

REDEFINING THE ATTENDANCE PARADIGM

A Systemic Analysis of Chronic Absenteeism, Economic Impacts, and Human-Centered Interventions

THE OLD WORLD

28% CHRONICALLY ABSENT



THE TRANSFORMATION LINE



THE NEW WORLD

RETURNED AFTER A SINGLE SUPPORTIVE INTERVENTION



By Ivory A. Toldson, Ph.D.

Concentric Educational Solutions

REDEFINING THE ATTENDANCE PARADIGM

*A Systemic Analysis of Chronic Absenteeism,
Economic Impacts, & Human-Centered Interventions*



concentric
EDUCATIONAL SOLUTIONS

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About the Illustrations: The illustrations in this report were conceptualized, prompted, and art-directed by Dr. Ivory A. Toldson using Google NotebookLM's AI-assisted infographic feature. Inspired by the visual storytelling traditions of graphic novels and comic book art, each illustration was designed to make the report's findings vivid and accessible to policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders. The comic book format was chosen deliberately: just as Professional Student Advocates meet families where they are, these illustrations aim to meet readers where they are, through story, image, and human connection.

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Executive Summary

Chronic absenteeism has emerged as the defining crisis of post-pandemic K–12 education. This report presents an exhaustive analysis of the systemic barriers driving this crisis, drawing upon extensive ethnographic research, including insights derived from over 17,000 home visits conducted by Concentric Educational Solutions across seven states, as well as comprehensive national datasets. The findings culminate in a strategic framework of actionable recommendations for education policymakers, district administrators, educational technology innovators, and community stakeholders.

Four major findings anchor this report:

Chronic absenteeism has stabilized at historically high levels and become a structural feature of the post-pandemic education landscape. National chronic absenteeism rates surged from approximately 15 percent pre-pandemic to as high as 31 percent during the 2021–2022 school year. Rather than reverting to pre-pandemic baselines, rates have leveled off around one in five students chronically absent — approximately 23.5 percent in 2023–2024 — with year-over-year recovery decelerating to a mere 1 to 1.9 percentage points. This "new normal" represents a rate 57 percent above pre-pandemic levels, signaling a long-term engagement crisis rather than a temporary disruption. The crisis is not distributed equally: 58.2 percent of the highest-poverty schools experienced extreme absenteeism (30 percent or more of students chronically absent), compared to just 7.4 percent of the most affluent schools. Native American, Pacific Islander, Black, and Hispanic students, alongside English learners and students with

THE CRISIS. THE BARRIERS. THE PATH FORWARD.

Executive Summary — Redefining the Attendance Paradigm

23.5% – 28% CHRONICALLY ABSENT

17,000 HOME VISITS

ONE IN FIVE STUDENTS – MISSING

Based on 17,000 ethnographic home visits, research reveals that chronic absenteeism is not a result of individual apathy but a cascading crisis of "invisible barriers."

A Health disparities, transportation deficits, family trauma, and disengagement are compounded by criminalization.

B Transportation deficits, family trauma, and disengagement are compounded by criminalization.

C Family Trauma, and disengagement are compounded by criminalization.

D Disengagement compounded by criminalization.

The Attendance Trap (Criminalization) often penalizes families for keeping sick or medically fragile children home.

E AI EARLY WARNING

Shifting policy from tracking compliance to measuring how effectively systems address root causes.

Cost Comparison	
Chronic Absenteeism:	\$5,630
School Suspension:	\$27,260
School Expulsion:	\$70,870

ETHNOGRAPHIC HOME VISITS

Advocates conduct home visits to identify barriers like housing instability instead of policing.

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Transforming schools into centers providing healthcare, food pantries, and mental health support.

COMPLIANCE

TRUANCY

ATTENDANCE IS NOT A MANDATE – IT IS A MEASURE OF SUPPORT.

disabilities, bear a vastly disproportionate burden.

Absenteeism is primarily driven by systemic barriers — not student apathy or noncompliance.

Ethnographic research across more than 17,000 home visits identified over 70 distinct barriers to attendance, revealing that health disparities, transportation gaps, family trauma, caregiving burdens, and disengagement are deeply interconnected root causes that traditional truancy frameworks fail to address. In under-resourced communities, chronic health conditions are exacerbated by substandard housing and a lack of preventive care, while 80 percent of school administrators cite bus driver shortages as a significant operational hurdle. Housing insecurity, caregiver illness, and immigration enforcement fears force families into impossible daily calculations where immediate survival supersedes the promise of educational attainment. Behind most absences labeled "unexcused" are families lacking the physical, infrastructural, or financial means to get a child to school — not families lacking the desire. When students express disengagement, it is rarely innate apathy; rather, it is a rational response to an educational system that feels overwhelming, irrelevant, or hostile.

The economic and social costs of chronic absenteeism are massive and compounding.

Shadow-pricing analyses calculate the social burden of each chronically absent student at \$5,630, encompassing lost lifetime earnings, family costs, diverted school resources, and peer learning disruptions. When absenteeism escalates to exclusionary discipline, costs multiply exponentially: a single school suspension carries a social burden of \$27,260, and an expulsion costs society \$70,870 per student. Conversely, raising a state's high school graduation rate by just 3 percentage points would yield \$9.57 billion in total social gains and \$2.95 billion in direct taxpayer savings. Punitive responses make the crisis worse — schools with School Resource Officers have arrest rates 3.5 times higher than schools without them, and Black students with disabilities account for 7.8 percent of school-related arrests while representing only 2.3 percent of enrollment.

Human-centered, multi-tiered intervention models show measurable impact and represent the path forward.

This report details four scalable, evidence-based strategies that reduce absenteeism, improve engagement, and address root causes more effectively than punitive compliance frameworks:

- **Community Schools:** New York City's Community Schools model lowered chronic absenteeism by 7.3 to 10.1 percentage points compared to non-community schools, with the greatest impact for students in temporary housing (9.3 percent reduction) and Black students (10.1 percent reduction). California has invested \$4.1 billion to scale this model statewide.
- **Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS):** MTSS frameworks align academic, behavioral, and social-emotional interventions into a cohesive continuum. Schools implementing MTSS with high fidelity report significant reductions in behavioral incidents, enhanced academic proficiency, and marked improvements in daily attendance.
- **Ethnographic Home Visits — The Concentric Model:** Concentric Educational Solutions has conducted over 400,000 home visits, re-engaged more than 200,000 students, and achieved a 10 percent overall reduction in chronic absenteeism across partner districts in ten states, with a 95 percent attendance improvement rate reported across partner districts. Concentric's C.A.R.E.S. theoretical framework — Cultural Responsiveness, Advocacy, Relationship Building, Encompassing Support, and Shared Commitment — operationalizes the shift from punitive enforcement to relational trust, powered by a workforce in which 94 percent of employees are racial minorities and 78 percent of management positions are held by people of color.

- **AI-Driven Predictive Analytics and Family Engagement Platforms:** Advanced early warning systems can flag at-risk students within the first 60 days of the academic year, while AI-powered translation and contactability tools bridge communication divides with non-English-speaking families in real time.
- **Legislative Reform:** Washington D.C.'s Bill B26-0402 provides a replicable model for shifting jurisdiction from law enforcement and child welfare agencies to human services, structurally acknowledging that absenteeism is a social services issue rather than a criminal justice one.

