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What are Michigan Schools Doing to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism?

October 2025

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INTRODUCTION

What are schools doing to reduce chronic absenteeism? Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, we had little research documenting the specific strategies used to improve student attendance (Singer, 2024a). Now, with chronic absenteeism rates remaining stubbornly higher than they were pre-pandemic (Malkus, 2024; Singer, 2024b), the need to answer this question has taken on new importance.

In this brief, we summarize the results from our recent study of school attendance practices in Michigan. We sent surveys to every school leader in Michigan, asking a range of questions about their school attendance strategies and systems. (A full discussion of the results, as well as details about our survey methodology, can be found in the technical report [Singer & Lenhoff, 2025a].) Below, we highlight several key findings.

ONE-THIRD OF SCHOOL LEADERS SELECTED ATTENDANCE AS A "TOP THREE" PRIORITY

We asked school leaders to select "the top three areas" they were prioritizing from a list of eleven areas of focus (Figure 1). In total, 35% of respondents selected chronic absenteeism as one of their top three focus areas. This made chronic absenteeism the fifth most-commonly selected priority. By comparison, the most common selections included school climate (48%) and curriculum and instruction (40%). We found some notable variation: high school leaders more often selected chronic absenteeism as a top priority than elementary/middle school principals, as did school leaders with higher chronic absenteeism rates. These results help show that chronic absenteeism is a relatively important issue, with many school leaders including it among their top priorities (especially in higher-absenteeism contexts), though it ranks lower overall than other core areas of focus.

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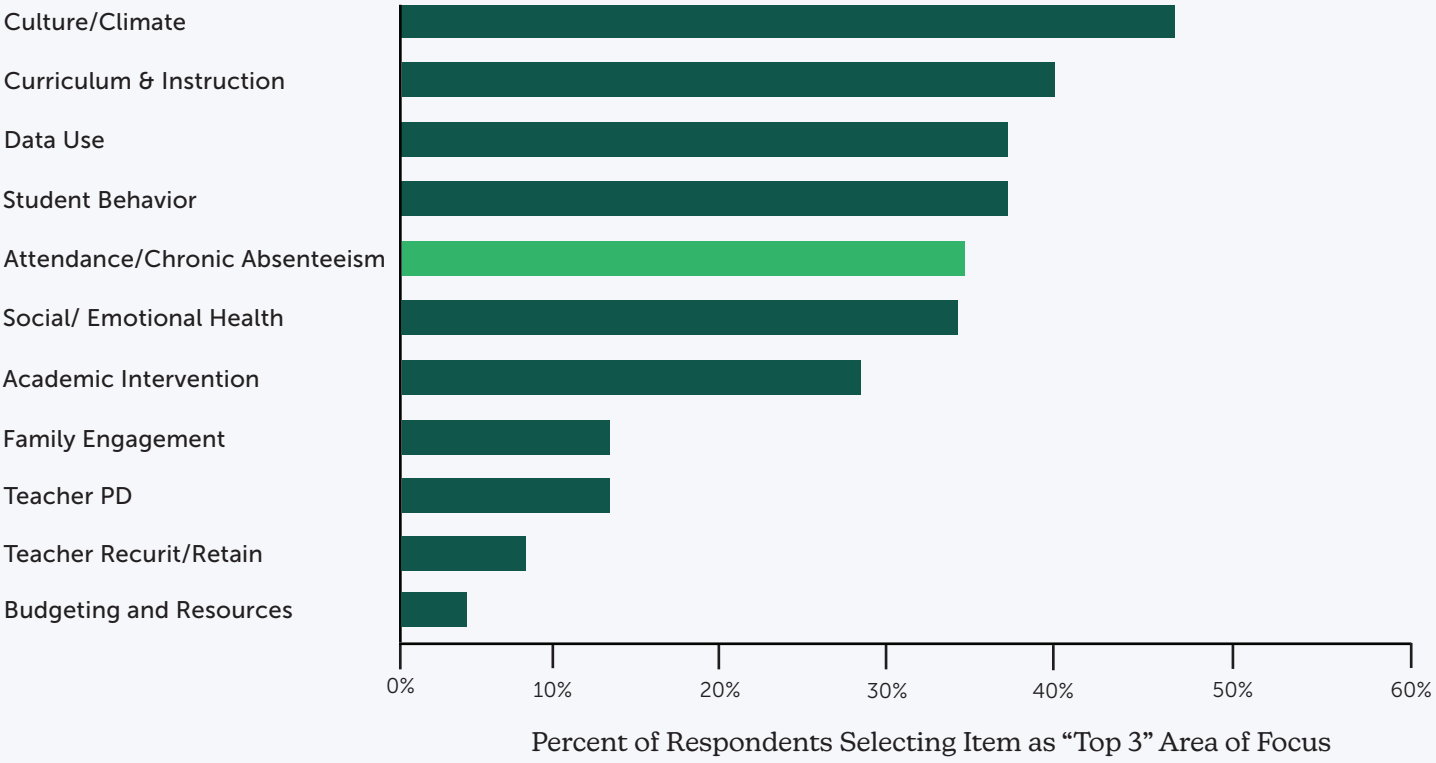
Figure 1: Michigan School Leader Selections of "Top 3" Priorities



