

# PRESENT DANGER

SOLVING THE DEEPENING STUDENT ABSENTEEISM CRISIS

BY PHYLLIS W. JORDAN

MAY 2021

***FutureEd***  
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

## **About the Author**

Phyllis W. Jordan is editorial director of FutureEd.

## **About FutureEd**

FutureEd is an independent, solution-oriented think tank at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy, committed to bringing fresh energy to the causes of excellence, equity, and efficiency in K-12 and higher education. Follow us on Twitter at @FutureEdGU

## **Usage**

The non-commercial use, reproduction, and distribution of this report is permitted.

© 2021 FutureEd

# PRESENT DANGER

## Table of Contents

Foreword

- 1 Lost Learning Opportunities
- 2 Disadvantaged Students
- 3 Academic Consequences
- 4 Addressing Absenteeism
- 5 Evidence-Based Interventions
- 7 The Right School Climate
- 7 Leveraging Community Partnerships
- 8 Data Demands
- 10 Spending Covid Recovery Resources
- 11 Endnotes

## FOREWORD

With coronavirus vaccinations rising, Covid cases falling, and schools reopening, education leaders are turning their attention to expanding learning opportunities post-pandemic.

But as this new FutureEd report makes clear, strikingly high rates of student absenteeism threaten that work. The report presents the findings of a detailed analysis of absenteeism during the pandemic in five school districts serving nearly 450,000 students in the South, Southwest and West, including substantial proportions of low-income students of color. The analysis was conducted by California-based EveryDay Labs, a company cofounded by Harvard Kennedy School behavioral scientist Todd Rogers that works with 2,000 schools to improve student attendance.

Report author Phyllis W. Jordan, who serves as FutureEd's editorial director and who has written extensively about student absenteeism, parses the EveryDay Labs findings and their consequences, and shares smart strategies for using federal Covid relief aid to address the rising tide of student absenteeism.

We are pleased to partner with EveryDay Labs on the report. Hedy Chang of Attendance Work provided helpful feedback on early drafts. And we are grateful to the Shah Family Foundation for funding the project.

**Thomas Toch**

**Director, FutureEd**

**States and school districts nationwide have reported** higher student absenteeism during the pandemic, with schools shuttered and families struggling with the often devastating consequences of Covid-19. But a detailed examination of pandemic attendance trends in five school districts serving nearly 450,000 students suggests that student absenteeism has been far greater during the pandemic than previously reported, especially among young children and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Significant numbers of students have missed fully half the school year. Together with declining public school enrollments during the pandemic, the striking increases in student absences during the Covid crisis have greatly intensified an absenteeism problem that was already pervasive prior to the pandemic. Left unaddressed, it threatens to disrupt emerging efforts to build back achievement as students return to school.

Yet states, school districts, and schools can take a range of steps to increase attendance, supported by the unprecedented infusion of federal Covid-19 recovery funding. This report examines the scope of the student absenteeism crisis, explores its causes and consequences, and provides policymakers and practitioners with a range of proven solutions to the problem.

## Lost Learning Opportunities

Absenteeism represents lost instructional time in its purest form. Even before the pandemic, one in six U.S. public school students were considered chronically absent, meaning they missed 10 percent or more of the school year in excused, unexcused or disciplinary

absences.<sup>1</sup> That level of absenteeism is linked to weaker social skills in kindergarten, poorer reading skills in third grade, and lower high school graduation rates.<sup>2</sup>

The bleak pre-pandemic picture makes the new absenteeism analysis all the more troubling. It was conducted in school districts serving substantial proportions of low-income students of color in the South, Southwest and West by California-based EveryDay Labs, a company cofounded by Harvard Kennedy School behavioral scientist Todd Rogers that works with 2,000 schools to improve student attendance. The analysis breaks down absences by age, ethnic and racial background, socio-economic status and other factors.

Rogers and his team found striking levels of severe absenteeism. One of the study's most troubling findings was a sevenfold increase in the number of students missing 50 percent or more of the school year during the pandemic, a level of absenteeism that few educators even contemplate. In one school district with nearly 100,000 students, the percentage of students absent half the school year rose from .9 percent in 2019-20 to 7 percent in 2020-21.

And while absenteeism is typically most prevalent at the high school level, the EveryDay Labs analysis found

sharply higher absences among younger children. One school district saw its absenteeism rate nearly double—from 12 to 23 percent—among students in kindergarten through fourth grade. Another saw a 60 percent increase in absenteeism in kindergarten through sixth grade.

The analysis also revealed increases in severe absenteeism among early learners. In a mid-sized district, the proportion of students in kindergarten through sixth grade missing at least half the school year climbed from .1 in 2019-20 to 2.5 percent in fall 2020. In another district, the proportion went from zero to 2.5 percent in kindergartens through fourth grade.

Other studies also reveal increasing absenteeism in elementary schools. In Charlotte, North Carolina, district data show elementary schools registered higher rates of chronically absent students than high schools in the 2020-21 year, reversing past trends. The elementary school rate rose from 11 to 18 percent, while the high school rate dropped from 17 to 16.<sup>3</sup>

## Disadvantaged Students

In perhaps the least surprising—but most distressing—trend in the EveryDay Labs analysis, disadvantaged students have missed more school than their peers in the past year, exacerbating pre-pandemic disparities in attendance and achievement. Children living in poverty, English language learners, and students with disabilities are particularly struggling to attend school regularly. There are racial disparities, as well, with rates rising faster in many places for Black and Latino students than for White students.

