A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR DISTRICTS

Getting Started with
MTSS-Based
Attendance Support

A step-by-step framework to move your district from reactive discipline to proactive, data-driven attendance support — powered by Alongside.

TIER 1	TIER 2	TIER 3
Universal	Targeted	Intensive

alongside

What Is MTSS for Attendance?

A Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) applies a structured, data-driven approach to attendance - moving away from reactive discipline toward proactive support. Students receive interventions matched to their level of need across three tiers.

Tier	Audience	Focus
Tier 1	All students	Universal culture, systems & messaging for every student
Tier 2	At-risk students	Targeted support for early warning signs before problems set in
Tier 3	Chronic / intensive	Individualized intervention for entrenched chronic absenteeism

Key Definition: Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic Absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of the school year - approximately 18 days - regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused. Aligning your team on this definition before launching is essential for consistent data tracking and intervention decisions across buildings.

1 Build Your Attendance Team
Before you do anything else, get the right people in the room.

Your Attendance Team owns the data, coordinates interventions, and tracks progress. Meet at least monthly with clearly defined roles so nothing falls through the cracks.

Role	Primary Responsibility
Building Principal or AP	Provide leadership; ensure the team has time, data access, and decision-making authority
School Counselor / Social Worker	Lead student-level interventions; coordinate family outreach and community referrals
Attendance Secretary / Registrar	Own daily attendance data; flag patterns and manage records consistently
Teacher Representative	Surface classroom-level insights; model welcoming re-entry practices school-wide
District Coordinator	Align strategy across buildings; support resource allocation and cross-school reporting

Key Questions to Answer as a Team

Who owns attendance data at the building level and has access to pull reports?

Who is responsible for contacting families when absences occur?

How will we document, track, and communicate about interventions?

2 Audit Your Attendance Data
You can't build a tiered system without knowing where students stand.

Pull at least one full year of attendance data and segment students into three groups. Look for patterns; are absences clustered on certain days, in grade levels, or among specific populations? This shapes your strategy.

Group	Threshold	Action	Tier
On Track	Absent < 5%	Maintain engagement; celebrate milestones	Tier 1
At Risk	Absent 5–9%	Begin monitoring; initiate family contact	Tier 2
Chronic	Absent 10%+	Formal intervention plan required	Tier 2–3

How Alongside Helps with Early Identification

Alongside's Data Dashboards surface school-wide trends in real time; friendship issues, interpersonal conflict, sleep struggles, and difficulty balancing activities with schoolwork.

This allows school teams to address root causes through skill-building before they escalate into absences.

Students who disclose mandatory reporting concerns often experience concurrent attendance challenges. Alongside enables counselors to monitor these students closely and intervene before patterns become entrenched.

3 Establish Tier 1 Foundations
Universal supports for all students - build the culture first.

Tier 1 is your universal layer - the structures, messaging, and daily practices that signal to every student and family that attendance matters and that the school will notice when someone is missing.

Communicate attendance expectations
Share clear expectations with students and families at the very start of the year

Launch a school-wide awareness campaign
Share attendance data with students monthly so the whole school can track progress together

Train staff on positive daily connection
Every staff member should greet students warmly at arrival each day - it signals they're seen

Create a welcoming re-entry process
Returning students shouldn't feel behind or embarrassed - a warm welcome back matters

Establish a Day 1 / Day 3 outreach protocol
Consistent family contact after the first and third absence shows students are noticed and valued

Celebrate attendance milestones
Recognize individual and classroom-level wins to build a positive, attendance-forward culture

Alongside in Action — Tier 1 Partner Spotlight

A high school partner in New Mexico introduces Alongside during back-to-school onboarding, guiding all students through scripted prompts to practice together.

This normalizes the platform so students feel comfortable opening up about sensitive topics when it matters; surfacing stress, conflict, or family challenges before they become barriers to showing up.

Build Tier 2 Supports

4

Targeted intervention for students showing early warning signs.

Key principle: Identify barriers first. Absences are often symptoms; transportation, bullying, mental health, housing instability, or work obligations are common root causes. Interventions work best when matched to the actual barrier.

Check-In/Check-Out (CICO)
A brief, structured daily touchpoint with a trusted adult - shown to improve attendance and engagement

Attendance Contracts
Co-created with the student and family; establishes shared goals, accountability, and support steps

Mentorship Pairing
Match at-risk students with a supportive staff member who proactively checks in throughout the week

Small Group Skill-Building
Targeted groups addressing anxiety management, boundary-setting, peer conflict, or social skills

Family Outreach Calls
Problem-solving focused - lead with "We want to help" not "Your student is absent again"

How Alongside partners with counselors to help Tier 2 students

Counselors complement small groups by having students set goals, share chats, watch videos, or journal inside Alongside between sessions. A group working on boundary-setting can be assigned skills from the Speaking Up and Setting Boundaries collection, watch a related video during group, and journal independently - providing a safe, structured space with appropriate guardrails. Visit alongside.care/partner-tips-toolkits to learn more.

