TeachME PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
CEUs for Teachers and Educators

Breaking the Cycle of Chronic Absenteeism



Introduction 3

Section 1: Understanding Chronic Absenteeism and Its Impact 4

1.1 Defining Chronic Absenteeism 4

1.2 National Trends and Current Data 9

1.3 The Impact of Chronic Absenteeism 10

1.4 Reframing Attendance: From Punishment to Support 15

Section 1 Conclusion 17

Section 1 Key Terms 18

Section 1 Reflection Questions 20

Section 1 Activities 21

Section 2: Understanding Why Students Miss School 22

2.1 Student Factors 22

2.2 School Factors 29

2.3 Community and Societal Factors 31

2.4 Populations Disproportionately Affected 32

Section 2 Conclusion 35

Section 2 Key Terms 36

Section 2 Reflection Questions 38

Section 2 Activities 38

Section 3: Breaking the Cycle: Prevention, and Intervention 39

3.1 Early Identification and Warning Signs 40

3.2 Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) 43

3.3 Student-Teacher Relationships and Looping 49

3.4 Restorative Discipline Practices 51

TeachME CEUs.com CEUs for Teachers and Educators

3.5 Universal Free Meals and School Breakfast Programs....53
3.6 Removing Barriers to Attendance....55
Section 3 Conclusion....59
Section 3 Key Terms....60
Section 3 Reflection Questions....62
Section 3 Activities....62
Course Conclusion....63
Classroom Example....64
Challenges....65
Considerations for Support and Improvement....66
References....67

TeachME CEUs.com CEUs for Teachers and Educators

Introduction

Regular school attendance is one of the strongest predictors of academic success, student engagement, and long-term well-being. Yet in recent years, chronic absenteeism has emerged as one of the most significant challenges facing schools across the United States. Although attendance rates have improved since the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of students continue to miss substantial amounts of instructional time, with the effects falling disproportionately on students who already face barriers related to poverty, disability, health concerns, and other forms of inequity. Chronic absenteeism is a complex issue that extends far beyond simply getting students through the school doors. Students may miss school because of physical or mental health concerns, family responsibilities, transportation challenges, negative school experiences, or broader community conditions. As a result, addressing absenteeism requires educators to move beyond punitive approaches and instead focus on understanding and addressing the underlying factors that affect students' ability to attend school consistently.

This course explores the causes, consequences, and solutions related to chronic absenteeism. Participants will examine current attendance trends, investigate the many factors that contribute to absenteeism, and learn practical, evidence-based strategies for prevention and intervention. Topics include early identification and warning signs, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), relationship-building practices, restorative approaches to discipline, and strategies for removing barriers that interfere with regular attendance. By the end of this course, educators will have a deeper understanding of why students miss school and will be better prepared to create supportive, equitable, and relationship-centered environments that promote regular attendance and meaningful engagement in learning.

Section 1: Understanding Chronic Absenteeism and Its Impact

Student attendance is fundamental to learning, engagement, and long-term success. When students miss significant amounts of school, the consequences extend far beyond lost instructional time, affecting academic achievement, social-emotional development, and future opportunities. In recent years, chronic absenteeism has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges facing schools, with attendance rates remaining well above pre-pandemic levels. As educators seek to support student success and address persistent inequities, understanding the nature and impact of chronic absenteeism has become increasingly important. This section examines the foundations of chronic absenteeism by defining key attendance concepts and exploring national trends and demographic patterns. It also highlights the academic, social-emotional, and long-term consequences associated with excessive absences and examines how the field's understanding of attendance has evolved. Together, these topics illustrate why chronic absenteeism should be viewed not simply as a disciplinary concern, but as a complex issue requiring supportive, relationship-centered, and systemic responses.

1.1 Defining Chronic Absenteeism

Consistent school attendance is essential to student learning and development. One of the most widely used measures of attendance is chronic absenteeism, which refers to students missing a significant amount of instructional time over the course of a school year. The U.S. Department of Education (2025) defines chronic absenteeism as missing at least 10% of school days, or approximately 18 days in a traditional 180-day school year, regardless of the reason, including excused and unexcused absences. Because the definition is based on a percentage rather than a specific number of days, students who enroll late or transfer schools

may also be identified as chronically absent if they miss 10% or more of the days they are enrolled (Attendance Works, 2025). Although 18 days may not initially seem excessive, it amounts to nearly four weeks of missed instruction. Missing as few as two days per month can place students at risk for chronic absenteeism and its associated consequences (Attendance Works). The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) (2024) notes that chronic absenteeism has become a national concern, with more than 14 million students identified as chronically absent during the 2021–2022 school year. Because attendance is strongly associated with academic achievement and student well-being, schools and districts increasingly use chronic absenteeism as an indicator for identifying students who may require additional support (IES).

Difference Between Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy

Although the terms *chronic absenteeism* and *truancy* are sometimes used interchangeably, they represent different concepts. Truancy generally refers to unexcused absences and is often associated with violations of compulsory attendance laws. State definitions of truancy vary, but they typically focus on the number of absences that occur without a valid excuse (Attendance Works, 2025). In contrast, chronic absenteeism includes all absences regardless of cause, including excused absences, unexcused absences, suspensions, illness, family emergencies, or transportation difficulties (U.S. Department of Education, 2025.). A student who misses school frequently because of asthma, anxiety, or family responsibilities may be chronically absent even though the absences are considered excused. This distinction is important because truancy focuses primarily on compliance, whereas chronic absenteeism focuses on the loss of instructional time and the underlying factors contributing to missed school. As a result, chronic absenteeism is often viewed as a more comprehensive measure of student engagement and opportunity to learn (Attendance Works).

Excused Versus Unexcused Absences

Schools commonly categorize absences as either excused or unexcused. Excused absences typically occur when students miss school because of illness, medical appointments, religious observances, or family emergencies. Unexcused absences occur when a student misses school without an approved reason according to state or district policies. Although schools distinguish between excused and unexcused absences for reporting and legal purposes, both types of absences contribute to lost instructional time. Chronic absenteeism measures all missed days because students lose opportunities to learn regardless of whether the absence is considered excused or unexcused (United States Department of Education, 2025; Attendance Works, 2025). For example, a student who misses school repeatedly because of chronic health conditions may accumulate enough absences to become chronically absent even though every absence is excused. Likewise, students who experience housing instability, transportation challenges, or family caregiving responsibilities may miss school frequently despite circumstances beyond their control. Consequently, focusing solely on unexcused absences may overlook students who need support and intervention (Attendance Works).

Why All Missed Instructional Time Matters

Every day of school provides students with opportunities to develop academic knowledge, build relationships, and engage in social and emotional learning. According to the Institute of Education Sciences (2024), missing 10% or more of school days creates significant learning challenges and negatively affects student well-being. Students who miss substantial amounts of instruction have fewer opportunities to participate in classroom discussions, collaborative learning experiences, and interactions with teachers and peers. Attendance Works (2025) emphasizes that excessive absences can accumulate quickly. Missing only two

days each month over the course of a school year is enough to place a student in the chronically absent category. As absences increase, students may struggle to keep pace academically, experience decreased engagement, and become increasingly disconnected from school. Because chronic absenteeism reflects lost opportunities rather than student misconduct, educators are encouraged to view attendance through a prevention and support lens rather than a punitive one. Understanding why students miss school and addressing barriers early can help schools promote regular attendance and improve student outcomes (Attendance Works).

Why Schools Measure Chronic Absenteeism

Schools have long tracked attendance, but increasing attention has been placed on chronic absenteeism because it provides important information about students' opportunities to learn and their level of engagement with school. Unlike measures such as average daily attendance, which reflect attendance across an entire school or district, chronic absenteeism focuses on individual students and identifies those who are missing substantial amounts of instructional time (IES, 2024). Monitoring chronic absenteeism allows schools to identify attendance concerns before they become more severe. Attendance problems often develop gradually, and students who miss school frequently may experience academic, social, and emotional difficulties that increase over time. By examining attendance patterns, educators can recognize students who may need additional support and intervene before absences become entrenched (Attendance Works, 2025). In addition, chronic absenteeism data can help schools evaluate the effectiveness of programs and interventions. Educators can analyze attendance trends to determine whether strategies such as mentoring programs, family outreach efforts, school climate initiatives, or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) are

helping students attend school more consistently. Attendance data can also guide decisions regarding resource allocation and continuous improvement efforts (IES).

Attendance Terminology and Key Indicators

Educators frequently use several terms when discussing attendance data (Attendance Works, 2025):

- **Absence:** Any day or portion of a day during which a student is not present for instruction.
- **Excused Absence:** An absence approved according to school or district policy.
- **Unexcused Absence:** An absence that does not meet approved criteria.
- **Truancy:** Unexcused absences that meet thresholds established by state or local law.
- **Chronic Absenteeism:** Missing 10% or more of enrolled school days for any reason.
- **Early Warning Indicator:** A measure used to identify students who may be at risk for academic difficulties or disengagement.

Among these measures, chronic absenteeism has emerged as an important early warning indicator because it can identify students who may need additional support before attendance problems become severe (IES, 2024). Monitoring attendance patterns enables schools to recognize concerns early and implement interventions designed to keep students connected to school and engaged in learning.

1.2 National Trends and Current Data

Attendance Trends Before and After the Pandemic

Although chronic absenteeism existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, rates increased dramatically during and immediately following the disruption to in-person learning. Before the pandemic, approximately 15% of students nationwide were chronically absent, representing more than eight million students (Attendance Works, 2025). During the 2020–2021 school year, the number of chronically absent students nearly doubled to approximately 14.7 million, making chronic absenteeism one of the most significant educational challenges facing schools across the country (Attendance Works). The U.S. Department of Education (2025) notes that chronic absenteeism emerged as a serious concern during the pandemic, reaching approximately 31% of students during the 2021–2022 school year. Although attendance has improved since that peak, absenteeism rates remain substantially higher than pre-pandemic levels. The national rate declined to approximately 28% (more than one in four students) during the 2022–2023 school year, indicating progress but also demonstrating that chronic absenteeism continues to affect millions of students (U.S. Department of Education).

Several factors contributed to these increases, including disruptions to school routines, physical and mental health challenges, family stressors, and changes in attitudes toward attendance that developed during periods of remote and hybrid learning. While many schools have implemented strategies to improve attendance, experts caution that chronic absenteeism should not become the "new normal" (U.S. Department of Education, 2025).

