

Proven Strategies that Schools Can Use to Address Chronic Absenteeism: Learnings from The GRAD Partnership

Recently released federal data show what most schools have experienced first-hand—the pandemic has triggered a wave of record high chronic absenteeism across the nation. This has led to large increases in the number of students missing a month, or more, of the school year and even greater increases in the number of schools where 30 percent, or more, of students are chronically absent. Many schools have seen their number of chronically absent students double. At this magnitude, the whole school is impacted, and traditional responses are inadequate.

The good news is that there are proven strategies to address large numbers of chronically absent students.

The GRAD Partnership, a collaborative effort of nine organizations, who have partnered with hundreds of schools and districts over the past 25 years to improve student outcomes, has identified a core set of evidence-based practices that schools have successfully used to address chronic absenteeism.

Understanding *Why* Students are Absent

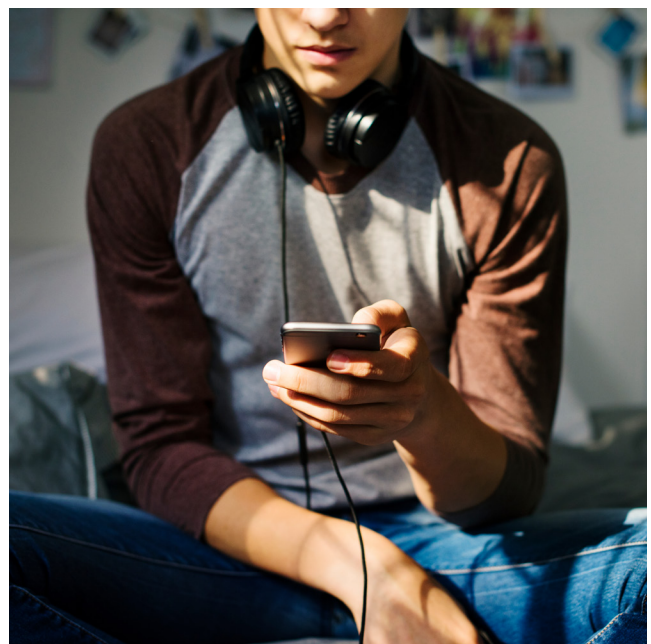
In general, the reasons students miss school, besides short-term illness, can be organized into four categories.

Out of school factors like chronic health conditions, working, or sibling/eldercare.

School avoidance can occur when students are being teased or bullied or are experiencing social or academic anxiety.

Disengagement when students don't see the point in being in school or see school as irrelevant; this often interacts with course failure and academic struggles, creating a downward spiral of more absenteeism.

Inaccurate information: students and families may underestimate how much school has been missed or may not have access to school data, may not understand the importance of attendance, or consider course completion on-line/at home enough.



Build Stronger Relationships and Increase School Connectedness

The pandemic widened the disconnection between families and school. In particular, students whose transition years were exacerbated by remote schooling due to the pandemic may be less connected to their peers and to school.

The evidence is clear. The strongest universal strategy we have to address absenteeism is re-connecting students to school. Students are connected to school when:

- They believe there is an adult at school who knows and cares about them as a person.
- They have a supportive peer group.
- They are engaged in activities they find meaningful and that help others.
- They feel welcome in school for who they are.

Relationships are at the heart of this.