5 Design Tier 3 Supports

Intensive, individualized intervention for entrenched chronic absenteeism

Tier 3 is reserved for students who haven't responded to Tier 1 or 2 supports. These students need coordinated, cross-agency support and a formal plan that all stakeholders work from together.

Formal Student Support Team (SST) Meeting
Convene a structured meeting with family, school staff, and community partners to co-develop a plan

Individualized Attendance Improvement Plan (AIP)
Document specific goals, identified barriers, assigned supports, and a clear review timeline

Community Partner Coordination
Engage mental healtha gencies, housing support, and transportation services as needed

School Social Worker / Case Manager Referral
A district-level specialist who can conduct homevisits, navigate systems, and provide case management

Home Visits
Where appropriate and permitted, direct outreach can surface barriers not visible from school

Remember: Tier 3 is not a destination - it's a temporary intensive phase. The goal is always to move students back toward Tier 2 and eventually Tier 1 as attendance stabilizes. Exhaust Tier 1 and Tier 2 options before escalating to this level of support.

6 Set Up Your Data Review Cycle

MTSS only works if data is reviewed regularly and drives decisions.

Build a sustainable review rhythm that keeps attendance visible at every level of your organization. Without a regular cadence, students fall through the cracks between interventions.

Frequency	Who	Agenda Items
Weekly	Building attendance team	Flag new at-risk students; review Tier 2 check-in data; update intervention logs
Monthly	School leadership team	Review school-wide trends; assess Tier 1 effectiveness; adjust messaging campaigns
Quarterly	District leadership	Cross-school comparison; identify patterns across buildings; reallocate resources as needed

Alongside Data in Your Review Cycle

Alongside's dashboards can serve as a standing agenda item in your monthly leadership review. Trend data on student-reported concerns (social conflict, sleep, academic stress) helps leadership understand the why behind absence patterns and directs Tier 1 programming accordingly.

For Tier 2 students, counselors can review shared chat activity and skill completion data in Alongside to assess engagement between sessions and adjust supports in real time.

7 Engage Families as Partners

Family engagement is one of the strongest evidence-based drivers of attendance improvement.

Research is clear: when families understand why attendance matters and feel supported rather than judged, students show up more. Approach every family interaction with curiosity and care - not compliance and consequences.

Lead with care, not compliance
"We miss your student" vs. "Your student has violated policy" - the framing changes everything

Offer multiple communication channels
Phone, text, email, and in-person options ensure families can respond in whatever way works for them

Host a Family Attendance Night
Share attendance data transparently and invite families to co-create solutions with the school team

Proactive community referrals
Connect families to transportation, food, housing, and mental health resources before crisis hits

Day 1 / Day 3 absence protocol
A consistent early-contact protocol shows families the school is paying attention and genuinely cares

Tip: When families are resistant or unresponsive, resist the urge to escalate to punitive measures. Instead ask: What barrier is preventing this family from engaging? Transportation, work schedules, language access, or past negative experiences with schools are common, and addressable, obstacles.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

Jumping to Tier 3 too fast
Exhaust Tier 1 and 2 supports first as many students respond to lighter-touch interventions when implemented consistently.

Tracking only unexcused absences
Excused absences count toward chronic absenteeism too. A student missing school weekly for illness is equally at-risk.

Working in silos
Attendance is a whole-school issue, not just one person's job. Counselors, teachers, and admins must all coordinate.

Punitive responses
Fines, suspensions, and threats rarely improve attendance and often worsen outcomes for students who are already struggling.

No feedback loop
If interventions aren't tracked, you can't know what's working. Build documentation into your process from day one.

Quick-Start Checklist

	Attendance team identified with defined roles, meeting on a regular schedule
	Baseline data pulled; students segmented into On Track / At Risk / Chronic
	Tier 1 Expectations and messaging communicated to all students and families
	Day 1 / Day 3 absence outreach protocol established and staff trained
	Tier 2 CICO or structured check-in process launched for at-risk students
	Data review schedule established at both building and district level
	Staff trained on welcoming, non-punitive re-entry practices

Ready to Build a Smarter Attendance System?

Alongside helps districts move from reactive responses to proactive, tiered support - with data dashboards, student tools, and counselor resources to make MTSS work in practice.

Data Dashboards

Track wellbeing trends and surface early warning signals school-wide

Tiered Student Tools

Skill-building, journaling & check-ins for all students

Family & Staff

Support Resources to strengthen school-family communication and counselor capacity

alongside.care

Visit our resource library or connect with your Alongside partner success team to get started.