



## **Restart & Recovery: Promoting Attendance for English Learners in Remote and Hybrid Learning Environments**

Authors:

Maria Santos, Hayley Weddle, Megan Hopkins, & Kathleen Lyons

*The purpose of this document is to compile resources and information for state education agencies (SEA) to support English learner (EL) students and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. States can repurpose this document to meet their needs. If you repurpose this document, please use the following language: “**This resource draws on a resource created by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) that is based on guidance compiled from state education agencies, national organizations, and the U.S. Department of Education.**”*

State leaders are instrumental in fostering access and equity for English learner (EL) students amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. While this role is multifaceted, leaders’ support of ELs’ consistent attendance in hybrid and remote learning is key to ensuring that these students continue to receive high-quality instruction and support. Some organizations have created resources outlining strategies for promoting attendance during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, specific attention to EL students and families is needed that considers their diverse experiences and strengths.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, school absenteeism represented a significant threat to educational equity for EL students, particularly at the secondary-school level. National data from the 2015-2016 school year illustrated that, among high school students, rates of chronic absenteeism (defined as missing more than 15 days in a year) were higher for ELs than for their non-English learner peers.<sup>1</sup> Recent evidence suggests that many schools have experienced increased absence rates during the COVID-19 pandemic, a trend that is exacerbated in districts implementing fully remote learning.<sup>2</sup> This problem is concerning, as chronically absent students not only miss out on schooling but are at the greatest risk of falling behind and not graduating.<sup>3</sup> These risks are likely heightened in the remote learning environment, given the inequities some EL students and families have experienced since the pandemic, such as lack of access to

---

<sup>1</sup> US Department of Education. Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools. <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>

<sup>2</sup> EdWeek Research Center Survey. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/10/15/in-person-learning-expands-student-absences-up-teachers.html/>

<sup>3</sup> US Department of Education. Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools. <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>

electronic devices and high-speed Internet, as well communications and instructional materials in the families' home languages.

Consistent school attendance provides students with direct, regular interactions with adults, which is critical for ELs' language acquisition, academic achievement, and socio-emotional development. In this resource, the authors offer recommendations to help state leaders promote ELs' consistent attendance during the remote and hybrid learning conditions necessitated by the pandemic.

### *Challenges to Consistent Attendance During the Pandemic*

In remote and hybrid learning contexts, all parties—students, families, teachers, para-educators, school staff, and families—are no longer engaging in regular, face-to-face schooling. Every member of the educational community has been forced to transition to new modes of communication and engagement. In this challenging context, schools' efforts to promote consistent attendance among ELs are hampered by several difficulties:

1. Many districts and schools are navigating the uncertain framework of what constitutes “attendance” in remote learning environments. For instance, some districts and schools may require attendance at synchronous class meetings, while others may require only asynchronous communication or the submission of completed school work.
2. Numerous students and families lack access to the technology, infrastructure, and skills needed to consistently engage in remote learning (e.g., electronic devices, Internet connectivity, bandwidth, digital literacy, etc.).
3. Educators are grappling with variability in terms of students' availability to participate in remote learning, as well as caregivers' availability to provide support. For example, some students may be engaging in learning in the evenings, based on caregivers' work schedules. Other students may now be responsible for assisting younger siblings with their schooling, or have had to take on job responsibilities to help their families financially.
4. Some families may not want their children to participate in online classes, because they do not want others to view their homes, are concerned about privacy, or fear surveillance in online spaces.
5. Teachers face challenges in terms of fully engaging ELs in remote learning, as they work to integrate best practices for supporting language development while also utilizing new technology to support access to content.

6. As new policies and practices are developed during the pandemic, some schools and districts have faced challenges with regard to sharing timely information with EL students and families in their home languages.

In light of these challenges, state leaders can play a critical role in developing systems and establishing practices that promote consistent attendance for ELs. For instance, SEAs could embed the following strategies into the professional learning opportunities they provide for local leaders and educators. In addition, SEAs could develop and disseminate attendance guidance that is aligned with state-specific policies and expectations and/or share examples of successful EL attendance interventions with their local education agencies (LEAs).

