PREVENTION INTERVENTION RETENTION

TRUANCY PREVENTION TOOLKIT

3rd Millennium CLASSROOMS

TRUANCY OVERVIEW

WHAT IS TRUANCY?

Truancy is intentionally not going to school without a valid or lawful excuse (Levi, n.d.). Truancy generally involves a pattern of unexcused absences rather than a single missed day. However, specific definitions and thresholds vary by state and school district.

Excused absences do not lead to truancy. Examples of excused absences are:

- ***Family emergencies***
- ***Illness, injury, or other health concerns (with doctor's note)***
- ***Court dates***
- ***Religious holidays***

Some districts also include mental health days in their excused absence policies. Students who intentionally miss or avoid school are typically responding to challenges at home, struggling with mental health, or feeling unsafe with their teachers or classmates.

The root cause of truancy is usually not simple disobedience. There is almost always an underlying motivation that leads to skipping school, such as:

- **Substance misuse**
- **Bullying**
- **Family issues**
- **Unstable home environment**
- **Mental health problems**
- **Frustrations with learning (Levi, n.d.)**

Studies show that truancy is often associated with challenges in a student's home life. The involvement of parents is especially relevant. Children who do not feel safe mentally, emotionally, or physically at home are more likely to display behavior issues at school. Additionally, statistics show that lower-income and impoverished students have higher absenteeism rates.

WHY IT MATTERS

The consequences of truancy are far-reaching and can affect students well beyond their school years. At an academic level, truant students are more likely to get poor grades, be held back a grade, and drop out before high school graduation (Levi, n.d.).

Socially, truant students experience isolation and struggle to build meaningful friendships. This alienation can lead to self-esteem issues and put children at a higher risk of abusing substances and committing crimes.

Limited educational and social development can make it difficult for a student to find or maintain a job in adulthood, increasing the likelihood of living in poverty throughout their life. They may also struggle with authority, discipline, and relationships.

Parents of truant students may face legal consequences, including fines.

WHAT IS CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?

The Department of Education defines chronic absenteeism as missing 10% or more of the school year (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). In a 180-day school year, missing 18 days meets the 10% threshold for chronic absenteeism.

These 18 missed days include excused and unexcused absences, as well as school-issued punishments banning students from the premises, like suspensions. The federal government requires schools to track missed academic days, but it is up to the discretion of each district as to how these records are updated, reviewed, and utilized.

The COVID-19 pandemic increased the rates of chronic absenteeism nationally. When all students transitioned to a learning-at-home or hybrid model, the rigidity of a standard school schedule was set aside. Educators have struggled to combat high absenteeism rates, despite students returning to a full-time schedule (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM STATISTICS

National chronic absenteeism rates peaked at approximately 31% during the 2021–2022 school year before declining to 28% in 2022–2023. While attendance has continued to improve, chronic absenteeism remains a significant concern. According to a 2026 analysis of data from 39 states and Washington, D.C., approximately 23% of students were chronically absent during the 2024–2025 school year. This means nearly 1 in 4 students continued to miss at least 10% of the school year, well above the pre-pandemic national rate of approximately 15% (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.; Reason Foundation, 2026).

Federal data show disparities in chronic absenteeism rates across racial and ethnic groups and among students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

WHY IT MATTERS

The amount of time spent in school directly correlates to student performance. As the rate of chronic absenteeism remains high across the country, standardized tests show decreases in reading and math proficiency. Further studies have shown that chronically absent children in the early grades are less likely to read at grade level by third grade. Students who are not reading proficiently by third grade are four times more likely not to graduate from high school (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

The Department of Education is urging schools to take action to improve attendance numbers. By launching resources like the Student Engagement and Attendance Center and the Attendance Solutions Network, the Department reinforces its commitment to stand by school districts, administrators, teachers, faculty, and communities as everyone works to encourage students to attend school regularly.

TRUANCY VS. CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Truancy and chronic absenteeism are two different issues. Truancy specifically relates to unexcused absences, usually as a violation of school rules or policies.

Chronic absenteeism includes all missed school days, whether excused or unexcused, including days missed due to out-of-school suspensions (Attendance Works, 2016).

Noting the difference between truancy and chronic absenteeism is essential to implement effective interventions. Truancy is generally left to the administration to monitor and issue consequences. In comparison, addressing chronic absenteeism requires a more comprehensive approach.

Engagement strategies may involve parent meetings and community efforts with a focus on the impact of missed class time.

ROOT CAUSES OF TRUANCY AND CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

A student's desire to attend school may have less influence on their attendance record than many assume. Even if disinterest is given as a reason when confronted by administration or educators, there is likely an underlying reason impacting the child's home and personal life. By understanding the root causes of truancy and chronic absenteeism, schools are better equipped to help students (Shirshikov, 2025).

