

# el

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From  
**ABSENT** to



*Engaged*

# New and Notable for Summer

New!

MIKE ANDERSON

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Powerful Habits for Becoming  
a More Well-Balanced Teacher

New!

ERIK PALMER



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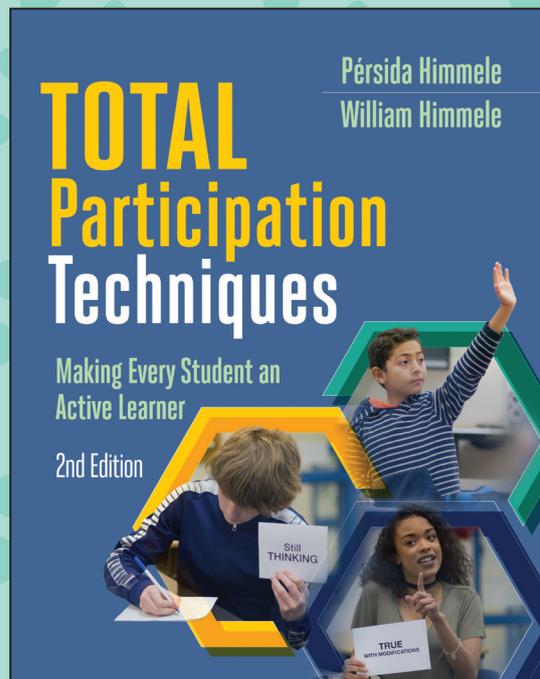
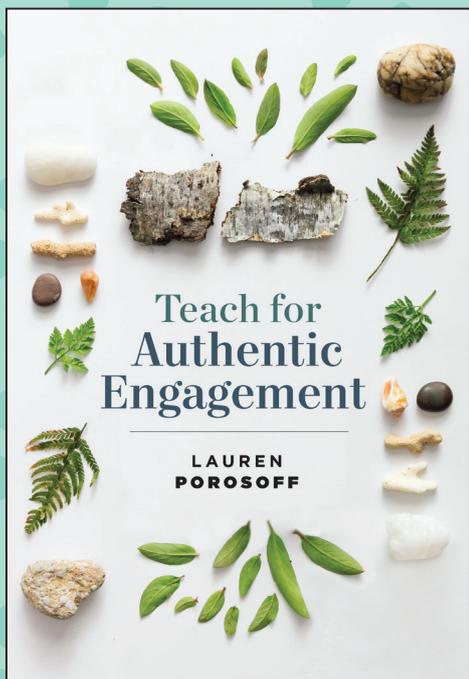
## THE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER'S GUIDE TO CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

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Keys for  
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Student  
Outcomes



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Shift to [proactive attendance strategies](#) to reduce chronic absences in your school or district with these tips from author Jessica Sprick.



EVGENY ATAMANENKO / SHUTTERSTOCK

## Try Something New

Florida superintendent Matthew Hayes offers [three novel ways](#) different schools have reduced chronic absenteeism—and seen great results.



ANDREW ANGELOV / SHUTTERSTOCK

## Put “Professional” Back in PD

District administrator Elizabeth Dampf advises school leaders how to [honor teacher agency and choice in PD sessions](#).



UNSPLASH

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## ▶ Addressing Chronic Absenteeism: What Works?

How can schools and districts re-engage students and families whose connections to school have frayed? In this [ASCD webinar](#), Attendance Works' **Hedy Chang**, school engagement expert **Shadae Harris**, and principal **Luis Torres** share what's working in classrooms, schools, and districts to address systemic barriers to attendance and increase student engagement.



## 🎧 Debunking the Summer Learning Stigma

In this [ASCD podcast](#), researcher **Allison Crean Davis** discusses the changing landscape of summer learning—and why it matters for equity, engagement, and school improvement.



### On-Demand Summer PD

Log in to ASCD's professional development platform Witsby to access the [Total Participation Techniques course](#), which focuses on transforming students into active learners. Become a [Witsby user here](#).

## Reducing Absenteeism Through Engagement and Support

“Can we talk about chronic absenteeism?” This title of a recent Reddit post grabbed my attention mid-scroll. As the teacher posing the question explained, she sees the “national headlines” about the problem, but her district is in “complete denial.” “How can we ‘build relationships’ with kids who are never there?” she asked. The struggle to get kids to go to school and then actually *attend* class, she added, is like trying to keep “sand in a sieve all day long.”

Her frustration was palpable, and understandably so. Since the onset of the pandemic, chronic absenteeism has skyrocketed—and it’s taking a toll on student engagement and academic achievement. Why have so many students and families become disconnected from school? What can schools do to re-engage them?

While chronic absenteeism is a deeply complex issue, this digital edition of *EL* suggests that headway can be made. You’ll read about an initiative in the Richmond, Virginia, school district that almost halved absenteeism rates in some buildings by shifting family engagement from “an isolated potluck into an essential strategy that foster[s] student achievement and two-way communication with families—on their terms” (p. 22).

A recent [NPR/Ipsos poll](#) showed that just one-third of families can identify what chronic absenteeism actually is (missing 10 percent or more of the school year). To ensure families understand how it impacts their children’s education, clear communication is essential. Todd Rogers and Karen Mapp, researchers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and cofounders of EveryDay Labs, share studies on

the benefits of using more supportive and less punitive language in truancy notices and sending families personalized attendance “nudges” (p. 42).

This issue is also packed with ideas on increasing student engagement so students *want* to show up and learn. For example, coauthors Amy Holcombe, dean of education at High Point University, and Steve Wozniak, cofounder of Apple, share AI activities (and sample prompts) that can help students be “active participants in their learning as opposed to passive recipients of information” (p. 16). Another article helps teachers keep “SCORE” of key engagement factors, including student success, curiosity, originality, and interpersonal relationships (p. 54).

As this issue of *Educational Leadership* shows, fixing the “sieve” will take strategic work. But if the 500+ comments on the Reddit post are any indication, chronic absenteeism is front of mind for classroom teachers. Let’s make addressing it front of mind for states and districts, too, as preparation for the new school year gets underway. **E**



*Sarah McKibben*

Sarah McKibben  
Editor in Chief

**RESEARCH ALERT**

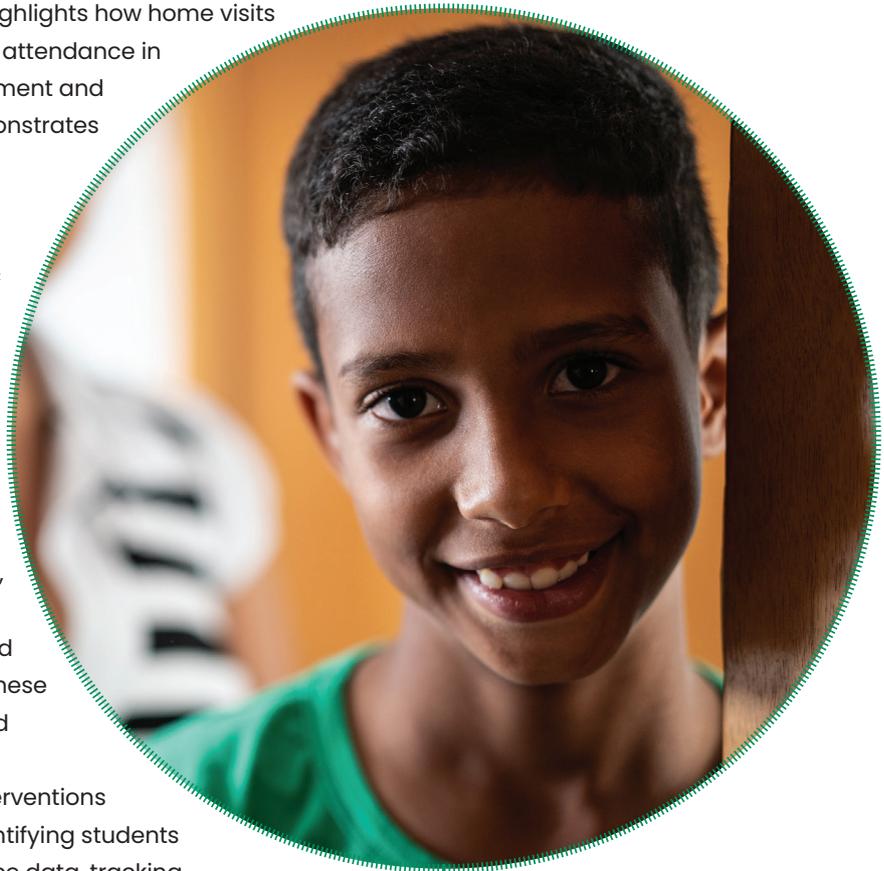
## To Bring Students Back to School, Visit Them at Home

**A** recent report by the Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration (CCERC) highlights how home visits are transforming student attendance in Connecticut. The Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP) demonstrates that personalized support directly in students' homes can make a real difference.

Launched during the pandemic in the summer of 2021, LEAP targets students at risk of chronic absenteeism by fostering positive home-school connections. At the heart of LEAP's effectiveness are home visits that focus on understanding families' strengths, aspirations, and barriers to attendance. Conducted by trained staff and community members, these visits are culturally responsive and adaptable to family preferences.

This approach ensures that interventions are targeted and effective by identifying students in need through school attendance data, tracking their progress, and tailoring support based on insights from families. Almost all of the participating districts saw a boost in attendance rates, leading to an average increase of nearly 15 percentage points during the 2021–22 school year. Dramatic improvements were seen in districts like Hartford Public Schools, where attendance rates jumped by nearly 30 percent. The CCERC report also emphasizes best practices that enhance the program's success: paying home visitors, ensuring their safety, connecting families to visitors who speak their home language, and repeating visits to build stronger connections with families.

As LEAP's success indicates, sometimes it takes going door-to-door to reconnect with students and families.



Source: Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration. (2022). [\*An evaluation of the effectiveness of home visits for re-engaging students who were chronically absent in the era of COVID-19.\*](#)



## Advisory

### NUMBERS OF NOTE



SUVAREE TANGEOVORNPICHET / ISTOCK

**52%**  
of students who  
experienced  
homelessness  
were chronically  
absent during  
the 2021-22  
school year.

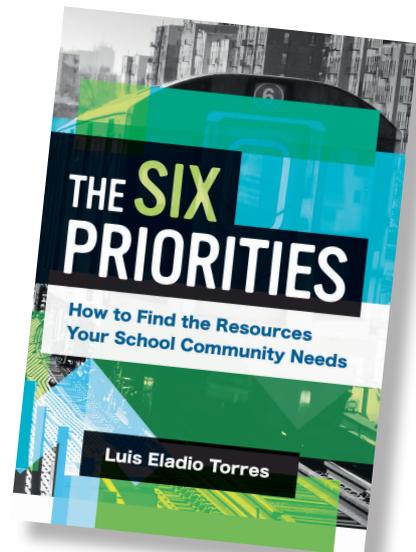
Source: National Center for Homeless Education. (2023). *Student homelessness in America: School years 2019-20 to 2021-22*.

### QUOTABLE

“ We know that hunger leads to many mental and physical health issues. It can affect children’s ability to focus and perform to their potential, and it also has an impact on student attendance. ”

—Luis Eladio Torres

*The Six Priorities: How to Find the Resources Your School Community Needs* (ASCD, 2023)



**NOTEWORTHY**

## When Attendance Gets Personal

*Individualized messages about students' attendance can reduce days missed.*

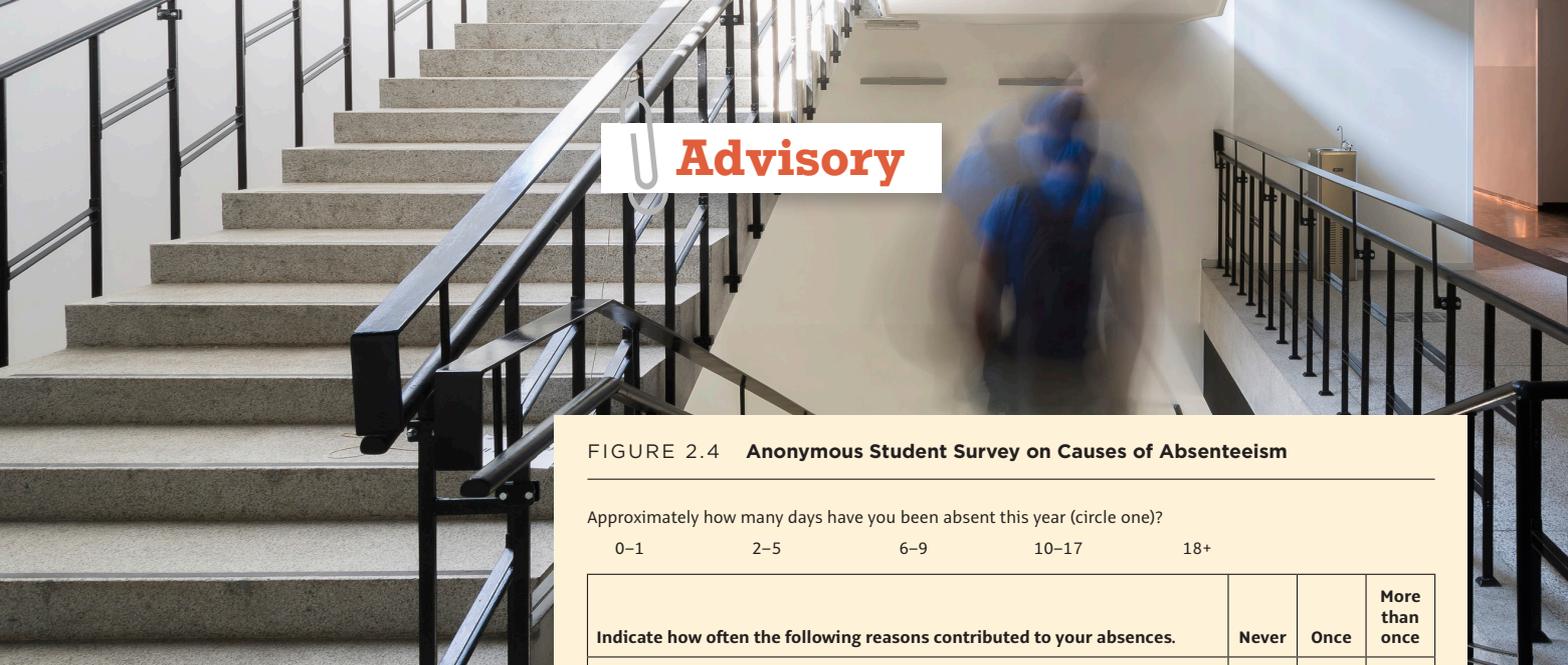
**N**o one likes a robocall, especially about their child. When informing families of student absences, many schools rely on generic messages with a lot of legalese. But there is growing evidence that a little bit of personalization can go a long way toward reducing absenteeism and building awareness of the importance of in-school instruction time.

In one recent personalized message intervention, eight rural districts in New York and Ohio reduced absenteeism by 2.4 percent over the course of the year by partnering with the National Center for Rural Education Research Networks to [pilot a series of personalized emails, texts, calls, and letters](#). In another, [Harvard's Proving Ground Network](#) worked

with two districts on a personalized postcard project designed to address families' misconceptions about the importance of attendance in the early grades (kindergarten through 2nd grade). The postcards displayed the student's name, the number of days absent, and information about what lesson the student missed that day. Over the course of one school year, the postcards reduced absences by 7.9 percent, equal to gaining roughly 6,883 instructional days.

