

Chair Benedetto, Chair Hevesi, members of the Committees on Education and Children and Families:

Thank you for inviting testimony by our organization, the New York State Council of School Superintendents, on the subject of chronic student absenteeism and low attendance.

Ample research has shown that students in the early grades who are chronically absent are far more likely to struggle in attaining reading proficiency by third grade, a crucial impediment to success in subsequent years. In middle and high school, high absenteeism is associated with course failure, disengagement, and eventually, too often, dropping out.

A simple fact is that very little of what schools do to help students either to learn or to thrive in other ways can succeed if students are not *in school*, engaged with teachers, other school personnel, and fellow students.

In Council surveys, we have asked superintendents across the state about their level of concern over various aspects of student well-being. In our most recent such survey, in 2024, student absenteeism ranked second in the share of superintendents indicating a high level of concern, trailing only mental/emotional health: 49% of superintendents that year reported high concern about student absenteeism; 67% did so for mental/emotional health.

Not surprisingly, we found that concern about several aspects of student well-being spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic, then receded as traditional school and daily life routines resumed. But that has not been the case with student absenteeism. The 49% of superintendents who expressed a high level of concern about student absenteeism in 2024 *rose* from 34% in 2021 and from 25% in 2019.

	2019	2021	2022	2023	2024	Change from 2019
Mental/emotional health	64%	80%	73%	75%	67%	3%
School absenteeism	25%	34%	32%	44%	49%	24%
Vaping/use of tobacco products	NA	NA	NA	49%	45%	NA
Family economic circumstances	37%	34%	40%	38%	37%	0%
Kindergarten readiness	27%	39%	29%	36%	32%	5%
Food insecurity (hunger)	NA	NA	NA	19%	20%	NA
Lack of effective adult supervision at home	17%	20%	21%	26%	19%	2%
Use of drugs	16%	15%	21%	20%	15%	-1%
Physical health	13%	19%	14%	9%	14%	1%
Dental health	10%	11%	7%	9%	7%	-3%
Homelessness	9%	9%	8%	5%	7%	-2%
Use of alcohol	10%	9%	8%	7%	5%	-5%
Violence in school or in the community	4%	10%	8%	6%	4%	0%

SOURCE: NYS Council of School Superintendents member surveys

In recent anecdotal discussions, some superintendents have reported that absenteeism rates in their schools are now similar to pre-pandemic levels. But their experience is not universal, and they nonetheless remain troubled by elevated absenteeism among their students.

Understanding the Problem

An obvious starting point to understanding any problem and identifying solutions is to ask why it exists and persists—in this case, why are some students prone to missing school and why have absenteeism rates climbed? Then, asking how what happens both in school and in students' lives outside of school each impact the problem can help point us toward solutions.

In our surveys we have asked superintendents what they believe it is most important for policymakers, the news media, and the public to understand about New York's public schools today. The number one theme in their responses has been that schools are doing more than ever before to help students and their families with needs beyond academics.

A Western New York superintendent wrote:

Schools today are expected to be the fixer of all family challenges ... food insecurity, learning the predominant language, child care, mental health and counseling, medical and dental assistance, transportation assistance. Never, ever do schools put up a "No Vacancy" sign. We always enroll. Always accept. Always support.

A Southern Tier superintendent wrote:

Public schools meet many needs, not just academic. We provide for a student's and family's basic needs on a daily basis. Many of our students do not come to us ready to learn (lacking food, clothing, shelter, etc.). Attendance is a huge issue for our students and often out of their control. The mental health needs of many of our parents are very significant and have a big impact on their children.

We believe that changes in family circumstances *outside of schools* are the primary cause for the *increase* in student absenteeism. But the problem predated the pandemic and other recent adversities which have beset families of our students. Changes *inside schools* can contribute to raising student attendance.

Twenty years ago, the Gates Foundation released results of a survey of young people who had dropped out of school.ⁱ Nearly half—47 percent—said a major reason for dropping out was that classes were not interesting. They reported being bored and disengaged from high school. Sixty-nine percent said they were not inspired or motivated to work hard. In focus groups, many said they went to school because they had to, not because they learned anything. Fifty-seven percent could not identify a teacher or staff person whom they felt they could talk to about personal problems; 43% could not identify a school employee they could speak with about school problems.

School Efforts to Improve Attendance

These findings from two decades past still ring at least partially true today. There are changes to students' in-school experiences that help raise attendance. Some have been underway in most districts for years.

Our surveys found widespread efforts to improve student mental health supports and other key services, boosted by increases in Foundation Aid and temporary federal assistance. In the final year of the phase-in of Foundation Aid full funding (2023-24), nearly two-thirds of superintendents told us that their district budgets that year would enable improvements in extra academic help for students in need, student mental health and related services, and core instruction in both elementary and middle grades.

Many districts also created family support centers or positions to assist families in finding help from other agencies for services their schools do not provide.

