Washington State Institute for Public Policy

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Chronic Absenteeism in Washington's K–12 Schools:
What Schools Are Doing to Reduce Absenteeism

A student is considered chronically absent when they miss 10% or more of a school year. Chronic absenteeism is associated with poor academic and non-academic outcomes for students across all grades.

In this report, we examine what schools in Washington are doing to address chronic absenteeism. We interviewed staff working on attendance and reengagement efforts in eight out of nine Educational Service Districts (ESDs) to collect this information. We summarize their perspectives on why students are chronically absent and what schools are doing to improve attendance. We highlight the strategies they believe are working to address chronic absenteeism, what ongoing challenges remain, and what lessons they and school staff have learned over the years.

This is the first report on chronic absenteeism. In June 2026, we will report on the evidence base for attendance interventions and their impact on student outcomes.

Section I provides background information on chronic absenteeism, Section II describes our methodology, Section III summarizes interview findings, Section IV discusses key takeaways, and Section V provides a conclusion and summary of the work.

Summary

We interviewed Educational Service District (ESD) staff to learn why students are chronically absent, what schools are doing to reduce absenteeism, and the challenges they face.

ESD staff reported that students miss school mostly because of illness or mental health issues. Often, students experience situations outside of their control that require them to stay home. Lack of belonging, falling behind in schoolwork, and changing schools are other reasons.

Schools are implementing the following types of strategies to reduce absenteeism:

- **Using data** to identify absent students and trends and to inform attendance initiatives.
- **Attendance teams** of teachers and administrators who focus on attendance strategies.
- **Communication strategies** like using positive language with students, informing parents about absences, and organizing schoolwide attendance campaigns.
- **Relationship-building interventions** so students feel more welcome and therefore motivated to come to school.
- **Competitions and incentives** to encourage good attendance habits.

ESD staff reported that schools have limited capacity to focus on attendance initiatives, few resources to effectively use data, and face shifting mindsets from students and families about attendance, which challenges their efforts.

WSIPP receives funding from the legislature to conduct ongoing research on K–12 education topics that are relevant in Washington State and of interest to policymakers.[1] Based on research and conversations with stakeholders, including nonpartisan legislative staff, we identified chronic absenteeism as a priority topic. Specifically, in our outreach, we learned that legislators are interested in understanding what schools are doing to reduce absenteeism rates in the state. This question is the focus of this report.

While chronic absenteeism has always been a challenge, rates in Washington and throughout the nation increased during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In the school year prior to the pandemic, an average of 15% of students nationwide, and 15% in Washington, were chronically absent.[2] By the 2022 school year, national and Washington rates increased to 28% and 33%, respectively. In 2024, the most recent year of data, 27% of students in Washington were absent. While there has been a slight decrease in rates between 2022 and 2024, absenteeism rates remain high and have not returned to pre-pandemic levels.
While this issue has received much attention in the years after the pandemic, there is more to learn about what works to effectively reduce chronic absenteeism in schools.

To better understand what schools in Washington are doing to reduce absenteeism, we interviewed staff working at Educational Service Districts (ESDs) who focus on attendance and reengagement efforts in school districts and schools.

We specifically asked ESD staff to share their perspectives on the following topics:

- Reasons why students are chronically absent,
- What schools are doing to reduce chronic absenteeism, and
- Strategies that are working to reduce absenteeism and challenges.

WSIPP's next report on the topic of chronic absenteeism will explore the evidence base for the effect of interventions on attendance outcomes and other student outcomes. The report will also examine what school-level characteristics predict absenteeism. This report will be published in June 2026.

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[1] Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 6386, Chapter 372, Laws of 2006.
[2] School year defined using last year in academic calendar (e.g., 2019 refers to 2018-19 school year). OSPI, Washington State Report Card and Return to Learn Tracker, Chronic Absenteeism: 2017-2024.

I. Background

This section provides information about chronic absenteeism in Washington.

What is Chronic Absenteeism, and Why Is It A Problem?

Chronic absenteeism refers to a student missing 10% or more (at least 18 days) of a school year.[3] Chronic absence includes both excused and unexcused absences as well as suspensions. The definition of chronic absenteeism includes truancy, which refers to unexcused absences only. Missing school for any reason is associated with lower academic, behavioral, and mental health outcomes for students.

We highlight below findings from some of the most rigorous studies that try to directly measure the effect of absenteeism on student outcomes, but note that research on this topic is complicated. It is challenging to isolate how absenteeism impacts outcomes. For example, students with mental health challenges like anxiety may be more likely to be absent, but poor academic outcomes may be more related to their mental health than missing school.

Academic Outcomes

Researchers report that students with lower attendance rates in elementary, middle, and high school perform worse on math and reading tests, compared to peers with higher attendance.[4] Several studies report that students with high rates of absences in high school experience lower rates of on-time graduation and college enrollment.[5]

Researchers also find that the relationship between absenteeism and academic performance is larger for some student populations than others. For example, some studies report that low-income students, students not meeting grade-level standards, Black students, Hispanic students, students with disabilities, English Language Learners, students in foster care, and students experiencing homelessness have worse academic outcomes than their peers with a similar number of absences.[6]

Further, researchers have observed cumulative effects, reporting that students who miss more school in elementary grades tend to miss more school in later grades, which is associated with negative effects cascading over time.[7]

[3] OSPI, What is Chronic Absenteeism? and U.S. Department of Education, Supporting Student Attendance and Engagement.

[4] Ansari, A., & Gottfried, M. (2021). The grade-level and cumulative outcomes of absenteeism. *Child Development, 92(*4), e548-e564; Gottfried, M. (2014). Chronic absenteeism and its effects on students' academic and socioemotional outcomes. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk,19(*2), 53-75; Goodman, J. (2014). *Flaking out: Student absences and snow days as disruptions of instructional time.* National Bureau of Economic Research; and Gershenson, S., Jacknowitz, A., & Brannegan, A. (2017). *Are student absences worth the worry in US primary schools? Education Finance and Policy,12(*2), 137-165.

[5] Liu, J., Lee, M., & Gershenson, S. (2021). *The short-and long-run impacts of secondary school absences. Journal of Public*

Economics, 199 and Smerillo, N., Reynolds, A., Temple, J., & Ou, S. (2018). Chronic absence, eighth-grade achievement, and high school attainment in the Chicago Longitudinal Study. *Journal of School Psychology, 67*, 163-178.

[6] Gershenson et al. (2017); Aucejo, E., & Romano, T. (2016). Assessing the effect of school days and absences on test score performance. *Economics of Education Review, 55,* 70-87; Ansari & Gottfried (2021); and Santibañez, L., & Guarino, C. (2021). The effects of absenteeism on academic and social-emotional outcomes: Lessons for COVID-19. *Educational Researcher, 50(*6), 392-400.

[7] Ansari, A., & Pianta, R. (2019). School absenteeism in the first decade of education and outcomes in adolescence. *Journal of School Psychology, 76, 48-*61 and Chang, H., & Romero, M. (2008). *Present, engaged, and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic*

Non-Academic Outcomes

Researchers have also reported associations between attendance and non-academic outcomes. For example, one study reported that students who experienced higher levels of absenteeism in earlier grades experienced higher levels of "internalizing behaviors" like depression, anxiety, and difficulty concentrating, as well as "externalizing behaviors" like aggression and disruption in later grades. Authors speculate that students who are chronically absent are disconnected from their peers and teachers, which can increase feelings of depression and hinder social skills.[8]

Several studies measured associations between lower attendance and lower levels of social-emotional skills like social awareness and self-efficacy. Lower attendance was also associated with, students feeling more school-related stress, lower motivation, and feeling like they do not belong at school. Some of the research indicates relationships between attendance and social-emotional skills may be larger in middle school than in elementary grades and may be more pronounced among Black students, compared to their White peers.[9]

Further, students may not necessarily have to miss school themselves to experience negative effects.

Researchers have observed that when classrooms have high absenteeism rates, non-absent students in the class have lower academic performance and executive functioning skills like problem-solving and inhibition control.[10] Authors were unable to identify why the absences of some students impact others in the classroom, but theorized that teachers may have to redirect attention away from non-absent students to help chronically absent students catch up, which could influence overall learning. Regardless of the mechanism, the authors say these findings highlight the importance of addressing chronic absenteeism using a class-wide approach, like communicating the importance of attendance to everyone in the classroom rather than just those struggling to attend regularly.

Why are Students Chronically Absent?

