

# ATTENDANCE PLAYBOOK

SMART STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING  
STUDENT ABSENTEEISM POST-PANDEMIC

BY PHYLLIS JORDAN  
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**FutureEd**  
Independent Analysis, Innovative Ideas



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Attendance Works is a national nonprofit initiative that supports improved policy and practices around school attendance. Our mission is to advance student success and help close equity gaps by reducing chronic absence. Follow us on Twitter at @AttendanceWorks.

# ATTENDANCE PLAYBOOK

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## FOREWORD

Among the dire educational consequences of the pandemic, the impact on student absenteeism stands out. The pandemic's long months of remote learning, hybrid schedules and repeated quarantines frayed bonds among students and between students and educators and fractured routines of attending school. Left unaddressed, these high levels of absenteeism threaten to undermine the unprecedented investment of federal Covid-relief funds in public schools.

To help education policymakers and practitioners respond to the post-pandemic absenteeism crisis in the nation's schools, FutureEd and Attendance Works have created a comprehensive compendium of strategies to address the many different dimensions of the absenteeism dilemma. Building on an earlier attendance playbook the two organizations first published in 2019, the new analysis includes more than two dozen effective, readily scalable approaches covering topics ranging from family engagement to the value of attendance incentives and students' social and emotional well-being, a high priority for educators post-pandemic.

In *Attendance Playbook: Smart Strategies for Reducing Chronic Student Absenteeism Post-Pandemic*, we explain each intervention, identify the problem it solves, summarize supporting research, and highlight schools or school districts that have used the strategy successfully.

We partnered with the nonprofit Attendance Works on the project and are grateful for the invaluable contributions of Hedy N. Chang, Cecelia Leong, and Catherine Cooney. We also consulted with leading attendance researchers and practitioners, including Elliott Attisha, Michael Gottfried, Clea McNeely, Todd Rogers and Kari Sullivan.

An important aspect of our analysis was gauging the quality of the research supporting absenteeism interventions. We engaged Texas Tech University researcher Teresa Lansford to assess the new studies we cite in the report against the four levels of research evidence described in the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. We include her research ratings throughout the report.

Finally, FutureEd Associate Director Phyllis Jordan managed the project and wrote much of the report, and Policy Analyst Bella DiMarco provided editorial support. Molly Breen and Jackie Arthur of FutureEd's editorial team did a great job producing the report, as always.

**Thomas Toch**

**Director, FutureEd**

## INTRODUCTION

Among the dire educational consequences of the pandemic, the impact on student absenteeism stands out. The pandemic's long months of remote learning, hybrid schedules and repeated quarantines frayed bonds among students and between students and educators and fractured routines of attending school.

At least 10 million students—more than one in every five students in the nation—were chronically absent, missing at least 10 percent of the school year, in the 2020-21 school year, the latest federal data reveals—a striking 20 percent increase from already troubling pre-pandemic levels. More recent state-level data is even more alarming. Connecticut, for example, reports that the proportion of chronically absent students in the state rose from 12 percent in the 2018-19 school year to 25 percent in 2021-22. In California, it climbed from 13 percent to 30 percent. Ohio saw a jump from 20 to 39 percent. The numbers were highest among students living in poverty, with disabilities or from communities of color.

The consequences of chronic absenteeism for students' academic prospects are devastating. By 9th grade, a student's chance of graduating from high school drops by 20 percent for every week of school they miss, [one study found](#). And the strikingly high rates of student absenteeism post-pandemic are undermining educators' efforts to

help students recover from the pandemic and diluting the massive, \$189 billion federal investment in that work.

To help education policymakers and practitioners respond to the post-pandemic absenteeism crisis in the nation's schools, FutureEd and Attendance Works have created a comprehensive compendium of strategies to address the many different dimensions of the absenteeism dilemma. Building on an earlier attendance playbook the two organizations first published in 2019, the new analysis includes more than two dozen effective, readily scalable approaches covering topics ranging from family engagement to the value of attendance incentives and students' social and emotional well-being, a high priority for educators post-pandemic.

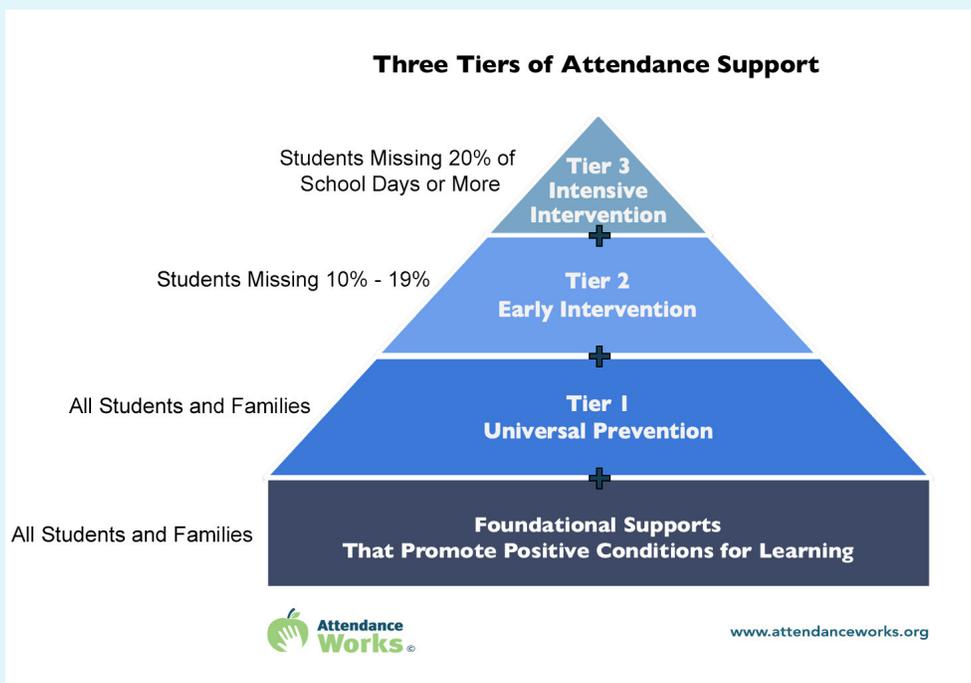
Each section describes a strategy, identifies the problem it solves, summarizes supporting research, suggests whether the intervention should be offered to all students or targeted toward those missing the most school, and highlights schools or school districts that have used the intervention successfully. The strategies eschew punitive approaches to reducing truancy, which research have found to be largely unsuccessful, and instead promote conditions that strengthen the educational experiences of all students: rigorous instruction that is relevant to students' lives; a safe, welcoming school climate; and stronger bonds between students and teachers.

## TIERS OF SUPPORT

The Attendance Playbook's interventions are organized into tiers. The first tier of support includes universal strategies applicable to all students and families, while the second and third tiers offer increasing levels of targeted support for students with higher levels of absenteeism. This approach will be familiar to educators and public health officials who use other multi-tiered systems of support, such as Response to Intervention and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support.

### Foundational Support

Attendance strategies work best when other, **underlying conditions** are present in schools, including physical and emotional health and safety, a sense of belonging among students and educators, academic challenge and engagement, and students and educators who are able to navigate school life socially and emotionally—conditions rooted in relationship-building and that are crucial to motivating students to come to school. High levels of chronic absenteeism are an indication that these positive conditions were never established or have deteriorated.



### Tier 1: School-wide Prevention

These strategies are aimed specifically at preventing absenteeism among all students. Examples of strategies include setting expectations about when students show up to class and recognizing improvement in attendance.

### Tier 2: Targeted Support

These interventions are designed to remove barriers to attendance for students at heightened risk of chronic absenteeism, such as those who are close to or already missing 10 percent of the school year (the standard definition of chronic absenteeism). Tier 2 interventions can be offered to individuals or to groups of students in similar circumstances. Schools need to give these students and their families more personal attention to help them understand the importance of coming to school and create a plan to address the barriers they are facing.

### Tier 3: Intensive Support

These interventions provide intensive support to students most at risk of chronic absenteeism and typically require case management customized to an individual student's challenges and can involve health, housing and social services agencies. Students missing 20 percent or more of the school year benefit from this level of support.

## UNDERSTANDING THE EVIDENCE

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) establishes four levels of evidence for education research and requires federal spending on schools in need of improvement (about 7 percent of the Title I budget) to include at least one evidence-based intervention at each school. To ensure the playbook's practices align with the requirement, we have summarized ESSA's four levels of research evidence and worked with Texas Tech University researcher Teresa Lansford to document the degree of evidence that exists for each intervention under the federal law's standards.

This doesn't mean, however, that every attendance approach schools use must be evidence-based. The American Rescue Plan calls for spending at least 20 percent of Covid-relief aid to K-12 schools on evidence-based practices but allows for spending at all four levels of evidence. And some of the interventions we present are too new to have strong research supporting them. We have included them because there is significant anecdotal evidence that in the language of ESSA "demonstrates a rationale" for their effectiveness. In addition, there is not yet scientific research on some emerging pandemic-related attendance strategies.

It is also the case that interventions with the strongest evidence can be proprietary programs. These programs, which can afford to pay outside evaluators, also cost school districts more to use. A strong research backing for a proprietary program does not automatically convey an evidence basis for similar programs. In a box on every page, we note the evidence level for interventions—from strong to emerging—where research is available. In addition, it makes sense for educators to assess whether and under what circumstances emerging practices are improving attendance.

### Federally established levels of evidence for education research include:

**Strong:** The highest level of evidence requires that the strategy produce a significant effect in at least one "gold standard" experimental study, including a "randomized control trial" comparing the impact of an absenteeism intervention on a randomly selected group of students to the absenteeism rates of similar students who don't receive the intervention. Such studies require a large, multi-site sample of at least 350 students in more than one location, without much attrition among participants over the course of the experiment.

**Moderate:** The second highest level of evidence should include a significant impact either from a randomized control trial with a high attrition rate among participants or a "quasi-experimental study" that compares equivalent groups but not in a random fashion, using a large, multi-site sample. The research should not be overridden by another study on the same intervention with negative effects.

**Promising:** The third level of evidence requires at least one well-designed and well-implemented study establishing a correlation to positive results without as much equivalence between groups. It can also include a randomized control trial or quasi-experimental study that did not meet the definition of a large, multi-site sample. The researchers must have selected a representative sample without any bias or skew toward certain groups. The research should not be overridden by another study on the same intervention with negative effects.

**Emerging:** The lowest level of evidence requires a rationale or logic model based on research to suggest that the intervention could potentially yield positive results, but rigorous evaluation has yet to be completed.

## TIER 1 STRATEGIES: Foundational Supports and School-Wide Prevention

Creating positive conditions for learning is a key first step to increasing student attendance. Students' physical and emotional health and safety, their sense of belonging, challenging curricula, engaging learning, and meaningful relationships with adults in their educational lives weigh heavily on students' attendance.

### Community Schools

The pandemic's devastating effects on student learning and mental wellbeing underscore the need for a collaborative, community-wide approach to helping children, families and schools recover. The community schools model offers a framework for coordinating the work of local agencies and organizations to address the tangle of challenges that many underserved students face. Research shows that these community collaborations can help schools reduce absenteeism.

Full-service community schools can operate at all three tiers of support, providing the critical infrastructure needed to deliver a range of interventions that increase engagement in school and address barriers to attendance. Under the model, the school essentially becomes a hub for the community, providing access not just to education but to health care, social services, extended learning and other support for students and their families. Mentoring and tutoring are often part of the model. Some schools provide dental screening and haircuts for children on campus. Parents can receive services as well.

The [Coalition for Community Schools](#) defines a community school as "both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community

engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities."

A 2020 RAND Corporation [study](#) found that New York City schools using the model saw reductions in chronic absenteeism in all grades and across all years of the study. A [study](#) by Annenberg Institute researchers, released in November 2022, reported that New York's model led to a 5.6 percentage point reduction in chronic absenteeism, which persisted over three years. The researchers suggested that "improved attendance is a leading indicator of success of this model."

Federal and state policymakers are investing heavily in this integrated approach. The federal American Rescue Plan specifically mentions the community schools concept as an appropriate, evidence-based use of the \$122 billion in Covid-relief aid flowing to states and school districts for K-12 schools. The Biden administration has increased funding for federal grants enabling the model fivefold since 2021. At the state level, education departments are investing in community schools with their Covid-relief aid, and legislatures are devoting funds in state budgets.

#### WHAT TO CONSIDER

The pandemic has underscored the value of schools as community hubs, with schools providing meals and connecting students and families to

healthcare and other resources. These collaborative approaches work best with a school-based coordinator at the helm. Community schools can be funded with federal grants available under Title I of the Every Student Succeeds Act. Covid relief funding can cover the coordinator’s salary and support convening partners, as well as help to develop data systems key for sharing information.

In order to target and monitor progress for such resources as mentoring, expanded learning and health services, partner organizations working at community schools must have on-going access to data on attendance, grades, disciplinary records and other information for individual students and for the whole school.

Real-time, easily accessible data reports were essential to the success of the Community Schools in New York City. Data sharing naturally raises privacy concerns that may require memoranda of understanding between districts and outside agencies. The federal government provides [guidance](#) on navigating these issues.

#### RESEARCH

- [Leading Indicators of Long-Term Success in Community Schools: Evidence from New York City: \*\*MODERATE\*\*](#)
- [Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools: \*\*STRONG\*\*](#)

#### RESOURCES

- [Coalition for Community Schools](#)
- [FERPA Guidance for Sharing Information with Community Based Organizations](#)
- [Federal Resources to Support Community Schools](#)
- [Addressing education inequality with a next generation of community schools: A blueprint for mayors, states, and the federal government](#)

## Engaging with Families

The disruptions of the pandemic underscored the importance of engaging with families to ensure that students are attending school regularly and succeeding academically. A [survey in Kansas](#) asked parents to assess five aspects of family engagement: a welcoming environment, support for student learning, effective communications, sharing power, and community involvement. Overall, the districts with the strongest scores for family engagement had lower chronic absenteeism rates. This was particularly true in places recognized for a welcoming environment and for sharing power with families through their input and advocacy.

As a low stakes initial step, general messaging campaigns promoted on billboards and public service announcements are an easy and inexpensive method of conveying the benefits of good attendance to students, families and the entire community, especially during challenging times such as holidays and the end of the school year. As yet there is not much research demonstrating the success of these campaigns in turning around attendance.

More direct, personalized outreach to families, through letters or texts, can reduce absenteeism, researchers have found. Todd Rogers of Harvard University has pioneered work in using “nudges,” which he describes as “interventions that are carefully tuned to individual psychology to promote desired behavior.”

Outreach works for improving school attendance, in part because many families are unaware of how many days their children have missed. When Rogers and his team surveyed families, parents estimated that their children had missed about nine days of school in the previous year. In fact, all the children from the surveyed families had missed at least

17.8 days, right at the 18-day threshold for chronic absenteeism. Most parents and caregivers did not realize absenteeism was having an adverse impact on their child’s academic success or that their child had missed more school than other students.

Working in Philadelphia, Rogers and colleague Avi Feller of UC Berkeley sent [five personalized postcards](#) to the families of more than 40,300 high-risk students throughout the 2014-15 school year. One group received a message about the value of good attendance, while others received information on how many days their children had missed.

