

SCIENCE SPOTLIGHT

Addressing Chronic Absenteeism by Aligning School Settings with the Developmental Needs of Adolescents¹

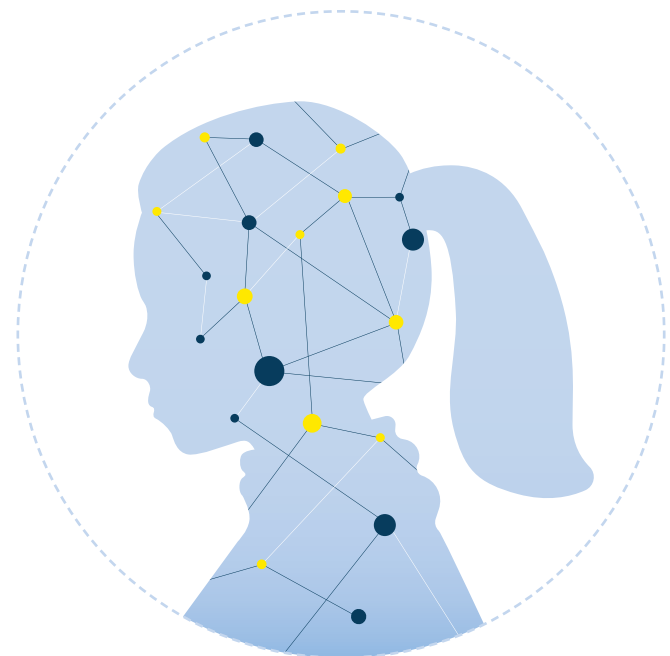
Adolescence is a time of remarkable opportunity and growth. We know from extensive research about adolescent brain development that these are critical years for learning and development. In addition to academic learning, the social and emotional learning that occurs through lessons, experiences, and relationships within school settings are important for youth to thrive, making chronic absenteeism particularly concerning among middle and high school students.

High rates of chronic absenteeism—a measure that describes the number of students who miss, for any reason, at least 10 percent of school days in an academic year—have persisted since in-person schooling was first curtailed by COVID-19. School districts that served students from neighborhoods with high levels of poverty tended to see the highest rates of chronic absenteeism prior to the pandemic and the rate of chronically absent students significantly increased in these districts following the pandemic,² raising urgent questions about how best to mitigate a trend that contributes to historical inequity.

Research indicates that there are multiple underlying causes of chronic absenteeism ranging from structural conditions, such as poor transportation infrastructure and teacher shortages, to student-level factors, such as students' health, home responsibilities, and feeling of connectedness to supportive adults.^{3,4} Initial efforts to understand the continuing effects of the pandemic-specific spike in chronic absenteeism indicate that these causes remain relevant today. For example, in spring of 2023, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) conducted a series of statewide interviews to investigate the root causes of student absenteeism and a range of societal, family, and school-related factors emerged.⁵ PACE also noted student-level factors, including inconsistent access to basic needs, uncertainty about safety, lack of a sense of belonging and connection, and inability to experience “competence, independence, and freedom” within school settings.⁶

Approaches to addressing these underlying challenges at the middle and high school levels should be responsive to the developmental needs

of adolescents, which can be distinct from those of younger learners. School leaders and policymakers can leverage insights from decades of research in the developmental science of adolescence to help navigate a path toward more equitably meeting the needs of adolescent learners and enhancing their attachment to school.



ADOLESCENCE IS A UNIQUE PERIOD FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Adolescents are motivated to explore, discover, and connect with the world around them. Regions in the brain responsible for motivation, learning, and feelings of reward become more active

and responsive to social experience during adolescence.⁷ Connections between these regions and the networks responsible for planning and social cognition are strengthened and refined in response to experiences and relationships throughout the years between childhood and adulthood, providing new capacities for learning, emotional development, and social behavior.

Together, these changes create unique opportunities for adolescent learning and development. Youth are more likely to take risks to learn about the world around them.⁸ They also are more tolerant of uncertainty and more likely to update their prior knowledge in response to new environments or making mistakes.⁹ Adolescents are driven to understand the world and their place in it, both among their peers in school as well as broader society. Conversations with youth about their future goals can help them cultivate a sense of purpose and encourage a desire to have an impact upon their worlds. Understanding these unique capacities for learning can help spark ideas about how to ensure that schools can best engage adolescent learners as an attempt to address at least one contributing factor to chronic absenteeism.



Program and Policy Insights

There is no universal solution to chronic absenteeism, and experts in education suggest that districts will need to develop strategies tailored to their local settings.¹⁰ As leaders partner with young people and their communities to create and test new approaches to restore attendance, they should aim to close the gap between the developmental needs of adolescents and the school-based settings young people encounter. Specifically, they can:

- ▶ **Provide compelling and supported ways for middle and high school students to explore and learn from experience.** Thoughtfully designed efforts both inside the classroom (such as project-based learning¹¹) and after school (for example, interest-based clubs and activities) leverage the natural inclination to explore and learn from experience during adolescence.
- ▶ **Incorporate ways for students to contribute to others at school and in their broader communities.** Longstanding research on classroom environments points to the ways in which incorporating student participation in decision-making promotes motivation and achievement.¹² Similarly, extracurricular programs that encourage adolescents' contributions to their school, teams, and communities enhance students' attachment to school.¹³
- ▶ **Build supportive relationships between adolescents and caring adults in their schools and communities.** Having these relationships at home and in the school and community is predictive of virtually every aspect of healthy adolescent development, including engagement with school.¹⁴
- ▶ **Identify and eliminate inequities in the availability and quality of adolescents' opportunities to have these vital experiences and relationships.** Ensure that all youth, including those impacted by racial, ethnic, or other forms of discrimination as well as those facing challenges related to poverty or financial instability, can meaningfully access opportunities to explore, contribute, and form strong relationships with trusted adults.

ENDNOTES

- 1 A version of this resource was originally published as a commentary on the Policy Analysis for California Education website, available at: <https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/leveraging-opportunity-adolescence-reduce-chronic-absenteeism>
- 2 Balfanz, R. (2024). *Meeting the Chronic Absenteeism Challenge What Do We Know?* The Grad Partnership. <https://www.gradpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/EGC-GP-NPSS-May-2024-Brief.pdf>
- 3 Balfanz, 2024.
- 4 Jacob, B.A., & Lovett, K. (2017, July 17). *Chronic absenteeism: An old problem in search of new answers*. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chronic-absenteeism-an-old-problem-in-search-of-new-answers/>
- 5 Myung, J. & Hough, H.J. (2023, November 17). *Why Aren't Students Showing Up for School? Understanding the Complexity Behind Rising Rates of Chronic Absenteeism*. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/why-arent-students-showing-school>
- 6 Myung and Hough, 2023.
- 7 Crone, E. A., & Dahl, R. E. (2012). Understanding adolescence as a period of social-affective engagement and goal flexibility. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 13(9), 636–650. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn3313>
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- 13 National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2002). *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/10022>
- 14 Grossman, J. B., & Tierney, J. P. (1998). Does mentoring work?: An impact study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. *Evaluation Review*, 22(3), 403–426. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193841X9802200304>