



LEADING WELL UNDER PRESSURE

2026 MASE Fall Leadership Conference

October 21-23, 2026 | Brainerd, Minnesota

Ahead of the Curve

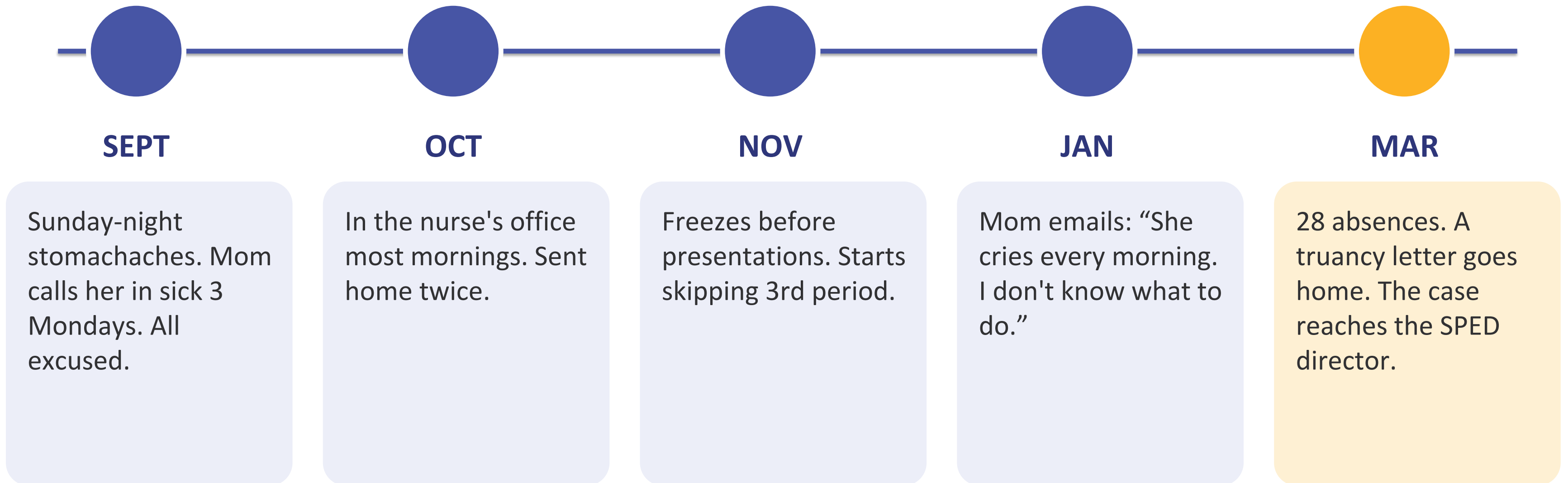
An MTSS Framework for School Avoidance Leadership

Alexandra McCannel, LMFT • Founder, Genoa

Thursday, October 23, 2026 • 9:00 AM



Meet Emma, 7th grade



A composite of the cases I see every year



Every signal was there. Nobody connected them.



Attendance office

Saw 3 Mondays out. All excused, so nothing triggered.



School nurse

Logged daily visits in a system no one else reviews.



Teacher

Noticed the freezing and skipping. Didn't know where to send it.



Parent

Asked for help. The email sat in one inbox.

This isn't a people problem. It's a system problem.



Why I'm talking about this



HEALTH AND EDUCATIONAL
SERVICES

Alexandra McCannel, LMFT

Founder of Genoa; Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist

10+ years working with children, teens, and families

8+ years inside Minnesota school districts on mental health and school avoidance

Today: the gap, the legal stakes, and what a defensible response requires



It's not just your building

1 in 5+

Minnesota students are chronically absent,
missing 10% or more of the school year

AND MOST OF IT IS EXCUSED

“Most absences are excused rather than unexcused, highlighting the need for prevention and intervention strategies that address all forms of absenteeism, not solely truancy.”

Minnesota Student Attendance Pilot, Report to the Legislature, July 2026



Minnesota's pilot districts are saying it too

“To scale this success, we believe a state-level inventory of evidence-based interventions—categorized by Tiers 1, 2, and 3—is essential.”

Minnesota Student Attendance Pilot, Report to the Legislature, July 2026

4 of 12

pilot districts reported increased mental-health-related absenteeism

3.5×

Students without a sense of belonging were 3.5 times as likely to miss school feeling sad, anxious, or stressed



Where most districts fall short

HOW MTSS IS DESIGNED

Tier 3 · few

Tier 2 · some

Tier 1 · all students

WHAT SCHOOL AVOIDANCE USUALLY GETS

Tier 3 · crisis response

Gap 2: no Tier 2

Gap 1: no early identification



Gap 1: No early identification



Only unexcused absences count

Anxiety shows up as parent-excused sick days, invisible to truancy systems



No written threshold

“Concerning” means something different in every building



Teacher concerns stay in the hallway

No simple way to flag, and no one assigned to receive it



Data lives in silos

Attendance, nurse visits, and parent emails never meet

By the time it's obvious, it's chronic.



Gap 2: Nothing between the letter home and the crisis

WHAT MOST DISTRICTS HAVE

Truancy letter home

Attendance meeting

County / educational-neglect referral

Crisis and a SPED referral

WHAT ANXIOUS STUDENTS NEED, EARLY



A consistent adult who checks in



Skills for managing anxiety at school



Family coaching, so home and school respond the same way



A short, documented re-engagement plan



Four reasons students avoid school

AVOIDING SOMETHING AT SCHOOL



Function 1: Avoiding school-related distress

Dread, stomachaches, panic at the door, the building or the bus



Function 2: Escaping social pressure

Peers, presentations, tests, gym, being called on or judged

GETTING SOMETHING OUTSIDE SCHOOL



Function 3: Getting attention from parents

Wanting to stay close to a parent; often looks like separation worry



Function 4: Getting rewards outside school

Sleep, screens, friends, freedom

Same absence. Different reason. Different response.



Same absences, different kids



Student A: avoiding something at school

Sunday-night dread, stomachaches

Panic at the door, freezes before presentations

Needs: gradual re-entry, coping skills, family coaching

Consequences alone often make it worse

Rewards are ineffective



Student B: pulled toward something outside

Up late gaming, sleeps in

Home is easier and more fun than school

Needs: structure, routines, incentives, accountability

Consequences and rewards can help



Child Find doesn't wait for a parent to ask

34 C.F.R. § 300.111: districts must actively locate, identify, and evaluate students who may have a disability.

IN PRACTICE, THE DUTY TO EVALUATE IS TRIGGERED WHEN STAFF HAVE:



Significant absences

Excused or unexcused, it all counts



A reason to suspect a mental-health link

Nurse visits, somatic complaints, known treatment



A possible need for services

Not about grades

Emma had all three by November.



Two cases, one lesson



ISD No. 283 v. E.M.D.H.

8th Cir. 2020 · Minnesota

District knew about her mental-health treatment and missed school

Dis-enrolled her instead of evaluating her

District lost: Child Find violation; compensatory education

“The District confuses intellect for an education.”



A.P. v. Pearland ISD

5th Cir. 2025 · Texas

Absences from family travel and minor illness

No behavioral, mental-health, or serious health concerns

District won: absences alone didn't trigger Child Find

Courts don't just count absences. They ask whether you saw the pattern, and what you did.



The question you'll be asked

“What did you know, when did you know it, and what did you do?”

THE GAP

No early identification

No Tier 2

No documentation

No proof of delivery

HOW IT SOUNDS IN A HEARING

“The signs were documented. No one acted on them.”

“The district's only response was a truancy letter.”

“The district can't show what it did, or when.”

“‘It didn't work’ isn't credible if it wasn't done as planned.”



What it costs when you can't answer



Compensatory education

Tutoring and services to make up lost learning



Two sets of legal fees

Yours, plus the family's attorney fees if they prevail



Private placement

Tuition reimbursement when FAPE is denied



Staff time

Due process prep, hearings, months of crisis management



Lost enrollment

Students who leave take their funding with them



Evaluation reimbursement

Paying for the evaluations the family got on their own

Every one of these starts with a pattern nobody acted on in September.



What a defensible system has



Every absence counts

Excused and unexcused, reviewed on a regular cadence



More than one way in

Attendance data, teacher observation, and parent concern



Teachers flag, the team fixes

The teacher's job is to flag, the team addresses the concern



A real Tier 2

Structured support while the problem is still small



Documented decisions

Data, team sign-off, and proof the support was delivered



A built-in Child Find checkpoint

Intensive cases prompt a special ed evaluation review

Knowing is the easy part. **The how is where districts get stuck.**



How ready is your district?

☐

Do excused absences count toward your attendance flags?

☐

Is there a Tier 2 option between the letter home and a crisis?

☐

Is there a written threshold that triggers a team review?

☐

Are tier decisions documented with data and team sign-off?

☐

Do teachers know exactly what to flag, and where to send it?

☐

Does an intensive case automatically prompt a special ed evaluation review?

Fewer than six? You're not alone, and that's the gap.



Turn and talk: Emma in your district

1

Who in your district would have noticed Emma first?

2

Where would that information have gone?

3

When would your district have formally acted?



2 minutes



Three things to take home

1

Anxiety hides in excused absences.

Count all of it, and look past the number to the pattern.

2

Child Find asks what you knew and what you did.

Your system, and your documentation, is your answer.

3

The gap is early.

Early identification and a real Tier 2 is where Emma gets identified in September, not March.



2026 MASE FALL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

Let's keep talking



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Scan to request the framework
materials

Questions?



References

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This presentation is general education, not legal advice. Consult your district's counsel.