, Jamiyah found herself excited to show her progress not only to her parents, but also to Mrs. Hughes. More motivated to improve her grades, Jamiyah began to attend tutoring sessions after school, and by the end of the third quarter, Jamiyah began to see an increase in her academic progress.

⁶ This is a quote from a student focus group.

3. When students feel disconnected from structural supports at home or at school, it impacts their social-emotional development.

The adage of “it takes a village to raise a child” may have never been truer than this school year. When it was clear that schools would not be able to open under normal circumstances in Fall 2020, districts and schools rallied to ensure content would be able to get in front of their students so that academic outcomes could stay within reach. And for the most part, schools and teachers did a great job on communicating the academic expectations for students. When we asked students about how they would rate communication from their district and schools, aside from the timeliness of the messages received, they said that the calls, texts, and emails they received were clear. Where complications arose however, was when students either had questions or had to leverage existing skills and competencies to manage their time and finish their coursework. When we asked students what the hardest part of this year was, one student said, “All we do is online work without anyone to help you. You have to depend on yourself, but you can’t learn from yourself.”⁷

While schools and teachers did their best to use the systems available to communicate expectations, some students did not have the social-emotional toolkit necessary to tackle their assignments alone. The overwhelming trend of responses around the biggest challenges of the year revolved around not being able to ask their teachers directly for help and not being able to receive real-time or timely support or feedback. Virtual assignments piled up as students were missing the periodic reminders that would occur within a classroom. As much as districts and schools promoted at-home learning and gave out widespread access to technology, students truly did not feel supported until they were back in school buildings. Equally as troubling to students was when they returned to schools; although they were back in physical buildings, the structure of their classes either resembled their virtual lessons or simply did not promote social interactions and engagement with their peers and their teachers. Students often gave accounts of teachers trying to juggle time between helping virtual and in-person students. While this frustrated them, they were also empathetic to what their teachers were trying to do daily.

“All we do online is work without anyone to help you. You have to depend on yourself, but you can’t learn from yourself.”

These reflections should serve as a cautionary tale for districts and schools to consider as we prepare for students and teachers to return to school this coming fall. Essentially, how are we ensuring that our staff and students are in healthy emotional and mental places to engage in learning? While data will point toward the academic gaps and growth areas, attention needs to be given to the emotional toll students and teachers have taken to their confidence.

⁷ This is a quote from a student focus group.

Quinton's Story

Quinton is the oldest of four siblings and is a junior in high school. In a normal year, each morning when he woke up, he would get dressed for school and drive himself and siblings to school. When he got to school, he knew the routine of going to his locker, seeing his friends, and then attending his first-period class. For Quinton, having a routine made things simple and provided structure. Attending school for Quinton had been the same each year until he had to experience school during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of walking to class at his own pace, students had to walk on one side of the hallway. Rather than experiencing the simple excitement of sitting with a group of peers in class or in the cafeteria, social distancing guidelines had to be followed. He had looked forward to becoming a junior so that he could finally attend a high school prom and for the first time ever, there was a possibility that it would not happen.

Before, Quinton was used to attending school five days a week; he now attends twice a week and learns virtually during the other three days. Now, instead of dropping his siblings off at the middle and elementary school, he found himself having to share the environment and fight for the computer and quiet spaces as they all learned at home. Often the school schedules of all four siblings did not match, meaning distractions were commonplace. For Quinton, this meant that he would not be fully present in class because he had to multitask. Complicating things further, when he emailed his teachers for help, sometimes it would take two days to get a response. This response time made Quinton feel as if he was not heard, so he stopped emailing to ask for assistance.

Being the oldest, Quinton would often have to assist his family with meals, setting his siblings up with technology, and other childcare duties while learning at home. The difference in structure between home and school began to impact Quinton's grades and attendance. He felt like he could not keep up with assignments. When asked how he felt about school this year, he stated, "school feels chaotic." Quinton felt pressure to get everything done while also feeling obligated to help his siblings complete their tasks. Other students like Quinton found it difficult to navigate the responsibilities between home and school. It is this disconnect that influenced Quinton to withdraw and focus on the minor things that he could handle as opposed to taking on responsibilities that made him feel overwhelmed.

4. Students experience barriers to engagement when they feel the relevance of school is short-term and disconnected from their post-graduation plans.

There are multiple benefits of teachers creating real-world connections for their students in the classroom. First, research has shown that students better retain information that they can contextualize and use outside of the classroom. Conversely, students become less engaged when they see assignments as "busy work"⁸ or disconnected from their daily lives. Finally, students largely become more motivated when they can deem the content that they're learning relevant to their lives and/or career goals. When we asked in focus groups about students' postsecondary goals and how or if they've changed as a result of the pandemic, one student's answer touched on some of these themes: "I feel like the stuff they teach, it doesn't have anything to do with what I want to be in life. They'll help me figure out my career life, but that doesn't happen in classes. I might need this stuff to pass classes and college, but I don't see how it connects. I feel like I grew out of my idea [after high school]. I was rushing to think about college and careers. And now I don't know what I want to be. I haven't had a conversation about that this year."⁹

⁸ This is a quote that came up in multiple student focus groups.

