Evidence-Based Interventions to Address Chronic Absenteeism

Strategic Insights for Education Leaders

Prepared for the Consortium of Florida Education Foundations by Innovation Partners in Education, LLC

10/27/25

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the wake of unprecedented disruptions to educational systems nationwide, chronic absenteeism has emerged not merely as an attendance metric but as a critical indicator of systemic challenges facing American public education. While chronic absenteeism is not new, its prevalence and magnitude have reached crisis proportions in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, with national rates remaining 50-100% higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Drawing on an extensive investigation of more than 500 bibliographic sources, interviews with 12 nationally recognized experts, and evidence from national conferences, this paper identifies five key findings that challenge education leaders to fundamentally reevaluate traditional approaches.

Finding 1: Understanding the Evidence Base Is Necessary but Not Sufficient

While the research literature on chronic absenteeism is extensive and provides critical insights, knowing what the research says does not automatically translate into successful implementation. Districts must master both the evidence base and the implementation realities.

Finding 2: Chronic Absenteeism Represents a Symptom of Systemic Challenges

Attendance patterns reflect complex interactions among economic instability, health disparities, housing insecurity, and community violence. Narrowly focused, school-centric interventions have limited effectiveness; schools cannot solve chronic absenteeism independently.

Finding 3: Post-Pandemic Shifts Require Innovative, Systemic Approaches

The pandemic fundamentally transformed how families view school attendance. Districts must acknowledge these shifts rather than attempting to restore previous norms; instead, they should develop new value propositions for in-person learning through engaging experiences and meaningful relationships.

Finding 4: Authentic Community Voice and Partnership Prove Essential for Effectiveness

Interventions developed with authentic community participation achieve significantly better outcomes than those imposed without meaningful input. True partnership requires shared decision-making power and a willingness to be influenced by community wisdom.

Finding 5: Implementation Quality Through Continuous Improvement Trumps Program Selection on Its Own

Implementation quality predicts outcomes more strongly than specific program models. Districts achieving sustained improvements invest in implementation infrastructure, maintain interventions through initial challenges, and treat interventions as hypotheses to be tested through continuous improvement cycles.

The evidence indicates that districts achieving meaningful attendance improvements share common characteristics: commitment to understanding local contexts, investment in relationship-building capacity, authentic partnership with communities, and dedication to continuous improvement processes. This paper provides education leaders with research-based insights, strategic perspectives, and proven implementation approaches for developing contextually appropriate responses to chronic absenteeism in the post-pandemic era.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1
Research Methodology 3
Finding 1: Understanding the Evidence Base Is Necessary but Not Sufficient 4
  Navigating the Research Literature on Chronic Absenteeism 4
  Why Understanding Is Not Enough 6
Finding 2: Chronic Absenteeism Represents a Symptom of Systemic Challenges 7
  What the Evidence Says About Chronic Absenteeism as an Indicator of Other Problems 7
  Strategic Perspectives on Chronic Absenteeism as a Symptom 8
  Successful Implementation Approaches to a Symptomatic Approach 10
    Universal Supports 11
    Coordinated Service Delivery Models 11
    Family Resource Centers 11
    Community School Models 12
    Data-Sharing Agreements 12
Finding 3: Post-Pandemic Shifts Require New Approaches 12
  What the Evidence Says About the Post-Pandemic Context for Public Education 12
  Strategic Perspectives on Navigating the Post-Pandemic Landscape 14
  Successful Approaches to Addressing Post-Pandemic Challenges 15
    Flexible Learning Pathways 16
    Focus on Instructional Engagement 16
    Traditional Compliance-Based Approaches Must Evolve 17
Finding 4: Community Voice Is Essential for Effectiveness 17
  What the Evidence Says About Community Engagement 18
  Strategic Perspectives on Engaging Communities Effectively 19
  Successful Approaches to Authentic Community Partnerships 20
    Community Advisory Councils 20
    Student Voice Initiatives 21
    Cultural Brokers and Community Liaisons 22
    Community-Based Organizations 22
Finding 5: Implementation Quality Through Continuous Improvement 23
  What the Evidence Says About Intervention Selection and Implementation Quality 24
  Strategic Perspectives on Implementing High-Quality Programs 25
  Successful Implementation Approaches to High-Quality Implementation 26
    Building Implementation Infrastructure 26
    Utilizing Data Systems 27
    Ensuring Data Quality and Ethical Data Use 29
Conclusions 29
References 31

INTRODUCTION

Chronic absenteeism, commonly defined as missing 10% or more of school days in a given academic year, has long posed a challenge in U.S. education. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 13-15% of students nationally (around six million children) were chronically absent (Malkus, 2025). These rates were not evenly distributed, with students from low-income households, racial and ethnic minorities, English learners, and students with disabilities being disproportionately represented among the chronically absent (Chang et al., 2018; Gottfried, 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic then exacerbated these existing challenges. As documented by Malkus (2025) and Diliberti et al. (2024), national chronic absenteeism rates nearly doubled to almost 30% during the 2021-2022 school year. At its peak, two-thirds of U.S. students attended schools classified as having high or extreme levels of chronic absenteeism, with elementary schools bearing particularly severe impacts. While rates improved somewhat in 2023-2024, declining to about 19% (more than 9 million K-12 students), levels remain significantly elevated above pre-pandemic baselines. These disparities have persisted, with the same vulnerable student populations continuing to experience the highest rates of chronic absenteeism (Chang, 2025).

Understanding the root causes of this persistent challenge is essential for developing effective solutions. While the pandemic intensified the magnitude of chronic absenteeism, the fundamental barriers to attendance remain rooted in longstanding systemic challenges. The research literature has consistently identified four core factors contributing to chronic absenteeism, as summarized in Table 1 (Attendance Works, 2025; Gubbels et al., 2019; Patnode, et al., 2018). These interconnected barriers underscore the need for comprehensive, multifaceted intervention approaches.

The urgency of addressing chronic absenteeism extends beyond educational outcomes to economic consequences. Each chronically absent student represents a $5,630 social burden in long-term costs to society (Belfield et al., 2025). When chronic absenteeism escalates to suspension or expulsion, outcomes closely linked to prolonged absences, per-student social burdens multiply to $27,260 and $70,870, respectively. These figures demonstrate that early intervention in attendance issues costs far less than addressing downstream disciplinary and dropout consequences.

TABLE 1. BARRIERS TO SCHOOL ATTENDANCE CATEGORIZED BY TYPE OF CHALLENGE

Barriers	Aversion	Disengagement	Misconceptions
• Chronic and acute health conditions • Family caregiving responsibilities • Unstable home environments • Trauma exposure • Community violence • Limited transportation access • Housing and food insecurity • Inequitable access to essential services • Justice system involvement • Unpredictable learning schedules • Limited technology access • Inadequate parental involvement in school • Poor parental attachment/support • Insufficient parental control/supervision • Additional socioeconomic barriers	• Academic and behavioral struggles • Unwelcoming school climate • Social isolation and peer conflicts • Mental health challenges • Discriminatory disciplinary practices • Undiagnosed learning disabilities • Inadequate disability accommodations • Intergenerational educational trauma • Additional institutional barriers	• Inadequate culturally responsive curriculum • Student disengagement and boredom • Absence of meaningful adult relationships • Limited enrichment opportunities • Insufficient academic and behavioral support • Credit deficiencies • Economic pressures to enter workforce • Additional educational barriers	• Only unexcused absences are problematic • Missing two days per month has minimal impact on learning • Underestimating total absence accumulation • Sporadic absences are harmless • Attendance becomes important only in upper grades • Suspensions do not constitute missed instructional time • Additional attendance misconceptions

Based on work by Attendance Works, Gubbels et al., and Patnode, et al.

