

Combating Chronic Absenteeism

This is one of a series of evidence-based strategies to help states and school districts invest Covid relief aid effectively. Read all 18 strategies in FutureEd's [Covid Relief Playbook](#).

Since the start of the pandemic, student absenteeism rates have spiked across the country and across different learning modes, with the most vulnerable students missing many more school days than in years past. Left unaddressed, this absenteeism crisis threatens to deepen the longstanding achievement gaps in public schools and undo efforts to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students. The American Rescue Plan stresses the importance of reducing chronic absenteeism and helping students make up for lost instructional time. Fortunately, there are a number of evidence-based interventions that specifically target absenteeism.

THE RESEARCH

Some absenteeism interventions focus on messaging and engagement, such as attendance communications campaigns, contests, and incentives. While there is anecdotal evidence for the success of these efforts, they lack a strong research base. However, one messaging approach—attendance notifications, or “nudges”—has been found in two high-quality studies to reduce absenteeism and even course failures by letting parents know how many school days their children have missed.

In a 2018 [study](#), Harvard University behavioral scientist Todd Rogers and University of California, Berkeley public policy researcher Avi Feller reported improvement in attendance rates after sending five postcards to the families of high-risk students. The intervention reduced total absences by 6 percent and the share of students who were chronically absent by 10 percent, when compared to similar students not involved in the study.

A 2019 [study](#) by Peter Bergman of Teachers College, Columbia University, and Eric Chen of Babson College took another successful approach. The researchers texted weekly updates to parents, alerting them to any missed assignments or absenteeism. Course failures dropped by a striking 27 percent and class attendance rose by 12 percent among students whose families received texts, compared to similar students.

A separate set of interventions addresses the reasons students miss school. Health initiatives, especially those aimed at reducing asthma attacks, have been linked to better attendance. Likewise, several school climate initiatives have shown promise in reengaging students and improving attendance.

Some cities have seen substantial improvements in absenteeism by addressing transportation challenges, a key barrier to attendance. A 2015 study by University of Minnesota researchers found that Minneapolis students who received free passes for public transit had absenteeism rates 23 percent lower than their peers who didn't participate. The benefits were most pronounced for students from low-income or single-parent families, as well as Black and immigrant students.

Free schoolwide breakfasts have also increased attendance. A 1998 [study](#) led by Michael Murphy of Massachusetts General Hospital found that such programs, aimed at reducing hunger, also led to better academic results and lower rates of absenteeism and tardiness when implemented in public schools in Baltimore and Philadelphia.

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The universal breakfast approach has the added benefit of removing the stigma from children who rely on school for their meals. Likewise, a 2015 Tufts University [study](#) of a Breakfast in the Classroom program in 446 urban elementary schools found a slightly higher attendance rate for students involved in the program, reflecting 76 additional attended days per grade each month.

WHAT TO CONSIDER

In [recent guidance](#) on spending Covid relief aid, the Education Department specifically mentions improving attendance, stressing the need for data systems that track absences and monitor the results of interventions. Early warning systems, which typically include an attendance metric, have proven effective at improving graduation rates. The influx of federal funding can provide the support needed to launch such systems and train staff members to use them..

Attendance interventions work best in a tiered system of supports, with universal messaging and engagement initiatives aimed at the entire student body, more targeted approaches for students with particular attendance challenges, and case management for students who need support from agencies beyond the schoolyard.

RESEARCH

- [Reducing Student Absences at Scale by Targeting Parents' Misbeliefs: **STRONG**](#)
- [Leveraging Parents: The Impact of High-Frequency Information on Student Achievement: **STRONG**](#)
- [Assessing the Impact of Student Transportation on Public Transit: **PROMISING**](#)
- [The Relationship of School Breakfast to Psychosocial and Academic Functioning: **PROMISING**](#)
- [Estimating Impacts of a Breakfast in the Classroom Program on School Outcomes: **PROMISING**](#)

RESOURCES

- [Present Danger: Solving the Deepening Student Absenteeism Crisis](#)
- [Safe Routes to School Toolbox](#)
- [Breakfast and Learning: An Updated Review](#)
- [Fact Sheet: School Breakfast Program](#)