The researchers found that alerting parents to how many days their children had missed was most effective, reducing total absences by 6 percent and the share of students who were chronically absent by 11 percent, when compared to similar students not involved in the study. The findings have been replicated in several randomized experiments, including in San Mateo County, California, and in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

In West Virginia, a [pair of researchers](#) used a different medium to nudge families: texting. Targeting 22 middle and high schools, Peter Bergman and Eric Chen of Teachers College, Columbia University, connected school information systems with teachers’ electronic grade books. They then sent weekly alerts detailing any missed assignments and absences—for each class, not just whole-day absences. As a result, course failures dropped by 38 percent and class attendance increased by 17 percent among the students whose families got the texts, compared to similar students.

A [2020 study](#) by an American Institutes for Research team also found that text messages reduced chronic absenteeism. The study involved nearly 27,000 students in 108 elementary schools.

On a random basis, some families received text messages discussing the benefits of attendance or the consequences of missing too much school, while others received no messages. The messaging reduced the expected chronic absence rate by 2.4 to 3.6 percentage points for all students, with greater declines in absenteeism for students with problematic attendance, the researchers found.

In 2021, EveryDay Labs conducted three [experiments](#) in testing different elements of text messaging for absenteeism. They found that describing the precise number of days missed made messages 22 percent more effective at increasing attendance than texts without such detail. They also found that reporting accumulated absences for the year was nearly twice as effective as giving weekly data. When texts and printed mail were combined, one-third of the effect came from text and two-thirds from mail, the researchers found.

That said, not all studies of text messaging show reliable impacts. For example, [MDRC researchers](#) conducted a randomized experiment in 2016 to reduce absenteeism in New York City schools and found no reliable effect.

A more time-intensive step toward family engagement comes through home visiting programs that send teachers and other staffers to meet with parents outside the school setting. This strategy took on increased importance following the months of remote learning and isolation during the pandemic and proved particularly effective with students and families feeling disconnected from school.

A popular model, Parent Teacher Home Visits (PTHV), sets a goal of engaging parents and caregivers around their child's education. The first

visit is focused on building a relationship. Teachers ask about the family's "hopes and dreams" for their child, learn about the challenges the family faces, and provide a connection to the school for parents who might not otherwise reach out to teachers.

A 2018 evaluation of the [PTHV](#) program found that students whose families received at least one visit from teachers a year were 21 percent less likely to be chronically absent than other students. What's more, the impact extended to the entire school when 10 percent or more of students had home visits.

In some districts, chronic absenteeism fell by at least 5 percent in these schools, and students were more likely to score better on English language arts assessments than those at other schools. The study, conducted by Steven Sheldon of Johns Hopkins University, looked at 2016-17 school year results for more than 100,000 students in kindergarten through 8th grade in four large, urban school districts. The results suggest that home visiting could be a valuable strategy for schools trying to reduce absenteeism rates.

An [earlier study](#) of 12 Washington, D.C. public schools by Johns Hopkins University found students whose families received home visits were less likely to be chronically absent and more likely to read on grade level in the 2013-14 school year. In North Carolina, a pilot program combining home visiting with dedicated cell phones for reaching parents, enhanced attendance tracking, and other interventions reduced the prevalence of frequent absences by about 10 percent and improved communication between parents and teachers, according to a 2017 [Duke University study](#).

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

The pandemic necessitated some changes in the way schools communicate about attendance. Offering a comparison of days missed is not effective when most students are missing a significant number of days. Some parents expressed confusion or even annoyance when receiving letters or text messages about absences, especially when they had been told to keep their children home to avoid the spread of Covid. Others told educators and researchers that they simply stopped paying attention when they receive too many communications or when the messages are too negative. This is especially the case when parents feel “text overload” from receiving a barrage of generic messages.

Best practices include:

- Focus on empathy, how the school can help families, and what specific things families can do. Avoid focusing on punitive messages that leave parents feeling blamed
- Include printed personalized postcards or letters, rather than just texts
- Provide precise, personalized information rather than generic messages
- Send repeated communications throughout the year

It’s important to remember that nudges alone don’t solve chronic absenteeism. The effects are real, but modest. But these interventions have worked in both elementary and secondary schools, they are cheap, and they are eminently scalable. Rogers and Feller estimate that the mailers they sent cost \$6 for every additional day of attendance, per student.

Post pandemic, it is important to expand messaging. Focusing solely on the academic impact of absences

does not always resonate with families and can heighten anxieties about learning loss. In response, The Showing Up Matters for REAL [Toolkit](#) offers resources for talking about the importance of establishing a regular attendance routine, increasing engagement and ensuring access to resources.

Home visits entail some costs since teachers and other staff should be trained and compensated for visits that typically occur outside of school hours. Schools have found the intervention particularly helpful with families of English language learners, especially when the visitor speaks the family’s language.

Districts should also designate a coordinator to work with schools and, in some cases, community-based organizations that do home visits. In addition to training, coordinators may oversee budgets, work with unions, manage the expansion of the program and collect data showing the impact of home visits.

Engaging families—through texts, email, mail, or in person—requires good contact information.

Attendance Works offers some [tips](#) for contacting students and families. Everyday Labs has created the Family Insight [Toolkit](#) with template letters and surveys, as well as suggestions for contacting all families.

**RESEARCH**

- Reducing Student Absences at Scale by Targeting Parents' Misbeliefs: **STRONG**
- Leveraging Parents: The Impact of High-Frequency Information on Student Achievement: **STRONG**
- Can Texting Parents Improve Attendance in Elementary School? A Test of an Adaptive Messaging Strategy? **STRONG**
- Using Behavioral Insights to Improve School Administrative Communications: The Case of Truancy Notifications: **STRONG**
- Can Informing Parents Help High School Students Show Up for School: **NULL**
- Student Outcomes and Parent Teacher Home Visits: **PROMISING**
- The Family Engagement Partnership Student Outcome Evaluation: **PROMISING**
- New Program to Prevent Primary School Absenteeism: **PROMISING**

**RESOURCES**

- Family Engagement, Attendance, and Performance on Statewide Assessments in Kansas
- How to Text Message Parents to Reduce Chronic Absence Using an Evidence-Based Approach
- Supported: Leveraging Attendance Data to Ensure Ongoing Success
- The Showing Up Matters for REAL Toolkit
- Family Insights Toolkit
- The Power of a Student Being Present

## Student-Teacher Relationships

A new strand of research by such scholars as [Kirabo Jackson](#) of Northwestern University, [Seth Gershenson](#) of American University and [Jing Liu](#) at the University of Maryland, as well as the [CALDER Center](#) at the American Institutes for Research, has found that some teachers contribute to better student attendance than others. They haven't been able to identify precisely why, but other research has found that the way teachers treat students, and their beliefs and biases about their students' abilities, can have a profound impact on student well-being and achievement. Students who feel respected and supported by their teachers demonstrate greater confidence in their ability to learn and are more motivated to tackle demanding classwork. For students re-establishing attendance habits and readjusting to school routines post-pandemic, strong, supportive relationships with teachers are especially important.

So what can schools do to ensure teachers are taking the right steps to improve attendance?

One strategy is to build on existing relationships by keeping students and teachers together for more than one year. In the elementary grades, this technique, known as "looping," can involve a whole class moving forward to the next grade with the same teacher. But the approach can also work with secondary subjects. A [2021 study](#) by researchers at the University of Missouri, Columbia, found higher math and ELA results for elementary and middle school students who were re-matched with the same teacher. The results were particularly strong for students of color, English language learners, students with disabilities, and children from low-income families. Although the study, which looked at seven years of data from Indiana, did not evaluate attendance trends, a [2023 report](#) out of England made the natural connection to attendance. Researchers from the University of

Nottingham and University of Essex looked at 7th and 8th grade students in Chile who were assigned the same math teachers in consecutive years. Both test scores and attendance rates were stronger for these students when compared to other students. Beyond connections to teachers, students who are in classes with peers they know from past years also record fewer absences, according to a [2022 study](#) by Texas Tech University researchers Jacob Kirksey and Joseph Elefante.

A schoolwide approach to strengthening teacher-student relationships is the BARR model, which stands for Building Assets Reducing Risks. Under this model, schools place high school freshmen together in small groups for English, math, social studies, and science classes. Teachers receive professional development on using their relationships with students to enhance achievement. They also meet weekly to discuss student successes and approaches that will build stronger relationships within the groups. A rigorous [2022 study](#) of the BARR model by the American Institutes for Research for the U.S. Education Department found improvements across a national sample of schools in test scores, credits earned, and grade point averages, and a decline in failure rates. It also found that schools using the BARR model had lower chronic absenteeism rates than those not using the model. The attendance impact was strongest for male students and students of color.

Equipping teachers to better understand students can reduce suspensions and decrease absences. The Perspectives Experience Program, or PEP, developed by psychologist Jason Okonofua and researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, is an intervention designed to address teacher bias that has also reduced disciplinary action. PEP enrolls teachers and students in two online modules over a span of six months. Teachers are asked to

consider student perspectives with the goal of shifting teacher mindsets about minority students and encouraging them to examine their approaches to discipline. Okonofua and his fellow researchers reported in a 2016 [study](#) that PEP cut suspension rates in half over the course of a year. As students return to the classroom post pandemic, strategies such as PEP can help schools avoid unduly harsh disciplinary approaches.

Creating a more diverse teacher workforce can also pay dividends in better attendance among students of color. A [2021 study](#) led by University of Pennsylvania researcher Michael Gottfried found that Latino juniors and seniors in a California district had fewer unexcused absences in classrooms with Latino teachers. There was no significant difference in excused absences.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

There are several other ways schools can strengthen student-teacher relationships, including prioritizing small-group experiences for students through teacher-led “advisories” and “student voice” initiatives (See “Relevant—and Culturally Relevant—Instruction” page 16). Creating smaller schools or academies within schools can also help build connections, as can scheduling blocks that keep students in a classroom longer. Home visits are another way to build relationships between teachers, students, and families, and potentially reduce teacher bias and enhance empathy.

Stanford Graduate School’s [Complex Instruction](#) model can help combat implicit biases about which students can be successful at math by using group work to emphasize equal-status interactions among students and specific conditions under which teachers can establish and support these interactions. For such strategies, teacher buy-in and

professional development are key. Introducing some of these approaches, such as looping or the BARR model, could require schools to secure district-level approval.

## RESEARCH

- [Let’s Stay Together: The Effects of Repeat Student-teacher Matches on Academic Achievement](#): **PROMISING**
- [A Familiar Face: Student-teacher Rematches and Student Achievement](#): **MODERATE FOR ACADEMIC OUTCOMES**
- [Familiar faces in high school: How having the same peers from year-to-year links to student absenteeism](#): **PROMISING**
- [Brief Intervention to Encourage Empathic Discipline Cuts Suspension Rates in Half Among Adolescents](#): **PROMISING**
- [Building Assets and Reducing Risks \(BARR\) I3 Scale-Up Evaluation](#): **STRONG**
- [Do High School Students With a Same-Race Teacher Attend Class More Often?](#) **MODERATE**

## RESOURCES

- [Teacher Mindsets: How Educators’ Perspectives Shape Student Success](#)
- [Complex Instruction](#)
- [Power of Connections](#)
- [Classroom Management](#)
- [Positive Developmental Relationships](#)

## Relevant—and Culturally Relevant—Instruction

Ask teenagers how they feel about school and the first adjective they choose is “bored,” a 2013 Gallup poll found. Ask them why they skip school, and boredom again comes up as the top answer, according to [another survey](#) by the nonprofit Get Schooled. Close behind boredom comes, “I just don’t like the classes or subjects.” [Research](#) and experience tell us that students become increasingly disengaged as they advance through school, in part because they don’t see why the material they’re learning matters in their lives. This disengagement can compound absenteeism, leading to weaker academic performance and higher dropout rates. A [national survey](#) shows that after the pandemic, many students are more disconnected from school, discouraged and less likely to feel hopeful, suggesting they may be at even greater risk of disengaging from their studies.

One antidote to boredom and disengagement is a relevant curriculum. In [a 2009 study](#), researchers Chris Hulleman and Judith M. Harackiewicz asked one group of high school students to write about how the topics they learned in science class were valuable to their lives. A second group simply wrote summaries of what they learned. The results showed that students who had low expectations for their success in science become more interested in the subject and earned higher grades when they wrote about the value of their class, as opposed to the students just writing summaries.

This intervention has been tested with thousands of students from middle school, high school and [college](#). In each study, it not only stops any decline in motivation but also sparks improvement in student [achievement](#). The researchers did not see statistically significant improvement in attendance, however. Hulleman’s [Motivate Lab](#) and the [Character Lab](#) have created an online toolkit, [Build](#)

[Connections](#), that shows teachers how to help students connect aspects of their lives to what they are learning.

A career and technical education track focused on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields can provide the relevance that improves student attendance and engagement, [a 2023 working paper](#) by Texas Tech University researchers Teresa Lansford and J. Jacob Kirksey suggests. The researchers examined the Foundation High School Program, a Texas requirement that high schools develop course pathways linked to student interests in the labor market. While some of the pathways did little to move student attendance, the STEM career track was associated with lower absenteeism both from students who started high school with poor attendance records and those who attended regularly. The attendance in these classes was better for students on the career track than for those taking the courses simply as graduation requirements.

Other researchers have shown that cultural relevance within a curriculum can make a difference for attendance. Even before the recent debates over critical race theory, efforts to teach about the history and experiences of racial and ethnic minorities have generated controversy. Tucson famously ended its Mexican American studies program in 2012 when state legislators said it fomented unrest and resentment. At the same time, other cities and states are expanding programs to reach diverse student populations. California is developing a model ethnic studies curriculum that will eventually be offered in every high school.

A [study](#) released in 2017 by researchers Thomas Dee and Emily Penner looked at a small cohort of students who participated in a 9th grade ethnic

studies class in San Francisco Unified School District over a five-year period. The class covered such topics as the genocide of American Indians; the media's portrayal of Asians, Latinos and African Americans; and the Civil Rights Movement.

All 9th graders with grade point averages under 2.0 the previous year were encouraged to take the class. The researchers compared students in the class who were just below that GPA cutoff to students just above the cutoff not taking the class. The results were remarkable: The 9th grade attendance rate for students taking the class increased 21 percentage points; their GPA increased 1.4 points and the number of credits they earned increased by 23, when compared to students just above the cutoff. A [follow-up study](#) released in 2021 by Dee, Penner and Sade Bonilla looked at longer-term outcomes and found that assignment to the course increased the likelihood that students would continue to show good attendance in the years beyond 9th grade and would graduate from high school. The impact on attending college was less clear.

Another approach to engaging students is giving them more of a say in what they learn and how. [“Student voice” initiatives](#) take many forms, such as expanding student leadership opportunities, collecting student survey data to inform administrative decisions, allowing students to lead parent-teacher conferences, and encouraging students to research a community problem. In Connecticut's [Voice4Change initiative](#), state leaders let students vote on how to use some of the federal Covid-relief aid. Winning ideas included replacing broken water fountains, posting multilingual signage in hallways and creating murals.

In Chicago, the district has created student voice committees and regularly surveys students to find out whether they believe administrators are listening to their feedback. In schools where students believed their voice was heard, grades

and attendance rates were better, according to a [2022 study](#) by researchers from the University of California, Riverside, and Northwestern University. In the first study of its kind, the researchers looked at survey data from 9th graders in 86 Chicago public schools, as well as their attendance rates and grade point averages as 8th graders. They found that students who attend schools they consider “responsive to their input” have better grades and lower rates of chronic absenteeism.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

Interventions designed to promote classroom connections have a research base showing improvements in engagement and achievement, but not attendance. Culturally relevant coursework, on the other hand, is associated with gains in attendance. Adopting such coursework is much more complex and can be controversial, however. As California expands its ethnic studies course statewide, school districts should concentrate on training teachers in the material and implementing the program with fidelity, as well as noting whether the impact on attendance is replicated. The student voice initiatives can be powerful tools for dealing with racial and equity issues, in addition to improving engagement.