Current Rates of Chronic Absenteeism

Attendance challenges are evident across the nation. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health (2024), more than one-fourth of

students in kindergarten through grade 12 missed at least a month of school during the 2022–2023 school year. This represents a substantial increase compared to pre-pandemic levels, with the number of chronically absent students nearly doubling since before COVID-19. These trends highlight the lasting effects of the pandemic on school attendance and underscore the importance of continued efforts to reestablish consistent attendance habits among students. Furthermore, Attendance Works (2025) reports that 49 states and the District of Columbia now publicly report chronic absenteeism data, reflecting growing recognition of attendance as an important indicator of student success and educational opportunity (Moden, 2025). Although attendance rates have shown gradual improvement since their pandemic-era peak, current levels remain significantly above those observed before 2020. As a result, educators, policymakers, and communities continue to prioritize attendance recovery efforts (Attendance Works).

1.3 The Impact of Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism affects far more than whether students are physically present in school. Missing substantial amounts of instructional time can influence students' academic performance, social and emotional well-being, and future opportunities. These effects often accumulate over time, making chronic absenteeism both an educational and an equity concern. Although attendance problems can affect any student, students who already face barriers related to poverty, disability, or other forms of disadvantage are often disproportionately impacted (Institute of Education Sciences [IES], 2024).

Academic Implications

Chronic absenteeism can have significant consequences for students' academic achievement and long-term educational outcomes. According to The Prichard

Committee for Academic Excellence (2026), national longitudinal studies following students from kindergarten through high school have found that attendance in kindergarten through third grade predicts later reading proficiency, course completion, and high school graduation, even after accounting for factors such as family income and prior academic achievement. Students who are chronically absent in the early grades experience measurable declines in reading and mathematics achievement, are more likely to repeat a grade, and face increased risks of dropping out years later (The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence). Research has also shown that chronic absenteeism in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade is associated with a lower likelihood of reading proficiently by third grade, highlighting the importance of establishing positive attendance habits as early as possible (California Department of Education, 2026). In the short term, missed instructional time disrupts learning continuity, interferes with the development of effective study habits, and increases the likelihood of course failure. Students who are chronically absent are also at greater risk for grade retention and are more likely to drop out of school or fail to graduate on time (Montello & Kellogg).

The consequences of attendance problems become even more pronounced as students get older. By middle school, chronic absenteeism increasingly predicts disengagement from school, course failure, and eventual dropout (The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, 2026). Ninth grade represents a particularly critical turning point, as declines in attendance during this year often precede academic failure and school withdrawal. By high school, persistent absenteeism is associated with lower rates of college enrollment, reduced accumulation of first-year college credits, and weaker postsecondary persistence (The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence).

The effects of absenteeism extend beyond individual students. Schools with high rates of chronic absenteeism often experience lower academic performance

overall, including lower proficiency rates and accountability ratings (Montello & Kellogg, 2026). In addition, absenteeism can influence peer groups, as attendance patterns and behaviors may spread among students. As a result, chronic absenteeism is not only an individual challenge but also a schoolwide concern that can affect the learning environment for all students (Montello & Kellogg). The consequences of chronic absenteeism may persist into adulthood. Research summarized by Montello and Kellogg (2026) suggests that prolonged attendance problems can limit postsecondary opportunities, reduce career readiness, and constrain long-term economic mobility. Thus, the academic effects of chronic absenteeism extend far beyond missed assignments or lower grades and may influence students' educational and occupational trajectories for years to come.

Non-Academic Implications

Chronic absenteeism also produces important social, emotional, and community-level consequences. Students who are frequently absent often experience lower levels of engagement and weaker connections to school. Absenteeism has been associated with school refusal behaviors, unmet social-emotional and health needs, and increased feelings of anxiety and stress (Montello & Kellogg, 2026). Students experiencing both internal factors, such as anxiety, and external factors, such as peer influences or disengagement, tend to experience the greatest declines in both academic and social-emotional functioning. Families may also experience increased stress because chronic absenteeism often reflects broader challenges, including transportation difficulties, limited access to healthcare, and housing instability (Montello & Kellogg). These barriers can make it difficult for families to participate fully in their children's education and may contribute to ongoing attendance challenges.

Schools are also affected by high rates of absenteeism. Frequent absences disrupt instructional planning and increase the demands placed on educators, who may

need to devote additional time to re-teaching content, providing interventions, and responding to attendance concerns (Montello & Kellogg, 2026). Chronic absenteeism can also negatively affect school climate, although research suggests that improvements in school safety and connectedness can help reduce absenteeism and strengthen students' sense of belonging (Montello & Kellogg).

The effects of chronic absenteeism extend beyond schools and families to communities as a whole. Widespread absenteeism can weaken educational attainment and workforce readiness, posing long-term risks to economic vitality and social cohesion (Montello & Kellogg, 2026). Students who are frequently absent may also have reduced access to school-based health, nutrition, and support services. In the long term, chronic absenteeism has been associated with lower rates of civic participation and community engagement. Conversely, community school models that integrate academic, health, and family supports have been shown to improve attendance while strengthening family-school partnerships and increasing access to essential services (Montello & Kellogg).

Equity Implications

The consequences of chronic absenteeism are not distributed equally. Students who already face barriers related to poverty, disability, language differences, housing instability, or limited access to healthcare are more likely to experience chronic absenteeism and its associated consequences (American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health, 2024). As a result, absenteeism can reinforce and exacerbate existing inequities. According to DiMarco (2026), attendance gaps between underserved student populations and their peers widened during the pandemic and have remained elevated in many states. Although attendance rates have improved since their pandemic-era peak, low-income students, English learners, Black students, and Hispanic students remain farther from pre-pandemic attendance levels than many of their peers. These trends suggest that the effects

of chronic absenteeism have not been experienced equally and that some groups continue to face greater obstacles to attendance recovery.

Because absenteeism disproportionately affects students who already face educational disadvantages, it can contribute to widening achievement gaps. Students who miss substantial amounts of instructional time may have fewer opportunities to access rigorous coursework, intervention services, extracurricular activities, and positive relationships with peers and adults. Over time, these missed opportunities can compound existing disparities and limit students' future opportunities (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). For these reasons, many researchers and policymakers view chronic absenteeism not only as an attendance issue but also as an issue of educational equity. Addressing chronic absenteeism requires more than encouraging students to attend school regularly. It also requires understanding and addressing the barriers that prevent some students from accessing the learning opportunities available to others (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

Impacts of Absenteeism on Schools and Communities

Chronic absenteeism affects not only individual students but also schools and communities. According to McKearney et al. (2023), elevated rates of absenteeism can serve as warning signs for broader changes within educational systems, including shifts in school funding, school closures, and the implementation of truancy and other legal policies. High levels of absenteeism and dropout can reduce school funding and contribute to a shift away from rehabilitative approaches and toward less costly, punitive responses to attendance problems. High absenteeism rates may also influence policy decisions. Schools and communities sometimes respond to attendance concerns by implementing truancy laws or zero-tolerance policies intended to compel attendance. However, McKearney et al. note that these approaches often fail to address the underlying

factors affecting attendance, may disproportionately affect students from marginalized groups, and can unintentionally create additional barriers to school participation.

1.4 Reframing Attendance: From Punishment to Support

Historically, efforts to improve attendance have often focused on punishment, compliance, and rapid turnaround strategies. Students with attendance problems were frequently viewed through a disciplinary lens, and interventions tended to emphasize consequences rather than addressing the underlying reasons students were absent (Montello & Kellogg, 2026). However, growing evidence suggests that these approaches often fail to produce lasting improvements because they do not account for the complex factors that influence attendance. Increasingly, researchers and practitioners are reframing chronic absenteeism as a multidimensional issue that requires coordinated academic, behavioral, and social supports rather than punitive responses (Montello & Kellogg).

The Limits of Punitive Approaches

One of the most common historical responses to attendance problems has been the use of exclusionary discipline practices such as suspensions and expulsions. Although these approaches are intended to address behavioral concerns and promote accountability, they often have the opposite effect by removing students from instructional opportunities and increasing their disconnection from school. According to Montello and Kellogg (2026), exclusionary practices may contribute to a broader "school-prison nexus" in which students, particularly students of color, experience disciplinary systems that mirror the punitive structures of the criminal justice system. Rather than addressing the social, emotional, or economic factors contributing to absenteeism, these approaches may reinforce feelings of marginalization and disengagement. Similarly, truancy interventions grounded in

the juvenile justice system have demonstrated limited effectiveness. Court diversion programs were designed as alternatives to more severe legal consequences, but research summarized by Montello and Kellogg suggests that these programs have not consistently improved attendance outcomes. Although such programs may be less punitive than formal juvenile justice proceedings, they still operate within a framework that treats absenteeism primarily as a legal problem rather than a symptom of broader barriers or unmet needs.

The Shortcomings of High-Intensity Reform Models

Efforts to address absenteeism have also included large-scale school turnaround initiatives that seek to rapidly improve outcomes through intensive interventions and increased resources. While these models are designed to accelerate improvement, evidence indicates that their effects are often modest and may not persist once students leave the intervention environment (Montello & Kellogg, 2026). These findings suggest that one-time or high-intensity reforms may be less effective than sustainable approaches embedded within broader systems of support.

Researchers have also examined a variety of behavioral, academic, and family engagement interventions. According to Montello and Kellogg (2026), approaches such as mentoring programs, incentive systems, and social-emotional learning initiatives have shown some promise in improving attendance. However, results have been inconsistent, and many interventions have been evaluated using limited samples or weak study designs. Likewise, family engagement efforts, including letters, phone calls, and mandatory truancy meetings, have frequently been implemented without strong evidence regarding their long-term effectiveness.

Attendance as a Systems Issue

Current research increasingly emphasizes that chronic absenteeism should be understood as a systems issue rather than solely a student problem. Students' attendance patterns are shaped by interactions among individual characteristics, family circumstances, school environments, and community conditions. Consequently, improving attendance requires more than simply motivating students to come to school. It requires understanding and addressing the barriers that prevent them from doing so (Montello & Kellogg, 2026). This shift in perspective reflects a move away from asking, "Why won't students come to school?" and toward asking, "What factors are preventing students from attending, and how can schools help remove those barriers?" Viewing absenteeism through this lens encourages educators to focus on prevention, support, and relationship-building rather than punishment (Montello & Kellogg).

