



# NO ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL SOLUTION TO CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Districts can best address absenteeism through low-cost, evidence-based efforts that align with the needs of their communities.

**By Thomas S. Dee**

**T**he sharp and sustained rise in chronic absenteeism among U.S. students is arguably the most striking and unanticipated challenge of our ongoing academic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Many strategies are available to meet the challenge of improving school attendance. However, credible evidence on the impact of these approaches is uneven. Also, growing financial constraints limit the capacity of many schools to implement the often-costly reforms.

These realities suggest that districts can best address this crisis through approaches that:

- Are aligned with the specific attendance barriers in their communities.
- Combine higher-quality evidence of impact with low costs and high ease of implementation.
- Are embedded in plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles of design, implementation, and evaluation.

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## The post-pandemic spike in chronic absenteeism

On the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 15% of public school students qualified as chronically absent, defined as missing 10% or more of school days for any reason (Dee, 2024a). Before the pandemic, policy makers recognized that chronic absenteeism was a central policy challenge with important implications for student success. Indeed, most state accountability systems developed in response to the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) chose chronic absenteeism as their required indicator of “school quality or student success.”

Data I collected in collaboration with The Associated Press (AP) (Dee, 2024; Toness, 2023) indicate that, as the nation returned to in-person instruction in the wake of the pandemic, the national rate of chronic absenteeism was *nearly double* what it was before the pandemic (i.e., an increase from 14.8% to 28.6% across the 2018-19 and 2021-22 school years). This sharp growth in chronic absenteeism occurred broadly across the U.S. as well as among different subgroups of students. The most recent and comprehensive data, which I collected with AP, indicate only a slight improvement. In the 2022-23 school year, one in four U.S. public school students still met the definition of chronically absent — an increase of 70% relative to the pre-pandemic level.

The substantial and enduring impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student attendance is undeniable. What is far less clear is the extent to which specific aspects of the pandemic (e.g., dislocation, economic hardship, negative shocks to physical and mental health) contributed to this problem.

One possible reason for the rise in absenteeism is “norm erosion,” the idea that parents and students now place less value in regular school attendance, partly in response to remote schooling. Two types of indirect evidence are consistent with this claim: First is the stubborn persistence of increased chronic absenteeism as other factors related to the pandemic have eased. The second is that the increases in chronic absenteeism appear substantially higher in states that closed their schools for more of the 2020-21 school year (Dee, in press).

Investigating these broad causes while reflecting on previous policy choices is both appropriate and potentially constructive. However, much of the national public discourse on this issue seems mired in a politicized relitigating of the controversial 2020-21 school closures. This is an unwelcome and unproductive distraction from meeting the real challenges of the chronic absenteeism crisis in our schools.

## Tiers of interventions to promote attendance

On a more optimistic and productive note, several resources (e.g., Jordan, 2023) identify an array of reforms that schools can undertake to promote attendance. These

### AT A GLANCE



- Many school districts and states are working to solve the problem of student absenteeism, which spiked during the pandemic.
- High levels of absenteeism hinder districts' ability to help students recover from the impact of the pandemic.
- Many of the suggested solutions to chronic absenteeism are resource-heavy and expensive and not backed by sound research.
- Districts seeking to reduce chronic absenteeism need research-based strategies they can tailor to their communities and test and refine over time.
- Multiple studies have shown the effectiveness of sending messages to families about attendance.

recommendations are built on increasingly targeted and intensive “tiers” of interventions. Foundational strategies available to all students include promoting school belonging, improving student-teacher relationships, providing engaging instruction, and offering free meals. More targeted and resource-intensive approaches for students with poor attendance include home visits, mentoring, and case management.

Researchers and policy makers often encourage schools to invest in a tiered approach that emphasizes all the foundational supports along with multiple tiers of focused interventions for students who need them (e.g., Geduld, 2024; James & Bernatek, 2024). However, schools are likely to face two practical complications with the tiered model.

### Cost and capacity issues

The first complication is related to cost and organizational capacity. Many schools are likely to find it prohibitively difficult to implement and assess multiple attendance initiatives simultaneously. Specifically, a substantial number of school districts face lingering and multifaceted challenges of academic recovery alongside diminished financial capacity.