**RESEARCH**

- Making Connections: Replicating and Extending the Utility Value Intervention in the Classroom: **PROMISING FOR ENGAGEMENT AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**
- A Matter of Course: Student Attendance Under New Graduation Requirements of the Texas Foundation High School Program: **PROMISING**
- The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance: **MODERATE**
- Ethnic Studies Increases Longer-run Academic Engagement and Attainment: **STRONG**
- Is Responsiveness to Student Voice Related to Academic Outcomes? **PROMISING**

**RESOURCES**

- New CDC data illuminate youth mental health threats during the COVID-19 pandemic
- What We know about Purpose & Relevance From Scientific Research
- Build Connections for Classrooms Guide
- Elevating Student Voice in Education
- Voice4Change

## Restorative Discipline Practices

Chronic absenteeism can often be exacerbated by school practices that push students out of school and external factors that affect student behavior. Out-of-school suspensions can take a toll on [academic achievement](#) and [reduce engagement](#) among not only the students suspended, but others who feel that discipline is imposed unfairly. A “restorative” approach—in which students come together in peer-mediated small groups to talk, ask questions, and air grievances—not only reduces absences due to disciplinary reasons but creates a safer, fairer school climate shown to improve attendance. Rather than punishing students with disciplinary measures that push them out of school and perpetuate absenteeism, restorative practices smooth the way for other strategies mentioned in this playbook.

[Restorative practices](#), which have also been used in the criminal justice system, have gained a foothold in schools as districts look for ways to reduce suspensions and improve their school climate. The approach focuses on fostering a sense of community within classrooms to prevent conflict and on reacting to misconduct by encouraging students to accept responsibility and rebuild relationships.

While critics argue that the failure to suspend disruptive students can undermine their classmates’ learning, a [2022 study](#) by researchers at the University of Albany and The Ohio State University suggests that the use of suspensions can reduce attendance and academic success for all students in the classroom. This effect is particularly strong for Black students when they believe White teachers exhibit racial bias in their disciplinary referrals. The statistically significant declines in attendance, though slight, could reflect students and families becoming disengaged because of the teachers’ actions.

At the same time, research shows the benefits of restorative practices for students and school communities. Pittsburgh schools using restorative practices saw both a reduction in suspension rates and a reduction in racial and socioeconomic disparities among suspended students, [according to research](#) led by Catherine Augustine for the RAND Corporation. The same study found improvements in teachers’ assessments of overall school climate and a boost in PSAT scores for 10th graders, but slightly lower test scores for African American students, especially in the middle grades. A 2013 [Rutgers University study](#) of 29 high school classrooms found that the approach improved student-teacher relationships and reduced the gap in referrals among Black and Latino students and their White peers.

The [Texas Education Agency](#) has devoted \$1.2 million to train administrators in restorative practices, which have spread through the state. Now twice a week, students and teachers at Bammel Middle School in Houston gather in “talking circles” for 35 minutes “to talk through their problems and build stronger relationships.” The practice has reduced suspensions by half.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

Restorative practices are most effective when schools make a wholesale shift from retributive disciplinary frameworks. Ideally, faculty and staff will all be on board, as the shift requires additional training for administrators, teachers, and counselors, but administrators should be prepared for questions and pushback. Given the increased behavioral outbursts that students have exhibited following the traumatic events of the pandemic, restorative practices can help de-escalate conflicts without physical violence.

## RESEARCH

- Can Restorative Practices Improve School Climate and Curb Suspensions? **MODERATE**
- The Promise of Restorative Practices to Transform Teacher-Student Relationships and Achieve Equity in School Discipline: **EMERGING**

## RESOURCES

- Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A Research Review
- Strictly Speaking: Examining Teacher Use of Punishments and Student Outcomes
- Restorative Practices for School Discipline, Explained
- Guiding Principles for Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive, and Fair School Climates

## Summer Learning and Afterschool Strategies

The American Rescue Plan requires states to spend about \$1.2 billion nationwide on summer learning and another \$1.2 billion on afterschool programs to address learning gaps that developed during the pandemic. Research also shows that these expanded time programs can improve student attendance and engagement in school.

Students who attended Horizons National programs over the summer had better attendance and lower chronic absenteeism rates during the school year than similar students who didn't attend, according to a [2018 study](#) by Concentric Research & Evaluation. The study evaluated students at 15 sites in seven states and focused on students who had attended the summer program several years in a row.

In April 2021, Brown University's Annenberg Institute released a [meta-analysis](#) of 37 studies of summer programs in math for students in pre-K through 12th grades. In addition to significant gains in mathematics, the authors found several studies showing improvements in non-cognitive indicators, including lower absenteeism rates.

Research is more mixed on whether creating a longer school day improves academic outcomes, with results often hard to distinguish from other school-wide reforms. Several studies suggest a positive impact on attendance during the school year.

In California, students who attended afterschool programs offered by the Oakland Unified School District missed fewer days and were less likely to be chronically absent than similar students who didn't participate, according to a [2011 analysis](#) conducted by Public Profit. Altogether, students increased school attendance by 35,343 days in a single school year.

A [2007 study](#) by researchers at Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago analyzed Chicago's After School Matters program, which is the largest of its kind to offer students in some of Chicago's most underserved schools paid internships. They found students who participated in at least 27 of 30 possible program days missed two fewer days of school compared to those who did not participate. Researchers also found participants were nearly 50 percent less likely to fail courses than those who did not participate and nearly three times more likely to graduate.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

Just as summer and afterschool programs can help reduce absenteeism, good attendance in these programs is essential to their success. The RAND Corporation [evaluated](#) voluntary full-day summer learning programs in five communities and found larger gains for students who attended at least 80 percent of the days.

Programs should develop strategies to encourage students to show up regularly, such as providing transportation, as well as working with community and other family-facing organizations to encourage high attendance. Programs should also consider engaging government leaders, private funders, higher education, and local businesses to share information on achievement and attendance with school districts.

During the summer, the RAND researchers suggest that summer programs run at least five weeks and limit groups to 15 or fewer students. The most successful programs offer both academic and enrichment activities, provide transportation and food, and work with community and other family-facing organizations to encourage high attendance.

Afterschool programs serving 10 to 20 students and offering 70 to 130 hours of additional instructional time annually are most effective, but programs that offer 44 to 100 hours annually are also likely to have an impact.

To ensure that high quality summer and afterschool programs benefit students who have missed the most school days and experienced more learning loss, districts can set aside slots and conduct outreach to enroll these students. In addition, expanded learning programs can use their own attendance data to identify students in need of extra support or to notice when a program is having difficulty engaging participants.

## RESEARCH

- [The Impact of Summer Learning Programs on Low-Income Children’s Mathematics Achievement: A Meta-Analysis](#): **INCLUDES STRONG AND MODERATE STUDIES**
- [Every Summer Counts: A Longitudinal Analysis of Outcomes from the National Summer Learning Project](#): **STRONG**
- [Examining the Long-Term Effect of Horizons National Summer Enrichment Program on Student Academic Outcomes](#): **MODERATE**
- [Oakland Out-of-School Time Program Evaluation](#): **PROMISING**
- [After-School Programs and Academic Impact: A Study of Chicago’s After School Matters](#): **PROMISING**

## RESOURCES

- [Designing Summer Programs That Students Want to Attend](#)
- [A Summer For Learning & Recovery](#)

## Positive Greetings at the Door

A sense of belonging among students and a connection to a caring adult can lead to better attendance. Research points to the often-devastating consequences of students feeling like no one cares about them. A [2017 study](#) led by Kathryn Van Eck of 25,700 middle- and high-school students found a direct correlation between alienating school climates and student absenteeism. The climate aspects most closely linked to attendance were school connectedness, parent involvement, relationship with teachers, and the learning environment. At the same time, teachers who create a positive climate in their classroom and build stronger relationships with students contribute to better attendance, according to a 2022 American Institutes for Research [study](#) (see Student-Teacher Relationships, Page 14).

Many schools are working to create a welcoming school climate by greeting students as they arrive. This can take the form of a principal standing outside the front door as students and families enter or a teacher shaking students' hands greeting students by name as they enter the classroom.

A [2018 study](#) of middle school students by University of Minnesota researchers found that when teachers used this technique at the classroom door, academic engagement increased by 20 percentage points and disruptive behavior decreased by 9 percentage points, as compared to classrooms without the greetings. Researchers estimate this adds the equivalent of another hour of engagement to the school day.

In the Minnesota study, teachers greeted students by name at the door or with a handshake or nod of the head. They also reminded students to start their work or reflected on some issue a student might be having. With younger children, some teachers ask if the student wants a handshake, a high five or a hug.

Others develop unique, often elaborate greetings for each child.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

So far, none of the research into classroom greetings makes a direct link to school absenteeism, but there is ample research connecting better attendance to student engagement and connections to caring adults. This is a low-cost intervention that could yield positive results for many students and teachers.

A [brief](#) from Character Strong suggests the intervention works best when teachers:

- Greet each student individually as they enter the classroom
- Remind students what's expected of them in terms of behavior
- Provide an activity students can do as they settle into the classroom
- Use the time to connect with any students who misbehaved or had negative interactions the previous day

Offering students and teachers choices about what type of greeting they prefer—warm hugs, high fives or no-contact options such as a thumbs up—allows for individual preferences and may reduce anxiety for those who may be fearful of close contact.

### RESEARCH

- Positive Greetings at the Door: Evaluation of a Low-Cost, High-Yield Proactive Classroom Management Strategy: **PROMISING FOR POSITIVE CLIMATE**

### RESOURCES

- How School Climate Relates to Chronic Absence
- How Learning Happens: Making Connections With Greetings at the Door (video)
- Positive Greetings at the Door Guide
- Positive Greetings at the Door Research Brief

## Incentives

The perfect attendance certificate is a timeless piece of school lore, a reward for students who show up for school each and every day. But what if such rewards don't actually motivate students to improve their attendance?

Research offers a decidedly mixed view of whether rewards and other types of incentives reduce chronic absenteeism. [A MDRC study](#) in New York City found better attendance for 9th graders when families were offered financial incentives. [A study](#) in Washington, D.C. by Roland Fryer and B.M. Allan found that middle school students improved their attendance when offered small cash rewards, but the results were not statistically significant. In [a study released in 2018](#), on the other hand, a research team led by Harvard University's Carly Robinson was surprised to find that mailing certificates to middle and high school students who had recently achieved one month of perfect attendance resulted in those students missing more days in the next month than students with excellent attendance who didn't receive an award.

The reality is that incentives can work for schools and districts when they are clear about whom they hope to reach and what behavior they seek to change. The incentives can be as simple as an attendance bulletin board for kindergartners or a competition among middle school classrooms.

In a [2018 study](#), researchers Rekha Balu and Stacy Ehrlich provide a framework to help school staff think about how—and when—to use incentives to improve student attendance. Key questions include:

- What are the specific attendance problems that need to be solved? The answer will be different if the school has too many kindergartners missing too much school or too many 9th graders skipping class.

- What type of incentive should be implemented? Rewards—or punishments—can be financial, social or informational. They should be universal for all students and possibly parents. If the incentives are aimed at students, are they judged individually or as a classroom?
- How can the incentive best be implemented? Too much focus on perfect attendance for relatively long periods of time doesn't help to improve attendance because students lose the incentive to participate after they miss a day or two. Districts also need to think about how soon the reward should follow the behavior. Monthly or weekly recognition tends to work better than annual awards.
- How did the intervention work? If it's not working, schools need to tweak the intervention or try a different approach. If it's working better for some students than others, that's important to know.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention discouraged using perfect attendance incentives during the pandemic for fear of encouraging students to come to school sick. It's important to keep in mind that perfect attendance awards can discourage students who struggle the most to attend and who are left out of such awards. Schools should consider rewards for improving attendance over shorter periods of time to engage more students.

Making the research case for incentives can be tricky given the mix of results, but there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that, done right, these efforts can provide powerful motivation to reduce chronic absence. To avoid wasting time and resources, schools and districts should regularly assess whether their incentives are improving attendance.

### **RESEARCH**

- Toward Reduced Poverty Across Generations: **PROMISING**
- The Power and Pitfalls of Education Incentives: **NULL**
- The Demotivating Effect (and Unintended Message) of Rewards: **NEGATIVE**

### **RESOURCES**

- Making Sense Out of Incentives
- What Makes an Attendance Incentive Program Successful

## Rethinking Recess

Daily recess offers students a chance for playtime that not only enhances physical health, but builds social skills, student engagement, and empowerment. Done right, this time can contribute to the sort of school climate that supports better attendance. But without enough supervision, recess can become a time when children feel bullied or left out. As schools emerge from the pandemic, structured play time can help students reconnect with peers and help ease anxiety and depression.

Once a staple of elementary school, recess time [was reduced](#) and, in some school districts, eliminated amid a push for greater academic achievement, according to a study by the Center on Education Policy. One in five school districts reduced recess time between 2001 and 2006. In other places, teachers kept students from recess as a punishment for acting up in class.

That trend is reversing itself, with [several states passing laws](#) requiring recess time. In a 2012 [policy statement](#), the American Academy of Pediatrics called recess a “necessary break in the day for optimizing a child’s social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development,” and discouraged teachers from withholding it for punitive reasons. In 2017, the [CDC](#) recommended at least 20 minutes a day of “unstructured physical activity and play.”

Physical fitness in general is associated with better school attendance, research led by Emily M. D’Agostino shows. And recent studies suggest that recess can help students focus on their school work. A [2010 study](#) by Georgia State University researchers compared 4th grade students on days when they were allowed recess and days when they stayed in class. About 60 percent of the students worked more or fidgeted less—or both—on days when they had recess. [A program in Texas](#) that provided four, 15-minute recesses during the day

found similar results, according to a 2018 Texas Christian University study. The researchers in these studies did not look at the connection to school attendance.

While children benefit from unstructured play, recess can lead to problems: children sitting on the sidelines feeling excluded, or worse, bullied. One model for addressing these concerns is Playworks, which provides a site coordinator or recess coach who trains teachers and gives students options for games on the playground. Some children become playground leaders or “junior coaches.” A [study of the Playworks](#) model by Mathematica Policy Research and Stanford University found a 43 percent difference in reports of bullying and exclusionary play in schools using the program compared to other schools. The study did not find a statistically significant difference in attendance, but schools using the program point to progress. [Loma Linda K-8 School](#) in Phoenix saw its chronic absence rate decrease by two thirds over a year, a change that administrators attribute in part to Playworks.

In 2021, Playworks and the Partnerships in Education and Resilience [surveyed](#) 710 4th and 5th graders who participated in Playworks programs. The students reported positive change in their own academic motivation, emotional control, relationships with adults and peers, and school connection, among other aspects of learning.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

The promising effects of research on attendance, school climate and academic achievement provide a research case for pursuing this approach. For schools with the resources to implement a program like Playworks, supervised recess can become a more supportive and engaging experience for all students.

