# Case Study: Launching Wapato's Attendance Improvement Journey

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## Executive Summary

The Wapato School District has recently initiated a series of strategic moves to increase student attendance, particularly on data-based decision-making and equitable support for traditionally marginalized students. They are organizing as a district to develop a tiered attendance monitoring system, marking a significant step towards targeted intervention, with a Tier 1 focus paving the way for a district-wide attendance continuum of support. Innovative steps being undertaken include (1) The use of accessible visual data to inform all staff meetings and tier 1 decision-making. (2) The establishment of a "no shame, no blame" ethos to promote a constructive dialogue around attendance issues. (3) They are positioned for tier 1 Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles to refine and improve universal attendance strategies on a continuous basis. Although still in the early stages, the district is setting ambitious SMARTIE goals, aiming for over a 10% annual increase in attendance rates. These initial efforts, particularly the focus on tier 1 data integration, position the district as a model for scalable and sustainable improvements in student attendance.

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# The Students of Wapato School District

Within Yakima County in central Washington, the Wapato School District operates primarily on the Yakama Indian Reservation, serving a student body of approximately 3,100. With a dynamic cultural composition, the five primary ethnic groups present in the Wapato School District include a predominant Hispanic/Latinx majority at 75.6%, a significant American Indian/Alaska Native community comprising 18.3%. followed by smaller percentages of Asian (1.8%), White (1.9%), and those identifying with Two or More Races (2.0%).[1] All students benefit from the free-reduced lunch

program, highlighting the district's support for its community. Wapato's educational structure includes four elementary schools, a middle school, a high school, and an alternative high school.

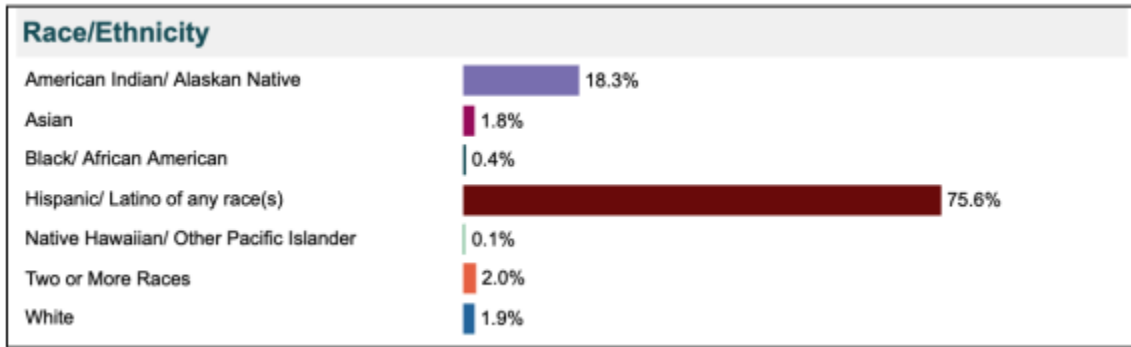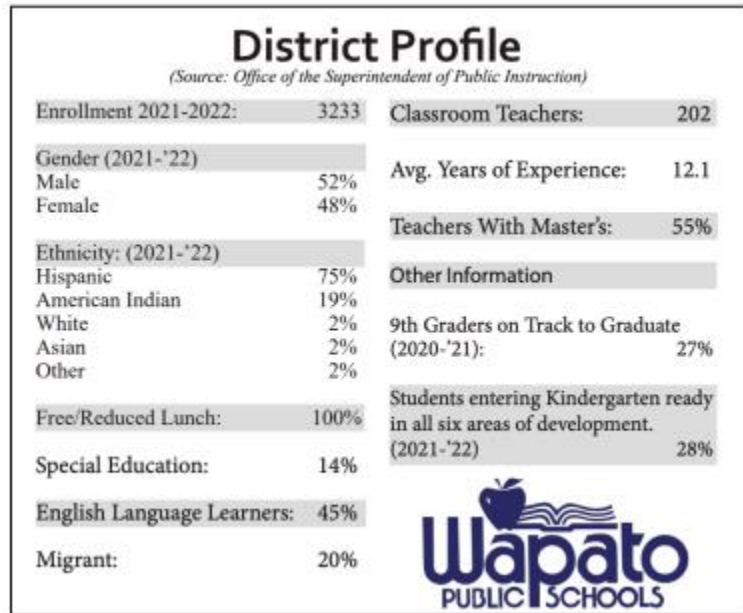Figure 1 Wapato School District Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity



Figure 2 Wapato School District Website Profile

## About Wapato School District's Historical Regular Attendance

Figure 2 Wapato School District Regular Attendance Rate Historical Trends

## Wapato School District

### All Students

### Gender

### Federal Race/Ethnicity
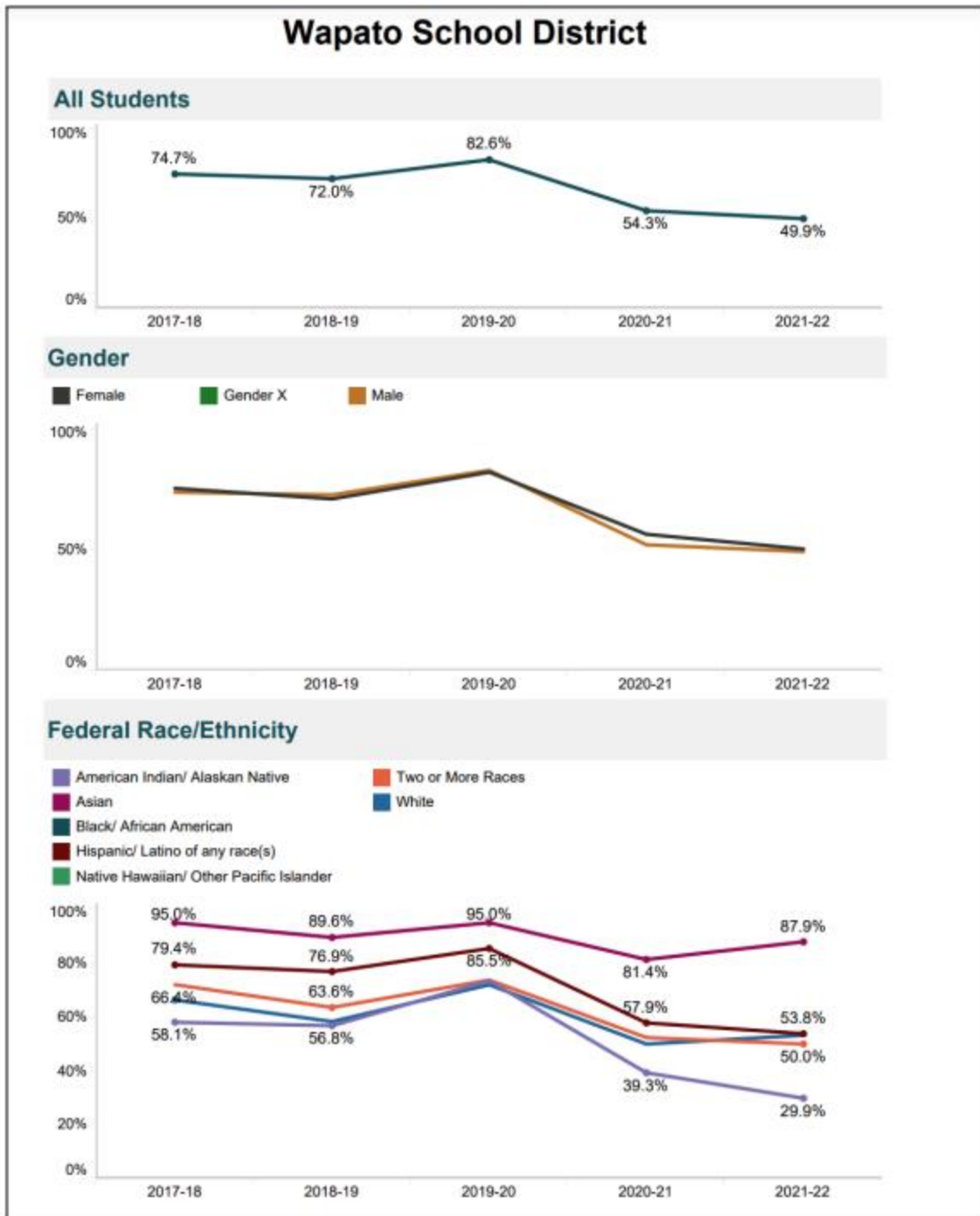
Note: OSPI Report Card regular attendance data from the "trend" tab.[2]

