



GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR IMPROVING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

A RESEARCH AND PRACTICE GUIDE

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

In our current educational context, few challenges are as fundamental and far-reaching as school attendance. From the earliest days of organized schooling to the present, consistent school attendance has been recognized as the cornerstone of a student's academic success and personal development. Good attendance has traditionally been seen as an essential component of school success. Seat time and time on task have long been assumed to be critical to individual student success and school quality. Attendance metrics are part of most school ratings, and educators have struggled for years to improve and/or maintain high student attendance rates.

School attendance and truancy are complex issues. Attendance is both an individual student issue and a matter of culture, climate, family, and community. Strategies have ranged from ice cream parties to legislation and court intervention. The issue is further complicated by differing opinions and beliefs among stakeholders. Educators might assume that parents and the community approve of their attendance improvement strategies until hearing from parents like Stephen Montgomery, who questioned traditional attendance wisdom in an editorial titled "Perfect Attendance Awards Are a Joke".

School attendance patterns have varied widely across schools and communities. Some schools and communities have maintained excellent attendance patterns across most of their student bodies (National Forum on Education Statistics) and, in many cases, have assumed these patterns were permanent. Other schools and communities have struggled with poor attendance patterns and have been frustrated when efforts to improve attendance produced minimal change. Since 1917, all states have mandated school attendance through legislation (Deffenbaugh and Keesecker), and most local school boards have enacted policies intended to promote good attendance. Most state accountability systems include attendance metrics (Wilkins), and some schools and communities have managed to shift student attendance patterns from poor to positive.

Before the COVID pandemic, national attendance rates were a problem. According to the U.S. Department of Education, more than 6.5 million students nationwide—or 13 percent of all students—were chronically absent, defined as missing 10% of school days during the school year, typically 18 or more days per year.

The 2020–21 pandemic and resulting school shutdowns disrupted attendance patterns and norms, significantly altering students', parents', communities', and educators' assumptions about attendance. In March 2020, attendance messaging from educators to students and parents quickly shifted from "attendance is important and essential" to "attendance is dangerous and not allowed." Societal assumptions about the importance of good attendance have not only changed in the school setting. Working from home has become acceptable and even an assumed right in many professions. In Virginia, over 300 state employees recently resigned when the Governor imposed regulations that severely limited the work-from-home privilege they had enjoyed since the pandemic. (Mirshahi)

The Guiding Principles for Improving School Attendance Practice Guide is a comprehensive resource designed to navigate the complex landscape of attendance improvement strategies. In today's educational terrain, where the lines between in-person and remote learning have blurred, and a variety of factors can disrupt a student's attendance, this guide offers a framework for clarity and expertise. This guide is not just a collection of abstract theories; it is a practical roadmap for educators, parents, and community members committed to tackling the attendance challenges facing our students today. It draws on the collective wisdom of educators, researchers, and policymakers who have dedicated their careers to understanding and addressing this critical issue. In the pages that follow, we will explore the multifaceted nature of school attendance and delve into the factors that contribute to absenteeism. Most importantly, we will provide a comprehensive model and a toolkit of strategies that can transform attendance patterns and, ultimately, the lives of students.

