

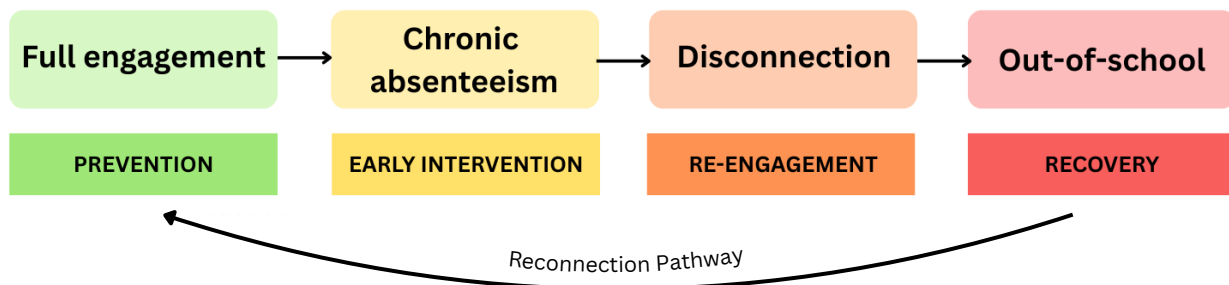
THE DISCONNECTION TO RECONNECTION SPECTRUM

INTERVENTIONS TO SUPPORT YOUTH AT EVERY STAGE

A Framework for Student Engagement & Re-engagement

Effective student engagement requires a proactive, multi-layered approach. This brief organizes evidence-based strategies across the Disconnection to Reconnection Spectrum — Prevention, Early Intervention, Re-Engagement and Recovery— each targeting students at different points along the engagement spectrum.

THE DISCONNECTION TO RECONNECTION SPECTRUM



STAGE 1

Universally applied
to all students

PREVENTION: Building Engagement Before Problems Arise

KEY INSIGHT

A single stable, caring adult relationship at school is the most consistent protective factor against disengagement — more powerful than any program or formal intervention alone.

Prevention strategies are proactive and relational, not reactive and transactional. Fully engaged students don't raise flags — which is exactly why prevention is easy to deprioritize and essential not to. Several key prevention strategies are outlined below.

Relationship Infrastructure

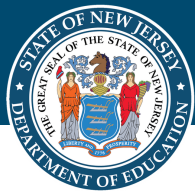
The structural goal is ensuring every student has at least one adult who genuinely knows them:

- **Advisory or homeroom models:** one teacher maintains consistent contact with the same small group across a year or more
- **Looping:** teachers stay with the same cohort across grade levels
- **Adult Advocates:** Caring adults who form a web of support for students who are struggling and support, engage, listen to, advise and motivate students as they overcome barriers and successfully complete K-12 education.
- **Connection audits:** staff periodically identify every student they have a genuine relationship with, then flag anyone not named by anyone.

Pathway Development Pathways for college, career and civic readiness are intentional educational structures within a school system that enable students to build agency, identify personal interests, strengths and talents, identify career interests aligned with those strengths and talents and understand the connection between academic learning and future success.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) School-wide SEL — teaching emotion identification, stress management, relationship skills, and conflict navigation — gives students internal coping tools and shapes a school climate where belonging is more possible for more students.





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Academic Relevance & Challenge Students disengage when school is too easy as well as too hard. Prevention includes ensuring students are genuinely challenged, can see relevance to their own lives, and have some agency in how they demonstrate learning. Contextual learning is also a form of prevention. Contextual learning provides students with opportunities to make connections between knowledge and its applications to their lives as family members, citizens, and workers. Contextual learning includes but is not limited to service-learning, work-based learning, project-based learning and capstone projects.

Mentoring Programs Formal mentoring has strong evidence, particularly for students lacking stable adult relationships outside school. Effective mentoring is:

- Long-term (at least one year): relationships ending before six months can cause harm if the student experiences the ending as abandonment
- Structured but not overly scripted, centered on the student's own interests and goals
- Peer mentoring (older students paired with younger ones) builds belonging on both sides at lower cost

Enrichment & Extracurriculars Students involved in at least one club, sport, or arts program have significantly better attendance and graduation rates. The mechanism is straightforward: activities give students a reason to show up, a peer identity, and an adult who notices absence.

