

Best Practices in Diversionary Programming and Addressing Attendance Among Elementary-Aged Students

A Literature Review

This literature review is part of a larger evaluation project for the Sauer Family Foundation (Sauer) on child protection diversionary programs, specifically those that address children's attendance at school. [Findings from the overall evaluation](#) will be shared with the legislature and state-level advocates to inform policy related to child protection.

As part of the overall work, Sauer asked Wilder Research to conduct a literature review of best practices in diverting families with young children away from child protection services and towards services that support consistent school attendance. The following document summarizes findings from the literature review. It is intended to be a guiding document throughout the project, including in the design of data collection tools, data analysis and interpretation, and reporting.

What is consistent attendance and why is it important?

Consistent school attendance plays an important role in students' academic achievement; if students are not in their classrooms on a regular basis, they may struggle to learn or retain concepts, especially in foundational subjects like reading and math.

In addition, families who do *not* consistently send their young students (under 12 years old) to school can face action from child protection services. To further contextualize and ground the literature, see several key definitions (relevant to Minnesota laws and regulations) below.

Consistent attendance: Attending “more than 90% of school days. Consistent attendance is the opposite of chronic absenteeism, which is defined as missing at least 10% of school days” (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.).

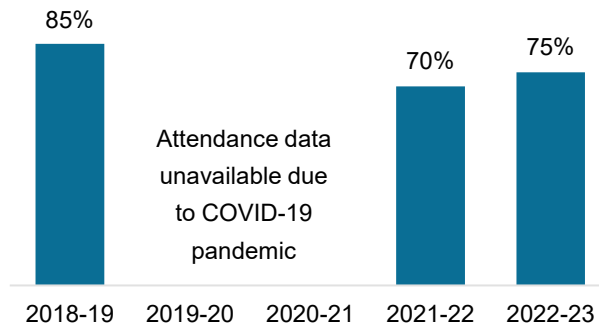
Truancy: Absence “from school without permission or a valid reason. A child can become truant if they have multiple unexcused absences (PACER Center, n.d.).” Depending on the type of school, continuing truancy is defined as:

- *Elementary:* Unexcused absence for 3 or more days
- *Middle or high school:* Unexcused absence for 1 or more class periods on 3 or more days.

It's important to note that while truancy focuses on unexcused absences, “chronic absenteeism” encompasses all types of absence—excused, unexcused, and suspension (Attendance Works, 2016).

Educational neglect: In Minnesota, if a child under 12 years old is truant for 7 or more days in a school year, then their school “is legally required to make an educational neglect report” to child protection services, which could include a child maltreatment investigation (Stearns County, n.d.).

Rate of Consistent attendance among Minnesota students, by academic year



Examining racial disparities

rate of consistent attendance for White students was 79%, compared to 50% for Native American students, 64% for Hispanic students, and 65% for Black students (MDE, 2023).

At the same time, Minnesota’s child welfare system (the system currently required to respond to cases of continuing truancy for children under 12 years old) has these same disparities. An April 2024 *Star Tribune* article stated:

“A Minnesota family’s chances of being reported for child maltreatment vary dramatically depending on their race. So does the likelihood a kid will be removed from their family, or reunited with them down the road” (Van Berkel, 2024).

The article cited 2021 data from a legislative report on *Minnesota’s Out-of-Home Care and Permanency*. A key finding from this report was that, although rates of out-of-home placements had decreased between 2017 and 2021, “American Indian children were 16 times more likely than white children to be in out-of-home care” (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2023). Multi-racial children were 7 times more likely than white children to be in out-of-home care, and African American children and Hispanic children (of any race) were two times more likely.

The deeply rooted disparities in each of these systems—education and child safety—highlight the importance of addressing educational neglect and diversionary programming that moves families towards support, rather than separation.