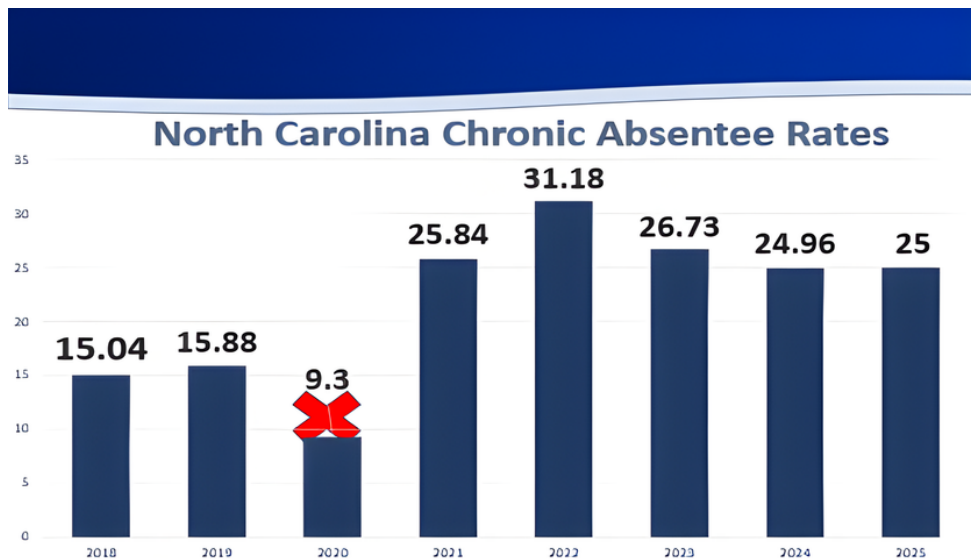
2. FOUNDATIONS OF THE SPN MODEL: DECADES OF RESEARCH

Since its founding in 1986, the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) has worked with, supported, and consulted with over 3,000 schools, districts, and state departments of education to improve student outcomes, with a focus on reducing dropouts. NDPC's efforts have included thousands of data analyses, on-site observations, and interviews with students and educators. Since 2003, the Successful Practices Network (SPN), NDPC's parent organization, has conducted parallel research and delivered similar services. During this time, SPN and NDPC staff members and researchers have collected volumes of data and produced hundreds of publications, all addressing various facets of student success. Attendance and truancy were components of the overwhelming majority of these field services, studies, and research reports. SPN and NDPC leaders have compiled research findings, action research outcomes, best practices, and lessons learned to produce Guiding Principles for Improving School Attendance. Along the way, we've learned that there is no magic solution or strategy for improving attendance, but that success depends on locally appropriate, strategic solutions grounded in foundational principles. These guiding principles are not "what to do" but rather "what to consider when deciding what to do." The recommended process, the Guiding Principles, and the resulting recommendations are grounded in a combination of scholarly research, action research, professional observations, and the logic and even the opinions of veteran educators.

3. THE POST-PANDEMIC EFFECTS: ANALYZING DATA & TRENDS

A close look at chronic absenteeism data, both before and after pandemic school closures, yields useful insights as we address the issue. We know that attendance patterns deteriorated after the COVID pandemic. National and state chronic absenteeism rates were consistently in the 12% to 16% range through 2019. Because districts and states counted and reported attendance differently, 2020 rates were not comparable. When schools reopened in 2021, chronic absenteeism was very high, often double pre-pandemic levels.

Rates then improved slightly in the following three years, but were nowhere near 2019 rates. This pattern is illustrated by North Carolina statewide data shown in Figure 1.



By examining events associated with this pattern, we can identify root causes and formulate solutions. SPN leaders and researchers suggest the following reasons for the post-pandemic disruption of attendance patterns and for the lingering negative impact. Note that each item mentioned ended abruptly when schools closed and resumed slowly as schools reopened.

- School and community messaging about the importance of attendance shifted from “attendance is essential” to “attendance is optional.” The lesson is that messaging and beliefs about attendance are important and slow to recover after a change.
- Wrap-around services that supported at-risk students ended abruptly and were slow to resume. The lesson is that these services are critical to good attendance among the most at-risk students and slow to achieve impact.
- Positive relationships that educators had worked hard to build with struggling students were almost impossible to sustain virtually and were not quickly restored when schools reopened. The lesson is that positive, supportive connections with caring educators are clearly a factor in many students' school attendance and take time to establish.
- School closure abruptly ended many of the non-instructional activities that attract many students to school. Sports, clubs, extracurriculars, and peer groups did not occur during the closure and were slow to resume when school reopened. The lesson is that non-instructional motivations for attendance are important and must be maintained.

Data also show that our post-pandemic efforts to improve attendance are either not working or working only minimally. Figure 2 below shows the national chronic absentee rates for 2018-19 to 2024-25, excluding the pandemic years of 2019-20 and 2020-21, for which data is not comparable.

