

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

A Toolkit for Launching An Elementary Success Mentor Attendance Initiative

January 2017

INTRODUCTION

Common sense tells us that students are more likely to attend school when they feel connected to caring adults who notice whether they show up. A caring adult mentor can help students feel hope for a better future and secure support for addressing barriers to getting to school.

Chronic absenteeism in kindergarten, and even pre-K, can predict lower test scores, repeated patterns of poor attendance, and retention in later grades, especially if the problem persists for more than a year. Chronic absence is especially challenging for low-income students whose families have fewer resources to make up for lost learning time in the classroom. Quality mentoring can be leveraged as a strategy to improve attendance and boost academic achievement.



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[Relationships Matter: A Toolkit for Launching an Elementary Success Mentor Initiative](#), builds upon ideas from a number of national partners and from districts participating in the groundbreaking [My Brother's Keeper Success Mentors initiative](#), announced in 2016 by the White House and the US Department of Education. The success mentor approach recognizes the power of using chronic absence (missing 10 percent or more of school for any reason) to trigger a cost-effective, early intervention that gets students to school so they don't miss out on important learning opportunities. It is filled with tips, scripts, and a variety of free tools that you can take and tailor to the needs of your community. This summary offers an overview of the concepts covered in this on-line toolkit.

WHAT IS THE ELEMENTARY SUCCESS MENTOR STRATEGY?

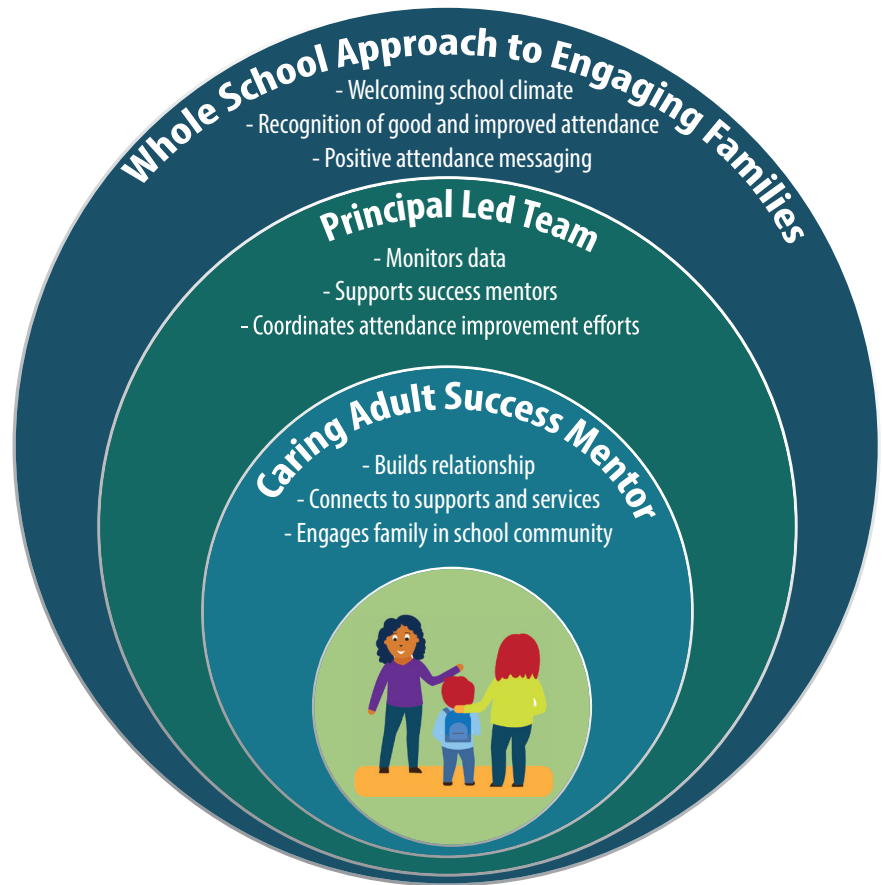
The primary component is a caring adult (mentor) who:

1. Builds a relationship with the mentee which motivates them to show up to school
2. Connects the mentee and his or her family to supports and services that address barriers to attendance, and
3. Reaches out, in partnership with school staff, to engage the mentee's family and deepen their sense of connection to the school community.