### *Strategies for Promoting Attendance During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Although applicable across all instructional models, the five strategies presented in this resource are especially relevant in remote and hybrid learning contexts. The strategies are summarized below and then will be explained in further detail with examples of how to implement each approach.

1. **Solicit EL families' input on attendance expectations and share information about attendance in their preferred languages and communication methods.** Strong partnerships with families are key to sustaining student attendance during remote and hybrid learning. Attendance policies should be reviewed with EL families in order to collaboratively build trust and engagement.
2. **Set clear expectations and provide diverse ways to account for attendance.** Clear and ambitious attendance expectations are important as districts, schools, and families work together to promote EL access and equity. It is also important to develop diverse ways to account for attendance that afford local LEAs flexibility.
3. **Establish cross-departmental teams to develop, review, and refine policies and practices to support EL attendance.** Leaders from numerous departments (such as accountability, instruction, technology, and student supports) need to work together to create systems and develop practices that promote consistent attendance.
4. **Establish attendance-monitoring systems and disaggregate the data by EL student groups to identify and respond to patterns.** Systems for comprehensively and accurately recording and tracking student attendance in hybrid or remote learning settings should include features that enable school staff to identify students who may be facing challenges. Timely identification of these issues is key to developing appropriate interventions and providing applicable support services.

- 5. Develop and implement plans to re-engage ELs who have missed a significant number of school days.** It is important for state and local leaders to have plans for how to support students who have missed a significant number of school days—that is, practical strategies for re-engaging these students in instruction. The most effective reengagement plans involve a range of stakeholders, all of whom share responsibility for promoting ELs’ attendance and achievement.

***Strategy 1: Solicit EL families’ input on attendance expectations and share information about attendance in their preferred languages and communication methods.***

Strong partnerships with families are key to sustaining student attendance during remote and hybrid learning. Attendance policies should be reviewed with EL families to collaboratively build trust and engagement. Communication is also needed to confirm accurate contact information and determine availability of communication devices, technology, Internet connectivity, and transportation. Privacy safeguards also should be explained clearly, especially as related to the log-in details students provide to access synchronous instruction and learning management systems. Districts and schools can build partnerships that empower EL students and families while communicating that educators care about their EL students and are concerned about their well-being.

**Examples:** State leaders may consider the following approaches to fostering family-school communication and engagement related to EL attendance:

- Acknowledge parents as critical partners who share a commitment to supporting student learning in hybrid and remote learning environments.
- Encourage LEAs to establish partnerships with community organizations and foundations to support relationship-building, foster communication, and secure resources for remote learning (e.g., computers and Internet access).
- Require districts and schools to provide consistent communications to EL families in their preferred language(s), in alignment with federal mandates. Communication could include regular outreach to families and students with positive messages, information about upcoming activities, and check-ins about academics and social-wellbeing.
- Support LEAs in developing resources (e.g., online training, videos, pamphlets, podcasts) in multiple languages for parents on how to use communication portals.
- Recommend diverse methods for disseminating information about attendance expectations (e.g., district and school websites, social media, text messages, robo calls, public service announcements). Engage parents and other community partners in sharing this information in multiple languages.
- Support LEAs in collecting regular feedback from families on hybrid and remote learning practices and attendance-related challenges.
- Recommend that LEAs organize “virtual family partnerships” to provide support. For example, families with less experience using particular technologies could be partnered with those who are more well versed in technology; families of new students could be partnered with established EL families who know how to navigate the educational system.

## Scenario

A group of EL families are concerned about a recent district decision to bring students back to school in stages. Many ELs have been absent, and the state has recommended that ELs and students with disabilities be prioritized to receive in-person instruction. The district has re-opened a select number of schools to offer these supports, but some EL parents are having difficulty transporting their children to the designated school. Other EL parents are concerned about health and safety issues related to onsite classes. However, the EL families have been reluctant to speak up about the challenges they are facing, because they do not want to be seen as “too critical” and/or are not comfortable engaging in English with district or school staff members.