Figure 2

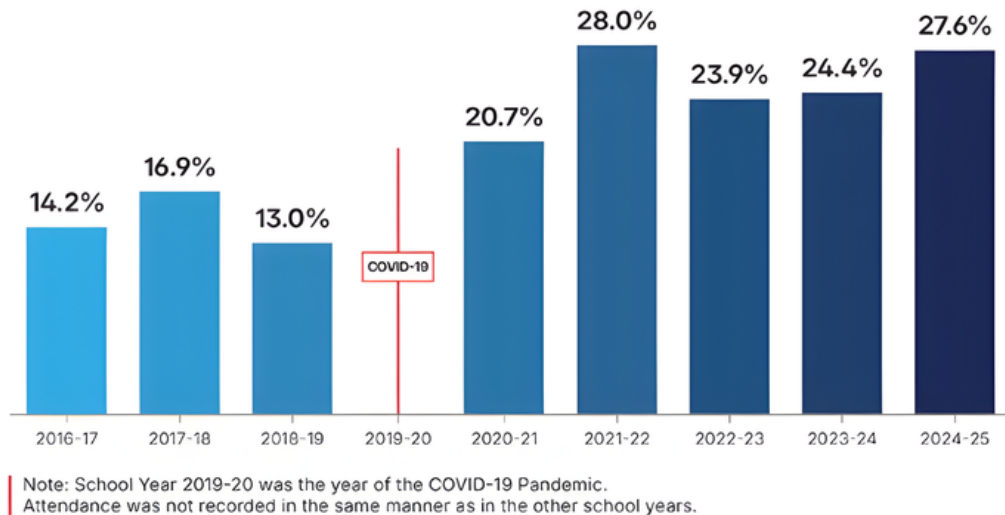
School Year	2018-19	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
National Chronic Absentee Rate	15%	28%	25%	23%	22%

From 2023-24 to 2024-25, some states saw slight improvements, but 10 states, including New Mexico, Oregon, and Alaska, reported rising chronic absenteeism rates, and over half of the nation's urban districts reported rates over 30%. Trends such as those in Mississippi, shown in Figure 3, indicate that the problem is far from solved and that efforts in many states are not working.

Figure 3

The State's Chronic Absenteeism Rate

The figure below represents the state's chronic absenteeism rates for the school years 2016-17 to 2024-25. The current rate of 27.6% shows a slight increase from the previous school year.



A deeper look at chronic absentee trends, such as isolating rates by grade level for large populations, can reveal more about the root causes of truancy and help us focus interventions on target populations. In most states, and probably in most school districts, different grades and school levels show distinct chronic absentee rates. Statewide grade-level data also show distinct grade-level points at which chronic absentee rates increase. Before the pandemic, this pattern was evident in most large datasets, as shown in Figure 4. In 2018-19, for South Carolina's 750,000+ students, chronic absenteeism rates were similar across school levels. Elementary grades ranged from 9% to 10%, middle grades from 12% to 14%, and high school grades from 19% to 22%.

Figure 4

Five years later, after schools reopened following the pandemic, a similar pattern of chronic absentee rates persists across grade and school levels, though at higher levels. Figure 5 below shows grade-level rates for the half million students in Mississippi for the 2023-24 school year. Elementary grades ranged from 17% to 20%, middle grades from 20% to 25%, and high school grades from 27% to 37%.