Section 1 Conclusion

Chronic absenteeism is more than a measure of how often students are present in school. As this section has demonstrated, attendance patterns reflect broader issues related to learning opportunities, student engagement, and educational equity. High rates of absenteeism have significant academic and non-academic consequences, and traditional punitive responses have often proven insufficient because they fail to address the complex factors that contribute to missed school. Increasingly, educators and researchers recognize that improving attendance requires supportive, student-centered approaches that acknowledge the interconnected roles of schools, families, and communities.

Understanding the impact of chronic absenteeism is only the first step. In order to effectively address attendance challenges, educators must also understand why students miss school in the first place. The next section examines the many factors

that contribute to chronic absenteeism, including student characteristics, family circumstances, school experiences, logistical barriers, and systemic inequities. By exploring these underlying causes, educators can better identify barriers to attendance and implement strategies that address students' needs before attendance problems become entrenched.

Section 1 Key Terms

Absence - Any day or portion of a day during which a student is not present for instruction.

Accountability Ratings - Measures used to evaluate school performance based on factors such as academic achievement, graduation rates, and other indicators.

Academic Achievement - The extent to which students meet learning goals and demonstrate proficiency in academic subjects.

Attendance Recovery - Efforts to restore regular attendance patterns following periods of increased absenteeism.

Chronic Absenteeism - Missing 10% or more of enrolled school days for any reason, including excused and unexcused absences.

Course Failure - Failure to earn a passing grade or credit in a class.

Disengagement - A reduction in students' interest, participation, or connection to school and learning.

Early Warning Indicator - A measure used to identify students who may be at risk for academic difficulties or disengagement.

Educational Equity - The principle of ensuring that all students have access to the resources and opportunities needed to succeed.

Excused Absence - An absence approved according to school or district policy.

Exclusionary Discipline - Disciplinary practices, such as suspensions and expulsions, that remove students from the learning environment.

Grade Retention - The practice of requiring a student to repeat a grade level due to insufficient academic progress.

Instructional Time - Time during which students receive teaching and engage in learning activities.

Learning Continuity - The uninterrupted progression of learning experiences and academic development.

Learning Loss - A decline in academic knowledge or skills resulting from missed instructional opportunities.

Long-Term Economic Mobility - The ability of individuals to improve their economic status and career opportunities over time.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) - A framework that provides varying levels of academic, behavioral, and social-emotional support based on student needs.

Peer Influence - The effect that classmates or friends have on an individual's attitudes, behaviors, and decisions.

Postsecondary Education - Education pursued after high school, including college, university, vocational, or technical programs.

School Climate - The overall quality and character of school life, including perceptions of safety, relationships, and belonging.

School Connectedness - The extent to which students feel accepted, valued, supported, and included in their school community.

School Refusal - A pattern of avoiding or resisting school attendance, often associated with anxiety, stress, or emotional distress.

Sense of Belonging - Students' feelings of being accepted, respected, and included within the school community.

Social-Emotional Development - The process through which individuals develop self-awareness, relationship skills, emotional regulation, and responsible decision-making.

Supportive Approach - An approach to attendance improvement that focuses on understanding barriers and providing assistance rather than punishment.

Suspension - A temporary removal of a student from school as a disciplinary consequence.

Systemic Factors - Conditions within schools, families, communities, and society that influence student outcomes.

Truancy - Unexcused absences that meet thresholds established by state or local law.

Turnaround Model - A school reform approach that uses intensive interventions to rapidly improve outcomes.

Unexcused Absence - An absence that does not meet approved criteria established by school or district policy.

Section 1 Reflection Questions

1. In what ways have you seen chronic absenteeism affect students' academic performance or engagement in your own classroom or school?

2. Why do you think chronic absenteeism increased so dramatically following the COVID-19 pandemic? Which factors do you believe have had the greatest impact?
3. Reflect on a student you have worked with who experienced frequent absences. What factors may have contributed to that student's attendance challenges?
4. Why might one-size-fits-all attendance interventions be ineffective?
5. If you could make one change to how attendance is viewed or addressed in your school or district, what would it be, and why?

Section 1 Activities

1. **Attendance Data Review:** Examine attendance data for your classroom, grade level, or school and identify patterns or trends that may warrant further attention.
2. **Attendance Intervention Inventory:** Make a list of attendance-related supports currently used in your school and categorize them as preventive, targeted, or intensive.
3. **School Climate Observation:** Observe common areas, classrooms, or transitions and note practices that promote or hinder students' sense of belonging and connectedness.
4. **Resource Collection:** Curate books, websites, videos, or community services that could help families address common barriers to attendance.
5. **Classroom Belonging Checklist:** Develop a checklist of practices that promote inclusion, engagement, and a sense of belonging among students.

TeachME CEUs.com CEUs for Teachers and Educators

Section 2: Understanding Why Students Miss School

This section examines the many factors that contribute to absenteeism and emphasizes that attendance challenges are often complex and multifaceted. Chronic absenteeism rarely results from a single cause. Instead, attendance problems typically emerge from a complex interaction of student, family, school, and community factors. According to Montello and Kellogg (2026), students may miss school for a variety of reasons, and those reasons often overlap. Consequently, understanding why students are absent requires looking beyond attendance records and considering the broader contexts that influence students' ability and willingness to attend school consistently.

This section examines the many influences that contribute to chronic absenteeism and highlights the importance of viewing attendance through a comprehensive and ecological lens. By exploring student characteristics, family circumstances, school experiences, logistical challenges, community conditions, and disparities among student populations, educators can better understand the underlying causes of absenteeism and recognize why one-size-fits-all solutions are often ineffective. Such understanding is an important first step in developing meaningful and equitable responses to attendance challenges.

2.1 Student Factors

Individual student characteristics and experiences can play an important role in chronic absenteeism. Mental and physical health concerns, developmental and trauma-related disorders, and family dynamics can all influence a student's ability to attend school consistently. Understanding these factors is important because chronic absenteeism rarely results from a lack of motivation or interest in school. Instead, attendance patterns are often shaped by challenges that affect students' well-being, relationships, and capacity to fully engage in learning.

Mental Health Concerns

Mental health concerns are among the most significant contributors to chronic absenteeism and are closely intertwined with students' academic, social, and emotional functioning. Students experiencing anxiety, stress, or social challenges may avoid school because attending causes emotional distress (Montello & Kellogg, 2026). Academic pressures, low self-confidence, and difficulties with peer relationships can further increase the likelihood of absenteeism. Importantly, students who are chronically absent do not represent a single group. Some students struggle primarily with anxiety or emotional concerns, while others experience academic frustration, social difficulties, or a combination of factors. Research summarized by Montello and Kellogg suggests that students experiencing multiple risk factors, including low self-esteem and poor interpersonal skills, are especially vulnerable to academic and emotional disengagement. These findings underscore the importance of recognizing that absenteeism is heterogeneous and that different students may require different types of support.

According to Kearney et al. (2023), students with mental health disorders experience substantially higher rates of absenteeism than their peers, and absences related to mental health account for a considerable proportion of missed school days. In fact, the relationship between attendance and mental health is so strong that researchers have identified several distinct forms of absenteeism based on underlying clinical characteristics, including school refusal, school phobia, school withdrawal, and truancy. Emotional disorders represent one of the highest-risk categories for school absenteeism (Kearney et al.). Anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety, social anxiety, and separation anxiety, are especially common among students who experience attendance difficulties. Other anxiety-related concerns, such as panic attacks, perfectionism, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, selective mutism, somatic complaints, and specific fears,

may also interfere with school attendance. Depression and related concerns, including self-harm and suicidal ideation, have similarly been linked to increased absenteeism (Kearney et al.).

Several mechanisms help explain why emotional disorders affect attendance. Students may avoid school because certain academic or social situations trigger feelings of anxiety or distress. In addition, emotional difficulties can interfere with concentration, participation in class activities, test-taking, relationships with peers, and overall academic performance (Kearney et al., 2023). Students struggling with anxiety or depression may experience rigid thinking patterns, low self-confidence, sleep disturbances, concerns about negative evaluation by others, or feelings of being unable to cope with academic demands, all of which can contribute to school avoidance and absenteeism (Kearney et al.).

Other mental health and developmental conditions are also associated with attendance problems. Disruptive behavior disorders, particularly attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and conduct disorder, frequently co-occur with chronic absenteeism (Kearney et al., 2023). Students with ADHD may experience executive functioning difficulties, learning challenges, peer relationship problems, and conflicts with teachers that make school attendance more difficult. Students with conduct disorder may be more likely to engage in aggressive behavior, associate with truant peers, or experience exclusionary disciplinary practices that further contribute to absenteeism. More broadly, these students are at increased risk for school disengagement, lower academic achievement, and poorer health outcomes (Kearney et al.).

Substance use disorders are also closely connected to chronic absenteeism. Students may miss school to engage in substance use or related risky behaviors, while stress, poor self-regulation, and attempts to self-medicate emotional or sleep difficulties may further contribute to attendance problems. Kearney et al.

(2023) note that substance use and absenteeism are often intertwined with other factors, including poverty, family substance use, maltreatment, involvement with the juvenile justice system, and racial and ethnic disparities. These findings highlight the complexity of absenteeism and underscore the importance of viewing attendance problems through a comprehensive lens that considers students' mental health and broader life circumstances (Kearney et al.).

Developmental and Trauma Disorders

Developmental disorders can also contribute to chronic absenteeism. According to Kearney et al. (2023), students with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, and learning disorders are disproportionately represented among youth experiencing attendance problems. More broadly, students with disabilities are considered a particularly vulnerable population with respect to chronic absenteeism. These students often face additional challenges that may interfere with regular attendance, including chronic health conditions, co-occurring mental health disorders, social isolation, and limited access to adequate resources and specialized supports. Students with developmental disorders may also be more likely to experience bullying, harassment, and peer victimization, which can increase anxiety and reduce school connectedness (Kearney et al., 2023). In addition, students with learning disorders may avoid school because of repeated negative academic experiences or fears of failure. Low self-esteem, reduced confidence in academic and social situations, and diminished expectations for academic success may further contribute to school avoidance and absenteeism (Kearney et al.).

