

# ATTENDANCE PLAYBOOK

SMART SOLUTIONS FOR REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

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***FutureEd***  
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

 **Attendance  
Works**  
Advancing Student Success By Reducing Chronic Absence

## About the Author

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## About Attendance Works

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.

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SMART SOLUTIONS FOR REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

## Table of Contents

### Foreword

### Introduction

### TIER I Interventions

#### Effective Messaging and Engagement

- 4 Nudging Parents and Students
- 6 Home Visits
- 7 Positive Messaging
- 8 Incentives

#### Removing Barriers to Attendance

- 9 School-based Health Services
- 11 Telehealth
- 12 School Buses and Public Transit
- 13 Safe Walks to School
- 14 Breakfast for All
- 15 Laundry at School

#### Improving School Climate

- 16 Relevant—and Culturally Relevant—Curriculum
- 18 Threshold Greetings
- 19 Rethinking Recess
- 20 Restorative Discipline Practices

### TIER II Interventions

#### Effective Messaging and Engagement

- 21 Early Warning
- 23 Mentoring
- 25 Youth Engagement

#### Removing Barriers to Attendance

- 26 Addressing Asthma
- 28 Targeted Transportation

### TIER III Interventions

- 29 Truancy Courts
- 31 Interagency Case Management
- 32 Housing

### Bibliography



## FOREWORD

Chronic student absenteeism dramatically undermines student success and school performance. Nearly 8 million students—16 percent of the nation’s public-school population—are chronically absent, losing 10 percent or more of the school year to transportation troubles, safety concerns, and other challenges.

FutureEd has previously published a comprehensive analysis of how states are using absenteeism as a school-performance metric under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and we have proposed a regulatory model that states can use to get the clearest possible picture of the causes and consequences of chronic absenteeism. That left us thinking about what strategies school, district and state leaders could adopt to improve attendance among all students.

In *Attendance Playbook: Smart Solutions for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism*, we address absenteeism at the ground level, providing local policymakers and educators with nearly two dozen practical strategies for improving attendance that have strong track records and are in many instances easy to introduce and simple to scale. We explain each intervention, identify the problem it solves, summarize supporting research, and highlight schools or school districts that have used the strategy successfully. The list isn’t exhaustive, but it represents a substantial sample of the leading work and latest thinking on improving attendance.

We worked closely with California-based Attendance Works on our earlier absenteeism initiatives and we are very pleased to partner with the organization again on this project. Hedy N. Chang, Cecelia Leong, Sue Fothergill, and Catherine Cooney provided invaluable insights.

FutureEd Editorial Director Phyllis Jordan managed the project and wrote much of the report. FutureEd research associates Rachel Grich, Sara Karim and Kendell Long also profiled several absenteeism strategies.

An important aspect of our analysis was gauging the quality of the research supporting absenteeism interventions. We worked closely with University of Illinois researcher Patricia Graczyk to do that. Graczyk, who has published research on attendance interventions and who has been trained on the federal standards for evaluating studies, assessed each study we cite in the report against the four levels of research evidence described in the federal ESSA. We include her research ratings throughout the report.

Finally, Molly Breen and Jackie Arthur of FutureEd’s editorial team did a great job producing the report, as always.

**Thomas Toch**  
**Director, FutureEd**



## INTRODUCTION

School absenteeism represents an enormous threat to many students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. By 9th grade, students' chances of graduating from high school drop by 20 percentage points for every week of school they miss.

Such **findings** have led the federal government to require all states to report chronic absenteeism rates, and they have led 36 states and the District of Columbia to hold schools accountable for chronic absenteeism rates under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Nearly 8 million students—16 percent of the nation's public-school population—are chronically absent.

But there are proven strategies that states and school districts can use to address the problem, strategies that policymakers and educators can implement quickly and cost effectively. These are interventions that move beyond the traditional focus on punishing students for missing school, an approach that **studies show** has failed to reduce absenteeism.

Instead, they stress the importance of effective messaging about attendance, particularly the need to focus on all student absences not just those that are unexcused, and the role attendance plays in promoting student achievement. They address barriers to getting to school. And they help create a welcoming school climate once students arrive, building a sense of belonging among students and parents alike.

FutureEd and Attendance Works have assembled nearly two dozen of the most effective and readily scalable approaches to reducing chronic student absenteeism. Each page of this “playbook” describes an intervention, identifies the problem it solves, summarizes supporting research, and highlights schools or school districts that have used the strategy successfully. The list is far from exhaustive, but includes much of the leading work and

latest ideas for improving attendance, work that in many instances complements recent efforts to strengthen social and emotional aspects of learning.

