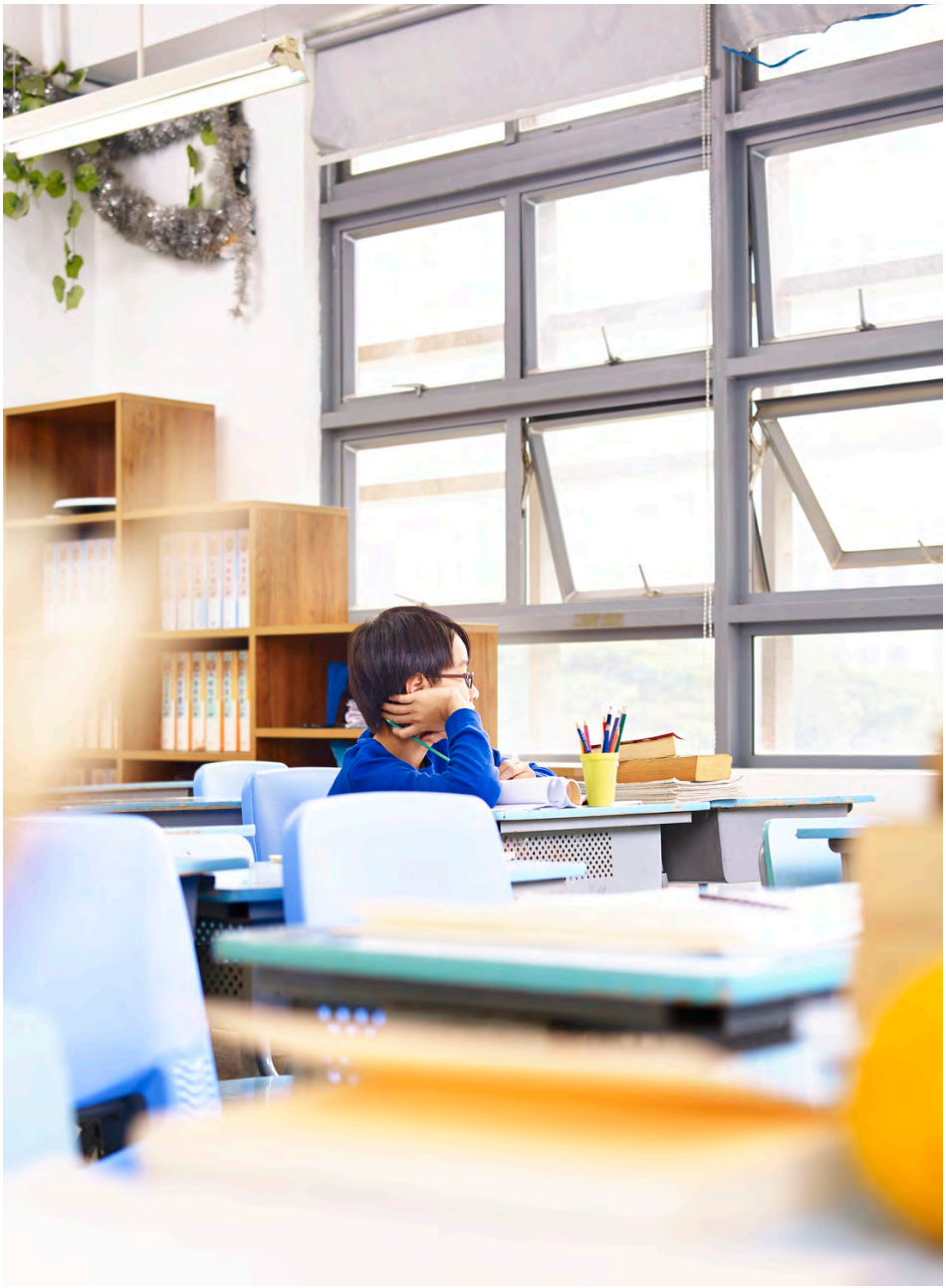

Understanding Who Is Missing and Why

The pandemic only magnified chronic absence among students with the greatest needs and made the problem harder to ignore.

Hailly T.N. Korman

During the shift to online learning in 2020, the disruption to students and families was nearly universal, but the causes—and effects—varied. It is now indisputable that there was a stretch of time when a shocking number of students did not attend school regularly, or at all. The work of the intervening years has been largely twofold: ensure that students reengage with learning and help them to get back on track with their academic progress.

Some kids who had disengaged from their schools came back as soon as the doors reopened. Others needed a bit more support to reengage, perhaps a few phone calls or a home visit from a school social worker. Still other students permanently transitioned to different learning environments—private schools or home schooling. But the evidence, as well as

common sense, underscores the possibility that some students are still fully disconnected from learning.[1] What can state boards of education do to support these students?

