

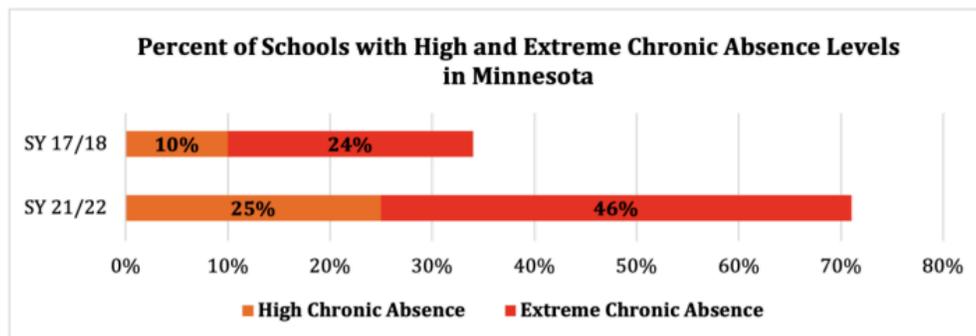


# Chronic Absenteeism: A National and Local Challenge

## Executive Summary:

Chronic absenteeism among middle and high school students has become a critical issue on both a national and local level. The 2021-22 school year saw unprecedented levels of absenteeism across the United States, with the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating the problem. Chronic school absenteeism has far-reaching consequences, impacting student learning, engagement, and the likelihood of on time high school graduation. Students from low-income backgrounds, communities of color, and those with disabilities are disproportionately affected by chronic absenteeism. In Minnesota, concerns over absenteeism have been highlighted by several recent reports and news articles, with data showing a decline in attendance rates post-pandemic, affecting student outcomes and graduation rates.

1. **Minnesota Schools with High and Extreme Chronic Absence Increased from 34% to 71%.** (See school demographics, chart 2)



Graph: Attendance Works: Chronic Absence in U.S. School Districts: 2021-22, Data Highlights for Minnesota.

Statewide data from the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Census Bureau revealed that the percentage of Minnesota Schools with either High or Extreme Chronic Absence increased dramatically from 34% in 2017/18 to 71% during the 2021/22 school year.

Multiple factors contribute to chronic absenteeism, including family, school, community, and student-specific issues including health concerns, academic struggles and transportation barriers. The impact of absenteeism on academic performance is significant, with studies showing a strong correlation between poor attendance and lower test scores, as well as increased dropout rates. To address this challenge, effective solutions such as family engagement, positive school climate initiatives, early warning systems, mentorship programs, and fair attendance practices have been proposed to improve student engagement and reduce chronic absenteeism. By implementing these strategies, schools, districts and lawmakers can work towards ensuring all students have equal access to education and support for academic success.

**Recommendations to address Chronic Absenteeism**



**Family Engagement**



**PBIS/MTSS**



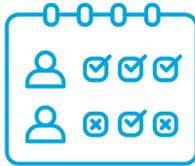
**Check & Connect Model**



**Increased Caring Adults and Mentors**



**Data-Driven Early Warning Systems**



**Promote Fair Attendance Practices**



Minnesota Alliance With Youth ◦ (February 2024) ◦ [www.mnyouth.net](http://www.mnyouth.net)

## **The Alarming Rise of Chronic Absenteeism in Middle and High School Students**

Chronic absenteeism in middle and high school students has reached unprecedented levels in recent years. On a national scale, chronic absenteeism, defined as the percentage of students missing at least 10 percent of a school year, has surged in recent years. New data from the U.S. Department of Education reveals unprecedented levels of chronic absenteeism in schools across the United States during the 2021-22 school year, according to researchers at Johns Hopkins University's Everyone Graduates Center. The COVID pandemic led to widespread absenteeism, and attendance levels have failed to return to pre-pandemic levels. The impact of missed school is far-reaching, affecting student learning, engagement, and the probability of on-time high school graduation. These consequences have a disparate impact on students. Children living in poverty are more likely to be chronically absent, and students from communities of color as well as those with disabilities are disproportionately affected by the issue.

