2023

Strategies for Addressing Chronic Absenteeism in the Post-Pandemic Era

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Recommended Citation

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a MERC research and policy brief

STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA
A MERC RESEARCH AND POLICY BRIEF

David Naff, Fatemah Khawaji, Morgan Meadowes, Kim Dupre, Zehra Sahin Ilkorkor,
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July 2023

A student who is "chronically absent" (defined by the United States Department of Education as missing 10% or more days of school) misses an average of at least two school days per month or 18 days within an academic year.[1] Unlike truancy, which only accounts for unexcused absences, chronic absenteeism considers excused absences as similarly concerning based on the philosophy that missing school for any reason can be detrimental to educational outcomes.[2] Since the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, 36 states have included chronic absenteeism as one of their indicators of student success.[3] While cumulative days of absence may provide a continuous and more granular metric, determining if a student is chronically absent offers a binary indicator by which educators and policymakers can identify students that may be particularly vulnerable to lower academic achievement, delayed graduation, and dropout,[4] all of which are persistently associated with missing school at a "chronic" level.[5]

While chronic absenteeism has been a concern for educators and policymakers for years, it has also increased dramatically since the COVID-19 pandemic in part due to the massive disruptions it caused in public education across the world.[6] The purpose of this research brief is to explore how chronic absenteeism has changed in recent years, illuminate the academic, social, and emotional outcomes that are associated with it, identify evidence-based strategies that help to address it, and review state and local policies that guide school divisions in the MERC region in their efforts to intervene. It concludes with a summary of key takeaways and recommendations for practice, policy, and research.

What are trends in chronic absenteeism pre and post-pandemic?

Nationally, about one in seven students struggles with chronic absenteeism.[7] In 2015-2016, the United States Department of Education (USDOE) Office of Civil Rights reported that

[1] Lassiter-Dennis (2020)
[2] Taylor-Williams (2022)
[3] Henderson & Fantuzzo (2022)
[4] Henderson & Fantuzzo (2022)
[5] Singer et al. (2021)
[6] Childs & Lofton (2021)
[7] Eklund et al. (2020)

roughly eight million students were chronically absent.[8] In the 2020-2021 academic year, that number increased to at least 10.1 million students.[9] Figure 1 depicts how chronic absenteeism has changed over the past five years according to USDOE data.

Figure 1. National Percentage of Students Chronically Absent
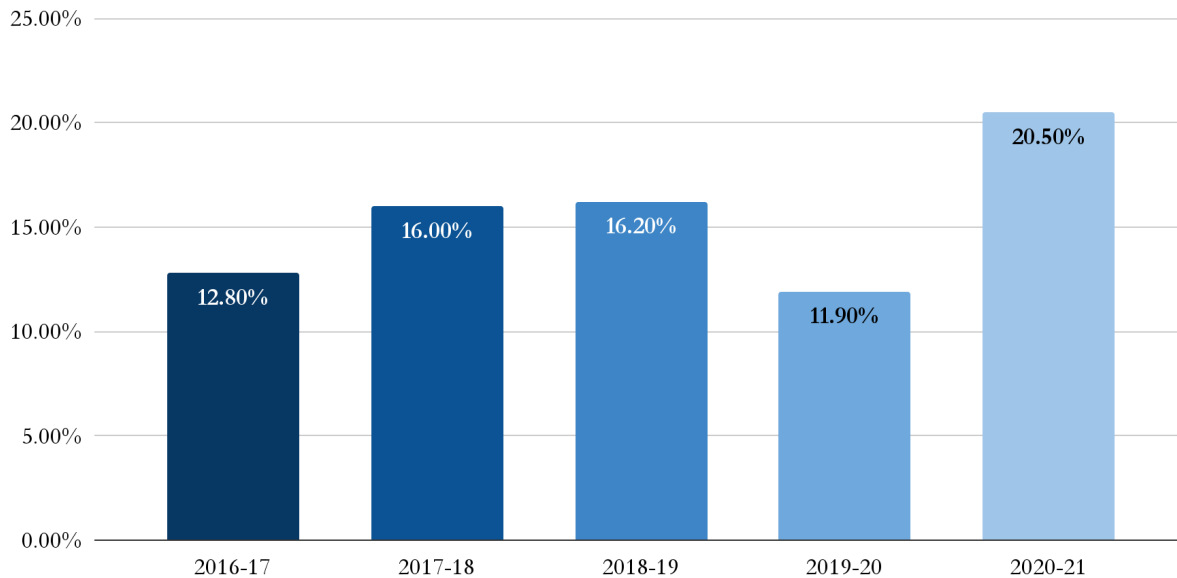
The decrease in reported chronic absenteeism during the 2019-2020 school year (when the pandemic initially hit) may have been the result of closed school buildings and a lack of daily attendance input.[10] Although chronic absenteeism was already increasing in the three years prior to the pandemic, it took a precipitous jump in 2020-21 of 4.3 percentage points compared to the most recent pre-pandemic year.

