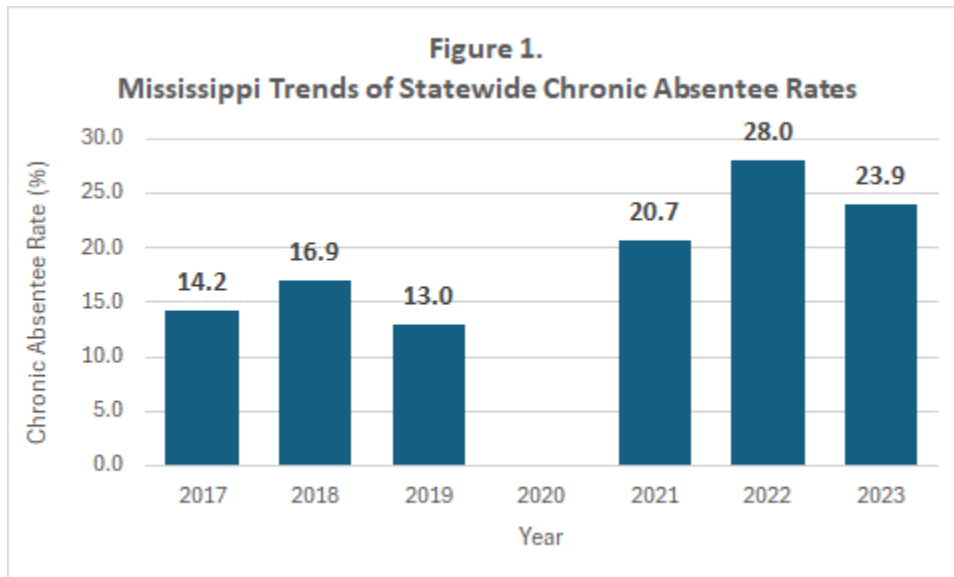


A Solution for the Post-pandemic Student Attendance Crisis

Dr. Sandy Addis, Chairman, National Dropout Prevention Center

We know that student attendance has deteriorated significantly in the post-pandemic years of 2021, 2022, and 2023. National chronic absentee rates—the percentage of students missing 10% or more of school days—increased from 15.0% in 2019 to 29.7% in 2022 and improved slightly to 27.9% in 2023 but remain nowhere near pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 1 below illustrates the chronic absenteeism rates for the state of Mississippi from 2017 to 2023, which are typical of most states. Note that 2020 data is omitted because of pandemic school closure issues. (Mississippi Department of Education)



School attendance patterns are directly correlated with learning, passing grades, and graduation outcomes. The 2023-24 Alabama Attendance Manual notes that Alabama 9th graders who miss 10 or more school days per year have an eventual graduation rate of 41% or lower. (Alabama State Department of Education)

Because truancy is often a cause of grade retention and course failure, we can expect graduation outcomes in the next few years to decline significantly if attendance rates are not corrected quickly. Because student attendance patterns often become adult habits, we can also anticipate serious problems with workplace attendance if current truancy issues are not remedied.

There are many reasons for the post-pandemic truancy crisis. These include a shift in the “attendance is important” messaging, concerns about the safety of the school environment, increased availability of virtual school options, and deteriorating confidence in public schools.



Also, pandemic shutdowns interrupted wrap-around school-site services and supportive educator relationships for the most at-risk students.

So What Do We Do? What Works and What Does Not?

Regardless of the reasons, the pressing question is, “What can schools, districts, and educators do to improve attendance rates to at least restore pre-pandemic attendance levels?” Dr. Bill Daggett, Founder of the Successful Practices Network, stated recently, “America’s schools are facing a post-pandemic attendance crisis that will not be resolved by broad application of random strategies. Educators must identify school-specific root causes of truancy, strategically select research-based strategies, and apply those strategies with laser focus.”

The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) and the Successful Practices Network (SPN) have provided services to thousands of schools over the past 30+ years with much of that work addressing attendance in some manner. This work has produced a body of research and findings about what works—and what does not work—to improve student attendance.

As attendance rates decline, schools are working hard to address the issue, but with minimal, or at best mixed, results. Analysis by NDPC/SPN leads to an overriding conclusion and some lessons learned. The overriding conclusion is that random acts of attendance improvement do not work but data-informed, research-based, strategically selected, and locally appropriate acts do.

To determine if local attendance efforts are random, the questions are simple:

- What are we currently doing to improve attendance?
- How and/or why did we decide to do that?
- Is what we are currently doing producing the desired results?

In most situations, NDPC/SPN find that schools are implementing a wide variety of attendance initiatives ranging from rewards to robocalls to legislation and court intervention. In most cases, schools report that strategies were selected because they seemed like good ideas at some point in time, and are continued in hopes of good outcomes, but are not very effective. Conversely, NDPC and SPN have found that when schools analyze data and apply strategically selected and research-based attendance strategies with laser focus, attendance improves.

