

From Absence to Engagement: Community Schools' Innovative Approaches to Reducing Chronic Absenteeism and Increasing Attendance

The Importance of Attendance¹

Attending school on a regular basis is crucial to a student's learning experience. Attendance impacts academic success and opportunity to connect with peers. Research shows that students who are consistently in class perform better on standardized tests and are less likely to engage in criminal behavior, ultimately increasing their quality of life (Sheldon, 2007). Keeping students in the classroom provides them a structured environment where they can receive support from teachers, while also developing time management and other life skills that are essential for future success. In addition, attending school offers students opportunities to build friendships and participate in sports, clubs, and other activities that enhance their learning, individual development, and overall school experience.

However, regular school attendance is a struggle some students face, especially our lowest income students. Their absences can become chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of the academic year for any reason (excused or unexcused). Since the pandemic, chronic absenteeism has grown across the United States. In Maryland, the chronic absenteeism rate has reached 30%, disproportionately affecting students who are economically disadvantaged, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities (Maryland State Board of Education & AIB, 2025). Research shows that

students who are “chronically absent are at greater risk of falling behind academically, disengaging socially, and ultimately dropping out of school” (Germain et al., 2024, p. 1). There is no one reason for absenteeism, and often there are large structural barriers to attendance. For example, the lack of transportation, food insecurity, and community violence all have been linked to absenteeism, barriers that are often beyond the control of the school.

For example, the Baltimore Banner reported that transportation is a widespread problem for students getting to school in Baltimore City. They recently investigated the lengths students must go to be present at school. Since the school system does not provide buses to middle and high school students, those students must navigate unpredictable bus, subway and light rail schedules, impacting nearly 25,000 students. As the Banner found, “When everything runs on time, the average city student's trip to school on mass transit takes about 40 minutes, more than twice as long as students spend on yellow buses in neighboring districts and longer than the average adult's commute to work” (Bowie & Morton, 2025, p. 4). Unreliable transportation has caused lateness and absence, and ultimately, decreases in academic performance (Bowie & Morton, 2025).

Even in districts where there are yellow school buses, transportation can be an obstacle. After finding that students from a particular housing development only 0.8 miles away from the school

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From Absence to Engagement: Innovative Approaches to Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in Community Schools

made up most of their absentees, staff creatively leveraged their Community School funding for a bus. Since the students live less than a mile away from the school, they do not qualify for bus service. Consequently, the school, Baltimore Highlands Elementary, a Community School located in Halethorpe, MD, has gone the extra mile to pay for a specific bus to go to that housing development to pick up students, and even return to pick up students who may have missed the bus the first time. In efforts to increase attendance, Baltimore Highlands exemplifies one way Community Schools can address attendance obstacles to support students' success.

Community Schools' Approach to Attendance

Community Schools across the country have developed many strategies to help increase attendance and address the needs of students who may be experiencing inequities, including:

1. **Improving family engagement** by calling home and making home visits for unexcused absences.
2. **Increasing student connectedness** through strengthening student-teacher relationships and prioritizing students' personal interests.
3. **Leveraging community engagement** by utilizing different services provided by partnerships to remedy various barriers influencing attendance.
4. **Systematically analyzing and tracking data** related to absenteeism, to create focused and beneficial interventions towards increasing attendance.
5. **Establishing systems of support** to reduce chronic absenteeism through incentives and

additional support systems outside of what the school is already offering (Germain et al., 2024).

With the use of these strategies, Community Schools across the country have seen progress in reducing absenteeism for students who are chronically absent. These findings provide evidence for the effectiveness of the various strategies being used to target absenteeism within Community Schools. For example, Buena Vista Horace Mann School in California has implemented various programs within their school to support their Latino families facing adversity. By integrating social and emotional advisory throughout the school day, creating an overnight shelter in the school's gymnasium for families experiencing homelessness, and offering new art electives to pique student's interests, Buena Vista Horace Mann made several impactful changes. As a result, the school was able to "reduce chronic absenteeism by 8 percentage points from 2021–22 to 2022–23" (Kini, 2024). Additionally, the RAND corporation evaluated the impact of the New York City Community School Initiative and found a significant decrease in chronic absenteeism and an increase in grade progression across a three-year period. By 2018, New York City had expanded to over 200 Community Schools, and from 2016 to 2018, chronic absenteeism fell by 7.3% among elementary, middle, and high school students (Johnston et al., 2020).

