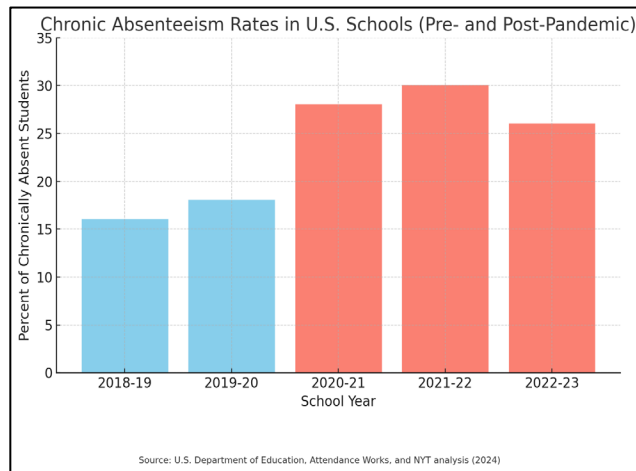


Starting Strong, Staying Strong: Reducing Chronic Absenteeism Through Strategic Communication

FRAMING THE CHALLENGE:

Chronic absenteeism—defined as missing 10% or more of the school year, or at least 18 days in a 180-day calendar—has emerged as one of the most urgent challenges facing schools, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. National rates have more than doubled in many districts, with some states reporting that up to 40% of students are chronically absent, highlighting both the scale of the problem and the need for effective responses (Attendance Works, 2023;



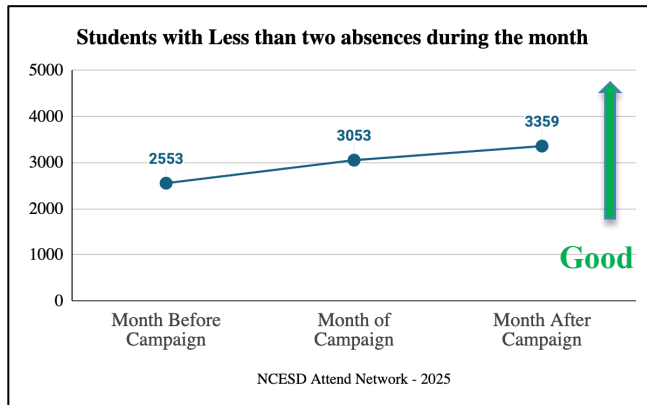
NYT, 2024). The academic and social consequences are significant: frequent absences are linked to lower achievement, early literacy gaps, increased dropout risk, and social-emotional disengagement, while also disrupting classroom instruction and limiting schools' ability to deliver timely interventions (Attendance Works, 2023; EveryDay Labs, 2025). Although barriers such as transportation, health, mental health, and bullying contribute to absenteeism, research points to a critical underlying factor—shifting parent beliefs about the necessity of consistent, in-person attendance. Many families perceive missed days as harmless and view make-up work as an adequate substitute, despite evidence that these beliefs undermine student success (ACRI, 2024). Traditional truancy enforcement approaches, which are often reactive and punitive, have shown limited effectiveness and can strain trust with families. Together, these findings suggest that reversing chronic absenteeism requires proactive, evidence-based attendance communication strategies that address misconceptions, build shared responsibility, and reinforce the value of daily school attendance.

A REGIONAL MODEL: STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION CADENCE

To address the complex challenge of chronic absenteeism, the National Attendance & Engagement Meta Network unites school leaders, educational service districts, and community partners around a shared goal: ensuring more students—especially those furthest from opportunity—are present and engaged in school. As a national learning community, the Meta Network rapidly identifies, tests, and scales promising practices to address persistent attendance

challenges. Early evidence from partner sites underscores the power of strategic, timely communication with students and families in reducing chronic absence.

As a Meta Network member, our regional attendance network adopted a targeted and proactive communication strategy. We designed a sequenced communication cadence that rolls out in three waves: a “Start Strong” attendance campaign in the early fall, followed by early winter, and early spring campaigns. Initial insights suggest that such campaigns positively impact attendance not only during the campaign but continue to produce positive impacts for a short time after the campaign (NCESD ATTEND Network, 2025).



Each campaign focuses on educating the full school community about the value of attendance and includes universal messaging designed to shift norms. Following each campaign, teams deploy “nudge letters”—personalized, non-punitive messages—targeted at students and families whose attendance data indicates they are at risk of becoming chronically absent. This sequence allows schools to “ride

the wave” of awareness generated by campaigns and extend their impact through strategic, data-informed touchpoints.

Experience across our regional network demonstrates that short-term communication surges can improve attendance in measurable ways, especially when reinforced with timely data and consistent follow-up like nudge letters.