The interventions are organized into three tiers, reflecting the intensity of support students need given their level of absenteeism. This approach will be familiar to educators who use other multi-tiered systems of support, such as Response to Intervention and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support. Tier I strategies make up the majority of the interventions and are aimed at encouraging better attendance for all students and at addressing absenteeism before it affects achievement. Setting expectations and recognizing improvement are essential.

The more intensive—and more expensive—Tier II interventions target students at greater 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. These students and families need personal attention to help understand the importance of attendance and create a plan to address the barriers they are facing. Tier III approaches focus on the most troubled students, often involving not just schools but other agencies such as health, housing, and social services, and typically requiring case management customized to individual students' challenges. Such students are missing 20 percent or more of the school year.

Beyond these targeted strategies, there are broader initiatives—such as Full Service Community Schools, Communities in Schools and cradle-to-career initiatives like Strive Together—that have proven effective at reducing chronic absenteeism. These programs typically combine multiple interventions that target both entire school populations and chronically absent students.

Some seek to address absenteeism directly. Others see increased attendance as a by-product of their success, as do some after-school programs and dual-enrollment programs that permit high school students to get a head start on their college careers.

Schools and districts that have achieved the best results typically use two interconnected practices as part of their work. First, they track an array of attendance-related data to identify vulnerable students, discern patterns, and determine the intensity of the response needed to help students improve their attendance. This tracking requires a level of analysis beyond daily attendance-taking to figure out how many students are missing so many days they are at risk academically. Best practice is to check weekly or biweekly for students who are missing 10 percent of the school year, or about two days a month for any reason: excused, unexcused or as a result of disciplinary actions.

Second, successful schools and districts use a team approach to addressing absenteeism. They bring 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. The most effective models involve school counselors, school nurses, parent advocates and community partners, with principals coordinating the teams' work with other school-improvement efforts.

To help policymakers and educators ensure their interventions align with ESSA's requirement for evidence-based school-improvement measures, we have worked with University of Illinois researcher Patricia A. Graczyk to document the degree of evidence that exists for each intervention under the federal law's standards.

Some of the interventions we present are too new to have high-quality research supporting them. We have included them because there is significant non-scientific evidence to support them, evidence that in the language of ESSA "demonstrates a rationale" for their effectiveness.

## LEVELS OF EVIDENCE

**ESSA requires that schools and districts use at least some evidence-based practices when they tap federal dollars to improve schools. The law sets up four levels of evidence for education research.**

**Strong:** The highest level of evidence requires that the strategy produce a significant effect in at least one "gold standard" experimental study, 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, one 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.



ESSA requires that federal spending on schools in need of improvement—about 7 percent of the \$15 billion Title I budget—must include at least one evidence-based intervention at each school. But that doesn't mean every approach schools use must be evidence-based.

It is also the case that some interventions with the strongest evidence are proprietary programs that can afford to pay for evaluations and that 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--when research is available.

Ultimately, the best strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism are steps that improve the educational experience of all students. Instruction that is relevant to students' lives encourages attendance and promotes academic achievement. A welcoming school climate can bring more students to school on a regular basis, and it can mitigate the trauma in many students' lives. Stronger bonds between students and teachers are associated not just with good attendance but with student success.

## TIER 1

Tier I strategies rely on schoolwide steps to encourage attendance among all students through effective messaging and engagement, removing barriers to good attendance, and improving school climate.

### Effective Messaging and Engagement

#### Nudging Parents and Students

Researchers have found that “nudges,” reminders to parents and caregivers about absences, can improve school attendance. Todd Rogers, a Harvard University researcher, describes them as “unobtrusive interventions to promote desired behavior.” That means there’s no mandate to do anything and no penalty assigned. In the words of Richard Thaler, the University of Chicago professor who won the 2017 Nobel prize in economics for his work on [nudge theory](#): “Putting fruit at eye level counts as a nudge. Banning junk food does not.”

This approach works for improving school attendance, in part, because many parents 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 schools in the previous year. In fact, they had all missed at least 17.8 days, right at the 18-day threshold for chronic absenteeism. Most didn’t think their child had missed any more time than other students.

[Working in Philadelphia](#), Rogers and UC Berkeley researcher Avi Feller sent five 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 students missed was most effective, reducing total absences by 6 percent and the share of students who were chronically absent by 10 percent, when compared to similar students not involved in the study.

In West Virginia, a [pair of researchers](#) used a different medium for the message: 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. The results: 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.