[2] https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/100284

# Case Study: Wapato School District's Initial Steps

## Towards Attendance Improvement

# Introduction

The Wapato School District in Washington State recently embarked on a strategic, district-wide initiative to improve student attendance. At the outset of their journey, the focus has been on laying the groundwork for effective, data-based decision-making. This case study examines their initial steps in establishing an attendance improvement strategy.



Laying the Foundations

## Step 1: Understanding Regular Attendance Trends

The district's first action included gathering district-wide attendance leaders, from principals to office staff, to analyze their historical OSPI Regular Attendance Rates. The team clarified attendance terms like "regular attendance", "average daily attendance, " and "chronic absenteeism". This initial data highlighted a critical need for improvement, with the district's attendance rates notably lower than the state average.

- **Regular Attendance:** Defined by fewer than two absences monthly, regardless of the reason. An absence is noted when a student misses half or more of the school day. This criterion considers students enrolled for at least 90 days in a school.
- **Average Daily Attendance:** Not a recommended metric for enhancing regular attendance rates, i.e., reducing chronic absenteeism.
- **Chronic Absenteeism:** Indicates a requirement for improving regular attendance. It represents an average of more than two absences monthly, regardless of their nature. This measure pertains to students enrolled for a minimum of 90 days.

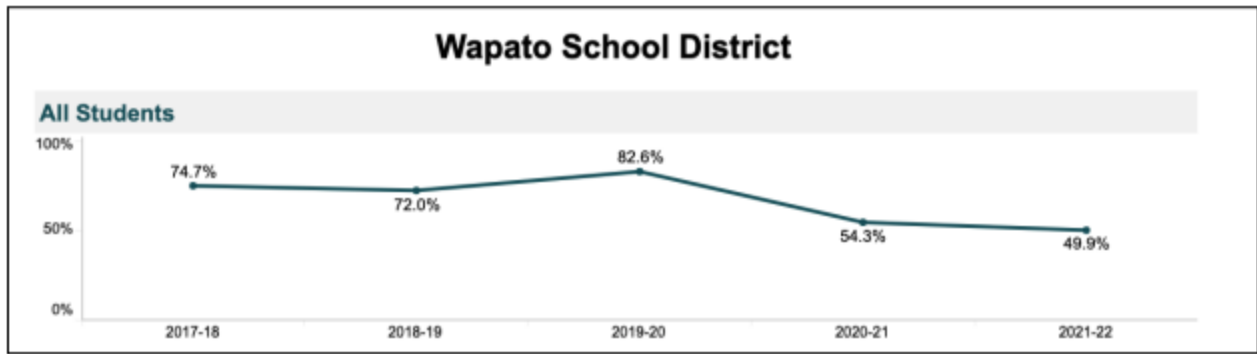Figure 3 Wapato School District Regular Attendance Rate Historical Trends

**Wapato School District**

**All Students**

Table 1 Wapato School District Regular Attendance Rate Historical Trends

| | 2017/2018 | 2018/2019 | 2019/2020 Sept-Feb COVID data* | 2020/2021 | 2021/2022 | 2022/2023 | 2023/2024 | 2024/2025 | 2025/2026 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **WA STATE** | 84% | 84% | 90% | 81% | 67% | | | | 95% |
| **District** | 74% | 72% | 82% | 54% | 49% | | | | 95% |
| **Adams Elem** | 76% | 80% | 89% | 53% | 51% | | | | 95% |
| **Camas Elem** | 77% | 73% | 85% | 43% | 44% | | | | 95% |
| **Status Elem** | 80% | 77% | 87% | 50% | 54% | Released Winter 2023 | | | 95% |
| **Simcoe Elem** | NA | 73% | 83% | 41% | 33% | | | | 95% |
| **Wapato MS** | 78% | 75% | 85% | 94% | 60% | | | | 95% |
| **Wapato HS** | 69% | 66% | 77% | 32% | 48% | | | | 95% |
| **PACE Alt HS** | 19% | 15% | 39% | 20% | 21% | | | | 95% |

Note that 2019-2020 data was taken Sept-Feb only causing data inflation.