These low-cost strategies provide caregivers with timely information about their child's absences and can be replicated by any district. Both networks provide free PDFs detailing the process for other schools to try.





**Advisory**

**FIGURE 2.4 Anonymous Student Survey on Causes of Absenteeism**

Approximately how many days have you been absent this year (circle one)?

0-1                      2-5                      6-9                      10-17                      18+

Indicate how often the following reasons contributed to your absences.	Never	Once	More than once
I was seriously ill.			
I had a cold, headache, toothache, or other minor or moderate illness.			
I was tired and needed to sleep.			
I had a doctor or dentist appointment.			
I felt anxious or depressed.			
I missed the bus.			
I had no transportation to school.			
It was not safe to walk to school.			
Weather made it too cold or hot to walk.			
I had hygiene reasons (e.g., no clean clothes, no deodorant, felt dirty).			
I had to work.			
I had to take care of younger siblings or other family members.			
I didn't think it would matter if I was absent.			
I didn't think adults at school would notice or care that I was absent.			
I didn't think my peers at school would notice or care that I was absent.			
I didn't think my parents would notice or care that I was absent.			
I did not complete homework or assignments.			
I was not prepared for a test.			
I did not understand the work or expectations in class and didn't want to go.			
My classwork was too hard.			
My classes were boring.			
I was having conflict with peers.			
I was being teased or bullied.			
I was having trouble with a teacher or staff member.			
I was hanging out with friends outside of school.			
I was spending time with my parent or guardian.			
I was using technology (video games, computer, cellphone) I can't use at school.			
I was doing things I wouldn't want to report to the school or my parents.			
I was competing or participating in an outside-of-school sport or activity.			
I was competing or participating in a school-sponsored sport or activity.			

Source: Sprick, J., & Berg, T. (2019). *Teacher's guide to tackling attendance challenges*. ASCD.

JURKOS / ISTOCK

**SCHOOL TOOL**

# Why Aren't Students Coming to School?

One of the first steps in addressing chronic absenteeism is to uncover the barriers keeping students at home. This anonymous student survey, from [Teacher's Guide to Tackling Attendance Challenges](#) by Jessica Sprick and Tricia Berg (ASCD, 2019), can provide teachers with valuable data about why students in their classrooms are missing school. Available as a [downloadable PDF](#), the survey can be adapted to the time of year, grade level, or other factors that contribute to absenteeism in the local community.

# Good Attendance Starts in the Classroom

*Teachers have tremendous power to influence student attendance.*

**Hedy N. Chang**

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, chronic school absence has nearly doubled in the United States. The U.S. Department of Education and most U.S. states define chronic absence as *missing 10 percent of school for any reason*, whether the absences are excused or unexcused or take the form of suspensions. This has repercussions far beyond the nearly one in three students who are chronically absent. In schools where at least 20 percent of students don't regularly attend, it's difficult for teachers to move forward with new lesson plans (Gottfried, 2014), and it even increases the likelihood of absenteeism schoolwide (Kirksey et al., 2024).

Chronic absenteeism erodes learning conditions that motivate students, including physical and emotional safety; a sense of belonging, connection, and support; academic challenge and engagement; adult and student

well-being; and a focus on building relationships (Chang, 2023). Reestablishing these learning conditions will require engaging with the entire school community and investing in the power of teachers to make a difference.

## **Why Teachers Matter**

Teachers are key to creating positive classroom climates (Backes et al., 2022) and building trusting relationships with students over time. When teachers show they care, students are more likely to feel they matter; when they express confidence in a student's ability to learn, students are more likely to believe in themselves even when they're feeling less hopeful. Because of their ongoing contact with students, teachers can notice if something is amiss and offer additional outreach or support.

By the same token, chaotic and alienating classroom environments undermine efforts





MIKOLETTE / ISTOCK

to nurture attendance (Van Eck et al., 2017). Students and families may ignore messaging or outreach that promotes attendance if they don't feel a sense of belonging and don't believe that classrooms offer meaningful learning experiences.

To address this issue, schools can use our three-tiered intervention model (see fig 1). Although teachers can contribute at every tier, their involvement is particularly crucial in implementing foundational and universal Tier 1 supports that reach all students.

### **What Teachers Can Do**

I am founder and executive director of Attendance Works, a nonprofit that serves at least 40 school districts in five U.S. states. Our

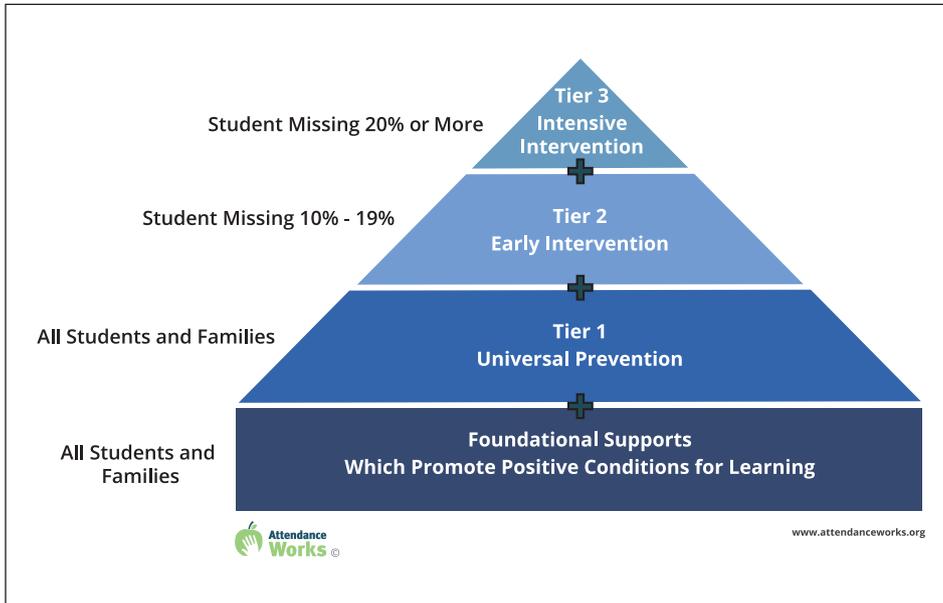
approach to reducing absenteeism has resulted in significant declines in chronic absence post-pandemic in both California and Connecticut. On the basis of our experience, we offer teachers the following strategies.

#### ***Nurture belonging and connection.***

Teachers can promote attendance in this context in a variety of ways.

*Warmly welcome students and families.* Before the school year even begins, teachers can welcome families by sending a note, an email, or a text or by making a phone call, and they can continue these practices throughout the year. If a school has a web-based parent portal, teachers can add welcoming messages to their classroom's page or use apps that enable two-way texting.

**FIGURE 1. A Three-Tiered Approach to Addressing Chronic Absenteeism**



dreams, build relationships, and offer support. Parent Teacher Home Visits reduced chronic absence overall for a school as long as the program served 10 percent of the student population. In Connecticut, the state-supported implementation of LEAP in 15 school districts improved attendance by 15 percent.

Provide engaging learning opportunities. Students and families are more likely to feel connected to school if the learning opportunities are engaging and relevant to their lives. “Relevant—and Culturally Relevant—Instruction” in the [Attendance Playbook: Smart Strategies for Reducing](#)

Being welcoming also starts at the classroom door. In this [video by Edutopia](#), the teacher greets her students at eye level and offers them a high-five, a handshake, or a hug.

Ensure positive relationships. Teachers and staff should consider the extent to which they have a relationship with each student and family they serve. Adapted from a tool created by Harvard University, this [resource on mapping quality connections](#) offers a systematic way to examine whether every student has a positive connection to a staff member, with special attention to students at risk (Summers, 2024).

Invest in home visits. Relational home visits can improve attendance by bridging the gaps that exist when educators don’t live in the neighborhoods served by their schools or share the ethnic or class backgrounds of their students. Two home visit programs have been proven to reduce chronic absence: [Parent Teacher Home Visits](#), which is a universal intervention, and [Connecticut’s Learner Engagement and Attendance Program](#) (LEAP), which is a targeted intervention for chronically absent students. Both models emphasize using a first visit to hear about a family’s hopes and

[Student Absenteeism Post-Pandemic](#) (Jordan, 2023), describes how to help students connect what they’re learning to their lived experiences, increase student voice initiatives, and create career and educational pathways.

Offer a supportive learning environment. According to a [national survey by Youth Truth](#) (Center for Effective Philanthropy, 2023), anxiety and depression increased significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic. This [tip sheet from the National Association of School Psychologists](#) (Malone, Dugas, & Ellis, 2020) offers a variety of strategies that teachers can use, including implementing predictable classroom routines, helping students understand the connection between anxiety and physical symptoms, and creating a plan for managing anxious behaviors.

**Incorporate attendance messaging into routines and interactions.**

In morning routines, teachers can let students know they are missed when they’ve been absent, and they can welcome them when they return. Key talking points for interactions with students and families are included in the [Showing Up](#)



## Promoting attendance and engagement starts with knowing who can help.

RICHLEGG / ISTOCK

[Matters for R.E.A.L. toolkit](#) (Attendance Works, 2022). These focus on building routines, increasing engagement, providing access to resources, and supporting learning. Recognizing good and improved—not just perfect—attendance can generate excitement and create opportunities for messaging. For example, rather than recognizing only the students who show up every day for an entire quarter, schools can hand out raffle tickets daily to each student who arrives at school on time in the morning and announce the winner at the end of the week during the last period of the day on Friday to discourage students from leaving early. Schools can do this intermittently throughout the school year.

Consider these [tips from Attendance Works](#) (2023, July) on how to establish meaningful incentives, which might include offering no-cost rewards, such as being first in the lunch line and having lunch with a favorite teacher, or items that address common barriers to getting to school, such as gas cards, grocery cards, or food baskets.

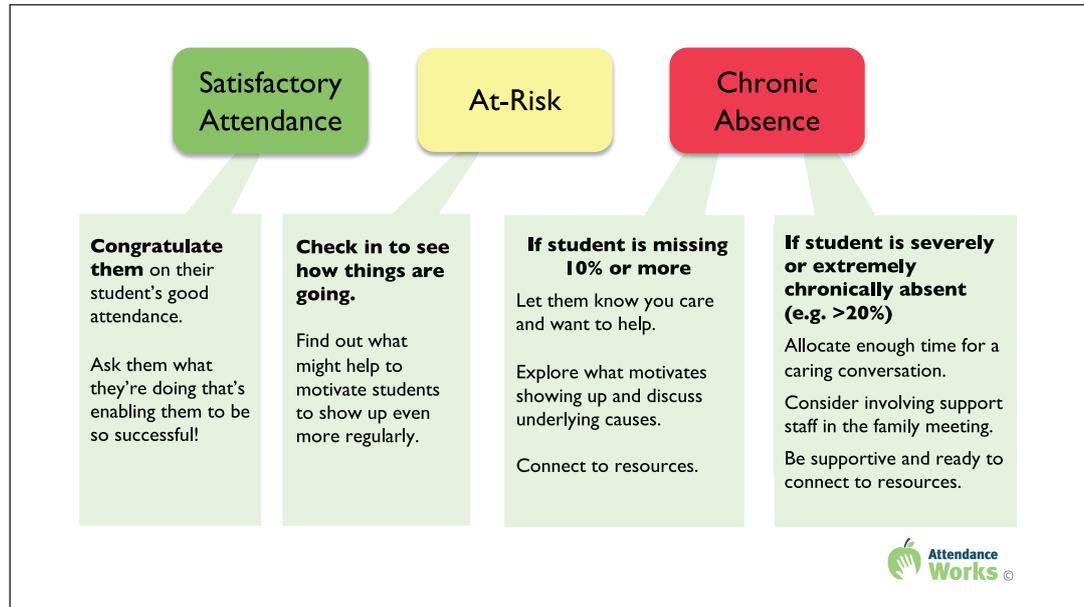
Avoiding a blaming approach is crucial. Research (Stempel et al., 2017) shows that absenteeism is correlated with traumatic experiences, which require a compassionate

response to support healing. (See this [article from the American Psychological Association](#) for guidance.) A variety of studies (Allison et al., 2019; Attendance Works & Healthy Schools Campaign, 2015; Brundage et al., 2017; Chang et al., 2019) reveal that many school absences are caused by challenges beyond a student’s or family’s control. These include lack of access to healthcare, unreliable transportation, unstable housing, lack of safe paths to school, as well as in-school difficulties, such as being bullied and struggling academically. In these cases, a punitive approach could hinder attempts to identify and address the underlying reasons that students miss school (McNeely et al., 2023).

### **Use conferences to promote attendance.**

One-on-one student-teacher conferences or IEP meetings are opportunities to update families and caregivers on their child’s attendance and share what students are learning. Before the conference, teachers should review attendance data for each of their students. If they aren’t sure how to approach a particular child or family, they might consult with another teacher who has managed to establish such a rapport. Teachers should also make sure they have translation support to

**FIGURE 2. Discussing Students' Attendance Status with Families and Caregivers**



communicate with families who speak languages other than English.

Staff can tailor their approach according to the student's attendance status, which can range from being excellent to being characterized by chronic absence. Figure 2 suggests appropriate talking points for each of three levels of attendance.

For students with severe levels of absenteeism, teachers might ask for help from the principal, school counselor, or school nurse, or schedule an additional meeting to allow more time to understand why the student is absent. This [toolkit from Attendance Works](#) (2024) offers more tips on engaging families at conferences.

#### **Draw on school resources.**

Promoting attendance and engagement starts with knowing who can help. Does your school have a team that is responsible for crafting and implementing a schoolwide strategy for reducing chronic absence? If so, who is on the team? When do they meet? What is the process

for getting help for a given student or family? If your school lacks such a team, a school nurse or social worker can help clarify what is happening with a particular child or parent, and they may have access to resources that can reduce barriers. For example, they might provide needed health services or offer transportation passes. For more guidance on how to take a whole-school approach involving teachers, check out this [resource from Attendance Works](#) (2023, May). Districts and states can also focus on our [key ingredients for systemic change](#) (Attendance Works, 2018).

#### **Helping Teachers Make It Happen**

Teachers have tremendous power to influence student attendance. They are the first to witness how absences can disrupt learning, not just for the absent student but also for the entire class. However, teachers shouldn't be expected to do this work alone. Education and community leaders need to ensure that teachers have the support they need to tackle chronic absenteeism.

For example, districts can ensure that teachers have access to friendly and clear messaging about the importance of daily attendance and to technology that supports meaningful two-way communication with families. They should also have access to resources that address basic needs, such as food, transportation, and warm clothing. To support students who are experiencing social-emotional or physical health-related challenges, teachers should also have easy access to counselors, mental health therapists, nurses, and school-based health services. Districts can encourage strong relationship building among teachers by providing professional development and making sure that teachers have time to visit or make phone calls to students and parents. With this support in hand, teachers can effectively promote attendance throughout the school day. 🗣️

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## Reflect & Discuss

How is your school addressing chronic absenteeism post-pandemic?

.....

What is the most important thing you can do as a teacher to promote attendance?

.....

What school or district support would most help you in this effort?

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**Hedy N. Chang** is the founder and executive director of the nonprofit initiative Attendance Works, which advances student success by reducing chronic absence.

# Using AI to Fuel Engagement and Active Learning



## Used in combination with creative human intelligence, artificial intelligence can transform the way students experience school.

Amy Holcombe and Steve “Woz” Wozniak

“What’s your favorite subject?”