In Pittsburgh, an AmeriCorps member who served as a liaison with parents in two kindergarten classes sent a

text message every week about attendance or available resources to help families. During the year, parents started responding to the weekly texts with requests for help. One mother needed ideas for addressing her son's anxiety about going to school. Home visits and extra attention in the classroom helped improve his attendance. Another had just been evicted and didn't know how to get her daughter to school from her temporary location. The Americorps liaison was able to arrange transportation for the child until the mother secured housing. In the wake of the regular text messages and support, chronic absenteeism in the classrooms plunged from 30 percent of students to 13 percent, according by a [2018 study](#) by Kenneth Smythe-Leistico and Lindsay C. Page of the University of Pittsburgh.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

Nudges alone don't always result in huge gains. But the intervention has worked in both elementary and secondary schools, it's cheap, and it's eminently scalable. Rogers and Feller estimate that the mailers they sent cost \$6 for every day of added attendance, per student.

## RESEARCH

- [Reducing Student Absences at Scale by Targeting Parents' Misbeliefs](#): **STRONG**
- [Leveraging Parents: The Impact of High-Frequency Information on Student Achievement](#): **STRONG**
- [Leveraging Text Messaging to Improve Kindergarten Attendance](#): **EMERGING**

## Home Visits

What if you could improve a student's attendance and achievement by getting to know his family a little better? Research suggests that is precisely what happens when teachers visit student homes on a regular basis.

An evaluation of the [Parent Teacher Home Visits](#) 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 researcher 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.

In this type of home visit, teachers meet with the family at home, with the 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 the child. They learn about the challenges the family faces. And they provide a connection to the school for parents who might not otherwise reach out to teachers. Relationship-building home visits are not designed to deliver explicit messages on absenteeism or to target students with problematic attendance. The Parent Teacher Home Visits program began in the Sacramento area two decades ago and now operates in more than 700 places in 25 states. The model relies on some basic practices: voluntary visits arranged in advance with teachers in pairs, teachers trained and compensated, and a focus on relationship building rather than targeting attendance.

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

Home visits entail some costs since teachers should be trained and compensated for visits that typically occur outside of school hours. The efforts seem to work best with families of elementary school children and when teachers and parents continue to interact after the initial visit. They also work better when teachers don't deliver explicit messages on absenteeism, but rather talk about parents' hopes for their children and about forging a strong partnership with the school. Schools have found the intervention particularly helpful with families of English language learners.

#### RESEARCH

- [Student Outcomes and Parent Teacher Home Visits: PROMISING](#)
- [The Family Engagement Partnership Student Outcome Evaluation: PROMISING](#)
- [A New Program to Prevent Primary School Absenteeism: PROMISING](#)

#### RESOURCES

- [Relational Parent Teacher Home Visits Boost Attendance](#)

## Positive Messaging

Many campaigns to reduce chronic absenteeism begin with positive messaging, an inexpensive and easy step that conveys the benefits of good attendance to students, families and the entire community. Messaging can extend year-round or target challenging times for attendance, such as holidays and the end of the school year. While there is not yet much research demonstrating the success of these practices, the experience in many districts suggests that messaging, combined with more targeted and intensive interventions, can help turn absenteeism around.

Many of these campaigns set targets for attendance. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, for instance, students are encouraged to miss fewer than five days in its [Challenge 5](#) campaign. The messaging campaign was combined with incentive for good attendance, a thorough review of data, and support for students and families facing major barriers to getting to school. Chronic absence dropped from 36 to 27 percent during the effort's first two years, school district records show.

Some efforts tap celebrities or sports figures. Cleveland Brown football players showed up at schools, recorded phone calls and hosted a community summit to preach the gospel of good attendance in Cleveland's "[Get 2 School. You Can Make It](#)" campaign. The community-wide effort—which included phone banking, canvassing, college scholarship opportunities, giveaway incentives, social media, celebrations and mentoring—brought the

chronic absenteeism rate in the city schools down from 35 to 29 percent in the 2015–16 school year, district data show.

A back-to-school campaign in Newark, New Jersey, is taking [a different approach](#) with a back-to-school campaign called "Give Me Five." District employees, from custodians to assistant superintendents, are tapped to call the families of five students and make sure they show up for the first day of school.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

Most successful campaigns have a messaging component. These approaches, while successful on the local level, have not yet been studied by national researchers. Schools and districts should talk to the students and families with absenteeism problems to get a sense of what messages would motivate them to attend school more regularly.

