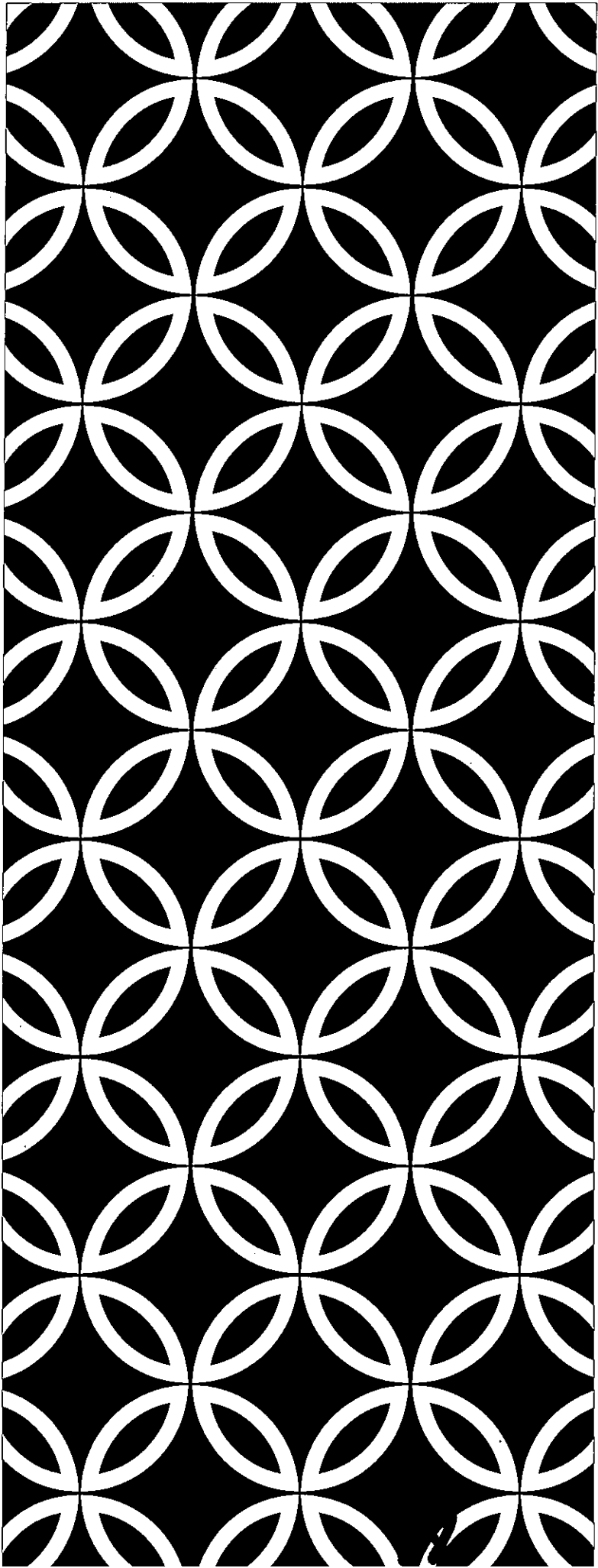


APPENDIX



**SCHOOL AVOIDANCE AND  
STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH:  
PASCACK VALLEY REGIONAL  
HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Dr. Sarah Bilotti  
Mrs. Doreen Babis  
Dr. Sandy Vazquez  
Dr. Jonathan Hesney

# UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

---

- School avoidance is when a student experiences severe difficulty attending school due to emotional distress.
- Common reasons include anxiety, depression, family issues, social concerns, or academic stress due to backlog of work, feeling overwhelmed.
- It can lead to academic decline, social isolation, and long-term emotional challenges.

# OUR APPROACH TO ADDRESSING SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

- We take a proactive and multi-faceted approach to support students facing school avoidance.
- Utilizing intervention and referral services (I&RS) to assess and develop individualized strategies.
- Implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) to provide varying levels of intervention.
- Interventions through these programs focus on both Academic and Mental Health Supports
- Adhering to attendance policy and sending appropriate notifications to parents at various thresholds, calling parents in for development of action plans, explaining compulsory education and parents' responsibility.
- Communicating with and collaborating with municipal courts if/when truancy charges are filed.

3x

# DIRECT INTERVENTIONS FOR STUDENTS

- **Home Visits:** Conducted to engage families, assess student needs, and create a supportive plan for reintegration.
- **School-Based Support:** Regular check-ins, modified schedules, and individualized transition plans. Crafting realistic incremental benchmarks.
- **Wellness Centers:** Each school has a dedicated Wellness Center with two support counselors providing emotional and mental health support.

# SPECIAL EDUCATION AND INTENSIVE SUPPORT

- For students requiring more structured emotional and academic support, we offer self-contained programs at each high school.
- These programs include mental health case managers who coordinate care and provide tailored support.
- Additional services include counseling, behavioral interventions, and collaboration with external providers.
- Analyzing the benefits of creating safe environments and supports, in-district and looking at the programs that are supporting school refusal/avoidant students to avoid students being placed in more restrictive environments.

# COMMUNITY AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

- We actively involve parents/guardians in the intervention process to ensure a holistic approach to student support.
- Resources, workshops, and meetings are being facilitated to educate and empower families.
- Collaboration with community mental health services to offer extended care and crisis management when necessary.

6x

# CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

- School avoidance is a complex issue requiring a compassionate, individualized response.
- Our district remains committed to supporting every student through a variety of interventions and specialized programs.
- Continue to explore agencies to provide proactive support for our students to avoid more severe situations arising.
- Possible utilization of a screening tool to assess students Mental Health throughout the school year.

7x



Julie Larrea Borst  
julieborst@saveourschoolsnj.org

11 March 2025

Joint Committee on the Public Schools  
Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

Save Our Schools NJ (SOSNJ) is a grassroots organization with over 38,000 members statewide who believe all children deserve a high-quality education regardless of their zip code.

**What is chronic absenteeism, and why is it important?**

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of school days. In New Jersey, where our school year is 180 days, it is missing 18 or more days of school.

The Learning Policy Institute (LPI), Dr. Linda Darling Hamond's organization, based in California, explains why this is problematic in LPI's report: *Reducing Chronic Absenteeism: Lessons from Community Schools*:

*"When students miss school, they lose opportunities for learning and social interaction as well as access to critical services. Research shows that chronically absent students are more likely to fall behind academically, disengage socially, and drop out of school altogether. Because absenteeism is strongly associated with these important student outcomes, it is crucial that policymakers, educators, and researchers identify effective strategies to alleviate it."*

**What are Community Schools?**

The Institute for Educational Leadership defines Community Schools as:

*"A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Community schools offer a personalized curriculum that emphasizes real-world learning and community problem-solving. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone – all day, every day, evenings and weekends."*

*Using public schools as hubs, community schools bring together many partners to offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families and communities. Partners work to achieve these results: Children are ready to enter school; students attend school consistently;*

8x

*students are actively involved in learning and their community; families are increasingly involved with their children's education; schools are engaged with families and communities; students succeed academically; students are healthy - physically, socially, and emotionally; students live and learn in a safe, supportive, and stable environment, and communities are desirable places to live."*

Simply put, community school strategies create schools where students, families, teachers, administrators, and community partners work together to strengthen conditions for student learning and development.

### **How do community schools help reduce chronic absenteeism?**

I've provided two reports - one from California and one from West Virginia via the national organization, Communities In Schools (CIS). They both demonstrate a reduction in chronic absenteeism in a variety of district types. One of the factors that is similar is that these are primarily districts with a low socioeconomic population.

By implementing community school strategies – specifically, deeply engaging with families, identifying the prominent factors that keep students from attending, and then providing resources to address those factors - they were able to reduce their absenteeism rates.

In the case of Communities In Schools, which is very focused on Integrated Student Supports, they noted that schools that specifically sought to reduce absenteeism saw better results than schools that focused on other priorities.

In the California report, the districts highlighted all were focused on absenteeism. Their results are dramatic. The key takeaways were:

- Effective approaches to combating chronic absenteeism are not just reactive but also proactive and preventive in nature.
- Trusting relationships with students and families—rather than punitive approaches—are foundational in preventing and reducing chronic absenteeism.
- A systematic approach to utilizing data and managing the provision of services is important.
- Community school coordinators played a critical role in reducing chronic absenteeism, pointing to the importance of dedicated capacity to address the challenge.
- Collaboration among varied school actors can support efforts to stem chronic absenteeism.
- Schools benefit from being part of a broader network of community schools that supports their efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism in a restorative manner.

9x

While these takeaways may sound simple on the surface, they do require capacity at the district and school levels. A community school site coordinator and well-trained teams within each school are critical.

I encourage you all to read through the attached reports and am happy to answer any questions you may have.

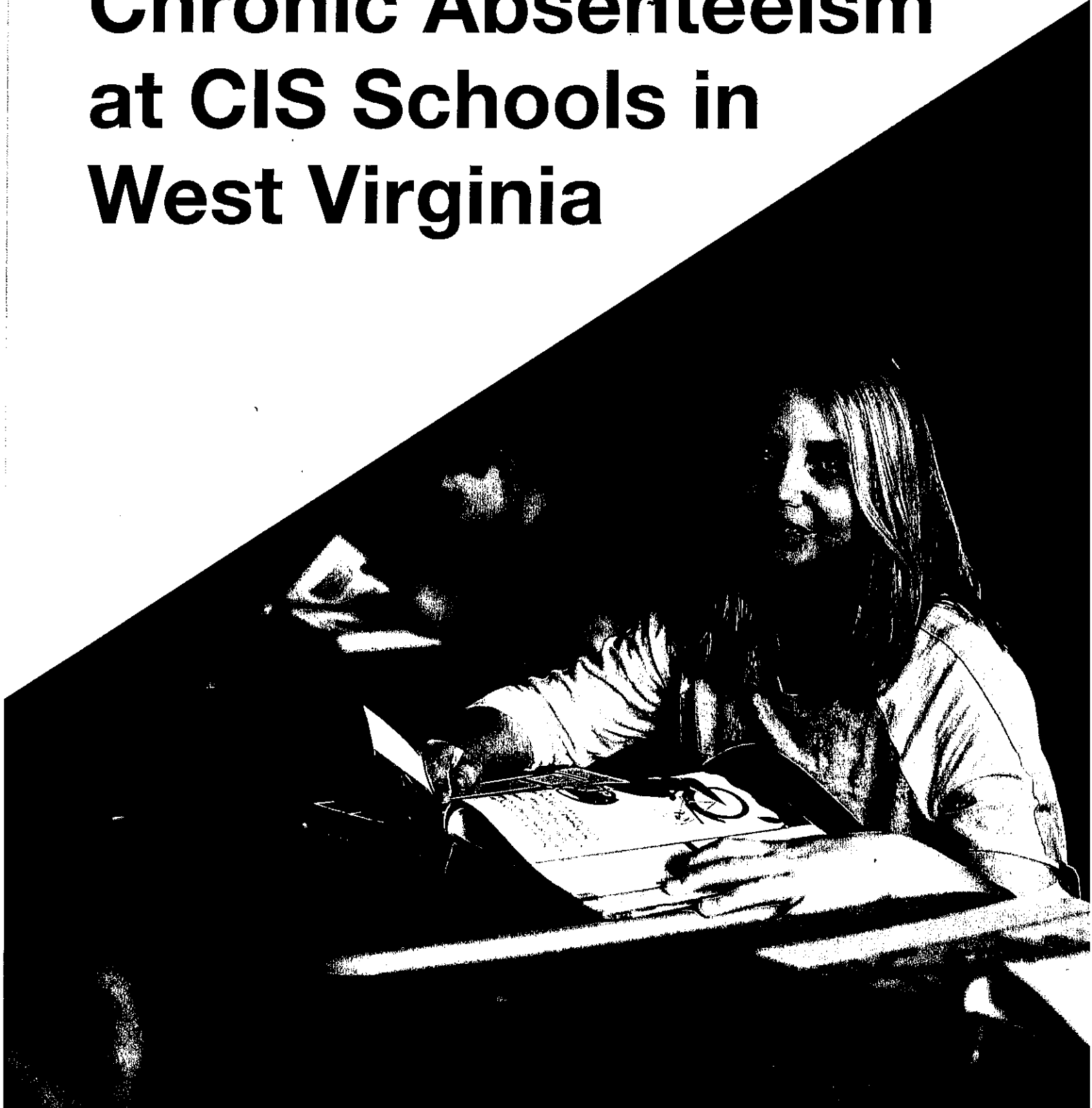
The New Jersey Institute for Community Schools at Saint Elizabeth University is launching this week. Their goal is to expand the number of community schools in the state.

As always, thank you for your time and consideration.

lox



# Chronic Absenteeism at CIS Schools in West Virginia





# Chronic Absenteeism at CIS Schools in West Virginia

By: Morgan Vail

## Key Takeaways

- Title I schools in West Virginia experienced increases in chronic absenteeism rates in the two post-pandemic school years (2021-22 & 2022-23), but **when CIS was present, Title I schools in West Virginia saw decreases in rates of chronic absenteeism by 2022-23.**
- Schools that had been served by CIS for at least 3 years demonstrated an even greater decrease in chronic absenteeism rates than those schools in their first two years with CIS suggesting that **the longer CIS is present in schools, the more chronic absenteeism rates can improve.**
- After 3 years of partnership, CIS generates enough incremental revenue through increased attendance to fund 3/4 of a site coordinator.
- CIS schools that set goals focused on improving school attendance had chronic absenteeism rates that were 5.5% lower on average than schools that had goals focused on other areas (behavior, academics, or school climate), suggesting that **when CIS focuses on attendance intentionally, significant impacts can be made.**

## Background

Between the 2018-19 and 2021-22 school years, chronic absenteeism in the United States exploded. As students returned to in-person learning in the 2021-22 year following pandemic-related school shutdowns and virtual learning, the share of students classified as chronically absent (defined as missing 10% or more of instructional days) increased by 91%, a figure that suggests an additional 6.5 million students are now chronically absent<sup>1</sup>. In West Virginia, 35% of students were chronically absent in the 2021-22 school year<sup>2</sup>.