# Step 2: Identifying Students in the Margins

The district identified two subgroups with the lowest regular attendance: American Indian/AK Native and Students with Disabilities. This early identification is crucial for tailoring subsequent interventions and ensuring resources are allocated to support students who have been historically marginalized within the public school system.

Table 2 Wapato School District Marginalized Subgroups with Historically Low Regular Attendance Rates

| | Subgroup #1 | Subgroup #2 |
|---|---|---|
| **District** | American Indian/AK Native | Students w/ Disabilities |
| **Adams Elem** | American Indian/AK Native | Students w/ Disabilities |
| **Camas Elem** | American Indian/AK Native | Students w/ Disabilities/White/Low-Income |
| **Status Elem** | American Indian/AK Native | Students w/ Disabilities |
| **Simcoe Elem** | American Indian/AK Native | Students w/ Disabilities |
| **Wapato MS** | American Indian/AK Native | Students w/ Disabilities/White |
| **Wapato HS** | American Indian/AK Native | Students w/ Disabilities |
| **PACE Alt HS** | American Indian/AK Native | White |

Note: Subgroup data comes from the 2022 WSIF Regular Attendance Rate in the "Detail" tab

# Step 3: Setting Preliminary SMARTIE Goals

The data from the OSPI Report Card revealed fluctuations and gaps in attendance rates across various schools and subgroups from 2017 to 2026, underscoring the need for preliminary goals aiming for over 10% annual improvements in attendance. This ambitious yet essential target is not merely a numeric aspiration; it's a commitment to addressing the underlying issues that have historically impacted student attendance. By eventually integrating these goals into each school's School Improvement Plans, the district ensures a cohesive approach that aligns resources, strategies, and monitoring mechanisms toward achieving these critical objectives. The SMARTIE Goals framework, emphasizing student outcomes and process measures, offers a structured and strategic approach to systematically address and improve attendance rates, particularly focusing on equity for American Indian/AK Native students and Students with Disabilities.

The SMARTIE Goals encompass student outcome and process measures to track and ensure progress toward the stated objectives. The template provides a structured approach to document the goals, objectives, and measurement strategies for improving attendance rates in the Wapato School District, focusing on equity for specific student groups.

**Template: Wapato School District AND Building Attendance SMARTIE Goals**

**Equitable District Attendance Goal:**
- Objective: Increase regular attendance rates (or decrease chronic absenteeism) from
    - [*Current Rate*] to [*Target Rate*] for American Indian/AK Native students and
    - from [*Current Rate*] to [*Target Rate*] for Students with Disabilities,
    - and finally, from [*Current Rate*] to [*Target Rate*] for all students by June 2026.

- **Measurement Tools:** Weekly, monthly, and quarterly school attendance rate checks using [*Skyward, Q, SDS/Homeroom, TDPS, Panorama, Educlimber, etc.*].

- **Additional Metrics:** Quarterly Tier 1 Attendance System Self-Assessment

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**Equitable District Attendance Goal:**
Our [District] goal is to decrease chronic absenteeism from [*Current Rate*] to [*Target Rate*] for American Indian/AK Native students and from [*Current Rate*] to [*Target Rate*] for Students with Disabilities, and finally from [*Current Rate*] to [*Target Rate*] for all students by June 2026. This improvement will be measured by weekly, monthly, and quarterly subgroup and school-wide attendance rate checks, quarterly Tier 1 Attendance System Self-Assessment checks, and quarterly student and staff empathy interviews.