“Recess,” she promptly replied.

“What’s your second favorite subject?” I asked.

Noelle, the precocious 2nd grader and burgeoning artist who had mastered reading at the age of 3, answered, “Dismissal!”

Despite the presence of supportive adults and a nurturing learning environment, Noelle found herself disengaged from school. Spending long hours confined to a desk for 180 days a year did not ignite her passion for learning. Instead, she thrived outdoors, enjoying activities like bug collecting, devouring books, and sketching the bats that flew out of the bat house she got for her birthday. While her curiosity knew no limits, school failed to engage her in exploring, thinking, and problem solving. To Noelle, it was a place where teachers imparted knowledge and students listened dutifully.

Like Noelle, most children possess an innate curiosity and drive to acquire knowledge. They exhibit boundless enthusiasm for experimentation, skills acquisition, and problem solving. This is evident when observing them at zoos, children’s museums, playgrounds, or engaging in imaginative play with friends. These stimulating environments, where children are active participants in their learning as opposed to passive recipients of information,

yield 100 percent engagement. As educators, our greatest challenge is replicating these engaging learning experiences within the confines of four classroom walls filled by 30 desks and limited resources, a scenario designed to educate the masses. Impossible to reach a 100 percent engagement level? No. Challenging? Yes.

New artificial intelligence (AI) tools are rapidly making it less challenging to break down the proverbial classroom walls and create more interactive and engaging learning experiences in schools. AI encompasses a wide array of applications that can be used in K–12 education. These include robotics, natural language-processing models, image and music generation tools, automated planning and scheduling, machine learning, and knowledge-based systems (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Many educators have become early adopters and champions of AI, using it as a pedagogical tool to enhance student engagement and motivation for learning (Quizlet, 2023). Already, we are beginning to experience the ways in which AI can increase engagement in the classroom while also reducing the rote work of teachers.

But there is more to be done. We believe that artificial intelligence (machine learning) powered by large language models and prompted by actual intelligence (the human brain) can significantly increase engagement for students like Noelle. Here are some examples.



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## Creative Ways to Use AI

From simple idea generation to the use of AI chatbots for research to working with customized GPTs (generative pre-trained transformers) targeted at specific content areas, teachers are experimenting with AI to level-up learning. The following student engagement activities are each based upon Steve’s model:

### Artificial Intelligence + Actual Intelligence

#### Increased Student Engagement

This model relies on machine learning to support more authentic learning experiences for students. We tested each of these activities with the most widely used natural language GenAI tools, including [ChatGPT](#), [Gemini](#), [Claude](#), and [Perplexity](#). The generated results were of similar quality and usability; however, we anticipate that these, and other tools, will rapidly advance in their usability as the technology improves.

As with any GenAI tool, the output quality increases in relation to the quality of the input. For best results, teach students how to provide detail and specificity in their prompts (the question or input that is provided to the GenAI model) and then take advantage of the “ask follow-up” option provided to increase the quality of the output.

#### Gather Facts Quickly

Remember those early research projects when your class spent a week going to the school library, using a card catalogue to find resources on a topic? Educators are now well-aware that basic facts are readily

## 3 Tips for Citing AI in Student and Teacher Work

1

Note the way AI is used in an assignment (e.g., was it used for brainstorming, inspiration, revising, or generating the content?).

2

Name the AI tool used.

3

Provide the prompt used.

available online and that it is students’ *transformation* of them into new products that holds the real educational value. Shorten the fact-finding process by teaching students how to use AI to quickly gather information, allowing more time for complex information-processing tasks that require “actual intelligence,” such as fact-checking and analysis. After inputting a prompt to gather facts (and vetting those facts), students should activate their “actual intelligence” to transform those facts into new products such as a comparison paper, presentation, speech, or diorama.

**Sample prompt:** Create a content matrix for beavers, nutria, groundhogs, and muskrats that compares their scientific name, physical characteristics, preferred environment, and behaviors.

#### Create Accessible Content

Student engagement increases when

content is both culturally relevant and accessible. To enhance content accessibility, educators are turning to AI to adjust the reading level for mixed-ability groups within a class and are translating content into students’ primary languages, catering to diverse learning needs with great efficiency. After inputting a prompt to revise the text level, students can then complete the teacher planned activity for that particular lesson without the barrier of accessibility.

**Sample prompts:** Rewrite this passage at a 3rd grade level. [Or] Translate this passage from English into Spanish.

#### Craft Case Studies

AI tools efficiently create content, such as case studies or scripts, saving educators time. By inputting a prompt with parameters such as audience, voice/tone, and length, educators can receive tailored case studies in seconds, enhancing student engagement in complex problem-solving discussions with real-life simulations. Students can further engage in the content and ideas through role-play, debate, or by writing persuasive arguments to convince others of their viewpoints.

**Sample prompt:** Create three single-paragraph case studies depicting the experiences of the British, French, and Germans following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. In each case study, identify the country’s main motivations and explain the conflicts they had with each of the other countries.

#### Gamify Learning

Enhance learning through gamification by using AI to create interactive

## Impossible to reach a 100 percent engagement level? No. Challenging? Yes.

activities like word walls, Jeopardy or game boards, scavenger hunts, crossword puzzles, and vocabulary games. Introducing novelty into the learning process boosts student engagement and retention of content.

**Sample prompt:** Create a Jeopardy Board for the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

### Generate Activities

One of the more popular uses of AI by educators is to brainstorm grade-level learning activities that are more engaging than what they've done previously or than what is suggested in their curriculum materials. The AI tool will first deconstruct the learning standard, breaking it down into its fundamental components. Then it will generate learning activities designed to engage students with the content by drawing from the best ideas from across the web. To explore a single suggestion further, use the "ask follow-up" option for more details and how-to's.

**Sample prompt:** Generate a list of highly interactive activities that are appropriate for teaching a 4th grader about the causes of day and night and the phases of the moon.

### Stimulate Writing

Many teachers use RAFT (role, audience, format, topic) as a structured framework for increasing writing engagement. This entire process can be modeled and taught to students using AI. As a whole group, students can practice writing AI prompts—changing out the role, audience, format, and topics—and quickly review how the output of the AI tool changes. After sufficient modeling, challenge students to create their own RAFT writing sample. They can then feed it into

an AI tool for personalized recommendations on increasing clarity, tone, organization, or even to serve as a grammar checker.

**Sample prompt:** Generate a 200-word letter written from the perspective of an atom, asking the Cavendish Laboratory not to be split.

### Personalize Tutoring and Test Preparation

Using AI to study smarter is one of the most cited uses by students. AI is a highly effective tool for engaging students in previewing and reviewing content by generating vocabulary games, feeding questions at different DOK levels, summarizing complex material, reviewing processes, and more. When students use AI to craft their own study experiences, they are more engaged and motivated to learn the content.

**Sample prompt:** Create a match game to teach me the parts of a plant cell.

### Write Songs for Learning

There is much research linking music to information retention. Teachers and students can select a well-known tune and ask AI to generate a content-related song using that melody. Challenging students to use AI to write a first version or even a first verse followed by further student-written verses will not only create a highly engaging learning activity but will aid in moving the information into long-term memory.

**Sample prompt:** Write a song to the tune of "Happy Birthday" to teach me about Marie Curie.

### Generate Choice Boards

Nothing is more engaging than getting to choose how you learn. Provide a curriculum standard, grade range, and number of choices and let AI do

the hard work of generating assignments. Present the choice board to students, allowing them to select which activities they will complete to demonstrate mastery.

**Sample prompt:** Create a choice board for 8th graders with 10 options for mastering the following curriculum standard: Analyze the relationship between trade routes and the development and decline of major empires (e.g., Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Greece, Rome, China, Mughal, Mongol, Mesoamerica, Inca, etc.).

### Produce Plays

Do you want to engage all your students in active learning? Ask AI to generate short plays, complete with stage design tips, costuming, narration, and dialogue around a topic. Divide the class into groups, each with a different AI-generated play, and challenge them to produce the play for the class, interpreting the script by acting it out for themselves and their peers as they gain a deeper understanding of the content.

**Sample prompt:** Write a five-page script at a 9th grade reading level for a play about the Boston Tea Party that presents the perspectives of both the British government and American colonists. Provide stage design tips, costuming, narration, and dialogue for six characters.

For those seeking more inspiration, Facebook and Instagram have a multitude of groups dedicated to the use of AI in K–12 education. Popular tools being used by educators include but are not limited to [MagicSchool](#), [Mizou](#), [Diffit](#), [Khanmigo](#), [Hello History](#), [Curipod](#), [Parlay Genie](#), [Teacher’s](#)

## Reflect & Discuss

How could you use AI in the classroom to strengthen your students’ critical thinking skills or “actual intelligence”?

.....

Which activity suggested by Holcombe and Wozniak piqued your interest the most? How could you incorporate it in an upcoming lesson or introduce it to staff?

[Buddy](#), [Eduaide.Ai](#), [Brisk Teaching](#), [Twee](#), [LingoTeach.ai](#), [Gibbly](#), and [PI](#). Teachers are largely leading the way in the development of these tools and are even monetizing GPTs by developing and offering them to others in the field seeking to save time.

### Looking Around the Proverbial Corner

It is expected that AI will soon become a standard tool for all educators, akin to textbooks or computers. As its adoption grows, the need for regulation will rise in tandem. In 2023, the U.S. Department of Education published its report *Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Teaching and Learning*, which includes definitions of terms, explanations of new technologies, and guidance on the appropriate use of AI tools. Nonprofit organizations such as the [Consortium of School Networks](#) (COSN) and [AI4K12.org](#) have crafted guidelines for AI use in classrooms, in addition to an increasing number of states and districts.

In general, there are three best practices for the transparent use of AI in teacher and student work. To cite AI use in instruction, Steve suggests:

1. Noting the way AI is used in an assignment (e.g., was it used for brainstorming, inspiration, revising, or generating the content?).
2. Naming the AI tool used.
3. Providing the prompt used.

As with any technology, the increased adoption of AI will lead to both innovative practices and unintended consequences. For example, overreliance on the use of AI may lead some educators to stray away from state mandated curriculum standards in favor of novelty activities. Further, a lack of training may lead to the misuse of AI, failure to cite original sources, or even the spread of misinformation when facts are not checked. As educators, we must take these lessons of experience and learn from them so that we mitigate any collateral damage while realizing the benefits of combining AI with actual intelligence to achieve increased engagement for all students. AI is not a substitute for human connection but rather a support for teachers. It cannot replace the “human element of teaching, which includes empathy, creativity, and adaptability to unique learning needs” (Greene-Harper, 2023).

When used in purposeful ways by talented educators, AI offers the potential to personalize learning engagement for all students, ensuring that actual intelligence will always carry greater value than artificial intelligence. And for learners like Noelle, AI allows them to become active participants in their own

learning, offering limitless paths to engage with data, information, and other students in ways that are beyond our current imagination. 

<sup>1</sup>Sample prompt from the [North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's social studies standards](#).

Authors' note: Portions of this article were edited with Perplexity AI, using the prompt, "Rewrite for clarity."

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**Amy Holcombe** is the dean of the Stout School of Education at High Point University in North Carolina. **Steve "Woz" Wozniak** is the co-founder of Apple Computers Inc., Woz Ed, Woz U, and Efforce. Together, Holcombe and Wozniak have convened students, educators, and members of the public to discuss the role of AI in the future of teaching and learning.



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# We Love You Here!

*Richmond Public Schools is decreasing chronic absenteeism by building relationships grounded in trust.*

**Shadae Thomas Harris**

“Ms. Brown,” I said, “I’m Dr. Harris, chief engagement officer from Richmond Public Schools. We wanted to tell you how great your daughter is doing. We love seeing her at school.”

Ms. Brown (a pseudonym) seemed surprised to see me knocking on her door for a home visit. Her eyes darted from me to Marquis, the family liaison. The corners of her mouth turned upward, but she had questions in her eyes.

“So, you’re just coming by here to say she’s good?” Her head tilted to the side.

Marquis shifted his notebook to his left hand, extending his right hand toward Ms. Brown. She examined his hand for a moment before taking his offering.

“Yeah,” I said. “We love her and wanted you to know she’s gotten more learning time in since she’s been making it to school more often. Thank you. Is there anything else we can support you with?”

A long exhale filled the space between us as Ms. Brown’s shoulders relaxed.

Above: City leaders, teachers, and emergency services personnel cheer students on during their first day of school at Fairfield Court Elementary.



A family liaison shares breakfast snacks and words of encouragement with students getting off the bus at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School.

“OK.” She smiled. “That’s good to hear. Whew. I didn’t know what to expect.”

When I visit families like the Browns, I am reminded of bell hooks’ definition of love as an *action*. I agree that loving well is “the task in all meaningful relationships” (hooks, 2000). As Richmond Public Schools’ (RPS) first-ever chief engagement officer, my role supported the district in building meaningful relationships with families and the community to reach district goals. I aimed to create a system of learning that loves the students, families, and communities of Richmond well.

### **Why Traditional Methods Fail**

In the 2021–22 school year, chronic absenteeism, which RPS defines as being absent 10 percent or more of the school year, soared as high as 37 percent across all student populations. Attendance officers monitored families when students missed school and told families when and how to show up. This one-sided relationship failed to lower chronic absenteeism.

This traditional approach to absenteeism was punitive. It assumed that students missed school because their families didn’t value education,

when the truth was, in communities like Richmond’s historic Jackson Ward neighborhood, barriers persisted for families that prevented students from coming to school.

Laden with assumptions about what families believed and needed, this punitive way of thinking failed to acknowledge families’ humanity, strengths, and challenges. By not creating space to understand families’ experiences, the system alienated them, isolating absenteeism from learning and family contexts. After spending time with families to understand their actual needs, I realized that the solution to chronic absenteeism could neither decouple students from their families nor families from their communities and contexts. We needed to *see* families.

### **A Relationship Issue**

As a former principal, I believe that students not coming to school isn’t an attendance issue; it’s a relationship issue.

As sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot writes, “Parents enter the school building not just as individuals but as representatives of families, their histories and aspirations woven into the tapestry of their children’s lives” (2003, p. 11). These histories



Barack Obama  
Elementary School  
Teacher of the Year  
Sharese Williams and  
one of her students share  
a joyful hug.

include uncomfortable experiences of not being seen or valued, and if the district doesn't take that into account, it will be difficult to build trust. Parents are balancing the world: raising their children, making a living, and advocating for a better future. It's a lot. Families will not take part in spaces they feel don't value them.

A relationship based on trust makes love possible. As a district, RPS committed itself to showing families that we value them by teaching with love, leading with love, and serving with love as its priorities. From these district priorities, I developed the *We Love You Here* campaign in 2022 as an initiative of the Office of Engagement. The *We Love You Here* campaign was an intentional departure from transacting with families, where attendance was the commodity. Our families needed to know we loved them. Through activities that shifted RPS' attention from attendance to making families feel seen, heard, and loved, we showed we deserved their trust.

As family engagement went up, chronic absenteeism in Richmond went down. Between the 2021–22 and 2023–24 school years, chronic absenteeism fell from 37 percent to 18.6 percent for all students, a decrease of nearly 20 percent.

Some individual schools experienced a 50 percent reduction in chronic absenteeism by prioritizing family engagement.

Here are some steps we took.

### **Looking at the Problem from a Systems Approach**

Systems either create or impede capacity. To understand our obstacles and capacity, RPS hosted over 150 meetings in Richmond as part of a districtwide strategic planning process. The meetings included RPS leadership, community partners, and families. Engagement emerged as a clear districtwide priority from these conversations with the community and families.