Given both the complexity of interconnected barriers and the significant costs of inaction, addressing chronic absenteeism requires not only understanding evidence-based interventions but also knowing how to implement them effectively within diverse local contexts. While the research literature on chronic absenteeism is extensive, including significant contributions by Patnode et al (2018), Gottfried and Hutt (2019), Brooks et al (2020), Eklund et al. (2022), Jordan (2023), the Arizona Chronic Absence Task Force (2024), Lenhoff and Singer (2025), Pérez-Marco et al. (2025), and others, the dramatic shift in chronic absenteeism following COVID-19 necessitated a fresh examination focused specifically on post-pandemic contexts and implementation realities.

In this paper, we synthesize findings from an extensive investigation conducted as part of a multi-district collaborative research initiative in Florida, organizing insights into five key findings that address both what works and how to make it work. While understanding the research base is necessary, it is not sufficient for success; effective action requires

strategic perspectives on implementation, authentic community partnership, and recognition that chronic absenteeism reflects deeper systemic challenges rather than isolated educational problems. This framework provides education leaders with research-based insights and proven approaches for developing contextually appropriate responses to chronic absenteeism.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This analysis draws from multiple sources: (a) review of more than 500 bibliographic sources published between 1990 and 2025, (b) interviews with 12 nationally recognized research and practice experts, and (c) evidence presented at two American Enterprise Institute (2025a, 2025b) national conferences.

The research team conducted systematic searches across academic databases, policy repositories, and practitioner resources, employing narrative synthesis and scoping review methodologies. Given the limited availability of peer-reviewed articles addressing post-pandemic contexts, expert interviews were incorporated to supplement published literature. These semi-structured interviews with researchers, district administrators, state education officials, and community organization leaders explored implementation challenges, emerging innovations, and contextual factors influencing intervention effectiveness.

The investigation was grounded in ecological systems theory, which recognizes student attendance as being influenced by complex, interconnected factors across multiple levels of the educational ecosystem (Childs & Scanlon, 2022; Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Lenhoff & Singer, 2025). This theoretical framework enabled systematic examination of intervention mechanisms while maintaining attention to contextual variations and implementation factors. To organize this extensive knowledge base, cluster analysis grouped sources into distinct categories representing qualitatively different dimensions of chronic absenteeism interventions, from foundational understanding through implementation and evaluation.

FINDING 1: UNDERSTANDING THE EVIDENCE BASE IS NECESSARY BUT NOT SUFFICIENT

Over the past 30 years, researchers have developed general overviews and definitions, conducted comprehensive reviews, identified causes and correlates, and analyzed the impacts and consequences of chronic absenteeism, thereby establishing an essential knowledge base for understanding the scope and complexity of this issue (Balfanz, 2024; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019; Gubbels et al., 2019). This research literature is rich in content and provides critical insights for addressing chronic absenteeism.

However, two challenges face education leaders: first, the sheer volume of evidence can be overwhelming to navigate; second, and more importantly, knowing what the research says does not automatically translate into successful implementation. As one expert cautioned, districts tend to be "data rich, analysis poor, and capacity starved." Understanding the evidence-based interventions is essential but knowing what to do with that information and how to implement solutions effectively separates successful districts from struggling ones.

NAVIGATING THE RESEARCH LITERATURE ON CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Our framework on chronic absenteeism, presented as Table 2, organizes the literature into three categories: (a) Foundation: Understanding Chronic Absenteeism, (b) Intervention: Multi-Level Strategies, and (c) Support: Implementation & Evaluation. Among interventions, we distinguish student-level factors (health, motivation, academic engagement), family-level factors (economic stability, transportation, family engagement), school-level factors (climate, relationships, instructional quality), district-level factors (policies, resource allocation), and community-level factors (healthcare access, economic opportunities, social services).

TABLE 2. FRAMEWORK FOR ADDRESSING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: FROM FOUNDATIONAL UNDERSTANDING THROUGH IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

FOUNDATION: Understanding Chronic Absenteeism	INTERVENTION: Multi-Level Strategies	SUPPORT: Implementation & Evaluation
1. Foundational Understanding. Core research, literature reviews, causes & correlates, and impacts of chronic absenteeism. Provides the essential knowledge base for understanding the scope and complexity of the issue. **2. Contextual Factors & Emerging Issues.** Addresses broader contextual factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic impact and related social issues that influence chronic absenteeism patterns.	**3. Individual-Level Interventions.** School-based and health-related interventions targeting individual student needs, including mentoring, behavioral support, and wellness programs. **4. Family & Community Interventions.** Strategies that engage families and leverage community resources to support student attendance through partnerships and involvement. **5. Systems-Level Interventions.** Policy approaches, data systems, and infrastructure solutions (like transportation) that address systemic barriers to attendance. **6. Technology & Communication.** Digital tools and communication approaches that leverage technology to improve attendance through parent engagement and nudges. **7. Prevention & Early Warning.** Proactive approaches and early identification systems designed to prevent chronic absenteeism before it develops. **8. Special Populations & Equity.** Addresses the unique needs of specific student populations and equity considerations in chronic absenteeism interventions.	**9. Implementation & Evaluation Resources.** Practical guides, toolkits, program evaluations, case studies, and theoretical frameworks that support the implementation and assessment of chronic absenteeism interventions.

Why Understanding Is Not Enough

While understanding the evidence base is essential, knowledge alone does not guarantee success. The remaining findings in this paper address critical factors that determine whether evidence-based interventions actually work in practice: recognizing chronic absenteeism as a symptom of deeper systemic challenges (Finding 2), adapting to fundamentally altered post-pandemic contexts (Finding 3), engaging authentic community voice and partnership (Finding 4), and implementing continuous improvement strategies to encourage sustainability (Finding 5). Districts that master the evidence base but neglect these implementation realities often struggle despite selecting well-researched interventions. One researcher emphasized the critical importance of local context: "I think every district needs to do this work for itself, because even though you can look at a hundred studies and see the same patterns and issues, their solutions are highly dependent on local context."

Every District Must Do This Work for Itself

"I think every district needs to do this work for itself, because even though you can look at a hundred studies and see the same patterns and issues, their solutions are highly dependent on local context." - Implementation Researcher

Understanding research evidence is essential, but effective action requires applying that knowledge to your unique community context.

FINDING 2: CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM REPRESENTS A SYMPTOM OF SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

Chronic absenteeism is the tip of the iceberg. The massive underwater portion represents root causes such as poverty, transportation barriers, health issues, housing instability, food insecurity, family stress, and academic struggles. Analysis of the research literature reveals chronic absenteeism as a manifestation of these deeper systemic challenges rather than an isolated educational problem.

The complexity of chronic absenteeism aligns with what public administration scholars call a "wicked problem," a complex social phenomenon that is difficult to define, cuts across multiple policy domains, and resists permanent solutions (Childs & Lofton, 2021). Unlike tame problems with clear solutions, wicked problems like chronic absenteeism are unstructured, with causes and effects extremely complicated to identify and model.

