

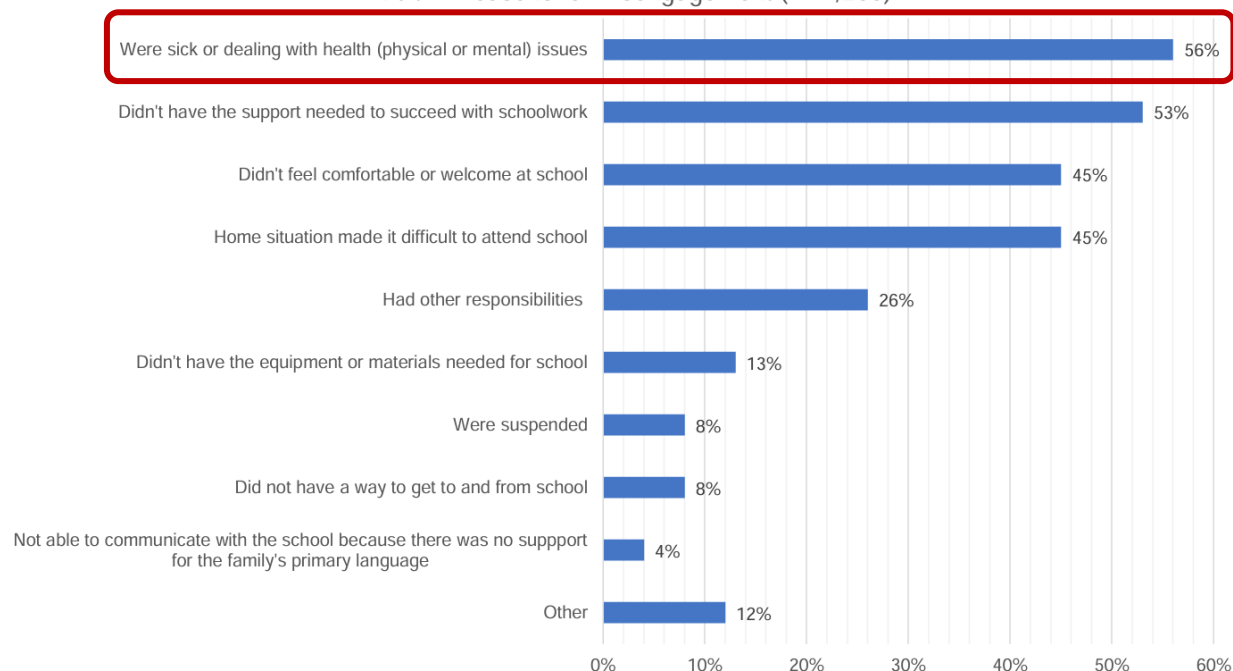
Help Wanted: Tackling Chronic Absenteeism with Healthcare Partners

By Allyson Fritz, Youth Attendance and Reengagement Project Coordinator, NorthEast Washington Educational Service District 101, June 2025

As an Attendance & Reengagement Coordinator, I often found myself wrestling with the reality that chronic absenteeism has a million moving parts – belonging, barriers outside of school, engaging curriculum, school aversion, push-out factors, you name it. We could chase our tails trying to tackle everything at once.

But as I looked again at a report from the statewide ESSER Attendance & Reengagement Project from 2024 (here's the [2025 Executive Summary](#)), one thing became crystal clear: physical and mental health were the #1 and #2 reasons Washington students and families shared about why they disengaged from school. And this data didn't come from attendance codes that can vary in how they are used from school to school– it came from one-on-one conversations with over 1,000 chronically absent students and their families with a trusted attendance & reengagement specialist. We had coded their responses as they shared about what caused them to stop attending school regularly.

Exhibit 4. Reasons for Disengagement (N=1,283)



When school staff look at their attendance data from this past January/February/March, I can't tell you how many times they tell me their attendance was hit HARD this year from particularly strong cases of seasonal illnesses, and that it felt worse than previous years. And when the conversation shifts to health-related absences, I see a lot



of proverbial hand throwing – front office staff feel powerless in the face of the myriads of parents calling in to say their child is sick. “There’s nothing I can do if a kiddo is out sick”.