While relationships with families had always been a priority, family engagement was considered a stand-alone activity. Each school and classroom used tactics like back-to-school nights and parent potlucks. These activities, while important, did not invite families into a relationship with RPS. They told families how to engage with the district rather than listening to families about how they wanted to be engaged. We had to shift family engagement from an isolated potluck into an essential strategy that fostered student achievement and two-way



RPS family liaisons visit residents during a Community Walk, a neighborhood engagement event aimed at building strong relationships and trust between families and schools.

communication with families—on their terms.

In the Office of Engagement, we tracked the implementation of engagement strategies at the school and district levels and created division-wide engagement toolkits that provided leaders clear expectations and examples of how to build trust with families. This initiative gave families a seat at the table. The office also signaled to the district and the community that families and communities were important in Richmond.

### **Prioritizing Relationships**

Traditionally, educators have considered family engagement to be an additional task outside their essential work. That narrative, however, had to shift for the district. The Office of Engagement created a professional learning experience for educators that spoke to Anne Henderson’s five dimensions of effective family engagement: (1) engagement is linked to learning; (2) engagement requires

the building of authentic relationships; (3) engagement affirms differences so that families feel seen, heard, and loved; (4) engagement supports families’ advocating for their children; and (5) engagement shares

## **As home visits increased, we saw chronic absenteeism decrease across the district.**

powers such that parents are equal partners (Henderson, 2007).

Our office provided professional development that helped our educators develop empathy for families and recognize their contributions to their child’s education. Teachers increased their direct outreach and interaction with families. Our educators began holding space to listen to families, so parents felt they had a seat at the table. Our goal was to convert

their feedback into action.

One critical change we made was to create new family liaison roles to replace attendance officers. The family liaison is a point of contact for families, and the role’s goal is to help

remove barriers to student attendance. We divided our 22 family liaisons into neighborhoods so they could develop a deep understanding of communities—the places of worship, the community leaders, and any persistent barriers. Family liaisons walk their assigned neighborhoods regularly during community walks, becoming visible to residents and greeting students on their way to school.

The family liaisons also conduct

## Students not coming to school isn't an attendance issue; it's a relationship issue.

morning home visits with all our families in Richmond, with additional in-person supports for some families when needed. During these visits, family liaisons listen to stories about the families' lives and share positive affirmations about the families' children. They don't discuss attendance. Instead, they ask how we can help. As bell hooks explains, "We cannot know love if we cannot surrender our attachment to power" (2000, p. 135). Spending time with families inside their homes shifts power to families on their terms and creates a relational demand for the district to act on what it hears.

We also realized there was an opportunity to build meaningful, trusting relationships with families even at the most punitive level—the truancy hearing. We partnered with the Richmond Juvenile Court system to move petition hearings out of the courtroom and into a local middle school. The judge now asks families to talk to various community partners located around the room, each one providing potential services that could address family needs and offer areas of support. Families are given a specific amount of time after working with a partner to improve attendance. Once families show improvement in attendance, the court drops the petition.

### **Quantifying Outreach**

Teaching and learning are inseparable from attendance. However, it is impossible to understand the impact of family engagement without looking at data in the context of relationships with families. I worked with my team to create an engagement dashboard, which tracked not only our outreach to families but also feedback from them about how to improve their educational experience. Using the engagement dashboard, my team could clearly see how increased engagement correlated with stronger attendance and relationships with our

families. For example, as home visits increased, we saw chronic absenteeism decrease across the district. This shifted engagement out of a silo; we could now identify and share our best strategies across RPS. Ultimately, the engagement dashboard pushed us to quantify engagement, analyze impactful practices, and draw stronger correlations between engagement and positive attendance.

Most importantly, the dashboard, accessible to both district and school-based staff, facilitated stronger internal communication and enabled school and district stakeholders to reallocate resources in response to families' needs. For example, during home visits, my team spoke with families about their needs, hopes, and desires. As we tracked this data across the district, we saw that housing was a real need for families. The Office of Engagement moved to create community partnerships that could provide direct financial assistance to families.

Quantifying engagement also meant changing how we measured absenteeism. Before the creation of the Office of Engagement, absenteeism was measured by the number of unexcused absences. However, whether or not the absence is excused, students who miss school are still missing instruction; missed instruction impacts achievement. I asked district leaders to reconsider how we measured absenteeism so we could get a fuller picture of how students were doing. Looking at the issue as *instruction missed*, rather than just unexcused absence, created a fuller picture of the learning environment and allowed us to understand with greater nuance the support families and students needed.

### **Honoring Personal and Community History**

As a former principal and the daughter of a community organizer, I learned years ago the

importance of honoring a community's history and its present realities. As each child enters the classroom with unique stories and needs, so does each family and community. When I came to Richmond, I sought to understand the beauty, resistance, and triumph of the communities where my students and families grew up. I spent my first year as the chief engagement officer asking questions and listening. Family members shared their hopes and dreams for themselves, their children, and RPS. They expressed a desire to see their children make an impact, drive change in Richmond, and inspire others from their community. Our conversations took place in living rooms, during engagement events, or any space that provided opportunity for connection.

Richmond has a complex relationship with the Black community. Richmond's Jackson Ward community is known as the Harlem of the South and thrives as an entertainment and economic hub for the Black community. Yet Richmond's history includes being the former capital of the Confederacy, and many of its residents reacted violently to school desegregation.

Richmond's complex history meant that many parents rightfully did not trust us. We had to own our history by openly acknowledging the harm families experienced in the past and their concerns when interacting with families and the school staff now. The Office of Engagement needed a message that parents and community members could rally behind. The *We Love You Here* campaign was born from the realization that parents needed to feel love from the district. Through

## Reflect & Discuss

Which of the strategies for engaging families mentioned here would work best for your school or district?

.....

How does your school show families they matter?

social media, our website, and a family newsletter, we leveraged visual storytelling to share families' and community members' experiences. In addition, the district expanded its communications team to create space for families to tell their own stories. These stories helped us repair the harm that was done and let the community know we prioritized them.

The first step in redressing harm is to recognize it. It isn't easy to honor history, but understanding the past and present harm experienced by families begins the journey toward healing. We separate ourselves from families when we do not invest time and heart into knowing their truth, including their tears and outrage. By knowing what shapes families—where they have come from and where they want to go—we can create a personalized engagement system based on the needs and the beautiful strengths of the school community. We can build a foundation to repair past injustices and communicate respect and love so families know they are valued.

### Giving Families a Voice

An effective engagement system shows love for people. Love grounds my actions with families. This act is

the essence of my work as an educator and an engagement leader. This love includes students, families, and staff, because the people doing the work need love, too.

Absenteeism is a national crisis. Without our families, we cannot address this issue. Our actions must align with our values, honor the community's needs and wisdom, and build relationships grounded in trust. As bell hooks said, "True love does have the power to redeem, but only if we are ready for redemption" (2000, p. 107). Our responsibility is to be the love that creates a community that sees and welcomes families. 

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**Shadae Thomas Harris**, previously the chief engagement officer at Richmond Public Schools, leads Groundwork Consulting, where she assists school districts in developing engagement systems that center families. She is also a distinguished professor in residence at Virginia State University and the founding faculty member of the VSU Engagement Institute.

# The MIDDLE Matters

*Regular attendance in middle school is one of the strongest predictors for success in high school—and beyond.*

**Jennifer Ciok**

**T**he bell rings. You are standing in the hallway welcoming students as they arrive. You overhear an intense conversation happening between a group of 8th grade boys about the newest drama between two celebrities. A few 7th graders share with you a good thing that happened in their social studies class. A bunch of 6th graders are racing to make it to class on time. You are glad to see so many of them in the building, but in the same moment are worried about the quarter of middle school students who are likely absent that day (Hays, 2024). Questions are swirling among staff: *Why are so many students not coming to school? How can we get them to come? How can we get them here on time? How can we continue to teach the students who are in class every day, but also support the ones who are not?*

Though concerns about attendance are not a new issue, they have become more pressing and pervasive since 2020. Almost double the students nationwide are considered

chronically absent (missing more than 10 percent of the school year for any reason) compared to pre-pandemic levels (Hays, 2024).

For middle schoolers in particular, being chronically absent in these critical years can be the start of a pattern that persists throughout the rest of their school career. A pre-pandemic [longitudinal study](#) of students in Utah found that chronic absenteeism begins to rise in middle school, and that the more consecutive years of being chronically absent for students led to a greater likelihood of a student dropping out. For each year that a student is chronically absent starting in 8th grade, the odds that he or she will drop out approximately double (Utah Education Policy Center, 2012). More recently, in 2022, the University of Chicago's To&Through Project [released a report](#) finding that students with strong grades and attendance in elementary and middle school were far more likely to graduate from high school and then enroll in college. In fact, students who had above a 3.0 GPA and 90 percent

attendance were twice as likely to graduate and almost four times as likely to attend college than those who fall below in both of those metrics (Seeskin et al., 2022).

## Understanding Student Experience

Knowing that attendance is one of the strongest predictors of success for middle schoolers in high school and beyond, and that higher attendance is linked to a higher GPA and high school graduation, it is important to understand why students who are coming to middle school continue to come and why those who don't aren't. There are many reasons why middle school students may be absent from school, and many of those problems may not entirely be in their locus of control. Barriers like illness, food insecurity, having to help care for younger siblings, other responsibilities at home, or unreliable transportation can cause students to be late or not come at all. Violence in a community can lead to students being afraid to travel to and from the school campus. Some middle schoolers are unsure of how they fit into their community and can experience anxiety or bullying, which can lead to missed days or weeks. Each of these factors requires a different approach and level of support for students and their families.

A short culture and climate survey can be helpful to better understand the perceptions students have of the school and their experiences overall. (See p. 31 for examples of questions to ask.) For students who are regularly in school, this type of survey can help give school leaders information about both the positives of the school experience and what potential changes



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need to be made. Educators should share the purpose of the survey with students and let them know what they will be doing with the information. This will help to get more truthful and robust answers from students.

It is also important to find out why students aren't attending school regularly. In these cases, surveys are not enough. Oftentimes, because they are chronically absent, these students' voices are missing in survey data, or students haven't been in school enough to feel like they can accurately answer the questions. Conducting a [focus group](#) or an [empathy interview](#) with students (and potentially their families) may help to gather additional information. The principal, counselors, or other team leaders can create a focus group of chronically absent students to give them an opportunity to build off one another as to the barriers they face in coming to school. Watch for body language and for those who do not participate to see if follow-up is needed. For an empathy interview—a one-on-one conversation



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**It is important to understand why students who are coming to middle school continue to come and why those who don't aren't.**

with a student to understand their story and challenges—make sure that the student knows that they are not in trouble and that you are there to listen and understand what is keeping them from attending school. Stay curious when having these conversations and use them to better understand the experiences of your students.

Once you have a better understanding of why students are missing school, you can start to assemble teams who can support them and their families. These teams are most effective when made up of staff who can bring different approaches to problems, such as administrators, counselors, teachers, or attendance coordinators.

### **Building Trusted Connections**

Having a trusted adult at school is essential for middle school students in a time of development when they are trying to figure out who they are, who they might want to become, and how they fit into the school community. As

Brooklyn Raney writes in *One Trusted Adult*, having a trusted adult during the period of adolescence “can significantly reduce risk, give you a safe place for processing normal life questions, provide a teacher and model of important life skills, and help you calibrate your inner compass” (Raney, 2019, p. xviii).

Having a positive, trusting connection to an adult at school has also been shown to “have tremendous benefits that include reduced bullying, lower drop-out rates, and improved social-emotional capacities” (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2023).

Here is a strategy that I have used effectively with schools to identify students who may not have a strong connection at school and help them start the process of building that connection.

Begin by asking students if they feel connected to an adult at the school and why. This can be done in a quick entrance or exit survey. Just make sure that you have a way to track the information

and gather all voices. Flag students who note that they don't have a connection to anyone in the building.

Then ask teachers to identify students who they think would come to them with a problem. Flag students who are not identified by any teacher. Then compare the lists. If there are students who didn't feel a connection to any teacher, but certain teachers felt those students would come to them with a problem, ask the teachers to build a connection to those students. For students who named a teacher, but teachers didn't name them, make sure that the trusted teacher knows that the student feels connected to them. If there are students who said they didn't have a connection to anyone and teachers also didn't identify them, then find teachers who are willing to build an intentional connection with those students.

Once teachers have their individual lists of students to build intentional connections, ask them to check in with those students as often as possible throughout the week about something other than their performance in school. Aiming for even a two-minute check-in each day can make a huge difference in building that connection.

Every two to three weeks, ask teachers to share any important information that they learned about their list of students in a team meeting. Keep track of relevant information (such as students' interests, challenging home situations, or interactions with peers) in a spreadsheet so that you can see patterns and trends and note if additional support is needed. Midway

## Survey Students About Their Connection to School

Why aren't students coming to school regularly? A simple survey can help you understand the root causes of absenteeism—and also highlight areas for improved student connection to school. Questions like the ones below can help identify themes and patterns of students' experiences.

### Scaled Questions

*(1-strongly disagree to 4-strongly agree)*

- Our school is a welcoming place for all students.
- I can go to a teacher when I have a question about their class.
- I can go to a teacher when I have a problem.
- I am happy to come to school each day.
- The work we do in class is connected to things I am interested in.

### Open-Ended Questions

- Which teacher do you have a connection to? Why?
- Which project/assignment/unit has been your favorite this year? Why?
- What has been your favorite moment at school this year?
- What is something that you think our school does well?
- What is something that you think our school could improve?

Source: Jennifer Ciok



JIA-LIOWA / SHUTTERSTOCK

through the year, have students answer the same questions again, and see if more students feel a connection or if additional students need to be added to the intervention.

Having trusted adults who are looking out for specific students helps not only to build connections, but also to problem solve when troubling patterns arise around social-emotional needs, attendance, behavior, or grades. One middle school team I worked with who put this into practice saw a big improvement. Two-thirds of the students who said that they did not have a connection at the beginning of the year were able to name a trusted adult halfway through the year. Teachers also reported that they

understood their students better and that they became better listeners to students' needs when they intentionally sought connections with them. They also saw students that they check in with taking more accountability for their grades, attendance, and behavior.

### **Engaging Students in Learning**

Though some attendance barriers go beyond what an individual educator can solve, there are some challenges that can be improved by making changes in the classroom to help students feel more connected to their learning. Middle school is the second most active period of brain development, a time when synapses are being strengthened and students are exploring their identity in a variety of new ways. To engage students in learning, educators need to show students they are seen, valued, and heard. They need to give students opportunities to build peer relationships, share their own stories, and feel like their work is connected to their life and contributing to their community.

Understanding how students are experiencing the classroom is the first step in knowing which area to focus on. After analyzing survey results and information collected from focus groups or empathy interviews, school leaders can share relevant findings with teachers so they can improve the experiences of students in their classrooms. Here are a few examples of ways educators can better engage students.

#### **Encourage students to share their stories.**

Knowing that your story matters and people see you for who you are is one of the most important things for middle school students seeking belonging. As adolescents grapple with who they are and how they fit into their community, storytelling is a way for them to see each other's humanity and perspectives and find common connections.

Storytelling can happen in many ways. Teachers can give students time to share a story about their lives outside of school (*What is an*

### **Reflect & Discuss**

What are a few ways that you currently gather data from students about their experiences at school? How do you and your colleagues act on that data?

.....