Chronic Absenteeism is a Wicked Problem

"As a multifaceted problem, with causes and implications across multiple facets of society, chronic absenteeism should be tackled like other wicked problems and not seen as an isolated educational issue, or be met with policies that serve to punish the symptom and not heal the causes." - Childs & Lofton (2021)

Wicked problems are complex, cross-cutting challenges that resist short-term solutions and require innovative, collaborative approaches across multiple sectors.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SAYS ABOUT CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM AS AN INDICATOR OF OTHER PROBLEMS

Balfanz (2024) demonstrates that attendance patterns reflect complex interactions among economic instability, health disparities, housing insecurity, and community violence. Research by Chang et al. (2018) documents how students from low-income households face multiple, compounding barriers that manifest as irregular attendance.

The evidence consistently shows that narrowly focused, school-centric interventions have limited effectiveness. Gottfried's (2014) longitudinal analysis found that addressing

attendance without considering underlying causes produces temporary improvements that rarely sustain beyond intervention periods. Similarly, research by Lenhoff and Singer (2025) argues that schools cannot solve chronic absenteeism independently, as the root causes often originate beyond the direct influence of educational institutions.

Expert interviews reinforced these findings, with one state education official noting: "Districts that view chronic absenteeism solely as an accountability metric miss the opportunity to address real challenges facing students and families. The most successful approaches recognize attendance as an indicator of student and family well-being, not just an educational outcome." Another researcher reinforced this perspective on systemic challenges: "One of the most powerful lessons from COVID was that chronic absenteeism, in many cases, is a byproduct of social and economic inequality, and that schools and districts cannot be expected to address it on their own."

How schools define and track attendance can itself constitute a systemic barrier. Gentle-Genitty et al. (2020) note that students in in-school suspension are often marked absent from classes despite being physically present in the building. This practice artificially inflates absence rates for students already facing discipline, creating data that misrepresents the problem and can trigger further consequences. The distinction between excused and unexcused absences adds further complexity: while Gentle-Genitty et al. (2020) observe that both represent situations where students cannot access learning, Henderson and Fantuzzo (2023) demonstrates that only unexcused absences predict future achievement risk. This research suggests that all absences require support, but different absence types may signal different root causes requiring different responses.

Analysis of successful district initiatives reveals common characteristics among effective approaches. These districts conduct systematic root cause analyses, engage multiple community sectors in solution development, and address barriers through coordinated service delivery. For instance, partnerships between schools and healthcare providers in addressing health-related absences show significantly better outcomes than school-only interventions (Komisarow & Hemelt, 2024). A researcher observed: "There are a thousand and one, really, a million and one, causes of chronic absenteeism. Much of the work for districts and schools is to understand their populations well enough to identify their specific local needs." This complexity demands comprehensive diagnostic approaches rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.

Strategic Perspectives on Chronic Absenteeism as a Symptom

Understanding chronic absenteeism as symptomatic requires fundamental shifts in organizational thinking. Districts demonstrating sustained attendance improvements

develop perspectives that recognize interconnections between educational outcomes and community conditions. These organizations view attendance data as diagnostic information about student and family needs rather than simply compliance metrics.

Successful districts cultivate beliefs that position schools within broader support networks. Research by Sheldon (2007) demonstrates that schools viewing themselves as community hubs rather than isolated institutions achieve better attendance outcomes. This perspective shift enables more effective resource mobilization and partnership development.

The evidence indicates that education leaders who understand the systemic nature of attendance challenges make different strategic decisions. These leaders prioritize relationship-building over compliance enforcement, invest in family engagement infrastructure, and advocate for community-wide approaches to addressing root causes. Analysis of district leadership practices reveals that superintendents who frame attendance challenges as community issues receive greater stakeholder support for comprehensive interventions.

Chronic Absenteeism Is a Symptom, Not the Problem

Students from low-income households face multiple, compounding barriers that manifest as irregular attendance. - Chang et al. (2018)

“Districts that view chronic absenteeism solely as an accountability metric miss the opportunity to address real challenges facing students and families.” - State Official

“One of the most powerful lessons from COVID was that chronic absenteeism, in many cases, is a byproduct of social and economic inequality, and that schools and districts cannot be expected to address it on their own.” - Implementation Researcher

“Chronic absenteeism is a symptom; it's not the problem.” - Education Leader

Attendance data is diagnostic information about student and family well-being, not merely a compliance metric.

Expert interviews highlighted the importance of shifting from deficit-based to asset-based perspectives. One researcher observed: “Districts that recognize families as partners with valuable insights and resources create more effective interventions than those viewing

families as problems to be fixed." This perspective enables authentic collaboration and utilizes community strengths in addressing attendance barriers.

This reframing extends beyond rhetoric to practice. Gentle-Genitty et al. (2020) argue that shifting from an "absenteeism focus" to an "attendance focus" fundamentally changes how schools engage with students, moving from punitive exclusion to proactive support, from tracking absences to celebrating presence, and from deficit-based interventions to relationship-building pathways. When schools frame the challenge as absenteeism, they inadvertently center the problem on the student's failure to attend. When they frame it as attendance, they center the solution on the school's responsibility to engage, support, and remove barriers.

Research on implementation practices reveals how deficit thinking can misdirect interventions: "If they're asked to identify the main drivers, they'll usually focus on factors related to the student and their family. They're less likely to recognize the primary drivers of chronic absenteeism, things like aligned curriculum and instructional practices, feeling safe and secure at school, and having a sense of connection." This highlights why shifting from deficit to asset-based perspectives proves essential for accurate problem diagnosis.

Districts must also guard against what Childs and Lofton (2021) describe as "policy distractions," well-intentioned reforms that focus on individual student behavior or compliance metrics while masking the systemic barriers driving absenteeism. For example, average daily attendance (ADA) can distract from chronic absenteeism patterns, and punitive policies can serve as distractions from addressing root causes.

Successful Implementation Approaches to a Symptomatic Approach

Districts effectively addressing chronic absenteeism as a symptom employ comprehensive, coordinated strategies that target root causes across multiple systems. Root cause analysis protocols, adapted from continuous improvement methodologies, help identify underlying factors contributing to attendance patterns. The "Five Whys" approach, modified for educational contexts, enables systematic exploration beyond surface explanations (Bryk et al., 2015). One expert described the impact of this approach thusly: "It's often a tool they say they want to keep using moving forward. People come away saying, 'Wow, that was really powerful.'" The value lies not in standardized frameworks but in systematic inquiry that uncovers local realities. As another researcher cautioned: "Being responsive to the root causes of why students miss school is what truly matters, but in practice, schools often end up looking for a more standardized approach."

Universal Supports

Understanding systemic barriers also requires attention to universal supports. Districts must ensure that foundational systems, such as transportation, a safe school climate, and engaging instruction, are firmly in place before expecting targeted interventions to succeed. Another researcher added: "Every student needs a reliable way to get to school in order to attend regularly, yet those supports are too often overlooked instead of being recognized as essential, schoolwide strategies." As one expert emphasized, "The higher your level of chronic absence, the more likely it is that students are missing Tier 1 approaches. The more Tier 1 is missed, the more your higher-level systems become overwhelmed and unable to address those issues." There are multiple approaches to integrating supports into core services, including:

Coordinated Service Delivery Models

Coordinated service delivery models demonstrate particular effectiveness. Districts formally establishing partnerships with health departments, social services, and community organizations report significant attendance improvements. For example, the City Connects program assigns coordinators to connect students with tailored community resources and shows sustained positive effects on attendance and achievement (Walsh et al., 2014). Sensitivity analysis demonstrates that the program generates a benefit-cost ratio between 1.0 and 11.8, with the best estimate indicating $3.00 in social benefits for every dollar invested (Bowden et al., 2015). Even under conservative assumptions, the program remains cost-effective, representing a sound approach to coordinated service delivery with substantial returns on investment.

