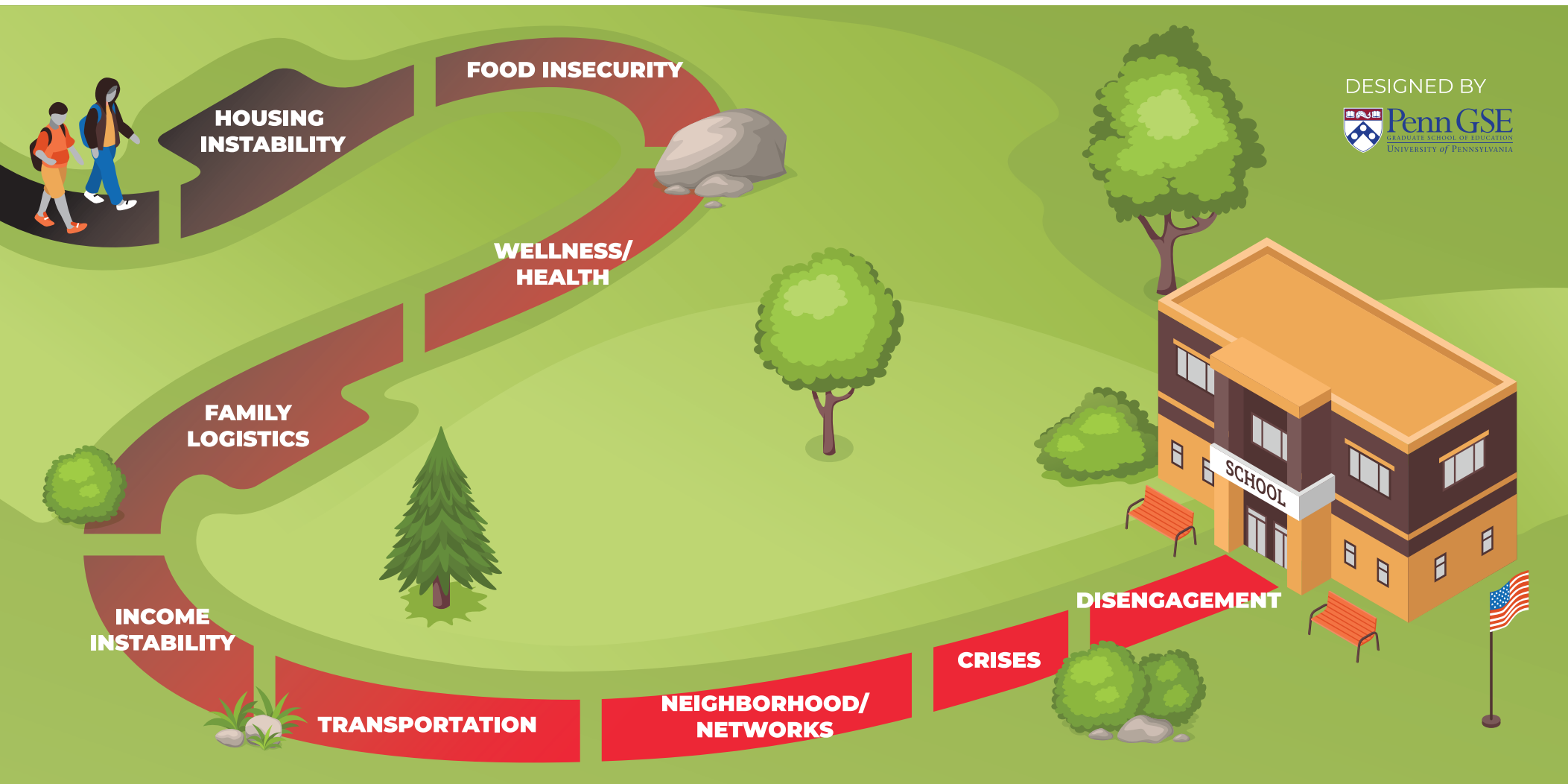


Before the Bell:

Obstacles Preventing Children from Attending School

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SOLVING CHRONIC ABSENCE REQUIRES CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION.