One mid-sized district in the study saw its chronic absenteeism rate for students who qualify for free and reduced-price meals climb nearly 12 percentage points, compared to a 1-point increase among students who don't qualify. In another mid-sized district, the percentage of chronically absent students rose 19 percentage points among Black children, nearly doubling, while it inched up less than 1 point for White

students. In a third district, the rate for Black students increased to nearly 20 percent, while the rate for White students actually dropped, from 7.6 to less than 4 percent.

Connecticut's absenteeism picture illustrates the challenges facing English learners; the state reports that more than a third of its students in that category were chronically absent in fall 2020, the highest rate of any student subgroup and a trend that also played out in other parts of the country.<sup>4</sup>

The decline in attendance has accompanied a precipitous drop in school enrollment. Each of the districts in the EveryDay Labs study saw enrollment numbers decline, especially in the early grades. One district saw a 29 percent drop in the number of 3-year-olds in pre-K and a 25 percent drop in 4-year-olds. Another recorded a 22 percent decline in the number of pre-K students and a 7 percent drop in kindergarten. And a third reported a 13 percent decline in kindergarten students. The enrollment declines have implications not just for student learning but also for school financing.

In a seemingly contradictory finding, some school districts are reporting that more students have perfect attendance. Every district in the EveryDay Labs analysis saw its perfect attendance rates climb, in many cases doubling from the previous year. In all but one district, chronic absenteeism rates rose at the same time. One large district saw the percentage of students with perfect attendance nearly triple from 13 to 36 percent in its schools with concentrated poverty. At the same schools, the chronic absenteeism rate climbed from 21 to 34 percent.

"I've been working with attendance data for over five years, and I've never seen anything like this," said Jessica Lasky-Fink, a senior data analyst at EveryDay Labs. "And this increase in perfect attendance is continuing into April. It's staggering."

However, an increase in perfect attendance is not necessarily good news in the context of the pandemic. The trend likely reflects the fact that attendance is hard

to define and harder to track with schools delivering education in different ways. With millions of students learning remotely, states and districts have had to rethink what it means to “attend” school, especially when students have challenges connecting to the internet during class time.<sup>5</sup> As many as 19 states weren’t tracking daily attendance this fall, an Attendance Works survey found.<sup>6</sup>

What’s more, the definition of attendance varied, with some districts counting a student as present if they logged in for even a minute of time and others requiring a half day’s online participation. Some counted completed assignments or a conversation with a teacher as a sign of attendance. The myriad definitions made sense, given that some students couldn’t log in to live classes but were watching them later.<sup>7</sup> But the variation made it harder to know who was truly engaged in learning.

Before the pandemic, a robust body of research demonstrated that poverty and its related tangle of problems—unreliable transportation, unstable housing, poor health—put students at higher risk of missing school.<sup>8</sup> The pandemic has made matters worse, leaving students stuck at home without devices or WiFi, shuttled to new homes far from school, caring for younger siblings, in many instances struggling with anxiety or depression—and less likely to attend school, either online or in person.

The U.S. Education Department in recent months has found nearly identical daily attendance rates for in-person and online instruction, while hybrid schedules—with students showing up on certain days or at certain times—tend to produce more absences.<sup>9</sup>

## Academic Consequences

Pandemic-era schooling has been particularly hard on early elementary school students, who rely more on a teacher’s direction and connection than do older students. Learning online, or attending only on certain

days, has made it hard to build strong attendance habits and maintain supportive relationships that help motivate students to attend school.

Amplify Education Inc. compared the reading scores of 400,000 students nationwide in fall 2019 and fall 2020 and found that first and second graders suffered the steepest declines in reading skill during the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> An analysis of literacy skills in Los Angeles elementary schools showed the largest losses among kindergartners and first graders during the same time frame.<sup>11</sup> And the statistics may underestimate the losses in the early grades, since many families chose not to enroll their young children in school this year.

These results should not be surprising. Pre-pandemic research draws a straight line between attendance and achievement in the early grades. A 2014 study by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research found that students who are chronically absent between preschool and second grade have significantly lower learning outcomes at the end of second grade than their counterparts who are not chronically absent in the early years.<sup>12</sup>

A 2021 study from the Detroit Education Research Partnership confirmed that connection and found that every year of chronic absenteeism was associated with a 26 percent increase in the likelihood that a student would be eligible for retention under Michigan’s Read by Grade 3 Law, which requires mastery of reading to advance to fourth grade.<sup>13</sup> Equally concerning, a study of kindergarten absenteeism by University of Pennsylvania researcher Michael Gottfried linked missing too many days to lagging development of the social skills needed to persist in school.<sup>14</sup>

Making matters worse, elementary schools face logistical and pedagogical challenges as the pandemic subsides and more families choose to enroll their children in school. This fall, kindergarten classes are likely to be overcrowded with students ranging in age from 4 to 7. Those who skipped pre-K may have missed out on early learning, including important social skills and lessons on

how to behave at school. The isolation and trauma from a year at home will only compound these social-emotional concerns.

