IES Institute of Education Sciences

DOCUMENTARY VIEWING GUIDE

Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest

Rebuilding Routine: Solving the post-pandemic attendance crisis

Chronic absenteeism continues to be a persistent challenge for communities across the country, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. Students who are regularly out of school miss opportunities to learn and build relationships with both classmates and teachers. Student absence is associated with lower academic performance and reduced graduation rates.[1,2] Accordingly, communities are working to improve attendance and provide students with positive conditions for learning. Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Midwest developed this documentary to highlight research about chronic absenteeism and promising strategies to support student attendance and engagement.

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10 percent of school days or more for any reason, whether excused, unexcused, or suspended.[3]

About the documentary

This 30-minute public television program, produced by REL Midwest, spotlights two Chicago Public Schools working to support student attendance and engagement. In the program, educators, leaders, and students share experiences, activities, and strategies at Ralph H. Metcalfe Community Academy (PK–8 grades) and Carver Military Academy (9–12 grades). Combining these reflections with expert commentary, the documentary explores the factors that influence chronic absenteeism. In addition, the program highlights the benefits that students gain from regular attendance, along with strategies to strengthen engagement and improve attendance. The documentary includes remarks from Cecelia Leong (Attendance Works) and Jenny Scala (American Institutes for Research).

"Attendance is not just a two-dimensional issue, it is really a complex issue. Each student is a story, each absence means there's something going on."

— Zakieh Mohammed
Senior Manager of Attendance and Truancy, Chicago Public Schools

Scan the QR code to watch the documentary

[1] National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). *Rising absenteeism since onset of pandemic associated with NAEP 2022 score declines.* https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/blog/attendance_and_naep_2022_score_declines.aspx

[2] Roderick, M., Kelley-Kemple, T., Johnson, D. W., & Beechum, N. O. (2014). *Preventable failure: Improvements in long-term outcomes when high schools focused on the ninth grade year. Research summary.* University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED553174

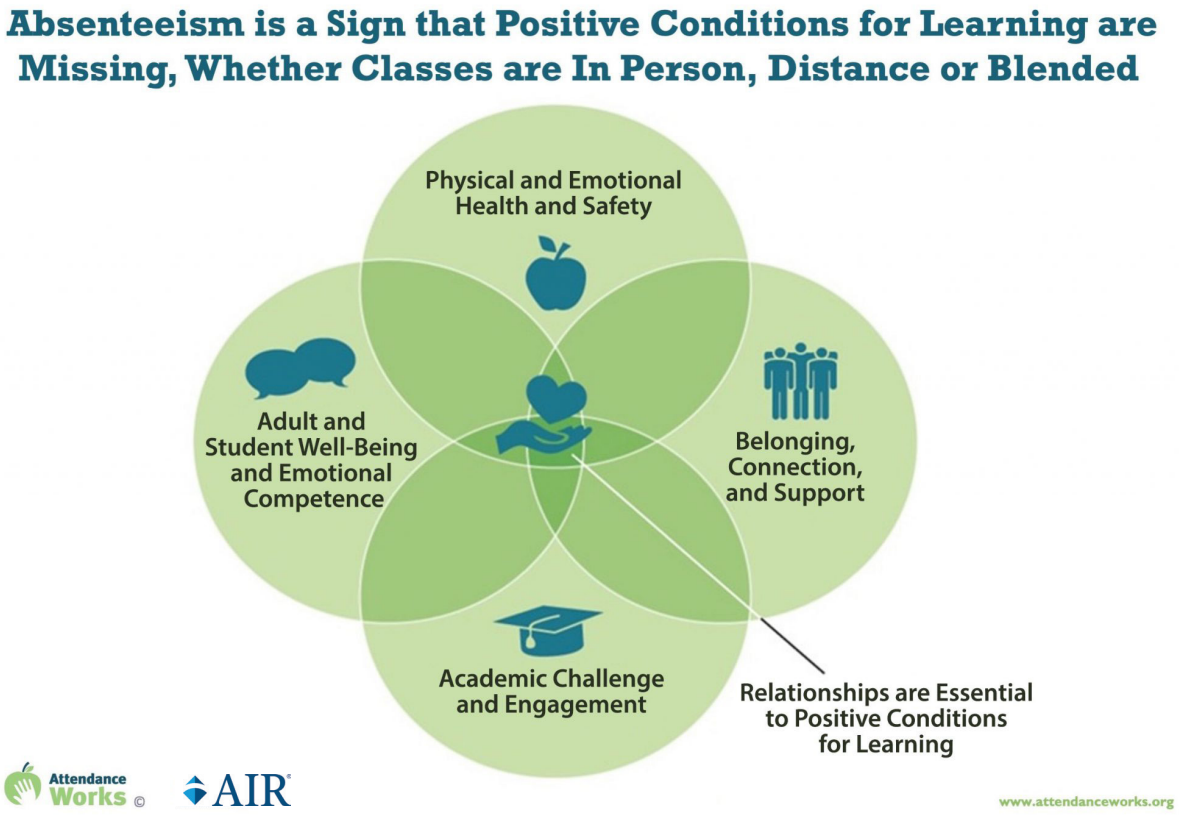
[3] Attendance Works. (n.d.). *Chronic absence: The problem.* https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/the-problem/

Promising strategies to support student attendance

In the program, experts highlight three promising strategies to improve student engagement and attendance:

- **Use data with school teams.** Schools can develop collaborative teams to track, analyze, and share student attendance data to make sure that student absences are noticed and addressed. Equipped with data, schools can better understand why students are missing school, craft targeted efforts to boost student engagement, and identify practices that are already working well to support attendance.[4,5]
- **Build authentic relationships.** Schools can work to deepen students' sense of connection and belonging in school, as relationships drive student engagement and attendance. Schools have higher attendance rates when students have stronger relationships with peers and teachers.[6] Likewise, schools that build strong relationships with families experience lower rates of chronic absenteeism.[7]
- **Ensure positive conditions for learning.** Schools can support student attendance and engagement by strengthening positive conditions for learning. Students are more likely to attend and be engaged in school when they feel physically and emotionally safe, connected to their classmates, challenged academically, and respected by adults.[8]

Positive Conditions for Learning



[4] Fothergill, S., Hansen, L., & Derby, K. (2018, April 26). *REL West: Using attendance data for decisionmaking: Strategies for state and local education agencies* [Webinar]. https://ies.ed.gov/learn/events/workshoptraining/using-attendance-data-decisionmaking-strategies-state-and-local-education-agencies

[5] Attendance Works. (n.d.). *Data-informed teams.* https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/toolkits/integrating-attendance-into-kindergarten-transition/data-informed-teams/

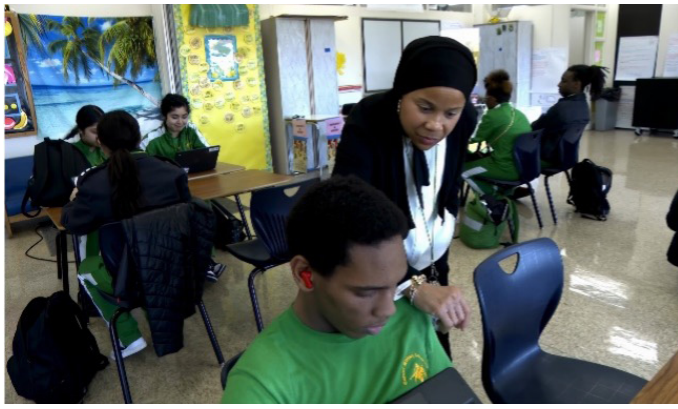
[6] Allensworth, E. M., Antony, M., Delgado, W., & de la Torre, M. (2026). *Connection, trust, and learning: Student attendance in the middle and high school grades following the COVID-19 pandemic.* University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/2026-01/Connection%2C%20Trust%2C%20and%20Learning-Jan26-Consortium.pdf

[7] Anderson, J. (Director). (2024, March 28). Combatting chronic absenteeism with family engagement (No. S1: EP441) [Broadcast]. *In The Harvard Ed Cast.* https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/edcast/24/03/combatting-chronic-absenteeism-family-engagement

[8] Chang, H. N., Osher, D., Schanfield, M., Sundius, J., & Bauer, L. (2019). *Using chronic absence data to improve conditions for learning.* Attendance Works & American Institutes for Research (AIR). https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Attendance_Works_Using_Chronic_Absence__091619.pdf

Intended audience

REL Midwest created this documentary to build awareness about the challenges of chronic absenteeism among students, families, educators, policymakers, and community members. The documentary also serves as a resource for school and district leaders to learn about the drivers and consequences of chronic absenteeism, as well as promising strategies for improving student attendance and engagement. Although the documentary focuses on efforts in Chicago, Illinois, the lessons of this documentary are relevant for educators and policymakers across the country.



Discussion questions

- What is your first reaction to this video? What parts of the video resonate with you most and why?
- Chronic absenteeism has been a persistent challenge for schools since the COVID-19 pandemic. How has student attendance changed in your community during the past few years?
- The video highlights four key drivers of chronic absenteeism: barriers to attendance, aversion to school, disengagement from school, and student and family misconceptions. Which of these drivers may be impacting students in your community? What efforts in your community are helping students to overcome these challenges?
- This program highlights the importance of using data to understand and address chronic absenteeism. What kind of data and information would be helpful for your community to better understand and improve attendance?
- Thinking about your school experiences, did any relationships with teachers and classmates help you thrive in school? How did these relationships help you learn and stay engaged?
- The video highlights how positive conditions for learning support student engagement and attendance. What actions can your school, district, or state take to build the authentic relationships that create positive learning conditions for all students?

About REL Midwest

REL Midwest is part of a network of 10 regional educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. REL Midwest works in partnership with practitioners in seven Midwest states to conduct applied research and provide training, coaching, and technical support designed to improve student outcomes.

Contact Us

relmidwest@air.org

ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/region/midwest

This document was prepared under Contract 91990022C0011 by Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest, administered by the American Institutes for Research. The content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Institute of Education Sciences or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

29653 v6 3/26