NDPC/SPN has learned that schools can follow a four-step process to pivot from ineffective random acts of attendance improvement to strategically selected and effective actions. These four steps are:

1. Analyze local attendance data and trends, with specific attention to sub-groups and grade levels, to identify root causes of truancy and target subgroups and areas for action
2. Inventory current attendance strategies with attention to the actual effectiveness levels of each strategy
3. Consider implications of the *15 Guiding Principles for Improving Student Attendance* that are known to inform effective practices (see Appendix)



4. Modify current initiatives and implement new steps to strategically address attendance problems with a laser focus.

NDPC/SPN has observed this pivot from random acts to strategic acts to produce better results in a variety of school-site and statewide situations.

In a statewide initiative by the South Carolina Department of Education, NDPC/SPN delivered a series of three-day “Diploma Planning Institutes” across the state in 2023. Thirty-eight school teams were guided to select and develop plans to address their most pressing post-pandemic issues. Of the plans developed, 51% of schools elected to address the root causes of truancy using the four-step process recommended by NDPC/SPN. In follow-up reporting six months past the implementation of those attendance plans, all reported significant shifts in attendance-related indicators.

After analysis of multiple options, the Mississippi Department of Education recently selected the NDPC/SPN four-step Attendance Improvement Initiative to address the state’s attendance crisis. To date, a series of two-day “Attendance Improvement Institutes” facilitated by NDPC/SPN staff have guided 48 district teams to analyze data, assess current efforts, and to replace random acts of attendance improvement with more strategic action steps. Time and evaluation will determine the final outcome of the Mississippi Attendance Improvement Initiative, but early indicators are that significant change in practice and outcomes are underway.

What Guiding Principles Should Inform Attendance Improvement?

Through years of research and experience, NDPC/SPN identified the *15 Guiding Principles for Improving Student Attendance* that, when considered with findings from local data, can inform and shape the most effective practices. The Appendix to this paper lists the 15 Guiding Principles and a detailed explanation of each one can be found in the publication, [*Guiding Principles for Improving School Attendance—A Practice Guide*](#) (Peters, Addis, Hawkins, 2023). The following is a brief description of a two-part Guiding Principle with an explanation of how they may be applied, or misapplied, to influence student attendance outcomes.

Guiding Principle #2: Parents and families control the attendance of young children.

Guiding Principle #3: Older children control their attendance.

For kindergarten and early grade students, parents and family members are responsible for structuring their time, schedules, and thus their school attendance. As parents and families hopefully facilitate school attendance, early grade educators hopefully make school engaging and exciting to attend. While parents and families of older students can and should monitor and facilitate school attendance, some older students lose interest in school and find ways to be absent. Some of the most at-risk and truant older students manage to wrestle control of school attendance away from parents and family, causing those adults to “give up”.

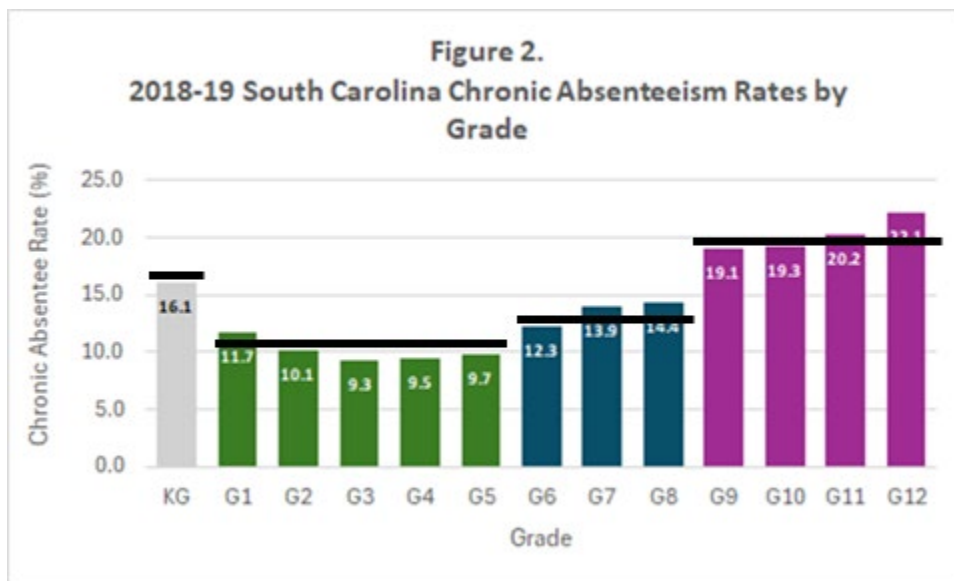
Educators who recognize and understand these Guiding Principles typically focus attendance improvement efforts on the parents of young students and the attendance motivation of older

students. Attendance Improvement Plans that consider these Guiding Principles may include attendance messaging to parents of young students or events to better connect parents and educators. If parent letters or legal steps are used, they are typically targeted to parents of younger students. Attendance plans that consider these Guiding Principles may also include strategies to motivate attendance of middle and high school students such as increased slots for at-risk students in extracurricular activities and strategies to make instruction more relevant and engaging for truant-prone students.