### RESOURCES

- [Portraits of Change](#)
- [Get 2 School. You Can Make It](#)
- [Challenge 5 Campaign](#)
- [Handouts and Messaging](#)

## Incentives

The perfect attendance certificate is a timeless piece of school lore, a reward for students who show up for school 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 will reduce chronic absenteeism. [A MDRC study](#) in New York City found better attendance for 9th graders with [financial incentives for families](#). [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 address the right problem and the right student population. 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

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. Attendance Works offers a [range of approaches](#) that have worked, often as part of a broader, comprehensive effort to reduce absenteeism.

#### RESEARCH

- [Toward Reduced Poverty Across Generations: PROMISING](#)
- [The Power and Pitfalls of Education Incentives: NO IMPACT](#)
- [The Demotivating Effect \(and Unintended Message\) of Rewards: NEGATIVE](#)

#### RESOURCES

- [Making Sense Out of Incentives](#)
- [What Makes an Attendance Incentive Program Successful](#)
- [Establishing School-wide Attendance Incentives](#)

# Addressing Barriers to Attendance

## School-based Health Services

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 study in California](#) 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. Providing physical and mental health services at school, including screenings and immunizations, can help reduce absences. These services not only help prevent illness but can also spare the time that students miss for routine medical appointments or when they are sent home from school 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 rates decreased 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 research](#) from Texas A&M University in 2012 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, school-based health providers can help 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.

School-based health services take many forms, whether delivered by a school nurse, a clinic or a remote provider. All models offer evidence of improving attendance. [A review of research](#) on school nurses by Erin Maughan of the University of Utah, for instance, found that nurses could have profound impact when they focused attention on chronically absent students. 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.

Likewise, several studies detail how school-based health centers influence school attendance. Nearly 2,600 schools with a total of 6.3 million students have clinics designed to promote healthy living and preventative care for chronic health conditions. That can range from managing a head lice infestation, administering medication to asthmatic students, or offering counseling for an anxious or depressed teen.

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. 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.

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

## 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](#)



## Telehealth

Telehealth, the use of telecommunications such as interactive video conferencing to deliver healthcare services, has become increasingly common in schools. A student with asthma can talk to a doctor without leaving school. Or a dental technician can clean children's teeth at school and communicate with a dentist about any serious problems that arise. For students, especially those in remote communities or in neighborhoods served by few doctors, telehealth saves hours they might miss from school.

Telehealth in schools has been used to address primary care, dental needs, mental health services, and chronic conditions with promising results. In Rochester, NY, for instance, 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 has shown promising results, as it allows patients to receive dental care while avoiding the logistical and cost burdens to families of taking students out of school. For example, for 60 percent of the cases at Harmon Johnson Elementary in Sacramento, all dental care needed by the children was provided at school, thereby reducing absenteeism.

In Howard County, Md., 150 telemedicine exams were conducted in select schools in 2016. About 98 percent of the students treated through telemedicine, not including those who were contagious or had conditions that needed further attention, immediately returned to their classes, therefore reducing absenteeism. This can be a large benefit for caregivers who would otherwise have to spend time and money taking their children out of school to go to the pediatrician.

These results are similar to those found in the [Children's Health School Telehealth Program Texas](#), which served 112 schools in 2018. The program reduced absenteeism, not just at school but in parents' work places. In a survey, 74 percent of caregivers said would have had to miss work if their child had not received school telehealth services, meaning their child would have also missed class. Texas is one of at least 18 states that has authorized Medicaid reimbursement for telemedicine services provided in schools and one of 28 states (plus Washington, D.C.) that requires private insurers to cover telemedicine appointments as they would face-to-face doctor visits.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

Telemedicine can present challenges for providers, which include coverage, liability, and licensing. With the implementation of new technology, there are system barriers such as space allocation, startup costs, maintenance, technical expertise and equipment, internet speed and bandwidth capabilities. Also, for certain groups of students, such as those who are deaf or who speak English as a second language, telemedicine can present language challenges. And in schools, telemedicine interactions must comply with HIPPA and FERPA privacy regulations.

#### RESEARCH

- [Effect of School-based Telemedicine on Asthma Management: STRONG](#)

#### RESOURCES

- [Expanding the Dental Team](#)
- [Telemedicine in Schools Helps Keep Kids in the Classroom](#)
- [Roadmap for Action](#)
- [Center for Connected Health Policy](#)

## School Buses and Public Transit

Transportation challenges contribute to chronic absenteeism in many places, whether it's a city that has limited school bus routes or a rural community where missing the school bus leaves students few options for getting to school on time. Not surprisingly, research has found that providing school bus service or free passes on public transit can improve attendance rates and educational outcomes.