Equity note: enrichment participation drops sharply for students who work, have caregiving duties, or face fees. Active recruitment, fee waivers, and flexible scheduling are necessary.

Family Engagement Effective family engagement builds relationships before problems arise, not just at crisis points:

- Communicate in families' home languages through their preferred channels
- Invite families as partners, not just recipients of information
- Understand family context: work schedules, prior school experiences, cultural expectations
- Strong family relationships create faster early-warning signals, because families feel safe reaching out

Monitoring for Drift Gradual disengagement (or "drift") often precedes visible warning signs of disconnection. Prevention still requires watching for early signals. Effective schools build in low-stakes, regular check-ins: brief well-being surveys, teacher check-ins, and attendance patterns reviewed weekly rather than at semester's end.

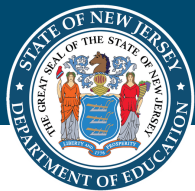
STAGE 2

Targeted: 3–8
absences

EARLY INTERVENTION: Acting Before Patterns Solidify

The focus of Early Intervention shifts from detection to outreach – responding to issues before they deepen. Early intervention is most effective at 5–8 absences — not 18. By the time a student crosses the chronic absenteeism threshold, habits, barriers, and disconnection are significantly harder to address. All effective interventions share a design principle: they lead with curiosity and care, not consequences.





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STAGE 2

Targeted: 3–8
absences

EARLY INTERVENTION: Acting Before Patterns Solidify

KEY INSIGHT

Automated robocalls and form letters have very little effect. Human contact — by someone the family already knows — is what opens doors.

Sample Tiered Outreach Cadence

- **3 absences:** teacher or advisor makes personal contact
- **5 absences:** counselor or attendance team reaches out to family
- **8 absences:** meeting convened, a formal plan created, and specific barriers identified

Note: As members of your school community supporting students every day, you know young people and families best. Outreach should be nuanced and based upon your knowledge of students, families and their current experiences; the above is a sample of what tiered outreach could look like.

Attendance Alerts/Data Systems The infrastructure behind early intervention is a real-time attendance monitoring system that flags students at 3, 5, and 8 absences and routes that information to the right person — not just a dean of discipline, but a counselor, social worker, or trusted teacher. The alert is only useful if someone has the time, relationship, and tools to act on it. Schools that invest in the data system without investing in the response capacity see little change.

The Right Outreach Call The first contact sets the tone for everything that follows. Effective outreach:

- Is made by someone the family already knows, not an automated system
- Asks open questions: “Is there anything making it hard to get to school right now?”
- Listens for the real reason, which is often not the stated reason on the first call
- Offers something concrete — a bus pass, schedule adjustment, or counselor meeting — rather than just expressing concern

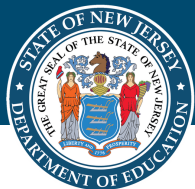
Tailored Interventions Providing universal, targeted and intensive interventions can help schools meet students’ individual academic and social/emotional needs so all students can succeed. The New Jersey Tiered System of Supports (NJTSS) builds on Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) and gives schools structure to meet the academic, behavioral, health, enrichment and social/emotional needs of all students.

Home Visits Among early interventions, home visits have some of the strongest evidence. They signal genuine care, allow staff to see the home context directly (revealing barriers that wouldn’t surface in a call), and build the trust needed for families to ask for help. Effective home visit programs:

- Train staff or community liaisons specifically for this relational role
- Pair visits with tangible support: bus passes, food referrals, community resources
- Treat visits as relationship-building, not enforcement

Attendance Mentors For students in the at-risk range, an attendance mentor — someone whose explicit caseload and metric is whether their students are showing up — can be the decisive factor. This is distinct from a general counselor or teacher: the attendance mentor follows up personally every time someone is absent.





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absences

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High-impact Tutoring Students who are at risk of, or have already disconnected from school may have any increased need for individualized academic supports. Providing expanded access to high-impact tutoring programs can help ensure this population of students receives the support they need outside the classroom, to succeed academically.