Recent work in Minnesota

In addition to the work that Sauer, Casey Family Programs, Wilder, and counties across Minnesota are doing related to attendance and child and family well-being, a House bill (SF 4747) was first introduced in the 2023-24 Minnesota legislature to address educational neglect. The bill, authored by Senator Mary Kunesh and Representative Bianca Virnig, would “modify the current ‘child welfare response’ to educational neglect... [and] would also create limited grants available to local agencies ‘for the purpose of improving school attendance after receiving a report that alleges failure to ensure that a child is educated’” (Perez, 2024). The 2023-24 legislature also established the Student Attendance and Truancy Legislative Study Group (Spewak, 2024a) and authorized funding for a three-year pilot program, involving 12 school districts, to “develop strategies against absenteeism” (Spewak, 2024b). Most recently, in the 2025-2026 legislative session, Bill SF942 was introduced

with the aim of mandating a child welfare (rather than child protection) response to school attendance reports (in addition to other changes, such as modifying the habitual truant definition and appropriating funds for grants to fund child welfare response efforts). A version of the bill was passed during the 2025 special session in the Education omnibus bill, with changes going into effect July 1, 2025 (see Section 39. 260E.291). (The request for grant funding to support this change did not pass during the session).

Landscape of research and evaluation on attendance-related programming

Because of the uptick in chronic absenteeism during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been renewed interest in programs and policies related to reducing chronic absenteeism. However, that does not necessarily translate into more evidence-based practices that clearly show “what works” to increase attendance. Despite numerous programs aimed at improving school attendance, there still appear to be relatively few studies that illustrate the effectiveness of truancy intervention programs, especially for young students (Eklund et al., 2020; Hobbs et al., 2018; Jacob & Lovett, 2017). It is very likely that research and evaluation work is happening, but results are not yet publicly available.

Several of the articles reviewed for this literature review discussed the need for additional research and provided general ideas for measuring and evaluating this topic. For example, an article from the Brookings Institution states, “There are hundreds of studies on programs designed to increase school attendance. Unfortunately, very few meet even a minimum standard of rigor” (Jacob & Lovett, 2017).

In a recent meta-analysis of evidence-based interventions, Eklund et al. call for higher quality research to “increase confidence in the available interventions designed to address chronic absenteeism” (Eklund et al., 2020). Specifically, they suggest:

- Randomizing at the student level, instead of at the school or district level
- Consistently collecting baseline measures of outcomes
- Controlling for covariates
- Examining different types of interventions that have demonstrated larger effect sizes, such as social-emotional learning curricula and teacher mentoring; while there were only a few of these studies in their meta-analysis, they appeared to have more positive outcomes.
- Collecting information about the program itself, including “who delivered the intervention (e.g., teacher, school psychologist) and manualized components of each intervention.”
- Measuring the fidelity of an intervention is also critical, according to at least two studies (Eklund et al., 2020; Goulet et al., 2018).

Related to specific measures, many articles provided ideas around what to collect for attendance-related evaluations (see quotes below); however, there was little discussion around how to word the questions, or which response categories to use.

“Social risk factors for truancy include social culture, curriculum, poor teaching, negative school environment, poor relationships with teachers, dissatisfaction with school, and school disciplinary practices. Community and contextual risk factors include delinquent peer involvement, employment opportunities, neighborhood characteristics, levels of social support, community norms, and community violence. Family-related contributors include poverty, family conflict, parental education, parental attitude toward education, education, and involvement in their children’s school” (Kethineni et al., 2021, p. 2).

“Since truancy is a behavior with complex patterns of ingredients affecting different individuals in different ways, truancy reduction programs typically address a range of issues leading students to skip school...The [truancy] models that show the most promise, not only of reducing truancy, but also of affecting its risk factors, include several key components: Parental involvement; Meaningful sanctions or consequences for truancy; Meaningful incentives for school attendance; Ongoing school-based truancy reduction programs; Involvement of community resources (e.g., law enforcement)” (Wesley & Cloud Duttweiler, 2005, p. 6).

Measuring attendance

Given the nature of the work that Sauer, Casey, and Wilder Research are undertaking, attendance is one of the most important measures to collect. However, as discussed by Hobbs et al., there is not always consistency around the definition of absenteeism, and measures “often differ across states, jurisdictions, school districts, schools, and programs—making multi-site program evaluations challenging. For example, it may be that in one school, a phone call from a parent about a medical appointment is considered an excused absence, whereas another school may consider this an unexcused absence because it is not accompanied by a doctor’s note” (Hobbs et al., 2018). Federal education legislation, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) does help create some consistency in the definition of “chronic absence” (as discussed later in this report).

Types of absences

One state-level evaluation of federally funded attendance programs illustrated the importance of collecting and analyzing data by “reason for absence,” and particularly whether the reason was “excused” or “unexcused” (see quote below).

