Chronic Absenteeism

Brittainy Newman/AP

Page 8

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Page 18

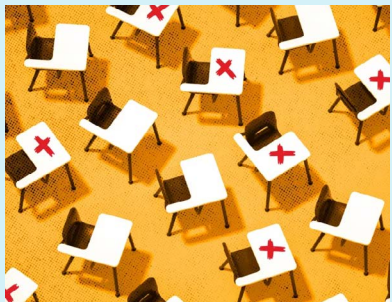## OPINION

EDITOR'S NOTE

Unless children attend school, learning is impossible but chronic absenteeism is an issue confronting school leaders, principals and teachers everyday in schools all across America. This Spotlight showcases how educators have confronted this problem, with innovative and cost effective solutions, building family engagement, and learning about their community, all with the goal to get and keep children in the classroom.

Clockwise from upper left: Damon Lewis, the principal of Ponus Ridge STEAM Academy; Miguel Salazar, the principal of Sundown Middle School; Sherilynn Boehlert, the principal of Schoenbar Middle School; Tony Cattani, the principal of Lenape High School; Terita Walker, the principal of East High School; and Shauna Haney, principal of Ogden High School. These are the finalists for the 2025-26 National High School and Middle School Principals of the Year awards.

June 24, 2025

How Top Principals Are Tackling Teacher Morale and Other Challenges

By Olina Banerji & Jennifer Vilcarino

For most principals, summertime doesn't always mean a clean break from school. Most find themselves deep in planning for the new school year, shortlisting hires, deciding which training their teachers most need, and catching up with tasks they've long put off in the bustle of the school term—like cleaning out their desks.

That's how Tony Cattani, principal of Lenape High School in Medford County, N.J., spent his first day of summer break. But he has bigger plans, which include sending a postcard to each of his 1,900-plus students over the summer to let them know their educators are thinking of them. It's all part of an effort to boost their sense of belonging and connection with the school.

Tony Cattani

Over the summer, Cattani, along with a team of counselors and 48 student leaders, will call students who consistently showed up late to class or missed instructional time the past school year to find out why. The calls will also screen for the activities these students are most interested in—such as sports, drama, or art—so staff can connect them to those extracurriculars and clubs when school starts again.

"To have a connection to this building, we felt like that's the biggest draw. Students know there's a landing spot for them when they come in, a safe spot for them. We need to do a better job with that in the new school year," Cattani said.

Cattani is one of the three finalists for the 2025-26 National High School Principal of the Year award, organized by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Three other principals are nominated for the same honor in the middle school category—it's the first time the association has split its top award into two grade-level categories.

The two winners will be named in July. Education Week spoke with all six finalists about the challenges—from bolstering parent engagement to growing as an instructional leader—they want to tackle in the new school year.

How these top principals work to be better instructional leaders

A couple of years into her principalship at Schoenbar Middle School in Ketchikan, Alaska, Sherilynn Boehlert realized the school needed to develop a new instructional model. She began researching the qualities of highly effective middle schools.

Sherilynn Boehlert

One takeaway from her research: Students need a trusted adult in the building and equitable classes.

"Once I kind of caught wind of what the research was showing, [what] best practices in middle school were—that really moved us toward a really purposeful and intentional school improvement model," said Boehlert, who has now been principal for a decade.

One change that's paid off is assigning students to teams made up of a math teacher, a science teacher, a social studies teacher, an English teacher, an instructional specialist, and some elective teachers.

This interdisciplinary "teaming" model provides students with "wrap-around support" and grows teachers' knowledge about individual students, said Boehlert.

It was also a support for teachers. "Teachers were no longer siloed in their room. … Now they're actively talking about [things happening in their classroom] every day," she said.

In Ogden, Utah, Shauna Haney took over as principal of Ogden High School just as the pandemic hit, and quickly realized that her No. 1 priority was to retain teachers. Teachers didn't want to come back after remote instruction, a challenge that Haney said shaped the first few months of her principalship.

Shauna Haney

"My goal, as a principal, is to be supportive in any way I can with my teachers, and to listen to them and to listen to their needs," Haney said.

One of the ways in which Haney wants to support teachers, especially the newer ones, is to communicate student achievement goals at the beginning of the year, and plan professional development tailored to teachers' experience levels—newer teachers, for instance, may need

more help with classroom management.

Haney is also trying to put in place a new system where if an administrator walks into a classroom to talk to a student, they can fill out a quick form about what they observe in the classroom.

"We want to highlight teachers to remember the good things that we've seen or talk to teachers about giving them feedback about small things they can do to get better," she said.

How school leaders are working to engage parents and guardians

Damon Lewis, the principal of Ponus Ridge STEAM Academy in Norwalk, Conn., has followed a cardinal rule over the last 10 years in his role—to be an avid listener to the community.

To engage parents and guardians, the school hosts "Walkthrough Wednesdays" every third Wednesday of the month. The school opens for an hour, between 9 and 10 a.m., and families can walk through campus with Lewis and the administrative team to visit classrooms and learn more about what the school offers.

Damon Lewis

Lewis said "Walkthrough Wednesdays" has had a large turnout with about 15 to 20 families showing up every month.

In the past year, the school shrunk its chronic absenteeism rate from 31% to 8%. Lewis credits this to the 25 after-school clubs and other electives "that other schools just don't offer." For example, his school offers coding, robotics, computer science, music technology, and digital literacy.

Despite the improvement, chronic absenteeism will always remain a focus for Lewis: "Students and scholars can't learn if they're not here," he said.

Miguel Salazar

In small-town Texas, Miguel Salazar, the principal of Sundown Middle School, walked the same halls of his school as a teenager. He routinely got into trouble until a teacher saw and tapped into his potential. As a leader, he now wants to do the same for his students.

Salazar uses social media to publish videos that celebrate his students and teachers.

"I want other principals to reach out to me this time of year and say, 'Hey, what is it that you're doing that's so magical?'" he said.

Salazar said he's attended workshops for principals to connect with others in his area and learn their best practices in engagement.

How this finalist for the Principal of the Year award plans to boost

teacher morale

Terita Walker, a fourth-year principal at East High School in Denver, said it was important for leaders to recognize that their own experience as educators differs significantly from the teachers in classrooms today—principals like her don't have the experience of teaching during or after the pandemic.

That self-awareness "pushed me to be more reflective of the challenges that teachers currently face," she said. "It pushed me to listen better."

Terita Walker

Another difference: Walker said there were no destructive TikTok challenges being shared on social media when she was in the classroom.

This past year, Walker spoke with a group of teachers about parts of the school's culture that makes them feel seen and appreciated. One-on-one, individualized sessions with Walker came up on top. Walker said she plans to expand on the time she spends talking to teachers—in addition to walks, she wants to have more lunch hours and coffee chats.

Creating a positive school climate isn't just about happier teachers, Walker added. At East High School, nurses, librarians, paraprofessionals, and executive assistants are also celebrated.