Traumatic experiences and trauma-related disorders can also have profound effects on school attendance. School violence, concerns about school safety, bullying, and victimization have all been linked to increased absenteeism among students (Kearney et al., 2023). Exposure to adverse childhood experiences

(ACEs), particularly neighborhood violence and family substance use, has similarly been associated with chronic absenteeism. In some cases, students who have experienced physical abuse, neglect, or other forms of maltreatment may miss school because of injury, emotional distress, placement disruptions, or efforts by caregivers to conceal signs of abuse. Trauma can affect both attendance and classroom functioning by disrupting students' sense of safety, trust, and emotional regulation. Students who have experienced trauma may struggle with concentration, relationships with peers and adults, and participation in academic activities. Kearney et al. note that these effects may be exacerbated when schools lack systems for identifying and addressing trauma-related needs. However, protective factors can help mitigate the impact of traumatic experiences. Access to supportive adults, strong community connections, cultural engagement, and opportunities for students to exercise control over their circumstances can foster resilience and help promote school engagement and attendance (Kearney et al.).

Physical Health Concerns

Physical health challenges are another important contributor to chronic absenteeism. According to Kearney et al. (2023), both acute and chronic medical conditions can interfere with students' ability to attend school consistently. Common health conditions associated with absenteeism include asthma, allergies, dental problems, diabetes, and seizure disorders. These conditions may require frequent medical appointments, medication management, or periods of illness that result in missed instructional time. In some cases, physical symptoms and complications can create additional stress and anxiety that further contribute to attendance difficulties (Kearney et al.). Several mechanisms help explain the relationship between physical health and absenteeism. Students with chronic health conditions may experience pain, fatigue, sleep disturbances, social isolation, stigma, or difficulties managing symptoms, all of which can make

attending school more challenging (Kearney et al., 2023). Families may also face barriers to accessing healthcare or managing complex medical needs. For example, poorly controlled asthma, allergies that interfere with sleep and concentration, inadequate dental care, difficulties monitoring diabetes, and concerns about seizure management can all contribute to increased absences. Caregiver concerns and fears regarding their child's health may further influence decisions about school attendance (Kearney et al.).

Students with chronic absenteeism also commonly report somatic complaints, or physical symptoms that may be associated with stress or emotional distress. Kearney et al. (2023) note that symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, nausea, dizziness, fatigue, vomiting, and muscle or joint pain are frequently reported among students with attendance problems. These symptoms may be linked to anxiety, difficulties coping with stress, family conflict, social withdrawal, or school-related negative emotions. In some cases, students may experience genuine physical symptoms triggered or worsened by stress, while in others, physical complaints may reflect attempts to avoid anxiety-provoking situations at school (Kearney et al.).

School resources can also influence the impact of health conditions on attendance. According to Kearney et al. (2023), schools without nurses or health centers may be more likely to send students home when physical symptoms arise rather than providing on-site care that allows students to remain in school. Access to school health services can therefore play an important role in minimizing unnecessary absences and supporting students with chronic medical conditions. At a broader level, patterns of school absenteeism can also reflect community health trends. Illness-related absences have long been used as an early warning system for infectious disease outbreaks because schools often serve as important points of transmission within communities (Kearney et al.). Students frequently exhibit symptoms and miss school early in the course of illness, making

attendance data useful for monitoring the spread of conditions such as influenza and other infectious diseases.

Familial Factors

Family factors can also play a significant role in chronic absenteeism. According to Kearney et al. (2023), attendance challenges are closely connected to broader family experiences and circumstances. Factors such as residential mobility, housing instability, immigration status, interactions with the legal system, discrimination, and limited access to school and community supports can all affect a family's ability to ensure consistent school attendance. Families experiencing frequent moves may encounter delays in enrollment or transportation arrangements, while others may struggle to secure the documentation required for school enrollment or lack access to academic and technological resources. In some cases, students leave school temporarily or permanently to support their families financially or pursue employment opportunities that do not require a high school diploma. Attendance difficulties can also place substantial strain on families. Caregivers may need to miss work, arrange alternative transportation or childcare, attend school meetings, and absorb financial costs associated with a child's absenteeism (Kearney et al.). In addition, behavioral challenges associated with school refusal or chronic absenteeism can be emotionally taxing and stressful for family members. Over time, these pressures may erode productive communication between families and schools, making it more difficult to collaborate on attendance interventions or accommodation plans.

Parenting practices and family relationships may also influence attendance patterns. Kearney et al. (2023) note that some families struggle with ineffective responses to attendance concerns, including inconsistent follow-through, overprotectiveness, vague expectations, or reinforcing avoidance behaviors. Low parental confidence in addressing attendance difficulties can further complicate

intervention efforts. At the same time, attendance problems themselves may contribute to increased stress and conflict within families. Disagreements about how to address absenteeism, frustration over repeated absences, and competing family demands can impair communication and problem-solving and reduce students' motivation to return to school.

Changes in family dynamics can also contribute to chronic absenteeism. Some families may become overly involved in a child's difficulties, creating patterns of dependency in which parents unintentionally shield students from anxiety-provoking situations or advocate for accommodations that limit opportunities to develop coping skills (Kearney et al., 2023). Other families may experience detachment, characterized by limited supervision, reduced academic involvement, or delayed responses to school concerns. Still others may become isolated from outside support systems, limiting communication with teachers, school personnel, and community agencies. Research summarized by Kearney et al. suggests that families of students with attendance problems often report lower levels of family cohesion, communication, and achievement orientation, highlighting the importance of family-school partnerships and supports that strengthen both relationships and problem-solving capacities.

2.2 School Factors

Patterns of absenteeism can also provide insight into the overall climate of a school. Research summarized by McKearney et al. (2023) indicates that higher rates of absenteeism are associated with more negative perceptions of school climate. In contrast, lower absenteeism is linked to positive characteristics such as stronger academic engagement, greater parental involvement, higher levels of school safety, better student-teacher relationships, increased access to resources, and stronger feelings of school connectedness. These relationships are especially

important for vulnerable student populations and for students who perceive school environments as unfair or oppressive. Factors such as discrimination, unequal access to rigorous coursework, harassment, and disparities in teacher quality may contribute to both negative school climate and increased absenteeism (McKearny et al). Teacher-student relationships are particularly important. Supportive relationships with teachers can help students navigate academic and social challenges and ease transitions between home and school. In contrast, controlling or unsupportive classroom environments may intensify anxiety and contribute to school avoidance behaviors (Montello & Kellogg, 2026). Likewise, school-based health services and supports that address chronic conditions such as asthma or mental health concerns have been identified as important components of effective attendance improvement efforts.

School discipline policies may also influence attendance patterns. According to Montello and Kellogg (2026), schools with higher rates of suspensions and expulsions tend to experience higher rates of habitual truancy. Greater police presence in schools has similarly been associated with increased rates of absenteeism, raising concerns that exclusionary practices may unintentionally contribute to disengagement and missed instructional time. These concerns are particularly relevant because disciplinary systems may disproportionately affect racially minoritized students. Peer influences can also affect attendance. Students are more likely to experience chronic absenteeism when their classmates or friends are frequently absent, suggesting that attendance behaviors can spread through social networks (Montello & Kellogg). Conversely, stable relationships with teachers and peers can promote belonging and reduce absenteeism. Research indicates that students who encounter more familiar teachers and classmates throughout the school day tend to experience fewer absences, highlighting the importance of consistency and relationship-building.

Logistical Factors

Families often face practical barriers that interfere with consistent attendance. Transportation difficulties, health concerns, and neighborhood safety issues are among the most commonly reported obstacles (Montello & Kellogg, 2026). While positive relationships between schools and families are important, relationship-building alone may be insufficient if families lack access to concrete resources that address these challenges. Transportation appears to be particularly influential. Research summarized by Montello and Kellogg indicates that access to school transportation can significantly reduce absenteeism, especially among economically disadvantaged students. These findings suggest that practical supports can play an important role in improving attendance. However, transportation policies must be designed carefully, as some well-intentioned initiatives may produce unintended consequences if they do not adequately address students' needs. Housing instability, limited healthcare access, family stressors, and competing responsibilities can also make regular attendance more difficult. Because these barriers often occur simultaneously, attendance interventions are most effective when they address multiple needs rather than focusing on a single issue (Montello & Kellogg).

2.3 Community and Societal Factors

Community conditions and broader societal influences can also affect attendance. Policies and circumstances outside of school may create barriers that limit students' access to education. For example, Montello and Kellogg (2026) cite evidence indicating that immigration enforcement policies can contribute to increased absenteeism among Hispanic students by creating fear and uncertainty within immigrant communities. Such policies may disrupt students' educational engagement even when students themselves are not directly affected. Community resources and supports can also shape attendance patterns. Schools

that collaborate with healthcare providers, social service agencies, and community organizations are often better positioned to address barriers affecting students and families. Community school models, which integrate academic, health, and family supports, have demonstrated promise in improving attendance by increasing access to essential services and strengthening family-school partnerships (Montello & Kellogg, 2026).

At the community level, widespread absenteeism patterns can also reveal broader economic, political, and social conditions that contribute to inequitable outcomes. Root cause analyses in areas with high rates of chronic absenteeism have identified concerns such as inadequate transportation, deteriorating housing conditions, food insecurity, unsafe routes to school, and heavy reliance on emergency services (McKearney et al., 2023).

2.4 Populations Disproportionately Affected

Although chronic absenteeism affects students across all grade levels and demographic groups, some populations face greater barriers to consistent school attendance than others. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health (2024), students in kindergarten and first grade, as well as students in high school, are more likely to experience chronic absenteeism. Students with disabilities, students living in poverty, and students of color are also disproportionately affected. These differences suggest that attendance challenges are not experienced equally and that some students encounter circumstances that make regular attendance more difficult.

Data from the U.S. Department of Education (2025) provide a more detailed picture of these disparities. During the 2022–2023 school year, approximately 36% of students with disabilities were chronically absent, compared with 26% of students without disabilities. Disparities are also evident among racial and ethnic

groups. American Indian or Alaska Native students experienced the highest rates of chronic absenteeism, with approximately 46% of students missing at least 10% of the school year. Rates were also elevated among Pacific Islander students (45%), Black students (37%), and Hispanic students (33%). In comparison, approximately 24% of White students and 15% of Asian students were chronically absent (U.S. Department of Education). These differences have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to DiMarco (2026), White students experienced smaller increases in absenteeism during the pandemic than the overall average, whereas Black and Hispanic students experienced substantially larger increases. Although attendance among Black and Hispanic students has improved since the pandemic peak, these groups remain farther from their pre-pandemic attendance levels than White students. In many states, Black students continue to experience some of the highest rates of chronic absenteeism, while Hispanic students remain among the groups furthest from recovering to pre-pandemic attendance patterns (DiMarco).

