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Promising approaches for reducing student chronic absenteeism

Do school-based interventions reduce absenteeism? Findings from a meta-analysis of 49 studies



A summary of findings from
Gottfried, Le, & Kim, 2026

This report summarizes findings from:

**Do School-Based Interventions Reduce Absenteeism?
A Meta-Analytic Review**

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Based on the study: <https://ies.ed.gov/use-work/awards/what-works-reduce-student-absenteeism-systematic-review-literature>

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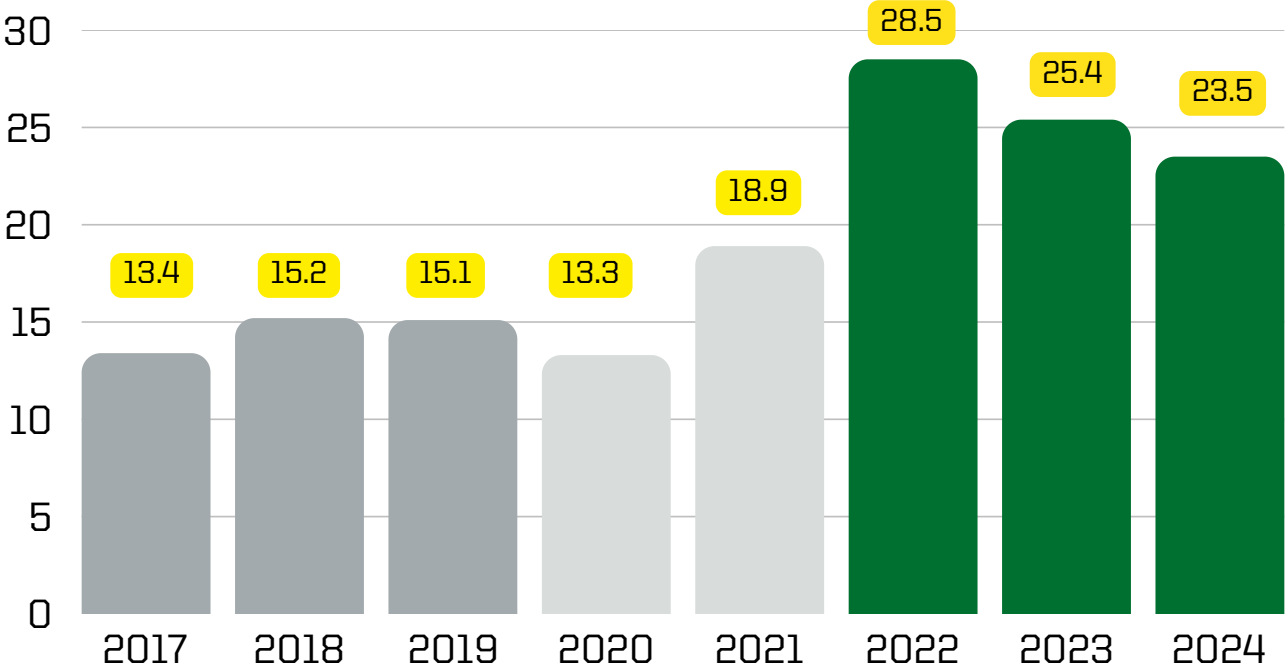
<https://hedcoinstitute.uoregon.edu/reports/chronic-absenteeism>

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Chronic absenteeism is a persistent challenge across the U.S.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across the U.S. saw sharp increases in chronic absenteeism¹. While rates are slowly declining, they still remain high.²

Chronic absenteeism rates sharply increased following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and have not yet reached pre-COVID levels



School years are labeled by the year they end (2022 refers to the 2021-22 school year). Source: Nat Malkus, “[Lingering Absence in Public Schools Tracking Post-Pandemic Chronic Absenteeism into 2024](#),” American Enterprise Institute, June 2025.

What is chronic absenteeism?

Chronic absenteeism is most commonly defined as missing 10% or more of a school year. These absences may be excused, unexcused, or due to disciplinary actions such as suspensions.³

How do schools address chronic absenteeism?