HOUSING INSTABILITY

Children from families experiencing housing instability, including unhoused families, are more prone to mobility which increases their risk of missing school.

- Housing instability is a major risk factor for students, in large part because it disrupts school-going routines and [increases absenteeism](#).
- Students experiencing homelessness are far more likely to [move zip codes and schools](#), making it more difficult for them to attend school and for their schools to identify their needs and [support them](#).
- Child-welfare involved youth often have high rates of school mobility, with some moving through [5 or more foster homes](#), leading to frequent school changes that further disrupt their attendance.
- Schools can invest in more efficient systems to identify when students are experiencing housing instability, so they can better support them and connect them with resources to help with attendance.
- School districts and housing authorities can [work together](#) to link data systems between schools, shelters, and eviction courts to ensure that families are supported in their school enrollment and attendance, while also being supported to find stable housing.

FOOD INSECURITY

Food is an essential need that is linked to student wellbeing and attendance--without food, students may not only show up hungry to class which can disrupt their learning, but may miss more days of school.

- Children from homes experiencing food insecurity are more [likely to be absent](#).
- Absences related to food insufficiency may be driven by the effects that food insecurity has on children's behavioral and [academic outcomes](#), particularly among more vulnerable student populations, like [students with disabilities](#).
- Supporting families and students with stable sources of food, especially school breakfast has shown promising results in boosting attendance. Students who received [breakfast in the classroom](#) missed fewer days of school and the effects were strongest among [high school students](#). These efforts will require education systems to coordinate with organizations overseeing child health and nutrition as well as data that helps identify families that may be struggling with food insecurity so they receive vital access to food.

WELLNESS/HEALTH

Students facing significant struggles with their physical, emotional, and mental health are more likely to miss school.

- A [range of physical conditions](#) can lead children to miss school with [asthma](#) being one of the leading drivers of health-related absences.
- Students who struggle with mental health issues, like anxiety and depression, are more likely to [avoid going to school](#).
- Since health-related absences are driven, in part, by a lack of access to high quality healthcare, addressing health-related absences will require collaboration with our healthcare system, including [partnering with pediatricians](#). Data is needed on students' individual health conditions as well as the broader [social determinants of their health](#).

FAMILY LOGISTICS

Attending school each day is a family-wide effort. Barriers for families means barriers for children.

- Families sorting out the logistics needed to get their children is an issue that all families face and starts as early as [prekindergarten and kindergarten](#).
- When logistics are not set in place, it becomes [more challenging](#) for families to ensure their children get to school each day.
- When logistical [barriers are removed](#), evidence suggests that children attend more each day.

- Schools can consider how to ease the burden of logistics, such as aligning school start and end times with common parental work schedules, providing before- and after-care to create buffers around school drop off and pick up, and providing resources such as meals, healthcare, and community services within the school building.
- Outside agencies and organizations can also play a role - [employers](#) can consider flextime or flexplace policies to support parents who need to work and get their children to and from school; community-based organizations can provide childcare or other wraparound services to ease logistical hardships; and policymakers can consider how to reduce commute times and transit burdens for families.

INCOME INSTABILITY

Children in families experiencing poverty can face a variety of systemic challenges that pose significant barriers to regular attendance.

- Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to experience [higher rates of absences](#).
- Children in families experiencing [greater income volatility](#) also are more likely to be absent.
- Absences due to poverty are driven by a range of factors including limited access to [economic resources](#) vital to attendance, like transportation and stable housing, as well as overall heightened levels of stress due to economic hardship.
- Tackling income instability is a multifaceted challenge given the complex causes of poverty. However, addressing absences among children from low-income backgrounds will require coordinated efforts between the education system and organizations with oversight over our social safety net programs. These efforts must ensure that families are connected with resources they need to overcome economic challenges linked to absences.