"Usually, the minute you see nurses or paraprofessionals, you're asking them to do something for you," she said. "But it's important to remember that those who look after people also need to be looked after. They also want to feel valued and celebrated." ■

Struggling with
Chronic Absenteeism?

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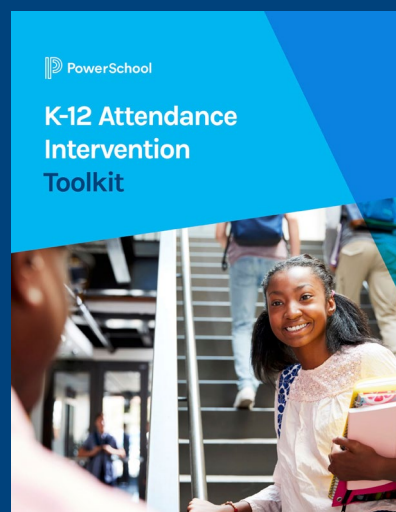
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What School Leaders Learned When They Talked To Families About Absenteeism

A district reached out to community members to find out why students missed school, and responded accordingly

By Caitlynn Peetz

When administrators in New York's Hudson City school district set out on a yearlong journey to better understand why students were missing school and how the district could boost attendance, some thought they had a good grasp on the barriers families faced in making sure their children showed up every day.

But once the work—which focused heavily on family engagement and feedback through surveys and conversations—began, there were several surprises.

Some families in the 1,600-student district south of Albany didn't send their children to school when it was rainy. In some cultures, administrators learned, it's believed that if a child's head gets wet in the rain, they will catch a cold. Some didn't understand the bus schedule and didn't know how to ask for help. Others didn't have transportation, and walked long distances pushing their young children in strollers, sometimes in the freezing cold.

None of these revelations would have come to light without intentional outreach to families in the Hudson community, said Mark Brenneman, the principal of Montgomery C. Smith Elementary School in the district, who helped lead the family engagement efforts. And many problems had a relatively simple solution.

The district worked with the local health department and school nurses to share tips about keeping kids healthy in bad weather. It clarified its bus routes online and with individual families. And the district partnered with other community organizations to provide backup transportation to families who weren't eligible for bus services, but needed help getting their children to school.

"I think one thing we realized quickly was to be very wary of the unverified assumptions about what's going on with our families," Brenneman said. "Because as much as I think we do know, once we started to interview the kids and talk to parents, there were some more

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than eye-opening moments about the stresses and what was actually going on."

The result of district leaders' hard work to address the many different root causes of absences: Chronic absenteeism across the district—defined as students missing at least 10% of school days for any reason—was down 12 percentage points through the start of June compared to the year prior, he said.

Absenteeism affects all students

In July 2024, the Hudson district joined 16 other school districts from across the country in an inaugural cohort that aimed to try a new approach to reducing chronic absenteeism by enlisting the help of students, parents, and community members in crafting an absence-fighting strategy. The cohort was an initiative of the Center for Inclusive Innovation at the nonprofit Digital Promise.

The group started its work at a time when districts across the country have been battling increased absenteeism following the onset of the pandemic.

More than 1 in 4 students nationwide were chronically absent during the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years, according to an analysis of federal data conducted by the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University and Attendance Works. Those figures represented a marked increase over pre-pandemic levels.

Chronic absences have profound impacts on students who miss classes, hurting their grades, connectedness to their peers and school community, and chances of completing high school. When absences reach high levels, the churn makes it harder for teachers to set classroom norms and teach, and harder for students to learn—even those who do show up every day.

Each district involved in the cohort spent about six months in an "intensive engagement process," said Kimberly Smith, chief inclusive innovation officer at Digital Promise. The process included workshops with other participating district leaders, community forums, and small group activities with families from various backgrounds to solicit feedback about what might stand in the way of students attending school every day.

The idea is that the people closest to the problem—students and their families—could offer important insights into the unique barriers that keep students in their communities

from attending class, and help the community feel a sense of ownership over the issue so it's not strictly a school district problem.

Engagement, review led to policy changes in Hudson

In Hudson, district leaders solicited feedback largely through a survey with about five different, curated, open-ended questions for each of its three schools based on its absenteeism rates, demographics, and other factors, Brenneman said.

"There's a lot of stuff out there about attendance, but a lot of the work is granular, boots on the ground, and individualized," he said. "It's brick by brick, because there is no holistic silver bullet. If there was, everyone would be using it."

Through conversations with families and thorough, routine reviews of schools' absenteeism data, district leaders were also able to identify some areas for policy changes, Brenneman said. For example, the data showed that absences spiked on the afternoons in which there was a morning event, like an elementary choir concert open to families or the public.

Families would take their children out of school to go celebrate after, he said, and then kids would miss half of an instructional day.

Now, district policy says concerts and similar events should be held in the afternoon.

Brenneman's school piloted the use of "family success plans," in which parents of chronically absent students met with a school leader to have one-on-one conversations about why their child was absent and how the school could help.

It was set up to be "supportive and inviting," rather than punitive or a "gotcha" moment, he said. During those meetings, administrators could share more personalized data and information about the family's child—like one student who was among the top readers in their school in 1st grade but by 3rd grade had fallen behind, largely because they were frequently late to class and missing important instruction.

"We've come to recognize that improving attendance, it's not just enforcing rules, but it's about creating supportive environments for our students," Hudson Superintendent Juliette Pennyman said. "What we have done in creating this proactive mindset is created a system where we can now continue to use the tools and the strategies that we have to continue to build on our progress." ∎

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July 24, 2024

The Influential Allies These Schools Are Enlisting to Boost Attendance

The idea is that chronic absenteeism isn't a problem for schools to solve alone

By Caitlynn Peetz

Seventeen school districts this summer are embarking on a new approach to reducing chronic absenteeism: enlisting the help of students, parents, and other community members in crafting an absence-fighting strategy, with the hope that all the input will yield effective results.

The idea is that the people closest to the problem—students and their families—will both be able to offer important insights into the unique barriers that keep students in their communities from attending class, and help the community feel a sense of ownership over the issue so it's not strictly a school district problem, said Baron Davis, a senior adviser for Digital Promise, the education nonprofit overseeing the cohort of districts working on this strategy.

"If I give you something and tell you it's a problem and here's how I think we should fix it, you have no ownership in that problem, and you don't have the same level of urgency to solve the problem," said Davis, the former superintendent in Richland, S.C. "But when we co-create and co-design the solution to the problem, I have now given you agency and

ownership of the issue, and gotten more people invested in the solution."

More than 1 in 4 students nationwide were chronically absent—missing at least 10 percent of school days—during the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years, according to an analysis of federal data conducted by the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University and Attendance Works. Those figures represented a marked increase over pre-pandemic levels.

