REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM REPORT

Indiana Math and Science Academy West

Introduction

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM, DEFINED AS MISSING 10 PERCENT or more of school days in an academic year, has become a significant challenge for schools across the nation.[1] Rates of chronic absenteeism surged during the COVID-19 pandemic and have yet to fully recover. In Indiana, chronic absenteeism peaked at 21.1% in 2022, gradually declining over the past two years, with 17.8% of students chronically absent in 2024. While this represents some improvement, the rates remain alarmingly high, particularly among low-income students and students of color. For example, 23.7% of students receiving free or reduced lunch were chronically absent, compared to just 13% of their peers with paid lunch status. Black students, in particular, experience the highest rates of chronic absenteeism at 28.5%.

The academic consequences of chronic absenteeism are profound. Students who are chronically absent are less likely to meet academic benchmarks, such as passing the state's IREAD assessment, compared to their regularly attending peers. The impact of these absences compounds over time, contributing to academic struggles and, in some cases, long-term disengagement from education.

This report sought to explore the practices of charter and innovation schools in Center Township, Indianapolis, that have successfully reduced chronic absenteeism in their schools, as indicated by attendance data from the Indiana Department of Education. By examining the strategies employed by schools with lower absenteeism rates, this report hoped to identify effective practices that can be shared more broadly across the city. By learning from one another's successes and challenges, we hope to contribute to the collective effort of improving student attendance and supporting academic achievement throughout Indianapolis. The schools featured in this report represent a small selection of learning institutions actively working to strategically address student attendance and family engagement within their areas of influence.

This report would not have been possible without the generous time, effort, and insights shared by **Allegiant Prep**, **Christel House Academy**, **Enlace Academy**, **Herron Preparatory Academy**, **Indiana Math and Science Academy West**, and **Monarca Academy**. We are deeply grateful to the schools that graciously participated in the interview process to share their insights with us.

Advancing the Work: Insights and Strategies for the Future

WHILE THE SCHOOLS FEATURED IN THIS REPORT WERE excited to be recognized, many emphasized that their work is ongoing and continually evolving. With each new cohort of students and families comes fresh challenges, particularly in maintaining consistent and effective communication. The schools acknowledged that they are not perfect and regularly adapt their practices to meet the evolving needs of their communities.

Although the report highlights best practices for addressing chronic absenteeism, several common challenges were identified by all schools. These include **inconsistent student transportation** and the financial burden of providing transportation for students experiencing special circumstances (including those who are McKinney-Vento eligible).

> *"I tell parents if they're having issues around transportation their students have the skills to help track their own bus. … Transportation can be a problem at times."*
> —School Leader, Monarca Academy

"We started a partnership with Hop, Skip, Drive, which is like an Uber for schools. This is a safe transportation service for our families, specifically for Mckinney-Vento families that are struggling to get to school because of transportation, financial or living situation issues. They pick students up at their home, regardless of where the home is located. They drop them off after school as well. We could use more of these sorts of services but they're so expensive."
—School Leader, Enlace Academy

"If I could wave a magic wand, we would have access to transportation. That's just such a huge component of it, especially when I think about some of the kiddos who were chronically absent last year….Whether that's the reliability of a family car or door to door bus service, we don't offer transportation and the students who would benefit the most would need access to transportation."
—School Leader, Herron Preparatory Academy

Additionally, **shifting student demographics**, especially an **influx of students immigrating to the United States** from a variety of countries, present challenges related to varying school attendance requirements and family expectations, including absences for international travel due to extended family obligations.

"In our school we've had a lot of students who are coming from Nigeria. We've started hiring staff members who speak the language and know the culture and can help with the translations. I think that helps with the attendance as well because sometimes there may be cultural things that affect attendance. We've had families fly back to their home countries and stay there for a couple of weeks and it's easier to address those things when you have someone who knows the culture."
—School Principal, Indiana Math and Science Academy West

"We have a lot of families who have families outside of this country and are not from here. They will say to us, 'I need to go to Mexico for two weeks. My grandma is dying'. Because their families are so far away, there tends to be longer absences for those reasons."
—School Leader, Christel House Watanabe

Schools also cited **affordable housing shortages**, **limited access to healthcare**, and **mental health barriers** as recurring issues that impact attendance.