Older students don't suffer any less from chronic absenteeism. An Attendance Works study conducted before the pandemic found that students who missed three or more days in the month before taking the National Assessment of Educational Progress scored an average 12 to 18 points lower than their peers on the national tests.<sup>15</sup>

A recently published study led by University of Maryland researcher Jin Liu found that missing 10 English language arts or math classes in secondary school reduced test scores by 3 to 4 percent of a standard deviation. This is roughly equivalent to 1 to 1.5 months of learning for an average seventh grader and 2 to 3.3 months of learning for an average ninth grader. The absences also reduce the likelihood that students would graduate from high school and attend college.<sup>16</sup> And a study by the Utah Education Policy Center of the University of Utah in 2012 found that students were seven times more likely to drop out of high school if they were chronically absent in any year between the eighth and 12th grades.<sup>17</sup>

Johns Hopkins University researchers report that the predictive power of chronic absenteeism emerges early in students' academic careers. They have found that sixth graders who missed 20 percent of the school year were likely to drop out of high school if schools didn't intervene.<sup>18</sup>

The missed days leave students disengaged from their studies and from the relationships with peers and teachers that keep kids coming back to school.<sup>19</sup> And high levels of absenteeism also affect students who show up for class regularly, because the churn slows down instruction for everyone.<sup>20</sup>

## Addressing Absenteeism

These trends make clear that millions of students will need extra help recovering in the academic and social-emotional realms. Fortunately, the federal government has devoted billions in Covid relief dollars that states and school districts can use to address learning loss, including efforts to address the absenteeism crisis. In fact, the latest two federal laws specifically mention "tracking student attendance and improving student engagement in distance education" as a priority for addressing learning loss. The U.S. Education Department is asking states to submit spending plans documenting how they will use relief funds to identify and engage students who missed the most instruction in the past two school years or who did not participate consistently in remote learning.<sup>21</sup>

The three funding packages approved since March 2020 deliver more than \$190 billion to public K-12 schools through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief fund, known as ESSER. State education agencies can reserve up to 10 percent of that money to use for statewide priorities. Much of the first round of ESSER funding went to purchasing the equipment needed for remote instruction and to

### Three Rounds of Federal Covid Relief Aid

**CARES Act:** Approved in March 2020, this package provided \$13 billion for K-12 schools, much of which has already been spent. The money, known as ESSER I, must be obligated by September 2022.

**CRRSA:** Approved in December 2020, this measure provides \$54 billion for K-12 schools. The ESSER II money must be obligated by September 2023.

**American Rescue Plan:** Approved in March 2021, the stimulus package provides \$123 billion for K-12 schools—20% of which must be spent addressing learning loss. The ESSER III money must be obligated by September 2024.

ensuring schools were clean and physically distanced for reopening. School districts received a second round of ESSER funding in the spring and should receive the third round in late spring or early summer, money that can be spent over the next three years.

The American Rescue Plan, approved in March 2021, requires local districts and charter schools to spend at least 20 percent of their ESSER money to address student learning loss; likewise, states must spend at least 5 percent of their total allocation on that goal—about \$6 billion nationwide—with another 1 percent going for summer learning and 1 percent for extended day programs. But these approaches to accelerate learning will only work if students show up for school. “The key to going back to school is that it needs to feel safe, normal, and expected,” said Emily Bailard, chief executive officer of EveryDay Labs.

## Evidence-Based Interventions

The American Rescue Plan specifies that states and school districts deploy “evidence-based interventions” to address learning loss, especially for disadvantaged students. These include “low-income students, children with disabilities, English learners, racial and ethnic minorities, students experiencing homelessness, and children and youth in foster care”—many of the same subgroups with the worst attendance records during the pandemic.

In Education Department parlance, “evidence-based” has a very specific meaning; it refers to four levels of research findings prescribed in ESSA. These levels range from a gold-standard study comparing students and schools in a random trial to a practice that “demonstrates a rationale” for effectiveness.<sup>22</sup>

FutureEd and Attendance Works in 2020 published an [Attendance Playbook](#) that describes two dozen strategies for reducing absenteeism and notes the federal evidence level that each achieves.<sup>23</sup> Several of the strategies could become critical components of

a broader plan to address learning loss with federal funding in the wake of the pandemic. They include:

**Home visiting.** One practice for reaching students isolated by the pandemic is home visiting, which involves an in-person or virtual visit with a student’s family. Designed to encourage family engagement, these visits have been proven to reduce absenteeism.<sup>24</sup> The point is not to show up and nag students and families about attendance, but rather to build relationships that encourage students to come to school every day.

During the pandemic, these visits became lifelines for families who lacked the ability to connect with school officials or were struggling with hunger, illness or unemployment. In Connecticut, state leaders plan to spend some of their Covid relief aid on an extensive home visiting campaign this spring and summer. Rather than pull teachers out of the classroom, the plan calls for tapping community-based organizations to reach out to families they may already have connections with and to ensure children attend summer programs and show up for school regularly.<sup>25</sup> Retired teachers could also play the role short term.