Socioeconomic status has also emerged as an important predictor of attendance. Low-income students experienced higher rates of chronic absenteeism than their peers before the COVID-19 pandemic, and those disparities widened during the pandemic years. Across states, chronic absenteeism among low-income students increased by more than 17 percentage points between the 2018–2019 and 2021–2022 school years, compared with an average increase of approximately 13 percentage points statewide (DiMarco, 2026). Although attendance has improved since its peak, low-income students remain farther from pre-pandemic attendance levels than students overall, and attendance gaps between economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers have widened in most states (DiMarco).

English learners have experienced similar trends. Prior to the pandemic, attendance rates for English learners were often comparable to those of their peers. However, absenteeism among English learners increased more sharply during the pandemic than statewide averages, rising by an average of 16.5 percentage points across states between 2018–2019 and 2021–2022 (DiMarco, 2026). Although rates have improved, English learners remain farther from pre-pandemic attendance levels than many other student groups, and attendance gaps have widened across nearly every state (DiMarco).

Many factors contribute to these disparities. Some absences are unavoidable, such as those related to infectious illnesses or chronic medical conditions. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health (2024), maintaining recommended vaccinations and obtaining appropriate medical care can help reduce illness-related absences. However, health concerns represent only one aspect of the issue. Children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder, and developmental delays are approximately twice as likely to experience chronic absenteeism as their peers without these conditions (American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health). Likewise, students with chronic health conditions such as asthma and type 1 diabetes tend to miss more school when their symptoms are poorly controlled. Mental health concerns can also contribute to attendance difficulties. Anxiety and depression are common reasons for school absences, and students who experience bullying or perceive their school climate as unsafe or unwelcoming are more likely to miss school (American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health). In addition, up to 5% of children experience school-related anxiety that can lead to school refusal or persistent attendance problems. Students experiencing school anxiety may struggle to explain the reasons behind their reluctance to attend school, making early identification and supportive interventions especially important.

Although disparities in chronic absenteeism are evident, elevated absenteeism rates exist across all student populations. Attendance has improved nationally since the pandemic, but underserved student groups remain farther from their pre-pandemic attendance levels than their peers, and attendance gaps have widened in many states (DiMarco, 2026). These findings underscore the importance of collecting and analyzing disaggregated attendance data so that educators and policymakers can better understand which students are missing school and direct supports where they are needed most. At the same time, the U.S. Department of Education (2025) emphasizes that chronic absenteeism is a nationwide challenge affecting students in every community. Understanding which students are at increased risk can help educators implement targeted supports while recognizing the need for broader schoolwide and communitywide efforts to promote attendance for all students.

Section 2 Conclusion

As this section demonstrates, chronic absenteeism is a multifaceted issue influenced by a wide range of interacting factors. Students may miss school because of physical or mental health concerns, developmental or trauma-related experiences, family circumstances, school climate, logistical barriers, or broader community conditions. In addition, some student populations face disproportionate challenges that increase their risk of chronic absenteeism. These findings underscore the importance of looking beyond attendance records and recognizing that absenteeism often reflects unmet needs and barriers rather than a lack of motivation or commitment to school.

Understanding why students miss school provides an important foundation for addressing attendance challenges, but awareness alone is not enough. Educators must also understand how to identify students at risk and implement effective

strategies to prevent and address chronic absenteeism. The next section examines approaches to prevention and intervention, including early identification, data-informed decision making, multi-tiered systems of support, and strategies for strengthening partnerships among schools, families, and communities.

Section 2 Key Terms

Academic Self-Efficacy - Students' belief in their ability to successfully complete academic tasks and meet learning expectations.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) - Potentially traumatic events or circumstances that occur during childhood that awesome may negatively affect health, well-being, and school functioning.

Bullying - Repeated aggressive behavior intended to harm, intimidate, or exclude another person.

Community School - A school model that integrates academic, health, family, and social services to support students and communities.

Conduct Disorder - A behavioral disorder characterized by persistent patterns of aggression, rule-breaking, and disregard for social norms.

Developmental Disorder - A condition that affects cognitive, physical, social, or emotional development and may interfere with learning and daily functioning.

Ecological Perspective - An approach that examines how multiple interacting factors within students, families, schools, communities, and society influence behavior and outcomes.

English Learner - A student whose primary language is not English and who is developing proficiency in the English language.

Executive Functioning - Mental processes involved in planning, organization, attention, self-regulation, and goal-directed behavior.

Family Cohesion - The degree of emotional bonding, support, and connectedness among family members.

Family Conflict - Persistent disagreements or stress within the family that may interfere with communication, relationships, and problem-solving.

Family-School Partnership - Collaborative relationships between families and schools that support student learning and well-being.

Housing Instability - Frequent moves, homelessness, or uncertain living arrangements that disrupt daily routines and access to resources.

Protective Factor - A characteristic, condition, or support that reduces the likelihood of negative outcomes and promotes resilience.

Resilience - The ability to adapt positively and recover from adversity or challenging experiences.

Risk Factor - A characteristic or circumstance that increases the likelihood of a negative outcome, such as chronic absenteeism.

School Phobia - Fear-based avoidance of school associated with anxiety or distress.

School Withdrawal - Parent-initiated absenteeism that occurs when caregivers intentionally keep students out of school.

Somatic Complaints - Physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomachaches, that may be associated with stress, anxiety, or emotional distress.

Trauma-Informed Practices - Approaches that recognize the effects of trauma and emphasize safety, trust, relationships, and supportive responses to students' needs.

Section 2 Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on a student you have worked with who experienced chronic absenteeism. What factors may have contributed to that student's attendance challenges, and how did those factors interact with one another?
2. In your experience, what barriers to attendance are most common among students in your school or community?
3. Think about the role of mental health in student attendance. How well equipped do you believe your school is to recognize and respond to anxiety, depression, or other emotional concerns that may contribute to absenteeism?
4. How might family-school partnerships help address barriers to attendance?
5. After reading this section, what is one assumption you previously held about chronic absenteeism that has changed, and how might that shift influence your practice moving forward?

Section 2 Activities

1. **Student Barrier Analysis:** Select a student with attendance challenges and identify the possible student, family, school, and community factors that may be contributing to the absences.

2. **Attendance Barrier Survey:** Develop a short, anonymous questionnaire that could be used to gather information about attendance barriers experienced by students or families.
3. **School Policy Review:** Examine school discipline and attendance policies and reflect on how they may either support or unintentionally hinder student attendance.
4. **Ecological Systems Diagram:** Create a diagram illustrating how student, family, school, and community factors interact to influence attendance.
5. **Community Resource Directory:** Create a directory of local organizations and services that address barriers such as transportation, housing, food insecurity, healthcare, or counseling.

Section 3: Breaking the Cycle: Prevention, and Intervention

Addressing chronic absenteeism requires more than recognizing the problem. Once educators understand why students miss school, the next step is to identify concerns early and respond with coordinated, supportive strategies. Effective attendance improvement depends on prevention, timely intervention, and collaboration among educators, families, students, and community partners. Rather than waiting until absences accumulate, schools can use attendance data, behavioral indicators, and academic warning signs to identify students who may need support before attendance patterns become entrenched. This section focuses on practical approaches for breaking the cycle of chronic absenteeism. It begins with early identification and warning signs, then examines how a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support framework can guide prevention and intervention. The section also explores strategies that strengthen student-teacher relationships,

promote restorative discipline, meet students' basic needs, and remove practical barriers related to transportation, health care, and school safety. Together, these approaches emphasize that improving attendance is not a single program or quick fix, but a coordinated effort to create conditions that help students attend school consistently and remain engaged in learning.

3.1 Early Identification and Warning Signs

Early identification is one of the most important components of preventing chronic absenteeism. Attendance problems rarely emerge suddenly. Instead, they often develop gradually and are preceded by warning signs that can be identified long before a student becomes chronically absent. Research consistently demonstrates that early attendance patterns are highly predictive of future academic outcomes and school engagement, making early intervention essential for preventing more serious attendance problems from developing (The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, 2026).

Because attendance problems often develop over time, schools are in a unique position to identify warning signs before they become entrenched patterns. The California Department of Education (2026) emphasizes that schools should implement systems for identifying students experiencing attendance or behavioral concerns as early as possible and should ensure that no student is overlooked. Prevention efforts should begin immediately upon enrollment and continue throughout the school year. Research suggests that attendance patterns established very early in the school year can be highly predictive of future problems. In fact, poor attendance during the first month of school is a strong predictor of chronic absenteeism later in the year (California Department of Education). Similarly, chronic absenteeism in transitional kindergarten often

predicts chronic absenteeism the following year, indicating that early attendance habits can persist over time.

Early identification efforts should not be limited to older students. From the time children enter school, educators should work proactively with families to emphasize the importance of regular attendance and establish positive attendance habits. Because compulsory attendance laws may not apply until children reach a certain age, some families may underestimate the importance of regular attendance during the early years of schooling (California Department of Education, 2026).

Monitoring Attendance Patterns

Effective early identification requires schools to monitor multiple indicators of attendance. Tracking chronic absenteeism helps identify students who are missing substantial amounts of school, even when absences are excused and students remain under parental supervision. Monitoring truancy and habitual truancy can also help identify students, particularly older students, whose families may not be aware that attendance problems are developing (California Department of Education, 2026). Educators should also look for patterns of irregular attendance rather than focusing solely on the number of absences. Warning signs may include frequent tardiness, absences that occur on particular days of the week, recurring absences during certain class periods, or repeated absences before or after school breaks (California Department of Education). Such patterns may indicate underlying concerns that warrant further investigation and support.

Behavioral and Academic Warning Signs

Attendance concerns are often accompanied by changes in behavior, emotions, and academic performance. School personnel should remain attentive to indicators that may suggest a student is struggling with underlying issues affecting

attendance. According to the California Department of Education (2026), warning signs that may require further assessment include:

- Difficulty learning or persistent academic struggles
- Defiance of authority or significant behavioral changes
- Excessive sensitivity to criticism
- Withdrawal, frequent crying, or persistent anxiety
- Frequent emotional outbursts or temper tantrums
- Extreme restlessness or impulsivity
- Speech, hearing, or vision difficulties
- Excessive dependence on adults or separation anxiety
- Poor peer relationships or social isolation
- Unhappiness or symptoms of depression
- Frequent disruptive or aggressive behaviors
- Sleeping in class, poor hygiene, or a disheveled appearance
- Bruises or other signs of physical trauma
- Sensitivity to physical contact or other indicators of possible abuse

These warning signs do not necessarily indicate chronic absenteeism or a specific diagnosis. However, they may suggest that a student is experiencing challenges that could interfere with school attendance and warrant additional support or assessment.

