School attendance problems are complex, and our solutions need to be as well

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There are many reasons why students miss school or struggle with engagement. Credit: Shutterstock

Over the past few years, the pandemic prompted school closures and remote learning that drew international attention to issues of students missing school—what researchers call "non-attendance."

Millions of students across the world missing varying amounts of school raises concerns about students' learning loss and mental health—and also about long-term implications, particularly for those already at-risk for poor educational outcomes.

But school non-attendance is not a new issue. Terms like "epidemic" have been used in relation to school attendance problems in many countries such as Canada, the United States and Australia for a long time. There have always been students who missed school.

School attendance problems are complex and often very challenging to address. And for responses to be effective in getting students to school more often, they need to reflect this.

Not a Hollywood picture

Popular culture is filled with examples of teenagers skipping classes—and in films like Ferris Bueller's Day Off, this is framed by humor and a gleeful sense of freedom. But Ferris Bueller went back to school the next day without any major impact on his life. This isn't the case for many.

Evidence shows worse outcomes for students who miss a lot of school, including lower academic achievement, lower graduation rates, higher rates of interaction with juvenile justice systems, mental and physical health issues and lower employment.

And certain life circumstances, such as poverty, increase the risk of chronic school attendance issues.

Chronic school attendance problems are usually defined as missing more than 10 percent of school days.

School attendance in countries like Canada and Australia is mandatory until between 16 and 18 years of age, depending on the province or territory.

There are legal penalties for families whose children are chronically absent from school as well as for students themselves, and possible involvement of child protection services.

Many reasons students are absent, disengaged

There are many reasons why students miss school.

Some because they are disengaged, others because of significant anxiety or mental health and well-being concerns.

Some are absent because of frequent experiences of harassment, bullying and racism.

Others miss school because they have family responsibilities such as younger siblings, or...
because of disability-related needs that schools are struggling to support. Students may experience multiple types of school attendance problems, and these may vary over time.

**Punishing attendance problems fails to address the issues** students face, from family responsibilities to barriers related to racism or inadequate support for disabilities.

**Complex, flexible approaches needed**

There has been more evidence in recent years of the recognition of the complex, multilayered and flexible approaches necessary to improve school attendance. There have also been efforts to think about school attendance as more than just "present" or "absent." Are students participating? Are they included? Are they engaged? Are they learning?

Many initiatives are still based on simplistic ideas of school attendance and punitive approaches that really don't work well in the long run.

These fail to address the issues experienced by students that create the attendance problem in the first place. And these approaches often further punish students most at risk of school attendance problems.

There are four key points or "ABCDs" for schools, families and communities to consider:

1. **Academics and well-being**

Well-being supports, including mental health and addictions services, lunch programs, identity-based clubs, and opportunities for movement and physical activity are all important in promoting school attendance.

But if a child can't read, or an adolescent is struggling to learn algebraic equations and falling behind their peers, well-being initiatives aren't enough. An integrated approach to support academic success and well-being for students is essential.

2. **Building relationships**

A sense of belonging and connectedness is critical to engagement, learning and attendance for students. Students need to feel like they matter to someone at school—someone who notices when they're not there but who also welcomes them when they are.

Relationships need to be purposefully fostered between and among students, staff, families and communities. Mentorship programs, peer buddies, leadership opportunities, community experiential projects or attendance counselors are some examples of ways to support relationship building.

3. **Climate of school**

A supportive and positive school climate is key for students, staff, families and communities. Schools can provide opportunities for shared decision-making, autonomy, support and valuing of student and family identities and strengths.

Extra-curriculars and high expectations need to be in place alongside supports to meet these. Families can be welcomed in a range of ways that reflect the needs of communities. Bullying and harassment, including anti-racist, homophobic and anti-Indigenous abuse, needs to be addressed.

4. **Data needed**

Data is important for understanding attendance—who is at school, who is not. And if not, what are the reasons? In shifting responses to attendance, schools can consider also shifting the ways they collect, use and report on data. For example, an early flag system to identify student attendance patterns can help to proactively support students and families before chronic issues arise.

Considering traditional attendance counts alongside school climate data, student records, academic profiles and student well-being indicators can tell a fuller story, and lead to more effective ways of getting students to school—and keeping them there.

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