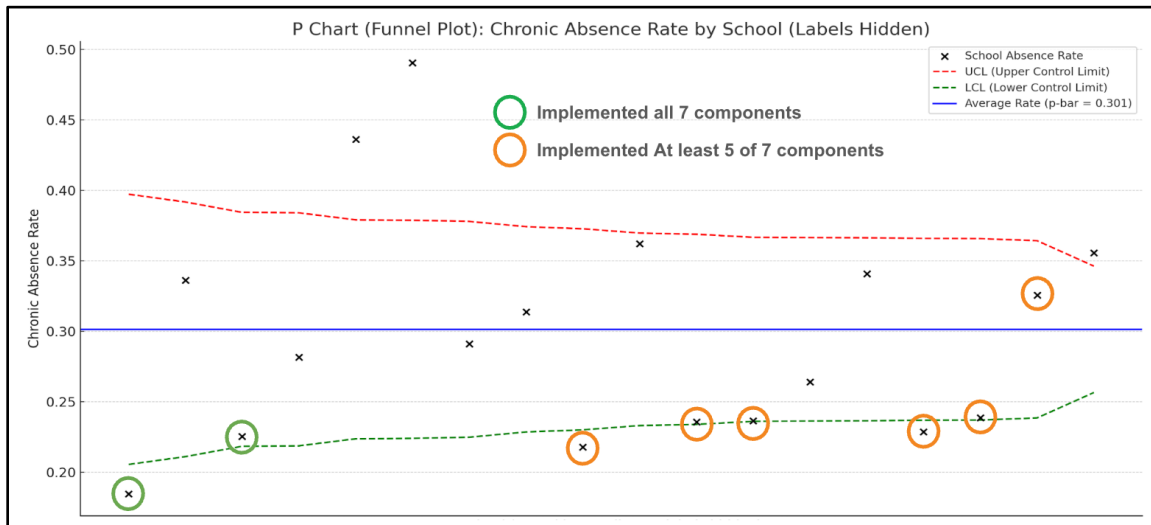
THE POWER OF A CADENCED CHANGE PACKAGE

Targeted campaigns and nudge letters can function as effective **early interventions**, helping schools interrupt attendance declines before patterns become entrenched. However, the data do not suggest that nudge letters or campaigns alone eliminate chronic absenteeism. To move beyond isolated strategies, the NCESD Attendance Network implemented a seven-component attendance change package designed to support schools in building coherent, proactive systems. Below, a clear pattern emerges - schools that implemented more components of the change package experienced lower chronic absence rates.

Specifically:

- Schools implementing **all seven indicators** clustered near the **lowest observed chronic absence rates** in the network.
- Schools implementing **at least five of seven indicators** also performed better than the regional average.

- Schools with fewer components in place were more likely to appear above the average line and closer to the upper control limit.



This pattern reinforces a critical insight: **attendance improvement is not driven by a single strategy, but by the strength and consistency of the system supporting it.** The seven indicators—when implemented together—create reinforcing conditions that normalize attendance, promote early action, and sustain improvement over time.

WHY CADENCE MATTERS

Our regional network organizes attendance communications into three strategic waves:

- **Start Strong (early fall)** to establish expectations and norms
- **Midyear reinforcement (early winter)** to counter emerging attendance drift
- **Spring persistence (early spring)** to prevent late-year disengagement

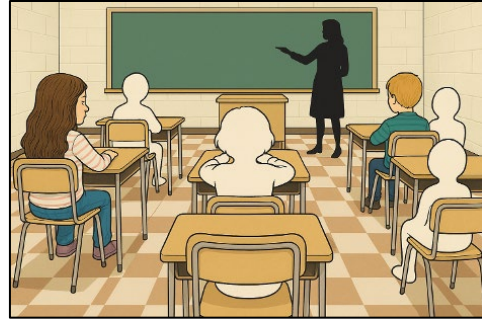
Early network findings indicate that these short, focused communication surges produce attendance gains that persist for several weeks beyond the messaging window, allowing schools to “ride the wave” of awareness and reinforce positive behavior with timely, personalized outreach.

RETHINKING SYSTEMS TO ADDRESS A SYSTEMIC ISSUE

Embedding a cadenced communication strategy within broader systems ensures that families hear from schools early, often, and in ways that build momentum rather than fatigue.

We encourage schools to reflect on how and when they currently communicate with families about attendance. Are the messages personalized? Are they framed with empathy? Are they delivered early enough to change behavior before patterns become entrenched?

Chronic absenteeism is a multi-faceted issue requiring multi-level solutions. While communications and campaigns are essential tools, they are most effective when embedded in broader systems and carefully cadenced. Schools that establish attendance teams, meet regularly to review real-time data, and implement supportive interventions—not just enforcement measures—are best positioned to make sustainable improvements.



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