TeachME CEUs.com CEUs for Teachers and Educators

Looking Beyond Attendance Numbers

Early identification involves more than simply counting absences. Educators should seek to understand why a student is struggling to attend school and recognize that attendance concerns may signal underlying health conditions, learning disabilities, mental health challenges, or family stressors. As previously mentioned, repeated absences may indicate an undiagnosed medical condition, anxiety disorder, or learning difficulty that requires additional support or accommodations (California Department of Education, 2026). Students are more likely to attend school when they feel connected to caring adults who notice their absences and help them overcome barriers to attendance. Therefore, attendance monitoring should be paired with supportive interventions that build relationships, emphasize student strengths, and engage families in problem-solving efforts (California Department of Education).

3.2 Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

Because the causes of chronic absenteeism are complex and vary from student to student, schools need a framework that provides different levels of support based on students' needs. A Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework offers a proactive and systematic approach to improving attendance by combining prevention, early intervention, and intensive support. Rather than waiting until attendance problems become severe, MTSS emphasizes identifying concerns early and matching interventions to the level of need (Attendance Works, 2022). According to Attendance Works, effective attendance improvement begins with strong foundational supports that create positive conditions for learning. These foundational practices are followed by universal prevention strategies (Tier 1), targeted interventions for students at risk of chronic absenteeism (Tier 2), and intensive, individualized supports for students experiencing the most significant attendance challenges (Tier 3).

Foundational Supports: Creating Positive Conditions for Learning

At the base of the MTSS framework are foundational supports that benefit all students and establish conditions that encourage attendance and engagement. Attendance Works (2022) emphasizes that students are more likely to attend school consistently when they feel safe and secure, connected to others, and engaged in meaningful learning experiences. Several foundational practices can help create these positive conditions.

Physical and Emotional Health and Safety

Students are more likely to attend school when they feel safe and their basic needs are met. Foundational supports in this area include (Attendance Works, 2022):

- Maintaining healthy learning environments
- Creating welcoming and safe school climates
- Ensuring access to food and other basic necessities
- Using restorative circles and other relationship-building practices

Belonging, Connection, and Support

A sense of belonging is a powerful protective factor against chronic absenteeism. Schools can foster connection by (Attendance Works, 2022):

- Encouraging active student and family engagement
- Providing advisory periods and community-building activities
- Offering enrichment opportunities and extracurricular clubs
- Supporting positive peer relationships

Academic Challenge and Engagement

Students are more likely to attend school when learning feels meaningful and accessible. Schools can promote engagement by providing (Attendance Works, 2022):

- Access to technology and internet resources
- Academic supports and interventions
- Project-based learning opportunities
- Credit recovery options
- Internships and community service experiences
- Alternative scheduling options

Adult and Student Well-Being

Attendance is also influenced by the well-being of both students and school staff. Effective foundational practices include (Attendance Works, 2022):

- Restorative check-ins
- Access to physical and mental health supports
- Trauma-informed practices
- Staff wellness and self-care initiatives

These foundational supports create the conditions necessary for attendance improvement and provide a strong base upon which additional interventions can be built (Attendance Works, 2022).

Tier 1: Universal Prevention and Support

Tier 1 interventions are designed to promote positive attendance habits for all students and prevent absenteeism before it negatively affects learning.

Attendance Works (2022) emphasizes that schools should not wait until students become chronically absent to address attendance concerns. Effective Tier 1 practices include (Attendance Works):

- Providing clear, consistent communication about school expectations and schedules
- Establishing routines, rituals, and celebrations that promote attendance and engagement
- Communicating positively and proactively with families when students are absent
- Recognizing both good attendance and meaningful attendance improvement
- Helping students and families understand the importance of attendance for academic and social success
- Ensuring that every student has a connection with at least one caring adult at school
- Encouraging students and families to develop individualized success plans that include attendance goals

These universal strategies help establish a positive attendance culture and communicate that attendance matters while also emphasizing support rather than punishment.

Tier 2: Early Intervention and Personalized Support

Some students require additional support because they are beginning to demonstrate attendance concerns or are at risk of chronic absenteeism. Attendance Works (2022) recommends implementing targeted interventions for

students who have missed approximately 10% of the school year or who are beginning to exhibit patterns of concerning absences. Importantly, schools should not wait until students become chronically absent before intervening. Monitoring attendance data and initiating personalized outreach early can prevent attendance challenges from becoming entrenched. Tier 2 interventions are designed to remove barriers to attendance and provide more individualized support. Examples include (Attendance Works):

- Identifying and addressing common school and community barriers to attendance
- Developing individualized student success plans that include attendance goals
- Incorporating attendance supports into Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) when appropriate
- Conducting family visits to strengthen relationships and understand barriers.
- Connecting students with mentors or success mentors
- Facilitating peer support groups and positive peer connections
- Providing intensive tutoring and expanded learning opportunities
- Implementing Check-In/Check-Out (CICO) systems
- Offering small-group interventions and targeted supports
- Using restorative alternatives to exclusionary discipline

These strategies are intended to provide additional support before attendance problems become severe and to help students reconnect with school and learning (Attendance Works, 2022).

Tier 3: Intensive and Individualized Intervention

Some students experience significant attendance challenges that require intensive, coordinated intervention. Attendance Works (2022) recommends Tier 3 supports for students who have missed approximately 20% or more of the school year or whose attendance difficulties are severe and persistent. At this level, interventions often extend beyond the school and involve collaboration with community agencies and service providers. Because the barriers facing these students are often complex and multifaceted, intensive case management is frequently necessary. Examples of Tier 3 supports include (Attendance Works):

- Educational support champions or advocates
- Interagency case management
- Housing stability supports
- Student attendance review boards
- Community-based, non-criminal truancy courts
- Individualized learning and graduation plans
- Legal intervention as a last resort

The goal of Tier 3 intervention is not to punish students or families but rather to coordinate services that address the underlying factors contributing to chronic absenteeism and support students' long-term success.=

The Importance of Early Intervention

A key principle of MTSS is that schools should not wait until attendance problems become severe before taking action. Attendance Works (2022) emphasizes four critical practices:

1. Invest in strong foundational supports and universal prevention strategies
2. Monitor attendance data regularly
3. Intervene early when concerns emerge
4. Initiate personalized outreach to students and families before absences accumulate

By emphasizing prevention, early identification, and increasingly intensive levels of support, an MTSS framework provides schools with a comprehensive and sustainable approach to improving attendance. Rather than relying on one-size-fits-all solutions, MTSS recognizes that students experience different barriers to attendance and that effective interventions must be responsive to individual needs and circumstances.

3.3 Student-Teacher Relationships and Looping

Within a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework, fostering positive relationships and ensuring that every student feels connected to a caring adult are considered important Tier 1, or universal, strategies for promoting attendance and preventing chronic absenteeism (Attendance Works, 2022). A growing body of research suggests that students are more likely to attend school consistently when they feel respected, supported, and connected to caring adults at school (Jordan, 2023). Studies suggest that the way teachers interact with students, along with their beliefs and expectations about students' abilities, can significantly influence students' well-being, motivation, and engagement in school (Jordan). Students who feel supported by their teachers tend to demonstrate greater confidence in their ability to succeed and are more willing to engage in challenging academic tasks. These relationships may be especially important for students who are re-establishing attendance routines or who have previously struggled with school

engagement (Jordan). When students know that adults at school notice their presence, care about their success, and provide encouragement, they are more likely to attend regularly and remain connected to school.

One promising strategy for strengthening these relationships is looping, the practice of keeping students and teachers together for more than one year (Jordan, 2023). In elementary schools, looping may involve an entire class progressing to the next grade level with the same teacher. Similar approaches can also be used in middle and high schools by intentionally reassigning students to teachers they have previously had (Jordan). Research suggests that maintaining these familiar relationships can benefit both academic achievement and attendance. A study of seventh- and eighth-grade students in Chile found that students who were assigned the same mathematics teacher in consecutive years demonstrated stronger attendance rates and higher test scores than students who had different teachers each year (Jordan). Similarly, research has found that students who share classes with peers they already know from previous years tend to experience fewer absences, suggesting that familiarity and stable relationships may strengthen students' sense of connection to school.

Studies of repeat student-teacher assignments in the United States have also produced promising findings. Research from Indiana found that students who were matched with the same teacher in consecutive years demonstrated higher mathematics and English language arts achievement, with particularly strong benefits for students of color, English learners, students with disabilities, and students from low-income families (Jordan, 2023). Although the study did not specifically examine attendance outcomes, researchers have suggested that the same relationship-building mechanisms that improve academic outcomes may also support attendance.

Schools can also intentionally strengthen student-teacher relationships through broader schoolwide initiatives. One example is the Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR) model, which organizes students into smaller learning communities and provides teachers with professional development focused on relationship-building (Jordan, 2023). Teachers meet regularly to discuss student successes and develop strategies to strengthen connections with students. A national evaluation of the BARR model found improvements in academic outcomes and lower rates of chronic absenteeism among participating schools, with particularly strong attendance benefits for male students and students of color (Jordan). Other strategies for strengthening relationships include teacher advisory programs, student voice initiatives, home visits, and creating smaller learning communities within larger schools. These approaches provide additional opportunities for meaningful interactions between students and adults and can help ensure that every student feels known and supported (Jordan).

3.4 Restorative Discipline Practices

Restorative discipline practices represent another promising strategy for reducing chronic absenteeism because they seek to keep students connected to school rather than removing them from the learning environment. According to Jordan (2023), chronic absenteeism can be exacerbated by school practices that push students out of school, particularly exclusionary disciplinary practices such as off-campus suspensions. Restorative practices offer an alternative approach by focusing on relationship-building, accountability, and repairing harm. Rather than relying primarily on punishment, restorative approaches encourage students to come together in small, peer-mediated groups to discuss conflicts, ask questions, share perspectives, and rebuild relationships (Jordan). The goal is not simply to address misconduct but also to strengthen students' sense of community and belonging within the school environment.