Family Resource Centers

Family resource centers, located within or near schools, provide accessible support for addressing multiple barriers simultaneously. These centers, staffed by social workers and community liaisons, offer services ranging from healthcare navigation to housing assistance. Mac Iver & Sheldon (2019) document that schools with comprehensive family resource centers experience significant reductions in chronic absenteeism rates. The complexity of addressing seemingly straightforward barriers like transportation illustrates why systemic approaches matter. One school leader explained: "Often, the distinction came down to whether a student had a family member or friend who could provide a reliable ride, or someone who could lend them money. In some cases, it was simply about whether they had enough money themselves to call an Uber or find another way to get to school." These nuances, invisible to standardized data systems, emerge only through relationships and local knowledge.

Community School Models

Community school models represent comprehensive approaches to addressing systemic factors (Malone, 2020). These schools integrate academic, health, and social services while engaging families and community members as partners. Research by Maier et al. (2017) documents consistent positive effects of community schools on attendance, with particularly strong outcomes for economically disadvantaged students.

Data-Sharing Agreements

Data-sharing agreements between schools and community partners enable coordinated responses to attendance challenges. From an ecological systems perspective, these partnerships utilize diverse organizational resources and expertise to address the complex, interconnected factors contributing to attendance barriers (Childs & Scanlon, 2022). Research on inter-agency coordination reveals that successful collaboration requires systematic communication protocols that enable early identification of attendance patterns and rapid deployment of preventive interventions, creating comprehensive support networks that address both immediate attendance barriers and underlying systemic challenges (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018; Childs & Scanlon, 2022).

FINDING 3: POST-PANDEMIC SHIFTS REQUIRE NEW APPROACHES

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered educational landscapes, creating shifts in attendance patterns and expectations that persist years after initial disruptions. As one expert observed, there has been a shift in how families view school attendance: “We spent a lot of the last five years saying we just have to get back on track, and I think the reality that we’ve all come to right now is we’re on a different track entirely.”

What the Evidence Says About the Post-Pandemic Context for Public Education

Research by Malkus (2025) documents sustained elevation in chronic absenteeism rates, with national averages remaining 50-100% higher than pre-pandemic levels. These changes reflect not a temporary disruption but a transformation in how families view school attendance. One expert described this shift: “I think there’s been a cultural change in people’s expectations, especially among parents. Their sense of what absence costs, or what the trade-offs are, has shifted.” Another added: “I think some parents have lost trust

in schools because of the pandemic. That distrust has carried over, and many are now questioning the overall value of schooling."

Districts are also confronting unprecedented levels of chronic absenteeism severity. One expert explained: "Most people are reporting that they're seeing more students with extremely high levels of chronic absence, which we're calling it 'acute,' meaning missing 50% or more of school days. That wasn't something we had to track before the pandemic." This emergence of extreme absenteeism patterns calls for interventions that go beyond those developed for pre-pandemic contexts.

Analysis by Diliberti et al. (2024) published in RAND's Spring 2024 American School District Panel Survey RAND's Spring 2024 reveals multiple mechanisms driving persistent attendance challenges in the post-COVID era. Pandemic experiences normalized irregular attendance patterns, with families developing new routines and priorities that deprioritize daily school attendance. Technology adoption during remote learning created expectations for educational flexibility that conflict with traditional attendance requirements. Health anxieties, particularly among families with vulnerable members, continue influencing attendance decisions despite reduced COVID-19 risks. Economic disruptions pushed older students into workforce participation, creating competing priorities with school attendance. Changed parent work patterns, including remote and hybrid arrangements, altered family schedules and supervision availability.

Mental health challenges, particularly anxiety and depression, are linked to school attendance problems. Research by Finning and colleagues has shown that students experiencing various forms of anxiety, including social anxiety, generalized anxiety, and separation anxiety, are more likely to have unexcused absences or refuse to attend school altogether (Finning et al., 2019a). Similarly, their studies found that students with depression are also at higher risk for chronic absenteeism and truancy (Finning et al., 2019b).

The scope of mental health challenges among students has grown substantially, making these attendance-related concerns increasingly urgent. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024) reports that nearly all indicators of poor mental health and suicidal thoughts and behaviors worsened from 2013 to 2023. In 2023, 40% of high school students reported feeling so sad or hopeless almost every day for at least two consecutive weeks during the past year that they stopped engaging in their usual activities, and 29% experienced poor mental health during the past 30 days. The disparities by gender were pronounced: female students reported persistent sadness or hopelessness at nearly twice the rate of their male peers (53% vs. 28%), and similarly elevated rates of poor mental health (39% vs. 19%).

Although there was a slight decrease in persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness from 2021 to 2023, the overall prevalence remains concerning. These findings highlight how mental health struggles can create barriers to regular school attendance, potentially leading to a cycle where missed school days further impact students' academic progress and social connections (Finning et al., 2022).

Expert interviews consistently emphasized the impossibility of returning to pre-pandemic approaches. A district superintendent stated: "Families experienced different educational models during the pandemic. Some discovered their children thrived with alternative schedules or learning environments. Simply demanding a return to previous attendance patterns ignores these revelations and changed family dynamics."

Strategic Perspectives on Navigating the Post-Pandemic Landscape

Addressing post-pandemic attendance challenges requires acknowledging fundamental shifts rather than attempting restoration of previous norms. Research reveals that district leaders have observed a significant cultural shift where more students and families view school as optional rather than compulsory, with this pattern appearing across various demographic groups (Diliberti et al., 2024).

Districts achieving attendance improvements develop perspectives that recognize the legitimacy of changed expectations while articulating compelling rationales for in-person learning. As district leaders increasingly acknowledge, "the whole system needs to change," including helping families understand the value of attending school and creating deeper learning experiences that meaningfully engage students (Diliberti et al., 2024). This systemic change also involves rethinking how schools communicate about learning. One researcher noted a contradiction in messaging: "Yes, it's online. Yes, your student will have access. We're going to do everything we can to make sure your student can get all the materials." Districts now face the challenge of ensuring educational continuity for students who are legitimately absent while also reinforcing that in-person attendance remains essential.

Successful organizations cultivate beliefs about educational flexibility and responsiveness. Research indicates that districts offering multiple pathways for engagement and credit recovery experience better attendance outcomes than those maintaining rigid requirements. Chang et al. (2018) recommend considering flexible scheduling options to accommodate diverse student needs, including blended learning models that allow students to attend partially online while maintaining access to necessary face-to-face engagement. This perspective enables innovation in scheduling,

instructional delivery, and attendance policies that address the reality that families have become accustomed to pandemic-era flexibility and continue to keep children home, knowing they can access lessons through technology (Diliberti et al., 2024).