The CIS model of integrated student supports is uniquely poised to address chronic absenteeism<sup>3</sup>.

West Virginia provides a unique glimpse into the possibilities when CIS is present in all local education agencies. The West Virginia Department of Education became a licensed partner<sup>4</sup> with CIS in the 2018-19 school year. Since the 2018-19 school year, CIS has grown to serve 114,000 students in 272 schools across 55 counties in West Virginia.

<sup>1</sup> Dee, T. S. (2023, August 10). Higher Chronic Absenteeism Threatens Academic Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/bfg3p>

<sup>2</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation (2024). 2024 Kids count data book. <https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-2024kidscountdatatobook-2024.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The CIS model places site coordinators in communities' most high needs schools (often those that receive Title I funding or are Title I eligible). The site coordinator works to identify schools' and students' most pressing needs, including chronic absenteeism and attendance rates, and either brokers or directly provides supports focused on improving those needs so that students have what they need to succeed in school and achieve in life.

<sup>4</sup> A licensed partner is a school district or state education agency that partners with the CIS National Office to receive training to implement the CIS model with local oversight.

12x



In the 2022-23 school year, the CIS model was present in 122 of the schools that received title I funding in West Virginia. To understand CIS' outcomes in these high-need schools, the CIS National office recently conducted a study to examine chronic absenteeism rates in title I schools served by CIS as part of the licensed partnership with the West Virginia Department of Education compared to title I schools not served by CIS in West Virginia. This study was part of a larger study focusing on chronic absenteeism outcomes in title I schools in several states; the findings of this broader study are forthcoming.

## Method

Chronic absenteeism data were accessed from the West Virginia Department of Education Balanced scorecard<sup>5</sup> for the 2020-21, 2021-22, and 2022-23 school years. The state of West Virginia defines chronic absenteeism as missing 10% or more of instructional days in an academic year, in line with the federal definition. Data on schools' title I funding were accessed from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)<sup>6</sup>. At the time of this study, title I funding data for the 2022-23 school year were not yet available, so schools' 2021-22 funding data were utilized to identify title I schools. Full data were available for 315 title I schools in West Virginia, including 122 served by CIS and 193 not served by

CIS. Demographic data, including school enrollment, geographic locale, racial/ethnic makeup, and gender makeup, from NCES<sup>6</sup> were used to create matched comparison groups of 122 CIS and 122 non-CIS schools using propensity score matching.

Comparative analyses were conducted to examine the differences in both annual chronic absenteeism rates and change over time between the matched CIS and non-CIS title I schools. Additional analyses were conducted to explore the impact of CIS tenure in a school and focus on chronic absenteeism in CIS schools, exhibited by schoolwide goals related to attendance. Finally, analyses to determine revenue gained from reductions in chronic absenteeism were conducted utilizing West Virginia's state funding formula. Revenue-based analyses were conducted in partnership with School House Partners.

## Results

Results indicated that title I schools served by CIS had similar rates of chronic absenteeism as matched non-CIS schools in the 2020-21 school year, followed by significantly higher chronic absenteeism rates at CIS schools compared to matched non-CIS schools in 2021-22. However, by 2022-23, rates at CIS schools had declined to return to levels similar to schools not being served by CIS.

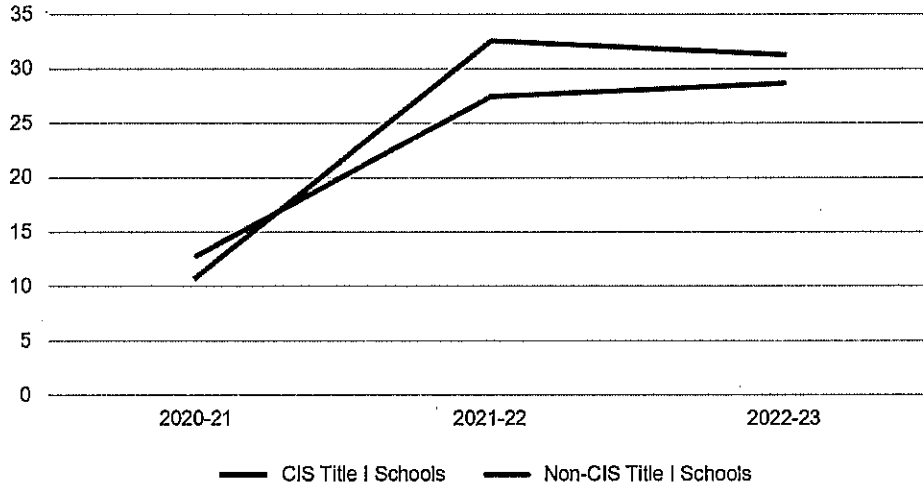
<sup>5</sup>West Virginia Department of Education, West Virginia Balanced Scorecard Dashboard (2019-20, 2020-21, 2022-23). <https://wveis.k12.wv.us/essa/dashboard.html>

<sup>6</sup>U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey", 2020-21 v.1a, 2021-22 v.1a, 2022-23 v.1a; "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey Geographic Data (EDGE)", 2020-21 v.1a, 2021-22 v.1a.

Additionally, chronic absenteeism rates at schools with CIS declined by 1.3% on average in the 2022-23 school year, while schools without CIS saw rates increase by 1.2%. The total revenue-based impact of the decrease

in chronic absenteeism was a net increase of \$668,444 across all West Virginia districts in which CIS operates. This amounted to an average increase of \$18,568 in funding at the individual district level.

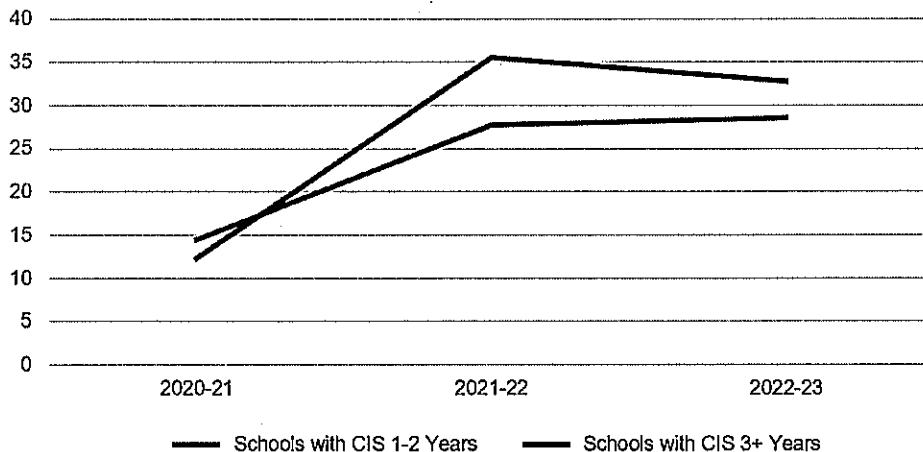
### Average Annual Chronic Absenteeism Rates



Analyses also showed that rates of chronic absenteeism at schools in which CIS had been present for at least 3 years saw chronic absenteeism rates decreased by 2.8% on average between the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years, whereas schools in their first two years with CIS (often considered the “start-up” years) saw rates remain relatively steady in 2022-23. Districts in which CIS was present for 3

or more years saw an average increase of \$29,848 in revenue, while districts in which CIS was present for 1-2 years saw a \$2,775 average increase. Following 3 years of implementation, a district is able to pay for approximately 3/4 of a site coordinator’s total compensation via the increased revenue stemming from the reduction in chronic absenteeism rates.

### Average Annual Chronic Absenteeism Rates, by CIS Tenure

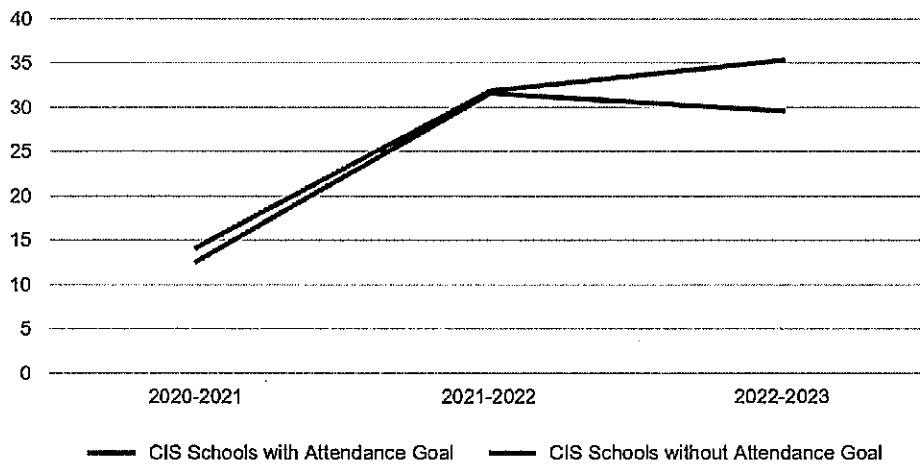


14x

Additionally, findings showed differences in rates of chronic absenteeism for schools with different schoolwide goals; specifically, CIS schools with a goal to improve attendance had rates of chronic absenteeism that were 5.7% lower than rates at CIS schools with other schoolwide goals in the 2022-23 school year. Furthermore, schools with attendance

related goals saw chronic absenteeism rates decline in the 2022-23 school year, while schools focused on other schoolwide goal areas saw chronic absenteeism rates continue to rise. These findings suggest that intentional work by CIS on attendance at the school-level can improve rates of chronic absenteeism.

Average Annual Chronic Absenteeism Rates at CIS Schools With and Without Schoolwide Attendance Goals





# Reducing Chronic Absenteeism

## Lessons From Community Schools

Emily Germain, Laura E. Hernández, Sarah Klevan,  
Rebecca S. Levine, and Anna Maier

## Acknowledgments

The authors thank the staff at Buena Vista Horace Mann, Elk Hills Elementary, Helen Keller Elementary, and Lucille Roybal-Allard Elementary who took the time to share how their community schools were reducing chronic absenteeism. The authors also thank their Learning Policy Institute (LPI) colleagues Tara Kini and Tiffany Miller for their thoughtful feedback. In addition, we thank the members of the LPI Communications team for their invaluable support in designing, producing, and disseminating this report.

This research was supported by the Stuart Foundation and The California Endowment. Core operating support for LPI is provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Heising-Simons Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Raikes Foundation, Sandler Foundation, Skyline Foundation, and MacKenzie Scott. We are grateful to them for their generous support. The ideas voiced here are those of the authors and not those of our funders.

## External Reviewers

The report benefited from the insights and expertise of two external reviewers: Hedy Chang, Executive Director at Attendance Works, and Marisa Saunders, Associate Director of Research at the UCLA Center for Community Schooling. We thank them for the care and attention they gave the report.

Suggested citation: Germain, E., Hernández, L. E., Klevan, S., Levine, R., & Maier, A. (2024). *Reducing chronic absenteeism: Lessons from community schools*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/510.597>

This report can be found online at <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/chronic-absenteeism-community-schools>.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.



Document last revised October 22, 2024

# Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	iii
Introduction .....	1
Four Community Schools Meeting the Attendance Challenge .....	4
Buena Vista Horace Mann .....	5
Elk Hills Elementary.....	6
Helen Keller Elementary.....	7
Lucille Roybal-Allard Elementary .....	8
How Community Schools Have Reduced Chronic Absenteeism .....	10
Improving Family Engagement.....	10
Increasing Student Connectedness and Relationship-Building.....	12
Systematic Data Tracking and Monitoring .....	14
Utilizing Tiered Systems of Support to Increase Attendance.....	15
Leveraging Partnerships to Support Youth and Families.....	16
Key Role of Community School Coordinators .....	17
Key Takeaways for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism.....	19
Endnotes .....	21
About the Authors .....	23

## List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1	Chronic Absenteeism in California and Profiled Community Schools.....	4
Table 1	Chronic Absenteeism at Buena Vista Horace Mann, 2018–2024.....	6
Table 2	Chronic Absenteeism at Elk Hills Elementary, 2018–2024.....	7
Table 3	Chronic Absenteeism at Helen Keller Elementary, 2018–2024 .....	8
Table 4	Chronic Absenteeism at Lucille Roybal-Allard Elementary, 2018–2024 .....	9

18x

# Executive Summary

Educators, policymakers, and families share concerns about the significant decline in school attendance since the onset of pandemic-induced school closures. According to a 2023 report, the national rate of chronically absent students—those missing 10% or more of school days—nearly doubled from 2018 to 2022, reaching 28%. Although attendance has started to improve in some states, chronic absenteeism remains 75% higher, on average, than prepandemic levels. California mirrors this trend, with chronic absenteeism rising to 30% in 2022 before decreasing to 25% in 2023, still well above prepandemic levels.

When students miss school, they lose opportunities for learning and social interaction as well as access to critical services. Research shows that chronically absent students are more likely to fall behind academically, disengage socially, and drop out of school altogether. Because absenteeism is strongly associated with these important student outcomes, it is crucial that policymakers, educators, and researchers identify effective strategies to alleviate it.

Community schools have emerged as a promising approach to mitigate chronic absenteeism, as they are adept at organizing supports for students and families and creating conditions for rich learning and well-being. Support and funding for community schools has increased in recent years at both the federal and state level. California has become a leader in implementation in recent years, supported by an unprecedented \$4.1 billion investment through the California Community Schools Partnership Program. The program provides grants that enable school and district partnerships with community agencies and local government to support students' academic, physical, and mental development.

This report examines how four California community schools—Buena Vista Horace Mann, Elk Hills Elementary, Helen Keller Elementary, and Lucille Roybal-Allard Elementary—significantly reduced their chronic absenteeism rates postpandemic. Drawing on interviews with school leaders and personnel, it highlights proactive and interventionist attendance strategies that have enabled these schools to reduce chronic absenteeism. Insights from these efforts can guide educators and policymakers nationwide in addressing attendance challenges effectively.

