

Chronic Absenteeism and the Need for a Comprehensive System of Student and Learning Supports*

From our Center's perspective, chronic absenteeism – commonly defined as missing 10% or more of school days for any reason (excused or unexcused) – is best understood not as an attendance compliance problem, but as another indicator of barriers to learning and teaching (Adelman & Taylor, 2014; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008). Frequent absences typically reflect unmet needs, ineffective learning environments, weak connections to school, and insufficient student and learning supports rather than student or family indifference (Attendance Works, 2025).

The sharp rise in chronic absenteeism during and after the COVID 19 pandemic has intensified national concern. Although rates have declined modestly since their 2021-22 peak, absenteeism remains well above pre pandemic levels (Diliberti et al., 2025; U.S. Department of Education, 2025).

Research consistently links chronic absenteeism to students experiencing poverty, housing instability, transportation barriers, family caregiving responsibilities, negative school climate, weak adult – student relationships, physical and mental health challenges, and community stressors (Attendance Works, 2025; Kearney et al., 2022). Research also cautions that consistent attendance cannot be achieved through monitoring, incentives, or enforcement alone. When schools respond to these complex factors with punitive or compliance driven approaches, disengagement and alienation often deepen, particularly for students already facing significant factors interfering with learning (Adelman & Taylor, 2014).

Moving Beyond Fragmented and Punitive Practices

Many school systems rely on fragmented and reactive strategies such as truancy letters, referrals to courts, or suspensions. Evidence shows these approaches have limited effectiveness and may exacerbate inequities by disproportionately affecting students experiencing poverty, disability, or community adversity (Adelman & Taylor, 2014; Attendance Works, 2025).

Consistent with Center guidance, attendance improvement is most effective when embedded across the following six interrelated arenas: enhancing classroom strategies to enable learning; supporting transitions; increasing family and community involvement; responding to and preventing crises; providing student and family assistance; and promoting positive school climate.

Using Data to Guide Support – Not Label Students

Attendance data should function as an early warning system to guide timely support, not as a mechanism for labeling students or triggering punitive responses. Monitoring individual attendance patterns over time enables early intervention before problems become chronic (Attendance Works, 2025; Sutton, 2023).

Tiered Supports as an Organizing Tool—Not the Goal

MultiTiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) can help organize interventions, but widespread absenteeism indicates systemic weaknesses, not individual deficits. Targeted and intensive supports are effective only when nested within strong universal, preventive schoolwide conditions (Adelman & Taylor, 2014; Kearney et al., 2022).

*The material in this document builds on work done by Sydney Bates a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2025.

Exhibit

About Best Practices

The following best practice summary synthesizes widely accepted research and guidance on chronic absenteeism (see reference list).

1. **Make Attendance a Shared, Positive Expectation** – Communicate that attendance equals belonging, success, and safety, not compliance. Use consistent, welcoming messages from staff students know and trust.
2. **Monitor Early and Act Quickly** – Track patterns, not just totals (e.g., Mondays, specific classes, transitions). Intervene after 2–3 absences, before problems become entrenched. Data are used to trigger supports rather than sanctions.
3. **Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching, Not Just Behaviors** – Identify and reduce causal factors related to neighborhood, family, schooling, peer, and personal factors. Collaborate with community agencies to fill gaps schools cannot address alone.
4. **Strengthen Student–Adult Connections** – Ensure every student has at least one meaningful relationship with a school adult. Use mentoring, advisory periods, or check ins to increase engagement.
5. **Increase Instructional Relevance and Supports** – Enhance intrinsic motivation for classroom engagement, cultural responsiveness, and academic, social, and emotional supports. Reduce avoidance and acting out driven by anxiety, bullying, or academic frustration.
6. **Engage Families as Partners** – Use two way communication, not automated notices alone. Respect family circumstances and collaborate on solutions.
7. **Use a Comprehensive System of Student/Learning Supports** – Embed attendance strategies within a comprehensive continuum of interventions and an organized set of support domains. Align attendance initiatives with existing student and learning supports. Reserve punitive or legal actions as a last resort, not a first response.

In general, attendance improves most when schools

- treat chronic absenteeism as a learning supports and engagement issue, not a discipline problem
- shift from blaming students and families to systematically removing barriers, strengthening relationships, personalizing supports, and communicating in ways that promote inclusion, respect, and belonging
- shift from monitoring attendance as a compliance issue to addressing it as a re engagement and learning supports challenge, strengthening enabling components that reduce barriers, build relationships, and reconnect students to school.

Examples of schools and districts where attendance improvement strategies have worked can be found at the following websites:

<https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/success-stories/>

<https://www.future-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Attendance-Playbook.5.23.pdf>

<https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai22-669.pdf>

Note: We caution that short-term gains will not be sustained unless attendance practices are fully integrated into a school's permanent enabling-component infrastructure. Without embedding these strategies into everyday school improvement, staff roles, and accountability systems, reductions in absenteeism risk fading once temporary resources are withdrawn.

References and Resources Used in Preparing this Information Resource

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