Unfortunately, attendance improvement efforts too often ignore these Guiding Principles and target the wrong people with the right strategies. It is common for early-grade plans to specify attendance rewards and incentives for young children and to train elementary teachers to use high-interest instructional methods to motivate engagement and attendance. Attendance plans that ignore these Guiding Principles may overly rely on parent letters and parent conferences about the attendance of older students but not include steps to motivate older students such as rewards and early enrollment in relevant career courses.

Guiding Principle #4: Attendance patterns tend to deteriorate as students age and progress through grades.

Analysis of state, district, or school data almost always shows significant shifts in attendance patterns when students move across school levels. The percentage of chronically absent students increases noticeably when students move from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school. This pattern is illustrated in Figure 2 by data showing chronic absenteeism rates of South Carolina’s 750,000+ students in 2019. (South Carolina Department of Education)



This data pattern, typical of most states and local districts for most years, indicates some shifts in root causes of truancy at school-level transitions. A deeper root cause analysis of local data, combined with local knowledge, might reveal issues such as changes in staff-student connections, decreased attention to individual student needs, decreased levels of student engagement, or the need for more transition preparation and support.

Schools that understand and effectively apply this Guiding Principle anticipate the changes in attendance motivation that occur as students mature and implement interventions at transition points to prevent truancy from occurring, particularly among the most at-risk students.

Schools that ignore this Guiding Principle tend to apply the same or similar strategies like student rewards and truant letters at all school levels and neglect to focus age and grade-appropriate strategies at critical points of progression through grades.

An important but under-considered Guiding Principle is #11: *Teachers and other staff members play important roles in attendance improvement.*

All school staff members have several important roles in promoting good attendance. For example:

- To establish and maintain positive connections with individual students
- To make instruction and school experiences relevant, engaging, interesting, and enjoyable for students
- To encourage attendance and to monitor and follow up on individual student absences
- To model good attendance themselves.

Attendance improvement plans that consider this Guiding Principle often include strategies such as assigning individual staff members to all students to react to each absence, inventorying staff-student connections to make sure that every student has a positive staff relationship, and plans for coaches and sponsors to recruit the most disengaged and truant students to their teams and clubs. An effective strategy that reflects this Guiding Principle includes attendance monitoring of team members in the job description of all coaches.

Unfortunately, the critical role of all staff members is sometimes ignored with overreliance on attendance clerks and truancy officers to address the issue. Schools with truancy problems often fail to impart a sense of responsibility for attendance to all staff members or to recognize and reward staff members who regularly address the attendance of their students. Schools that ignore this Guiding Principle usually fail to acknowledge and remind staff that staff absences model truancy for students and lead to student absences.

Within the document, *Guiding Principles for Improving School Attendance—A Practice Guide*, NDPC/SPN provides an Attendance Improvement Self-Assessment Instrument with instructions and templates that districts and schools can use to analyze current attendance initiatives, to pinpoint areas for focus, and to create next-step actions most likely to produce desired outcomes.



In summary, NDPC/SPN encourages states, districts, and schools to address the post-pandemic truancy crisis by deliberately pivoting from random acts of attendance improvement to data-informed, research-based, and strategically selected action steps that are applied with laser focus. To accomplish this, NDPC/SPN offers *Guiding Principles for Improving School Attendance—A Practice Guide* (link provided previously). Assistance to apply these recommended steps and the Guiding Principles may be requested from NDPC/SPN by emailing ndpc@dropoutprevention.org or by calling 518-723-2063.

Appendix

The 15 Guiding Principles for Improving Student Attendance

1. External events influence attendance.
2. Parents and families control the attendance of young children.
3. Older children control their attendance.
4. Attendance patterns tend to deteriorate as students age.
5. External barriers are not always the primary cause of truancy.
6. Attendance is about more than instructional time on task.
7. Relationships impact attendance.
8. Culture, climate, and student satisfaction impact attendance.
9. Community influences attendance.
10. Laws and policy alone will not solve the problem.
11. Teachers and other staff members play important roles in attendance improvement.
12. Policy and practices may create barriers to attendance and graduation and have unintended consequences.
13. Students look at attendance differently than adults.
14. Reasons that students and parents give for absences are not always accurate.
15. Recovering and re-engaging dropouts is complex and difficult.



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