TRANSPORTATION

Students need a reliable way to get to school in the morning and home in the afternoon - whether that's a school bus, public transit, a safe walk or bike route, or a private car. When school transportation is unreliable or families do not have back-up options, children often miss school.

- School transportation issues are some of the most common reasons why [parents](#) and [school staff](#) say children miss school.
- Robust school-sponsored transportation can help create a strong foundation for getting to school each day. It is a daily resource that students rely on [nationally](#), in [cities](#) and [rural](#) areas alike.
- Therefore, when districts can provide reliable school transportation options, [students come to school more](#). When districts cut transportation, students attend school less. The bus is a lifeline.
- To best track the role of [transportation](#) in ensuring equitable opportunity to access school, we need data on how students get to school, including ridership data for the school bus and public transit.
- Unreliable school transportation is not a problem that can be solved by schools alone. Public transit authorities, public safety and neighborhoods departments, block groups, and state school funding agencies need to coordinate to ensure that students have the transportation resources they need. Parent and community groups can also design local, low-cost systems to provide back-up transportation when families need it.

NEIGHBORHOOD/NETWORKS

Where students live and the social resources they have access to can influence where they enroll in school and whether they are able to attend school regularly.

- Students who live in [neighborhoods](#) with more concentrated economic disadvantage and larger shares of racially minoritized residents tend to have worse attendance.
- Economic and racial [segregation](#) of neighborhoods and schools has a harmful effect on student outcomes, likely because of inequality in the distribution of economic and educational opportunities in these neighborhoods compared to their less segregated counterparts.

- [Social capital](#), or the human resources that families have access to, can also influence attendance. For instance, families who have [neighbors](#) they can rely on for help if their car breaks down may have better attendance than those who do not have any close neighbors with resources to help.
- City and county housing authorities can invest in mixed-income neighborhoods and create opportunities for [social connection](#) among families from diverse backgrounds, especially with the support of federal programs like the U.S. Housing and Urban Development's [Choice Neighborhoods Initiative](#).

CRISES

Crises, by definition, disrupt the routines, expectations, and resources that families and communities normally rely on to ensure school attendance. These disruptions require creative and holistic problem solving to reduce the likelihood of absenteeism.

- Environmental crises, like hurricanes, can displace families from their homes and, often, their neighborhoods, which significantly [increases their likelihood of missing school](#).
- Societal disruptions, like the COVID pandemic, [place strains on the mental health](#) of students and families, which is associated with [increases in absenteeism](#). They can also result in [students and families feeling less connected and focused on the work of schools](#). Schools need to make sure to re-engage students and families in the wake of disruption.
- School attendance is impacted when students are dealing with personal [substance abuse issues](#).
- Students who are experiencing consistent [adverse childhood experiences](#) can feel disconnected from school.
- Crises can produce [immediate challenges that cut across various social sectors](#) such housing, transportation, mental and physical health, access to social services.

DISENGAGEMENT

Student disengagement and anxiety are critical factors that can negatively influence school attendance. When students feel disconnected from school, they are more likely to be absent, which can further exacerbate existing emotional and academic challenges.

- [Disengaged](#) and [anxious students](#) are more likely to engage in school refusal behavior.
- [Personal challenges outside of school](#), such as family issues, health problems, and financial difficulties, impact students' mental health and engagement within school.
- Negative experiences within school, like a lack of [support from teachers and peers](#) and [experiences with bullying](#), also lead to greater isolation and feelings of anxiety, resulting in more absences.
- To help address disengagement- and anxiety-related absences, collaboration among educators, mental health professionals, and parents/guardians is necessary. Educators should try to create a supportive and safe school environment that promotes student engagement and minimizes anxiety. They should also work closely with parents and guardians along with mental health professionals in schools to support students who may be experiencing these issues.