

# Be There Buddy Project Toolkit

Created by:



United Way of  
Southwestern Pennsylvania



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# Be There Buddy Project

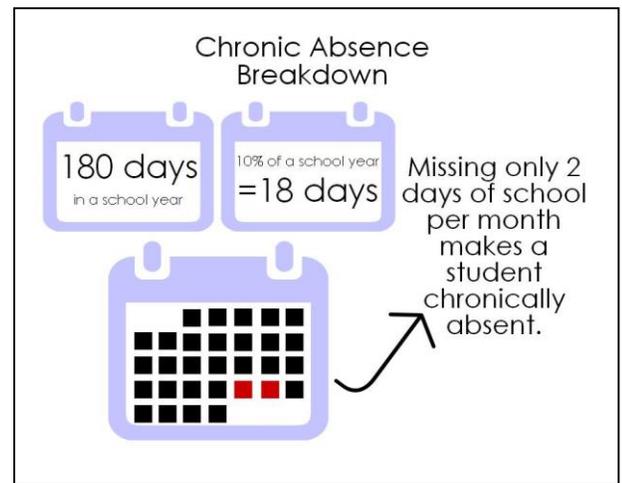
## Why: Chronic Absence.

**Defined as: when a student misses 10% of their school year, excused or unexcused.**

Nationally, up to 6.5 million students are chronically absent. Multiple years of chronic absence—as early as Pre-K—is a forewarning of academic trouble. Chronically absent students are less likely to succeed academically and are more likely to be suspended and eventually dropout. Students who experience barriers such as lack of access to health care, housing insecurity, and unreliable transportation are at higher risk for chronic absenteeism because they need a lot of extra support to be there.

## How: Relationships.

A significant way to improve attendance is by making sure students have positive and caring relationships with adults at the school (Railsback, June 2004). When a young person knows that someone is counting on them to be there every day, they become accountable to that person. Connecting with parents so they also develop a positive relationship with the school is also critical and helps build the culture of attendance in a student's home.



## What:

### Be There Buddy Project

The Be There Buddy Project is a partnership between the United Way of Southwestern PA and schools that establishes positive and caring relationships between students and staff to increase student attendance. A principal or lead coordinator from the school identifies students who are at-risk of or who are chronically absent and pairs them with staff who serve as a student's "buddy." On a daily basis, buddies greet the students, track their attendance, call home when the student's missing, and encourage the student to make attendance a priority.



## Impact

Here's what teachers had to say about their experience with the Be There Buddy Project:

"My student has not missed a day of school in a long time. This is remarkable. She and her family have been cited for truancy numerous times every school year. I truly believe that the Be There Buddy Project has helped my student not only academically, but socially and emotionally. "

"I think the Buddy Project made them personally accountable to someone for their attendance. It also gave them someone to share day to day experiences with (positive or negative). They were excited to share events in their life with someone other than family. It gives them another reason to come to school other than just seeing friends.

Speaking of friends, it gave them a platform other than their teacher (who may be bias) to vent to about classroom happenings and issues on a daily basis. I think some things were able to be put in perspective and other issues were able to be resolved before they ate away at their brains all night."

"I have seen the impact the project makes with the students. Many of them improved during our first run and graduated from the program. It helps the adults connect more with students and gives the children motivation to get to school on time. "



### Proven Results:

During the 2015-2016 school year, a school in Duquesne City School District participated in the Buddy Project for the first time.

Out of the twelve students who participated, 76% increased their attendance by at least 5% and at most, 31%.

# Steps for Principals or Lead Project Coordinators

*The Be There Buddy Project is a very simple model, but it requires solid planning in order to make an impact. Below is a checklist to help champions of your school's Buddy Project be successful.*