“Research has often neglected to separately assess the impact of excused and unexcused absences. Although much of the research within juvenile justice has focused on delinquent or truant behavior (i.e., absences for which parents are unaware), within other disciplines, researchers have also examined non-truant “excused” absences stemming from medical/mental health, family issue or poverty, employment, religion, bullying, or school refusal” (Hobbs et al., 2018).

In their evaluation, Hobbs et al. analyzed student data (N=1,606) from 12 distinct (and unnamed) absenteeism programs implemented at 137 schools across a state. Schools and districts varied greatly in their classification of absences (one district had 144 ways of coding absences); therefore, creating broad categories for analysis was difficult. Ultimately, the Hobbs et al. analysis used the following:

Excused absences	Unexcused absences
Medical/illness* (with documentation)	Medical/illness* (without documentation)
Administrative/school activity	Parent acknowledged**
Religious/funeral	Truant
Suspension	Unverified

*“Medical/illness” may be an excused or unexcused absence, depending on the school. Some schools count medical absences as “unexcused” until they receive appropriate documentation from a student’s family.

***“Parent acknowledged” reasons include those where a parent or caregiver is aware of a student’s absence, but may not condone it (i.e., the parent could not persuade the child to go to school).

Their conclusion points out that much research focuses on truant behavior having a negative impact on academics, as well as dropping out of school or delinquency; however, “missing school for any reason could contribute to negative outcomes. For example, a student who is chronically absent for health reasons could be just as likely to disengage from school and dropout as a student who is chronically absent for truant reasons...As the data in this study supports, interventions that address both excused and unexcused absences are worthy of implementation and can improve both types of absences” (Hobbs et al., 2018, p. 12).

Degrees of school absence

“Using a tiered approach (e.g., Attendance Works) that categorizes youth based on their degree of absenteeism is promising because it could offer objective guidance for attendance programs on how to assess and intervene when a student is absent” (Hobbs et al., 2018, p. 4).

In their evaluation, Hobbs et al. classified students into tiers based on their absences from school. The four tiers are described below:

- Tier 1A: Students who missed less than 5% of required school attendance (11.4% of sample)
- Tier 1B: Students who missed between 6% and 10% of required school attendance (19.6%)
- Tier 2: Students who missed between 11% and 19% of required school attendance (32.4%)
- Tier 3: Students who missed 20% or more of required school attendance (36.7%)

These tiers generally align with “The Tiers of Intervention” from Attendance Works, a nonprofit working to address chronic absenteeism. Attendance Works recommends using interventions that meet the needs of students at different levels of absenteeism. For example, all students and families should have “foundational supports” and “universal prevention,” while students who are missing 10-19% of the school year need Tier 2 or “early intervention,” and students missing 20% or more of the school year need “intensive intervention” (Attendance Works, n.d.).

Other potential evaluation measures

In addition to attendance, several potential measures are listed below (based on suggestions from the literature). They are grouped into four levels: family or caregiver, student, school or program, and community. These categories are generally supported by other research, such as Jacob & Lovett, who also talk about differences in measurement by student age. For example:

“Kindergarten absenteeism is most strongly related to family factors—e.g., children whose parents suffer from substance abuse, or whose work schedules make it difficult for them to get their children out the door each morning...Teenage truancy, on the other hand, is more frequently associated with student- or school-factors, such as fear of bullying or disengagement with school” (Jacob & Lovett, 2017).

Family or caregiver measures

- Caregiver education
- Caregiver employment
- Language spoken at home
- Household income
- Support for child’s education (e.g., perception of school legitimacy, involvement in school activities)
- Growth mindset (i.e., readiness to change)
- Parenting style (e.g., questions from the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire (APQ)-9)

Student measures

- Age and grade level
- Race and ethnicity
- Child mental health (e.g., anxiety)
- Child physical health (e.g., food, sleep)
- Attitude towards school
- Perception of school legitimacy
- Experiences with bullying
- Relationship with peers
- Relationship with school/teachers/staff
- Academic performance
- Frequency and type of disciplinary measures (e.g., detention, suspension, in-class time out)

School or program measures

It is also important to measure what is happening in schools (including programs and interventions) to understand how the school environment impacts absenteeism. To start, collect basic information on what schools are currently providing and how:

- Teachers and support staff
 - Are there “high-quality” teachers and support staff?
 - What is the teacher to student ratio (i.e., Are there teacher shortages?)
 - What support staff exist to address social-emotional learning?
 - What is the quality of the student-teacher relationships?
- Poor conditions or lack of school facilities, geographic access to school, less challenging courses and student boredom
- What curricula are currently being used to address school attendance? Are these curricula evidence-based? What tools exist to collect measures for these curricula?
- Specific aspects of diversionary programming
 - Who initiated student involvement in the program (e.g., school, court, state agency)?
 - Is attendance voluntary or mandatory?
 - What is the length of the program?

