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Introduction

The vision of *Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans* (a blueprint for the future of Alberta’s K–12 education system) is that all students in the province will be engaged thinkers and ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit. To achieve this vision, students need to be engaged in learning. To ensure all students are engaged and successful learners, every day in school counts.

When students are engaged in learning, they enjoy coming to school and feel more positive about the future. Engaged students have a greater sense of belonging to their school, which leads to increased learning and increased ability to contribute to the community. Attending school also enhances students’ ability to access community resources and supports.

Disengagement in school can lead to attendance issues which, in turn, inhibit learning and may result in suspension, expulsion or dropping out. Non-attendance is a significant early indicator that a student is at risk for not completing high school.

Although the high school completion rate in Alberta is gradually increasing, approximately one in five students do not graduate. This is not good enough.

Not completing high school has life-long implications, including unemployment or lower income and diminished opportunities. Students who do not complete high school may find it more difficult to support themselves and their families and make a meaningful contribution to their communities. This loss of human potential, with all of its associated costs, affects all of us.

**Keeping Kids in School project objectives**

The Keeping Kids in School and Engaged with Respect to Attendance project is designed to provide leadership and support to Alberta Education, stakeholders and school authorities in the area of student engagement and student attendance. From 2011–2013, the project reviewed research related to school attendance and truancy, and identified key themes.

The project also compiled detailed information from 16 Alberta school authorities. Selection of these school authorities was based on low dropout rates, positive high school completion rates and minimal referrals to the provincial Attendance Board. In addition, over 2,700 school staff responded to an online survey about how they managed attendance in their schools.

Throughout the project, 31 members of the Attendance Board provided information through a questionnaire. In March 2013, 26 participants at a College of Alberta School Superintendents Symposium shared their expertise on what contributes to student non-attendance in the Alberta context and what types of proactive strategies are working effectively to address student non-engagement and non-attendance in school authorities across the province.

An important part of this research project was to give voice to students who experience attendance challenges, and to listen to the concerns and ideas of their parents and guardians. More than 150 students participated in a series of three focus groups, in addition to over 100 parents who participated in over 10 focus groups. School principals helped identify student participants with attendance challenges and parents interested in the topic of student non-attendance.

In addition to strategies, this report includes questions for reflection that school leaders can use to help enhance staff understanding of these issues. The illustrations in this report are visual representations of what students said during the focus groups (see page 23 for the complete picture).
What puts students at risk for not attending school

What the research says

Research indicates that students with attendance challenges typically do not:

- feel safe;
- have positive connections or relationships with others;
- feel that they belong; and/or
- make the effort to attend school regularly.

Students with attendance issues often struggle academically and find course work difficult. They may have issues at home such as a lack of parenting skills from parents, parental substance abuse, neglect and financial difficulties. There may be negative peer influences in the community that interfere with school attendance. Personal issues often include not valuing education, having no clear goals, substance abuse and not being physically and mentally healthy (National Centre for School Engagement, 2007; Davis & Lee, 2008; Railsback, 2004).
What students say

Students from the focus groups acknowledged that it was important for them to attend school so that they learned what they needed to have a better life in the future. These students indicated that they were absent from school for a multitude of reasons, including:

- feeling bored and generally disengaged, in school and out of school;
- not connecting with either the work or the people at school;
- feeling that the school staff did not care about them;
- not feeling well (both physically and mentally);
- lack of family support to attend school; and
- feeling they had nothing to look forward to.

Bringing together the research and what students and adult stakeholders say

The responses of students and adult stakeholders aligned with and illuminated key themes in the research related to school attendance, including the importance of:

- connecting and belonging;
- health;
- family context;
- communication;
- relationships;
- school environment; and
- student accountability.

(Office of Student Services, Virginia Department of Education, 2005; Safe Schools and Violence Prevention Office, 2000).
Connecting and Belonging

- Many students felt they had little or no reason to be in school. They did not enjoy school and felt no urgency to complete school.

- Adult stakeholders recognized that students with attendance challenges often did not seem to enjoy any aspect of school and saw little value in learning.

- While students said they wanted to be welcomed and connected to their schools, they said they were often afraid or nervous to come to school because of bullying.

- Adult stakeholders recognized that students often did not feel welcomed or safe in their schools, and that they often avoided school because of bullying and relationship problems.

What the related research says:

- Building a safe and caring environment for students is an ongoing priority in all schools. We know that students who feel safe and supported in their school environment thrive in their learning and are more engaged (Office of Student Services, Virginia Department of Education, 2005; State of Victoria, 2009).

- We know that students who are welcomed and connected to their school are less likely to miss school (Railsback, 2004). They have something to look forward to.

Health

- Students said being physically unwell was a common reason for missing school. They also had anxieties that led to absences.

- Adult stakeholders recognized that students’ attendance at school was affected by depression, anxiety, use of drugs and alcohol and feelings of being a failure.
Health (continued)

- **Students** also reported feeling tired, having trouble sleeping and feeling overwhelmed at times.
- **Adult stakeholders** recognized that issues with physical health also played a factor in attendance and students were often away due to illness. They expressed concerns that some families did not have the ability to handle health issues at home.
- **Students** reported not knowing what they were good at.
- **Adult stakeholders** indicated that learning difficulties played a role in non-attendance, which contributed to students not feeling successful.

Family Context

- **Students** reported that family rules about going to school were inconsistent or did not exist. Parents or guardians were often absent—often because of work schedules—and this made setting and following through on rules challenging.
- **Adult stakeholders** identified lack of parenting skills as an overarching factor that affects children's participation and attendance at school.
- **Adult stakeholders** also acknowledged the challenges many families face, including poverty. As a result of these challenges, school attendance may not be seen as a priority for these families.
- **Students** were concerned about morning readiness (even older high school students expressed these concerns). They also mentioned not having anyone to wake them up in the morning, not having an alarm clock, and being left on their own to make breakfast and pack lunches.
Family Context (continued)

- Many students mentioned that their parents did not appear to take an interest in their schooling. They felt their parents did not talk with their teachers, help with homework and overtly encourage them to do well at school.

- Adult stakeholders expressed concerns that parents or guardians did not value or take an interest in the students’ education, did not talk with teachers and did not help with homework.

- Many parents and guardians had negative experiences in school themselves. Their past hurts and negative experiences in school play a role in their reluctance or inability to be supportive in their child’s education.

- Students reported having many distractions at home, such as video games and TV.

- Adult stakeholders identified lack of parental supervision as a factor in students’ non-attendance.

- Other family reasons for missing school revolved around travel (e.g., going on holidays, visiting extended family, going on shopping or hunting trips).

What the related research says:

- Having parents involved in their children’s education is beneficial; developing partnerships with the school can lead to parents and school personnel working on common goals, such as improving their child’s attendance. Parents really are the first stakeholders in a child’s education; they know their children best and would be a great contributor if the school partnered with them (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Railsback, 2004).
## Communication

- **Students** felt that regular contact between home and school did not occur, making it easier to miss school without being detected until attendance became chronic.

- **Adult stakeholders** were concerned that often parents would not inform the school of absences and contacting parents directly could be challenging, especially when inaccurate contact information was on file.

- **Adult stakeholders** felt that the school was often unaware of family or personal issues affecting students’ engagement and attendance at school.

- **Adult stakeholders** were concerned with the barriers to accessing community resources for families who needed them.

- **Students** pointed out that simply phoning home and leaving a message was not an effective intervention because many students were skilled at intercepting the phone calls and messages related to attendance.

- **Adult stakeholders** also mentioned that parents (and sometimes students) often did not understand how much time the student was missing from school.

- **Adult stakeholders** felt that students did not understand the seriousness of attendance or why it matters.

- **Students** also felt that it was important that they be directly consulted when problems arise because they often had ideas of their own about how things could work better for them at school.
Relationships

- **Students** felt they had no one to talk to because they did not trust anyone at school, and they felt that teachers did not have the time or desire to get to know them as individuals.

