**Headline:** Why There Is a Growing Student Absentee Rate—and How Community Schools Can Fix It

**Teaser:** Experts call for cultivating better student relationships and providing families with more supports—exactly what the community schools approach is all about.

By Jeff Bryant

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**[Article Body:]**

School absentee rates that [increased dramatically](https://www.edweek.org/leadership/chronic-absenteeism-spiked-during-covid-heres-what-schools-can-do-about-it/2022/04) during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic have not declined. In fact, they’re getting worse, according to a September 2022 [research analysis](https://www.attendanceworks.org/pandemic-causes-alarming-increase-in-chronic-absence-and-reveals-need-for-better-data/) posted on the blog site of Attendance Works, a national nonprofit that advocates for reducing “chronic absenteeism” in schools. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing at least 10 percent of the school year.

“[C]hronic absence has at least doubled to an estimated 16 million, or one out of three students nationwide,” according to the blog post, authored by Hedy Chang, executive director of Attendance Works; Robert Balfanz, director of the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University; and Vaughan Byrnes, an affiliated researcher at the Everyone Graduates Center.

The authors back up their estimate using national data as well as 2021-22 school year reports from [Connecticut](https://edsight.ct.gov/relatedreports/Supporting%20Student%20Participation%20in%202020-21.html), [Michigan](https://www.mischooldata.org/student-attendance/), [Ohio](https://reports.education.ohio.gov/report/report-card-data-state-attendance-rate-with-student-disagg), [Virginia](https://schoolquality.virginia.gov/virginia-state-quality-profile#desktopTabs-6), and [California](https://d2c124bf-cdc1-4ce2-8d47-e5169beeb59b.usrfiles.com/ugd/d2c124_1b4d6478c3664d08aac7ad6cab78c241.pdf).

The authors’ findings were echoed in a March 2023 [research study](https://edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/r_mcneely-march2023.pdf) of how unexcused absentee rates are significantly higher for students who already tend to struggle the most in schools. “Socioeconomically disadvantaged students are much more likely to have their absences labeled unexcused,” the study’s summary page [highlighted](https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/disparities-unexcused-absences-across-california-schools). “This is also true for Black, Native American, Latinx, and Pacific Islander students relative to White, Asian American, and Filipino students. Black students experience the largest disparity.”

The data also appeared in an article by ABC News in April 2023, which added that [“nearly half”](https://abcnews.go.com/US/students-chronically-absent-country-covid-made-worse/story?id=95936160) of students in Washington, D.C., were chronically absent from school in 2022, an increase of [17 percentage points](https://osse.dc.gov/publication/dc-attendance-report-2021-22-school-year) from the previous year.

The causes for the worsening absentee numbers seem complicated and wide-ranging. ABC News pointed to multiple origins, including “behavioral problems,” caused by the loss of socialization skills that occurred during pandemic-induced remote learning, and “family struggles.”

Attendance Works lists more than two dozen [“root causes”](https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/addressing-chronic-absence/3-tiers-of-intervention/root-causes/) of chronic absenteeism on its website. And COVID-19, which of course has not gone away, has had a lingering influence, causing reinfections, quarantines, and parent hesitancy to return to in-person schooling, [according to a December 2021 Chalkbeat article](https://www.chalkbeat.org/2021/12/1/22811872/school-attendance-covid-quarantines).

But regardless of what is causing this wave of absenteeism, and whether its origins are different from past surges, there’s a widespread consensus that students are likely to experience negative consequences from so many missed days of school.

These negative consequences include, according to an [analysis of 2015-2016 school year research studies](https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html#four') by the U.S. Department of Education that was updated in 2019, a failure to reach academic “milestones” in the early grades, a greater likelihood of dropping out of school, and “poor outcomes later in life, from poverty and [diminished health](https://www.nber.org/papers/w12352.pdf) to [involvement in the criminal justice system](https://justicepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/07-08_rep_educationandpublicsafety_ps-ac.pdf).”