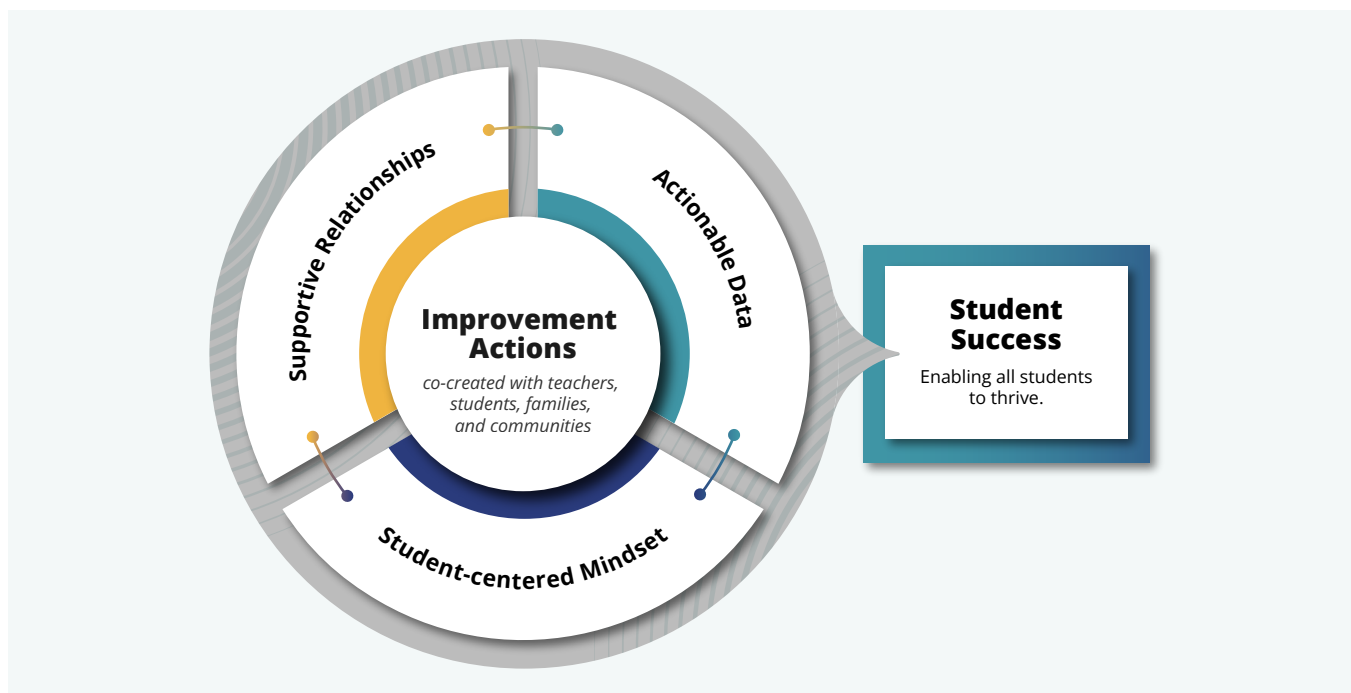
Positive school-student relationships create a sense of belonging that inspires a student to actually want to attend. For example, involvement in after school activities are known to increase attendance, and **intentional efforts to connect students to activities** have shown promising results. Culturally relevant and responsive instruction also sends a message that students' identities and cultures are valued. **Mentoring programs** also provide a caring adult in the school building who can advocate for the student.

Surveys such as the **Search Institute's Developmental Relationships survey** are a good resource for establish-

ing baselines about how students experience the adults in the school—a first step in working to foster more positive relationships. School leaders can also simply ask students to name the adults in the school whom they trust.

Peer supports: there are multiple ways students can be organized to help each other, for example: multi-age or grade level advisory groups, peer mentors, and home room or advisory captains—where older students support a homeroom or advisory of younger students i.e. 8th graders with 6th graders, or 12th graders with 9th graders, including encouraging their homeroom or advisory “team” to be in school every day. These programs have positive results for the student helpers as well as those being supported.

Strong school-family relationships are also essential for developing a network of support that keeps students in school. Phone calls and **home visits** in response to absences are more effective than impersonal robocalls and texts (mindful that parents need to be trusted as partners in their child's education). School leaders can intentionally build a welcoming environment characterized by open and active communication—including providing information in families' first language. School events like **Family Resource Nights** not only support families, but create trust and human connections with parents and guardians that can be activated when absences occur.



Combine Real-time, Actionable Data with Human Insights

Students often miss school for multiple reasons, but it is important for schools to have a general sense of the major reasons many of their students are not in school every day. Different causes required different solutions. Here are ways to investigate this question:

- Conduct an attendance audit—select a typical day and organize a team to talk to every student absent that day, excused and unexcused, to find out why they were absent. It is important to do this in a supportive way in order to get accurate information.
- Use [empathy interviews](#) or student listening sessions to gain insight into causes.