- **Adult stakeholders** recognized that students with attendance issues were often not well known by school staff and had minimal connections with anyone in the school building.

- **Students** felt that school office staff were often not friendly and tended to ask too many questions about their attendance issues; students felt the questions were too personal to discuss with school staff they did not know or trust.

- **Adult stakeholders** noted that students who did not have friends or healthy relationships tended to not attend more often.

What the related research says:

- To have a positive culture within the school means to have positive relationships between staff, students, families and community members. When there are caring and welcoming individuals involved with students, it sends a strong message to students that they matter. Students who are connected to someone and have that positive influence regarding their schooling tend to want to be in school (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009; Railsback, 2004).

Focus on healthy relationships

Introduced in 2013, Alberta's Social Policy Framework is designed to clarify what Albertans are trying to achieve, to co-ordinate activities within government and between stakeholders, and to influence and guide the work of improving the lives of Albertans.

One of the key principles of the policy is the importance of healthy relationships. Promoting healthy relationships between individuals and within families recognizes that individuals are intrinsically linked to their community and that they are strongly influenced by their surroundings.

Some of the social policy outcomes identified in the framework are that Albertans will live free from abuse and violence and that they will feel welcomed in the communities where they live, learn and work.
School Environment

Students identified issues related to transportation to school, primarily around taking the bus. They expressed concerns about unfriendly bus drivers, buses leaving when they’re running to catch them, confusing transfers, and that there was no other way to get to school if they missed the bus.

Adult stakeholders acknowledged that transportation can be a factor in attendance issues; particularly for students who miss the bus and have no other way of getting to school.

Students believed that school rules were too strict and that there were some unfair practices (e.g., being locked out of class when late).

Adult stakeholders noted that some students are not mature enough to handle high expectations and the pressures of school and that this contributes to attendance issues.

Adult stakeholders also noted that students who experience conflict with teachers tend to have more challenges with attendance.

Students felt that classes were too large and teachers could not pay attention to everyone, which reinforced the feeling that teachers did not care.

Adult stakeholders expressed concerns that larger classes made it more difficult for teachers to personalize learning and devote time to individual students who are at risk.

Many students said they found their classes too difficult and they had difficulty understanding teachers’ instruction. They said they didn’t have choices about what and how they could learn.

Adult stakeholders said that those students who did not attend regularly compounded their academic challenges.

However, adult stakeholders also suggested that segregation of students (e.g., for remedial support) had a negative impact.
Students expressed concerns about what they perceived as too much homework. They said homework made them not look forward to going home and caused them frustration.

Students said that there were not enough breaks and time in the lunch hour to visit friends in other classes.

Students also felt there were no clubs or activities at school that interested them and gave them something to look forward to.

Some students felt that the school was technologically outdated. They felt that increased access to technology could help them catch up when they missed a class.

Some students believed that the tracking of attendance was not accurate.

Adult stakeholders noted that peer influence could negatively affect student attendance, especially students who lacked confidence or did not have an adult advocate to guide and support them.

Adult stakeholders identified that not having clear processes in place or designated staff members available affected how schools were able to implement policies and support strategies to improve attendance.

Many students did not feel there were in-school opportunities to set goals and plan for the future. They did not see the connection between their current school experience and their future.

Some adult stakeholders felt that career planning in school begins too late, which can result in students not taking the right courses they need to meet their personal career goals.

Many students did not feel prepared for the next level of school, particularly at the transition between grades 6 and 7, and grades 9 and 10.

Adult stakeholders identified lack of transition planning for students as a concern, particularly between junior and senior high school.
Students identified timetabling and scheduling as an issue, particularly for grades 10 to 12 students. They often stated that school started too early in the morning.

Adult stakeholders recognized that scheduling issues were often a contributing factor to students’ frustration with and disengagement from school.

A number of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students indicated that there was limited cultural learning in their courses, or opportunities to learn their traditional language.

