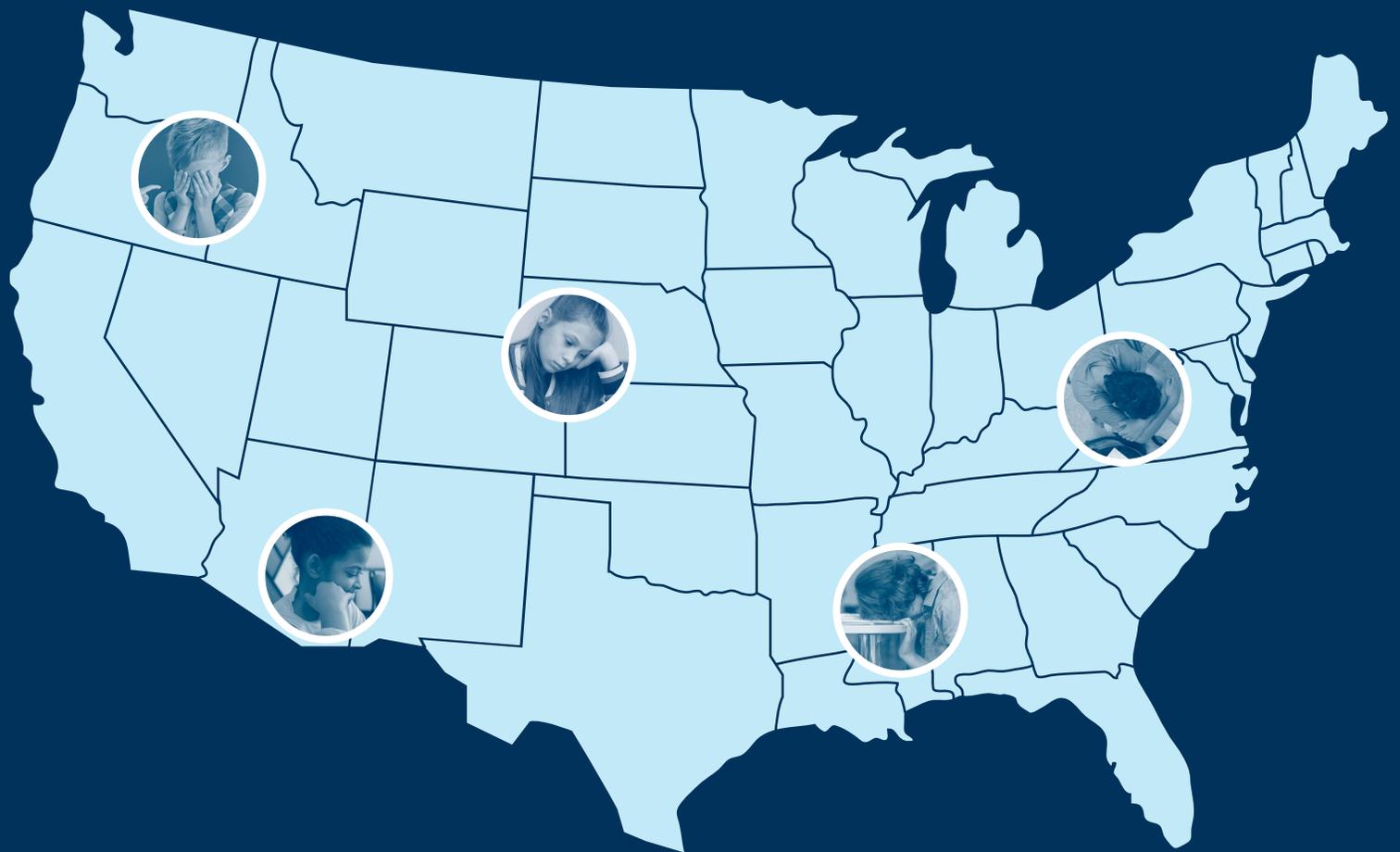


CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: A National Crisis



How social-emotional skill development helps combat an issue affecting over 7.5 million American students every year.

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Reduce Chronic Absenteeism with Social and Emotional Learning

Schools are so focused on meeting the challenge to help all students achieve. But one of the first steps to improving academic performance is ensuring that students attend school in the first place. Students must be present in school to learn what is being taught.

Unfortunately, millions of students in the U.S. are chronically absent from school. Called a “hidden educational crisis” by experts, research shows that chronically absent students are at increased risk of academic failure, dropping out, and even criminal behavior.



But promising evidence shows that schools can effectively tackle chronic absenteeism by improving school climate and culture and focusing on social-emotional skill development.



A National Problem with Serious Consequences

Chronic absenteeism focuses on identifying students who miss so much school that they become at risk for academic failure. This is different than traditional attendance measures, such as average daily attendance, which tracks how many students on average show up each day. Keeping track of chronic absences goes a step further and accounts for two factors:

- The number of days (excused and unexcused) a student misses
- How many students miss 10 percent or more of the school year

This shift more accurately identifies at-risk students because it tracks those students who are missing two or more days per month. Chronic absenteeism better accounts for lost instruction time and instructional gaps that make it difficult for students to succeed academically.



What Are the Risks?

There are many long-lasting impacts of chronic school absences. Research shows that when preschoolers, kindergarteners, and first graders do not regularly attend school, they are less likely to be proficient in reading and math by third grade - even when controlling for income, disability status, race, and social and emotional competence (Romero & Lee, 2007). Additionally, according to a report by the U.S. Department of Education (2016), **students with high absences score 20 percent lower than their peers in math, and their social and emotional skills tend to be weaker.**

The effects of chronic absences can snowball in middle and high school. Students who missed many days in elementary school are more likely to continue this pattern in upper grades. Missed instruction time increases the likelihood of falling behind in grade-level reading, which significantly increases the risk of dropping out of school (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).



A Chicago Public Schools study found chronic absences to be eight times more predictive of ninth grade course failure than eighth grade test scores. This same study found the number of school days missed is a strong predictor of graduation (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

A study in Baltimore Public Schools reached similar outcomes, **finding chronic absences to be the strongest predictor among sixth graders for dropping out of high school.** The study showed chronic absenteeism to be more predictive than traditionally strong early warning measures, such as course failure, GPA, and grade retention (Baltimore Education Research Consortium, 2011).

The risks of chronic school absences can follow students throughout their lives. A Rhode Island study found that only **11 percent** of students who were chronically absent in high school made it past their first year of college. Students chronically absent from school also are more likely to live in poverty, experience health issues, and engage in criminal activity (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Who is Affected?

All 50 states are dealing with chronic absenteeism, and in the U.S. an estimated 5 to 7.5 million students (30 percent) miss three or more weeks of school each year (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and students of color have the highest rates of chronic absences. Conversely, language learners are slightly less likely to miss school than peers, and Asian students have the lowest rates of chronic absences (Jacob & Lovett, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Why Are Students Chronically Absent?

There are many reasons why students do not attend school, and these may include family-, school-, community-, or student-specific factors. The most common reasons for chronic absences include:



Trauma and community violence



Unsafe neighborhoods



Learning disabilities



Health factors



Homelessness or unstable housing



Low family income



Responsibilities to support the family



Family issues such as domestic violence, neglect, or abuse



Bullying



Disengagement from school



Low academic performance



Lack of caring relationships with educators



Poor or negative school environments

Students in younger grades are more likely to miss school due to family reasons. Older students are more likely to be absent due to self- and school factors, such as disengagement, bullying, and low academic performance (Jacob & Lovett, 2017).

Getting a Handle on the Issue

Chronic absenteeism is a complicated problem, and there are no easy solutions. More rigorous research is needed to determine the effectiveness of interventions that specifically target student attendance (Jacob & Lovett, 2017).

One thing is clear, however: **In order to increase student attendance and reduce the number of chronically absent students, schools need to consider a multifaceted approach.**

Schools are moving the needle by reaching out to communities, lawmakers, and parents for support in increasing student attendance. For example, districts are seeking legislation aimed at reducing truancy, and many are involving parents through postcard campaigns or text-message notifications when students are absent. Other approaches include programs designed to increase connections to community resources, chronic absenteeism awareness campaigns, and student mentor programs (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013).

Many educators also are turning toward policy for support. For instance, thirty-six states and the District of Columbia have incorporated chronic absenteeism into their Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plans (Jordan, & Miller, 2017). Many states have added chronic absenteeism as an accountability measure of school improvement. This is a widely supported practice because it meets ESSA requirements and can be accurately measured (Schanzenbach et al., 2016).

