

Act



SEL in Action:
What the Field Needs Now

Chronic Absenteeism



Supported by SEL in Action

Understanding the challenge of chronic absenteeism

Over the last ten years, chronic absenteeism has increasingly become a metric that schools, local education agencies and states track and are prioritizing, largely due to the growing chronic absenteeism crisis as a result of the pandemic. According to Attendance Works, the number of chronically absent students has virtually doubled across the country since the start of the pandemic when schools transitioned to remote learning. Since then, [schools have faced significant challenges](#) in helping students and families rebuild consistent attendance habits. Not only did the pandemic contribute to family unemployment, the growing digital divide, and food and housing insecurity, but the sudden transition to remote

learning also impacted students' access to building strong relationships with teachers, connecting with their school and engaging with learning. A recent article by The 74 name the following [drivers of chronic absenteeism](#) as:

- 1) students' worsening mental health,
- 2) death of caregivers (particularly in multigenerational, low income households),
- 3) teacher absences,
- 4) remote assignments (students doing school work from home),
- 5) a higher minimum wage being more attractive than school, and
- 6) better record keeping by states and districts on attendance

Generally, chronic absenteeism can be defined as missing [10 percent or more of school days](#)—regardless of if the absence is excused (e.g., for illness) or unexcused. This definition is standard across 45 states, with the other five states setting a specific number of days missed or leaving it up to school districts to define.

How can SEL help mitigate chronic absenteeism?

When students are chronically absent from school, they not only miss crucial academic time, but their social and emotional wellbeing also suffers. Chronic absenteeism [can isolate students and increase feelings of disconnection](#) from their peers and teachers. And if students are missing school frequently due to underlying personal or family challenges, then feelings of anxiety or distress can exacerbate this isolation. [One recent study from California](#) found that chronic absenteeism has significant negative effects on students' academics, particularly in mathematics and for middle school students. The study attributed this to elementary students transitioning to remote

learning as they entered middle school. The paper also found that absence from school affects students' SEL skills, particularly those related to social awareness, self-efficacy and self-management. These effects were also [more pronounced for middle school students](#). When students' academic and SEL success are affected, this can create a negative feedback loop, where students who feel academically behind and less of a sense of belonging due to missing school time feel even less compelled to come to school.

A greater focus on SEL and positive school climate can improve student attendance and interrupt the negative feedback loop described above, creating stronger ties between students, their teachers and their schools. Attendance [is often a reflection of](#)

[school climate and conditions for learning](#).

Chronic absenteeism can negatively affect students' social and emotional wellbeing, but efforts to increase students' social and emotional wellbeing are strongly connected to improvements in attendance:

- **SEL skills:** students who have learned SEL skills like cooperation and emotional regulation, and who display more energy are less likely to be chronically absent than their peers.¹ SEL supports kindness, empathy, sharing and compassion, as well as student engagement, which promotes student attendance.
- **Family engagement:** Family engagement and relationships play a significant role in whether students at a school are chronically absent. Schools with stronger family engagement are more likely to also have better attendance, achievement and school climate outcomes, particularly post-pandemic.²
- **School climate:** Supportive and culturally responsive learning environments can [motivate students to come to school](#) and can be a buffer against other factors that cause absenteeism.
- **Relationships with teachers:** Students who have strong connections with teachers are also [more likely to feel safe and valued at school](#), which can protect against chronic absenteeism.

What are bright spots we can learn from?

In 2020-2021, 22 percent of students at West Seaford Elementary School in Delaware were chronically absent, but after the principal led a school-wide effort that focused on data and family engagement, chronic [absenteeism levels dropped to 9 percent](#) in 2022-2023. This improvement was even more pronounced for the Black and Latine students, whose levels of chronic absenteeism [dropped from 30 and 26 percent respectively in the 2021 school year to 7 and 10 percent respectively in 2022](#). The school's multi-pronged approach included:

- Communicating consistently with parents across several forums about the importance of attendance
- Reviewing data for early-warning signs of students experiencing chronic absenteeism
- Creating a multi-tiered system of approach, the way many schools do for academics, for absenteeism
- Training all staff members—especially new teachers—to check for attendance as a daily priority
- Being open to change, for example, considering a “school family model” where each staff member is assigned to participate with a small group of students in bi-monthly activities

In 2019, the Cleveland Browns Foundation, Ohio Department of Education and Harvard's Proving Ground launched the [Stay in the Game!](#) Attendance Network to campaign, connect and convene with experts and partners to improve attendance in Ohio. The network is:

- Creating a statewide attendance movement
- Developing partnerships

¹ One study of over 3,000 15 year old students in the Houston Independent School District found that students who self-reported higher levels of cooperation, emotional control or energy were less likely to be chronically absent. [Yin et al.](#) (2023).

² Learning Heroes and TNTP conducted a study on schools' pre-pandemic and post-pandemic family engagement in relation to their chronic absenteeism and found that across a diverse range of schools, schools with stronger family engagement before the pandemic experienced better attendance, achievement and school climate outcomes post-pandemic. [Learning Heroes and TNTP](#) (2023).

- Building a dynamic peer-to-peer learning community, and
- Identifying and elevating proven and promising practices, such as rallying the local community to positively message about student attendance through, for example, schools and districts inviting community organizations to back-to-school and family events

Since launching, the network has grown to over 50 member school districts that are providing attendance supports and interventions to nearly 230,000 students across Ohio.

Questions for reflection

- How can schools, districts, states and funders target the root causes of and support the students who are most impacted by chronic absenteeism (middle school students, students of color, etc.)?
- In a post-pandemic era, how can schools create welcoming school climates, strong teacher-student relationships and other positive SEL-related school structures that incent and support student attendance, particularly for students most impacted by chronic absenteeism?
- What role can philanthropy play in building understanding for and support of learning conditions that support student engagement and attendance?

Suggested further reading

- NPR on [Chronic Absenteeism is Changing K-12 Education](#)
- The Education Daly's [three-part series on chronic absenteeism](#)
- [Stay in the Game! Attendance Network](#)
- Attendance Works GLR Learning Tuesdays Webinar Series [Big Bets Working: Engaging Families for Everyday Attendance](#)
- The 74, [Six Hidden \(and Not-So-Hidden\) Factors Driving America's Student Absenteeism Crisis](#)
- The Education Trust post, [Addressing Chronic Absenteeism](#)
- ProPublica, [Skipping School: America's Hidden Education Crisis](#)