

DISTRICT STRATEGIES TO REDUCE STUDENT ABSENTEEISM

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This brief is one in a series aimed at providing K-12 education decision makers and advocates with an evidence base to ground discussions about how to best serve students during and following the novel coronavirus pandemic. [Click here](#) to learn more about the EdResearch for Recovery Project and view the set of COVID-19 response-and-recovery topic areas and practitioner-generated questions.

STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

Tier 1

- Safe, reliable transportation to and from school and a safe school environment promote daily attendance.
- Providing detailed and timely information to parents about their child's absences and positive messaging about school can improve attendance.
- Home visiting by nurses or teachers can provide greater insight into why children are absent and foster stronger relationships between families and schools.
- Students are more engaged—and more likely to attend school—when their schoolwork connects to their own identity and when they feel a sense of belonging at school.
- Addressing students' and families' morning barriers, routines, and engagement shows promising evidence of improving attendance.
- Attendance interventions that target physical health at school are particularly effective, and this is even more salient during COVID.

Tier 2

- Data systems that identify students for increased support based on attendance, behavior, and academic metrics can facilitate targeted efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism.
- School-based mentorship programs have been shown to improve attendance and academic outcomes for students at all grade levels.

Tier 3

- Partnering with other public agencies and community-based organizations shows promise for comprehensively responding to complex challenges some students face to strong school attendance.
- For frequently absent students, absence intervention teams that holistically respond to causes of student truancy are more effective than strategies that punish students with suspension or expulsion.

BREAKING DOWN THE ISSUE

Missing school negatively affects academic and socioemotional outcomes for all students, but the impacts are largest for low-performing, low-income, and English learner students.

■ Absences decrease students' test scores, course grades, and on-time graduation.

- Missing school regularly also reduces students' self-efficacy, eagerness to learn, and social engagement.
- The negative effects of school absences are larger for low-performing, low-income, and English learner students.

■ Students who are chronically absent in kindergarten have lower attendance rates and achievement in future grades.

- States and school districts commonly define chronic absenteeism as being absent from school more than 10% of days by the end of the school year.
- Students in classes with higher percentages of chronically absent students have lower test scores.

The biggest drivers of absenteeism are transportation challenges, student health, school climate, mobility, and poverty—for individual students and for communities.

■ Families report that transportation access is the largest barrier to school attendance.

- Students who walk through dangerous neighborhoods to get to school or who have long commutes to school have lower attendance rates.

■ Students with chronic health conditions miss school more often.

- Districts located in cities with higher rates of asthma and colder weather have a higher percentage of chronically absent students.
- Poor classroom ventilation is associated with increased absences due to illness.
- Mental health drives absenteeism too. Chronically absent students report personal stress as a reason they are absent from school.

■ Children who enjoy school are less likely to be chronically absent, while children who report conflicts with teachers and other students are more likely to miss school.

- When parents engage with student learning by attending school events, students are more likely to attend school regularly.

■ Low-income students and students experiencing housing instability are more likely to be chronically absent.

- Students living in neighborhoods with higher poverty levels, lower homeownership rates, and more violent crimes have more absences.

The virtual learning environment, increased physical and mental health concerns, and reduced transportation access associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated the problems that cause student absences.

■ Districts and teachers reported lower attendance rates and challenges with student engagement as a result of the pandemic.

- Households isolated from their school communities with little internet access were less engaged with schools during remote learning.
- **Relative to before the pandemic, schools and families may be less likely to send children to school when they have symptoms of an illness or have been in contact with someone who is sick.**
- **The rates of childhood depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation have significantly increased since the pandemic started.**
- **Public transportation use decreased since March 2020 because of the increased risk of infectious disease transmission in confined spaces.**
 - In a 2021 survey, half of districts reported experiencing a severe or desperate school bus driver shortage. Two-thirds of districts reported altering school bus service in fall 2021.

STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

TIER 1 STRATEGIES Reaching all students with broad-based and preventative supports

Safe, reliable transportation to and from school and a safe school environment promote daily attendance.

- **School and/or public bus transportation benefits all students, particularly those in rural areas and those from low-income or single-parent households.**
- **In urban contexts contending with high rates of crime, monitoring common walking routes and facilitating students to walk to school in large groups show promise for ensuring safe travel to school.**
- **More targeted transportation support may be needed for students who are homeless, live in foster care, have disabilities, live in rural settings, travel long distances to school, or exhibit signs of chronic absence.**
 - Recent innovations in transportation efforts, not yet backed by rigorous evidence, include door-to-door van services, ride-sharing services, and family carpool coordination.
- **For families contending with undocumented status, concern about their children's safety within school is a barrier to regular school attendance.**

Providing detailed and timely information to parents about their child's absences and positive messaging about school can improve attendance.

- **Parents often underestimate how much school their child has missed. Equipping them about their child's attendance through flyers or text messaging can reduce absences.**
 - In Philadelphia, an experimental study found that personalized mailers sent home to parents reduced chronic absenteeism by 10% or more, in part by updating parents' information of how much school their children had missed.
- **Two-way text messaging can facilitate faster identification of and response to barriers to regular attendance.**

- In Pittsburgh, [a two-way text-messaging pilot](#) reduced chronic absence among kindergarten students while supporting families to navigate barriers to attendance such as poor access to laundry facilities and new transportation needs related to home eviction.

■ **School- and community-wide messaging campaigns promoting strong school attendance show promise but must be [designed with care](#).**

- Messaging focused on [incentives](#) (which can be [financial](#)) and [positive messaging](#) for attending school works better than messaging focused on reducing absenteeism, which could be construed as punitive.