### *Questions to consider:*

- How can educators foster engagement and partnership with EL families to collaboratively develop a solution?
- What strategies could educators use to consistently gather information from EL families about their needs and expectations?
- How can schools provide information on steps being taken to ensure that health and safety precautions are in place?

## Additional Resources

- Attendance Works provides [\*Strategies for Connecting with Students and Families\*](#).
- Louisiana outlines a [strategic communication plan](#).
- The District of Columbia offers [strategies to support ELs during learning at home](#).
- Massachusetts posted [a comprehensive guide for families in multiple languages](#)
- The California Department of Education (CDE) has a [CDE Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Webinars web page](#) with links to all CDE COVID-19 webinars including some focused on English learners, English language development (ELD), and dual-language immersion (DLI) programs. It also provides resources for families, including monthly newsletters for parents in multiple languages.
- The US Department of Education’s Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) offers the [Engaging English Learners and Families through Distance Learning](#) podcast. This podcast presents a wealth of strategies employed by districts to engage families of ELs, drawing on their cultural and linguistic assets. Parents’ share concerns and solutions are presented.
- [Region 15 Comprehensive Center at WestEd](#), in collaboration with the California (CA) Teachers Association and CA Department of Education, offered a webinar on [Communicating with Families of Newcomer ELs During Distance Learning](#)
- New Mexico’s leaders reached out to the Region 13 Comprehensive Center to offer a webinar on [Starting the School Year in a Blended/Distance Learning Setting – Building Relationships with Students and Families](#).

**Strategy 2: Set clear expectations and provide diverse ways to account for attendance.**

Clear and ambitious attendance expectations are important, as districts, schools, and families work together to promote access and equity for ELs. Further, diverse ways to account for attendance afford flexibility to LEAs. For example, schools and districts may conceptualize attendance beyond “logging in” during class sessions to include forms of asynchronous participation. Flexibility in class scheduling and/or in determining how attendance is counted also may help increase attendance among EL students who need to support their families due to economic hardship.

To promote EL equity, leaders need to consider the impact of their attendance policies and regulations. It is best to avoid any punitive approaches to managing attendance that enforce consequences (such as those employed for truancy). For instance, engaging law enforcement or involving the courts can marginalize and alienate EL students and their families, especially those with immigrant status concerns. It is also important not to drop ELs from enrollment rosters without reaching out to EL families first to understand the circumstances – i.e., whether they have moved out of the district/school boundaries.

**Examples**

State leaders may consider the following approaches to promote the establishment of clear attendance expectations during hybrid and remote learning:

- Support schools and districts in implementing a variety of methods to count attendance, such as:
  - regular sign-in to courses, homework submissions, and assessment completions;
  - regular submission of posts to class discussion boards;
  - time spent in online courses or participation in live virtual instruction;
  - video conference check-ins, phone calls, text messages, and packet collections;
  - maintaining a log of participation in remote learning, to be signed by the student and a designated adult.
- Consider modifying the length of the school day, as well as the scheduled breaks during the school year.
- Recommend that schools and districts suspend attendance policies with punitive consequences
- Encourage attendance-reward systems that are flexible (e.g., recognizing students’ efforts to participate in school at alternative times).
- Support schools in ways that enable them to extend attendance-reporting into evenings or weekends.
- Encourage schools and districts to share their successful interventions for increasing EL attendance.

**Scenario**

Siblings Pablo and Maria are secondary newcomers from an indigenous community in Guatemala. They speak little English, have experienced interruptions in their formal schooling, and have never used a computer. Their school district has planned to offer solely remote instruction until January 2021, but Pablo and Maria do not have a computer and their smart phones have limited Internet connectivity. They have been trying to use their phones to attend virtual sessions with their teachers, but they often are unable to stay online for the full session. They try to complete the assignments their teachers post to the learning management system, but they have trouble accessing all the information and knowing where to submit their work. District leaders have been working with community groups and local businesses to provide students with access to computers. However, Pablo and Maria have not applied for a computer because they are afraid of being asked to show proof of residency.