A common perception may be that students who are chronically absent miss school because they are lazy and unmotivated. However, based on the research, reasons for absences are generally more complicated and involve interconnected factors, often outside of students' control, that make it difficult for them to attend school regularly. The overall research also suggests that absenteeism is a symptom of larger core issues students experience.

absence in the early grades. National Center for Children in Poverty.

[8] Ansari & Pianta (2019).

[9] Ansari & Gottfried (2021); Gottfried (2014); and Santibañez & Guarino (2021).

[10] Gottfried, M., & Ansari, A. (2022). Classrooms with high rates of absenteeism and individual success: Exploring students' achievement, executive function, and socio-behavioral outcomes. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 59,* 215-227 and Gottfried, M.A. (2019). Chronic absenteeism in the classroom context: Effects on achievement. *Urban Education, 54*(1), 3-34.

Research indicates that students are most likely to be absent from school because of physical illness and mental health.[11] For example, students may stay home because they have the flu, are feeling depressed or anxious, or are attending medical appointments.

Some students may not attend school because they worry about being bullied or believe the school environment is unsafe.[12] Others may disengage from school because they are uninterested, do not find value in being at school, or lack good relationships with students or teachers, which would motivate them to attend.[13]

Reasons can vary by grade level and student characteristics. For example, elementary students cannot drive themselves to school, so transportation challenges may disproportionately affect them, whereas older students may be able to drive themselves or ride with a friend.[14] Students in middle and high school are more likely to report disengagement because they do not find value in education or feel they belong.[15]

Further, factors related to poverty increase the likelihood of absenteeism. For example, students living in poverty are more likely to experience housing insecurity, and frequent school changes make it difficult to attend regularly. Further, parents and caretakers may be working long hours and multiple jobs and may not be able to drive their children to school every day. In some instances, students may make the decision to miss school and work instead to supplement their family's income.[16] There is also evidence that low-income students are more likely to suffer from chronic health conditions than their higher-income peers, which forces them to miss school more often.[17]

Absenteeism in Washington

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, average chronic absenteeism rates in Washington and at the national level were the same (about 15%).[18] However, during and after the pandemic, rates dramatically increased across the country, and current rates in Washington remain higher than national levels. In the 2024 school year, 27% of students in Washington were chronically absent, compared to 24% nationally (Exhibit 1).

[11] EdChoice. (2024). *Teens and their school perspectives: a national polling report;* OSPI, University of Washington (2022). *WA Covid-19 Student Survey, 2022*. State Report; Liu, J., & Lee, M. (2022). *Beyond chronic absenteeism: The dynamics and disparities of class absences in secondary school*. EdWorkingPaper No. 22-562. Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University; Brundage, A., Castillo, J., & Batsche, G. (2017). *Reasons for chronic absenteeism among Florida secondary students*. Tampa, FL: Problem Solving and Response Intervention Project; and OSPI, PSESD. (2024). *ESSER attendance & reengagement project evaluation interim report*.
[12] Urquhart, M. (2018). *Why do students miss school? Results from a statewide survey on chronic absenteeism.* EducationNC and Liu & Lee (2022).

[13] OSPI, University of Washington (2022); EdChoice (2024); and Brundage et al. (2017)
[14] Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). The importance of being in school: A report on absenteeism in the nation's public schools. *The Education Digest, 78*(2), 4.
[15] Lenhoff, S., & Singer, J. (2025). COVID-19, online learning, and absenteeism in Detroit. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 30(*2), 99-128 and Liu & Lee (2022).
[16] Lenhoff & Singer (2025) and Urquhart (2018).
[17] Brundage et al. (2017).
[18] OSPI, Washington State Report Card; Return to Learn Tracker, Chronic Absenteeism: 2017-2024

Note that graphs in Exhibits 1 and 2 show dips in rates in 2020. Readers should interpret this with caution since remote instruction during this period likely impacted the accuracy of attendance data collection and reporting.

Chronic absenteeism rates have also increased across all grades, student groups, and geographic regions in Washington and have not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Rates by Grade Level

Historically, chronic absenteeism rates in Washington have been highest in high school. However, rates across grade levels spiked during and after the pandemic.

At its peak in 2022, absenteeism rates reached 36% in high school grades, 30% in middle school, and 32% in elementary school. The spike in rates in elementary school was driven by students missing school in early grades, particularly kindergarten. In high school, absenteeism rates are highest among seniors. Between 2022 and 2024, rates declined 28% in elementary grades, 13% in middle school, and 5% in high school (Exhibit 2A).

Rates by Race & Ethnicity

Chronic absenteeism rates have historically been highest among students who identify as American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN), Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (NH/PI), Hispanic, Black, and multiracial. In the 2022 school year, at least 50% of AI/AN and NH/PI students missed school, compared to 27% of White students and 17% of Asian students. In the last few years, attendance has improved the most among White, AI/AN, Hispanic, multiracial, and Black students (Exhibit 2B).

Rates by Student Characteristics

Historically, absenteeism rates have been high among students from low-income backgrounds, English Language Learners, students with disabilities, migrant students, students in foster care, and students experiencing homelessness.

Exhibit 1

Chronic Absenteeism Rates in Washington vs Nationwide, by School Year
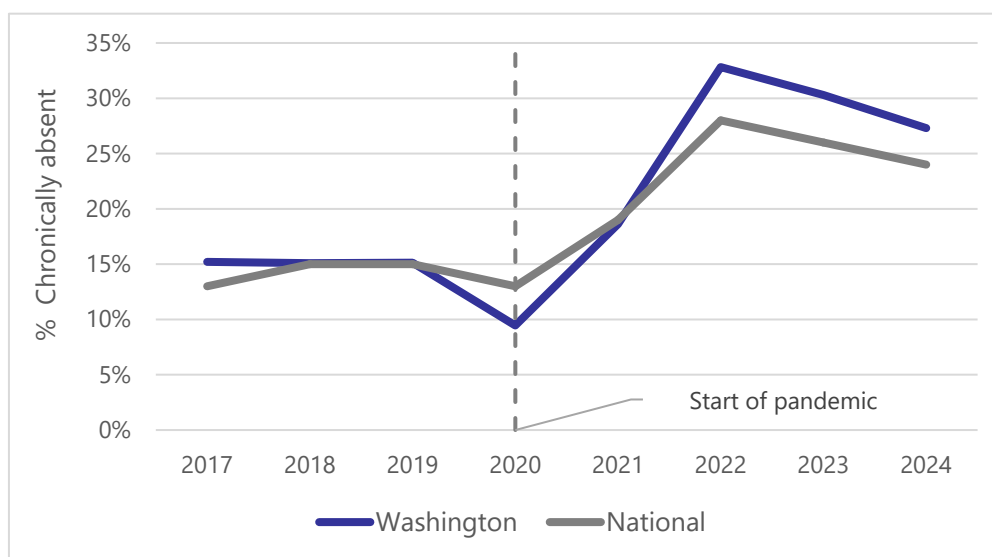
Post pandemic, on average, over 50% of students experiencing homelessness are chronically absent, and 35%- 40% of low-income students, English Language Learners, migrant students, students with disabilities, and students in foster care are chronically absent. In recent years, attendance has improved among migrant students, English Language Learners, low-income students, and students with disabilities (Exhibit 2C).[19]

Rates by Locale
Absenteeism rates have not varied much between cities, suburbs, towns, and rural regions in Washington, before or after the pandemic. Post pandemic, on average, about 30% of students in all areas are chronically absent, although we observe slightly higher rates (33%) in rural areas.

Attendance rates have improved about the same across all regions, though towns have seen slightly more progress (Exhibit 2D).

Rates by School Districts
Exhibit 3 illustrates absenteeism rates by school districts and ESDs in the 2024 school year. Lighter blue indicates school districts with lower rates, and darker blue indicates higher rates. Below, we also report the average chronic absenteeism rates by ESD.[20]

- ➢ ESDs 121, 189, & 171: 26%
- ➢ ESDs 101, 114, & 123: 27%
- ➢ ESD 105: 28%
- ➢ ESD 113: 29%
- ➢ ESD 112: 30%

Exhibit 4 summarizes key takeaways about chronic absenteeism in Washington State.

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[19] FRPM refers to students enrolled in the Free or Reduced-Price Meal program. ELL refers to English Language Learners.

[20] ESD average rates were created by weighting school districts by their student enrollment.