ACADEMIC CHALLENGES

Many students struggle with learning in a traditional classroom setting. If they feel like they are behind their classmates, are embarrassed to ask the teacher for help, or are frustrated by poor grades, they are more likely to try to avoid school. Academic challenges are amplified when parents are disengaged or do not take an active role in their child's education.

As students miss more school days, they fall further behind academically, making returning to the classroom feel increasingly overwhelming without support from teachers or school staff.

POVERTY

Socioeconomic factors also play a role in chronic absenteeism. Students from low-income families are more likely to miss school. Other income barriers include limited access to school supplies, supplemental learning experiences, transportation, and funding to participate in extracurricular activities.

LACK OF ENGAGEMENT

It is important for children to feel like their school and classrooms are a safe space where they feel heard, challenged, and accepted. If a student is struggling to make friends or is frequently bored, they are more likely to miss school. Making sure each child's needs are met while balancing the curriculum is challenging for teachers, and having supportive, engaged parents is an essential component.

BULLYING

Nearly 1 in 5 students ages 12–18 reported being bullied at school during the 2021–22 school year (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). Avoiding a bully is one of the leading reasons children skip school. Many feel uncomfortable coming forward to report their tormentor or worry that they will be further ostracized from their classmates for "telling."

HEALTH ISSUES

Physical health concerns that require frequent medical care or doctor's appointments impact attendance. Students with disabilities are more likely to miss school. Working with the faculty to develop an IEP or 504 plan can be effective for balancing health and educational needs.

MENTAL HEALTH

Nearly 1 in 5 children ages 3–17 have been diagnosed with a mental, emotional, or behavioral health condition (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2025). Some mental health conditions, particularly anxiety and depression, may go undiagnosed. A disorder increases the likelihood of chronic absenteeism, particularly if the child is not getting support from their family to manage the condition.

FAMILY INSTABILITY

A child's home life can greatly impact chronic absenteeism. When parents are neglectful, struggle with addiction, or experience severe poverty, students may stay home to care for siblings or ill family members or to prevent friends and teachers from discovering their living conditions.

TRANSPORTATION LIMITATIONS

Students in urban areas or those with working parents rely on school buses and other forms of public transit. When a bus schedule changes or the student runs late in the morning, they may not have another way to get to school. Many students in this situation may miss school because they do not have access to an alternative form of transportation.

CONSEQUENCES OF TRUANCY & CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Frequently missing school has substantial consequences for the student's academic performance, socialization, and future (DeFlitch, n.d.). Understanding the impact of truancy and chronic absenteeism is an important step in a school's prevention program.

ACADEMIC IMPACT

The academic impact of chronic absenteeism starts as early as kindergarten. Students who miss a significant number of school days are more likely to:

- Not read at grade level by third grade
- Score lower on standardized tests
- Get suspended
- Drop out
- Not pursue further education after high school graduation (DeFlitch, n.d.)

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Academics are important, but school also provides important opportunities for social interaction. Missing school can make it more difficult for students to build meaningful friendships or develop a sense of community among their peers.

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

If a student continues to be chronically absent throughout high school, they are less likely to graduate or attend college or trade school (DeFlitch, n.d.). Chronic absenteeism can also be associated with longer-term education and economic consequences.

TRUANCY PREVENTION STRATEGIES

The more days of school missed, the more likely a student is to fail or drop out. Implementing truancy prevention strategies helps teachers and administrators identify concerning behavior and intervene before absenteeism becomes a chronic issue. The earlier truancy is addressed, the better the results. Reengaging and remotivating students is a team effort, requiring emotional, psychological, social, and academic support.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS

It is important to define chronic absenteeism and truancy in student and staff handbooks. Encouraging students and their parents to sign school policies increases the odds of compliance. Clearly outlining attendance expectations, intervention strategies, and potential disciplinary actions helps students and families understand what to expect and how to improve attendance.

Essential components to include in your school handbook regarding truancy include:

- Define attendance expectations, including excused and unexcused absences, tardiness, and truancy
- Outline communication procedures, including how parents/guardians should report absences, receive attendance notifications, and participate in interventions
- Explain how attendance is tracked and how that data is used
- Highlight attendance thresholds, including the number of absences that could affect grade advancement or graduation
- Identify early warning signs of attendance problems that parents/guardians should recognize

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

Identifying students who are at a higher risk for truancy allows administrators to intervene early and reduce potential long-term consequences. Early warning systems use attendance records, behavior reports, and academic performance to provide risk ratings. These data are then used to schedule check-ins and academic assistance (Kirkland, 2024).

For an early warning system to work, educators need to feel empowered to intervene. Mapping out what metrics are considered concerning and how to conduct an intervention helps schools maintain consistency. These expectations also guide staff actions. The intervention program should include a plan to monitor and evaluate progress, including teacher, student, and family check-ins. As every student is unique, flexibility is essential.