Locally, East Salisbury Elementary in Salisbury, MD has implemented various support programs for chronically absent students and families in efforts to increase attendance. In addition to informing parents on the importance of attendance on academic success, East Salisbury also utilizes individualized attendance intervention plans and

From Absence to Engagement: Innovative Approaches to Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in Community Schools

attendance intervention groups to provide personalized efforts and attendance-based resources.

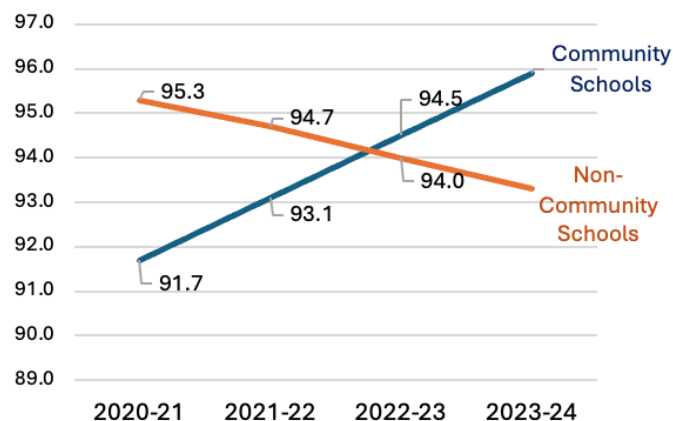
Key Findings

In Maryland, Community Schools are making progress in improving student attendance. An analysis of student attendance data reported to Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) from the 2020-21 through 2024-25 (chronic absence data were not reported in 2019-20 due to COVID-19) found that the different rates of change in attendance over time between Community Schools and non-community schools are statistically significant. Students' average daily attendance (ADA) in Maryland's community schools improves with each additional year that the Community School strategy is in place (Figure 1). While community schools' predicted ADA in 2020-21 was 91.7, this grew to 94.5 by 2023-24. This stands in contrast to predicted ADA for non-community schools, which was 95.3 in 2020-21 falling to 93.3 in 2023-24.

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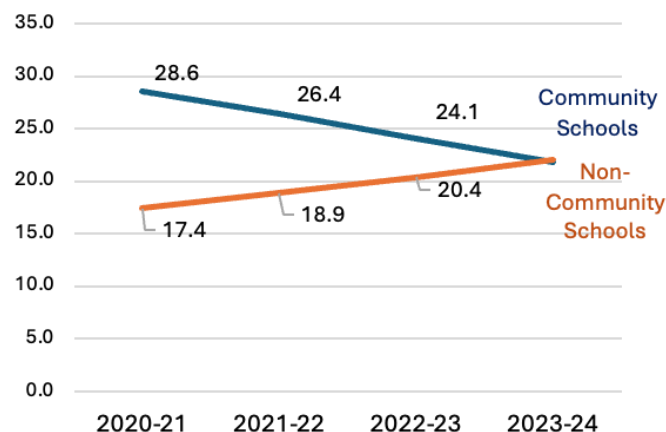


Figure 1. Average Daily Attendance



Similarly, chronic absenteeism decreased with each year of Community School implementation (Figure 2). While the predicted rate of student chronic absence in Community Schools was 28.6% in 2020-21, this rate declined to 21.8% in 2023-24. Among non-community schools, predicted chronic absenteeism increased from 17.4% to 22.0% during the same timeframe.

Figure 2. Chronic Absenteeism



Several Community Schools were statistical outliers, beating the average trend. Lillie Mae

From Absence to Engagement: Innovative Approaches to Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in Community Schools

Carter Jackson School's (Baltimore City) rate of chronic absence was 32.0%, falling by 19.5 points to 12.5% from 2020-21 to 2023-24. The Crossroads School's (Baltimore City) chronic absence levels also fell starkly from 19.0% to 6.1% over the past four years. Colgate Elementary (Baltimore County), Bakersfield Elementary (Harford County), and New Hampshire Estates Elementary (Montgomery County) also had double-digit decreases in chronic absenteeism.

