

Beyond Child Protection: Family-Centered Support Strategies for Elementary School Attendance in Minnesota

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Minnesota, educational neglect has been treated as a form of child maltreatment under state law. Children under age 12 with seven or more unexcused school absences in a single school year should be referred to child protection services.

In this report, we use the term "support program" to describe the family-centered initiatives developed by counties in Minnesota to address educational concerns and attendance-related issues. These programs—referred to as "diversion" by some agencies—aim to provide supportive, non-punitive responses to address children's and families' needs.

Recognizing that punitive approaches may fail to address challenges experienced by families that are not necessarily due to safety concerns, several Minnesota counties have implemented family-centered supportive strategies. These strategies aim to proactively address school attendance concerns through prevention and early intervention and service coordination between counties and schools, and avoid unnecessary engagement with child protection.

With support from the Sauer Family Foundation and Casey Family Programs, Wilder Research evaluated five counties' support programs—Anoka, Olmsted, Scott, Washington, and Wright—to understand how these programs operate, to inform more equitable and effective practices, and the impact of these programs on families. Between 2023 and 2025, the evaluation used multiple methods and sources to gather information—a literature review, an online Service Tracking Form completed by program staff about families served, an online survey and follow-up interviews with families, school staff interviews, and collaborative co-interpretation sessions or data walks—one with families and the other with county program staff.



The goals were to understand who is being served, the barriers to school attendance, the services families received from the support programs, and the perceived and experienced outcomes of the programs. The findings were intended to inform service coordination and policy decision-making across school districts.

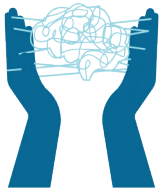
The evaluation results show that families involved in these support programs often face interrelated challenges that contribute to school attendance issues. These challenges, combined with varied school experiences and program service deliveries, shape how families engage with support efforts and the outcomes they experience. Key findings include:



Families face complex challenges related to their children's school attendance. Attendance challenges are often influenced by parents' and children's mental and physical health, parenting and co-parenting dynamics, financial and economic challenges, transportation issues, and work schedule conflicts. Most families face multiple types of challenges simultaneously. Negative experiences with schools—such as bullying and peer abuse, inflexible attendance policies, unsupportive school cultures, and ineffective communication with school staff—further compound the challenges some families face.



Support programs provide diverse services, resources, and supports for families. Schools and counties provide a range of services such as a combination of communication approaches, incentives and rewards for attendance, mental health support, transportation assistance, basic needs support, and special education accommodations. School-county collaboration is essential but capacity issues and inconsistent communication sometimes limit effectiveness.



Families have varied experiences with and services and programs. While many families report satisfaction with services, those facing more complex challenges are less likely to feel supported or to have received all the help they needed. Disparities are observed across cultural groups—non-Black families of color, including Asian American, Hispanic or Latino/a, American Indian, African immigrant, and multiracial families who do not identify as Black or African American, are the least likely to report that services are culturally appropriate or sufficient.



Support programs have influenced multiple family outcomes. Many families report improvements in their children's attendance, engagement with school, and well-being as a result of the programs. They also note that the programs improved their access to resources, their understanding of school policies, and their relationships with school staff. Disparities are observed across cultural groups—BIPOC families (families of color, including Black/African American, Asian American, Hispanic or Latino/a, American Indian, African immigrant, and multiracial families) are more likely than White/Caucasian families to report improvements in their children's school attendance and overall outcomes, and a small gap remains between BIPOC families with and without a

Black/African American background. While the data do not explain the reasons behind these differences, it is possible that families with White/Caucasian children may have entered the program with higher baseline levels of school engagement or access to support, leading to less noticeable change over time. Although the number of families in each group is relatively small, the consistent pattern across several outcomes is still worth noting.



Stakeholders have a number of suggestions for program and policy improvement. Support program staff emphasized the importance and effectiveness of non-punitive, early intervention strategies. Families, school staff, county staff, and social workers recommended several improvements to current approaches: tailoring attendance policies to better respond to family circumstances and cultural needs—such as chronic health conditions (including those without formal medical documentation), long-term illnesses requiring ongoing support, and barriers related to transportation or other basic needs; strengthening collaboration between schools and county agencies to ensure timely referrals and coordinated service delivery that support prevention and early intervention; improving communication among stakeholders; and expanding community supports and resources to better serve children and families.

Based on key findings from this evaluation, the following recommendations are offered for stakeholders:

FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS

Clarify and consider legislative updates to Statute Section 260C to support proactive, non-punitive responses to educational neglect.

- Reexamine language in Section 260C of Minnesota statutes to ensure that it supports school attendance reporting to local county welfare agencies, distinct from child protection pathways, for cases of potential educational neglect.
- Align statute language with a tiered prevention approach, where school absences due to unmet family needs (e.g., transportation, housing instability, medical caregiving) can trigger supportive outreach—not solely assessment or investigatory action—from a coordinated network of county and community-based services.
- Encourage legislative guidance to distinguish between chronic absenteeism rooted in unmet needs from cases that may necessitate a different child welfare or child protection response; align with Minnesota’s 2025–2029 Child and Family Services Plan by shifting from a reporting-focused approach to one centered on identifying family strengths and connecting families to

supportive community resources; provide policy guidance and funding to standardize a reporting, referral, and response framework across counties that enables schools to refer k-5 students to county agencies or local social services teams for supportive intervention—prior to legal involvement or punitive measures.