**Nudges.** Another evidence-based form of outreach comes through letters and texts alerting parents to their children’s absences. These so-called “nudges” have proven effective in improving student attendance, several studies show.<sup>26</sup> The approach works, in part, because many parents are unaware of how many days their children have missed. In a study by Todd Rogers of Harvard and EveryDay Labs and the University of California-Berkeley’s Avi Feller, alerting parents to that information, in letters written in simple, nonjudgmental language, reduced total absences and the share of students who were chronically absent, compared to students who didn’t receive the nudges.<sup>27</sup>

Another set of researchers, Peter Bergman and Eric Chen of Teachers College, Columbia University used texting to target 22 middle and high schools. The weekly updates about missed assignments and absences reduced course failures and increased class

## Federal Levels of Evidence

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act sets definitions for evidence-based practices when districts use federal funding, such as that provided by the American Rescue Plan, to improve schools.

**Strong:** The highest level of evidence requires that the strategy produce a significant effect in at least one “gold standard” experimental study, a “randomized control trial” comparing the impact of an absenteeism intervention on a randomly selected group of students to the absenteeism rates of similar students who don’t receive the intervention. Such studies require a large, multi-site sample of at least 350 students in more than one location, without much attrition among participants over the course of the experiment.

**Moderate:** The second highest level of evidence should include a significant impact either from a randomized control trial with a high attrition rate among participants or a quasi-experimental study, one that compares equivalent groups but not in a random fashion, using a large, multi-site sample. The research should not be overridden by another study on the same intervention with negative effects.

**Promising:** The third level of evidence requires at least one well-designed and well-implemented study establishing a correlation to positive results without as much equivalence between groups. It can also include a randomized control trial or quasi-experimental study that did not meet the definition of a large, multi-site sample. The researchers must have selected a representative sample without any bias or skew toward certain groups. The research should not be overridden by another study on the same intervention with negative effects.

**Emerging:** The lowest level of evidence requires a rationale or logic model based on research to suggest that the intervention could potentially yield positive results, but rigorous evaluation has yet to be completed.

attendance.<sup>28</sup> Dallas is using nudges this spring to reach out to students with high rates of absenteeism. The Los Angeles Unified School District used the approach for a remote summer program last year and found the regular communication cut down on absences among students, who were mostly from low-income Latino families.<sup>29</sup>

**Tutoring and mentoring.** With school districts eager to invest in high-dosage tutoring to accelerate learning, it’s important to know that the caring relationships such programs create can also reduce absenteeism and enhance students’ sense of belonging. This represents a more targeted approach to learning loss, moving to the second tier in the traditional multi-tiered system of support used by many schools.

Check & Connect, a program included in the U.S. Institute of Education Sciences What Works Clearinghouse, is an evidence-based intervention shown to improve attendance in the early grades and to reduce dropout rates.<sup>30</sup> Another model for improving attendance is known as success mentoring, developed during a three-year pilot in New York City. It draws on community mentors, school staff or older students within a school.

According to a study by researchers Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes at Johns Hopkins University, all three approaches worked as long as the mentoring met certain criteria: Mentors were on site at least three days a week; worked with a defined and manageable caseload; had access to attendance data; and had a voice in weekly principal-led student success meetings.<sup>30</sup> There is broad support for using federal pandemic relief aid to tutor struggling students. That investment would pay extra dividends in the form of improved attendance if a mentoring component were added to the tutoring equation.

These interventions have a price tag. Home visiting often include overtime pay for teachers or other staff members working beyond regular school hours. Nudges involve staff hours, as well as postage fees for letters. Training and supervising tutoring programs takes time and money, as does using an established, evidence-based

program that delivers these services. Districts could use Covid relief aid for these efforts, and states could sponsor programs in targeted areas.

## The Right School Climate

In any year, schools need to create a welcoming climate that ensures students want to come back day after day. This is particularly important after the tumult of the past year, with schools opening and closing and with students losing loved ones, suffering from hunger, or just missing their connections to teachers and friends.

An attendance messaging campaign at the start of the school year can set the right tone. So can positive greetings, whether principals are welcoming families as they arrive to drop off children or teachers are finding special ways to greet students as they enter the classroom.<sup>32</sup> Providing breakfast in the classroom or grab-and-go bags for older students has improved attendance rates.<sup>33</sup> In elementary school, a well-organized recess can make a difference in a school's climate and, ultimately, attendance.<sup>34</sup>

Schools and districts should anticipate behavioral problem among students who have struggled during the pandemic or who have simply gotten out of the practice of being in school. When possible, schools should avoid responding with suspensions. A harsh disciplinary climate can take a toll on academic achievement and reduce engagement, both for suspended students and their peers who feel discipline is imposed unfairly.<sup>35</sup> Given that suspensions have disproportionately affected Black and Latino students in the past, a strict approach to discipline has consequences for equity, as well.