But we also found widespread concern that increases in student needs were outpacing the growth in resources and that improvements could not be sustained without adequate state aid.ⁱⁱ Improvements slowed in 2024-25, a year when roughly half the state's school districts received no increase in Foundation Aid.

Percent of superintendents anticipating positive impact on various student services due to district budgets — 2017 to 2024*							
Highlighting indicates a majority of superintendents anticipated a positive impact							
	2017	2018	2019	2021	2022	2023	2024
Core instruction in elementary grades	42%	42%	44%	70%	74%	64%	43%
Student mental health, counseling, social work, or similar support services	34%	49%	53%	80%	82%	65%	37%
Prekindergarten	16%	18%	14%	39%	58%	47%	33%
School safety/security	30%	59%	49%	39%	71%	59%	32%
Career and technical education	26%	23%	29%	34%	54%	43%	32%
Extra academic help for students who need it -- any level	37%	31%	37%	78%	79%	66%	31%
Instruction in English, math, science, and social studies in the middle level grades	31%	31%	34%	55%	66%	54%	30%
Instruction in English, math, science, and social studies in high school	31%	28%	34%	53%	63%	50%	28%
Advanced classes (e.g., AP, IB, college-dual enrollment classes)	29%	30%	30%	33%	52%	39%	26%
Services for English language learners	22%	24%	17%	36%	41%	40%	25%
Other extracurricular activities	21%	20%	23%	43%	51%	45%	24%
Summer enrichment programs	NA	NA	NA	NA	72%	56%	22%
Instruction in music -- any level	18%	20%	20%	35%	45%	34%	21%
Interscholastic athletics	18%	17%	20%	24%	40%	33%	21%
Instruction in the arts -- any level	16%	15%	18%	32%	43%	33%	20%
Student transportation	11%	11%	18%	25%	38%	28%	18%
Other family support services (e.g., child care, health care, after-school)	NA	19%	19%	41%	49%	34%	17%
Second language instruction at the middle or high school levels	13%	13%	23%	24%	33%	27%	15%
SOURCE: NYS Council of School Superintendents member surveys							

Changes in instruction and in state academic requirements can help boost attendance too, by making school more engaging for more students. The revisions in high school diploma requirements being developed by the Board of Regents and State Education Department should help. But it will be a challenge to guarantee equitable access to improved learning opportunities envisioned for all students, especially for needy students in low-wealth communities. Now, students must pass Regents examinations in multiple subjects as one requirement for earning a diploma. "New York Inspires," the SED plan, will enable alternatives intended to ensure all young people receive experiences providing meaningful preparation for what they will pursue upon leaving school, whether college, a career, or a

combination of both—experiences like internships, hands-on-learning, career and technical education, and capstone projects. That will be more difficult and more expensive to deliver, but also more valuable for our students.

A Finger Lakes Region superintendent explained,

New York has been slow in adopting new pathways for students to graduate. Regents exams are antiquated, there are far too many course requirements, and not enough offerings in the skilled trades. Many students in the state remain on waitlists for BOCES and/or skilled trade programs.

The increases in BOCES and Special Services Aids enacted through the current year's budget will help districts to expand career and technical education opportunities for their students.

Beyond School Factors

Our members most often cite out-of-school influences as driving the rise in school absenteeism. One has been a residual impact from the COVID 19 pandemic. A Hudson Valley superintendent explained,

Away from school, the pandemic created a “learned choice”—a shift in perception where school is now seen as optional or “flexible.” Also, families are now more likely to keep a child home for a minor illness that wouldn't have triggered an absence in 2019.

There have been other changes of a cultural nature that have weakened attendance. The Finger Lakes area superintendent we quoted above also said,

A higher percentage of parents today do not expect their kids to be resilient when facing tough situations at school. When things get difficult at school or when students are held accountable, more parents seem to believe that the answer is separating the student from school when in reality this perpetuates the problem.

Many superintendents report frustration in working with county child protective services (CPS) agencies. Some see their local agencies as overwhelmed and without capacity to help. A North Country superintendent told us,

Our greatest frustration is the post-pandemic disinterest by our local CPS in pursuing educational neglect. That used to be a pressure point to help encourage parents to see that their child attends school, but the county agency has overtly told us that they do not have the resources to investigate or manage educational neglect and will only accept hotlines/referrals when student physical safety is in jeopardy. Their non-action is perhaps our greatest deficit.

In the same vein, a Mohawk Valley superintendent said, “If we do not get help from them [CPS], then parents know there are no consequences. We need to be able to form relationships and help each other.”

We know that families are coping with real difficulties of their own, as the very first quotations we shared acknowledged. Some parents cope with mental health issues. Some families struggle with housing or food insecurity. Lack of access to adult or pediatric health care may also be hurting parents, or children, or both, either because of lack of insurance, or an absence of accessible providers. A school may be the only location where families can get the help they need. A Western New York superintendent observed,

Chronic absenteeism is a cross-agency issue; schools can't solve it alone, and families shouldn't have to either. We need policy that funds the people-work: the liaisons, social workers, and mental health connections that get kids back in the building.