**RESEARCH**

- Playing Fair: The Contribution of High Functioning Recess to Overall School Climate in Low-Income Elementary Schools: **PROMISING FOR CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR**
- The Impact of Recess on Classroom Behavior: **EMERGING**
- Effects of Multiple Recesses and Character Curriculum on Classroom Behaviors and Listening Skills in Grades K-2 Children: **PROMISING FOR CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR**
- Impact and Implementation Findings from an Experimental Evaluation of Playworks: **EMERGING**

**RESOURCES**

- Choices, Changes, and Challenges
- The Crucial Role of Recess in School
- Building a Culture of Health Through Safe and Healthy Elementary School Recess
- The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds
- Playworks Statistical Report: Overall Sample

## Healthy School Buildings

The pandemic has increased public awareness of the role that healthy buildings play in keeping students on track for good attendance and academic success. This includes adequate ventilation, thorough cleaning, and effective handwashing protocols for students and staff.

Visible mold, poor ventilation, and the presence of vermin are all linked to higher rates of absenteeism, especially for younger students and for schools in districts with concentrated poverty, according to a 2010 New York State Department of Health [study](#).

A 2020 U.S. [General Accountability Office](#) report found that as many as 36,000 schools nationwide had inadequate heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems pre-pandemic. Likewise, an estimated 400,000 schools and childcare facilities use lead pipes to deliver water to staff and students, putting children at risk for damaging lead exposure, according to the [White House](#). Many of these poorly equipped schools are in underserved communities. The billions of dollars Congress provided in Covid-relief aid has allowed many districts to begin addressing some of these needs: Half of the 5,000 district spending plans reviewed in a FutureEd [analysis](#) included money for HVAC upgrades, and nearly a third earmarked money for repairs to prevent illness.

Research suggests that ventilation systems have a significant impact on student achievement. Overheated classrooms can negatively impact learning, according to a [2018 study](#) led by Boston University economist Joshua Goodman. Goodman's research team found that hotter school days in the previous year were linked to lower results on the PSAT, an impact two to three times larger among students living in communities with concentrated poverty than for their more affluent peers.

Opening windows can help dispel Covid particles in classroom air, but can complicate student health in other ways, especially if outside air is polluted by industrial sites or heavy traffic. Air pollution can exacerbate asthma and interfere with brain development, as well as lead to increased school suspensions and absences, [several studies](#) show. A research team led by Piers McNaughton of Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that exposure to particulate air pollution was associated with higher rates of chronic absenteeism, while green space around the school was linked to better attendance. The findings were the same regardless of students' race or income level, according to the team's [2017 study](#).

Good ventilation can contribute to better attendance, according to a [2013 study](#) led by Mark Mendell at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. Researchers studied 150 classrooms in 28 California schools for two years and found that updating classroom ventilation systems to state standards could bring a 3.4 percent decline in illness-related student absences.

Lead exposure has long been linked to weaker cognitive development and poorer academic performance. The events in Flint, Michigan, where changes to the water supply nearly a decade ago led to widespread exposure to lead among the city's children, provided a natural experiment for economist Jessica Sauve-Syed, then at Syracuse University. Sauve-Syed compared performance of the same students before and after their exposure to lead and found that the share of those reading proficiently dropped, on average, 12 to 14 percentage points; in math the share of proficient students dropped six to nine points, according to her [2017 study](#). She also found an increase in disciplinary infractions. There is no research showing

the impact of replacing lead pipes on attendance or student achievement, but other science on lead mitigation strongly suggests a positive impact on students.

Beyond improving ventilation, schools can contribute to good attendance by adopting strong hand-washing protocols. Danish researcher Inge Nandrup-Bus, a nurse, conducted a three-month pilot program at two schools in Denmark with students ages 5 to 15. At one school, students were required to wash hands before their first class, before lunch and before going home. The other school did not change its handwashing practices. In her [2009 study](#), Nandrup-Bus reported that the school with the hand-washing protocols saw a 66 percent decrease in pupils with four or more days of absence and a 20 percent increase in children with zero absences over the previous year. The following year, she introduced the handwashing intervention at what had been the control school. That school also saw significant declines in illness-related absences, while the first school held on to the gains it had made the previous year.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

Ventilation improvements and other capital projects using Covid relief money must receive approval from state and federal authorities and abide by their rules on competitive bids and wages. While the American Rescue Plan and CDC guidance encourage school districts to upgrade ventilation, federal guidance cautions against using relief money for extensive construction projects, since the funds must be obligated by September 2024. Districts that want to pursue this option should start as soon as possible with an assessment of school building needs. Improving ventilation can be an expensive but important investment for schools.

Handwashing protocols require a few essential elements: school bathrooms with working sinks, running water and soap. These interventions can be enhanced with hand-sanitizing stations on playgrounds, around campus and in the classroom. Other cleaning practices are essential to keeping students healthy and attending school regularly, as rodent droppings, cockroaches, mold, and water damage can trigger asthma and other respiratory illnesses. Bathrooms must also be kept clean and stocked with soap. Some common cleaning products such as chlorine bleach can trigger asthma among custodial workers, studies show.

**RESEARCH**

- Association of classroom ventilation with reduced illness absence: a prospective study in California elementary schools: **PROMISING**
- Impact of Particulate Matter Exposure and Surrounding “Greenness” on Chronic Absenteeism in Massachusetts Public Schools: **PROMISING**
- Effects of Classroom Ventilation Rate and Temperature on Students’ Test Scores: **MODERATE**
- Comparative studies of hand disinfection and handwashing procedures as tested by pupils in intervention programs: **PROMISING**

**RESOURCES**

- Update on Asthma and Cleaners
- School Districts Frequently Identified Multiple Building Systems Needing Updates or Replacement
- Foundations for Student Success: How School Buildings Influence Student Health, Thinking, and Performance
- The Ventilation Problem in Schools
- Heat and Learning
- The Impact of School Building Conditions on Student Absenteeism in Upstate New York
- Three Essays on Public Health Policy
- How Exposure to Pollution Affects Educational Outcomes and Inequality
- Impact of Particulate Matter Exposure and Surrounding “Greenness” on Chronic Absenteeism in Massachusetts Public Schools

## School-Based Health Care

Despite concerns about truancy or unexcused absences, illness remains the No. 1 reason that students miss school. While many of these absences are excused, they represent lost instructional time that can erode student achievement. Asthma alone accounts for nearly 14 million missed days of school, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention records. [A 2012 study](#) by University of Southern California’s dentistry school showed that a third of absences among economically disadvantaged elementary school students are due to dental problems. During the pandemic, illness, fears of becoming exposed to illness at school, and time spent in quarantine all contributed to rising absenteeism rates.

Providing health services at school—including screenings, immunizations, and nursing—care, can help reduce absences. These services not only help prevent and treat illness but can also spare the time students miss for routine medical appointments and being sent home when they feel sick.

Consider what happened when school districts in central Texas started [delivering flu shots](#) at school, after identifying a spike in absences during flu season. The E3 initiative, a regional education collaborative based in Austin, provided vaccinations to 38,032 students in 262 elementary and middle schools in the fall. The result: The schools with the highest vaccination rates saw the biggest drops in absenteeism during the peak flu weeks. In Texas, where state aid is doled out based on daily attendance, this intervention saved the schools collectively about \$500,000. The E3 results are backed up by [2013 research](#) from Texas A&M University that found students who received flu shots at school had fewer absences than their unvaccinated peers. Researchers at Armstrong Atlantic State University in Georgia [found evidence](#)

suggesting that attendance benefits extended to the entire school, as the vaccinations seemed to increase “herd immunity.”

Beyond flu shots, local health department and school-based health providers can provide vaccines on site to ensure that all children receive the immunizations they need to attend school—either by giving the shots on site or referring parents to other clinics. Some students miss several days at the beginning of the school year because they do not have the shots required to attend, a problem exacerbated when students missed appointments because of the pandemic.

School-based health services take many forms, whether delivered by a school nurse, a clinic, visiting providers or a remote service (see Telehealth on Page 35).

[A review of research](#) on school nurses by Erin Maughan of the University of Utah found that nurses could have a profound impact on attendance when they focused attention on chronically absent students. Unfortunately, nurses don’t always have the capacity to play that role, according to a [2021 study](#) by researchers at UPMC Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh. In interviews with school nurses, the researchers identified a number of barriers, including the need for more coordination between schools and community-based health care teams. The National Association of School Nurses [offers examples](#) of how nurses are working with educators by sitting on attendance teams that help determine the best interventions for students. And they’re calling parents to check on sick children and help decide how quickly they can return to school.

Several studies suggest that school-based health centers improve attendance and a sense of connection to school among students. Across the

United States, nearly 2,600 schools with a total of 6.3 million students have clinics designed to promote healthy living and offer preventative care for chronic health conditions. [A 2010 study](#) by a researcher at St. John Fisher College compared outcomes for students who visited school-based centers to those who visited school nurses. Students who visited clinics were less likely to be sent home from school or lose “seat time” than those who saw nurses—outcomes that could potentially impact academic achievement. According to [a 2003 study](#) by researchers at Montefiore Medical Center in Bronx, N.Y., students with asthma who had access to a school clinic were less likely to be hospitalized and attended school an additional three days, compared to similar students in schools without clinics.

In the first two years after the opening of the Rales Center at the KIPP Harmony Academy in Baltimore in 2015, which serves 1,500 students, the school saw a 23 percent drop in chronic absenteeism among students with asthma and a 30 percent drop among students with ADHD. In one month alone, the clinic prevented 177 visits to the emergency department, according to [a study](#) by Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

One of the biggest challenges in providing school-based health services is cost. Yet at the same time, there is growing evidence to support the cost savings of onsite health services. One American Academy of Pediatrics [study](#) found that, “for each dollar spent on school nurses, \$2.20 was saved in parent loss of work time, teacher time, and procedures performed in school rather than in a more costly health care setting.”

Clinics rely on various combinations of local, state and federal dollars that are not guaranteed for the long term. Insurance reimbursements and Medicaid can supplement the clinics, but often involve complex billing systems that schools have trouble managing. Strong community partnerships, a sound business model that results in a variety of stable funding sources, and high-quality practices are key.

All school-based health services require attention to federal privacy rules for sharing student information with providers beyond the school staff. Flu shots or other immunizations require parental permission.

Schools and districts should also expand their communications with families and students around health-related absences. They should provide clear guidance about when a child should stay home or show up to school for physical and mental health-related reasons. They should work with local health departments to develop and disseminate clear messaging and protocols to enable educators and health providers to help families and students judge whether staying home or showing up to class is the best course of action. If a child complains of symptoms like a headache or stomachache, it is important to quickly determine if this is related to anxiety or a physical. If the challenge is anxiety, then staying home may worsen the situation.

**RESEARCH**

- School-located influenza vaccination and absenteeism among elementary school students in a Hispanic community: **PROMISING**
- Impact of school flu vaccine program on student absences: **EMERGING**
- Burden of asthma in inner-city elementary schoolchildren: **PROMISING**
- The Relationship Between School-Based Health Centers, Rates of Early Dismissal from School, and Loss of Seat Time: **PROMISING**

**RESOURCES**

- The Cost Benefit of Comprehensive Primary and Preventive School-Based Health Care
- School-Based Health Care Support Toolkit
- Addressing the Health-Related Causes of Chronic Absenteeism Link
- School Nurse Perspectives on Addressing Chronic Absenteeism
- The impact of school nursing on school performance: a research synthesis
- A Guide to Expanding Medicaid-Funded School Health Services
- The Role of the School Nurse in Providing Health Services
- School Nurses' Role in Combating Chronic Absenteeism

## Telehealth

Telehealth, the use of telecommunications such as interactive video conferencing to deliver healthcare services, has become increasingly common in schools, particularly since the pandemic. The remote delivery of services can increase access to primary care and specialty services, improve care coordination for students with special needs and chronic health conditions, and improve collaboration among local providers, schools and parents. It can also decrease lost work time for parents, reduce ER visits and hospitalizations, and cut health care costs.

What's more, telehealth is a tool schools can use to keep students in school, especially low-income students with little access to health care or those living in remote communities. A school nurse can connect a student troubled by asthma to an offsite provider who can listen to the child's lungs remotely and determine appropriate treatment without the student leaving school. Or a dental technician can clean children's teeth at school and communicate with an offsite dentist about any serious problems that arise. Virtual checkups also allow mental and physical health care providers to serve more children by cutting down the time spent traveling to various schools.

Not surprisingly, telehealth became more prevalent when schools, businesses, and doctors' offices shut down due to Covid. Nationally, the percentage of outpatient visits handled through telehealth rose from 1 percent before the pandemic to 13 percent in the first six months of lockdowns, an [analysis](#) by the Kaiser Family Foundation found. A year later, the figure was about 8 percent.

Telehealth has grown in popularity as a tool for mental health and substance abuse treatment as well. Before the pandemic, 9 percent of all treatment sessions nationally were virtual. This proportion

rose to 24 percent during the first six months of the pandemic, and one year later had reached 39 percent, the Kaiser analysis found. Schools are embracing telehealth in a similar way: New York City, the nation's largest school district, is pledging to offer mental health services via telehealth to every one of its high school students. The Los Angeles County Office of Education, which includes the nation's second largest district, is offering these services to every K-12 student.

Research from before the pandemic shows promising results for addressing a range of health needs remotely. In three rural North Carolina school districts, access to telehealth services reduced the likelihood that a student would be chronically absent by 29 percent and reduced the number of absences by 10 percent, according to a 2023 [CALDER Center study](#) by Sarah Komisarow at Duke University and Steven W. Helmet at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Looking at data from 2007-08 to 2018-19, the researchers found students receiving telehealth services had fewer violent disciplinary infractions in the period from 2007-08.

Likewise, in a small elementary school district in California's Central Valley, 94 percent of telehealth visits resulted in students returning to class, where they received, on average, another three hours of instruction, according to a [2021 study](#) by the U.S. Institute for Educational Sciences and the Regional Education Laboratory at WestEd. More than a quarter of the district's students used the services during the two-period year before the pandemic. Black students were more likely to use the remote services than other students.

In Rochester, New York, schools [reduced asthma attacks](#) by increasing in-school services for children through regular telehealth visits with specialists, according to a study led by University of Rochester

researchers. In California, [Virtual Dental Home \(VDH\)](#) delivers care to more than 40 sites, including elementary schools in low-income neighborhoods and Head Start centers. The program allows patients to receive dental care while avoiding the logistical and cost burdens to families of taking students out of school.

In Texas, the Children's Health School Telehealth Program, which served 112 schools in 2018, reduced absenteeism not only in schools but in parents' workplaces. In a [survey](#), 74 percent of caregivers said they would have had to miss work if their child had not received school telehealth services, meaning their child would have also missed class.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

Telehealth can present challenges for providers, including the extent of insurance coverage, liability, and licensing. With the implementation of new technology, new system barriers have arisen, such as space allocation, startup costs, maintenance, technical expertise and equipment, internet speed and bandwidth capabilities. That said, costs have dropped sharply in recent years: The CALDER researchers estimate that equipment costs have fallen from \$24,000 to \$2,400 per school in the past decade, largely due to cheaper prices for computer equipment.

As telehealth expanded during the pandemic, so did state and federal rules for seeking reimbursement of costs through Medicaid. By 2021, 49 states were allowing schools to seek Medicaid reimbursement for telehealth services, up from 24 states before Covid arrived; many of the original states expanded the services that would qualify, according to a National Academy for Health Policy [brief](#). It's unclear whether these rules will remain in place post pandemic.