## Strategies for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism

The featured community schools use comprehensive, holistic approaches aimed at creating a culture of support to combat chronic absenteeism. Key strategies include:

- **Improving Family Engagement.** The selected schools utilized several strategies to build relationships with families and engage them in attendance efforts, including phone calls and texts for unexcused absences, outreach campaigns focused on the importance of consistent attendance, and home visits to connect students and families with needed resources. These strategies were crucial in supporting families to recalibrate attendance expectations, which were disrupted during the pandemic.
- **Increasing Student Connectedness.** The featured community schools prioritize student connectedness to school through relationship-building and enrichment opportunities that promote students' enthusiasm for school attendance. These include advisory groups, mentorship programs, and a wide range of extracurricular activities that incorporate student interests and facilitate friendships between students and their peers.

- **Systematically Tracking and Analyzing Data.** Community schools included in this report have developed consistent systems for collecting, tracking, and analyzing attendance data. These systems help school staff to examine attendance patterns, identify students nearing or exceeding the chronic absenteeism threshold, and develop targeted supports and intervention strategies
- **Utilizing Tiered Systems of Support.** The selected community schools leverage differentiated strategies to support student attendance. These include universal strategies like attendance incentives and relationship-building opportunities, as well as targeted interventions such as home visits and referrals to community resources for students who need more intensive support.
- **Leveraging Partnerships.** Partnerships with external organizations are critical for addressing specific attendance barriers. Community schools included in this report utilize partnerships to provide services like housing support, before- and after-school programming, and mental health services.
- **Deploying Community School Coordinators.** Comprehensively addressing barriers to school attendance is time-intensive and skilled work. In the featured community schools, community school coordinators play a pivotal role in identifying attendance challenges and implementing strategies to promote attendance, from data analysis to family engagement and partnership management. They are essential to building cohesive systems that effectively address the unique needs of students and families.

## Key Takeaways for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism

The strategies above demonstrate key learnings about effective approaches to increasing school attendance:

- **Proactive and Preventive Approaches.** Rather than waiting for problems to arise, the community schools included in this report proactively engage families and students by sharing the importance of consistent attendance and information about students' attendance data. They also focus on building family relationships and nurturing a sense of connection, making community schools places where students and families want to be.
- **Trusting Relationships.** By building trusting relationships with students and families and partnering with them to problem-solve attendance barriers together, the featured community schools adopt a restorative approach rather than a punitive approach, which might involve disciplinary actions such as employing truant officers or taking legal action against parents.
- **Systematic Data Utilization.** Utilizing robust data systems, the selected community schools identify underlying causes of absenteeism and develop targeted interventions. By leveraging a tiered system of supports, the schools offer a coherent approach to supporting attendance that builds upon their approach to addressing challenges in other areas.
- **Dedicated Capacity.** The range of challenges that contribute to chronic absenteeism necessitate additional capacity to address attendance barriers. Community school coordinators can play a key role on attendance teams, spearhead family engagement, manage external partnerships, and coordinate support services, ensuring a comprehensive approach to attendance improvement.

- **Collaboration.** Collaboration among administrators, school support teams, and community school coordinators helped schools meet student and family attendance challenges. The principals at these sites, in particular, engaged in a collaborative leadership approach that provided coordinators the support and flexibility to take this on.
- **Systems-Level Support.** The featured community schools are part of community school initiatives receiving state funding through the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP). The CCSPP prioritizes many of the strategies identified in this report, such as implementing a tiered approach to intervention and engaging community partners. The districts in which the featured community schools are located provide support for participating schools that aligns with the community schools approach. This systemic context reinforces the work of individual schools, allowing them to expand their efforts rather than battling against a misaligned system.

21x

# Introduction

Educators, policymakers, and families share concerns about the dramatic drop in school attendance that has persisted since the onset of pandemic-induced school closures. A 2024 report shows that the rate of students who were chronically absent—youth missing 10% or more of school days (including excused and unexcused absences)—nearly doubled from 2018 to 2022 nationwide, from 15% to 28%.<sup>1</sup> While the report shows that attendance has started to rebound in many states, it indicates that the average chronic absenteeism rate remains 75% higher than prepandemic levels. Chronic absenteeism in California mirrors the national trend, up from 11% in 2018 to 30% in 2022, then dropping to 25% in 2023—still far above prepandemic levels.<sup>2</sup>

When a student is absent from school, they miss out on opportunities to learn, socialize with peers and adults, and receive services critical to their development. Research demonstrates that students who are chronically absent are more likely to fall behind academically, disengage socially, and drop out of school altogether.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the rise in chronic absenteeism occurred in tandem with significant national declines in achievement.<sup>4</sup> Taken together, the evidence suggests that addressing chronic absenteeism is critical for the success of any efforts aimed at reducing the opportunity gap, improving academic achievement and graduation rates, and helping students access the long-term social and cognitive benefits of school.

The evidence suggests that addressing chronic absenteeism is critical for the success of any efforts aimed at reducing the opportunity gap, improving academic achievement and graduation rates, and helping students access the long-term social and cognitive benefits of school.

To address this pressing concern, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers are examining both the causes of chronic absenteeism and promising strategies to combat it. Chronic absenteeism is highest in school districts serving students and families from low-income backgrounds,<sup>5</sup> where many encounter transportation challenges, housing insecurity, inadequate access to health care, and community violence that can contribute to inconsistent school attendance.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing attendance barriers and contributed to new ones, requiring substantial absences for many students.<sup>7</sup> Even as the pandemic has subsided, COVID-19 surges, along with widespread exposure to RSV and other viruses, have kept many students out of school for more days than was common in the past. The pandemic also worsened staffing shortages,<sup>8</sup> hindering schools' capacity to identify students who need support and connect them with resources to improve their well-being and their attendance. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the pandemic, rates of depression and anxiety have skyrocketed for young people, creating an additional barrier to consistent school attendance.<sup>9</sup>

Climate events have also contributed to attendance challenges. More intense and frequent storms, floods, and wildfires have, at times, closed schools and made roads impassable in many places, adding to the number of student absences. In California, for example, the 2022–23 school year featured more than 1,000 emergency events that prevented students from attending school.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of the reason for absence, missing school affects students' learning progress, their attachment to school, and their mental health. With the range of factors that can contribute to chronic absenteeism, researchers point to the need for multifaceted strategies to increase attendance, including offering support to students and families in locally and contextually relevant ways.<sup>11</sup>

Community schools have emerged as a promising strategy to combat chronic absenteeism, as they organize supports for students and families and work to create conditions for rich learning and well-being. (See *What Does It Mean to Be a Community School?*) Support and funding for community schools has increased in recent years at both the federal and state level,<sup>12</sup> in part due to schools' responses to local needs during the pandemic.<sup>13</sup> California has become a leader in implementation in recent years, supported by an unprecedented \$4.1 billion investment through the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP). The program provides grants that enable school and district partnerships with community agencies and local government to support students' academic, physical, and mental development. Technical assistance is also a key programmatic element.

## **What Does It Mean to Be a Community School?**

Community schools organize in- and out-of-school resources and supports such as mental health services, meals, health care, tutoring, internships, and other learning and career opportunities that are tailored to the goals and needs of students and families. They also cultivate a welcoming and safe school environment and provide instruction that invites students' multifaceted identities and backgrounds into the classroom to support rich and inclusive learning. This whole-school strategy brings educators, local community members, families, and students together to make collaborative decisions; prioritize student learning, well-being, and engagement; and turn schools into community hubs.

While community schools adopt different structures and practices depending on the needs and assets of the school and surrounding community, they often share common site-level practices. These include: (1) expanded, enriched learning opportunities; (2) rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction; (3) a culture of belonging, safety, and care; (4) integrated systems of support; (5) powerful student and family engagement; and (6) collaborative leadership and shared power and voice. These whole child practices are best implemented when there is a shared vision and purpose, trusting relationships are formed between members of the school community, and decision-making is both data-informed and inclusive.

Community school coordinators and other specialized personnel are commonly central figures in community schools who support and manage the integration of these school features.

Source: Community Schools Forward. (2023). *Framework: Essentials for community school transformation*.

Community schools implement supports that can address attendance barriers, such as increased access to health services, meals, and before- and after-school programming, among others. They also seek to create welcoming and asset-based learning environments, drawing on community connections for the curriculum as well as approaches that increase student engagement and sense of belonging, which can influence absenteeism. With these structures and approaches in place, community schools implement proactive and interventionist measures to address the root causes of chronic absenteeism. In doing so, they promote a shift from blaming students and families for attendance challenges to engaging in problem-solving and collective action that address students' and families' personalized needs.

This report considers how some California community schools have dramatically reduced their chronic absenteeism rates postpandemic. Its driving research question is: What whole-school approaches and processes have state-supported community schools used to effectively identify and respond to attendance challenges?

It investigates this question with a qualitative study of four elementary or K–8 community schools that are supported by CCSPP grants, have shown growth along various outcomes, are geographically diverse, and are located in districts that have implemented the community schools strategy for several years. During data collection for three broader case studies and a profile of community schools, these four schools emerged as particularly successful at reducing chronic absenteeism. The findings are drawn from published research and eight individual or focus-group interviews with site leaders and community school personnel—key figures who were purposefully recruited based on their roles in implementing the community schools model and connecting students and families with holistic supports—to understand how the schools have enacted approaches to mitigate chronic absenteeism. Interviews and focus groups were semi-structured and lasted between 60 and 120 minutes.

Findings suggest that the four schools embraced common approaches to increasing consistent attendance. Principals and community school personnel across the sites described their keen focus on relationship-building with students and families to cultivate healthy school attachments that promote consistent attendance. They also pointed to processes and structures that enabled systematic data tracking, the use of tiered systems of support, and community partnerships as critical to identifying interventions that can support increased attendance at each site. Community school coordinators lent critical capacity in these efforts, yet consistent collaboration among coordinators, school leaders, and other staff was a central feature in each site's approach to stemming chronic absenteeism. Lessons learned from community school efforts to address chronic absenteeism can inform the work of educators and policymakers in California and across the nation.

24x

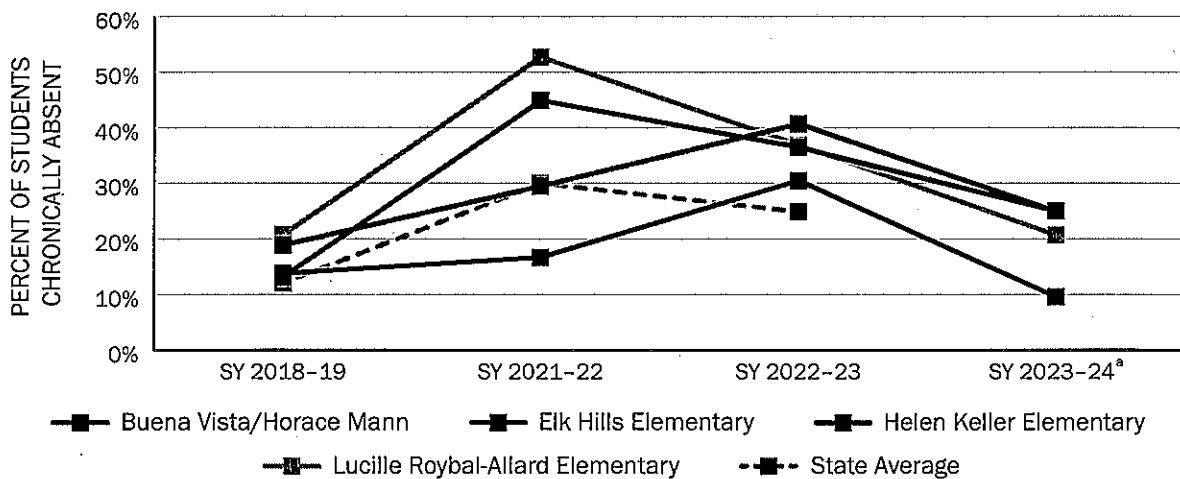
# Four Community Schools Meeting the Attendance Challenge

While emerging data indicate that attendance is incrementally improving in many districts and counties across California, it remains troublingly low when compared to prepandemic rates.<sup>14</sup> This report examines how four California elementary or K-8 community schools have made substantial gains in alleviating chronic absenteeism and in closing the gap between prepandemic and postpandemic rates. (See Table 1 for the schools' chronic absenteeism data.)

The community schools at the center of this report span the state and differ in district size and geography. Despite their contextual differences, they each primarily serve low-income communities. Schools in these communities typically experience higher absenteeism than the state as a whole and their home county. These communities were also disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, experiencing particularly large surges during the pandemic as well as greater rates of illness, unemployment, dislocation, eviction, and mortality.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, these schools experienced greater levels of chronic absenteeism.<sup>16</sup> Data indicate that the featured community schools, like other schools in under-resourced communities, have faced sharp rises in chronic absenteeism in the wake of the pandemic and yet have made great strides in addressing this urgent challenge in their school settings. (See Figure 1.)

Before describing the common approaches the community schools have used to increase daily attendance, we provide a brief description of their community school models and the systems-level support they receive to implement their approaches.

**Figure 1. Chronic Absenteeism in California and Profiled Community Schools**



<sup>a</sup> Since publicly available California Department of Education (CDE) chronic absenteeism data were not available for the 2023-24 school year at the time of publication, these data were self-reported by school staff in the spring of 2024, reflecting attendance rates at varying points in the spring semester. End-of-year chronic absenteeism rates published by the CDE may differ.

Note: As a result of the statewide school closures that occurred in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CDE determined that absenteeism data for the 2019-20 school year were invalid and unreliable and thus did not release them to the public. In addition, the CDE notes that the widespread implementation of distance learning affected attendance data during the 2020-21 school year. For these reasons, data from those 2 years are omitted from the table.

Source: California Department of Education. DataQuest [Data set].

## Buena Vista Horace Mann

Buena Vista Horace Mann K–8 Community School (Buena Vista Horace Mann) is a K–8, Spanish dual immersion, community school in the Mission District of San Francisco. In the 2023–24 academic year, the school served just under 600 students, approximately 62% of whom were identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged. Eighty-eight percent of its students identified as Latinx, 58% were English learners, 16.4% were designated as students with disabilities, and 4.3% were experiencing homelessness.