Shifting Focus to Career Readiness Based on a young people's needs and expressed interests/postsecondary plan, staff may consider shifting students' academic programming to focus on career readiness. This may include Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways, work-based learning or internships, industry credentialing programs, dual enrollment with community colleges, or individualized graduation plans that count relevant work experience toward credit.

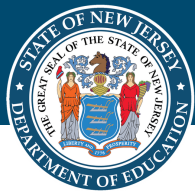
Access to Behavioral Health Supports Behavioral health refers to the social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of all students, including students with mental health needs. Students' behavioral health is intricately connected to academic, social, and emotional success at school.

Barrier Removal Identifying a barrier is not intervention. Removing the barrier is. Common barriers and responses:

BARRIER	RESPONSE
Transportation	Bus passes, carpool coordination, walking school buses for younger students
Health	School-based clinics, telehealth referrals, vision/dental screenings, onsite mental health
Clothing & Supplies	Discreet access to uniform closets, laundry facilities, hygiene supplies
Childcare for Siblings	Connecting families to subsidized care; in some cases bringing younger siblings into programming
Work Conflicts	Adjusted schedules, workforce programs that coordinate with school
Safety Concerns	Safer routes, addressing bullying directly, reviewing school climate as a potential push factor

Avoiding a Punitive Approach Truancy charges, fines, and court referrals consistently either have no effect or make attendance worse. They add stress to already-stressed families and damage the school-family relationship without addressing any underlying barrier. Early intervention done well, makes punitive responses unnecessary.





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STAGE 3

Intensive: for students who have largely withdrawn from school

RE-ENGAGEMENT: Reconnection Deeply Disconnected Students

Showing up without reconnecting to meaning doesn't hold. Re-engagement strategies that address only logistics — getting a student in the building — tend to produce students who re-enroll and then disconnect again.

KEY INSIGHT

Disconnected students are in a qualitatively different situation than chronically absent ones. They have often stopped believing school is for them — not just that it's hard to get there, but that being there doesn't make sense for their life. Re-engagement must address that belief directly, not just the attendance number.

Start with a Genuine Conversation The instinct to immediately build an intervention plan — contracts, schedules, goal-setting — usually backfires at this stage. Students here have often experienced school as a place that processes them rather than sees them. The first priority is a real conversation about what happened, what their life looks like now, and what made school feel impossible.

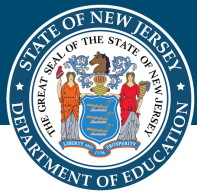
The person having this conversation matters. It should be someone the student already has some trust with, or someone trained in motivational interviewing who can build trust quickly. Sending a disconnected student to an administrator they associate with consequences is almost always counterproductive.

Counseling as Prerequisite Most disconnected students carry something significant — accumulated academic failure, unaddressed mental health challenges, trauma, or family crisis. School-based counseling at this stage is not optional support; it is a prerequisite for re-engagement. A student in active crisis or depression cannot meaningfully engage with academics until there is some stabilization. This requires counselors with manageable caseloads, warm referrals to community mental health with active follow-through (not just a phone number), and trauma-informed approaches throughout the school environment.

Wraparound Support The reason disconnected youth don't re-engage isn't usually that they don't want to. It's that the circumstances that caused them to leave in the first place are still present — often compounded by additional periods of instability. Re-engagement efforts that address only the academic piece while leaving everything else unaddressed do not have high success rates. Effective wraparound support at this stage typically includes:

- **Childcare:** Young parents — disproportionately young mothers — cite childcare as the primary barrier to re-enrollment more often than any other factor. Programs that provide on-site childcare or partner with subsidized childcare providers see dramatically higher enrollment and completion rates among this population.
- **Housing stability:** Youth experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity cannot prioritize education until basic safety is established. Programs serving this population need strong connections to housing resources, and ideally co-locate or closely partner with housing support. The McKinney-Vento Act provides some federal protection for homeless youth's right to educational access, but implementation varies widely.
- **Legal support:** Youth with justice system involvement face specific barriers — fines, probation requirements, records that affect employment eligibility — that interact with re-engagement in complicated ways. Programs that have legal aid partners or staff familiar with these intersections can help young people navigate them rather than being stopped by them.