For certain groups of students, such as those who are deaf or who speak English as a second language, telehealth can present language challenges. Schools must ensure that appropriate translation services are available. Schools must take care to obtain parental consent and that telehealth interactions comply with federal privacy regulations, ensuring any sharing of information meets both HIPAA and FERPA requirements. In order to plan and implement telehealth strategies, district staff with expertise in health, finance, information technology and facilities all need to be involved. School health staff using telehealth equipment will also need to be trained. Once properly implemented, telemedicine can overcome health access challenges and form part of a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to helping students stay healthy and in school.

**RESEARCH**

- Students' Use of School-Based Telemedicine Services and Rates of Returning to Class After These Services in a Small Elementary School District: **EMERGING**
- School-Based Healthcare and Absenteeism: Evidence from Telemedicine: **MODERATE**
- Effect of School-based Telemedicine on Asthma Management: **STRONG**

**RESOURCES**

- States Expand Medicaid Reimbursement of School-Based Telehealth Services
- The Role of School Nursing in Telehealth
- Telehealth: Improving Access to and Quality of Pediatric Health Care
- Expanding the Dental Team
- Telemedicine in Schools Helps Keep Kids in the Classroom
- Roadmap for Action
- Center for Connected Health Policy

## Free Meals for All

More than 30 million students receive free or reduced-price meals at school every day, and many schools with high concentrations of poverty are starting to make these meals free to all students, regardless of income. This universal approach can reduce the stigma of receiving free meals and ensure that no student misses out because of challenges in applying for the aid. New research shows that such universal free meal programs are linked to better attendance in the early grades. Other studies show that offering a free breakfast can impact attendance for both elementary and secondary students.

In a [2023 study](#), researchers from Syracuse University looked at data from New York City public schools from 2009 to 2017 and found that students who had access to universal free meals in kindergarten had higher attendance rates and lower chronic absenteeism levels than those who did not. The good effects persist through third grade, although the gaps narrow.

Likewise, studies in recent years have shown the overwhelmingly positive effect of eating breakfast on attendance and academic outcomes. Unfortunately, skipping breakfast is relatively common for American children, whether by choice or not, and this can have detrimental effects on [learning and attendance](#). Many children arrive at school without having eaten breakfast, and those children are more likely to make errors, have poorer memory recall, and be late or miss school altogether.

When and where breakfast is provided can have enormous impact. When low-income students were provided with school breakfast, they showed greater academic achievement, and their attendance increased by 1.5 days per year, according to a

[2007 review of research](#) by Michael Murphy of Massachusetts General Hospital.

A universally free breakfast program implemented in public schools in Baltimore and Philadelphia led to better academic results and lower rates of absenteeism and tardiness, Murphy and other researchers found. The universal approach has the added benefit of removing the stigma from children who rely on school for their meals.

More recently, schools have started moving breakfast into the classroom, which can ensure that more students have access to the morning meal. A [2014 Tufts University study](#) of a Breakfast in the Classroom program in 446 urban elementary schools found that children ate breakfast at far higher rates in participating schools (73 percent) than in those schools without the program (43 percent). Researchers also found a slightly higher attendance rate, which reflected collectively 76 additional attended days per grade each month. A [2019 study](#) led by University of Wisconsin researchers found that universal free breakfast programs in Wisconsin were linked to a 3.5 percentage point drop in the probability of lower attendance, as well as increases in test scores. The numbers were about the same whether breakfast was offered in the cafeteria or the classroom.

A [2021 study](#) from Michael Gottfried of the University of Pennsylvania and J. Jacob Kirksey of Texas Tech University explored the impact of breakfast in the classroom in Nevada and Colorado, where schools with at least 70 percent of students living in poverty are required to provide the program. The researchers found that breakfast in the classroom programs were linked to an average 6 percentage point decline in chronic absenteeism rates, when compared to schools that did not adopt the program. The strongest effects came

in high schools, at schools serving universal free meals and in places with higher participation rates in the program. In a separate [2022 study](#) using a national data set of kindergarten students, Gottfried and Kirksey found that moving breakfast into the classroom led to an average 4 percentage point decline in the likelihood of chronic absenteeism, as well as an increase in standardized reading achievement and a decline in behavioral problems.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

When possible, the meals should provide students an opportunity to connect with peers or adults at school. Both these factors make breakfast after the bell an appealing option that can be implemented with the support of classroom teachers, food service workers, and custodians.

### RESEARCH

- [Exposure to Free School Meals in Kindergarten Has Lasting Positive Effects on Students' Attendance: \*\*STRONG\*\*](#)
- [The Relationship of School Breakfast to Psychosocial and Academic Functioning: \*\*PROMISING\*\*](#)
- [Breakfast in the Classroom Linked to Better Breakfast Participation, Attendance: \*\*PROMISING\*\*](#)
- [Access to the School Breakfast Program Is Associated with Higher Attendance and Test Scores among Elementary School Students: \*\*PROMISING\*\*](#)
- [The Effect of Serving "Breakfast After-the-Bell" Meals on School Absenteeism: Comparing Results From Regression Discontinuity Designs: \*\*STRONG\*\*](#)
- [School breakfast and young children's absenteeism: Does meal location matter? \*\*PROMISING\*\*](#)

### RESOURCES

- [Breakfast and Learning: An Updated Review](#)
- [Fact Sheet: School Breakfast Program](#)

## Transportation and School Buses

Transportation challenges contribute to chronic absenteeism in many places, whether it's a city with limited school bus routes or a rural community where missing the bus leaves students few options for getting to school on time. In interviews with Detroit families during the pandemic, [researchers](#) from Wayne State University found that transportation was the No. 1 barrier to good attendance. Many students did not receive school bus service, so families struggled to get them to school when the family car broke down or work conflicts occurred, according to the 2021 report. Parents also cited the dangers of walking to school, either because of traffic or neighborhood violence.

Not surprisingly, research has found that expanding school bus service or providing free passes on public transit can improve attendance rates and educational outcomes. A [2017 study](#) by University of Pennsylvania researcher Michael Gottfried found that kindergartners who rode the school bus had fewer absences and were less likely to be chronically absent than those using other routes to school. Tapping a nationally representative trove of federal data on elementary school students, Gottfried found that about a quarter of kindergartners ride the bus to school, while the remainder walk, bike, or arrive by car.

The bus riders had a 2-percentage-point lower likelihood of being chronically absent. The results were particularly strong in rural areas, where bus riders had significantly higher attendance rates and lower incidence of chronic absenteeism. The research suggests that riding the bus may help develop the routines that are crucial to developing a habit of school attendance among young children.

A [2022 study](#) by Brown University researcher Danielle Sanderson Edwards echoed these findings. Using seven years' worth of data from 50 large Michigan school districts, she was able to compare attendance rates for students eligible to ride the bus (because of their distance from the school or other factors) to those attending the same schools who were not eligible. She found that bus eligibility was linked to slightly better attendance rates and lower likelihood of chronic absence, effects that were most pronounced for students from low-income families.

When school bus rides run too long, however, chronic absenteeism rates climb, according to a [2022 study](#) of New York City students by researchers at Temple University. While the average school bus ride was 21 minutes, about 6 percent of students were on the bus for 45 minutes to an hour and another 3 percent for more than an hour. In most cases, these students were attending charter schools or other schools of their choice. The longer commutes were linked to chronic absenteeism rates that were 1.8 to 3.2 percentage points higher than those for students with shorter commutes.

The type of bus transporting students can make a difference, as well. Districts that received federal money in the past decade to retrofit diesel-engine school buses with new filters and cleaner technology saw significant increases in student attendance, compared to similar districts, according to a [2023 study](#) from public health researchers at the University of Michigan and University of Washington. In a district of 10,000 students, the increase equates to about six additional students attending school each day. For districts with high rates of bus ridership, it translates to 14 additional students attending each day. Researchers suggest

that diesel fumes from older buses contribute to illness and hence to absenteeism.

In place of, or in addition to, the yellow school bus, many cities are providing free mass transit to students, an approach that can help reduce absenteeism. A [2015 study](#) by University of Minnesota researchers found that Minneapolis students who participated in a free transit pass program had absenteeism rates 23 percent lower than their peers who didn't participate.

Minneapolis Public Schools coordinated the program by distributing transit passes to high school students, with positive impacts both immediate and long-term. By not being tied to the yellow school bus with just one pick-up and drop-off time, students enjoyed more flexibility. They could catch another bus if they missed the first one, which reduced absences and tardiness; they could also participate in afterschool educational or recreational activities without missing their ride home. The benefits were most pronounced for students from low-income or single-parent families, as well as Black and foreign-born students. Opening transportation options to these groups promoted equity. Other cities—including Washington, D.C., Chicago, New York, and Sacramento—offer similar programs.

Some districts have begun working to coordinate different modes of transportation for families that face challenges getting students to school. In some metropolitan areas, parents are using ride-sharing apps designed specifically for children, with drivers who undergo more extensive background checks. These rides run about \$15 to \$20 a piece, so are not feasible for low-income families. But some school districts are using dollars earmarked for homeless children to pay for services such as HopSkipDrive and Zūm.

During the pandemic, Indianapolis Public Schools began working with a consulting firm known as 4MATIV to streamline the district's existing transportation system—continuing to move some high school students to public transit and consolidating some bus stops, making for longer walks but shorter bus rides. They also provided targeted transportation for students who are homeless or moved out of their school boundaries, as well as for students choosing schools outside their neighborhoods or engaged in apprenticeships.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

The pandemic and an ongoing shortage of bus drivers have exacerbated the challenges of getting students to school. Transportation programs remain an expensive item in the school budget, so expanding bus service may be difficult. But school districts would do well to consider these findings when weighing whether to reduce services. Transit passes can be a good option for older students. One challenge in some cities is the poor reliability of the public transportation system, with buses showing up late or erratically.

There is not yet research on the ride-share or multi-modal approaches.

## RESEARCH

- Assessing the Impact of Student Transportation on Public Transit: **PROMISING**
- Linking Getting to School to Going to School: **EMERGING**
- Another one rides the bus: The Impact of School Transportation on Student Outcomes in Michigan: **STRONG**
- Exploring school bus ridership and absenteeism in rural communities: **PROMISING**
- Randomized design evidence of the attendance benefits of the EPA School Bus Rebate Program: **STRONG**

## RESOURCES

- Why Do Detroit Students Miss School?
- Do Long Bus Rides Drive Down Academic Outcomes

## A Safer Walk to School

Neighborhood violence and unsafe routes to school can keep students from getting to class every day. A [recent study](#) found that Baltimore high school students who have to walk or wait for a bus along streets with high rates of violent crime are 6 percent more likely to miss school. This held true regardless of the students' demographic characteristics, prior attendance records, their neighborhood crime rates, or their choice of schools. A 2018 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [study](#) found that 7 percent of students had missed school in the past 30 days out of a fear for their safety either at school or traveling to school.

Chicago is dealing with this concern using a program called Safe Passage, which hires adults to stand along designated walking routes and provide protection to students during before- and after-school hours. These workers wear high-visibility vests and carry radios connected to emergency personnel.

Launched in 2009 with 35 schools, Safe Passage now employs about 1,400 workers to protect the path to 160 schools. On routes where Safe Passage is in effect, there has been a 14 percent reduction in reported crime, according to a [2019 study](#) by University of Illinois researcher Daniel McMillen. That translated into a 2.5 percent decline in the rate of absenteeism when compared to similar schools not using the program. The reduction in absenteeism was even better at the high school level. Several metropolitan school districts have adopted this model, including Newark and Washington, D.C.

Beyond neighborhood violence, heavy traffic can make the walk to school unsafe for children. An [2021 analysis](#) in Philadelphia found that a quarter of all pedestrian crashes involved children, most of

them struck during the day. The rates were higher in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty.

Many districts use an approach known as the “Walking School Bus,” especially for young children. The bus is essentially a volunteer group of parents and teachers who walk through the neighborhood, picking up students at their homes or designated corners and then walking with them to school. The concept works not just for communities with violent crime but also those where children must cross dangerous intersections on the way to school. Advocated by the National [Center for Safe Routes to School](#), the Walking School Bus has shown documented benefits for promoting physical activity among children, which has been linked to positive effects on academic achievement. A survey of coordinators found that about a quarter saw a reduction in tardiness. There is not, however, any published research into its effect on absenteeism.

Anecdotally, schools and districts report reductions in chronic absenteeism when they launch these walk- to-school efforts—either targeted for students with problematic attendance or adopted for all students. In Springfield, Massachusetts, for instance, students in the Walking School Bus had a better attendance rate than their peers.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

The Safe Passage approach, while effective, comes with considerable costs of hiring and vetting adults who can monitor routes to school. An analysis in Chicago showed that the return on investment in terms of reduced crime made up for any upfront costs. A volunteer program would be more affordable but would still require some supervision and vetting. The Walking School Bus is popular in many communities but does not yet have the

research basis required for much federal funding. Many suburban and rural districts are simply too spread out to benefit from a pedestrian approach.

**RESEARCH**

- [Do More Eyes on the Street Reduce Crime?](#)  
**PROMISING**

**RESOURCES**

- [Danger on the Way to School](#)
- [National Center for Safe Routes to School](#)
- [Safe Routes to Schools Programs](#)
- [Chicago Safe Passage Program](#)
- [Vision Zero for Youth Demonstration Project in Philadelphia, PA](#)

## Laundry at Schools

Some students miss school simply because they don't have any clean clothes to wear. About 15 percent of households in the United States do not have washing machines and rely on laundromats. As a consequence, some students experience bullying because of dirty or smelly clothes. Others are sent home if they show up out of uniform, though schools are generally moving away from such punitive policies. A few schools have addressed this concern by offering laundry facilities at school, a move that has shown early evidence of improving attendance.

Laundry at school is a fairly new approach without much of a research base. But Whirlpool, which donates washers and dryers through its [Care Counts](#) in 134 schools, has released some data. In the 2019-2020 school year, nearly 73 percent of the participating elementary students who were on track to be chronically absent improved their attendance after they began using the program. In the 2017-18 school year, 85 percent of students missing 15 or more days the previous year improved their attendance rates. More than half were no longer at risk for chronic absenteeism. In addition, teachers and students reported increased engagement in class and participation in extracurricular activities.

Beyond the Whirlpool program, other schools are turning to local merchants or philanthropy for help. A [high school](#) in Newark, New Jersey, got a grant from a local utility company to open a laundromat at school. An elementary school in Kansas City, Missouri, tapped the United Way for help. Mentors at the school recognized that dirty clothes were keeping some students from showing up regularly. Laundry facilities, along with other interventions, had a major impact. The principal [reported](#) the

share of students who attended school 90 percent of the time jumped from 46 to 84 percent.

If laundry machines seem impractical for a school, a viable alternative is a community closet, allowing donations of gently used clothes, coats and shoes in various sizes. Schools that require uniforms typically keep a stash on hand for students in need.

In Massachusetts, one woman started a program in the district's high school where students could access donated clothes and toiletries. Since then, [Catie's Closet](#) has expanded to 120 schools in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. This model can be implemented on a school-wide or district-wide level and run by volunteers.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

Managing a laundry program could increase the burden on school staff and could require negotiating new job duties or overseeing volunteers. The costs of installing laundry machines may be a financial burden for schools if done independently. Given that one of the underlying goals of the initiative is to counter bullying, schools should aim to keep use of the services discreet, allowing for clothes to be dropped off or picked up before or after school. Or they could open up laundry services for all students.