What the related research says:

- As Railsback (2004) indicated in her work, schools that do personalize and create smaller learning groups have higher attendance and lower dropout rates. Students are less likely to do things that could threaten their bond to the school community.

Student Accountability

Many students indicated they had difficulty getting up in the morning and were disorganized. They acknowledged there were many technology distractions at home that made focusing on getting to school challenging.

The adult stakeholders identified that the many distractions in students' lives, including video games, TV and negative peer influences, affected their school attendance.

Most students did not have clear goals for themselves regarding school and the future.

The adult stakeholders also felt that students had no clear goals and a lack of ownership in their education. They see students who lack confidence and a sense of self-worth and understand that these students are unable to envision a better life for themselves, so attending school serves a limited purpose.
Strategies for enhancing student attendance

Through discussions, focus groups and surveys, youth and adult respondents identified a number of strategies that enhance school attendance. A number of these strategies and practices are being successfully used by the 16 Alberta school authorities who shared their experiences with the project.

This collection of strategies is organized around the six components Reimer and Dimock (2005) identified that positively affect truancy within school systems. Each component is mutually dependent on the others. All six components need to be present to markedly improve attendance and engagement in school.

They include:

1. Collaboration
   Collaboration brings schools together with community partners to better support students and their parents and guardians. Expertise, resources and ideas are maximized and each group involved brings different perspectives and supports to create responsive and effective solutions.

   **COLLABORATION STRATEGIES**

   *Between students and school staff*

   - Teacher advisors act as advocates for small groups of students for two or more years.
   - Students are involved in regular meetings with teacher advisors (one-on-one or in small groups) to build positive relationships, review course selections, explore career plans and address issues and concerns related to school participation and attendance.
   - Through discussions and activities with advisory groups, students clearly understand why attendance is important.
   - Students have multiple opportunities to participate in activities that build connections with peers.
   - Students have authentic opportunities to provide input on decisions related to their education and their school community, and their voice is listened to and valued.
   - Collaborative support teams at the school, school authority or community level are available to support the school success of individual students at risk by working on common goals, and meeting regularly to review progress, evaluate success of strategies and plan for improvement.
COLLABORATION STRATEGIES (continued)

*Between schools and families*

- Schools organize activities to build connections with families.
- Collaborative support teams at the school, school authority or community level are available to support families with skill-building opportunities (e.g., morning readiness, how to help students with homework) or solution-focused counselling for home issues.

*Between schools and communities*

- Schools actively build relationships with community partners.
- The community is engaged in working on shared goals to improve school attendance.
- Community organizations, businesses and services are involved and supportive of activities to promote improved school attendance (e.g., financial contributions to support attendance incentives, assistance with transportation to community activities after school).
- Schools establish links with local and regional post-secondary institutions and students have access to career counsellors to help them set goals, identify career interests and options, and help them make the link between what they’re doing in school and how this will create choices and opportunities for them in the future.
- There is a seamless referral process to connect students at risk and their families with appropriate community support agencies, including counselling.

For more information on collaborative practices, see the *Working Together Collaborative Practices and Partners Toolkit* on Alberta Education’s website at: http://education.alberta.ca/media/6877700/working-together-toolkit.pdf

Also, see the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Collaborative Framework at: http://education.alberta.ca/admin/fnmi/collaborativeframework.aspx

**YOUR TURN**

- reflect on collaborative practices in your school or school authority

- How are staff collaborating with one another to support students and improve attendance?
- What are examples of how your school or school authority is currently collaborating to support student attendance with families? With students? With community partners?
- How is your school or school authority collecting evidence of successful collaborations related to improving attendance? How are you using this data?
- What areas of collaboration are most challenging for your school or school authority? Why?
2. Family involvement

Family involvement means the significant adults in students’ lives are aware of their children’s school attendance and are supportive of their children attending school every day. Students want parents and guardians to take an interest, be more involved, encourage them and help resolve issues at school. Involving parents and guardians enhances the school’s ability to find solutions to non-attendance. Parents and guardians need to be engaged in an ongoing basis—not just when there are issues.

