Tackling Attendance with Connection-Based Strategies

by Phyllis W. Jordan

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Phyllis W. Jordan

The pandemic left millions of American children out of the habit of attending school. The months of remote learning, followed by the confusion of hybrid schedules, followed by days lost to quarantines, if not actual illness, contributed to absenteeism rates rarely seen in U.S. school districts.

Not only did districts record steep increases in the number of students missing nearly a month of school, they saw a small but alarming jump in those missing half the school year.[1] Millions of students nationwide simply disappeared from school rolls.

If schools are going to turn around the learning loss that has come with the pandemic's disruptions—whether through tutoring, afterschool programming, or new curriculum—they are going to have to get students back into the classroom to benefit from these efforts. To accomplish that, educators are embracing a different approach to attendance, one that emphasizes connecting with students and families and creating schools where everyone feels safe, welcome, and respected.

Los Angeles educators, including Superintendent Alberto Carvalho, are visiting students and families at home to bring them back to school. Dallas schools are sending "nudge letters"—letting parents know how many days their children have missed and reminding them about the importance of attending school regularly. Schools near Pittsburgh are turning their schools into hubs for community service, providing the wraparound support some students need.

About 560 school districts nationwide have earmarked some of their federal Covid-relief dollars to re-engage students, and more than 1,000 are investing in family

and community outreach, according to FutureEd's analysis of more than 5,000 local plans for spending the American Rescue Plan's aid for K-12 schools.[2] Those plans, compiled by the Burbio data services firm, represent school districts and charter organizations serving 74% of the nation's public school students.

Even before the pandemic, about 8 million students nationwide were considered chronically absent, meaning they missed at least 10% of the school year—or about 18 days in a typical school district. Research shows that that level of absences, excused or unexcused, is linked to lower test scores and grade point averages and, eventually, to higher dropout rates.[3] As early as pre-K and kindergarten, absenteeism reduces the chances that students will master reading by the end of third grade and develop the social skills that help them persist in school.

The latest national data, released in September, shows that the number of chronically absent students ratcheted up to 10 million in the 2020-21 school year.[4] Based on data that states are releasing this fall, the number could grow even higher for the 2021-22 school year.

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Consider what happened in Connecticut. In the 2019-20 school year, 62,190 students statewide were chronically absent. In the next year, the number climbed to 94,506; and in the 2021-22 school, it reached 117,513—nearly double the rate before the pandemic. Ohio saw similar trends, with the rate of chronically absent students going from 17% pre-pandemic to 30% in the past year.[5]

Hedy Chang, director of the nonprofit Attendance Works, has studied trends in absenteeism for the past 15 years and said she has never seen anything quite like the 2021-22 school year. High school seniors, who typically have stable attendance, began missing more school. So

did elementary students. Attendance is usually strong at the beginning of each semester, but Covid's Delta wave overwhelmed schools in the early fall, and Omicron struck at the start of the second semester.

"Absences at the beginning of a semester are so problematic because it's when you're building a routine," Chang said. "It's when kids are getting the basics so that they can actually pass a class by the end of the semester. And it's when they develop their relationships to peers and teachers so if they miss class, they can know who to reach out to help connect. And it's those relationships that help you still feel connected and able to succeed."

So what should schools do to turn this around?

The answer does not lie in strict truancy policies that punish students and parents. The late 1990s brought a crackdown on truancy, with the number of cases reaching juvenile courts climbing by 69% from 1997 to 2004. But rather than bringing students back to class, the court involvement tended to push them out of school altogether, researchers found.[6] And attendance didn't improve: truancy rates nationwide were 10.8% in 2002 and 11.1% in 2014.

What's more, a punitive approach doesn't address what's keeping students from coming to school right now. The pandemic left many students anxious and depressed, conditions that often have contributed to absenteeism. Many feel disconnected from friends and teachers. Some older students have found jobs; some have simply stopped seeing school as relevant to their lives. Some manifest a psychological condition known as school refusal, which often requires professional support to address.[7] Changing this epidemic of absenteeism requires a mix of strategies.

Reaching Out to Families and Students

Many school districts are using home visits to talk with parents about what barriers their children face in getting to school—whether it's unstable housing, unreliable transportation, or a lack of access to health care.[8] In Connecticut, the state is investing $10.7 million of its

federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER III) funds in an intensive home-visiting initiative for 15 school districts.

Torrington Public Schools in northwestern Connecticut trained 65 educators and staff members to visit 360 families last year, with a focus on getting students back to school. "It wasn't just a one-and-done, a drive-by thing," said Donna Labbe, community engagement coordinator for the 4,000-student school district. "It was building a relationship and the ability to continue the relationship throughout the school year. So not just visiting once or twice, but getting to know you, providing some resources, and gaining that trust."

Some places are using attendance "nudges," letters or texts letting families know how many days their students have missed, and in some cases, how they compare to other students.[9] The District of Columbia Public Schools combined the nudges with a chat function that helps families connect to resources for housing, food, and other needs.

TAKE ACTION

Evidence-Based Family Engagement Strategies

1 **Home Visits:** Research provides strong evidence that home visits can improve student attendance and achievement by building relationships between families and school staff. These visits can often reveal barriers children face in getting to school.

"Home Visits," FutureEd's Covid Relief Playbook, June 2021, https://www.future-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Home-Visits_Final.pdf.

2 **Attendance Nudges:** Notifications, or "nudges," letting parents know how many days their children have missed can improve attendance, research shows. Two high-quality studies show reductions in absenteeism and even course failures by alerting parents to the importance of regular attendance.

"Combating Chronic Absenteeism," FutureEd's Covid Relief Playbook, June 2021, https://www.future-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Combating-Chronic-Absenteeism_final.pdf.

