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How Can We Improve Student Attendance? A Framework to Guide Schools

October
2025

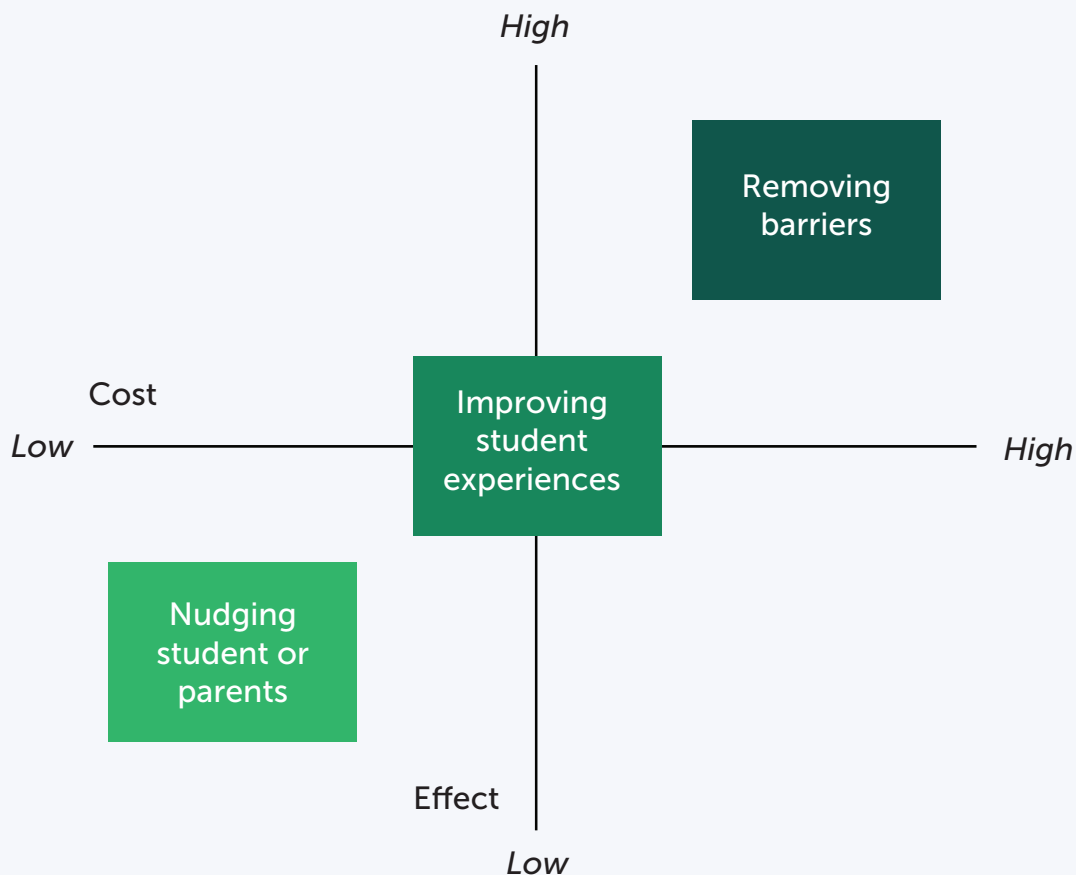
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How Can We Improve Student Attendance? A Framework to Guide Schools

INTRODUCTION

Schools in Michigan and around the country are developing new strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism and improve student attendance. This means implementing new practices, developing new organizational systems, and assigning new staff responsibilities or even creating new staff roles (Diliberti et al., 2024, 2025; Singer, 2025; Singer & Lenhoff, 2025). As schools develop and refine their attendance strategies, what should they prioritize? How can they most effectively spend their time and resources?

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Approaches to Improving Student Attendance



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In this brief, we offer a framework to guide schools' efforts to improve student attendance (Figure 1). The framework is based on two dimensions: the impact of different types of strategies, and the cost and effort required to implement those types of strategies. Though we have not conducted a formal cost-benefit analysis, our framework is guided by a close review of existing research on attendance interventions, considering costs, effectiveness, and implementation realities (Kraft, 2020).

THREE APPROACHES TO IMPROVING STUDENT ATTENDANCE

Absenteeism is a complex problem, and schools can develop a range of different practices or strategies to improve it. We have categorized these practices into three different approaches to improving attendance. The first approach is changing student or parent behavior (i.e., “nudging”), including forms of communication, incentives, and punishments. The second approach is improving student experiences in school, from developing strong relationships and school climate to improving learning experiences. The third approach is removing barriers to attendance—especially out-of-school barriers (e.g., health, housing, basic needs, and transportation)—and related activities to engage with families such as home visits. In this section, we provide an overview of the research related to these three approaches.

