

# All in for Attendance: Collective action for public health strategies that address chronic absence

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More than one in four children in the U.S. are chronically absent, defined as missing 10% or more of their school days, putting their long-term learning health, development, and economic prospects at risk. Chronic absence affects all students, with significant disparities by geography, race, and socioeconomic status. Absences due to mental or physical health challenges are one of the most common contributors. Many of the root causes of chronic absence including limited access to health care, housing instability, and family stress arise from the broader social drivers of health and originate outside of the school setting. It is common, however, to consider chronic absence as solely an educational issue.

There is an alternative perspective: **seeing chronic absence as a public health challenge**. A public health approach leverages individual and population-level data to guide collective action, engages new cross-sector partners and facilitates a shift from reactive responses to proactive, prevention-focused strategies.

This paper, developed by education and health experts at the Johns Hopkins University, Attendance Works, and Kaiser Permanente, presents a new public health framework for promoting school attendance and addressing chronic absence. The framework is organized around three evidence-based guiding principles and supported by specific actionable recommendations. Together the principles provide a roadmap for use by state and local public health, healthcare, education agencies and community-based agencies and leaders to collaborate, coordinate efforts, and pool resources to reduce chronic absence.

Together, these principles support a shift toward **data-driven decision-making, shared responsibility, sustained collaboration and greater community capacity** to address the root causes of chronic absence ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive and succeed.

The paper also offers real-world examples that illustrate how these principles can be put into practice. These examples show that that this approach is possible when there is a shared commitment, unified vision and the will to act.



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# Guiding Principles for Action

## Principle 1:

**Use school attendance data as a vital sign of student and system well-being to drive action.**

*Track absence patterns across communities, and by risk factors, link attendance to broader health and social indicators, and use the data to inform, target and evaluate strategies to address the root causes of chronic absence.*

**Action 1: Improve the quality of actionable data for decision-making.**

**Action 2: Strengthen the collective use of individual-level attendance data.**

**Action 3: Improve use of population data to inform strategic decision-making.**

## Principle 2:

**Develop strategic partnerships to align goals and drive progress on reducing chronic absence.**

*Establish cross-sector partnerships between educators, health practitioners, public health departments, and community-based agencies to align goals, share data responsibly, combine resources, and coordinate strategies to address chronic absence.*

**Action 1: Align goals across strategic partners.**

**Action 2: Build trust and engagement through partnerships that support attendance.**

**Action 3: Improve coordination of funding and service delivery to support sustainable attendance strategies.**

## Principle 3:

**Develop strengths-based policies and programs to prevent chronic absence and promote school attendance.**

*Design and invest in policies and programs that address systemic barriers, promote whole child health, strengthen school connectiveness and promote school attendance.*

**Action 1: Use evidence to guide policymaking.**

**Action 2: Coordinate efforts to tackle the root causes of chronic absence.**

**Action 3: Build and share the evidence base for prevention approaches through cross-sector research and evaluation.**

### Disclaimer

This document is intended to serve as a potential blueprint to drive collective action for system changes aimed at addressing America's escalating chronic absenteeism crisis. This document is not an advocacy agenda and does not endorse any specific policies or examples provided herein. It outlines various strategies and approaches that may be considered by organizations and individuals seeking to drive systemic improvements to address chronic absenteeism in schools. The strategies and examples included are for illustrative purposes only and should not be interpreted as policy endorsements by individual contributors, or sponsoring organizations. Readers are encouraged to critically evaluate the information presented and consider their own organizational goals, values, and political landscapes when developing strategies for system changes to address absences in America's K-12 schools.