**Little Consensus on What to Do**

While the spike in chronic absentee rates would seem to call for urgent solutions, there seems to be little consensus on what those solutions should be.

“There are hundreds of studies on programs designed to increase school attendance,” wrote researchers Brian A. Jacob and Kelly Lovett [in a 2017 report](https://www.brookings.edu/research/chronic-absenteeism-an-old-problem-in-search-of-new-answers/) for the Brookings Institution. “Unfortunately, very few meet even a minimum standard of rigor.”

Of the few analyses that met the researchers’ standards, “[the] interventions studied were small, locally developed programs, so it is not known whether these approaches can be replicated at scale.” Larger-scale interventions that were more commonly implemented across multiple school systems had results that were “mixed,” according to Jacob and Lovett.

ABC News, in its [reporting](https://abcnews.go.com/US/students-chronically-absent-country-covid-made-worse/story?id=95936160), pointed to recent initiatives that seem to share an emphasis on more “hands-on involvement” with families and communities. The examples described include an ambitious program in the Los Angeles school district that includes “knocking on doors” and other personal interventions. Another approach in Jefferson County, Kentucky, includes in-person family meetings, adding nurses and counselors to school support staff, and home visits.

But it’s not clear whether these initiatives are based on a coherent strategy that has evidence of having worked elsewhere.

“The relationship building is the most essential component,” Hedy Chang said in the ABC News [article](https://abcnews.go.com/US/students-chronically-absent-country-covid-made-worse/story?id=95936160). “The question is, how do you organize schools so they ensure meaningful relationship-building between school staff or… community partners and other folks who can support that relationship-building?”

Fortunately, schools are answering Chang’s question by implementing an approach commonly called [community schools](https://futureforlearning.org/media/community-schools-animation/).

“Community Schools are public schools that provide services and support that fit each neighborhood’s needs,” [according to](https://www.nea.org/student-success/great-public-schools/community-schools/what-are-they) the National Education Association. The approach relies on creating partnerships with community organizations and local businesses, which broadens the educational experiences and family and student services available from the school.

The approach lends itself to the kind of relationship-building Chang says is essential to addressing the problem of high absentee rates.

**A Walking School Bus**

Even before the pandemic broke out, public schools in Erie, Pennsylvania, were severely under stress. As Our Schools [reported](https://www.alternet.org/2021/12/community-schools) in 2021, factory closures over the course of the preceding [two](https://www.starbeacon.com/news/local_news/ge-plant-to-close-in-a-year/article_e63dedfd-ca85-5e6e-9f63-d9f9eb9b562e.html) [decades](https://www.goerie.com/story/business/2022/05/12/hammermill-paper-erie-pa-international-manufacturing-history-closure/65355005007/) had wrecked the local economy, and the loss of good-paying jobs caused many families to leave the local schools. (Family income [strongly correlates](https://research.stlouisfed.org/publications/page1-econ/2017/01/03/education-income-and-wealth) with education achievement.) These hardships delivered a withering blow to school funding, and by 2016, the combination of the cratering local economy with declining school revenues had resulted in the district accumulating a debt load of [$9.5 million](https://web.archive.org/web/20190619085556/https://www.goerie.com/news/20170414/erie-school-district-trims-deficit) in the 2017-2018 school year, according to the Erie Times-News.

Adding to the challenges was the fact that the remaining student populations in the district were much more apt to live in households contending with poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and health-related issues. For years, [numerous](https://tcf.org/content/commentary/concentrated-poverty-impacts-student-achievement/) [studies](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/02/concentration-poverty-american-schools/471414/) [have](https://edsource.org/2019/poverty-levels-in-schools-key-determinant-of-achievement-gaps-not-racial-or-ethnic-composition-study-finds/617821) [found](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/leandro-high-poverty-schools-brief) that concentrated poverty, and the problems that often come along with it, severely complicate student learning.

Faced with these challenges, educators in Erie [formed](https://www.eriereader.com/article/community-schools) a partnership in 2016 with the local [United Way](https://www.unitedwayerie.org/) in a homegrown effort to address the many challenges their students faced.