- Identify students in need of a buddy
  - Using data from the previous school year, identify students who missed roughly 1- 2 days/month of school
  - Use this number to:
    - Decide the group of students you would like to give a buddy
    - Decide how many buddies (staff) you will need for the project to be successful
- Schedule planning meeting with key staff members (e.g. school social worker, principal, etc.)
  - Review idea and assign roles to each lead
  - Ask for their help to champion the project and recruit other staff to be buddies
- Schedule an All Staff Meeting to introduce the intervention
  - Bring the list of students who need a buddy
  - Explain idea and invite staff members to serve as buddies
  - Pair volunteering staff members with a student for the school year
- Tell parents of identified students about the Buddy Project
  - *Optional:* Send invitation to a “Buddy Project Kick Off”
  - Send a letter home (**see attached sample**)
  - Call home and personally let the parents/guardians know about the project
    - Let parents know why their student is in this program
    - Work with parents to set goals for their student
    - Let them know the buddy will be calling home when the student misses school
- Schedule a “Buddy Project Kick Off” event at the school for students and buddy-staff to meet each other and become acquainted with the program.
  - Plan a few Icebreaker activities (**see attached**)
  - This event can be as simple or extravagant as you would like. One suggestion is to schedule a special breakfast/lunch. At the event:
    - Ensure students understand why they were “nominated” for the program
    - Designate where they will meet their buddy on a daily basis
    - Set a few short term attendance goals
- On-Going: Schedule weekly meetings for staff to meet and review their student’s progress.
  - Ask buddy staff to report on both qualitative and quantitative results of the program
  - Designate through data students who still seem to be struggling, and develop plan to better support that student
  - To keep tabs on progress, consider developing a survey (**see attached**)

# Expectations for Buddy Project Staff

*A buddy's main goal is to develop a positive and supportive relationship with their assigned student. The logic? If students feel there's someone at the school who holds them accountable for attendance, they're more likely to be motivated and want to be there. Below is a check list to help the buddies/ staff at your school meet their goals.*

- See and connect with assigned student(s) at least twice per day
  - If possible, check in with the student as soon as they walk in the door in the morning, at lunch time, and before they leave school.
  - **Why?** If a student has a negative experience during the school day, e.g. bad test score, bullying, seeing a caring face before they leave the building can make all the difference in motivating them to come back the next day.
- Track student attendance every day.
  - Record the attendance on the school data system and let the child know their attendance as well (**see attached calendar**)
  - **Why?** Making sure to keep track on a regular bases lets the student know you are paying attention, and also ensures accurate tracking of the student's progress
- Make a friendly call home when they don't show up on time.
  - Let the parent know their child was not in school; ask if everything is all right
  - Ask the parent to let their child you miss them and can't wait to see them tomorrow
  - **Why?** When personal and friendly phone calls are made to the home, families and schools develop a stronger, more positive relationship. Parents feel like they also have a friend at school, and their child is being taken care of. It's also possible that if a family is in crisis, the school can become aware and connect them with relevant support and resources.
- Develop reward/incentive system with student that encourages them to meet their goals.
  - Set attendance goals with the student and reward them if they make it; start with shorter goals and increase with difficulty as they get better
  - See the calendar in this toolkit. Use this to help students track their own attendance.
  - Offer the student a sticker, snack, or other reward when they are present the entire week, month, or when they meet their attendance goal. Read on to find more ideas.
  - As your relationship with the student strengthens, you will have a better idea of what motivates them to be there. Of course, rewards alone won't solve the attendance problem, but it's a way to celebrate the small wins.
- Update attendance database (if relevant) and fill out evaluations on as requested.
- Graduate students who meet their goals!
  - Plan a "graduation" for students in the program that meet their goals.
  - Identify another student in need and "nominate" them for the Buddy Project.

# Everyday Mentoring Tips for Buddies

*The Be There Campaign partners with the Mentoring Partnership of Greater Pittsburgh to get the latest tools and resources for supporting youth. Here are some of their tips on everyday mentoring which can be helpful for buddies to review before jumping into the project.*



- Look young people in the eye when you're talking
- Get to know their names
- Ask open-ended questions instead of yes/no questions, for example:

*What's going on today?*

*Anything funny happen at school today?*

*Why is going to school important for you?*

*Are you involved in any sports or afterschool programs?*

- Take note of interesting things about them and ask fun questions, for example:

*I love that pin on your backpack. What does it mean?*

*What do you think of this new product?*

*What do you like about school?*

*What don't you like about school?*

*If there was one thing you could do to make school/your neighborhood more fun?*

- Be a positive role model be constantly setting a good example.
- Wish them luck on their attendance challenge and remind them that every single day counts!
- Remember their birthday/other important personal information they tell you.