Key Terms

Term	Definition
Chronic Absenteeism	Missing 10% or more of the academic year, regardless of whether absences are excused or unexcused
Ethnographic Home Visit	A non-punitive, relationship-based visit to a student's home conducted by a trained community advocate to understand barriers to attendance
Privilege Gap	The structural disparity between families with resources to absorb disruptions and families where a single disruption cascades into prolonged absence
School-to-Prison Pipeline	The systemic pattern by which punitive school discipline policies push vulnerable students out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems
Shadow Pricing	An economic method of estimating the social cost of outcomes (e.g., absenteeism, suspension) that are not directly traded in markets
Transportation Desert	A geographic area where reliable, safe, and affordable transit options to school are unavailable or severely limited
Wraparound Services	A comprehensive, coordinated set of support services (health, housing, mental health, economic) provided to a student and family to address root causes of disengagement

Problem Statement



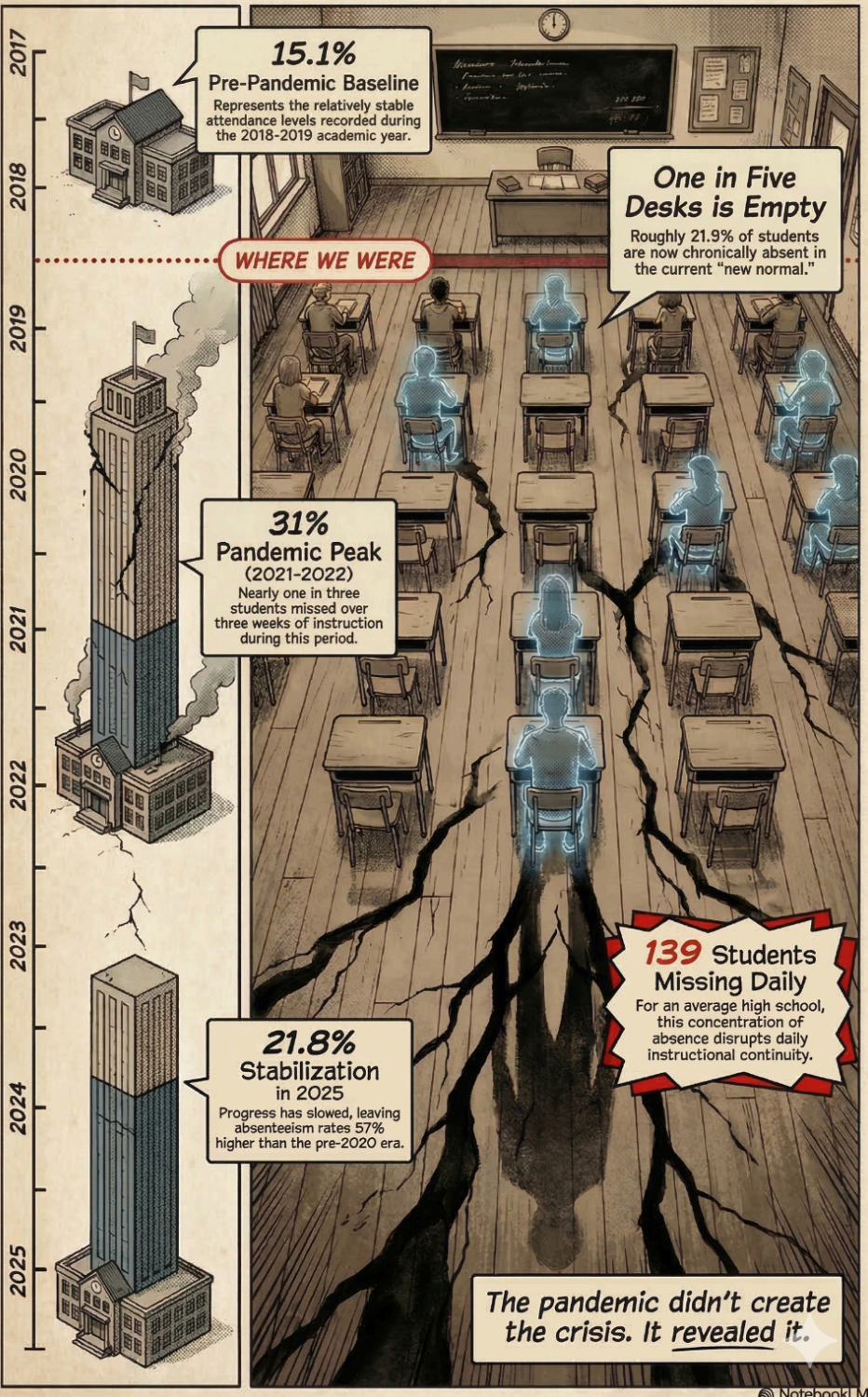
For decades, the educational establishment has approached school attendance through a paradigm of compliance, utilizing a clinical and often punitive vocabulary that categorizes students who miss school as "truant," "disengaged," or lacking in parental oversight. This compliance-driven framework relies heavily on automated warning systems, mandatory court appearances, and the threat of legal sanctions to compel attendance.¹ However, the persistence and escalation of chronic absenteeism reveal the fundamental inadequacy of this model. The core problem facing education policymakers and institutional stakeholders today is not simply that students are missing school, but that the systems designed to measure, manage, and enforce attendance are structurally blind to the root causes of absence.

When absenteeism is treated as an isolated behavioral infraction rather than a symptom of overlapping systemic crises, interventions inevitably fail. The traditional approach assumes a baseline of privilege—stable housing, reliable transportation, accessible healthcare, and flexible employment—that millions of marginalized families simply do not possess.¹ Consequently, punitive attendance policies actively harm the populations they ostensibly aim to support, adding legal and financial trauma to families already navigating impossible choices with insufficient resources.

The challenge, therefore, is to dismantle the entrenched "truancy" narrative and reframe chronic absenteeism as a complex, multi-dimensional equity issue. Stakeholders must transition from adversarial models of enforcement to human-centered models of care. This transition requires recognizing that sustainable improvements in attendance demand addressing the structural barriers of poverty, health inequity, and community disinvestment before academic engagement can realistically occur.

THE NEW NORMAL

A Nation of Empty Desks



Without a structural overhaul that aligns intervention strategies with the lived realities of students, the educational system risks institutionalizing a permanent underclass of chronically absent youth, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization that extend far beyond the classroom.

Background & Context

The Post-Pandemic Attendance Landscape

The assumption that school attendance would naturally revert to historical baselines following the cessation of pandemic-era remote learning has been unequivocally disproven by national data. Instead, chronic absenteeism has calcified into a structural feature of the contemporary educational landscape, a phenomenon increasingly referred to as public education's own iteration of "long COVID".² National datasets confirm that while there has been a marginal deceleration in absence rates since the peak of the pandemic, the figures remain extraordinarily elevated compared to the pre-2020 era.²

During the 2018–2019 academic year, the national chronic absenteeism rate stood at a relatively stable 15.1 percent.³ However, by the 2021–2022 school year, this figure surged to roughly 31 percent, meaning

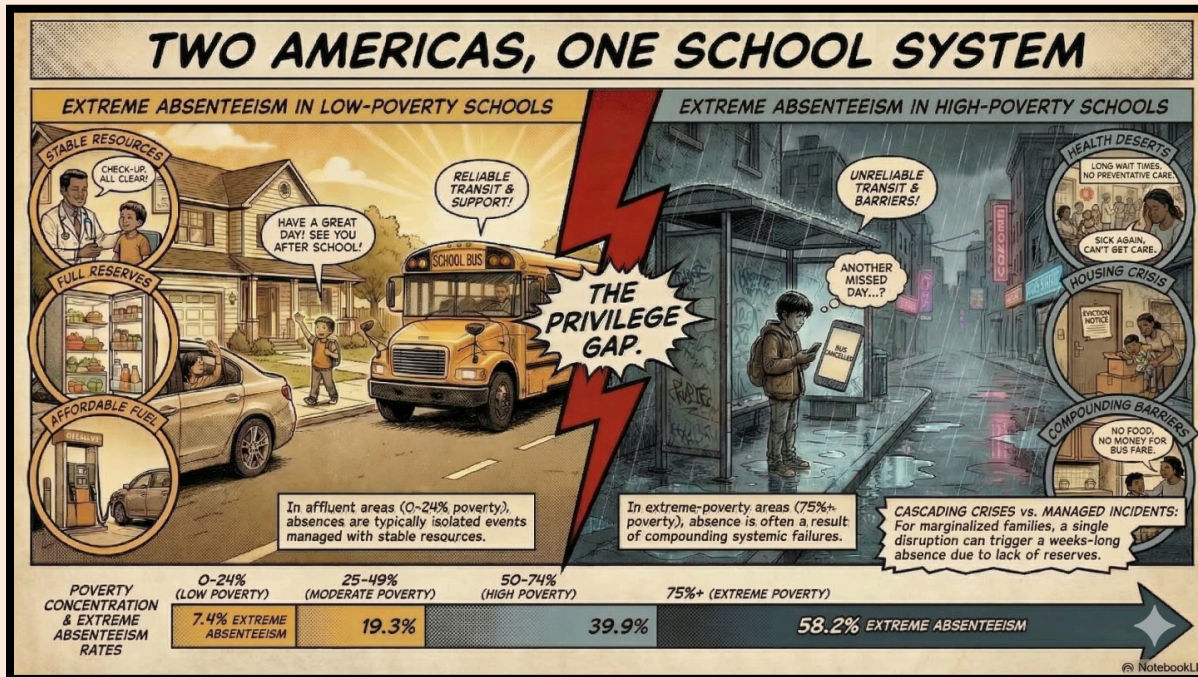
nearly one in three students was missing over three weeks of instruction.⁴

