How parents and schools can get chronically absent kids back in the classroom

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In the wake of the pandemic, more students are missing school than ever before. But there are steps parents and schools can take to get kids back into class.

In 2019, before the pandemic began, [nearly 6% of the nation's students](#) missed more than 15 days of school during the average year, for any reason or combination of reasons. Students who miss that amount of school are termed "chronically absent."

Since the beginning of the pandemic, when school buildings were closed for a period of time, the number of chronically absent students has [nearly doubled](#) because of a number of factors, such as students not returning to school once schools reopened, students staying home with COVID-19 or in quarantine or family anxiety about coming back to school during the pandemic. Also, more schools reported [increases in students missing classes or school altogether](#) since the majority of schools have transitioned to back to face-to-face instruction.

Of course, some of these absences stem from pandemic-related policies, such as students who are asked to stay home if they show COVID-19 symptoms or have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive. And the [more than 1 million U.S. deaths](#) from the pandemic have also required many students to care for other [family members](#), which may require them to miss school.

As [a researcher](#) who studies chronic absence, I see five ways that schools and districts can seek improvements in student attendance.

1. Collect, analyze and explain attendance data

Most schools collect [overall attendance data](#) on how many students are present on a given day. But many of them really care only about unexcused absences—ones for which parents or doctors haven't sent a note. That can be a problem, because kids miss learning opportunities when they're not in school, regardless of the reason they're out.

Some schools—including those in [San Francisco](#) and [Baltimore](#)—look

more closely at the reasons students miss class. They have found some problems schools can help solve, such as replacing unreliable transportation with carpools or providing information about local bus service.

Teachers and other school staff members who use data to further understand the reasons for their students' absences can help encourage students who have missed school to return to class. For instance, in Illinois, students are allowed to take up to five mental health days and, when they return to school, are able to make up missed assignments.

It may also be useful for schools to examine absence data for trends of weeks or months when many students are absent, or even when particular students tend to miss school. With that information, they can take steps to reduce absenteeism.

For example, one San Francisco elementary school enters every kid who shows up on a Monday or a Friday into a raffle for a prize, encouraging more people to attend on days that are frequently skipped. A program in Pittsburgh high schools gives a scholarship to college to students who get good grades and have better than 90% attendance.

2. Use technology

Many schools already use text messaging to communicate with students and their families. Some schools use it to alert parents if their kids are absent without permission and help get them back to school.

Four Georgia school districts reduced chronic absence by 8% by simply texting parents when their children were absent and warning them that kids who miss school are less likely to graduate.

That might not sound like a lot, but it is a starting point. And when it is

coupled with other efforts, more kids may spend even more time learning.

3. Pair chronically absent students with mentors

If students have a close contact at school—a teacher, another staff member or even a fellow student—that person can encourage them to stay in school. A mentoring program launched in New York City saw students who missed school frequently gain almost two weeks of instruction because of mentoring connections and creating relationships with adults.

If needed, a formal program can match chronically absent students with mentors who can help them connect with others at school, get help with missed work or even find staff who can provide mental and social services.

Evidence on mentorship programs has shown they help keep students in school through high school graduation. This includes regularly checking in on a student's family, providing academic supports and helping students to navigate social dynamics within schools. A mentoring program in Nashville, Tennessee, that began in the wake of the pandemic is seeking to do just that, in concert with other efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism.

4. Connect students to mental and physical health services

Some of the leading reasons students miss school involve their mental or physical health. Dental cavities, asthma or other breathing conditions and stress from violence or hunger are all potential factors.

If students don't have health insurance or <u>can't afford to go to the doctor</u>, they may miss school because of illnesses or even <u>untreated long-term conditions</u>.

Research based in Pennsylvania has found that <u>school nurses can play an important role</u> in identifying and addressing health problems that cause students to miss school. They can help <u>arrange for key services</u> such as medical testing and exams, provide referrals to expert practitioners and regularly check on students when they are in school.

My own research, co-authored with social psychologist <u>Chris Kearney</u>, has found that <u>school counselors can also be crucial</u> to providing the support students need to stay in school. Often this help is not academic but rather involves connecting students with therapists to deal with trauma or food banks to reduce hunger, for example.

In California, local school districts that have <u>launched student-retention efforts</u> within the school and throughout the surrounding community have found attendance improves. These attendance review boards have shifted from being punitive to focusing on getting kids back in school by meeting the needs of <u>students and families</u>.

5. Create local partnerships

Research has shown that schools cannot address all attendance issues on their own. <u>Pittsburgh</u>, <u>Detroit</u> and <u>Austin</u>, Texas, are just a few of the cities whose schools have expanded attendance campaigns into the wider community. These cities have been able to bring together community-based organizations in order to rely on their expertise and support to improve attendance.

Such cities as <u>Chicago</u> and <u>Long Beach, California</u>, have sent district and school employees out to canvass their local neighborhoods about what

might be affecting students' attendance. This not only helped them [identify potential barriers](#), such as unreliable transportation, but also provided solutions to overcome them such as changing bus routes or providing alternative transportation options. And it reinforced the importance of school to community members.

As in-person learning returns across the country, schools will play an important role in addressing the pandemic's impact on student attendance. Deploying the right strategies can help to create learning environments in which [students](#) feel supported in attending [school](#) and want to stay.

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