While Buena Vista Horace Mann has embraced community school strategies for a decade, recent state and local funding has bolstered its whole child educational approach. These include a first-round California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) implementation grant, which funds the community school coordinator,<sup>17</sup> the on-site therapist, and the Expanded Learning Opportunities Program, which supports summer school and after-school enrichment programs. In addition to these state funding sources, Buena Vista Horace Mann also receives funding support from local sources like the Beacon Initiative, which enables the school to have an on-site Beacon director, and a partnership with the Jamestown Community Center, which provides a before-school program and after-school programming (at no cost to families) with academic tutoring and enrichment.

By blending various state and local funding sources and developing a dynamic network of community partners, Buena Vista Horace Mann provides systems of support that holistically address the needs of its students. It offers extensive basic needs, health, and wellness resources to students and families, including on-site behavioral and mental health services and a stay-over program for families experiencing homelessness, which supports stability and safety. Buena Vista Horace Mann has also implemented structures that allow students and families to be well known, including a family resource center, small class sizes, and a middle school advisory program that meets four times per week.

By blending various state and local funding sources and developing a dynamic network of community partners, Buena Vista Horace Mann provides systems of support that holistically address the needs of its students.

Each of these structures and approaches has enabled Buena Vista Horace Mann to make significant progress in increasing attendance. Unlike in the past, Buena Vista Horace Mann well exceeded district and county chronic absenteeism rates in 2021–22, suggesting that the school community was grappling with the destabilizing effects of the pandemic. Since then, it has dramatically reduced its chronic absenteeism rate by 20 percentage points. (See Table 1.) The increased attendance that Buena Vista Horace Mann has enabled is notable given that pandemic effects were severe in this new-immigrant community that has experienced extensive employment, homelessness, and mobility challenges for several years.

26x

**Table 1. Chronic Absenteeism at Buena Vista Horace Mann, 2018–2024**

Population	2018–19	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24
Buena Vista Horace Mann	13.2%	44.9%	36.5%	25.0% <sup>a</sup>
San Francisco Unified School District	18.8%	33.2%	31.9%	-
San Francisco County	18.9%	33.3%	32.1%	-
California	12.1%	30.0%	24.9%	-

<sup>a</sup> Since publicly available California Department of Education (CDE) chronic absenteeism data were not available for the 2023–24 school year at the time of publication, these data were self-reported by school staff in the spring of 2024, reflecting attendance rates at varying points in the spring semester. End-of-year chronic absenteeism rates published by the CDE may differ.

Note: As a result of the statewide school closures that occurred in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CDE determined that absenteeism data for the 2019–20 academic year were invalid and unreliable and thus did not release them to the public. In addition, the CDE notes that the widespread implementation of distance learning affected attendance data during the 2020–21 academic year. For these reasons, data from those 2 years are omitted from the table.

Source: California Department of Education. DataQuest [Data set].

## Elk Hills Elementary

Elk Hills Elementary (Elk Hills) is a K–8 school in Kern County, located near Bakersfield in California's Central Valley. As a one-school rural district, Elk Hills enrolled 163 students in 2023–24, the majority of whom were socioeconomically disadvantaged (58.1%) and White (80.2%).

Elk Hills is a member of the West Kern Consortium for Full-Service Community Schools, which brings together six districts to coordinate and leverage resources to enable community schooling in this rural region. The consortium was officially established upon receiving a Full-Service Community Schools grant from the federal government in 2018. Over time, the consortium has received additional federal and state grants, including a CCSP grant in 2021, that have allowed it to bring Elk Hills and two high school districts into the fold.

Like the other districts in the consortium, Elk Hills organizes its community school around five priority areas that were collaboratively identified through the federal grant application process: (1) early childhood education, (2) expanded learning, (3) math and literacy education, (4) family and community engagement, and (5) social and mental health services. Key to developing and implementing these priority areas are school-based community school coordinators and social workers. Elk Hills' community school coordinator, hired in 2020, works closely with the social worker and other school staff members to understand and address student absenteeism at the site level. As the Elk Hills coordinator and social worker provide families with supportive interventions to combat chronic absenteeism, the school maintains relationship-centered structures and practices that aim to enhance school connectedness among students and families to support increased attendance.

Through these approaches, Elk Hills has greatly improved its chronic absenteeism rate, which saw a significant uptick in 2022–23, when it exceeded both state and county averages. Since the 2022–23 school year, Elk Hills has reduced its chronic absenteeism rate to 9.6%—a 20% decrease from the previous year and lower than its 2018–19 prepandemic rate. (See Table 2.)

**Table 2. Chronic Absenteeism at Elk Hills Elementary, 2018–2024**

Population	2018–19	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24
Elk Hills	13.8%	16.7%	30.5%	9.6% <sup>a</sup>
Kern County	11.5%	37.6%	26.3%	-
California	12.1%	30.0%	24.9%	-

<sup>a</sup> Since publicly available California Department of Education (CDE) chronic absenteeism data were not available for the 2023–24 school year at the time of publication, these data were self-reported by school staff in the spring of 2024, reflecting attendance rates at varying points in the spring semester. End-of-year chronic absenteeism rates published by the CDE may differ.

Notes: As a result of the statewide school closures that occurred in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CDE determined that absenteeism data for the 2019–20 academic year were invalid and unreliable and thus did not release them to the public. In addition, the CDE notes that the widespread implementation of distance learning affected attendance data during the 2020–21 academic year. For these reasons, data from those 2 years are omitted from the table.

Elk Hills Elementary is the sole school in the Elk Hills School District. No district data is reported in the table, as it is captured in school-level data.

Source: California Department of Education. DataQuest [Data set].

## Helen Keller Elementary

Helen Keller Elementary School (Helen Keller) is a Title I school serving students from transitional kindergarten through Grade 6 in the Lynwood Unified School District (Lynwood Unified)—a small district spanning 4 square miles in Los Angeles County. In 2023–24, it served 434 students, the majority of whom qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (98%) and identified as Latinx (91%). Twenty-four percent were English learners, 9.7% were designated as students with disabilities, and close to 5% were newcomers to the United States.

Lynwood Unified first implemented the community schools strategy in 2019 in one of the district’s comprehensive high schools—Lynwood High School—under the Los Angeles County of Education’s Community Schools Initiative. In 2023, Lynwood Unified received a second-round CCSPP implementation grant to turn all 17 of its schools into community schools. This grant allowed Lynwood Unified to hire both the district- and school-level personnel needed to support the district’s vision for community schools, including community school coordinators on every campus and certified student analysts who support general education students requiring intensive supports and/or interventions. CCSPP funding also enabled the district to generate systems and efficiencies to deepen its existing infrastructure around whole child education and integrated services, including a robust health collaborative offering physical and mental health services to students and families.

The 2023–24 school year was the first year of implementation at Helen Keller. The newly hired community school coordinator has prioritized building relationships with parents, students, and staff and increasing parent engagement. In her role, she also works closely with the community liaison to conduct home visits, communicate the importance of attendance, and help connect families and students with an array of resources available through school-based partnerships and the district’s health collaborative.

After maintaining a chronic absenteeism rate lower than its host district and surrounding county in the immediate wake of the pandemic, Helen Keller saw the number of chronically absent students rise to 40.7% in 2022–23. The early systemic efforts to track attendance and conduct outreach to families by the school’s newly hired community school coordinator and community liaison helped Helen Keller reduce its chronic absenteeism rate by 15 percentage points in 1 year, to 25% in 2023–24.

**Table 3. Chronic Absenteeism at Helen Keller Elementary, 2018–2024**

Population	2018–19	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24
Helen Keller	18.9%	29.5%	40.7%	25.0% <sup>a</sup>
Lynwood Unified School District	18.9%	37.1%	40.2%	-
Los Angeles County	13.8%	31.2%	26.8%	-
California	12.1%	30.0%	24.9%	-

<sup>a</sup> Since publicly available California Department of Education (CDE) chronic absenteeism data were not available for the 2023–24 school year at the time of publication, these data were self-reported by school staff in the spring of 2024, reflecting attendance rates at varying points in the spring semester. End-of-year chronic absenteeism rates published by the CDE may differ.

Note: As a result of the statewide school closures that occurred in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CDE determined that absenteeism data for the 2019–20 academic year were invalid and unreliable and thus did not release them to the public. In addition, the CDE notes that the widespread implementation of distance learning affected attendance data during the 2020–21 academic year. For these reasons, data from those 2 years are omitted from the table.

Source: California Department of Education. DataQuest [Data set].

### Lucille Roybal-Allard Elementary

Lucille Roybal-Allard Elementary (Roybal-Allard) is a K–6 community school in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Located in Huntington Park, a city in South Central Los Angeles County, Roybal-Allard served 483 students in 2023–24, most of whom qualified as socioeconomically disadvantaged (90.3%). The school’s student population was predominately Latinx (98.5%), and more than a quarter of students (26.8%) were English learners. Eleven percent of its students were identified as having disabilities, and 1.9% were experiencing homelessness.

A collective bargaining agreement between LAUSD and United Teachers Los Angeles allocated district funding to the systematic development and growth of community schools in 2019. CCSPP implementation grants, totaling more than \$83 million, have bolstered district funding, allowing the district to onboard

and support 61 community schools to date. Through these investments, the district has placed full-time community school coordinators and part-time community school representatives, who support the coordinator to achieve community school goals and priorities, on every community school campus. Additionally, the district has used state funding to develop systems and processes that support community schools, such as a robust system of professional development for community school staff.

Roybal-Allard, which opened as a pilot school in 2012, was founded by a group of educators who embraced the principles of community schooling and envisioned the school as a hub for academic excellence and essential community services. The school offers three programs: a resident school with a global studies focus, a Spanish dual language program, and a DREAMS (Design Thinking, Research, Engineering, Arts, and Math) magnet program. As a community school, Roybal-Allard prioritizes student belonging and engagement; safety; rigorous, project-based learning; and partnerships that provide physical and mental health services.

Like schools across the country, Roybal-Allard’s chronic absenteeism rate surged in the 2021–22 academic year, reaching 52.7% and far surpassing the district, county, and state rates. Actively working to improve attendance, the school has seen marked progress, reducing the rate by slightly more than 15% in 2022–23 and cutting the rate by more than half in 2 years. During the 2023–24 school year, the school reported a rate of 20.7%. School staff at Roybal-Allard, including a pupil service and attendance coordinator, achieved this feat by addressing chronic absenteeism through a data-driven multitiered approach that focuses on building strong relationships with students and families, creating a welcoming and engaging environment, and providing personalized support and incentives.

**Table 4. Chronic Absenteeism at Lucille Roybal-Allard Elementary, 2018–2024**

Population	2018–19	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24
Lucille Roybal-Allard	20.8%	52.7%	36.9%	20.7% <sup>a</sup>
Los Angeles Unified School District	18.4%	36.9%	30.8%	-
Los Angeles County	13.8%	31.2%	26.8%	-
California	12.1%	30.0%	24.9%	-

<sup>a</sup> Since publicly available California Department of Education (CDE) chronic absenteeism data were not available for the 2023–24 school year at the time of publication, these data were self-reported by school staff in the spring of 2024, reflecting attendance rates at varying points in the spring semester. End-of-year chronic absenteeism rates published by the CDE may differ.

Note: As a result of the statewide school closures that occurred in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CDE determined that absenteeism data for the 2019–20 academic year were invalid and unreliable and thus did not release them to the public. In addition, the CDE notes that the widespread implementation of distance learning affected attendance data during the 2020–21 academic year. For these reasons, data from those 2 years are omitted from the table.

Source: California Department of Education. DataQuest [Data set].

30x

# How Community Schools Have Reduced Chronic Absenteeism

The mission of a community school is to take care of whatever's coming up for a family in service of a student's ability to feel stable enough to learn. ... A community school says our job is to address whatever those stressors are in the child's life so that they can feel calm enough and safe enough to learn in class and so that all their classmates can, too.

—Buena Vista Horace Mann Principal

The community schools highlighted in this report are committed to meeting students' and families' holistic needs so that youth can learn and thrive. This includes working to ensure that students consistently attend school and that they are cognitively, socially, and emotionally supported once they get there. While the featured community schools operate in disparate settings and have varying programmatic features, they embrace common approaches that have allowed them to effectively achieve this goal.

These shared strategies are described in the sections below. They include improving family engagement and instituting approaches that facilitate student connectedness and relationship-building. The featured schools also engage in systematic data monitoring and leverage tiered systems of support and cross-sector partnerships to enable consistent attendance among youth and families. Community school coordinators play a central role in enacting these approaches in each community school, lending important capacity to their effective implementation. Taken together, these approaches create a culture of support to combat chronic absenteeism rather than one that relies on punitive measures, which have been shown to alienate families and students rather than build the relationships essential to understanding and addressing the underlying reasons that students miss school.<sup>18</sup>

## Improving Family Engagement

To stem chronic absenteeism at their sites, the featured community schools placed increased attention on family engagement—an approach that is associated with a range of positive youth outcomes<sup>19</sup> and has been shown to be a pivotal factor in school improvement efforts.<sup>20</sup>

Practitioners at each school described how student absences initiate a range of responses, including immediate actions like phone calls or texts to families who have not called to excuse an absence as well as more intensive outreach to those who are near or over the threshold of being chronically absent. Among the latter are one-on-one conversations and home visits with families of chronically absent students, often initiated and facilitated by a community school coordinator or other community school personnel. For instance, the social worker at Elk Hills described how she engaged in these efforts in the past year:

We brought in parents, met with them, and showed them, “Hey, your kid is missing 20 days of school this whole year. What can we do? We have this person, and this person, and this person [at the school] that can support you.”

As reflected in her comments, extended conversations with families about chronic absenteeism consistently included offers to connect parents and guardians to key personnel or resources to support increased attendance.

COVID-19 altered the routine of attending school and how parents and schools calculated the risks and benefits—to the individual and school community—of sending a child to school who may be feeling ill. As the community school coordinator at Buena Vista Horace Mann explained, “[There was] a dramatic shift in the perception at home of how critical it was to be at school every day.” Engaging families to recalibrate expectations and guidelines became an important strategy for addressing chronic absenteeism. To ensure that kids come to school when they are healthy or at low risk for infecting others, staff in the featured schools have engaged in proactive strategies, through communication and outreach campaigns, to reinforce the importance of attendance.