While subsequent years have shown slight improvements—dropping to approximately 28 percent in 2022–2023 and an estimated 21.8 percent by 2024–2025—the recovery trajectory is decelerating.³ Progress stalled significantly in the most recent academic cycles, with rates declining by a mere 1 to 1.9 percentage points year-over-year, suggesting the system is stabilizing at a "new normal" where one in five students is chronically absent.²

Academic Year	National Chronic Absenteeism Rate	Trend/Context
2016–2017	13.4%	Pre-pandemic baseline ³
2018–2019	15.1%	Stable pre-pandemic levels ³
2021–2022	28.5% - 31.0%	Pandemic peak; highest recorded absence rates ³
2022–2023	25.4% - 28.0%	Slight recovery; high levels persist across all demographics ³
2023–2024	23.5%	Progress stalls; rates remain 57% above baseline ²
2024–2025	21.8% (Estimated)	"New normal" stabilization; urban districts disproportionately affected ³

State-level data mirrors this national stagnation. In California, chronic absence rates climbed from 12.0 percent in 2018–2019 to an unprecedented 30.0 percent in 2021–2022.⁶ By the 2024–2025 school year, California's rate had decreased only slightly to 19.4 percent, leaving over 1.1 million students chronically absent.⁶ Furthermore, the distribution of these absences is highly concentrated. In roughly half of all urban school districts across the country, over 30 percent of students were chronically absent during the 2024–2025 school year, a concentration that severely disrupts classroom environments and instructional continuity.³ For an average-sized high school, this extreme level of absenteeism translates to roughly 139 students missing daily, creating a constant "churn" that fundamentally alters the educational ecosystem, forcing educators to constantly pause instruction to remediate returning students.⁷

The Privilege Gap and Demographic Inequities



These statistical averages mask profound disparities that correlate directly with socioeconomic status, race, and geographic location. The concept of the "Privilege Gap" is essential to understanding these data trends. For affluent families, an absence is typically an isolated, manageable event—a sick day buffered by health insurance, flexible parental employment, and reliable transportation.¹ For socioeconomically disadvantaged families, an absence is frequently the result of compounding systemic failures, where a single disruption can trigger a cascading crisis that keeps a child out of school for weeks.¹

Data from the 2022–2023 school year provides stark evidence of this inequity. Extreme levels of chronic absenteeism—defined as school environments where 30 percent or more of the student body is chronically absent—are heavily concentrated in high-poverty zones. Specifically, 58.2 percent of schools where at least 75 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals experienced extreme absenteeism.⁷ In contrast, only 7.4 percent of the most affluent schools (those with 0-24 percent poverty concentration) faced similar levels.⁷

Poverty Concentration (Free/Reduced Meals)	Percentage of Schools with Extreme Absenteeism (30%+) in 2022-2023
0 - 24% (Low Poverty)	7.4% ⁷
25 - 49% (Moderate Poverty)	19.3% ⁷
50 - 74% (High Poverty)	39.9% ⁷
75%+ (Extreme Poverty)	58.2% ⁷

Demographic disparities follow similar contours. Native American, Pacific Islander, Black, and Hispanic students, alongside English language learners and students with disabilities, continue to experience absenteeism rates substantially higher than their white, affluent peers.⁷ In California, Hispanic/Latino students constituted 65 percent of all chronically absent students, despite representing only 56 percent of the total student population.⁷ The magnitude of these disparities demonstrates that chronic absenteeism is not uniformly distributed but is instead a direct reflection of broader societal marginalization and structural inequity.

The Economic Burden of Chronic Absenteeism



Beyond the immediate academic consequences, which include significantly lowered probabilities of reading at grade level by third grade and diminished high school graduation rates,² chronic absenteeism imposes a massive economic burden on local and state governments. Because many states, including Texas and California, allocate educational funding based on Average Daily Attendance (ADA) rather than total enrollment, fluctuating attendance rates pose a severe and immediate threat to district operational budgets.⁸ As federal COVID-19 relief funds expire, the financial instability caused by ADA shortfalls forces districts to make draconian cuts to essential programs, disproportionately harming the underserved student populations who rely most heavily on school-based resources.⁸

The broader macroeconomic impact is detailed in comprehensive shadow-pricing analyses. A joint report by the Center for Benefit-Cost Studies of Education (CBCSE) at the University of Pennsylvania and the Center for the Transformation of Schools at UCLA calculated the exact economic cost of these educational disruptions. The analysis determined that the "social burden" for each student who is chronically absent amounts to \$5,630.¹⁰ This figure encapsulates lost human capital (lifetime earnings losses due to lower graduation rates), the financial burden on families required to supervise

children at home, the cost of school resources diverted to manage attendance, and the educational externalities inflicted on peer students whose learning is disrupted by classroom churn.¹⁰

Disruption Type	Total Social Burden Per Impacted Student	Breakdown of Key Economic Costs
Chronic Absenteeism	\$5,630	Lost Human Capital: \$2,720; Family Burden: \$1,080; Peer Externalities: \$820 ¹⁰
Disciplinary Restraint	\$6,040	Primarily resource allocation and lost instructional time ¹⁰
School Suspension	\$27,260	Lost Human Capital: \$25,300; Family Burden: \$300 ¹⁰
School Expulsion	\$70,870	Lost Human Capital: \$54,490; School Resources: \$11,500; Peer Externalities: \$2,340 ¹⁰

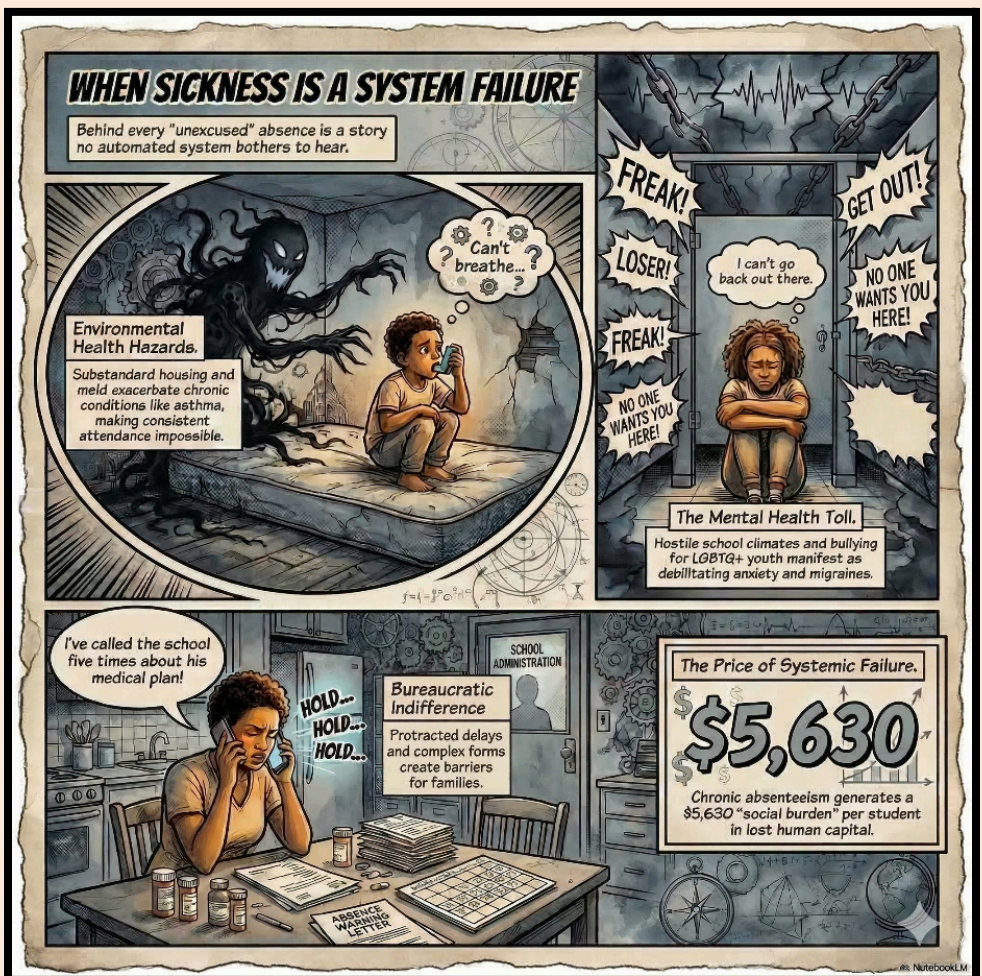
When absenteeism escalates to exclusionary discipline, the costs multiply exponentially; a single school suspension carries a social burden of \$27,260, while an expulsion costs society a staggering \$70,870 per student.¹⁰ The report concludes that if a state like California could elevate its high school graduation rate by a mere 3 percentage points (reaching 90 percent), it would generate \$9.57 billion in total social gains and \$2.95 billion in direct taxpayer savings.¹⁰ Thus, investing in effective, non-punitive attendance interventions is not merely a moral imperative; it is a critical economic necessity that yields substantial returns on investment for the broader society.