### **A Local Issue**

In Minnesota, concern over the issue of chronic student absenteeism has been increasing. A recent Star Tribune article<sup>1</sup> noted that in advance of the 2023/24 school year “several east metro school districts have huddled with Ramsey County Attorney John Choi to consider possible solutions to attendance concerns and the way truancy ripples across other societal issues.” The same newspaper highlighted the issue in September 2023, noting that “Across Minnesota, only 70% of students attended class at

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<sup>1</sup> Lonetree, Anthony. “Minnesota school, county leaders push for plans to address chronically absent students” Minneapolis Star Tribune, February 10, 2024.  
<https://www.startribune.com/minnesota-school-county-leaders-push-for-plans-to-address-chronically-absent-students/600342541/>

least 90% of the time during the 2021-2022 school year, according to the most recent state Department of Education report. That's a drop from pre-pandemic times, when 85% of students were regularly showing up for school<sup>2</sup>.”

### **Who is Affected?**

Data from the U.S. Department of Education showed that during the 2021-22 school year, two-thirds of K-12 students, or 32.25 million children nationally, were “enrolled in a school with high or extreme levels of chronic absence, meaning at least one of five students in their school missed almost four weeks throughout the school year.<sup>3</sup>” Students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and students of color have the highest rates of chronic absences.

A September 2023 article in The74 highlighted the inequities inherent in the issue of absenteeism, providing the following data on Minneapolis Public Schools: “In Minneapolis Public Schools, for instance, the overall attendance rate fell from 79% to 46% from 2019 to 2022. But while the number of white students attending school 90% or more of the time dropped from 90% to 59%, the number for Black students fell from 71% to 32%; for Native Americans, from 44% to 24%; and for Latinos, from 78% to 44%. Attendance among children receiving special education services plummeted from 63% to 37%.<sup>4</sup>”

Chronic absenteeism is not just a metro issue. Statewide 2021-22 data shows that 44% of middle schools and 66% of high schools across Minnesota had extreme chronic absence. School districts across the state have alarming chronic absence levels<sup>5</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> Klecker, Mara. “Minnesota schools work to combat rising levels of chronic absenteeism” Minneapolis Star Tribune, September 23, 2023.  
<https://www.startribune.com/minnesota-schools-work-to-combat-rising-levels-of-chronic-absenteeism-student-mental-health/600306959/>

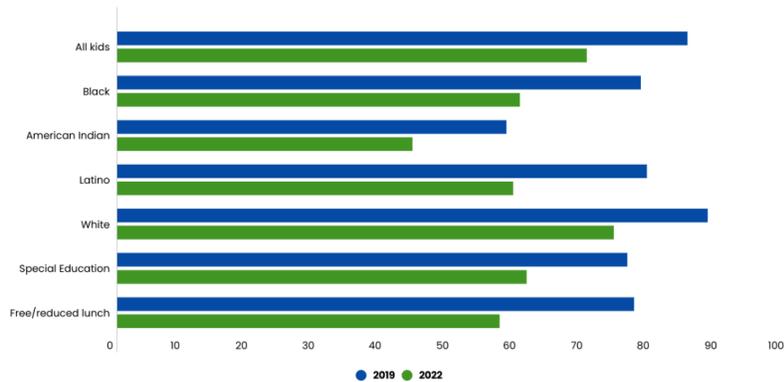
<sup>3</sup> Malkus, Nat. “Long COVID for Public Schools: Chronic Absenteeism Before and After the Pandemic.” American Enterprise Institute. January 31, 2024.  
<https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/long-covid-for-public-schools-chronic-absenteeism-before-and-after-the-pandemic/>

<sup>4</sup> Hawkins, Beth. “Attendance Gap: New Data from Minnesota Reveals Chasm in Chronic Absenteeism” The74. September 14, 2023.  
<https://www.the74million.org/article/attendance-gap-new-data-from-minnesota-reveals-chasm-in-chronic-absenteeism/>