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- **Mental health and substance use support:** Years of instability, trauma, and disconnection take a toll. Recovery programs that treat mental health support as optional or referral-only rather than embedded tend to lose participants at higher rates. Integrated behavioral health within the program itself — not a separate appointment somewhere else — is a significant predictor of completion.

Credit Recovery One of the most concrete barriers for older disconnected students is the credit gap. When students calculate that catching up to their cohort is mathematically impossible, disengagement becomes rational. Credit recovery creates achievable alternative paths:

- Online or blended programs allowing students to work through courses at their own pace, demonstrating mastery
- Credit for prior learning: work experience, community service, or demonstrated skills for students who have been out of school building real-world competencies
- Competency-based progression: advancing on demonstrated knowledge rather than seat time

Caution: credit recovery works best paired with strong relationship and counseling support, not as a replacement for it. Low-quality programs with minimal human interaction complete credits without restoring belonging.

Flexible Scheduling Disconnected students frequently have responsibilities that aren't going away — jobs, caregiving, court obligations, treatment programs. Re-engagement means meeting students where their lives are:

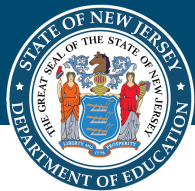
- Block scheduling and late-start options for students with morning work or transportation constraints
- Part-time enrollment as a re-entry point: two or three classes, building toward full enrollment
- Evening and weekend programming through continuation schools or community-based programs
- Hybrid models combining in-person attendance with independent or online work

A student attending two classes is measurably better off than one attending none. Two classes also creates daily human contact that can grow into fuller re-engagement.

Alternative Settings For some students, returning to the school they left is not the right re-entry point. Associations with failure, discipline, or social difficulty make fresh starts difficult. Effective alternatives include:

- Continuation high schools — smaller environments, individualized pacing, staff who have chosen to work with this population
- Community schools co-locating social services, health care, and academics in one place
- Community college dual enrollment — reframing identity from “struggling high schooler” to “someone starting college early”
- Workforce-connected programs integrating academic credit with vocational training, creating a clear line between school and economic opportunity





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Repairing the Relationship with Learning Many disconnected students have a fractured relationship with learning itself, often rooted in years of unaddressed academic struggle. Project-based and experiential learning approaches create a different entry point — one where a student who has repeatedly failed traditional assessments can experience genuine competence and interest. That experience of competence is what makes sustained re-engagement possible.

Persistent, Non-Punitive Outreach Disconnected students rarely re-engage on the first invitation. Effective programs build in regular contact (by someone the student knows) over weeks or months if necessary, that keeps the door open without pressure. The consistent message must be: you are welcome here when you're ready, and we will be here. Students who have experienced institutional rejection are testing whether this institution is different. The outreach cadence is part of the answer.

STAGE 4

Intensive: for out-of-school youth, typically ages 16–24

RECOVERY: Re-Connecting Out-of-School Youth to Learning & Opportunity

KEY INSIGHT

Recovery programs that address only the academic piece — getting the student enrolled, getting them credits — without addressing the circumstances that caused them to leave tend to produce students who re-enroll and then disconnect again. The goal is not just re-enrollment; it is sustained connection.

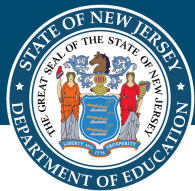
Out-of-school youth represent the furthest point on the spectrum, and the strategies that work here look quite different from anything earlier. By this stage, school has often become associated with failure, exclusion, or simply irrelevance to the life the young person is actually living.

Recovery isn't about getting someone back into the system they left. It requires building a new relationship with learning and credentialing that fits where they are now — and acknowledging that most out-of-school youth are not simply waiting to be invited back.