*Questions to Consider*

- What kind of attendance policies would be reflective and supportive of newcomer students like Pablo and Maria? What “counts” as attendance for these students?
- How can educators effectively communicate attendance expectations to newcomer students and families during the pandemic?
- How can educators better support Pablo and Maria’s consistent attendance?

**Additional Resources**

- [Attendance Works](#) offers ideas for monitoring attendance in remote learning settings and outlines alternative attendance measures.
- California has an attendance plan that supports learning continuity by taking into consideration multiple forms of daily participation. The [Policy Analysis for California Education](#) outlines key provisions of this plan.

### **Strategy 3: Establish cross-departmental teams to review, refine, and develop policies and practices to support EL attendance.**

Leaders from various school system departments (such as accountability, fiscal, instruction, technology, and student support) can work together to create systems and develop practices that support ELs' attendance. State leaders may consider encouraging LEAs to form attendance teams at either the district or school levels, which would be charged with developing and implementing innovative strategies to increase EL attendance. These teams could collaboratively develop resources and support to monitor students' attendance and the implementation of relevant interventions, as well as to identify and address challenges or barriers to attendance for diverse EL populations (e.g., newcomers, long-term ELs, early childhood, secondary school). They also could co-construct innovative solutions and engage community partners to secure resources such as fiscal and in-kind support, professional expertise, etc.

#### **Examples**

To support the development of cross-departmental teams, states may consider the following approaches:

- Encourage LEAs to form teams of leaders whose work focuses on EL education, curriculum and instruction, and data and evaluation to examine and refine attendance policies. Promote collaborations with diverse education departments, including migrant education, to enrich outreach strategies.
- Provide support for LEAs to refine their information systems to capture data on student groups of ELs (e.g., newcomers), allowing teams to identify patterns and target interventions.
- Support cross-departmental teams in districts and schools in developing communication plans to follow up with absent students and their families as needed. Such follow-up could include sharing attendance expectations and discussing strategies for re-engagement.
- Develop ways teams can collaborate with businesses, social workers, and community organizations to connect EL families with resources that may help bolster students' abilities to attend and engage in schooling.
- Promote and incentivize the LEA leaders (i.e., those who are responsible for instruction, student supports, fiscal and human resources, and technology) to form partnerships with institutions of higher education, city departments, and foundations to address challenges or barriers to EL attendance— such as lack of access to computer devices, online connectivity, bilingual staff, or transportation.
- Give LEAs flexibility to prioritize funds toward providing access to technology, connectivity, etc. for traditionally marginalized communities.

## Scenario

Departments within a large district have historically worked within silos, with little communication or collaboration between them. The district's director of student supports is exploring creating an attendance team to monitor and address attendance challenges during remote and hybrid learning, and potentially beyond COVID-19. In an effort to foster shared responsibility for English learners, the director invites colleagues from accountability, instruction, technology, and student supports to join the attendance team.

### *Questions to consider:*

- How could the director of student supports communicate the importance of participating in the attendance team?
- What systems, supports, and community partnerships may need to be in place for the team to be successful?

### **Additional Resource**

- Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) [created a coalition](#) to increase the number of students and teachers with access to devices and strong Internet connectivity. Serving as a model of collaboration across diverse stakeholder groups, the coalition includes partners from the OUSD, Office of the Mayor, and charter school leaders, as well as representatives from community organizations and relevant non-profits such as [Tech Exchange](#), [Oakland Public Education Fund](#), and [Oakland Promise](#).

#### **Strategy 4: Establish attendance-monitoring systems and disaggregate the data by EL student groups to identify and respond to patterns**

Systems for comprehensive and accurate tracking of student attendance during hybrid or remote learning should enable school leaders to identify challenges. Timely identification of recurring absences is key, so educators can quickly identify and provide applicable support services and interventions. Leaders also need to be able to disaggregate EL attendance data by student groups (e.g., newcomers, long-term ELs, students with interrupted formal education) in order to identify patterns, explore root causes, and intervene with specific strategies. With this information in hand, EL staff can follow-up on recurring absences by contacting caregivers using the caregivers' preferred communication method and language, then document the outcome of their outreach efforts in the attendance monitoring system.

