

Katie Pekel

Do You Know if Your Kids Are in School?

The importance of school attendance and what we should know to try and improve it

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Why Attendance?

We know from research literature and common-sense experience students who have consistent attendance in school do better academically, have higher graduation and post-secondary going rates, and report a more positive school climate[1,2]. We also know that there are no "silver bullets" to increase student attendance. While student absenteeism may have gotten worse during the pandemic, chronic absenteeism is not a new concept for schools. In fact, we could argue it dates back to the inception of compulsory attendance laws that originated in the late 19th century which led to the advent of "truancy"[3]. While schools have likely tried to urge students to school for decades, it was not until student attendance became a "nonacademic measure of school quality" and thus part of an accountability system under ESSA in 2015 that "chronic absenteeism" moved to the front of the stage[4].

Defining Consistent Attendance

The Minnesota Department of Education considers a student "...consistently attending school if they attend more than 90 percent of school days. Consistent attendance is the opposite of chronic absenteeism, which is defined as missing at least 10 percent of school days (the equivalent of missing one day out of every two traditional school weeks)"[5]. In Minnesota we calculate consistent attendance by comparing each student's average daily attendance to average daily membership. The concerning news is that on average only 75.5% of our students were consistently attending school in 2024. This falls far below our desired rate of 90%. The good news is that on average, schools across Minnesota have been increasing their consistent attendance rates incrementally for the past three years: 2022: 69.8%; 2023: 74.5%; 2024: 75.5%. You can look up this data by district and school and disaggregate that data among a multitude of factors at the Minnesota Report Card site under the section *Are students safe and engaged?* (https://rc.education.mn.gov).

Troubles with the Data

In Minnesota we report attendance data one year behind when we report MCA Test scores. For example, on the current MDE Report card site, you can access the 2024-2025 MCA data and the 2023-2024 attendance data. While this poses issues when thinking about acting on data in a timely manner, this is not the only concern with data reporting. Currently, each school district, and in many cases, each individual school building determines what they are reporting or how they are "coding" the rationale provided for student absences. For example, one school may mark a school activity or funeral as "excused" while another may not. The internal data collection and coding may make it challenging for districts to ascertain some of the root causes of student absenteeism. This also

1 *(Ginsburg, Jordan, & Chang, 2014)*
2 *(Van Eck, Johnson, Bettencourt, & Lindstrom Johnson, 2017)*
3 *(Winchell Lenhoff & Singer, 2025)*
4 *(Winchell Lenhoff & Singer, 2025)*
5 *(MDE, Implementing ESSA: Consistent Attendance, n.d.)*

makes it hard for schools to compare themselves to each other from a benchmarking or continuous improvement perspective because they could be comparing "apples to oranges." This lack of truly comparable data leaves school leaders unable to really understand if another school's particular approach or intervention to absenteeism is working and if similar results could be expected in a different setting.

State Efforts

In 2024, the state of Minnesota allocated $4.7 million dollars for 12 districts statewide across three years to "...explore ways to increase student attendance and reduce truancy"[6]. Reports of their ongoing work are and will continue to be made to the Minnesota Legislature. Additionally, the Student Attendance and Truancy Legislative Study Group was established in 2024 to "make recommendations to the relevant legislative committees in order to increase student attendance and reduce truancy..."[7]. The Minnesota Department of Education, COMPASS, and the Minnesota Service Cooperatives are working together[8] to support attendance. An Attendance Guidebook was published by COMPASS in June 2025[9].



Visit https://tinyurl.com/bdf2w53s to access the Minnesota Department of Education's "Minnesota Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MnMTSS) Attendance Guidebook."

What Works?

Researchers Sarah Winchell Lenhoff and Jeremy Stringer have been working with the Detroit Public Schools in a research-practice partnership, Detroit Peer, for nearly a decade to try and answer this question. As they outline in their book, "Rethinking Chronic Absenteeism: Why Schools Can't Solve It Alone," the answer to "What works?" is complicated. They explain that absenteeism is much more than individual behaviors or characteristics of students, or even their families, but rather a more ecological issue that encompasses schools, neighborhoods, communities, and even policies and system structures. They share in their report, "How are Michigan Schools Addressing Chronic Absenteeism,"[10] there are three basic approaches to addressing chronic absenteeism:

1. *Nudging students or parents* to change behavior: providing information or using positive or negative motivation
2. *Improving student experiences in schools:* improving school climate, student engagement and belonging, school-family relationships, etc.
3. *Removing barriers* to attendance: providing resources and services to directly address root causes of absenteeism (e.g., transportation, health, housing, etc.)