Exhibit 2

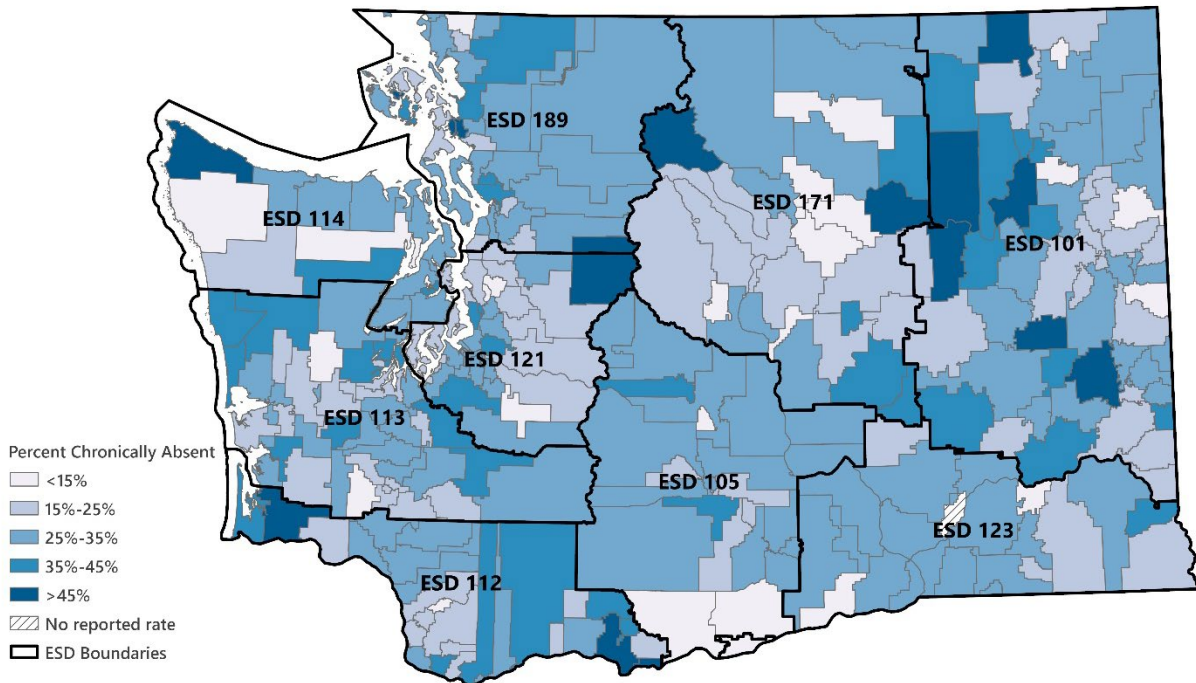## Percentage of Chronic Absenteeism by School, Student, and Regional Factors, by School Year
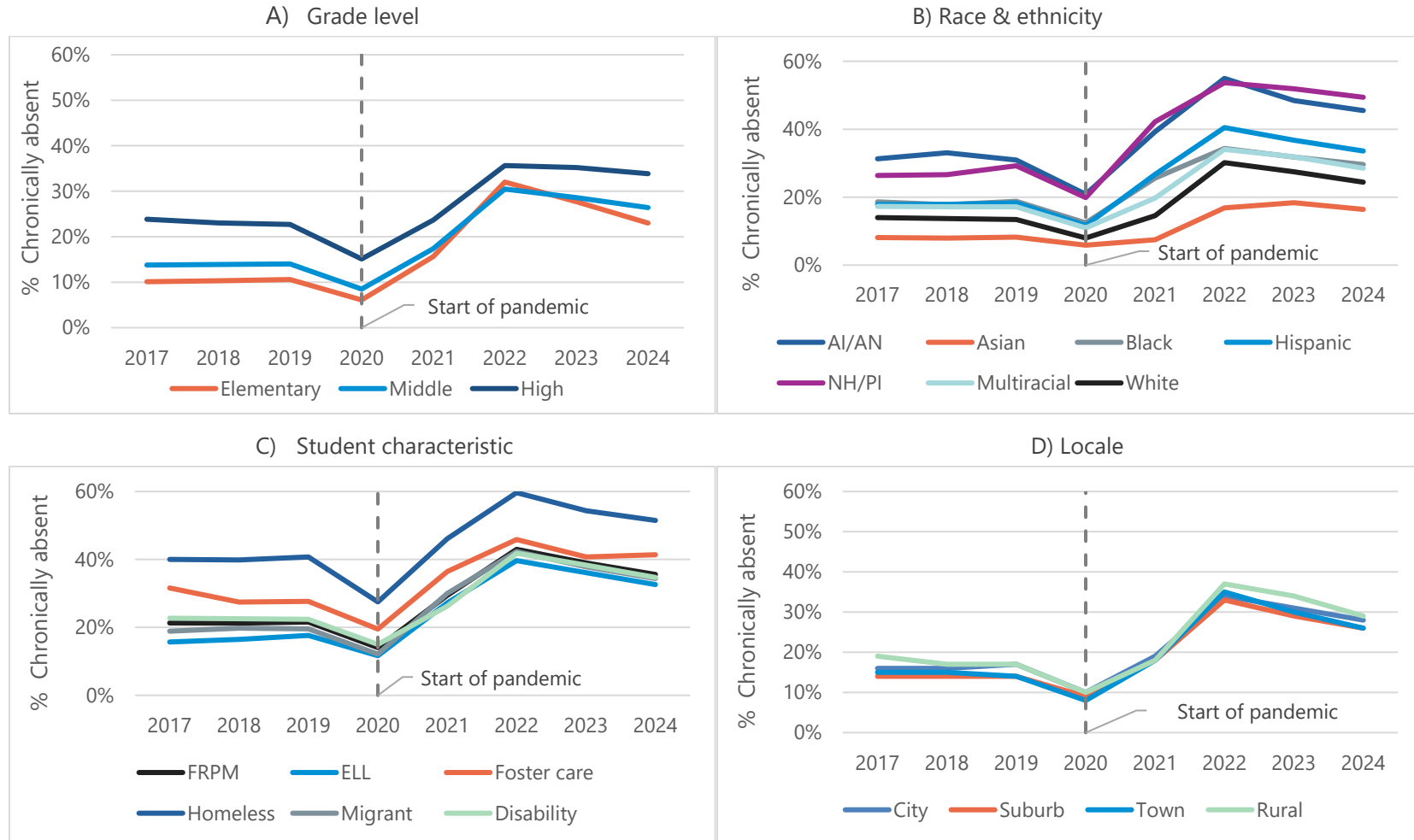
Notes:

Sources: OSPI report card.

Accuracy of rates in 2020 likely affected by remote instruction. Interpret with caution.

Exhibit 3

Chronic Absenteeism Rates by School District & ESD, School Year 2023-24

Notes:
OSPI, Report Card Enrollment 2023-2024 School Year; No attendance data reported for Star School District.

Exhibit 4

Chronic Absenteeism in Washington: Takeaways

Overall takeaway: Chronic absenteeism rates have increased across all grades, student groups, and regions in Washington and have not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Grade-level: Rates are largest in high school. During the pandemic, absenteeism in elementary school spiked because of student absences, particularly in kindergarten. Post pandemic, attendance rates have improved the most among elementary students and the least among high school students.

Student demographics: Certain populations, particularly American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Black, and multiracial students, experience higher rates than their White and Asian peers. In recent years, Hispanic, AI/AN, Black, multiracial, and White students have experienced the greatest improvement in attendance rates.

Vulnerability factors: Students who experience more vulnerability have higher absenteeism rates, including those experiencing homelessness, students in foster care, students from low-income backgrounds, migrant students, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners.

Locale: Absenteeism rates are similar across cities, suburbs, towns, and rural areas, but a slightly higher proportion of students are chronically absent in rural areas in Washington.

Federal and State Regulations Related to Attendance and Truancy

There are no federal mandates requiring states to take specific actions when students are absent. Chronic absenteeism was first recognized in federal law in 2015 with the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This federal legislation eliminated the requirement for states to collect and report truancy data that was formerly mandated under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Many states have transitioned from reporting truancy data to chronic absenteeism data, a more general measure of attendance. Currently, 36 states voluntarily collect and report chronic absenteeism data as one option to meet ESSA accountability measures.[21] Washington reports "regular attendance" as part of three School Quality and Student Success (SQSS) measures, as well as 9th Grade on Track and Dual Credit.

