



Chronic Absence: A Call for Deeper Student and Family Engagement

Connecticut's experience underscores the value of a positive, systemic approach to improving attendance.

Since the onset of the pandemic, chronic absence from K-12 schools has increased dramatically in every state. Often, the rate doubled: for instance, 12.1 percent to 30 percent in California, 12.9 to 27.7 percent in Massachusetts, 19.7 percent to 38.5 percent in Michigan, and 13.1 percent to 28 percent in Mississippi between school years 2018–19 and 2021–22.

Although many hoped attendance would quickly return to pre-pandemic levels once students emerged from quarantined, early data for 2022–23 are disheartening. Chronic absence has remained persistently high—at 24.5 percent in Massachusetts, for example, as of March 2023.

Chronic absenteeism is typically defined as missing 10 percent of school for any reason—excused and unexcused absences as well as suspensions. It is an early warning sign that students are struggling and need extra support. Chronically absent students are significantly less likely to read proficiently by the end of third grade, do well academically in middle school, and graduate from high school.¹ Equally important, chronic absence is associated with declines in educational engagement, social-emotional development, and executive functioning.² Economically challenged students suffer the most, as they typically have less access to resources that would help them make up for the lost opportunities to learn in classrooms.

Monitoring chronic absence by grade, student populations, school, district, and geography is crucial to learning recovery and addressing the inequities exacerbated by the pandemic. Chronic absence and other types of attendance data can help identify where more engagement and support are needed as well as illuminate policies and practices that are yielding better outcomes.

Shoring Up Conditions of Learning

When key conditions of learning are in place (figure 1), students show up, and they and their families stay engaged in school. Chronic absence reflects the erosion of these conditions.

Physical and Emotional Safety. The need for physical and emotional safety at school is a key condition for learning. When schools required students to quarantine, the need to stay home at the first sign of illness became newly ingrained on students and families. Through our work with districts across the country, my colleagues and I at Attendance Works are hearing that families and educators are now confused about when and how long students should stay home due to illness. Moreover, families working remotely may deem it easier to keep a child home rather than risking a disruption in the workday. Others may be missing school because they are catching up on health care screenings, immunizations, and checkups missed during the pandemic.³

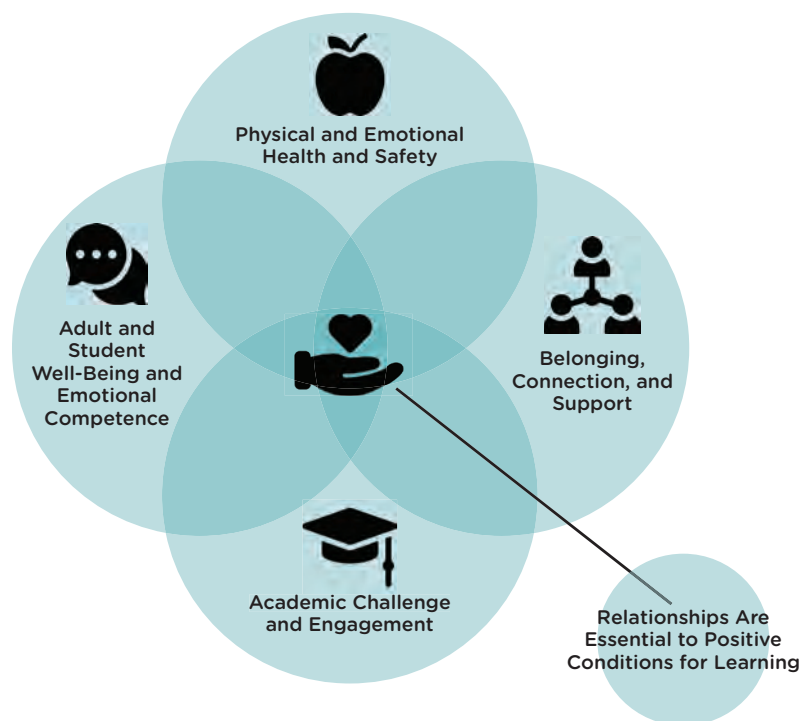
Ensuring students do not stay home unnecessarily for illness will require an intentional strategy. State and local public health and education agencies will need to develop and broadly communicate updated, consistent health guidance as well ensure and expand access to preventative health care, especially in grades, student groups, or schools experiencing the highest levels of chronic absence.