Community measures

- Community safety
- Availability of social-emotional support services
- Availability of job opportunities

Promising practices for increasing student attendance

There are many programs and practices designed to increase children’s school attendance and hundreds of studies aimed at showing program effectiveness; however, a smaller number of studies have been conducted with enough rigor to prove that an intervention is effective. And few (if any) have been done specifically for children under 12 years old (the upper age limit at which Minnesota schools are required to make an “educational neglect report” for unexcused absences).

Much of the research points to the need for multiple interconnected approaches across systems (family, school, society) in order to improve consistent attendance. In 2024, the American Institutes of Research (AIR) published an article that outlined “four ways education leaders can harness evidence to address attendance” (Scala et al., 2024); these are:

- 1) Strengthen positive communication with families
- 2) Improve student engagement and conditions for learning
- 3) Invest in early warning systems (though the evidence for this appears to be found in older, middle, or high school students)
- 4) Engage strength-based, community-focused supports and services

In addition, many articles discuss the need for a “tiered” approach with students, meaning that schools need targeted interventions for students who are already chronically absent, as well as, a universal intervention for all students in the school (e.g., Attendance Works). This type of tiered framework is sometimes called a Response to Intervention (RtI) approach and is described by Hobbs et al. as follows:

The Response to Intervention approach... proposes that interventions should be matched to the student by utilizing a multi-tier system, with each tier becoming increasingly responsive based on the students' need for the intervention. The RtI framework has typically been applied to student achievement... As applied to absenteeism, the RtI model promotes proactive interventions for school absences 'as it first occurs, and before other, more intransigent or comorbid problems develop' (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014)" (Hobbs et al., 2018, p. 4).

Below are two commonly used frameworks that have evidence of reducing chronic absenteeism for young students, and ultimately prevent a report of educational neglect. In particular, they appear to address the “tiers” of students who are **at-risk** of being chronically absent or who are **already chronically absent**.

Early Truancy Prevention Program

The Early Truancy Prevention Program (ETPP) was co-designed by university researchers and teachers and administrators from Durham Public Schools in North Carolina (Cook et al., 2017). The purpose of this program was to focus on truancy concerns for young students, with the idea of leveraging “the close relationship that students in primary grades typically develop with the teacher with whom they spend most of the day” (Cook et al., 2017, p. 263). The ETPP was designed as a three-tier intervention (much like the Attendance Works tiers described earlier in this report), including: “facilitating communication between teachers and parents (Tier 1), giving the teachers the lead role in intervening with individual students who begin to accumulate excessive absences (Tier 2), and encouraging referrals to specialists for chronic absentees (Tier 3)” (p. 263).

A pilot study was conducted with “five high-poverty public elementary schools” (p. 262). The ETPP was implemented in 20 classrooms, while 21 other classrooms from the same schools served as the control group. The study program and study focused on first and second grade students.

The final conclusion of the experimental design for this pilot study is that there is “strong evidence that ETPP was effective in reducing the prevalence of students with frequent absences (6 or more)” (Cook et al., 2017, p. 268). The authors stress that the components of the program are “feasible for schools to implement and together constitute a promising way to improve student attendance for primary grades” (Cook et al., 2017, p. 268). They note that “it is a matter of resources,” since the ETPP would require additional training for teachers as well as more time and effort to carry out the program; this would also mean additional compensation for any teachers involved. The specific components of ETPP are outlined below (quoted directly from Cook et al., 2017, p. 265):

Specific components of ETPP	Related tier
Universal teacher home visiting to provide teachers with information about students' home life and establish a productive working relationship between parents and teachers	Tier 1
A smart phone for each teacher with a cellular plan sufficient to accommodate frequent communication with parents by text, email, or voice, as well as providing a mobile device to access on-line materials	Tier 1
Bi-weekly attendance data to give teachers information needed to identify students with emerging attendance problems	Tier 1
An on-line Attendance Information System that guides the teacher's assessment of the main barriers to attendance for each student, as well as providing suggested interventions for removing barriers and a convenient method of keeping track of each target case	Tier 2
Consultation with staff to ensure that teachers are taking full advantage of the available resources in the school system and community, as well as coordinating with the truancy-court program and other established social-work programs	Tier 3

Check & Connect

Check & Connect (C&C) is an intervention program developed by the University of Minnesota for “K-12 students who show warning signs of disengagement with school and who are at risk of dropping out” (University of Minnesota, n.d.).

C&C was referenced in many of the articles reviewed for this report (more than any other program related to reducing chronic absenteeism); however, studies appear to show mixed results.

A relatively recent study (published in 2020) details the results of a large-scale randomized control trial; this study involved students in grades 1-8 from 69 participating Chicago Public Schools. The overall findings of this study were that participation in C&C “decreased absences in grades 5-7 by 4.2 days, or 22.9 percent, but with no detectable effects on students in grades 1-4” (Guryan et al., 2021, p. 1). These results appear to indicate that the program is successful for middle-school aged children, but not necessarily those in elementary school.

Two articles from the literature review state that early C&C studies were limited in scope and size (Cook et al., 2017; Jacob & Lovett, 2017). In addition, a study out of California found that, “Despite prior evidence of effectiveness for students with disabilities, Check & Connect did not have a positive impact on outcomes for general education students in a large, urban district in California” (Holtzman et al., 2017, p. 10).

The program itself includes four components and three elements; quoted directly from the website, these are:

Components of Check & Connect

- 1) **The Mentor:** A person assigned to a specific student(s) who builds a strong relationship with him/her based on mutual trust and open communication, nurtured through a long-term commitment focused on success at school and with learning. This person may be called a mentor, monitor, graduation coach, intervention specialist, etc.

- 2) **"Check" Component:** Systematic monitoring of student performance variables (warning signs of disengagement such as attendance, grades, and behavior referrals) using data readily available to school personnel.
- 3) **"Connect" Component:** Timely, personalized, data-based interventions designed to provide support tailored to individual student needs, based on the student's level of engagement with school ("check" data), associated influences of home and school, and leveraging of local resources.
- 4) **Parent/Family Engagement:** Mentors partner with parents/families. They work with caseloads of students and families for at least two years, functioning as liaisons between home and school and striving to build constructive family-school relationships.

Elements of Check & Connect

- 1) **Relationships:** Are based in mutual trust and open communication and nurtured through a long-term commitment focused on promoting a student's educational success.
 - **Focus on alterable variables:** Refers to systematic monitoring (i.e., "checking") of indicators of disengagement (attendance, grades, behavior) that are readily available to school personnel and can be altered through intervention.
 - **Personalized, data-based intervention:** Refers to "connect" interventions, which are supportive interventions that are personalized, not prescriptive. Mentors use data—including information on the student's needs ("check" data and student perspective), family circumstances, and availability of school and community resources—as the basis for intervention design. It is expected that different students on a mentor's caseload will receive different interventions.
 - **Long-term commitment:** Means that interventions are implemented for a minimum of two years. Mentors make a two-year commitment, which may involve following highly mobile youth and families from school to school and program to program within a district.
 - **Participation and affiliation with school:** Means that mentors facilitate student access to and active participation in school-related activities and events.
- 2) **Problem Solving and Capacity Building:** Means a cognitive-behavioral approach is used to promote the acquisition of skills to resolve conflict constructively, encourage the search for solutions rather than a source of blame, foster productive coping skills, and diminish dependency on the mentor.
- 3) **Persistence Plus:** Refers to persistence, continuity, and consistency. The mentor is a persistent source of academic motivation, is familiar with the youth and family (continuity), and conveys the message that "education is important for your future" (consistency).

Preventative supports for all students

In addition to the tiered frameworks of ETPP and C&C, there are specific interventions that may reduce chronic absenteeism for young students. A 2023 research brief from EdResearch for Action summarizes evidence-based practices for three levels of interventions, those that: 1) respond to chronic absenteeism, 2) focus on students who show signs of risk, and 3) provide broad, preventative supports to all students. The following section outlines practices that provide preventative supports for all students (Gottfried et al., 2023). This content is structured using the outline of the EdResearch for Action brief with while also including other studies found during this literature search.