Table 1 depicts how the percentage of chronically absent students changed at the state level as well as in the MERC region from 2018-19 (pre-pandemic) to 2021-22 (post pandemic) according to data from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE).

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[8] Kim & Gentle-Gennity (2019)
[9] USDOE (2021)
[10] Gross & Opalka (2020)

Table 1. Chronic Absenteeism Rates for the State and MERC Region

Demographic	2018–19		2021–2022		Percentage Increase	
	State	MERC Region	State	MERC Region	State	MERC Region
Overall	10.60%	10.59%	20.10%	19.49%	89.62%	84.04%
ED*	16.30%	17.16%	29.80%	30.41%	82.82%	77.21%
Black	13%	15.11%	25.10%	28.03%	93.08%	85.51%
White	9.50%	6.87%	17.30%	12.01%	82.11%	74.82%
Latina/o/x	12.70%	13.70%	24.90%	25.09%	**96.06%**	83.14%
Disability	16.20%	16.76%	26.30%	26.45%	62.35%	57.82%
ELL**	11.70%	11.30%	22.70%	23.08%	94.02%	**104.25%**
Homeless	**34.0%**	**37.52%**	**50.90%**	**57.33%**	49.71%	52.80%
Foster Care	16.0%	22.01%	25.70%	33.14%	60.63%	50.57%

* Economically disadvantaged, ** English Language learners

Since COVID-19, the overall rate of chronic absenteeism approximately doubled at the state level as well as in the MERC region. All student subgroups saw increases over time, with Latina/o/x students experiencing the highest rate of increase at the state level and ELL students experiencing the highest rate of increase at the MERC region level. While students in foster care and students experiencing homelessness saw the lowest rates of increases, they also had the highest overall percentages of chronic absenteeism both pre-and post pandemic, with more than half of homeless students and more than a third of students in foster care being chronically absent in the MERC region in 2021-2022.

Table 2 depicts how chronic absenteeism varies between elementary (K-5) and secondary (6-12) levels, based on VDOE data.

Table 2. Chronic Absenteeism by Grade Level

	Elementary (K-5)		Secondary (6-12)	
	State	MERC Region	State	MERC Region
2018-2019	8.30%	7.16%	12.62%	13.24%
2021-2022	17.65%	15.96%	22.10%	22.34%
Percentage Increase	**113%**	**123%**	75%	69%

These data show that the chronic absenteeism rate more than doubled for both the state and MERC region at the elementary level while the increases at the secondary level were still precipitous but less pronounced. However, students at the secondary level remained more likely to be chronically absent than elementary students before and after COVID-19 at

both the state and regional level. Figure 2 depicts chronic absenteeism for each grade to illustrate this change more continuously.