For instance, staff at Elk Hills and other elementary schools in its consortium used social media and other forms of written communication (e.g., flyers, emails, doorhangers) to support the development of healthy at-home routines (e.g., time management) that could support wellness and attendance. At Buena Vista Horace Mann, staff sent letters home that presented their student’s attendance data and included information about the importance of daily attendance. Collectively, these efforts serve to invest parents and guardians in consistent attendance. The Roybal-Allard principal expressed why these information campaigns were critical to combating chronic absenteeism: “I think parents, especially with the pandemic, had a different definition of what good attendance was because [school] was online. So, now coming back, it’s also about reeducation.”

Community school staff and school leaders also emphasized that developing trusting relationships with families was an essential element of their effective efforts to address chronic absenteeism. The Roybal-Allard principal described the importance of trust-building in increasing attendance, explaining, “Trust is built through small actions over time. I think when [caregivers] identify the school as a safe, trusting place to send their kids, they’re more willing to come.” Practitioners at each community school described a range of relationship-building approaches they employed, including greeting parents and guardians at the gate during arrival and dismissal and hosting community events that provide opportunities for families and staff to engage and develop connections.

Community school staff and school leaders emphasized that developing trusting relationships with families was an essential element of their effective efforts to address chronic absenteeism.

The community school coordinator at Elk Hills, who organizes events and leads efforts to increase attendance, described the impact of these relationship-building approaches, saying, “The relationships I’ve built with parents who were really unavailable—who didn’t call in the absences, didn’t come to campus, didn’t come to events—now they’re here, and they’re calling in. They’re emailing or texting me.” She attributes this to both the work she did throughout the pandemic and concerted efforts to be trustworthy, to be respectful, and to curate the school environment to be welcoming to all. The coordinator began her role just 2 weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the school, and, as happened all over the country, her job shifted. She became the point person for ensuring students and families had the technology needed for learning to continue remotely. Reflecting on this time, she noted, “I became the IT help desk, which was also [developed into a] phone counseling system.” During this really stressful time, she was not only troubleshooting, showing up at families’ homes to assist them, but was

also the consistent school representative who would pick up the phone and listen to parents vent and share their hardships. This “blessing in disguise,” as she described it, allowed her to build strong and trusting relationships.

Centering relationships in the strategy to mitigate chronic absenteeism has also allowed the community schools to move away from less effective approaches that seek to compel attendance through punitive measures.<sup>21</sup> As the Roybal-Allard principal explained, “We have families for whom there was always a negative connotation: ‘Oh no, you’re tardy or absent.’ ... Now ... they just go to the gate. The community rep can help them with anything they need and answer questions. They’re welcomed to school.” The principal at Helen Keller described a similar shift in the reception to school outreach on attendance, noting how the community school coordinator supported this dynamic:

In the past it would just be that the principal would call home and find out more information. But now, with [the] community school coordinator, I think it’s a friendly face that they know is there strictly to support and to give you resources.

This evidence shows that building relationships with families may mitigate fears of stigma or repercussions that can prevent some parents and guardians from engaging in school settings after a significant absence or inconsistent attendance.

Overall, the featured schools employed a multifaceted approach to engaging families that was grounded in consistent communication and relationship-building. This not only reflects a fundamental feature of high-quality community schools but also serves to facilitate greater alignment between home and school norms, practices, and values.

## **Increasing Student Connectedness and Relationship-Building**

Relationship-building with students was also seen as a critical approach to supporting increased attendance, and the featured community schools implemented strategies for strengthening relationships across their communities. For example, multiple schools have small-group structures built into the school day to enable closer connections between students and school staff. At Buena Vista Horace Mann, students in grades 6–8 participate in advisory groups. Each advisory is composed of 11 students and one teacher, who meet 4 times per week. They spend this time in community circles developing social-emotional skills; forming relationships with peers; and building the muscles for communicating, listening, and discussion.

Elk Hills uses a mentorship program to foster student–staff connectedness, where each classified and non-classified staff member at the school is assigned a small, mixed-grade group of student mentees. Mentors meet with their mentees once per month, completing optional activities that support social and emotional learning and, importantly, build peer-to-peer and student–adult bonds in a low-stakes setting. One Elk Hills teacher reflected on the power of these mentorship groups:

Our mentorship groups have helped a lot, because kids have gotten to be able to connect on a deeper level than with just a school teacher on campus, and that gives them a safe space. ... It has shifted the attitude of a lot of our kids.

Through these, and other, small-group structures, schools are able to help students experience a sense of belonging and form connections with a trusted adult and their peers.

Schools are also intentionally creating supplemental and extracurricular activities designed to be engaging and support socialization. This year, the culture and climate team at Buena Vista Horace Mann is working with their middle school students to increase their sense of belonging, asking students questions like, “What makes you feel really good about being here on-site? What is the quality of your experience once you’re here? What do you want to have happen that isn’t happening right now?” Based on students’ responses, they began implementing wellness days throughout the year focused on physical and mental health, and they created a wellness center—similar to a student lounge—that offers music and free food on a regular basis. As the principal explained, “We’re hoping that continuing to do things like that will show students that this is really their school. ... Then, as a result, they will want to be here.”

Similarly, Helen Keller introduced Wellness Wednesdays, organized by the community school coordinator and social-emotional learning coach. On these days, during recess, students can opt in to a focused activity or game, like drawing a picture of themselves and showing or writing their positive attributes. These adult-monitored safe spaces have allowed students with “smaller friend circles” to make connections with their peers. The principal shared that students have “actually gained friendships through those Wednesday activities, and they look forward to it, especially if [their] anxiety is kicking up.”

Meanwhile, Roybal-Allard’s principal and community school coordinator emphasize the importance of focusing on the whole child, including providing enriching, outside-the-classroom experiences based on family preferences. They have leveraged partnerships to expand after-school program options, which include a coding club, choir, cheer, basketball, and other sports. These opportunities, they believe, will help students reengage with school and interact with peers after spending so much time at home during the pandemic. The principal emphasized the importance of “this idea of the kids’ community and building a sense of belonging” and said, “I feel like kids come to school when they feel like they belong here and they’re connected to other individuals.” In instituting these structures and practices, the principal said, she is able to “see their excited faces.” She continued, “I hear their voices, I go into the classroom, and they’re learning.”

Similarly, Buena Vista Horace Mann offers enrichment opportunities within the school day and outside of it. Middle schoolers participate in seminar electives run by community partners, including art, weightlifting, chess, DJing, and a mariachi program. They also partner with the Jamestown Community Center, which cultivates a diverse set of before- and after-school programming. Students can learn cooking, coding, soccer, skateboarding, painting, poetry, theater, and chess, among many other activities. These types of non-classroom organized activities have “facilitated socialization” and rebuilt pandemic-induced “atrophied social muscles,” according to the coordinator. Finding different avenues to keep students engaged is one way the school has tackled student attendance.

Reinvigorating students’ desire to be in school, to learn, and to be with friends is key to improving attendance. The featured schools are building on key community school practices, like enriched and expanded learning opportunities and building a culture of belonging, safety, and care to increase engagement and connectedness.

34x

## Systematic Data Tracking and Monitoring

The historic rise in chronic absence, as well as growing attention to attendance in state school accountability systems, has pushed schools to focus more acutely on who is missing school and why. The featured community schools have developed consistent systems for collecting, tracking, analyzing, and acting on data. At Elk Hills, the community school coordinator has a strict routine. Every day after greeting students and families at the gate during arrival, she sits at her desk and examines attendance data. She checks to see who is out, which families forgot to call in the absence from the day before, and which classes have earned 100% attendance for the day so they can receive credit and move closer to a pizza party (20 days of 100% attendance). For monthly meetings with the principal and the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) team, she analyzes data using the Everyday Labs platform, which provides these insights:

It will show an overall view that's updated every other day with your chronic absenteeism rate. You can go to each child. It'll show you how many absences they have, where they stand, are they at risk, are they moderately chronic, severely, no attendance issues. You can create groups on there, and it'll show you attendance patterns. So if a student is missing Wednesdays all the time because that's our short day, or if they tend to be a vacation extender, it'll group those students together.

Having this data helps the coordinator, principal, and other members of the MTSS team at Elk Hills to identify if a student's absence pattern may indicate another barrier in attending school regularly. From there, targeted outreach allows the school to assess whether and which supports can help get the students to school more regularly. What these tiered interventions look like in practice is detailed in the next section.

Similarly, at Roybal-Allard, according to the community school coordinator, the pupil services and attendance counselor works with the leadership team to "look at attendance monthly and break it down by grade levels, by subgroups, and then look at why." They organize students into "bands" (chronic, basic, and excellent) based on accumulated absences, ideally no more than 1 for every 25 days of school. This helps staff motivate students who border two bands, and to home in on students who are in the "chronic" band. Staff at Buena Vista Horace Mann also have a systematic approach to data analysis. A coordinated care team identifies students approaching chronic levels of absenteeism. As the community school coordinator explained, "Our team used a protocol where our wellness leads identified students [at risk of chronic absenteeism] and answered these questions: Who's improving? Who's missing more [school] than they were before? What trends do you see?"

At Helen Keller, the principal described their use of data as one of the most successful strategies they have employed to bolster attendance. She shared:

I think our focus of really looking at the patterns of attendance [is] really important because it helps us focus on the families who really need the support and who really need the constant engagement to remind them that they need to come to school.

Through the data analysis and targeted outreach, the principal, coordinator, and family liaison gain a firm grip on the root cause for each student who misses several days of school. The principal explained:

I can print out a report for our attendance right now, and I can give you a reason why every one of our students is on that list, right? These two sisters, it's because mom works in the morning, and she struggles sometimes to [get them] to school. For [another student], it's because he has anxiety, he's starting to take medication, and it's not working for him. I can go through case by case because of the conversations that I have with parents or that the community liaison has with parents, or information that's been provided by the teacher's to me. I can break down case by case why students are missing or what we suspect is the issue. ... It doesn't mean that we can [solve every] problem or [stop] brainstorming ideas on how to support them.

This engagement with data allows the school-based teams to effectively and efficiently leverage the services and resources available to the students and families most in need. Importantly, this work does not fall to one person. Rather, data are reviewed and decisions are made collaboratively, allowing for multiple voices and perspectives to inform the supportive solutions that are identified.

## **Utilizing Tiered Systems of Support to Increase Attendance**

The systemic use of data aids the highlighted community schools in leveraging the tiered support systems (e.g., MTSS) they have in place to tackle chronic absenteeism. As with their approaches to providing students with academic, social, or emotional supports, these schools use universal (Tier 1) strategies designed to reach all students and targeted and intensive (Tiers 2 and 3) strategies intended to support students struggling with attendance.

Tier 1 strategies encourage attendance among all students. These universal strategies include student connectedness—an approach that leaders and staff at the featured community schools named as essential to their efforts to combat chronic absenteeism. Several schools emphasized that their Tier 1 interventions are designed to support students in building friendships and to nurture close connections between students and adults. The principal at Roybal-Allard shared that one cause of absenteeism in the postpandemic years is increased social anxiety and rusty social skills among students. To address this, Roybal-Allard has provided structured opportunities for students to interact with their peers and build friendships. These include after-school sports clubs and a new program called Elevo, in which coaches engage students in fun, productive activities that incorporate social and emotional skills.

In addition to relationship-centered approaches, community school staff mentioned the use of incentives as a universal strategy to bolster attendance. For example, Elk Hills has developed reward systems such as a monthly raffle drawing for students who missed no more than 1 day of school during the month. Similarly, Roybal-Allard strategically plans fun activities and giveaways on days that are typically low attendance (e.g., the days after winter and spring breaks) and displays bulletin boards that present student improvements in attendance.

For students and families needing more intensive attendance support—as identified through the data collection and analysis processes described above—the community schools use a range of targeted (Tiers 2 and 3) strategies to support families. For example, Buena Vista Horace Mann, Elk Hills, and Roybal-Allard utilize parent conferences on-site and home visits to meet with families, understand the barriers that prevent students from regularly attending school, and connect families with resources. For more complex (Tier 3) cases, students and families may require referrals for additional services, such as mental health counseling, relief funds, or housing and transportation.

Overall, the community schools leverage their tiered systems of support to increase attendance and meet individual student and family needs. This approach allows them to address chronic absenteeism through data-driven approaches and processes to connect students and families to needed resources and opportunities.

The community schools leverage their tiered systems of support to increase attendance and meet individual student and family needs.

## Leveraging Partnerships to Support Youth and Families

Partnerships with external organizations are critical to community schools and their ability to foster youth well-being and achievement through integrated systems of support and other school features. Some of the focal community schools reinforced the importance of partnerships and pointed to their role in addressing chronic absenteeism.

The partnership that supports Buena Vista Horace Mann's "Stay-Over Program" is an illustrative case. This noteworthy program seeks to address San Francisco's growing housing crisis by providing overnight shelter as well as food and other supportive services for up to 60 people in the school's gymnasium. The program, which is open 7 days per week to all San Francisco Unified School District students and families experiencing homelessness, is made possible by a collaboration and joint-use agreement between the school, the district, the city, and the county.<sup>22</sup> Buena Vista Horace Mann's principal explained why this program is important for students and school attendance:

If a student is concerned about where they're going to sleep that night, or if they're going to have enough food, or if their mother is safe from violence, if they're going home to a housing situation that is far less than ideal, they're not going to be able to really attend in the ways that we want them to in class.

This statement suggests this partnership is seen as supportive of the school's goals of reducing chronic absenteeism.

Helen Keller's partnership with the California-based nonprofit Think Together provides another example of how community school partnerships can support increased attendance. Across Lynwood Unified, data showed that parents and caregivers who need to be at work before schools open their doors were struggling to bring their children to school. In response, Helen Keller partnered with Think Together, which organizes programming for youth outside of school hours, to provide before-school care. A little over a month after the service began, more than 25 families were already participating.

