

Exercise: Conducting a Scan of Environment and Attendance

MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS

Time: 30-60 minutes

The goal of the **Scan of Environment and Attendance (SEAT)** is to help schools identify strengths and opportunities for schools to shape the deep-seated issues that drive student attendance, including climate and culture and the physical environment. Armed with information about building-level practices that influence attendance, schools can take actionable steps to address some of the causes, not just the symptoms, of chronic absence. The following steps will help schools maximize use of the SEAT and resulting activities to support student attendance.

Note that the tool should be adapted to meet the needs and priorities of the school. The SEAT is intended to be used multiple times over the course of the school year as part of an iterative process and should serve as a tool for qualitative analysis of the observable features of school climate that support a culture of attendance and engagement. Schools may choose to observe different climate elements at different times of the day, week, or year.

STEP I: Gather your team

Identify who from your school or organization should participate in the Scan of Environment for Attendance Tool (SEAT) review. Ideally, reviewers should represent a diverse group of stakeholders from your school, including an administrator, teacher, nurse, counselor, attendance clerk, along with parents, students, and members of the community. These should be people who are already members of a school attendance team, who could participate in a newly formed team or whose perspectives can inform the work of a school attendance team. In addition to having student members of the team ensure that youth voice is part of the scan. You can obtain youth voice through school surveys, focus groups and other means.

STEP II: Review the tool

Review the tool as a team to decide where you will observe each school characteristic and what time of day is best to conduct the walk considering your space and school schedule. Add any questions you think are relevant to your school or district at the end of the assessment (#22, #23). Remember that if you plan to conduct the walk more than once a year, you will want to observe the characteristics in the same places each time to identify improvements. (Attendance Works recommends that schools use the tool at least twice per year). You may also want to consider observing at different times of the day, such as the morning welcoming, or at the end of the day to observe the end of day rituals. As you discuss how you will use the SEAT, discuss the importance of reflecting only what team members see during the observation period rather than relying on prior

knowledge of the school to inform their results. For example, if a team conducts an observation when no students are eating in the cafeteria, mark question 16 “Don’t Know”.

The team should determine how to use the tool to best serve the school’s priorities and the needs of students. This includes determining what time of day or week to conduct the assessment and/or what climate elements to focus on during each individual assessment.

STEP III: Notify school staff and students about who will be on campus and the purpose for the observation.

Be sure to inform staff and students the names of who will be on campus, what they will be observing and how the findings will inform action.

STEP IV: Conduct the assessment

Use the instructions on the SEAT to conduct your review. Make sure all members of your review team have a copy of the SEAT to complete them individually along with writing utensils and clipboards. Agree on a day and time and a gathering point. Divide the team into groups of two to three people so that observers can take turns documenting observations. Remember not to rely on prior knowledge of the school to inform your results. Encourage team members to document their observations by taking photos, recognizing that no images should be made public without parental consent.

STEP V: Debrief and set goals

Schedule time to review the SEAT results, ideally immediately following the scan or within three to five days of the observation to ensure that it is still fresh in people’s minds. Identify aspects of school climate that were positive and which elements of school climate the school is strongest in. Then determine areas for improvement and set achievable goals within a specified timeframe. Leverage the schools strengths to inform ways in which to strengthen other elements of school climate. Use the three tiers of intervention to determine how to respond to the needs you identified as a team.

STEP VI: Communicate results with school staff

Make sure to communicate the results of your review with your school faculty and staff and engage them in determining the strategy and helping to set the goals for improvement. Use the information below to ensure school staff understand the importance of each of these characteristics to fostering a welcoming school environment that encourages attendance. Make sure teachers and staff have concrete steps to take action.

