

Fostering Harmony and Belonging as a Solution to Chronic Absenteeism

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Regular school attendance is essential, as classrooms provide students with opportunities to learn both academic and social and emotional skills. When students are not in school, they are to likely learn less. The evidence on attendance suggests that missing school has a negative impact on learning outcomes, with an effect size of -0.37 (Hattie, 2024). Yes, it has a negative effect on learning.

But missing school does more than impact academic development; it also impacts social and emotional development (Yin et al., 2023). When students are absent from schools, they miss out on the guidance and support of caring adults, reducing the chance to form social connections and receive well-being supports.

With rates of chronic absenteeism nearly doubling since the 2018-2019 school year (13.5% compared to 25.1% in the 2023-24 academic year; Panorama Education, 2024), it is critical to begin to find solutions for students chronically missing school. This paper aims to identify the key contributors to chronic absenteeism—defined as missing more than 10% of the school year. In addition, we offer solutions to the most common non-illness-related reasons for absence. We conclude with actions that educators can take to shift the focus to ensuring students are in school, learning with their peers and teachers, and building the academic and social skills needed to be successful learners.

Clark County School District

The Clark County School District (CCSD), the fifth-largest school district in the United States, is celebrating strong gains in reducing chronic absenteeism. From the 2022-23 to the 2023-24 academic years the district saw an estimated a nine percentage point decrease, due in large part to their Every Day Matters initiative, led by interim superintendent Dr. Brenda Larsen-Mitchell. This initiative includes a comprehensive approach led by multiple community partners and deep engagement with families, including home visits and investment in their family engagement centers.

To continue to address chronic absenteeism in the 2024-25 academic year, CCSD has taken significant steps to enhance the capacity of their educators and leaders. This year, CCSD purchased Harmony Academy's new Educator and Leader Certificates to further empower staff to foster relationships and create a sense of belonging within the school community, while at the same time investing in the professional growth of their educators and leaders by offering these valuable certificates at no cost. Educators and leaders were excited to receive this opportunity, with over 1,000 staff signing up within 48 hours of launch.

In addition, the district continues to support families through the Harmony at Home program at their family engagement centers to promote well-being and strengthen relationships at home. Furthermore, CCSD emphasizes the importance of relationship-building during home visits to ensure a holistic approach to student support. By leveraging partnerships, CCSD aims to cultivate harmonious relationships across all environments where students live and learn, thus ultimately contributing to improved attendance and student success.

Key Contributors to Chronic Absenteeism

When students are ill, they should stay home. And one reason a percentage of students miss school is because they are sick. While illness is a valid reason for students to miss school, it only accounts for a portion of absences. For instance, about 25% of students have a chronic illness, including mental health conditions, which contributes to some absentism (Lawrence et al., 2019; Van Cleave et al., 2010). Further, one study found that 48% of the days of learning missed were due to a reported illness (Choi, 2013). However, some students may report not feeling well when actually other things beyond their control are prompting the absence, such as when parents call in sick, when they lack transportation or need older children to supervise younger children. In other words, some percent of that 48% is not actual illness, but it's difficult to uncover the actual numbers.

In addition to health issues, socioeconomic status and family circumstances such as unstable housing, lack of reliable transportation, and financial struggles can greatly impact attendance. Schools do what they can, such as providing bus passes and places to wash clothes, but sometimes that is not enough, and they need to connect families with other systems of support. In addition, family circumstances can impact attendance. A death in the family, a divorce, and moving can all disrupt plans to have students in school.

Even so, a notable portion of absenteeism can be addressed by schools. For example, one study found that the probability of a student being chronically absent (or not) increased or decreased by almost 20% due to the school a student attends, even when accounting for individual factors (Panorama Education, 2024). In addition to legitimate illness and realities of families, research highlights other well-documented reasons for absenteeism, (e.g., Allen et al., 2018; Gottfried & Ehrlich, 2018; Panorama Education, 2024) including:

- Bullying.** Verbal and physical violence at school, whether threatened, perceived, or experienced, is a major reason some students avoid attending. They fear for their safety and have experienced humiliation from their peers. According to the National Center of Educational Statistics (2024), over 20% of students ages 12–18 report being bullied each year. Estimates are that 13% of elementary school-age students are bullied each year (Jansen et al., 2012). The effect size of bullying on learning is -0.32 (Hattie, 2024), or very harmful, partly because of students' well-being and partly because bullied students miss school.
- School and classroom climate.** Classrooms have a certain feel to them based on the actions and behaviors of the people in them, both adults and students. A positive classroom climate has a small but positive impact on learning, with an effect size of 0.26 (Hattie, 2024). When students perceive that the energy is low, social interactions are not positive, and the rules within schools and classrooms are not consistently followed, the classroom climate fails to contribute to learning and invites students to miss school (Panorama Education, 2024). The classroom climate can facilitate a sense of belonging, which has an even greater impact on student learning and attendance. The effect size of belonging is 0.40, a strong moderator of students' learning. Belonging is the belief that you are part of a larger group that values and respects you and to which you have something to contribute (Smith et al., 2024).
- Academic difficulties.** Students who experience repeated failure in school are less likely to want to show up. When students are frustrated with their learning experiences, the impact is negative, with an effect size of -0.04. Similarly, when academic tasks cause anxiety, the effect size is even more pronounced at -0.40. The challenge is that when students miss school, they fall further behind and experience additional stressors and difficulties, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Without appropriate academic support and intervention, students are likely to continue to miss school.

and then feel underprepared for the academic tasks that are assigned. Further, students who perceive themselves as having lower self-efficacy, self-management, and relationship skills are more likely to be chronically absent because they

cannot use these resources effectively in their learning (Panorama Education, 2024). In other words, social and emotional skills also influence the likelihood of someone being chronically absent or not.

Solutions to Support Chronic Absenteeism

While schools alone cannot solve the chronic absenteeism problem, there are multiple strategies that they can take based on the evidence behind why students may be more likely to become chronically absent and the research- and evidence-informed solutions to those school-related reasons. Below are select solutions that may help reduce chronic absenteeism that are within the locus of control of schools (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Germain et al., 2024; Panorama Education, 2024), along with practice strategies.

Build social and emotional skills through evidence-based programs and practices.

Students and staff need explicit and embedded time to nurture and apply their social and emotional competencies. This can be done through explicit instruction on skills like emotion management, communication, and collaboration, plus providing time for students to cooperate. Similarly, calming corners help students have safe places in schools and classrooms to become calm and center themselves. SEL interventions have been shown to improve attendance and learning (Xia et al., 2022).

Practical strategy. The Harmony Curriculum from National University is a no-cost, evidence-based, relationship-driven SEL curriculum. Harmony provides multiple strategies, particularly ones that support emotion management, specifically [Mindful Minute](#) or [Relaxation Station](#).

Provide anti-bullying activities.

Students need support in understanding what bullying is, how it impacts others, and the skills to prevent bullying from occurring. To ensure students feel safe, educators can offer scenarios, games, and activities to develop and practice these anti-bullying skills. When bully prevention and intervention programs are successfully implemented, students' feelings about attending school in addition to their attendance rates improve (Beran et al., 2004).

Practical strategy. Use concrete lessons that help teach about the roles in bullying behavior and strategies for standing up to unfair behavior, including Harmony Curriculum's lesson, [Standing Up to Bullying Behavior](#), or the *Battle the Bullybot* game in the [Harmony Game Room App](#).

Train staff on how to create affirming learning environments and spaces for belonging.

Staff need training and support in creating environments where students feel safe and included, for instance, to create predictable routines, spaces where they can co-solve problems, and opportunities to co-regulate emotions. Students who feel a strong sense of belonging attend school more regularly (Smith et al., 2024).

Practical strategy. Build educator capacity on relationship-driven activities that also has the ability to enhance educator career progression (though continuing education credits or course credit), such as through the [Harmony Educator Certificate](#).

Create opportunities to build relationships and connections in schools and classrooms.

Each student and adult in the school community needs to feel included, that they belong, and that they have value. Thus, it's important that every student feels as though they have a trusted adult in this community. It is also important to create structures to check in on students and adults, as well as to create relationship-building strategies throughout the day. Strong teacher-student relationships improve attendance (Quinn, 2017).