<sup>5</sup> Chronic Absence in U.S. School Districts: 2021-22. Data Map created by Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University. [https://edu-dsi.shinyapps.io/chronic\\_absence/](https://edu-dsi.shinyapps.io/chronic_absence/)

- Pipestone Area School District: 32.6%
- Rochester Public School District: 48.1%
- Cook County Public School District: 42.9%
- Warroad Public School District: 39.6%
- Staples-Motley School District: 45%

**Percentage of Minnesota student attendance statewide  
2019 vs. 2022**



Minnesota Department of Education/Meghan Gallagher

## Why Are Students Chronically Absent?

There are many reasons why students do not attend school, and these may include family-, school-, community-, or student-specific factors. Students in younger grades are more likely to miss school due to family factors (“children whose parents suffer from substance abuse, or whose work schedules makes it difficult for them to get their children out the door each morning”). Older students are more likely to be absent due to student and school factors, such as disengagement, fear of bullying, and low academic performance<sup>7</sup>.

Data collected from Be@School, Hennepin County’s attendance support program, shows the top reasons behind chronic absenteeism were: student mental or physical health,

<sup>6</sup> Hawkins, Beth. “Attendance Gap: New Data from Minnesota Reveals Chasm in Chronic Absenteeism” The74. September 14, 2023. <https://www.the74million.org/article/attendance-gap-new-data-from-minnesota-reveals-chasm-in-chronic-absenteeism/>

<sup>7</sup> Jacob, B.A. & Lovett, K. (2017). Chronic absenteeism: An old problem in search of new answers. Washington, D.C.: Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chronic-absenteeism-an-old-problem-in-search-of-new-answers/>

chemical dependency, academic struggles and being behind academically, and transportation barriers. Other major factors included communication problems with the school, financial strain, housing insecurity, and major life changes like having a baby, moving or being incarcerated<sup>8</sup>.

Additionally, new research is showing that students that identify as LGBTQIA are impacted by higher absenteeism rates as well. A 2022 study published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine revealed that “disparities in school absence due to safety concerns may be due, in part, to greater exposure to violence victimization and interpersonal violence at school experienced by sexual minority students than by their heterosexual peers.”<sup>9</sup>

### Common Reasons for Chronic Absenteeism



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### The Impact of Chronic Absenteeism

Persistent absenteeism is linked to a range of negative academic consequences. A 2008 study on graduation trends within Chicago Public Schools revealed a striking correlation: the number of days a student missed in eighth grade proved to be eight times more

<sup>8</sup> Be@School Program Statistics. <https://www.hennepinattorney.org/prevention/students-youth/be-at-school>

<sup>9</sup> Lowry et al. (2022) Associations Between School Absence and School Violence by Sexual Identity. American Journal of Preventive Medicine

[https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(22\)00184-2/abstract](https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(22)00184-2/abstract)

<sup>10</sup> CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: A National Crisis. 2023 Aperture Education

<https://f.hubspotusercontent30.net/hubfs/2613587/White%20Papers/Chronic%20Absenteeism%20Whitepaper.pdf>

indicative of failing courses in the freshman year compared to eighth grade test scores. Put simply, student attendance matters for academic performance<sup>11</sup>. The association between poor attendance and lower test scores is robust and remains consistent across school districts of varying sizes, locations, and student demographics.

According to research from Johns Hopkins University, absenteeism in middle and high school is one of the strongest predictors of dropout rates. Starting as early as 6th grade, missing school can indicate a higher likelihood of a student eventually dropping out. “A study of public school students in Utah found that an incidence of chronic absenteeism in even a single year between 8th and 12th grade was associated with a seven-fold increase in the likelihood of dropping out.<sup>12</sup>” Absenteeism influences not only a student’s likelihood of graduating high school but also of completing college. An analysis of Rhode Island data found that only 11% of the chronically absent students who graduated from high school made it to a second year of college, compared to 51% of students with better high school attendance records<sup>13</sup>.