Any caring adult, school staff or school based partner, who is willing to interact with a mentee at least three times a week for the entire school year has the potential to be a success mentor. Consistent contact is critical to developing trust and gaining a deeper understanding of obstacles to getting to school. Because family engagement is especially fundamental when working with young children, the mentor should be closely connected to the school and able to help build a positive relationship between the family and the school community.

The second component is a principal led team. It ideally meets on a weekly basis to coordinate a school's approach to improving attendance and serves as an on-going source of support to success mentors. Success mentors need to be able to turn to such a team to connect their mentees to additional supports and address common challenges affecting more than one student.

A third component is a school-wide approach to creating a welcoming environment that promotes relationships with families and conveys the importance of being in class every day. Too many families and students simply do not realize how missing just two days a month can throw them off track for learning and success in school.



SELECTING YOUR DISTRICT CAPTAIN/LEAD

An essential ingredient of success is selecting the administrator in your district who will be responsible for launching and managing the program throughout the district. The ideal candidate would have the authority and skills to work across a variety of departments and with community partners who need to be engaged and supportive. In addition to being comfortable with data, familiar with attendance and experienced in working directly with school sites and principals, the district captain should be highly organized and able to creatively solve problems.

HOW DO WE GET STARTED?

These steps are critical to launching an elementary success mentor program.

1. Selecting your District Captain/Lead.

A key ingredient is selecting the administrator who will be responsible for launching and managing the program throughout the district.

2. Ensure access to chronic absence data.

Your district needs to ensure regular access to chronic absence data to identify students in need of success mentors and monitor whether progress is being made.

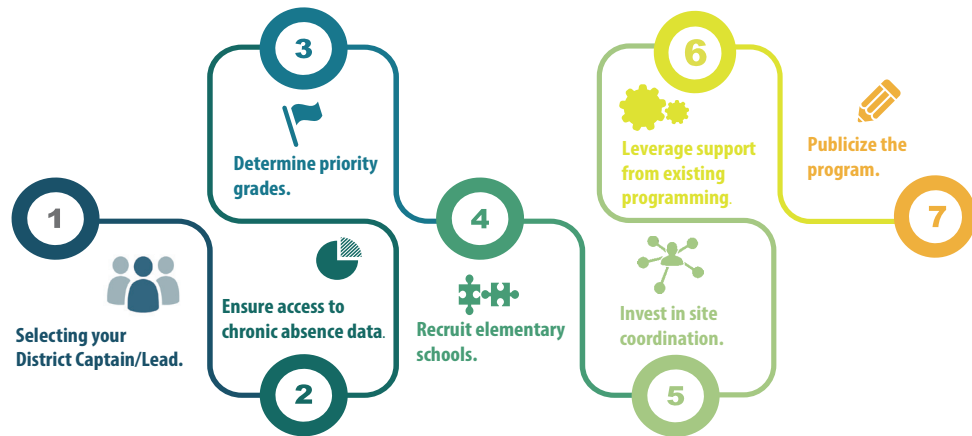
3. Determine priority grades. Will you start, as a district, in particular elementary grades or allow participating elementary schools to determine where to focus?

4. Recruit elementary schools. Because school site support is critical, consider launching the program with a small group of priority elementary schools with eager principals.

5. Invest in site coordination. Identify and invest in the capacity of a lead staff member who can coordinate, develop and implement the program at each school.

6. Leverage support from existing programming. The program requires a modest investment of staff time, and much can be accomplished by creatively leveraging existing programs and resources.

7. Publicize the program. Consider taking steps that will ensure support for the program, notify parents, and publicize the program to district and school staff and community partners.