Disciplinary absences also contribute to chronic absenteeism, creating yet more days of lost learning. Schools should consider adopting a “restorative” approach to discipline, which involves bringing together students in peer-mediated small groups to talk, ask questions, and air grievances. Research shows these practices can reduce suspensions and create the

kind of safer, fairer school climate shown to improve attendance.<sup>36</sup> This approach works better when it includes training for administrators, teachers, and counselors.

There are always students who refuse to come to school because of anxiety or depression. For these students, the dread of attending school inevitably increases with every day they miss.<sup>37</sup> Coming back to class after the pandemic will be particularly challenging for this population; chances are the ranks of school refusers have grown during the long absence from school. These students will need additional support to return to the classroom.

Each of the Covid relief packages specifies that mental health support for students is an appropriate use for the dollars flowing to K-12 schools. Districts and states should explore ways to expand counseling and nursing staffs, as well as mental health supports, mindful that the extra dollars will run out in three years. Investing in equipment for telehealth, an evidence-based strategy for reducing absenteeism by connecting students with health providers remotely, could be an effective, sustainable strategy for expanding access to mental and physical health services.<sup>38</sup>

The U.S. Education Department has released a handbook of best practices and is asking districts to share successful approaches for an online clearinghouse.<sup>39</sup> The department should also use its renewed guidance on school discipline to emphasize the role that suspensions play in chronic absenteeism. Punishing a missed day with more days out of school simply doesn't make sense.<sup>40</sup> The guidance should discourage the use of such approaches and promote more holistic solutions to behavioral problems.

## Leveraging Community Partnerships

To expand and sustain these recovery efforts, school districts should collaborate with other public agencies and community-based organizations. The local transportation agency can brainstorm ways to

help students get to school more easily. The health department can connect students suffering from asthma to health resources. Nonprofits and faith groups can provide volunteer tutors and mentors. And local universities can help with data analysis.

Beyond the local community, another source of support is AmeriCorps, a national service program that already provides schools about 90,000 members each year, serving as mentors, tutors, attendance staff, and other roles. In Pittsburgh, an AmeriCorps member served as a liaison with families, texting them about their children's attendance and helping them navigate challenges that were keeping students from getting to school.<sup>41</sup>

National service programs received a \$1 billion boost in the American Rescue Plan, helping to expand the ranks and the reach of these workers. While districts can apply directly for an AmeriCorps grant, they would need capacity to recruit, enroll and train the members and meet the agency's reporting and evaluation requirements. A better approach would be to work with an organization with a demonstrated track record like City Year, an evidence-based nonprofit that deploys AmeriCorps members to schools, or with a local United Way chapter.<sup>42</sup> AmeriCorps requires matching funds, which could come from Covid relief aid.

Each state has a national service commission that can help connect schools and districts with AmeriCorps. These commissions, appointed by governors, manage 80 percent of AmeriCorps funds. State education agencies should consult with their commissions as they develop plans for spending relief aid and provide guidance and recommendations to local education agencies for their relief aid spending.

At the federal level, the Education Department can support the use of national service members by encouraging or requiring state education agencies to work closely with their state commissions. The Biden administration should also consider creating a Corps for Student Success, a framework for supporting students proposed by the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, the COVID Collaborative,

and City Year, and endorsed by more than 40 other organizations.<sup>43</sup>

Another approach that has worked to reduce absenteeism is the Full-Service Community School. This model brings together multiple interventions by multiple public agencies and community-based organizations, essentially turning schools into neighborhood hubs that offer a range of services for students and families. Nonprofits and public agencies that deal with housing, health and transportation are often part of the collaborative effort.

A 2020 RAND Corporation analysis of New York City schools showed that the approach improved student attendance.<sup>44</sup> The American Rescue Plan specifically mentions Community Schools as an evidence-based approach to providing mental health services and supports. Districts or states can use Covid relief dollars to pay for the school-based coordinators, who work with agencies and nonprofits to offer services. Likewise, the federal government could increase its funding for the Community Schools model, which is funded under the Every Student Succeeds Act's Title IV. The latest budget proposal includes a hefty increase for the program.

State and federal agencies can facilitate community partnerships by making it easier to share data among agencies and community organizations enlisted to support attendance initiatives. Afterschool programs, as well as tutors and mentors, should have access to certain student records, so they can devise strategies to turn around absenteeism.

## Data Demands

In many school districts, tackling the absenteeism crisis will require upgrading and updating data systems, so that schools can see all the data collected in the past year from online platforms, in-person attendance rolls and other systems that have not always connected during the pandemic.

It will also require regular reports that allow teachers and administrators to identify new patterns of absenteeism quickly and recognize the reasons that some students are missing school. That will mean training to ensure all staff members know how to interpret absenteeism information and act on it.

States can play a key role in this area. Smaller districts often have limited capacity and time to analyze attendance records carefully. State education departments can collect the data, pull out absenteeism trends, and provide actionable reports to schools and districts. Such a process can also identify schools that are exceeding expectations. Connecticut responded to the pandemic with two new data collection requirements: a weekly, district-by-district tally of instruction modes and a monthly tracking of attendance data. The state now tracks attendance rates in the different learning models.<sup>45</sup>

Establishing a clear, consistent definition of absenteeism, both in remote and in-person settings, will be key to this work. Even before the current crisis, states and school districts used a range of definitions for what constitutes a school day, an absence or even a student—a problem when trying to improve attendance on a wide scale.<sup>46</sup> In California, for instance, students are considered present if they show up for one period; in Washington, D.C., they need to attend 80 percent of the school day.

