

A Multidimensional, Multi-tiered System of Supports Model to Promote School Attendance and Address School Absenteeism

- [Christopher A. Kearney](#) &
- [Patricia A. Graczyk](#)

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Abstract

School attendance and school completion are important benchmarks of successful development. Unfortunately, school absenteeism and school dropout remain debilitating and prevalent conditions among youth. Stakeholders invested in promoting school attendance and reducing school absenteeism generally agree that multifaceted ecological frameworks are needed to account for these heterogeneous problems as well as differences across local education agencies and broader jurisdictions. A multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework emphasizes many aspects that match well with school attendance and its problems, including prevention and a continuum of supports, screening, evidence-based assessment and intervention, problem-solving and data-based decision-making, implementation fidelity, and natural embedding into extant school improvement plans. This article outlines a multidimensional MTSS model for school attendance and absenteeism to account for recent developments regarding service delivery within schools. Such developments include integrated models of multi-tiered service delivery to concurrently address multiple domains of functioning, the development of more nuanced approaches for students with various challenges, and consideration of three-dimensional (pyramidal) perspectives to allow simultaneous and yet nuanced strategies for several domain clusters. Sample domain clusters common to the literature that could populate the multiple dimensions or sides of a MTSS pyramid model for school attendance and absenteeism are presented. These domain clusters include (1) school refusal/truancy/school withdrawal/school exclusion, (2) functional profiles and analysis, (3) preschool/elementary/middle/high school, (4) ecological levels of impact on school attendance and its problems, and (5) low/moderate/high absenteeism severity. Recommendations are made as well regarding broader MTSS integration and implementation science vis-à-vis school attendance and its problems.

Research methodology / Data Collection methods

The paper discusses how the MTSS (Multi-tiered System of Supports) pyramid model is a practical and effective model to support the implementation and integration of nuanced interventions and systems to improve school attendance and ameliorate absenteeism. Domain clusters are ways to categorise school attendance problems using themes that frequent the literature. The report details different ways that a multi-dimensional MTSS model could be applied to each of the domain clusters, giving referenced research-backed examples of intervention strategies within each domain and across each tier.

Key relevant findings

Tier 1 of the MTSS model largely focuses on universal, school-wide practices and primary prevention strategies to promote adaptive behaviour (e.g. successful academic achievement, social-emotional competencies, engaged classroom behaviour) and to deter maladaptive behaviour that can lead to school absenteeism. Generally, Tier 1 interventions include those designed to improve school climate, physical and mental health, social and emotional competencies, parental involvement, academic readiness, and cultural responsiveness. As part of Tier 1, the report recommends universal data screening to assess and predict school attendance problems (standardized test results, discipline referrals, behaviour questionnaires). The paper recommends using the model below, a spectrum of school attendance problems, to identify the severity of absenteeism. The report also advocates

early warning systems to prevent school absence problems.

Tier 2 interventions are designed to target emerging individual cases of school absenteeism, or those of mild/moderate absence severity. These include interventions designs to improve family functioning, including psychological therapy approaches linked to emotional distress, student engagement approaches and teacher/peer/other person-based mentoring programmes.

Tier 3 interventions include those designed to address individual cases of chronic and severe absence, through a multi-agency approach. Such interventions include expanded Tier 2 therapies, alternative education programmes and family involvement strategies. Kearney et al. recommend the introduction of a Tier 4 to include very intensive interventions for youth with psychopathology, which may involve a blend between education and inpatient/residential facilities.

Domain cluster 1 - The paper defines and explains different types of absenteeism.

School refusal – reluctance to attend due to emotional distress, child-initiated

Truancy – related to behaviour, illegal absenteeism, child-initiated

School withdrawal – parent-initiated, often withdrawn for economic/caregiving purposes

School exclusion – disciplinary reasons, school-initiated

Common interventions mainly include cognitive-behavioural-oriented practices, which address internalising and externalising behaviour problems, and family interventions such as parenting skills training and family therapy.

Domain cluster 2 - functional profiles and analysis (what are the motivating factors of a child's absenteeism?)

As outlined in the report, a common functional profile is based on the motivating conditions of child's absenteeism. An example of this was developed by Kearney et al. who referred to the following aspects.

- 1) Avoid school-based stimuli that provoke a general sense of negativity or anxiousness
- 2) Escape aversive social and/or evaluative situations at school
- 3) Seek attention from significant others
- 4) Pursue tangible rewards outside school

The report recommends that these factors should be considered at each tier to adopt preventative, targeted and nuanced interventions and provides research-backed examples of these.

Other domain cluster options:

Domain cluster 3 – preschool, elementary, middle and high school

Domain cluster 4 - ecological levels of impact on school attendance and its problems

Domain cluster 5 - low/ moderate/ high absenteeism severity