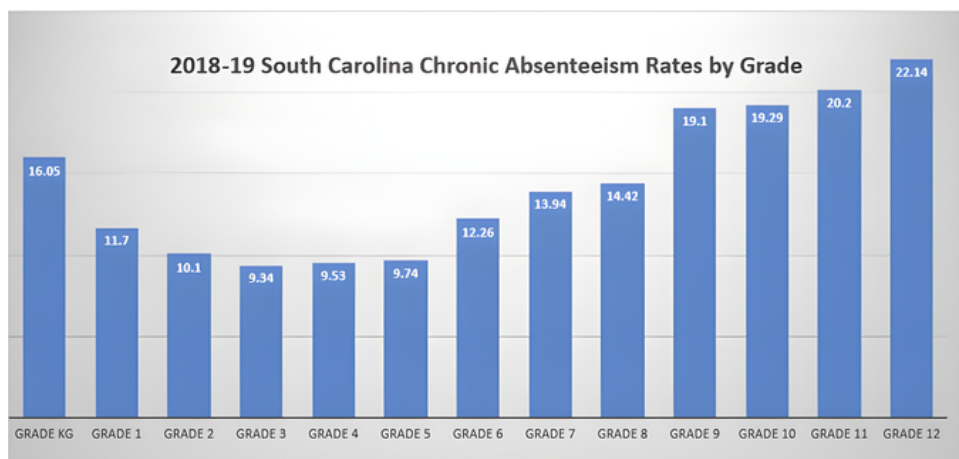
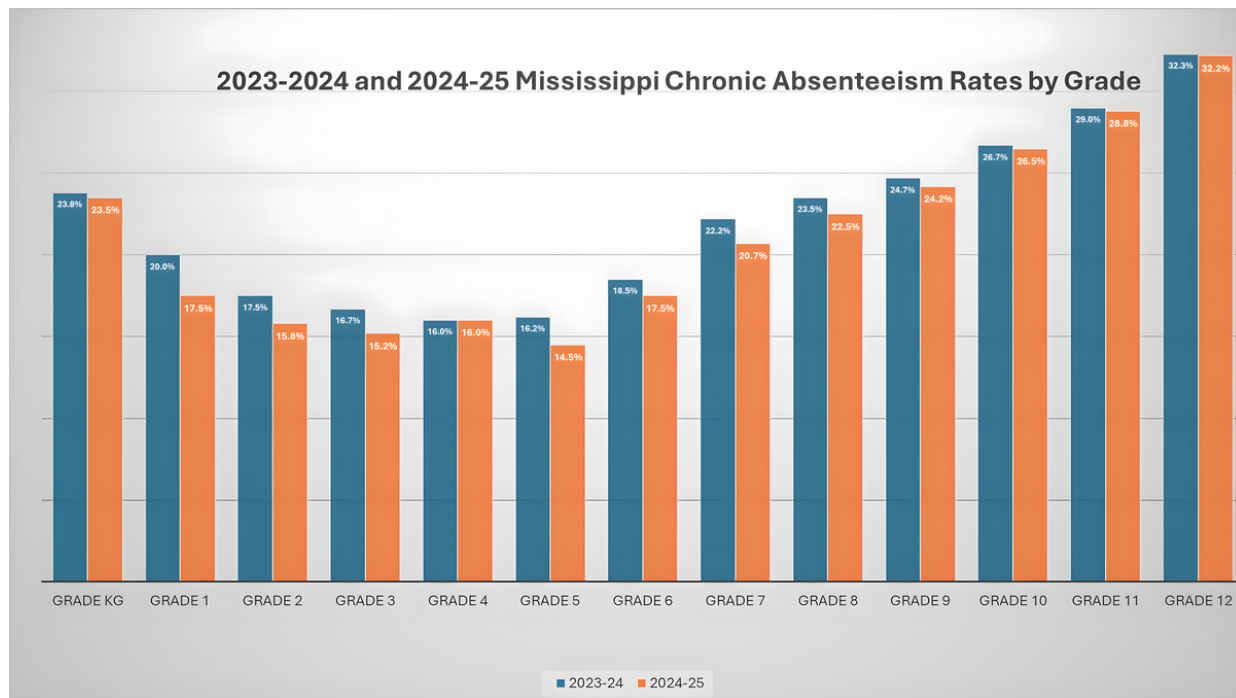


Figure 5



This data from large student populations is valuable, but SPN recommends that similar district-level analysis can be even more useful. These grade-level patterns and the plateauing of graphed data at transition points can help us identify the root causes of truancy among student subgroups and move from random acts of attendance improvement to focused interventions and strategies. SPN attendance experts highlight several lessons from these grade-level patterns that can guide local school efforts.

- Attendance supports typically are different across school levels and often change abruptly from elementary to middle to high school.
- Educator-student relationships and connections change from elementary to middle to high school.
- For some students, the perception of security and belonging diminishes from elementary to middle to high school.
- For some students, parent-school connections and parent support for attendance diminish as students move through the grades.
- These grade-level patterns suggest that at each school-level transition, a larger number of students, perhaps 5% or more of a cohort, become chronically absent. At the local school level, is it possible to pre-identify these 20 or 50 “pre-truant” students as they enter middle or high school and to focus interventions directly on them?