Some parents and guardians will benefit from opportunities to improve their parenting skills related to supporting their child’s engagement and attendance at school. This can often be done through collaboration with community partners.

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT STRATEGIES

- School staff recognize the importance of making families feel welcome in the school and develop specific and ongoing strategies to create a welcoming environment for all students and their families.

- Orientations for new families to the district provide a welcoming introduction, validate the importance of family involvement in their child’s education and communicate the importance of regular school attendance and ongoing communication between home and school.

- School staff work with community partners to organize activities throughout the school year that are opportunities to build positive relationships with students and their families and communicate the importance of students being engaged and successful learners.

- Schools create opportunities for parents to be in the school and participate in their children’s learning on a regular basis.

- School staff establish clear and friendly communication with families through mail-outs, tip sheets, web postings, emails and face-to-face opportunities.

- Teachers establish regular contact with parents and guardians, not just when issues arise.

- When attendance issues begin to arise, school staff establish a partnership with parents and guardians to work on common goals within the school and at home.

- Schools provide skill-building opportunities for parents on strategies they can use to support their child’s attendance and engagement in school. Sample topics could include: helping children set and achieve goals, understanding high school credits and course selection, planning for post-secondary, morning readiness strategies and supporting homework completion.

- School staff are familiar with community resources and services that support families and have a process to connect families to these resources.

- There are professional learning opportunities available to build school staff capacity to understand, communicate and collaborate effectively with families, particularly families with youth who have attendance issues.
YOUR TURN – reflect on how your school or school authority supports family involvement

- What is currently being done in your school or school authority to improve family involvement, particularly for families of students who have attendance issues?
- How do you know whether or not these strategies are making a difference?
- What other kinds of family involvement strategies could be explored in your school or school authority? What specific needs of students and families would they meet? What resources would they require?
- Who are the community partners that your school or school authority currently works with to support families? What other partners need to be involved?

The Alberta High School Completion Framework

The Alberta High School Completion Framework addresses the challenges students face in finishing high school and helps ensure all students are given the opportunity to succeed. The framework supports work in five core strategies.

- Student engagement
- Successful transitions
- Collaborative partnerships
- Positive connections
- Tracking progress

For more information, see the High School Completion page on Alberta Education’s website at: https://ideas.education.alberta.ca/hsc/about/

3. Comprehensive approach

A comprehensive approach focuses on prevention and intervention. It is based on clear and transparent communication about the importance of student attendance and articulates what school staff, students, families and community members can do to enhance attendance and student success. All non-attendance issues are clearly communicated and all partners involved have a shared vision of how to work together to improve student attendance.

The school environment is a welcoming place, and processes are in place to deal with absences, including offering support for issues arising in and out of the classroom. When there is an attendance concern, the school intervenes immediately and provides the necessary supports, collaborating with community partners to ensure families have the supports they need to resolve the issue. A comprehensive approach also means recognizing that each student is an individual, and that interventions must be responsive to the student’s strengths, needs, context and culture.
COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH STRATEGIES

Proactive approach to attendance

- Schools and school authorities establish clear attendance guidelines, protocols, policies and processes across the school authority with district-level supports for non-attending students and their families, including counselling services.

- Schools and school authorities have processes in place to track attendance to identify patterns and act on it.

- Schools and school authorities intervene early—school staff act on the first unexcused absence and have ongoing involvement for continuous absences.

- Success contracts (sometimes called support plans) are used, which outline roles and processes each person is to follow (e.g., students, parents, teachers, administrators, other community partners).

- If students do make the decision to formally leave school before graduation, there is a follow-up exit interview to identify the student’s reasons for leaving, determine if different types of supports or incentives would have made a difference, and invite the student to reconsider the decision, now or in the future.

- Professional development for school staff on key issues related to improving attendance is available.

Clear and transparent communication

- Schools and school authorities have clear messages in place about the importance of attendance that staff use to communicate with students and their families.