Text messaging with caregivers

Communication with caregivers appears to be one of the most effective interventions in improving attendance rates. As described by AIR, “research shows that increasing effective communication with families, through positive text messaging, email and telephone calls, can help improve rates of attendance among students” (Scala et al., 2024).

A research project from the Institute for Education Sciences found that sending basic attendance-related text messages to caregivers reduced chronic absence among students. At the beginning of their study, which included 26,843 students (K-5) from 108 elementary schools, Heppen et al. randomly assigned families into three groups: “benefits-framed basic messaging,” “consequences-framed basic messaging,” or “no-messaging.” Basic messaging included weekly reminders about the importance of attending school, framed around either the benefits of attending or the consequences of missing school. Basic messaging also included automated same-day notifications to caregivers if their student was marked as absent that day. The study found that both approaches—basic text messaging to caregivers around the benefits and consequences of school attendance—were “similarly effective at reducing chronic absence” (Heppen et al., 2020, p. 7).

In addition to basic text messaging, the study looked at adapted messaging, based on students’ attendance rates between October and December of the 2017-18 school year. For students who had missed 8% or more of school days, families received one of two adapted messages:

- **School outreach** messaging included school staff “directly texting parents to enhance feelings of engagement and provide opportunities for ongoing discussion and individualized support” (p. 2).
- **Goal commitment** messaging included weekly (Sunday) messages asking “parents to set goals for perfect attendance for the upcoming week, with feedback sent each Friday. Additionally, parents in the goal commitment group were given the opportunity to request additional attendance tips on topics of interest each Sunday” (p. 2).

The study found that “all four combinations of basic and intensified messaging strategies reduced chronic absence” (Heppen et al., 2020, p. 4). For students with a prior history of higher absences, the best strategy (i.e., the one that reduced chronic absences the most) involved school staff texting directly with families.

Transportation

“Investments in safer and more accessible transportation can lead to significant improvements in student attendance” (Gottfried et al., 2023, p. 5). One study examined data from the Environmental Protection Agency’s Bus Rebate Program to determine whether federal funding to upgrade buses had any causal impact on student attendance (Pedde et al., 2023). The study found evidence that

“upgrading older, more polluting buses with newer cleaner buses was associated with increases in school district attendance rates” (Pedde et al., 2023, p. 841). Researchers hypothesized that this was because there were “reductions in asthma exacerbations...and fewer respiratory symptoms in general,” as well as student preference for riding on newer buses and possible reductions in bus noise levels (Pedde et al., 2023, p. 841).

Another study (conducted by the author of the EdResearch in Action brief) examined “whether kindergartners who took the school bus...had fewer total absences and lower chances of being chronically absent, compared with those who went to school by other means” (Gottfried, 2017, p. 571). The study relied on a nationally representative sample of kindergartners from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (Kindergarten class of 2010-11). Overall, this study found that “children who took the bus to kindergarten had fewer total missed days of school and lower likelihood of being chronically absent. This remained the case even after controlling for a large span of covariates” (Gottfried, 2017, p. 585).

The EdResearch in Action brief discusses the importance of interventions for students who face more challenges with transportation, including students who are homeless or in foster care, those who have disabilities, students who live in rural settings, or those who live in urban settings that have high rates of crime (Gottfried et al., 2023).

School breakfast

Other common interventions explored in the literature were School Breakfast Programs (SBP); however, evidence of their impact on attendance is mixed. In a recent literature review, Olarte et al. reviewed Breakfast after the Bell (BATB) programs in public and private elementary, middle, and high schools. The authors categorize BATB programs into the following models: Breakfast in Classroom (BIC); Grab-and-Go (GG); and Second Chance Breakfast (SCB). Among the 10 elementary school studies they reviewed, “six found increased student attendance after the implementation of BATB, while four found no association” (Olarte et al., 2023, p. 14). Their findings state:

“One government report conducted in Maryland found improvements in attendance with BIC. Another government report found a 1.05-percentage-point increase in attendance after three years, but pooled impacts across all three years were small and not statistically significant. In a large, urban school district, one study found a small but statistically significant increase in attendance (i.e., 95.5% with BIC versus 95.3%, with breakfast served in the cafeteria ($p = 0.004$)). Additionally, using a nationally representative sample during the 2010–2011 SY, another study found students had fewer absences (-0.50 [SE: 0.24] $p < 0.05$) and a lower likelihood of chronic absenteeism (-0.04 (SE: 0.02) $p < 0.05$) with BIC. However, the remaining four studies conducted in elementary schools showed that serving BIC had no impact on absenteeism” (Olarte et al., 2023, p. 14).

Health-related interventions

“Attendance interventions that target physical and mental health needs tend to be particularly effective [at reducing chronic absenteeism]” (Gottfried et al., 2023, p. 6).

A study from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill looked at the impact of **school counselors** on several indicators, including attendance. Looking back at six years of data from all North Carolina public elementary and middle schools, researchers found that “increases in school counseling FTE

rations predicted lower rates of student absenteeism” (Domina et al., 2022, p. 181). The authors also state that these positive findings are consistent with other research on school counselors and student attendance.

The EdResearch in Action brief mentions other health-related interventions, ranging from **improvements to the physical spaces** at school (e.g., improved ventilation, asbestos removal) to increasing the number of **school nurses**. In fact, several articles explored the possible connection between school nurses and attendance; however, the evidence appears to be mixed. One study looked at the cost and effectiveness of school-based Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) “for improving attendance and chronic absenteeism at a large, urban school district in the southeastern USA” (Leach, 2022, p. 94). Researchers analyzed data from 46 elementary schools (23 with nurses and 23 without nurses) and found that “despite substantial incremental costs of \$68,228 per school, the presence of a full-time LPN was associated with...negligible improvements” (Leach, 2023, p. 102). The authors hypothesize that their disappointing results may be related to the “limited training and scope of practice of LPNs relative to RNs” (p. 102).

A qualitative analysis of interviews with 23 high school nurses grouped nursing work into four main themes (or domains): 1) care coordination, 2) leadership, 3) quality improvement, and 4) community and public health (Rankine et al., 2023). The study illustrates that nurses understand their role in student attendance, but that there are barriers at multiple system levels that limit their capacity; recommendations based on the interviews are outlined below:

- **School and district level:** “Advocate for school nurses to routinely be included as integral members of school attendance teams. School leadership, school staff, school nurses, and other school health or mental health personnel should work together to develop attendance policies and enact collaborative team-based approaches to absenteeism... Additionally, schools should recognize attendance data as health data and grant school nurses timely access to attendance records and medical absence excuses” (Rankine et al., 2023, p. 9).
- **State and federal levels:** The article clearly emphasizes the need for policies that allow for nurses to be in *every* school *every* day, and that more nurses are needed to provide adequate care to students, especially those with special health needs. The article also calls for increased mental health supports in schools. “Appropriate staffing should be determined after careful consideration of the student population’s health needs and social influences on health, which may manifest as disparities in health and academic outcomes including chronic absenteeism” (Rankine et al., 2023, p. 9).
- **Health care system level:** The more that systems can communicate and work together the better. Rankine et al. offer several health system solutions, including encouraging a student’s primary care physician obtain data-sharing permission from the student’s school; identifying school nurses as “care team members,” and (more broadly) sharing “electronic health records between school and clinical settings (p. 9). In addition, they say that “the health care system...bears responsibility to ensure that professional development for school nurses keeps pace with students’ increasingly complex health needs” (p. 9).

Practices that may meet Every Student Success Act (ESSA) standards

The Every Student Success Act (ESSA) is federal K-12 legislation, signed into law in 2015, that “replaced the previous education law called ‘No Child Left Behind’” (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Each state has its own ESSA plan, which includes goals and measurements around consistent school attendance.

The website, Evidence for ESSA, is a clearinghouse for programs shown to “improve attendance and reduce chronic truancy while also meeting the national ESSA evidence standards” (Evidence for ESSA, n.d.). The following programs are marked as having “strong” evidence for improving attendance for students K-12. Any intervention that might include children under 12 is included in the table below (even if it is not specifically for children under 12). The interventions vary in cost; none are free.