In Washington, schools are required to take a series of actions depending on the number and type of absences a student has.[22]

Across all grades, at the beginning of the year, schools send information to students and their parents or guardians about the importance of attending school regularly, the impact of absences on achievement, the school's course of action depending on the level of absenteeism, and resources for students and families.[23]

If students meet certain thresholds for the number of excused and unexcused absences, schools must take specific steps, including calling or writing parents and guardians, setting up conferences to determine why students are missing school, and providing resources. Schools must take data-informed steps to reduce future absences, which at the secondary level include administering an assessment to determine what barriers influence a student's attendance and identify solutions.[24]

If students have seven or more unexcused absences in a month or 15 unexcused absences in a year, school districts must file a truancy petition with local juvenile courts. The petition will be stayed by the court, and the school district must then refer the student and their guardian to a community engagement board (CEB), an intervention intended to reduce further involvement with the court. If the student's attendance still does not improve after a CEB, further action may be taken or mandated by a court.[25]

Statewide Efforts to Address Chronic Absenteeism

Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) has implemented initiatives over recent years focusing on chronic absenteeism and truancy.

[21] Burr, L., Ziegler-Thayer, M., & Scala, J. (2023). *Attendance legislation in the United States*. American Institute for Research.

[22] Barch, M., Knoth, L., & Wanner, P. (2020). *An evaluation of the 2016 act to promote attendance and reduce truancy* (Doc. No. 20- 12-2201). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

[23] RCW 28A.225.005.

[24] RCW 28A.225.018 and RCW 28A.225.020.

[25] RCW 28A.225.020; RCW 28A.225.030; RCW 28A.225.035; and RCW 28A.225.023.

ESSER Attendance & Reengagement Project.
During the 2023 and 2024 school years, OSPI invested $19.4 million of its discretionary Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds into attendance and reengagement efforts across the state.[26] This project focused on building staff capacity in schools to work one-on-one with students who were disengaging and their families. The project also provided funding for each of the nine ESDs to hire a regional coordinator to provide coaching and training to school staff on efforts like building attendance teams, collecting and interpreting data on students missing school, and implementing tiered interventions using a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework.[27] The project supported 80 school districts and six State-Tribal Education Compact schools. In a final report, OSPI reported that:

- Among participating schools, average chronic absenteeism rates decreased about 10 percentage points, compared to 7 percentage points among non-participating schools.
- Among students who received individualized supports through the project (about 12,000 students), their average absenteeism rate decreased 15 percentage points, compared to the statewide average of about 3 percentage points.[28]

Regional Attendance Improvement Networks.
OSPI has continued to build from the work developed under the ESSER project by working with three ESDs that coordinate regional attendance and improvement networks. ESD staff provide coaching and training to support schools to build attendance teams, use data to inform strategies, and focus on schoolwide efforts to address attendance and engagement. ESDs have convened schools in network meetings throughout the year to discuss what is, and is not, working to improve attendance.[29]

Re-Envisioning Truancy Project. Beginning in 2023, OSPI, with support from American Institutes for Research and the Puget Sound Educational Service District Strategy and Evaluation Team, facilitated listening sessions and interviews with students, families, and community partners who have been involved in the truancy process.[30] Through this work, OSPI learned:

- Earlier interventions are needed, but are often complicated by limited staff.
- Parents want communication from schools about student attendance that is timely but not punitive.
- CEBs and courts tend to see positive results with students and families when they focus on the root causes of disengagement and provide resources to address barriers, rather than taking punitive measures.

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[26] OSPI (2025). *ESSER attendance & reengagement project: successes & outcomes.* Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) federal funds were allocated to schools to address the impact from the COVID-19 pandemic.
[27] OSPI (n.d.). *ESSER attendance and reengagement project: building capacity to reengage students and keep them engaged.*

[28] OSPI, PSESD (2025). *OSPI/AESD ESSER attendance & reengagement project evaluation: final report.*
[29] K. Johnson, Assistant Director of Attendance & Engagement, OSPI, (personal communication, May 2025).
[30] OSPI (n.d.). Re-envisioning truancy in Washington project.; Senate Early Learning & K–12 Education Committee Hearing, March 25th, 2025.

An OSPI workgroup is using these findings to inform guidance around community engagement boards, resources for schools and districts, and considering improvements to the truancy process in the state.

In addition to the work described above, OSPI maintains a repository of resources for families, schools, and districts on topics like attendance and truancy regulations, data, and research-informed interventions and best practices.[31]

What Works to Reduce Absenteeism?

We did not conduct a systematic review of attendance research, but we summarize findings from some of the most recent and relevant systematic reviews and meta-analyses below. Overall, research indicates a positive association between attendance interventions and improved attendance outcomes. Further evidence suggests that some interventions, like behavioral interventions, may be more effective than punitive measures like suspensions, detentions, or juvenile court referral.

A meta-analysis including 22 studies was published in 2020 and evaluated attendance interventions in elementary, middle, and high schools.[32] The authors examined effects by intervention type, including behavioral interventions, academic interventions, and family-school partnerships.

They also examined effects by the quality of studies (e.g., randomized clinical trial, quasi-experimental study, single-case experimental study).

The authors found that the highest quality studies mostly focused on family-school partnerships, academic interventions, and behavioral interventions, which all had small but positive associations with attendance.[33] Overall, results across studies included in the analysis indicate that 60% of students in treatment groups had better attendance outcomes than students in control groups. The authors also found that interventions had similar effects across elementary, middle, and high school settings.

A research review published in 2020 examined interventions focused on reducing student truancy rates specifically (i.e., unexcused absences).[34] Authors report that interventions that reward or punish students (including their parents) generally are not effective and can even increase truancy. For example, some studies found that schools that used suspensions to punish students who were truant observed an increase in future unexcused absences.

The authors report that school-bonding interventions, which aim to develop relationships between students and school personnel and focus more on addressing the underlying causes of truancy, tend to have more positive outcomes.

[31] OSPI website, *Attendance, Chronic Absenteeism, and Truancy.* Washington has also joined other states in a national initiative to reduce chronic absenteeism by 50% over the next five years. Attendance works website, *States participating in the 50% challenge.*
[32] Eklund, K., Burns, M., Oyen, K., DeMarchena, S., & McCollom, E. (2022). Addressing chronic absenteeism in

schools: A meta-analysis of evidence-based interventions. *School Psychology Review, 51*(1), 95-111.
[33] The average weighted effect sizes (Hedges' g) were 0.26, 0.25, and 0.09 for behavioral, academic, and family-school partnership interventions, respectively.
[34] Keppens, G., & Spruyt, B. (2020). The impact of interventions to prevent truancy: A review of the research literature. *Studies in Educational Evaluation, 65*, 100840.

In this 2020 review, authors included evaluations of varying quality. Therefore, findings should be interpreted with caution because it is difficult for studies to demonstrate a causal link between interventions and truancy outcomes.

A meta-analysis published in 2012, which included 16 studies, analyzed interventions for students struggling with truancy or absenteeism.[35] The review included school-based, court-based, and community-based interventions. Authors report that these interventions have a moderate and positive association with attendance outcomes. Students who received interventions attended school an average of 4.7 more days than students who did not receive interventions. However, the authors note that students who received the interventions still had low levels of attendance after the intervention.

The authors found that court-based, school-based, and community-based interventions produced similarly moderate effects on attendance.[36] As a result, those making decisions about which type to use may want to consider which setting has more resources and time to invest in programming.

The authors of this 2012 analysis also found that the mode in which interventions are applied (e.g., individual, group, family, etc.) and an intervention's length does not influence effectiveness. The authors also did not find differences between complex programs with multiple components and less-complicated programs.

Authors suggest that those making programming decisions may not necessarily have to implement a multicomponent intervention lasting all school year to have positive impacts on attendance.

Readers should interpret results from this 2012 analysis with caution; the authors acknowledge that they include a limited number of studies in their analysis, which may impact findings. Further, the number of programs in the review is much smaller than the number of attendance programs that actually exist, and findings cannot be generalized to all attendance interventions or student populations.

Finally, while other research has found links between race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status and attendance, the authors explain that none of the studies in their review included enough information to examine program effects by these factors, an important topic they recommend future researchers consider.

Exhibit 5 summarizes key takeaways from these research reviews.

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[35] Maynard, B., McCrea, K., Pigott, T., & Kelly, M. (2013). Indicated truancy interventions for chronic truant students: A Campbell systematic review. *Research on Social Work Practice, 23*(1), 5-21.