**A 2017 study** by University of Santa Barbara 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.

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 African-American and foreign-born students. Opening transportation options to these groups promoted equity. Other cities—including Washington, D.C., Chicago and New York—offer similar programs. Sacramento plans to implement a plan in fall 2019.

Denver Public Schools used another approach, initiating the **"Success Express,"** a shuttle bus service that ran from early morning to late afternoon for students attending charter schools, or schools outside their attendance zone, or afterschool activities. University of Denver researchers found that the availability of the shuttle service was associated with significant improvements in attendance and truancy rates.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

Transportation programs remain an expensive item in the school budget, so expanding 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.

#### RESEARCH

- **Assessing the Impact of Student Transportation on Public Transit: PROMISING**
- **Linking Getting to School to Going to School: EMERGING**
- **Success Express: Transportation Innovation in Denver Public Schools: EMERGING**

#### RESOURCES

- **Safe Routes to School Toolbox**

## A Safer Walk to School

Neighborhood violence 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 [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 during before- and after-school hours for added safety. Workers in high-visibility vests wear radios, which connect them to emergency personnel and provide protection to students.

Launched in 2009 with 35 schools, the program now employs about 1,400 workers to protect the path to 160 schools. On routes where Safe Passage is in effect, there was a 14 percent reduction in reported crime, according to a [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.

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 [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, Mass., for instance, students in the Walking School Bus had a better attendance rate than their peers.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

The Safe Passages 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. And 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](#)

## Breakfast for All

Studies in recent years have shown the overwhelmingly positive effect of eating breakfast on 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 to school without eating breakfast, and those children are more likely to make errors, have poorer memory recall, and are more likely to be absent or late.

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 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.

The [No Kid Hungry](#) Campaign partners with schools partners with schools to ensure kids start the day fed. The campaign also found that the Grab n' Go model allowed students to quickly pick up packaged breakfasts off of mobile carts. The [Second Chance Breakfast](#) program provides meals later in the day to students who may not be hungry first thing in the morning.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

School breakfast should be delivered in a way that avoids stigma for the students eating their meal. It should also provide students an opportunity to connect with peers or adults at school. Both these factors make breakfast in the classroom an appealing option. There is mixed evidence on the risk of obesity in children. Some students may gain weight because they are eating a meal at home and then eating again once they arrive to class. This should not cancel out the benefits of a free breakfast.

#### RESEARCH

- [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](#)

#### RESOURCES

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

## Laundry at Schools

Some students miss school simply because they don't have any clean clothes. About 15 percent of households in the United States do not have washing machines and rely on the weekly trip to the laundromat. That leaves some students in a bind, and some 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 recently launched the [Care Counts](#) pilot program, has released some data. In the 2015-16 school year, the pilot provided about 2,000 loads of clean clothes to students across the two districts. Of the students tracked, those missing 10 or more days in the previous year, about 90 percent improved their attendance by an average 6 more days. 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, N.J.](#) got a grant from a local utility company to open a laundromat at school. An elementary school in Kansas City, Mo., 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 over 71 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 require an increased burden on school staff. 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 pointing to success and none comparing results to similar schools without laundry facilities. Nor does the closet approach. But for certain schools, these could be smart approaches to removing barriers to attendance.

### RESOURCES

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

# Improving School Climate

## Relevant—and Culturally Relevant—Instruction

Ask teenagers how they feel about school, and the No. 1 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, [another survey](#) by the nonprofit Get Schooled showed. Close behind is, “I just don’t like the classes or subjects.” [Research](#) and experience tell us that students become increasingly disengaged as they advance in school, in part because they don’t see why the material they’re learning matters in their lives. This can compound absenteeism, leading to weaker academic performance and higher dropout rates.

One antidote to boredom 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 for 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 the decline in motivation but also sparks improvement in student [achievement](#). However, they did not see statistically significant improvement in attendance. 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.

Other researchers have shown that cultural relevance within a curriculum can make a difference for attendance. Efforts to teach about the history and experiences of racial and ethnic minorities have generated controversy in some places. Tucson famously ended its Mexican American studies program in 2012 when state legislators said it fomented unrest and resentment. But other cities and states are expanding programs to reach diverse student populations. California is developing a model ethnic studies curriculum that will be offered in every high school starting in 2020-21.

[A study released in 2017](#) by researchers Thomas Dee and Emily Penner looked at 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 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 increase 1.4 points and the number of credits they earned increased by 23, when compared to other students.