Of the three strategies—sharing stories, building connections, and connecting to life outside of school—which do you think is most needed in your school or district? Why?

*experience that you have had where food was an important part of the story?) or something connected to their past (Share a time when you felt celebrated?). Teachers can assign a bigger project where students have to interview someone from their family about an experience or time period in history and share it with the class. They can give students choice in how to share their story and make sure their peers have the opportunity to give positive feedback. Sharing of stories can break down barriers and build a strong sense of belonging where students feel connected to their classroom and school community.*

#### **Help students build intentional connections.**

Building structures where strong peer-to-peer relationships are central to the success of the classroom is one way to make students feel valued in the classroom. This could take the form of a peer buddy system in the classroom where students meet to hold each other accountable for the goals they set. It could also be opportunities where students come up with and lead the opening question of the day. *Would you rather?* questions are always a favorite, as are any questions that generate some controversy. You would never guess how much discussion comes from asking the question, *Would you rather*

have pizza or tacos? or Which is more important to you, loyalty or humor? These activities can help make school feel more relevant to students and show them their voice is valued.

### **Connect learning to life outside of school.**

Why are we doing this? How will this ever help me? are questions that students often ask and teachers dread having to answer. Telling students that they will “need this later in life” often seems like an inadequate and unsatisfying response. Helping students to make connections between what they are learning in school and life outside of school builds relevancy and a greater understanding of the content. This can happen in small ways, like giving students a choice in what they are learning or how they are sharing their learning, having them practice a relevant skill like public debate, or having students make and share their own connections to the content through writing or group share-outs. This could also become an entire unit where students engage in a passion project or a service-learning project that allows them to take some action to help their community. Giving students the opportunity to have this type of choice and voice allows them to know that they are being heard and that their voice matters and can make a difference.

### **Paving the Path for Future Success**

For many middle schoolers, school can bring up a lot of emotions and can come with a lot of barriers. Understanding how students are

currently experiencing school, making sure that all students have a trusted adult in the building, and figuring out new ways to engage students based on their current development and the need to feel seen, valued, and heard, can truly make a difference in growing a strong community where students know that they belong. 📍

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**Jennifer Ciok** is the manager of coaching and improvement for the University of Chicago's To&Through Middle Grades Network. Her book on practical ways for classroom teachers to make work more meaningful in middle school is forthcoming by ASCD.

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# Adapting Discussions to Unpredictable Attendance

*How can teachers turn student unpreparedness into participation?*

**Matthew R. Kay**

I began my teaching career at a school where, for many reasons both in and outside of their control, a lot of students struggled to come to class. This meant that, on any given day, I had no idea which students would be there. I could plan few, if any, discussions around the assumption that the same students who were there yesterday would be there today. This also meant that few valued resources, like books, went home with kids because our school was not particularly confident that it would ever get them back.



## Always be ready for *nobody* to have done “the reading.”

So, every day and every discussion had to make sense within the context of a single class period. I could neither assume prior knowledge about a text nor depend on the ability to follow up with a student the next day. This is no longer my teaching reality, but I learned a career-shaping lesson about class conversations that first year: *always* be ready for *nobody* to have done “the reading.” With this, our discussions can survive in the face of absenteeism that can be both unpredictable and pervasive.

Practically, this means that class discussions benefit from teachers giving students immediate access to relevant information and key terms before we start prompting. Some kids might not need this information, as they come to the moment prepared. Others, for whatever reason, do not, and so we face the choice to either leave them behind or to give them *just enough* of a grounding to participate. If our pride gets involved, we might choose the former. This is understandable. But it too often is an illogical choice. If kids do not have enough information to participate, awkward silence might not be the only consequence. These kids might become a classroom management problem. And what’s the point? It’s not like kids who enter a conversation unprepared will suddenly start doing their homework tonight out of embarrassment. We cannot fill students’ return to school with “gotcha” moments meant to shame them into attending.

### **Making the Most of Discussion Time**

There are a couple of ways to ground students in the information being discussed. Unfortunately, both of these strategies eat at valuable discussion time, so we have to choose wisely. First, we can read aloud the portion of the text that will be discussed. If we want the class to discuss one moment in an entire scene, we could read aloud just that moment, even if it’s only one of 25 assigned pages of their homework. (I am a fan of making this reading interactive, having kids “act out” or do dramatic voices.) This roughly three-minute investment is not just for the kids

## Discussions should not just be another way for students who miss school to feel excluded from the community that we've built.

who didn't read. It's for the kids who "read" while doing their chores or playing video games or watching TV. It's for the kids who "read" at 2:00 a.m. with their eyes half-closed or in the lunch period before class. Everyone could always use a review. Any veteran ELA or history teacher can remember moments when students gasped at something that happened in the reading, and when asked why they were surprised, the students said some version of, "I swear that I read it! I just didn't remember that happening!" I teach students *Lord of the Flies*, and every year, when Simon dies, students who have not read attentively are surprised as I review this passage aloud:

At once the crowd [of kids] . . . poured down the rock, leapt on the beast [Simon], screamed, struck, bit, tore. There were no words, and no movements but the tearing of teeth and claws.<sup>1</sup>

They say, "Wait, they ate him?" Giggling, I say, "In a way, yup!" And suddenly, engagement is boosted.

Second, we can give students a quick summary that might only take a few seconds. It helps if we do a little bit of "selling" the reading. We might just say, "So, in last night's reading, \_\_\_ got in an argument with \_\_\_ and it was wild!" From here, we could either tell the class what happened or ask for volunteers to do so. It might be tough to figure out when to ask for volunteers. Awkward silences are not always bad—sometimes students just need time to think or to work up the courage to raise their hands. But these awkward silences can be destructive when they follow simple requests, like asking kids what happened in the reading. We face the temptation to passively-aggressively extend the silence, thinking we are embarrassing unprepared students. And I've seen students do the same, wanting to punish an

overeager teacher. Again, what's the point? Just tell them what happened! Now we can ask our interesting prompts and get going.

### Reframing Accountability

Just to be clear, I am not against accountability. I'm actually pretty old-school about quizzes, using them for just about every take-home reading. Students who don't do the reading will fail these quizzes. Students who don't do the reading will write bad essays. They will probably not get a good grade in my class. But *class discussions* have got to be different. Everyone gets to engage with the ideas if they have even the slightest motivation to do so. Kids who didn't read might not get as much out of a conversation as kids who did. But they should get *something*. Discussions should not just be another way for students who miss school to feel excluded from the community that we've built.

Put simply, great classroom discussions should give students who are not motivated by quiz

### Reflect & Discuss

Kay suggests great discussions can do more than hold students accountable. How can class-wide discussions authentically motivate and engage students?

.....

What's one strategy you could use to not make class discussions a "gotcha" moment for unprepared students?

We cannot fill students' return to school with "gotcha" moments meant to shame them into attending.

grades a reason to earnestly engage with the content. (And even, with wild hope, to come to school!) It's a similar feeling to a friend making us watch an episode of their favorite HBO series. We need just enough basic information to root ourselves in the episode that we are watching. And if that episode is entertaining enough, we're more likely to watch future episodes. We *might* just go home and stream the show from the beginning. 🎧

<sup>1</sup>Golding, W. (1954). *Lord of the Flies*. Faber and Faber, p. 153.



**Matthew R. Kay** teaches students English at Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia and is the author of two books, including *We're Gonna Keep On Talking* (Stenhouse, 2023).

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# 3 Strategies to Boost Students' Connection to School

*New tools and resources can help educators deepen student engagement and belonging.*

## Gabriela López

Schools across the country are still grappling with the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Addressing chronic absenteeism, which remains well above pre-pandemic levels, is a [particularly daunting challenge](#) (FutureEd, 2023). While there is no single reason why more students are missing more days of school, it's clear that increasing students' sense of connection and belonging at school is central to making them feel more welcome, engaged, and motivated to make it to class.

Studies consistently show that [increasing students' connectedness to school leads to positive outcomes](#), including reduced absenteeism, higher test scores, and increased graduation rates (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). According to [Attendance Works](#), a nonprofit working to reduce chronic absenteeism, students feel connected to school when:

- They know there is an adult at school who knows and cares about them.
- They have a supportive peer group.
- They engage at least some of the time in activities they find meaningful and that help others.
- They feel seen and welcome in school. (2023)

In other words, schools must be intentional about supporting each student's sense of inclusion. And when done well, the work to create an environment of connection and belonging pays off. A [recent study by The Grad Partnership](#) found that schools using relationship-centered interventions as part of student success systems saw a reduction in chronic absenteeism of more than five percent in one year (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2024).

Over the past few years, many schools have implemented programs to promote student well-being, including increased access to counseling and new curriculum focused on supporting whole child development. But there are additional opportunities to build systems and structures that can help educators know their students more deeply, build stronger relationships, and make learning more relevant to students' lives—all of which can help to build stronger connections to school.

At the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI), we partner with organizations to translate research on the science

of learning and development into effective classroom practices and tools that help educators address day-to-day challenges. Today, this prominently includes addressing the gaps in connection and engagement that can lead to absenteeism. Just as we know that there is no single explanation for the rise in chronic absenteeism, we recognize that no single program or approach will create and sustain an environment of connection and belonging. But here are three innovative initiatives that show distinct promise and give schools new ways to deepen students' engagement with their education.

### 1 Seeing Students' Potential



When schools know more about the individual strengths and aspirations of their students, they can better support student success. Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS) works with schools nationwide to help them identify students from historically underrepresented backgrounds with the potential to succeed in advanced coursework (such as Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate), design outreach plans to engage them, and create support systems to ensure they succeed.

The EOS approach starts with the Student Insight Card, which provides 43 unique insights for each student with data from a survey developed to understand students' interests, aspirations, challenges, and barriers to enrolling in higher-level courses. The survey helps schools better understand their students and design ways to engage highly capable students in advanced coursework.

EOS has worked with over 900 schools to help more than 70,000 students enroll in advanced courses who would otherwise be unlikely to enroll. For example, after Verona Area High School in Wisconsin adopted the EOS model in the fall of 2013, AP enrollment increased among low-income students and students of color by 25 percent in one year. Over the next nine years, the district enrolled more than 500 students of color and low-income students in AP courses. In New York City, schools working with EOS [increased enrollment in AP/IB courses by an average of 16 percent](#)—or 3,400 students—over six years, while increasing or maintaining course and exam pass rates (Equal Opportunity Schools, 2022).

Enrolling more students with the interest and aptitude in advanced coursework expands opportunities for Black and Latino students to succeed in higher education and STEM fields. The work of EOS also demonstrates that schools can take a systematic approach that signals to students that educators care about their future and believe in their abilities, a key part of strengthening connection.

## 2 Expanding Graduation Pathways



In New Mexico, Future Focused Education (FFE) is part of a statewide effort to redesign graduation requirements and connections to the workplace to better prepare students for the future. The goal is to make learning more relevant and engaging by building new high school graduation pathways grounded in the unique needs of communities and the workforce.

FFE actively works with 47 local education agencies across New Mexico and expects that number to grow. As part of this collaboration, community members come together to create a graduate profile that defines the knowledge and skills that local educators, business, and community leaders believe are important as students transition to adulthood. The profile includes measures of academics and career readiness, as well as skills that honor students' cultural and linguistic identities.

FFE recently supported these efforts in the Peñasco School District, where district leaders engaged community members of the small rural school district to [create a culturally informed profile](#). This new graduate profile gives the school district a roadmap to improve student engagement and increase enrollment.

Capstone projects allow high school seniors to demonstrate that they have mastered the skills in the graduate profile. During these months-long projects, students dive deep into topics that interest them, conduct research, and present their findings in public exhibitions of learning to school, family, and community.

### Relationship-Building Tip:

*Ask each student how they like to be recognized for their hard work.*

*A question like this can provide insights that shape how teachers interact with students and show students that their perspectives and voices are valued.*

These practices give students greater agency over their education, allowing them to connect school to their interests, identities, and communities. When students are engaged in their learning, they are more motivated to tackle challenges that stand in the way of their goals.

## 3 Building Teacher-Student Relationships



Educators recognize the impact of positive relationships with students on connection and belonging. A [recent survey of teachers](#) found that 78 percent rated building stronger connections with their students as a highly effective strategy for boosting student engagement (Gradient Learning, 2023).

Yet teachers face challenges in building trusting relationships with all of their students, especially in middle and high school where each teacher may see more than 100 students per day. In collaboration with Gradient Learning, CZI brought together learning scientists, educators, students, and community partners to develop Along, a digital communications platform that supports relationship building between teachers and students. The tool gives teachers a meaningful and easy-to-use way to check in with each student and collect feedback that can shape their instruction.

## Teachers need support in building trusting relationships with all of their students, especially in middle and high school where each teacher may see more than 100 students per day.

Along is grounded in research that shows that when students have positive relationships with their teachers, they are more likely to feel motivated and engaged in school, develop positive social and emotional competencies, and perform better academically.

With Along, teachers can connect with students by asking them research-informed questions designed to find out how they think and experience the classroom. For example, teachers might ask how students like to be recognized for their hard work. These insights can shape how teachers interact with students, and the feedback loop signals to students that their perspectives and voices are valued.

In a 2023 survey of more than 700 teachers and students who actively used Along, 89 percent of teachers agreed that Along helps in finding the capacity to build relationships with their students. Similarly, 72 percent of students [agreed that Along helps their teachers get to know them](#) (Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, 2023).

### Creating Lasting Change

Connection can play a part in drawing students to school and combating chronic absenteeism—but it must be consistently woven into the fabric of the school day. By supporting conditions in schools where students see adults as partners in their learning,

respecting their interests, and creating meaningful experiences both in and out of school, students are more engaged and excited about their learning.

Educators also need help to make these shifts. Tools like Along and resources from organizations like Equal Opportunity Schools and Future Focused Education can provide teachers and school leaders with the necessary support to address the needs of their students. Working with

### Reflect & Discuss

What steps have you taken in your school or classroom to increase students' sense of connection and belonging? Where do you think there is room for improvement?

.....

In your view, how are opportunities for advanced coursework and student engagement related? How is your school or district supporting such opportunities?

.....

What specific strategies do teachers in your school or district use to build strong developmental relationships with students? What supports do they need?

partners like these has reinforced our belief at CZI that with the right supports, educators can cultivate authentic, unique connections with students that are a critical part of addressing the absenteeism crisis. **3**

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**Gabriela López** leads CZI's portfolio of grants focused on the translation of research in the science of learning and development into classroom practice. Prior to CZI, she was the director of Early Childhood Program Quality Assessment and Equity Implementation at WestEd's Center for Child and Family Studies.

# Attendance Is a Family Affair

*New research shows how schools can build family engagement as a strategy to reduce absenteeism.*

**Todd Rogers and Karen L. Mapp**

**S**tudents missing school has always been a challenge, but since the pandemic it has become a national crisis. High rates of absenteeism are undermining student learning and increasing the chasm between schools and families. Yet, as researchers who study family engagement, we have seen how schools can build productive relationships with families that can actually reduce absenteeism.

Parents have the most influence over their children's lives. Enlisting them as true partners in student success is a critical—but often overlooked—attendance strategy. Here, we discuss how educators can do this in both strategic and tactical ways.