In this review, the authors included five approaches to reducing absenteeism:



Curriculum and instruction changes to increase engagement

Using culturally relevant pedagogy or incorporating music into lessons.



Fostering relationships and mentoring

Pairing students with adult mentors or case managers, or having older students serve as peer mentors to younger students.



Increase family connectedness to school

Interventions that seek to address home factors and engage parents, such as through home visits or parenting support services.



Messaging parents about attendance

Interventions communicating with parents via “nudges” – short messages informing them of their child’s attendance records.



Whole school approach

School climate reforms or early warning systems to analyze attendance, behavior, and achievement to identify students at risk of failing or dropping out.

Schools may have used multiple strategies simultaneously.

Do these approaches work?

Yes, findings across studies suggest that on average, these approaches reduce chronic absenteeism, reduce days absent, and increase attendance rates.

Will these work for my school?

77%
chance⁺

There is a 77% chance that implementing these approaches will **reduce chronic absenteeism** for students at your school

75%
chance⁺

There is a 75% chance that implementing these approaches will **reduce days absent** for students at your school

65%
chance⁺

There is a 65% chance that implementing these approaches will **increase attendance rates** for students at your school

⁺Assuming your students and school are similar to those included in this study.

Chronic absenteeism: SMD = -0.054, 95% CI [-0.071, -0.037]

Attendance rates: SMD = 0.039; 95% CI [0.022, 0.055]

Days absent: SMD = -0.038; 95% CI [-0.054, -0.021]

How well do these approaches work?

On average, students exposed to any approach were about **9% less likely** to be chronically absent compared to those whose schools did not implement an approach.

The strongest effects were for **interventions messaging parents** or **instituting whole school reforms** compared to interventions lacking these components.

Messaging Parents



Students whose parents were exposed to messaging were about **18% less likely** to be chronically absent.

SMD = -0.107; 95% CI [-0.142, -0.071]

Whole School Reforms



Students exposed to whole school reforms were about **12% less likely** to be chronically absent.

SMD = -0.073; 95% CI [-0.102, -0.045]

The authors also explored possible differences in findings based on study characteristics. For chronic absenteeism, randomized designs had significantly stronger effects than quasi-experimental designs ($b = -0.09$, $SE = 0.02$). For attendance rates and days absent, there was no evidence of a moderating effect from type of intervention, schooling level, or type of study design for these outcomes.

Recommendations

1. Consider implementing parent-focused messaging interventions.

Refine messaging content to enhance salience or personalization, especially for subgroups historically experiencing higher absenteeism

2. Prioritize investments in infrastructure surrounding interventions, not solely in the interventions themselves.

- Establish progress monitoring routines within early warning systems
- Invest in data systems that facilitate real-time identification of students requiring support
- Provide professional development for staff implementing mentoring programs

3. Encourage state agencies to develop statewide guidance and multi-tiered systems of support.

- Develop implementation standards for attendance initiatives to reduce variability in execution across schools
- Focus on implementation rigor so that districts may be able to realize effects closer to those observed in the randomized evaluations included in this study
- Develop centralized templates, nudges, or behavioral insight-informed communication toolkits to help schools easily implement interventions

Additional resources

[Attendance Works](#)

[Education Commission of the States](#)

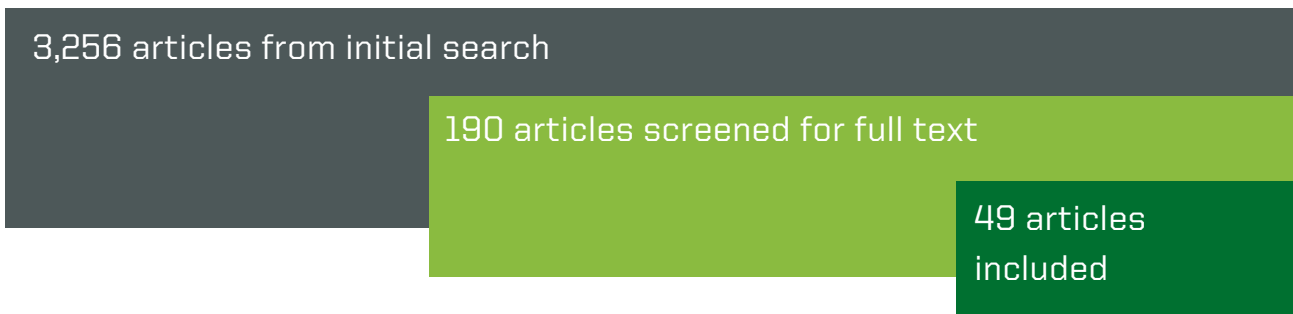
[U.S. Department of Education](#)

