GUIDE 3 OF 5 · IPG PLANNING TOOLS

Root Cause

What root cause analysis is, how to run the meeting, and what to do at each of the tool's six steps, from the problem statement to proposal-ready text.

Reading time: about 20 minutes. The examples use two made-up schools, Pleasantville Middle School and Riverview Alternative High School. Every number about them is invented.

Systems for Innovative Schools, LLC · Rockford, Michigan · October 2026

What root cause analysis is

A needs assessment tells you *what* the problem is. Root cause analysis asks *why* it exists, and keeps asking until the answer is something the adults in your school can change. Skip it and you risk choosing an intervention that treats the symptom: a tutoring program for a problem that is really a follow-up routine nobody owns.

A symptom

What you see in the data. "Students with disabilities are chronically absent at 49.6%."

A root cause

A condition the school controls that produces the symptom. "No routine assigns same-week absence follow-up for students with IEPs to a specific adult."

Three ideas run through every step:

1. **Focus on what adults control.** Causes are stated as conditions the school can change, never as faults of students or families. The tool flags blaming language and asks you to restate it.
2. **Separate hunches from evidence.** Every cause is marked as supported by data or still a hunch. A hunch isn't wrong; it's something to check.
3. **Context is real, but it isn't the plan.** Some causes are outside your control, like funding rules or a student's medical needs. They go on a "context" rail: acknowledged, not ignored, and not something your plan has to fix.

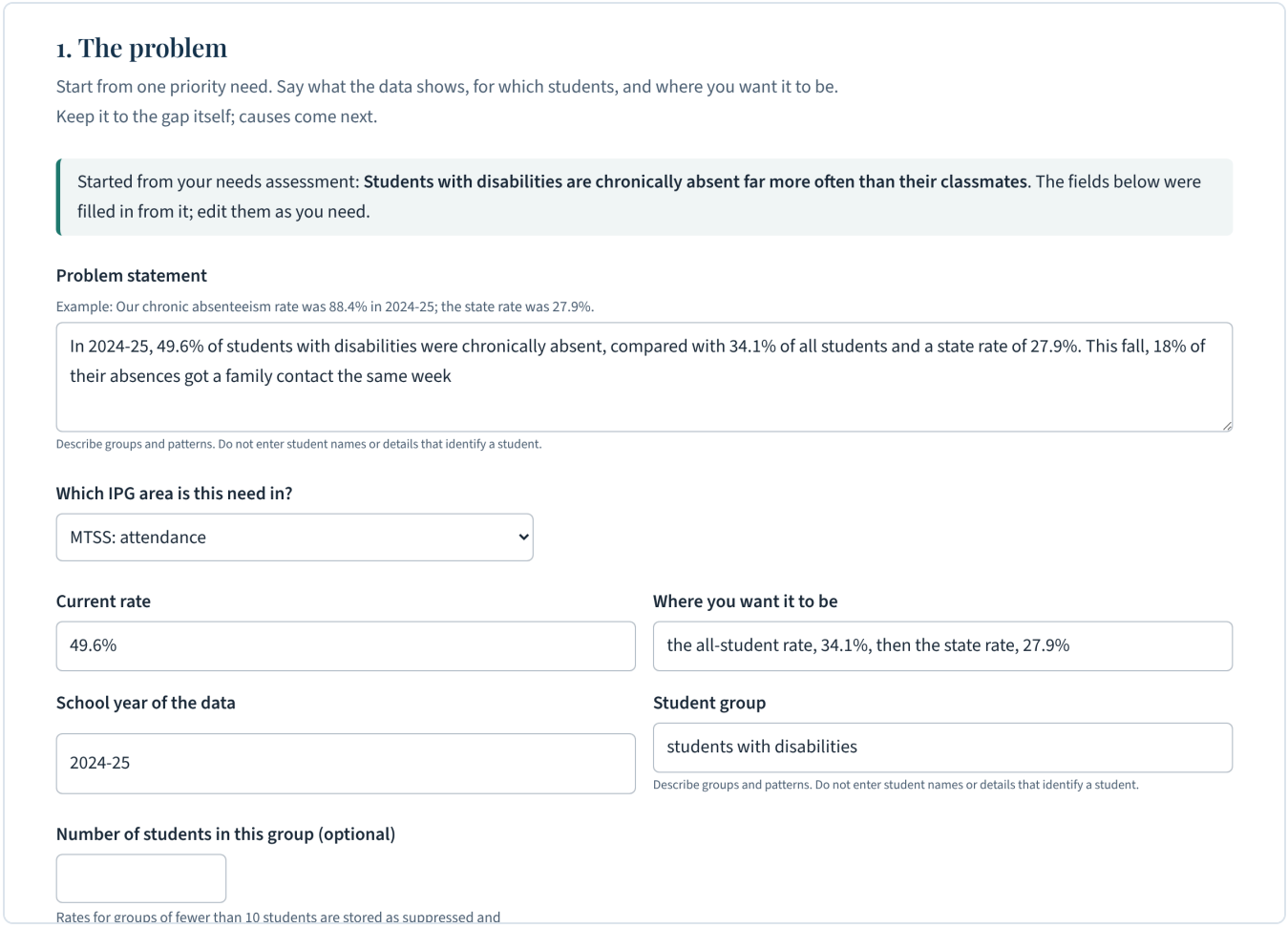
Running the meeting (90 minutes)

- 5 min: the problem statement, read aloud (step 1, done beforehand by the lead)
- 30 min: fishbone brainstorm, every idea on a bone, no debate yet (step 2)
- 10 min: mark who controls each cause and whether data supports it
- 25 min: five whys on two or three causes (step 3)
- 15 min: evidence check (step 4); assign anyone gathering missing data
- 5 min: confirm and code (step 5), or agree to finish once the data is in

> **FACILITATION**
>
> Write causes as the team says them, then restate together. "Parents don't value school" becomes "We have no routine for meeting with a family after a pattern of absences." The second version is something you can change on Monday.

1 The problem

Start from a priority in your needs assessment and the problem statement carries across. Check the IPG area, then state the gap as numbers: where you are now, where you want to be, the year of the data, and the student group.



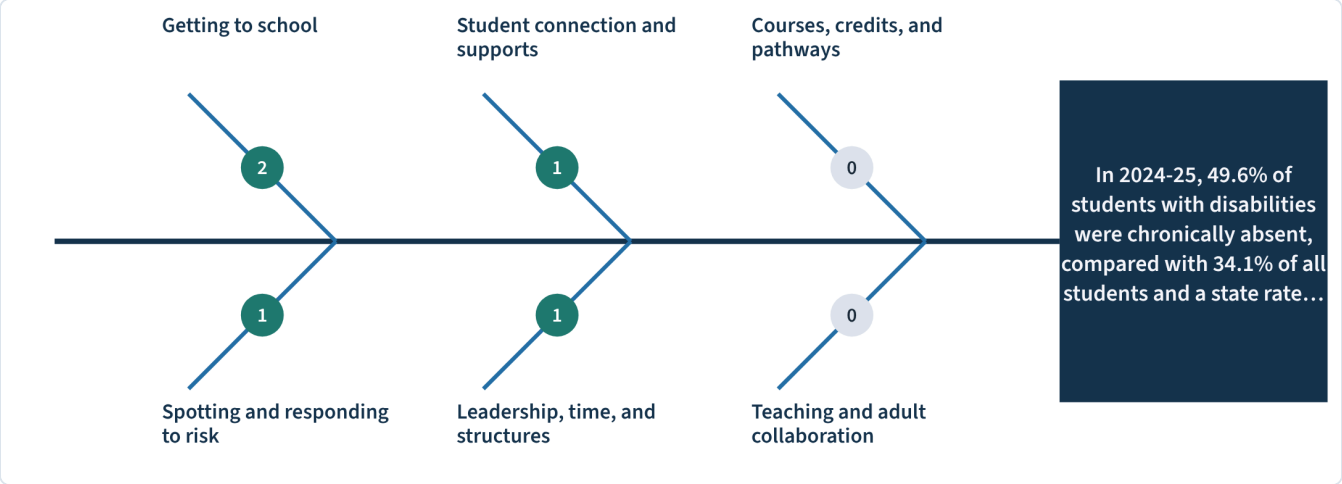
Step 1: Pleasantville's problem statement, started from its first priority.

PLEASANTVILLE

Current rate 49.6%; target the all-student rate, 34.1%, then the state rate, 27.9%; year 2024-25; group: students with disabilities. A good problem statement describes a gap you can measure, without guessing at its cause.

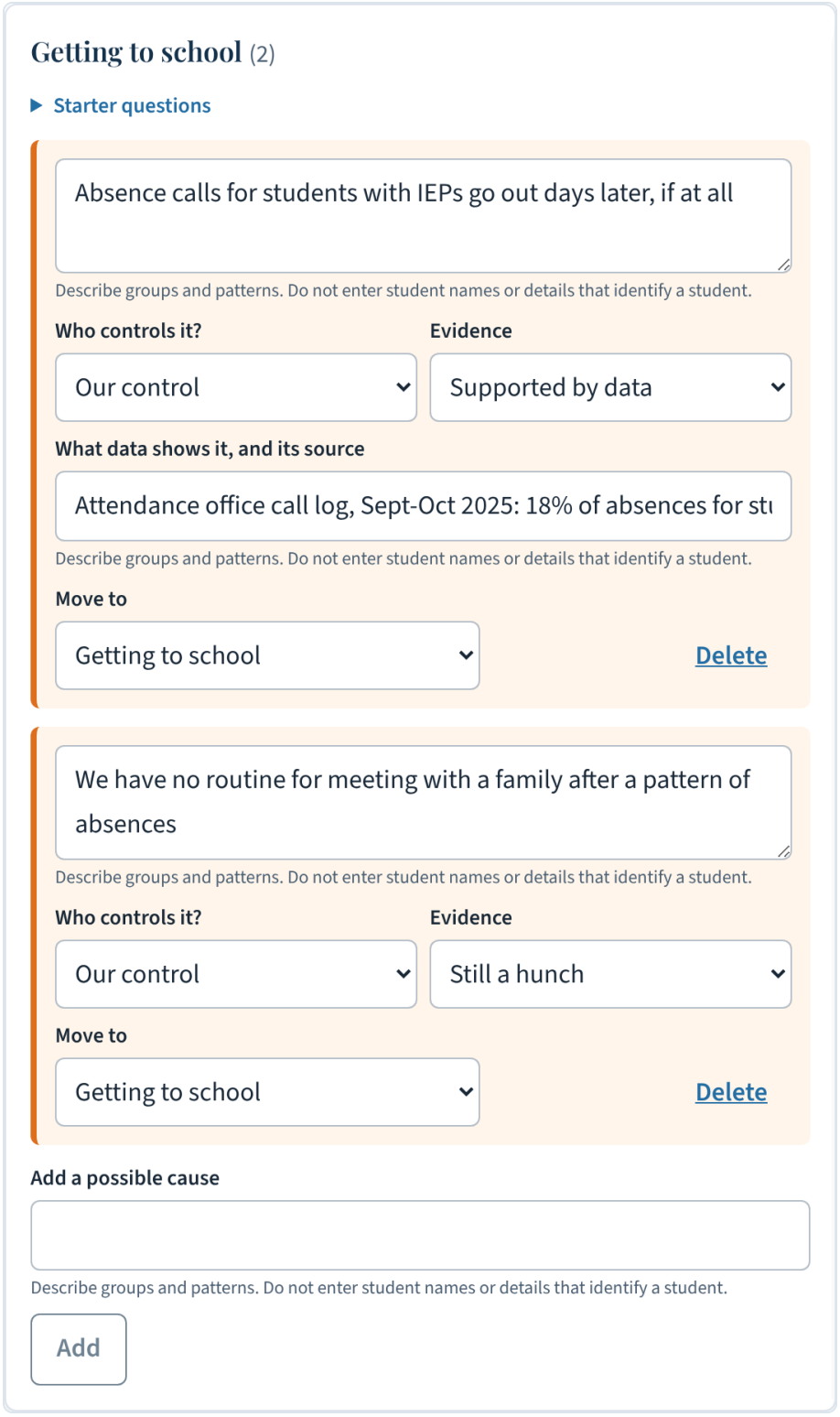
2 Fishbone: possible causes

Possible causes hang on six bones: student connection and supports; getting to school; spotting and responding to risk; courses, credits and pathways; teaching and adult collaboration; and leadership, time and structures. The tool orders the bones by the problem's area and offers starter questions on each.

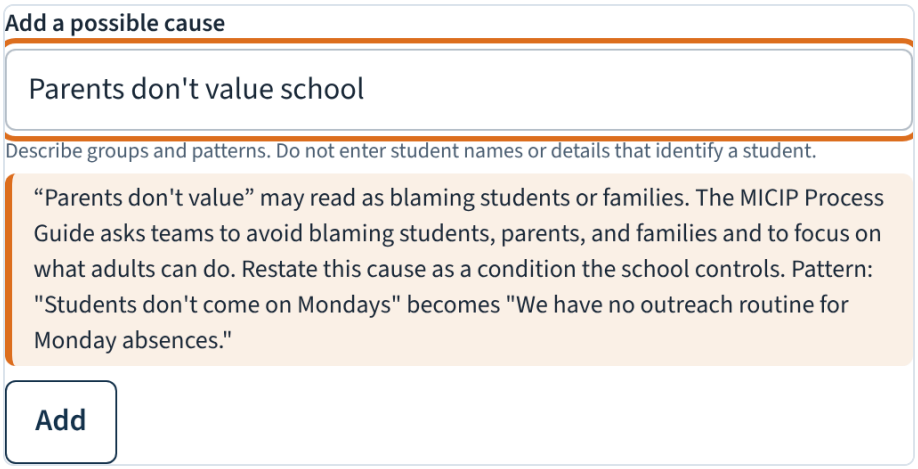


Step 2: the fishbone diagram, with the number of causes on each bone.

Add causes in plain words, then give each two quick judgments: **who controls it** (our control, we can influence it, outside our control) and **evidence** (supported by data, or still a hunch). For supported causes, write the data and its source on the card.



Causes on the Getting to school bone, with control, evidence and the data behind them.



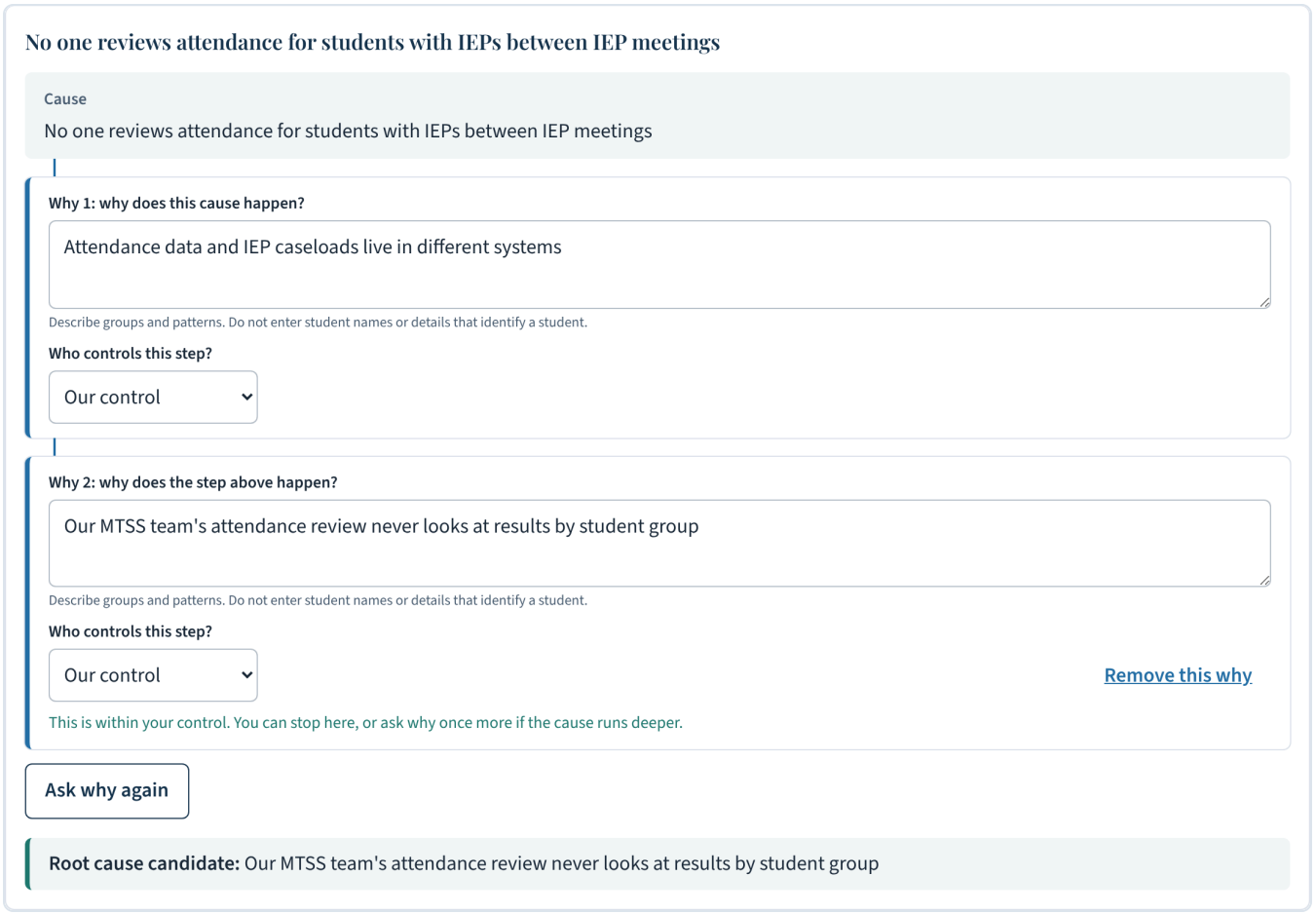
The tool flags blaming language and asks you to restate the cause as a condition the school controls.

PLEASANTVILLE'S CAUSES

- **Getting to school:** Absence calls for students with IEPs go out days later, if at all (our control; supported by data)
- **Getting to school:** We have no routine for meeting with a family after a pattern of absences (our control; still a hunch)
- **Spotting and responding to risk:** No one reviews attendance for students with IEPs between IEP meetings (our control; still a hunch)
- **Student connection and supports:** Suspensions pull students with IEPs out of school, and re-entry is uneven (we can influence it; supported by data)
- **Leadership, time, and structures:** The attendance team and the special education team meet separately and never compare lists (our control; still a hunch)
- **Context:** Some students have medical needs that require frequent appointments

3 Five whys

Pick up to three causes you control or influence, starting with the ones your data supports. For each, ask "why does this happen?" and write the answer as the next rung, marking who controls it. Stop when you reach something the school can act on directly, or when the answer leaves your control. You rarely need all five.



Step 3: a five-whys ladder ending in a root cause candidate.

PLEASANTVILLE

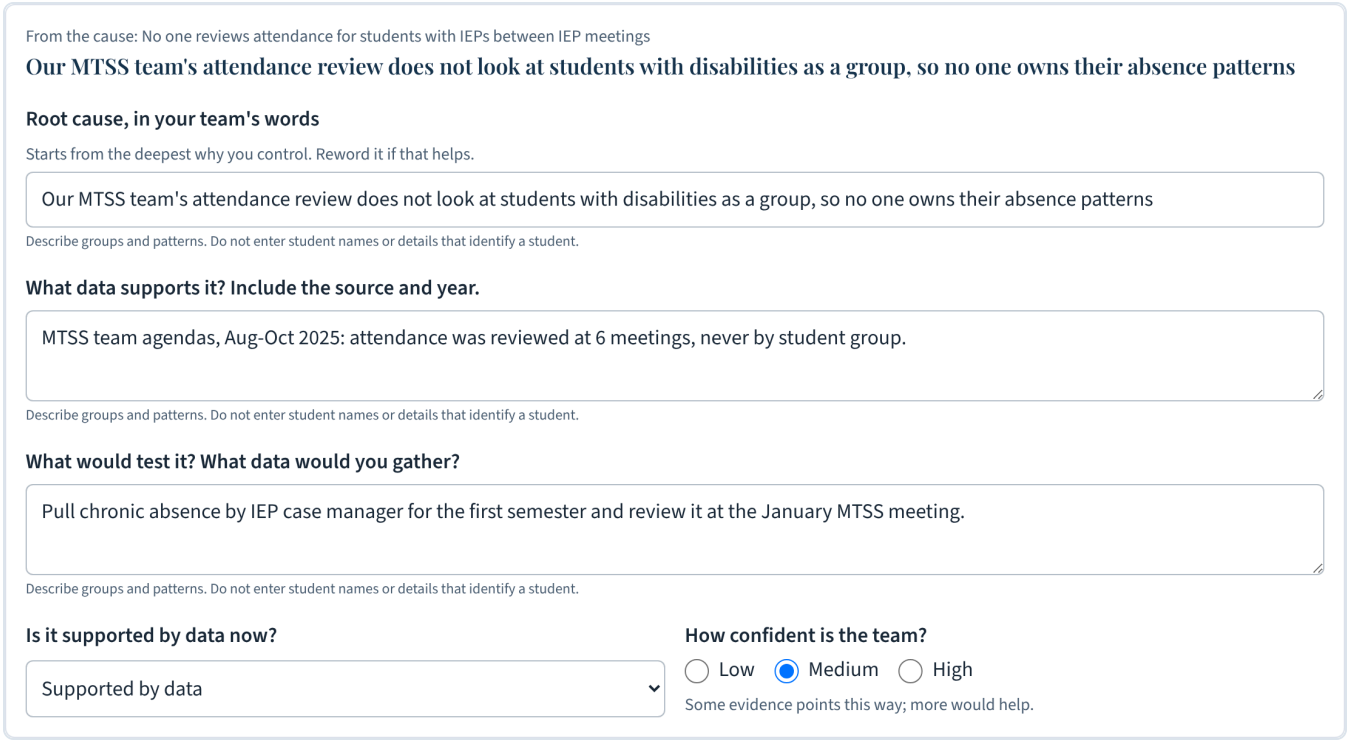
No one reviews attendance for students with IEPs between IEP meetings. Why? Attendance data and IEP caseloads live in different systems. Why? Our MTSS team's attendance review never looks at results by student group.

Absence calls for students with IEPs go out days later, if at all. Why? One attendance clerk makes every absence call for 641 students. Why? No routine assigns same-week follow-up to a student's case manager or advisory teacher.

Both ladders end at adult routines, not at students. That's the pattern to look for.

4 Evidence check

For each root cause candidate, write it in your team's words, then record **what data supports it now** and **what would test it**. Mark whether it's supported by data and how confident the team is: low, medium or high.



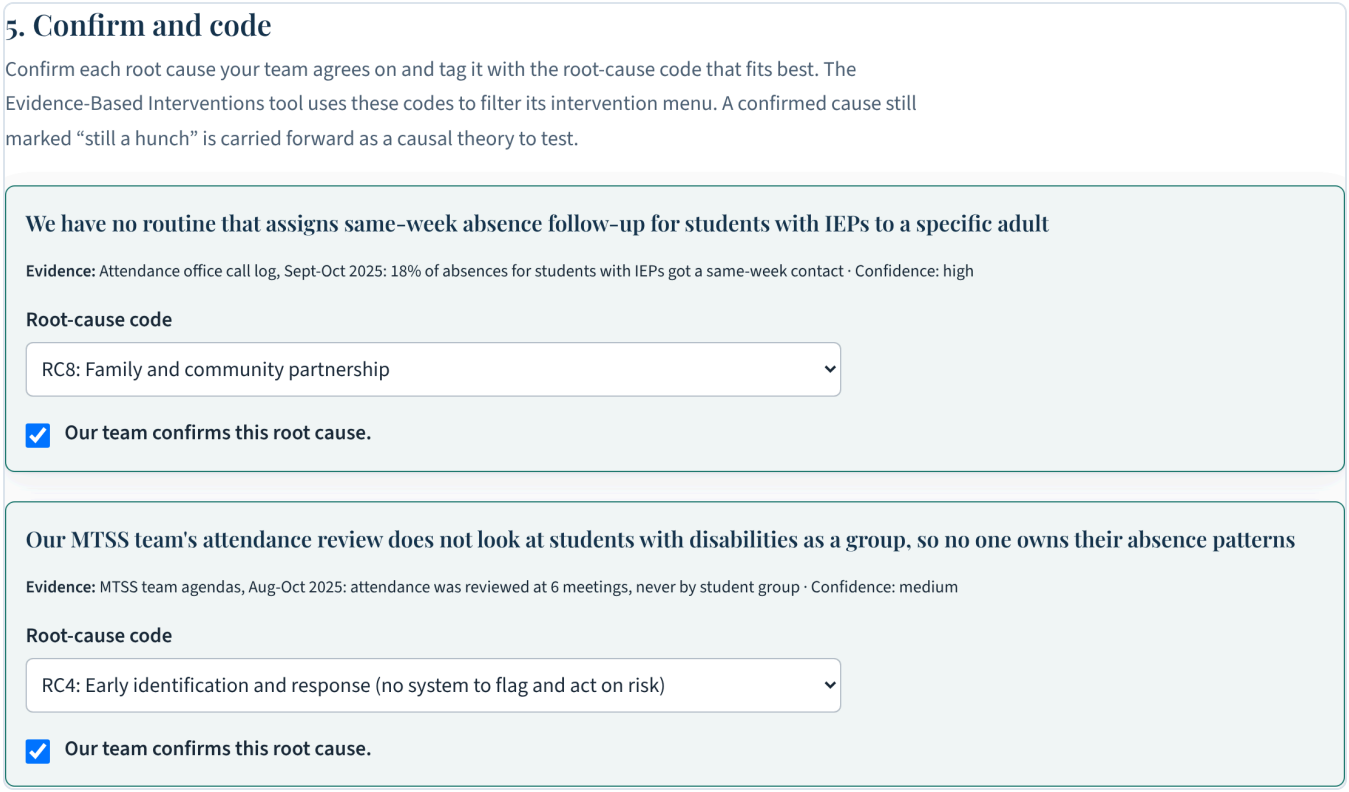
Step 4: the evidence check for one root cause candidate.

EVIDENCE OF THE PROBLEM IS NOT EVIDENCE OF THE CAUSE

"Chronic absence is 49.6%" is evidence of the problem. "MTSS agendas from August to October show attendance reviewed six times, never by student group" is evidence of the cause.

5 Confirm and code

Confirm each root cause the team agrees on and tag it with the root-cause code that fits best. The twelve codes (RC1 to RC12) are shared across the IPG materials and point toward evidence-based interventions for that kind of cause. A cause that's still a hunch can be confirmed as a **causal theory to test**: an honest result that belongs in your plan as something to check early.

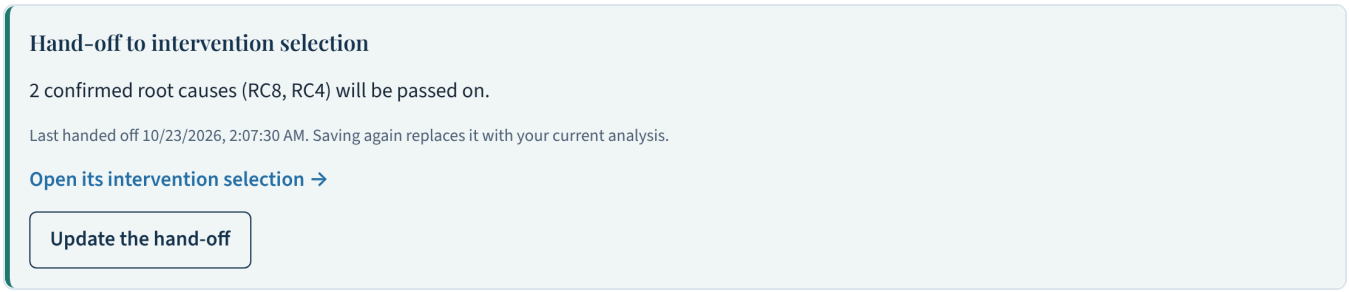


Step 5: two confirmed root causes with their codes.

PLEASANTVILLE'S ROOT CAUSE	CODE	CONFIDENCE
Our MTSS team's attendance review does not look at students with disabilities as a group, so no one owns their absence patterns	RC4 Early identification and response	Medium
We have no routine that assigns same-week absence follow-up for students with IEPs to a specific adult	RC8 Family and community partnership	High

6 Summary and hand-off

The summary pulls together the problem, the causes considered, the five-whys chains and the confirmed root causes with their evidence and codes, written for the root cause section of your proposal. Copy any block, copy everything, or print a clean copy.



Step 6: the hand-off to intervention selection.

From root causes to your plan

- **Choose interventions that act on the cause.** Once the hand-off is saved, **Choose interventions for this problem** opens the Evidence-Based Interventions tool with your domains and confirmed root-cause codes already in place. For each code, look for practices with evidence for that kind of cause, and check that the one you choose changes the condition you found.
- **Turn tests into early milestones.** The "what would test it" entries become checks in the first months of your plan.
- **Keep the baseline.** Measure progress with the same data and source as your evidence statement.

VIDEOS FOR THIS GUIDE

Root Cause 1 to 6 on the Start Here page show every step with Pleasantville Middle School's attendance priority.

IF YOUR TEAM GETS STUCK

Where to get help

The tools are free for every eligible school, and most teams can work through them on their own with this guide and the short videos. If you'd like another set of eyes, here is what's available.

1. Office hours

Four sessions, all Eastern time: Friday, November 13, noon to 1:30 p.m.; Friday, November 20, noon to 1:30 p.m.; Tuesday, November 24, noon to 1:30 p.m.; and Monday, November 30, 9 to 10 a.m. The first 30 minutes answer questions sent in ahead of time; the rest is open for questions live. Anything that needs more research or analysis is answered in the first half hour of the next session. Sign up on the Start Here page for the sessions you plan to join, or ask for the recordings, and send your questions on the same form.

2. Videos and guides

Every video and guide, step by step, is on the Start Here page. Inside each tool, "Help for this step" shows the video and guide pages for the step you're on.

3. One-on-one conversations

Office hours are the place to bring your questions. Booking links for individual conversations may be set up after the first office hours, depending on availability and need.

The office hours sign-up is on the Start Here page: tools.systemsforinnovativeschools.com/start