# Initial Phase of Data-Based Decision-Making for Teams

## The AIM

The primary goal of the data-based decision-making phase is to leverage visual data and data mining to create a culture of inquiry and increase attendance. This effort is not just about collecting data but about creating a robust focus on tier 1 data and transforming insights into actionable plans that elevate attendance rates across the district. Most recently, the district attendance team met to determine the relevant Tier 1-3 data they would use to inform team decision-making. This involved:

1. **Selecting Appropriate Visual Data to Drive Tier 1, All-Staff Decisions:**
   - The district-wide team met to learn about the days-of-the-week and period-by-period visual data everyone can access in their student information systems. District leaders modeled how to pullup one bar graph with the staff each month and run monthly PDSA cycles with them.



   - The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle is a systematic series of steps for continually gaining valuable learning and knowledge to improve a process or product. By continuously cycling through these phases, schools can refine their attendance strategies, making incremental improvements informed by real-world results. This evidence-based approach ensures that strategies are effective and resource-efficient before being fully implemented.

## 2. Data Mining Tier 2 and 3 Student Groups and Individual Student Lists

o In addition, the district leaders modeled how to pull tier 2 and tier 3 chronic absenteeism student lists with race/ethnicity included so staff could continue to center their efforts on the students in the margins (AI/AK Native and SWD).
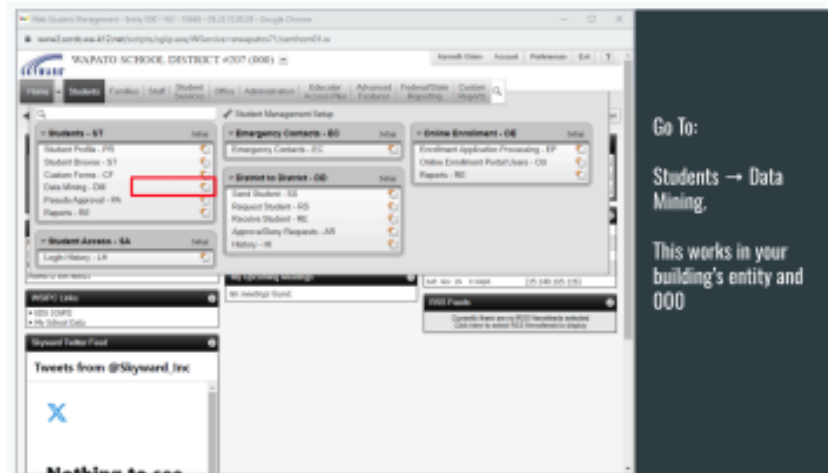


o **Tier 2 Data Mining:**
  - This involves identifying students who are at risk of becoming chronically absent. By analyzing patterns in attendance data, the school can pinpoint students who have begun to show a decline in attendance but are not yet chronically absent.
  - In this tier, race, and ethnicity data are used to ensure interventions are equitable and that students from historically marginalized groups receive the necessary support. For example, if American Indian/AK Native students are showing higher absenteeism trends, schools may develop culturally responsive strategies to engage these students and their families.

o **Tier 3 Data Mining:**
  - Tier 3 focuses on students who are chronically absent. Data mining at this level is more intensive, often involving case studies and individual student profiles.
  - Including race/ethnicity data allows the school to delve deeper into the systemic factors that may contribute to absenteeism within specific demographics. For instance, the district might find that Students with Disabilities (SWD) require more tailored resources to address their unique challenges related to attendance. By incorporating race/ethnicity information into the data mining process for Tier 2 and Tier 3, the district can:

- Develop targeted interventions that address specific challenges faced by marginalized groups.
- Monitor the effectiveness of strategies for different racial and ethnic groups to ensure that the support provided leads to improved attendance.
- Create an inclusive environment where the diverse needs of all students are recognized and met with appropriate and effective strategies.