"We have some students who are chronically sick. That's been a barrier. We ask that after three days there's a letter from a doctor but we've found out that some of our families don't have a doctor."
—School Leader, Allegiant Prep

"We're seeing significantly more mental health challenges at our school after COVID."
—School Leader, Christel House Watanabe

Schools are proactively addressing attendance barriers within their control by:

1. **Cultivating environments where students and families feel a sense of belonging**
2. **Consistently tracking attendance**
3. **Responding swiftly to issues**
4. **Collaborating with their community and external partners to address obstacles to consistent attendance**

Cultivating Environments of Belonging

THE SCHOOLS FEATURED IN THE REPORT UNDERSCORED the pivotal role of school culture in fostering a sense of belonging for students. They emphasized the importance of being relentless about relationships and ensuring every student knows they have a caring adult in the building. They highlighted the value of teachers and staff building strong, supportive relationships with both students and their families. These relationships create an environment where students feel comfortable sharing their successes as well as any challenges they face, including barriers to attendance. The schools stressed the importance of recruiting and retaining a diverse staff that reflects the student demographics, wherever possible, to strengthen connections and representation. Through these efforts, these schools have created environments where students and families feel welcomed and motivated to engage.

"Our students feel like our school is safe, consistent, and predictable. They also feel like they can be held to high expectations but supported."
—School Leader, Allegiant Prep

"I believe the biggest reason students want to come here is because they love their teachers. We have an environment where the students feel safe and welcome and where identity is something they talk about constantly, not separate from academics but as a part of academics."
—Executive Director, Monarca Academy

Tracking Attendance Consistently and Responding Swiftly

SCHOOLS EMPHASIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF TRACKING attendance data daily and implementing systems that assign clear responsibility for tracking, reporting, and addressing attendance concerns across the team. Teachers often take the lead in the initial monitoring and relationship building. Meanwhile, school leadership teams and support staff play a crucial role in regularly reviewing attendance trends and identifying resources to address barriers swiftly as part of their continuous improvement efforts. One school has integrated school-wide attendance goals into its staff evaluation process, while another tracks and reports attendance progress to its Board of Directors, underscoring the significance of attendance in achieving overall school success.

"School culture and establishing standard protocols for attendance goes a long way. We take attendance seriously and tie that into our evaluation rubric for all of our staff. Everyone in the building is responsible for attendance."
—School Leader, Enlace Academy

"We have a dashboard for our Board of Directors and we track attendance even on our board dashboard."

—School Leader, Indiana Math and Science Academy West

Collaborating with Community and External Partners

THE SCHOOLS HIGHLIGHTED IN THE REPORT EMPHASIZED THE importance of viewing parents and families as genuine partners, recognizing them as essential contributors to the shared mission of providing an excellent education for every child. When families feel valued, deeply connected to the school, and trusted as co-owners in their child's success, meaningful collaboration emerges, enabling schools to address student needs more effectively. This trust allows schools to work closely with families to overcome challenges and secure additional resources when necessary. Whether addressing transportation barriers, housing instability, or food insecurity, these schools actively identify and utilize local resources to ensure students and families have the support they need to thrive.

"We reach out to families when we notice an attendance trend to see if there are any

barriers that we are not aware of. Sometimes families have a housing situation or fall into hard times so we can provide support like bus passes. We don't want to slap parents on the wrist, we try to mitigate barriers."
—School Leader, Allegiant Prep

"While we have Project One Love, we have some families who need care until 6:30 pm. That's where the Boys and Girls Club came in. They were the only partner that could stay open until 6:30 pm. What we noticed was, parents were getting off work at 6 pm. It takes them 30 min to get to the school from work. There are families that literally get here every evening at 6:30 pm so we've intentionally placed the students who need that service in the club."
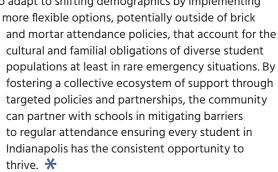—School Leader, Enlace Academy

Summary

MOVING FORWARD, CONTINUED EFFORTS TO REDUCE chronic absenteeism will require innovative strategies, partnerships, and supportive policy changes to address the multifaceted challenges identified in this report. Schools should continue refining their approaches to communication, ensuring that families are well-informed and committed to daily school attendance. To make a lasting impact, though, policymakers and advocates must prioritize making school attendance more easily accessible for all families. This could include expanding access to free and reliable transportation for all students and alleviating the financial burden associated with the transportation needs of students experiencing vulnerable circumstances.

Considering the need for quality healthcare and the growing need for mental health support, resources to increase access to school-based counselors, community mental health services, and quality healthcare could help address one of the key barriers to regular attendance. Policies aimed at alleviating housing instability, such as increasing affordable housing options and providing rental assistance, could directly support families facing these challenges.

Finally, schools should be supported in their ongoing efforts to adapt to shifting demographics by implementing more flexible options, potentially outside of brick and mortar attendance policies, that account for the cultural and familial obligations of diverse student populations at least in rare emergency situations. By fostering a collective ecosystem of support through targeted policies and partnerships, the community can partner with schools in mitigating barriers to regular attendance ensuring every student in Indianapolis has the consistent opportunity to thrive. ✳

To read the full report, scan the QR code or visit **themindtrust.org/ absenteeismreport**.