Analysis & Findings: Deconstructing the Barriers to School Attendance

To develop effective interventions, policymakers must understand the granular, lived experiences that drive absenteeism. Based on ethnographic research involving over 17,000 home visits conducted by Concentric Educational Solutions across seven states, the traditional categorizations of absence are woefully inadequate.¹ Attendance barriers do not exist in isolation; they are cascading challenges that compound and reinforce one another, forcing marginalized families into impossible daily calculations.¹ The following sections deconstruct these primary barriers, illustrating how systemic failures masquerade as individual attendance infractions.

When Sickness Becomes a System Failure

While national surveys indicate that "sickness" is the most commonly reported reason for youths missing school³, ethnographic data reveals that physical and mental health challenges in under-resourced communities operate fundamentally differently than in privileged contexts.¹ In high-poverty demographics, illnesses are frequently exacerbated by environmental factors and a lack of access to preventive medical care.¹ Families report chronic conditions such as lupus, severe seizure disorders, and hidradenitis, which require complex management that schools are often ill-equipped to support.¹ For instance, a child with asthma living in substandard housing with persistent mold will experience compounding health crises that make consistent attendance impossible.¹



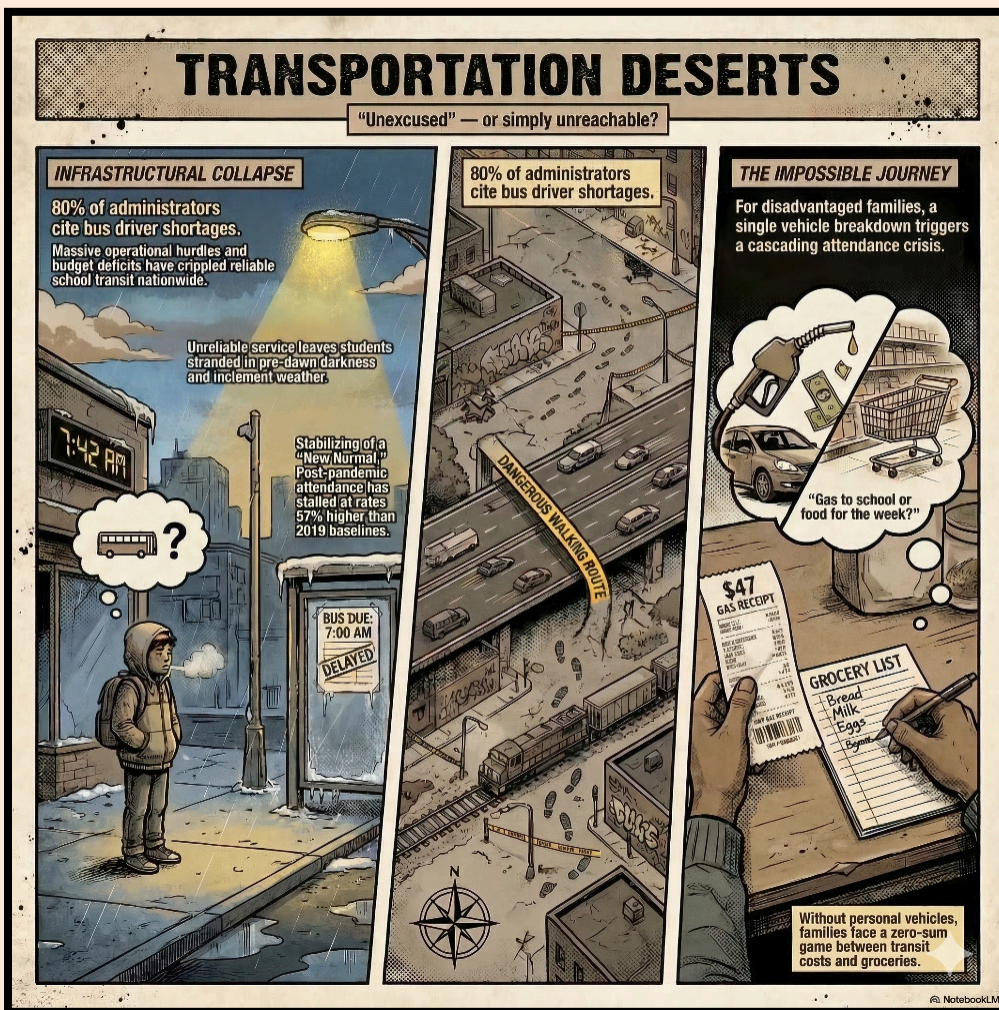
Simultaneously, a profound mental health crisis is driving students away from the classroom. Families cite severe anxiety, clinical depression, and trauma resulting from community violence or the loss of primary caregivers as primary reasons for absence.¹ For LGBTQ+ students, particularly transgender youth, relentless bullying and hostile school climates manifest physically through anxiety-induced

migraines and gastrointestinal distress, rendering attendance an emotionally insurmountable task.¹

When these health crises intersect with systemic bureaucratic failures, the situation deteriorates further. Parents report that their attempts to coordinate with school administrations regarding medical absences are frequently met with unresponsiveness or rigid procedural demands, leaving families feeling isolated and blamed for circumstances beyond their control.¹ Without access to School-Based Health Centers (SBHCs)—which have been empirically shown to lower absenteeism, particularly in rural and elementary settings by providing immediate primary care—health challenges rapidly mutate into persistent educational disengagement.¹¹

Transportation Deserts: The Invisible Infrastructure Barrier

The logistical mechanisms of getting a child to school are heavily reliant on functioning infrastructure, yet transportation emerges as one of the most intractable barriers to consistent attendance.¹ Nationwide surveys confirm the severity of this issue; a joint study by the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and HopSkipDrive revealed that 80 percent of school administrators cite bus driver shortages as a significant operational hurdle, while 73 percent point to transportation budget deficits.¹²



For families living in “transportation deserts,” the unreliability of public and school transit creates a foundation of daily instability. Buses frequently arrive excessively late, skip designated stops, or fail to appear entirely, often leaving children stranded in inclement weather for upward of 40 minutes.¹ Furthermore, geographic and administrative rigidities—such as students living just outside the eligibility radius for bus service but facing highly dangerous walking routes across busy interstates or through high-crime neighborhoods—eliminating safe transit options.¹