[36] Average effect sizes (Hedges' g) were 0.47, 0.49. and 0.27 for school-based, court-based, and community-based interventions, respectively. Confidence intervals for each estimated effect overlap, indicating no significant differences.

Exhibit 5

Research Takeaways

Meta-analysis published in 2020

➢ Family-school partnerships, academic interventions, and behavioral interventions are associated with small positive effects on attendance across elementary, middle, and high school grades.

Research review published in 2020

➢ Punitive interventions (e.g., suspension) may not be effective and may increase absenteeism.
➢ Interventions that focus on addressing the root causes of absenteeism have positive outcomes.
➢ Limitation: Studies of varying quality were included in the review.

Meta-analysis published in 2012

➢ School, court, and community-based interventions are associated with moderate and positive effects on attendance.
➢ Program administrators deciding between intervention types may want to consider which setting has more resources to invest in programming.
➢ Limitation: Limited number of studies in analysis; results may not be generalized to all programs or populations.

III. Interview Methodology

We interviewed 12 staff members working in eight of the nine ESDs in Washington.[37] The ESDs we spoke to represent schools in eastern, central, and western regions of the state, including urban and rural areas, and encompass 85% of students statewide.

In general, ESD staff provide services, information, and guidance to staff and educators in school districts and schools on issues like statutory duties, technology, financial operations, data and reporting, serving students with special needs, and ensuring equitable educational opportunities across districts.[38] ESD staff also act as liaisons between schools, districts, the Washington State Board of Education, the legislature, and OSPI.

The goal of this project was to learn what schools are doing to reduce chronic absenteeism. Ideally, we would survey or interview staff working in schools who implement attendance interventions directly with students. Due to the short timeframe of this project, we focused on gathering information at the ESD level and learning from their perspectives.

Though located at the ESD level, many of the individuals we spoke to hold positions focused on attendance and reengagement efforts and reported visiting schools regularly to provide support. These individuals had first-hand knowledge about the work schools are doing to support attendance.

Some ESD staff we interviewed work on broader issues related to student success, teaching, and learning. Most interviewees had been involved in OSPI's ESSER Attendance and Reengagement Project, and several staff across three ESDs are participating in OSPI's current Regional Attendance Improvement Network.

We specifically asked ESD staff to share their perspectives on the following topics:

- Reasons why students are chronically absent, how reasons differ by grade level and student characteristics, and how the pandemic has influenced these reasons.
- What schools are doing to reduce chronic absenteeism, and how efforts vary by grade level and student characteristics.
- Strategies that seem to be working well to reduce absenteeism, continuing challenges, and lessons learned.

We asked all interviewees the same set of questions to collect consistent information across ESDs. See Appendix I for a full list of interview questions.

We conducted hour-long interviews using Zoom. We recorded all interviews and transcribed information to ensure that we accurately documented what individuals reported to us. Once all interviews were complete, we reviewed responses and identified themes across ESDs. We summarize these themes in the next section.

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[37] We were unable to interview staff working in ESD 189.

[38] RCW 28A,310.010 and Association of Educational Service Districts website.

IV. Interview Findings

In this section, we summarize findings from interviews with ESD staff. We first describe ESD staff's perceptions about why students are chronically absent. Next, we describe what ESD staff say they are doing and what schools are doing to address absenteeism. We report ESD staff's perspectives on what works to reduce absenteeism, ongoing challenges, and what considerations individuals should keep in mind when making investments or program decisions related to chronic absenteeism.

Reasons Why Students are Chronically Absent

In our conversations, we identified several key reasons why staff believe students are chronically absent. We list these reasons in the order of frequency with which ESD staff reported to us. Overall, the main reasons we heard reflect the reasons identified in research, which we reported earlier in the background section.

Physical and Mental Health
Five ESDs reported that students are absent due to illness and mental health struggles. Interviewees reported noticing perspective shifts among families during and after the pandemic. ESD staff mentioned that parents seem more likely to keep children home from school and for longer periods of time when they are sick, because they were constantly told during the pandemic to stay home and isolate when sick. Further, ESD staff mentioned that since many parents and guardians now work from home, it is easier to keep a sick kid home.

ESD staff reported that parents and students have had a difficult time transitioning back to school after learning and working from home for an extended time during the pandemic.

Parents saw their children being successful while learning from home during the pandemic, and some parents now believe that kids don't need to be in school every day to learn. There was strong messaging during the pandemic to stay home when you're sick, but there hasn't been strong messaging about the importance of attending school regularly and how it relates to learning.[39]

Situations Outside of Students' Control
Five ESD staff reported that students often face home situations that are out of their control, making it difficult to attend school. For example, ESD staff reported that older siblings might have to stay home from school to watch younger siblings while their parents work, some high school students work to supplement their family's income, and other factors like housing instability and lack of transportation can complicate a student's ability to attend school.

It's important to remain open-minded about why students are absent. Mostly, what I've seen is that it's circumstances out of their control that force students to miss school. It's not because they are lazy and don't care about school or their future.

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[39] Text in quote boxes in this section are paraphrases of ESD staffs' comments during interviews.

Lack of Belonging

Half of the ESDs we spoke to mentioned that students miss school because they do not feel a sense of belonging, either because they lack strong relationships with teachers, or they experience bullying or harassment. We also heard that some students, particularly in high school, disengage because they fail to see the purpose of school or how it relates to future goals. Three ESDs reported that students who miss school fall behind in coursework, which discourages them from attending because they think they are too behind to catch up.

Mobility and Travel

Finally, while less common, staff from two ESDs reported that some students are chronically absent because they change schools and districts throughout the year or they travel with their families more often and for longer periods of time than they did before the pandemic.

Variation by Student Characteristics

We also asked ESD staff to share whether the reasons for absences vary by grade level or student characteristics.

ESD staff reported that at the middle- and high-school level, it is more common for students to miss school because they do not feel like they belong, fail to see the purpose of school, or feel discouraged by the amount of work they need to finish to catch up. Mental health challenges like depression and anxiety are often reported in middle and high school grades.

ESD staff reported that absences in elementary grades are often related to things like illness, limited access to transportation or missing the bus, and other home situations that are out of students' control. Further, several ESD staff reported that, while still a problem, chronic absenteeism tends to be lower in elementary than high school grades. They speculated this may be because teachers and administrators engage more directly with families when students miss school, compared to students in high school.

Several ESD staff also reported that absences seem to spike in transitional grades, including kindergarten and grades spanning elementary to middle school, middle to high school, and senior year. The additional stress and challenges related to academic and social expectations that students face during these transitional periods may partially explain the higher absence rates.[40]

Finally, similar to trends reported in the background section of this report, some ESD staff noted higher rates of absenteeism among migrant students, American Indian and Alaska Native students, Pacific Islander students, students experiencing homelessness, and students in foster care. They mentioned that underlying reasons are often related to things like mental health, financial instability, and periods of mobility.

Exhibit 6 describes the main reasons ESD staff say students are chronically absent.

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[40] Benner & Wang (2014).

Exhibit 6
Reasons Why Students are Chronically Absent

> ➢ **Physical illness and mental health struggles** are common reasons students miss school. Messaging during the pandemic about "staying home when sick" and the shift to remote work among parents and guardians seems to have increased the likelihood that students stay home when they are ill and for longer periods of time.
>
> ➢ Home **situations outside of students' control** often force them to stay home.
>
> ➢ Students **may not feel like they belong** in school or see how school meets their future goals. Some students may not attend because **they are bullied or face harassment**.
>
> ➢ Some students miss school because they are **traveling with their families or face mobility issues** and frequently change schools in and out of Washington State.
>
> ➢ **Absences spike in transitional grades** like kindergarten and senior year of high school, and between transitional levels, like the movement from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school.

What ESD Staff Are Doing to Support Attendance and Reengagement Efforts

As mentioned before, most of the ESD staff we interviewed had previously worked on OSPI's statewide ESSER Attendance and Reengagement Project. We heard that much of the funding and concerted focus on attendance has decreased at the ESD, district, and school levels since the ESSER project ended in 2024.

In the absence of this funding, ESD staff are still supporting attendance efforts in a variety of ways. For example, ESD staff provide resources and training to school and district staff on topics like communicating absences and the importance of regular attendance to students and their families, using data to identify students and absence trends, complying with state attendance and truancy laws, and sharing research and best practices about ways to improve attendance.

Several individuals are currently participating in OSPI's Regional Attendance Improvement Networks and continuing some of the work they started under the ESSER project. The three participating ESDs in this network identified schools with high chronic absenteeism rates to invite to participate in the network. These include schools from both Western and Eastern Washington. School staff working on attendance and reengagement efforts come together several times a year to share interventions they have implemented, discuss lessons learned, and brainstorm new approaches. ESD staff provide resources and training to assist school staff, organize meetings throughout the year, and offer coaching to attendance teams working in participating schools.

Even among individuals we spoke to who did not participate in the statewide ESSER project or are not currently involved with OSPI's improvement network, staff are still supporting schools' attendance efforts by offering guidance, staff trainings, technical support, information about attendance and truancy regulations, and disseminating research and information about best practices to reduce absenteeism.

What Schools Are Doing to Address Chronic Absenteeism

Since ESD staff work closely with schools on attendance efforts, we asked them to share their perspectives about what attendance initiatives schools are implementing. We report attendance activities in the order of frequency heard in interviews.

Data Initiatives

All ESD staff we spoke to reported that schools are trying to use data to inform attendance strategies, though the information they collect and the tools they use vary significantly.

We heard that in larger districts, schools have more funding and staffing to accommodate more robust data collection and analysis. For example, some schools have data platforms beyond their general student information systems, which report information on students' attendance, behavior, and academic status. School staff can see a comprehensive picture of students' educational experience, identify areas where students are struggling, and better tailor interventions. In some schools, though ESD reported this seems rare, data platforms identify the interventions students receive so staff can see if outcomes like attendance change once interventions are given.

In smaller districts and schools, we heard that data collection and interpretation are more difficult. Staff collect data manually and compile and analyze it themselves, which takes time and skill. It is more challenging to map data onto students' experiences and identify which interventions would be most impactful.

Several ESDs also reported that middle and high schools are required to conduct needs assessments, using the Washington Assessment of Risks and Needs of Students (WARNS) or another assessment, but the use of this information is not consistent across schools.

What Works Well Using Data to Inform Strategies. One ESD reported that schools that successfully improve attendance **first focus on data**. Schools need to collect the right data and review it regularly so they can identify trends both at a schoolwide level and among individual students. For example, some schools collect data on when students are absent throughout the year and what classes they miss so they can see months of the year where students miss school or certain periods or classes during the day.

A few ESD staff said they provided **data and software training** to both district and school staff so they are better equipped to collect, review, and use attendance data in a meaningful way. ESD staff mentioned that the best predictor of a student being chronically absent is whether they were chronically absent in the previous year. They recommended that schools should track this at the very least and use it to proactively identify students who might need extra support in the future.

We also heard that it is effective when schools **share data with students and parents**. Students and their families sometimes are not aware of how many absences a child has, but when they get this data, particularly when compared to average absences in the school, it can motivate students to attend.

Attendance Teams
Six ESDs mentioned the use of attendance teams in schools as a strategy to reduce absenteeism. The structure of teams and what they do varies across schools depending on need, but we heard general themes. Teams can include administrative staff like principals and vice principals, MTSS

coordinators, teachers, and counselors. Teams meet to discuss data on students missing school and determine what steps they need to take to intervene. Teams can provide case-management-like services to individual students through home visits and coordinate schoolwide interventions to address widespread absenteeism issues.

Forming teams was a practice implemented during the ESSER Attendance and Reengagement Project. Some schools have continued this approach, though ESD staff reported that not all schools can because of other priorities, limited funding, and the time required to attend meetings. Interviews suggest that attendance teams are implemented across elementary, middle, and high schools.

In one high school, the team conducted assessments with disengaged students to understand barriers. They found that sleep was an issue, so the team created a sleep hygiene unit, and students learned better sleep habits as a way to address the overall attendance problem.

What Works Well in Attendance Teams. ESD staff reported that attendance teams have more success when they **meet regularly, either weekly or biweekly**. A few interviewees also discussed that teams are better able to identify solutions for addressing absenteeism when they **review data often** and observe trends that influence absences. The most successful teams are also monitoring progress, talking about what they have tried, determining if it is working or not, and adjusting as needed.

One interviewee reported that it is helpful when teams **include a diverse array of positions, including teachers and administrative staff**. This connects staff, allows for more information sharing, and concentrates efforts on a schoolwide level. They also mentioned that when teams have dedicated leaders like principals or counselors, there is more schoolwide buy-in for the work. However, this is not common because it is difficult for teachers and principals to have additional time to commit to this on top of their existing workloads.

We also heard that **teams should not focus on both schoolwide and individualized interventions in a single meeting**. Teams should dedicate some meetings to approaches that support schoolwide attendance and other meetings to focus on individual students. Several ESD staff reported that when teams **include MTSS frameworks** and focus not just on attendance but also on student behavior and learning, attendance outcomes will improve. Further, one interviewee mentioned that when schools have strong pre-existing truancy processes in place, the attendance teams can incorporate these practices more seamlessly and do not have to start from scratch.

Several ESD staff reported the need for districts to support attendance teams, since there is so much variation across schools in terms of whether teams exist and what they do. One ESD interviewee mentioned that some districts have district-level attendance teams that provide guidance to teams working in schools.

Finally, many of the ESD staff we spoke to talked about the importance of **learning from others who are working to improve attendance**. It was clear that ESD and school staff who participated in the ESSER Attendance and Reengagement Project and the current improvement network have learned from talking with other schools. Meeting throughout the year to discuss what is working well, what has not worked, and lessons learned has promoted the use of promising practices. ESD staff also provides state and national resources to schools and connects schools so they can share their experiences. Several ESD staff mentioned examples of schools working with districts in other states or using materials from OSPI's attendance website or Attendance Works, a national advocacy organization, to support their efforts.

Communication Strategies

Staff in five ESDs reported the use of communication strategies to reduce absenteeism. Most of what we heard was related to schools changing how they communicate with students and their families about attendance. Some ESD staff told us that because of state requirements around truancy, communication is sometimes negative, and responses have historically been punitive. Since the pandemic, schools are focusing on raising awareness about the importance of attending school regularly and how it impacts learning. School staff are also communicating differently with parents and guardians to help them understand the importance of attendance, share data with them about their children when they are absent, and provide them with resources.

Related to communication strategies, three ESDs described how some schools organize attendance campaigns. Ideally, school staff identify absenteeism trends during the year, like higher rates in January or March, and run campaigns during these periods to encourage better attendance.

ESD staff noted that these types of communication strategies seem to be implemented more often at elementary and middle school levels than at the high school level, though they noted these strategies would be effective among high school students, too. They also reported that communication between schools and families tends to be concentrated in earlier grades, but parents want to hear from teachers as their students progress in middle and high school grades, too.

What Works Well in Communication. ESD staff reported that schools establish more trusting relationships with students and their families when they **share more information about attendance, avoid negative and punitive language, and provide resources**.

One school sent nudge letters to families that reported the number of days the student had missed compared to the average number of absences in the school, which helps to create a small behavioral nudge for students and families.

Schools are required to send information home to families when students meet absence thresholds. We heard from some ESD staff about the importance of reaching out to students and families beyond these requirements to reinforce the importance of attending school.

Many ESD staff said that when schools focus their communication efforts on everyone in the school, not just those with high absenteeism rates, it builds a schoolwide culture of better attendance and can prevent future chronic absenteeism. We heard that at the elementary level, teachers have more direct lines of communication with parents and guardians, and it is important for them to promote messaging about attendance in these interactions, regardless of whether a student is struggling. Further, multiple ESD staff told us that when students are absent, **parents want to hear from teachers** rather than administrators, as it feels more personal and connected to a student's academic success.

Finally, several ESD staff talked about prioritizing communication campaigns in earlier grades to build strong attendance habits for younger students that will carry forward.

Relationship-Building Interventions

Four ESDs reported the use of relationship-building interventions. Because a sense of belonging is a frequent reason students report missing school, some schools are focusing on strengthening relationships between students and staff so students feel more comfortable at school.

Some ESD staff reported the use of a practice called "two-by-tens," in which teachers identify students who have disengaged from school and commit to having two-minute conversations with them over ten consecutive days. Teachers are instructed to have positive interactions with students, avoid negative or punitive language, and focus on understanding what is going on in a student's life.

Another strategy we heard is the use of "warm welcomes," in which teachers and administrative staff greet students in the morning and have a positive and brief interaction so students feel welcome at school. Though less common, we also heard of examples where school staff or community members mentor students to build trusting relationships.