Who We're Talking About Out-of-school youth are not a monolithic group. Effective recovery strategies require recognizing who is in the population. It typically includes:

- Young people who aged out of the traditional system without graduating — often called opportunity youth or disconnected youth, typically ages 16–24
- Students pushed out through disciplinary processes: suspensions, expulsions, or a school climate so hostile that leaving felt like the only option
- Young parents, particularly mothers, for whom childcare was an insurmountable barrier
- Youth involved in the justice system, either currently or recently
- Young people who left to work, and whose economic circumstances have not changed
- Students with unidentified or unaddressed learning disabilities who were failed by the system before they left it.





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RECOVERY: Re-Connecting Out-of-School Youth to Learning & Opportunity

The right entry point and program vary significantly depending on experience. A 17-year-old who left six months ago needs different support than a 22-year-old who has been out since sophomore year.

Enrollment Outreach Most out-of-school youth do not re-engage because someone sent them a letter or posted a flyer. They re-engage because a person they trusted told them about an option that sounded achievable — and in many cases went with them to find out more. Effective outreach is:

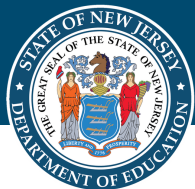
- **Relational and community-based:** the most effective outreach workers are often people with lived experience of disconnection — peer navigators who can speak credibly about what re-engagement looked like for them. Formal school recruiters from institutions young people associate with failure tend to produce low uptake.
- **Present where young people are:** community centers, barbershops, laundromats, social service offices, food banks, and trusted community organizations — not primarily schools or official channels. Text and social media outperform letters and phone calls for this age group.
- **Concrete about what's on offer:** a specific, honest description of a pathway — how long it takes, what support exists, what credential they'll earn, and what that credential opens up. Young people who have been burned by institutional promises need specificity, not marketing.
- **Persistent without pressure:** outreach for out-of-school youth often requires multiple contacts over time. The first conversation plants a seed; the second or third is where trust begins to build.

Community Referrals & Navigation Out-of-school youth are often navigating multiple systems simultaneously — workforce, housing, public benefits, justice, child welfare — none of which communicate with each other well. One of the most valuable things a recovery program can offer is a navigator: someone whose job is to help a young person understand what they're eligible for, connect them to it, and follow through to make sure the connection held. This is distinct from a case manager. A navigator is an advocate and guide who helps young people exercise agency within systems designed to be confusing. Programs connected to networks of community resources tend to see better outcomes than those providing academic support in isolation.

Employer Partnerships For many out-of-school youth, the most motivating thing a recovery program can offer is a direct line to employment. Partnerships with local employers who co-design training programs or agree to consider program graduates create a pull factor that abstract credentials cannot match.

- Sector-based training models — healthcare, technology, skilled trades — connected directly to employer pipelines are among the most effective interventions for older out-of-school youth in both completion rates and long-term economic outcomes.
- Paid work experiences and internships embedded in program design provide income support while reinforcing why the academic work matters.
- Employer agreements to consider program graduates signal to young people that the credential they are working toward has tangible value.





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AT A GLANCE: FRAMEWORK SUMMARY

	STAGE 1 Prevention	STAGE 2 Early Intervention	STAGE 3 Re-Engagement	STAGE 4 Recovery
Target Population	All students	Students with 3-8 absences	Students largely withdrawn from school	Out-of-school youth, ages 16-24
Primary Goal	Build belonging & protective factors	Remove barriers; restore attendance	Rebuild connection to learning & identity	Build new relationship with learning & credentialing
Lead Mechanism	Relationships & structures	Outreach, barrier removal, mentoring	Counseling, flexible pathways, trust	Navigation, peer outreach, wraparound support
Key Risk to Avoid	Deprioritizing prevention when students look fine	Acting too late or leading with consequences	Addressing logistics without addressing meaning	Re-enrolling without addressing underlying circumstances
Core Evidence Base	SEL, mentoring, extracurriculars, family engagement	Home visits, tiered outreach, barrier removal	Counseling, credit recovery, alternative settings, wraparound support	Community outreach, alternative settings, employer pipelines, wraparound support

Key Finding for Young People

The research on student engagement is consistent: the students who stay — and those who return — can almost always name a specific person at the school, a counselor, a navigator, a peer, who believed in them consistently enough that they started to believe it themselves. These strategies create the conditions for that relationship to exist. The relationship itself is what does the work.