One issue that immediately rose to the top was the worsening absentee rates in many of the district schools. One school in the Erie City School District, McKinley Elementary School, had only 73.5 percent of students attending regularly in the 2018-2019 school year, which was well below the statewide average of 85.7 percent, [according to Mike Jaruszewicz](https://www.alternet.org/2021/12/community-schools), the senior vice president of community impact for United Way of Erie County.

Due to the district’s budget cuts in 2017, getting to and from school was made much more difficult because the district had [limited](https://www.goerie.com/story/news/education/2017/09/21/erie-school-district-explores-increased/18721830007/) school bus service to only those families living outside a 1 mile radius of the school. Later, that limitation was [raised to 1.5 miles](https://www.eriesd.org/Page/16521).

“At McKinley [Elementary School], that excludes most of our families,” Amy Grande, the school’s community school director, told Our Schools in 2021. “So, you’re talking about children as young as kindergarten having to cross dangerous roads, [including highways](https://www.google.com/maps/place/McKinley+Elementary+School/@42.1224182,-80.0543838,15z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x0:0xd21fad678630ef51!8m2!3d42.1225454!4d-80.0544674), to get to school. That’s an incredible impediment to attendance.”

Working with Jaruszewicz and his United Way colleagues, McKinley educators secured a grant to conduct a [safe routes assessment](https://www.saferoutespartnership.org/safe-routes-school/srts-program/basics) to note where students live, the intersections they had to traverse, and the stoplights and sidewalk conditions students encountered along the way.

Using the results of their assessment, McKinley educators and their United Way partners created a [walking school bus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walking_bus) with adult volunteers to escort students in their daily treks walking to and from the school.

When the first walking school bus started in February 2021, only four students enrolled, but by the end of the school year, 30 students were enrolled, according to Jaruszewicz, and of the 30 students enrolled, 26 increased their attendance, and the average attendance at McKinley jumped to 86 percent by the end of the school year in 2021, besting the state average.

Other Erie schools, working with the United Way and other partners, had similar success with raising student attendance rates. Strong Vincent Middle School saw chronic absenteeism decrease by 20 percentage points, according to Jaruszewicz, and Edison Elementary School saw its chronic absenteeism rate drop from 22 percent to 11 percent between 2017 and 2020.

**Laundry Facilities and Street Lights**

Schools in Gibsonton, Florida, had similar success at raising student attendance rates, but [their solution](https://www.alternet.org/2021/04/school-test-scores) was somewhat different, as Our Schools reported in 2021.

Gibsonton is an unincorporated, semi-rural community south of Tampa Bay that has its roots in agriculture, light manufacturing, maritime-related businesses, and the [carnival industry](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/feb/26/welcome-to-gibtown-the-last-freakshow-town-in-america).

Like Erie, the Gibsonton community struggles with poverty. In 2023, the average household income in Gibsonton is $64,757 with a poverty rate of 24.62 percent, [according to](https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/gibsonton-fl-population) World Population Review, and 71.85 percent of adults over 25 have attained an education of less than an associate or college degree. In the 2017-2018 school year, Gibsonton received a grade of “D” on the [state’s annual report card](https://edudata.fldoe.org/ReportCards/Schools.html?school=1601&district=29) that assesses elementary schools on the basis of their scores on standardized achievement tests.

Furthering the community’s marginalization is a lack of supports and resources that families need, including grocery stores, recreation facilities, dental and health clinics, and mental health services.

One school in the district that was struggling was Gibsonton Elementary School. Gibsonton Elementary also has a student population that often struggles in the public school system. Most of the students (57.34 percent) are Hispanic, [according to](https://edudata.fldoe.org/ReportCards/Schools.html?school=1601&district=29) 2022-2023 state data, and 100 percent are economically disadvantaged, with 25.1 percent being English language learners, and 22.50 percent having some sort of disability.

Poor student attendance at Gibsonton Elementary was chronic, Catherine Gilmore, the school’s community school coordinator, [told](https://www.alternet.org/2021/04/school-test-scores) Our Schools in an article published in 2021.