In Oregon, school leaders have reduced high chronic absenteeism rates among American Indian students [through a program](#) connecting schools with tribal leaders and books and readings by tribe members.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

The classroom connections interventions have a research base showing improvements in engagement and achievement, but not attendance. The culturally relevant coursework, on the other hand, is connected to gains in attendance. But adopting such coursework is much more complex and can be controversial.

## RESEARCH

- [Making Connections: Replicating and Extending the Utility Value Intervention in the Classroom: \*\*PROMISING\*\*](#)
- [The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance: \*\*MODERATE\*\*](#)

## RESOURCES

- [What We know about Purpose & Relevance From Scientific Research](#)
- [Build Connections for Classrooms Guide](#)



## Threshold Greetings

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.

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 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, when compared to classrooms without the greetings. Researchers estimate this adds the equivalent of another hour of engagement to the school day.

In the 2018 study, teachers greeted the 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.

#### 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](#)



## 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 where children feel bullied or left out.

Once a staple of elementary school, recess time **has been 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 of a day** “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 studies. 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 similar 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.

Without any structure, 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. **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, a change that administrators attribute in part to Playworks.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

There is not direct research on the impact of effective recess on school attendance. But the proven effects on school climate and academic achievement provide a research case for pursuing this low-cost approach.

#### 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**
- **Impact and Implementation Findings from an Experimental Evaluation of Playworks: EMERGING**

#### RESOURCES

- **The Crucial Role of Recess in School**
- **Building a Culture of Health Through Safe and Healthy Elementary School Recess**

## 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 justice" 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.

Initially used in the criminal justice system, restorative practices have gained a foothold in schools as districts look for ways to reduce suspensions and improve their school climate. Key to the approach is a talking or dialogue circle. Participants gather in a circle, speaking in turn without interruption, often using a talking stick or similar object to denote who "has the floor." The circle creates a space to resolve the conflict or share feelings with peers and teachers. It offers a solution to keep students in school while also addressing disruptive behavior.

Existing research shows benefits for students and school communities. In Pittsburgh, schools saw a reduction in suspension rates, as well as reductions in racial and socioeconomic disparities in those rates, [according to research](#) led by Catherine Augustine for the RAND Corporation. The same study found improvements in overall school climate, but slightly lower test scores for African American students. [A pilot study in Minnesota](#) saw suspensions drop by 27 percent in the first year

of implementation, according to Skidmore College researchers. A 2013 Rutgers University study found that the approach reduced [the gap in referrals among Black and Latino students](#) and their white peers.

[In one Houston school](#), introducing talking circles reduced suspension by half. Twice a week, students and teachers at Bammel Middle School gather for 35 minutes "to talk through their problems and build stronger relationships." The Texas Education Agency devoted \$1.2 million to train administrators in restorative practices, which have spread through the state.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

Restorative practices are most effective when schools make a wholesale shift from retributive disciplinary frameworks, a shift that has buy-in from faculty and staff. Such a shift requires additional training for administrators, teachers, and counselors. Administrators should be prepared for questions and pushback.

#### 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**
- [A Cluster-Randomized Trial of Restorative Practices:](#) **EMERGING**

#### RESOURCES

- [Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A Research Review](#)

## TIER II

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

## Effective Messaging and Engagement

### Early Warning Systems

Researchers in [Chicago](#) and [Baltimore](#), looking for ways to reduce high school dropout rates, identified three signs that students were headed off track as early as middle school: attendance, behavior, and course performance. Put simply, 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. The early warning schools reduced the percentage of chronically absent students: 10 percent of students missing too many days, versus 14 percent at the control schools.

Ninth grade seemed to be a critical year, especially for attendance: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago 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. That 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. That translated into higher graduation rates as well. 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 in 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 32 struggling urban secondary schools in 11 school districts. Another 30 schools served 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 comparison group.

## 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 successful in a variety of settings using a variety of models.

## 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](#)

## Mentors

A caring relationship at school—whether it's with a teacher, a counselor, or another student—can enhance a student's sense of belonging and reduce absenteeism. 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.

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 African-American 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 turned to City Year, which uses AmeriCorps members as “near-peers” for students who need extra support. As they develop these relationships, absenteeism rates have dropped. In 2016-17, students with City Year mentors improved their attendance by at least 2 percent points, or about three and a half more days in school. In a [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. they had six fewer absences, according to a University of Wisconsin study. The program also had a strong parent engagement component. Attendance Works has [created a toolkit](#) for implementing Success Mentor programs in elementary schools.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

Depending on the model that schools choose, mentoring 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 program 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.

