

Absenteeism actively harms everybody, even the students who show up

April 8 2022



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First and foremost in setting a student up for success is ensuring they're

attending school—but many schools are struggling with climbing absenteeism rates. A growing body of literature suggests chronic absenteeism is an enormous problem. So what can districts and parents do to stop it?

Thankfully, there is also a growing body of literature providing a trove of helpful suggestions to curb this alarming trend.

Co-authored by Penn GSE associate professor Michael Gottfried and the Annenberg Institute at Brown University's Lindsay Page and Danielle Edwards, the evidence brief, "District Strategies to Reduce Student Absenteeism," takes aim at the growing problem of absenteeism. Meticulously researched and cited, it breaks down the issue of absenteeism and introduces a three-tier strategy for administrators, teachers, and parents to employ.

The brief is part of the Annenberg Institute's EdResearch for Recovery initiative, designed to provide schools with the data and evidence they need to navigate recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Understanding absenteeism

Though it can vary from district to district, the brief notes many states and [school districts](#) define chronic absenteeism as missing 10% or more of days throughout the [school year](#). The reasons for absence can vary, but among the most frequent are transportation difficulties, student health, school climate, mobility, and poverty.

According to the brief, while missing school negatively impacts students from all demographics and socioeconomic backgrounds, that impact is even more substantial for those who are low-performing, low-income, or English learner students.

And while absenteeism has always been an issue in one form or another, the authors report the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation. Between the virtual learning environment, increased concerns over mental and [physical health](#), and difficulty accessing reliable transportation, student absences have been on the rise—and driving those numbers down will be important as districts work to overcome the damage of the past two years.

"Absences decrease students' test scores, course grades, and on-time graduation," the authors wrote. "Missing school regularly also reduces students' self-efficacy, eagerness to learn, and social engagement. Students in classes with higher percentages of chronically absent students have lower test scores."

The three-tier strategy

In the second portion of the brief, Gottfried, Page, and Edwards lay out a three-tier plan to combat absenteeism on multiple levels. Each strategy is bolstered by concrete examples of ways administrators, teachers, and parents can help students—along with supportive evidence.

The first and most broad tier, designed to reach every student with preventative measures, tries to deal directly with the most frequent causes of absenteeism. It suggests, among many other things:

- Providing safe, reliable transportation: School and public transportation benefits every student and ensures those in rural or low-income areas can make it to school. For urban students who walk to school in high-crime areas, this can mean monitoring common walking routes.
- More open communication about absences: Parents reportedly underestimate how often their child misses school, which schools can remedy by communicating directly with parents through

flyers, two-way text messaging, and mail.

- **Helping out with school-going logistics:** By offering access to laundry services, public transportation, ride shares, or school breakfasts, schools can help families set up routines—which have, the authors note, been shown to help increase attendance.
- **Providing health services:** Improving student access to nurses, vaccinations, health centers, dental care, and mental health counseling can all help students be more comfortable with the idea of attending school.

The second tier focuses on those students who are at risk or displaying signs of absenteeism. It includes:

- **Making use of data:** Utilizing a data system that can analyze attendance, behavior, and academic performance can help schools identify and target those students who need help before absenteeism becomes an issue.
- **Providing mentorship:** According to Gottfried, Page, and Edwards, the evidence points to school-based mentorship programs improving attendance and academic outcomes for students at all grade levels.

Finally, the third tier gives concerned parties the strategies they need to respond to chronic absence with coordinated support. This includes:

- **Exploring public partnerships:** Public agencies and community-based organizations can provide vital support for schools in the daunting effort to comprehensively respond to the complexities of absenteeism on an individual level.
- **Establishing intervention teams:** Evidence points to intervention teams designed to work with students—exploring and remediating the causes of their absenteeism—being more effective than simply punishing students for their truancy.

Strategies that should be avoided

In the brief, Gottfried, Page, and Edwards also provide a glimpse at strategies that have been proven ineffective in fighting absenteeism. For example, creating an expectation of perfect attendance—through, say, perfect attendance incentives—often leads to increases in absenteeism. Schools should also avoid employing punitive measures, as the existing literature has found schools which focus on solving [absenteeism](#) rather than punishing it experience better results.

And while schools should explore public partnerships as outlined in the third-tier strategies, they should also be careful in that approach—as some external organizations can needlessly overcomplicate things.

"Partnering with external organizations can be helpful, particularly for serving students facing complex challenges such as health needs," the authors wrote. "But it can also increase the number of people and offices involved and make it harder for schools themselves to do the work."

More information: District Strategies to Reduce Student Absenteeism: [annenberg.brown.edu/sites/defa ... ecovery_Brief_22.pdf](https://annenberg.brown.edu/sites/default/files/2022-04/ecovery_Brief_22.pdf)

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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