Look for trends in the data, such as students missing the first period or Fridays.

There are several ways that combining data analysis with human insights can improve attendance:

Identify where actions could help groups of chronically absent students who face similar challenges.

Look for patterns and trends in attendance data. Examine both excused and unexcused absences. Are there days of the week, or times in year, when absenteeism increases? Does chronic absenteeism in your school vary by grade level or sub-groups of students? Once a pattern or trend is established, use of teacher and staff knowledge and relationships with students, families, and the community is key to identifying root causes. Developing a plan of action may

involve community or government partners as health, transportation, sibling and eldercare, and work issues require support in and out of school.

Identify when something may have changed in students' lives or schooling experience that could lead to absenteeism and act before it becomes chronic.

Have a team review attendance weekly and note students who missed several days in a week, or have missed a single day a week for 2-3 weeks in a row. Pay particular attention to students who do not have a history of chronic absenteeism, as this could be a signal that something has recently changed. Gather insight from staff and teachers, and the student to determine if this is just a temporary illness or something that requires action to enable the student to attend school regularly.

In a non-judgmental way, keep students and families, informed when students are heading towards being chronically absent.

Both students and parents tend to underestimate how many days of school a student has missed. Nudge letters and texts can be effective as reminders that their child is missed when they are not in school, the importance of regular attendance, how many days have been missed, and the resources that are available to help them overcome barriers to regular school attendance. A non-judgmental problem-solving approach is key to engaging families in a productive partnership with the school.



Create a Student Success System

When a school has more than 50 students who are chronically absent, systematic approaches are required that are often beyond the scope of traditional student support, MTSS, or PBIS teams. A dedicated group of teachers, student support staff, and administrators, needs to be the organizers of an all hands-on deck approach.

This is where a student success system and a student success team can be helpful.

HAVING STUDENT-CENTERED MINDSETS

Reversing chronic absenteeism requires the persistence of continuously striving to foster school culture that students view as safe, inviting, and relevant. Successful systems in place to address chronic absenteeism intentionally place students at the center. For example:

When identifying root causes of absenteeism, avoid blaming or shaming students and families, which can perpetuate cycles of absences. A student-centered

mindset also holds spaces for parents and guardians to participate as equal partners, rather than school adversaries. Students themselves are also partners not passive participants, and they can often identify what they need to be successful—ask them, listen to them, and validate their perspective.

Make sure there is a welcoming system in place for when a student returns after a long absence, rather than a punishing environment that will make it less likely a student returns again. Ensure a trusted school adult helps the student identify priority assignments, develop a work plan that allows the student to catch up, and if needed, advocate with teachers to adjust due dates and give credit for assignments.

While absenteeism is a troubling problem in our schools, these proven approaches can address it and build school culture that fosters success for all students.

How Student Success Systems Work

Set up student success teams

- School wide efforts: School leaders, teachers, counselors and community.
- Meet regularly.
- Empowered to take actions.

Progress monitors all students with key indicators

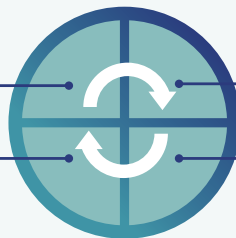
- Key predictive indicators include attendance, behavior, course grades, school connectedness (belonging), and well-being.

Monitors impact of actions and modifies until it works

- The goal is to create conditions under which students thrive, to be proactive rather than reactive.

Gathers insights and co-creates improvement actions

- Take action at school, grade, classroom, small group, and individual level, building on evidence-based solutions.
- Work with students, parents, and teachers in designing solutions.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Future Ed/Attendance Works's [Attendance Playbook](#)
- [Parent Teacher Home Visits](#)
- [Communities in Schools](#)
- Everyone Graduates Center/City Year's [Evidence-Based Changes for Attendance](#)
- The GRAD Partnership's [Student Success Team Reflection and Action Planning Tool](#)