While national, state, and grade-level chronic absenteeism trends can inform our attendance work, SPN finds that detailed analysis of school-level data is essential to developing effective attendance improvement plans.

4. A CALL TO ACTION: ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND FINANCIAL STABILITY

The attendance crisis must be addressed for several reasons. Student achievement, graduation rates, and school financial stability are at risk.

Truancy and chronic absenteeism are closely correlated with poor student learning. During the 2023-24 school year, 53% of South Carolina students in grades 3-12 who missed 9 or fewer school days scored at the “Meets” or “Exceeds” achievement level in Math. Of students who were chronically absent, only 20% scored at the “Meets” or “Exceeds” level, while 44% of that group scored at the “Does Not Meet” level.

A similar pattern holds for ELA achievement for the same group in 2023-24. Sixty-one percent (61%) of students who missed 9 or fewer school days scored at the “Meets” or “Exceeds” achievement level. Of students who were chronically absent, only 39% scored at the “Meets” or “Exceeds” level, while 31% scored at the “Does Not Meet” level.

Truancy and chronic absenteeism are closely correlated with graduation rates.

In Alabama, students who were absent for 4 or fewer days in ninth grade achieved a graduation rate of 87% 4 years later. Students who were absent 15 to 19 days in ninth grade had only a 21% graduation rate, and those absent more than 19 days were even less likely to graduate. See Figure 6 below.

Relationship of Attendance to Graduation Rates

Number of 9 th Grade Absences	Graduation Rate 4- Years Later
0-4	87%
5-9	63%
10-14	41%
15-19	21%
20-24	9%
25-29	5%
30-34	2%
35-40	1%

Alabama Attendance Manual, 2023-24

Figure 6

The attendance problem is also a school funding problem because absences and dropouts negatively affect the formulas most states use to allocate dollars to local school districts. In 2026, five states based funding directly on attendance, namely California, Idaho, Kentucky, Missouri, and Texas. In these states, student absences are clearly costly.

In California, for example, a single student absence day costs the district at least \$62.00 and can be higher if the student is part of a higher-funded subgroup. At this rate, one chronically absent student costs the district at least \$1,116.00 per year, and the cost can be higher for students in higher-funded subgroups. A hypothetical school district with 10,000 students and a 30% chronic absentee rate is losing over \$3 million in state funding each year due to poor attendance among these 3,000 students. Even if the attendance of these truant students improved by 50%, the funding difference would be significant.

While other states do not base funding directly on attendance, they use a variety of formulas that almost always take enrollment into account. Because poor attendance is correlated with high dropout rates, truant students become non-enrolled and reduce state funding for the years they would have otherwise been enrolled. For the 2025-26 school year, a non-enrolled student in New York reduces the local district's state funding by \$36,976. In Florida, where state per-pupil funding is lower than in most states, the lost funding for one non-enrolled student is \$9,130.

If the 2024 Alabama graduation rate data (see Figure 6) hold true, districts with significant chronic absentee rates among 9th-grade students can expect non-enrolled students to cause significant financial loss over the next few years.

5. THE SPN FRAMEWORK: A STEP-BY-STEP STRATEGIC PROCESS

Over years of supporting schools, districts, and states in improving attendance and years of research, SPN and its subsidiary NDPC have learned valuable lessons that must be considered.

There is no single magic strategy or prescription for improving school attendance. One size, or even several, does not fit all. An overarching lesson is that improving attendance is not dependent on any particular program or strategy. Practitioners must begin with three essential understandings.

- The strategies must be locally selected and owned by those who implement them.
- The strategies selected must consider the context and local root causes of truancy. Stated differently, 'It's the process, ownership, and logic that make attendance programs effective
- Local selection and implementation of attendance strategies must consider the Guiding Principles of School Attendance that are available from SPN.