SIMILAR APPROACHES TO CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM ACROSS SCHOOLS

We provided school leaders with a list of twenty-nine different practices that they might use to improve attendance and asked them to select all that they were currently using during the 2024-25 school year. We placed the practices included on our survey into three categories: changing student or parent behavior through information or motivation (i.e., "nudges"), improving student experiences in school, and removing out-of-school barriers to attendance. The average Michigan school leader reported about thirteen different attendance practices—about six practices (out of eleven) related to changing student or parent behavior; two practices (out of nine) related to improving student experiences; and five practices (out of nine) related to removing barriers to attendance.

Notably, we did not find any major distinctions in the types of practices schools used. In other words, there was not any evidence of distinct

approaches, with some schools prioritizing one category of practices over another. Thus, while some schools used more total practices than others, it was typical for schools to use a similar mix of practices.

We found some differences between elementary/middle schools and high schools, though there were mostly similarities. Where differences did appear, they often reflected developmental and organizational distinctions between grade levels. For example, elementary/middle schools placed a greater emphasis on social-emotional learning and family engagement, while high schools more often offered schedule adjustments, online learning options, make-up sessions, and mentorship. On other items, however, there were not substantial differences by grade level.

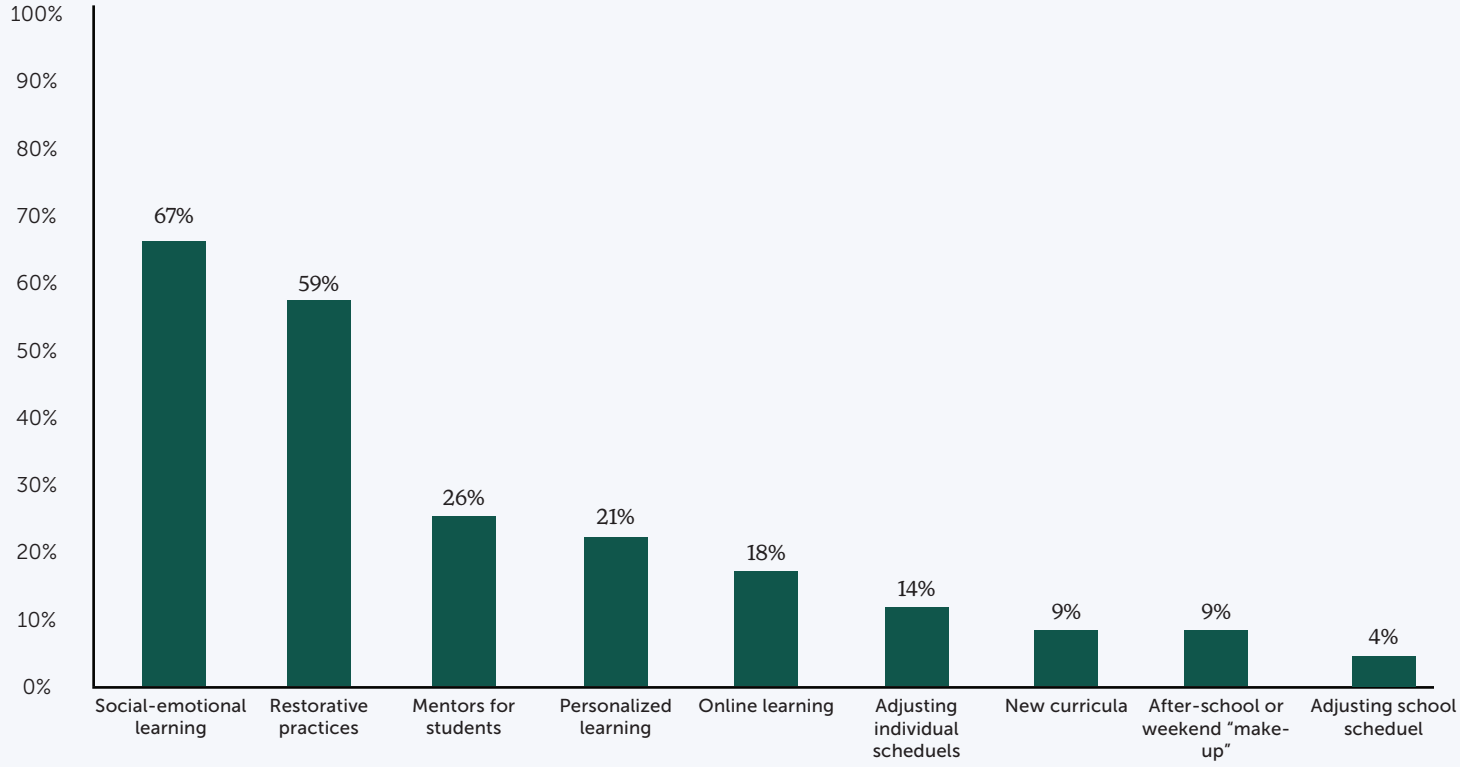
We also found some differences based on a school's prior chronic absenteeism rate, though these differences were more typically about the amount rather than the type of practices. Schools with higher chronic absenteeism rates tended to use a greater number of practices. This was true of practices that address out-of-school barriers, which align with the greater degree of out-of-school challenges for students in higher-absenteeism contexts; but it was also true of many strategies that seek to nudge students or parents. Since the types of strategies employed were largely similar across contexts, our findings suggest that schools facing greater need often respond by increasing their efforts overall rather than by adopting substantially different or more targeted approaches.

SOMEWHAT LIMITED FOCUS ON IMPROVING SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

Of the three types of attendance practices that school leaders reported, those related to improving school experiences were least common (Figure 2). It is important to note that we did not ask about very general improvement efforts such as improving instructional quality or overall school climate as strategies for improving attendance, since these are

already the most common priorities for schools. Still, we asked about other discrete practices, such as adopting new curricula to motivate students or offering personalized learning opportunities. These strategies were among the least common as reported by schools: just 9% reported adopting a new curriculum, and 21% reported offering personalized learning.

Figure 2: Use of Attendance Practices that Address Student Experiences in School



By contrast, practices that focused on changing student or parent behavior were among the most common (Figure 3). Sending letters home to families about their children's attendance was nearly a universal practice (94%). Communicating about the importance of attendance with families (82%) and making personal phone calls to families about their children's attendance (71%) were also very common. Likewise, it was common for schools to use automated phone calls (66%), refer students to court (60%), help families make an attendance plan (58%), and offer attendance incentives (48%).

