

# An Action Plan for Confronting Chronic Absenteeism This Fall



*Zikirah Skinner runs toward an educator dressed as the panther mascot from her school, William Dick Elementary, during a surprise visit to her home in north Philadelphia to celebrate high attendance.*

*Heather Khalifa/The Philadelphia Inquirer via AP*

If students aren't in school, they can't learn.

That has to be the starting theory of action for district officials putting together their return-to-school plans for the upcoming year.

Before the pandemic, federal data from 2017-18 showed that more than 8 million K-12 students were chronically absent—defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year.

Now there's emerging evidence that [rates surpassed that during the 2020-21 school year, as students turned off from lackluster remote learning,](#)

cared for relatives, or sought jobs to keep their families afloat.

Getting students to attend regularly isn't a silver bullet for achievement, experts warn. Learning hinges on developing relationships with students and providing them with a powerful instructional program. But those are impossible if students don't show up.

One challenge: Most states didn't do much to help districts collect absenteeism data during the pandemic, and [until recently the U.S. Department of Education](#)

[hasn't forced them to.](#)

Education Week spoke to a number of district practitioners and researchers with a history of working on chronic absenteeism to describe their recommended strategies. We also asked them to suggest cost-effective uses of their American Recovery Act funding to boost student-attendance rates. Some of these ideas can also be done without hiring full-time personnel—a concern given the time-limited nature of the federal spending.

## 1. Get your data in order.

Prior to the pandemic, districts' student information systems typically weren't set up to capture anything other than whether students were present or absent. But as remote and hybrid learning entered the scene, those definitions changed.

In some cases, students needed to log on to remote classes just once to be considered present; other districts required it for a majority or every class. For still others, students needed to interact with teachers or submit an assignment to be counted as present. All of that has made for messy data.

Some districts, like Pomona Unified, in Southern California, quickly made changes to their student information systems to account for the new learning modes. It introduced new codes, like an exclamation point, which meant a student was having problems connecting during remote learning; a hashtag meant a student had successfully logged into distance learning that day, said Tatiana Gomez, the district's coordinator of pupil resources, child welfare, and attendance.

Those additions came in handy later when Pomona was trying to get a handle on new absenteeism patterns and helped distinguish if the problem was tech-related or some other issue.

Districts that haven't yet should get started on making these changes, especially if they plan to preserve remote learning this fall, attendance advocates said.

"You have to decide on the code, and where things get stored in your data system, and train staff to know what counts as attendance in the different modes of learning," said Hedy Chang, the director of Attendance Works, a nonprofit that has worked with Pomona and other districts to decrease absenteeism. "But this is perfect for recovery spending—it's not only OK by the feds, but you can invest in it once, and it operates for you."

## **2. Equip school leaders with good information.**

Often the more salient problem with data systems is figuring out how to query them and analyze absenteeism patterns in a way that produces actionable information to intervene before patterns of absenteeism become chronic.

"In the past, people didn't have usable reports. Data got collected, it all went in, and never came out in ways anyone could interpret it," said Chang. If you don't visualize it in ways people can make sense of it, and notice which kids need support, it doesn't get used for action."

Michael Romero is the superintendent of one of the Los Angeles Unified School District's six regions, called Local District South, which serves more than 85,000 students. At every monthly meeting with his principals, he gives out data for each school comparing the prior month's absenteeism rate to that same month the previous year; a portion of time is spent reviewing the data and sharing out successful approaches.

He's used the approach for three years and attributes it for helping bring the region's rate of chronic absenteeism below 12 percent—and below the national average of 15 percent.

The point isn't to blame or shame but to set clear targets. Romero asks schools to aim to reduce chronic absenteeism to 11 percent, or to cut the rate by 20 percent from the prior year's figure. School leaders design the specific plans to get there.

The ongoing collection and analysis of data in Local District South means Romero has been able to pinpoint days that tend to be particularly problematic. A holiday that often results in the largest single number of absences? Halloween.

### **3. Consider using 'nudges' to find and connect families.**

Among the most promising ideas are to employ "nudges," sent by phone calls, text messages, and letters that remind families of the importance of daily attendance for students.

The idea developed out of behavioral science; the basic mechanism is to use simple messages to alter people's behavior. It has a robust research base. In one study based in Philadelphia, the nudges [reduced chronic absenteeism by 10](#)

[percent](#).

After districts clamored for help setting up nudge systems, the researcher behind that study, Harvard University Professor Todd Rogers, spun off the work into a consulting company called [EveryDay Labs](#).

Careful iteration has improved the impact of the approach since the Philadelphia study.

Phone calls, text messages, and email are all viable methods for reaching out to families. One of the challenges, though, is that districts' family [contact phone](#)

[numbers](#)

[are](#)

[often out of date,](#)

[particularly when the families are](#)  
low income.

It turns out, in fact, that good old-fashioned snail mail is particularly effective at reaching families—and prompting them to change behavior.

“It has both the reach—change of address cards work pretty well—and also when it comes to behavior change, it’s a really sticky form of communication. We design them to be something you want to post on your refrigerator and want to leave on the kitchen table,” said Emily Bailard, the CEO of EveryDay Labs.