■ **Home visiting by nurses or teachers can provide greater insight into why children are absent and foster stronger relationships between families and schools.**

- **[Home visiting](#) is particularly effective for students whose families might otherwise lack a strong relationship with the school.**
- **Rather than focusing explicitly on desired outcomes such as attendance, [teachers' conversations with parents can focus on their hopes and dreams](#) and shared goals for their children to facilitate relationship building and trust.**

■ **Students are more engaged—and more likely to attend school—when their schoolwork connects to their own identity and when they feel a sense of belonging at school.**

- **Courses employing [culturally relevant pedagogy](#) can improve academic performance and attendance, particularly among lower-performing students.**
- **For students with disabilities, learning in a [self-contained special education classroom](#) has been linked to a reduced sense of belonging, thereby placing an impetus on researchers and policymakers to understand why and how to better support those in these settings**

■ **Addressing students' and families' morning barriers, routines, and engagement shows promising evidence of improving attendance.**

- **Schools can help families address school-going logistics through access to [laundry services](#), [public transportation](#), [school-partnered ride share](#), or [school breakfast](#).**
- **Teachers [greeting students](#) as they arrive also improves student attendance via better student engagement.**
- **[New research](#) suggests that having a teacher of the same race or ethnicity as the student in the first period of the day might reduce absences.**

■ **Attendance interventions that target physical health at school are particularly effective, and this is [even more salient during COVID](#).**

- **School infrastructure remains an important factor for many attendance interventions and is especially so for students with [breathing-related diseases](#). Examples have included [proper ventilation](#) or [asbestos removal](#).**
- **[In-school health services](#), including [school nurses](#), [vaccinations](#), school-based health centers, [dental care](#), and mental health counseling, can improve student access to adequate healthcare, which can improve student attendance.**
 - Hybrid models that combine on-site and [telehealth care](#), show promise for increasing access to care, such as treatment for [asthma](#) and [dental care](#).

TIER 2 STRATEGIES Targeting students with signs of risk

Data systems that identify students for increased support based on attendance, behavior, and academic metrics can facilitate targeted efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism.

- **Early warning indicator systems combined with follow-up supports reduced chronic absenteeism among 9th grade students in Chicago and among middle school students across a host of urban school districts.**
 - In Chicago, for example, the district responded to patterns of high absenteeism and low academic performance with mentoring, summer support, and family outreach. The on-track status of 9th grade students rose nearly 30 percentage points following these efforts.

School-based mentorship programs have been shown to improve attendance and academic outcomes for students at all grade levels.

- **Pairing students with role models and mentor programs can improve positive attitudes for students coming to school.**
 - Collaborating with external partners can reduce burden on school staff for identifying and managing mentors.
 - Mentorship programs can stand alone or be part of a comprehensive support system that also includes health and social services.
- **Mentoring programs such as Check & Connect, My Brother's Keeper, City Year, and Peer Group Connection have improved attendance and other outcomes in elementary, middle, and high school contexts.**
 - Common features of these programs include using attendance data to target students for support and connecting students with mentors for a sustained period of time.
 - Youth school engagement programs, such as Positive Action and Becoming a Man, have led to improvements in school attendance, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds residing in urban contexts.

TIER 3 STRATEGIES Responding to chronic absence with coordinated supports

Partnering with other public agencies and community-based organizations shows promise for comprehensively responding to complex challenges some students face to strong school attendance.

- **The Full-Service Community Schools (FSCS) and Communities in Schools models are run by non-profit organizations that place staff coordinators in schools to analyze student data, identify needs, and connect students and their families to needed resources.**
 - In New York City, schools that participated in FSCS saw, in comparison to similar schools that did not participate, reduced chronic absenteeism across elementary, middle, and high schools targeted for support.
 - The FosterEd program, which targets children in the child welfare and justice systems, shows promise for improving students' attendance by connecting them to a coordinated support team that can include social workers, therapists, teachers, and students' court-appointed special advocates.
- **Partnerships between schools and homeless services show promise for improving attendance among homeless students.**

- A [partnership in New York City](#) facilitated student placement in schools and the development of in-shelter homework centers. Attendance data from May 2019 (after a year of the program) compared to attendance data in May 2018 suggest that those who participated were substantially less likely to be chronically absent.

For frequently absent students, absence intervention teams that holistically respond to causes of student truancy are more effective than strategies that punish students with suspension or expulsion.

- In [Kentucky](#), a school-court partnership that provided families of truant students with workshop training followed by meetings and case management from court and school staff improved student attendance and academic performance.

Note: FutureEd's Attendance Playbook also provides a detailed synthesis of the evidence base and implementation guides around specific attendance interventions.

STRATEGIES TO AVOID

Setting expectations for students to achieve perfect attendance can backfire.

- Attendance incentives can be useful, but likely less so if focused on perfect attendance. [Rewarding perfect attendance](#) in one month can lead to lower attendance the month following.

Punitive school discipline strategies reduce engagement and attendance.

- School discipline that relies on restorative rather than punitive practices can improve student engagement and school attendance.
 - [Restorative justice efforts](#) in [Pittsburgh](#), [Minnesota](#), and [Houston](#) reduced suspension and absence rates, with some sites also seeing reductions in differences by race and socioeconomic status.

Strategies that rely heavily on external organizations may unnecessarily increase complexity.

- Partnering with external organizations can be helpful, particularly for serving students facing complex challenges such as [health needs](#). But it can also increase the number of people and offices involved and make it harder for schools themselves to drive the work.
- Outside agencies may also have non-educational goals, such as [addressing neighborhood quality](#), that lie beyond the scope of school systems.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

More evidence briefs can be found at the [EdResearch for Recovery website](#). To receive updates and the latest briefs, [sign up here](#).

Briefs in this series will address a broad range of COVID-19 challenges across five categories:

- Student Learning
- School Climate
- Supporting All Students
- Teachers
- Finances and Operations

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