In order to assess which schools and districts need the most support, states should ensure that districts are using common definitions and producing comparable data. EdFacts offers some helpful definitions, but the Education Department should provide districts additional guidance on how to report data during the pandemic.

Ultimately, it will take the collaborative efforts of educators, families and community partners to turn around the troubling recent absenteeism trends. Children have endured a year like no other, cut off from school and friends, suffering from hunger or poor health, and falling behind where they should be in reading and math. Recovering from the pandemic begins with getting students back to school, whether in-person or online. The effort continues with a comprehensive effort to reengage students and families and provide a welcoming atmosphere when they arrive at school. And it requires a data-informed, evidence-based approach targeting the right interventions to the right students. Schools cannot do this alone. Entire communities must work together to ensure their students thrive once the pandemic has ended.

## Spending Covid Recovery Resources

### A Summary of Recommendations for Addressing Student Absenteeism

	Local	State	Federal
<b>Evidence-Based Interventions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invest in proven practices that can both improve attendance and address learning loss such as home visits, nudges and tutoring</li> <li>Provide staff training for using these practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use state share of relief funds to promote best practices</li> <li>Sponsor interventions in targeted areas</li> <li>Provide technical assistance to districts using proven interventions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reinforce the key role that reducing absenteeism plays in promoting academic recovery</li> <li>Create guidance on best practices</li> <li>Provide convenings for districts and states to learn from each other</li> </ul>
<b>School Climate</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop strategies for welcoming students and families back to school</li> <li>Address the needs of students who suffered trauma or isolation with increased staff and mental health programs</li> <li>Anticipate behavioral issues and avoid harsh disciplinary approaches</li> <li>Adopt healing practices such as restorative justice, and train staff to use them properly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide financial support for districts to hire counselors and nurses</li> <li>Provide professional development on restorative practices and other techniques for creating a calm school climate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide guidance and best practices for states and districts</li> <li>Use revised disciplinary guidance to reduce excessive suspensions and make clear the connection to chronic absenteeism</li> </ul>
<b>Community Collaboration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Convene or work with community coalitions to address absenteeism</li> <li>Tap AmeriCorps for extra support</li> <li>Adopt the Community Schools model to provide additional support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consult with state national service commissions on plans for spending Covid aid</li> <li>Provide technical assistance and financial support for launching Community Schools</li> <li>Revise state laws to remove undue obstacles to sharing data across agencies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote the role of state service commissions in Covid recovery activities</li> <li>Provide technical assistance and financial support for launching Community Schools</li> </ul>
<b>Data Tracking</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Break down data based on how many days students have missed</li> <li>Invest in system upgrades</li> <li>Provide professional development on data analysis and attendance teams</li> <li>Ensure schools are using uniform definitions for attendance terminology in remote and in-person settings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collect and analyze district data, share actionable attendance reports</li> <li>Provide technical and financial assistance to districts</li> <li>Encourage use of other federal grants, such as Title IVa, for attendance data improvements</li> <li>Ensure districts are using uniform definitions for attendance terms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide guidance to districts and states on best practices for data collection and analysis</li> <li>Expand funding for Title IVa grants that can be used for attendance data systems</li> <li>Promote use of uniform definitions for attendance terms through EdFacts reporting requirements</li> </ul>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Attendance Works and the Everyone Graduates Center, "Using Chronic Absence to Map Interrupted Schooling, Instructional Loss and Educational Inequity: Insights from School Year 2017-18 Data," February 2021. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/using-chronic-absence-to-map-interrupted-schooling-instructional-loss-and-educational-inequity/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Jordan, Phyllis W. "Attendance Playbook; Smart Strategies for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in the Covid Era," *FutureEd*, June 2020. [https://www.future-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/REPORT\\_Attendance-Playbook-Covid-Edition.pdf](https://www.future-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/REPORT_Attendance-Playbook-Covid-Edition.pdf).
- <sup>3</sup> Charlotte-Mecklenberg Schools Attendance Data, 2020-21, accessed at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1TSa8Vbc1VDzvH3CzGyStWvUAdT5DKuJXkMT8usCgFDk/edit>.