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Figure 3: Use of Attendance Practices that Address Student or Parent Behavior

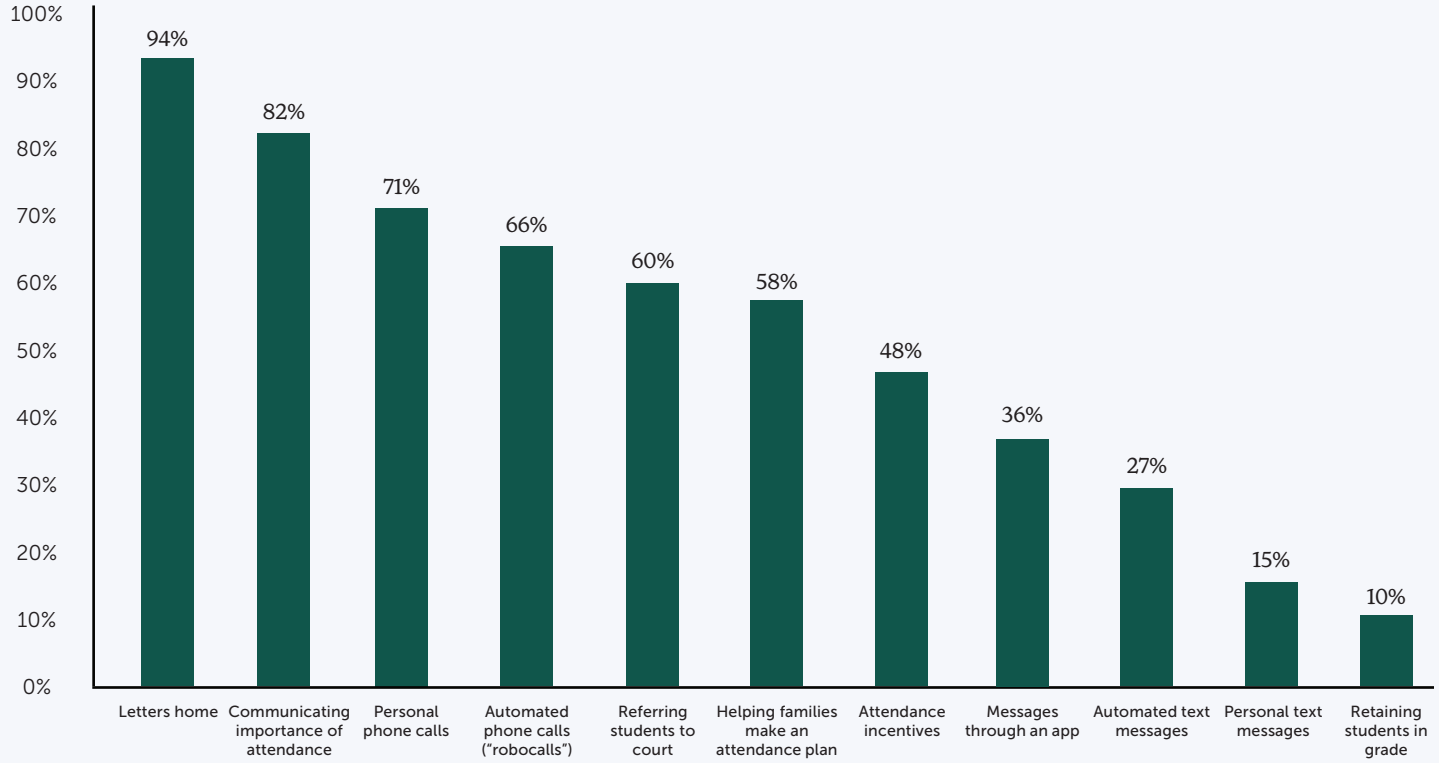
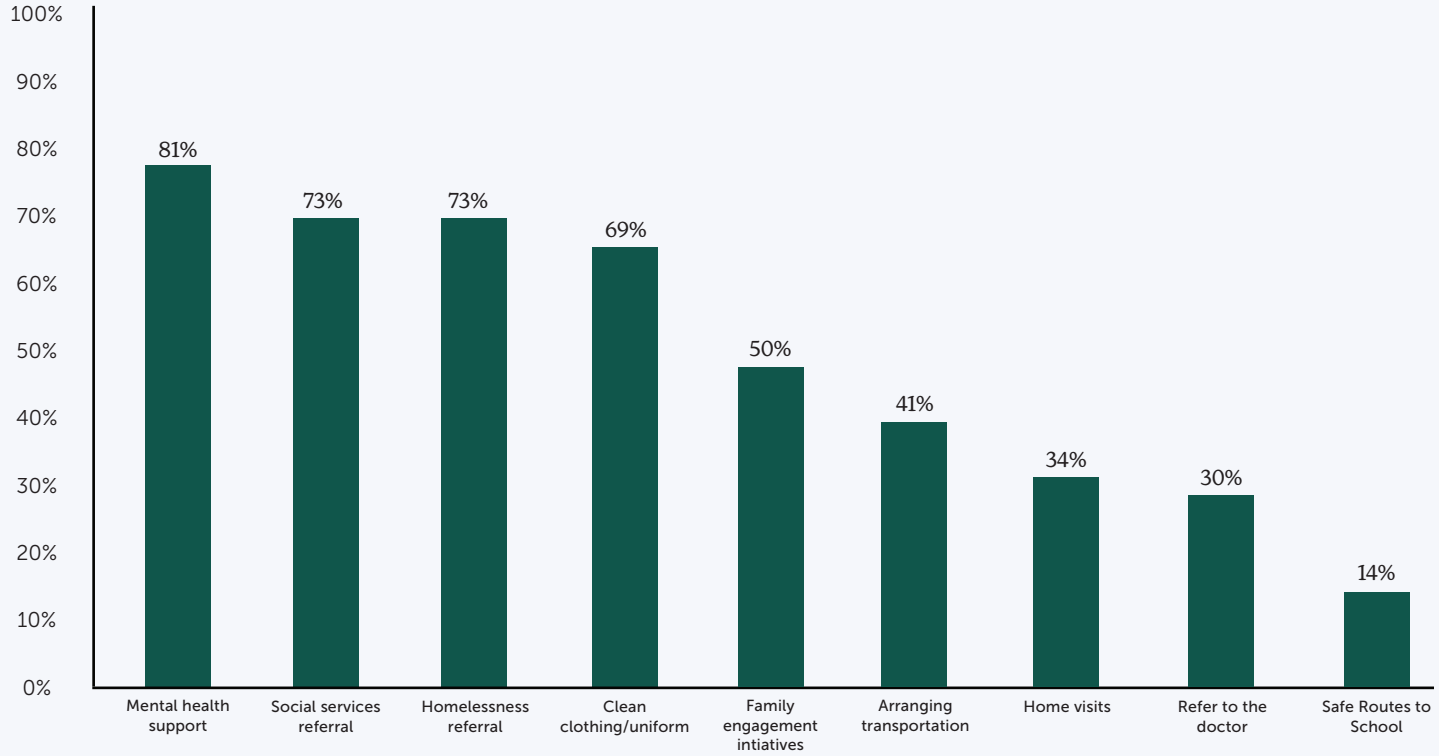