“We asked parents why,” she recalled, and one of the most frequent responses was that not having clean clothes was an impediment to coming to school.

The school responded by installing a campus washer-dryer and eventually opened a clothing closet that provided some free clothing articles.

Another factor contributing to the attendance problem was that in the shorter daylight hours of winter, streets were often too dark for students to safely walk to the bus or to school, and there were too few streetlights.

Given this response, the school organized an effort to have the county install new streetlights around the school. Working with the commissioners, the number of streetlights near the school quickly increased from nine to 51. Attendance immediately improved, said Gilmore.

Decreasing absentee rates at Gibsonton Elementary had a positive impact on student achievement. The school’s 2017-2018 “D” rating on the [state’s annual report card](https://edudata.fldoe.org/ReportCards/Schools.html?school=1601&district=29) increased to a “C” in 2018-2019, which it [maintained](https://edudata.fldoe.org/ReportCards/Schools.html?school=1601&district=29) in 2021-2022.

**A Collaborative Approach**

Another school that achieved gains in attendance rates was Lynn Community Middle School in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

As Our Schools [reported](https://ourfuture.org/20200522/new-mexico-shows-how-public-ed-can-thrive-after-covid-19) in 2020, Las Cruces is a school district in one of the [poorest states](https://wisevoter.com/state-rankings/poorest-states/) in America. According to 2016-2020 data, 24.6 percent of families in Las Cruces schools had an [income below the poverty level](https://nces.ed.gov/Programs/Edge/ACSDashboard/3501500), which is significantly above state and national averages.

In 2016, a partnership that included the local teachers union, leaders of community and youth-focused nonprofit organizations, and representatives of the business sector spearheaded [an effort](https://www.lcsun-news.com/story/news/education/lcps/2016/04/06/progress-made-community-schools-initiative/82725280/) to pilot a new program at Lynn Community Middle School that aimed to address the multiple challenges the district’s students and families faced.

Under the state’s former school assessment system, the school had been graded “F” as recently as 2016 [according to](https://nmindepth.com/2018/it-takes-a-community-to-educate-a-child-at-lynn-middle-school/) New Mexico in Depth.

But beginning in 2017, the collaborative new program brought to Lynn Community Middle School a wide range of new resources and supports for students and families, including “healthy snacks” and “warm clothes” for students, New Mexico in Depth [reported](https://nmindepth.com/2018/it-takes-a-community-to-educate-a-child-at-lynn-middle-school/). “Parents [gained] access to computers, Wi-Fi, and office supplies to apply for jobs. Families and neighbors [could] stop in for staples at a monthly food pantry[, and]… a mobile Boys and Girls Club… [was] set up in the school’s cafeteria.”

One of the near-immediate positive impacts of these extra resources and supports was an improved student absentee rate “from around 15 percent each day to about 8 to 10 percent,” [according to](https://nmindepth.com/2018/it-takes-a-community-to-educate-a-child-at-lynn-middle-school/) the school’s then-principal, Toni Hull, in 2018. By 2018, Lynn had raised its school rating to “D,” New Mexico in Depth [reported](https://nmindepth.com/2018/it-takes-a-community-to-educate-a-child-at-lynn-middle-school/).

In 2019, Lynn Community Middle School added to its wide range of student and family services an on-campus dental clinic, mental health services, a food bank, summer programs, horticulture classes, service learning projects, money management and nutritional education, a garden and cooking club, and a family center, [according](https://www.lcsun-news.com/story/news/education/lcps/2019/04/26/nm-education-secretary-tours-lynn-middle-school-las-cruces/3593127002/) to the Las Cruces Sun-News.

Drawing from this success, Las Cruces city officials and the school district worked together to expand the collaborative approach that worked at Lynn districtwide, [according](https://www.ktsm.com/local/las-cruces-news/city-of-las-cruces-las-cruces-public-schools-come-together-to-help-students/) to local television station KTSM, starting with three more schools.