As partnerships can connect youth and families to site-based services that support school attendance in community schools, evidence from Elk Hills suggests that cross-sector collaborations can also inform the identification of effective strategies that community schools use to combat chronic absenteeism. Specifically, a first-of-its-kind rural Children's Cabinet advises Elk Hills and other districts in its consortium in tackling key challenges and better connecting schools to resources. The cross-sector advisory cabinet was established in 2018 and is composed of district leaders, parents, students, community school coordinators, and representatives of county- and community-based organizations, such as College Community Services, Community Action Partnership of Kern, and Kern Behavioral Health and Recovery Services.

The Children's Cabinet has actively advised Elk Hills and other consortium districts around the challenge of chronic absenteeism, helping the community school collective to identify attendance barriers, research innovative solutions, and improve ways to track attendance progress. The cabinet's collective efforts have generated tangible resources and strategies for community schools affiliated with the consortium, including protocols to guide home visits, effective messaging campaigns to support attendance awareness, and the development of high-quality attendance teams. Significant decreases in chronic absenteeism at Elk Hills and other elementary districts in the consortium suggest that the advice and strategic insights garnered from the cross-sector Children's Cabinet are yielding results.

## **Key Role of Community School Coordinators**

Staff in the featured schools identified many factors and circumstances that lead to chronic absenteeism, including transportation barriers, work schedules, homelessness, student and family mental health challenges, and confusion around attendance policies. Given the range of challenges that can contribute to chronic absenteeism, efforts to increase school attendance require school staff to identify *why* students are missing school and to support families in overcoming barriers to attendance. In this, community school coordinators play a critical role.

Coordinators in the featured schools lend essential capacity and attention to the strategies for combating chronic absenteeism described above. For instance, community school coordinators at Buena Vista Horace Mann, Elk Hills, and Helen Keller support data tracking and analysis processes that help identify students in need of attendance interventions, which in turn informs how schools leverage their tiered systems of support to meet student and family needs. Community school coordinators also play a prominent role in relationship-building with students and families. They are intentionally visible to students and families, often welcoming each child to the campus in the morning and taking opportunities to have informal conversations with students and families whenever possible. Coordinators also organize and support structures intended to foster student connectedness and well-being, as demonstrated by the role of coordinators in leading the mentorship program at Elk Hills and Wellness Wednesdays at Helen Keller.

With their focus on family engagement, community school coordinators play a large role in supporting parental outreach and communication regarding attendance promotion. They are often charged with making initial phone calls home when a student is absent from school and pursue more extended conversations with families when students are chronically absent or nearing the threshold. The latter includes home visits. For instance, at Helen Keller, the community school coordinator conducts approximately 10 home visits per month to support students who are chronically absent. She noted that the visits allow her to explain the types of resources that Helen Keller can provide to support student attendance. She shared:

It's our opportunity to let them know we have hot spots, we have school uniforms. If that's the reason you are not coming to school, we can [help] with transportation, housing stability. Maybe they have issues going at home, [such as] divorce, trauma. We can provide referrals for therapy services.

In addition to this outreach, community school coordinators described other activities they engaged in to support attendance, such as leading messaging and informational campaigns about the importance of school attendance and organizing monthly raffles for students with strong attendance.

Community school coordinators also play a pivotal role in bringing resources to families through partnerships. The community school coordinator at Buena Vista Horace Mann explained:

[It is my job to] turn those needs that are surfaced into resources. When families said they needed housing, it was, "Let's bring in the supervisor's office and find out how we can get families into housing." When our data told us mental health was a need, it was, "Let's write this Kaiser grant to run a pilot." The cycle is identify the need, gather the data in a way that is meaningful, present that data to the folks that can provide services or resources, and then build a program around that.

In addition to identifying resources, Buena Vista Horace Mann's community school coordinator explained that his role entails managing the partnerships that provide needed resources. "I'm responsible for bringing in partnerships that can do that work and maintaining [those] relationships," he said. "That network of support has to be maintained, and that is what I have my eye on." Community school coordinators manage partners to support many aspects of school and students' lives, and these skills allow them to address chronic absenteeism using a similar skill set.

The activities that support school attendance—providing incentives for consistent attendance, regularly analyzing attendance data, meeting with students, conducting home visits with families, identifying community resources, and managing partnerships—are time-intensive and require skilled work. The featured schools benefit from community school coordinators who have expertise in identifying student and family needs, building relationships with families, and developing partnerships with organizations that can provide the support that students need to attend school regularly.

While community school coordinators in the featured schools provided critical capacity and support, they did not work alone. They collaborated with administrators and other site-based support teams to make sense of attendance data and to implement supportive approaches that help students and families come to school regularly. Principals at these sites played a key role in supporting and encouraging the community school coordinators to take leadership in these efforts. The collective efforts to combat chronic absenteeism in the featured sites embodies a key practice in high-quality community schools: an embrace of collaborative leadership, shared power, and voice.

# Key Takeaways for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism

Concerns about chronic absenteeism are prevalent as schools grapple with the reality of post-COVID-19 pandemic challenges. Policymakers and educators throughout the nation can learn from the California community schools featured here, which are making substantial progress in addressing these challenges head-on.

Community school personnel and site leaders at the featured schools pointed to structures and processes that enabled their effective efforts to stem chronic absenteeism. These included lending dedicated capacity to combating chronic absenteeism through the critical work of their community school coordinators, who closely collaborated with school leaders and other staff to identify attendance barriers, support students and families in addressing those challenges, and manage partnerships with service providers. The schools also increased attention to family engagement and relationship-building with students to bolster their sense of school connectedness. Community school staff at the featured sites also systematically monitored attendance data, used a tiered system to provide differentiated supports to increase attendance, and leveraged school-community partnerships to support students and families.

These strategies demonstrate key learnings about effective approaches to increasing school attendance:

- **Effective approaches to combating chronic absenteeism are not just reactive but also proactive and preventive in nature.** The community schools featured in this report did not solely wait for problems to arise. Instead, they actively invested in engaging families, often sharing the importance of consistent attendance and information about students' attendance data. They also focused on relationship-building with students and families and worked to create a school climate that felt warm and welcoming. These efforts fostered a sense of connection, making community schools places where students and families wanted to be.
- **Trusting relationships with students and families—rather than punitive approaches—are foundational in preventing and reducing chronic absenteeism.** Without trust and a feeling of connectedness to school, efforts to support chronically absent students are unlikely to succeed. The community school staff emphasized that if students and families trust that community school staff care about them, are there to help, and will welcome them even if they are running late or have missed a substantial number of school days, they are usually willing to show up and seek support when needed. By partnering with students and families to problem-solve attendance barriers together, these schools adopted a restorative approach rather than a punitive approach, which might involve actions such as employing truant officers or taking legal action against parents.
- **A systematic approach to utilizing data and managing the provision of services is important.** When challenges arose that created barriers to attendance, the featured community schools were prepared to respond quickly in providing support for both students and families. They had robust data systems and analysis processes that helped them to identify students who were nearing and exceeding the chronic absenteeism threshold and to consider underlying causes that the school could work to mitigate. The community schools also had a structured approach to managing the provision of services (such as transportation assistance, overnight shelter space for families experiencing homelessness, and mental health care) to help address attendance barriers for students and

40x

families. By leveraging a tiered system of support to meet the differential needs of students and families around attendance, the schools were able to offer a coherent approach to supporting attendance that aligns with how they already approached intervention and challenges in other areas.

- **Community school coordinators played a critical role in reducing chronic absenteeism, pointing to the importance of dedicated capacity to address the challenge.** All practitioners at the featured schools played a role in partnering with families and developing the trusting relationships that form the backbone for supporting school attendance. However, given the range of challenges that contribute to chronic absenteeism—some of which, such as mental health, have been exacerbated by the pandemic—schools need capacity to address attendance barriers. The community school coordinators met this need. The coordinators played a key role in tracking and analyzing data and in brainstorming solutions. They were central figures in strengthening family engagement, building trusting relationships, and managing external partnerships at school sites—the latter of which also provided resources and support to increase attendance at many of the community schools.
- **Collaboration among varied school actors can support efforts to stem chronic absenteeism.** While dedicated capacity to support students and families in reducing absenteeism was important in the featured community schools, collaboration and consultation among administrators, school support teams, and community school coordinators helped schools in meeting student and family attendance challenges. The principals at these sites, in particular, engaged in a collaborative leadership approach that provided coordinators the support and flexibility to address the issue.
- **Schools benefit from being part of a broader network of community schools that supports their efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism in a restorative manner.** While the community schools featured in this report operate in vastly different school district contexts, they are all part of broader community school initiatives that are receiving state grant funding through the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP). The districts in which the schools are situated have committed to the community schools strategy and are providing support and training to participating school sites. Host districts also have established systems-level (e.g., city or county) partnerships that enable community school sites to access resources for students and families, rather than each site adopting a “one school at a time” partnership approach. Having systemic supports in place enhances and reinforces the work at individual schools, so they can expand their efforts rather than battling against a misaligned system.

These takeaways can inform leaders and practitioners who are working to identify and implement approaches to address chronic absenteeism in their own settings. While their form and scope will look distinct in implementation, particularly in non-community school settings and at the high school level, they nonetheless shed light on the importance of a multifaceted and collaborative strategy to support consistent attendance—one that provides key supports and interventions when needed while ensuring that schools are environments where students and families want to be.

As this report highlights, community schools are particularly well positioned to address the challenge of chronic absenteeism and its varied underlying causes. With their dedicated staff (e.g., community school coordinators) and key practices (e.g., family and community engagement, integrated student supports, community partnerships, collaborative leadership), community schools have the structure, resources, and commitment to partner with students and families to address attendance barriers in a holistic manner that supports student achievement and well-being.

## Endnotes

1. Malkus, N. (2024). *Long COVID for public schools: Chronic absenteeism before and after the pandemic*. American Enterprise Institute. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/long-covid-for-public-schools-chronic-absenteeism-before-and-after-the-pandemic/>
2. Chang, H., Chavez, B., & Hough, H. (2024). *Unpacking California's chronic absence crisis through 2022-23: Seven key facts* [Infographic]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/unpacking-californias-chronic-absence-crisis-through-2022-23>
3. Chang, H. N., & Romero, M. (2008). *Present, engaged, and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades* [Report]. National Center for Children in Poverty, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University. [https://www.nccp.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/text\\_837.pdf](https://www.nccp.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/text_837.pdf); Gottfried, M. A. (2014). Chronic absenteeism and its effects on students' academic and socioemotional outcomes. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 19(2), 53–75.
4. The Nation's Report Card. (n.d.). *NAEP long-term trend assessment results: Reading and mathematics*. <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/ltt/2022/>
5. Malkus, N. (2024). *Long COVID for public schools: Chronic absenteeism before and after the pandemic*. American Enterprise Institute. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/long-covid-for-public-schools-chronic-absenteeism-before-and-after-the-pandemic/>
6. Chang, H. N., & Romero, M. (2008). *Present, engaged, and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades* [Report]. National Center for Children in Poverty, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University. [https://www.nccp.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/text\\_837.pdf](https://www.nccp.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/text_837.pdf)
7. McNeely, C., Chang, H., & Gee, K. (2023). *Disparities in unexcused absences across California schools* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/disparities-unexcused-absences-across-california-schools>
8. Carver-Thomas, D., Leung, M., & Burns, D. (2021). *California teachers and COVID-19: How the pandemic is impacting the teacher workforce*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/987.779>
9. Gramlich, J. (2023). *Mental health and the pandemic: What U.S. surveys have found*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/03/02/mental-health-and-the-pandemic-what-u-s-surveys-have-found/>
10. California State Board of Education. (2024, January 18). *President's Report, California State Board of Education Public Session*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/sbwebcastarchive.asp>
11. Childs, J., & Lofton, R. (2021). Masking attendance: How education policy distracts from the wicked problem(s) of chronic absenteeism. *Educational Policy*, 35(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904820986771>; Kearny, C. A., Benoit, L., González, C., & Keppens, G. (2022). School attendance and school absenteeism: A primer for the past, present, and theory of change for the future. *Frontiers in Education*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2022.1044608>; Naff, D., Khawaji, F., Meadows, M., Dupre, K., Sahin Ilkorkor, Z., ... Sheriff, M. (2023). *Strategies for addressing chronic absenteeism in the post-pandemic era*. Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium.
12. Kostyo, S., & Miller, T. (2023). *Federal funding sources for community schools*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/federal-funding-sources-community-schools>; Maier, A., & Rivera-Rodríguez, A. (2023). *State strategies for investing in community schools*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/612.402>
13. Modan, N. (2022). *Pandemic spurs state investment in community school model*. K-12 Dive. <https://www.k12dive.com/news/pandemic-spurs-state-investment-in-community-school-model/618095/>
14. Prunty, E., & Hill, L. (2024, February 20). *Chronic absenteeism in K-12 schools remains troublingly high* [Blog post]. *Public Policy Institute of California*. <https://www.ppic.org/blog/chronic-absenteeism-in-k-12-schools-remains-troublingly-high/>
15. Chen, C. Y.-C., Byrne, E., & Vélez, T. (2022). Impact of the 2020 pandemic of COVID-19 on families with school-aged children in the United States: Roles of income level and race. *Journal of Family Issues*, 43(3), 719–740. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X21994153>; Fahle, E. M., Kane, T. J., Patterson, T., Reardon, S. F., Staiger, D. O., & Stuart, E. A. (2023). *School district and community factors associated with learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Center for Education Policy Research. [https://cepr.harvard.edu/sites/hwpi.harvard.edu/files/cepr/files/explaining\\_covid\\_losses\\_5.23.pdf](https://cepr.harvard.edu/sites/hwpi.harvard.edu/files/cepr/files/explaining_covid_losses_5.23.pdf)

16. Chang, H., Chavez, B., & Hough, H. (2024). *Unpacking California's chronic absence crisis through 2022–23: Seven key facts* [Infographic]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/unpacking-californias-chronic-absence-crisis-through-2022-23>
17. Please note that within different local education agencies, various titles are assigned to this role (e.g., community school case manager, community school coordinator). For clarity and consistency, the authors have used the title community school coordinator throughout the brief.
18. McNeely, C., Chang, H., & Gee, K. (2023). *Disparities in unexcused absences across California schools* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/disparities-unexcused-absences-across-california-schools>
19. Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. National Center for Family & Community Connections With Schools.
20. Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. Russell Sage Foundation. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/9781610440967>
21. McNeely, C., Chang, H., & Gee, K. (2023). *Disparities in unexcused absences across California schools* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/disparities-unexcused-absences-across-california-schools>
22. Kini, T. (2024, April 22). Supporting learning and well-being at San Francisco's Buena Vista Horace Mann K–8 Community School [Blog post]. *Learning Policy Institute*. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/transforming-schools-buena-vista-horace-mann-k8-community-school>

## About the Authors

**Emily Germain** is a Researcher at the Learning Policy Institute (LPI), working primarily with LPI's Whole Child Education team. She has focused her time and research at LPI on community schools, coauthoring *Theory of Action for Community School Transformation* and *Outcomes and Indicators for Community Schools: A Guide for Implementers and Evaluators*, and conducting case studies of community schools in California and New Mexico. Her time as a teacher in traditional public and charter schools in New York City, rural Kansas, and Austin, TX, shaped her commitment to influencing policy and practice in service of greater equity in education. Through qualitative and multimethod approaches, she has studied the implications of urban education reforms for historically marginalized communities, the relationship between schools and communities, and how policy and politics shape both the labor markets and practice of education leaders and teachers. Germain holds a PhD in Education Leadership and Policy from the University of Texas at Austin. She received an MAT in Secondary Social Studies from Teachers College at Columbia University and a BA in American Studies from Barnard College.