Chronic absenteeism has also been associated with negative socioemotional consequences, social disengagement, and feelings of alienation, even when factoring in comprehensive student factors such as lagged socioemotional measures<sup>14</sup>.

## **A Focus on Solutions**

During the widespread school closures in 2020, educational institutions nationwide experienced a rise in chronic absenteeism. However, there are several effective strategies with strong evidence that can be employed to increase student engagement post pandemic.

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<sup>11</sup> Allensworth, E. & J. Easton, 2008. What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A Close Look at Course Grades, Failures, and Attendance in the Freshman Year. Consortium on Chicago School Research, July 2008

<sup>12</sup> United States Department of Education. “CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN THE NATION’S SCHOOLS A hidden educational crisis.” <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>

<sup>13</sup> Ginsburg et al. “Absences Add Up: How School Attendance.” Attendance Works. August 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Gottfried, M. 2014. Chronic Absenteeism and Its Effects on Students’ Academic and Socioemotional Outcomes. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 19:2, 53-75.

### Family Engagement:

Research shows that schools with strong family engagement prior to the pandemic had notably lower levels of chronic absenteeism compared to others. “Schools with stronger, pre existing family engagement—measured in surveys that assessed trust between parents and teachers, parent involvement in schools, and parents’ influence in schools’ decision making- had chronic absenteeism rates after remote learning that were about 6 percentage points lower than similar schools with weaker family engagement.<sup>15</sup>”

**Local Spotlight:** Laura Jeffrey Academy is a tuition-free charter middle school in St. Paul, offering STEM-focused, inclusive educational experiences for students in grades 5-8. The school prioritizes strong family engagement that starts with expectation-setting at the beginning of year with a family potluck. Laura Jeffrey Academy’s advisory model focuses on addressing current events, as well as student performance and behavior. Staff advisors conduct home visits (either at the family’s home or in a public space) with students on their caseloads in order to establish a strong relationship with parents and caregivers, and maintain an open door policy in the school for parents and family. Every family is required to participate in a school tour at the start of their student’s time at Laura Jeffery, and staff explains the many available ways to engage in their student’s school and learning, including participating directly in the classroom setting to support their student’s school experience.

### Positive School Climate/Multi-Tiered System of Supports:

Implementing a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports framework (PBIS) in a school setting shifts the disciplinary focus from punishing negative behaviors to acknowledging positive ones. A positive school climate results from the school's efforts to prioritize fostering safety; promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community. The social-emotional bond teachers establish with students through PBIS fosters a positive school environment. By utilizing PBIS to emphasize positive behaviors, it can decrease problematic conduct, enhance perceptions of school safety, and boost academic achievements. A positive school

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<sup>15</sup> Peetz, Caitlynn “New Research Finds a Crucial Factor in Reducing Chronic Absenteeism.” Education Week. October 23, 2023

climate is critically related to school success, leading to improved attendance, achievement, and retention and even rates of graduation, according to research<sup>16</sup>.

**Local Spotlight:** Aitkin Public School District utilizes Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) programming districtwide to address the growth and achievement of students. Their District Strategic Plan prioritizes several critical areas of growth, including Student Growth and Achievement, Student Development and Support, and Safe Learning Environments. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) are integrated into the plan to provide opportunities for students and staff to have positive interactions. The District employs an Assessment Coordinator who helps focus the MTSS system in the district. Superintendent Dan Stifter said, "Our district has taken a team approach to work within our MTSS framework to not only focus on academics, but to also build relationships with students across the board. We know and believe that students who have positive relationships within their school will do better both academically and socially." Currently, the priority areas are data and student support, and we are fortunate to have AmeriCorps Promise Fellows in our high school during the last 2 years. The Promise Fellows' work has centered around intervening by building relationships with our chronically absent students. The district's robust MTSS framework has led to promising results; Aitkin Secondary's graduation rate in 2022 was 86%, with an additional 6% continuing their education to pursue high school graduation in more than 4 years (compared to the state average graduation rate of 83.6% with 7.8% continuing).

