

Strategic Action Guide: *Chronic Absenteeism*

Chronic absenteeism is defined as [a student missing 10% or more of school days within an academic year](#), including both excused and unexcused absences. Chronic absenteeism can be an indication that a student is disengaged from their education environment and/or that they may be experiencing non-academic challenges in their school, community, or home.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on attendance, with the national average of students chronically absent nearly doubling from [16% in the 2018-2019 school year](#) to [28% in the 2021-2022 school year](#). Although states are seeing some improvement, numbers have been slow to return to pre-pandemic levels. The spike in chronically absent students serves as a clear signal that interventions to address chronic absenteeism are critical now more than ever.

This is a state and district action guide for advocates, policymakers, and practitioners that can be used to examine the policies, practices and investments used to tackle chronic absenteeism. In addition to an example of how California has been intentional in improving chronic absenteeism through investments, data, and practices, this guide also includes questions that district leaders can use to ensure their systems and practices are aligned to proven practices. Additional resources are included throughout to provide practical examples for suggested action steps to combat chronic absenteeism.

The Importance of Data

Accurate and timely data on student attendance is essential to reducing chronic absenteeism. States need the data to assess their attendance patterns, to conduct early intervention and prevention, identify trends, properly allocate resources, and implement targeted interventions to address root causes and meet the needs of students and their families.

Impact on Underserved Populations

Chronic absenteeism disproportionately affects marginalized groups such as students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and students with disabilities. Students from low-income backgrounds are [two to three times more likely](#) to be chronically absent, and their communities lack the resources to make up for unfinished learning in school. Students from communities of color, as well as those with disabilities, are disproportionately affected by the [underlying causes](#) that lead to chronic absenteeism. Addressing these disparities is crucial for promoting educational equity and ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed.

Investment in Evidence-Based Strategies

To combat chronic absenteeism, it is imperative that states and districts invest in effective strategies to help students attend school regularly. Investing in evidence-based practices will result in positive outcomes for both students and school communities with limited resources. Here are three evidence-based practices of emphasis:

- **Early Intervention and Prevention:** Being proactive about engaging with students who may show signs of disengagement from school creates opportunities to address barriers to regular attendance before challenges persist
- **Family and Community Engagement:** Collaborating with families and community organizations to address factors contributing to absenteeism
- **Creating Safe and Inclusive School Environments:** Moving away from punitive discipline practices and hardening measures to institute alternative discipline practices and foster a sense of belonging to encourage regular attendance

STATE SPOTLIGHT: CALIFORNIA

California is a strong example of how using data to inform solutions can lead to significant improvement in reducing chronic absenteeism. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the state's chronic absenteeism rate [rose to 30% from a pre-pandemic level of 12%](#). However, through a focus on data, family and community engagement, and student connectedness, California's chronic absenteeism [rate dropped to 20% by the end of the 2023-24](#) school year.

With an investment of \$4.1 billion, community schools have played a key role in this reduction by leveraging data-driven practices, wraparound services, and community partners to address the root causes contributing to chronic absenteeism in the state. A commitment to tracking attendance data and providing tiered interventions ensured that students showing the most need received the necessary support. Additionally, students were able to improve their sense of belonging by participating in California's advisory groups, mentorship programs, and other extracurricular activities, which empowered them to cultivate relationships and develop a stronger sense of community. Finally, community school coordinators served as the strategic guides leading efforts to analyze data, engage families, and manage partnerships through providing services such as mental health supports, home visits, extended learning opportunities, and filling other significant gaps.

Though progress has been slow to return to pre-pandemic levels nationally, California's commitment to reducing chronic absenteeism shows that responding to data with targeted strategies and investments is paramount in reducing chronic absenteeism.

Questions to Ask District Leaders about Implementation, Evaluation, Program Monitoring

Early Intervention and Prevention

- What culturally responsive approach does your district use to prevent chronic absenteeism?
- Is your district implementing [Multi-Tiered Systems of Support](#) (MTSS)?
 - What is your district's process for ensuring all staff are trained on how to facilitate the MTSS process?
- What are your identification systems for students who may be chronically absent?
 - Who are the staff members responsible for identifying students at risk for becoming chronically absent?
 - What resources and support systems do staff have access to so they can review data (suspensions, attendance, student experiences) and institute the correct interventions?
- What opportunities does your district provide for ongoing professional development or coaching for your staff to analyze attendance data and respond accordingly?

Data to consider

- District-level data systems that track attendance:
 - Disaggregated by school/race/gender/low-income status/multilingual learner/homeless/etc.
- School report cards:
 - School climate and chronic absenteeism data

Family and Community Engagement

Collaboration with families and community organizations to address external factors contributing to absenteeism

- What culturally responsive and healing-centered approaches are your district using in family and community engagement?
- What funding streams could the district leverage to fund, implement, and train educators to implement family and community engagement?
- What is the district doing to properly and regularly train all staff on their role in the family and community engagement process?
- What is your district's two-way communication strategy? How do students and families become aware of the process? Who is responsible for managing this process?
- What community partnerships can be leveraged in supporting students, families, and/or the school?
- How is the district leveraging student and family survey data to understand why students are chronically absent?

Data to consider:

- State-level grants to support district and school-level investments in meaningful family engagement strategies
- Budgets — investments are embedded in funding formulas and district budgets
- What are the long-term investments of your district/school that may not be producing any results?
- Student/family/staff survey data regarding:
 - Sense of belonging and safety
 - Student-adult relationships
 - Student-student relationships

Creating Safe and Inclusive School Environments

Moving away from [punitive “hardening” measures and fostering a sense of belonging](#) to encourage regular attendance

- How is your district prioritizing culturally responsive and healing-centered approaches with their discipline practices?
- Are the safety measures (e.g., metal detectors; school resource officers) in your district making students feel unwelcome in the school environment?
- How are staff trained to engage students in discipline matters?
 - Are all staff receiving the same training?
 - How are students welcomed back in the classroom/school community after a discipline incident?

Data to consider:

- CRDC Data — discipline referral rates broken down by grade/race/ethnicity
- District attendance data
- District suspension and expulsion data
- Bullying/harassment data
- Student/family/staff survey data regarding:
 - Sense of belonging and safety
 - Student-adult relationships
 - Student-student relationships

Other Resources

- [Attendance Works Resources](#)
- [50% Challenge Campaign pages](#)
- [5 Things About CA](#)
- ARE Guidebooks: [Positive and Inviting School Climate](#) and [Student Supports and Interventions](#): These two guidebooks provide a list of policy and practice suggestions for schools and districts designed to address inequities related to discipline policies, staff capacity, identification for supports, and family engagement. Advocates can use this guide to make suggestions to change to district practices based on the answers to the above questions.
- [ARE Advocating Across Government tool](#), [Student Supports & Intervention](#), and [Positive and Inviting School Climate](#): These two guides outline what state, district, and school leaders can each do to provide students with equitable access to strong school climates, targeted supports, and inclusive family engagement practices. Advocates can use these guides to identify who should be the target of their advocacy.