Every Day Counts

IMPROVING STUDENT BELONGING & ATTENDANCE

A BETTER CHICAGO

Chronic absenteeism has emerged as one of the most urgent post-pandemic challenges for our schools, and Chicago is not immune to this nationwide crisis. The evidence has long been clear that persistent absence from school contributes to lower academic achievement, reduced graduation rates, and diminished long-term economic opportunities for young people.

Against this backdrop, A Better Chicago will launch a new Request for Proposals (RFP) in January 2026 focused on reducing chronic absenteeism and strengthening belonging for Chicago students. This RFP will invite schools, community-based organizations, and civic partners to propose evidence-informed approaches—particularly those rooted in connection, prevention, and trusted relationships—that support consistent attendance and student engagement across key transition points. In the months ahead, we will share additional details and welcome early expressions of interest from organizations that believe they may be aligned with this work.
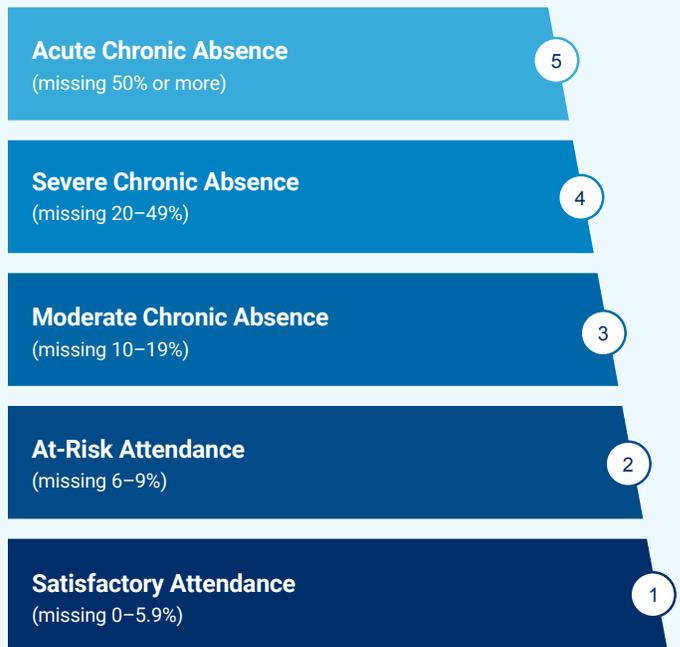
Understanding Chronic Absenteeism

The traditional definition of chronic absenteeism (missing 10% or more of the school year) offers a limited view of a complicated challenge. We are adopting a tiered framework developed by Attendance Works to redefine the issue in Chicago. This framework utilizes five distinct attendance bands to more accurately capture the magnitude of the problem, underscoring the need for a multifaceted approach to address absenteeism. Prevention is just as important as intervention.

In Chicago, extreme absenteeism is a significant challenge. In the 2023/24 school year, 21% of high school students—over 21K students citywide—missed more than 40 days of school each year. Nearly half of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) high schools (34 of 82) had at least 30% of their students classified as acutely absent.

However, attendance challenges begin long before high school. While elementary absenteeism is also high, there is no consistent pattern across grade levels, suggesting that the drivers of absences among younger students are more localized and context specific

Multi-tiered Framework of Absenteeism

Acute Chronic Absence
(missing 50% or more)
5

Severe Chronic Absence
(missing 20–49%)
4

Moderate Chronic Absence
(missing 10–19%)
3

At-Risk Attendance
(missing 6–9%)
2

Satisfactory Attendance
(missing 0–5.9%)
1

Data is drawn from A Better Chicago's landscape analysis, conducted in partnership with The Luminary Collective, and further supported by insights from A Better Chicago's citywide youth survey and focus groups.

Additional Insights:

1 **Four consistent barriers to attendance emerged across all stakeholder groups:** mental health, motivation and connection, safety and belonging, and medical challenges. Students and parents primarily identified health and well-being issues as barriers, while school staff and community partners focused on structural barriers like transportation and caregiving responsibilities.

2 **Trusted relationships and a sense of belonging at school anchor consistent attendance, but there is a significant difference in how students and adults perceive students' sense of belonging.** Adults define belonging more broadly through respect and safety, while students define belonging as feeling "safe at school" and "feeling accepted for who they are."

3 **Absenteeism rates increase at key points of transition, particularly from 8th—9th grade.** Parents and staff highlighted the strain of increased workload, new schedules, and commuting, while students emphasized that strong relationships were one way to help ease the challenges of transitioning from middle to high school. This suggests that interventions for 9th graders should combine academic support with intentional structures for building peer and adult connections.