Chronic absences have profound impacts on students who miss classes, hurting their grades, connectedness to their peers and school community, and chances of completing high school. When chronic absences reach high levels, the churn makes it harder for teachers to set classroom norms and teach, and harder for students to learn even when they do show up every day.

The 17 districts from 10 states make up the new cohort, which is an initiative of the Center for Inclusive Innovation within Digital Promise. They hope to address absenteeism at its roots, Davis said.

The districts involved range in size from 1,500 students to more than 45,000 with percentages of students in free and reduced-price meal programs ranging from less than 10 percent to more than 60 percent. Not all districts

have an alarmingly high absenteeism rate, but many do. The districts' chronic absenteeism rates vary from 10 percent on the low end to up to about 45 percent, Davis said.

"The issue of absenteeism is really well suited for finding strategies and solutions through the lens of collaborations between schools, parents, and students" because it can be such a complex problem that is different from student to student, Davis said.

Each district involved will spend the next six months in an "intensive engagement process," said Kimberly Smith, chief inclusive innovation officer at Digital Promise. The process will include workshops with other participating district leaders, community forums, and small group activities with families from various backgrounds to solicit feedback.

By the end of 2024, each district will develop a blueprint for addressing absenteeism with ideas generated during the engagement process. The hope is that some initiatives will be short-term and schools will be able to implement them at the start of the second semester. Some will be longer-term initiatives, Smith said.

Districts will be asked to keep close tabs on their chronic absenteeism rates between the first and second semesters to determine whether any changes they make have the desired impact so they can adjust for the next school year if needed, Smith said.

The participating districts' superintendents, or other high-ranking officials in district central offices, will lead the work, Smith said. Principals will also play a key role.

Each district participating in the cohort volunteered to do so, and Davis hopes there will be additional cohorts in the future.

The 17 districts in the inaugural group will receive support and guidance from their peers and staff at the Center for Inclusive Education, including feedback on the blueprints they develop and expert input on implementing new initiatives.

There are some research-backed approaches to combating chronic absenteeism—like ensuring students have reliable transportation to school and that they feel a sense of belonging once they get there. But the inclusive innovation model allows districts to tailor those best practices to fit their communities' desires and needs.

"What we see in inclusive innovation is that the solutions that come out are things that are really wholly reflective of the folks that are at the table," Smith said.

At the end of the program, Davis hopes district leaders take the skills they learn about inclusive innovation and apply them to other complex and persistent challenges they face.

"When they move on from chronic absen-

teeism, and they are faced with the next challenge, I hope and believe they'll remember to use the inclusive innovation process in helping to solve that problem as well," he said. "We want it to become culturally ingrained in the educational ecosystem."

The 17 participating districts are:

- Adams 12 Five Star Schools (Colorado)

- Allentown School District (Pennsylvania)

- East Irondequoit Central School District (New York)

- El Segundo Unified School District (California)

- Elizabeth Forward School District (Pennsylvania)

- Hudson City School District (New York)

- Lynwood Unified School District (California)

- Mount Vernon School District (New York)

- Mountain View Whisman Schools (California)

- NOLA Public Schools (Louisiana)

- Richland School District Two (South Carolina)

- Roselle Public Schools (New Jersey)

- Spokane Public Schools (Washington)

- Springfield City Public Schools (Ohio)

- Suffern Central School District (New York)

- Wilmington Learning Collaborative (Delaware)

- Greenfield Union School District (California) ■

Schools Successfully Fighting Chronic Absenteeism Have This in Common

A White House summit homed in on chronic absenteeism and strategies to reduce it

Caitlynn Peetz

A surge in students' chronic absenteeism since the return to in-person classes hasn't discriminated, threatening academic recovery in schools of all sizes and demographic makeups across the country.

But schools that are finding success in combating the problem tend to have at least one thing in common: They've leveraged help from outside of school, including community groups, families, and political leaders.

President Joe Biden's administration on May 15 stepped up a call for communities across the country to "cultivate a culture of attendance" and make it clear that students need to be in school to learn and develop important academic and social skills.

"This is a very crucial moment for academic recovery, so we need all hands on deck to make sure that we're getting students fully engaged ... to attend school every day," U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said at a White House event held to highlight approaches to fighting chronic absenteeism and new policy steps from the Biden administration to support those approaches.

The importance of community partnerships was a recurring theme of the May 15 event, which was called the Every Day Counts Summit and featured school district leaders, education advocates, and state officials discussing how communities can best address chronic absenteeism—and why it matters.

More than 1 in 4 students nationwide were chronically absent—missing at least 10 percent of school days—during the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years, according to an analysis of federal data conducted by the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University and Attendance Works. Those figures represented a marked increase over pre-pandemic levels.

Chronic absences have profound impacts on students who miss classes, affecting

Brittainy Newman/AP

their grades, connectedness to their peers and school community, and chances of completing high school. When chronic absences reach high levels, the classroom churn makes it harder for teachers to set classroom norms and teach, and harder for students to learn even when they show up every day. Chronic absenteeism can also be self-perpetuating, as research has shown that student absences can make peers more likely to miss school, and absences have contributed to national declines in math and reading in recent years.

To help more states and districts take collaborative approaches to boost attendance, Cardona announced a handful of new partnerships and resources at the event, saying the country's students "cannot afford to normalize" high rates of chronic absences.

Among the resources touted by Cardona were $250 million in grant funding for learning acceleration, which can include measures to fight absenteeism; a "toolkit" for districts to use to communicate with families about the importance of attending school, which will be available by the fall; and a new partnership with the American Academy of Pediatrics that will encourage pediatricians to provide resources to parents explaining when it is appropriate to keep children home from school, tips for addressing school avoidance, and guidance on preparing for the start of a new school year.

Putting plans into action

Although strong messaging campaigns can be effective, driving down students' absences will take much more, speakers said during the event.

In Connecticut, statewide absenteeism rates more than doubled during the pandemic, from 12 percent to about 25 percent, according to Gov. Ned Lamont, a Democrat.

The most successful approach districts in the state have used has been old-school door-knocking campaigns, through which thousands of volunteers—teachers, superintendents, student leaders, and others—knocked on the doors of families of students missing school and said, "We miss you and want you back—how can we make that happen?" Lamont said.

Every family had a story to tell about why their children were absent—a teenager got a part-time job to help pay the family's bills, a mom needed her daughter to help translate at doctor's appointments, a child was nervous about bullying.

Districts worked to address each individual

> " This is a very crucial moment for academic recovery, so we need all hands on deck. "

MIGUEL CARDONA
U.S. Education Secretary

situation, providing as many solutions as possible and referring families to outside organizations for assistance they couldn't provide (such as for housing and counseling).

The model, Lamont said, proves that "schools can't do this alone."

The barriers families face

The reasons students are chronically absent generally fall into four main categories, said Robert Balfanz, director of the Everyone Graduates Center at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education.

- **Barriers:** These can include challenges such as older students having to care for younger siblings or take jobs, and a lack of transportation to school.