Research suggests that restorative practices can positively influence both school climate and attendance. Jordan (2023) notes that restorative approaches have been associated with reductions in absences related to disciplinary reasons and improvements in overall school safety and fairness. By reducing practices that exclude students from school, restorative approaches may help interrupt cycles of disengagement and absenteeism. Evidence also suggests that exclusionary discipline practices can negatively affect students who are not directly involved in disciplinary incidents. A 2022 study found that the use of suspensions can reduce attendance and academic success for all students in a classroom, particularly when students perceive disciplinary actions as biased or unfair (Jordan). These findings suggest that punitive discipline practices may contribute to broader feelings of disconnection and disengagement among students and families.

Several studies have demonstrated the potential benefits of restorative practices. Research in Pittsburgh schools found that implementing restorative practices reduced suspension rates and narrowed racial and socioeconomic disparities in school discipline (Jordan, 2023). The same study also reported improvements in teachers' perceptions of school climate. Similarly, a study of high school classrooms found that restorative approaches improved student-teacher relationships and reduced disciplinary referral disparities among Black, Latino, and White students (Jordan). Schools across the country have also reported positive outcomes from implementing restorative practices. For example, Bammel Middle School in Houston introduced regular "talking circles" in which students and teachers meet to discuss concerns and strengthen relationships. According to Jordan, the school reduced suspensions by half following implementation of these practices.

Although restorative practices show promise, successful implementation requires a comprehensive shift in school culture. Jordan (2023) emphasizes that restorative approaches are most effective when schools move away from purely punitive

disciplinary frameworks and commit to relationship-centered practices throughout the school community. This shift often requires professional development and ongoing support for teachers, administrators, and counselors. Within an MTSS framework, restorative practices can serve as both a universal and targeted support. At the Tier 1 level, restorative circles, relationship-building activities, and community-building practices can strengthen school climate and foster a sense of belonging for all students. At the Tier 2 level, restorative conversations and interventions can help address emerging attendance concerns and repair relationships before students become chronically absent (Jordan). By keeping students connected to school and promoting positive relationships, restorative discipline practices can serve as an important strategy for preventing chronic absenteeism and supporting student engagement.

3.5 Universal Free Meals and School Breakfast Programs

Meeting students' basic needs is an important component of attendance improvement efforts. Access to nutritious meals can influence students' physical well-being, concentration, engagement, and ability to attend school consistently. According to Jordan (2023), more than 30 million students receive free or reduced-price meals at school each day, and many schools serving high-poverty communities have adopted universal free meal programs that provide meals to all students regardless of income. This approach reduces the stigma that can be associated with receiving free meals and helps ensure that students do not miss out because of difficulties completing applications or meeting eligibility requirements (Jordan). Research suggests that universal meal programs can positively affect both attendance and academic outcomes. A study of New York City public schools found that students who had access to universal free meals in kindergarten demonstrated higher attendance rates and lower levels of chronic absenteeism than students who did not have access to these programs. The

benefits persisted through third grade, although the differences narrowed over time (Jordan).

School breakfast programs have also shown promising results. A review of research found that when low-income students were provided with school breakfast, their attendance increased by approximately 1.5 days per year and their academic achievement improved (Jordan, 2023). Similarly, a universally free breakfast program implemented in public schools in Baltimore and Philadelphia was associated with improved academic outcomes as well as reductions in absenteeism and tardiness. In recent years, many schools have moved breakfast from the cafeteria into the classroom to increase student participation. A study of a Breakfast in the Classroom program implemented in 446 urban elementary schools found that students in participating schools ate breakfast at substantially higher rates than students in schools without the program. Researchers also observed modest improvements in attendance, which translated into an additional 76 attended days per grade each month across participating schools (Jordan). Additional studies have demonstrated similar benefits. Universal free breakfast programs in Wisconsin were associated with a 3.5 percentage point reduction in the likelihood of lower attendance and improvements in test scores (Jordan). Likewise, a study conducted in Nevada and Colorado found that schools implementing Breakfast in the Classroom programs experienced an average six percentage point decline in chronic absenteeism compared with schools that did not adopt the program. In a separate study of kindergarten students, moving breakfast into the classroom was associated with a four percentage point reduction in the likelihood of chronic absenteeism, improved reading achievement, and fewer behavioral concerns (Jordan).

The timing and structure of meal programs may also contribute to their effectiveness. Jordan (2023) notes that breakfast programs can create opportunities for students to connect with peers and caring adults, which may

strengthen students' sense of belonging and connection to school. Programs such as breakfast after the bell and classroom breakfast not only address food insecurity but also provide additional opportunities for relationship-building and community.

3.6 Removing Barriers to Attendance

For many students, chronic absenteeism is not the result of a lack of motivation or engagement but rather the consequence of practical barriers that make attending school difficult. Transportation challenges, unsafe routes to school, and limited access to healthcare can all interfere with students' ability to attend school consistently. For some students, barriers may be as simple as not having reliable transportation or a safe way to get to school each day. For others, chronic health conditions, unmet medical needs, or difficulty accessing healthcare services may result in repeated absences. Addressing these barriers is therefore an important component of any comprehensive attendance improvement strategy because even highly motivated students may struggle to attend school regularly when their basic needs for safety, transportation, and health are not adequately met.

Transportation Supports

Transportation difficulties contribute to chronic absenteeism in many communities. According to Jordan (2023), transportation was identified as the number one barrier to attendance among families interviewed in Detroit during the pandemic. Many students did not receive school bus service, leaving families to navigate challenges such as unreliable vehicles, work conflicts, and concerns about neighborhood safety and traffic conditions. Research consistently suggests that improving transportation access can positively influence attendance. Students who ride the school bus tend to have higher attendance rates and lower rates of chronic absenteeism than students who rely on other forms of

transportation (Jordan). One study found that kindergarten students who rode the bus were approximately two percentage points less likely to be chronically absent, with particularly strong effects observed in rural communities. Researchers suggest that consistent transportation may help establish the routines that are essential for developing positive attendance habits.

Additional research has found that eligibility for school bus transportation is associated with slightly better attendance rates and lower levels of chronic absenteeism, particularly among students from low-income families (Jordan, 2023). However, transportation quality also matters. Extremely long bus rides have been linked to increased rates of chronic absenteeism, suggesting that transportation systems should prioritize both access and efficiency. Some districts have expanded transportation options by providing free public transit passes, coordinating multiple forms of transportation, or partnering with community organizations and ride-sharing services (Jordan). Studies of free transit pass programs have found substantial reductions in absenteeism, particularly among students from low-income families, students from single-parent households, and students from historically marginalized groups (Jordan). These findings suggest that improving transportation access can also promote educational equity.

School-Based Health Services

Illness remains one of the most common reasons students miss school. Although many health-related absences are excused, they still represent lost instructional time that can negatively affect learning and engagement (Jordan, 2023). Chronic health conditions, such as asthma and dental problems, contribute significantly to school absences, particularly among economically disadvantaged students. Providing health services within schools can help address these challenges and reduce unnecessary absences. School-based health services may include nursing care, health screenings, immunizations, school clinics, telehealth services, and

partnerships with community healthcare providers. These services can help prevent and treat illness, reduce the need for students to miss school for routine appointments, and minimize situations in which students are sent home unnecessarily because of health concerns (Jordan).

Research has demonstrated promising outcomes associated with school-based health services. Schools that implemented on-site flu vaccination programs experienced reductions in absenteeism during peak flu seasons, while school-based health centers have been associated with improved attendance and stronger school connectedness (Jordan, 2023). Studies have also found that students with chronic health conditions, such as asthma and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), experience meaningful reductions in chronic absenteeism when they have access to comprehensive school-based healthcare services. School nurses can also play an important role in attendance improvement efforts. According to Jordan, nurses who focus attention on chronically absent students can have a significant impact on attendance outcomes. In many schools, nurses participate on attendance teams, communicate with families about health concerns, and help determine when students can safely return to school after an illness.

Clear Communication About Health-Related Absences

Supporting attendance also requires helping families understand when students should remain home because of illness and when they can safely attend school. Jordan (2023) recommends that schools work closely with local health departments and healthcare providers to develop clear guidance and communication regarding physical and mental health-related absences. This communication is especially important when students report symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches, which may stem from either physical illness or anxiety. Determining the underlying cause of these symptoms is essential because

prolonged absences for anxiety-related concerns may unintentionally worsen school avoidance and increase the risk of chronic absenteeism (Jordan).

Safe Routes to School

For some students, simply getting to school safely is a significant barrier to attendance. Neighborhood violence, dangerous traffic conditions, and unsafe walking routes can discourage students and families from attending school consistently (Jordan, 2023). A study of Baltimore high school students found that those who had to walk or wait for transportation in areas with high levels of violent crime were approximately 6% more likely to miss school than their peers, even after accounting for demographic characteristics, prior attendance patterns, and neighborhood factors. Similarly, a national survey found that approximately 7% of students had missed school during the previous month because they feared for their safety either at school or while traveling to school (Jordan).

Some communities have responded by implementing programs designed to make the journey to school safer. One example is Chicago's Safe Passage program, which employs adults to monitor designated routes to and from school during arrival and dismissal times (Jordan, 2023). Workers wear highly visible clothing and maintain communication with emergency personnel to provide additional supervision and support. Research found that neighborhoods with Safe Passage routes experienced a 14% reduction in reported crime and a corresponding 2.5% decline in absenteeism compared with similar schools that did not implement the program (Jordan). The effects were even stronger at the high school level.

Another promising strategy is the Walking School Bus, in which volunteers, such as parents and school staff, walk through neighborhoods, picking up students at designated locations and accompanying them to school (Jordan, 2023). The approach has been used both in communities experiencing neighborhood violence and in areas where students must navigate dangerous intersections or

heavy traffic. While published research on the impact of Walking School Bus programs on chronic absenteeism is limited, schools and districts have reported anecdotal improvements in attendance after implementing these initiatives (Jordan). In Springfield, Massachusetts, for example, students who participated in the Walking School Bus demonstrated higher attendance rates than their peers.