## RESEARCH

- [Check & Connect: STRONG](#)
- [Using Data and the Human Touch: PROMISING FOR ENTIRE CAMPAIGN](#)
- [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](#)

## Youth Engagement

Youth engagement programs that seek to promote problem solving, self-control, emotional regulation, and a stronger sense of themselves as learners can also reduce absenteeism. Typically these efforts, which can be operated in Tier I or II, combine a variety of strategies: improving school climate, encouraging character development or offering tutoring and mentoring. These programs can function as both school-wide efforts as well 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 on the schoolwide level. In Hawaii, absenteeism was 15 percent lower at the schools in the program 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 afterschool 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. As social-emotional development becomes a priority, school districts can reap added benefit of improved attendance.

#### 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**



# Removing Barriers to Attendance

## Addressing Asthma

Among health conditions affecting school attendance, asthma stand 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. 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 the concern about falling behind due to absences.

An obvious step to 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, NY**, found that for children with asthma, access to a school-based clinic was associated with a gain of three school days. In Rochester, NY, in-school services combined with regular telemedicine 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 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 the 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 fewer episodes of asthma for shorter durations, 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, the **Asthma Impact Model** 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 parents 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](#)

## Targeted Transportation

Some students become chronically absent simply because of the logistics of getting to school. Homeless or foster care children can sometimes find themselves beyond a school bus route or a walk to school. So can students who choose charter schools or magnet programs across town. And those who rely on a school bus can miss an entire day if they miss the bus. This is a particular problem in rural communities, where housing is more spread out and children must travel farther to get to school. It's also an issue with **a racial dynamic**: One in four African-American households and one in six Latinx households do not own a car, compared to one in 15 white households.

Acknowledging the connection between absenteeism and transportation, Detroit Public Schools is **buying a fleet** of six, 10-person vans that will allow them to pick up chronically absent students at their homes. The vans will also be used for special education students who need support getting to school. The pilot program will cost the school district about \$200,000.

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 this sort of service. One such service, **HopSkipDrive**, works with a number of school districts to transport students for school field trips, students who need individualized care, and students who live with out-of-district foster families. Another service, **Zūm**, has relationships with schools in more than 125 school districts.

Other schools confront transportation challenges in a more ad-hoc manner: Some coordinate carpools among families who live in the same neighborhood as a chronically absent student, while others send attendance clerks out to pick up absentee children. In California's rural Butte County, the principal of an alternative school drives a mini-van around to pick up students who can't get to school otherwise. These interventions are relatively new and haven't had the benefit of high-quality research to assess their effectiveness.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

Beyond the costs, transportation interventions—whether buying vehicles or tapping ride-sharing services—don't always address all the problems that are causing students to miss school. Ride-sharing startups for kids must follow stringent privacy laws aimed at protecting children. At least two companies **have shut down** after only a couple of years, and Uber's pilot program for teens is now defunct. This is also a gap in research. School districts that pursue such approaches should work with a research partner to assess the value.

### RESOURCES

- [What is the Future of Getting Kids to Soccer?](#)
- [DPS has a new idea: Send vans to pick up absent kids in Detroit](#)
- [Hop, Skip, Drive](#)
- [Zūm](#)

## TIER III

Tier III approaches work with the most troubled students, often involving not just schools but other agencies dealing with health, housing, and social services, and typically requiring case management customized to individual students' challenges.

# Effective Messaging and Engagement

## Truancy Courts

Truancy—missing school without an excuse—is one of the oldest school offenses in the book. Even as schools and communities have begun addressing the broader problems that contribute to chronic absenteeism, many places still struggle to deal with students who have excessive unexcused absences. Truancy typically refers only to unexcused absences, though each state has the authority to define truancy and what level of unexcused absence triggers the need for legal intervention. A [2017 study](#) led by St. Louis University researcher Brandy R. Maynard shows that these unexcused absences are linked to substance abuse, risk taking, weak engagement in school and poor grades.

With the increased emphasis on crime and punishment in the mid 1990s came a crackdown on truancy. The number of truancy cases that ended up in juvenile courts increased by 69 percent from 1997 to 2004. Many school districts imposed steep fines and jail terms for students caught skipping school and for their parents. Some schools suspended students for truancy, essentially punishing missed school days with more missed school days.

What educators found—through research and experience—was that these punitive approaches didn't work. 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, according to the analysis by Maynard and her co-authors.

States have begun taking a different approach to truancy. 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 considered truancy a criminal offense that could be tried in adult courts, turned it into a civil offense in 2015. In the first year of the new policy, the number of court referrals for truancy dropped from 88,675 to 20,555 for students, with a similar trend for parents, [an analysis by a state legislative panel showed](#). School districts reported that attendance stayed about the same.