Unstable housing, unreliable transportation, unsafe paths to school, lack of access to health care, and poor nutrition can also contribute to school absences and make it harder for students to concentrate and learn even when they do go to class.

Well-Being. Also taking a toll on

Hedy Chang

Figure 1. Positive Conditions for Learning Lead to Students Being Engaged and Attending Regularly



The effects of chronic absence compound, making it harder for students to stay engaged in what is being taught when they do attend.

student and staff well-being are the stresses of the pandemic, including traumatic events; the rocky, disrupted return to school; falling behind due to missed instruction; and increased violence on school campuses. Student anxiety and depression have skyrocketed.⁴ In my organization’s work with states and districts on chronic absence, school refusal is a frequently shared challenge.⁵ It is therefore more important than ever to equip schools to take a trauma-informed approach to learning that creates a sense of belonging, connection, and support. This approach includes such strategies as educators’ greetings by the door, advisories, mentoring, clubs, and home visits.

Connection and Belonging. Relationship building is central to many of the evidence-based interventions outlined in our recently updated Attendance Playbook, developed by FutureEd and Attendance Works.⁶ To ensure that all students feel connected, all educators and school staff must share the responsibility for building relationships. Schools can also encourage students to make peer connections and can expand opportunities for students to interact

with caring adults through mentoring, volunteering, and community organizations.

Academic Challenge. Students and families are more likely to show up for school when they believe that what is being taught is challenging, engaging, and relevant. For older students, college and career pathways, paid internships with local businesses, and flexible scheduling to accommodate increased family and work responsibilities help students attend school.

For younger students, schools should find ways to welcome families back to school campuses so they can discover how classroom activities are nurturing their children’s development. In the aftermath of the pandemic, some schools hesitated to let families back on campus. Yet the better families understand the immediate benefit of the classroom experience, the more they prioritize their children’s attendance.⁷

The effects of chronic absence compound, making it harder for students to stay engaged in what is being taught when they do attend, forge meaningful connections, and benefit from on-campus resources that can help address their basic needs and expand their engagement.

Improving attendance requires the entire community working together to ensure that families as well as school staff have what they need to support each other, grow, and thrive.

Connecticut's Systemic Approach

A systemic approach to reducing chronic absence will require the state education agency (SEA) to advance on a number of fronts (figure 2). It starts with capacity building—that is, equipping educators and community partners to adopt a data-driven, problem-solving, multi-tiered approach. When attendance and chronic absence reports are accurate, accessible, timely, comprehensive, and easy to interpret, they are actionable. The first response to absenteeism should be positive engagement—eschewing a punitive approach in favor of one centered on belonging and engagement and helping everyone understand why daily attendance matters.

Strategic partnerships among the district, school, and community are essential for providing resources and supports to address the barriers