Figure 2. Chronic Absenteeism by Grade
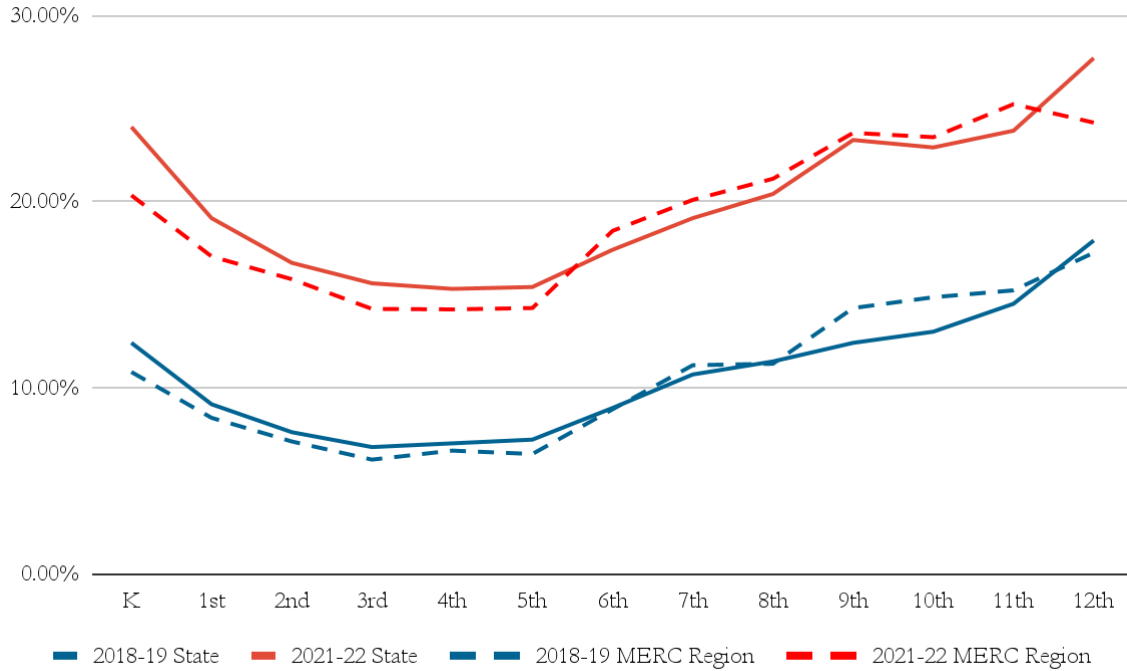
This figure illustrates that pre-and post-pandemic, chronic absenteeism tended to be highest at the elementary level in kindergarten and then decrease and eventually plateau by the fifth grade. At the secondary level, it tended to increase at each subsequent grade until it peaked in the 12th grade. Trend lines at the state and MERC region level tended to closely follow each other each year, but there was a sharp increase in chronic absenteeism in 2021-2022 for each grade.

What factors contribute to chronic absenteeism and which student groups are particularly vulnerable?

There are a variety of reasons why students repeatedly miss school, which is one of the reasons chronic absenteeism is often termed a "wicked problem" in education due to its complexity.[11] Childs and Lofton identified five categories of contributing factors in their 2021 literature review:

- **Student wellbeing** (e.g. challenges with physical and mental health)

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[11] Childs & Lofton (2021)

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- **School environment** (e.g. the availability of caring adults and the quality and upkeep of the physical school structure)
- **Family dynamics** (e.g. parental expectations and aspirations)
- **Neighborhood conditions** (e.g. the presence of crime that makes traveling to school unsafe), and
- **Poverty** (e.g. access to reliable transportation or having basic needs met).

Other contributing factors to chronic absenteeism include:

- **Family obligations:** Students may miss school due to a need to take care of a family member, such as a younger sibling.[12]
- **Housing and school instability:** Students who change residences or schools in the previous year are often significantly more likely to be chronically absent.[13]
- **Suspensions:** Both and in- and out-of-school suspensions tend to predict lower attendance rates for students,[14] and this tends to be particularly true in "zero tolerance" disciplinary environments.[15]
- **Peer influence:** When students' peers are chronically absent, it increases the likelihood that they will miss school as well. In a 2020 study, Gottfried and colleagues found that when 10% of a student's peer group were chronically absent, it increased their own likelihood by 3.1 percentage points. Additionally, students may chronically miss school in order to avoid potential conflict with peers.[16]
- **History of absenteeism:** In a 2021 study, Singer and colleagues found that students who were chronically absent the previous year were nine times more likely to be chronically absent the following year, even after controlling for other student, school, and neighborhood factors. Similarly, Gottfried and colleagues (2020) found that students who were chronically absent in the previous semester were 48 percentage points more likely to be chronically absent in the following one.

Historically, research has persistently shown that some students are especially vulnerable to chronic absenteeism, including students from low-income or minoritized racial and ethnic backgrounds, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners.[17] This is consistent with trends at the national, state, and regional level identified in the previous section.