4 **Rates of absenteeism also rise as students progress through high school, particularly in the 12th grade.** Offering more career-connected learning opportunities and programs with real world exposure are important levers to consider

5 **Even the most academically rigorous schools face attendance challenges.** Selective enrollment high schools generally have a higher percentage of students with satisfactory attendance than the CPS average, but they are not immune to the citywide trend of declining attendance as students progress from 9th to 12th grade, with chronic absenteeism rising over time.

6 **Family engagement efforts must extend beyond the walls of the school.** Home visits are an effective (though resource-intense) approach to building stronger relationships with families, as are warm, parent-focused communications and campaigns such as nudges via text or mail. Studies have shown that students who receive a relational home visit were 21% less likely to be chronically absent. And in Washington DC, a targeted, family-focused communication campaign showed an 11% reduction in chronic absenteeism.

Every Day Counts Initiative

A Better Chicago's investment strategy is guided by a Three-Pillar Framework:

Be Here
Ensuring students have the necessary supports to attend school consistently.

Belong Here
Fostering environments where students feel seen, valued, and connected to peers and adults in their schools and communities.

Thrive Here
Equipping students to shape their learning and take ownership of their futures.

Recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to chronic absenteeism and that schools cannot address this challenge alone, effective strategies will require authentic community partnerships with layered interventions at the **individual, school, and systems levels**. We envision investing in programs working at the elementary level in the at-risk and moderate absenteeism attendance bands, and at the high school level in the severe and acute chronic absence band.
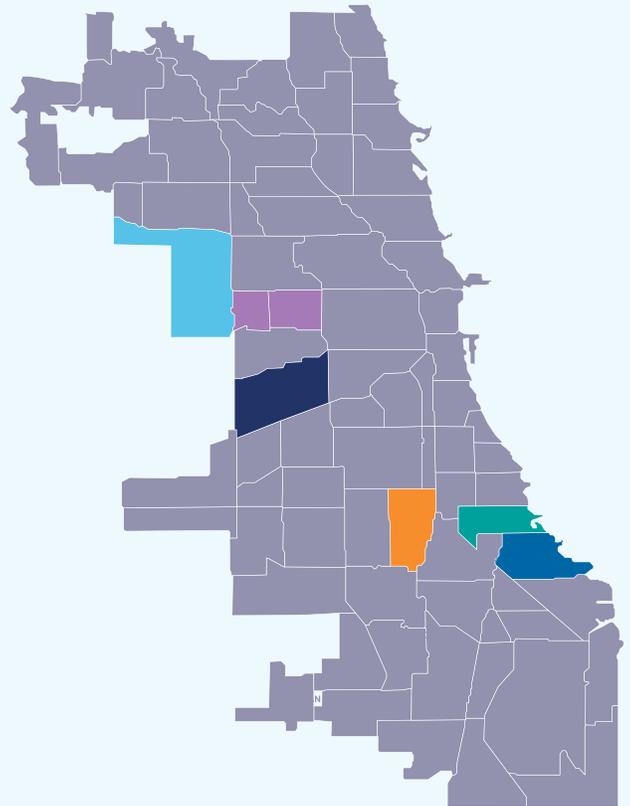
Communities in Focus & Priority Funding Areas

The *Every Day Counts* initiative will focus on improving attendance among students in six Chicago communities—**Austin**, **Englewood**, **Garfield Park**, **South Lawndale**, **South Shore**, and **Woodlawn**. These neighborhoods are home to strong families, schools, and community organizations, yet face disproportionate challenges with student attendance. Our goal is to strengthen attendance supports in these areas while developing approaches and insights that can benefit students and families across all Chicago neighborhoods. Efforts will target elementary students in the at-risk and moderate absenteeism bands and high school students in the severe and acute bands, with an emphasis on prevention, transitions, and sustained student engagement.

We will prioritize funding for strategies that:

- **Strengthen prevention** by fostering belonging and joy in learning through enrichment and student-centered programming that inspire consistent participation.

- **Build strong school–home connections** through culturally responsive engagement and trust-building efforts that highlight the value of attendance and connect families to resources addressing barriers such as transportation, health, housing, and caregiving.

- **Support critical transition points**—particularly from middle to high school—through mentoring, summer bridge programs, peer supports, and family engagement that promote continuity of care and connection.

- **Foster collaboration between schools** to ensure smoother transitions and align supports across grade levels and campuses.