Methods

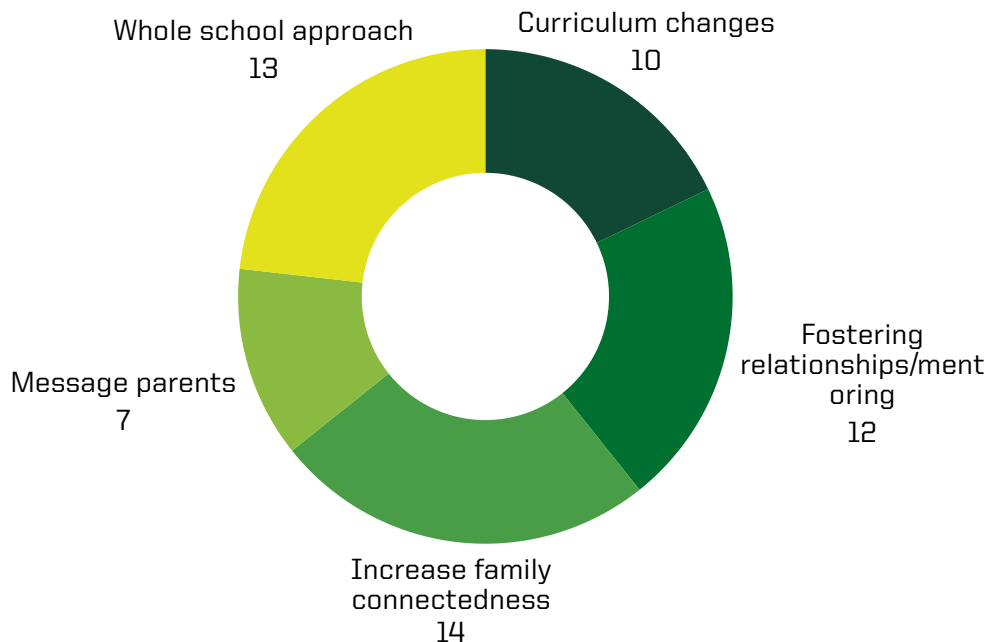
The authors included:

- Studies published in English from 2016 through August 2025
- Studies of interventions delivered in school settings in the U.S.
- Studies of grades K-12 (37% included elementary school, 35.6% included middle schools, 27.4% included high school)
- Studies that analyzed student attendance data obtained through administrative records

The authors used robust variance estimation to adjust the standard errors to account for the non-independent observations.



Number of studies for each type of intervention



Study Considerations

- The authors noted potentially biased reporting with respect to the number of days absent: studies with larger standard errors were associated with larger effect sizes ($t = -4.33$, $p = 0.00$)
- Transportation and health-related programs were underrepresented in the eligible study pool
- The authors did not have a sufficient number of studies to examine other attendance outcomes outside of chronic absences, attendance rates, and number of days absent
- There were few follow-up studies to assess longer-term outcomes of the interventions
- Most studies included in the analysis were on interventions predating the substantial structural changes that reshaped schooling during and after the pandemic (e.g., e-learning days)

References:

1. Princiotta, D., Change, H., Balfanz, R. & Byrnes, V. (2024). Turning Back the Tide: The Critical Role of States In Reducing Chronic Absenteeism. Education Commission of the States. Time in school is measured using:
2. DiMarco, B. (2026). Tracking state trends in chronic absenteeism. FutureEd. Time in school is measured using:
3. Attendance Works. (2016). What's the Difference Between Chronic Absence and Truancy? At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across the U.S. saw sharp increases in chronic absenteeism, nearly doubling the percentage of students who were chronically absent¹. While rates are slowly declining, they still remain high.

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