# Early Interventions for School Improvement

Use this advocacy guide to push your state, district, and school leaders to create systems to identify and provide appropriate interventions to students who are not on track to graduate high school prepared for credit-bearing college coursework.

## What we know

- There are early warning signs that students are falling off track and less likely to be successful in school and receive a diploma. Students of color and students from low-income families are at a greater risk for missing critical milestones on the path toward high school graduation.

- Research shows, for example, that:

    - Chronic absenteeism is associated with a number of negative consequences for students, including lower achievement, disengagement from school, course failure, and increased risk of dropping out. Chronic absenteeism disproportionately impacts students of color and students with disabilities.

    - Students who are proficient in reading by the end of third grade are more likely to earn a high school diploma, yet four out of five low-income students miss this early milestone.

    - Students who are on track at the end of ninth grade are nearly three times more likely to graduate high school than students who aren't. Students of color are more likely than their peers to be off-track in ninth grade.

- Yet, many states, districts, and schools do not have systems in place to identify students who are struggling and provide them with the appropriate supports and interventions that research shows can help them get and stay on track. Among these are targeted tutoring, behavioral interventions, wrap-around and mental health services, and family and community engagement.

## Advocacy guide roadmap

This guide offers advocates information and ideas about how to prod their states, districts, and schools to create systems that identify students who are off track and intervene early—and effectively. It suggests:

- **Key questions to ask** about what schools are doing to identify and provide interventions to students who are off track, and what states and districts are doing to provide data and systems that make early identification and intervention possible. The guide also offers tips on things to look for — and watch out for — in their answers.

- **Examples** of states and districts that are rising to the challenge, implementing promising strategies to identify and support students who are off track.

- Ways that advocates can **use ESSA** to compel state, district, and school leaders to focus on early warning systems and interventions.

- **Additional resources** for advocates to learn more.

> ### KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT ANY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INTERVENTION
>
> 1. What interventions has the school tried in the past and what were the results?
>
> 2. Why does the district or school think the proposed intervention will work?
>
> 3. How will the district or school plan for and implement the intervention?
>
> 4. How will district or school leaders know if this approach is working?
>
> 5. What will district or school leaders do if it doesn't work, and when?

**1.** What information will the state or district provide schools to help identify students who need support as early as possible?

**Look for:**

- The state or district to provide schools with a data system that uses routinely collected, research-based indicators to identify students who need additional attention to get and stay on track.

- At minimum, indicators should include academic performance (students' grades and test results), absences, and behavioral infractions (such as disciplinary referrals).

  - Specific indicators may differ by grade level

  - For English learners, an early warning system should include progress toward English proficiency as an indicator

- The system should automatically generate frequent (ideally, weekly) reports that flag students who are off-track and why they were identified.

- Parents should have access to their student(s)' attendance, grades, and disciplinary incidents so they are aware of and can intervene proactively.

**Watch out for:**

- No early warning system or no information on whether current tools have been used successfully

- Data that are not available to district and school leaders or data systems that do not automatically notify educators when students are off track

- Indicators that are not evidence-based

**2.** What will the state or district do to develop district leaders, principals, and school leaders to effectively identify and support struggling students?

**Look for:**

- State- or district-wide professional development for principals and student support teams with clear objectives, processes, monitoring tools, and training on both importing/entering data, understanding data, *and* acting on it

- State- or district-wide professional development on selecting appropriate interventions

- Regular coaching to support school leaders in the beginning stages of implementation of the early warning systems and interventions

**Watch out for:**

- States or districts that do not support school leaders in their implementation of early identification and interventions

**3.** **How will the district identify and fund appropriate interventions to best address the needs of students?**

**Look for:**

*The district to fund:*

- Evidence-based interventions that are chosen based on input from school leaders.

- [Professional development](#) for educators to implement the interventions.

- Dedicated support staff, including district case managers, to help coordinate supports for students as well as full-time school counselors and other social-emotional and mental health professionals at each school who can support these efforts.

- For schools that are **low-performing overall**, clear decision rules in place about when district staff should provide more intensive supports.

**Watch out for:**

*Districts that do not:*

- Provide adequate funding for professional development

- Provide adequate funding for appropriate support staff (e.g., [ASCA](#) recommended counselor-student ratio of 250:1)

- Make funding conditional on choosing evidence-based approaches

- Coordinate with other agencies so that the burden falls exclusively on schools

▶ **QUESTIONS TO ASK SCHOOL LEADERS ABOUT**
*early identification and intervention*

**1.** **Who is responsible for identifying students who are in need of support, deciding what supports to provide, and monitoring student progress?**

**Look for:**

- At least one dedicated [team](#) of people with diverse perspectives, skills, and roles, including someone who has a strong understanding of the data and their use, a member of the school leadership team, and a school counselor

- Teachers to proactively identify students in need of additional support, based on interactions in the classroom and knowledge of home environment

**Watch out for:**

- Single-person "teams" or lack of clarity about roles

- Expectation that classroom teachers provide all supports without roles for other staff