- **Sustain engagement through high school** by cultivating positive school climates that promote motivation, belonging, and consistent attendance through graduation.

Neighborhoods focused on by the Every Day Counts Initiative

■ Austin	■ Englewood
■ Garfield Park (West/East)	■ Woodlawn
■ South Lawndale	■ South Shore

Communities of Focus & Priority Funding Areas

Following is a snapshot of the chronic absenteeism data for SY 2023/24 in the communities of focus:

Community	Elementary At Risk / Moderate Missing 5.6−17% (10−35 days)	Elementary Severe / Acute Missing 17−23% (35−86+ days)	High School At Risk / Moderate Missing 5.6−17% (10−35 days)	High School Severe / Acute Missing 17−23% (35−86+ days)	Target Population Rationale & Priority Focus
Austin	4,640	1,881	99	219	Austin has a predominantly elementary-aged student population, with most chronic absenteeism concentrated in the at-risk and moderate bands. Interventions could prioritize early prevention and engagement among elementary students to establish strong attendance habits.
Englewood	732	235	337	798	Englewood's attendance data show a clear divide between elementary prevention needs and high school re-engagement priorities. Efforts could focus on early intervention at the elementary level and intensive support for high school students experiencing severe absenteeism.
Garfield Park	3,389	1,163	235	422	Garfield Park's high concentration of elementary students creates a strong opportunity for prevention. Efforts can focus on early attendance intervention and sustained family engagement to prevent escalation into chronic absenteeism.
South Lawndale	4,293	2,317	1,037	1,177	South Lawndale demonstrates significant absenteeism across both elementary and high school levels. Given the size of the student population, strategies could target elementary prevention alongside sustained high school engagement to reduce chronic absenteeism system-wide.
South Shore	1,154	579	871	594	South Shore presents a need across both elementary and high school students. Interventions can be dual-focused—reinforcing attendance foundations for younger students while maintaining consistent engagement for older youth.
Woodlawn	1,010	332	488	948	Woodlawn's data indicate elementary-level risk but elevated high school absenteeism. Priority will center on re-engagement of high school students while supporting attendance stability for elementary students.

Preliminary Funding Guidance

To support early planning and expectation-setting, we are sharing high-level funding and eligibility guidance below.

Funding information

- Annual funding range: Up to $500,000 per year (dependent on project scope)
- Grant period: 12 months, with the potential for annual renewal based on performance and outcomes

Eligibility

Applicants must:

- Be a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization or a collaborative with fiscal sponsorship. Note: Schools may not apply independently—all school-based applications must include partnership with a community-based organization with accompanying memorandum of understanding (MOU).
- Demonstrate capacity to serve students in at least one of the focus communities: Austin, Englewood, Garfield Park, South Lawndale, South Shore, and/or Woodlawn.
- Prepared to launch interventions in the 2026–2027 school year

Timeline

Application Launch: **January, 2026**
Application Close: **February, 2026**
Selection: Grants awarded by **July, 2026**

At A Better Chicago, we aim to reverse the trend of chronic absenteeism by collaborating with partners across the city to improve student attendance and belonging. In the coming weeks, we will share more details about the RFP process and how organizations can apply for funding. We will provide dedicated opportunities for Q&A following the official launch to support equity of access and ensure consistent information for all potential applicants.

Submit questions through this form »

Data Appendix

Please use this supplemental information—which includes a national scan, interventions, and absenteeism data from each of the six focus communities—to inform your proposals. Data is drawn from A Better Chicago's landscape analysis, conducted in partnership with The Luminary Collective.

National Scan and Intervention Mapping

Chronic absenteeism has risen to the level of a national crisis. The sheer number of news articles, reports, webinars, and studies on the topic continued to grow exponentially as we were conducting this scan. (A compendium of articles, reports, and webinars that informed this analysis can be found here.) In a recent RAND study, district leaders named absenteeism as the fourth most commonly identified challenge affecting their schools, after raising reading achievement, recruiting and keeping effective teachers, and raising math achievement. Here in Chicago, principals named "chronic student absenteeism" as the top factor (above even budgetary concerns) having an impact on their schools, according to the Chicago Public Education Fund's annual engagement survey. So we know this issue is significant, pervasive, and thus far stubbornly resistant to improvement, despite efforts being undertaken across the country.

Part of the challenge here is that chronic absence is not one thing. It is an indicator of underlying symptoms that may stand alone or that may act in concert with each other, making the challenge that much more difficult to solve. For this analysis, we've identified levels of intervention to consider in tandem with each other—**Individual, School,** and **Systems**, as we know this issue cannot be solved by a single approach or actor.

- **Individual Level:** These interventions are designed to directly support and engage students 1:1. They are often personalized and address the unique barriers or challenges a student faces.
- **School Level:** These interventions are implemented at the school-wide or classroom level. They are designed to create a positive school climate, improve instructional practices, and provide support that benefits a larger group of students.
- **Systems Level:** These interventions are implemented at the district, city, or state level. They are designed to align policies, promote collaboration across sectors, and address broader systemic issues that contribute to chronic absenteeism.

We've also identified the driving root causes which intersect within and across systems: mental health, motivation/connection, perceptions of safety and belonging, illness/medical issues, and structural and logistical barriers. (We describe these in detail in Section 3 of this report.) For interventions to be effective, they must be tailored to the root causes they are being used to address.

Intervention Scan

The interventions we describe below have at least some evidence to back their efficacy, but note that while some interventions may not yet have been studied, that does not mean they are not efficacious. And while the efficacy of any single intervention is difficult to isolate, our scan shows that districts making progress reducing chronic absence such as Washington D.C. and Richmond, VA, approach the issue through multi-level, coordinated efforts spanning individual, school, and systems levels. These approaches consistently emphasize addressing the underlying issues that prevent attendance.

Also bear in mind that a number of the more rigorous studies took place prior to the pandemic, so while the findings are likely still relevant, they do not account for normative shifts that occurred starting in 2020. (For the full list of interventions we reviewed, please see the Interventions Spreadsheet.)

Individual Level Interventions

Structured mentoring programs

In Chicago Public Schools, "**Check and Connect**" decreased student absences among students in grades 5–7 by 4.2 days, or 22.9 percent relative to the control group (note that this study occurred in 2011–2015, so pre-COVID). Core components of Check and Connect are: a mentor who works with individual students and their families, regular check-ins with the mentor (roughly 5x/month), timely personalized interventions to reestablish student connection to school, and learning and engagement with parents.

Launched by an interagency task force, **The New York City Success Mentor program** utilized a mix of external (staffed by non-profit school partners) and internal school adult mentors. Mentors greeted and met regularly with their caseload of students, called homes, identified underlying causes of absences, celebrated students' talents and successes, and worked with the school and its partners to connect students and their families with local resources to address specific challenges. Mentors benefited from having direct access to the attendance data of the students they mentored and being able to link students with pressing out-of-school issues with professional supports. They also had a voice in weekly principal-led student success meetings. Analyses of the NYC campaign's pilot in 100 schools from 2010–2013 (pre-pandemic), with over 80,000 students, found that its efforts significantly improved students' attendance rates, particularly for students from a high-poverty background. Students at participating schools were also significantly less likely (7%) to be severely chronically absent (attendance under 80%) and, conversely, significantly more likely (8%) to be "good attenders" with attendance rates at or above 95%.

High Impact Tutoring

A study of Washington DC Public Schools by the National Student Support Accelerator at Stanford University (using SY22–23 data) found that students were 1.2 percentage points less likely to be absent on days they were scheduled for tutoring, a 7.0% reduction, and a more intensive implementation (combining key features of high-impact tutoring, such as in-school delivery, smaller tutor-student ratios, and increased frequency of sessions) amplified the positive effect. A recent report from UChicago EdLabs and MDRC underscores the importance of implementation, specifically finding that "overall we still see that the dosage students are getting falls far short of what would be needed to fully realize the promise of high dosage tutoring." Given the high cost of this intervention and the recent layoffs in Chicago Public Schools, the future of this work locally is uncertain.

Warm Communication/Nudging

There have been a number of studies on attendance nudging, of high interest in part due to its low cost relative to other strategies. EveryDay Labs, founded by Harvard professor and Addressing researcher Todd Rogers, Ph.D., recently released a randomized controlled trial of over 27k students in district and charter schools in Washington, DC that found that a combination of mail and text nudges (3 of each over the fall semester) decreased chronic absenteeism rates by 1.7 percentage points, or 6.3%, among the focus population. (It is important to note, however, that this study focused on a category of students considered

"Priority," with an absence range of 5–30%, versus "Non-Priority" with an absence range of 30–95% based on prior studies of this intervention's effectiveness, calling into question its potential efficacy in Chicago, particularly in our focus neighborhoods where the majority of students would fall in their "non-priority" category. Also, in a prior DC study, the intervention appeared more efficacious for elementary

School Level Interventions

Student Success Systems

Akin to a next generation of OnTrack work, effective Student Success Systems are comprised of four essential elements: Strong Supportive Relationships; Real-Time, Actionable, Holistic Data; Strategic Improvement Actions; and Student-Centered Mindsets. They also rely upon Student Success Teams, cross-functional groups of adults who work together on a regular basis to implement and continually improve their local student success system. Results from the second year of the GRAD Partnership show that implementing grades, on average, saw chronic absenteeism rates decline from 29% to 21%, an 8 percentage point and 28% decline.