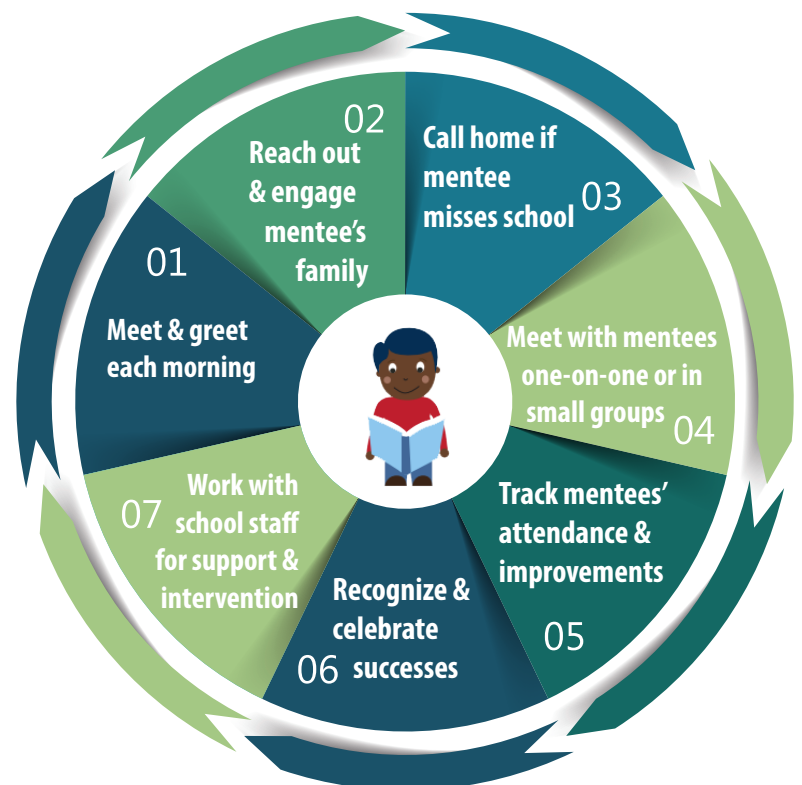


WHAT DOES AN ELEMENTARY SUCCESS MENTOR DO?

Elementary success mentors are cheerleaders, advocates, and motivators – who encourage their mentees to attend school every day. Seven key elements define the role of a success mentor, which are drawn from the practices of the New York City Department of Education.

The seven elements include:

1. Meet and greet each morning
2. Reach out and engage mentee's family
3. Call home when mentee misses school
4. Meet with mentee one-on-one or in small groups
5. Track mentee's attendance and improvements
6. Recognize and celebrate success of mentees and families
7. Work with school staff for support and interventions including connecting a student to engaging enrichment activities and needed resources



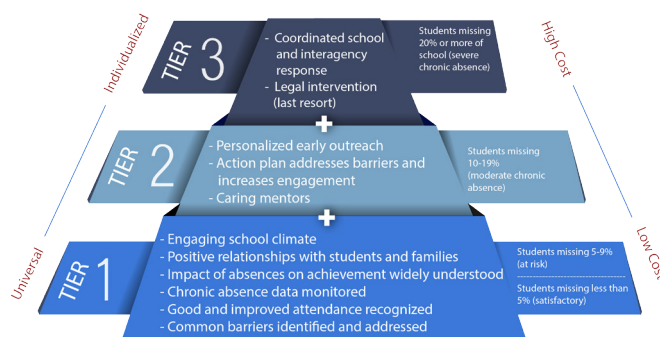
HOW DO WE RECRUIT, SCREEN, TRAIN, MATCH, AND SUPPORT ELEMENTARY SUCCESS MENTORS?

An essential ingredient of launching a quality program is putting in place the capacity to recruit, screen, match, train and support the adults who will serve as elementary success mentors. Drawing upon the practices of existing mentoring programs, this toolkit offers examples of recruitment letters, job descriptions, training resources as well as best practice tips. These are tailored to programs operating at the elementary level which need to recruit and develop mentors with the skills to engage young children and their families.



WHAT IS NEEDED FROM SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS TO ENSURE THE SUCCESS OF AN ELEMENTARY SUCCESS MENTOR STRATEGY?

Success mentor strategies should be embedded within a more comprehensive approach for improving attendance. Success mentors are most effective as a second tier of intervention that is triggered once attendance data show that a student is missing too much school despite the existence of universal strategies. Ideally a team supported by the principal helps to develop and coordinate the strategy for the school and support the work of success mentors.



District support for the success mentor strategy is essential to ensuring that this approach can go to scale and be sustained over time. To take a systemic approach to improving attendance, districts should have in place actionable data, positive engagement, capacity building, shared accountability and strategic partnerships.

By launching elementary success mentor initiatives, districts and communities leverage the power of caring connections to ensure all students are in class so they can learn. Such an investment is especially important for our most vulnerable students who face the greatest challenges to getting to school.



Attendance Works is a national organization dedicated to improving the policy, practice and research around attendance. Its website offers materials, studies, and success stories about reducing chronic absence. Sign up to receive updates at: <http://www.attendanceworks.org/>

We want and welcome your input. To offer feedback or suggest additional resources, please contact Sue Fothergill, sue@attendanceworks.org.

The full on-line toolkit can be found at: <http://www.attendanceworks.org/elemsuccessmentortoolkit/>

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