#### **Examples**

States could consider exploring the following approaches to promote data-responsive attendance monitoring for ELs:

- Encourage districts and schools to refine existing systems for tracking attendance and absences to capture information that is relevant to hybrid and remote learning contexts.
- Develop comprehensive tools and guidance to support districts and schools in exploring root causes of chronic EL absences.
- Encourage district and school leaders to create opportunities to share and discuss attendance data with colleagues (e.g., during professional learning opportunities, staff meetings, grade-level collaboration time, etc.).
- Outline expectations for leaders and educators with regard to timeframes for expediently addressing chronic EL absences (e.g., within one, two, or three days from the time a student's absenteeism is identified).

#### **Scenario**

Five students identified as ELs, ranging from third to tenth grade and representing varying levels of English language proficiency, live in a multigenerational household with six working adults who have limited experience speaking English. Some of the adults work at night and others during the day. The apartment has three bedrooms. The household is usually noisy, and the students often struggle to find a quiet space in which to complete their assigned work. Two of the students have missed their last three remote learning sessions, and all of the students regularly complete their assignments late.

#### *Questions to consider:*

- What data does the system need to capture to give school leaders the information they need to recognize attendance challenges and identify the root causes outlined in this scenario?

- What types of attendance-flexibility measures can the school or district implement to better meet students'/families' needs and support the children's regular attendance?

### **Additional Resources**

- New York has a [set of comprehensive tools](#) including: a synthesis of research on the impact of school absences; dashboards and tools to disaggregate attendance for EL groups; best practices in newcomer and long-term EL programs; protocols for analyzing ELs' schooling experiences and stressors; and Individual Graduation Plan templates.
- [Attendance Work](#) continuously shares strategies for monitoring attendance.

**Strategy 5: Develop and implement plans to re-engage ELs who have missed a significant number of school days.**

Educators should have plans in place for supporting students who have missed a significant number of school days by using strategies to successfully re-engage these students in instruction. Developing a comprehensive plan for re-engagement is key to addressing the different circumstances EL students and their families are facing during COVID-19 and the pandemic-related shifts to hybrid or remote learning. Effective strategies are built on data obtained through the attendance-monitoring systems described above and factor in whether the EL students and families are experiencing trauma, isolation, and/or a lack of access to the equipment or services needed to participate in school on a daily basis while at home. In addition to helping to overcome students' attendance challenges, successful re-engagement strategies can promote a culture of partnership and collaboration in which families and educators share responsibility for ELs' attendance and achievement.

**Examples**

State leaders may consider implementing the following approaches to support ELs' re-engagement in school during remote or hybrid learning:

- Issue guidance outlining approaches for re-engagement during remote learning (as well as in hybrid and fully in-person instructional models) that factor in any barriers to ELs' ability to participate in schooling.
- Encourage LEAs to develop tiered re-engagement strategies for students who are absent from remote learning for a particular length of time (e.g., more than three instructional days in a school week). Examples of such strategies include:
  - verification of current contact information for each enrolled student;
  - daily notification to parents or guardians of student absences, in the adults' preferred communication method and language;
  - a plan for ways the school can reach out to both families and community service providers to identify root causes for absenteeism and meet student needs by connecting them with health and social services as necessary;
  - provision of extended learning opportunities before and after school programs, Saturday school, etc.;
  - when local health experts have determined it is safe to return to in-person schooling, a plan to transition EL students to on-campus instruction.
- Provide guidance to LEAs on developing a multi-tiered system of student re-engagement for hybrid/remote learning absenteeism that is distinct from the system used during in-person instruction. (See table below for more detail.) This distinctive system ideally will provide universal support, early intervention, and intensive support and can factor in:
  - ways to address the different circumstances EL students and families are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to hybrid or remote learning.

- strategies to re-engage EL students and families experiencing trauma, isolation, and/or a lack of access to the necessary supports students need to participate and fully engage in remote schooling on a daily basis.
- approaches to promoting a culture of partnership and collaboration with families.