Focusing on school improvements and creating a positive school culture has shown promising results, including increasing attendance. A growing body of evidence shows that **students are more likely to attend when their school promotes a safe, caring environment whereby students and educators have strong, supportive relationships.** The opposite also is true—when schools have a negative school climate or culture, students are much more likely to have high levels of chronic absences (Van Eck et al., 2017; Durham et al., 2014).

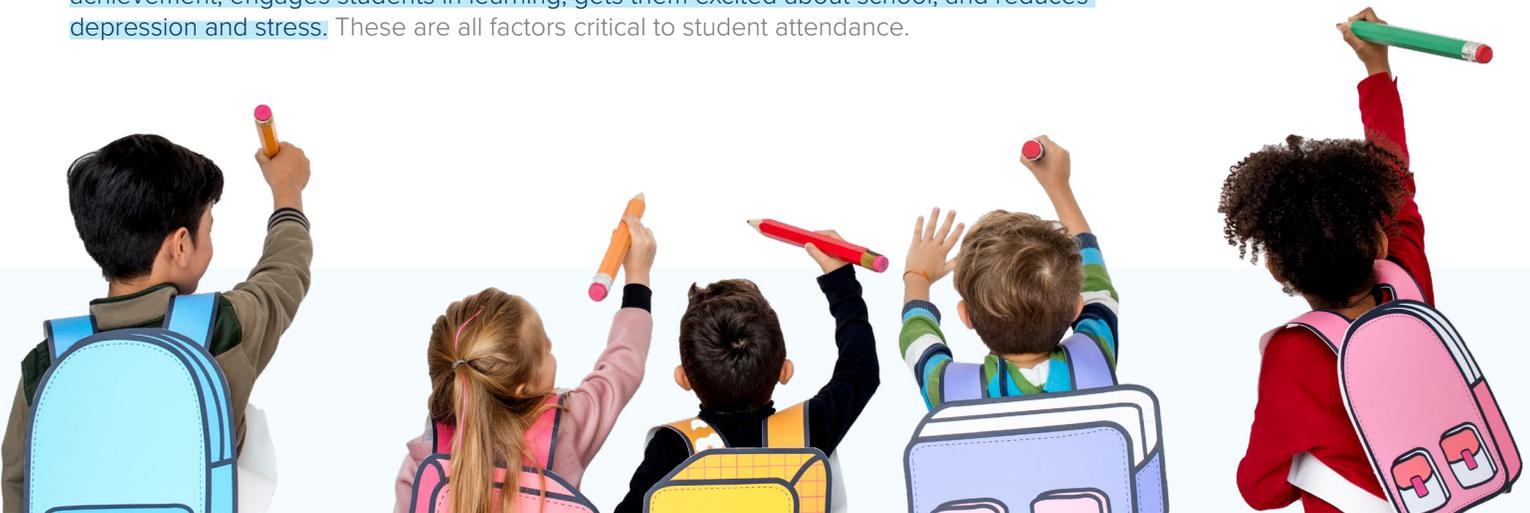


The Role of Social-Emotional Skills in Attendance

Social-emotional skill development plays an integral role in mitigating a culture of chronic absenteeism and fostering safe, caring, and supportive environments where all students feel accepted and can thrive. [Social-emotional skills are defined as](#) “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”

Extensive research has shown that social-emotional skills foster a positive school climate and culture and promotes prosocial behaviors such as kindness, empathy, sharing, and compassion (Durlak et al., 2011; Zins et al., 2004; National Research Council, 2012).

In addition to improving school climate and culture, [social-emotional skills also increases student achievement, engages students in learning, gets them excited about school, and reduces depression and stress.](#) These are all factors critical to student attendance.



Conclusion

Chronic absenteeism has been described as a hidden crisis that affects millions of students in the U.S. There are many reasons why students are chronically absent but missing more than 10 percent of school places students at increased risk of academic failure, dropping out of high school and college, and negative life outcomes such as poverty and criminal activity. To effectively address the issue of chronic absenteeism, schools must consider a multi-faceted approach.

Improving school climate and culture and promoting social-emotional skill development can increase student engagement and attendance. Research shows that social-emotional skills can help schools build a caring and safe environment and strong relationships between students and educators. This in turn can greatly reduce instances of chronic absenteeism in schools.

To learn more about social-emotional skills, improving school climate and culture, and chronic absenteeism, [contact our experts at Aperture Education.](#) Together, we can work to keep students attending school and achieving academic and life success.

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