- <sup>4</sup> Attendance Works and the Everyone Graduates Center.
- <sup>5</sup> Jordan, Phyllis, and Hedy Chang, "The Challenge of Taking Attendance During the Pandemic," *FutureEd*, August 3, 2020. <https://www.future-ed.org/the-challenge-of-taking-attendance-during-the-pandemic/>.
- <sup>6</sup> Attendance Works, "Are Students Present and Accounted For? An Examination of State Attendance Policies During the Covid-19 Pandemic," January 2021. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/are-students-present-and-accounted-for-an-examination-of-state-attendance-policies-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.
- <sup>7</sup> Jordan and Chang.
- <sup>8</sup> Childs, Joshua, and Richard Lofton, "Masking Attendance: How Education Policy Distracts from the Wicked Problem(s) of Chronic Absenteeism," *Educational Policy*, 2021;35(2):213-234. doi:10.1177/0895904820986771.
- <sup>9</sup> Institute of Education Sciences, "Attendance by Type of Instruction: February," February 2021. <https://ies.ed.gov/schoolsurvey/>.
- <sup>10</sup> Amplify, "Instructional loss due to COVID-19 disruptions," Fall 2020. [https://amplify.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/mCLASS\\_Flyer\\_CovidBrief-LearningLoss\\_v10.pdf](https://amplify.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/mCLASS_Flyer_CovidBrief-LearningLoss_v10.pdf).
- <sup>11</sup> Great Public Schools Now, "Educational Recovery Now," March 2021. [https://greatpublicschoolsnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/EdRecoveryNow\\_Final\\_3-29-21.pdf](https://greatpublicschoolsnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/EdRecoveryNow_Final_3-29-21.pdf).
- <sup>12</sup> Ehrlich, Stacy B, Julia A. Gwynne, Amber Stitzel Pareja, Elaine M. Allensworth, Paul Moore, Sanja Jagesic, and Elizabeth Sorice, "Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences," *The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research*, May 2014.
- <sup>13</sup> Cook, Walter, Sarah Winchell Lenhoff, Ben Pogodzinski, and Jeremy Singe, "Third Grade Reading and Attendance in Detroit," *Detroit Education Research Partnership*, Wayne State University, 2021. <https://education.wayne.edu/detroit-education-research-partnership>.
- <sup>14</sup> Gottfried, Michael, "Chronic Absenteeism in the Classroom Context: Effects on Achievement," *Urban Education*, December 23, 2015. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0042085915618709>.
- <sup>15</sup> Ginsburg, Alan, Phyllis Jordan and Hedy Chang, "Absences Add Up: How School Attendance Influences Student Success," *Attendance Works*, August 2014. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/absences-add-up/>.
- <sup>16</sup> Liu, Jing, Monica Lee, and Seth Gershenson, "The Short- and Long-Run Impacts of Secondary School Absences," (EdWorkingPaper No. 19-125) *Annenberg Institute at Brown University*, May 2021. <https://doi.org/10.26300/xg6s-z169>.
- <sup>17</sup> Utah Education Policy Center, "Research Brief: Chronic Absenteeism," University of Utah, July 2012. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/UTAH-Chronic-AbsenteeismResearch-Brief-July-2012.pdf>.
- <sup>18</sup> Balfanz, Robert, Lisa Herzog and Douglas J. MacIver, "Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in Urban Middle-Grades Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions," *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 223-235, 2007. [https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/preventing\\_student\\_disengagement.pdf](https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/preventing_student_disengagement.pdf).
- <sup>19</sup> Gottfried.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> U.S. Department of Education, "State Plan for the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund," April 21, 2021. [https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/04/ARP-ESSER-State-Plan-Template-04-20-2021\\_130PM.pdf](https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/04/ARP-ESSER-State-Plan-Template-04-20-2021_130PM.pdf).
- <sup>22</sup> Jordan, Attendance Playbook.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Cook, Philip J., Kenneth A. Dodge, Elizabeth J. Gifford, and Amy B. Schulting, "A New Program to Prevent Primary School Absenteeism: Results of a Pilot Study in Five Schools," *Children and Youth Services Review* 82 (September 13, 2017): 262-70. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.09.017.
- <sup>25</sup> "The LEAP Program Will Help Address Student Absenteeism and Disengagement," Connecticut.gov, April 2021. <https://portal.ct.gov/Coronavirus/Covid-19-Knowledge-Base/LEAP-Program>.
- <sup>26</sup> Rogers, Todd and Avi Feller, "Reducing Student Absences at Scale by Targeting Parents' Misbeliefs," *Nature Human Behaviour*, 2, 335-342, April 23, 2018. [https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/todd\\_rogers/files/rogers\\_sdp\\_-\\_final.pdf](https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/todd_rogers/files/rogers_sdp_-_final.pdf).
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>28</sup> Bergman, Peter, and Eric W. Chan, "Leveraging Parents through Low-Cost Technology: The Impact of High-Frequency Information on Student Achievement," *Journal of Human Resources*, January 08, 2019. doi:10.3368/jhr.56.1.1118-9837r1.
- <sup>29</sup> Everyday Labs, "Preventing Absences in a Remote Environment: An Evaluation of Evident in LAUSD," August 2020. <https://f.hubspotusercontent40.net/hubfs/4875399/EDL%20LAUSD%20Evident%20Evaluation%20Final.pdf>.
- <sup>30</sup> Lehr, Camilla A., Mary F. Sinclair, and Sandra L. Christenson. "Addressing Student Engagement and Truancy Prevention During the Elementary School Years: A Replication Study of the Check & Connect Model." *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)* 9, no. 3 (2004): 279-301. doi:10.1207/ s15327671espr0903\_4.
