

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

We interviewed staff in Educational Service Districts (ESDs) to learn why students are chronically absent, what schools are doing to address the issue, and the challenges of reducing absenteeism.

Background

A student is considered chronically absent when they miss 10% or more of a school year. Chronic absence is associated with worse academic and developmental outcomes for students in all grades. Rates of chronic absenteeism in Washington have increased across all grades, student groups, and regions, and have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. In 2024, 27% of students were chronically absent from school.

Findings

- Physical illness, mental health, lack of belonging at school, home situations like caring for a sibling, and factors related to poverty are common reasons why students are chronically absent.
- While attendance initiatives vary, schools most frequently use data to inform their efforts, use attendance teams, adjust how they communicate information to students and families, strengthen relationships with students, and use incentives to encourage better attendance.
- Limited staffing capacity, prioritizing other issues over attendance, variation in data collection and use, and shifting mindsets about attendance after the COVID-19 pandemic have challenged ESD and school staff's attendance efforts.

Limitations

Interview findings reflect ESD staff perspectives, not school staff who work directly on attendance efforts. We were unable to interview staff at one ESD.

Common Attendance Initiatives Schools are Implementing



Using data to identify absent students and trends and inform attendance initiatives.



Developing **attendance teams** that may include teachers and administrative staff who focus on interventions for individuals and schoolwide.



Revising **communication strategies** to use positive language, inform students and parents/guardians about attendance information, and organize schoolwide attendance campaigns.



Building relationships between teachers, school staff, and students so students feel welcome in school buildings and classrooms.



Implementing **attendance competitions or incentives** throughout the year to encourage better attendance.

Assignment Details

WSIPP used legislative funds for K-12 research to support this work

Full report available on [WSIPP's website](https://www.wsipp.wa.gov)

Project lead: Julia Cramer
Julia.Cramer@wsipp.wa.gov
 360.664.9073