Family Engagement

Anecdotally, family engagement consistently arises as a key strategy in addressing chronic absenteeism. One of the most compelling studies of this is from the collaboration between Learning Heroes and TNTP, where they discovered using Illinois' 5Essentials data that schools with stronger family engagement before the pandemic experienced better-than-expected attendance, achievement, and school climate outcomes post-pandemic.

Home visits

External research on four large urban districts employing the Parent-Teacher Home Visit model in SY15–16 and SY 16–17 (pre-pandemic) shows that students who receive a relational home visit are 21% less likely to be chronically absent. It is important to note that this intervention is not explicitly focused on absenteeism, rather it is aligned to a specific set of core practices: 1) Visits are always voluntary for educators and families and arranged in advance; 2) Teachers are trained and compensated for visits outside their school day; 3) The focus of the first visit is relationship building—educators and families discuss hopes and dreams; 4) No targeting—visit all or a cross-section of students, so there is no stigma, and 5) Educators conduct visits in pairs and, after the visit, reflect with their partners.

Community Schools

Two recent (post-COVID) studies from the Learning Policy Institute show positive impact of well-implemented Community Schools. Key characteristics of high-quality community schools include: integrated systems of support, powerful student and family engagement, collaborative leadership with shared power and voice, expanded and enriched learning opportunities, Addressing rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction, and a culture of belonging, safety, and care. A qualitative study of 4 elementary schools showed that by focusing efforts on 1) Improving Family Engagement, 2) Increasing Student Connectedness, 3) Systematically Tracking and Analyzing Data, 4) Utilizing Tiered Systems of Support, 5) Leveraging Partnerships, 6) and Deploying Community School Coordinators, the featured schools significantly reduced their post-pandemic chronic absenteeism rates. The quantitative study echoed these findings, analyzing 458 schools in their first year of implementation and finding that these schools demonstrated a meaningful reduction in chronic absence—a reduction, on average, 30% greater than that experienced by similar matched comparison schools. These findings were most pronounced in elementary schools.

Systems Level Interventions

System-level interventions may be the hardest to quantify as they invariably involve multiple efforts across many organizations and institutions. Promising practices include engaging with public health entities as has been done in Washington DC, Los Angeles, Trenton NJ, and other cities to align supports and resources with student and family needs, particularly as related to physical and mental health; coordinating public information campaigns about the importance of school attendance; and ensuring that families understand that school resources are often tied to attendance (to inform them, not as a cudgel).

The emergence of cross-district and cross-state networks to address chronic absenteeism is promising. These include efforts from the High Tech High Graduate School of Education (the National Attendance & Engagement Meta Network, as well as the California-focused RAISE Network), the San Diego County Office of Education's ICAN, and the Attendance Solutions Network from the Johns Hopkins Partnership for Student Success. One proof point that is still being analyzed is Digital Promise's Chronic Absenteeism: Insights and Innovations Cohort, which engaged 17 school districts across the country in their Inclusive Innovation model which brings those closest to the challenge—students, parents, families, and organizers—to the table with district leaders, educators, researchers, and solution developers to intentionally involve all stakeholders in the processes of co-research and co-creation. One participating district, Hudson City (NY) evidenced a 12% drop in chronic absenteeism following their engagement as a member of the cohort, and we hope to see additional evidence of impact from this work once they share the results.

Case Studies: Multi-Level Approaches in Practice

Many districts across the country have pursued multifaceted, multi-level approaches to tackle this issue:

Washington DC

DC Public Schools serve approximately 50,000 students. They take a citywide approach to chronic absenteeism, with the Mayor's office leading the Every Day Counts! Taskforce which includes DCPS, and numerous agencies including the areas of health, public safety and criminal justice, transportation, and economic opportunity. The district partners with EveryDay Labs to send targeted, research-backed letters and text messages to families to reduce absenteeism which showed an 11% reduction in chronic absenteeism among students receiving the intervention (SY22–23). They also launched a data- sharing partnership, CARE-H (Collaborative for Attendance Resources in Education and Health) between DCPS and local medical providers for students who are enrolled at DCPS and are current Children's National Hospital patients to support student health and reduce absenteeism by enabling healthcare professionals to provide special outreach and medical attention to children that might be missing school and their families. Their intensive tutoring program was analyzed by Stanford University's National Student Support Accelerator which found that students were 1.2 percentage points less likely to be absent on days they were scheduled for tutoring, a 7.0% reduction. In partnership with the Flamboyan Foundation, DCPS has increased the number of home visits conducted, and working with XQ they have hosted student design challenges, using school climate survey data. Overall, these efforts seem to be working: as of SY24–25, they reported a chronic absenteeism rate of 28.3, down from 31.4 the prior year and 48% in SY21–22.