There are other factors that impact attendance. In some communities, immigration enforcement actions are a consideration. One superintendent explained, “When federal law enforcement agents are rumored to be present and active in our community, we have a number of families who have told us directly that they will keep their children home and not leave the house.” Also, it has been a longstanding pattern for attendance to dip on days adjacent to school holidays, especially holidays that may fall mid-week, like Veterans Day and now Juneteenth and Asian Lunar New Year.

Some specific school practices that superintendents cite as essential and effective include:

- Data tracking to ensure “early warning” of a possible problem (two or three absences, not 10) and a rapid response—by the next day at the latest. Home visits are helpful with some families.
- Assigning a point person who will be responsible for each case of elevated absenteeism, who contacts families and helps coordinate student and family assistance.
- Setting clear expectations and ensuring consistent follow-through—supportive to start, but firm about the importance of attendance.
- Striving for connection with *every* student—through clubs, athletics, counseling, a trusted adult—whatever works.

Recommendations

A useful framework for addressing any problem is to ask, “Who should do what?” Here are some recommendations we can offer now.

State government should:

- Provide funding to support the staffing and processes schools need to intervene early and effectively to prevent individual absences from persisting and growing. Some of this can be done through increases in Foundation Aid, including for districts on save-harmless—while enrollments may have declined for some districts, student needs have grown. We will also confer with our members about whether categorical funding is warranted and, if so, how the funding should be distributed.
- Provide incentive funding to support collaboration between school districts and other community agencies which aid families and children. Create an expedited regulatory waiver process with a single point of contact to facilitate innovative school-community partnerships.
- Improve and expedite the availability attendance data and align definitions across systems to better enable early intervention.
- Identify and disseminate effective practices in reversing and preventing chronic absenteeism. Support regional best practices networks, so that schools are spared from reinventing effective interventions. Some of this is underway through the Council on Children and Families “Every Student Present” campaign.

- Expand access to child care. Some families must rely on older children to look after their younger siblings while both parents work. This should include regulatory flexibility to enable more schools to house child care programs.
- Continue the state’s commendable work in increasing children’s mental health services. Governor Hochul’s proposal to make Teen Mental Health First Aid training available for all tenth graders is another positive step.
- Authorize schools to use tele-health services to provide care to children and families, especially in areas where access to health and mental services is poor (A.4024—Paulin).
- Ensure that county child protective services agencies have the capacity to enforce the law—school attendance is compulsory in New York State.
- Streamline some existing planning and reporting requirements to free school professionals to devote more of their time to actions that help children, rather than to often redundant paperwork.
- Be attentive to how the creation of school holidays may impact student attendance.

School districts, BOCES, and other local agencies should:

- Build early warning systems to flag patterns of absences that may signal the beginning of chronic absenteeism.
- Use a tiered intervention approach: first, universal messaging about the importance of attendance and the availability of help, then targeted supports, then intensive case management.
- Initiate, expand, and formalize partnerships with county health and mental health departments, community-based organizations, and other agencies which support families and children.
- Participate in regional networks to identify and share best practices.
- Help students see school as a place of belonging, not just a place of instruction. Recognize that often parents did not see schools as paces of belonging when they were young.
- Create school environments where students feel known, safe, and valued, because connection drives attendance far more than consequences alone.

Families need to establish expectations and routines for their children and communicate with their schools—when barriers to attendance arise, families need to alert schools early, to allow them to help.

The Council’s statewide fall summit last September included one session on combatting chronic absenteeism. We will seek our members’ advice on what more we can do to assist them and their schools in mitigating this obstacle to student success.

Conclusion

One of the Council’s past presidents observed that there should be something about school for every student, every day that they just do not want to miss. For some, that might be a social studies or art class. For others, it may be the opportunity to perform in a band or participate in a sport. And for some, it may be one teacher, aide, librarian, or other school professional who has demonstrated that they care about what that student is going through. Finding and ensuring those connections for every student is part of what we must do and this requires both personal attention and district resources.

One of our Mohawk Valley members explained,

Chronic absenteeism is a symptom, not the disease. Schools have evolved because children's needs have evolved. If we want students present, engaged, and successful, we must continue investing in the people, the relationships, and partnerships that make schools places students want, and are able to attend. Funding those connections is not optional; it is essential.

The struggles students and their families face in their lives away from school cannot be an excuse for inaction by either school leaders or state policymakers. We must strive to raise attendance to levels necessary to give students a fair chance at success. Our State Constitution promises "...a system of free common schools, wherein all the children of this state may be educated"—*all children*, not merely those whose families have been spared from hardship.

ⁱ [*The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*](#). Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. March 2006.

ⁱⁱ [*Out of Balance: Rising Expectations for Schools Not Matched by Predictable Funding*](#). New York State Council of School Superintendents. November 2024.