- **Aversion:** When students don't want to go to school due to factors like social anxiety, which has been increasingly true for students who took online classes during key developmental or transition years (from elementary to middle school or middle to high school, for example).

- **Disengagement:** When students lack a connection to peers and adults at school, or don't understand how coursework is relevant.

- **Misconceptions:** These reasons can include assumptions among parents that students should be kept at home for even minor illnesses or a perception that in-person classes aren't all that important because students can make up work later.

Every community is different, Balfanz said, and district leaders need to understand their community's individual needs to make meaningful progress in fighting absenteeism.

Then, districts must adjust staffing and resources to respond to those needs, instead of continuing to rely on "pre-pandemic norms" that are outdated and leave schools "underpowered."

There is no silver bullet solution, but if school and district leaders are looking for a good place to start, making efforts to ensure every student has a person they connect with at school can go a long way, Balfanz said.

"School connectedness is as close as we have to a universal prevention measure," he said. "You have to believe there's an adult who knows and cares about you as a person ... This is where we as a nation have to double down."

Real-time data are a powerful tool

Several leaders, including Rhode Island Gov. Dan McKee and Indiana State Superintendent Katie Jenner, emphasized the importance of districts gathering and tracking real-time absence data.

Rhode Island and Indiana have both developed online dashboards that are updated daily with absence rates at every school in each state. The Rhode Island tool is available online publicly. Indiana's will become publicly available soon, Jenner said.

Rhode Island's dashboard was developed as part of an initiative called Attendance Matters RI, which has taken an "all-hands-on-deck" approach, said McKee, a Democrat.

As part of the campaign, local leaders and influencers have created videos discussing how it's important—and cool—to be in school, organizers have written opinion pieces for local newspapers, businesses have sponsored attendance incentives that allow students and families to receive special perks for good attendance, and mayors have recorded robocalls emphasizing the importance of attendance.

More than 90 percent of schools in the state are reporting fewer chronically absent students than a year ago, McKee said. ■

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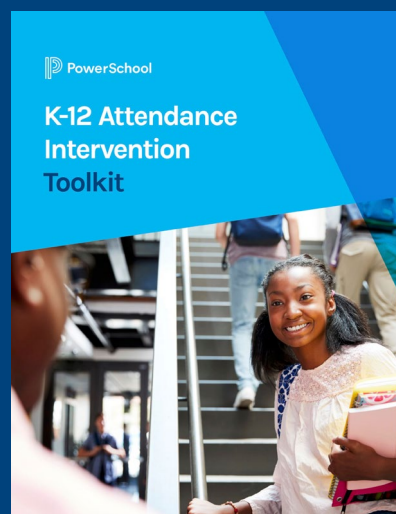
'A Universal Prevention Measure' That Boosts Attendance and Improves Behavior

By Matthew Stone

Inside a locked room at Colleyville Middle School that staff members use for professional development, a "data wall" offers a glimpse of each of the school's 600-plus students.

It lists each student's name and academic data points dating back to 3rd grade. It includes attendance information. And next to each name appear the initials of staff members who have a substantive connection with that student—perhaps a mentoring relationship, a tendency to check in with each other at lunchtime, or a common interest over which they've bonded.

When there's a student name without initials by it, it's a sign that someone needs to try to make a connection.

"We pinpoint those students, and our teachers and educators, staff members, they go out of their way to try to build those connections to create that mentorship aspect with them," said David Arencibia, the principal of the Colleyville, Texas, school.

The strategy, a variation on an exercise called relationship mapping, is one that schools have turned to increasingly in recent years. The goal is to strengthen students' ties to school that weakened from the isolation of pandemic school closures and haven't bounced back. That disconnection has manifested itself perhaps most visibly in elevated chronic absenteeism.

A body of research that predates the pandemic shows that when students feel connected to school, they're more likely to attend and perform well academically. They're less likely to misbehave and feel sad and hopeless. Some research has even linked health benefits well into adulthood to a strong sense of connection to school.

"It's the closest we have to a universal prevention measure for everything," said Robert Balfanz, the director of the Everyone Graduates Center at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education, who has worked with schools on connectedness strategies through an initiative called the GRAD Partnership. "And it makes sense, because if you feel connected to someplace, you're less likely to be off and sort of disengaged on your own."

Principal David Arencibia embraces a student as they make their way to their next class at Colleyville Middle School in Colleyville, Texas.

Students' ties to school revolve around the relationships they have with adults in the building and their peers—whether they think others genuinely care about them and welcome them for who they are—as well as opportunities to participate in activities they find meaningful.

Building off those elements, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has identified mentoring, service learning, student-led clubs, and classroom-management training for teachers as strategies schools can use to build connectedness, reducing unhealthy behaviors and strengthening students' engagement.

Many students don't feel connected to their school

There's no precise measure for how connected students feel to their school, but there's evidence that many of the nation's students don't feel they have a meaningful bond.

In 2021, 61.5 percent of high school students taking the CDC's biennial Youth Risk Behavior Survey said they felt close to people at school, meaning nearly 40 percent of students didn't. Girls, students from most racial minorities, and LGBTQ+ students were less

likely than others to say they felt connected. And the closer they were to the end of high school, students became less likely to say they felt close to others at school.

Students are less likely to feel close to others at school as they progress through high school

On the other hand, in a March EdWeek Research Center survey of 1,056 high school-age youth, 86 percent at least partly agreed that they felt accepted and welcomed in their school community. Nearly as many students, 81 percent, said the adults in their school care at least somewhat about their well-being and success as people.

It's clear why students would be drawn to a place where they feel strong connections, Balfanz said.

"There's a place where they want you there, and there's someone who knows you, and there's a group of peers that are going to miss you if you're not there, you're going to do something meaningful, and you feel welcome," he said. "That's actually a place you would fight to get to as opposed to finding a reason not to go."

Emil T. Lippe for Education Week

The percent of students who agree or strongly agree that they feel close to people at their school

Grade	Percent
9th grade	65%
10th	61.5%
11th	61.1%
12th	58.5%

*Results show responses from high school-age students

SOURCE: High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey, U.S. CDC, 2021

EdW

Check-ins, curriculum audits, and clubs: Schools work on belonging

Trying to reverse sagging attendance, the Tacoma, Wash., school district over the past two years has deployed a range of initiatives that aim to foster a sense of belonging among students at greater risk of becoming chronically absent.

They include community-based mentors who come into schools for regular check-ins with students and affinity clubs aimed at Indigenous and LGBTQ+ students, who—district data show—are more likely to have irregular attendance.

One initiative is called the "Walking School Bus." It provides younger students with a safe way to get to school with a group of peers who are led along an established walking route by high school students or educators. The high school student route leaders get a paid internship and course credit.

It was a response to survey feedback from parents who said their kids didn't have a safe way to get to school, presenting a barrier to attendance, said Jimmy Gere, Tacoma's attendance and engagement counselor.