Richmond, VA

Richmond Public Schools, which serves roughly 22,000 students, has taken on chronic absenteeism as a district-wide priority, and this focus seems to be paying off as their chronic absenteeism rate dropped from 37% in SY21–22 to 22% by the end of SY23–24. To achieve this reduction, the district implemented strategies like increased family home visits and partnerships with non-profits to address issues such as housing instability. The reduction is in part attributable to the work of Shadae Harris, former chief engagement officer for the district, who saw that, as related to parents, the district had "an engagement problem, a relationship problem, (and) a trust problem." For over 6 years, she worked to build a new approach to family engagement in the district, one that positioned parents as partners in co-creating new systems that better serve their needs. The district also partnered with a local housing-focused nonprofit, leveraging a foundation grant to help more than 120 families access rental deposits and lease negotiation help to move out of motels.

Tulsa, OK

In Tulsa Public Schools, which serves about 33,000 students, Superintendent Dr. Ebony Johnson has made reducing their chronic absenteeism rate from 44% to below 20% a key focus of her leadership through the "Attend to Win" initiative. They have pursued a multifaceted approach to the issue, partnering with organizations like Impact Tulsa to conduct root cause analysis to identify key local barriers to school attendance, which they deemed "the Big Four:" housing instability, safety concerns, transportation, and mental and physical well-being. They are also partnering with The Opportunity Project to expand out of school time offerings for students, whose analyses showed 3-4 additional days of attendance for students with consistent participation in quality OST programming. They formed a Collaborative Action Network to do a deep dive on absenteeism issues Pre-K through 3rd grade. Working with city and county government and agencies, they are tackling some of the systemic issues (advocating for changes in eviction policy, collaboration around transportation needs) and they are working directly with schools and community partners to provide support and fill gaps related to safety and health. They've also partnered with TalkingPoints, leveraging technology to improve family-school engagement by enabling two-way text conversations, translated into the parents' preferred language. The platform sends text "nudges" about attendance, enables teachers to send positive messages home and notifies parents about key school activities (conferences, etc.). A study of Talking Points found that students whose families used the platform had a predicted 6 additional days of attendance per year, for a 24% reduction in absenteeism. As they have not yet seen the level of improvement they seek—their overall rate of chronic absenteeism went from 47% to 44% over the course of SY 2023–2024 (24–25 data is not yet available)—the Superintendent is now considering accountability measures, such as linking attendance to eligibility for sports or extracurricular activities, the ability to transfer to a magnet or specialty school, or even in-grade retention.

Nashville, TN

Although not hitting national headlines as some districts are, Nashville Public Schools (serving 81,000 students) is making strides to reduce chronic absenteeism, seeing reductions at a faster rate than other large urban districts in Tennessee and the state overall. Their rate was 29.7 in SY21–22 and now stands at 24.1. A key strategy they've employed is integrating efforts to increase student attendance into the work of school-based MTSS (Multi-Tiered Systems of Support) teams, enabled by a platform called Sown to Grow.

Sown to Grow is a universal screening tool where students log in weekly to select an emoji to describe how they are feeling and write a quick reflection as a Tier 1 intervention. Teachers review this data for their classes, and trend data goes to counselors and social workers, along with suggested Tier 2 groups and lists of students who may need Tier 3 interventions. Each student also has a relationship with a Navigator, a caring adult who helps students chart a path to success in school. This "Every Student Known" initiative started during COVID but has evolved to a district philosophy. In addition to these school-based interventions, they have strengthened their partnership with Communities in Schools Tennessee to assess the unique needs of each school, its students and families, and coordinate with community partners to bring outside resources inside the school to help with day-to-day challenges and ongoing programs.