Gottfried and Hutt (2019) identify specific populations requiring flexible pathways: students with chronic health conditions, those facing temporary transportation challenges, students with family responsibilities, and those experiencing housing instability. Furthermore, Rumberger (2012) advocates for redefining success beyond conventional college preparedness, recognizing that students have diverse aspirations and learning needs best served through curricula integrating real-world applications, vocational training, and life skills.

Expert interviews highlighted the importance of meeting families where they are rather than where educators wish they were. One researcher noted: "Districts that acknowledge pandemic-related trauma and ongoing challenges while providing supportive pathways forward achieve better outcomes than those simply demanding compliance with traditional expectations." The evidence suggests that education leaders must develop new value propositions for regular attendance. Rather than relying on compulsory attendance laws, successful districts articulate the benefits of in-person learning through demonstrable student engagement and meaningful relationships.

RAND interviews of education leaders revealed that in states with stringent truancy laws, district leaders report using these measures as a last resort, primarily because their use can damage already strained relationships with families (Diliberti et al., 2024). Lenhoff and Singer (2025) explicitly caution against relying solely on punishments, parent fines, and even rewards, noting these approaches can inadvertently reinforce the social inequalities that make accessing school difficult for many students. Instead, at least seven district leaders in the RAND study emphasized that interventions perceived as most effective were those that build or utilize existing relationships with students and families (Diliberti et al., 2024).

Successful Approaches to Addressing Post-Pandemic Challenges

Districts effectively addressing post-pandemic shifts employ innovative strategies specifically designed to respond to changed family expectations and student needs. Graduated re-engagement protocols help students experiencing pandemic-related anxiety or disengagement return to regular attendance through incremental steps. These approaches show particular effectiveness when combined with mental health supports

and flexible scheduling options that acknowledge families' continued concerns about health and safety.

Flexible Learning Pathways

Flexible learning pathways that balance structure with choice respond to families' pandemic-era experiences with alternative educational models. Chang et al. (2018) recommend blended learning approaches, while Gottfried and Hutt (2019) emphasize that flexibility must be strategic and targeted to students with specific needs rather than universally applied in ways that undermine attendance expectations. Districts successfully implementing flexible options establish clear criteria for participation and maintain accountability for learning outcomes.

Focus on Instructional Engagement

Creating compelling value propositions for in-person learning has become essential in the post-pandemic context. Five of twelve district leaders interviewed by Diliberti et al. (2024) had implemented programs specifically designed to make school more engaging and welcoming for all students in response to pandemic-related disengagement. Evidence-based mentorship programs demonstrate measurable impact: students with histories of chronic absenteeism gained almost two additional weeks of schooling in years they had a mentor (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). Social-emotional learning interventions positively impact students' experiences of school climate and safety, with the largest effect sizes found in students' perceptions of classroom supportiveness, school safety, and teacher relationships, as well as improved feelings of inclusion, belonging, and connectedness (Cipriano et al., 2023).

The importance of meaningful engagement appeared consistently in expert interviews. One expert emphasized that students must feel their daily learning truly matters, explaining: "The fundamental thing is: How do you make it matter? It has to be that you're teaching me so much every day that I can see it matters, so much so that I don't want to miss school." Similarly, another expert noted, "What makes kids want to come to school? There is an adult who cares about them." Together, these insights suggest that post-pandemic recovery depends on providing students with compelling, human-centered reasons for daily attendance, reasons that go beyond mere compliance.

Traditional Compliance-Based Approaches Must Evolve

Districts achieving success in the post-pandemic era recognize that traditional compliance-based approaches must evolve. They invest in relationship-building, offer strategic flexibility, address mental health barriers, and create school experiences compelling enough to overcome competing priorities. Rather than attempting to restore pre-pandemic norms, these districts build new models responsive to fundamentally altered contexts.

We Can't Go Back

"We spent a lot of the last five years saying we just have to get back on track, and I think the reality that we've all come to right now is we're on a different track entirely." - State Education Official

"I think there's been a cultural change in people's expectations, especially among parents. Their sense of what absence costs, or what the trade-offs are, has shifted." - Researcher

Post-pandemic recovery requires building new models responsive to fundamentally altered contexts, not attempting to restore pre-pandemic norms.

FINDING 4: COMMUNITY VOICE IS ESSENTIAL FOR EFFECTIVENESS

Extensive research demonstrates that interventions developed with authentic community participation achieve significantly better outcomes than those imposed without meaningful input. Epstein & Sheldon (2002) found that family-school-community partnership practices predicted an increase in daily attendance and a decrease in chronic absenteeism.

When schools, families, and communities collaborate and share responsibility for students' education, more students succeed in school (Epstein, 2019). Capretta et al., (2024) emphasize the indispensable role that families play in addressing chronic absenteeism, presenting a framework with strategies that schools can implement to improve attendance by cultivating trust and establishing strong partnerships with families.

What the Evidence Says About Community Engagement

The literature demonstrates multiple mechanisms through which community voice enhances intervention effectiveness. Programs incorporating local knowledge address culturally specific barriers that external interventions miss. Germain et al. (2024) found that successful California community schools that significantly reduced chronic absenteeism post-pandemic used improved family engagement through enhanced communication and proactive outreach, such as home visits, as key strategies. These approaches leverage existing social networks and trusted relationships, facilitating greater participation and sustainability.

District leaders emphasized that interventions perceived as most effective were those building or leveraging existing relationships with students and families (Diliberti et al., 2024). Lenhoff & Singer (2025) advocate for schools and districts to focus on factors within their purview, such as redefining attendance-focused staff as navigators who help families overcome barriers, enhancing school-home communication, facilitating families' access to resources, and prioritizing positive relationships with students and families.

Analysis of intervention effectiveness reveals important patterns regarding community engagement. Eklund et al. (2022) found through meta-analysis that most practices implemented to improve student attendance led to small effects, with the confidence interval for family-school partnerships including zero, suggesting this type of intervention may not have a significant effect on improving attendance when implemented without sufficient attention to relationship quality and cultural responsiveness. The authors concluded that the majority of practices currently implemented to address student attendance are either understudied, resulting in only small improvements, or both.

This finding underscores a critical distinction: partnerships succeed not simply through implementation, but through the quality of authentic relationships. As one expert explained, "Schools must have the capacity and the relationships to understand why kids are missing school, so they can develop effective interventions, and they must also have the trusted connections needed to truly engage families." Without this foundation, partnership efforts risk becoming procedural rather than transformative.

Research specifically examining culturally and linguistically diverse communities demonstrates the importance of tailored approaches. Reid (2023) provides guidance to state and local education agencies on identifying, accessing, and adapting evidence-based practices for various underserved populations, including English language learners, highly mobile students, Indigenous students, students with disabilities, and unhoused students. This targeted approach recognizes that different student populations may face

unique barriers to attendance, requiring customized interventions. Lenhoff & Singer (2025) further emphasize that chronic absenteeism is fundamentally linked to social and economic inequality, arguing that effective solutions must address both in-school and out-of-school factors through community-based approaches that engage with the broader social context in which families live.

Strategic Perspectives on Engaging Communities Effectively

Incorporating community voice requires fundamental shifts in power dynamics and decision-making processes. Districts achieving meaningful community engagement develop perspectives that value lived experience alongside professional expertise. These organizations view families and community members as essential partners rather than passive recipients of services. Epstein and Sheldon (2016) found that while policy on parental involvement may be a good first step, other factors, such as principals' support for family and community engagement and active facilitation of research-based structures and processes by district leaders, are essential for establishing effective partnership programs. Schools implementing these supportive structures have higher percentages of engaged families and report higher rates of average daily attendance among their students.