Figure 4: Use of Attendance Practices that Address Out-of-School Barriers



Some practices related to out-of-school barriers were also more common than those focused on improving student experiences (Figure 4). For example, most schools reported referring students for social services or homelessness services or providing cleaning clothing or uniforms. Fewer reported arranging transportation or making health-based referrals, or conducting intensive family engagement or home visits, but this was still more common than strategies related to improving student experiences in school.

Overall, these findings suggest that Michigan schools' attendance strategies remain heavily weighted toward low-cost, communication-based approaches and, to a lesser extent, addressing out-of-school barriers—while strategies aimed at improving students' in-school experiences are comparatively rare. Schools would likely benefit from a strong alignment between attendance strategies and broader school improvement efforts (e.g., school climate, instructional quality), as these areas of practice are more within their control, well-aligned to their resources and expertise, and have the potential for lasting positive impacts (Singer & Lenhoff, 2025b).

A CONNECTION BETWEEN SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND ATTENDANCE STRATEGIES

Michigan schools appear to have drawn a strong connection between attendance and mental health. Indeed, student mental health was among the most common barriers to attendance perceived by school leaders (see the technical report for additional details). Practices that address student mental health and social-emotional well-being were among those most commonly used (see Figures 2 and 4 above). Overall, 81% of schools provided direct mental health support to students, along with 67% implementing social-emotional learning (SEL), and 59% implementing restorative practices.