They also offer incentive-based programs, community events with support services, and have even created music videos to promote school attendance. During SY22–23, they stood up an Attendance Task Force which developed a set of recommendations including strengthening collaboration with immigrant/refugee focused agencies to improve communication between families with English learners and Nashville Public Schools, working with principals to appoint Family Attendance Ambassadors at each school, and building out mentoring support for students in partnership with community-based organizations. In January 2025, they entered into a partnership with Vanderbilt University

to study chronic absenteeism in the district over a period of 18 months to examine the root causes of student disengagement and design stronger, data-informed attendance systems.

Detroit, MI

Detroit Public Schools serves about 53,000 students and has historically had one of the highest chronic absenteeism rates in the country, even before the pandemic. In partnership with the district, researchers Jeremy Singer and Sarah Winchell Lenhoff conducted an in-depth study of chronic absenteeism in Detroit from 2016 to 2023. This longitudinal perspective enabled them to chronicle several attempts at reducing absenteeism—most of which did not achieve intended targets but are instructive for other districts. Early attempts (2017) included an after school program for middle school students and a communication campaign, neither of which appeared successful in reducing absenteeism. In the wake of increased accountability requirements from the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), in 2018 the district partnered with a nonprofit to work with the district on shared accountability, capacity building, and the use of actionable data as well as bringing in community partners to help address root causes outside of school walls. They used a tiered approach (similar to MTSS) with interventions tied to tiers, advocated for school-based attendance teams, and encouraged schools to have an adult point person for every student. The district also created a school-based position of "attendance agent." This strategy, which lasted until the pandemic, also failed to significantly reduce absenteeism for two main reasons, 1) the role of attendance agent was not clearly defined, so implementation varied widely and these individuals were often overwhelmed by the sheer scope of the task they were taking on, and 2) the MTSS approach did not allow for sufficient differentiation of interventions within tiers to address the various barriers to attendance, nor was it resourced to enable provision of necessary support to students needing Tier 3 (intensive) interventions since that percentage of students was far higher than the 5% that category would typically serve in an MTSS mode. The pandemic further exacerbated Detroit's already high chronic absenteeism rate, which rose to 77% in SY 21–22. The pandemic caused the coalition that led citywide efforts to reduce absenteeism to take an "ecological" approach, explicitly acknowledging that absenteeism "is a proxy indicator for youth, family, and community wellness and contributing factor to future youth success in school" and that supports need to include families and communities and the ecosystem of organizations and agencies that serve them. This broadened conception rested on four pillars intended to foment systems change: research

and continuous improvement, technical assistance and capacity building, multidirectional communications, and wraparound supports for students and their families. As students fully returned to school, coalition leaders sought to weave these four pillars together in their work in individual schools, which ultimately resulted in an approach much like community schools. They brought in AmeriCorps members and instituted a Check & Connect program. Ultimately, the four pillars approach lacked a level of alignment between school needs and the resources the external partners could provide, so it was paused at the end of SY 23–24, though there was an overall reduction to 66% in SY22–23 and 23–24. Meanwhile, the district embraced the ecological model, intervening in areas such as housing, transportation, and health, including hiring a school nurse in every building. The district also improved its data reporting tools enabling school staff to access a user-friendly data dashboard and to produce reports with a few clicks. The district set a goal in 2024 to reduce chronic absenteeism to 43% (and increase daily attendance to 90%) by 2027. These more comprehensive efforts seem to be helping, as the rate for SY24–25 is 60.9%—still higher than state and national averages, but trending down. The authors conclude that chronic absenteeism must be seen as an ecological issue, not purely an educational one, therefore requiring partnership with systems outside of schools and districts to reduce it. They further underscore that deepening social and economic inequalities, seen starkly in places like Detroit, make the challenge of improving this metric even more difficult.

Insights from the Intervention Scan

What these case studies show is that in large urban districts, the approach to reducing chronic absenteeism varies by context and approach, but typically involves interventions at multiple levels of the system. Similarly, in the case of Chicago Public Schools, we believe that a multi-level approach, where interventions are matched with school needs, is essential to address the vexing issue of chronic absenteeism. While we know the system lacks capacity for every school to implement every strategy, we believe that there are some foundational strategies that should be considered at scale and then a menu of interventions that schools and partner agencies can choose from based on local needs, resources, and organizational capacity.

Intervention Insight 1.
Leverage Relationships for Student Belonging

At the individual level, it is clear that there is a deep need for students to feel connected to adults and peers at their schools. We recommend focusing on efforts to build a sense of belonging within schools, which could certainly be augmented by bringing in partner organizations that offer mentoring and perhaps tutoring to build developmental relationships with students that encourage them to attend school.