Younger students build relationships with each other and with high school stu-

dents, and high school students gain a service-learning opportunity—one of the CDC's identified strategies for building school connectedness.

"There's an element of mentorship because elementary kids love high school kids," Gere said.

In Albuquerque, N.M., Manzano High School built connectedness into its early-warning system, so staff could more readily notice when a student is falling behind.

In the last couple of years, the school's weekly, 30-minute advisory periods have become a time when school staff check in with their advisees and deliberately review their grades, attendance, and behavior over the prior week. If a student is struggling, the adviser refers them to one of the school's student-success teams, which then works with the student to identify the root cause of their challenges and solutions.

Last spring, Manzano staff interviewed students who had been referred to a student-success team, and they said regular check-ins with their advisers had been the most important part of keeping them on track.

"Students were saying, 'We do better when we have people doing those one-on-one check-ins,'" Principal Rachel Vigil said. "Just, 'Hey,

how are you doing?' It doesn't even have to be academic."

When the Arlington Central school district in New York surveyed students after their return to campus from pandemic closures, staff discovered that older students, students of color, and students in special education felt a weaker sense of belonging.

In follow-up focus groups, less connected students said they felt as if they had no way to connect to the school community if they weren't an athlete or musician. So the high school started holding activity fairs to proactively bring information about extracurricular activities to students, and administrators solicited student ideas on new clubs, said Daisy Rodriguez, Arlington's assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

"We know that when kids feel like they belong in school, they have better attendance, they have better academic achievement, and just greater social-emotional support," she said.

In the district's middle schools, Arlington last year established regular advisory periods set aside for check-ins and social-emotional learning. Groups of students are assigned to the same adviser throughout the three years of middle school. The district ultimately hopes to bring similar advisory periods to its high school.

And through curriculum audits, the district has tried to respond to student feedback that the books they read in class weren't relevant by swapping in more current selections.

At Thomas Kelly College Preparatory in Chicago, survey feedback was also critical to efforts to ensure 9th graders felt a connection to the 1,700-student high school.

Through a survey called Elevate that the school now administers quarterly, students largely said they didn't feel as if teachers cared about them, they thought classes were boring, and they didn't think what they were learning was relevant, Principal Raul Magdaleno said.

So a newly established, five-member freshman success team held an event before the end of the school year last year where each of the school's 500 9th graders could sit down one-on-one with an adult for five to 10 minutes and discuss how the school year had gone, ask questions about sophomore year, review attendance and grades, set goals for the remainder of the year, and talk about clubs they could join.

When the 2023-24 year started, that team also made sure an adult—college mentors working with a local community group as well

as school staff—would regularly meet with students flagged as high risk in the Chicago schools' early-warning system.

In classrooms, Kelly has made 2023-24 the year of "meaningful work," with teachers rethinking their instruction to make it more "culturally relevant and rigorous," Magdaleno said.

"It's definitely still a work in progress," said Grace Gunderson, a school counselor at Kelly who leads the freshman success team. "But I think the students understand now that we want their feedback, we genuinely want to know what they think, and they feel as if their opinions are valued."

A connection to school has academic and health benefits

Researchers have linked a range of benefits to strong student connections to school.

Students who said in the 2021 CDC survey that they felt close to others at school, for example, were also less likely to report poor mental health, missing school because they felt unsafe, and risky behaviors such as drug use.

The health benefits have even proved long-lasting.

CDC researchers tracked more than 14,000 middle and high school students over 20 years and, in a 2019 study, found that those who reported feeling connected to school as adolescents were half as likely as adults—or even less likely—to have used illegal drugs or misused prescription drugs, been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease, experienced emotional distress and thoughts of suicide, or been the victim of physical violence.

There's also an academic upside to strong student-teacher relationships that's emerged in multiple studies: better grades and attendance, fewer disruptive behaviors and suspensions, and lower dropout rates.

Dozens of high schools have made such relationships central to their improvement efforts as part of the BARR (Building Assets, Reducing Risks) model, through which teams of teachers are assigned to designated groups of students so they can form strong bonds and quickly notice when a student might need extra support. Years of federally funded evaluations of the model have highlighted the dividends: reduced 9th grade course failures and lower chronic absenteeism, as well as improved teacher collaboration.

Back at Colleyville Middle School near Dallas, staff members have worked throughout the school year to forge a connection with every student. Shortly after the end of the first semester, just a handful of students remained who didn't have initials by their name on the data wall, said Arencibia, the principal.

Using color codes, the data wall shows when a student might need some extra attention from the adult whose initials appear by their name. And if counselors and administrators notice a student's attendance is slipping or they've had behavior problems, they often ask the adult mentor for more information or for help, Arencibia said.

"Kids are no different than adults. They're no different than any human being," he said. "When a human is connected to other individuals or a location—or if they're connected to a sport, a band, a certain class—they feel included and they feel seen, they feel heard, and they feel a part of what's going on." ■

Additional Resource
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Choosing a
Modern Attendance Intervention Tool

TACKLE ABSENTEEISM WITH INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY

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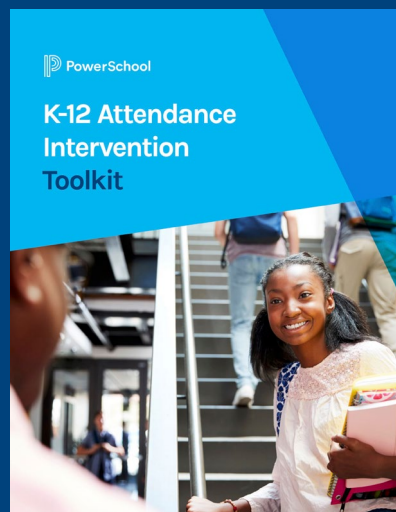
Published April 14, 2024

VIDEO: How Schools Can Harness The Power of Relationships

By Jaclyn Borowski & Matthew Stone

Students who feel close to their teachers and peers at school are more likely to attend, engage in class, and earn good grades. They're less likely to behave disruptively.

As schools contend with daunting challenges associated with a rise in absenteeism, misbehavior, and student apathy, there's evidence a surprisingly simple intervention can help: ensuring students have strong relationships with and feel connected to others at school.

So how does a school harness the power of strong relationships? It takes deliberate effort. Watch this video for an overview. ∎

VIDEO: How Schools Can Harness The Power of Relationships

RETURN TO PAGE 1

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April 28, 2025

This Educator Shows Why Family Trust Is Key to School Attendance

Sarah D. Sparks

When students miss a lot of school, often their entire family is disconnected.

That's why, when the Richmond, Va. school district saw chronic absenteeism surge during the pandemic, it reached out to families to find both the roots of the problem and the solutions.

"I've seen the same things in districts all around the country ... again and again, these were really a breakdown in trust," said Shadae Harris, a former chief engagement officer for Richmond, Va. public schools who now works with districts as a consultant on family engagement. "Many times the challenge was generational; lots of our families have not felt that their voices are valued, appreciated, or felt like they were welcomed in schools."