Successful districts cultivate beliefs about shared ownership of educational outcomes. Krumm and Curry (2017) found that district leaders with a strong emphasis on social justice and intentional school- and district-wide emphasis on collaborative efforts encourage the shared influence and shared responsibility necessary to support student learning. This perspective enables collaborative problem-solving and resource mobilization. Chang et al. (2018) recommend that schools work with local government, health services, and community organizations to create a coordinated approach to addressing chronic absenteeism, recognizing that many factors affecting attendance extend beyond what schools alone can address.

The evidence indicates that education leaders must develop comfort with community-driven processes that may challenge institutional assumptions. Expert interviews emphasized the distinction between consultation and genuine partnership. One expert observed: "Many districts conduct surveys or focus groups but then design interventions without incorporating community input. True partnership requires shared decision-making power and willingness to be influenced by community wisdom." The challenge of authentic engagement is particularly acute when working with students and families who have been systematically marginalized. As one researcher emphasized, "You're not going to truly learn the reasons students miss school from a school or district data system, because

those reasons aren't reliably tracked. The only way to really understand is by going directly to the students and families themselves."

Lenhoff and Singer (2025) advocate for redefining attendance-focused staff as navigators who help families overcome barriers, enhancing school-home communication, facilitating families' access to resources, and prioritizing positive relationships with students and families. Krumm and Curry (2017) found that a common vision provides a foundation and motivation for collaborative efforts, with partnership efforts becoming embedded in district culture when leaders consistently emphasize shared responsibility. Germain et al. (2024) identified that successful community schools used proactive approaches that build strong family relationships and foster trust between school staff and families, with establishing trust recognized as fundamental to successful family-school partnerships. Capretta et al. (2024) emphasize that schools can improve attendance by cultivating trust and establishing strong partnerships with families through strategies that recognize families' indispensable role in addressing chronic absenteeism.

Districts that create authentic structures for partnership, moving beyond policy statements to genuine collaboration supported by leadership and embedded in organizational culture, ultimately develop more effective and sustainable interventions. As Epstein and Sheldon (2016) demonstrate, these research-based approaches to partnership result in measurable improvements in both family engagement and student attendance outcomes.

Successful Approaches to Authentic Community Partnerships

Districts effectively incorporating community voice employ structured processes for authentic engagement. Germain et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of dedicated roles such as community school coordinators to lead attendance initiatives and promote collaboration among stakeholders. In a recent survey of district leaders, approximately 30% reported hiring staff specifically focused on reducing absenteeism, and while fewer districts implemented this approach, one-third of those that did considered it their most effective strategy (Diliberti et al., 2024). These dedicated personnel help ensure interventions reflect local priorities and values through ongoing engagement with families and community partners.

Community Advisory Councils

Community advisory councils with genuine decision-making authority guide intervention development and implementation. These councils, comprising parents, students, community leaders, and educators, ensure interventions reflect local priorities and values. Participatory action research (PAR) methodologies engage community members as co-

researchers in identifying problems and developing solutions (Wood, 2020). By positioning youth and parents as active contributors rather than research subjects, PAR promotes self-reflective inquiry and collective action aimed at social change. In school contexts, youth participatory action research (YPAR) and parent participatory action research (PPAR) have been used to address inequities in school experiences, strengthen family-school partnerships, and promote student well-being.

Wilhelm et al. (2021) found that implementing YPAR and PPAR within school-based interventions fostered trust, collaboration, and shared learning among students, parents, and educators. Youth researchers reported gains in leadership, communication, and critical awareness, while parent researchers experienced greater social support and community engagement. Districts that train parent leaders and students in research methods report deeper insights into educational barriers and the co-creation of more innovative, contextually relevant solutions. Evidence indicates that these approaches particularly benefit historically marginalized communities by elevating community voices, enhancing the cultural relevance of interventions, and improving the sustainability and validity of outcomes.

Student Voice Initiatives

Student voice initiatives focused on attendance provide critical insights often overlooked by adult-centered approaches. When students are treated as partners rather than passive subjects, they offer nuanced perspectives on the social, emotional, and structural factors that influence school participation (Lubelfeld et al., 2018). Districts that conduct regular listening sessions with students report uncovering unexpected barriers and identifying innovative, student-driven solutions.

The nature of effective engagement also varies by student age. One expert explained, “It’s different at the secondary level, especially in high school. Family engagement still matters, but in different ways. What resources are available, and how do families access them?” Districts must adapt partnership strategies to developmental needs and family structures to ensure engagement remains relevant and accessible.

Mockler and Groundwater-Smith (2015) argue that authentic engagement with student voice moves beyond token consultation to shared inquiry and co-construction of meaning, allowing young people to shape both the questions asked and the actions taken. Consistent with this approach, analyses show that interventions incorporating student recommendations lead to stronger engagement and improved attendance outcomes compared to those designed solely by adults. One researcher reflected on this approach, noting, “I love doing this with young people. They are candid, and they offer perspectives

that differ from those of any adults in the system." Such candor provides insights that administrative data and adult viewpoints cannot capture, revealing barriers and solutions that may remain invisible through conventional analysis.

Cultural Brokers and Community Liaisons

Cultural brokers and community liaisons play a vital role in bridging communication between schools and diverse communities. Recruited from and trusted by the cultural groups they represent, these individuals help families and educators navigate linguistic, cultural, and institutional barriers while promoting mutual understanding and trust. McWayne et al. (2019) emphasize that such intermediaries draw upon families' cultural and social assets to strengthen the home-to-school link, fostering environments where parents feel respected as partners in their children's education. Similarly, Pacino and Warren (2023) highlight that culturally responsive partnerships depend on recognizing community knowledge as a form of expertise and embedding cultural brokers within school systems to facilitate two-way learning between educators and families. Schools that employ cultural brokers and community liaisons not only enhance communication and family engagement but also report improvements in student attendance and participation, particularly among historically marginalized populations.

Community-Based Organizations

Community-based organizations serve as vital intermediaries for reaching disconnected families and building the trust necessary for authentic engagement. Warren et al. (2009) demonstrate that a community-based relational approach to parent engagement proves particularly effective when schools partner with organizations already embedded in communities and trusted by families. Partnerships with churches, cultural centers, and grassroots organizations enable schools to engage families who distrust or feel alienated from educational institutions by leveraging existing social networks and relationships rather than expecting families to navigate unfamiliar institutional structures.

Perry and Geller (2021) emphasize that transformational family engagement requires systemic and sustainable models that build capacity through partnerships at multiple levels, moving beyond transactional interactions to create integrated support systems. These partnerships prove particularly effective in addressing attendance among immigrant and refugee populations, with tailored, culturally responsive approaches enhancing intervention effectiveness (Reid, 2023).

Create Feedback Loops, Not Solutions

When schools, families, and communities collaborate and share responsibility for students' education, more students succeed in school. - Epstein (2019)

"You design something and hand it over, saying, 'Here's the solution to the problem, just do this.' And then we wonder why we get pushed back, we wonder why it is not sustainable when you don't create feedback loops." - Implementation Science Researcher

"You're not going to truly learn the reasons students miss school from a school or district data system, because those reasons aren't reliably tracked. The only way to really understand is by going directly to the students and families themselves."
— Researcher

True partnership requires shared decision-making power and a willingness to be influenced by community wisdom.