Interventions with *strong* evidence for improving attendance or reducing truancy

Intervention	Description	Grades studied	# of studies
EveryDay Intervention	EveryDay Intervention delivers “Absence Reports to parents and guardians with actionable, personalized information about their student’s attendance. After establishing a district partnership and securely receiving attendance data, EveryDay Intervention runs analyses to identify students who are at risk of being chronically absent and most likely to benefit from the program. They generate personalized Absence Reports with content tailored for each student and mail them directly to the parents/guardians” (Evidence for ESSA, n.d.)	K-12	2
Positive Action	“Positive Action is a whole-school reform strategy designed to improve social-emotional, attendance, and achievement outcomes by building school climate, self-control, goal-setting, problem-solving, persistence, and other skills. Students learn these skills through structured discussions and activities, games, and role plays. Teachers receive detailed manuals and materials to support 140 15-20 minute lessons per year) (4 days per week). Parents also receive handbooks that parallel the school lessons” (Evidence for ESSA, n.d.)	K-8	2
Future Forward	“Future Forward is an early literacy intervention that provides a support system for kindergarten through third grade students struggling with reading that integrates one-on-one tutoring and family engagement...Future Forward is a freestanding program, using customized curriculum and dedicated staff, with the full collaboration of school administrators and classroom teachers. Future Forward staff work with a child’s home and learning community toward the ultimate goal for all students to read at grade level by the end of third grade” (Evidence for ESSA, n.d.). Note: Although this is an early literacy intervention, a randomized study found significant impacts on student attendance.	K-3	3

Evidence for ESSA also includes the following “promising” evidence for improving student attendance. Again, these are interventions that may include children under 12, but are not specific to young students. Each intervention has an associated fee.

Interventions with *promising* evidence for improving attendance or reducing truancy

Intervention	Description	Grades studied	# of studies
PowerSchool Attendance Intervention	“PowerSchool Attendance Intervention is intended to increase family engagement and support student attendance. The solution helps educators monitor daily and period-level attendance as well as chronic absenteeism data for each student. Educators can also engage in two-way messaging with families via texts to the families’ personal phones and email. The solution gathers data from a school or district’s administrative system to provide attendance dashboards, customized messaging templates, and options for administrators and teachers to communicate with families. It includes auto-translation features that help administrators and treatment teachers reach parents from diverse backgrounds. The ability to automatically populate a parent or student’s name and real-time attendance data into communication templates greatly reduces the time burden for school staff” (Evidence for ESSA, n.d.).	6-12	1
Parent Teacher Home Visits – Attendance	“The Parent Teacher Home Visits model was co-created by parents and educators using the community organizing principles of shared leadership. Participating teachers conduct 30-40 minute home visits in which educators listen, ask questions, and make observations that they can take back to their classrooms to improve instruction for the learner. As a two-visit model, PTHV encourages the first relationship-building visit to occur in the summer or early fall, followed by ongoing communication throughout the year and a second visit that focuses on academics or any other relevant issue to the student or family. The PTHV model has five non-negotiables: Visits are voluntary and arranged in advance Teachers are trained and compensated for visits Visits focus on hopes and dreams Educators visit a cross-section of students (not a targeted intervention) Educators go in pairs and reflect” (Evidence for ESSA, n.d.).	1-5	1

Intervention	Description	Grades studied	# of studies
Absenteeism and Truancy: Interventions and Universal Procedures (ATI-UP)	“ATI-UP is a preventive, school-wide intervention that has school teams following a multi-tiered, multi-system framework intended to increase attendance for all students and reduce the number of students identified as chronically absent. These systems incorporate a problem-solving team, a parental/community engagement component, promotion of attendance in school, and motivation for improvements in behavior. The goal of ATI-UP is to instill a positive social climate in which attendance expectations are directly taught to the students, consistently acknowledged, and actively monitored” (Evidence for ESSA, n.d.).	K-6	1
SaferSanerSchools Whole-School Change	“The SaferSanerSchools™ Whole-School Change program is disseminated through the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP). It is grounded in 11 essential elements that center around the importance of communication, responsibility, restoration, and separating the “deed” from the “doer.” It requires all school staff to learn how to enact the key elements with an aim of increasing understanding of how one’s actions affect others and more broadly creating a better school climate” (Evidence for ESSA, n.d.)	K-12	1
Second Step – Attendance	“Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum is designed to teach elementary students social skills and how to respond to others in non-violent ways. The ultimate goal is to prevent violence in schools by providing early training in empathy, impulse control, problem solving, and anger management. Fear of victimization at school and poor school climate have negative impacts on school attendance, so such violence prevention programs are expected to have positive effects on attendance” (Evidence for ESSA, n.d.). Note: Although this is a violence prevention program, a randomized study found a significant decrease, at the student-level, in the number of unexcused absences after one semester in the program. (This was a study of first grade students.)	1	1

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