Allocate funding for pilot initiatives that allow schools and counties to test alternative attendance options (e.g., flexible start times, partial-day-attendance policy, virtual check-ins) for students and their caregivers experiencing health issues, family caregiving responsibilities, or transportation barriers. Evaluate these models to identify effective solutions that maintain engagement without penalizing families.

- ➔ Allocate funding for practices that promote communication and collaboration across schools, counties, and community organizations to serve the needs of families facing school attendance challenges.
- ➔ Expand use of Medicaid and other funding streams, indirectly or directly, to support local Family Resource Centers (FRCs), school-linked mental health services, and mobile outreach teams to do home visits, outreach, and engagement.

Enhance learning from existing support programs by supporting research and evaluation to identify effective practices, assess outcomes, and inform continuous improvement.

FOR COUNTY AGENCIES AND SUPPORT PROGRAM STAFF

Promote mutual understanding, shared accountability, and respectful engagement between county agencies, schools, and families to build trust and ensure coordinated support.

- ➔ Create routine communication mechanisms (e.g., monthly case coordination calls, secure data dashboards) so that schools receive updates on family engagement, service access, and outcomes.
- ➔ Collaborate with school staff or school case workers to establish feedback mechanisms, track families' follow-through on agreed-upon actions or support plans, and develop appropriate, sustainable solutions for families.

Empower, encourage, and support schools to provide early prevention and intervention services for families, while establishing formal criteria for when and how schools should refer families to county support programs, ideally before chronic absenteeism or legal involvement begins.

- ➔ Support schools to provide greater flexibility or differentiated policies (e.g., tardiness policy) that account for the unique challenges families may face, ensuring children and families receive support rather than being penalized for circumstances beyond their control.

Ensure timely access to resources and services for families based on their identified needs.

- Expand partnerships with trusted community organizations and collaborate with community-based organizations, parent peer support programs, and local Family Resource Centers who can provide wraparound prevention and intervention supports informed by those with lived experiences. For example:
- Partner with a community mental health agency to advocate for additional family therapists, and support the co-location of a therapist at an FRC on or near a school campus, increasing access to mental health support for families referred for attendance-related concerns.
- Collaborate with trusted community centers, libraries, or churches to host joint attendance-focused outreach events in community spaces where school staff, county workers, and community partners offer information on supports (e.g., transportation, flexible school options, family therapy, etc.) in a family-friendly setting.

Increase staffing capacity to better serve and meet the growing and diverse needs of families more effectively.

- Ensure caseloads are manageable to allow for sustained relationship-building.
- Provide targeted training for staff on how to identify and respond to the specific needs of families when school attendance concerns are present, so they are better equipped to offer timely and appropriate support.

FOR SCHOOL STAFF

Ensure approaches are responsive and accommodating—within the guidance of policies and laws —when supporting families whose children miss school or face complex or persistent barriers, focusing on tailored solutions rather than punitive responses to keep students engaged in learning.

- Strengthen communication and information sharing with families and support programs by using clear, consistent, and non-stigmatizing, strengths-based language—ensuring families understand how programs work and fostering more coordinated, collaborative support.
- Promote the collaborative approach of the support programs to families, highlighting specific resources they can provide.
- As [Attendance Works](#) suggests, schools may consider aligning interventions with students' levels of absences—for example, providing all students and families with foundational supports and universal prevention, offering early interventions for students missing 10–19% of the school year, and implementing intensive interventions for those missing 20% or more (Attendance Works, n.d.).
- Normalize early referrals to county and community support services by proactively introducing these resources during family nights, newsletters, and conferences, framing them as strengths-based and collaborative rather than disciplinary.

Create an environment where families feel welcomed, heard, and valued by listening to their experiences and perspectives.

- Strengthen staff training on trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices, and effective communication to better support diverse family needs and strengthen trust.
- Ensure families are involved in efforts to address bullying—especially those from communities that may feel mistrustful of school systems—by using culturally responsive communication and creating clear, accessible pathways for raising concerns and co-developing solutions.
- Strengthen home-school partnerships through effective outreach approaches. For example, the [Parent Teacher Home Visits \(PTHV\)](#) model— a voluntary initiative where trained educators conduct at least three respectful, relationship-building home visits per school year and participate in debrief sessions— builds trust with families through non-evaluative, relationship-centered home visits early in the school year.

Implement evidence-based programs to strengthen school climate and prevent bullying. For example:

- The [Second Step](#) program model— a weekly, classroom-based curriculum focusing on social-emotional competence and positive peer relationships— proactively prevents bullying by teaching elementary students empathy, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution skills and practices, while also supporting improved attendance and a stronger sense of safety.

Adopt structured, supportive attendance interventions with proven impact to ensure timely support for students and families within the school. For example:

- The multi-tiered attendance intervention framework such as [ATI-UP](#) (Absenteeism and Truancy: Interventions and Universal Procedures), which promotes school-wide norms for attendance, involves problem-solving teams, and engages families and communities collaboratively.
- The innovative communication approach such as PowerSchool Attendance Intervention, which enables automated messaging to families using real-time attendance data of their children—helping to build trust, reduce stigma, and encourage timely engagement with supportive services; or the EveryDay Intervention, which uses personalized attendance reports to engage families with actionable, student-specific information.

For more information

This summary presents highlights of *Beyond Child Protection: Family-Centered Support Strategies for Elementary School Attendance in Minnesota*.

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