Creating the Right School Climate

Once students are back in class, school leaders need to make sure children and adolescents feel safe and welcome, because the isolation of the pandemic severed ties and increased disengagement. For many students, feeling welcome is as simple as a warm greeting at the door and classroom practices that help students to get to know each other. About a third of school districts in the national sample are investing in social-emotional learning and in mentoring programs, which can connect a student to a caring adult at school.[10] For students with more serious mental health needs, more than a third of districts in the national sample are spending federal aid to bring psychologists, counselors, and social workers into schools.

For some students, their discomfort at school turns into behavioral problems. Many districts are investing in training to avoid responding with suspensions: first, because disciplinary absences amount to more lost days of learning; and second, because a harsh disciplinary climate can reduce engagement in both suspended students and

> ## 🎬 TAKE ACTION
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> ## School Climate Strategies
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> **1 Mentoring:** Research shows mentoring programs improve attendance by connecting students to a caring adult. The mentors can be drawn from the school staff, community-based organizations, and, in some cases, older students. Research shows the results were strongest when mentors were in school at least three days a week; worked with a defined, managed caseload; had access to student data; and had a voice at a weekly principal-led meeting.
>
> "Mentoring," FutureEd's Covid Relief Playbook, https://www.future-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Mentoring_Final.pdf.
>
> **2 Equitable School Discipline:** 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. The approach works best when administrators and teachers are committed to using it and trained on its tenets.
>
> "Equitable School Discipline," FutureEd's Covid Relief Playbook, https://www.future-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Equitable-School-Discipline_Final.pdf.

> ## " Actionable data can help districts turn around poor attendance throughout the year.

peers who feel punishment is imposed unfairly. Long Beach, California, plans to use a portion of its ESSER III allotment to provide training for a districtwide restorative approach.[11] The workshops focus on conflict resolution strategies, cultural awareness, positive behavior supports, and other alternatives to suspensions and expulsions.

Tapping Community Resources

Schools shouldn't be expected to do this work alone. Community collaborations can help provide the support students need, especially in the Community Schools model many districts are adopting.[12] The state of California is investing $3 billion into the California Community Schools Partnership Program, providing grants to schools and districts to develop or support this model.[13] Each community school hires a coordinator, who pulls together government agencies and nonprofit organizations that can turn the campus into a hub for community. That can include offering health care, employment services, even haircuts. In Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, philanthropic dollars are helping to bring a program known as Communities in Schools to several campuses.[14] Research from the RAND Corporation on schools in New York City shows that these collaborative approaches have a significant impact on student attendance.[15]

National service programs like AmeriCorps can also provide workers to mentor and tutor students.[16] Research shows that such relationships with caring adults at school can improve attendance and achievement.[17] About a third of school districts are earmarking ESSER III money for tutoring or academic coaching, and about a tenth are setting aside funds for mentoring. A new federal and nonprofit initiative, the National Partnership for Student Success, is working to find 250,000 tutors, mentors, and student success coaches who can help students recover from the pandemic and move forward.[18]

Community Engagement Strategies

1 Community Schools: Research shows this collaborative approach can reduce chronic absenteeism. Each community school hires a coordinator, who pulls together government agencies and nonprofit organizations that can turn the campus into a hub for community. That can include offering health care, employment services, even haircuts.

"Community Collaborations," FutureEd's Covid Relief Playbook, https://www.future-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Community-Collaborations_Final.pdf.

2 National Partnership for Student Success: This new public-private partnership seeks to enlist 250,000 adults to work with students. While the focus is on academic recovery, the partnership can bring in the mentors and tutors who can help students reconnect with school.

National Partnership for Student Success, https://www.partnershipstudentsuccess.org.

Taking a Data-Driven Team Approach

The best efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism involve teamwork among school staff and, at times, community partners. Many school districts encourage schools to establish attendance teams to review student attendance weekly or biweekly. Using data that is regularly updated, the team can identify students who are missing too much school and then brainstorm solutions. The teams often include school nurses and counselors, in addition to teachers and administrators. A community schools coordinator, as well as key nonprofit or government agency representatives, often join the team.

Data is an important aspect of this approach. In the Austin Independent School District in Texas, an integrated data dashboard can show school officials a student's chronic absenteeism rate, grades, and, importantly, the last time someone from the school or district had reached out to the student. That sort of actionable data can help districts turn around poor attendance throughout the year.

Data and Team Tools

1 Data Tools: Actionable data that is regularly updated can help schools identify students who are missing too much school and then brainstorm solutions. Attendance Works provides a calculator that teams can use to track student attendance.

Attendance Works, "Resources: Data Tools," https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/data-tools/.

2 Attendance Team Guidance: Many schools have established teams that meet weekly or biweekly to review absenteeism trends. The teams often include school nurses and counselors. Team efforts can bring more resources to bear on reducing chronic absenteeism.

"A Principal-Led Team Overseeing Attendance," Attendance Works, 2018, https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/toolkits/mentoring-elementary-success-mentors/what-support-is-needed-from-schools/a-principal-led-team-overseeing-attendance/.

These efforts to improve attendance are essential to closing the learning gaps that grew worse during the pandemic. Too often, the students who miss too much school are the ones who can ill afford to, including children living in poverty and those dealing with disabilities. Bringing these students back to school is essential not only for academic recovery, but for ensuring that every child has equal access to a good education. ◆

To learn more about the strategies outlined here, please refer to

The Attendance Playbook

Smart Strategies for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in the Covid Era

https://www.future-ed.org/attendance-playbook
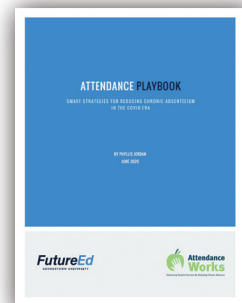
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NOTES

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