THE SEAT SERIES · FREE ATTENDANCE SCIENCE™ RESOURCE

SEAT 12

Practitioners · K-12

Refusal and Avoidance: Matching Care to Cause



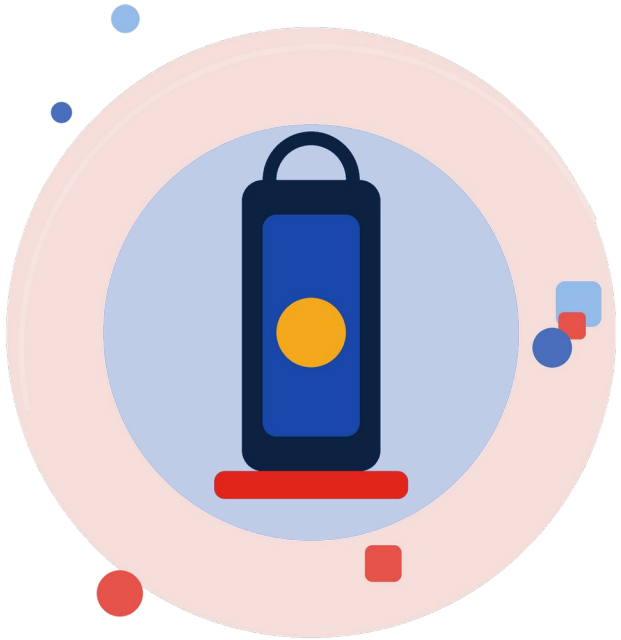
How do I respond when anxiety or the school environment is keeping a student home?

10 slides · 2 handouts · evidence from Schools Spared, Children Punished and the Attendance Science™ research base

Clinical anxiety needs therapy, not a court date

> A student kept home by a caregiving schedule needs logistics support. A student avoiding a hostile building needs the building to change. A student in clinical anxiety needs therapy rather than a court date. Under most district policy today, all three receive the same truancy letter.

Source: Gentle-Genitty, Schools Spared, Children Punished (Attendance USA, 2026)



Every story in this series is a composite or a published case. Names are invented.

What practitioners are asking

How do I respond when anxiety or the school environment is keeping a student home?

1

Anxious students are punished for distress.

2

Bullying-related absence gets labeled defiance.

3

School avoidance sits inside counts no federal system tracks.

Shared words before shared work

R

Refusal

Anxiety-driven absence, often with clinical features.

A

Avoidance

Climate-driven absence rooted in a negative experience of the building.

G

Gradual re-entry

Partial days, safe-person check-ins, a quiet arrival.

The numbers behind the moment

+27%

rise in adolescent anxiety diagnoses, 2016 to 2019

Guinn Center / NICRP (2025), Chronic Absenteeism in Nevada, Part II; Attendance Works

1 in 5

U.S. K-12 students with a diagnosed mental-health condition

Guinn Center / NICRP (2025), Chronic Absenteeism in Nevada, Part II; Attendance Works

18.5%

of long-term absences linked to not feeling safe at school

OECD report on long-term student absence (causes reported)

Classify before you consequence

Refusal

Fear before school, physical complaints, fine on weekends. Counselor within 48 hours.

Avoidance

Avoids a person, place or time. Investigate and change the window.

Withdrawal

Rule out home logistics before assuming anxiety.

Truancy

Rule out fear before assuming choice.

Three moves you can make this week

01

Cost: $0

Loop in counseling

Bring the school counselor in within 48 hours of a refusal pattern.

02

Cost: $0

Find the trigger

Academic demand, peers, transitions or sensory load?

03

Cost: $0

Take bullying seriously

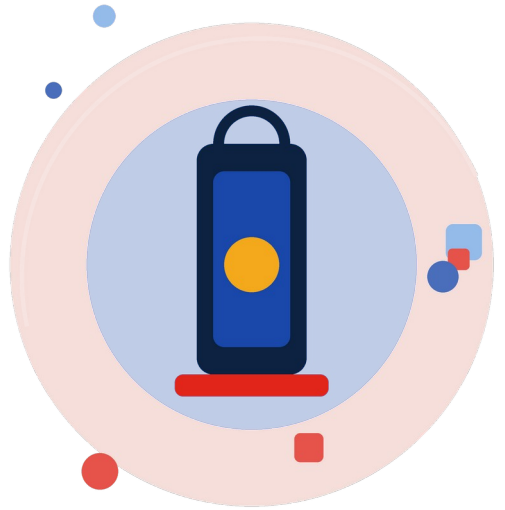
Private interview, report per policy, weekly follow-up; avoid peer mediation.

A PRESENCE™ prompt for your building

P	R	E	S	E	N	C	E
Problem definition	Research evidence	**Environmental context**	Statistical analysis	Equity assessment	Network and partnership	**Compliance and legal**	Evidence-based recommendations

YOUR PROMPT

Map where and when avoidance occurs. Cross-reference incident reports with absence by period. Then check what your policy requires before acting.



Common missteps, and how you will know it works

- ✕ Punitive consequences for anxiety, which increase avoidance
- ✕ Peer mediation for bullying
- ✕ Telling families 'it's being handled' without concrete safety steps

LEADING INDICATOR · Moves first

Refusal cases with a re-entry plan

LAGGING INDICATOR · Confirms it worked

Partial-day to full-day progress

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Seat 09: The Four Reasons
Seat 10: SALT: A Strengths-First Response
Seat 11: The Family Stability Conversation

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