Additionally, two community schools stood out for their exceptional growth in average daily attendance. Tyler Heights Elementary (Anne Arundel County) had a 2.1 point increase in ADA, placing the school at 94.9% while Langley Park-McCormick Elementary kept their attendance at over 95% across the four-year span.

Exemplary Attendance: Schools Making it Happen Locally

Digging into the kind of strategies that exemplary schools use, this next section explores the strategies these schools implemented to achieve exceptional results.

1. Direct Family Engagement & Outreach

- Colgate Elementary ensures personal outreach by having front office staff, nurses, or health assistants call the families of students who are absent for that day, followed by teacher check-ins if absences persist.
- Bakersfield Elementary assigns attendance-related outreach based on the nature of the absence. Mental health-related concerns are handled by the school social worker, while the Community School specialist engages families to address other issues.

- New Hampshire Estates prioritizes parent education, holding meetings where the principal presents data on the impact of absenteeism, while parent liaisons provide targeted support for families.

2. Targeted Interventions & Accountability Measures

- Colgate Elementary convenes a monthly attendance team to discuss students approaching chronic absenteeism and determine appropriate interventions, such as parent-teacher conferences or legal notices. For severe cases, Project Attend may require families to report to an administrative judge.
- Bakersfield Elementary's biweekly attendance meetings allow for more frequent, tailored responses to student attendance issues, with structured parental notification through phone calls and letters.
- New Hampshire Estates schedules mandatory family meetings once absences reach a threshold, ensuring a collaborative action plan to address attendance concerns.

3. Incentive & Reward Systems

- Colgate Elementary provides lunch-based incentives, gift cards, and perfect attendance drawings, especially during the challenging winter months.
- Bakersfield Elementary offers quarterly celebrations, such as dance parties and snowball fights, with school-wide recognition for high attendance.
- New Hampshire Estates motivates students with classroom-based rewards, including extra recess, arts and crafts, and public

From Absence to Engagement: Innovative Approaches to Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in Community Schools

recognition after five consecutive days of perfect attendance.

Discussion

The findings presented in this research brief highlight the positive impact of Community Schools on student attendance and chronic absenteeism. It is crucial to note the role Community Schools have in fostering multi-tiered interventions that extend beyond the classroom. By providing direct family engagement, targeted support services, and structured incentive programs, Community Schools are not solely responding to absenteeism but proactively shaping a culture of attendance. The correlation between increased student attendance and the implementation of mental health services, short term accommodations and other helpful resources suggests that absenteeism is not just a behavioral issue, but a multifaceted challenge rooted in socioeconomic and structural factors. The documented successes of Baltimore Highlands Elementary and other successful Community Schools demonstrate that logistical challenges can be mitigated through strategic distribution of resources.

By utilizing the Community School strategy, schools can track and analyze data that is related to chronic absenteeism and therefore create tailored programs, resources and supports surrounding attendance. Schools such as Colgate Elementary, Bakersfield Elementary, and New Hampshire Estates Elementary show how targeted interventions, family outreach, and reward-based strategies can create meaningful improvements in attendance. Direct engagement with families through home visits and individualized

interventions fosters a sense of accountability and community involvement, while structured attendance teams make a point to look at each student's needs individually to develop personalized strategies that will benefit that student and their family's situation. By embedding these strategies within the school culture, Community Schools provide a sustainable framework for attendance improvement that can be adapted and transferred to other educational settings.

Conclusion

By examining both the numbers and the stories behind them, we are seeing success around Community Schools and school attendance. Consequently, the financial investments being made in Maryland's Community Schools are beneficial. Furthermore, the declining rates of chronic absenteeism in Community Schools indicate that structured comprehensive approaches can produce long-term improvements in student participation. These findings align with national research on Community Schools, reinforcing their efficacy in reducing barriers to education. With attendance being such key lever to academic success, strategies to address these factors must be intentional, diverse and dedicated to the whole child. Through Community Schools' commitment to providing wraparound services, they have the ability to create an environment that fosters consistent attendance, academic success, and overall student well-being.

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From Absence to Engagement: Innovative Approaches to Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in Community Schools

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