ATTENDANCE INCENTIVES

Attendance incentives give students a reason to want to attend school and class (McElwee, 2022). These rewards don't have to be costly, and even the promise of recognition can encourage improved attendance, especially among students with a history of chronic absenteeism. However, incentive programs should be designed to recognize attendance improvements without penalizing students for legitimate medical, disability-related, or other unavoidable absences. Examples of attendance incentive programs that are simple to implement and budget-friendly include:

- Schoolwide recognition during assemblies or morning announcements
- A certificate from the principal acknowledging the student's good attendance record
- Lunch with a teacher
- Extra time for "fun" activities like recess, the computer lab, or PE
- Permission to dress down for a day
- Priority parking spots for high schoolers
- Personalized notes to parents recognizing improved attendance

In addition to offering incentives, implementing a tracking program that allows students to monitor their own attendance can be beneficial. Schools can use individual attendance trackers or classroom-wide progress charts to encourage accountability, recognize improvements, and motivate consistent attendance while respecting student privacy.

MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS

For students struggling with fitting in or who don't have a positive adult influence at home, mentorship programs can help encourage attendance (Yeager, 2024). Many schools that use this strategy ask teachers, counselors, administrators, and other staff to volunteer as mentors. Their responsibilities include making a schedule to meet with the student on a regular basis, building a trusting relationship, giving the student a sense of purpose or value by having them help with a task, and being a reliable resource to talk about the good, bad, and everything in between.

It is important that the student feels as though they have a say in the mentorship and are incentivized to go to the meetings, even if it is just out of a sense of responsibility. Some mentors meet with students outside regular school hours, while others schedule meetings during planning periods or designated times throughout the school day. If the student gets in trouble, access to their mentor should never be part of the disciplinary plan, as that relationship should feel safe and not conditional on grades or behavior.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE ENGAGEMENT

To reinforce the importance of attendance, it is essential that students feel wanted, respected, and heard (Childs & Grooms, 2024). Every child and family brings different values and norms shaped by their culture and background. Recognizing these factors and affirming individual and cultural identities has a significant impact on a student's self-confidence, trust in their teachers, and sense of importance, all of which contribute to their desire to attend school.

The key to culturally responsive engagement is making students and families feel included and invited. When teachers, school staff, and administrators are accessible, they can foster trust and improve cooperation, particularly when chronic absenteeism is a concern.

CLASSROOM CULTURE THAT SUPPORTS BELONGING

Many classroom management tactics focus on monitoring behavior and measuring performance (Eakins, 2025). However, prioritizing making students feel like they belong over reinforcing responsibility and accountability can have a meaningful impact on attendance. When students feel like they have autonomy and a say in decision-making, they are more likely to make positive choices. Creating a safe, inclusive classroom environment should be a priority alongside managing disruptions, assessing performance, and maintaining discipline.

TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES

When teachers are aware of their students' emotional and mental well-being, students may feel safer and more supported, making them more likely to attend class (Institute of Education Sciences [IES], 2024). Creating opportunities for students to communicate their emotions in a comfortable, private setting can help build this sense of safety.

For example, a teacher could use private emotional check-ins, such as individual reflection cards or confidential student surveys, to better understand how students are feeling. Recognizing when a student is experiencing sadness, frustration, or anger can help teachers identify who may need additional support or more individualized attention while respecting student privacy. Trauma-informed approaches can also help educators recognize early warning signs that may contribute to chronic absenteeism, truancy, or other behavioral concerns.

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PUTTING THESE STRATEGIES

INTO PRACTICE

The following tools can help schools put attendance strategies into action by supporting family communication and making it easier to monitor attendance patterns.

SAMPLE PARENT LETTER

Subject: Supporting [Student's Name] Together

Dear [Parent/Guardian's Name],

I enjoy having [Student's Name] in my class. I care deeply about [Student's Name] and want to make sure they feel supported and engaged in their learning. I've noticed that [Student's Name] has been absent from class on several occasions, and I'm concerned about the impact this may have on their progress and confidence in school.

I understand that there can be many reasons for missed days, and my intention is not to place blame, but to open a conversation. My goal is to work together with you to identify any challenges [Student's Name] may be facing and to find ways we can help reengage and remotivate them.

School attendance is a key part of building consistency, confidence, and connection with peers. When students miss multiple days, it can make returning feel overwhelming. With your insights at home and my support here at school, I believe we can create a plan that helps [Student's Name] feel encouraged and excited about learning again.

I would love the opportunity to talk with you about what might be helpful. Please let me know a good time for us to connect by phone or in person. I strive to foster a positive learning environment for each of my students, and I believe that by working together, we can help [Student's Name] reach their full potential.

Warmly,

[Your Name]

[Grade/Subject] Teacher

ATTENDANCE TRACKER TEMPLATE

ATTENDANCE TRACKER

MONTH: _____

Academic Year:	Week 1					Week 2					Week 3					Week 4					Week 5				
Student Name:	M	T	W	T	F	M	T	W	T	F	M	T	W	T	F	M	T	W	T	F	M	T	W	T	F
Sample																									

Key: Present | Excused Absence | Unexcused Absence | No School

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