Visit https://tinyurl.com/4vffsww2 for more details about this book.

They also share through their reading of the research literature a conceptual framework that may run counter to our preconceptions of "what works" (Figure 1).

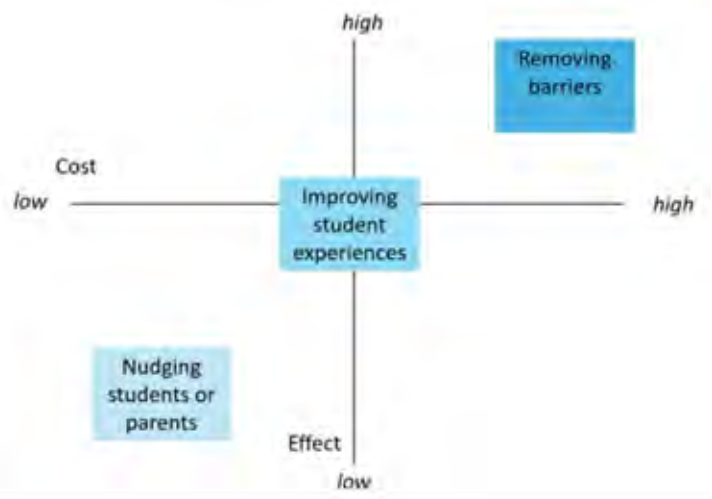


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for approaches to Chronic Absenteeism as found on p. 29 of Singer, J., & Lenhoff, S. W. (2025). How are Michigan's schools addressing chronic absenteeism? Detroit Partnership for Education Equity & Research.

What Lenhoff and Singer set forth in this framework is the things school leaders in Detroit identify as spending a lot of time on, "Nudging students or parents" (e.g., letters and phone calls home, messaging the importance of attendance, incentives, and referring students to court) may have a low cost, but they also have a low effect. They also explain that while "Removing barriers" activities (e.g., mental health support, social service referral, arranging transportation, home visits or planning safe routes to school) have a high impact, they are also traditionally high in cost. To be clear,

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6 *(MDE, News Center: 12 Minnesota Districts Pilot Programs Aimed at Improving Attendance Rates, n.d.)*
7 *(Nigro & Xiong, 2024)*
8 *(Mansfield, Peterson, & Wheeler)*
9 *(COMPASS, 2025)*
10 *(Singer & Lenhoff, 2025)*

Lenhoff and Singer are not advocating these efforts not be considered or employed, rather they are simply recognizing that they present a likely financial burden to schools, and thus, they likely cannot provide them alone and will need collaboration with outside organizations. What they do tell us, situated in the middle of their figure, is that "Improving student experiences in school" (e.g., social emotional learning, restorative practices, mentoring, and personalized learning) seems to be the least common strategies, but may also have promise for impact and within the space of direct influence schools can make.

Community Partnerships: A Minnesota Story

As Lenhoff and Singer make the case in their book, schools cannot solve the problem of chronic absenteeism alone. In Scott County, they have used a collaboration between the county, nonprofits, and local school districts to not only reduce chronic absenteeism, but also child protection referrals. In 2017, the Scott County Board embarked on a bold goal: **end the need for child protection services.** They formed a community-driven coalition: Together WE CAN (Work to End Child Abuse and Neglect) which led to the implementation of the Family Resource Centers of Scott County. Here families can access a multitude of services and supports in one location. Agencies and supports like NAMI, WIC, SNAP, early childhood screening, parenting and language supports are all co-located in one building in Shakopee as well as satellite locations in Jordan, Savage, and Belle Plaine. In 2022, as truancy numbers were exploding, they initiated two programs that had them partnering with local nonprofits:

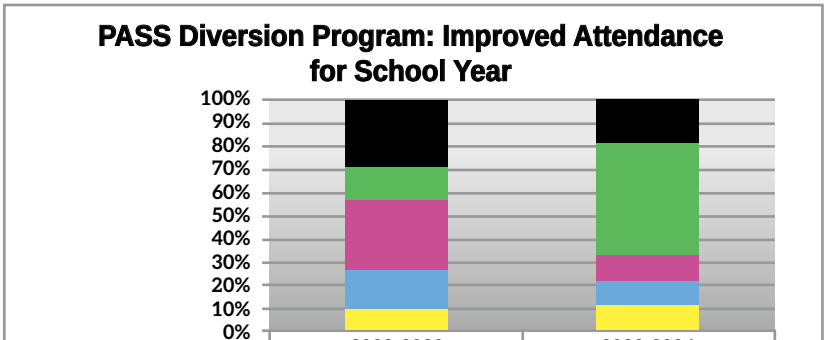
PASS (Promoting Attendance and School Success) was focused on supporting students under the age of 12 and their families. Within PASS there are two routes: Prevention and Diversion. PASS Prevention enables schools to make a direct referral to St. David's, a community-based nonprofit, at the first indication an attendance concern emerges. PASS Diversion supports schools in making mandated reports to the County when a student has seven or more unexcused absences. The county screens the report and if appropriate, diverts the case from child protection to St. David's. Regardless of PASS Prevention or PASS Diversion, St. David's role is to immediately connect with the student and family to assess needs and support school attendance. This may include education regarding school attendance laws, school district policies and building expectations, referrals for mental health services, parent coaching, mediation/support between family and school, and connection to the Family Resource Center. School attendance as well as family resiliency measures are tracked to identify improved attendance and increase in a family's protective factors (an evidenced-based framework aimed at reducing child abuse and neglect).

PATH (Promoting Attendance Through Hope) focused on students above the age of 12. Here two nonprofits, TreeHouse and The Katallasso Group, work together to empower students and parents and caregivers through restorative practices toward better attendance and student success.

Scott County's formal truancy cases dropped from 61 in 2022-2023 to 31 in 2024-2025. Additionally, evidence of progress to their original goal, ending the need for Child Protection Services, is emerging. Child Protection Assessments due to Educational Neglect dropped from 48 in 2022 to just 14 in 2024, and Out of Home Placements dropped from 122 in 2022 to 86 in 2024[11]. Specific to the PASS Diversion intervention, there are promising results with regards to improved student attendance (Figure 2).

About this measure:

This measure shows the PASS Diversion Program: Improved Attendance for School Year: The data reflects the impact on school attendance for Promoting Attendance and School Success (PASS) Diversion referrals to St. David's Center for Child and Family Development in the designated school year: Significantly improved means 50% increase in school attendance: moderately improved means 25-49% increase in attendance; slightly improved means 5-24% improved, unchanged is under 5% improved attendance and unable to assess includes families that move, cases that were referred late in the school year, etc.



	2022-2023	2023-2024
Unable to Assess	28.6%	18.5%
Significantly Improved	14.3%	48.1%
Moderately Improved	31.0%	11.1%
Slightly Improved	16.7%	11.1%
No Change	9.5%	11.1%

Figure 2: PASS Diversion Program Improvements to Attendance

[11] *(Arnston, 2025)*

Not only were there fewer referrals in 2023-2024 than the previous year, leading one to surmise the prevention work was taking hold, the category of "significantly improved," meaning a 50% increase in attendance, saw a large percentage increase. There were also financial wins as well. According to Suzanne Arnston, Deputy Director of Health and Human Services in Scott County, due to the reduction in out of home placement, $160,000 was able to be moved to the Family Resource Center prevention work. Placing dollars upstream in prevention work seems to be paying off for the students and families of Scott County. However, these dollars, like funding for schools, are always in a precarious position. Much of this prevention work in Scott County was accomplished through ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act), the 2021 federal stimulus package. Additionally, philanthropic support from the Sauer Family Foundation, which has made investments in county child welfare systems across the state has also been helpful. Moving forward, sustainability of this type of prevention work will no doubt require "braiding" of a variety of funding streams, some from the county and potentially some from the school systems trying to address chronic absenteeism, because schools cannot do it alone, and neither counties nor schools can fund community school partnerships alone.

Three Questions You Can Ask

1. **What stories do our attendance data tell, and *not* tell?** Using the Minnesota Report Card site under the section Are students safe and engaged? (https://rc.education.mn.gov) what does your district's consistent attendance look like? Once you have formulated questions, resist the potential urge to jump to assumptions, and work with your district leadership to find ways to engage families and students in dialogue to understand why they are not coming to school.
2. **Do we have a clear and consistent process for coding attendance?** Rochester Public Schools, one of the 12 pilot districts, has spent considerable time standardizing this work across their 27 schools. They recently shared their progress and their Attendance and Truancy Handbook at the Be@School Conference this past summer at the University of Minnesota. (https://bit.ly/rps-attendance-handbook)
3. **Who are our community partners?** Beyond the traditional school/county work on truancy, are there other community agencies that could be engaged in the work as Scott County did? As a governing board, can the school board initiate or help in the "braiding" of resources to support prevention work in support of students and families?

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