The absence of a personal vehicle in a household compounds this crisis. When a family car breaks down or is damaged in an accident, parents without financial reserves are forced to rely on cost-prohibitive alternatives like ridesharing services, which are unsustainable over the long term.¹ The financial calculus becomes a zero-sum game: funds must be agonizingly allocated between purchasing gasoline to transport a child to school or buying groceries for the week.¹ The qualitative data underscores that behind a vast percentage of absences labeled "unexcused" lies a family that simply lacked the physical, infrastructural means to cross the distance between home and the classroom.¹

Family Trauma, Instability, and the Caregiving Burden

The sterile policy term "family factors" fails to capture the catastrophic impact of trauma and instability on school attendance.¹ Housing insecurity is a primary driver; students residing in transitional housing, extended-stay motels, or facing imminent eviction lack the basic routines required to sustain daily school attendance.¹ In extreme instances, researchers encountered families living in trailers without running water for months, creating profound hygiene and mental health barriers that completely override educational priorities.¹

Furthermore, the health crises of adult caregivers frequently force children into premature adult roles. Single parents managing debilitating conditions such as multiple sclerosis, strokes, or relying on wheelchairs often lack external support networks.¹ Consequently, students miss school to act as primary caregivers for their disabled parents or to supervise younger siblings.¹ These are not temporary interruptions but structural shifts in family dynamics where the immediate survival of the family unit fundamentally supersedes the abstract promise of long-term educational attainment.¹

Adding to this complex web of trauma is the pervasive fear of immigration enforcement. In undocumented or mixed-status households, the fear of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) paralyzes



families, making the simple act of sending a child to a government institution feel incredibly dangerous.¹ In these contexts, drawing any institutional attention—even positive attention for attendance—is viewed as an unacceptable risk, resulting in chronic, protective absenteeism.¹

The Motivation Crisis and Student Disengagement

A thorough analysis of attendance cannot ignore the issue of student agency and motivation. Ethnographic interviews reveal a raw truth often obscured by policy rhetoric: a significant subset of students simply do not want to attend school.¹ However, this disengagement is rarely innate apathy; rather, it is a rational response to an educational system that feels overwhelming, irrelevant, or hostile.

1 **THE MOTIVATION CRISIS**
3 WEEKS BEHIND
Academic Overwhelm & Avoidance: Accumulated academic deficits create a cycle where returning feels insurmountable.

2
Real money. Right now.
The Pull of Immediate Economic Participation: Prioritizing immediate income or alternative pathways over traditional schooling.

3
2:47 AM
Technological Sleep Disruption: Late-night gaming and social media disrupt sleep cycles, making early attendance physically impossible.

4
School is BORING. Nobody listens to us.
Students perceive the environment as boring or hostile to their lived socioeconomic realities.

Disengagement isn't apathy. It's a rational response to an irrational system.

© NotebookLM

Disengagement frequently begins with academic deficits. Students who fall behind in core subjects like mathematics and English feel increasingly overwhelmed by the material. As absences accumulate, returning to the classroom feels insurmountable, initiating a vicious cycle of avoidance.¹ For older students, the allure of immediate economic participation pulls them away from traditional schooling. Many students express a preference for working to generate immediate income or pursuing alternative pathways like the GED or Job Corps, viewing the traditional high school structure as disconnected from their socioeconomic realities.¹

Technology also plays a dual role in motivation. While digital tools hold educational promise, the immediate gratification of late-night gaming and social media frequently disrupts sleep architectures, rendering early morning attendance virtually impossible for many adolescents.¹ When students bluntly state that school is "boring" or that they "just don't care," they are often articulating a profound disconnection from an environment that has failed to provide engaging, culturally relevant, or

intellectually stimulating experiences.¹

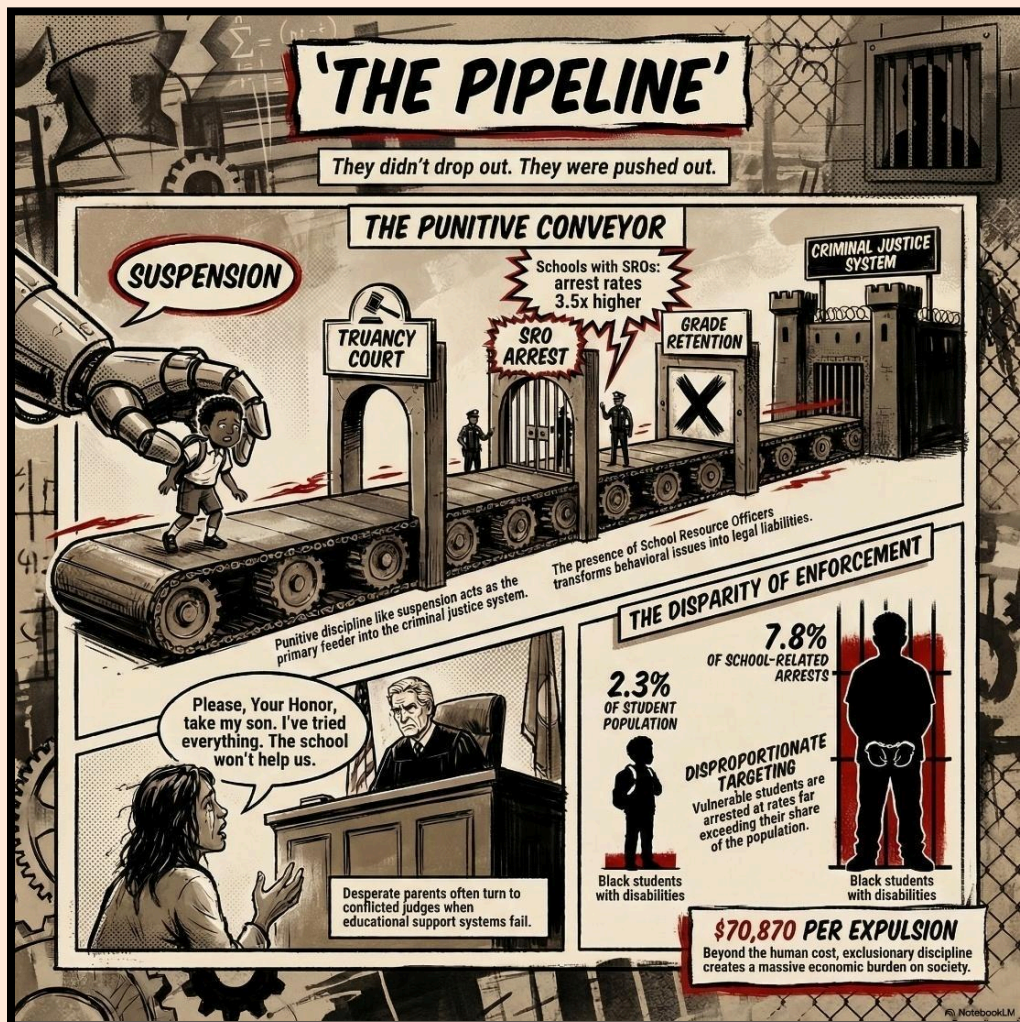
The School-to-Prison Pipeline: Criminalizing Absence

The most destructive response to chronic absenteeism is its criminalization, a process that feeds directly into the "school-to-prison pipeline." When schools respond to attendance barriers with punitive measures, such as truancy courts, financial penalties for parents, and police involvement; they transform educational challenges into legal liabilities.¹

Longitudinal data unequivocally demonstrates the dangers of exclusionary discipline. Utilizing 15 waves of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, researchers have established that receiving a school suspension serves as a critical turning point that significantly increases a youth's odds of future incarceration, independent of other behavioral covariates.¹⁴ Exclusionary discipline is strongly correlated with lower standardized test scores, grade retention, and ultimately, dropping out.¹⁴

In living rooms across the country, home visitors frequently encounter families trapped in this punitive cycle. Parents express profound fatigue from attending repeated truancy court hearings that

offer no structural support but continually threaten legal action.¹ In some tragic instances, frustrated parents, feeling entirely unsupported by the educational system, actively ask judges to place their disengaged children into juvenile detention facilities, mistakenly believing the justice system will provide the discipline the school cannot.¹ Furthermore, the deployment of School Resource Officers (SROs) often exacerbates the issue; research indicates that schools with SROs possess arrest rates 3.5 times higher than schools without them.¹⁵ This criminalization disproportionately targets vulnerable populations; federal data highlights that Black students with disabilities accounted for 7.8 percent of school-related arrests despite representing only 2.3 percent of the student population.¹⁶ Ultimately,



criminalizing attendance failures penalizes marginalized families for systemic deficits, pushing vulnerable youth out of the classroom and into the justice system.¹

Proposed Solutions and Strategic Recommendations

Recognizing the failure of punitive frameworks, progressive school districts and education policymakers are transitioning toward holistic, support-based paradigms. This shift requires acknowledging that attendance is a symptom of broader community health, necessitating interventions that remove barriers rather than assign blame.¹ The following sections detail actionable, evidence-based recommendations for overhauling attendance management.

Legislative Paradigm Shifts: The Washington D.C. Case Study

To effectively address chronic absenteeism, policymakers must dismantle the legal frameworks that criminalize unexcused absences. Washington D.C. provides a compelling case study of this legislative transition. Following the pandemic, D.C. experienced a devastating surge in chronic absenteeism, peaking at 48 percent during the 2021–2022 school year.¹⁷ In response, the D.C. Council undertook aggressive legislative efforts to reshape how the city handles unexcused absences, moving away from law enforcement and toward social services.

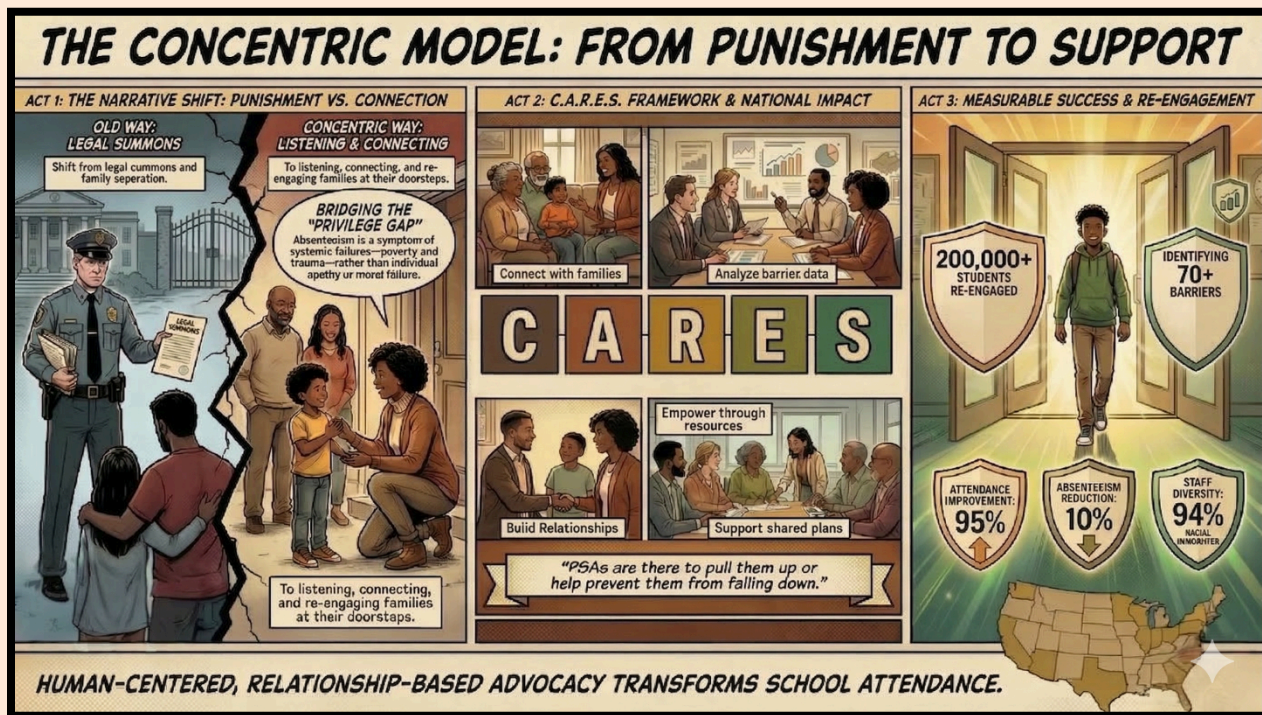
A centerpiece of this effort is Bill B26-0402, the "Improving School Attendance Outcomes Amendment Act of 2025".¹⁹ This legislation represents a stark departure from the school-to-prison pipeline model.

Policy Area	Traditional/Previous Approach	New Legislative Framework (D.C. Bill B26-0402)
Law Enforcement	Schools are required to send warning letters and Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) info to parents of truant youth.	Repeals the requirement to involve MPD or send police-based warning letters to parents. ¹⁹
Agency Referral	Truancy cases resulting in educational neglect were referred to the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), risking family separation trauma.	Transfers screened-out educational neglect referrals from CFSA to the Department of Human Services (DHS) for wraparound support. ¹⁹
System Integration	Fragmented, punitive responses across multiple judicial and child welfare agencies.	Mandates the Mayor to propose a unified referral system for educational neglect and truancy under the DHS by March 2028. ¹⁹

By shifting jurisdiction from child welfare and police agencies (CFSA and MPD) to human services (DHS), the legislation structurally acknowledges that absenteeism is a social services issue necessitating housing assistance, mental health care, and economic support, rather than a criminal justice issue.²⁰ Furthermore, D.C.'s Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) is deeply investing in data transparency and the Partnerships for School Attendance (PSA) Grant Program, which equips community-based organizations to partner directly with schools to provide multi-tiered systems of support.²²

Recommendation for Policymakers: State legislatures must systematically repeal statutes that mandate court appearances, financial fines, or juvenile justice referrals for truancy. Policy should redirect funding toward integrated human services, utilizing grants to embed social workers, nurses, and community liaisons directly into school environments.

The Concentric Model: Action and Impact



While legislative reform reshapes the policy architecture surrounding chronic absenteeism, the question of *operational execution* remains: what does a human-centered attendance intervention actually look like when it arrives at a family's front door? Concentric Educational Solutions (CES) provides the most comprehensive answer currently available in the field. Founded as a mission-driven organization dedicated to identifying barriers that negatively impact education and connecting families to wraparound resources, Concentric has scaled a nationally replicated model grounded in ethnographic home visits, high-dosage tutoring, and a proprietary multi-tiered system of support. To date, the organization has conducted over 400,000 home visits, re-engaged more than 200,000 students, and achieved a 10 percent overall reduction in chronic absenteeism across partner districts spanning Maryland, Michigan, Alabama, Pennsylvania, Arkansas, Delaware, Washington D.C., Indiana, Tennessee, and Georgia.

The Concentricity Model: From Compliance to Connection

Concentric's theory of change operates through a clearly articulated pathway that inverts the traditional truancy enforcement sequence. Rather than beginning with a legal summons and ending with a courtroom, the model begins with a trained Professional Student Advocate (PSA) knocking on a family's door and ends with a student re-engaged in the classroom and connected to sustained support.

The Professional Student Advocate: A PSA Who C.A.R.E.S.

The PSA role is the operational backbone of Concentric's model — trained professionals who serve as the bridge between students, families, and schools. Unlike traditional truant officers whose authority derives from legal enforcement, PSAs derive their effectiveness from relational trust. Original qualitative research conducted by Dr. Ivory A. Toldson through semi-structured focus groups with 15 PSAs across diverse school settings identified five interconnected components of effective practice, formalized as the **C.A.R.E.S.** theoretical model :

Component	Definition
Cultural Responsiveness	Understanding and valuing diverse student backgrounds; creating inclusive, welcoming environments
Advocacy	Addressing systemic barriers at individual, classroom, school, and district levels
Relationship Building	Establishing trust through active listening, empathy, and consistent support
Encompassing Support	Providing holistic academic, social, emotional, and basic needs assistance
Shared Commitment	Collaborating with teachers, administrators, families, and community partners toward aligned goals

PSAs described their role in terms that starkly contrast with the punitive language of traditional truancy enforcement. As one advocate stated: *"What keeps me in this role is seeing kids fall through the cracks. Students are falling through the cracks all the time, and PSAs are there to pull them up or help prevent them from falling down"*. Another emphasized the primacy of honesty and consistency over institutional authority: *"Be honest with them. These kids aren't stupid, and especially when it comes to adults, they want to know why you're there, why you're in their life, what your intention is. I learned quickly not to sugarcoat things"*.