Beyond Whirlpool's corporate approach, some schools are turning to local merchants, the United Way or other local philanthropy for help acquiring machines or laundry supplies. The intervention is relatively new and doesn't yet have much research documenting success. Nor does the closet approach. Districts implementing these interventions can measure impact by comparing attendance in schools that have laundry programs to similar schools that do not.

## RESOURCES

- [Care Counts™ School Laundry Program Exposes Link Between Clean Clothes and Attendance](#)
- [Catie's Closet](#)

## TIER II INTERVENTIONS: Students with Elevated Risks

Tier II interventions target students at greater risk of chronic absenteeism, including those close to or already missing 10 percent of the school year.

### Early Warning Systems

Schools and districts that have achieved the best improvements in attendance typically use two interconnected strategies to gauge students' commitment to school. First, they track an array of attendance data to identify students in need of support, discern patterns, and determine the intensity of the response needed. This tracking requires a level of analysis beyond daily attendance-taking. Best practice is to check weekly or biweekly for students who are chronically absent—10 percent of the school year or about two days a month for any reason.

Second, they use a team approach to addressing absenteeism, bringing together key players to assess data and develop a course of action, often as part of a student support network or an early warning system that also looks at course failure and disciplinary action. They analyze data at the school, grade and student levels to understand where inequities exist, garner insights from students and families about the root causes contributing to high levels of absenteeism, and tailor responses for different racial, ethnic, linguistic and geographic groups. The most effective models involve teams of school counselors, school nurses, parent advocates and community partners, with principals coordinating the work with other school-improvement efforts.

Tracking student achievement and behavior can head off attendance problems before they emerge.

Researchers in [Chicago](#) and [Baltimore](#), looking for ways to reduce high school dropout rates, identified three signs that students were at risk as early as middle school: attendance, behavior, and course performance. Students who are chronically absent from school, suspended for misconduct and failing key courses are less likely to graduate. Programs developed to track and respond to these indicators have helped schools reduce chronic absenteeism and improve graduation rates. A [2017 study](#) by the Regional Education Laboratory Midwest randomly assigned some schools to use early warning systems and others to continue standard practices. Within a year, the early warning schools reduced the percentage of chronically absent students to 10 percent of their students, compared to 14 percent at the control schools.

Ninth grade seems to be a critical year for at-risk students, especially for attendance: The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research [found](#) that the number of absences for the average student nearly tripled between 8th and 9th grade, accounting for three quarters of the drop in grade point averages in the first year of high school. Chicago Public Schools and the research consortium responded to these findings with an intensive focus on keeping 9th graders on track for graduation.

The process began with data reports helping high school administrators and teachers identify at-risk students. Schools developed their own strategies,

which included mentoring, summer institutes and reaching out to families when students were absent. Between 2007 and 2014, the rate of on-track 9th graders rose from 57 percent to 82 percent, which also translated into higher graduation rates. In terms of attendance, the average number of days missed in 9th grade dropped from 27 to 21.

**Diplomas Now**, developed at Johns Hopkins University, saw a 33 percent reduction in the number of chronically absent students across 32 struggling urban secondary schools in 11 school districts during the 2016-17 school year. The model includes curriculum reform and instructional support for teachers, mentoring for at-risk students, and case management for students with the greatest needs. Diplomas Now received a \$30 million federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant to implement its program in all 32 schools, with another 30 schools serving as a control group. The model seemed to work best in middle schools, where a statistically significant number of students stayed on track for graduation, compared to other schools. Chronic absenteeism rates dropped at many of the secondary schools in the program, but not significantly more than those in the control group.

In 2018, the Chicago research consortium's To & Through Project began experimenting with an early warning system that tracks attendance and grades starting in 3rd grade, according to a [2022 brief](#). Looking back a decade, the researchers found that 93 percent of elementary and middle school students who attended classes at least 90 percent of the time and had at least a 3.0 grade point average graduated from high school, compared to 39 percent of the students furthest off track. The two indicators did not always align: For instance, more than a third of students came to school

regularly but still needed academic support. A much smaller share of students had good grades but poor attendance. Black and Latino students, especially boys, were less likely to be on track for graduation than their peers. In their brief, the researchers outlined a tracking system that divides students into five categories based on their attendance and grades.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

The intensive programs to track data and intervene with students headed off track require considerable time, training and resources. Some schools find the approach hard to implement and abandon it, especially when trained staff leave the school. But those that persist have found success in a variety of settings using a variety of models.

Key to implementation is developing an attendance team, which meets at least twice a month to evaluate the data and identify approaches to support students with academic, attendance or behavioral problems. Teams should use data to identify troubling trends and patterns requiring programmatic or policy solutions and not just focus on case management of the students with the greatest challenges.

Consider connecting the team working on early warning with another school team focused on universal strategies to improve attendance as part of a comprehensive tiered system.

**RESEARCH**

- Getting students on track for graduation: First- year impact of an Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring System: **STRONG**
- Preventable Failure: Improvements in Long-Term Outcomes When High Schools Focused on Ninth Grade: **PROMISING**

**RESOURCES**

- Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path: Addressing Early Warning Indicators
- Tips for an Effective Attendance Team
- Diplomas Now
- Elementary On-Track: Elementary School Students' Grades, Attendance, and Future Outcomes

## Targeted Home Visits

When Connecticut education leaders looked at student data during the pandemic, they saw a **dramatic surge** in chronic absenteeism. To bring those students back to class, they adapted a home visiting strategy focused on the students missing the most school days.

Connecticut invested \$10.7 million in federal Covid-relief aid to launch the Learner Attendance and Engagement Program (LEAP) in 15 districts, reaching nearly 8,700 students who were chronically absent from school or not showing up at all. LEAP home visits were conducted by both trained school staff and community partners. Designed to build relationships over time, the program supported multiple home visits carried out over the course of the school year.

The first-year results show that attendance rates increased by four percentage points in the month immediately following the first visit and climbed 15 percentage points after six months, according to a **2023 study** by the Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration. The chronically absent students had missed at least 10 percent of the school year, meaning their initial attendance rate was no higher than 90 percent. For some it fell far lower. So a 15-point gain could take a student from missing a day a week to missing a day every month.

The targeted home visits worked in Connecticut in part because of the strong infrastructure that school districts there had built to monitor and respond to student absences. State legislation approved in 2015 required tracking chronic absenteeism data and setting up attendance teams to brainstorm solutions in certain communities. These and other efforts led to improvements in attendance rates. The pandemic upended that progress, however, prompting state officials to embrace home visiting targeted toward the students missing too much school. That

required expanding the number of adults in a school community who can provide ongoing and consistent outreach to students and their families.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

LEAP home visits explicitly focus on chronically absent students, making them different from a more universal model used nationally, Parent Teacher Home Visits (see *Engaging With Families*, Page 10). Some districts in Connecticut employ both home visiting models simultaneously. Both approaches emphasize voluntary visits arranged in advance with a focus on relationship building and do not explicitly address attendance in the first visit.

Home visits entail some costs, as teachers and other staff who do home visits should be trained and compensated for visits that typically occur outside of school hours. During the 2022-23 school year, the Connecticut state legislature invested an additional \$7 million for LEAP to continue in existing districts and is expected to do the same next year. The initial investment also bolstered the state's infrastructure for tracking, responding and holding districts accountable for absenteeism.

While pre-pandemic PTHV efforts worked best with elementary school students, the Connecticut LEAP program showed promise with teenagers, as well. Schools have found the intervention particularly helpful with families of English language learners, especially when the visitor speaks the family's language. The LEAP home visits evaluation showed better results when families and staff met in person, either at home or another location.

Districts hoping to launch targeted home visiting programs should make sure they have the infrastructure needed to track and respond to attendance challenges. Districts should also

designate a coordinator to work with schools and, in some cases, community-based organizations that do home visits. In addition to training, coordinators can oversee budgets, work with unions, manage the expansion of the program and collect data showing the impact of home visits.

#### **RESEARCH**

- [An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Home Visits for Re-Engaging Students Who Were Chronically Absent in the Era of Covid-19: \*\*STRONG\*\*](#)

#### **RESOURCES**

- [Chronic Absence Patterns and Predictions During Covid-19: Insights from Connecticut](#)
- [SB 1056: An Act Concerning Chronic Absenteeism](#)

## Mentors and Tutors

A caring relationship at school—whether with a teacher, a counselor, or another student—can enhance a student’s sense of belonging and reduce absenteeism. Establishing these connections is particularly important post-pandemic, when many students feel disengaged from their friends and teachers. Mentoring and tutoring programs, deployed to address pandemic learning gaps, can also provide opportunities for students to build relationships and connections that keep them coming back to school regularly.

Once a school identifies a student with problematic attendance, mentoring can improve not only attendance but also student achievement. MENTOR, a national nonprofit dedicated to the practice, [cites research](#) by Public/Private Ventures showing that students who meet regularly with mentors are 52 percent less likely to skip a day of school than similar students without such support.

Check & Connect, a student engagement intervention developed in the 1990s, trains and deploys mentors to monitor early warning signs for at-risk students. The program is listed in the U.S. Institute of Education Sciences [What Works Clearinghouse](#) as an evidence-based approach for dropout prevention. A University of Minnesota [study](#) of elementary students with problematic attendance found that 40 percent of those receiving Check & Connect services were engaged and regularly attending school, an improvement of 135 percent.

Another model for improving attendance is known as success mentoring, which was a key component of the Obama administration’s [My Brother’s Keeper project](#) aimed at improving achievement among Black boys and men. The success mentors model was developed during a three-year pilot in New York City that reached about 10,000 students with

mentors drawn from the community, the school staff or from older students within the school. All three approaches worked as long as the mentors met certain characteristics: They were in the school at least three days a week, worked with a defined and manageable caseload, had access to attendance data and had a voice in weekly principal-led student success meetings. [Researchers](#) Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes at Johns Hopkins University found that students who had been chronically absent gained almost two additional weeks (nine days) of school a year after working with mentors—and experiencing other attendance interventions—when compared to similar students. High school students who improved their attendance also saw a slight increase in their grades and were less likely to leave school in the following years.

Several of the New York City schools have turned to City Year, which uses AmeriCorps members as “near-peers” for students who need extra support, often in the form of tutoring. As they develop these relationships, absenteeism rates have dropped. In 2016-17, students with City Year mentors improved their attendance by at least 2 percentage points, or about three and a half more days in school. In a [2019 study](#) by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, Chicago students in schools served by City Year attended about a week more of school (nearly six days) than peers at similar public schools.

Another successful approach taps older students to serve as mentors. The Center for Supportive Schools has developed the Peer Connection Group program, in which “peer leaders” participate in a yearlong leadership course. They meet weekly with small groups of 9th graders to develop relationships and work on skills needed to succeed in high school. A Westat Inc. evaluation of [programs](#) in Baltimore,

New York City and a rural North Carolina county showed that the students involved attended about six additional school days a year, compared to those who didn't participate. The gains in attendance continued in the year after participating.

Tutoring can improve attendance in the early grades. In Milwaukee's SPARK Literacy Program, kindergarten, 1st and 2nd grade students with tutors not only saw significant gains in reading achievement and literacy when compared to similar students not chosen for the program, but had six fewer absences, according to a University of Wisconsin study. The program also had a strong parent engagement component.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

Depending on the model that schools choose, mentoring and tutoring can cost additional dollars and create administrative challenges. Programs like City Year or Check & Connect charge for their work, costs that many communities tap local philanthropy to support. Using external volunteers requires training, developing privacy rules and policies for background checks, as well as data sharing agreements with other governmental or nonprofit agencies working with schools. Even mentoring programs internal to the school require time for training and supervision, especially with peer mentors. These hurdles should not prevent schools and districts from pursuing a very promising approach that benefits students requiring Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions.

For tutoring, Brown University researchers Matthew A. Kraft and Grace T. Falken suggest using a tiered structure, with high school students tutoring elementary school students as an elective course, college students tutoring middle school students

as a federal work-study job, and recent college graduates tutoring high school students as full-time tutors. Some districts have used virtual tutoring to expand options post-pandemic. This approach can still provide opportunities for connections, but not as effectively as in-person tutoring.

Just as these strategies can reduce student absenteeism, tutoring and mentoring rely on good attendance to be effective. British educators developed a set of interventions designed to build a strong relationship between tutors and their students. They use a snap survey for tutors and students to establish common interests, then provide training to tutors on building relationships with students. A series of email nudges helped improve student attendance at tutoring sessions.

When working with elementary schools, mentoring programs must be especially careful to forge strong partnerships with parents. Attendance Works has created a toolkit for implementing Success Mentor programs in elementary schools.

## RESEARCH

- Check & Connect: **STRONG**
- Using Data and the Human Touch: **PROMISING FOR ENTIRE CAMPAIGN**
- Implementation and Impact of City Year Within the Chicago Context: **PROMISING**
- In School and On Track to Graduate: **PROMISING**
- SPARK Literacy Program Evaluation: **STRONG**

## RESOURCES

- The Mentoring Effect
- Relationships Matter Toolkit
- The Case for a National Student Tutoring System
- Common ground: helping tutors and pupils find similarities boosts session attendance

## Targeted Youth Engagement

Youth engagement programs that seek to promote problem solving, self-control, emotional regulation and stronger self-identification as a learner can also reduce absenteeism. Sometimes known as character development or social-emotional development programs, these interventions typically combine a variety of strategies: improving school climate, encouraging character development or offering tutoring and mentoring. These programs can function as school-wide efforts and as targeted interventions for a particular population. The results are strong, especially for low-income students in urban areas.

The **Positive Action** program was tested in Chicago and Hawaii and demonstrated gains in attendance, as well as other indicators. Positive Action stresses a self-concept curriculum, getting along with others, and self-management. The curriculum is delivered in 15- to 20-minute segments, four days a week, in kindergarten through 6th grade. In 7th and 8th grades, it's taught two days a week. Schools supplement the curriculum with training for teachers and families, as well as efforts to develop a better school climate.

In a **2017 study**, researchers led by Niloofar Bavarian of California State University, Long Beach, reviewed six years of data comparing students in the Positive Action program in Chicago with those in a control group. The program had a positive impact on attendance, one of the largest effects the program had at the schoolwide level. In Hawaii, absenteeism was 15 percent lower at schools using Positive Action than in similar schools over a four-year period, according to a **2010 study** led by Frank Snyder of the Department of Public Health in Corvallis, Oregon.

In Chicago, a program known as Becoming a Man involves after school sessions focused on self-reflection, problem solving, relaxation strategies, and other aspects of “cognitive behavior therapy.” The students are also engaged in non-traditional sports, such as boxing and handball. The social-emotional program was paired with math tutoring through Match Education. Along with significant academic benefits, a **2014 study** led by Duke University researcher Philip C. Cook found that students involved in the experiment reduced absences by nearly 13 days, compared to similar students who were not involved.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

The most successful efforts to promote youth engagement and the social and emotional dimensions of learning often come with a price tag. The Becoming a Man and tutoring program, for instance, cost the school district an estimated \$3,000 to \$4,000 for each student.