The Successful Practices Network and the National Dropout Prevention Center recommend that local schools and districts use a sequenced process to move from random acts of attendance improvement to locally appropriate, research-based, and high-impact strategies. Because this is an extended and relatively complex undertaking, external expertise from SPN may be helpful and is available on request.

a) Convene a school-level attendance task force to inventory all attendance and truancy programs and initiatives currently in place. It is important that this task force be school-specific because the root causes of truancy are typically school-specific.

b) Have the task force review SPN's Guiding Principles for Attendance Improvement and assess the value and success of existing programs and initiatives in light of the Guiding Principles.

c) Have the task force analyze data and local understandings to identify the root causes of absenteeism at their specific school.

d) Have the task force modify existing practices to better align with root causes and make current practices more effective. Then develop new strategies and action steps to address gaps and newly identified root causes.

e) Have the task force develop and implement a plan to inform all staff and stakeholders about selected attendance initiatives and to secure support and participation.

f) Maintain the task force to sustain focus on attendance, collect ongoing data, modify strategies, and report progress to decision makers and stakeholders.

6. EVIDENCE OF IMPACT: SUCCESS STORIES IN PRACTICE

Since 2023, SPN has supported efforts to improve school and district attendance in Oklahoma, Nebraska, Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Mississippi. Over 100 of these supported task forces have analyzed local attendance data, identified target subgroups and root causes, and implemented locally selected strategies. These schools and districts report significant short-term improvements in chronic absenteeism rates and longer-term improvements in graduation rates.

In 2025, an attendance task force from Dorchester School District Four in South Carolina, led by SPN consultants, identified fifth-grade African American females with a 24% chronic absentee rate as a target subgroup. They identified the root causes of absences for this group, implemented several targeted strategies for this population, and monitored the subgroup's monthly chronic absentee rate. In three months, they reduced the subgroup's chronic absentee rate to 19%. When asked for a lesson learned from this experience, the attendance task force stated, "Root Causes Matter."

Other schools noted that improved attendance led to longer-term improvements in graduation rates. Whale Branch Early College saw its graduation rate improve from 83% to 89% over two years. Goose Creek High School saw its graduation rate improve from 79% to 83% over two years. In Greenville, South Carolina, Berea High School, with 62% Hispanic enrollment and 24% African American enrollment, saw its graduation rate improve from 67% to 77% over two years.

7. IMPLEMENTATION: FROM RANDOM ACTS TO STRATEGIC ACTION

All schools and districts are concerned about student attendance and almost always have existing attendance improvement initiatives. It is common, however, for attendance efforts to be somewhat unplanned and not strategic, resulting in random acts of attendance improvement. To be more effective, school and district attendance efforts must be carefully planned, strategically selected, and implemented with purpose and forethought.

It is recommended that school and district leaders adopt the SPN model to improve attendance and use our resources and experts for detailed assistance. This approach will include assessing current attendance circumstances and initiatives, providing assistance to identify root causes, determining how closely current practices align with the Guiding Principles, and planning and structuring initiatives to produce the best possible outcomes.

SPN provides templates, instruments, and guiding questions to help schools, districts, and communities assess current efforts and move from random acts of attendance improvement to the development of sound, strategic actions most likely to produce the desired results.

This Practice Guide and other resources are not intended to prescribe specific attendance action steps because the most effective steps are locally determined by local leaders in consideration of local contexts. The school or district must be guided by proven research and experience from the Guiding Principles to choose and implement appropriate local action steps to achieve the best results.

8. CUSTOMIZED SUPPORT AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Successful Practices Network (SPN) offers the Guiding Principles and the recommended self-assessment process to support local schools and districts. SPN also recognizes that local circumstances, such as limited personnel, limited time, insufficient attendance expertise, and the need for external validation, may sometimes require the assistance of attendance experts.

SPN employs many experienced attendance facilitators who can assist local schools and districts in addressing this complex issue. SPN support for attendance improvement, always customized to meet local needs, may include:

- Guidance and coaching to apply the Guiding Principles
- Facilitation of attendance task force work to develop new and more effective attendance strategies and action steps.
- Expert evaluation of current and new attendance initiatives and reports of findings.
- Analysis of local truancy problems and recommendations for improvement.
- Ongoing guidance and coaching of the local attendance task force to monitor, improve, and sustain local initiatives.
- Professional development for leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders to establish and sharpen attendance improvement skills.

For support or more information, email SPN at ndpc@dropoutprevention.org or call 518-723-2063.

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