ESD staff reported that relationship-building interventions seem to be most common at the elementary level, but said these strategies should be used in high schools to ensure students feel more connected with peers and teachers.

What Works Well in Relationship-Building Initiatives. Some ESD staff reported that school staff implementing two-by-tens or warm welcomes must **concentrate on having positive interactions** and learning more about the student and why he or she is struggling to attend school, rather than focusing on the negative and chastising students for missing school. Schools that work to **understand root problems that lead to absenteeism** and utilize existing resources like wraparound services to address barriers tend to build more trust with students and encourage better attendance over time.

Competitions and Incentives

Two ESDs reported that some schools use competitions or incentives to motivate students to attend regularly. For example, schools have organized programs where classrooms with good attendance will get pizza or extra recess time.

What Works Well in Using Incentives or Competitions. ESD staff consistently told us that schools implementing attendance competitions should **not encourage perfect attendance because it sets up unreasonable expectations**. It is essential for students to know when they should take excused absences for things like illness, while still learning why attending school regularly matters to their academic and social development.

Further, ESD staff mentioned that schools should strategically **coordinate competitions during the year when schoolwide attendance is low**, like in January, but not run too many competitions to avoid diluting the messaging about the importance of attendance.

When schools have extra time and resources, they often do attendance challenges like March Madness-type campaigns when attendance dips. However, these are not long-term strategies and often do not reach the students who need the most support.

Exhibit 7 describes the main types of interventions schools are implementing and some of the strategies that ESD staff say are working to reduce absenteeism.

Exhibit 7
Interventions Schools are Implementing and What is Working to Improve Attendance

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Data initiatives: Schools use data to inform attendance strategies, though the information they collect and tools they use vary.

[What works well](#)
- Schools first start with collecting and understanding attendance data.
- Review data often and identify trends at individual and schoolwide levels.
- ESDs provide data training to districts and schools.
- Share absence data with students and families to increase awareness.

Attendance teams: Teachers/administrators review data and determine individualized and schoolwide attendance interventions.

[What works well](#)
- Meeting regularly, either weekly or biweekly and including teachers and administrators if resources allow.
- Dedicating one meeting to schoolwide interventions and another to supports for individual students.
- Reviewing data often, discussing what's working, what's not, and adjusting as needed.
- Incorporating MTSS frameworks to include attendance efforts in the work the school is doing around behavior and academic supports.
- Learning from other schools. ESDs providing state and national resources.

Communications strategies: Schools adjust their communication around attendance to be more positive, informative, and less punitive.

[What works well](#)
- Sharing attendance facts, using positive and non-punitive language, and providing resources to students and their families.
- Contacting families frequently to educate them about the importance of attendance and how it impacts academic performance.
- Building a schoolwide culture that emphasizes the importance of regular attendance.
- Having teachers communicate student absences with parents and guardians.

Relationship-building interventions: Teachers/administrators build relationships with students so they feel a sense of belonging in school.

[What works well](#)
- Focusing on having positive interactions and getting to know students. Avoiding punitive or chastising language.
- Identifying what barriers lead to absences and utilizing existing wraparound supports for struggling students.

Competitions & incentives: Some schools use competitions or incentives to motivate better attendance, usually at schoolwide levels.

[What works well](#)
- Do not encourage perfect attendance. It sets up unreasonable expectations.
- Coordinate competitions during the school year when schoolwide attendance is low.

Challenges to Improving Attendance

We heard common challenges from ESD staff describing the implementation of attendance initiatives. We list the challenges in order of the frequency they were reported.

Staffing Capacity

The most common challenge we heard from ESD staff (five interviewees) was about limited staff capacity in schools to focus on attendance work. In many schools, one or a **few individuals, often administrators, are working on attendance initiatives** in addition to their primary responsibilities. Their ability to focus on the work, especially without help from others, is a major challenge to maintaining the consistency of attendance efforts over time. Also, while it would be **ideal for teachers to be involved**, they often do not have the extra time or funding to do this work.

Unfortunately, if attendance work is happening in a school at all, it's usually because one or two people who are already overworked are leading the charge. There's a real lack of funding and time that schools have to dedicate to attendance initiatives.

We also heard that in the post-pandemic period, schools are asked to do a great many things and are trying to determine which priority areas to focus on. Attendance is sometimes not seen as a priority when other things, like students' learning and behavior, are areas of concern. Further, because of statewide requirements, schools prioritize complying with truancy policies first, which can mean little time is left over to focus on chronic absenteeism.

Interviewees described several factors that compound the issue of limited staff. For example, many schools have had decreasing enrollments, which impacts funding levels and the schools' ability to work on attendance initiatives. Some ESD staff told us that schools were able to devote time and staff to attendance when the ESSER Attendance and Reengagement Project was running, but now that the project is done, they are struggling to maintain the work.

Finally, several ESD staff reported that schools are trying many different things but are not sure which interventions work. These ESD interviewees talked about the need for districts to develop strategic plans around how to address absenteeism and to provide schools with guidance on policies, communication, and what works.

Focus on Mental-and Behavioral-Health Initiatives

Four ESDs reported that mental health and behavioral issues, which often influence student attendance, have been a significant challenge for schools to address post-pandemic. ESD staff described how students have struggled to return to in-class learning after being isolated and learning online during the pandemic. Students are struggling with depression, anxiety, and many exhibit behavioral problems in the classroom. The influx of ESSER funds during the pandemic helped schools focus on mental health and behavioral services and supports, but now that this funding has ended, **schools struggle to provide supports to students, such as counselors or connecting them with community-based resources**.

Because mental and behavioral health is a major area of concern for schools, when there are extra resources available, schools prioritize these efforts over attendance, even though students often report missing school for mental and behavioral health reasons.

In some schools, the same person in charge of behavior is also trying to lead attendance efforts. With behavior issues escalating post-pandemic, it's hard to have time for preventative attendance work because the priority is to keep kids safe.

Data Use

Three ESDs reported data collection and use as a challenge to doing attendance work in schools. Also related to limited capacity, several interviewees described that there are **too few individuals in a school who have the time or knowledge to pull data and understand who is absent and why**. Some schools have dedicated staff and sophisticated data systems and dashboards that allow them to easily run attendance reports, but this does not exist across all schools; schools must seek additional funding for these purposes.

It's often the principal, secretary, or counselor in a school doing data collection and reporting on top of their already busy day. Often, they must enter data manually into their systems, and don't have software to do it automatically, like some better-funded schools. Also, it's sometimes easier to collect data at an individual level, but it takes more time to aggregate data for the whole school. This makes it harder for schools to respond quickly and make changes based on data.

Shifting Mindsets

Three ESDs talked about changing mindsets after the pandemic, both among parents, students, and school staff, and how this has challenged attendance efforts. Interviewees described how **families and students sometimes do not connect attending school regularly with academic performance**. Schools working on attendance initiatives often first prioritize changing the way they talk about attendance to students and families and try to educate them about why attendance matters. Several ESDs also mentioned that parents and students are not always aware of the actual number of absences a student has and, therefore, are not concerned.

Alternatively, some ESD staff talked about the work they have done to educate school staff about the importance of focusing on attendance and incorporating this work into other initiatives related to mental and behavioral health and learning. Among some staff, there has been a disconnect in understanding how attendance relates to other initiatives the school is doing, but ESD staff explained that these efforts should be interconnected and not siloed. ESD staff also talked about working to shift perspectives among some school staff away from blaming and judging students who are chronically absent to a more open-minded approach in which they understand the barriers that cause students to be absent.

Exhibit 8 lists the main challenges we heard during interviews.

Exhibit 8
Challenges Schools Face Related to Attendance Initiatives

> ➢ There is **little or no extra capacity** for teachers and administrators to focus on attendance initiatives.
>
> ➢ In the post-pandemic period, schools are struggling to address behavioral and mental health challenges. These **initiatives get prioritized over attendance efforts**, even though behavior, mental health, and attendance are often interconnected issues.
>
> ➢ Schools have **limited staffing and tools to collect and analyze attendance data**.
>
> ➢ **Shifting mindsets after the pandemic challenge attendance efforts**. Families and students sometimes do not connect attending school regularly with academic performance. Some school staff do not realize the need to integrate attendance efforts with behavior and academic initiatives. Further, some staff still blame students rather than try to understand what barriers keep them from attending school.