**2.** **How will the school monitor data and identify students in need of additional supports and interventions?**

**Look for:**

*The student support team to:*

- Have a [weekly](#) monitoring system that alerts school leaders when a student is showing increases in [off-track](#) behavior or performance

- Meet regularly to discuss interventions for students who are off track

- Alert and engage families when a student is struggling

- Gain additional information by talking to students, families, and school staff

**Watch out for:**

- Infrequent or inconsistent monitoring of student data

- Failure to identify students until they are failing a class or underperforming on standardized tests

**3.** **What will the school do to assign and provide interventions to students based on their needs?**

**Look for:**

*Varying levels of evidence-based interventions that support a rigorous, standards-aligned curriculum and are based on student need, including:*

- Universal supports for all students, such as an engaging school climate and positive relationships with students and families

- Targeted interventions for students who are at risk of falling off track, such as outreach to families, assigning mentors, and providing additional academic support

- Intensive interventions for students who are off track, such as one-on-one tutoring or appropriate social services and community support

**Watch out for:**

- Interventions that do not target the specific needs of students for whom the school is underperforming

- Blaming the students or families, instead of addressing systemic barriers to success

**4.** **How will the school provide social-emotional and physical and mental health supports to mitigate barriers to student success?**

**Look for:**

*A plan to provide these supports to children, including through:*

- Partnerships with national and/or community-based organizations that have a proven record of success, offering systematic, coordinated services to meet students' social-emotional and physical and mental health needs and are held accountable for supporting improvement, or

- A system of referrals to a district case manager who coordinates these services

**Watch out for:**

- No plan to coordinate additional student supports

- School leaders use students' needs as an excuse for their lack of academic progress

**5.** **How will the school examine a student's progress and intervention effectiveness?**

**Look for:**

*The student support team to:*

- Meet regularly to monitor the progress of students receiving interventions

- Have procedures and processes in place for determining when students no longer need intervention or need different interventions

- Establish measurable improvement targets on key indicators (e.g., chronic absenteeism, course grades, suspensions) for students overall and for groups of students and regularly monitor progress

**Watch out for:**

- Schools without any established procedure or timeline for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions for individual students *and* school-wide interventions

## States, districts, and schools that are rising to the challenge

- **Massachusetts** created their Early Warning Indicator System in 2012 to identify students who need additional attention to reach an upcoming academic milestone. Schools are also able to use the system to monitor students and track their responses to interventions throughout the school year.

- In 2007, **Chicago Public Schools** (CPS) implemented an initiative to reduce course failure and chronic absenteeism in the ninth grade. The district introduced a system that allows teachers and school administrators to monitor data on how many first-time freshman are on-track to graduate from high school within four years, and made the percentage of students on-track a part of each school's rating within the district. In 2017, nearly 90 percent of CPS students were on-track for graduation, up more than 28 percent since 2011, and the graduation rate improved three times faster than the national average. CPS also narrowed gaps in rates of freshman on-track between groups of students.

- For many years, Aki Kurose Middle School in **Seattle** has implemented a system to identify, support, and monitor the progress of students in need of academic and social-emotional support. The school has decreased the percentage of students who are chronically absent from 58 percent in 2009 to 40 percent in 2015. Aki Kurose is a Diplomas Now school, where City Year, Communities in Schools, and Talent Development Secondary work together to help students succeed.

## How can advocates use the Every Student Succeeds Act to push district and school leaders to focus on early identification and intervention?

- **Improvement plans:** Under ESSA, schools identified for improvement have to submit an improvement plan with evidence-based interventions. Given the wealth of research that supports early intervention, advocates can call for district and school leaders to include in their plans strategies for identifying students who are off-track and providing them with the appropriate supports. For example, advocates can urge school and district leaders to use chronic absenteeism data that is a part of many states' accountability systems to identify schools that strugge with this key early warning indicator.

- **Funding:** ESSA provides dollars for school improvement, as well as funding for specific student populations: Native students, children of migrant workers, homeless students, and students who have had contact with the juvenile justice or child welfare systems (Titles VI; Title I Part C; Title IX; Title I Part D). Advocates can push state and district leaders to use these federal funding sources, as well as state and local funds, to support early warning and intervention systems. Advocates can also encourage district officials to apply for — and direct to struggling schools — Title IV funds, which can be used to integrate health and social services into schools or provide summer learning and extended day programs.

## Additional Resources

**Attendance Works** is an organization with many valuable resources about chronic absenteeism, its effects on student outcomes, and what schools and districts can do to promote regular attendance.

**The Everyone Graduates Center** shares resources to develop and spread knowledge about how to ensure that students  graduate from high school prepared for college, career, and life.

**The To & Through Project** provides research on the critical milestones in getting students to and through college, and how schools and districts can support students in meeting high school milestones.

**The Freshman On-Track Toolkit** provides schools and districts with valuable information on how to develop educator teams that are focused on research, data, and successful practices to help high school freshmen succeed.