This relational approach yielded measurable shifts in school climate. PSAs reported that students who were initially resistant — wary of being singled out or stigmatized — grew to depend on and value the relationship. One PSA recounted: *"At first, some students were unsure about working with me. They worried about being bullied for needing extra help. But by the end of the year, they were upset when they learned we wouldn't be there for the last two weeks of school"*. Students themselves confirmed the impact. One noted that the program *"gave me a positive reason to come to school more often. Clarity with so much chaos"*

Critically, Concentric's workforce composition reinforces the cultural responsiveness at the core of the

C.A.R.E.S. model. Ninety-four percent of CES employees are racial minorities, 58 percent are women, and 78 percent of management positions are held by people of color — ensuring that the professionals conducting home visits and building relational trust reflect the communities they serve.

Aggregate National Outcomes

Across all partner districts, Concentric's cumulative impact data tells a consistent story of scale and effectiveness:

Metric	Result
Home visits conducted	400,000+
Students re-engaged	200,000+
Overall chronic absenteeism reduction	10% across partner districts
Distinct barriers to attendance identified	70+
National attendance improvement rate	95% improvement reported across partner districts
Baltimore City ADA increase	8.3% increase; 4% reduction in chronic absenteeism

Lessons Distilled

Across all partnerships, research, and operational experience, Concentric has distilled six guiding principles that inform the organization's evolving practice :

1. **The Power of Human Connection:** Improving attendance is fundamentally about relationships. When students feel seen, heard, and valued, their behavior changes.
2. **Direct Student Contact Matters:** Across multiple studies, PSA contact directly with students — not only parents — was the home visit outcome most positively associated with academic gains.
3. **Systemic Alignment is Essential:** Sustainable progress depends on aligning data systems, communication protocols, and intervention strategies across entire districts.
4. **Root Causes Must Be Addressed:** Efforts must extend beyond school walls to address poverty, health barriers, transportation, housing instability, and family dynamics through wraparound supports and community partnerships.
5. **Asset-Based Approaches Work:** Centering community cultural wealth, family strengths, and positive deviance — rather than deficits — produces more effective and equitable outcomes.
6. **Continuous Improvement is Non-Negotiable:** Regular feedback from students, families, and staff, combined with rigorous data analysis, enables ongoing refinement of strategies.

As one PSA articulated the philosophy that underpins the entire model: "The role of the PSA is very crucial in keeping students engaged and coming to school... building the relationships with those students, caring about how they're performing academically, being kind of a support for what other things they could be dealing with or going through".

Recommendation for Policymakers, District Leaders, and Funders: Concentric's model demonstrates that human-centered, relationship-driven attendance interventions — independently validated and scaled across diverse contexts — produce measurable, replicable results. Districts seeking to transition from punitive truancy enforcement to supportive re-engagement should invest in trained, community-reflective Professional Student Advocates embedded within an MTSS framework; require independent, quasi-experimental evaluation of all attendance intervention contracts; and fund root cause analyses as a prerequisite to resource allocation, ensuring that intervention dollars flow toward the specific barriers — health, transportation, housing, trauma — that home visit data reveal in each unique community.

Operationalizing Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)



To systematically address the diverse barriers to attendance, institutions must widely adopt the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. MTSS is an integrated, comprehensive architecture that aligns academic, behavioral, and social-emotional learning (SEL) into a cohesive continuum of support, moving beyond the siloed interventions of the past.¹⁰

The efficacy of MTSS in combating absenteeism is well-documented. By utilizing data-driven decision-making, schools can deploy universal supports (Tier 1) such as school-wide attendance awareness campaigns; targeted interventions (Tier 2) for students showing early signs of

disengagement; and intensive, individualized wraparound services (Tier 3) for the chronically absent.²⁶ For example, the state of California invested \$95 million in the Scaling Up MTSS Statewide (SUMS) initiative to build capacity across districts.¹⁰ Schools implementing MTSS with high fidelity—such as those monitored in Nevada and at Keansburg High School in New Jersey—report significant reductions in behavioral incidents, enhanced academic proficiency, and marked improvements in daily attendance rates.²⁷

Recommendation for Institutional Leaders: Move away from siloed attendance tracking. Integrate attendance data directly with academic performance and behavioral metrics within an MTSS framework. Ensure that Tier 1 interventions focus heavily on establishing a positive school climate and fostering a sense of belonging, while Tier 3 interventions provide intensive, individualized wraparound care that addresses the specific root causes of a student's absence.

Scaling the Community Schools Model

Perhaps the most potent structural intervention for chronic absenteeism is the Community Schools model. This evidence-based strategy transforms the traditional school into a neighborhood hub by integrating four core pillars: expanded learning opportunities, collaborative leadership, active family engagement, and most critically, integrated student supports.²⁹ By partnering with local agencies, Community Schools provide on-site access to mental health counseling, medical care, food pantries, and adult education, directly neutralizing the systemic barriers that cause absenteeism.²⁹

The outcomes of this model are highly compelling. California has recognized this potential, making an unprecedented \$4.1 billion investment in the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP), vastly exceeding the federal Full-Service Community Schools (FSCS) program allocation.²⁹ A comprehensive analysis of New York City's Community Schools revealed that chronic absenteeism was 7.3 percentage points lower in community elementary and middle schools, and 8.3 points lower in high schools compared to non-community schools.³⁰ The impact was particularly pronounced for highly vulnerable populations, lowering absenteeism by 9.3 percent for students in temporary housing and 10.1 percent for Black students.³⁰

Recommendation for Policymakers and District Leaders: Shift federal, state, and local educational grants toward the establishment of Full-Service Community Schools. Prioritize sustainable, long-term funding for on-site health clinics and community coordinators, ensuring that schools possess the infrastructural capacity to address the out-of-school factors driving absenteeism.

Leveraging Ethnographic Home Visits

THE NEIGHBORHOOD HUB:
Transforming Schools through Community Support

PILLAR 1 & 2: Collaborative Growth.
Expanded learning through after-school programs and collaborative leadership involving parents and teachers.

PILLAR 3 & 4: Integrated Wraparound Care.
Active family engagement paired with on-site health clinics, food pantries, and counseling.

EXPANDED LEARNING

INTEGRATED STUDENT SUPPORTS

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

"When the school becomes the community, the community comes to school."

PROVEN IMPACT AND INVESTMENT

CALIFORNIA: \$4.1 BILLION INVESTED.
Unprecedented state-level funding dedicated to the Community Schools Partnership Program.

ABSENTEEISM 7.3% LOWER
Significant reduction in NYC community elementary and middle schools compared to traditional schools.

10.1% LOWER FOR BLACK STUDENTS
The model demonstrates profound success in supporting highly vulnerable student populations.