NUDGING STUDENTS AND PARENTS

Schools may focus on changing student or parent behavior through information and motivation. For example, schools use various forms of one-way communication (e.g., phone calls, newsletters, text messages, letters home) to encourage families to maintain good attendance and to inform parents or students about their attendance (Himmelsbach et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2018; Rogers & Feller, 2018; Swanson, 2022). Districts might also engage in community-wide communication campaigns to promote the importance of attendance (Childs & Grooms, 2018; Lenhoff et al., 2020). In addition, some schools offer specific incentives to students, such as awards or prizes for their attendance (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018; Robinson et al., 2019).

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Finally, districts also leverage state truancy policies, from warnings about legal consequences to court referrals for truancy prosecution, to push families to improve their children’s attendance (Edwards et al., 2023; Lasky-Fink et al., 2021).

The benefit of these types of practices—using positive and negative nudges to change student or parent behavior—is that they are relatively inexpensive and easy-to-implement. Educators have capacity for and experience with communicating with students and parents, creating motivational systems for their classrooms or schools, and applying existing laws and policies. The drawback, however, is that these practices have only a small impact on attendance, if any. Numerous rigorous studies have shown that high-quality one-way communication with families about attendance has a small positive impact, resulting in an average effect of about one or two fewer absences for an entire school year (Himmelsbach et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2018; Rogers & Feller, 2018; Swanson, 2022).

Other nudges have less supporting evidence. Incentives for attendance have almost no empirical basis (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018). One study found a limited positive impact, but under some circumstances rewards can actually lead to worse attendance (Robinson et al., 2019). In general, existing evidence suggests that court-based action is not effective: stricter truancy-based prosecution does not lead to better attendance (Conry & Richards, 2018; Weber, 2020), nor do truancy-diversion programs (McNeely et al., 2019). One study found that truancy notification letters—whether worded more positively or more punitively—have relatively little impact on attendance at all (Lasky-Fink et al., 2021); and more generally, threats of punitive action could negatively impact the relationship between schools and families (Edwards et al., 2023). Thus, while some efforts to nudge students and parents toward better attendance can have a small positive effect, others have little supporting evidence or may even be harmful.

IMPROVING STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Schools may also focus on improving the experience that students have in school to improve their attendance. A number of studies have found a positive association between attendance and school climate, and in particular measures of student belonging and school-family relationships (Hamlin, 2020; Learning Heroes & TNTP, 2024; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; Liu & Lee, 2022). Yet, other dimensions of school climate, such as the use of exclusionary discipline (e.g., out-of-school suspensions), can negatively impact student attendance (Hinze-Pifer & Sartain, 2018; Lacoë & Steinberg, 2019; Singer, 2023; Sorensen et al., 2022). Negative experiences with peers, such as bullying, can be associated with lower attendance (Laith & Vaillancourt, 2022). These studies suggest that decreasing exclusionary discipline and improving peer relationships may significantly improve student attendance.

In addition to the school climate in general, teachers specifically play a significant role in student attendance. A number of studies suggest that teachers impact student attendance through their dispositions, identities, relationships with students, and instructional quality (Bowden et al., 2023; Gershenson, 2015; Gottfried et al., 2022, 2024; Jackson, 2018; Liu & Loeb, 2019).

The benefit of focusing on improving school experiences is that these efforts are central to what schools and districts do, and they are wholly or mostly in the scope of influence of schools. Schools and districts are already dedicated to providing students with high-quality instruction and a positive school climate, and they have existing organizational systems and resources dedicated to them. The drawback, however, is that the link between these efforts and student attendance is more nebulous than stand-alone nudges or other discrete initiatives. Thus, while providing a positive experience for students—through positive school climate and school-family relationships as well as well-trained educators and high-quality instruction—is associated with better attendance, the specific actions that districts and schools should take are not always clear-cut and

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may not be as easily connected to attendance-specific strategies. In addition, they can take more time and be more costly than nudge-type strategies, although they are likely to have a bigger positive impact on student attendance in the long-run.

ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO ATTENDANCE

Finally, schools may focus on identifying and addressing the barriers to attendance that students and their families face. Districts already provide some resources that can aid families, such as school meals, school-based transportation, some health services, and resources for homeless students (Allen, 2003; Edwards, 2022; Erb-Downward et al., 2023; Kirksey & Gottfried, 2021; Komisarow & Hemelt, 2023; Lenhoff et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2023; Trajkovski et al., 2023). They can also partner with external organizations (e.g., community-based service providers, regional and state agencies) to provide additional resources and supports for students and their families (Childs & Scanlon, 2022; Henig et al., 2015; Sanders, 2003; Zuckerman, 2022). Schools can organize their efforts to provide these resources to families around casework, using home visits and other forms of intensive two-way communication (Smythe-Leistico & Page, 2018; Stemler et al., 2022). They may also adopt the “community schools” model, integrating external resources organizationally with school operations and physically in the school building (Covelli et al., 2022; Germain et al., 2024; Weiss & Reville, 2019).