## **Family Engagement Goes Both Ways**

Let's start by describing the framework for how we think about strengthening the productive connection between schools and families. Karen developed the [Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#) in 2013 while working with the U.S. Department of Education and revised it in 2019. This research-based framework identifies the “essential” conditions that must be met to develop and sustain effective partnerships between families and schools. The “process conditions” describe the practices that must be deployed to build trusting and respectful partnerships between families and educators, while the “organizational conditions” describe the leadership commitment and required systems and structures that must be in place



to support and sustain the process conditions (Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

A central philosophy of the framework is that both schools and families require development in key areas—such as understanding each other’s expectations and overcoming barriers to communication—to foster a collaborative environment that supports student success, including reduced absenteeism. By emphasizing reciprocal capacity-building, the framework offers a strategic approach to enhancing family engagement, recognizing that both educators and families play critical roles in achieving the shared goal of student success.

## “Attendance nudge” programs have been shown to reduce chronic absenteeism by 10 to 15 percent districtwide.

It’s worth underscoring two points from the updated framework that are often overlooked. First, family engagement in schools should be focused on *student success*, not merely involvement in school events. Showing up for bake sales is good, but genuine partnership between families and educators about student goals and student learning is better. Second, successful family engagement is an *explicit strategy*, not an aspirational goal. This means districts, schools, and educators must prioritize building relationships and trust with families. It means making the family-school connection a core area of accountability, planning, professional development, and practice.

### The Link to Absenteeism

While productive family engagement has been shown to increase student academic success, until recently there has been no research on its impact on attendance. That’s why we joined a research team that produced a [powerful study](#) showing exactly this connection. In collaboration with the family engagement advocacy organization Learning Heroes and the nonprofit

education research and consulting group TNTP, we looked at the link between family engagement and chronic absenteeism in schools before, during, and after the pandemic (Learning Heroes/TNTP, 2023). We found that schools that had established strong connections with families *before* the pandemic—with its massive increase in chronic absenteeism—tended to be buffered from the most extreme increases in chronic absenteeism *after* the pandemic. In fact, compared with schools that had weak connections with families before the pandemic, these schools had a 39 percent smaller increase in chronic absenteeism post-pandemic. We saw similar effects for English language arts and math proficiency—strong family relationships powerfully muted the detrimental effects of the pandemic.

To measure family engagement, we used teacher-family surveys<sup>1</sup> conducted before the pandemic. They documented the level of trust between parents and teachers, the extent of parent involvement in school activities, and the degree of influence parents had on school decision-making processes. While this study showed how strong family engagement mitigated the pandemic’s effects on absenteeism, additional research is shedding new light on how schools can enhance family connections to reduce absenteeism moving forward.

### Family Engagement as an Attendance Strategy

To use family engagement as a strategy for reducing student absenteeism, we must think of families as partners and invest time, attention, and money to support staff and families. Caregivers are the experts on their own children. Rather than sidelining them or focusing on what these caregivers are perceived to lack, it’s more productive (and more inclusive) to create a collaborative environment where families feel valued and are more likely to engage actively, productively, and supportively in their child’s education.

Strategic family engagement requires the attention of school leadership, money for

**Schools that had established strong connections with families before the pandemic tended to be buffered from the most extreme increases in chronic absenteeism after the pandemic.**



personnel and interventions, and ongoing educator professional development. Principals must set clear expectations for teachers and staff regarding the importance of building relationships with families and provide the necessary training and resources to do so effectively. They must also be innovative in overcoming barriers to family participation, whether logistical, linguistic, or cultural.

Likewise, teachers need to develop and refine skills in effective communication, cultural competence, and collaborative problem solving. They must move beyond traditional parent-teacher meetings to more meaningful interactions that leverage the insights and strengths of families to support student success.

Family engagement also requires deliberate and sustained commitment from the district; it serves students best when it is integrated into a district's strategic framework. This requires allocating resources—both financial and human—to support schools in their engagement efforts. It may well require a formal senior-level position focused on this work.

Districts should invest in systems that facilitate regular, meaningful communication with families. This can take the form of routinely delivering information that families find valuable and actionable, like

“[attendance nudges](#).” It can also mean facilitating more meaningful two-way communication between teachers and families.

Finally, district leaders can support policies that recognize, reward, and expand effective family engagement practices—from individual teacher practices that build trust with families to districtwide attendance-nudge programs.

### **Two Key Tactics**

Exactly how to make family engagement a central pillar to reducing absenteeism will vary by district, but the general approach is going to be the same: investing in and prioritizing relationships with families. Consider how Richmond Public Schools in Virginia has approached this challenge. Like districts around the country, Richmond has struggled with high rates of chronic absenteeism. To change this trajectory, the urban district committed to strengthening family engagement—hiring its first chief engagement officer, Shadae Harris—and saw impressive improvements (see related article on p. 22). As a result of the multi-tiered approach she has overseen, chronic absenteeism has decreased by nearly two-thirds in some schools.

The district used the Dual Capacity-Building Framework as the foundation for the creation of their engagement

strategy to reduce chronic absenteeism. One component of the strategy was to repurpose “attendance officers” into “family liaisons.” The title change came with a job description change as well. Instead of taking a more punitive approach, family liaisons were asked to foster personal, trust-based relationships with families. They were embedded within communities and tasked with understanding and helping families with their unique challenges and aspirations.

These liaisons do more than pro forma outreach, too; they address real barriers to attendance. For example, they provide direct aid to families to reduce housing insecurity. The district also works with the local justice system to focus less on its punitive role and more on offering support and access to resources. Finally, Richmond has centralized its data into a dashboard to better understand and target their outreach efforts.

### **1 Attendance Nudges**

One tactical way the Richmond district used this data was to implement “attendance nudges”—communications to families on a regular cadence about their student's absence record (EveryDay Labs, 2022). (See Figure 1 on p. 46.) To execute this, the district partnered with EveryDay Labs, an organization we are both affiliated with that helps districts

**FIGURE 1. Attendance Nudge Example**

**RPS RICHMOND PUBLIC SCHOOLS**  
 Albert Hill Middle School  
 3400 Patterson Avenue  
 Richmond, VA 23221

Parent/Guardian of:  
 CASEY LEE  
 123 2nd Street  
 Anytown, USA 12346

**Your November Update**

**Casey has missed 6 days this school year\***

*How can we help?*

Dear Parent/Guardian of Casey Lee,

Many families tell us it is helpful to get updates about their student's attendance. To help you track Casey's attendance, you may receive additional letters this school year.

Casey is an important part of our school community. We want to partner with you to help Casey attend school every day.

If we can help with anything, call the school or see the resources on the back of this letter.

Sincerely,  
 Tanya Maple  
 Principal  
 Albert Hill Middle School

**Casey's Attendance Snapshot**

Casey	
Average 6th Grade student at Casey's School	

Total Missed Days of School

\*Questions about this letter? Call 555-123-4567 and reference this unique code 1ct1234, or see the footnote on the back for more info.

Turn Over

**Track Casey's Absences**  
 Casey's most recent absences occurred on the following dates:  
*(abs\_list\_key)*

Tues, Sep 26 (E)  
 Monday, Oct 2 (U)  
 Fri, Oct 6 (U)  
 Wed, Oct 11 (U)  
 Mon, Oct 16 (E)  
 Wed, Oct 25 (U)

**Did you know?** All missed school, for both excused and unexcused reasons, adds up to lost learning time.

Start the school year off right!

Create a routine to help Casey learn and stay on track this year. Here are some tips that many families find useful:



- Choose a spot to keep your child's school backpack and supplies.
- Work with your child to check their backpack each night to look for homework and important notes.
- Make sure Casey gets to bed on time! Getting enough sleep will help Casey be ready for the school day.

We're Here to Help!

If we can help with anything, call the school: (school\_phone)  
 For food, technology support, translation services, and other resources call our Family Support Hotline: 555-123-4567.

\* We send these letters to help families keep track of attendance. It's just for your information, and we hope you find it helpful. The letter lists excused and unexcused absences between the first day of school and (pull\_date). We know students miss school due to illness, religious holidays, or emergencies. Please talk with your student's school and health provider in advance when your student will miss school. For questions and support, or if you no longer want to receive these letters, contact (parent\_support\_phone) and provide the code below.  
**Unique Code:** <<01\_unique\_code>>

In districts that partner with EveryDay Labs, families of students who miss more than a few days of school typically receive a personalized “attendance nudge” every 4–6 weeks by mail, as well as supplemental text messages. There are more than 10,000 versions of these letters depending on factors like the time of year, grade level, and language spoken at home. Example provided courtesy of EveryDay Labs.

reduce absenteeism by engaging families. These interventions have been tested, replicated, and optimized to reduce absenteeism based on more than a dozen randomized controlled experiments conducted in school districts around the country. Overlaying nudges on top of other strategies consistently reduces chronic absenteeism by another 10 to 15 percent districtwide (Robinson et al., 2018; Rogers & Feller, 2018).

How do they work? Attendance nudges are a series of personalized messages delivered throughout the

year, such as, “Karen has missed 7 days so far this school year.” They can also include comparisons to peer absences; grade-specific information about why attendance matters; and useful information about absenteeism, health support, and transportation resources offered by the school district. Which specific message a family receives is tailored to their unique circumstance—there are more than 10,000 versions of these messages, depending on factors like the time of year, grade level, and language spoken at home, to name a few. The messages

are delivered by U.S. mail and by text; the greatest impact comes through the printed mail nudges.

## 2 Better Truancy Notices

Another easy-to-implement tactic to support family engagement as an attendance strategy is to rewrite mandated school-to-family communications. For example, consider the “Notices of Truancy” states require schools send to families when a student is late or absent a certain number of times. Todd conducted research on rewriting these notices



# *Making School Worth Kids' Time*



Educators can bring school environments to life by mirroring children's innate curiosity and imagination.



JORM SANGSORN / SHUTTERSTOCK

## Aleta Margolis

“Inquisitive.” “Impulsive.” “Pure energy.” These are some of the words a group of Washington, D.C., teachers participating in the Inspired Teaching Institute listed when asked to describe characteristics of children. Children are natural learners who are eager to experiment, to manipulate their environment, to explore. Most children, when they are young, are not afraid of failure. Their days are filled with trial and error and new discoveries. Most children are messy, adventurous, and excitable.

In contrast, school tends to be a subdued place, where order, raised hands, and straight lines are rewarded. Oftentimes, little space is provided for youthful exuberance or student decision making. As learning expert Eric Jensen points out, “At a typical school, nearly every decision, from length of time on learning to whom to work with, is dictated and managed outside student control” (1998, p. 59).

The rift between healthy childhood behaviors and school expectations is especially vast for students living in vulnerable circumstances. In his most recent book, *An End to Inequality*, Jonathan Kozol notes Black and Brown students who live in low-income communities are far more likely than their white or wealthy peers to be subjected to a “severity agenda” designed to “keep them on a straight gray line of march to their next examination [including sitting] stiff and silent in the classroom, no impulsive and unscripted questions, many numbered lists of minor misbehaviors and the unpleasant penalties for each, [and] regimens of shaming for those who aren’t ‘performing up to expectations’” (2024, pp. 4–5).

Of course, all children should learn to be considerate, to listen to others, and to master academic subjects. The question is: *Do they have*

to stop acting like children in order to make it through the school day?

## Can We Blame Them?

While there are situations in which students are forced to miss school because they need to care for siblings at home or face other external barriers that make it difficult or impossible to attend, the primary reasons for student absenteeism, according to decades of research, are not these external situations that “pull” them out of school. Instead, students are “pushed” out by school-based factors that make school unpleasant (Doll et al., 2013).

How many children could attend school, but frankly, don’t want to due to negative school environments or a lack of connection to their teachers and peers? A report from CASEL found that “more than 8 in 10 recent high school students say they felt bored at school at least some of the time” (DePaoli et al., 2018). Young people, like all people, don’t want to go places where they don’t feel engaged. If they find school to be a place where their thoughts, ideas, and interests are not particularly valued, can we blame them for not showing up?

Keith Johnstone, former classroom teacher and renowned improvisational theater director, refers to adults as “atrophied children” in his book *Impro* (1979), claiming that we’ve lost the ability to imagine, to play, to communicate genuinely with one another. Imagine what it would be like if school fostered children’s imaginations, curiosity, and communication skills, while increasing their knowledge of the world.

As teachers, school leaders, and



PHOTO COURTESY OF AILETA MARGOLIS

The Profile Pages activity from *Inspired Teaching* helps educators understand their students better, value their voices, and strengthen peer connections.

education changemakers, we have a unique opportunity and, given the growing engagement crisis, an imperative to create school communities where students’ full selves—their curiosity, their needs, their ideas—are welcome and valued.

## Seven Ways to Make School Worth Kids’ Time

Below are concrete strategies teachers and school leaders can use to increase engagement and connection and decrease boredom and disaffection, which just might make students more interested in coming to school:

### 1

#### Examine underlying assumptions.

Due to the day-to-day pressures of their job, educators can sometimes fall into patterns of thinking that fail to fully appreciate students’ potential and interest in learning. Ask yourself:

“Am I engaging with students and their families from a deficit-based stance? Might I be thinking, even unconsciously, ‘How do I convince these kids and their parents that school is valuable, that learning is important?’”

Or are you engaging with them from an asset-based stance? Asset framing, a concept coined and popularized by social entrepreneur [Trabian Shorters](#), means assuming students and their families are inherently curious people who want to learn (Shorters, n.d.). From an asset-based stance, ask yourself: “How can I ensure that school identifies, values, and builds on the aspirations and contributions of our students and their families?” and “How can I describe the school experience to students and their families in a way that lets them know we value our students and want them to thrive?”

2

**Engage empathy.**

Ask yourself: “Would I want to be a student at my school?” Picture what it feels like to come into a classroom for the first time where you are greeted with a list of rules and consequences for breaking them, versus one in which you’re invited, for instance, to create a “[profile page](#)” about yourself and share with classmates your answers to questions like: *What do I contribute to my learning environment? What do I like about where I live? What would I like to be doing five years from now?* Imagine yourself as a student walking into both classrooms. Which classroom would make you feel more supported and valued?

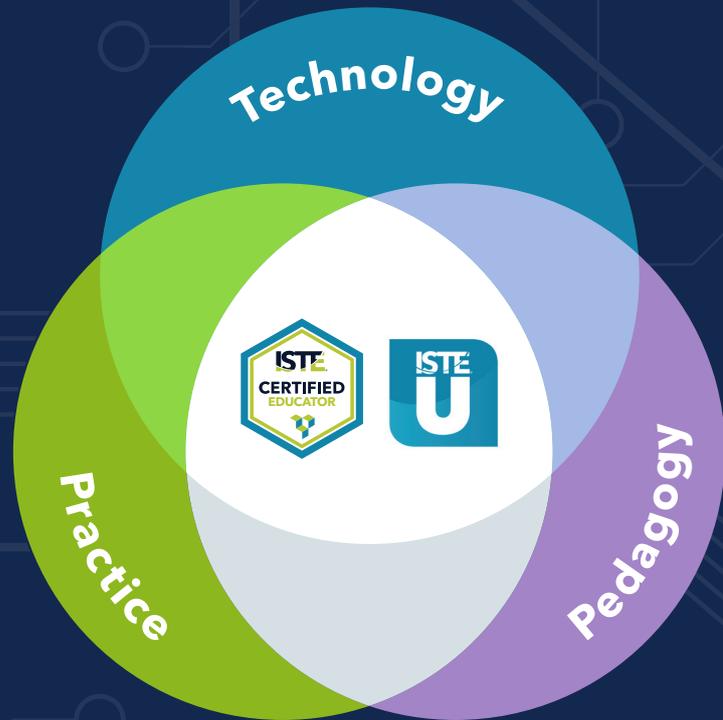
3

**Broaden the definition of success.**

Borrowing from improvisational theater, embrace a “Yes! And . . .” approach. Yes! Students need to learn content and prepare for assessments. And students need interesting, meaningful work to do that engages their curiosity and engages them in authentic interactions with one another. Yes! Teachers are expected to deliver specific content to their students on a specific timeline and to ensure their students absorb that content and can prove they have done so on a test or other assessment. And while learning skills and content is important, education decision makers need to ask ourselves a critical question: “What price are we paying when we prioritize the delivery of content and skills over the needs, interests, and engagement of our students?”