At first glance, this may seem like a frustrating new problem for schools and communities, but in truth it is a very old one, with familiar names like "truancy," "chronic absenteeism," "high mobility," "transiency," and "dropping out." While COVID's school closures have undoubtedly accelerated, expanded, and deepened these challenges, they remain fundamentally the same as ever. Fifteen, ten, or even five years ago, there seemed to be general acceptance that some small number of kids would just stop showing up to school—either to a specific school where they had been attending or anywhere at all. Today, the pandemic presents a renewed opportunity to rethink how to reach missing students and to reenergize efforts that have long gone neglected and underresourced.

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Comprehensive data are hard to come by, but existing data from the U.S. Department of Education suggest that this new wave of school disengagement is, like its predecessors, not evenly distributed.[2] It is reasonable to conclude that those students, families, and communities who were most likely to experience the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic are also most likely to still be experiencing these consequences. For a family in which the caregivers were classified as "essential workers," for example, young people in the home were probably experiencing greater pressures to provide childcare for younger siblings, making it difficult for them to engage with their own learning. Some households lost caregivers to COVID, pushing young people into the workforce as primary wage earners for their families.[3] Still others simply fell so far behind that returning to a high school setting may have seemed impractical.

Regardless of the cause, the consequences of an incomplete education are both significant and shared: A 2009 study found that young people who did not complete high school struggled to participate fully in the labor market, had higher rates of incarceration, and were far more likely to live in poverty.[4] In addition to the individual human costs for each young person, "[t]he average high school dropout will cost taxpayers over $292,000 in lower tax revenues, higher cash and in-kind transfer costs, and imposed incarceration costs relative to an average high school graduate."

The most important questions for state board members to ask are, Who is missing? and Why? Finding the answers is the first step to understanding the nature of unmet needs in each state, district, and school so that solutions are responsive. Here are four such efforts:

- In Yakima, Washington, local leaders have convened a citywide task force to do case management and systems improvement.
- In El Dorado County, California, a county commission established to improve coordination and communication for youth and families is being deployed to understand and address the underlying causes of disengagement.
- As the number of truancy petitions have soared, leaders in Nashville, Tennessee, are developing an innovative school design informed by youth in contact with the courts.
- The Utah State Board of Education directly oversees the delivery of Check & Connect mentoring, an evidence-based program for young people receiving services through the state's Youth in Care programs.[5]

Notably, these programs operated at different levels of education leadership, from the state board down to local partnerships between educators and community-based organizations. But each offers different opportunities for state board support.

Analyzing Data

The Yakima, Washington, school district first analyzed their attendance data during the pandemic but then looked back to data long before 2020. While school closures had expanded and accelerated truancy and attendance challenges for their most vulnerable students during COVID, the underlying phenomenon of student disengagement was not new. The patterns had simply gone undetected, which meant that individual cases were treated as unremarkable exceptions, not symptoms of a larger problem. For years, these students had slipped from school rosters and drifted into unsafe environments and behaviors that ultimately led to a high rate of dependence on long-term care in their communities.

As a result of this analysis, local leaders

convened a citywide task force. The task force looked for ways to fund and lead community reengagement boards that could work in parallel with case management and systems improvement. The boards include agency leaders from across the city, public school staff, and community-based organizations.

Guided by the fundamental questions of "who is missing?" and "why are they missing?", the district has redirected its focus toward a multitiered systems of support framework. In the upcoming academic year, the district's 23 schools are set to pair their attendance subcommittees and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports teams with experienced coaches. These coaches will guide the teams in using a new, more holistic child data system to guide selection of schoolwide measures for preventing chronic absence. Training for the support teams, as well as community boards, will help ensure that students most in need get rigorous individual case management, even as they identify areas for targeted group support.

Improving Coordination

When leaders in El Dorado County, California, established a county commission in 2018 to improve coordination and communication among county agencies and community organizations, they unknowingly set the stage for problem solving during COVID. A cross-agency partnership formed by the county's board of supervisors and funded by participating agencies, the commission has been deployed to find underlying causes of disengagement and marshal all available county resources to address them.

The El Dorado Commission for Youth and Families comprises county leaders representing the board of supervisors, education, health and human services, probation, local partners, families, and students. The commission's vision is to ensure that every door is the right door for a child or family in need of services. El Dorado County partners determined they lacked the centralized communication and data systems needed to fulfill this mission and provide comprehensive, coordinated service. Working together to ensure all young people have access to social, emotional, educational, and health services, county partners are establishing an integrated, transparent, data-driven system so that the burden of navigating services falls on the system, not on young people and their families.

This effort positions the county to align with California's whole-child approach to education, in which millions of dollars are being allocated to provide wraparound supports to children and families. In preparation, the commissioners conducted a countywide needs assessment, collecting data on children and youth across local systems. These data invite a broad root-cause analysis of chronic absenteeism in the county and encourage development of joint strategies to meet unique challenges, especially for students in foster care, probation, and child welfare systems. Although in its infancy, the commission expects to use data to inform collaborative case management, communications, and regular reporting to inform continuous improvement.