Richmond's family engagement now includes school teams made up of teachers and administrators, social workers, and community members who regularly analyze attendance data and reach out to families.

"We took everything that had to do with absenteeism and said, look, we don't have an attendance problem. We have an engagement problem, a relationship problem, we have a trust problem. So that's what we use to really

dig in and understand the root causes behind our absences," said Harris, who oversaw Richmond's family engagement overhaul for more than six years.

The district has significantly increased family home visits and check-in calls. Staff have also worked to help solve some of the root causes of students' absenteeism, like housing instability.

For example, the district partnered with local nonprofit Housing Families First, using a $500,000 grant from the local Lora M. and E. Claiborne Robins, Sr. foundation to help more than 120 families access rental deposits and lease negotiation help to move out of motels.

Richmond superintendent Jason Kamras and other district leaders have credited better family partnerships for boosting both student achievement and attendance. The district's chronic absenteeism rate dropped from a high of 37 percent in 2022 to 22 percent by the end of the 2023-24 school year.

Nationwide, chronic absenteeism remains a major problem. The share of students who miss 10 percent or more of school nearly doubled nationwide during the pandemic and remains high, with 23 percent of students chronically absent as of 2023-24, according to FutureEd, which tracks absenteeism rates.

This interview with Harris, who left the district last June, was edited for length and clarity.

What's different about Richmond's approach to family engagement and traditional parent involvement?

It's a mindset shift. Involvement is when you lead with your mouth; you are telling people what you want them to do. So I may set a goal and I identify the priority, and I'm telling parents how they can contribute. Engagement is when you're really focused on leading with your ears. You're listening to the wants, the needs, and the dreams of your families. And then you're co-creating systems together.

[Instead of] us saying, "Hey, this is our new attendance initiative. This is what we need you guys to do, or else," we're prioritizing their needs. That's how you build trust, because you're sharing power; you're sharing resources with families.

What does that look like in practice?

Something we heard from our families is "we don't see you"—like we didn't have a presence in the community. So community walks and empathy interviews really allowed us to be visible and connect with people who weren't necessarily coming to the school—not because they didn't care about their child's education, but because they didn't feel invited.

For a community walk, you identify different communities, and the goal is to just be present, and to listen. As you're walking, you run into people, you're asking them about their experiences. Those walks gave us visibility, but then that also starts to shift mindsets when people start to see you in the community.

What role do the home visits play?

We started with this pilot with a coalition of teachers and people who were interested and ... a training model based after this organization called Parent Teacher Home Visits. We partnered with them to really understand what makes a strong home visit program.

It really changes the idea that those [home] visits are to share information. The sole purpose of that initial visit is to build the relationship [with a family]. Once they (the teacher and family) had a relationship, you could get into more sharing information or responding to things that they needed. It really allowed

people to just talk and reflect on their actions, the family, and how they could kind of improve the process.

How should school leaders better integrate family engagement?

I think that the first step is really thinking about this from a systemic level. When I'm working with superintendents, we first start with, what are your beliefs around families? Because your [engagement] structure is going to directly correlate with your beliefs about families. So, if you believe they're add-on, something where we have to check a box, your systems will reflect that, right? But if you believe that we want [parents] as co-creators, then you're going to have a chief engagement officer and you're going think about your school level goals very differently.

What is the most common mistake you see schools make when it comes to family engagement?

I still see a lot of misdefinition of what engagement is. Schools end up doing a lot of those activities that involve parents without engaging them. Let's say you're having a potluck or a talent show, right? You're saying, this is what we're doing, this is how you can contribute; you're still telling [parents] what you want to do. You have to go a little deeper than that and think [about], what is the intention of that activity? Is it just to inform, or to build a deeper relationship?

Or if I'm going into that home visit thinking I'm here to tell families what they need to do to better support their child, and this is how they can contribute, but I don't take time to listen and honor the wisdom that they already bring—that is going to completely dismantle trust. So that's why it's so important to understand that difference. ■

What Makes an Effective Intervention Tool?

## USING DATA TO AUTOMATE EFFECTIVE ATTENDANCE INTERVENTIONS

Without the right software solution to address chronic absenteeism, you can waste time with manual data tracking or trying to identify students at risk of missing class. Inconsistent communication can also hamper family relationships.

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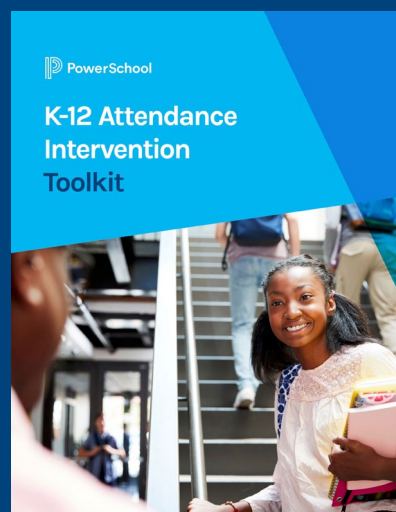
OPINION

An NFL Franchise Is Tackling Chronic Student Absenteeism. Here's How

The Cleveland Browns are partnering with Ohio schools to improve attendance

By Rick Hess

Since the pandemic, chronic absenteeism has loomed large. Educators are seeking strategies and partners who can help tackle it. Well, getting kids back to school is one place where it's long struck me that professional sports franchises could make a big difference. After all, professional athletes live daily with a show-up-early, work-hard routine. Indeed, of the teen and tween role models—like actors, social media influencers, and singers—athletes may be the ones with the most obvious ties to schools, colleges, and a grind-it-out ethos. When I learned the Cleveland Browns have spent a decade partnering with Ohio schools to improve attendance and launched the Stay in the Game! Attendance Network in 2019, I wanted to learn more. I recently had the chance to chat with team owner Dee Haslam about the effort. Here's what she had to say: —*Rick*

Rick: Dee, can you tell me a bit about the Browns' efforts to combat chronic absenteeism?

Dee: Stay in the Game! is a learning network that seeks to dramatically improve student attendance across Ohio. Our goal is to have 90 percent of students attend school more than 90 percent of the time through a statewide attendance movement, partnerships, peer-to-peer learning, and proven practices. We partner with districts across Ohio, serving more than 495,000 students. Stay in the Game! is unique because we work with the National Football League's Cleveland Browns and two Major League Soccer teams, the Columbus Crew and FC Cincinnati, to encourage students to attend school. The athletes are great examples of why it matters for students to show up every day.

Rick: How did you decide to focus on this issue?