- The Partnership for Student Success shared a model of **partnership with college students** where work-study funds were used to compensate mentors and tutors—perhaps such a strategy could be piloted in Chicago given the mass layoffs of tutors that took place earlier this year due to budget cuts.
- **Peer mentoring** programs like LinkCrew can help build supportive student-student relationships and can be used specifically to help ease the transition to high school.
- **Warm communication** strategies can be implemented in low-cost ways and have been shown to have significant (if modest) positive impact on school attendance. Programs like TalkingPoints and EveryDay Labs could be piloted in target schools and tracked for effectiveness. Research shows that caregivers frequently underestimate the extent of absence, which can lessen their sense of urgency about addressing the challenge. Personalized letters or messages with up-to-date information can lead to changes in behavior.

Intervention Insight 2.
Strengthen School-Level Systems

At the **school** level, we would emphasize the importance of *implementing strong Early Warning/Student Success systems, and cross-functional Attendance Teams*. These foundational practices are essential to beginning the process of triaging the high numbers of chronically absent students in CPS schools, particularly in the focus neighborhoods. Our team wondered: do schools even know how many of their students are missing 30% or more of the school year? And if they do, do they know the causes driving this high absence? Once schools have the lists of students and the reasons for their chronic absence, they can begin segmenting groups of students by causes to begin implementing relevant interventions to start reducing their numbers by getting students and families what they need to go to school. As we know from the Reinvention Lab analysis, school-based interventions won't get every student back, but they are a sensible place for schools to start as they seek to broaden their net of support to include partners with specialized expertise to address non-school factors.

- In Chicago we have the benefit of **rich and accessible data sources** and practice-oriented research partners, so increasing capacity and use around 5E's, Cultivate and other school and classroom climate data could bolster efforts to increase attendance. Student perception data can be used in concert with student voice approaches to ensure that adults in schools are making changes in ways that are responsive to student needs.
- **Family engagement** has been shown to be a "protective factor" against post-pandemic increases in chronic absenteeism, and was a key pillar of the strategy in Richmond that led to their precipitous reduction in chronic absence. We recommend supporting efforts to strengthen partnerships with families in ways that align with the research-backed Dual Capacity Framework, an approach to building effective family engagement efforts that are linked to student achievement and school improvement. Supportive **home visits** are an effective (although resource intensive) approach to building stronger relationships with families.
- Chicago has over 200 **community schools partnerships** in place (including 27 of the 68 focus neighborhood schools). Most are coordinated through Communities in Schools of Chicago while 36 are Sustainable Community Schools in partnership with the CTU. Research shows that high-quality Community Schools can have a positive impact on attendance, and they can be tailored to the

needs of the local community through partnerships and programming. There could be opportunities to provide capacity building support to increase the fidelity of implementation through organizations like the Attendance Solutions Network at Johns Hopkins, the Coalition for Community Schools and the National Center for Community Schools. Community Schools staff can also be integrated into attendance teams to help focus their work on chronically absent students and their families, particularly if their root cause is an out of school issue (transportation, housing, health, food insecurity, etc.).

- Of course, **increasing student engagement** in classrooms and offering more **career-connected learning** opportunities are important levers in increasing student attendance and interest in school. Yet we know that changing educational practice at scale may be beyond the scope of what A Better Chicago is seeking to take on. We encourage ABC to work in partnership with other foundations in Chicago that are focused on instructional improvement and school-to-work connections to harmonize these efforts in a citywide attempt to reduce chronic absenteeism.

Intervention Insight 3.
Build a Citywide, Cross-Sector Coalition

At the **system** level, we would prioritize *building a cross-sector coalition to address chronic absenteeism head-on, as it is a citywide public health issue*. A comprehensive approach would include health, transportation, and housing agencies as well as providers of social services.

- The city would also likely benefit from a **public information campaign**, using research-based, tested messaging. Perhaps as in other states like Colorado and Virginia this could be launched in conjunction with statewide efforts related to reducing chronic absenteeism. (Note: IL recently passed SB 407 to establish a Chronic Absence Task Force—perhaps this group could consider looking at state-level actions like joining the 50% Challenge or leading statewide communication efforts on this issue.)

- We were heartened to see that CPS has joined Cohort 2 of the **National Attendance & Engagement Meta Network** at High Tech High Graduate School. Engaging in this network will enable district staff to learn from national leaders in using continuous improvement strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism and receive ongoing support as they seek to test change ideas locally here in Chicago.

To better contextualize and determine which of these approaches are most relevant and necessary for Chicago, we will now turn to the **voices of Chicago's stakeholders** to identify the most critical barriers students face.