⁹ This is a quote from a student focus group.

"I took a break for my mental health, a month-long break. I needed it but there was no communication, so I was behind when I come back. I started going to therapy, I was diagnosed with situational depression, and I was just crying whenever thinking about school. It was just so bad; I didn't have any motivation."

During the pandemic, in both virtual and in-person instructional models, students struggled to find relevance in the work that they were assigned. This may have been true for some students prior to COVID, but, like other educational concerns, it was only exacerbated by the lack of group work, diverse learning experiences, social interaction, and conversations with teachers and counselors about their future. For this disengaged population of students, some faced additional punishment instead of receiving the support they needed. Barriers such as truancy court, lack of makeup opportunities, and harsher grading policies added to questioning the relevance of this school year. Responses from the focus groups suggested that students felt that this year was simply a means to an end of satisfying graduation requirements. Without the feel of a traditional high school setting, the first semester felt like an extension of summer. When students were invited back to their schools, the electives, clubs, and other social activities didn't feel the same. At the end of the day, these responses and data suggest that students will continue to do what they need to do to graduate. However, educators must keep the relevance of school in mind as they combat the trauma and frustration of this year.

Zoe's Story

Zoe, a high school senior, had her future all planned out. She decided during her sophomore year that she wanted to be a cosmetologist. Understanding the path that it would take to make this dream a reality would be to attend college, she had a game plan to take all the courses required to receive a high school diploma. However, not realizing how each individual class would impact her final grade point average, Zoe cruised through math and science courses earning grades that would be just enough to pass without having to repeat the course. As a result, her overall grade point average was below proficient, and Zoe found herself at risk of failing to meet graduation requirements.

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, Zoe wanted to improve her grades. In a normal year, her counselors would be able to hold conversations and make plans to do just that. Her teachers would be able to better contextualize the work assigned in class and help Zoe make connections of what she was learning to the real world. However, the new remote learning format coupled with her lack of understanding of how her current courses would help her to achieve her career goals became obstacles to her motivation to join her daily classes.

While learning at home, Zoe found herself working during school hours while allowing her classes to run in the background on computer. Allowing her classes to run meant that she was counted present, but she was not fully engaged. Zoe wanted to earn her high school diploma but could not make relevant connections to the myths that she had to read and write about in her senior English courses and her desires for her future career. Like many other high school seniors, Zoe found herself facing a daily choice of having to attend class virtually or to make money while learning at home. Often, Zoe would choose the latter. When asked why she made this choice, she detailed her immediate interest in doing what she liked to do because this would be long-term.

Recommendations

The voices of student participants in the focus group clearly affirmed that both social connections and communication with staff and peers at their school matter. These connections have a significant impact on their perceptions about teacher investment, school structure, and social emotional development. Additionally, we can surmise that if systems for connections and communication exist, students will be more likely to ask questions that will help them to find relevance in their coursework as it relates to their long-term career goals.

Furthermore, conversations with disengaged students also revealed a strong awareness among them that though schools have attempted to provide normalcy this year, the effects of their lack of engagement will impact their engagement with school moving forward. Because we are aware of this perception, it would be beneficial for school districts to plan to eliminate barriers that will have an impact on students fully engaging within their courses next year. Additionally, as school districts continue to process final plans to combat learning loss as it relates to COVID-19, we offer the recommendations below for school and district leaders to consider when planning for school to open in the fall. Specifically, we recommend that school systems take four key steps to support critically absent students.

1. **Develop support systems that nurture authentic connections and support social-emotional development at school.**

During the pandemic, many educators have focused on getting academics “right” with online learning. The lost opportunities for social-emotional growth and connections, however, have taken a large toll on students. Entering the 2021-22 school year with a structured plan to rebuild connections and address emotions experienced during the pandemic is an important first step for reengaging all students, including those who were critically or chronically absent this past year.

To help students grow and connect, school leaders should first launch a positive campaign to reengage students, with a particular focus of those who were frequently absent. Once in school, these students will benefit from guaranteed connections with adults who can help them work through challenges they face in connecting with schools and prepare them for future challenges. Schools should consider fostering these connections through structured opportunities — such as purposeful academic advisory or mentoring programs — that also position schools to have focused discussions about how to best support students at risk of disengagement. This work will be even more impactful if schools are setting meaningful goals to foster connections and student social-emotional health. We specifically suggest the following three actions.



Positively reengage chronically and critically absent students — Proactively reach out to students with excessive absences and encourage them to return to school in the fall. Lead with positive messaging, setting a tone that schools want to restore a relationship, not punish a behavior.



Provide structured advising or mentoring — Find time to authentically connect with students and help them build their social-emotional toolkits. This could take place through academic advisory or mentoring programs that help students connect and grow.



