



Quality Standard for School Attendance Counselling Practice

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Every School Day Counts!



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Overview

The **Ontario Association for Counselling & Attendance Services (OACAS)** is a volunteer group of professionals comprised of Attendance Counsellors and Social Workers. Our mission is to protect student welfare and educational rights by promoting regular school attendance and mental health. We have been serving Ontario's educational sector since 1954. We provide advocacy, professional development, and expert consultation to the Ministry of Education to support at-risk youth.

Attendance counselling in Ontario currently lacks standardization, with significant variations in professional titles, core responsibilities, caseload capacities, and referral processes. Establishing a comprehensive quality standard will ensure the delivery of consistent, high-impact services across the province, ultimately fostering improved educational outcomes for students.

Quality Standard Development

Why a Quality Standard for Attendance Counselling?

Regular school attendance is closely tied to academic success (Brittain & Vaillancourt, 2026), social development, and long-term health and well-being (Allison et al., 2019). Conversely, chronic absenteeism is associated with reduced educational attainment (Klein et al., 2022), mental health challenges (Smyth et al., 2026), and widening health and social disparities (Kearney et al., 2023). These findings highlight the need for targeted quality improvement efforts in attendance-related interventions.

School attendance problems are shaped by complex and interacting factors, including mental health, family dynamics, socioeconomic conditions, and systemic inequities (Klan et al., 2024). Attendance counsellors work at this intersection, supporting students and families while collaborating with schools and community partners. Establishing a quality standard helps provide a structured and consistent approach to this work, ensuring that

attendance counselling is delivered in a way that is evidence-informed, equitable, and oriented toward improved student outcomes.

What Is a Quality Standard?

Quality standards are structured tools designed to drive measurable improvements in health, education, social care, and public systems. They outline key principles and evidence-based statements that define what “high-quality” services should look like and provide clear, actionable guidance on best practices. Quality standards are often accompanied by indicators that enable organizations to track implementation and monitor progress in improving service delivery and outcomes (Knowledge Institute, 2022).

Within the context of attendance counselling, a quality standard helps identify core components that should be consistently integrated across interventions. By articulating and standardizing these elements, a quality standard can support equitable access, consistent service delivery, and improved educational and well-being outcomes for students and their families.

Quality Standard Development Process

Quality standards are commonly developed through a combination of research evidence, professional expertise, and stakeholder input (Knowledge Institute, 2022). While there is a growing international evidence base on chronic absenteeism and the factors contributing to school attendance problems, there is currently limited research or formal documentation in Canada describing the scope, competencies, or best practices associated with attendance counselling. In the absence of a Canadian practice framework, this standard was developed in collaboration with the [Canadian School Attendance Partnership](#) and drew upon: (a) the available absenteeism literature, and (b) the practice-based knowledge and expertise of attendance counsellors across Ontario.

The development process included multiple waves of data collection, review, and refinement. The voices, expertise, and lived experiences of OACAS

members and attendance counsellors across the province form the foundation of the standard.

For an overview of the emerging Canadian evidence base, see publications on the [Canadian School Attendance Partnership website](#).

Quality Statements

The quality standard for school attendance counselling practice is comprised of nine quality statements. These weave and work together to form high-quality attendance counselling practice.

Each statement will be explained in greater detail in the following pages, including the voices of attendance counsellors. A 1-page plain language summary of the standard is included in Appendix A.

Quality Standard: Nine Quality Statements



1. Building Trusting Relationships

Practice should demonstrate consistent, non-judgmental, and respectful engagement with students, families, schools, and community partners that fosters safety, trust, and belonging as the foundation for attendance services.

Description

Attendance counsellors consistently identified **trust, consistency, authenticity, and patience** as the foundation of effective attendance practice. Building trust was described as a gradual process that often precedes any visible improvement in attendance. Simple acts of responsiveness and showing up were often described as “wins.” Counsellors emphasized that families disengage when communication feels negative or judgmental and that a welcoming environment at all levels of the school matters.

Attendance Counsellor Voices

“Sometimes success is just that they come in to see me. We haven’t even gotten to class yet, but they came into the building”

“A lot of families don’t trust the school system because of past trauma, so we end up being the bridge.”

“When you’re non-judgmental and consistent, families start responding. That’s when the work actually begins.”

“Relationships are the key to any success you’re going to have in this job.”

2. Celebrating Small Wins: Defining Success Beyond Attendance

Practice should demonstrate recognition of incremental progress, valuing engagement, wellbeing, connection, and attendance as important indicators of success.

Description

This theme was strongly supported. Attendance counsellors repeatedly stated that success is not only about perfect attendance — it includes contact, emotional shifts, engagement, and reconnection. They also noted that success looks different for each student.

Attendance Counsellor Voices

“Improvement from not attending to coming late is a win. I’d rather a kid be late than not show up at all.”

“Success isn’t 100 percent attendance. Sometimes it’s one class a day, and that’s huge.”

“A lot of little wins... we made contact... we had a productive conversation... those are big wins in this work”.

“Sometimes success is that they leave the house. That’s the win that day.”

“We should see a more welcoming environment... it could be with secretary, principal, custodian, anybody.”

3. Individualized and Flexible Supports

Practice should demonstrate adaptive, person-centred planning that responds to each student’s unique circumstances, removes barriers, and evolves as needs change.

Description

Flexibility appeared repeatedly in the transcripts. Attendance counsellors emphasized modifying schedules, expectations, locations, and approaches to meet students where they are. Creative problem-solving around barriers — especially transportation — was seen as key and alternative programming was also identified as an individualized solution.

Attendance Counsellor Voices

“We can’t just aim for five days a week... maybe we aim for three days... acknowledging small wins and trying to be flexible.”

“I taught her how to do the school bus... then the city bus... if we could have funding for taxi vouchers, transportation issues would be almost non-existent.”

“We’re seeing success with alternative programming... small setting, quiet... better teacher ratios... hands-on.”

“Mornings were impossible for her, so we started with coming at 11. That flexibility brought her back.”

4. Student Voice, Agency, and Self-Advocacy

Practice should demonstrate meaningful engagement of students as partners, empowering them to express their perspectives, set goals, and participate in decisions that affect their educational journey.

Description

Student voice was one of the most concentrated themes. Attendance counsellors emphasized listening to what students identify as safe, meaningful, and doable. Counsellors described intentionally sharing power with students and strengths-based identification was also emphasized.

Attendance Counsellor Voices

“You know it’s working when they start saying, ‘This is what I need.’”

“Create a course... meeting the student where they’re at... building on their strengths... being asset-based.”

“Maybe the student actually feels best in their math class... that’s their safe space... making sure student voice is always forefront.”

“How can you lend your authority... to support them in getting the resources that they need?”

5. Community Collaboration and Wraparound Supports

Practice should demonstrate knowledge of and active collaboration with education, health, and community partners to deliver integrated, wraparound supports that address the full range of factors influencing attendance.

Description

Participants consistently framed attendance counselors as connectors and bridges. They described linking families to tangible resources and the need for better alignment across sectors (e.g., sports, schools, community programs) was also highlighted.

Attendance Counsellor Voices

“We are the bridge... the network... collaborating with parents and teachers and all of that teamwork.”

“Having access to grocery cards... taxi services... community services might be helpful.”

“When community partners step in, barriers like transportation and appointments disappear.”

“Families don’t always know what supports exist. Part of our role is connecting them.”

6. Equity-Responsive and Contextually Grounded Practice

Practice should demonstrate explicit attention to the social, structural, and cultural contexts and resources that shape students' attendance and engagement, using flexible, non-punitive, and relational approaches that reduce systemic barriers and recognize shared responsibility.

Description

Attendance counsellors described attendance difficulties as rooted in broader life circumstances rather than individual choice. Effective practice involved recognizing factors such as mental health, disability, poverty, caregiving responsibilities, transportation, and marginalization, while viewing absence as a signal of unmet needs rather than non-compliance. Flexibility, collaboration, and moving away from punitive responses were seen as central to equity-responsive practice.

Attendance Counsellor Voices

“If we don't look at what's happening outside of school, we're just blaming the kid for something they can't control.”

“The more consequences you add, the further away families get.”

“Generational non-attendance doesn't change with letters. It changes with understanding.”

“Some families are starting from completely different places. We have to acknowledge that.”

7. Training, Role Clarity, and Appropriate Resourcing

Practice should demonstrate clear and consistent professional roles, manageable caseloads, and access to supervision and professional development, ensuring ethical, sustainable, and high-quality attendance services.

Description

Attendance counsellors described effective attendance practice as being grounded in clear role clarity, consistent training, and sufficient resourcing that reflects the relational and preventative nature of the work. When roles were understood and supported at the system level, counsellors reported being better positioned to collaborate, intervene early, and sustain meaningful engagement with students and families.

Attendance Counsellor Voices

“Common practice and documentation helped everyone stay aligned.”

“When caseloads are reasonable, you can actually build the relationships that attendance work depends on.”

“Having opportunities to come together and talk through cases makes practice more consistent and effective.”

“Consistency doesn’t mean rigidity — it means shared direction with room for professional judgment.”

“Everybody needs to see their role in the multi-tiered system so they understand how everyone is responsible for attendance.”

8. Early Identification and Prevention

Practice should demonstrate a coordinated, whole-school approach, with early action by school teams and targeted interventions by attendance counsellors for students not responding to earlier supports, alongside education and advocacy for early identification and prevention.

Description

Attendance counsellors spoke about levels of need and intervention and the importance of catching patterns early, even before a referral formally occurs. Students with prolonged or persistent absences were often described as requiring intensive interventions, but there was recognition that early signals should trigger action sooner.

Attendance Counsellor Voices

“Elementary prevention matters – patterns start early.”

“Waiting until crisis just creates more work later”

“At five days absent, we start asking questions”

9. Data-Informed, Human-Centred Practice

Practice should demonstrate the thoughtful use of accurate, meaningful, and useful data to guide decision-making and advocacy, while maintaining a focus on relationships, context, and lived experience.

Description

Attendance counsellors described both formal tools and frustration that data is not always available and/or used systemically. Some counsellors use structured scales and feedback tools and others expressed concern that data is not being elevated for system change. Attendance counsellors saw data as valuable when it is connected to advocacy and resourcing.

Attendance Counsellor Voices

“We track patterns, not just totals”

“You need both the numbers and the story”

“Human judgment has to sit alongside the data”

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Appendix A: Quality Statements Simplified

1. Building Trusting Relationships

Attendance work is based on respectful, non-judgmental relationships. Students and families feel safe, listened to, and supported, not blamed or pressured.

2. Defining Success Beyond Attendance

Success is not measured by attendance alone. Small steps—such as feeling more connected, coming to school more often, or feeling better about school—are also considered progress.

3. Individualized and Flexible Supports

Support is adjusted to fit each student’s situation. What works for one student may not work for another, and plans change as needs change.

4. Student Voice, Agency, and Self-Advocacy

Students have a real say in decisions about their learning and attendance. They are supported to share their views, set goals, and ask for what they need.

5. Community Collaboration and Wraparound Supports

Schools work closely with families, health services, and community organizations to support students. Help feels coordinated, not confusing or disconnected.

6. Equity-Responsive and Contextually Grounded Practice

Attendance work considers the real-life challenges students and families face, such as mental health, money, housing, or discrimination. Support is caring and flexible, not focused on punishment or blame.

7. Training, Role Clarity, and Appropriate Resourcing

Attendance counsellors have clear roles, reasonable workloads, and proper training and support. This helps them do their jobs well and support students and families consistently.

8. Early Identification and Prevention

Attendance concerns are noticed and addressed early. Schools act quickly when students start missing school and offer support before problems grow.

9. Data-Informed, Human-Centred Practice

Information about attendance is used to understand what is happening and how to help. Decisions are always guided by relationships, context, and what students and families are experiencing.