That matters, she said, because the point is to change behavior not immediately, but in three days or three weeks, when a family faces an obstacle that makes it harder to get a child to school.

How do you craft a good nudge? Bailard said it should be short and written in easily understandable language, not jargon or legalese. (EveryDay Labs aims at a 4th grade reading level and translates the text into all languages spoken within the district.)

It should provide parents with useful, specific information they can act on, not aspirational goals. And it should be personalized to note how many days a child has missed, because parents frequently underestimate the number, Bailard and Rogers said.

And although truancy letters—which by law typically have to go out to families when students miss school—serve a different purpose, they too can be written to emphasize partnership with parents and the provision of services, not the threat of truancy court.

## **4. Relationships, relationships, relationships.**

Now we come to the heart of the matter: It's building—or rebuilding—relationships with parents and families that can really make the difference and help solve the individual problems that keep kids out of school.

In Los Angeles, Romero's schools use three principles to guide their relationship work. First, school staff members reiterate the importance of attendance in most communications. Second, whenever a student is absent, the family gets a personal phone call to make sure everything is OK. And finally, for students on the verge of being chronically absent, there are more targeted approaches. Often, Romero said, they're designed to make kids feel wanted, not punished.

“We often use incentives: ‘Hey, if you get to school every day, you’re going to have lunch with the principal,’ he said. “It’s the personalizing of support for kids who struggle with attendance that improves attendance.”

As they develop those relationships, district leaders also figure out how to problem-solve each family's unique challenges.

Pomona's Shandria Richmond-Roberts, then the principal at the Harrison Elementary school site, knew that some students who had been absent were living in a local motel. On her visits there, she found that students' attendance rates varied by which room they were in: Those who were furthest away from the Wi-Fi connection in the main office were more likely to have connectivity issues.

So she worked directly with hotel management to get them better-situated rooms, and brought staff to make sure the login process to the school's learning platforms was easy and efficient.

“It became apparent to the manager of the motel—but also to the families—that no tiger is going to be left behind,” she said, referring to the school’s sports mascot.

*It’s the personalizing of support for kids who struggle with attendances that improves attendance.*

Michael Romero, Superintendent, Local District South, Los Angeles

Developing relationships now is harder than if the work wasn’t done pre-pandemic. But for those districts starting fresh, Richmond-Roberts recommends embedding it in a strong social-emotional learning program to kick off the year—starting off with being honest that families and students have a lot of fear and trauma remaining from the disruptions of the past year and a half.

“The first step is addressing the elephant in the room and being transparent: addressing the fears and the losses that people have experienced and acknowledging the fact that those are very real to them, and assuring them that together we’ll be able to transition back to some sense of normalcy,” she said.

## **5. Don’t overwhelm your teachers with new responsibilities.**

Although teachers are essential to the relationship-building process with families, the experts cautioned against charging teachers with all the work of tracking down students and trying to re-engage them. Some of the most-effective strategies, like the nudges described above, can be directed by the central office—thus allowing teachers to do their core job of teaching.

As students return to school, then it should begin to fall to teachers to sustain relationships with students.

Pomona came up with one smart idea during the 2020-21 school year: It reassigned a beloved intervention teacher to re-engage students who were reluctant to log into remote school, said Gomez. Some students who wouldn’t attend their academic classes often would agree to meet with that intervention teacher on Zoom. She became a bridge to getting them back to attending regular classes.

## 6. If the baseline strategies don't work, try more-intensive programs like home visits.

Nearly all of the district officials said that [home visiting can be an effective way to find those students who seem to be disengaged](#)

and to begin building a relationship with them. (Traditionally, home visits are performed by teachers, but districts have successfully tapped administrators, principals, and counselors to do them; sometimes, the details need to be negotiated with labor groups.)

Home visiting is one of Sacramento City's most effective strategies, according to Jennifer Kretschman, the director of multitiered system of supports, and the district will be performing them this summer. In fact, the district has taken attendance and chronic absenteeism data and cross-referenced it with enrollment data for entering 7th and 9th graders, two tough transition points.

"We're doing preventative work rather than crisis-mode work," she said. "We want on the first day of school to have eliminated as many potential barriers as possible.

"I was in an apartment complex yesterday, and every single one of the students who lives in it was chronically absent. And that's on us, because we stopped that bus route last year," Kretschman said. "This is a system function that needs changing. Twenty to 30 kids doesn't sound like a huge detail in a 42,000-student district, but it's a huge deal to every one of those kids."

In Pomona, the district plans to expand home visiting this fall and to make it highly practical. Administrators will carry iPads that can access available district services, help parents fill out enrollment or permission forms, or help the visitors contact other staffers who can solve other problems.

The context of home visiting can be tricky. It can feel pejorative if "at risk" kids alone are targeted for visits—or, alternatively, like a service only enjoyed by some families, so experts said it generally works best if every student can be visited.



But it's also essential when all other ways of trying to contact a family have failed.

For districts whose current attendance data is severely limited, though, home visiting may be the place to start.

“If you know your data is garbage and it will take you eight months to dig into it to get anything useful, I would get a home-visiting program up and running ASAP,” said Paige Kowalski, the executive vice president of the Data Quality Campaign, a group that advocates for data transparency.