The benefit of providing such resources is that they directly deal with the root causes of chronic absenteeism. Theoretically, identifying and addressing the specific barriers that students face is the best way to improve their attendance; and empirically, these types of interventions have been shown to have a greater impact on student attendance than nudges and school-based efforts (Covelli et al., 2022; Smythe-Leistico & Page, 2018; Stemler et al., 2022). One drawback, however, is that these efforts are much more time- and resource-intensive. Another drawback is that these approaches often fall outside schools’ influence or expertise, and thus they may have limited capacity to carry them out (Spillane et al., 2022).

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Effectively connecting families with new resources and services requires dedicated personnel, strong school-family relationships, well-developed organizational infrastructure, as well as adequate access to the resources or social services themselves (Hine et al., 2023; Kearney et al., 2023). Many of the resources that would help families are controlled by other organizations and agencies. School-based caseworkers are often constrained to referring families to resources rather than being able to directly provide them, and the resources to which they refer families are often too limited to adequately meet families' needs (Sugrue et al., 2016). Thus, while directly addressing the root causes of absenteeism is potentially effective, it is logistically complex, resource-intensive, and often beyond the immediate scope and capacity of schools. to have a bigger positive impact on student attendance in the long-run.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our framework suggests that there is no silver bullet to improving student attendance: strategies that are lower-cost and easier-to-implement are also lower-impact, while strategies that have larger impacts are also more costly or difficult to implement. Schools must therefore select a thoughtful combination of strategies. Schools in Michigan often use communication-based strategies and other kinds of nudges and sometimes use their resources to help address barriers to attendance, with less emphasis on improving student experiences (Singer & Lenhoff, 2025). We recommend that schools adjust their focus: develop data and organizational systems to support their attendance strategies, choose a small number of evidence-based nudges to use, place a strong emphasis on improving school-family relationships and student experiences in school, and use the resources and partnerships available to them to help remove barriers to attendance when possible.

DEVELOP DISTRICT- AND SCHOOL-BASED SYSTEMS TO SUPPORT ATTENDANCE STRATEGIES

Before addressing the different approaches to attendance, it is important to discuss the data and organizational systems related to attendance.

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Districts should make investments that provide school-based staff with useful information and save time so they can focus on implementing and improving their strategies.

First, schools need an easy way to access and analyze attendance data. School and district leaders want to take a data-driven approach to attendance issues; but without tools to easily access and interpret data, educators can waste a lot of time trying to generate reports to guide their efforts (Lenhoff & Singer, 2025). Districts should invest in student information systems or other data tools that make it easy for school-based staff to analyze patterns in student attendance and identify target students for interventions.

Relatedly, schools need a systematic approach to tracking the reasons that students miss school. As useful as attendance data can be, schools cannot effectively refine and target their efforts if they don't understand the underlying barriers faced by students and their families. It is difficult for schools to track this information, since it is often gathered informally in interactions with students and parents, and student information systems are not often equipped to easily record and review this information. Districts should help schools develop the necessary organizational processes and technological systems for documenting barriers to attendance. In the meantime, schools can pilot low-cost ways to collect this information, such as a one-question online survey asking parents why their children missed school.

Second, schools need easy-to-reference information and clear processes for addressing barriers to attendance. It takes time and effort to understand the challenges that students and their families face related to attendance. Once schools have this information, how should they respond? If educators are scrambling to compile a list of resources for every individual student, they will not be able to effectively respond to all of their students' needs. Districts should develop external resources and references that schools can turn to for common barriers to attendance (e.g., mental

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health, physical health, transportation, housing, basic needs), as well as well-defined systems (e.g., key personnel, reporting and communication) for connecting students with internal resources.

Third, districts should provide clear guidance to schools on their approaches to improving attendance. We found that less than half of school leaders in Michigan reported receiving any guidance from their districts (Singer & Lenhoff, 2025). While there might be good reasons to allow schools some flexibility or autonomy in their approaches, clear guidelines can help ensure that schools are strategic with the approaches they select, and that their approaches are informed by evidence.