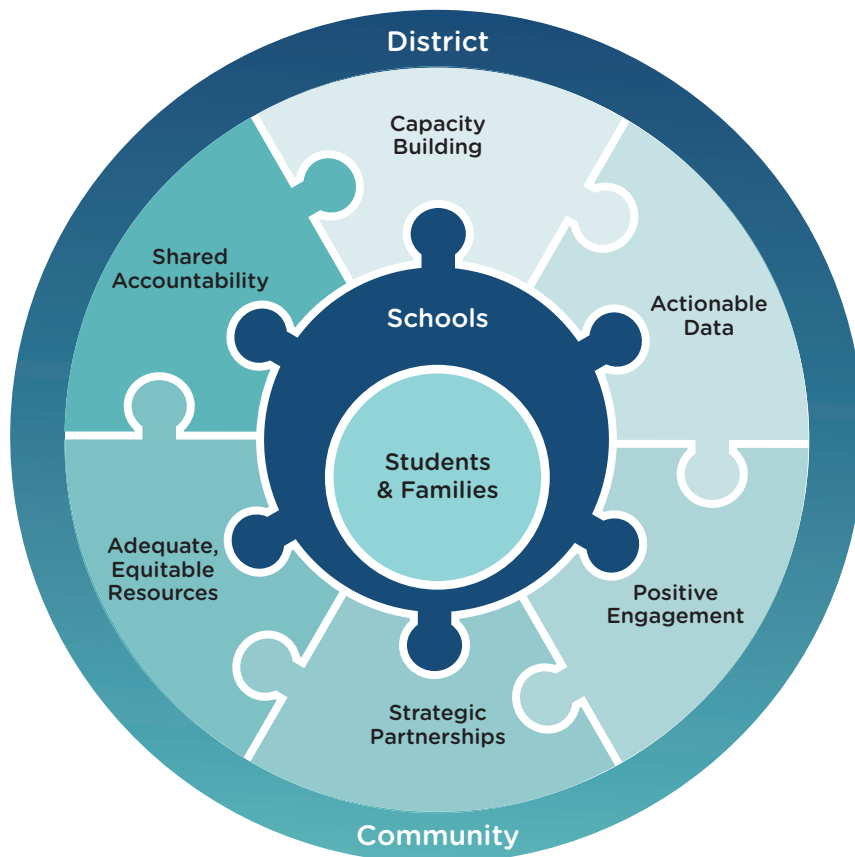
to attendance. Partners' deep commitment to adequate, equitable resources can ensure that students from all backgrounds and circumstances receive a quality education and opportunities to thrive and achieve. Because absenteeism is a cross-cutting issue that cannot be solved by any one person, department, or agency, shared accountability is the final key ingredient.

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) exemplifies the benefits of advancing and sustaining a systemic approach to reducing chronic absence. Its current multi-pronged strategy builds upon past policies and investments, some of which were made more than a decade ago.⁸

Actionable Data. In 2020–21, CSDE shifted from yearly to monthly collection and release of attendance data. To ensure that districts deliver high-quality data, CSDE publicizes its definition of attendance—that is, showing up to school for half of a day for in-person and virtual learning—and data are coded by learning mode. The department also works with districts to identify

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Figure 2. Elements of a Systemic Approach to Reducing Chronic Absence



Connecticut saw reductions in absenteeism in every high-need population.

and resolve data quality issues quickly. Publicly available in near real time, the data have facilitated timely problem solving. For example, data that showed lax attendance in distance learning informed the decision to make in-person learning an early priority. With the benefit of monthly data, Gov. Ned Lamont and CSDE established the Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP), a home-visit model that began serving 15 districts in spring 2021.⁹

Positive Engagement. A 2016 law prohibits using juvenile court as a response to truancy, and CSDE gave districts a list of approved alternatives in 2018.¹⁰ As part of its definition and framework for family engagement, it also promoted high-impact strategies for reducing chronic absence.¹¹

LEAP built upon these earlier investments. The program prioritized establishing trusting relationships with school staff, encouraging regular attendance, and assisting families with summer placements and afterschool learning. While its main goal was ameliorating chronic absenteeism for a targeted set of students, qualitative data gathered from home visitors and families during the program evaluation revealed outcomes that are often harder to tackle and measure: improved family-school relationships, increased feelings of belonging, improved access to resources, and greater gratitude and appreciation.¹²

Strategic Partnerships. LEAP exemplifies the critical role of partnerships. State and national partners (including Attendance Works and the Parent Teacher Home Visit Program) helped design and implement it. Regional Education Service Centers served as fiduciary and implementation partners in training, data collection, and technical support. Given the toll the pandemic was taking on existing school staff, LEAP explicitly encouraged districts to partner with community agencies to recruit added adults to conduct home visits. The program created a system for home visitors to document challenges facing families. These data helped pinpoint areas where added partnerships were needed—for example, to address a need for more bilingual materials.