**What Works**

A walking school bus, laundry facilities, streetlights, a food pantry, and youth clubs? The tools these schools employed to lower absentee rates seem piecemeal. But what these efforts all had in common was their implementation of the community schools strategy.

Community schools look different from state to state, and even from school to school, but at the heart of the strategy is an emphasis on meeting the multiple needs of not only students but also the community. The basic idea is that schools should serve as hubs in the community and partner with local organizations that serve the many needs of families and students. Schools are the delivery source because that’s where children and families are.

Also, the school’s curriculum and program offerings should reflect the local culture and interests of the community, and the governance should be shared among the various stakeholders the school actually serves.

In each of these districts, what started the ball rolling toward better outcomes, like lower absentee rates, was a conscious and deliberate effort to take up the community schools approach by organizing from the ground up.

“We’ve been very intentional about the schools we’ve picked to adopt the approach,” Rob Kriete, president of Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association, [told](https://www.alternet.org/2021/04/school-test-scores) Our Schools in 2021. (The Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association represents teachers in Gibsonton schools.) The district has not taken a “top-down approach,” he said, and has instead only proposed to pilot the effort in schools that welcome the approach and have leadership and faculty who are agreeable to the demands of it.

In March 2018, Gibsonton Elementary leadership, faculty, and support staff agreed the school should adopt the community schools approach. “The entire school had to be behind the idea,” said Gibsonton Elementary community school coordinator Catherine Gilmore in 2021, “and we were.”

The next step was to hire a community school coordinator in each school receiving the community schools designation. Having a dedicated community school coordinator is key to taking on the role of assessing the school community’s assets and needs and developing partnerships with nonprofits, businesses, and family service providers in the community.

When Gilmore stepped into her new role, she had assumptions about what the school needed, but the first year of implementing the community schools approach requires the school to conduct a needs assessment, including an audit of program strengths and weaknesses and assets in the surrounding community, and an outreach, via surveys and interviews, to students, parents, business leaders, local nonprofits, and others.

What she got back from this outreach didn’t always match what her assumptions were, but that process is what led to implementing ideas like streetlights and a laundromat that ultimately made the difference in absentee rates.

And while schools in Erie and Las Cruces may have found different ways to address the urgent needs of their students and families, each of these districts used the very same process Gilmore and her colleagues employed in Gibsonton.

Researchers may assume that because the results of community schools implementations look different in different schools, then this is not something that can be “replicated at scale.” But there are empirical studies showing the effectiveness of the community schools approach, especially when it comes to addressing the problem of high absentee rates.

A 2020 research study released by the Rand Corporation looked at the results of community schools implementations in New York City and [found](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10107.html) that schools using the approach were able to increase attendance and graduation rates, improve school climate and culture, raise math scores, and ensure higher percentages of students advanced to the next grade.

Cincinnati schools that had taken up the community schools approach “had better attendance and showed significant improvements on state graduation tests,” according to a 2017 [joint report](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/community-schools-equitable-improvement-brief) by the Learning Policy Institute and the National Education Policy Center.

Older studies of the community schools approach’s impact have [found](https://www.chalkbeat.org/2017/5/12/21100480/community-schools-are-expanding-but-are-they-working-new-study-shows-mixed-results) similar results in terms of improving attendance, quality of school life, and graduation rates.

Politicians and policymakers may also be reluctant to adopt the community schools strategy because it’s a departure from top-down, seemingly easy solutions to lower student absentee rates like [suspending students for skipping school](https://hechingerreport.org/when-the-punishment-is-the-same-as-the-crime-suspended-for-missing-class/) or [cracking down on parents](https://newrepublic.com/article/121186/truancy-laws-unfairly-attack-poor-children-and-parents) whose children are truant.

But there’s scant evidence these ideas actually work. The community schools approach, on the other hand, is the very thing that answers the question Hedy Chang and other experts [asked](https://abcnews.go.com/US/students-chronically-absent-country-covid-made-worse/story?id=95936160) about how to “organize schools” to address the current crisis in absentee rates.