- <sup>31</sup> Balfanz, Robert, and Vaughan Byrnes. "Using Data and the Human Touch: Evaluating the NYC Inter-agency Campaign to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism." *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)* 23, no. 1-2 (April 3, 2018): 107-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2018.1435283>.
- <sup>32</sup> Cook, Clayton R., Aria Fiat, Madeline Larson, Christopher Daikos, Tal Slemrod, Elizabeth A. Holland, Andrew J. Thayer, and Tyler Renshaw. "Positive Greetings at the Door: Evaluation of a Low-Cost, High-Yield Proactive Classroom Management Strategy." *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* 20, no. 3 (February 19, 2018): 149-59. doi:10.1177/1098300717753831.
- <sup>33</sup> Bartfeld, Judith S., Lawrence Berger, Fei Men, and Yiyu Chen. "Access to the School Breakfast Program Is Associated with Higher Attendance and Test Scores among Elementary School Students." *The Journal of Nutrition* 149, no. 2 (February 02, 2019): 336-43. doi:10.1093/jn/nxy267.
- <sup>34</sup> *Impact and Implementation Findings from an Experimental Evaluation of Playworks: Effects on School Climate, Academic Learning, Student Social Skills and Behavior*. Report. Mathematica Policy Research and John W. Gardner Center. 2013. [https://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj1216/f/Brief\\_4\\_Playworks\\_School\\_Climate.pdf](https://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj1216/f/Brief_4_Playworks_School_Climate.pdf).
- <sup>35</sup> Pyne, Jaymes, "Suspended Attitudes: Exclusion and Emotional Disengagement from School," *American Sociological Association*, 2018. DOI: 10.1177/0038040718816684 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0038040718816684#>.
- <sup>36</sup> Augustine, Catherine H., John Engberg, Geoffrey E. Grimm, Emma Lee, Elaine Lin Wang, Karen Christianson, and Andrea A. Joseph, "Can Restorative Practices Improve School Climate and Curb Suspensions? An Evaluation of the Impact of Restorative Practices in a Mid-Sized Urban School District," RAND Corporation, 2018. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2840.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2840.html).
- <sup>37</sup> Maynard, Brandy R., David Heyne, Kristen Esposito Brendel, Jeffery J. Bulanda, Aaron M. Thompson, and Terri D. Pigott. "Treatment for school refusal among children and adolescents: A systematic review and meta- analysis." *Research on Social Work Practice*, 28, 56-67. 2018 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1049731515598619>.
- <sup>38</sup> Halterman, Jill S., Maria Fagnano, Reynaldo S. Tajon, Paul Tremblay, Hongyue Wang, Arlene Butz, Tamara T. Perry, and Kenneth M. McConnochie. "Effect of the School-based Telemedicine Enhanced Asthma Management (SB-TEAM) Program on Asthma Morbidity: A Randomized Clinical Trial." *JAMA Pediatrics*, March 1, 2018. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2017.4938.
- <sup>39</sup> The handbook is available at <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/coronavirus/reopening-2.pdf>. Districts can submit to the clearinghouse by emailing: Bestpracticesclearinghouse@ed.gov.
- <sup>40</sup> Maynard, Brandy R., Michael G. Vaughn, Erik J. Nelson, Christopher P. Salas-Wright, David A. Heyne, and Kristen P. Kremer. "Truancy in the United States: Examining Temporal Trends and Correlates by Race, Age, and Gender." *Children and Youth Services Review* 81 (October 2017): 188-96. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.08.008>.
- <sup>41</sup> Smythe-Leistico, Kenneth, " Leveraging Text -Messaging to Improve Kindergarten Attendance," *University of Pittsburgh School of Education*, 2018. [http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/34851/1/ETD\\_KSL.pdf](http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/34851/1/ETD_KSL.pdf).
- <sup>42</sup> *Implementation and Impact of City Year within the Chicago Context*. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. City Year Report September 2017. September 2017. [https://www.cityyear.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/CY-Chicago-Evaluation-Report-Chapin-Hall-at-UChicago\\_SY1415-SY1516-1.pdf](https://www.cityyear.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/CY-Chicago-Evaluation-Report-Chapin-Hall-at-UChicago_SY1415-SY1516-1.pdf).
- <sup>43</sup> Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, the COVID Collaborative, and City Year, "Framework for Action: Building a Corps for Student Success," 2021. [http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CorpsforStudentSuccessFramework\\_FINALa.pdf](http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CorpsforStudentSuccessFramework_FINALa.pdf).
- <sup>44</sup> Johnston, William R., John Engberg, Isaac M. Opper, Lisa Sontag-Padilla, and Lea Xenakis, "Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools: An Assessment of the Impact of the New York City Community Schools Initiative." City of New York, 2020. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR3245.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3245.html). Truancy Courts.
- <sup>45</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education, "Student Attendance Report for Year- to- Date as of February 2021," March 2021. <http://edsight.ct.gov/relatedreports/MonthlyAttendanceFebruary2021Report.pdf>.
- <sup>46</sup> Jordan, Phyllis W., Sue Fothergill and Mary Rosende, "Writing the Rules for Tackling Chronic Absenteeism," *FutureEd*, June 2018. <https://www.future-ed.org/setting-the-rules-for-tracking-chronic-absenteeism/>.





**PRESENT DANGER**  
SOLVING THE DEEPENING STUDENT  
ABSENTEEISM CRISIS