Capacity Building. Over the years, Connecticut invested in building capacity to reduce chronic absence. In 2015, a state law required districts or

schools to set up attendance review teams when chronic absence rates reached a certain level. CSDE created a prevention and early intervention guide for districts and virtual sessions for peer exchange. It invested in communities of practice for charter schools and districts struggling with poor attendance. This commitment carried through to LEAP, which provided training, peer exchange, and technical assistance for the program's home visitors.

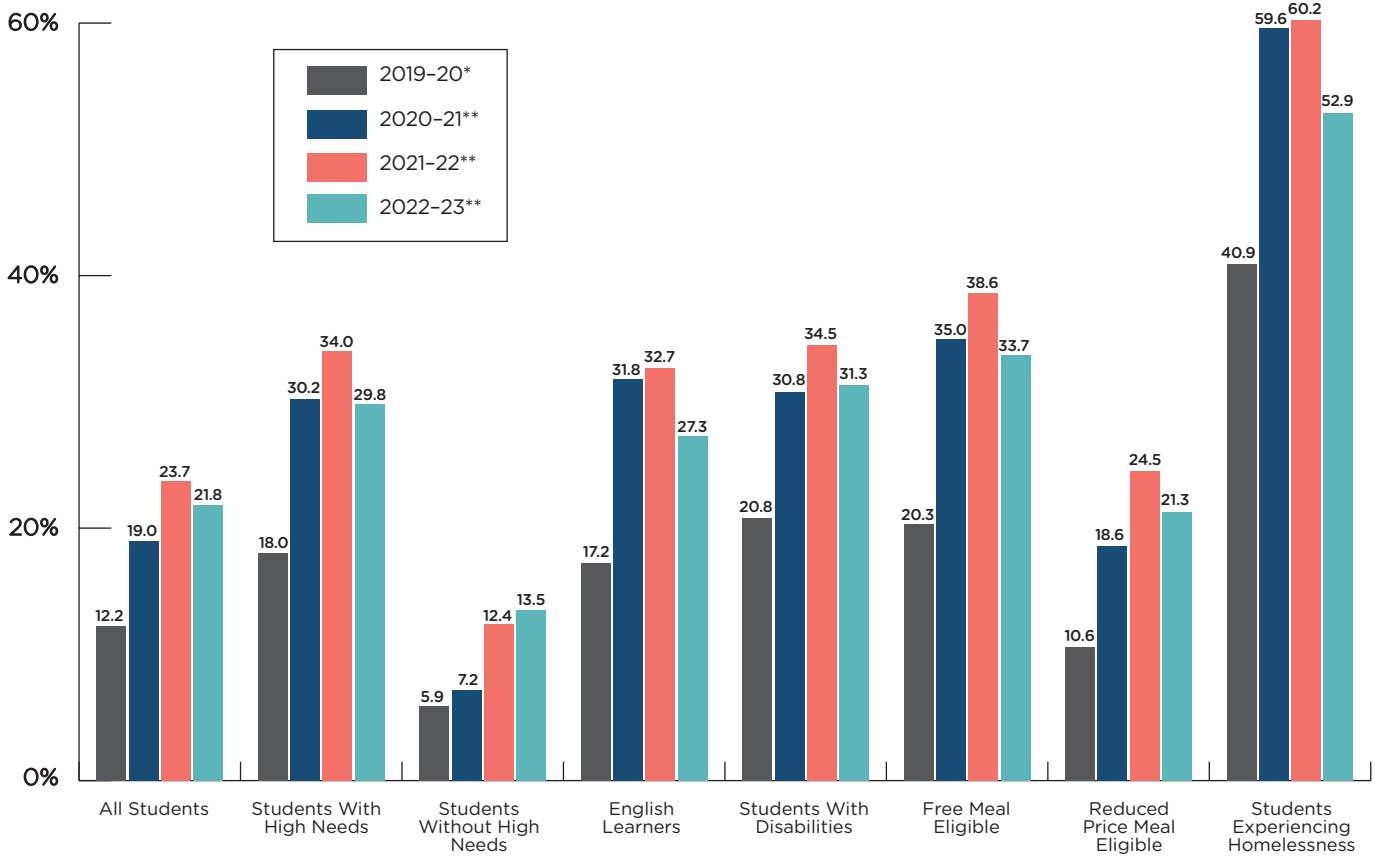
Adequate, Equitable Resources. Data on chronic absence as well as academic performance and student demographics informed the selection of districts to participate in LEAP. In addition, Connecticut's long-standing practice has been to integrate efforts to combat chronic absence with the technical assistance offered to its lowest performing districts.