- **Low-income and homeless students:** Poverty tends to be a particularly strong and consistent predictor of chronic absenteeism.[18] These students are more likely to experience housing instability and homelessness,[19] have limited transportation,[20]

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[12] Holyfield (2019)
[13] Singer et al. (2021)
[14] Lassiter-Dennis (2020)
[15] Grooms & Bohorquez (2022)
[16] Holyfield (2019)
[17] Henderson & Fantuzzo (2022)
[18] Mac Iver et al. (2022)
[19] NCHE (2022)
[20] Mac Iver et al. (2022)

endure food insecurity,[21] and live in communities with limited resources that help compensate for learning loss due to absence from school.[22]

- **Students from minoritized racial and ethnic backgrounds:** Research persistently shows that Black and Latina/o/x students are more likely to miss school than their White and Asian peers.[23] This may be explained in part due to their higher likelihood of coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.[24] Additionally, students from minoritized racial and ethnic backgrounds are more likely to have an identified disability,[25] which is also associated with higher rates of chronic absenteeism.[26]

- **Students with disabilities:** Not only are students with disabilities more likely to miss school than their non-disabled peers,[27] they are also more likely to be adversely impacted by the absences due to the higher need of support from teachers and other educators to navigate the curriculum.[28] In a 2021 study, Coughenour and colleagues found that the percentage of students in a school with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) was the strongest predictor for overall chronic absenteeism in the student body. Students with disabilities may also be more likely to encounter health-related barriers to school attendance.[29]

- **Secondary school students:** In a 2017 study, Brundage and colleagues explored reasons why secondary school students in Florida were chronically absent. The top reported reasons by students were health (e.g. short-term or chronic illness; 92.4% of respondents), transportation (e.g. missing the bus or having car mechanical issues; 54.8% of respondents), stress (e.g. depression or family emergencies; 41.1% of respondents), preferring activities outside of school (e.g. spending time with friends, substance use; 41.1% of respondents), and perceiving a low value for school (e.g. considering it boring or unrelated to future goals; 38.9% of respondents). In a 2020 meta-analysis of attendance interventions at the elementary and secondary level, Eklund and colleagues found that there was no significant difference in how effective the interventions were for students based on grade level. This suggests that while chronic absenteeism may be a more complex problem for secondary school students, there is still a relatively equal opportunity to intervene.

- **Students in high-poverty schools and communities:** Students who attend schools of concentrated poverty (particularly in urban environments) are more likely to chronically miss school.[30] Oftentimes these school settings experience two to four times the national average for chronic absenteeism.[31] These school settings also tend to implement exclusionary school discipline at higher rates,[32] leading suspended

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[21] Coughenour et al. (2021)
[22] Lassiter-Dennis (2020)
[23] Kearney & Childs (2022); Mac Iver et al. (2022); Malika et al. (2021); Singer et al. (2021)
[24] Kearney & Childs (2022); Williams (2020)
[25] Mac Iver et al. (2022)
[26] Henderson & Fantuzzo (2022)
[27] Holyfield (2019)
[28] Lassiter-Dennis (2020)
[29] Holyfield (2019)
[30] Mac Iver et al. (2022), Grooms & Bohorquez (2022)
[31] Lassiter-Dennis (2020), Singer et al. (2021)
[32] Lassiter-Dennis (2020)

students to miss more school. Students in high-poverty school settings are also more likely to endure higher rates of violent crime and housing instability in their neighborhoods.[33]

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What are the connections between chronic absenteeism and other student outcomes?

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One of the main reasons why chronic absenteeism is a key metric of interest in education policy is because of its consistent connection with other student outcomes.[34] This is primarily the case for academic achievement.

- When students repeatedly miss school they miss out on opportunities to engage with academic content and receive instruction from teachers.[35] Relatedly, **students who are chronically absent are also more likely to struggle academically in school.**[36] Even evidence-based educational interventions will likely prove ineffective for students who are not in school to benefit from them.[37]
- **There are potential negative long-term implications of chronic absenteeism on academic achievement.**[38] Weak or inconsistent attendance in elementary school has proven to be predictive of lower academic outcomes in high school.[39] Additionally, there are clear connections between a history of absenteeism and school dropout.[40]
- Although chronic absenteeism accounts for both excused and unexcused absences, Henderson and Fantuzzo (2022) found that excused absences were no better at predicting academic achievement in kindergarten than random chance. However, **unexcused absences tended to significantly predict lower achievement**.
- **There are also connections between chronic absenteeism and cognitive development outcomes for students.** Students who regularly attend school have greater opportunity to practice executive functions like problem solving and self-regulated effort towards a goal.[41] Additionally, there is evidence suggesting that students who were chronically absent in kindergarten tend to exhibit lower working memory performance over time.[42]
- This evidence suggests that **any efforts by schools to address academic achievement challenges in students need to simultaneously focus on promoting school attendance** in order to be effective.[43]