That’s when it hit me: schools often feel powerless to address health issues, and yet, our data is telling us it’s the top reason for absences in our state (and my region) – could the systemic nature of this challenge actually make it the perfect candidate for the work of our Spokane County Attendance Task Force?

Confessions of a Reformed Solo Act

Asking for help has never been my strong suit. Like many raised in the individualistic culture of the United States, I used to believe that figuring things out by myself was a strength, and relying on others was a weakness. But as I’ve had more life experiences, I’ve come to realize that the opposite is true. Admitting you need help isn’t weakness – it’s a superpower that opens unexpected doors. And we (the education system) clearly need help in addressing chronic absenteeism. Knowing it was going to take all hands-on deck and the engagement of many different sectors to help move this needle, I was thrilled to get to be a founding member of Spokane County’s LaunchNW Attendance Task Force.

[LaunchNW](#), an initiative of Innovia Foundation, combines promise scholarships with support services for student success. They created this task force because regular attendance rates in Spokane County were quite low, and chronic absenteeism significantly impacts academic achievement and future opportunities. (If you want to learn more about the Task Force, you can see our journey in this living [Storyboard](#).)

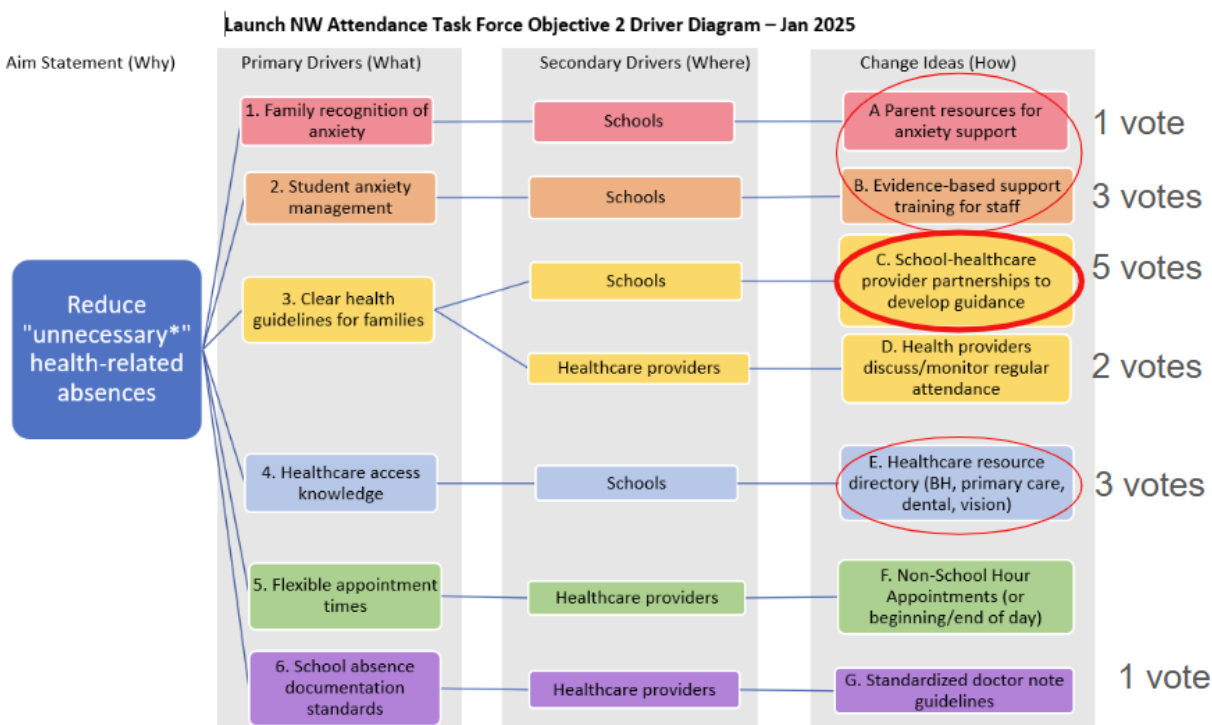
Building the Dream Team & Choosing Our Goal

Since early 2023 the task force has met about twice a month and includes representatives from several school districts, juvenile justice, community college and community health. In the summer/fall of 2024, I was reflecting on how to support our task force to coalesce around a second objective we might work towards. (The first objective we worked on was better supporting Marshallese students and families in our community, knowing that a student group’s low attendance rates are a signal that the current system is not designed to serve them well.)

