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Building School Cultures Where Students Show Up



The FranklinCovey Education Research Brief Series translates evidence on school conditions, student development, and instructional practice into actionable guidance for K–12 leaders. Each brief grounds practice in the strongest available research and identifies where Leader in Me Schools are producing measurable results.

Introduction

Evidence on the Conditions That Drive Attendance Recovery, and How Leader in Me Builds Them

Chronic absenteeism is one of the clearest signs that the work of school recovery is not finished. It tells leaders whether students are connected to the daily life of school, whether families have the support they need, and whether adults have the systems to notice and respond before absence becomes a pattern. National data show that chronic absence nearly doubled during the Covid-19 pandemic period and remains well above earlier levels, with recent progress slowing across many states.^{1,2}

This brief synthesizes recent research on what helps students attend school consistently and connects that evidence to national Leader in Me results from 2022 through 2025. The evidence points to a practical conclusion for school and district leaders: attendance improves when schools build coherent cultures where students are known, trusted with meaningful responsibility, supported by adults, and connected to families through early and constructive partnership.



CENTRAL QUESTION

What school-level conditions help more students attend consistently, and how can schools build those conditions at scale?

Key Insights

1

Attendance is a culture outcome before it is a compliance outcome. Students attend more consistently when they experience strong relationships, peer connectedness, and a meaningful sense of contribution within the school community.

2

The national attendance challenge remains urgent. Chronic absence rose from 14.8 percent in 2018 to 28.3 percent in 2022, adding an estimated 6.5 million chronically absent students. By 2024 to 2025, rates had improved but remained around 23 percent in states with available data.

3

Research consistently points to the same attendance-supporting conditions: trusting relationships, early use of data, family partnership, meaningful student contribution, and coordinated support for barriers to attendance. Leader in Me helps schools build these conditions into the daily life of the school.

4

National Leader in Me data show meaningful attendance improvement from 2022 to 2025. Across 2,381 schools with usable data, chronic absence declined by an estimated 2.19 percentage points per year, which equals about 6.57 fewer chronically absent students per 100 over three years.

5

Leader in Me Schools serving communities with high economic need showed the strongest movement, with an estimated 10.94 percentage-point decline in chronic absenteeism from 2022 to 2025. Among schools with data in both years, 87.0 percent improved.

6

In a national comparison model with more than 51,000 non-Leader in Me schools, Leader in Me Schools improved faster after accounting for each school and state year conditions.

Breaking Down the Issue

Where Attendance Stands Now

A student is typically counted as chronically absent when they miss 10 percent or more of the school year for any reason. In a 180-day year, that is about 18 days. The measure includes excused and unexcused absences because the core question is instructional time: whether a student is present enough to benefit from school.^{3,4}

The national picture has improved from the peak of the pandemic period, but the recovery has slowed. Attendance Works reported that in 2022 to 2023, at least 20 percent of students were chronically absent in 61 percent of schools, compared with 28 percent of schools before the pandemic.³ Education Week reporting on the American Enterprise Institute Return to Learn Tracker found that 2024 to 2025 rates in 39 states and the District of Columbia averaged 23 percent, roughly 50 percent higher than before the pandemic.²

This is why Attendance Works has moved from a local operations concern to a national education priority. FutureEd's 2026 tracker identified 65 chronic absenteeism and truancy related bills across 22 states and the District of Columbia, with recurring attention to early warning systems, attendance review teams, family engagement, data transparency, transportation barriers, and alternatives to punitive approaches.⁴

Why Attendance Matters So Much

Absence affects learning long before it becomes a chronic absence label. A national elementary study found that more frequent absenteeism from kindergarten through fifth grade was associated with lower math and literacy outcomes, weaker working memory and social skills, and more internalizing and externalizing concerns. The cumulative effects were stronger than single-year effects, which means the damage builds over time.⁵

Attendance also connects directly to long-term outcomes. Research in the Chicago Longitudinal Study found that chronic absence in grades four through six was associated with lower eighth grade achievement and lower high school attainment.⁶ In practical terms, attendance is a daily signal of whether students are staying connected to the academic and relational conditions that support graduation.