A slightly less bleak version of that

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## If kids find school to be a place where their thoughts, ideas, and interests are not particularly valued, can we blame them for not showing up?

question is: “How can we spend our time with young people in schools so that they get to engage their curiosity, forge meaningful connections with peers and adults, and learn content in a way that is meaningful and relevant?” Content does not have to be learned at the expense of personal well-being. And personal curiosity and excitement do not have to be sacrificed for learning to happen. As educators, of course we know this. But when we are overwhelmed with the day-to-day demands of adjusting schedules, responding to administrative requests, documentation, meetings, catching up to curricular timelines, and more, we can lose sight of this core truth.

4

### **Connect the mind, heart, and body.**

In most schools, a student’s day is divided by subject area. This artificial separation often results in the belief that movement is for gym class, critical thought is for English lit, and mathematics is for algebra. Time is carved out to address students’ social-emotional well-being, as if mental health is its own discrete subject.

What if, instead, the entire school day were a time for SEL and academic learning, and a time for students to engage their minds, hearts, and bodies? (Consider inviting students to journal about how they feel when they encounter an unfamiliar math problem; challenge chemistry students to use their bodies to demonstrate

the difference between covalent and ionic bonding; or ask students to write persuasive essays arguing for changes to school policies to support well-being.)

5

### **Put kids in charge.**

Give students something to do that’s worth showing up for. This can be as small as inviting them to choose where they sit, decide which of two novels the class will read next, or grapple with a difficult mathematical equation instead of turning to the teacher for instructions on how to solve it.

It can be as big as tasking high school students with designing and implementing a schoolwide poll on whether their peers intend to register to vote once they turn 18 (and why or why not), or involving students in

making age-appropriate decisions about how to allocate funds in the school’s budget, as school leaders did recently at the Inspired Teaching Demonstration Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., when they surveyed students about which vendor they preferred for school lunches.

Putting kids in charge might also look like asking a student *why* they broke a rule, rather than proceeding directly to the consequences for doing so—or, even better, engaging students in creating rules in the first place. The more opportunities students have to take the lead, the more ownership they feel over their learning experience, and the more likely they are to want to spend time in school.

6

### **Embrace awe.**

Much of our focus in the classroom is on imparting information and confirming our students have, indeed, learned the day’s lesson so that we can move on to the next one. Surprise, wonder, and curiosity don’t fit neatly into that delivery-reception paradigm. But research has shown that experiencing awe—defined by social psychologist Dacher Keltner (2024) as “the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your understanding of the world”—offers a host of benefits that increase our students’ capacity to learn and their interest in doing so (Heshmat, 2023).

## Reflect & Discuss

What’s one way your school supports children’s natural curiosity and wonder?

.....

This article outlines seven strategies to boost student engagement and connection. Which of these strategies seems most needed in your school, and why?

Simply asking students, “What are you curious about?” or “What do you wonder about?”—or incorporating this exercise into curriculum-based assignments—can infuse elements of awe into all aspects of the school day. So can spending time outside, incorporating music into the classroom experience, and inviting students to share stories about times they made a difference in someone else’s life.

7

**Change the narrative for families.**

In addition to, or instead of, traditional parent-teacher conferences, create ways to let families know they are important to the school community. We know, for instance, how important it is to offer food at parent events, but what about hiring local parent-owned restaurants to provide the catering, as Pittsburgh schools participating in the [Parents as Allies](#) (PAA) project do (Rayworth, 2024)? And while you’re at it, check out the PAA’s [empathy interviews](#), a fabulous tool for engaging families and gathering useful context about everyone in your school community (Kidsburgh, n.d.).

**If You Build It, Will They Come?**

Each year in the Inspired Teaching Institute, my colleagues and I ask participating teachers, “Why do children go to school?” The answers vary widely, but they always include some version of, “Because they have to/because it’s the law.” We can’t simply require young people to go to school and expect them to show up. And ironically, the consequences put in place for truancy can serve as disincentives, by perpetuating the idea that school is a negative space where students are forced to go and a place where they will be punished for not complying.

**Can children be themselves while also learning in school? They can if we rethink the school experience.**

Can children be themselves while also learning in school? They can if we rethink the school experience. Students shouldn’t have to check their needs, wants, energy, and expertise at the school door. When teachers and school leaders engage with students from a place of genuine curiosity and respect, we won’t have to threaten students in order to get them to go to school. They’ll want to spend their days learning by our side. 🍎

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**Aleta Margolis** is founder and president of the Center for Inspired Teaching. A former public school teacher, Margolis has taught teachers around the world how to incorporate students’ curiosity and expertise into academic instruction.

# Engagement:

*A simple framework can help educators promote (and track) five key factors of engagement.*

**Harvey F. Silver and Abigail L. Boutz**

**E**ducators have long appreciated the importance of engagement to student success. But with unprecedented rates of absenteeism threatening to become the new normal—and threatening educators' abilities to help students recover post-pandemic—the need to get students academically and personally engaged in school is greater than ever before.



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# Are You Keeping SCORE?

Conversations about the current attendance crisis often focus on challenges that originate outside the school walls—for example, those related to family circumstances or a lack of transportation. But “outside factors” aren’t the only ones affecting attendance. Shebby and Porter (2021) note that many students are “voluntarily absent because they are simply not engaged with the classroom materials, their teachers, or both” (p. 76). And feeling disconnected and disengaged from school also plays a key role in students’ decisions to drop out early (Bridgeland et al., 2006). So, if we want to get the absent students back and keep the students who are coming to school from leaving, we need to focus on keeping them engaged.

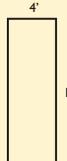
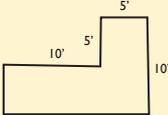
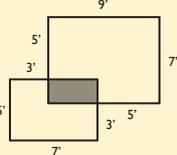
What can educators do to make school a place where students want to come and want to learn? A place where they’re not just physically present, but willing to exert the mental energy that meaningful learning requires?

The acronym SCORE can guide educators’ efforts to heighten engagement by helping them understand and keep “score” of key factors that can make a difference. It’s as simple as this: If teachers facilitate student **S**uccess, if they spark **C**uriosity, if they invite **O**riginality, and if they foster interpersonal **R**elationships, they can boost student **E**ngagement. Let’s look at each of these in turn to see why.

## Success

Success has a powerful effect on people’s emotions, and emotions often drive our behavior. So it’s no surprise that students who struggle often withdraw, disrupt classroom learning, or drop out of school entirely. On the other hand, when students feel they can accomplish learning tasks

**FIGURE 1. Sample Menu Tasks for Area and Perimeter**

LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3
		
Calculate the area and perimeter of the shape.	Calculate the area and perimeter of the shape.	Calculate the area and perimeter of the shaded shape.

Source: Harvey F. Silver and Abigail L. Boutz

or goals successfully, they’re more likely to invest time and effort, even when those tasks are challenging (Goodwin et al., 2023; Hattie & Yates, 2014). That’s why finding a “just right” level for students to work at is key—not so hard that they get frustrated and give up, but not so easy that they lose interest.

The Graduated Difficulty framework (Silver et al., 2007) puts students in charge of choosing the right level and managing their learning.

## When students feel they can accomplish learning tasks or goals successfully, they're more likely to invest time and effort, even when those tasks are challenging.

Students examine a menu of increasingly difficult tasks, analyze what each level involves, decide where to start working, and move up when they're ready (see fig. 1). Working at a challenging but comfortable level lets students build the competence and confidence they need to achieve at higher levels. What's more, analyzing the full range of tasks inspires them to make that jump by letting them see where they're going and what top-level work requires, assess where they are now, and develop goals and plans for closing the gap.

Research tells us that setting achievable goals, experiencing success, and connecting successes with effort can have a powerful effect on students' motivation and commitment to learning (Dweck, 2016; Goodwin et al., 2023). But if you've ever watched a child work for days, weeks, or months to master a video game, you don't need research to appreciate the motivational power of Graduated Difficulty. It motivates in the same way video games do—by drawing on a natural desire to reach the top level,

by providing immediate feedback about performance, and by triggering the sense of pride and accomplishment that comes from “leveling up.”

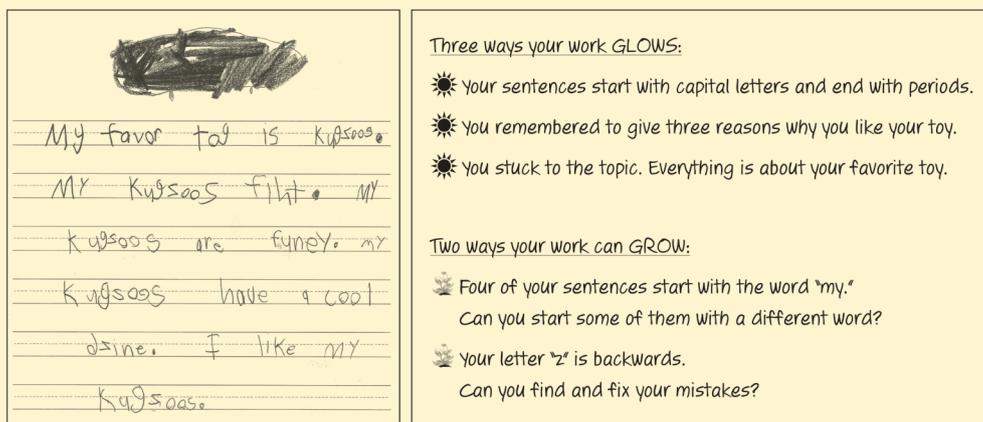
Pairing positive feedback with constructive feedback is another way to facilitate that same sense of pride and accomplishment, while simultaneously encouraging growth. The Glow & Grow technique (see fig. 2) promotes this kind of balanced feedback by having teachers point out what students have done well (what “glows”) and where their work can “grow.”

### CURIOSITY

If we want students to absorb and retain what we teach, then capturing their interest is crucial. As Bryan Goodwin and colleagues (2023) remind us, “If your students don't pay attention to what's going on in your classroom—if they don't find it interesting, relevant, or meaningful—you can be assured they will not learn it” (p. 25).

The challenge educators face, of course, is how to

**FIGURE 2. Glow & Grow Feedback on 1st Grader's “What's Your Favorite Toy?” Assignment**



The figure shows a student's handwritten work on lined paper. At the top, there is a large, dark scribble. Below it, the student has written several sentences: "My favor tal is Kugsoos.", "MY Kugsoos filit. MY", "Kugsoos are funny. MY", "Kugsoos have a cool", "dine. I like MY", and "Kugsoos." To the right of the handwriting, there are two sections of feedback. The first section, titled "Three ways your work GLOWS:", lists three points with sun icons: "Your sentences start with capital letters and end with periods.", "You remembered to give three reasons why you like your toy.", and "You stuck to the topic. Everything is about your favorite toy." The second section, titled "Two ways your work can GROW:", lists two points with lightbulb icons: "Four of your sentences start with the word 'my.' Can you start some of them with a different word?" and "Your letter 'z' is backwards. Can you find and fix your mistakes?"

Source: Boutz, A. L., Silver, H. F., Jackson, J. W., & Perini, M. J. (2012). *Tools for thoughtful assessment: Classroom-ready techniques for improving teaching and learning* (p. 118). Thoughtful Education Press.

get students curious about classroom content they might not naturally be interested in. After all, few students come to class saying things like, “Linear equations? Let’s get started!” or “I’ve always been dying to learn about osmosis!”

So how can we stimulate interest while still teaching the content we need to teach? Opening lessons with curiosity-sparking questions can make any content more captivating, especially when those questions invite students to explore puzzling facts or content-related “mysteries” like these:

- How is it possible that the U.S. presidential candidate who wins the most votes doesn’t always win the election?
- How is it possible that burning a forest can be good for its health?
- How is it possible that changing the order of operations can change the solution?
- Why would health experts say it’s better to cough and sneeze into your elbow than into your hand?

Making the content “mysterious” isn’t the only way to capture students’ attention. Try making content more relevant to students’ lives—for example, by using the analogy of a teenage breakup to engage students in exploring the colonists’ “breakup” with Great Britain. Or capitalize on the motivational power of controversy by asking a debate-sparking question to get students talking, such as, “Graphic novels: are they canon-worthy or just kid stuff?” Getting students interested in classroom content doesn’t just make the learning more enjoyable; it actually helps it stick (Gruber et al., 2014).

## ORIGINALITY

Many students long to express themselves and their ideas, but research and experience tell us they often spend more time responding to recall questions and repeating others’ ideas than thinking independently (Mehta & Fine, 2019). This leads to boredom and disengagement.

A simple remedy is to pose fewer “what’s the correct answer” questions and more questions that invite multiple, unique responses. The stems shown in Figure 3 make it easy to design questions like these.

**FIGURE 3. Divergent Thinking Stems and Sample Questions for Promoting Original Thinking**

### **What if \_\_\_\_\_?**

**What if** the United States had joined the League of Nations? What might be different now?

**What if** there were no seasons? In what ways might our world and lives be different?

### **How might \_\_\_\_\_?**

**How might** we make this program run more quickly? Generate some possible strategies.

**How might** we make our classroom a better place to live and learn in? Generate some ideas.

### **Why might \_\_\_\_\_?**

**Why might** we have gotten a different experimental outcome than we expected?

**Why might** the mouse have felt contented at the end of the fable?

### **How many ways can you \_\_\_\_\_?**

**How many ways can you** use the numbers 1 to 20 to generate an equation that equals 10?

**How many ways can you** move from one side of the gym to the other?

*Source:* Adapted from Silver, H. F., Perini, M. J., & Boutz, A. L. (2016). *Tools for a successful school year (Starting on day one)* (p. 62). Thoughtful Education Press. Copyright © 2016 by Silver Strong & Associates.

**A simple strategy to heighten students’ interest is to pose fewer “what’s the correct answer” questions and more questions that invite multiple, unique responses.**

**FIGURE 4. “Check Your Attitude at the Door” Poster**



Source: Silver, H. F., Perini, M. J., & Boutz, A. L. (2016). *Check your mood at the door* (Sample tool). Copyright © 2016 by Silver Strong & Associates.

When we pose questions that invite students to share *their* ideas and opinions, we’re telling them that we value who they are and what they think. What’s more, we’re building the kind of classroom climate that fosters positive attitudes and attendance.

## RELATIONSHIPS

This may be the most important factor of all because the relationships that students form with their teachers and peers influence how they feel about school, how engaged they are, and how much they learn. According to Silver and Perini (2010), “For many students, the greatest inspiration comes in knowing that they are part of a community” (p. 329). So, if we want these students to *want* to come to school, we must build that kind of community in our classrooms. We must show our students we care about them, and we must teach them to care about and respect one another.

A simple way to show students we care is to ask them how they’re feeling as they enter the classroom each day. To quickly gauge students’ emotions, post a list of feeling words or emojis on the wall and have students tap the word or image that best captures how they’re feeling. Use a poster like the one shown in Figure 4 or create

your own—and think about how to respond to what you learn. Might a student who is having a bad day need a little extra space or slack? Might you be able to turn things around with a kind word or an “I’m here if you want to talk”?