Observation	Importance for Encouraging School Attendance
1. School staff greet <u>all</u> students warmly when they arrive at school.	Makes students and their families feel welcome and noticed.
2. Students who arrive late are welcomed, kindly reminded about the importance of being on time and asked whether there are any barriers to timely attendance the school can address.	Regular messaging by schools can reinforce the importance of attendance.
3. Students are respectful to one another.	Students who feel physically and emotionally safe at school are more likely to attend.
4. Students are observed engaging in small group activities including project work, socializing, or in classroom discussions.	Students who feel engaged in meaningful learning are more likely to attend school every day.
5. Principals, teachers and support staff are present and engage positively with students.	Caring, respectful adults can make students and their families feel more connected a school – a major factor in school attendance.
6. The school visibly acknowledges and celebrates the diversity (cultural, ethnic, sexual, ability/disability, etc.) of the student population through displays, art, signage, etc.	Celebrating student identity and diversity helps establish a positive school climate and culture.
7. The school clearly communicates expectations and consequences for student attendance in languages spoken by parents and guardians.	Parents and guardians who understand the expectations for attendance are more likely to take it seriously and ensure their student(s) attend school.
8. For schools that require uniforms: If students arrive at school out of uniform or failing to meet the dress code they are treated with consideration and are offered an alternative so they can stay at school.	Lost instructional time seriously impacts whether a student stays on track academically. Therefore it is imperative that schools identify strategies to ensure that the school dress code or uniform policy keeps students in school. Examples include clothing closets, uniform vouchers, and uniform exchange programs.
9. School security officers are visible and engage all students in a considerate and friendly way.	School security officers are members of the school community and should be part of and aligned with the overall school climate and strategy for engaging with youth.
10. The main office is easy to find and there is a clear sign-in and sign-out system for students who arrive late or leave early.	This demonstrates a customer service orientation and clear, organized systems for tracking student attendance.
11. If there is a metal detector, students are treated equally and respectfully and the process of passing through is orderly.	Metal detectors are sometimes needed to help ensure the safety of everyone in a school building. If a school has a metal detector it is important that it is implemented with professionalism and fairness so that all students are treated respectfully and equally.
12. Posters, pictures, bulletin boards, banners, etc. posted around the school make it clear that good attendance is valued.	Regular messaging by schools can reinforce the importance of attendance.
13. Recognition for good and improved student attendance is visible.	Students who are recognized are more likely to feel engaged in school, and therefore more likely to attend.
14. The physical environment is welcoming and supports learning for all students. Examples include well-lit, clean, brightly painted walls, student gathering areas, and working HVAC systems.	Students who feel physically and emotionally safe at school are more likely to attend.
15. The school health office is easily accessible, staffed by a medical professional and in-use by students.	Students have access to resources to help address potential health barriers to being in school.
16. Common spaces are clean, orderly, and offer students an opportunity to socialize.	Common areas are conducive to sitting and eating and ensure students have a place to take a break and refuel for learning.
17. Bathrooms are well-maintained, fully stocked and safe for students.	Students feel cared for when they have bathrooms that are accessible, clean, and respect their privacy.
18. Students' academic work and artwork is evident throughout the school.	Documenting academic and art work conveys the learning that is happening each and every day.

Observation	Importance for Encouraging School Attendance
19. Classrooms foster active learning, including supplies and materials relevant for the subject area.	Students who are actively engaged in learning are more likely to attend school.
20. Classrooms are well-organized and clean.	Children thrive on structure and organization.
21. Self-contained classrooms support student learning, and are physically located near other classrooms. The students are included within the school community (e.g. lunch, clubs, afterschool programming, etc.)	Research shows that students with special needs are more likely to be absent from school. Inclusive practices emphasize the importance of all students as part of the school community.
22. OTHER (as needed)	
23. OTHER (as needed)	

STEP VII: Monitor progress

Ideally, schools should use the SEAT to review their environment and attendance practices four times a year to assess progress toward meeting their goals and make adjustments accordingly. This is an ongoing process and requires regular review to ensure it is a priority for school staff and administrators alike.

STEP VIII: Discussion Questions

Use these questions, each of which corresponds to a SEAT observation, to guide your post-observation debrief and action planning. Note that not every question will be relevant depending on what the team was able to observe using the SEAT.

1. What did team members observe about staff behavior that reflected (or did not reflect) warm greetings by school staff (i.e., eye contact, body language, smiling, positive language)? Were the behaviors team members observed age and culturally appropriate?
2. If observed, were students who arrived late reminded about the importance of being on time in a friendly, caring way? Who delivered the message? What was the response of the student(s)?
3. In what ways did students demonstrate respectful behavior to one another? Reference specific interactions that team members observed during the observation. Did the team observe any disrespectful behavior between students? Did staff successfully mitigate those behaviors? If so, how? If not, what could have been done?
4. If observed, comment on how the group saw students involved in small group activities and to what extent they seemed engaged and on-task.
5. Talk about an interaction one or more team members observed between a student and a staff member (such as administrator, teacher or support staff). Was the adult responsive to the needs of the student? Did the adult treat the student with respect? How did the student respond to the interaction (note body language, behavior and verbal response)?