Two factors contribute to the current financial strain in many school districts. One is the significant loss of public school enrollment, which is related both to demographic change (e.g., family mobility) and the shift of many students to home schools and private schools (Dee, 2023). The impact of this enrollment loss is particularly evident in the growing financial pressure some school districts face to close under-enrolled schools and lay off staff (Roza & Dhammani, 2024).

Second, the imminent expiration of federal pandemic aid (Mervosh & Ngo, 2024) limits schools' capacity to undertake

multifaceted and expensive efforts to confront chronic absenteeism. While a compelling case can be made for new state and federal investments in promoting school attendance, school districts need to focus on initiatives that are financially and operationally within their current means.

### Limited evidence of effectiveness

Another complication is that the scope and quality of the evidence on the efficacy of recommended attendance-promotion strategies has serious limitations. For example, experts frequently recommend home visits by teachers, school staff, or partnering community organizations to understand and address chronic absenteeism. However, many of the studies of this approach have descriptive or correlational designs that would place them only in the third or fourth “tiers of evidence” under ESSA, meaning that they are promising or show a rationale for their effectiveness, but lack strong or moderate evidence.

Arguably, the highest-quality study is a widely cited experimental evaluation of the Early Truancy Prevention Program (Cook et al., 2017), which found attendance gains for early elementary students who were assigned teacher home visits. However, this small-scale pilot involved only 10 school-grade teams (i.e., five randomly assigned to treatment, five to control), which raises concerns about possible confounding factors. Furthermore, the attendance gains occurred only among students with modest attendance problems (i.e., a 5 percentage-point impact on the share of students missing six or more days). The program’s impact on students with more severe attendance problems (i.e., missing 10 or more days) was smaller and statistically insignificant.

A higher-quality study examined the impact of the Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP) in

15 Connecticut school districts (Stemler et al., 2022). This larger-scale initiative featured visits by staff from partner community organizations or the school district (though not primarily teachers). Participating districts had flexibility in targeting their LEAP initiative to students identified as chronically absent, students at specific grade levels, or subgroups of schools or students deemed at risk. Quasi-experimental estimates (consistent with ESSA’s evidence tier 2, i.e., moderate evidence) suggest that LEAP significantly increased attendance rates, but do not provide evidence on whether rates of chronic absenteeism were reduced.

The study also noted the presence of implementation challenges, particularly in New Haven Public Schools, that implied a lack of impact and underscored how difficult it can be to consistently replicate and scale promising programs. Because of initiatives like LEAP, Connecticut is frequently characterized as an innovative leader in addressing chronic absenteeism (e.g., Chang & Cooney, 2024). However, Connecticut’s chronic absenteeism rate remained at roughly twice its pre-pandemic levels even through the 2023-24 school year.

### Practical tactics for the post-pandemic context

What can and should school districts do to confront chronic absenteeism given limited financial resources and mixed evidence about a dizzying array of interventions? The most promising approach is likely to be a grassroots one that considers the specific attendance barriers unique to each school and uses that information to reduce those barriers through implementing, assessing, and refining promising solutions.

This type of continuous improvement approach has three broad components.

#### Needs assessment

A structured needs assessment is a critical first step. It enables educators to identify the distinctive character of local attendance barriers rather than rely on national narratives that may have little local relevance (Cuiccio & Husby-Slater, 2018). This initial assessment may surface school, grade, or neighborhood issues related to school safety or transportation as well as identify attendance barriers related to mental health or housing insecurity.

#### Improvement team

A second step is to select an improvement team (Shakman et al., 2020) that can manage the continuous improvement effort. In business, health care, and education, continuous improvement efforts often fail because teams do not include staff closest to the issues or provide them with needed supports. Those supports include time, particularly for a team leader; guidance in managing an improvement process; and supportive data systems that can produce timely, relevant metrics (Dee, in press).



“This is my voice mail.”

### Plan-do-study-act cycles

The third step is the team's management of plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles focused on reducing chronic absenteeism.

The initial *plan* stage would identify the most promising interventions that are aligned to addressing local attendance barriers and feasible within the district's financial and organizational constraints. Research evidence can inform these considerations. However, studies can only indicate what has (or has not) worked in a particular place and time and not necessarily what will work elsewhere.

The *do* stage focuses on high-quality implementation of a promising, aligned initiative. During this stage, the team should also be planning for a study stage that will credibly assess how a new approach is working and whether it is leading to the desired improvement.