Shared Accountability. Connecticut promotes shared accountability through data transparency. In addition, CSDE and the governor bring key decision makers within and across agencies to review emerging trends and potential responses. The state's dedication to addressing the pandemic's impact on learning, well-being, and recovery led to creation of the Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration. It will meet CSDE's ongoing evaluation and research needs and foster collaboration across state institutions of higher education.

The center evaluated LEAP and found it had improved participants' attendance, results that are informing the decision to sustain the program. Attendance rates increased by four percentage points in the month following the first LEAP visit for most students. Attendance continued to rise subsequently, reaching an average increase of approximately seven percentage points for students served in summer 2021 and nearly 15 percentage points for students served during the 2021–22 school year after they had been in the program for six months. The impact was greatest for secondary students.

By the end of May 2023, chronic absence in Connecticut overall decreased to 21.0 percent compared with 23.7 percent at the end of the 2022 school year. The state saw reductions in absenteeism in every high-need population—English learners, students with disabilities, students eligible for free and reduced-price meals, and students experiencing homelessness (figure 3).

Figure 3. Connecticut: Students Chronically Absent by Student Group



*Calculations are based only on in-person school days until mid-March 2020.
 **Calculations include both in-person and remote days.

Even so, the overall rate of chronic absence remains persistently high because the rate among students outside the high-need groups is more than double that recorded before the pandemic. Additionally, while attendance is improving in most grades, chronic absence remains stubbornly high in the early grades, especially kindergarten (figure 4).