USE EVIDENCE-BASED NUDGES

When it comes to attendance strategies, schools tend to prioritize “nudging” families. The existing research is clear: nudging families through text messages or letters home can have a small positive impact on attendance. These types of tailored communications can be low-cost and easy-to-implement, especially with technology-enabled communication platforms, so they are worth the investment. But they should be guided by the evidence: they should be positive, nonthreatening, concise, and specific to the student. In addition, schools should be parsimonious in when and how they communicate with students and families, rather than overwhelming them. They should also not expect these practices to have a large effect on attendance or chronic absence rates.

Schools should also avoid, or very carefully use, practices that lack a strong base of evidence (such as incentives) and that can have more negative than positive consequences (such as truancy prosecution). Although incentives may be appropriate in some individual cases, schools should avoid relying on them, since they can be ineffective while also diverting staff time from more effective practices. Schoolwide programs should be used only with a clear rationale, linked to specific attendance barriers or patterns (e.g., historically low-attendance days), and

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carefully evaluated (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018). Similarly, while there may be severe cases in which court-based action is warranted, threatening or pursuing legal action is mostly counterproductive, since it erodes school-family relationships and punishes families in need, with no evidence of effectiveness (Edwards et al., 2023; McNeely et al., 2019; Weber, 2020). We instead recommend supportive relationships and connecting families to resources.

FOCUS ON IMPROVING STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND SCHOOL-FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Strategies focused on improving student experiences in school—such as improving school-family relationships, school climate, and instructional quality—are the most promising attendance practices that are within schools’ control. These foundational elements may not offer immediate or easily measurable gains, but they form the basis for trust, belonging, and engagement, all of which can improve school attendance. Among these, strong school-family relationships deserve particular emphasis. Research has long shown the value of family-school partnerships, and recent evidence points to a protective effect of positive family relationships in mitigating post-pandemic absenteeism (Learning Heroes & TNTP, 2024; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Yet schools more frequently use low-cost, low-impact communication—like automated messages or generalized appeals to parental responsibility—that do little to build meaningful relationships.

Prior research suggests that strong school-family relationships require capacity building for educators and families alike. Key elements of strong school-family relationships include authentic collaboration in planning and decision-making; trust between a school, families, and the community; family and community collaboration as a shared and embedded value; adequate funding, organizational systems, and routines to support collaboration; and equitable treatment and inclusivity for families of all backgrounds (Fernandez & Renbarger, 2024; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Stokes et al., 2024). Schools already focus on school climate and

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school-family relationships as a key part of school improvement, so doubling down on these efforts is a much more productive approach than introducing new strategies and interventions.

In addition to low-cost and easy-to-implement one-way communication, districts should consider intensive two-way engagement with families to identify and address student barriers to attendance—in other words, using home visits or other case-management strategies for sustained engagement with families. The challenge with these more intensive efforts is that they are costly, because they require a large amount of time and personnel. Thus, while this approach is worthwhile, it may be difficult for districts to implement at scale without additional funding or support from external agencies. Districts could explore the possibility of intensive casework with a subset of grades or schools to start, and they could advocate to the state for more funding to implement these evidence-based strategies. In addition, this sort of casework may be more feasible if districts already have a foundation of positive school-family relationships.

HELP REMOVE BARRIERS TO ATTENDANCE WHEN POSSIBLE

To the extent that they can, schools should also focus on helping remove barriers to attendance. Of course, schools and districts cannot feasibly address all out-of-school issues on their own. But as a first step, they should evaluate the extent to which the basic conditions for regular attendance—such as reliable access to transportation, stable housing, and necessary healthcare—are in place for students. With a clear sense of the barriers that students face, schools and districts can focus on effectively providing those resources that are within their capacity. For example, districts often already provide some forms of transportation and health services, and they are required to provide additional resources to students who are experiencing homelessness. Thus, they can start by evaluating the quality of the services and resources they already provide and explore opportunities to do so more effectively (e.g., through partnerships with community-based organizations and external agencies).

SCHOOLS CANNOT DO IT ALONE

Finally, it is important to note that many of the root drivers of chronic absenteeism are beyond the immediate influence of schools. This does not mean that schools should ignore the issue—indeed, as discussed above, there are productive ways for schools to make progress on this problem. Still, we believe that schools cannot be expected to solve chronic absenteeism alone. Rather, progress will require cross-sector collaboration, with education leaders working alongside health, housing, transportation, and social service agencies—as well as community organizations and policymakers—to create the conditions that enable students to attend school regularly (Lenhoff & Singer, 2025).

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For citations, please use:

Singer, J. & Lenhoff, S. W. (2025). *How can we improve student attendance? A framework to guide schools*. Detroit Partnership for Education Equity & Research, Wayne State University. <https://detroitpeer.org/research/>

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