Section 3 Conclusion

Preventing and addressing chronic absenteeism requires a proactive, supportive, and coordinated approach. As this section has shown, schools can reduce absenteeism by identifying warning signs early, monitoring attendance patterns, and providing tiered supports that respond to students' individual needs. Universal strategies, such as building strong relationships, promoting restorative discipline, offering meal supports, and creating safe, welcoming school environments, can help prevent attendance problems before they become severe. More targeted and intensive supports, including transportation assistance, school-based health services, and community partnerships, can help remove barriers for students who need additional support. Ultimately, breaking the cycle of chronic absenteeism requires schools to view attendance as a shared responsibility. Teachers, administrators, families, support staff, and community partners all play a role in helping students feel connected, supported, safe, and ready to learn. When schools combine early identification with meaningful intervention, they are better positioned to address the root causes of absenteeism and ensure that students have consistent access to the academic, social, and emotional benefits of school.

Section 3 Key Terms

Advisory Period - A designated time during the school day in which students meet regularly with an adult advisor to build relationships, receive support, and discuss academic or personal concerns.

Attendance Team - A group of school personnel who monitor attendance data, identify students with attendance concerns, and coordinate interventions and supports.

Behavioral Warning Sign - An observable behavior, such as withdrawal, aggression, or frequent emotional outbursts, that may indicate a student is experiencing challenges affecting school attendance.

Breakfast in the Classroom - A school meal model in which students eat breakfast in their classrooms to increase participation and improve access to nutritious food.

Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR) - A school improvement model that organizes students into smaller learning communities and emphasizes relationship-building to improve academic and attendance outcomes.

Case Management - A coordinated process for identifying student needs, connecting students and families to services, and monitoring progress over time.

Check-In/Check-Out (CICO) - A structured intervention in which students regularly meet with an adult to receive support, feedback, and encouragement throughout the school day.

Community Partnership - A collaborative relationship between schools and external organizations that provides additional resources and services to support students and families.

Early Intervention - Actions taken as soon as concerns emerge to prevent problems from becoming more severe.

Foundational Supports - Schoolwide practices and conditions that promote safety, connection, engagement, and well-being for all students.

Habitual Truancy - A pattern of repeated unexcused absences or tardiness that exceeds established legal or district thresholds.

Home Visit - A structured meeting in a student's home intended to strengthen relationships with families and better understand barriers affecting student success.

Individualized Success Plan - A personalized plan that outlines goals, supports, and strategies designed to improve a student's attendance and academic outcomes.

Interagency Collaboration - Cooperation among schools, healthcare providers, social service agencies, and community organizations to address students' needs.

Looping - An educational practice in which students remain with the same teacher for more than one academic year to strengthen relationships and continuity.

Positive Attendance Culture - A school environment that promotes regular attendance through supportive relationships, communication, and recognition rather than punishment.

Restorative Circle - A structured discussion process that encourages participants to share perspectives, address conflicts, and strengthen relationships.

Safe Passage Program - A community-based initiative that provides supervised and secure routes for students traveling to and from school.

Student Success Mentor - A caring adult who provides individualized encouragement, relationship-building, and support to help improve student attendance and engagement.

Walking School Bus - A supervised group of students who walk to school together with adult volunteers along designated routes.

Section 3 Reflection Questions

1. How does your school currently identify students who are at risk for chronic absenteeism? What strengths and gaps do you notice in this process?
2. Reflect on your relationships with students. How do you communicate to students that their presence in school matters?
3. How could your school ensure that every student has a meaningful relationship with at least one caring adult?
4. What barriers to attendance are most common in your school or community? How effectively are these barriers currently being addressed?
5. Consider the MTSS framework. Which tier of support does your school implement most effectively, and which tier may need additional attention or resources?

Section 3 Activities

1. **Early Warning Audit:** Review a sample of student records and identify indicators that may signal a risk for chronic absenteeism, such as frequent tardiness, declining grades, or behavior concerns.

2. **Relationship Mapping:** Identify which students in your class have strong connections with adults in the school and which students may need additional relationship-building supports. Then, develop a plan to ensure

that every student in your classroom has regular, meaningful interactions with a caring adult.

3. **MTSS Reflection:** Evaluate your school's current attendance supports and identify examples of Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 interventions already in place.
4. **Attendance Team Observation:** If possible, attend or observe an attendance team meeting and reflect on how data and interventions are used to support students.
5. **Student Support Plan Development:** Select a hypothetical or former student who struggled with attendance and create an individualized support plan using MTSS principles.

Course Conclusion

Chronic absenteeism is not simply an attendance issue; it is an indicator of students' opportunities to learn, their sense of belonging, and the barriers they may be experiencing both inside and outside of school. As this course has demonstrated, attendance patterns are shaped by a complex interaction of individual, family, school, and community factors. Improving attendance therefore requires more than enforcing policies or monitoring absences. It requires understanding students' experiences, identifying concerns early, and implementing supportive, collaborative, and data-informed interventions. Educators play an essential role in breaking the cycle of chronic absenteeism. By building strong relationships, creating welcoming and inclusive learning environments, partnering with families, and connecting students with needed supports, schools can help remove barriers that interfere with attendance and promote meaningful engagement in learning. Even small actions, such as noticing when a student is absent, fostering a sense of belonging, or connecting a family

with resources, can have a significant impact on students' attendance and long-term success. Although chronic absenteeism remains a significant challenge, it is also an opportunity to rethink how schools support students and families. By approaching attendance through a lens of prevention, equity, and collaboration, educators can help ensure that all students have consistent access to the relationships, experiences, and learning opportunities they need to thrive.

Classroom Example

Mr. Duncan teaches seventh-grade math at a large middle school in an urban district. His students come from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, and he believes that every student deserves the opportunity to succeed academically and feel connected to school. Over the past several years, however, Mr. Duncan has become increasingly concerned about chronic absenteeism in his classroom. Several students have missed significant amounts of instructional time, and he has noticed that these students often struggle academically, participate less in class discussions, and seem less connected to their peers and the school community.

Determined to help his students re-engage with school, Mr. Duncan begins exploring ways to better identify early warning signs of absenteeism, strengthen relationships with students and families, and create a classroom environment that encourages belonging and consistent attendance. He wants to move beyond simply tracking absences and instead focus on understanding and addressing the barriers that prevent students from attending school regularly.

Challenges

- **Recognizing Early Warning Signs:** Mr. Duncan notices that attendance problems often develop gradually. Some students begin arriving late, missing one or two days each month, or becoming increasingly withdrawn before their attendance declines significantly. He wants to identify concerns earlier but is unsure which indicators should prompt intervention.
- **Understanding the Causes of Absenteeism:** The students who miss school do not all share the same experiences. Some struggle with anxiety or chronic health concerns, while others face transportation problems, family stress, or negative experiences at school. Mr. Duncan wants to avoid making assumptions and better understand the underlying reasons for students' absences.
- **Re-Engaging Students Who Feel Disconnected:** Several students who have missed substantial amounts of school seem discouraged and overwhelmed by missed assignments. Some have become socially isolated and no longer feel connected to their classmates or teachers. Mr. Duncan wants to rebuild students' sense of belonging and help them feel that returning to school is both possible and worthwhile.
- **Strengthening Family Partnerships:** Mr. Duncan recognizes that families often want to support attendance but may face barriers such as work schedules, transportation difficulties, or limited access to resources. He wants to improve communication with families and develop collaborative approaches to attendance concerns.
- **Balancing Accountability and Support:** While school policies require teachers to address attendance concerns, Mr. Duncan worries that punitive

responses may further disengage students. He wants to encourage accountability while also responding with empathy and support.

Considerations for Support and Improvement

- How can Mr. Duncan use attendance, behavior, and academic data to identify students who may be at risk for chronic absenteeism before patterns become severe?
- What strategies could help him learn more about the barriers affecting individual students' attendance rather than focusing only on the number of absences?
- In what ways could he strengthen relationships and create a classroom environment that increases students' sense of belonging and connection to school?
- How might he partner more effectively with families to understand attendance challenges and collaboratively develop solutions?
- Which Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 supports within an MTSS framework could help prevent attendance problems and provide increasingly intensive interventions when needed?

References

American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health. (2024, October 10). *School attendance, truancy & chronic absenteeism: What parents need to know*. HealthyChildren.org. https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/school/Pages/School-Attendance-Truancy-Chronic-Absenteeism.aspx

Attendance Works. (2025). *The problem: Chronic absence*. https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/the-problem/

Attendance Works. (2022, September). *Chronic absence: Three tiers of intervention*.https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/addressing-chronic-absence/3-tiers-of-intervention/

California Department of Education. (2026, April 1). *Early identification*. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ai/sb/sarbhbkearlyid.asp

DiMarco, B. (2026, March 12). *Chronic absenteeism trends in 27 states by income, English learner status & race*. The 74. https://www.the74million.org/article/chronic-absenteeism-trends-in-27-states-by-income-english-learner-status-race/

Germain, E., Hernández, L. E., Klevan, S., Levine, R. S., & Maier, A. (2024, August 26). *Reducing chronic absenteeism: Lessons from community schools*. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/chronic-absenteeism-community-schools-report

Institute of Education Sciences. (2024). *Chronic absenteeism*. https://ies.ed.gov/use-work/supporting-recovery-with-evidence-based-practices/chronic-absenteeism

Jordan, P. (2023, May). *Attendance playbook: Smart strategies for reducing student absenteeism post-pandemic*. FutureEd. https://www.future-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Attendance-Playbook-2023.pdf

Kearney, C.A., Dupont, R., Fensken, M. and Gonzálvez, C. (2023). School attendance problems and absenteeism as early warning signals: review and implications for health-based protocols and school-based practices. *Front. Educ. 8:1253595*. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2023.1253595. https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/education/articles/10.3389/feduc.2023.1253595/full

Montello, S., & Kellogg, S. (2026, January). *Chronic absenteeism literature review: Evidence to inform attendance improvement in North Carolina*. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of Research and Promising Practices. https://www.dpi.nc.gov/documents/chronic-abseteeism-literature-review-draft/open

U.S. Department of Education. (2025, August 21). *Chronic absenteeism*. https://www.ed.gov/teaching-and-administration/supporting-students/chronic-absenteeism

TeachME PEDs.com CEUs for Teachers and Educators

The material contained herein was created by EdCompass, LLC ("EdCompass") for the purpose of preparing users for course examinations on websites owned by EdCompass, and is intended for use only by users for those exams. The material is owned or licensed by EdCompass and is protected under the copyright laws of the United States and under applicable international treaties and conventions. Copyright 2026 EdCompass. All rights reserved. Any reproduction, retransmission, or republication of all or part of this material is expressly prohibited, unless specifically authorized by EdCompass in writing.