#### RESEARCH

- **Using Social-Emotional and Character Development to Improve Academic Outcomes: STRONG**
- **Impact of a Social-Emotional and Character Development Program on School-Level Indicators: STRONG**
- **The (Surprising) Efficacy of Academic and Behavioral Intervention with Disadvantaged Youth: PROMISING**
- **Progress report of the randomized trial of Positive Action in Hawai'i: STRONG**

## Addressing Asthma

Among health conditions affecting school attendance, asthma stands out. The disease afflicts nearly one in 10 U.S. children and accounts for nearly 14 million missed days a year, according to data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The rate of chronic absenteeism for asthmatic children 7 to 10 years old is more than three times that of other students, a 2023 [CALDER Center study](#) found. Asthma can quickly turn a common cold into a week out of school. Both asthma and its related absences are more likely to affect students who are disadvantaged and children of color, a Brown University [study](#) found. Parents report keeping their children home for fear that schools can't handle asthma attacks. Students report anxiety over both the possibility of an asthma attack and falling behind due to absences. As a respiratory virus, Covid created additional challenges for these students.

An obvious step in cutting asthma-related absences is providing qualified health professionals at school who can help students manage the chronic disease. A [2004 study](#) by researchers at the University of Toledo and Wayne State University found that low-income and African American students with asthma who attended schools with full-time nurses missed 23 percent fewer days than did students in schools with part-time nurses. A [study](#) by epidemiologists based in the Bronx, New York, found that for children with asthma, access to a school-based clinic was associated with a gain of three school days. In Rochester, New York, in-school services combined with regular telehealth sessions with asthma specialists [reduced asthma attacks](#), according to a study led by University of Rochester researchers. [Researchers](#) at Boston Children's Hospital found that a combination of home visits and case management by hospital staff brought

down absenteeism rates by 41 percent for students treated.

Another approach is to educate children and families on how to use asthma control medications, how to develop a plan for dealing with the child's asthma, and how to recognize when a child needs to see a doctor or visit the emergency room. A 2007 University of Michigan [study](#) of several education programs found a positive impact on school attendance, especially when the asthma education was delivered by a health professional, including school nurses. A program in Southeastern Virginia used home visits to families in public housing to educate them on controlling their child's asthma.

A [2005 study](#) by Eastern Virginia Medical School researchers found that these "asthma ambassadors" produced several positive results, though the analysis didn't include school attendance. The Virginia program, one of several supported by the [Allies Against Asthma initiative](#), also worked through Head Start to identify and educate families affected by the condition. National guidelines encourage families to develop written asthma plans for their children and share these plans with the school, but the [research](#) is [mixed](#) on whether these plans add much to general benefits of asthma education.

The American Lung Association has developed a widely used curriculum called [Open Airways for Schools](#) focused on teaching students, ages 8 to 11, how to avoid asthma triggers, recognize warning signs of an attack and take appropriate action. [Researchers](#) led by Columbia University's David Evans found that students involved in the program had fewer episodes of acute asthma symptoms of shorter duration but found no impact on school absences.

Some communities are developing broader, cross-sector approaches that tap health, education and environmental sectors. In California’s rural San Joaquin Valley, Comprehensive Asthma Remediation and Education **Services** partners with managed care organizations, physicians and other community agencies to coordinate care. It connects families to providers for medication and tools and helps reduce triggers at home and school, with in-home environmental evaluations. School-based efforts include everything from evaluating outdoor air quality to encouraging caregivers not to run their engines while waiting for students.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

School-based health services come with considerable start-up costs but can pay dividends in increased attendance and academic performance. Asthma education programs can tap community volunteers, but the best results seem to come when a health professional is involved. Some school districts are turning to community partners—children’s hospitals are leading the work in many places—or philanthropic support.

### RESEARCH

- [Effect of School-based Telemedicine on Asthma Management: \*\*STRONG\*\*](#)
- [Effect of Full-Time versus Part-Time School Nurses on Attendance of Elementary Students with Asthma: \*\*PROMISING\*\*](#)
- [Asthma ambassadors—A home visiting program in public housing programs in Southeastern Virginia: \*\*PROMISING\*\*](#)

### RESOURCES

- [Open Airways for Schools](#)
- [Asthma and Academic Performance in Urban Children](#)
- [Asthma Health Outcomes Project](#)
- [Allies Against Asthma](#)
- [Do Written Asthma Plans Improve Outcomes?](#)
- [Example of an Asthma Plan](#)
- [School Based Health Care and Absenteeism: Evidence from Telemedicine](#)
- [A school health education program for children with asthma aged 8-11 years](#)
- [Comprehensive Asthma Remediation and Education Services](#)

## Mental Health and School Refusal

The disruptions of the pandemic led to dramatic increases in the number of students suffering from depression and anxiety. Some experienced trauma as they lost family members and connections to friends and teachers. Others struggled to readjust to attending school again and became anxious that their long absences had left them behind in their studies. For some, their parents' anxieties contributed to their own sense of unease. An April 2022 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [survey](#) found that student anxiety and feelings of hopelessness are at an all-time high. Students from low-income families are often hardest hit because they have less access to health care and treatment.

These mental health concerns can contribute to absenteeism, especially when they manifest as a psychological condition known as “[school refusal](#).” Psychologists find that the longer these students refuse to attend school, the harder it becomes for them to return. This refusal or avoidance can often express itself through physical symptoms: a child complaining of a stomachache or making frequent visits to the school nurse. Students may also feel tired, have trouble concentrating or avoid activities they previously enjoyed. Parents are usually aware that their children are at home and are often trying to get them to school. As such the response should not be punitive and should focus instead on mental health interventions. If left unaddressed, school refusal can lead to behavioral health and social issues, impact schoolwork, and potentially place the student at risk of dropping out.

The first step toward addressing school refusal is to identify its causes. In some cases, the cause is a personal anxiety—fear of separating from family, interacting with peers, moving to a new home or school, or failing grades. For other students, the anxiety ties into some aspect of school climate,

particularly a bullying environment or intense academic pressure. Some students are seeking attention or simply looking for something more interesting to do than attend school, blurring the line between school refusal and truancy. Interviews with the students, families and key school officials are essential in identifying causes.

In a [2014 paper](#), Christopher Kearney of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and Patricia Graczyk of the University of Illinois at Chicago recommend that schools use the multi-tiered approach Response to Intervention to promote school attendance, assess school refusal cases, and monitor the progress made after the intervention. The most common intervention for school refusal is cognitive behavior therapy, typically a short-term approach that focuses on helping students identify the thought patterns that are keeping them from getting to school and learn how to combat them. This can include relaxation techniques, work on social skills, and a gradual exposure to the aspects of school that are causing their anxiety.

The intervention can be done by a school psychologist or social worker or handled by an outside practitioner; it depends on school staff to help ease the student back into school. Parents also play a role in helping their children develop the routines and confidence to attend regularly. Many schools ask students and families to sign attendance contracts setting goals for improved attendance. A [2018 analysis](#) of eight school refusal studies showed progress in improving attendance, though not a reduction in anxiety.

Along with Wendy Silverman of the Yale School of Medicine, Kearney created the [School Refusal Assessment Scale](#) tool to help providers and school staff members evaluate students' behavior. Kearney and his colleagues have also developed an approach

that treats school refusal behavior based on various causes, acknowledging that these causes are often overlapping. In addition to his research, he has produced handbooks for school-based staff, mental health professionals and parents.

Anxiety medication can be used to treat school refusal, but the few studies done thus far show little additional impact on attendance beyond the benefits of cognitive behavior therapy. A [2017 study](#) led by Australian psychology professor Glenn Melvin broke school-refusing adolescents into three groups: Those receiving therapy, those receiving therapy plus an anti-anxiety medication, and those receiving therapy and a placebo. All three groups showed gains in attendance and improvements in mental health, though few were free of anxiety. Students who received therapy and medication reported the greatest satisfaction.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

Even before the pandemic, three quarters of U.S. students who received mental health support received it at school, according to a [2020 study](#) from EAB Global Inc. With the infusion of billions in Covid-relief funds, school districts are investing even more in mental health services, with more than a third bringing in additional psychologists, social workers and counselors to work with students, including through telehealth services (see Telehealth page 35). Some of these resources should be directed toward the students struggling to come to school because of anxiety and depression.

Some schools are using surveys or other tools to screen all students for mental health concerns. These tools take a variety of forms and cannot diagnose problems with anxiety and depression. But they can help identify students who need more support.

Key to addressing school refusal is identifying the reasons that students are missing school and engaging school officials and family members in addressing those problems. The [@School](#) model and Back2School [intervention](#) being studied by Dutch researcher David Heyne and others creates a manual for school refusal and uses a modular approach to deal with different mental health issues. The [Dialectical Behavior Therapy](#) approach, being investigated by David Chu and a team of researchers at Rutgers University, supplements therapy with web-based coaching for students and families when and where they need it most: in the morning at home.

To sustain mental health support beyond the pandemic, schools and districts can use federal grants focused on creating safe and healthy schools. In some instances, schools can tap [Medicaid](#) to reimburse costs for services provided to eligible students. The [School Avoidance Alliance](#) website offers information on school refusal and tips for parents and educators.

**RESEARCH**

- Treatment of School Refusal for Children with Mixed Functional Profiles: **EMERGING**
- Treatment for School Refusal Among Children and Adolescents: **PROMISING**
- Augmenting Cognitive Behavior Therapy for School Refusal With Fluoxetine: **NULL**

**RESOURCES**

- Is your child missing school due to anxiety?
- School Avoidance Alliance Website
- Practitioner review: School Refusal
- Reconciling Contemporary Approaches to School Attendance and Absenteeism
- A Response to Intervention Model to Promote School Attendance and Reduce Absenteeism

- School Refusal Assessment Scale
- Dialectical Behavior Therapy for School Refusal
- Developmentally Sensitive Cognitive Behavior Therapy for Adolescent School Refusal
- The Back2 School Modular Cognitive Intervention
- Assessing Social Influencers of Health and Education
- Are Districts the Nation's Adolescent Mental Health Care Providers?
- How Medicaid Can Help Districts Sustain Support for Student Mental Health

## Students with Disabilities

Chronic absenteeism rates for students with disabilities are typically higher than those for other students, a trend exacerbated by the pandemic. In Connecticut, for instance, the share of students with disabilities who were chronically absent is 50 percent higher than the rate for other students. It rose from 20 percent in the 2019-20 school year to 33 percent in 2021-22.

A [2017 study](#) of New York City students with disabilities in 1st through 6th grades offers some insight into the trends. Students in self-contained, special education classrooms were more likely to be chronically absent than those in inclusive settings or receiving only part-time services, according to the analysis by a team of researchers from New York University and University of California, Santa Barbara. While it's tempting to attribute these absences to medically fragile students, the highest rates were among students identified as having emotional disturbances, with nearly half of them (48 percent) missing too much school. National data show students with emotional disabilities also have higher suspensions rates than their peers, adding disciplinary absences to their missed days.

In a [report](#) produced for the National Center on Education Outcome, K.B. Boundy and Candace Cortiella suggest a number of steps to improve attendance among students with disabilities. They recommend mentioning absenteeism explicitly in the process of developing the required individual education plan (IEP), setting goals for what level of attendance is reasonable, and tracking the results carefully. They also urge schools to provide access to counselors and therapists for students missing school because of anxiety and depression. For those with specific learning disabilities, particularly dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity

disorder, social support needs to be combined with academic accommodations; otherwise, many of these students will miss school because they feel unsuccessful or overwhelmed.

To address these absences, schools and districts can deploy a number of interventions that improve attendance for all students. For instance, the St. Louis Special School District has launched a telehealth initiative in six schools that exclusively serve the special needs population with a goal of reducing absenteeism. Initially the work will be focused on treating common physical illnesses but also includes work in mental health services. Missouri allows school districts to seek Medicaid reimbursement for mental health services for eligible students.

Likewise, the difference in attendance rates between students in inclusive and self-contained classes suggests that interventions that increase a sense of belonging could improve attendance among students with disabilities. These include positive classroom greetings, home visits and mentoring programs. Likewise, interventions such as restorative practices that reduce suspensions could also reduce some of the disciplinary absences for students with emotional disabilities.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

School staff members involved in developing IEPs should be trained on how to incorporate attendance goals into the process with emphasis on supports and accommodations that are tailored to students' specific disabilities. Outreach to parents is key to moving beyond blaming them to enlisting their help in addressing the physical and emotional challenges to showing up every day.

## RESOURCES

- [Showing Up: Disparities in Chronic Absenteeism Between Students With and Without Disabilities](#)
- [Students with Disabilities and Chronic Absenteeism](#)
- [Chronic Absenteeism and Students with Disabilities: Frequently Asked Questions](#)

## Immigration Enforcement

New research confirms what common sense tells us: Heightened immigration enforcement is linked to chronic absenteeism among immigrant students. Whether it's a full-scale raid at a local factory or simply a government van parked near a school, the threat of deportation is prompting students to miss school, research suggests.

This is no small problem. An estimated 675,000 children under age 18 are in the United States without formal legal status. About 5 million children, many of them U.S. citizens, live with an undocumented parent. While a 1982 Supreme Court decision guarantees that children have a right to attend school regardless of their immigration status, enforcement actions still provoke fear.

In seven California school districts, heightened immigration arrests led to declines in academic achievement, attendance, and certain school climate and safety measures for Latino students and those who were English learners, according to the [2021 study](#) by Jacob Kirksey of Texas Tech University and his former University of California, Santa Barbara, colleague Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj. Specifically, Latino student absenteeism rose by 5 percentage points in elementary schools and 8 percentage points in secondary schools when immigration arrests in the county rose significantly; attendance was unaffected for other students. The study relied on data and survey results from [California CORE districts](#), which survey students extensively to help drive school improvement. An increase in immigration arrests led to lower rates of students expressing a sense of belonging and safety at school, the researchers found.

A team of Santa Barbara researchers led by Kirksey found in a [2020 study](#) that deportations within 25 miles of a school were associated with higher rates of chronic absenteeism for Latino students and

lower achievement scores in math. The effect on attendance was similar to that of a hostile school climate, the researchers found. The study used data from 2009 to 2016, when Obama administration policy changes increased deportations.

A [2019 study](#) released by Stanford University researchers Thomas Dee and Mark Murphy looked at earlier data and found Obama's policies caused a distinct impact on school enrollment. Immigrant families moved to different communities when their local police departments formed partnerships with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

There are no quantitative studies on interventions to reduce absences in such circumstances, but several qualitative case studies support two approaches: establishing clear school-based protocols for handling immigration enforcement and building strong, trusting relationships with students and families. In a [2017 paper](#), University of Missouri researcher Emily Crawford described a California elementary school where immigrant parents were rattled by the appearance of an ICE van two blocks away. Some parents refused to leave the school grounds after dropping off students. Others didn't bring their children to class. The principal, with no policy in place, decided to lock down the school. She had community liaisons call families to tell them what was happening. One staff member drove several children home in the afternoon.

The incident underscores the need to develop and communicate a set of enforcement protocols that align with district, school board and state policies. California's attorney general, for instance, has issued [detailed guidance](#)—with an emphasis on making schools “safe havens” for children. Texas, on the other hand, bans any locality or campus from acting as a sanctuary for immigrants. In Los Angeles, schools must receive district permission

before allowing immigration officers to enter. And in Denver, the school board passed a resolution pledging to do everything “in its lawful power” to protect immigrant students.

Once school-level protocols for dealing with immigration officials are set, they should be shared with staff members and families, so that everyone knows what to expect in cases of enforcement action. The National School Board Association has released [recommendations](#) and templates.

To build trusting relationships, schools can rely on a number of strategies including home visiting and culturally relevant curricula. In a [2017 study](#), Crawford and a team of researchers interviewed Texas school counselors and found they were uniquely positioned to reassure students they are safe at school and to encourage children to attend despite their fears.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

School leaders need to ensure their protocols for dealing with immigration enforcement are aligned with local and state policies. Schools with large populations of immigrants should create intentional strategies for connecting with families. These include home visits, establishing a network of community contacts, and assigning a staff member to serve as a point of contact.

## RESOURCES

- [Immigration Arrests and Educational Impacts: Linking ICE Arrests to Declines in Achievement, Attendance, and School Climate and Safety in California](#)
- [Deportations Near the Schoolyard: Examining Immigration Enforcement and Racial/Ethnic Gaps in Educational Outcomes](#)
- [Vanished Classmates: The Effects of Local Immigration Enforcement on School Enrollment](#)
- [Educational Justice for Undocumented Students: How School Counselors Encourage Student Persistence in School](#)
- [When Boundaries Around the “Secret” are Tested: A School Community Response to the Policing of Undocumented Immigrants](#)
- [Immigrant and Refugee Children: A Guide for Educators and School Support Staff](#)
- [National School Board Association Guidance](#)
- [California School Guidance](#)
- [CORE Lessons: Measuring the Social and Emotional Sides of Student Success. FutureEd. 209](#)

## TIER III INTERVENTIONS: Intensive Support

Students most at risk of chronic absenteeism, those missing 20 percent or more of the school year, typically require case management customized to individual challenges. This can involve health, housing and social service agencies.

### Interagency Case Management

Students facing serious and complex problems such as homelessness, teen pregnancy and parenthood, and mental illness require coordination and case management with agencies beyond the school yard. Often the solutions require extended support tailored to the unique situations of the most severely chronically absent students. That may mean tapping the local housing authority to help children facing eviction or working with social service agencies to help those in foster care.

**Communities in Schools** (CIS) offers a model for encouraging interagency collaboration. The organization, which provides services across all three tiers of absenteeism responses, has demonstrated the value of wrap-around services in supporting some students. A 2017 MDRC [evaluation](#) of two years of case management by CIS found significant improvement in attendance rates for elementary school students involved in the program when compared to similar students, but not for middle and high school students.

Another intervention that has shown promise in reducing absenteeism is FosterEd, which currently operates in Arizona, California, New Mexico and Indiana. FosterEd works with children in the child welfare and justice systems to coordinate work with schools and families. Program organizers identify an “education champion” for each child, often a caregiver who can advocate for and support the

student. They set up education teams staffed by caring, involved adults who work collaboratively in support of the children, conscious of the trauma these students have endured. And, importantly, organizers allow students to set their own goals for improvement. In three Arizona counties, students who received FosterEd services showed statistically significant improvements in attendance, according to a [2020 evaluation](#) by RTI International.

**Impact Tulsa**, a part of the StriveTogether network, focuses on data to help educators understand the factors outside of the classroom that influence student success. It connects individual data on student outcomes from 21 school districts (including attendance, grades, and suspensions) with census-tract data on neighborhoods in four domains: neighborhood poverty; neighborhood education levels; neighborhood health; and neighborhood access to such assets as schools, parks, trails, transit, and grocery stores. The school district has used the index to identify areas where schools and their community-based partners need to work more closely to eliminate barriers to student success.

At the state level, many states are developing Children’s Cabinets—interagency partnerships across such fields as education, health, human services, and juvenile justice— to coordinate service delivery for vulnerable students.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

Collaboration with agencies and nonprofit organizations necessarily involves sharing data, something that raises privacy concerns under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The federal government provides guidance on navigating these issues. Developing the needed data systems and coordinating services can add costs but pay dividends for the most vulnerable students.

Key to any coordinated approach is data sharing. Community-based projects such as mentoring or afterschool programs need access to attendance records, grades, disciplinary records and other information. This naturally raises privacy concerns that may require memoranda of understanding between districts and outside agencies.

## RESEARCH

- [Two Years of Case Management: PROMISING](#)
- [FosterEd Arizona: Year 2 Evaluation of Statewide: EMERGING](#)

## RESOURCES

- [Strive Together Collaborative Improvement](#)
- [FERPA Guidance for Sharing Information with Community Based Organizations](#)
- [A New Strategy for Driving Educational Equity](#)

## Housing Insecurity

Unstable housing and student mobility are key predictors of chronic absenteeism, whether students are living in homeless shelters or moving frequently from school to school. Interagency collaboration can connect families to supports that help them avoid eviction and find stable housing as well as ensuring homeless families take full advantage of protections provided under federal law. Nationally, 37 percent of students experiencing homelessness were chronically absent in the 2018-19 school year, more than double the average for all students, according to a [2022 report](#) from the National Center for Homeless Education. The proportion dipped in the first year of the pandemic—when school closings made identifying students harder—and rose to nearly 42 percent in 2020-21.

A [2015 study](#) by the Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness found that homeless elementary students in New York City missed an average of four weeks of school in the 2013-14 school year. About 36 percent of those students were chronically absent, double the city's overall rate. Among students living in homeless shelters, the chronic absenteeism rate was a staggering 58 percent, compared to 25 percent for those doubling up with other families. When homeless students missed fewer than five days, they performed at about the same level as other low-income elementary students; when they were chronically absent, test scores and other academic indicators dropped. A [2012 study](#) by University of Utah researchers found similar results for homeless and highly mobile students.

The American Rescue Plan provided \$800 million for school districts to support homeless students. What's more, the federal McKinney-Vento Act offers several provisions that can make it easier for

homeless students to maintain good attendance rates. The law eliminates some paperwork requirements for demonstrating residency in a school attendance zone. It requires school districts to make placement decisions based on the "best interest" of the homeless student. That can mean allowing students to stay in a school even if they have moved out of the attendance zone or to move into a school that is more convenient. The law also requires districts to provide or arrange transportation for homeless students. All states and many local education agencies have [designated coordinators](#) who can help schools with transportation, enrollment and other issues.

A [New York City campaign](#) to reduce absenteeism included sharing school data for students living in shelters with staff from the Department of Homeless Services. A coordinator at each shelter helped families place students in school, monitored attendance among children, and provided space for a homework center. Chronic absenteeism became a metric these homeless shelters shared in their monthly progress reports. The effort showed initial results: Homeless students who participated were 31 percent less likely to be chronically absent than homeless students who did not participate. A [2018 audit](#), however, found that the program's procedures were not followed consistently because of overwhelming caseloads, prompting the city to invest more money in data tracking and other resources.

[Housing authorities](#) in San Francisco, San Antonio, Seattle, Sarasota, Florida, and Springfield, Massachusetts, among others, have also taken ownership of student attendance—sharing data with schools, hiring education liaisons to work with students and families, or organizing "Walking School Buses" from their properties.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

Any initiatives involving homeless students must abide by the federal McKinney-Vento rules. State and local coordinators can help guide these initiatives. Data sharing also requires memoranda of understanding that navigate student privacy rights.

A [2020 brief](#) from Schoolhouse Connection outlines strategies for improving attendance among students who are experiencing housing instability. Schools should:

- Address basic needs such as mental and physical health concerns, as well as clothing, hygiene and school supplies
- Provide transportation for students who have moved beyond the bus route or walking zone
- Create a school climate where students and families feel welcome and respected
- Track attendance and other indicators for students with unstable housing

It's important to remember that federal aid for homeless students can support families in various stages of housing instability, including those doubled up with other families. In many cases, these parents don't realize they qualify for support and can benefit from outreach.

## RESEARCH

- [Using Data and the Human Touch: PROMISING](#)

## RESOURCES

- [Empty Seats: The Epidemic of Absenteeism Among Homeless Elementary Students](#)
- [Research Brief: Chronic Absenteeism in Utah](#)
- [Community Action Guide to Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism: For Homeless Service Providers Contacts for State Coordinators](#)
- [Chronic Absenteeism Among Students Experiencing Homelessness in America](#)
- [Audit Report on the Department of Education's Efforts to Monitor and Address School Attendance of Homeless Children Residing in Shelters](#)
- [Supporting the Attendance of Students Experiencing Homelessness](#)

## Rethinking Truancy

Improving attendance involves not just adopting proven, evidence-based practices but also discarding ineffective approaches. That means shifting away from a punitive response to truancy and using legal action only as a last resort, combining it with additional support when needed. It also means examining potential bias in deciding which absences are labeled unexcused and count toward truancy.

When an absence is labeled unexcused, students can be denied course credit and lose the opportunity to make up missed work, be excluded from extracurricular activities, have their drivers' licenses suspended, and eventually be taken to court and fined. As absences accumulate, responses generally become more punitive.

Even as schools and communities address the broader problems that contribute to chronic absenteeism (which includes all missed days, excused and unexcused) many places still struggle to deal with students who have excessive unexcused absences. While truancy typically refers only to unexcused absences, each state has the authority to define both the term and the level of absenteeism that triggers the need for legal intervention.

With the current rise in chronic absenteeism, some districts and states are contemplating imposing strict new truancy rules, despite little evidence that such a step will help. A truancy crackdown in the mid-1990s led to a 69 percent increase in the number of cases ending up in juvenile court, according to a [2017 study](#) led by St. Louis University researcher Brandy R. Maynard. Rather than coming back to class, students were being pushed out of school, often into the juvenile justice system. And truancy rates didn't budge, holding nearly steady at 10.8 percent in 2002 and 11.1 percent in 2014, the study showed.

Moreover, a [2021 study](#) led by University of Tennessee researcher Clea McNeely found that punitive responses are unlikely to improve attendance when absences occur for reasons beyond the control of the student and their family, such as such as transportation challenges, the lack of access to health care, or bullying in the classroom. For instance, in many districts, a student who misses four consecutive days with the flu will have their absences excused if they show up with a doctor's note, but not if they couldn't get in to see a doctor. Overuse of the unexcused absence label could undermine efforts to partner with students and families to identify the underlying challenges that cause students to miss school.

These policies also exacerbate disparities. A recent [analysis](#) published by Policy Analysis for California found that socioeconomically disadvantaged students are much more likely to have their absences labeled unexcused. This is also true for Black, Native American, Latino and Pacific Islander students, compared to White, Asian American and Filipino students. Black students experience the largest disparity. These disparities cannot be fully explained by poverty since they persist across differences in socioeconomic status.

Strategies that rely on court action alone have not proven effective. A [report](#) from the Council of State Governments Justice Center found that "an arrest, court involvement, and/or system supervision for youth who are truant or commit other low-level offenses actually decreases their likelihood of attending school and completing high school." The study notes that taking punitive measures such as barring students from attending in-person classes, automatic suspensions or expulsions or requiring attendance in alternative schools make it harder,

not easier, for students to stay connected to the positive adults, peers, and activities that are critical to successful education.

At the same time, early intervention approaches that divert students from court have also not been shown to improve attendance. In a [2019 study](#) of a secondary school truancy intervention program in a Midwest county, McNeely and her co-authors found no significant improvement in attendance. The program requires a parent meeting, a hearing to develop an attendance contract and a petition to the juvenile court. Likewise, a [2020 study](#) led by University of Minnesota researcher Won Fy Lee found that a Minnesota school truancy program offering support and guidance to elementary school students and families produced no significant impact on reducing absenteeism.

Recognizing that a different response is needed, some states have begun to shift their approach to ensure legal action is used as a last resort and services are offered to address the underlying issues. In Ohio, for instance, a 2017 change to state law prohibits schools from suspending or expelling students solely because of truancy. Instead, schools must set up an absence intervention team to work with those students considered habitually truant. Texas, one of two states that used to consider truancy a criminal offense that could be tried in adult courts, reduced it into a civil offense in 2015. In the first year of the change, the number of court referrals for truancy dropped from 88,675 to 20,555 for students, with a similar trend for guardians, [an analysis](#) by a state legislative panel showed. School districts reported that attendance stayed about the same.

In addition, Connecticut passed legislation in 2015 expanding truancy clinics, which include the parent or caregiver in a nonpunitive proceeding with the student. The state later removed truancy as a reason to refer students to juvenile court and encouraged districts to community-based services instead, according to a [report](#) from the American Institutes for Research. The state of Washington has created what are now known as community engagement boards and requires schools to meet with parents and provide information about the value of attendance.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

Schools and districts should monitor excused and unexcused absences to detect biases in how absences are labeled and to address problematic truancy practices. In particular, schools should avoid punishing truancy with suspensions—essentially responding to students missing school by forcing them to miss more school.

Truancy still evokes an urge to punish students for violating school rules, so school leaders should be aware that they may be confronted with that perspective as they pursue different approaches within schools and the courts.

**RESOURCES**

- [Truancy in the United States: Temporal Trends and Correlates](#)
- [Overview of the Effects of Changes to Texas Truancy Laws](#)
- [Exploring an Unexamined Source of Racial Disparities in Juvenile Court Involvement: Unexcused Absenteeism Policies in U.S. Schools](#)
- [Disparities in Unexcused Absences Across California Schools](#)
- [Rethinking the Role of the Juvenile Justice System: Improving Youth's School Attendance and Educational Outcomes](#)
- [Long-Term Effects of Truancy Diversion on School Attendance: a Quasi-Experimental Study with Linked Administrative Data](#)
- [Can Court Diversion Improve School Attendance among Elementary Students? Evidence from Five School Districts](#)

## APPENDIX: Monitoring Attendance During Distance Learning

The shift during the pandemic to remote and hybrid learning required schools to rethink how they measured attendance. Some simply stopped monitoring attendance once students went into quarantine. Others measured how many students logged into an online portal daily and checked in with those who didn't. Still others tracked students' communications with teachers or the number of assignments they submitted as signs of "attendance." While schools have returned to in-person instruction, it's important to reflect on the lessons the pandemic taught about monitoring attendance:

### Contact

The pandemic exposed holes in schools' contact-information systems, with many schools struggling to reach their students and families. In some cases, families moved suddenly because of lost jobs or health concerns. In others, contacts were outdated. The pandemic pointed to the value of reaching out students and their families through multiple channels: text, phone, email, social media, and mail, as well as through friends and neighbors.

### Connectivity

The pandemic revealed a tremendous lack of connectivity tools among low-income and rural families and while federal Covid-relief funding helped shrink the number of students without wifi, computers and other connectivity tools, there is still considerable work to be done to close the gaps. Post-pandemic audits of families' resources would be a smart first step, including learning the percentage of students able to log-on to on-line learning systems.

### Participation

Participation in online learning is more than simply logging on. It is showing up for an entire class or submitting an assignment. And many teachers during the pandemic found that students did the former far more often than the latter. So tracking completion of assignments to the student and classroom levels emerged as a key metric. Breaking down that and other completion data by school, grade, race/ethnicity, home language, disability and ZIP code would help educators identify inequities and inform decisions about allocating resources.

### Relationships

The pandemic also highlighted the importance of providing students with meaningful relationships with adults during remote learning.

Schools and school districts could get baseline information by tracking how often they engage students and families in a day or a week. Teachers are especially well-positioned to monitor if students have responded to daily opportunities for interaction. They reported that adapting traditional classroom relationship-building strategies to online settings was effective, using positive messaging, incentives, and checking in with students regularly. Connecting with students in real time at least three times a week emerged as a good benchmark.

Teachers also found that encouraging connections among students in virtual classrooms helped combat student isolation, using group assignments and online chats to keep students engaged with each other. Many schools created call-in lines support students and their families.

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# ATTENDANCE PLAYBOOK

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