Recommendations

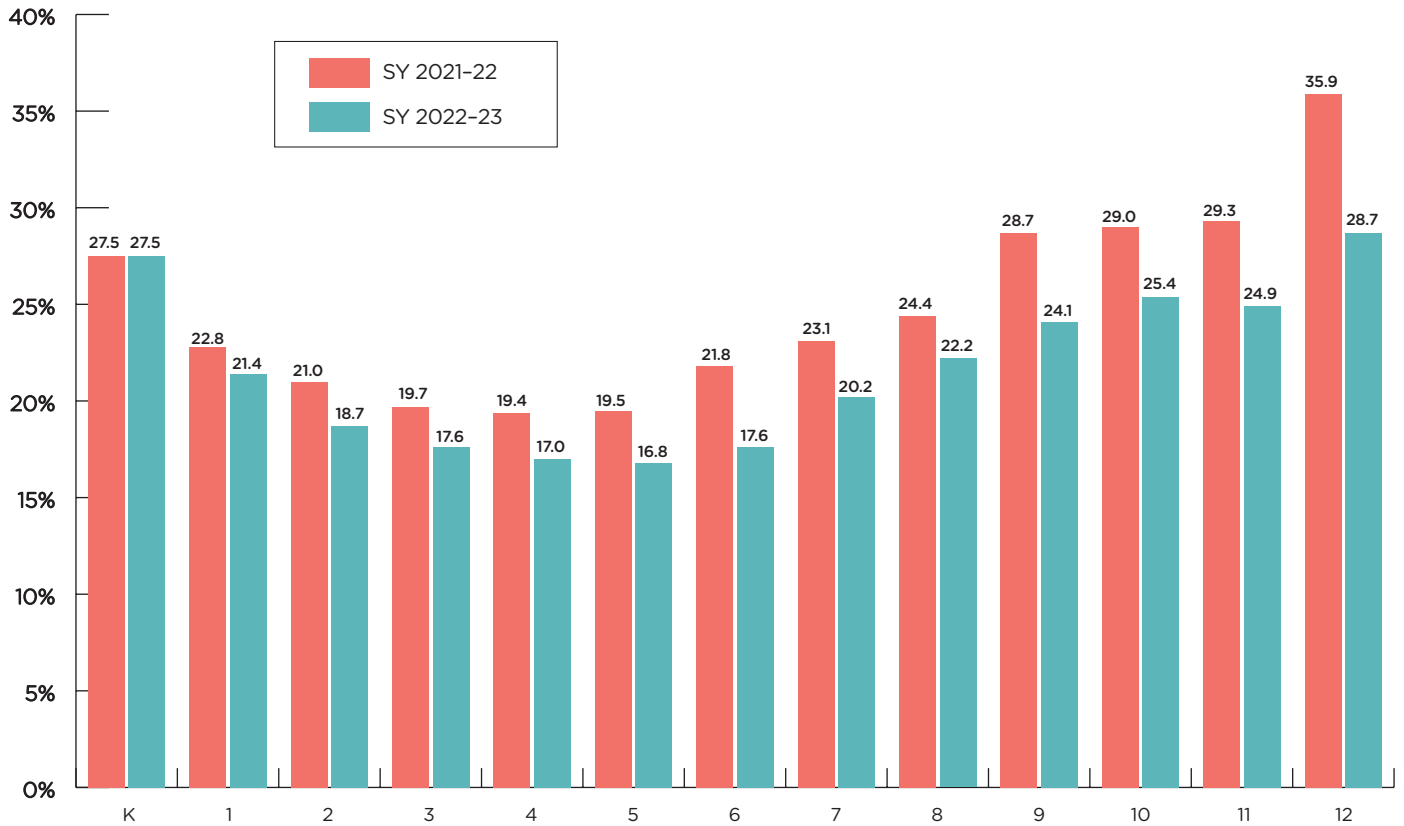
State boards of education are especially well positioned to ensure that their SEA takes a strategic approach to chronic absence. In Attendance Works’ third annual review of state attendance policy and practice, “Monitoring Data Matters More than Ever,”¹³ we encourage states to do the following:

- invest in accurate, timely, actionable data by offering a consistent definition of what

constitutes a day of attendance; making sure data are disaggregated by grade as well as district, school, and student population; and promoting publication of timely state data and real-time data dashboards for districts;

- shift from a punitive response to absences to a supportive, solution-oriented approach that begins with prevention and early intervention;
- leverage the inclusion of chronic absence as an accountability metric (as is the case in the majority of Every Student Succeeds Act state plans) to expand availability of high-quality technical assistance to help districts take a tiered approach to improving attendance and using evidence-based strategies;
- use chronic absence data to inform the allocation of resources;
- double down on a cross-departmental approach; and

Figure 4. Connecticut: Chronic Absence by Grade



Use data to identify and learn from the state's bright spots.

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Attendance Works also offers states a self-assessment tool to identify the most urgent gaps.¹⁴ Ideally, state board members will work with SEA staff to create a shared vision for moving forward. ■

¹Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes, "The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools" (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, Center for Social Organization of Schools, May 2012); Hedy Chang and Mariajosé Romero, "Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades" (New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, September 2008); Stacy B. Ehrlich et al., "Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences" (Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, May 2014); University of Rhode Island, "Chronic Absenteeism among Kindergarten Students" (2014); University of Utah, "Chronic Absenteeism in Utah Public Schools." (Salt Lake City: Utah Education Policy Center, July 2012).