#### Data-Driven Early Warning Systems:

"An early warning system (EWS) is a systematic approach to identifying and supporting students in elementary and secondary schools who display symptoms of risk for failing to achieve a key educational milestone, such as readiness for high school, on-time high school graduation, or college readiness.<sup>17</sup>" An Early Warning System consists of personnel, procedures, and information that are dedicated to using student data, including

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<sup>16</sup> National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments.  
<https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-climate-improvement>

<sup>17</sup> Faria, A.-M., Sorensen, N., Heppen, J., Bowdon, J., Taylor, S., Eisner, R., & Foster, S. (2017). Getting students on track for graduation: Impacts of the Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring System after one year (REL 2017–272). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest.  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED573814.pdf>

attendance and tardy-to-school data, in the early detection of students who may be facing difficulties in order to prevent academic failure or eventual dropout.

**Local Spotlight:** In Northfield, Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI) is dedicated to building partnerships and encouraging community collaborations that support, value, and empower youth. HCI provides behind-the-scenes support to over 30 initiatives in Rice County (including Minnesota Alliance With Youth), helping them further leverage resources for programs that benefit youth and families, including the TORCH program, which serves Northfield students in grades 6–12 who identify as students of color, youth from low-income families, and potential first-generation college attendees. Through this coalition, collective impact is a data-driven effort. In collaboration with program partners, HCI “identifies objectives, develops systems to collect meaningful program data, implements evaluations to measure impact, and produces data-driven evaluation reports for stakeholders and funders.” In 2022, an astounding 98% of TORCH program seniors graduated on time, and overall, Northfield High School reported a 95.9% graduation rate.

#### Increased Caring Adults and Mentors:

School-based mentoring programs foster lasting, positive bonds between a student and a supportive adult figure. Research demonstrates that linking students with mentors can effectively decrease instances of chronic absenteeism<sup>18</sup>. In a groundbreaking program in New York City, students with a pattern of chronic absenteeism who were paired with success mentors showed up for almost two additional weeks of school annually. These students also achieved improved academic results compared to peers without the guidance of a supportive adult<sup>19</sup>.

**Local spotlight: AmeriCorps Promise Fellows:** A 2022 study<sup>20</sup> of Minnesota Alliance With Youth’s AmeriCorps Promise Fellow program, a caring adult intervention

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<sup>18</sup> Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2013). Meeting the challenge of combating chronic absenteeism: Impact of the NYC Mayor’s Interagency Task Force on Chronic Absenteeism and School Attendance and its implications for other cities. Johns Hopkins School of Education.

<http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/NYC-Chronic-Absenteeism-Impact-Report.pdf>  
<sup>19</sup>Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2013). Meeting the challenge of combating chronic absenteeism: Impact of the NYC Mayor’s Interagency Task Force on Chronic Absenteeism and School Attendance and its implications for other cities. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins School of Education.

<sup>20</sup> Impact Evaluation of the Minnesota Alliance With Youth Statewide AmeriCorps Promise Fellows Program. Van Norman, Ethan. October 7, 2022.  
<https://americorps.gov/evidence-exchange/impact-evaluation-minnesota-alliance-youth-statewide-ameri-corps-promise-fellows>

program based on the Early Warning System, showed significant attendance gains for students served by Promise Fellows. The study found that, on average, students that participated in the program attended an additional week, or roughly five days of school, relative to students that did not participate in the program. The largest effects were observed among high school students and the analysis also indicated a larger benefit for Asian American, Latinx and multiracial students; with each of these student demographic groups showing an increase of approximately 10 additional days of school attendance each year.