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[33] Singer et al. (2021)

[34] Henderson & Fantuzzo (2022)

[35] Gottfried & Ansari (2021)

[36] Mac Iver et al. (2022)

[37] Childs & Lofton (2021)

[38] Gottfried & Ansari (2021); Henderson & Fantuzzo (2022)

[39] Kearney & Childs (2022)

[40] Grooms & Bohorquez (2022); Kearney & Childs (2022)

[41] Malika et al. (2021)

[42] Gottfried & Ansari (2021)

[43] Henderson & Fantuzzo (2022)

Additionally, chronic absenteeism is associated with mental health challenges like depression,[44] physical health issues like diabetes, asthma, and obesity,[45] disengagement from school,[46] violence,[47] substance abuse,[48] and even limited lifetime earnings.[49] These associated academic, social, emotional, health, and behavioral outcomes compound concerns raised by dramatic increases in chronic absenteeism post-pandemic.

What strategies are effective in reducing chronic absenteeism?

There are a number of strategies identified in the research as being potentially effective for reducing chronic absenteeism, and they often recommend **taking a systemic approach** where support is offered at the school, policy, and community levels.[50] Interventions and supports also **need to be contextually-relevant** to attend to the needs of students in the schools and communities in which they exist,[51] and **should be implemented with fidelity** to the extent possible.[52] When considering potential strategies for addressing chronic absenteeism, it is also important to recognize that there is likely not a singular approach that will completely resolve the issue.[53] Therefore, it is beneficial for educators and policymakers to consider which of these strategies, in combination, may be the most appropriate fit for promoting attendance within their specific school and community context. Research often emphasizes taking an ecological approach that considers chronic absenteeism prevention and intervention at various levels of potential contextual influence.[54] The following figure depicts prominent recommendations from the literature organized according to the Bronfenbrenner Ecological Systems model.

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[44] Kearney & Childs (2022)
[45] Malika et al. (2021)
[46] Gottfried & Ansari (2021)
[47] Malika et al. (2021)
[48] Kearney & Childs (2022)
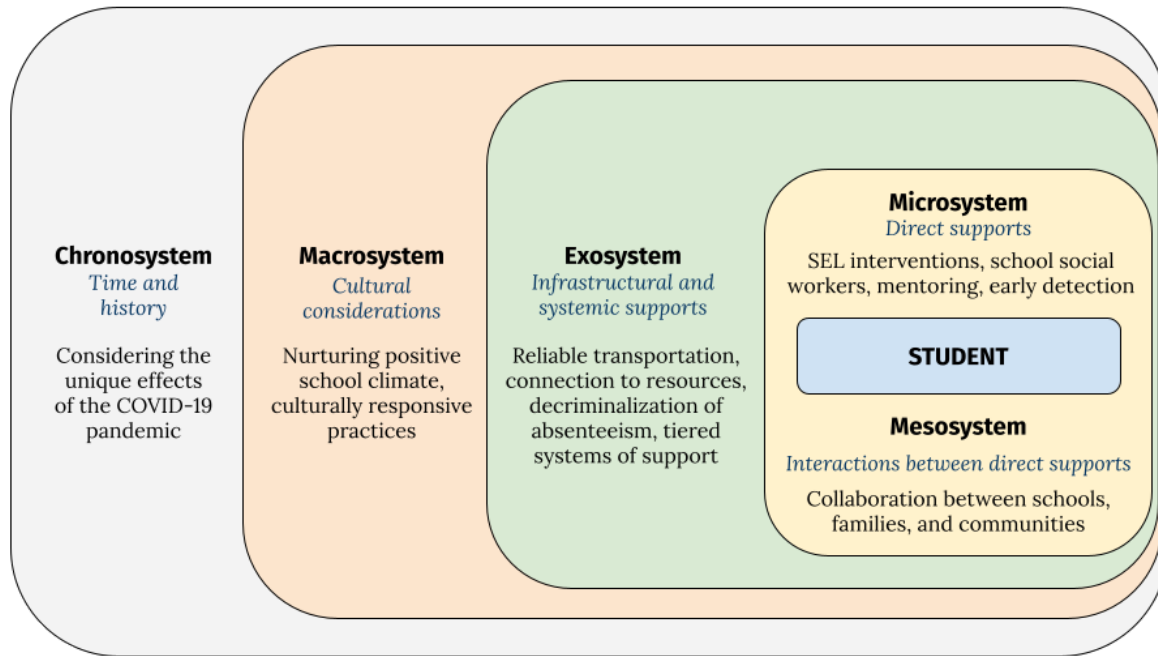[49] Malika et al. (2021)
[50] Lenhoff & Singer (2022)
[51] Childs & Lofton (2021)
[52] Eklund et al. (2020)
[53] Young et al. (2020)
[54] Lenhoff & Singer (2022)