Considerations for Decision-Makers

Finally, throughout our interviews, some ESD staff described considerations they would like decision-makers in Washington to keep in mind if they want to improve chronic absenteeism. We highlight these in Exhibit 9.

Absenteeism is a Complicated Problem That Will Require Multi-Year Investments

ESD staff reiterated that there is no quick fix to addressing chronic absenteeism. To solve this issue, **individuals must understand the barriers that students face that cause them to be absent**. They should then invest in or implement interventions that solve these barriers. Supporting mental health in schools, bolstering transportation, and building relationships between students, teachers, and families are some examples of how investments can be targeted to address root causes that influence absenteeism.

Further, **schools must have a structured approach to addressing absenteeism**. This can include having a dedicated team focused on reviewing data, identifying trends in students missing school and at a schoolwide level, and making decisions about attendance interventions. As reported by many ESD staff, schools have limited staffing capacity and resources to support this work and need funding to begin or continue these efforts.

In addition to supporting school staff, it is also vital to **support the work that ESD staff do**, as they provide valuable guidance, technical assistance, and resources to school staff who work directly with students

Support for Attendance Initiatives Should Not Be Separate from Other Initiatives

Several ESD staff described that when students are struggling academically, behaviorally, or with their mental health, it often shows up in poor attendance. When schools support students academically and/or behaviorally, it will improve their attendance and vice versa.

Individuals making decisions about programming and or investments should understand that these areas are interconnected and **support should not be focused just on academic, behavioral, mental health, or attendance initiatives, but on all areas.**

Communication Style Matters

ESD staff consistently reported that students and families are less receptive to negative messaging about absences in letters and phone calls and to punitive approaches like suspensions or truancy petitions with juvenile courts. Parents and guardians want more information about their child's attendance, and they want to hear from teachers as much as possible. Decision-makers should understand that **programs that include positive communication, connect the importance between attendance and learning, and share data with students and families may be more effective than punitive measures.**

There is a Need For Consistency in Data Collection and Use Across Schools

The use of data to inform attendance initiatives varies significantly across schools. Some schools have extra resources (sometimes privately funded) and staff expertise to support robust data collection and analysis, while other schools struggle to use data to identify absence trends at individual or schoolwide levels. Data trainings from ESDs, school districts, and OSPI have been helpful, but there is a **need for better statewide data systems, training for individuals to use data, and consistency in collection and data tools across schools** in the state.

Learning From Others

Finally, many ESD staff reported that school staff have learned and grown in their efforts by collaborating with other schools, sharing what works and does not work, and brainstorming strategies. **Future investments may consider ways to build learning communities across schools, districts, and ESDs.**

Exhibit 9
Considerations for Decision-Makers

➢ **The goal to reduce chronic absenteeism will likely require investments over multiple years.** Absenteeism is a complicated issue, and solving this problem requires targeted interventions that address root causes, like mental health, transportation, and relationships between students, teachers, and parents.

➢ **Attendance initiatives should not be separate from the work schools are doing on learning, mental health, and behavior**. When students struggle academically, behaviorally, or with their mental health, it often shows up in poor attendance. Therefore, attendance interventions should be considered in relation to academic, behavioral, and mental health initiatives.

➢ **Students and parents/guardians may be more receptive** to attendance initiatives that incorporate positive language, make attendance data transparent, and avoid punitive measures like suspensions and referral to juvenile court.

➢ **There is a lot of variation in the type of attendance data collected and how it is used across schools.** Schools could benefit from investments that create more consistency in data collection, analysis, and reporting statewide.

➢ **Schools have progressed in their attendance efforts by learning from others about what works and what does not.** Future support for learning communities across schools, districts, and ESDs could help expand attendance initiative successes.

V. Conclusion

While chronic absenteeism has been a challenge even before the COVID-19 pandemic, rates dramatically increased during and after the pandemic and have yet to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Chronic absenteeism is associated with lower academic test scores and worse behavioral and social outcomes among students in all grade levels. Students in high school, some students of color, students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care, and those from low-income backgrounds are disproportionately impacted by chronic absenteeism.

We interviewed ESD staff working on attendance and reengagement initiatives to learn about the reasons why students are chronically absent and what schools are doing to support them.

Reasons for Chronic Absenteeism
ESD staff explained that students generally are not missing school because they are lazy or do not care; the reasons are largely outside of their control. Illness and mental health were the most common reasons ESD staff reported. Students also face situations at home that force them to miss school, like the need to watch younger siblings or work to supplement the family's income. Lack of belonging, falling behind in schoolwork, and traveling or changing schools are other factors that influence absenteeism.

How Schools are Addressing Chronic Absenteeism
We heard that all schools are working to use data to inform their attendance initiatives, but the data they collect and the platforms they use to analyze information vary.

Some schools coordinate attendance teams that collect and review data regularly and develop interventions to support individual students and schoolwide attendance goals.

Many schools are also implementing communication strategies, including changing how they message attendance information to students and families, and some schools organize attendance campaigns to build a schoolwide culture of good attendance habits.

We heard about some schools implementing relationship-building interventions to build trust between students, teachers, and administrative staff, so students feel more welcome at school. We also heard several instances of schools using competitions or incentives to motivate students to improve or maintain attendance.

During our interviews, we learned that dedicated attendance teams, using positive communication with students, sharing attendance data with families, identifying absenteeism trends in data, focusing efforts to reduce attendance barriers, and learning from one another have been successful strategies to reduce absenteeism.

Challenges

ESDs reported that schools face many varied challenges when working on attendance initiatives. Schools have limited staff capacity to focus attention on attendance. In this post-pandemic period, schools are struggling to address many different issues, including learning and behavior, and attendance is sometimes seen as less of a priority, even though ESD staff emphasized that attendance is interconnected with all issue areas.

While schools strive to use data to inform their efforts, the resources, time, and skills staff need to effectively use data vary. Schools that have extra resources for better data systems tend to see more improvement in attendance rates, while smaller and rural schools often do not have the resources to support this work.

Further, changing attitudes during and after the pandemic have made it difficult for schools to convey why attending school should matter to students and their families.

Considerations for Decision-Makers

Finally, throughout our interviews, some ESD staff described several things they would like decision-makers to consider as they are thinking about investments or program decisions related to chronic absenteeism.

The effort to reduce chronic absenteeism will require investments for multiple years and a focus on addressing underlying barriers that cause students to miss school. Attendance work is closely related to academic, behavioral, and mental health initiatives in schools and should be integrated accordingly.

Those making decisions about programming should keep in mind that students and families may be more receptive to positive communication about attendance and less punitive measures. Investments could build more consistency in data collection and analysis across schools in the state and should consider the importance of building learning communities across schools, district, and ESDs.

Limitations

There are several limitations that influence our results. First, because of our short timeline, we did not administer surveys to schools. ESD staff may not be aware of all the activities schools are doing to reduce absenteeism, and we may not have captured all activities in our review.

Second, we spoke with staff working in eight of nine ESDs and are missing information about potential attendance initiatives that schools are doing in one ESD in the state.

WSIPP's Next Report

This is the first report WSIPP is producing on the topic of chronic absenteeism. The next report will analyze the evidence base to understand the effects of specific interventions on attendance outcomes and other relevant outcomes, depending on available research. The report will also examine what school-level characteristics predict absenteeism to inform what data points may be most useful for schools to collect and analyze when they initiate attendance reforms. This report will be published in June 2026.

I. Interview Questions for ESD Staff

Question about the interviewee's role
- What support and services do you provide to schools to help them reduce chronic absenteeism?

Questions about the reasons for chronic absenteeism
- From your perspective, how big of a problem is chronic absenteeism in the districts you serve?
- From your perspective, how has the pandemic impacted chronic absenteeism in the districts you serve?
- What do you think are the main reasons students are chronically absent?
- Do these reasons differ by grade levels or student populations?

Questions about what schools are doing to reduce chronic absenteeism
- What are the main activities schools are doing to reduce chronic absenteeism?
- Do these approaches differ by grade level and/or student populations?
- How do schools identify students who are likely to be chronically absent, and how is this information used?

Questions about what is working to reduce absenteeism rates
- What approaches are schools doing that you think are working well to reduce absenteeism?
- Are there approaches that work well for certain grade levels or student populations that might not work well for others?

Questions about challenges and lessons learned
- What are the biggest challenges schools face when trying to reduce absenteeism?
- What lessons have you, and school staff if you can speak to this, learned in efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism?

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