# Ideas for Rewards and Incentives for Students

*Rewards for students don't have to cost a lot, or anything at all! Here are some ideas for both free and low cost rewards for students that you can offer when they reach milestones during the school year. Ask students to weigh in on the ideas—they know best what will encourage them to continue working toward their goals!*

## Daily

Stickers  
Joke or riddle of the day  
Daily Calendar page

## Weekly

Candy Jar  
Extra recess time  
Snacks  
Lunch line “fast pass”  
Free Homework pass  
Pencils, pens, other school supplies  
Special lunch with favorite teacher or friend

## Tips

This is an all year challenge. Find new ways to keep the students encouraged and motivated. Continue letting them know how excited you are to see them in school every day.

Have weekly and monthly incentives.

Set a year-long goal and reward. Let the students know how many days they need to attend to get the reward.





**Dear Student,**



**You are invited to join the Be There Buddy Project!**

We want school to be a place you love to be! This year, you will have a special adult who works in the school be your buddy. Your buddy will be someone to talk to about your day and they will help you feel supported.

Your buddy wants you to be in school, on time, every day! When you aren't in school, they will make a phone call home to check and make sure everything is O.K. They will miss you on days you are absent, so do your best to have perfect attendance! Your buddy is like your cheerleader, they will always encourage you to be and do your best.

**Your buddy this year will be:**

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## Dear Parent,

We want you to know that our school is doing their best to make sure students feel loved and supported at school. One strategy we plan to use this year to be successful is the

### **Be There Buddy Program.**

Your child will be paired with a staff person who will be their “buddy.” The student will meet with their buddy every day at school. Buddies will encourage students to work hard and have perfect attendance! If your student is absent from school, their buddy will make a friendly phone call home to check in and make sure everything is O.K.

Please contact the school if you have any questions about the program.

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_



## Questions to “Break the Ice”

*Below are some questions that you and your buddy can ask each other in order to get to know each other better. Each of you will answer the question. Feel free to ask other questions that you feel are missing!*

Do you have siblings?

Who is your best friend? What about them is special?

Do you have any hidden talents?

What is your favorite book?

What is your favorite song? Sing a few lines!

If you don't have a favorite song, what kind of music do you like?

What is your favorite movie?

If you had an endless supply of any food, what would it be?

Where is your favorite place to go with your family?

Where is your favorite place to go with your friends?

Where is your favorite thing to do?

Do you have any phobias? What are they?

Do you believe in aliens or life on other planets?

# Be There Buddy Monthly Report

*Thank you for going above and beyond to help our students succeed. This report is meant to help you keep track of the experience and progress of your assigned buddy. Please take a few minutes to share your thoughts and ideas about the program. Prior to filling out this form, please reference attendance records to understand your buddy's progress in improving their attendance.*

Note: If you are assigned to multiple students, fill out a form that is unique to each of them.

First and Last Name \_\_\_\_\_

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_

Student's Grade Level \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been paired with your student? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you seen improvement from the previous school year?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Do you think your buddy is ready to graduate from the program?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

How many absences (excused and unexcused) does your student have so far this year? \_\_\_\_\_

How many times has your student been tardy this year? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you been able to connect with your student's parents/guardians every time your buddy has been absent?

- Yes
- No

If not, why?

Do you need extra support in your involvement with the buddy program? If so, please describe.

Please share anything else about the program that hasn't yet been covered.

To access the report in its original form from a Be There representative, email Campaign Coordinator, Jenna Baron at [Jenna.Baron@uwac.org](mailto:Jenna.Baron@uwac.org).



Teacher/Buddy's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Student's First Name: \_\_\_\_\_

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
<p>Date: _____</p> <p>Circle: Present Absent</p> <p>Call home? Notes from Call:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>Date: _____</p> <p>Circle: Present Absent</p> <p>Call home? Notes from Call:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>Date: _____</p> <p>Circle: Present Absent</p> <p>Call home? Notes from Call:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>Date: _____</p> <p>Circle: Present Absent</p> <p>Call home? Notes from Call:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>Date: _____</p> <p>Circle: Present Absent</p> <p>Call home? Notes from Call:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>



**Be There Buddy Weekly Calendar**