### Scenario

Kareem, a junior in high school, is a long-term EL who has recently been absent from remote learning for more than three days. He has a computer at home with access to the Internet. His mother has urged him to attend school and has outlined her expectation that he will graduate and go to college. Kareem has told her that his classes are not preparing him for college and that he already knows the material being covered in online classes. During remote learning, Kareem's school placed all identified ELs together into content classes in order to streamline language-support services. Kareem feels his English is better than it is for most of his classmates and that he would find the classes offered to non-ELs more interesting and challenging. Since he does not feel challenged or engaged, Kareem has been regularly skipping his online classes.

#### Questions to consider:

- How can Kareem's teachers gain a deeper understanding of what he is experiencing?
- What strategies can be employed to re-engage Kareem in remote learning?
- What data supports are either keeping Kareem in these streamlined-language support classes or could allow him to transfer into non-EL classes?
- How can the school more effectively partner with Kareem's mother to improve and sustain his attendance?

### Additional Resources

- California provides an example of a [comprehensive continuity and attendance planning template](#) in multiple languages that requires engagement from multiple stakeholder groups.
- Table 1, below, outlines tiered strategies to support ELs' re-engagement. These strategies are modified from several sources, including LEA plans; Future Ed's [Strategies for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in the COVID Era](#); and the U.S. Department of Education's [Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism](#).

**Table 1. Multi-tiered strategies for re-engaging English learners who have missed instruction or who are chronically absent in hybrid or remote learning**

Tier	Strategies
1: Universal support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Survey EL students and families for their preferred methods and language for communication.</li> <li>● Augment welcoming strategies for EL students and families by providing spoken interpretation and written translations of remote learning procedures and attendance expectations; establishing intake processes that identify remote learning needs (e.g., devices, Internet</li> </ul>

	<p>connectivity, academic, socioemotional support); and regularly monitoring and updating contact information.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Use freeware, cross-platform messaging service groups (such as WhatsApp) and other accessible messaging resources to share schedules and information on school activities with EL students and their families.</li> <li>● Establish protocols to safeguard students’ information privacy rights and develop strategies for handling inquiries by immigration enforcement officials. Note: developing and implementing such protocols also fosters trusting relationships with EL students and families.</li> <li>● Promote an “attendance culture” by sending letters, cards, and flyers to EL students and their caregivers in their preferred languages—e.g., outlining remote learning expectations, sharing research on the impact of chronic absences, and relaying positive messages of caring and concern about students’ health, safety, academic achievement, and well-being.</li> <li>● Provide flexible schedules to facilitate attendance for EL students who need to support their families due to economic or other hardships.</li> </ul>
2: Intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Monitor disaggregated EL data at the school level; identify enrollment drops; and deploy family-engagement staff or community partners to contact and/or visit homes to recover student enrollments and share attendance expectations.</li> <li>● Develop a communication plan that includes administrators, counselors, school psychologists, teachers, paraprofessionals, nurses, etc., to connect with EL students and families who have inconsistent attendance, poor technology access, or health and safety concerns. Recognize that much of this effort will require a strategy for making direct, one-to-one contacts (e.g., arranging to meet in a designated place, providing various schedule options, etc.). Utilize a strategy to locate siblings who can assist with contact.</li> <li>● Provide extended learning opportunities for EL students who have missed a significant amount of school during remote learning, such as before- and after-school programs or Saturday school, not only to enable some students to complete unfinished learning but also to accelerate instruction for others.</li> <li>● Organize collaborative learning opportunities, including via peer mentors, buddies, or peer connection groups – fostering group-based learning with students at different levels of English proficiency, academics, technology skills, and/or with a common home language.</li> </ul>
3: Intensive support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Prioritize the in-person return of vulnerable learner groups, including but not limited to students with disabilities and ELs, particularly those with more intensive needs, students with other barriers to remote learning such as device/Internet access issues, and students who are</li> </ul>

	<p>significantly behind academically or who have been identified as disengaged.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Assign case managers for each EL student who has chronic absences to conduct daily check-ins regarding academic, technical, social, emotional, or other basic needs.</li><li>● Engage experts and community resources to support families beyond the district or school, such as health workers and housing authorities.</li></ul>
--	--