FINDING 5: IMPLEMENTATION QUALITY THROUGH CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Implementation science demonstrates that implementation quality predicts outcomes more strongly than specific program models. One researcher captured this challenge well, noting the tendency to over-rely on prescribed frameworks: "You can fetishize the multi-tiered approach (i.e., MTSS) and offload the thinking onto the framework, but the framework can't do the thinking for you." This observation highlights a fundamental pitfall. While frameworks provide essential structure, they cannot substitute for the critical

thinking, contextual understanding, and continuous problem-solving that successful implementation demands.

What the Evidence Says About Intervention Selection and Implementation Quality

In education, Meyers and Brandt (2015) argue that interventions yield their intended effects only when core components are delivered with sufficient fidelity, dosage, and quality, supported by adequate staff capacity and contextual resources. They emphasize that variability in these implementation dimensions across sites often far exceeds variability in the formal program design itself, making implementation a primary driver of effect heterogeneity.

Similarly, Nilsen and Birken (2020) synthesize extensive empirical evidence showing that implementation determinants such as organizational readiness, professional competence, leadership, data systems, and cultural alignment, determine whether an intervention's mechanisms of change are activated in practice. They note that even "evidence-based" models fail when these supports are absent, while simpler models can succeed when buttressed by strong implementation infrastructure. According to their framework, context and strategic implementation quality often explain more outcome variance than the conceptual or theoretical distinctions between programs (Nilsen & Birken, 2020).

Analysis of district reports reveals widespread implementation challenges undermining potentially effective interventions. A RAND Corporation study found 23% of districts reporting no particularly effective interventions, with further investigation revealing implementation problems rather than program inadequacy (Diliberti et al., 2024). Expert interviews consistently highlighted implementation challenges, with one district administrator noting: "We've tried numerous evidence-based programs that failed not because they were wrong for our context, but because we lacked infrastructure to implement them properly."

Research examining scaled interventions documents consistent degradation of effects when programs expand without paying attention to implementation quality. Interventions showing strong effects in controlled studies often fail when implemented at scale due to inadequate training, insufficient resources, or lack of continuous improvement processes (Dede, 2006; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019).

Frameworks Can't Do the Thinking for You

"You can fetishize the multi-tiered approach (i.e., MTSS) and offload the thinking onto the framework, but the framework can't do the thinking for you." - Implementation Researcher

"We've tried numerous evidence-based programs that failed not because they were wrong for our context, but because we lacked infrastructure to implement them properly." - District Administrator

Implementation quality, not program selection, determines whether interventions succeed.

Strategic Perspectives on Implementing High-Quality Programs

Prioritizing implementation quality requires shifts in how districts approach intervention selection and management. Organizations achieving sustained improvements develop perspectives valuing process over product, investing in implementation infrastructure before launching new programs. One researcher introduced the concept of "tier zero" to describe the foundational work a district must undertake before implementing any tiered support system. This work focuses on a district's "own practices and priorities."

Successful districts cultivate beliefs about continuous improvement rather than one-time solutions. Research by Bryk et al. (2015) demonstrates that schools adopting improvement science principles achieve better outcomes through iterative refinement than those seeking perfect programs. This perspective enables learning from implementation challenges rather than abandoning interventions at first signs of difficulty.

The evidence indicates that education leaders must develop patience for gradual improvement rather than expecting immediate transformation. Districts that maintain interventions through initial implementation challenges, making adjustments based on data and feedback, ultimately achieve better outcomes than those that frequently change approaches.

Expert interviews emphasized the importance of viewing implementation as organizational change rather than program adoption. One researcher stated: "Successful implementation requires changing adult behaviors, organizational routines, and institutional cultures. Districts that recognize this complexity invest appropriately in

change management processes." Effective implementation hinges on leadership priorities. One researcher challenged school principals who describe student attendance as a "nice to have," asking pointedly: "If it isn't in your top five, then what is?" Another extended this critique to the district level, questioning whether an issue can truly be a priority if superintendents are not actively leading the work: "If you're a superintendent or assistant superintendent and not prioritizing this and expecting your principals to do this and not having conversations, is it really a priority from a leadership perspective?" These questions reveal a crucial point: when attendance is treated as secondary to other priorities, even evidence-based interventions cannot overcome the structural neglect.

Principals navigate competing demands that affect implementation quality. One researcher observed: "The principal may feel the district is asking them to shift focus away from instruction and academics to deal with other priorities." This tension highlights why implementation requires organizational alignment rather than simply directing building leaders to add programs.

Successful Implementation Approaches to High-Quality Implementation

Districts achieving high-quality implementation employ systematic approaches to building organizational capacity and monitoring fidelity. These approaches span from establishing clear implementation structures to ensuring data quality supports continuous improvement.

Effective implementation sometimes emerges from surprisingly simple innovations. One researcher shared: "Some of the things that we've found… the things where we've seen the greatest effects on our postcards… postcards that had a cover with a big sign that said 'urgent' really got parents' attention. It went into backpacks and really seemed to catch their eye." This illustrates how implementation quality includes testing and refining even basic communication strategies.

Building Implementation Infrastructure

Implementation teams with clear roles and responsibilities guide intervention deployment and monitoring. These teams, including administrators, teachers, support staff, and community members, ensure coordinated effort and accountability. Inadequate staffing structures undermine even well-designed approaches. One expert described a concerning example: "There was one person tasked with focusing on attendance at the district level, and I thought, 'That's not going to go well.'" Implementation capacity must match the scope and complexity of the challenge.

Phased rollout strategies enable districts to build implementation capacity gradually. Beginning with pilot schools allows refinement of processes before scaling. Evidence indicates that districts using phased approaches achieve better long-term outcomes than those attempting immediate full implementation. Professional learning communities focused on interventions facilitate continuous improvement (DuFour et al., 2021). Regular meetings for sharing challenges, analyzing data, and refining practices build collective efficacy and implementation knowledge. Research documents stronger implementation in schools with active professional learning communities.

Technical assistance partnerships with research organizations or implementation specialists provide external expertise and support (Scott et al., 2024). Districts accessing ongoing coaching and consultation report better implementation quality and sustainability. Evidence suggests that external support proves particularly valuable during initial implementation stages and when addressing complex challenges.

Utilizing Data Systems

Data systems supporting implementation monitoring enable rapid identification and resolution of problems. Districts tracking implementation fidelity alongside outcome metrics make more effective adjustments than those monitoring only attendance rates. Real-time attendance tracking systems with data analytics enable schools to identify attendance patterns early and implement timely interventions (Gottfried & Hutt, 2019). As reported in RAND's Spring 2024 American School District Panel Survey, approximately 70% of districts reported using early warning systems to flag at-risk students in 2023-2024, making it the most common approach to combat absenteeism, with 25% of these districts reporting it as their most effective strategy (Diliberti et al., 2024).

Early warning systems provide a systematic framework for identifying at-risk students through key predictors, including attendance, behavioral incidents, and course performance. Research by Balfanz et al. (2007) demonstrates that a limited number of predictive indicators can identify students at risk of not graduating, highlighting the importance of early identification and intervention. Chang et al. (2018) recommend implementing early warning data monitoring systems to track attendance in real-time and identify at-risk students early on. A randomized controlled trial found that schools implementing early warning systems experienced statistically significant reductions in chronic absenteeism and decreases in course failures during the first year of implementation (Faria et al., 2017).