- Schools and school authorities communicate regularly to ensure all staff understand processes for handling attendance issues.

Supports available specific to attendance

- School staff use the strategy known as silent mentoring; staff identify and connect with students who have limited involvement at school (e.g., at a staff meeting determine which students could benefit from increased involvement and which staff will make the connections and how that will be done in quiet and discrete ways).

- Schools and school authorities have access to specialized personnel to assist students and connect with families such as counsellors, First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultural advisors and graduation coaches.

- Schools and school authorities involve students in exploring ways to resolve transportation issues that might be interfering with attendance.

- School staff use goal setting with students to help create a positive vision for the future and help them connect school attendance with future and career success.

- Schools and school authorities have planning and processes in place to support student transitions (e.g., moving from grade to grade, coming new to the school).
YOUR TURN – reflect on a comprehensive approach to attendance in your school or school authority

• How is the importance of regular attendance communicated to students in your school or school authority?
• How is the importance of regular attendance communicated to parents and guardians?
• What is currently being done in your school authority to support a comprehensive approach to addressing attendance issues?
• What kind of tracking system for attendance does your school or school authority use? How effective is it?
• Has transportation been identified as an issue that affects attendance in your school or school authority? If so, what solutions have you tried?
• How does your school or school authority plan for and support students transitioning from grade to grade or from school to school? What are your successes? What additional supports would make transitions more successful for students, particularly for students with attendance issues?

4. Supportive context

To be effective and sustainable, strategies need to take place within a supportive context. To resolve attendance issues, schools and classrooms must be welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that support the success of each and every student.

STRATEGIES FOR A SUPPORTIVE CONTEXT

Positive learning environment

• Schools establish positive school climates that are welcoming to students, staff and the community.
• Flexible schedules and timetables consider the needs and preferences of youth (e.g., later start times).
• Regular celebrations affirm positive school climate and communicate about the positive things happening at the school.
• Recreational and cultural activities are available at noon and after school to engage students and connect them with peers (e.g., computer club, languages).

Engaging learning opportunities

• Schools and school authorities identify and support effective teaching practices that engage and challenge all students.
• School staff know their students and can create learning experiences and supports that effectively address student differences.
• Schools and school authorities make appropriate learning pathways available for all students.
• Teachers create time for students to finish work in class and are committed to assigning minimal and purposeful homework.
STRATEGIES FOR A SUPPORTIVE CONTEXT (continued)

• Teachers co-ordinate assignments, evaluations and exams throughout the year to reduce stress and help students perform at their best.

• There are professional learning opportunities available to build teachers’ capacity to engage and respond to the individual learning needs of all students, including students who may have attendance issues or be at risk of early school leaving.

Focus on wellness

• Schools and school authorities implement social/emotional learning into classroom practices and co-curricular activities across the grade levels.

• Schools and school authorities identify the needs of students and their families and develop wellness supports to address these needs, such as health-related information in newsletters, partnering with community to create workshops for parents on health-related topics, breakfast and hot lunch programs, opportunities for families to join their children in physical activities, and bullying prevention initiatives.

YOUR TURN – reflect on supportive contexts for improving student attendance in your school or school authority

• What is currently being done in your school or school authority to create a supportive context for learning?

• What is currently being done in your school or school authority to create a supportive context for helping students connect with one another? Connect with school staff?

• How does classroom practice promote school attendance? How can classroom practice unintentionally discourage school attendance?

• Is homework an issue for students and their families in your school or school authority? Does your school or school authority have a homework policy? If so, how does it address attendance and non-attendance issues?

• What types of extra- or co-curricular activities does your school or school authority offer? How could these activities be used to address attendance issues?

• How is your school or school authority addressing the emotional/social learning of students? What is working? What isn’t? How are schools gathering evidence to know what is effective?

• What type of wellness supports are being offered in your school or school authority? What is working? What isn’t? Where are the gaps?