²Michael A. Gottfried, "Chronic Absenteeism and Its Effects on Students' Academic and Socioemotional Outcomes," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* 19, no. 2 (2014): 53–75; Michael Gottfried and Arya

Ansari, "Detailing New Dangers: Linking Kindergarten Chronic Absenteeism to Long-Term Declines in Executive Functioning," *The Elementary School Journal* 121, no. 3 (March 2021): 484–500; Lucrecia Santibañez and Cassandra M. Guarino, "The Effects of Absenteeism on Academic and Social-Emotional Outcomes: Lessons for COVID-19," Policy Brief (Stanford, CA: PACE, October 2020).

³Ann B. Conmy et al., "Children's Health Coverage Trends: Gains in 2020–2022 Reverse Previous Coverage Losses," Issue Brief HP-2023-07 (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, March 2023).

⁴Sherry Everett Jones et al., "Mental Health, Suicidality, and Connectedness among High School Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic—Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey, United States, January–June 2021," *MMWR Supplement* 71, Suppl-3 (2022): 16–21, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su7103a3external.icon>.

⁵David Heyne et al., "School Refusal: Epidemiology and Management," *Paediatric Drugs* 3, no. 10 (2001): 719–32, <https://doi.org/10.2165/00128072-200103100-00002>.

⁶Phyllis Jordan, "Attendance Playbook: Smart Strategies for Reducing Student Absenteeism Post-Pandemic" (FutureEd and Attendance Works, May 2023).

⁷Ehrlich et al., "Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools," p. 34–35.

⁸Hedy N. Chang, Charlene M. Russell-Tucker, and Kari Sullivan, "Chronic Early Absence: What States Can Do," *Phi Delta Kappan* (October 2016).

⁹Hedy N. Chang et al., "Chronic Absence Patterns and

Hedy Chang is the founder and executive director of Attendance Works.

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Prediction during Covid-19: Insights from Connecticut" (Attendance Works and the Connecticut State Department of Education, June 2021), <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence-patterns-and-prediction-during-covid-19-insights-from-connecticut/>

¹⁰CSDE, "Catalog of Truancy Intervention Models" (March 2018).

¹¹CSDE, "Full, Equal and Equitable Partnerships with Families: Connecticut's Definition and Framework for Family Engagement" (August 2018), chart 5.

¹²Steven Stemler et al., "An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Home Visits for Re-Engaging Students Who Were Chronically Absent in the Era of Covid-19" (Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration, December 2022), https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/CCERC-Report-LEAP_01_24_2023_FINAL.pdf.

¹³Attendance Works, "Monitoring Data Matters Even More: A Review of State Attendance Data Policy and Practice in School Year 2022–23," policy brief (June 2023), <https://www.attendanceworks.org/monitoring-data-matters-even-more-a-review-of-state-attendance-data-policy-and-practice-in-school-year-2022-23/>. A table in this brief provides a look at attendance policies and practices in 50 states and the District of Columbia.

¹⁴Attendance Works, "Does Our State Have a Systemic Approach to Reducing Chronic Absence?" (rev. August 18, 2018), <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/self-assessment/>.

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track the community members who participate in the work-based learning experiences and the quality of the experiences through reflection forms, surveys, and evaluative rubrics so state leaders can readily evaluate the academic, employability, and technical skills students are gaining. ■

¹National Career Academy Coalition, "Career Academies Change Lives Every Day," web page, <https://www.ncacinc.com/nsop/academies>.

²James R. Stone III and Morgan V. Lewis, *College and Career Ready in the 21st Century: Making High School Matter* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2012); James R. Stone III et al., "Building Academic Skills in Context: Testing the Value of Enhanced Math Learning in CTE" (St. Paul: National Research Center for Career and Technical Education, University of Minnesota, 2006).