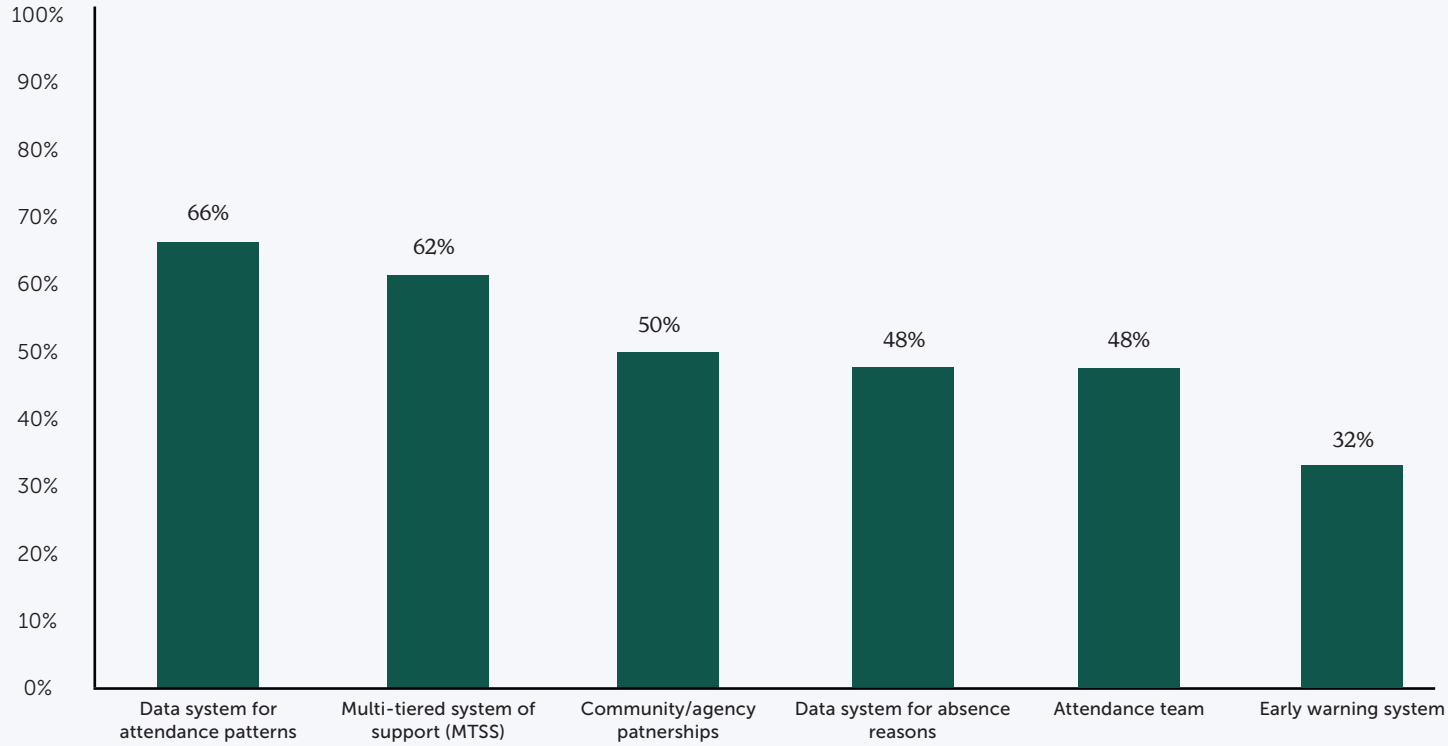
Further, school leaders reported an increasing and intensive use of these practices related to social-emotional support. We asked follow-up

about how frequently schools used each practice, and how their use of that practice changed over time. Most practices had a mix of responses: some schools used a practice daily or weekly while others used that practice monthly or yearly; and some schools used a practice similarly to before the pandemic, while others had increased their focus on that practice since the pandemic. For mental health services and SEL, however, the vast majority of schools that used these practices reported doing so frequently (i.e., daily or weekly) and increasing their use of the practice since the COVID-19 pandemic.