• What types of professional learning opportunities do the teachers in your school or school authority need related to creating supportive environments for all students?
5. Incentives and sanctions

Incentives should be motivating to individual students and their families. The first approach should always be incentives and other proactive strategies. Incentives for attendance should be:

- available for all students;
- immediate;
- based on student interests;
- connected to a reason for students to attend school (e.g., linked to something they want to be able to do); and
- linked to participation in school activities.

Incentives can also be linked to community (e.g., discount cards for local store or gift certificates) and offer students choice and options.

Sanctions for non-attendance should be used where necessary, be appropriate for the issue and be standardized across schools. Sanctions need to be clearly linked to behaviour that is unacceptable (i.e., non-attendance).

School policies should be reviewed to determine if they actually encourage attendance or if they create unintended sanctions that work against student attendance. For example, suspension from school for not attending sends a contradictory message to students and their parents and guardians.

Sanctions need to be perceived as fair and predictable by students and their families and can include:

- making-up time for missed days/classes; and
- processes based on number of unexcused absences with increased sanctions with increased number of absences (e.g., letter to parents and guardians, meeting with parents and guardians, alternative placements, Attendance Board referrals).
YOUR TURN – reflect on incentives and sanctions for attendance in your school or school authority

• What current incentives related to attendance are currently in place in your school or school authority? Are they school by school or district wide?

• Are these incentives having a positive impact on attendance? What evidence is being collected about their implementation and effectiveness? Who are the partners involved?

• Are there any unintended consequences related to these incentives?

• How could these incentives be strengthened?

• What new incentives could be explored? What new partnerships might be explored?

• What current sanctions related to attendance are currently in place in your school or school authority? Are they school by school or district wide?

• Are they having a positive impact on attendance? What evidence is being collected about their implementation and effectiveness? Who are the partners involved?

• Are these sanctions perceived by students and families as fair and predictable?

• Are there any unintended consequences related to these sanctions?

• How could these sanctions be strengthened to be more effective?

• Do new sanctions need to be explored? What new partnerships might be explored?

6. Evaluation

Data gathering is an important component of any school improvement plan. Schools and school authorities need to collect and use relevant data to inform decisions and gather evidence that a strategy is making a difference. Having outcome data is valuable for ongoing planning and sustainability of any prevention and intervention strategy related to improving student attendance.

EVALUATION STRATEGIES

• Schools and school authorities develop consistent, accurate and manageable processes for tracking attendance.

• Processes are in place to determine if the strategies implemented are relevant, effective and efficient.

YOUR TURN – reflect on how your school or school authority is evaluating plans and practices that support student attendance

• How is your school or school authority gathering evidence that processes and strategies related to student attendance are having a positive impact?

• Who is involved in gathering and analyzing this data?

• How is your school or school authority sharing this information with school staff, students, parents and guardians, and the community?
• What kinds of new or different evaluation procedures might your school or school authority consider? Why?

• Are there evaluation efforts that your school or school authority could discontinue? If so, why?

• Are there existing sources of data your school or school authority could tap into to help inform decision making around attendance issues and strategies?

Conclusion

When a student in Alberta does not complete high school, it affects all of us. This is a complex issue with no easy answers. However, there are strategies that have been shown to be effective.

The key is that all partners need to work together within schools, families and communities. This includes teachers, students, school leaders, parents and guardians and community members.

Attendance tracking, monitoring and intervention should be a priority in the early years of school. Prevention is always the preferred alternative, addressing small challenges before they become bigger challenges with serious and irreversible consequences.

Students say they want to feel welcomed at school and to have a sense of belonging. They want an adult to care about them, to connect with them, to help them resolve issues and to help them with their learning. They want to be valued.

Inspiring Education brought thousands of Albertans together to talk about the future of education in the province. The initiative led to a clear vision and policy directions. The province also has a new Social Policy Framework that emphasizes supporting healthy relationships.

These supports cannot be for some students only. Every student in Alberta counts, and every day in school counts.
Graphic record from student focus groups
References