Figure 3. Ecological Approach to Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

Chronosystem
Time and history

- **Disruptions caused to schooling due to the COVID-19 pandemic may have made it especially difficult for students to build and maintain habits of regular school attendance**, particularly if they were engaged in remote schooling for prolonged periods of time.[55]
- Concurrently, **it was difficult for schools to keep consistent a record of student attendance during remote and hybrid instruction**, leading to challenges not only with understanding trends in chronic absenteeism but also returning to traditional tracking practices when in-person schooling resumed.[56]
- **The pandemic may have also disrupted some of the trusted relationships with educators** that encourage students to come to school, as well as their sense of physical and emotional safety in school environments.[57]
- To account for these disruptions, the Virginia Board of Education voted to suspend chronic absenteeism as an indicator of school accreditation in 2020, but is reinstating that requirement for the 2022-2023 academic year while schools are seeing historically high rates of chronic absenteeism.[58]

[55] Childs & Lofton (2021)
[56] Childs & Lofton (2021)
[57] Blad (2022)
[58] Elwood (2023)

Macrosystem
Cultural considerations

- **Nurturing a positive school climate can support reduced chronic absenteeism** by establishing an environment where students readily wish to attend school.[59] Stronger school climates tend to foster more positive relationships and interactions between students and educators as well as students and their peers while establishing a sense of trust within the school community.[60] When students see trusted, familiar faces at school it tends to be associated with a decrease in absenteeism.[61]
- One potential explanation for students missing school is when they feel "othered" by a curriculum and culture that is not always supportive of their backgrounds.[62] Thus, the use of **culturally responsive practices can contribute to students feeling more welcomed and included within their schools, leading them to be more interested in regular attendance**.[63]
- One potential strategy that schools and divisions can use to establish a culture of regular school attendance is to recognize "**Attendance Awareness Month**" in September and offer programming for students and families as well as training for faculty and staff.[64]

Exosystem
Infrastructural and systemic supports

- One of the potentially most effective things that schools can do to help address chronic absenteeism is to **ensure that students have access to reliable transportation.**[65] Although schools often provide transportation already in the form of buses, families report that they still have trouble getting to school, especially if they live out of the districted area.[66]
- Schools should partner with community organizations to **help students from low-income backgrounds get access to resources that meet their basic needs**, potentially increasing the likelihood that they will be able to attend school.[67] This may also include helping students access stable and affordable housing.[68] Communities in Schools is a prominent example of a community organization focused on promoting school attendance as part of a holistic approach to student support.
- At the most intense level of intervention, repeated absenteeism can result in involvement with the criminal justice system due to truancy. To the extent possible,

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[59] Young et al. 2020
[60] Kirksey & Elefante (2022)
[61] Kirksey & Elefante (2022)
[62] Grooms & Bohorquez (2022)
[63] Grooms & Bohorquez (2022)
[64] Gottfried et al. (2020)
[65] Singer et al. (2021)
[66] Lenhoff & Singer (2022)
[67] Singer et al. (2021)
[68] Singer et al. (2021)

schools should seek to decriminalize absenteeism while acknowledging the structural barriers (e.g. poverty and lack of transportation) that may contribute to students repeatedly missing school.[69]