6. Is there visible evidence that the school respects and celebrates diversity? If so, describe.
7. Are materials about attendance available for parents and guardians in multiple languages? Separate from the observation, are teachers expected to make a point to speak with parents and guardians about student attendance during every parent-teacher conference?
8. If applicable and observed, did any students arrive out of uniform or out of compliance with the dress code? Did staff address the issue? If so, was class attendance a clear priority in resolving the issue?
9. Are school security officers visible on campus? What, if any, interactions did the team observe between the officers and students? Discuss the strengths of those interactions and opportunities for improvement.
10. If applicable, did the team observe students going through the metal detector during the SEAT observation? Were students treated equally during the entry process? Was the process efficient and orderly?
11. Are there clear signs leading to the main office? How does the sign-in and sign-out process support a welcoming environment? What could the school do differently to improve this process?
12. Were there visible posters, pictures, bulletin boards, banners, etc. posted around the school that make it clear that good attendance is valued? If so, where were they posted? Would they have been noticed if the team hadn't been looking for them? If not, where might the team suggest posting these materials?
13. How, if at all, does the school recognize students with good and improved attendance? If so, does this include visible recognition posted throughout the school? If not, how can the school implement a recognition program?
14. Did team members observe that the physical environment is welcoming? What are opportunities for improvement? Which of these can be accomplished in the next two-three months?

STEP VIII: Discussion Questions *continued*

15. Was the school health office staffed during the observation? If so, were there students in the health office? Overall, are students aware of the availability of the health office to support them? Do teachers know when to refer students to the health office?
16. What adjectives would the team use to describe the atmosphere of common spaces? Were they clean? Did students comfortable? Were students socializing? Were adults present and interacting with students?
17. What adjectives would the team use to describe the bathroom? Would members of the team be willing to use the student bathrooms? Were the bathrooms clean and stocked? Would a student feel safe using the bathroom alone?
18. Is students' academic and artwork visible throughout the school? If so, where was it posted? Would it have been noticeable if the team hadn't been looking for it? If not, what are the barriers to posting student work and how can the school overcome them?

19. In the classrooms that the team visited, what led members to conclude whether they fostered active learning? How did you assess whether supplies and materials relevant for the subject area? Were students interacting with materials in the classroom? Were materials sufficient for every student? Were there significant differences between classrooms by teacher or grade?
20. What evidence did the team use to determine whether classrooms are clean and well-organized?
21. What evidence did the team use to determine whether students with special needs are included in the school culture?
22. OTHER – as determined by school or district
23. OTHER – as determined by school or district

STEP IX: Taking Action

Now that you have used the SEAT and discussed the results, use this planning tool to inform your plan of action. What are your key next steps for addressing school climate and

attendance? Who will be responsible for each task? When will each task be completed? What resources can you leverage to support each task?

Observations	Key Next Steps	Individuals/Groups Responsible	Target Date	Resources to Leverage
1. School staff greet <u>all</u> students warmly when they arrive at school.				
2. Students who arrive late are welcomed, kindly reminded about the importance of being on time and asked whether there are any barriers to timely attendance the school can address.				
3. Students are respectful to one another.				
4. Students are observed engaging in small group activities including project work, socializing, or in classroom discussions.				

Observations	Key Next Steps	Individuals/Groups Responsible	Target Date	Resources to Leverage
5. Principals, teachers and support staff are present and engage positively with students.				
6. The school visibly acknowledges and celebrates the diversity (cultural, ethnic, sexual, ability/disability, etc.) of the student population through displays, art, signage, etc.				
7. The school clearly communicates expectations and consequences for student attendance in languages spoken by parents and guardians.				
8. For schools that require uniforms: If students arrive at school out of uniform or failing to meet the dress code they are treated with consideration and are offered an alternative so that they can stay at school.				
9. School security officers are visible and engage all students in a considerate and friendly way.				
10. If there is a metal detector, students are treated equally and respectfully and the process of passing through is orderly.				
11. The main office (or attendance office) is easy to find and there is a clear sign-in and sign-out system for students who arrive late or leave early.				

Observations	Key Next Steps	Individuals/Groups Responsible	Target Date	Resources to Leverage
12. Posters, pictures, bulletin boards, banners, etc. posted around the school make it clear that good attendance is valued.				
13. Recognition for good and improved student attendance is visible.				
14. The physical environment is welcoming and supports learning for all students (e.g., well-lit, clean, brightly painted walls, student gathering areas, working HVAC).				
15. The school health office is easily accessible, staffed by a medical professional and in-use by students.				
16. Common area spaces are clean, orderly, and offer students an opportunity to socialize.				
17. Bathrooms are well-maintained, fully stocked and safe for students.				
18. Students' academic work and artwork is evident throughout the school.				

Observations	Key Next Steps	Individuals/Groups Responsible	Target Date	Resources to Leverage
19. Classrooms foster active learning, including supplies and materials relevant for the subject area.				
20. Classrooms are well-organized and clean.				
21. Self-contained classrooms support student learning, are physically located near other classrooms, and the students are included within the school community (e.g. lunch, clubs, afterschool programming etc.)				
22. OTHER:				
23. OTHER:				

Attendance Works is a national initiative dedicated to improving the policy, practice and research around attendance.
<http://www.attendanceworks.org/>

This resource was created with support from the National Student, Attendance, Engagement, and Success Center.

For additional resources on school climate, check out the National School Climate Center.