**Laura E. Hernández** is a Senior Researcher at LPI and coleads the Whole Child Education team. She specializes in designing and conducting qualitative research on whole child approaches and the systems and structures that enable them. Her work is informed by her 9 years of classroom teaching as well as her interdisciplinary research training focused on education policies and the factors that affect their equitable and democratic implementation. To date, her work has examined the systems, factors, and processes surrounding a range of reforms, including community schools, deeper learning school design, and relationship-centered schooling initiatives. Hernández holds a PhD in Education Policy from the University of California, Berkeley; an MST from Pace University in New York City; and a BA in Political Science from the University of California, Los Angeles.

**Sarah Klevan** is a Senior Researcher and a member of LPI's Whole Child Education team. Prior to joining LPI, Klevan was a Research Associate for the Research Alliance for New York City Schools, where she led several research projects focused on the New York City school system. She has conducted research studies on a variety of topic areas related to how schools reproduce and disrupt patterns of inequality, including community schools, school safety and climate, best practices for immigrant youth, college-readiness initiatives, anti-racism education for teachers, and restorative approaches to school discipline. Klevan previously taught 5th and 6th grades in Philadelphia and was a fellow of the Jewish Organizing Initiative in Boston. Klevan earned her PhD from New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. She holds an MEd in Elementary Education from the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education and a BA in International Relations from Tufts University.

**Rebecca S. Levine** is a PhD candidate in Education Studies at the University of California, San Diego and Research and Policy Intern at LPI. In her work, Levine seeks to improve student mental health and social-emotional learning through research, policy, and practice. With LPI, she supports a range of projects on strengthening systems to support community school implementation. She also has years of experience as a clinical social worker in school, group home, and outpatient settings, specializing in child trauma therapy, and she has published original research on school-based mental health services, trauma-informed care, and social-emotional learning strategies. Levine holds an MSW from Boston College and a BS in Communications from the University of Miami.

Anna Maier is a Senior Policy Advisor and Researcher at LPI and coleads the Whole Child Education team, with a focus on community schools. She is the lead author of *Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of the Evidence*. Her policy work and research focus on federal, state, and local investments in community schools, with a particular focus on California. Maier began her career managing an after-school program for elementary school students in Oakland and went on to teach 2nd and 3rd grades in the Oakland Unified School District and Aspire Public Schools. As a graduate student fellow with the Center for Cities and Schools at UC Berkeley, she worked with West Contra Costa Unified School District on implementing a full-service community schools initiative. Maier received an MPP from the Goldman School of Public Policy at UC Berkeley; a Multiple Subject Cross-Cultural, Language, and Academic Development credential from the New College of California; and a BA in Psychology and Education Studies from Carleton College.

45x



1530 Page Mill Road, Suite 250  
Palo Alto, CA 94304  
p: 650.332.9797

1100 17th Street, NW, Suite 200  
Washington, DC 20036  
p: 202.830.0079

@LPI\_Learning | [learningpolicyinstitute.org](http://learningpolicyinstitute.org)

The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.

46x

# MSESC

MONMOUTH OCEAN EDUCATIONAL SERVICES COMMISSION

REGIONAL ACHIEVEMENT ACADEMY



47x



ALTERNATIVE PLACEMENT FOR  
ELEMENTARY, MIDDLE & HIGH  
SCHOOL STUDENTS  
GENERAL/SPECIAL EDUCATION GRADES 4-12

Where Change Happens

Inducing long-term behavior change involves a combination of effective teaching methods, emotional engagement, and a supportive environment



- THERAPEUTIC SERVICES**  
Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Licensed Psychologist, & Licensed Psychiatrist On-Site
- Strength Based Counseling
  - Solution Focused Counseling
  - Crisis Intervention Services
  - Psychiatric Services including Medication Management



**ADVENTURE EDUCATION**

Combining Adventure Education with social and emotional learning (SEL) is a powerful way to engage students both intellectually and emotionally. RAA's Adventure Education program ties into content learning and SEL, ensuring long-term impact on student behavior:



- Experiential Learning Through Hands-on Outdoor Activities
- Goal Setting and Reflection
- Team Building & Relationships
- Resilience & Coping Skills
- Mindfulness & Stress Management
- Real-World Problem Solving



**PERSONALIZED ACADEMICS**

RAA offers a differentiated approach to learning that sets us apart from other schools. Courses are designed to meet the needs of our students with a hands-on multifaceted approach. RAA students have the opportunity to explore hands-on learning experiences through:

- Project Based Activities & Electives
- STEM Lab
- NJ Virtual School
- On site Greenhouse
- Hydroponic Systems
- Personalized Learning
- Esports Lab



@RAchieveAcademy  
#WeRAchievementAcademy

For more information visit [moesc.org/rar](http://moesc.org/rar)  
100 Torrimo Way 732-389-5555  
Tinton Falls, NJ 07712 Kmiller@moesc.org



418x

## Regional Achievement Academy

The Regional Achievement Academy is where change happens, serving classified and non-classified, at-risk students in grades 4–12 seeking an alternative to the traditional educational program. Potential students may:

- Be in danger of not graduating with their class
- Have chronic discipline/attendance problems
- Be self-abusive
- Have Emotional Regulation Impairments
- Be struggling with substance misuse

### **Students are accepted for:**

- Full school year
- Alternative Interim Placement (AIP) - 45 days or 90 days

# Additional Information

RAA Program Elements Include but are not limited to:

- Individual & Group Counseling with Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Licensed Psychologist
- On Site Psychiatrist with Services Including Medication Management
- Personalized Learning Plans for Each Student-Meeting Students Where They Are Instructionally
- Positive Behavioral Supports
  - Tier I II & III systems
  - Calm rooms
- ESports program with new New Lab coming Summer 2025
- Supplemental Learning Opportunities Through NJ Virtual School
- Work-Based Learning
- Mentorship Opportunities
- On-Site Electives
- Adventure Education
  - Fishing, Rock Wall Climbing, Ice Skating, Pickleball, etc.
- Greenhouse & Hydroponics Program
- Student Leader Program (Wingman) with Shore Center for Students with Autism

# Chronic Absenteeism

Creating a positive school climate that emphasizes attendance culture and supports students is essential for fostering success and engagement in school.

RAA utilizes a comprehensive approach to creating such an environment to determine common and root causes:

## 1.) Motivation

- **Strength Based Counseling** - This approach focuses on identifying and utilizing a person's strengths, resources, and abilities to help them overcome challenges and achieve their goals.

## 2.) Solution Focused

- **Solution Focused Counseling**- is a goal-oriented, future-focused therapy that emphasizes finding solutions rather than analyzing or dwelling on the problems.

## 3.) Level of flexibility on attendance.

- School avoidance often stems from complex family, personal, social, and emotional challenges. We use a flexible and supportive approach to attendance and work closely with students, families, and staff.



Combining Adventure Education with social and emotional learning (SEL) is a powerful way to engage students both intellectually and emotionally. RAA's Adventure Education program ties into content learning and SEL, ensuring long-term impact on student behavior:

- Experiential Learning Through Adventure
- Building Emotional Intelligence
- Goal Setting and Reflection
- Team Building & Relationships
- Resilience & Coping Skills
- Mindfulness & Stress Management
- Real-World Problem Solving



# Thank you!

more information: [moesc.org](http://moesc.org)

Kathleen Miller, Principal

 [kmiller@moesc.org](mailto:kmiller@moesc.org)

 (732) 389 - 5555

For the referral packet, click [HERE](#)





# ALTERNATIVE PLACEMENT FOR ELEMENTARY, MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS GENERAL/SPECIAL EDUCATION GRADES 4-12

## Where Change Happens

Inducing long-term behavior change involves a combination of effective teaching methods, emotional engagement, and a supportive environment



### THERAPEUTIC SERVICES

Licensed Clinical Social Worker, & Licensed Psychologist  
Psychiatric Services Including Medication Management

- Strength Based Counseling
- Solution Focused Counseling
- Crisis Intervention Services



### ADVENTURE EDUCATION

Combining Adventure Education with social and emotional learning (SEL) is a powerful way to engage students both intellectually and emotionally. RAA's Adventure Education program ties into content learning and SEL, ensuring long-term impact on student behavior:

- Experiential Learning Through Hands-on Outdoor Activities
- Goal Setting and Reflection
- Team Building & Relationships
- Resilience & Coping Skills
- Mindfulness & Stress Management
- Real-World Problem Solving



### PERSONALIZED ACADEMICS

RAA offers a differentiated approach to learning that sets us apart from other schools. Courses are designed to meet the needs of our students with a hands-on multifaceted approach. RAA students have the opportunity to explore hands-on learning experiences through:

- Project Based Activities & Electives
- STEM Lab
- On site Greenhouse
- Hydroponic Systems
- Personalized Learning



@RAchieveAcademy  
#WeRAchievementAcademy

For more information visit [moesc.org/raa](http://moesc.org/raa)  
100 Tornillo Way  
Tinton Falls, NJ 07712

732-389-5555  
Kmilller@moesc.org





**SPAN Parent Advocacy Network comments to Joint Committee on Public Schools: Student Mental Health Issues/School Avoidance**

March 11, 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today on these very important issues. The SPAN Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN) is NJ's federally designated Parent Training and Information Center, Family-to-Family Health Information Center, NJ State Affiliate Organization (SAO) of Family Voices, and the NJ affiliate of Parent-to-Parent USA. We also house a Military Family 360 Support program and national RAISE (Resources for Access, Independence, Self-Determination, and Employment) TA Center. Additionally, we provide technical support to the parent centers in the Northeast Region as well as house the National Technical Assistance Center providing support for the approximately 96 parent centers across the country.

SPAN provides resources, training, leadership development as well as individual technical assistance. We receive tens of thousands of calls each year looking for that support/information. It's through that lens that we submit these comments.

Since Covid and the return to physical school buildings, our calls related to children's mental health, behavior, school removal and school avoidance have increased by at least 30 percent. It is difficult to just put a laser focus on one result i.e. School avoidance when so much of this is intertwined. I can report to you what is shared with us by parents, students and members of the education community.

**We have found multiple reasons for school avoidance:**

- Bullying
- Not implementing IEP/504 Plan or IHP
- Lack of resources or options at the school
- School removal and/or Discipline-no real transition plan to return to schools, barriers faced by families
- School Anxiety, Social Anxiety, Depression, Social Deficits or co-morbid with other disability including health impairment.
- Boredom, School too difficult or not difficult enough to maintain interest
- Staff and administrative training, coaching
- Lack of access to resources outside of school

***More than 20% of youth experienced at least 1 major depressive episode in the past year More than HALF of youth with major depression did not receive mental health treatment School Mental Health Report Card – March 2025 With that alarming statistic the reports itself puts forth some policy recommendations I will share with the committee:***

**55x**

## School Mental Health Report Card | Inseparable

### Policy Recommendations:

- Permit excused absences for mental health and offer the student and their parent or caregiver information on mental health support following two or more absences
- Adopt regular training and coaching of teachers and school staff on mental health, suicide prevention, and substance use disorders.
- Utilize proactive not reactive response. Early Intervention is crucial.
- Expand mental health supports for teachers and school staff Implement alternatives to exclusionary discipline (e.g. suspension and expulsion), such as referrals to counseling or behavioral supports. Improving crisis response.
- Update anti-bullying and harassment policies to ensure they effectively address emerging trends in harmful behaviors
- Ensuring access to mental health care; expanding the mental health workforce.
- Promoting school and youth mental health, skills for life success. School based services are critical
- Require age-appropriate mental health education in grades K–12 Schools have an important role in addressing youth suicide. States can support suicide prevention awareness and training for students. Direct schools that issue student ID cards to include the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline or other crisis help line

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide input and share some experiences and ideas.

***Respectfully,***

***Peg Kinsell***

***Policy Director, SPAN Parent Advocacy Network***

***570 Broad Street, Suite 702***

***Newark, NJ 07102***

***201-724-4454***

***[pkinsell@spanadvocacy.org](mailto:pkinsell@spanadvocacy.org)***

---

***To empower families and inform and involve professionals and other individuals interested in the healthy development and education of children, to enable all children to become fully participating and contributing members of our communities and society.***

Joint Committee on the Public Schools  
Tuesday, March 11, 2025  
Draft Testimony of Dr. Rachel Goldberg

Good Morning Joint Committee on the Public Schools Members,

Thank you for being here today.

My name is Dr. Rachel Goldberg, I am a taxpayer in South Orange, a parent of three public school students, Superintendent of Springfield Public Schools in Union County, and member of the Garden State Coalition of Schools. It is an honor to join you.