The effective use of data systems requires transparency about what data are being collected, how they are analyzed, and for what purposes they inform decisions (Mandinach

& Gummer, 2025). These systems facilitate evidence-based decision-making throughout implementation when grounded in two primary components of ethical data use: transparency in the decision-making process and careful consideration of consequences, including potential harms (Mandinach, in press). The technical factor of data ethics—using appropriate data aligned to intended purposes, applying suitable analytics, and ensuring data quality in terms of reliability, validity, timeliness, completeness, and relevance—is particularly critical for implementation monitoring systems (Mandinach & Gummer, 2025). Furthermore, such systems must attend to the social factor by respecting students' educational, academic, personal, and social needs while taking into account their values, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds (Mandinach, 2024).

For maximum effectiveness, attendance data should be disaggregated by factors such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability status to reveal inequities in attendance patterns (Chang et al., 2018). Gentle-Genitty et al. (2020) advocate for proactively utilizing attendance data rather than merely emphasizing absences, systematically collecting and analyzing attendance markers to understand patterns, identify risk factors, and target early interventions. However, identification systems succeed only when paired with an accurate diagnosis of underlying problems. One researcher cautioned: "You have to diagnose the problem accurately. If you identify the wrong problem, you're just analyzing the wrong thing. It's like diagnosing a patient and treating the wrong diagnosis." Data systems identify students needing support; implementation quality determines whether that support addresses actual barriers.

Once at-risk students are identified through data systems, targeted interventions become critical. Chang et al. (2018) recommend tracking attendance metrics at both individual and school levels to create accountability. Schools should develop personalized attendance improvement plans tailored to the specific needs of at-risk students, which may include interventions such as tutoring, counseling, or mentorship programs (Eklund et al., 2022). The effectiveness of these targeted approaches is supported by meta-analysis finding that targeted interventions for at-risk students resulted in small but significant effects on attendance outcomes (Eklund et al., 2022).

However, districts must also confront resource limitations realistically. As one expert noted: "They can't give intensive support to every single student. I mean, I'm sure they'd like to, but they can't. They know they can't. It's just too much." This reality necessitates strategic thinking about "bringing people together around the student instead of a content area, determining what's working, and allocating your resources." Implementation quality includes making difficult decisions about resource allocation based on data and local context. It also requires treating interventions as hypotheses to be tested rather than

solutions to be deployed. One researcher emphasized: “Strategies don’t become solutions until you test them. They don’t become solutions until you can attest that you’ve actually seen that they work.” This perspective shifts districts from program adoption to continuous improvement cycles.

Ensuring Data Quality and Ethical Data Use

As schools increasingly rely on data-driven decision-making to address chronic absenteeism, understanding the potential consequences of using inaccurate or flawed attendance data becomes crucial. Poor data quality can lead to misallocation of resources, with underreporting resulting in insufficient resources for attendance initiatives while overreporting diverts excessive resources at the expense of other critical areas. Inaccurate data can lead to implementation of interventions that don’t address real issues, wasting time and resources on strategies that don’t yield results. Inherently biased or flawed attendance data could lead to unfair targeting of certain student groups or failure to provide support to groups that need it. Awareness of data inaccuracies among students, families, or staff members could erode trust in school systems and reduce engagement with attendance improvement initiatives. Inaccurate reporting could potentially lead to compliance issues with district regulations, risking penalties or reduced funding.

To address these data quality risks, schools and districts should implement several strategies. Develop a robust data governance framework that clearly defines roles, responsibilities, and processes for collecting, managing, and ensuring the quality of data. Conduct regular audits of attendance data to identify discrepancies, patterns of errors, or potential biases. Provide comprehensive training to all staff involved in attendance data collection and management to ensure consistency and accuracy. Implement key data quality metrics, such as accuracy, completeness, timeliness, consistency, and regularly monitor these metrics. Address data quality issues at the source by improving data entry processes and implementing validation checks. Maintain trust with stakeholders by being transparent about data collection methods and known limitations of the data.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings presented in this paper converge on a critical insight: addressing chronic absenteeism in the post-pandemic era requires rethinking traditional approaches. As one researcher observed, “There hasn’t been much work examining what’s changed from pre- to post-pandemic. My colleagues and I suspect that the ABCs—attendance, behavior, and course performance—the indicators of students who succeed in school, have probably changed.” This acknowledgment of an evolving landscape should inform how education leaders approach the challenge moving forward.”

The evidence is clear: knowledge of effective interventions is necessary but insufficient. Districts must simultaneously address chronic absenteeism as a symptom of deeper underlying causes, adapt to fundamentally altered family expectations, engage authentic community voice, and prioritize implementation quality over program selection. These are not sequential steps but interconnected activities that must be pursued concurrently.

Three principles should guide education leaders as they develop contextually appropriate responses:

First, embrace complexity rather than seeking simple solutions. The "million and one causes" of chronic absenteeism demand diagnostic approaches tailored to local contexts. Frameworks provide structure, but cannot substitute for the difficult work of understanding why students in your community miss school. As districts nationwide have discovered, evidence-based programs fail when implementation infrastructure is absent, while simpler approaches succeed when supported by strong organizational capacity and genuine relationships.

Second, recognize that traditional compliance-based approaches are insufficient for post-pandemic realities. Families experienced alternative educational models during COVID-19, and many discovered that their children could learn differently. Simply demanding a return to previous attendance patterns ignores these revelations and risks further eroding the trust that pandemic disruptions damaged. Districts must develop compelling value propositions for in-person learning through engaging experiences, meaningful relationships, and acknowledgment of families' legitimate concerns.

Third, center the voices of those most affected by chronic absenteeism. Students, families, and community members possess irreplaceable knowledge about attendance barriers and potential solutions. Partnerships succeed not through procedural implementation but through authentic relationship quality and shared decision-making power. Districts that create genuine feedback loops, rather than designing solutions and then wondering why they face resistance, develop more effective and sustainable interventions.

The work ahead is substantial and ongoing. Chronic absenteeism rates remain significantly elevated above pre-pandemic levels, with some students missing 50% or more of school days, a severity level that didn't require tracking before 2020. Educational systems cannot simply "get back on track" because, as one expert noted, "we're on a different track entirely."

However, the path forward is illuminated by districts already demonstrating success: those conducting systematic root cause analyses, investing in implementation

infrastructure before launching programs, building authentic community partnerships, creating flexible yet accountable learning pathways, and maintaining interventions through initial challenges with continuous improvement mindsets. These districts recognize that effective responses require organizational change, not just program adoption.

Chronic absenteeism serves as a barometer for broader systemic health. When students miss school at high rates, they signal that something fundamental isn't working, whether in their families' economic stability, the school's cultural responsiveness, community support systems, or the compelling nature of the educational experience itself. Education leaders who view attendance data through this diagnostic lens, rather than simply as a compliance metric, position themselves to address root causes while building sustainable systems of support.

The challenge is significant, but so is the opportunity. By combining a comprehensive understanding of evidence-based interventions with strategic attention to implementation realities, authentic community partnership, and adaptation to post-pandemic contexts, districts can make meaningful progress. The work is difficult, context-dependent, and requires sustained commitment, but it is achievable and essential for ensuring all students have the opportunity to benefit from consistent, engaging educational experiences.

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