³Data came from a survey of students designed to gauge their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. In this survey, emotional engagement comprises a sense of belonging and safety and beliefs that students can be themselves and accepted for it. Edward C. Fletcher Jr. et al., "Examining the Engagement of Career Academy and Comprehensive High School Students in the United States," *The Journal of Educational Research* 113, no. 4 (2020).

⁴Edward Fletcher and E. Daniel Cox, "Exploring the Meaning African American Students Ascribe to Their Participation in High School Career Academies and the Challenges They Experience," *The High School Journal* 96, no. 1 (2012): 4–19.

⁵James J. Kemple, "Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts

on Labor Market Outcomes, Educational Attainment, and Transitions to Adulthood" (New York: MDRC, June 2008).

⁶Edward C. Fletcher Jr. et al., "Equity Perspectives of School Stakeholders Regarding the Representation and Access of Black Male Students in an Academy of Engineering," *School Science and Mathematics* 123, no. 3 (2023); Jerrod Henderson et al., "Enhancing Engineering Identity among Boys of Color," *Journal of Pre-College Engineering Education Research (J-PEER)* 11, no. 2 (2021).

⁷Fletcher et al., "Equity Perspectives of School Stakeholders."

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academically. The policy intervention model we propose will ensure that preservice educators are trained before they enter the classroom and help in-service teachers gain new professional knowledge. ■

¹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey (ABES)," web page (March 31, 2022), <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/abes.htm>.

²Office of the Surgeon General, "U.S. Surgeon General Issues Advisory on Youth Mental Health Crisis Further Exposed by COVID-19 Pandemic," press release, December 7, 2021.

³CDC, ABES.

⁴Susan D. Hillis et al., "COVID-19–Associated Orphanhood and Caregiver Death in the United States," *Pediatrics* 148, no. 6 (2021).

⁵Christopher Blodgett and Jane D. Lanigan, "The Association between Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) and School Success in Elementary School Children," *School Psychology Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2018): 137–46.

⁶Nicole Reddig and Janet VanLone, "Preservice Teacher Preparation in Trauma-Informed Pedagogy: A Review of State Competencies," *Leadership and Policy in Schools* (April 25, 2022): 1–12.

⁷Tom Brunzell, Lea Waters, and Helen Stokes, "Trauma-Informed Teacher Wellbeing: Teacher Reflections within Trauma-Informed Positive Education," *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 46, no. 5 (2021).

⁸Joyce Dorado et al., "Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS): A Whole-School, Multi-Level, Prevention and Intervention Program for Creating Trauma-Informed, Safe and Supportive Schools," *School Mental Health* 8, no. 1 (2016): 163–76.

⁹Sherry Shamblin, Dawn Graham, and Joseph A. Bianco, "Creating Trauma-Informed Schools for Rural Appalachia: The Partnerships Program for Enhancing Resiliency, Confidence and Workforce Development in Early Childhood Education," *School Mental Health* 8, no. 1 (2016): 189–200.

¹⁰Nicole Reddig, Janet VanLone, and Molly Mishler, "Supporting Teacher Retention through a Trauma-Informed Lens," *Pennsylvania Educational Leadership* 41, no. 2 (2022): 34–59.

¹¹National Child Traumatic Stress Network, "Creating, Supporting, and Sustaining Trauma-Informed Schools: A System Framework" (2017), https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/creating_supporting_sustaining_trauma_informed_schools_a_systems_framework.pdf.

¹²See Pennsylvania Department of Education, "Framework for Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Wellness of PK-12 Students Endorsement Program Guidelines" (February 2018), <https://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/Teachers-Administrators/Certification%20Preparation%20Programs/Specific%20Program%20Guidelines/Social%20Emotional%20and%20Behavioral%20Wellness%20of%20PK-12%20Students%20Endorsement.pdf>.

¹³Shamblin, Graham, and Bianco, "Creating Trauma-Informed Schools for Rural Appalachia."