The *act* stage, informed by evidence on how an initiative is working, focuses on whether to adopt, adapt, or abandon the effort.

- *Adopt.* If an intervention is successful, planning for a high-fidelity scale-up is appropriate.
- *Adapt.* If an initiative is promising but appears to fall short of key goals, an adaptation to the intervention that informs another PDSA cycle is appropriate.
- *Abandon.* If an intervention is ineffective, the appropriate decision is to abandon it and to begin exploring other promising solutions.

### The promise of low-cost messaging

This continuous-improvement approach reflects the view that there is no one universal solution to chronic absenteeism. Instead, reductions in chronic absenteeism can best occur through differentiated, grassroots efforts where solutions are closely aligned to the local causes. Nonetheless, given the need for solutions that sit at the intersection of a strong promise of efficacy, low costs, and feasibility of implementation, the research literature on family engagement merits special attention.

Specifically, several large-scale field experiments provide compelling evidence that real-time messaging to families about their child's school attendance effectively reduces chronic absenteeism at exceptionally low costs. The impact of this light-touch form of family engagement can be notably enhanced through specific design features.

#### Messages by mail

For example, Todd Rogers and Avi Feller (2018) conducted a large-scale field experiment in Philadelphia that focused on correcting parents' misbeliefs about their child's school absences through sending as many as five mail-based messages throughout the school year. While each form of engagement was effective, the most impactful messages focused on how many absences children had relative to their school peers. These messages reduced the rate of chronic

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absenteeism by 11% (i.e., from 36% to 31.9%). The cost was under \$7 per household.

A closely related field experiment conducted among families of students in grades K-5 in California similarly found that messaging reduced chronic absenteeism by 15% (Robinson et al., 2018).

Another mail-based field experiment indicates the importance of message design. Jessica Lasky-Fink and colleagues (2021) conducted a field experiment in a large urban school district that compared standard truancy notifications to modified ones that emphasized simple language, parental efficacy, and the consequences of missing school. These modifications reduced student absences by about 2%.

#### Engagement by text

Several other field-experimental studies have focused on engaging families through text messaging. For example, Peter Bergman and Eric Chan (2021) conducted a field experiment among families of students in 22 middle and high schools in West Virginia. They sent weekly text messages to parents indicating when their child did not attend a specific class as well as messaging about missed assignments and low grades. They were not specifically focused on chronic absenteeism. However, they did find that this messaging increased class attendance by 12%, reduced course failures, and increased student retention. The cost of sending more than 32,000 text messages was \$63, while the entire system, including training, cost around \$7 per student.

Jessica B. Heppen and colleagues (2020) fielded another experimental study of text messaging in 108 elementary schools across four large urban school districts. This "adaptive" experiment involved sending more intensive messaging to spring-semester students who had been frequently absent in the fall (i.e., staff outreach or additional messaging emphasizing a commitment to attendance goals). They found that all forms of messaging to families about attendance significantly reduced chronic absenteeism. But they found no substantial differences in the impact of messaging that emphasized the benefits of school attendance rather than the consequences of absences. However, texts that came directly from a school staff member to promote engagement and productive follow-up reduced chronic absenteeism among frequently absent students by 7.3 percentage points.

Ariel Kalil and colleagues (2021) conducted a field

experiment among parents with children in subsidized Chicago preschools. They found that text messages pointing out simple solutions to school attendance problems reduced chronic absenteeism by 20% (i.e., 9.3 percentage points).

### Low cost, high impact

Taken together, this is an exceptionally promising body of evidence. In fact, engaging families through low-cost messaging is arguably the most validated approach to reducing chronic absenteeism. The design features that best enhance this impact — such as peer comparisons, personalized outreach, stressing parental efficacy, or information on the importance of attendance — are not standardized. However, this general approach merits careful consideration among districts.

This evidence should also serve as a rare and welcome source of encouragement. The enduring rise in chronic absenteeism is a sobering threat to our children's educational potential. However, at least some high-quality research studies provide hopeful evidence that it is not intractable. There is promise in evidence-based, data-informed solutions that are aligned to local attendance barriers. The immediate challenge for educators is to understand barriers specific to their communities and the practical solutions that they can quickly and feasibly implement. Embedding these efforts within rapid cycles of careful assessment and data-informed adaptation is a compelling strategy for addressing the substantial developmental harm of the pandemic on this generation of youth. ■

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