This focus on students 'in the margins' ensures that efforts to combat absenteeism are widespread and specifically honed to support those who might otherwise be overlooked. It is a commitment to equity, recognizing that attendance is not just a number but a reflection of the complex interplay of societal, community, and individual factors.
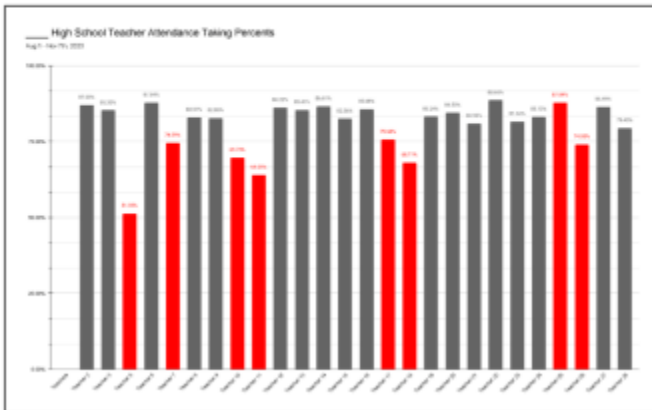
## 3. Staff Attendance Taking and Data Input

- The district-wide attendance team discussed ways to help staff understand the importance of taking attendance consistently so that the Tier 1, 2, and 3 teams had reliable and valid data for decision-making. The district leaders modeled ways to use a "no shame, no blame" approach and a more positive and supportive approach to improving attendance.
  - The "no shame, no blame" approach fosters a culture of inquiry that focuses on understanding and addressing the factors contributing to attendance issues rather than assigning fault. This perspective is rooted in the belief that most educators and students want to succeed and that barriers to regular attendance are challenges to be solved rather than offenses to be punished.
  - **Culture of Inquiry**: In a culture of inquiry, staff are encouraged to ask questions and engage in open dialogue about attendance patterns. The goal is to explore the reasons behind absenteeism and develop solutions collaboratively. This approach promotes a sense of collective responsibility. Instead of pointing fingers when attendance rates are low; the team examines systemic factors, personal circumstances, and school practices that might impact student attendance.

# Problem: Tier 1 Attendance Data is Unreliable or Invalid
## Change Idea: Staff Video Helping Staff with Humor!



# Problem: Tier 1 Attendance Data is Unreliable or Invalid
## Change Idea: Rate of Attendance Taking Visual Data

# Anticipated Next Steps

1. **Establishing Tier 1 Attendance Teams**
   o The next phase will involve forming Tier 1 Attendance Teams at each school, responsible for monitoring and responding to Tier 1, school-wide attendance monthly, days-of-the-week, and by-period "peaks" and "dips."

2. **Actionable Data Integration**
   o These teams will focus on integrating actionable data into their monthly staff and/or PBIS meetings to identify trends and devise targeted interventions with a large focus on Tier 1 data and Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles.

3. **Developing a Comprehensive Attendance Strategy**
   o Once Tier 1 Teaming routines are established, the district plans to expand its strategy to include Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, focusing on students requiring more individualized support.

# Key Considerations

- **Strong Leadership:** Critical for maintaining the vision and routines of this effort
- **Early Data Analysis:** Critical for understanding the scope of attendance challenges and potential for improvements.
- **Focus on Marginalized Students:** Essential for addressing disparities and ensuring equity in attendance improvement efforts.
- **Progressive Goal Setting:** Start with attainable goals and gradually increase targets.
- **Systemic Approach:** Developing a tiered system (MTSS) for addressing varying attendance issues.

# Conclusion

At this early stage, Wapato School District is laying a solid foundation for its attendance improvement initiative. By focusing on data-based decision-making and preparing to establish tiered intervention teams, the district is positioning itself to tackle its attendance challenges effectively. Its emphasis on Tier 1 attendance is critical to the long-term effectiveness of this initiative. This initial phase is critical for setting the tone and direction for their comprehensive attendance improvement strategy.

**Tier 1 Attendance Team Monthly Meeting Agenda**

Date:

Monthly Attendance Rates this Year-To-Date: _____

1. Previous Tier 1 Solution Update from Last Month:
   - ____ Keep going, ____ adjust, ____ stop

     _____
     _____
     _____

2. Current Tier 1 Attendance Problem
   - When are students not coming?

     _____

   - Why are students not coming at this time?

     _____

1. School-wide action to try for one month to address school-wide attendance problem:

   _____

3. Goal w/timeline:

   _____

4. All Staff Buy-in:
   - When/how will we share the problem with all staff?

     _____

   - What will be "the ask" of staff to help with the problem?

     _____

   - When/how will we let the staff know it worked or did not?

     _____