Dee: When my husband Jimmy and I bought the Cleveland Browns in 2012, the franchise had several community-impact programs, which had a scattered impact. We chose to focus on education. It's an issue we are passionate about, and Jimmy and I believe every child has the right to a quality education, no matter their Zip code. Around that time, we met with Cleveland's superintendent of schools, Eric Gordon. He told us that Cleveland was dealing with chronic absenteeism and thought there was a pivotal role we could play. Our partnership with the district has been so valuable because they wanted an early-intervention approach. We don't want to wait until students are chronically absent. We also don't think this issue should be solely the responsibility of the school or families—they must both be at the table, along with others in the community. Fortunately, as a sports team, our strength is organizing, convening, and bringing people to the table. Together, we realized that we could make a tremendous difference in the lives of kids.

Rick: How does this partnership work?

Dee: We are thrilled to have excellent founding partners in this work, including the Ohio education and workforce department, Proving Ground at Harvard University's Center for Education Policy Research, and our new network manager, Battelle, which has better positioned us to expand our reach across the state. What makes this partnership so strong is that each partner has a role and does what it does best. There is bipartisan consensus that chronic absenteeism is a problem, so we have been fortunate to find political support across the state, from school boards to the governor.

Rick: What does all of this look like in practice?

Dee: All districts and schools across Ohio are invited to join the Stay in the Game! Attendance Network. While participation is free, partner districts must ensure that their leadership is willing to prioritize improving attendance through data-driven decisions in a way that is positive, preventative, and supportive of students and their families. When a district partners with Stay in the Game!, they receive a variety of resources, including an online Campaign Playbook which aids in the development of a localized, data-informed attendance campaign and is the basis of our work. The network also helps to ensure that districts can access and interpret attendance data to inform their goals and communication and engagement strategies, all of which is housed in the playbook. Once the district strategy is set, the school system receives team-branded campaign materials to raise awareness, and their team partner organizes recognition and reward opportunities to create excitement around attending school.

Rick: You mentioned a Campaign Playbook that you share with districts. What's that entail?

Dee: The Campaign Playbook is an online platform districts use that leads them through developing their attendance team, uploading relevant data, and analyzing that data to pinpoint where there are attendance issues needing attention. It provides districts with ways to do a root-cause analysis and clearly identify attendance challenges and barriers. The playbook also provides guidance on creating a campaign tailored to a specific district and the students district leaders need to reach most. Our committed districts update their data quarterly and review their results to continually refine their approach. The playbook has a chat feature for districts to talk with each other and Stay in the Game! staff to share information and ask questions. The support from the teams complement the district strategy in the playbook.

Rick: What are some of the materials you supply to schools?

Dee: We provide materials like yard signs, banners, player posters, and other handouts that can be used to encourage attendance. One form of outreach is especially impactful: student-specific postcards showing how often they attend class. When a student comes home, their parents will often look through

their backpacks and find the postcard. Many parents have no idea that after missing just 10 days of school, their student will have fallen behind. This letter is one way to raise awareness. Harvard's Proving Ground tested this intervention, and we were really surprised to see how much of an impact something as simple as a postcard had.

Rick: One of your advantages in doing this work, obviously, is a roster full of ballplayers who are local celebrities. Are they involved in this push?

Dee: Absolutely! We are always looking to get our athletes involved. They really understand that showing up every day, whether that be to practice or to school, is key. When they go to schools to interact with students and staff, not only do the kids love it, but it's also great for our athletes. They can become ambassadors and really dedicate themselves to this cause. Browns defensive tackle Maurice Hurst wore cleats designed by students at Orchard Park Academy as part of Stay in the Game! and the NFL's My Cause My Cleats program. Dustin Hopkins, a Browns placekicker, will spend extra time with special-needs students during his visits. When one of our former player ambassadors was a student, he didn't miss a day of school and he draws from that experience on his visits. Those personal stories can be incredibly powerful.

Rick: What are your plans going forward?

Dee: Our goal is to increase the coverage of Stay in the Game! across Ohio. Currently, we work with 161 of the 611 districts across the state, and we hope our partnership with Battelle will allow us to impact even more students. Our collaboration with the Columbus Crew and FC Cincinnati allow us to partner with districts outside of the Cleveland area. We know that other franchises and regions outside of Ohio are interested in the work that we are doing. Though our focus is on Ohio, we're happy to share the lessons we have learned, the processes we use, and our Campaign Playbook. The Campaign Playbook is continuously evolving based on what we hear. One thing we know we're getting right is our emphasis on collecting measurable data.

Rick: What sort of data are you looking at?

Dee: We look at chronic attendance across all categories—satisfactory, at risk, moderate, and severe—and we disaggregate the data across a variety of student groups. Attendance

data is the key to our work, especially when it allows us to analyze what is happening in specific districts and schools. High-quality data can show where attendance is an issue in a specific grade, among schools with later starts, or is centralized in a particular region. This allows resources to be more effectively targeted to specific challenges or groups of students. It also allows us to learn what works and what doesn't.

Rick: What have the results been so far?

Dee: Stay in the Game! Attendance Network continues to see year-over-year declines in chronic absenteeism across partner districts. In 2023, we saw a a 5.2 percent reduction in chronic absenteeism, and results from 2024 data evaluation demonstrated that Stay in the Game! partner districts continue to outperform Ohio schools in reducing chronic absenteeism. Among the districts we work with, chronic absences declined by 2.9 percent in 2024, compared with 1.2 percent across the state as a whole. Similarly, districts we worked with had larger increases in satisfactory attendance than districts outside the network.

Rick: What would you like teachers to know about this work?

Dee: Teachers ought to support improvement, not perfection, in attendance and show an interest in learning why students are absent. Students indicate that when a trusted adult cares about their well-being, they are more likely to want to be at school. Teachers can also highlight just how important attendance is to students and their parents. We don't expect teachers to do it all alone, but even adding phrases like "Can't wait to see you tomorrow!" and talking about what students have to look forward to can be a really strong and exciting message for students. The work done by Stay in the Game! tries to give educators the tools they need to keep students engaged. We have tremendous gratitude for educators, administrators, family members, and of course, the students themselves, who understand the importance of working together to create success in this area. We look forward to continuing to work with our partners to make a positive impact helping students Stay in the Game! ◼

Rick Hess is the director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute and the author of Education Week's Rick Hess Straight Up *opinion blog. He is the creator of the annual RHSU Edu-Scholar Rankings.*

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RETURN TO PAGE 1

OPINION

3 Things You Need to Know About Absenteeism

Overlooked insights for boosting student attendance

By Todd Rogers, Emily Bailard, & Mikia Manley

C hronic absenteeism—missing over 10 percent of school days—remains a persistent challenge for too many districts. Reducing it is complicated but badly needed.

Our organization, EveryDay Labs, partners with districts comprised, in total, of more than 1.5 million students in 15 states to use attendance data to tailor and target absenteeism interventions. To date, we've reduced absenteeism by millions of days. We've uncovered three insights about student absenteeism that have profound implications for how to help students thrive. Each of them can inform what educators do, for whom, and when.