A new approach focuses on using truancy courts to deliver a more holistic approach to resolving the problems causing the absences. In Alameda County, Calif., a judge determines what problems are keeping students and families from getting to school and has social workers and service providers in the courtroom to help. The judge suspends any fines or jail time, then

erases them if families can prove they have turned around poor attendance. The District Attorney's office also [created a handbook](#) to help schools navigate the process.

In Bowling Green, Kentucky, the Truancy Court Diversion Program brings local judges to schools, where they meet with school personnel, truant students and families. In the first phase, truant students and their families undergo a two-hour education workshop. If unexcused absences persist, they meet weekly with a team of court and school officials for at least 10 weeks to get attendance back on track. A [2006 evaluation](#) by researchers at Western Kentucky University and the court system found significant impact on unexcused absences, tardiness, and academic performance.

In Baltimore, the judges in the [Truancy Court Program](#) are actually volunteers who work with students to reward positive behavior and provide weekly incentives for improved attendance. The program, run by the University of Baltimore, focuses on students who have five to 20 unexcused absences but are still connected to school. It provides them with classes on issues such as listening skills, goal-setting, and organization. Mentors meet with students and communicate with parents at least once a week. Students graduate from the program when they have reduced unexcused absences or tardies by at least 65 percent and have demonstrated improved behavior and academic achievement. A [2011 evaluation](#) by the

Maryland Administrative Offices of the Courts found that 71 percent of these students graduated from the program and that those graduates continued to improve their attendance after finishing.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

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.

### RESEARCH

- [The Truancy Court Diversion Program \(Bowling Green\): EMERGING](#)
- [Evaluation of the Truancy Court Program in Baltimore City: PROMISING](#)

### RESOURCES

- [Truancy in the United States: Temporal Trends and Correlates](#)
- [Overview of the Effects of Changes to Texas Truancy Laws](#)
- [Alameda County District Attorney's Truancy & Attendance Program Handbook](#)

## Interagency Case Management

Some students face more complex problems—such as homelessness, pregnancy and mental illness—that 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 the foster care system.

**Communities in Schools** (CIS) offers one model for encouraging interagency collaboration. The nonprofit provides a school-based coordinator, who brings together school administrators with external partners. It works at all three tiers of intervention: starting with analyzing student data to determine the underlying causes of chronic absenteeism and what the school and its students need. It also involves a school support team that can marshal resources and partners, from government agencies to businesses, for helping student and families. 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 and support the student. They set up education teams for all the adults involved in the child’s life—social workers, teachers, therapists, caregivers, and others—to work collaboratively, conscious of the trauma these students have endured. And they allow students to set their own goals for improvement. In **Pima County, Ariz.**, three

quarters of foster students were either chronically absent or close to it when they started with FosterEd, according to a 2016 report by RTI International. In the first two months of the program, 81 percent of those students improved their attendance rates. A 2015 report by RTI found that in **Santa Cruz County, Calif.**, half the students arrived with weak attendance records, and three quarters of them showed improvement.

Key to any coordinated approach is data sharing. Government agencies and nonprofits working with school districts on projects such as mentoring or afterschool programs need access to attendance records, grades, disciplinary records and other information. This naturally raises privacy concerns that school districts need to navigate; tools include memoranda of understanding between districts and outside agencies. Districts should stay abreast of federal privacy restrictions and should limit the type of information that flows to its external partners, depending on what data they need.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

Collaboration with agencies and nonprofit organizations beyond the school yard 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.

#### RESEARCH

- **Two Years of Case Management: PROMISING**
- **FosterEd Evaluations: EMERGING**

#### RESOURCES

- **FERPA Guidance for Sharing Information with Community Based Organizations**

## Housing

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.

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 them 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. All of these absences only compounded the academic problems homeless students faced. When they 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 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. Every state and many local education agencies have [designated coordinators](#) who can help schools.

A [New York City campaign](#) to reduce absenteeism included sharing school data with staff from the Department of Homeless Services for students living in shelters. 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 that these homeless shelters shared in their monthly progress reports. The effort showed results: Homeless students who participated were 31 percent less likely to be chronically absent than similar students.

[Housing authorities](#) in San Francisco, San Antonio, Seattle, Sarasota, Fla., and Springfield, Mass., among others, have also taken ownership for 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.

#### RESEARCH

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

#### RESOURCES

- [Empty Desks: 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](#)



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# ATTENDANCE PLAYBOOK

SMART SOLUTIONS FOR REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM