

# LEAP



Learner Engagement & Attendance Program

## The LEAP Effect

Taking A Systemic Approach to  
Improving Attendance & Engagement

*Lessons Learned from Connecticut's  
Learner Engagement & Attendance Program (LEAP)*

*Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) with contributions from  
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## Foreword

by Hedy Chang, Executive Director, Attendance Works

Since the onset of the pandemic, chronic absence has increased dramatically in every state, often doubling in size. Addressing this attendance crisis is crucial to student well-being, achievement, and recovery.

Sharing the story of the Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP), this brief describes how a state can successfully tackle even the most complex challenges facing students and families when the work is grounded in a strategic, systemic, and data-driven approach combined with a deep understanding of the power of relationship building. Connecticut's current strategy for reducing chronic absence builds upon intentional policy levers and investments started more than a decade ago. As described in [this article](#) published by the National Association of State Boards of Education, Connecticut's approach reflects the key ingredients of change: *Actionable Data, Positive Engagement, Strategic Partnerships, Capacity Building, Adequate and Equitable Resources, and Shared Accountability*.

This brief is an invaluable resource for states and communities across the country seeking to adopt strategies that improve attendance, especially given the new challenges and conditions created by the pandemic. The LEAP Effect demonstrates and inspires hope about what is possible to achieve while also sharing numerous insights about what it takes to achieve better outcomes for our youth and families. Attendance Works is deeply grateful for the opportunity to be a thought partner throughout Connecticut's attendance journey as well as to help document and share the invaluable insights gained.

## Background and Context

In January 2021, Connecticut's monthly attendance data demonstrated that the pandemic had impacted some school districts more significantly than others. Data analysis showed that urban districts with high levels of remote learning and a higher percentage of low-income families and families of color were missing more time away from school than their wealthier white peers in more suburban and rural districts who were learning a greater percentage of the time in person.

At this point in the pandemic, the CSDE recognized that teacher capacity to reach out to families individually was greatly reduced due to the demands placed on teachers who were juggling in-person, hybrid, and remote models of teaching, and filling in for colleagues sick with COVID-19. Districts whose students were experiencing chronic absenteeism needed immediate, people-powered support. In many of these districts, community partners were poised to help jump in when teachers could not. These community agencies and their far-reaching support networks were well-positioned to reconnect families and students to school, while also helping troubleshoot a wide range of barriers contributing to students' chronic absenteeism.

As a result of this urgent need to re-engage students and families in schools, LEAP was launched in early 2021. Under the guidance and leadership of Governor Ned Lamont and his administration and in collaboration with Connecticut's Regional Educational Service Center (RESC) Alliance, the CSDE partnered with nationally-renowned Attendance Works, as well as Parent Teacher Home Visits, to design a comprehensive program focused on building trusting relationships with families, breaking down barriers to attendance, and getting students back to school.

## Purpose and Overview

Designed to help states, districts, and other organizations implement a similar endeavor, this brief is organized into sections responding to the following key questions:

- A. What is the LEAP Model? What are its core components?**
- B. How is LEAP financed and structured?**
- C. Does LEAP make a difference?**
- D. What are lessons learned for effective implementation?**

## A. What is the Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP)?

LEAP is a relational home visit model and a targeted (Tier II) student intervention that serves as part of a comprehensive system of support for families whose students are struggling with consistent attendance. Its mission is to build trusting relationships with families to ultimately positively impact students' engagement and attendance. Students at-risk of or already chronically absent and disengaged from school are identified for home visits by the school.

Home visits are scheduled opportunities for a pair of home visitors to go to the home (or other parent-preferred location) of a student to meet with a parent or guardian for the purpose of strengthening the school-family relationship in a positive and relational manner. The conversation is focused on families' strengths and capabilities, as well as their aspirations for their child. The visitors are there to learn from families, not to enforce attendance policies. Ideally, families receive multiple home visits that support building relationships over time.



### LEAP Home Visit #1

#### Goals

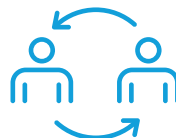
- Begin building a positive relationship.
- Learn about family and student.
- Offer resources and supports if needed.



### Follow-up Calls

#### Goals

- Begin building a positive relationship.
- Learn about family and student.
- Offer resources and supports if needed.



### LEAP Home Visit #2

#### Goals

- Build relationship.
- Connect student to teacher and school.
- Provide helpful attendance and school resources.



### LEAP Home Visit #3, #4 and #5...

#### Goals

- Deepen relationship.
- Check in on well-being of student, especially for those who continue to be chronically absent.
- Ask family if they want to continue visits.

Home visitors may be any willing school staff member with a supportive mindset including administrators, teachers, student support staff, family liaisons, or community partners. LEAP is built on an intentional mindset shift away from a punitive truancy approach to a whole child, trauma-informed chronic absence approach centered on best practices and aligns with [Connecticut's Definition and Framework for Family Engagement](#). All home visitors are trained in the LEAP approach and supported by the Connecticut Home Visit Hub established at Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), one of the state's six RESCs. Home visitors are explicitly taught to put relationships with families first; this connection is vitally important to the success of the program and comes before talking about attendance, behavior, or grades. Home visitor log information is then aggregated to identify common barriers and needs in the community. Administrator-led school attendance teams and classroom teachers monitor interventions.

## What are the core components of LEAP?

The LEAP model was not designed to be implemented in isolation. Rather, its cornerstones dovetail with the broader components of comprehensive attendance and engagement work and a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) approach. Layering LEAP into a preexisting, broader attendance plan is part of what makes LEAP work. LEAP's cornerstones and operational components apply to both the state and local levels and are designed to cement operational and organizational commitment.

### • **Cornerstones of the LEAP Approach (beliefs/values)**

- **Trusting Relationships** – LEAP nurtures trust and relationship building with everyone involved in the implementation, starting with the home visitors and extending to administrators and community-based organizations.
- **Flexible** – CSDE and LEAP leadership allow for and endorse adapting the program in a flexible manner to build on the strengths and realities of different families, communities, schools, and districts.
- **Collaborative** – LEAP emphasizes a collaborative approach which respects the perspectives and assets of everyone involved and takes a partnership approach to making decisions about program implementation.
- **Data Driven** – Chronic absence data is used to prioritize who receives home visits and is reviewed over time to allow for continuous improvement.
- **Culturally Responsive** – LEAP emphasizes the importance of taking time to appreciate and understand the cultures and languages of students and families as well as recognize and address when there are cultural differences or potential biases.
- **Voluntary for All** – No one is forced to participate in LEAP. Rather, participation in LEAP is voluntary for staff as well as for families who are offered the opportunity to participate in home visits and are allowed the option to decline.



Credit: Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUimages

### • **Operational Components (delivery)**

- **Tier II Intervention** to Address Attendance and Engagement
- **Multiple Visits** Focused on Relationships
- **Data Informed** at State and Local Levels
- Professional Development Hub known as the **Connecticut Home Visit Hub** (Hub) provides Training and Peer Support
- Home Visitors are **Compensated** and are Members of the School or from a Community Agency
- Delivery **System and Structures** with District and School Level Coordination

- **Connecticut Home Visit Hub**

- To build capacity to conduct home visits, the CSDE created a professional development home visit hub housed at CREC, one of the state's six RESCs. The Hub offers a variety of professional development opportunities including:



- **LEAP 101 Trainings** are designed to teach staff who are new to the LEAP home visiting approach. These virtual sessions focus on preparing home visitors for their initial contacts with families and the first visit through role plays and discussion. Trained coaches assist participants with role-playing and deepening their understanding of the home visit experience.
- **District-specific LEAP Trainings** allow district leaders the opportunity to collaborate with the Hub staff to adapt and integrate the LEAP model into existing family engagement programs and design virtual trainings with this local context in mind.
- **Connection Sessions** offer home visitors virtual space and opportunities to share their experiences with home visits, learn from and be inspired by each other, and to flag areas where they need additional resources or training.
- **Social Emotional Health and Wellness & Mental Health First Aid Trainings** are opportunities for home visitors to learn from experts in order to be well-versed in how to respond to a variety of related needs that a family may share.
- **Talk Tuesdays**, offered by CSDE every other Tuesday, are informal, virtual discussion opportunities open to all Connecticut school district and community partner staff interested in conversations and learning about all things attendance and engagement-related in order to build broad capacity and best practices statewide. Talk Tuesdays are hosted by SERC, Connecticut's State Education Resource Center; they are recorded and available [online](#).
- **District Coordinator Meetings** are monthly opportunities for district LEAP Coordinators to come together with CSDE LEAP leadership to share updates, learn from one another, identify any implementation challenges, ensure fidelity of implementation, and make any necessary course corrections.
- **The LEAP Family Roundtable** is an opportunity for families to share insights about their experiences with LEAP in order for the program to continuously improve. This work is in partnership with the [Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center \(CPAC\)](#).
- The Home Visit Hub initially trained home visitors from the 15 districts who received funding. It has expanded and is currently also conducting statewide trainings for districts across Connecticut, as well as interested states around the country, and in Canada. The Hub has trained more than 1,700 home visitors in the LEAP approach.

- **Systems and Structures that Support LEAP Implementation**

- **Dedicated District and School LEAP Coordinators** – Each district and school ideally has a person responsible for coordinating implementation, informing the School Attendance Team, bridging relationships with classroom teachers, and engaging in ongoing problem solving.
- **Opportunities to Hear Family and Student Voices** – Student and family voices are essential to understanding the realities facing students, including what helps motivate them to show up to school and what barriers impede attendance. LEAP training emphasizes collecting, documenting, and sharing insights gleaned from conversations with students and families.



Credit: Collaborative for Student Success

- **Attendance Teams that Meet with Fidelity** – As a Tier II intervention, the LEAP program should be embedded within a larger tiered approach to improving attendance that is coordinated and supported by a team. The team should also help to share responsibility for ensuring students receive needed support or resources identified through the home visit process. It is also important for attendance teams to work with LEAP coordinators to monitor implementation and measure impact of home visits.
- **Collaboration with Community Partners** – Community partners are essential for ensuring home visitors have access to supports and services needed to support student engagement and address barriers to attendance. Home visitors need to know what types of resources are available in the community and how to ensure families can access them.
- **Timely and Accurate Data Collection/Monitoring** – Each district should ideally already have a system in place to monitor data on attendance, chronic absence, achievement, and behavior, and provide real-time reports at the student and school level.
- **Consistent Use of a Home Visit Log** – Home visitors maintain home visit logs to identify common barriers and needs of families. Data is submitted to the state to allow for analysis across the state and regions as well as within districts. Substantial attention is paid to coordination and reducing duplication with data collected by other surveys, as well as improving the log over time.



## B. How is LEAP Financed and Structured?

In 2021, Governor Lamont designated \$10.68 million in federal Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) recovery funds to support 15 high-need school districts. These 15 districts were selected to participate in LEAP based on a data algorithm developed by the Office of the Governor and the State Department of Education. The algorithm looked at student enrollment, attendance rates, percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL), percentage of time spent in remote learning, and numbers of English learners (EL). For example, a district with high student enrollment and proportion of FRL and EL students, but low attendance and availability of remote or hybrid instruction, would rank as being high-need for additional investment in student attendance and engagement support.

CSDE partnered with the RESC Alliance to fund the six RESCs, which in turn coordinated directly with their respective identified districts and local organizations (e.g., Youth Service Bureaus, Boys and Girls Clubs). Together, these organizations expanded their capacity to address specific student needs, including using devices to log in for remote learning, troubleshooting problems with new broadband services, and connecting students with critical social service needs, such as behavioral and mental health care, stable housing, and food.

In addition to managing and supporting funding to districts and community providers, the CSDE established state infrastructure by contracting with the RESC Alliance to support LEAP. Supports include:

- **Connecticut Home Visit Hub** – training and community building for all home visitors in LEAP grant districts and recently expanded to train home visitors from all Connecticut districts, other states, and Canada.
- **Data Collection** – collecting and tracking data received from the home visits.
- **Attendance Awareness Campaign** – ongoing comprehensive traditional and social media campaign with tailored attendance messaging for target audiences and informational materials for Connecticut districts and families.



In the spring of 2022, the Connecticut General Assembly appropriated an additional \$7 million for LEAP with federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds. This second phase of funding is being used to continue funding 14 of the previously funded districts. Funding level decisions included:

- Size of districts (largest districts received a maximum of \$800,000 and smallest districts received a minimum of \$200,000);
- Proportion of funds received from original \$10.68 million; and
- Year one performance, including expenditure of funds and number of home visits.

In the spring of 2023, the Connecticut General Assembly again appropriated \$7 million for LEAP with federal ARPA funds. The additional funding will allow LEAP districts and RESC oversight, training, and support to sustain operations through December 31, 2026.



Credit: Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUimages

### C. Does LEAP Make a Difference?

The Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration (CCERC) conducted a mixed-methods evaluation analyzing quantitative data from 8,690 students across 15 districts spanning K-12 education and incorporating qualitative interview data from 108 participating district leaders, home visitors, and families. It is the largest and most robust study of a home visit program ever conducted. [This research](#) shows that when implemented with fidelity, the LEAP model has a positive impact on students and families. (It is notable that one district took a different approach and it did not have the same positive impact.)

- **LEAP had a significant impact which grew over time.** For most students examined in this study, attendance rates increased by four percentage points in the month immediately following the first LEAP visit. Attendance rates then continued to rise in subsequent months, reaching an average increase of approximately seven percentage points for students served in the summer of 2021 and nearly 15 percentage points for students served during the 2021-22 school year after six months. These effects were most noticeable in the Hartford School District.
- **Secondary students experienced greater improvements in attendance.** Nine months after the first LEAP visit, students in grades PK – 5 experienced approximately an eight-percentage point increase in attendance. Students in grades 6-12 experienced approximately a sixteen-percentage point increase in attendance rates relative to similar students who were not served over the same time period, suggesting that the impact of LEAP was significantly larger in later grades.

- **Attendance improved for students of all backgrounds although it was less for English learners.** The impact of LEAP was remarkably similar across students with different demographic or socioeconomic characteristics. The one exception was students who are English learners who had treatment effects that were approximately half as large as the other student groups.
- **Results did not differ based on the type of personnel, whether school or community-based, conducting a LEAP home visit.** Nine months after the initial LEAP visit, attendance rates increased by between approximately 15 and 20 percentage points regardless of who conducted the visit.
- **In-person home visits were more effective.** LEAP visits that occurred at a student's home or a student's school had significantly larger impacts on attendance than LEAP visits that occurred virtually or on the phone.

Because LEAP is built on trusting relationships between families and home visitors who serve as the connector to services—and help resolve barriers to attendance and other life stressors—there is a significant positive impact on LEAP families' and students' social and emotional wellness.

The qualitative portion of the CCERC evaluation of LEAP found that families (and home visitors) both noted eight main benefits of LEAP:

1. Improved Family-School Relationships
2. Increased Student Attendance
3. Increased Student Engagement
4. Increased Student Achievement
5. Increased Feelings of Belonging
6. Increased Access to Resources (for Families)
7. Increased Expectations of Accountability
8. Greater Gratitude and Appreciation



Credit: Collaborative for Student Success

The [Collaborative for Student Success](#), a Washington, D.C.-based education nonprofit, made a [documentary video](#) about LEAP which captures the powerful impact of LEAP on families' and students' social and emotional wellbeing.

## D. What Are Lessons Learned for Effective Implementation?

Overall, LEAP has met with the success it has because it is not a standalone program. Instead, it is a specific intervention implemented in a state landscape already rich with deep-rooted and continually evolving, equitable attendance and family engagement best practices, as well as expert people power at the state level and resources dedicated to these efforts. LEAP has been successful because it meets an urgent need surrounding attendance through the big picture lens of family engagement while also:

- expanding people power beyond teachers who may not have the bandwidth to engage in outreach;
- leveraging the assets of existing community-based organizations that already successfully connect to families;
- creating a common approach to conducting assessments of assets and challenges;
- analyzing collective results; and
- allowing for flexibility.



Credit: Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUimages

This flexibility means that at its onset, districts were allowed to take different approaches to LEAP implementation depending upon what they felt would be most effective given their own local conditions. Their approaches can be grouped into these four categories:

**Approach #1: District-Wide Intervention.** Districts that took a whole district approach generally focused on anyone chronically absent at any level.

**Approach #2: Targeting a Subset of Schools.** One district chose to focus on a particular subset of schools with the highest levels of chronic absenteeism.

**Approach #3: Targeting Students at Transition Points.** Several districts chose to focus their LEAP interventions on specific transition points in student careers. Specifically, these tended to take place during the summer before entry into kindergarten, middle school, and high school.

**Approach #4: Targeting a Specific Demographic of Students.** Some districts focused on particular communities, such as an immigrant population, that have demonstrated a need for extra attendance support.



If a state, district or school is interested in implementing LEAP, consider the above approaches and the following lessons learned from Connecticut's experience:

**#1 Build and expand upon a strong foundation of work on engagement and attendance.**

LEAP works as a Tier II intervention when it exists on top of existing infrastructure that ensure schools offer warm and welcoming environments to all students and families and have put in place strong multi-tiered systems of support.

**#2 Use chronic absence data to prioritize districts, schools, and students for implementation.**

Data on chronic absence as well as other factors indicating need (e.g. free and reduced-price lunch, being an English learner, or experiencing insecure housing) can be used to prioritize which districts will be served first as well as which schools and students within a district.

**#3 Invest in high quality professional development and ongoing peer learning.** The key to effective implementation is having home visitors who can build relationships with students and families over time, draw upon strengths, and help students and families feel a sense of belonging, engagement, and support. High-quality professional development combined with the opportunity to learn from and exchange experiences with peers is essential to achieving the desired outcomes.

**#4 Allow for flexibility as long as districts/schools adhere to cornerstones.** Districts should be allowed flexibility to determine the approach to adapting LEAP to their local strengths and realities. The essential ingredient is using the cornerstones (trusting relationships, flexible, collaborative, data driven, culturally responsive, and voluntary for all) to guide implementation.

**#5 Braid funding streams to ensure sustainability.** Especially given that COVID-19 relief funds are coming to an end, it is even more important to braid funding streams to ensure resources to support these efforts are available over time. Other federal sources of funding, for example, include Title I, Title II, Title IV, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and Full-Service Community Schools. Many states may also have local or state funding sources that can be tapped.

**#6 Evaluate impact.** Build in a way to evaluate the impact of your home visiting program. Evaluations are invaluable initially for providing feedback on implementation and in the long-term for making the case that continued investments are worthwhile.

**#7 Monitor fidelity.** Whether a home visiting effort achieves improvement will depend upon fidelity to the underlying cornerstones as well as effective implementation of the core components at the state and local level. Determine *who* will monitor and *how* fidelity will be monitored as part of your initial design and program implementation plan.

## Conclusion

At its core, **LEAP is about relationships**. Life can be hard and can present unforeseen challenges; the pandemic only amplified these truths and Connecticut families were no exception to the havoc COVID-19 wrought. Families grappled with severe illness, loss of life, loss of employment, income, housing, and access to transportation. As was true nation-wide, Connecticut's urban, low-income families and families of color bore the disproportionate brunt of COVID-19. In a time of uncertainty and unprecedented challenges and loss, outreach from a trusted school or community partner presenting as an ally for one's child and family can be the ultimate difference-maker.

LEAP is not a golden ticket or a magic bullet, but it is a structured, thoughtful program with human connection at its heart. Caring, compassionate, persistent, and well-trained home visitors continue to help and empower families to navigate a host of wide-ranging barriers to attendance in the post-pandemic era. LEAP home visitors serve as the connector for families to services. Whether it is finding a shelter with availability, a translator to explain school policies and procedures, connecting a parent to reliable transportation options or to immigration advocates, the tasks home visitors undertake in the name of building trusting, positive relationships runs the gamut—and contribute to the overarching goal of getting children back to school on a regular basis.



As LEAP district leaders, home visitors, and the [LEAP Evaluation Report](#) note, sustained support, including funding at a state and local level—and the collaborative efforts of the Office of the Governor, the Connecticut State Department of Education, and the RESC Alliance that support this critical work—will ensure the continued success and impact of the LEAP model.

For further information about Connecticut's attendance and engagement efforts or about LEAP, Kari Sullivan Custer is the State Education Consultant for Attendance, Engagement, and LEAP at CSDE and may be contacted at [Kari.Sullivan@ct.gov](mailto:Kari.Sullivan@ct.gov).



## Appendix A: Media Coverage

- [CT Examiner](#): *Chronic School Absenteeism Shows Sharp Decline After Home Visitation Program*
- [CTPUBLIC.org](#): *Researchers Say In-home Visits Boost School Attendance for Chronically Absent Students*
- [Education Week](#): *This State Set Up a Program to Reduce Chronic Absences. It Worked*
- [Forbes](#): *Connecticut's Funding What Works in Education. They Can Prove It*
- [FutureEd, Georgetown University](#): *How Home Visits Helped CT Cut Student Absenteeism - FutureEd (future-ed.org)*
- [NASBE Standard](#): *Chronic Absence: A Call for Deeper Student and Family Engagement*
- [NY Times](#): *The Key to Getting Students Back in Classrooms? Establishing Connections*
- [WTNH.com](#): *New Study Shows Connecticut Educators Visiting Students Decreased Chronic Absenteeism*
- [WFSB.com](#): *Home Visits Helped Improve Student Attendance in Schools, New Report Says*

## Appendix B: Resources

- [Addressing Chronic Absenteeism in Schools: Connecticut's Learner Engagement and Attendance Program](#) A documentary video about LEAP produced by the [Collaborative for Student Success](#), a Washington, D.C.-based education nonprofit.
- [Attendance Works](#) Nonprofit initiative that promotes equal opportunities to learn and advances student success by reducing chronic absence.
- [Capitol Region Education Council](#) One of Connecticut's six Regional Educational Service Centers (RESCs).
- [Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration \(CCERC\): LEAP Evaluation Report December 2022: A research-based, comprehensive evaluation of LEAP.](#)
- [Connecticut's Definition and Framework for Family Engagement](#)
- [Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center](#)
- [Connecticut State Department of Education: LEAP What is LEAP?](#)
- [EdAdvance](#) One of Connecticut's six Regional Educational Service Centers (RESCs).
- [Regional Educational Service Center \(RESC\) Alliance](#)
- [Talk Tuesdays](#) CSDE-affiliated professional conversations every other Tuesday about attendance and engagement which are recorded and archived.