Assess and address students' needs — Explore new measures of student social-emotional health and set goals for student connection and well-being. Prepare staff to identify and respond to students who have experienced trauma or who are at high risk of trauma.

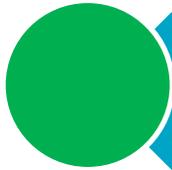
2. Provide systemwide structures that prepare teachers to build strong partnerships with students and families and communicate high expectations for all students.

School districts should plan for greater than typical requests for clear communication when students return for the 2021-22 school year. Focus group students were clear about their perceptions that school seemed chaotic and unorganized at times when decisions needed to be made. To eliminate this perception, schools should plan to implement structures that keep students at the center. In order to do this, schools must monitor students' reactions and their emotional well-being during and after their return to school in the fall.

It is through the monitoring of these reactions that districts and schools can set structures for operations. Most importantly, consistent procedures for teachers and other school personnel can be established and shared to support a universal response for high expectations. Furthermore, ensuring strong and clear communications between school and home will help in ensuring high expectations are reinforced. To collect insight on stakeholder perceptions we suggest the following actions.



Design and administer a reengagement survey — Capture the perceptions of all students about returning to school. Identify trends and plan short- and long-term goals to address concerns. Plan periodic checks to ensure progress and plan next steps.



Educate staff about emotional well-being and targets of social interactions — Draft a presentation to inform staff about the results of the reengagement survey. Outline practices that will support consistent actions for all teachers to address students concerns and to support them in building out high expectations for all students.



Ensure frequent communication between home and school — Plan to keep students and parents informed regarding schedules, changes in structures, and new procedures. Send messages via email, automated message, and share on social media platforms. Conduct periodic focus groups with students and families to hear stories and identify opportunities for stronger partnership.

3. Encourage student agency in course offerings to align with career goals.

Preparing for life after high school is the most pivotal concern during the pandemic for high school seniors. This year, this specific population was faced with the sobering reality that despite an atypical senior year, this would be their last year with their peers and that life options should be set upon graduation. While many students enter their senior year with a plan post-graduation, students have voiced their desires to change their career paths during the pandemic. Whether their decision was to actively pursue work after leaving high school or to change their career altogether, students have experienced increased uncertainty during the pandemic.

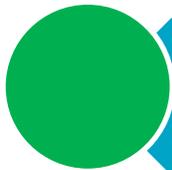
A deeper look into the student engagement group responses show that students have felt that their current courses do not align with their careers of choice. When students experience a lack of relevance with their courses to lifelong goals, their engagement decreases. In order to encourage students to have an active voice in their coursework, we offer the following strategies as school leaders plan for school in the fall.



Empower students to share their voices with course offerings — Begin advising early and know where each student is in their thinking about what they will do after they graduate. Enact a student council designed to advocate for student courses and choices that interest them when funding allows.



Assist students with mapping coursework to align with their career options — Engage students in advising at least semi-annually to address progress in coursework and to offer career explorations. These can begin in the early and middle years, and the focus can evolve as students move from career exploration toward making a postsecondary and career transition. All staff should be trained to have these conversations.

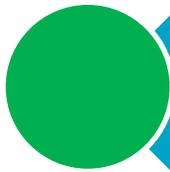
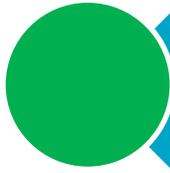


Plan future ready options — Invest in course offerings designed to increase exposure to student career interests. This could include designing a set of career pathways informed by student interest and workplace demand and options in the early and middle years for students to be exposed to potential career pursuits.

4. Institute restorative policies that give students viable pathways to improving their GPA and attendance records.

In this unprecedented year of education, school systems approached grading and attendance policies in myriad ways. Some offered increased flexibility to students to complete their work outside of traditional hours while others took a more rigid approach and only counted students present if they logged in and completed all assignments. Expectations for grading sometimes varied from teacher to teacher, while some school systems had clearer expectations and implemented policies like “no zero” grading so grades wouldn’t be disproportionately affected by a missed assignment.

Some students expressed hopelessness about their ability to get back on track after falling into deep holes with their GPA and attendance. They also expressed frustration about what seemed like a lack of fairness in policies. Some students attempted to complete assignments but struggled with the content or technology and not only failed their assignments as a result but were also marked as absent. We recommend the following actions to help restore students’ trust in the school system and to restore their optimism.

-  **Implement restorative grading policies** — In addition to credit recovery courses, schools should have clear policies for completing missed assignments and could consider long-term shifts towards mastery-based grading systems.
-  **Minimize referrals to and the effects of truancy court** — Create individual intervention plans for students who have been referred to court, create a path with the local court to expunge records, and institute a diversion program to minimize future referrals.
-  **Engage community members when revising policies** — Include staff, students, and families in the development of new policies, clearly communicate changes, and adjust course based on feedback.