Continue to provide support and encouragement throughout the day by doing what we call EMC (making Every Moment Count). Whether it’s a smile, a compliment, or an “I believe in you,” don’t miss an opportunity to let students know you’re there for them and rooting for them to succeed.

When we focus on academics, we

sometimes forget how important it is to address students’ social and emotional needs. Doing so is crucial, however, because emotions, it turns out, control the doorway to learning (Willis, 2007). If students come to school feeling anxious rather than secure, if they feel they can’t rather than they can, if they feel lost rather than loved, then the door will shut, and learning won’t occur.

## ENGAGEMENT

Addressing the barriers to attendance that originate outside the classroom walls is crucial, but we need to look inward as well. We need to ask ourselves as educators what we can do to make students who are voluntarily absent want to re-engage. And we need to keep SCORE—and invite students to keep SCORE through evaluation and feedback—of those elements within our control: our instructional choices and our classroom culture. How engaging are our lessons? How welcoming and supportive are our classrooms? How well do we support the natural drives that all people have to be good at what they do, to explore things that interest them, to express themselves, and to be cared about by others?

The SCORE acronym spells out

### Reflect & Discuss

Which SCORE components do you or your school pay most attention to? Which need more attention?

.....

How do you promote success, curiosity, originality, and positive relationships? What more could you do?

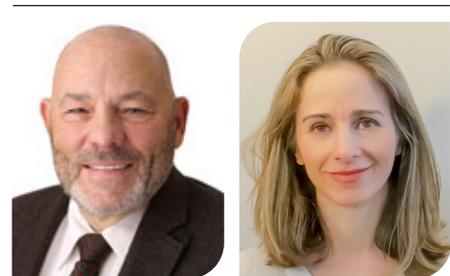
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Why is it important for students to participate in assessing a classroom’s engagement score?

simple criteria for conducting this kind of assessment—criteria that can help educators see what they’re already doing well and how they can further boost engagement. Yet having the acronym isn’t enough. If the goal is to increase students’ motivation and commitment to learning, teachers also need tools and strategies for putting the pieces of the acronym into practice. The more teachers use tools like the ones we’ve shared to promote success, curiosity, originality, and positive relationships, the more students will want to come to school, the more they will enjoy being there, and the more they will learn. That’s the power of engagement. **E**

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**Harvey F. Silver** is president of Silver Strong & Associates and Thoughtful Education Press. He is the author of multiple books on instructional tools and strategies, including the ASCD bestseller [Teaching for Deeper Learning](#) (2020). As a content developer at Silver Strong & Associates, **Abigail L. Boutz** develops practical techniques for putting research into practice. She is the author of multiple titles in the Tools for Today’s Educators series.



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# Reinventing Summer Learning

Researcher Allison Crean Davis says intentionally designed summer programs offer students a “unique and novel experience.”

**Anthony Rebora**

Summer learning has taken on greater urgency and new forms since the pandemic, as policymakers and education leaders have sought to extend and deepen students’ opportunities for academic development and enrichment. Summer programs can also be a way to heighten students’ connection to school and their own paths as learners. To find out more about new developments in summer learning—and what works best in summer programming—we recently spoke to Allison Crean Davis, the vice president for education studies at Westat and director of the National Summer Learning and Enrichment Study. Funded by The Wallace Foundation, this research project includes a series of reports on how [states](#) and [school districts](#) have responded to the call for greater attention to summer learning in the wake of the pandemic. A third and final report will be released later this year.

## How has the role of summer learning programs within school systems changed since the pandemic?

One of the major changes has been the attention paid to summer learning on a national basis. The summer of 2021 in particular was a turning point. That’s when kids were beginning to return to school broadly, so there was an opportunity to bring kids together in person. There was also a call to action at that time from the White House and the U.S. Department of Education for states and school districts to use summer learning to help kids recover academically and socially from having spent so much time away from school, their peers, and their teachers. And then finally the really big change was in funding for summer programs. That came from the federal government, earmarked specifically through the American Rescue Plan. So all this created the opportunity for summer learning to roll out at a national scale in a way that we hadn’t seen before.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALIBSON GREEN DAVIS

**It's important for school leaders to think of summer as . . . an opportunity for learning to be tailored in different ways to the needs of their students.**

**Your most recent report says that, in response to that call to action and the funding, many state leaders focused on the potential of summer learning through an “equity lens.” Do you think that has altered the role and purpose of summer programs?**

I think it has, and in fact, over the last 10 or 15 years, a lot of the research on summer learning has had an equity lens. There's a wealth of data showing that kids who do not have opportunities for enrichment programming over the summer tend to slip in their academic skills, whereas kids that have access to different learning opportunities and enrichment opportunities,

such as travel and camps, come back to school retaining more of their learning from the prior year. That has been a part of the “summer slide” over time—it's been a contributor to gaps in performance between different groups of students.

So summer learning has been increasingly conceptualized to make a difference by providing the opportunity for kids who don't necessarily have a lot of enrichment opportunities over the summer. I think that is more in focus now because, in general, many educators are more focused on equity, particularly in equity of opportunities.



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**Your report also notes that there’s been a strong emphasis on social-emotional learning in summer programs launched after the pandemic. Was that surprising to you, given the traditional perception that summer school is about addressing academic needs and the recent focus on accelerated learning and learning loss?**

Yes and no. I’m not surprised that people focused on social-emotional learning because it is important, and it is not unrelated to academic learning. It’s very much related and a contributing factor. Also, because of the pandemic, there has been a lot of concern about student mental health and just the lack of socialization opportunities kids had during the pandemic. It felt really important just to bring kids back together in learning how to socialize again.

What we found is that emphasis on social-emotional learning was coming from the states

in their plans that they wrote for their American Rescue Plan funding. But what we learned from districts is that nearly all of them also offered academic programming. And many of them paired that with social-emotional learning opportunities. So the translation in terms of what has really happened on the ground is that summer programs have had strong elements of academic programming, in part because I think teachers and families understood we had to curb that learning loss.

**What goes into making a high-quality summer program at the design level? What are the steps that leaders need to take to get there?**

The best evidence we have is from a randomized control trial that was conducted by the RAND Corporation and The Wallace Foundation over

a decade ago. One basic ingredient is having high-quality staff. We want to have programs where the staff are well-trained and specialized in educating students in the areas that are priorities for the students, the school, and the district.

The next thing is starting early with planning. This was something that a lot of schools and districts did not have the luxury of doing in 2021. But generally, planning should begin at the latest by January for the next summer. It's also important to have a blend of academic and enrichment activities, so between three and four hours of academics, and then usually three or four hours of enrichment blended into the day.

The research also says that programs should run for at least five weeks, optimally six weeks, and be five days a week. And of course, the other important ingredient is having a coherent curriculum. So what are students learning during that academic time period especially, and is it aligned to what they've learned during the academic year? There should be some cohesion to what they're learning. Finally, it's important to have smaller class sizes during the summer so that students are getting personalized attention.

So that's the best evidence we have so far. One of the exciting things as summer learning has scaled throughout the country is that we're now in a position where we can study what school systems are doing in a number of different contexts and learn about different ways in which programs can be successful. So we will have a wealth of new evidence and ideas to draw on.

### **In terms of the messaging and communication, how can school systems counter the traditional perception that summer school is punitive or just about academic recovery?**

It is a challenge. It is kind of amazing how sticky that concept of summer school being punitive has been. But there are some really good resources to help people think about how to message for summer differently.

One is a [guide commissioned by the Wallace Foundation](#) that came out in 2018. It goes into everything from including messages that are important to the students you are serving and using students as messengers to understanding your audience, what

the particular needs are in your community, and what will get people excited about coming to summer learning. And really having messaging that is engaging, consistent, and has multiple facets—not just one flyer or poster. It should be clear. It should be simple. And it should elevate the value proposition of summer learning programming for parents and help them understand how it will help prepare students and propel them into their future in a positive way.

You also want to have a written plan and be able to articulate exactly what this experience will look like for the kids in the program. This can help counteract some of that old messaging about it being punitive. If students and parents hear that kids will be involved



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## Use summer as a time and space to innovate, find new ways of working, and think about finding some continuity with the academic year.

in different enrichment activities, that there's going to be a camp-like atmosphere, and that there will be field trips and a lot of exciting things that might not traditionally be associated with summer school, it helps flip the equation.

### **At the day-to-day level, what can school leaders and educators who are involved in summer learning programs do to ensure they are engaging and effective?**

There are a lot of proven ways. One is making summer distinct and different than the traditional school year, so kids aren't just going into classes and sitting in rows of desks all day and

then having a bell ring. Summer should feel like a different experience that is fun, engaging, academic, and enriching, and still have some continuity with the school year in terms of the curriculum and the way kids are learning.

There can also be a trap where people feel like academics are a no-no for the summer, that academics are a turnoff for kids. But the evidence does not support that. The evidence supports having a blend that provides some different context around the academics so kids feel they're in a unique and novel experience. Most kids want to learn. They have no problem with learning when it's fun and blended with other enriching activities. So educators shouldn't shy away from that.

The other thing I will say is that most successful summer programs also leverage partners. Summer is a time when educators can really get creative. Look around. Look at your community assets. Look at your Boys and Girls clubs, the YMCA, your local arts programs, parks and rec programs, libraries. Think about how to

harness those partnerships in ways that, again, will help with staffing and enrichment and bring new life and new experiences into the learning.

**It's been three years since President Biden's call to action on summer learning and the inclusion of funding in the American Rescue Plan, which is now sunseting. What's your sense of what summer learning will look like in the near future?**

It's a great question. There's a lot of energy and excitement to sustain summer programming and the benefits we're seeing for kids, but that's tempered by some concern about the funds going away.

So, again, this is where I think partners can come in. There's a lot of efficiency and economies of scale that can happen when we are leveraging our community partners. There are also additional funding streams. A number of people who have been doing the hard work of building capacity and providing technical assistance to the coordinators who run summer programs are also helping them identify different funding streams that they may not have realized could be leveraged for summer learning programming. So just because the ARP funds are sunseting, it doesn't mean that the whole program has to sunset. There's a lot of energy around building bridges from those federal funds to other local funds and other more personalized, tailored ways of supporting this work. Funding matters, but it's also the people and the ideas that will sustain the programs.

**How should school leaders be thinking about summer learning as part of their overall academic programming and school-improvement planning?**

It's important for school leaders to think of summer as not optional but as an essential component in their academic programming, an opportunity for learning to be tailored in different ways to the needs of their students. It's also an opportunity to engage with partners that frankly may also be great partners during the traditional academic year.

So, use summer as a time and space to innovate, find new ways of working, and think about finding some continuity with the academic year. Let the academic year and the curriculum inform and build some continuity for students and what they need to learn in the summer. And let some of that innovation that can happen in the space of five or six weeks during the summer inform what you do and try during the academic year. 

Editor's note: This interview has been edited for length.

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## Tell Us About

Why do you think some students miss a lot of school?  
What could teachers do to help?



PAUL TONG / KONIMAGES

### Fourth Graders from Achievement First Bushwick Elementary in Brooklyn, New York

I think some students miss a lot of school because of bullying, depression, they're really sick, or have family problems. I think teachers can help these kids by talking to them or giving them stuff to calm them down. Or they can tell them the world is not perfect, but it's not that bad if we have our class and [we] will help you out. "You should know we will be there for you."

—Ami B.

Some students may not feel comfortable at school or maybe they don't feel challenged at school to want to come. Another reason might be because of bullies, or they feel that the people at school don't like them. Teachers could try to give more rewards or do more fun things like

throw parties, give class competitions, or things like that to make it more fun so we do want to come.

—Anabelle R.

### Eighth Graders from Davis Drive Middle School in Cary, North Carolina

Like a job, in school you should be able to take days off. We work 7 hours a day, 5 days a week, with homework after school and on weekends. Sometimes kids are just plain tired or mentally exhausted, like adults. I don't think teachers and parents get that burnout is a real thing, especially in the days leading up to or after a big test. I think teachers need to be more understanding of what kids are going through and dealing with, and look beyond the fact that a kid has been missing a lot of school.

—Bridget K.

If we had less homework, we would be less stressed, we would get more sleep, and therefore, would be able to do better in school and come to school more and on time. I'm not saying to do away with homework altogether because we still need the practice, but teachers should work to assign less homework.

—Reese M.

Students miss a lot of school because they may not feel comfortable or safe in that environment. If a student doesn't feel confident in their classroom or in their school, they will be more tempted to find excuses to stay home or skip classes. To help them, teachers can make their class more welcoming, invite students who usually sit alone to participate in fun activities, and be more open and accepting of students who are struggling in any way. School should be a safe place for everyone, a place where students can enjoy learning and interacting with others. Teachers are responsible for their students and providing them with a safe place.

—Veronika E.

Students may not have reliable and safe transportation to school daily because of bus rules. I believe that teachers could help by talking to the students who have bad attendance records and try to get to the bottom of what the problem is. This could help give data about what stops them from coming to school and could be sent to the administration so they can use special accommodations to help the students.

—Sohum V.

I feel like students miss school because the activities in school can sometimes get boring. Students usually enjoy learning that is more interactive and hands-on. Fun activities such as team-building games could make students socialize more and help students skip school less.

—Pavan V.

## High School Students from Health Sciences High and Middle College in San Diego, California

I believe that some students miss a lot of school because they are disinterested in pursuing school

in the future. I think that this leads to them being absent a lot because they find it impractical with the decision that they've made not to attend college or a university. Something that I think teachers can do to help this would be to educate students on the benefits of graduating with a high school diploma. I strongly believe that when students know the benefits of certain things, they have more interest and put more effort into these certain things because the students have it in their heads that they will eventually profit from it.

—Emily E.

**“Students miss school because they have nothing to look forward to throughout their day. Essentially, it's the same old cycle. Eat, sleep, school.”**

Students miss school because they have nothing to look forward to throughout their day. Essentially, it's the same old cycle. Eat, sleep, school. Teachers can approach this issue by adding variety in their teaching styles such as ice-breaker questions or daily check-ins. By giving students something to look forward to, attendance will improve.

—Aaron P.

I think most students who miss school just can't make it, but for those who do it on purpose, I think school is uninteresting or unimportant to them. They don't and can't find a reason to go to school every day. Teachers can help students enjoy school more by taking the students' opinions into account. Teachers could include more inclusive topics and find out what students like by having classroom votes.

—Danielle A.

*Editor's note:* Thank you to educators Robin Brantley (Achievement First Bushwick Elementary), Julie Adcock (Davis Drive Middle School), and Mikayla Haywood (Health Sciences High and Middle College) for their assistance in gathering the student responses featured here.

After spending time with families to understand their actual needs, I realized that the solution to chronic absenteeism could neither decouple students from their families nor families from their communities and contexts. We needed to see families.

—Shadae Thomas Harris, p. 22

Oftentimes, because they are chronically absent, these students' voices are missing in survey data.

Conducting a focus group or an empathy interview with students (and potentially their families) may help to gather additional information.

—Jennifer Ciok, p. 28

Environments where children are active participants in their learning as opposed to passive recipients of information yield 100 percent engagement.

—Amy Holcombe and Steve Wozniak, p.16

I learned a career-shaping lesson about class conversations that first year: *always be ready for nobody to have done “the reading.”* With this, our discussions can survive in the face of absenteeism that can be both unpredictable and pervasive.

—Matthew R. Kay, p. 34