- Research repeatedly recommends that **schools should use tiered systems of support to help address chronic absenteeism**.[70] According to Gentle-Genitty and colleagues (2021), Tier 1 involves establishing an engaging school climate that nurtures positive relationships between students, families, and educators. This includes clear messaging about the importance of regularly attending school, closely monitoring absenteeism data, and recognizing students who show improved attendance. Tier 2 involves offering targeted interventions for students who are particularly prone to school absenteeism, including creating an action plan that removes barriers and supports their attendance in school. Finally, Tier 3 involves coordination between the school and public agencies, including legal intervention as a last resort. Fidelity of implementation at each tier is important for successfully promoting school attendance.[71] Such systems (like the Virginia Tiered Systems of Support) often involve coordination of different microsystem interventions.

Microsystem
Direct supports

- Because chronic absenteeism is linked with detrimental academic achievement outcomes in the short and long-term, it is important for educators to intervene as early as possible.[72] "Red flag" and other **early detection systems can help mobilize adults in a school to intervene when students begin showing signs of habitually missing school**, and experimental studies have shown that they have proven effective in reducing chronic absenteeism.[73]
- **Social and emotional interventions** can help create nurturing school environments where students want to regularly attend while helping to build skills that are helpful in reducing chronic absenteeism, such as resilience, self-regulation, and coping.[74]
- **School social workers often play a key role in intervening with chronically absent students** through connecting them with needed resources and engaging in home visits and other direct outreach.[75] However, it is important to not solely rely on their services to combat chronic absenteeism because effective intervention requires a tiered approach[76] and social workers are already spread thin.[77]
- **Mentoring can be an effective method for reducing chronic absenteeism in students.** Pairing students with caring adults in school settings can prove helpful in

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[69] Grooms & Bohorquez (2022)

[70] e.g. Eklund et al. (2020); Gentle-Genitty et al. (2021); Kearney & Graczyk (2020)

[71] Eklund et al. (2020)

[72] Henderson & Fantuzzo (2022)

[73] Mac Iver et al. (2022)

[74] Childs & Scanlon (2021)

[75] Young et al. (2020)

[76] Eklund et al. (2020); Gentle-Genitty et al. (2021); Kearney & Graczyk (2020)

[77] Young et al. (2020)

> establishing relationships that support regular attendance at school,[78] and this is an increasingly popular intervention in educational settings.[79]

> **Mesosystem**
> *Interactions between direct supports*

> - Consistent with taking a tiered and multi-level approach to combating chronic absenteeism, **research repeatedly emphasizes the importance of collaboration between schools and families.[80]**
> - **Direct connection between teachers and parents could prove helpful in reducing absenteeism.** In a 2021 study by Coughenour and colleagues, the authors found that an increase in participation in parent-teacher conferences was significantly associated with an increase in school attendance.
> - According to a 2021 qualitative study by Childs and Scanlon, a community-engaged initiative in Pittsburg called the **Be There Campaign (BTC)** offered the opportunity for resource sharing between schools, parents, and members of the community to create a collective a "rallying cry" for regular school attendance.[81] School employees participating in the initiative shared how it helped them to amplify the effectiveness of their attendance promotion efforts by not working in silos.
> - Again, **school social workers can play a key role in promoting school-community interactions that support student attendance** given their frequent connections with students' families and the neighborhoods in which they live.[82]
> - In a 2019 study, Kim and Gentle-Gennity analyzed absenteeism data from over 3,000 students in 14 schools and found that **the most significant factor in reducing student absences was how democratic and egalitarian the structures were between schools and community organizations** working together to address the issue.

What are policies at the state and school board level intended to help address chronic absenteeism?

Although chronic absenteeism has been a focus of education policy prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the increase in its severity adds urgency to addressing the issue at the state and school board level. This section summarizes relevant policies in Virginia as well as the MERC region that focus on addressing chronic absenteeism.