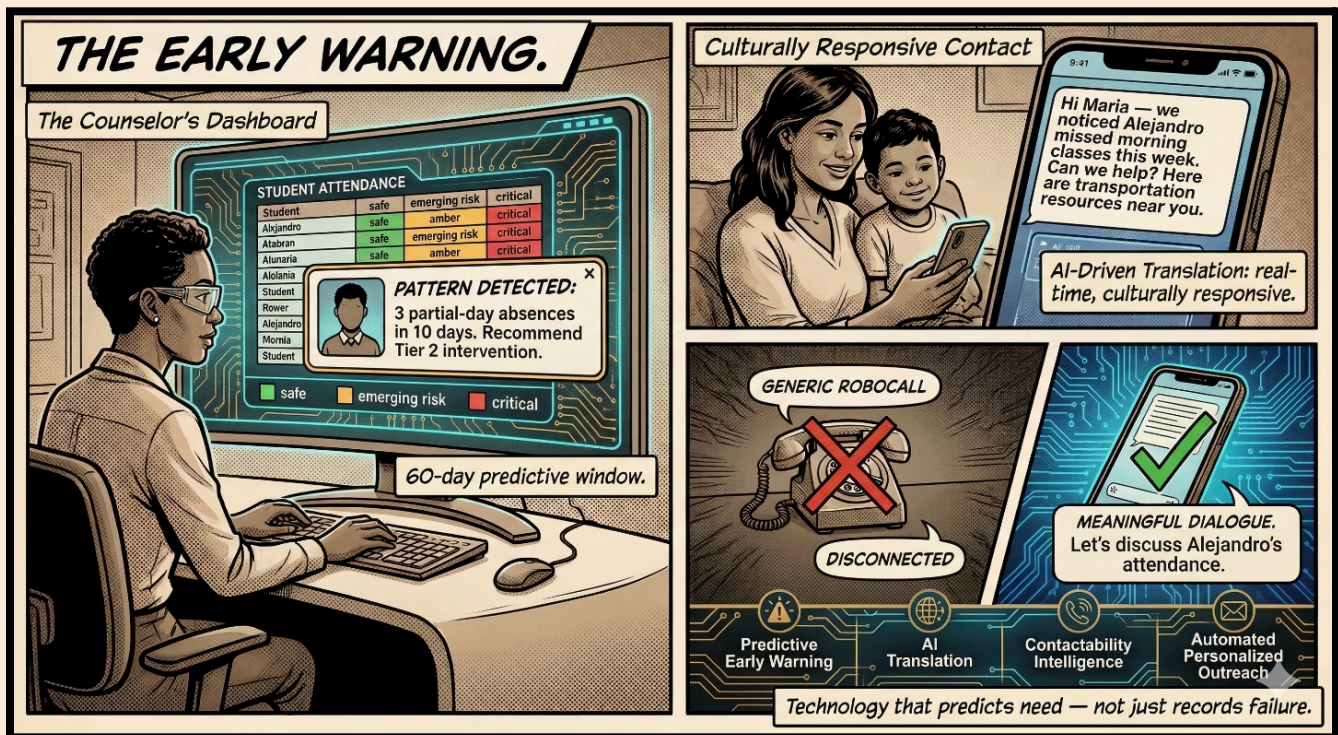
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To operationalize support on an individual level, districts must fundamentally rethink how they interact with absent students' families. Rather than dispatching truant officers to issue legal warnings, districts are achieving remarkable success by partnering with organizations like Concentric Educational Solutions to conduct ethnographic home visits.³¹ These visits are fundamentally distinct from compliance checks; they are conducted by trained, community-based advocates who seek to understand, observe, and document the holistic context of a family's situation without judgment.³²

The data underscores the power of this relational approach. Systematic outreach and genuine human connection act as powerful intervention tools. According to attendance data insights analyzing 1.3 million students, 48.4 percent of chronically absent students returned to school after just a single, supportive intervention.⁵ Furthermore, research from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) assessing home visits in the District of Columbia found that visits conducted before the school year slightly improved overall attendance and significantly reduced the likelihood of disciplinary incidents throughout the year (from 12.22 percent to 9.27 percent).³³ By asking "How can we help?" rather than "Why aren't you compliant?", ethnographic home visits dismantle adversarial dynamics and uncover hidden barriers.³²

Recommendation for Practitioners: Replace compliance-driven truant officers with trained, community-based advocates. Utilize home visits to conduct ethnographic assessments—listening to families, identifying hidden barriers like transportation deficits or housing insecurity, and building relational trust prior to the escalation of absences.

AI and EdTech Innovations: The Future of Predictive Attendance Management



As the paradigms of intervention shift toward proactive support, educational technology (EdTech) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) emerge as critical infrastructure to support human-centered, relationship-driven approaches. Historically, attendance tracking was a reactive, manual process that merely recorded failure after the fact.³⁵ Today, the integration of predictive analytics and generative AI is revolutionizing how districts identify risk and communicate with families.

Advanced early warning systems can now analyze student attendance behaviors within the first 60 days of the academic year, utilizing algorithmic models to flag students who are statistically at risk of becoming chronically absent.³⁶ This shift from reactive recording to proactive prediction is vital. By catching partial-day absences—such as a student attending homeroom but skipping subsequent periods—schools can intervene when the behavior is still a manageable anomaly rather than an entrenched habit.⁵ Platforms can automatically trigger workflows that alert counselors, teachers, and administrators, providing months of lead time to deploy MTSS Tier 2 interventions.³⁶

Furthermore, AI-driven family engagement platforms are bridging communication divides. Platforms equipped with generative AI ensure that complex attendance notifications are accurately translated into a family's native language in real-time, fostering inclusion.³⁷ By drafting personalized, culturally responsive outreach messages, generative AI also significantly reduces the administrative burden on overwhelmed educators, transforming generic robocalls into meaningful digital dialogues.³⁹

EdTech Innovation	Mechanism of Action	Impact on Attendance Management
Predictive Early Warning Systems	Analyzes 60-day attendance patterns and partial-day absences. ³⁵	Transitions districts from reactive recording to proactive intervention; identifies at-risk students before patterns entrench. ³⁶
AI-Driven Translation	Utilizes Natural Language Processing to instantly translate complex communications. ³⁷	Removes language barriers, ensuring equitable communication and building trust with non-English speaking families. ³⁷
Contactability Intelligence	Monitors data health signals to flag outdated family contact information. ³⁷	Achieves "universal contactability," ensuring crucial attendance interventions and resources actually reach the intended recipients. ³⁸
Automated Workflow Drafting	Generative AI assists in drafting personalized outreach messages. ³⁹	Alleviates severe educator burnout; enables schools to maintain high-frequency, personalized engagement without draining staff resources. ⁴⁰

Recommendation for EdTech Leaders and Administrators: Invest in EdTech platforms that prioritize predictive analytics over retrospective reporting. Ensure that AI integration is utilized to enhance human connection—through translation, personalized outreach, and contactability tracking—rather than replacing the nuanced judgment of educators. Furthermore, as data sharing becomes more complex, districts must establish clear, national-standard cybersecurity frameworks to protect vulnerable student data and build community trust regarding how AI systems process attendance algorithms.⁴¹

Conclusion

The persistence of chronic absenteeism in the post-pandemic era is not a reflection of a sudden, collective decline in the value families place on education. Rather, it is a stark illumination of the deep systemic fissures within the social safety net—fissures that public schools are increasingly expected to bridge without adequate resources, appropriate infrastructure, or human-centered pedagogical frameworks. The statistics surrounding this crisis—millions of missing students, billions of dollars in lost economic potential, and the disproportionate suffering of marginalized demographics—demand an immediate, structural departure from the status quo.

Continuing to rely on the punitive, compliance-based truancy models of the past is both empirically ineffective and morally untenable. Every data point of chronic absence represents a student navigating a complex web of health disparities, transportation failures, family trauma, and educational disengagement. By criminalizing these vulnerabilities through truancy courts, financial penalties, and law enforcement referrals, the educational system actively contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline and severely alienates the very communities it is mandated to uplift and serve.

The path forward requires a fundamental paradigm shift from compliance to community care. By scaling the Full-Service Community Schools model, implementing robust Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), leveraging ethnographic home visits to understand the lived realities of students, and utilizing advanced AI-driven early warning systems, stakeholders can systematically dismantle the structural barriers to attendance. Reimagining school attendance means recognizing that educational opportunity cannot be separated from basic human necessity. It requires a collective, uncompromising commitment to building resilient, empathetic systems where consistent attendance is made possible by comprehensive support, ensuring that every student is afforded the stability, resources, and safety required to learn, engage, and thrive.

FROM COMPLIANCE TO CARE.

ATTENDANCE IS NOT A MANDATE.
IT IS A MEASURE OF HOW WELL WE SUPPORT OUR CHILDREN.



**END
CRIMINALIZATION**



MTSS



**COMMUNITY
SCHOOLS**



HOME VISITS



**AI EARLY
WARNING**

Every absent student is a call for help. It's time we answered.

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Dr. Toldson's ethnographic fieldwork, encompassing over 17,000 home visits across seven states, provides the empirical backbone of this white paper and represents one of the most comprehensive qualitative datasets on the lived barriers to school attendance ever assembled.