I would like to start with a few points of gratitude. Garden State Coalition of Schools appreciates Ms. DiBenedetti's responsiveness to the needs of school districts and her organizing this session. We would like to recognize the work of the Governor's Office, Commissioner Dehmer, and the Department of Education for recognizing the importance of a strong budget process. By providing early notification of anticipated percentage changes and timely budget information, our district has been able to plan productively for the coming school year. I can attest that the budget provided to our district is a testament to the members of the Governor's Office and legislature who have heard our call, and our community is hopeful that this budget will pass successfully.

We are here today to discuss issues of chronic absenteeism and school avoidance.

The pandemic laid bare the essential role of schools, serving as centers for learning and vital economic engines, providing essential services including childcare and mental health support. We witnessed the profound impact of social isolation on our students, from delayed social development in our youngest students to adolescents grappling with navigating in-person peer connections. The pervasive anxiety exacerbated by the pandemic has had multi-generational impacts, and we address these challenges every day.

I became Superintendent of Springfield Public Schools on July 1, 2020, so there is not a great deal of "before" data or experiences that I can share; however I can speak directly to what our current reality is. For the context, Springfield is a "GH" district, supporting approximately 2,200 students from preschool through grade 12, and over 72% of our budget comes from local taxpayer dollars. Our per pupil expenditure for this school year is \$19,352.

Within our schools, our dedicated counselors are working tirelessly to support students struggling in the school system. We maintain low counselor caseloads in middle and high school (under 225 students per counselor) and provide access to a Student Assistance Counselor, a social worker who offers individual and group counseling. We are adding a new Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) position and budgeting for an additional staff member to expand our therapeutic options and proactively address student triggers before they escalate to school avoidance.

57x

Currently, Springfield has a number of students attending out-of-district schools due to school avoidance. Each of the students has an IEP. These cases are not isolated; their avoidance stems from a complex interplay of factors that may include mental health diagnoses, academic difficulties, bullying (often amplified by social media), and family dynamics. Most of these students began exhibiting school avoidance behaviors during middle or high school and, in some cases, began in relation to the post-pandemic return to school.

The financial burden is substantial. For the 2025-2026 school year, we have budgeted over \$650,000 for these out-of-district placements and transportation costs. These placements, operating without cost caps, are projected to increase by 7-10% annually. Despite our best efforts to develop in-house support programs, the likelihood of these students returning to our district is low. The cost of several private programs exceeds \$100,000 a year for tuition alone.

To provide a broader perspective, I consulted with Ms. Carrie Dattilo, Superintendent of the Union County Educational Services Commission (UCESC). UCESC serves a significantly different student population across five schools, including two alternative schools that support at-risk students from Elizabeth Public Schools and one therapeutic school that supports students from multiple districts. Of the students served in three of their schools, 26% of students in 23-24 were returned to the district for reasons including lack of attendance, extreme disciplinary infractions, and leaving their assigned district.

At their therapeutic school, the cost is approximately \$63,000 a year and includes daily group and weekly individual counseling, occupational and speech therapies, and small class sizes. Their staff includes 4 BCBAs, a Student Assistance Counselor, and a supervisor of Behavioral Sciences.

In Springfield and UCESC, the special education content area certification challenges make it difficult to find the staff necessary to build or expand programs to meet the complex needs of our students. The shortage of professionals to support our programs is a very real impediment.

Similar to others speaking this morning, we are asking for intentional and systematic support from our state and local agencies; what has been offered to date is not adequately addressing the challenges we are facing.

Today, we are offering three ideas to support our students and school systems:

**Please strengthen our state investment in public mental health programs.** You can assist us by encouraging the thoughtful development of more district or public options for supporting students struggling with mental health issues. Where districts see population shifts or have room, there may be an opportunity for the state to provide fiscal support for identifying and developing innovative programs as a shared service among other public schools. This is happening in some districts already; your voice can help move us forward.

**Please use your legislative power to address the exceptional bureaucratic hurdles and self-imposed limits to attracting strong educational staff.** Physical space may be available,

58x

but the staff to support the students' needs is increasingly difficult to find. Please, keep the momentum to reduce the cost burdens for certifications and move legislation broadening the reach of specific teacher certification credentials forward. There are two bills Sponsored by Assemblywoman Bagolie that deserve your attention.

Please accept that New Jersey is losing out on hiring qualified professionals because of the archaic New Jersey First rules that keep strong educators and school professionals from nearby states from applying to our schools. I would like to recognize Co-Chair Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson, and Assemblywomen Matsikoudis and Assemblywoman Morales for sponsoring or co-sponsoring legislation to make this change. We hope that members of the Senate sponsor a partner bill and move this forward before we enter another school year with fewer candidates.

Unfortunately, outside interests and partisan loyalties undermine the opportunity to make progress; please be the leaders who advocate for positive change.

**Please oversee the private programs' cost structures and accountability.** We must ask why private placements are allowed to operate with minimal cost oversight and unbounded ability to raise costs. Public school districts have a 2% cap on our annual budgets, and the enormous amount of public tax dollars supporting private out-of-district schools demands oversight. With federal funding under attack, we are even more concerned about maintaining quality programs for all of our students.

Please keep our schools from falling victim to a failure narrative. We can and do offer exceptional learning environments for our children. At a time when public education is under attack, please help us to effectively use our resources to provide every student access to the educational success that makes New Jersey among the best in the country. Thank you.

Senate

Senator Joseph Cryan- D- Union

Senator Renee C. Burgess- D-Irvington

Senator Angela McKnight- D-Jersey City

Senator Joseph Pennacchio-R-Montville

Senator Douglas Steinhardt-R-Lopatcong

Senator Michael Testa-R-Vineland

Senator Shirley Turner-D- Ewing

59x

Assembly

Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson-D-Trenton

Assemblywoman Linda Carter-D- Plainfield

Assemblywoman Victoria A. Flynn-R-Middletown

Assemblywoman Michele Matsikoudis-R- New Providence

Assemblywoman Carmen Theresa Morales-D-Belleville

Assemblyman Erik Simonsen-R-Vineland

Assemblyman Benjie E. Wimberly-D-Paterson



**Testimony of Jennifer Thompson, MSW**  
*CEO, United Way of Hunterdon County*

Before the New Jersey State Legislature's Joint Committee on Public Schools  
Hearing on Student Mental Health and School Avoidance  
March 11, 2025

Good morning, co-chairs Senator Cyran and Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson and esteemed members of the Joint Committee on Public Schools. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the critical issue of student mental health and school avoidance. My name is Jennifer Thompson, and I am the CEO of United Way of Hunterdon County. I have a Master of Social Work and a background in mental health, which informs my deep commitment to the well-being of young people in our community. I am also a mother of junior high student in our Hunterdon County public school system. My professional background and personal lived experience as a mother in this community drives my work on behalf of our children.

The U.S. Surgeon General has identified youth mental health as the *defining crisis of our lifetime*, citing an urgent need for action at all levels of government. This crisis has been exacerbated by the lingering effects of the pandemic, social isolation, economic hardship, and increased stressors on young people today. If we fail to act, we risk an entire generation of students struggling to achieve academic and personal success due to unaddressed mental health challenges.

**The State of Youth Mental Health in Hunterdon County**

Across New Jersey, and particularly in Hunterdon County, we are witnessing an alarming rise in youth mental health challenges that are contributing to increased school avoidance. According to recent data from the Hunterdon County Department of Health and local school districts:

- **Over 30%** of middle and high school students report experiencing persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.
- **An estimated 1 in 5** students in our county struggle with anxiety, depression, or other mental health conditions that interfere with their daily lives.
- Chronic absenteeism rates have surged, with **some districts reporting a 25% increase** in students missing 10% or more of the school year.
- Educators and school staff report that mental health concerns are among the top reasons for student disengagement and school avoidance.

**Understanding School Avoidance in New Jersey**

School avoidance, also known as school refusal, is a growing issue that is closely tied to student mental health. It occurs when a child regularly misses school due to emotional distress, rather than external factors like truancy or lack of parental enforcement. Research suggests that **between 2-5% of school-aged children** experience severe school avoidance, with rates increasing in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Common causes of school avoidance include:

- **Anxiety Disorders** – Many students with generalized anxiety, social anxiety, or panic disorders struggle to attend school due to overwhelming fear and distress.
- **Depression** – Symptoms such as fatigue, lack of motivation, and feelings of hopelessness can make attending school feel impossible.

- **Bullying and Social Isolation** – Students who experience bullying, discrimination, or social difficulties may avoid school to escape negative peer interactions.
- **Academic Stress** – High-stakes testing, learning difficulties, and pressure to succeed contribute to students feeling overwhelmed and avoiding school.
- **Trauma and Family Stressors** – Instability at home, including parental mental health struggles, poverty, or past trauma, can make school attendance inconsistent.
- **Lack of Representation in School Leadership** – Studies have shown that students are more likely to feel safe and engaged in school when they see teachers, administrators, and staff who share their racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. A 2023 report from the Learning Policy Institute found that students of color—particularly Black and Hispanic students—often struggle with feelings of alienation in schools where they do not see themselves reflected in the teaching and leadership staff. LGBTQIA+ students also report higher rates of school avoidance when they do not have trusted adults who affirm their identities.
- **School Safety Concerns** – The growing fear of school shootings and violence has also contributed to school avoidance. According to a 2024 Pew Research Center survey, nearly 60% of teenagers report worrying about a potential school shooting. Students experiencing anxiety over their personal safety may avoid attending school altogether, particularly in communities where active shooter drills and reports of gun violence have heightened their fears.

When students engage in school avoidance, it often leads to:

- **Academic decline**, as missed school days result in falling behind on coursework.
- **Social withdrawal**, leading to further isolation and difficulty reintegrating into peer groups.
- **Increased mental health struggles**, as avoidance reinforces anxiety and depression rather than addressing the underlying issues.
- **Long-term consequences**, including higher dropout rates and difficulty securing employment or further education opportunities.

### Causes of Increased Youth Mental Health Challenges

Several factors are contributing to the rising rates of youth mental health struggles, particularly among marginalized students:

1. **Racial Disparities and Diversity in Hunterdon County** – While Hunterdon County is often perceived as a predominantly affluent and homogenous community, our population is growing in diversity. Black and Brown students often face unique stressors, including racial discrimination, lack of representation in school curricula, and disparities in disciplinary actions. Studies have shown that students of color experience disproportionate rates of school suspensions and punitive discipline, further exacerbating feelings of alienation and anxiety.
2. **Lack of Adequate Resources in Rural Communities** – Many of the challenges we face are exacerbated by the limited availability of mental health services in rural areas like Hunterdon County. Students in need of specialized care often encounter months-long wait times for appointments, and the cost of private mental healthcare is prohibitive for many families.
3. **Limited Public Transportation** – A significant barrier to accessing mental health services is the lack of reliable public transportation. Many students and families in Hunterdon County have difficulty reaching providers due to the absence of a robust transit system, leaving those without personal vehicles unable to get the care they need.
4. **Financial Barriers** – Even when services are available, the cost of therapy, medication, and treatment can be prohibitive for many families, particularly those within the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) population. Insurance coverage is often inadequate, and many providers do not accept Medicaid or lower-cost insurance options.

5. **Federal Policy Shifts and the Marginalization of Vulnerable Youth** – Recent federal policy changes have rolled back protections and funding for programs that support LGBTQIA+ youth, diversity initiatives, and mental health services in schools. These shifts are deeply concerning, as they remove critical safeguards for some of our most at-risk students. It is imperative that the New Jersey Legislature counteract these changes by prioritizing funding for programs that support mental health equity, inclusion, and comprehensive care for all students, regardless of their race, gender identity, or background.

### **United Way of Hunterdon County's Response**

At United Way of Hunterdon County, we are taking a proactive role in addressing this crisis. Recognizing the urgent need for accessible mental health services, we have launched new initiatives aimed at providing free counseling and mental health support to students and families who might otherwise lack access to care.

1. **Free Mental Health Counseling Program** – This initiative provides no-cost, confidential counseling services to youth and young adults, as well as parents, ensuring that financial barriers do not prevent students from receiving the help they need. These services are available through a national telehealth partner and are virtual, eliminating the monetary and physical barriers to quality mental health services.
2. **Youth Resilience and Well-Being Workshops** – We have introduced a series of workshops in collaboration with local schools that focus on coping strategies, stress management, and building emotional resilience. These programs help students develop practical tools to manage anxiety and depression before they reach a crisis point. They are evidenced based, led by trained local mental health professionals and integrate emerging technology such as virtual reality, meeting youth where they are, in fun, interactive ways—thereby engaging them in the conversation and normalizing mental health discussions and support.
3. **United in Play** – As part of our commitment to supporting ALICE youth, we have expanded our programs to now include partnerships with schools and recreational sports teams, training volunteers and trusted adults in signs and symptoms of mental health issues while also eliminating the barriers to activities and community supports that positively impact youth's mental health and school avoidance.
4. **Parent and Educator Training** – We are working with schools to provide training sessions for parents, teachers, and school staff on recognizing signs of mental health struggles, responding effectively, and connecting students to available resources.

### **How the NJ Legislature Can Support These Efforts**

The New Jersey Legislature has an opportunity to be a national leader in student mental health policy. We urge the state to:

- **Increase funding for in-school mental health services**, including more counselors and social workers.
- **Expand telehealth mental health options** for students who may not have access to in-person services.
- **Strengthen community-school partnerships** to ensure that local nonprofits like United Way can continue to provide vital mental health programs.
- **Prioritize legislative funding for programs that support marginalized youth**, particularly in light of federal rollbacks in LGBTQIA+ and diversity-focused programs.
- **Invest in public transportation options in rural areas** to ensure that families can access critical services.
- **Support nonprofit-private partnerships** that allow organizations like United Way to expand our free mental health counseling and outreach programs.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, I want to emphasize that school avoidance is a symptom of a larger crisis. We must act with urgency to support our students, ensuring that every child—regardless of their circumstances—has the

63x

mental health resources needed to succeed in school and in life. The United Way of Hunterdon County stands ready to work alongside the Legislature to expand our programs and ensure that all students in New Jersey have access to the care and support they need.

Thank you for your time and for your dedication to the well-being of New Jersey's students. I welcome any questions you may have.

64x