Every additional absence is associated with decreased academic performance, especially for those not yet chronically absent.
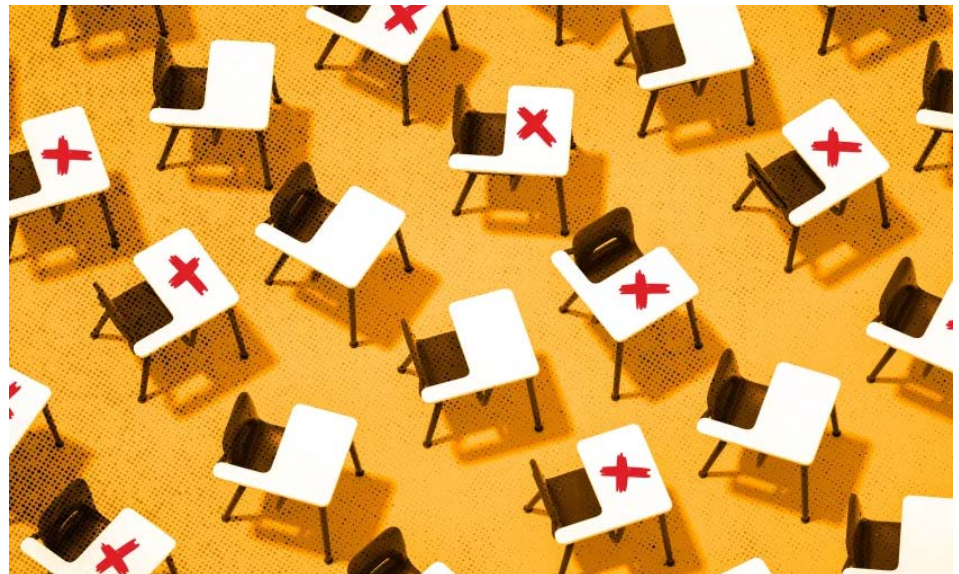
The chart illustrates a clear trend: Students who miss more school end up with lower standardized-test scores in math and in language arts. For instance, students who miss no school score around the 50th percentile in language arts and the 60th percentile in math. In contrast, those missing 15 days score just in the 31st percentile in language arts and 41st percentile in math. This trend is consistent with similar data collected from 1st and 2nd graders in the district in 2020-21.

There are two implications of this insight.

First, every additional absence is associated with students performing a little worse academically.

And second, the decline in test scores with each additional absence is sharpest before students become chronically absent. Preventing students from reaching the chronically absent threshold by missing 10 percent of school days is an important and worthwhile goal. It's also essential to broaden our focus beyond only those students, though.

Districts often concentrate the bulk of their efforts on students with the highest absence rates. But a recent analysis we conducted on absence patterns suggests we should reconsider this approach. A majority of school and district staff (51 percent) report spending most of their absence-focused time on students

Vanessa Solis/Education Week and iStock/Getty Images

> " **Students who miss more school end up with lower standardized-test scores in math and in language arts."**

**TODD ROGERS, EMILY BAILARD, & MIKIA MANLEY**
EveryDay Labs

who are severely absent, despite those students representing less than 20 percent of all absences.

Most absences come from students missing less than two days a month (students with absence rates less than 10 percent) and students missing two to four days per month (students with absence rates between 10 percent to 20 percent), yet those students receive little of our absence-reduction efforts. To effectively reduce absenteeism, we must also focus on this larger group, which represents approximately 84 percent of students. Implementing lighter-touch interventions, such as personalized family-communications programs, can be highly effective for these students.

In our organization, we have found that a program of repeated, personally tailored, data-informed mail and text nudges sent to parents and signed by district leaders consistently reduced chronic absenteeism districtwide by 11 percent to 15 percent. People are surprised to learn that printed mail is much more effective than digital text messages. Districts increasingly report parents complaining about "text overload," which may contribute to why printed mail has proved so much more potent.

Additionally, chatbots can provide low cost, 24/7 support in multiple languages, connecting families with the resources they need

1. Every single missed school day matters for achievement.
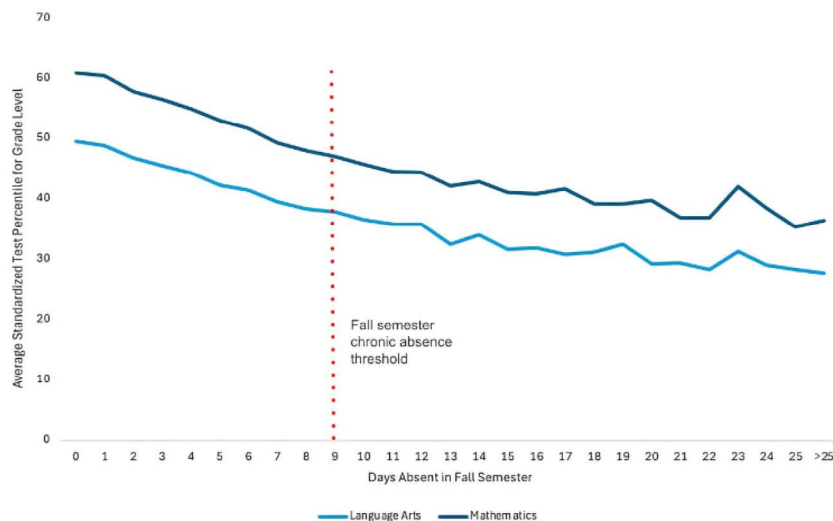
This chart reflects 2021-22 attendance and NWEA MAP scores from approximately 104,000 students in a single district. Students participating in the test were in grades 1-11. Tests were administered in January 2022. Academic performance is represented as score percentile within each grade.

to overcome attendance barriers. For example, our chatbot connected families to resources over 200,000 times during the 2023-24 school year, providing information about transportation, the school calendar, and attendance policies, among other topics. This is beneficial both for the families who receive the support they need and the school staff who otherwise would have fielded those questions.

The graph illustrates a clear trend: Absence rates increase as the school year progresses, suggesting that the need grows for targeted interventions to help students get back on track. Communicating early in the year about the importance of attendance can undoubtedly be helpful, but we must continue that communication and our absenteeism-reduction efforts throughout the year.

To reduce chronic absenteeism, we have to move beyond focusing almost entirely on students with extreme absences. There are many more students who are moderately absent, and they miss many more total days. Expanding our focus like this will mean expanding the interventions and strategies we typically use to reduce absenteeism. One especially useful and proven intervention approach that should be more widely deployed is repeated, personally

tailored, targeted, data-informed, low-touch interventions such as mail or text nudges. Broadening our focus from students with extreme absenteeism to students with moderate absenteeism can improve overall attendance and academic outcomes for all students. ■

Todd Rogers is a professor of public policy at Harvard University and the chief scientist (an unpaid position) at EveryDay Labs, an organization that partners with school districts to reduce absenteeism. Emily Bailard is the CEO at EveryDay Labs, and Mikia Manley is the head of research and development at EveryDay Labs.

Additional Resource
View this article's charts