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[78] Grooms & Bohorquez (2022)
[79] Lassiter-Dennis (2020)
[80] Kim & Gentle-Gennitty (2019); Lassiter-Dennis (2020)
[81] p. 77
[82] Kim & Gentle-Gennity (2019)

State Policies
- The *Code of Virginia* § 22.1-254-§ 22.1-269 establishes compulsory attendance definitions, the truancy intervention process, and exemptions to compulsory attendance. § 22.1-258 details required parent contacts and ongoing monitoring once a student reaches five unexcused absences in a school year.   - The *Administrative Code of Virginia* Chapter 730 establishes attendance policies, procedures for reporting truancy, and an unexcused absence intervention process for schools, which includes the role of an attendance officer in schools. This chapter outlines required school responses when a student reaches five and seven unexcused absences, as well as possible court proceedings and further actions in cases of continued noncompliance.   - State policy includes chronic absenteeism (which includes excused and unexcused absences) as a factor in school quality measures for accreditation, but policies guiding how schools should respond to student absenteeism still largely focus on truancy, which only accounts for unexcused absences.
MERC Division Policies
- All divisions directly refer to state policy regarding district attendance officers or designees and when they should begin legal proceedings addressing a minor needing supervision as outlined by § 22.1-261 and § 22.1-258 in the Student Attendance Policy.   - Some divisions explicitly define chronic or excessive absences as a student missing 10% or more of the required school days as defined by the division attendance requirements. Division minimum attendance days vary, but all support the state's compulsory attendance policies.   - Most divisions also provide excessive absence policy guidelines about the need for proper documentation of absences and the impact of absences on students' ability to compensate for missed classes and assignments fully.   - Most divisions have established policies and programs to provide homebound instruction for students who cannot attend regular school due to various circumstances. These divisions require certification of need by a licensed physician, clinical psychologist, nurse practitioner, or other healthcare professionals to determine eligibility for homebound instruction. Homebound instruction is the only absence that does not fall under chronic absenteeism.

Current state laws and established school procedures primarily focus on addressing and reporting truancy. Several MERC divisions include these procedures in their established division policies. Although the state established chronic absenteeism as a school quality indicator rather than truancy in the 2018-19 school year, current state law and school policies do not provide guidance on an intervention process for chronic absenteeism, which includes both excused and unexcused absences. The rise in chronic absenteeism since COVID-19 could, therefore, require revision of state law and division policy to address a wider scope of attendance concerns.

What are key takeaways and recommendations for addressing chronic absenteeism in the post-pandemic era?

Emphasize unexcused absences. While chronic absenteeism may help account for the entirety of time missed from school (excused or unexcused), research suggests that unexcused absences are still uniquely predictive of negative outcomes for students (particularly academic achievement).[83] Therefore, while schools and divisions should remain mindful of addressing the cumulative days missed from school, it may still be important to particularly focus on supporting students with high numbers of unexcused absences.

Take an ecological approach. Effectively addressing chronic absenteeism, which has become even more complex, requires a multi-level approach that engages schools, families, communities, and policymakers. Therefore, it is unlikely that any one of the approaches outlined in this report will address the issue in isolation. Multiple strategies that bring different stakeholder perspectives and address the complex causes of this problem are likely necessary.

Scaffolded accountability metrics. While there is clear reason to remain diligently focused on combating chronic absenteeism, state policy may need to take into account how intensely the rates have increased when considering how to factor it into metrics of accountability for schools, at least in the years immediately following the onset of COVID-19. Thus, it may make sense to take a scaffolded approach in setting expected attendance levels before arriving at standards of accountability consistent with pre-pandemic years.

Infrastructural and administrative adjustments. These include reviewing transportation policies and bus routes to ensure that they are maximizing their potential service to students, working to implement tiered systems of support with fidelity, and examining exclusionary discipline outcomes (disaggregated by student race and ethnicity) and considering how to adjust codes of conduct to reduce the use of out of school suspensions. When making these changes, it will be important to invite student and family input.

Secondary focus. The data clearly indicates that while chronic absenteeism has increased across all grade levels pre- and post-pandemic, it remains a particular concern for secondary students. Policies focused on absenteeism reduction should particularly attend to potential barriers in middle and high school outlined in research looking at grade-level differences.

Poverty reduction policies. Poverty is a persistent predictor of chronic absenteeism both pre- and post-pandemic, justifying the need to offer targeted support for economically disadvantaged students. However, this must not be the sole task of any individual school employee (e.g. school social workers) or even school systems as a whole. Effectively disrupting the connections between socioeconomic status and absenteeism requires community collaboration and policies aimed at poverty reduction, including sufficient transportation, healthcare support, and housing stability.

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[83] Henderson & Fantuzzo (2022)

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