

# **Chronic absenteeism** is when a student misses 10% or more of the days in an academic year.

And it's not getting much better—in many places, rates remain at double (or triple) prepandemic levels.<sup>1-3</sup> The problem can seem intractable, but hundreds of cities and school districts have made small but meaningful strides. At CivicSearch, we've scanned thousands of hours of school board and city council meetings and found 38 interesting tactics that districts have recently tried to combat absenteeism. Our sources are linked online at [civicsearch.org/nsba](https://civicsearch.org/nsba).

## **Augment or adjust the curriculum**

- Have paid internships that count for school credit. Useful for students who often need to choose between either income or education—now they can have both.<sup>4,5</sup>
- Allow students a more flexible schedule if they need a job on the side.<sup>6</sup>
- Give handwashing lessons. Leavenworth, Kansas, said it reduced its illness-related absences by 6% just by doing this.<sup>7</sup>
- If a student is absent, give them a chance to regain lost credit if they meet and discuss things with the teacher.<sup>8</sup>

## **Reward good attendance with experiences**

- Hold “that day” events: on random days, give students extra recess, ice cream, etc.<sup>9</sup>
- Let students eat lunch on the lawn.<sup>10</sup>
- Establish the Hair Care Club: teachers tidy up and style students' hair before school.<sup>11</sup>
- Hold monthly<sup>12</sup> or quarterly events:<sup>13</sup> a picnic lunch, a silent disco, etc.
- For students who've improved their attendance, promote them to Attendance Ambassadors, who help plan activities and work with staff to reduce absenteeism.<sup>14,15</sup>
- For students who are tardy or absent, encourage them to come back by having them read the morning announcements or conduct safety patrols.<sup>16</sup>
- Every month, reward the class and grade with the highest attendance with a party, which can have food, games, a DJ,<sup>17,18</sup> and a chance to pie a grown-up in the face.<sup>19</sup>
- Let students attend a long and unusual field trip, such as one to Ecuador.<sup>20</sup>
- Host the Daily Mile: teachers, staff, and students go on a morning walk or run.<sup>21</sup>
- Have sports players visit schools and expound on attendance<sup>22</sup>—or partner with sports teams to have students attend their games directly.<sup>23</sup>
- Let students skip an exam.<sup>24</sup>
- Let older students read books with elementary school students.<sup>25</sup>

## **Reward good attendance with something tangible**

- Give cash bonuses to teachers and support staff for keeping absence rates low.<sup>26</sup>
- Give cash bonuses to kindergarteners and ninth grade students. (This is an Ohio proposal,<sup>27,28</sup> but the city of Forest Park doesn't love it.)<sup>29</sup>
- Partner with businesses for popsicle parties and gift card drawings.<sup>30</sup>
- For students who have perfect attendance in a week, raffle their names and give the winners a plaque, a certificate, and boxes of pizza for their whole family.<sup>31</sup>
- Give play money, which students can redeem for time in the game room.<sup>32</sup>

## **Provide services outside the classroom**

- Provide and connect students with transportation, health care, community services, and basic needs,<sup>33,34</sup> like clean clothes<sup>35</sup> and alarm clocks.<sup>36</sup> Sometimes students are just too preoccupied with these things to go to school.

- Run extra days and hours, such as on weekends, on vacations,<sup>37,38</sup> and before and after school,<sup>39,40</sup> for students to make up missed time.
- Provide free, extended, and involved tutoring.<sup>41,42</sup> (This is a Virginia initiative.)<sup>43</sup>
- Support hybrid learning—which can be controversial, but hybrid instruction could let students continue to learn even while sick, and not going hybrid could encourage students to leave the district entirely, in favor of fully online schools.<sup>44,45</sup>

## **Build better relationships with families and students**

- Reach out to families individually, because each might be facing a unique set of barriers.<sup>46–50</sup> Dedicated attendance teams<sup>51–55</sup> can work, but families can be much more receptive to people they already have a relationship with, such as a teacher.<sup>56</sup>
- When reaching out, don't shame.<sup>57</sup> This should be more a partnership with families to improve attendance:<sup>58</sup> lean toward “we miss you”<sup>59</sup> and “how can we help?”<sup>57</sup>
- Be persistent: try frequent emails,<sup>60</sup> conferences, attendance plans, home visits, and phone calls and letters from teachers and the principal.<sup>61,62</sup> And do this as much as you can—every day if possible, especially for phone calls.<sup>63,64</sup>
- During conferences, go through the calendar to drive home the reality of how many days a student has missed, because a day or two every month can silently add up.<sup>65</sup>
- Send parents an app notification if a student is absent. Parents can then respond to that notification on their phone to explain the absence.<sup>66</sup>
- Be proactive: summer vacation can be a good time to conduct home visits and build rapport, even for families of kids who have not yet had any attendance issues.<sup>67,68</sup> And consider bringing small yet thoughtful gifts, like coloring pens for an artist.<sup>69,70</sup>
- Be perceptive: if a student is absent on the 10th day of school,<sup>71</sup> or if they've already missed 8 days, you don't need to wait for the 10%-absent mark to sound the alarm.<sup>72</sup>
- Encourage bus drivers to learn students' names and to inquire when they're absent.<sup>73</sup>
- Send letters comparing a student's attendance to their peers<sup>74</sup> and to the district's.<sup>75</sup>
- Give students one or more staff, student, or community mentors.<sup>76–79</sup>
- If a student is anxious about coming to school, work with them toward a “soft start” or another way of getting into the building,<sup>80</sup> or host school-refusal workshops.<sup>81</sup>
- Encourage older students to help their parents get the younger kids to school.<sup>82</sup>
- Conduct surveys, focus groups, and public forums to get direct student feedback.<sup>83</sup>

## **Other considerations**

- There are many more solutions than can fit onto two pages, and each school and district is different, with different resources. This list is meant only to inspire your own solutions and to enable you to reach out to fellow educators; it does not replace gathering your own data and talking with your own students and parents.
- Low-income, historically marginalized, and English-learning students generally experience chronic absenteeism at higher rates than other students—sometimes up to two times more.<sup>84–88</sup> Any plan to address chronic absenteeism cannot forget this.

## **About CivicSearch and this document**

This brief contains information up to April 2024 and was written with the extensive aid of CivicSearch, a tool that sifts through tens of thousands of hours of government meetings from more than 1,800 towns, cities, counties, and school districts across the US and Canada.

For sources (with time-stamped links to YouTube videos of board meetings) and a digital version of this document, head to [civicsearch.org/nsba](https://civicsearch.org/nsba).