WIDESPREAD USE OF MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT FOR ATTENDANCE

We also asked school leaders about whether they used different organizational systems to support their attendance improvement efforts. The findings on multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) are perhaps most notable: 62% of schools had an MTSS related to attendance. This suggests that MTSS has become the primary framework through which schools are organizing their attendance improvement efforts.

Figure 5: Use of Systems to Improve Attendance



Also, while most schools had data systems in place to track attendance patterns (66%) fewer had data systems in place to track the reasons for absences (48%). While tracking attendance rates and patterns is an important starting point, this information is less actionable than the specific reason for absences, which can guide the selection of schoolwide strategies or individualized support.

We found two notable differences based on prior chronic absenteeism rate: schools with higher absenteeism rates were more likely to have MTSS and attendance teams in place. On the other hand, the presence of data systems and community partnerships did not differ systematically by prior chronic absenteeism rates. This suggests that schools where the problem of absenteeism is worse have made greater organizational investments in systems to help them manage and monitor their attendance initiatives.

Finally, it is important to note that when schools had organizational systems in place related to attendance, they often used a greater number of attendance practices. This was generally true for each system, and for each category of practices. Not every system was associated with greater use of every practice; but in general, schools with MTSS, early warning systems, data systems, attendance teams, and/or partnerships were also somewhat more likely to be using most practices. This suggests that the organizational systems created greater capacity to implement practices but did not necessarily narrow or focus the type of practices that schools used.

MANY SCHOOLS LACK GUIDANCE FROM THEIR DISTRICTS ON ATTENDANCE STRATEGIES

We also asked school leaders whether their district provided guidance on specific strategies to improve attendance. In total, only 47% of respondents indicated that they received such guidance from their district. Further, only 13% of respondents indicated that the guidance they received was very helpful, with 32% indicating that the guidance was only somewhat helpful. These findings highlight an opportunity for additional

support and professional development to help guide schools' selection and implementation of attendance practices.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this statewide survey offer a greater understanding of how Michigan schools are responding to the challenge of chronic absenteeism. Most schools are using communication-based practices and other nudges; and many are using practices that aim to address out-of-school barriers. Schools are especially addressing student mental health and social-emotional well-being as an approach to improve attendance. Still, there appears to be less of a clear connection between improving student experiences in school (e.g., through improved school climate or instructional quality) and attendance strategies. Many schools have adopted organizational systems such as MTSS to coordinate their attendance efforts. Still, it is not clear that having such systems in place help focus schools' efforts; and gaps remain in tracking the reasons for absences. Strengthening the alignment between attendance strategies, barriers to attendance, and broader school improvement efforts—along with providing more actionable district-level guidance—could help schools focus their efforts where they are most likely to make a lasting difference. Our goal is to build upon these findings, by identifying practices and systems associated with attendance improvements during the 2024-25 school year.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to our partners and colleagues, who offered their time, support, and feedback as we conducted this study. In particular, we would like to thank Dr. Delsa Chapman and Ann-Marie Mapes at the Michigan Department of Education; Elizabeth Newell and other members of the Michigan Department of Education's Attendance and Engagement team; Chibuzo Ezeigbo at the Joyce Foundation; our fellow researchers in the Attendance Researchers Consortium; and Julie Osburn, Lisa High-Crume, Joyce Martin, and Shannon Johnson at Wayne State University. Thanks also to the school leaders who participated in our survey pilot. Any errors are our own.

The research reported here was supported by the Joyce Foundation through grant SG-24-51292 to Wayne State University. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of funders.

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Special thanks to our funders:

The Joyce Foundation

For citations, please use:

Singer, J. & Lenhoff, S. W. (2025). *What are Michigan schools doing to reduce chronic absenteeism?* Detroit Partnership for Education Equity & Research, Wayne State University. https://detroitpeer.org/research/

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