Tackling Truancy

The Nashville-Davidson County Juvenile Court leads the Metro Student Attendance Center (MSAC), a specialty court to which truancy petitions are referred. Partnering with the local school district to reduce truancy, improve attendance, and eliminate loitering during school hours, the court intervenes when students miss school and have not responded to school-based interventions.

The court saw an uptick in truancy petitions during the 2022–23 school year. In response, leaders had to think holistically about the causes of truancy and chronic absenteeism in order to create systemic solutions. For example, when a new third grade retention law threatened to retain the 60 percent of Tennessee third grade students who had not achieved proficiency on the state reading test, the district created a summer learning program, Promising Scholars. It provides educational opportunities each summer for students who choose to attend or are mandated to do so if they are at risk of retention. The program also provides high-dosage tutoring in reading for elementary students.

Another innovation has been to tap students who have involved in the justice system and those who have been disengaged from school to join an emerging effort to design a school for them. This school would be an addition to the city's current education ecosystem, in which

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existing alternative schools provide short-term rather than stable, long-term education options.

Connecting with Mentors

The Utah State Board of Education directly manages education programs for young people in the state who are eligible for youth in care/custody programming. The board provides mentoring through an evidence-based program called Check & Connect. Local education agencies (LEAs) apply to the state board for funding for the mentoring services. The state board is also responsible for training mentors, who are in place in 26 LEAs serving 1,500 students statewide. Working with the Utah Department of Health and Human Services, the state board identifies youth needing mentors and supports mentors with technical assistance, professional learning, and program monitoring.

A longstanding feature of Utah's service model, the Check & Connect mentors helped mitigate the effects of pandemic school closures on youth in care. They helped students transition to home learning, taking them Chromebooks and other school supplies and conducting "porch to car" visits to stay engaged with students and families while maintaining safe social distancing.

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State Support

In staving off chronic absence and increasing engagement, each state, district, and community has to respond to its own needs—there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Nonetheless, these examples highlight three common—and interdependent—elements of promising approaches for state boards to consider: invest in data systems, build and support relationships, and match resources to actual needs. State boards play a crucial role in supporting these approaches by advocating for allocation of resources, incentivizing targeted programming, and sharing highlights of promising approaches across districts.

- **Invest in Data Systems.** A precondition for understanding the scope and scale of any community's ongoing challenges with student disengagement is high-quality, timely data that reveal patterns.
- **Build and Support Relationships.** The essential point of connection between a disengaged young person and their school will always be a trusted person—an adult who is able to share information with the student and help solve problems. Statewide support for mentoring can help build durable system capacity for relationship building.
- **Match Resources to Actual Needs.** As leaders gather information and refine their approaches, resources can be adjusted to match actual needs that are interfering with school reengagement.

As students disengaged, education leaders have long accepted that there would be a certain amount of attrition in some schools—and a lot in others. School closures during the pandemic magnified student disengagement and laid bare the underlying challenges. It has become harder to look away. Addressing student disengagement today will take more than new tools or programs; it requires a fresh look at old challenges. ■

[1]Thomas Dee, "Where the Kids Went: Nonpublic Schooling and Demographic Change during the Pandemic Exodus from Public Schools," essay (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, February 2023); Attendance Works, "Pandemic Causes Alarming Increase in Chronic Absence and Reveals Need for Better Data," blog (September 27, 2022), https://www.attendanceworks.org/pandemic-causes-alarming-increase-in-chronic-absence-and-reveals-need-for-better-data/.

[2]National Center on Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, School Pulse Panel and "More than 80 Percent of U.S. Public Schools Report Pandemic Has Negatively Impacted Student Behavior and Socio-Emotional Development," press release (July 6, 2022); U.S. Department of Education, "Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools," data story, rev. January 2019, https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html.

[3]The American Academy of Pediatrics estimates that for every four COVID deaths, one U.S. child loses a parent or caregiver. In addition, there are disparities by race, ethnicity, and geography, with children of racial and ethnic minorities making up 65 percent of those who lost a primary caregiver. Susan D. Hillis et al., "COVID-19: Associated Orphanhood and Caregiver Death in the United States," *Pediatrics* 148, no. 6 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-053760.

[4]Andrew Sun et al., "The Consequence of Dropping Out of High School" (Boston: Center for Labor Market Studies, October 2009).

[5]The examples cited here include work supported by Bellwether through its contract- and grant-funded relationships. Shelby Lockheart (Yakima, Washington), Jennifer Wade (Nashville, Tennessee), Julia Armstrong (Utah), Amanda Charlesworth (Utah), Kathi Gurrero (El Dorado, California), and Ed Manansala (El Dorado, California) contributed details about their efforts via personal communication with the author.

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