#### Check and Connect Model:

Check & Connect is an intervention that uses a framework of mentoring and case management aimed toward reducing school dropout. The "Check" component refers to the process where mentors systematically monitor student performance variables (e.g., absences, tardies, behavioral referrals, grades), while the "Connect" component refers to mentors providing personalized, timely interventions to help students solve problems, build skills, and enhance competence. "Demonstrated outcomes of Check & Connect include: decrease in truancy, tardies, behavior referrals, and dropout rates; increase in attendance, persistence in school, credits accrued, and school completion; and impact on literacy.<sup>21</sup>"

**Local spotlight:** Check & Connect was developed at the University of Minnesota in partnership with the Minneapolis School District in 1990. The district's Director of Student Retention & Recovery oversees the program through the We Want You Back (WWYB) program, which utilizes a "rapid response, strength-based support system for students who were dropped from enrollment for non-attendance in MPS middle and high schools and youth/young adults who left school without a diploma.<sup>22</sup>" WWYB uses the Check & Connect model in partnership with a team of AmeriCorps Promise Fellows and full-time Check & Connect monitors to build strong relationships with each student. The monitors implement supports to keep students involved in their education, monitor grades, credits and attendance, offer academic support, and facilitate collaboration between the school, home and community services to ensure educational success. "Of the more than 1,700 Minneapolis students dropped from enrollment because of

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<sup>21</sup> <https://checkandconnect.umn.edu/model/default.html>

<sup>22</sup> Minneapolis Public Schools Check & Connect. <https://ccr.mpls.k12.mn.us/connect>

absenteeism last year, 550 were re-enrolled after the We Want You Back team reached out. Another 550 were confirmed to be enrolled in other districts.<sup>23</sup>

### Promote Fair Attendance Practices:

Research has found significant disparities in the labeling of absences as unexcused versus excused, as well as which students are suspended from school.

“Socioeconomically disadvantaged students are much more likely to have their absences labeled unexcused. This is also true for Black, Native American, Latinx, and Pacific Islander students relative to White, Asian American, and Filipino students. Black students experience the largest disparity.<sup>24</sup>” “As unexcused absences accumulate, responses typically become more punitive and can involve denial of credit for missed work, exclusion from extracurricular activities, court appearances, and fines for students and parents. Punitive responses are unlikely to improve attendance when absences occur for reasons beyond the control of a student and their family.<sup>25</sup>” Using data to identify and eliminate inequitable practices before they contribute to disengagement and dropping out of school is of critical importance.

**Local Spotlight:** Schools across the state have implemented strategies to provide flexibility and alternatives to unexcused absences. Norse Area Learning Center in North Branch, offers a pathway to graduation and/or a diploma, credit recovery, and work-based programming, in a unique location separate from traditional learning environments. The school manages the Distance Learning Academy (DLA) process in the district. When extenuating circumstances arise, students are able to meet with the school Principal to develop a plan for learning success, which can include attending school online from home via the district’s Edmentum platform. This flexibility allows students to take care of family obligations or accommodate work schedules without an unexcused absence.

Providing comprehensive on-site services also helps students from accruing unexcused absences. For example, Longfellow Alternative High School serves pregnant and

<sup>23</sup> Klecker, Mara. “Minnesota schools work to combat rising levels of chronic absenteeism” Minneapolis Star Tribune, September 23, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> McNeely, C., Chang, H., & Gee, K. (2023, March). Disparities in unexcused absences across California schools [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/disparities-unexcused-absences-across-california-schools>

<sup>25</sup> McNeely, C., Chang, H., & Gee, K. (2023, March). Disparities in unexcused absences across California schools [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/disparities-unexcused-absences-across-california-schools>

parenting teens in the Minneapolis Public School district. In addition to providing a student driven learning path and college credits through the D3 (Destination Diploma to Degree) program, the school also has on-site childcare and door-to-door transportation. These services meet the unique needs of the students and prevent unexcused absences.

## **Conclusion**

Student chronic absenteeism is a complex issue that requires a multi-faceted approach to address effectively. By understanding the impact of absenteeism on learning and graduation rates, educators, policymakers, and communities can work together to implement strategies that promote regular attendance, provide support for students facing barriers to attendance, and create a positive and inclusive school environment. In prioritizing attendance and engagement, we can help all students reach their full potential, improve graduation rates, and set them on a path towards success in their academic and professional endeavors.