Practical strategy. Students and staff need short, quick, relationship-driven activities like [Meet Up](#) (community meetings) and [Buddy Up](#) (paired activity) that help students form meaningful connections, ensuring that everyone feels included and valued within the school community. To support these activities, Harmony has over 400 activities and conversation prompts (two to 10 minutes each) within the [Quick Connection Cards](#) (QCC).

Use teaching and learning strategies that foster student interest and engagement.

Students are more likely to come to school when they are engaged in meaningful learning, piques their interest, and that they find useful and relevant (Fisher et al., 2011). This is why it's so important for adults to get to know their students so that they can connect learning to individual students.

Practical strategy. To better understand students and help embed their social and emotional assets into instruction, [Harmony](#) provides opportunities for educators to reflect on their interactions with students (through Educator SEL) and provides concrete strategies to integrate SEL into academics (through Academic Integration).

Strengthen family engagement efforts.

Parents and caregivers also need to feel as though they are connected to the school and see the school as a place in which they are welcome, can provide input, and receive resources. Purposefully

involving families will help provide knowledge on the importance of attendance as well as help create a sense of belonging.

Practical strategy. Schools can use multiple relationship-driven strategies with their families, including Meet Up, using a [QCC](#), or playing the [Finding Commonalities](#) game. Schools can also send home quick activities to help build relationships at home through [Harmony Home Letters](#) or [Harmony at Home Kits](#).

Develop school leader capacity.

Leaders also need support for their own well-being and for their efforts to create spaces where students, staff, and families feel welcome and that they belong. This also includes how they create systems (e.g., use data) and build relationships with community and families, for example.

Practical strategy. Provide opportunities to build leader capacity that also help advance their career, for example engaging in the [Harmony Leader Certificate](#) and using the associated system-level tools embedded throughout the certificate.

Recommendations Based on the Evidence

Reflecting on the evidence of strategies to address chronic absenteeism, actionable next steps that district and school leaders can take include the following:

Using data to guide decisions.

Collecting and analyzing data is an important tool educators have to address the absenteeism rates in their schools (Germain et al., 2024; Panorama, 2024). Are students missing one day more than others? That may indicate that students perceive some dates to either be boring or too challenging. Are students in some classes missing more school than students in other classes? That may have implications for the climate and sense of belonging in some classrooms.

Broader community collaboration.

Schools that want to have a significant impact on attendance schedule a brief, action-oriented daily meeting to review attendance (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Gonzalez Ojeda & Smith, 2023). In these “attendance huddles,” the people who record attendance and communicate with families share their perspectives while administrators and counselors help process the information and make decisions.

Centering relationships.

Purposefully including relationship-driven strategies will support schools that want to improve attendance (Germain et al., 2024). The school community intentionally implements activities that allow staff, students, and families to build relationships with one another and become more connected and collaborative, with a specific focus on the importance of attendance and finding solutions for chronic absenteeism (Torres et al., 2020).

Deepening capacity.

The entire school community needs continued capacity-building support (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Germain et al., 2024; Torres et al., 2020). Educators need support in building their capacity—through deepened professional learning—to build connections and relationships with students; leaders need to build their capacity in how they create warm and inclusive environments; and the school needs to build their capacity in connecting with the broader community to identify additional support for students and connect with families.

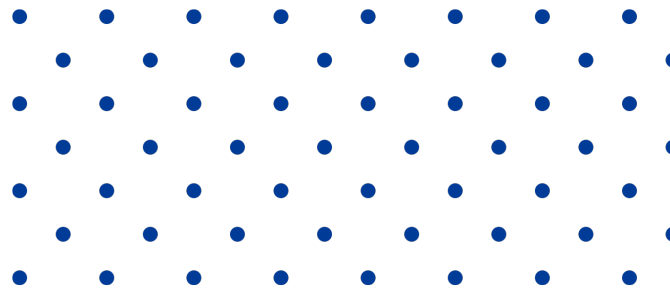
About the Authors

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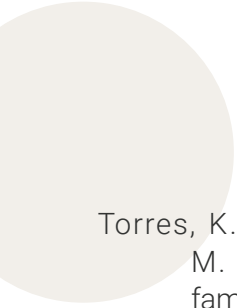
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