As soon as they saw the data on health-related absences, the task force was on board. But where to start? There are the common chronic health conditions that lead to lots of absences – asthma, diabetes, etc. - but that felt like it might require technical expertise & perhaps resources that we didn’t have. Mental health was a huge topic of interest, yet there is a separate Launch NW task force working on that issue specifically, and we wanted to add value, not duplicate. Also, we knew we had a Tier 1 problem on our hands, with more than 1 in 4 students experiencing chronic absenteeism. We wanted to start with something that would benefit all students, so we started having conversations with experts and brainstorming what it could look like to help schools address “avoidable” health-related absences.

What are “avoidable” health-related absences, you ask? Here’s how I defined it: “avoidable health-related absences” are absences where there isn’t an actual physical health concern that necessitates a student missing school, or when missing school for a behavioral health concern is not supporting the student’s long-term wellness.

Once we honed in on this specific type of absence, we compiled our best thinking into a driver diagram (thank you improvement science) to help us visualize our theories about what actions would lead to reduced absences. We did two rounds of voting and landed on “School-Healthcare provider partnerships to develop guidance” as our starting point.



So, we had our focus - but then reality hit. How exactly do you approach busy healthcare providers with this idea?

Making the First Move (AKA, the art of the cold call...)

Doctors are intimidating. Let me rephrase, doctors are busy, and when people are busy, I get intimidated and second guess if what I need to ask is worthwhile. Every minute of their day is filled with back-to-back appointments. If our task force had named partnering with healthcare providers on establishing common guidance as our goal, what would be the best way to approach these busy professionals? Will they think I’m overstepping, since I’m not a health expert? And are they too busy saving lives to care about attendance?

I started with people in my network - I connected with the School Nurse Corps Director and the Public Health Coordinator at my agency (NEWESD 101) and asked them for any provider contacts who might be able to advise us. That led to a phone call with an epidemiologist at our

regional health district office, and a zoom meeting with a well-connected pediatrician who email-introduced me to the pediatric leads at several different clinics across Spokane. Two of those leads invited our task force to present at upcoming all-staff meetings for their pediatric departments.

Here's what happened: The providers were incredibly interested and enthusiastic! Many weren't familiar with chronic absenteeism as is commonly defined in the education world, but they were absolutely on board with the value of attending school for health, wellness and development and aware that absenteeism was increasing.

What We Asked Providers to Do...

After reviewing the literature on health-related chronic absenteeism and talking to school nurses and our task force members, we created a [flyer](#) to disseminate across our community. This flyer was the launch point for our conversations with the previously mentioned pediatricians and providers. We developed it so that as a task force we were aligned on our messaging – that no matter which of us was talking with providers, we would be asking them to consider the same practices. Here's what we narrowed in on:

1. **Ask students/families** about school attendance during wellness exams or checkups to ensure students have what they need to attend as often as possible
2. **Ensure doctor's notes** that will be used to excuse absences are clear in how much time the student is expected to miss so schools can support the student accordingly
3. **Intentionally schedule appointments** for students that minimize absences, e.g. outside school hours or at the start/end of the day

The flyer is titled "Partnering with Healthcare Providers to Improve Wellness and Educational Outcomes for Kids in Spokane County". It features the "LAUNCH NW" logo in the top left and the "NEW ESD" logo in the top right. The main text is organized into sections: "The Challenge" (Regular school attendance is essential for student learning, social development, and overall well-being), "Research shows" (that as early as preschool and kindergarten, chronic absence-- defined as missing 10% or more of the academic year-- can significantly impact a child's education), "In Spokane County, 26.9% of students were chronically absent in 2023-2024 (OSPD). This compelling data led the LaunchNW Attendance Task Force to focus on reducing unnecessary health-related absences.", and "When Washington students were asked about their primary reasons for disengaging from/missing school, the top two reasons given were physical and mental health." There is a small icon of a school building. Below this, a blue box contains the "LaunchNW Attendance Task Force's Approach" (We bring together community members to find and test ways of reducing chronic absenteeism in Spokane County, especially for students most affected by it), "Since December 2024, the Task Force has met twice monthly to better understand health-related absences, review effective solutions, and explore how we can help.", "Guidance from local experts-- including school nurses, public health officials, and healthcare providers, has shaped our approach.", and "Using improvement science methods, we created a roadmap of key focus strategies to reduce avoidable health-related absences. Some of these can be led by schools, but others rely on partnering with you: our healthcare providers!". At the bottom, there is a small gear icon and a footnote: "For our purposes, 'chronic absence' refers to absences where there isn't an actual physical health concern that necessitates a student missing school or when missing school for a behavioral health concern is not supporting the student's long-term wellness. We recognize that some absences are unavoidable and necessary, including those related to chronic disease requiring medical support."

Questions Providers Asked Us...

At that first pediatric staff meeting, I was curious about the kinds of questions we'd get – I assumed some would be around what schools are currently doing to address it, or what else do we know about the other reasons for absence. The first thing the providers wanted to know was whether schools across our region were using consistent health guidance for advising families on when to stay home versus when to come to school. My answer to them: Ideally yes ([Spokane Regional Health District has an FAQ](#) that outlines the guidance, for use across our region), but in practice...the guidance given depends on who answers the phone! It's something we're working

on at the state level, and there's a recently released family-friendly infographic from OSPI — adapted from Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department in partnership with the WA State Department of Health — [When is your child too sick for school?](#) to help front office staff and families get on the same page. Definitely an area for improvement that is within the sphere of influence of schools and districts.

Then they hit us with something I hadn't expected: getting a signed Release of Information to collaborate with schools is a huge barrier that prevents them from supporting students effectively, they said. Could we work on making that easier? That sounds like a perfect future goal for our task force – and it reminded me of an [awesome pilot program](#) I'd read about that uses data to help healthcare providers address chronic absenteeism in Washington, D.C.

What I Learned



Figure 11+ Task Force Members Allyson Fritz (left, *NEWSED 101*) and Caesy Morphis (right, *Central Valley School District*) presented to pediatric team at Providence about chronic absenteeism

Through this process, we definitely gained potential avenues for collaboration locally with providers on chronic absenteeism. For example, we learned we could come present at a local pediatric residency program, an opportunity that would allow us to educate newly trained providers on chronic absenteeism as they prepare to enter the workforce. But I also learned a broader lesson – I live in an amazing community, and people *want* to partner. It isn't necessarily seen as a burden or more work for others, like I assumed that it would as I began my outreach. Instead, I learned that people were pleased to be contacted, that they are just as excited as I am at the possibilities that can come from collaboration across sectors. All it took was for me to step outside my comfort zone and make the first call (or send the first email...)

Takeaways to Consider

Are you wanting to take a collective impact approach, but aren't sure where to start?

Start by talking to and with those closest to the problem – aka students and families! Several of our task force members were working directly with students and families, and we relied on data from conversations with students and families to decide where to focus.

Make a list of attendance barriers you're seeing/hearing about. Now ask: who in your community is already working on those same issues from a different angle? The worst that happens when you reach out? They're too busy. That's information, not personal rejection. But

the best that happens? You find partners who've been waiting for someone to connect the dots.

Chronic absenteeism is too complex for any one sector to solve alone. When we stop trying to solve it ourselves and start being collaborators, amazing things happen.

So, pick up that phone, send that email, schedule that coffee date. Ask for help. The conversation will be worth it, even if you're nervous to start...