Evidence Based Practices

What Drives Attendance?

Five Practices that Consistently Appear in the Evidence

Use attendance data as a relationship tool. Effective schools act before a student is already chronically absent. They look for early patterns, assign adults to follow up, and use data to begin a conversation about support. The strongest use of data is timely care with enough precision to act.³

Build adult ownership across the school. Chronic absence rarely improves when responsibility sits with one attendance clerk, counselor, or administrator. Research and policy guidance increasingly point to team-based approaches where teachers, administrators, counselors, family liaisons, and community partners share responsibility for noticing patterns and responding early.^{3,4}

Make family partnership practical. Families need clear information, respectful outreach, and a simple path to ask for help. The most useful communication is specific, personal, and action-oriented. It tells families what is happening, why it matters, and how the school is ready to work with them.⁷

Strengthen connectedness through daily practice. Students need repeated experiences that tell them they matter in the building. This includes greeting routines, advisory structures, mentorship, student roles, peer leadership, and opportunities to help shape the school community.^{8,9}

Create tiered support that removes barriers. Some attendance problems improve with early communication and stronger connection. Others require transportation solutions, health supports, housing resources, mental health services, after school care, or case management. The strongest schools organize these responses rather than leaving families to navigate them alone.¹⁰



Practices to Avoid

Treating attendance primarily as enforcement. National guidance increasingly recommends positive, problem-solving approaches to absences, with legal and punitive responses used only as a last resort after prevention and outreach.^{3,10}

Waiting for the chronic absence threshold. By the time a student has missed 10 percent of the school year, the pattern is already established. Early warning systems are most useful when schools respond within the first weeks and months.²

Sending generic reminders without changing the relationship. Families are more likely to respond when they receive respectful messages that provide specific data and offer concrete help.³

Relying on campaigns without changing school experience. Improving daily school experience and relationships is more powerful for attendance than awareness campaigns alone.^{8,10}

Using averages without looking underneath. Overall improvement can hide which grades, schools, and student groups still need focused attention.³

When school feels meaningful, students want to be there.



Why Leader in Me Is Built for This

Through Leader in Me, FranklinCovey Education partners with schools to build the conditions that attendance research identifies as essential. The work gives schools a sustained whole school process for developing adult mindsets, student leadership, shared language, goal-focused routines, and family connection.

Leader in Me begins with a belief about students that has practical consequences: every student has leadership potential, every student has genius, and change starts with the choices adults and students make each day. That belief becomes visible through classroom leadership roles, student-led conferences, schoolwide goals, action teams, and routines that help students set goals, track progress, and contribute to the life of the school.

That alignment matters because the attendance research is clear about what schools need to build. Students need adults who know them. Families need constructive partnership. Schools need shared ownership of early intervention. Students need opportunities to contribute. Leader in Me gives schools a coherent way to build these conditions together rather than asking each classroom or department to invent its own approach.

The broader Leader in Me research base supports this connection. A 2023 meta analysis of:

**12
Studies**

**291
Schools**

**198,176
Students**

found a positive overall effect and stronger effects for school climate. The attendance subcomponent was based on only two effect sizes, so it should be treated as early evidence, but it was positive and statistically significant.¹¹

What Educators Described in the Interview Findings

Interview findings from 162 educators, students, coaches, and leaders across 10 collection sites help explain the school conditions behind the numbers (Figure 1). Across sites, the strongest recurring themes were student ownership and voice, school culture shift, common language, adult mindset, coaching relationships, and formal student leadership roles. The interview findings give leaders a clearer view of what the quantitative attendance pattern looks like inside schools.



FIGURE 1

Theme from Interviews	What Educators and Students Described	Why it Matters for Attendance
Student Ownership	Students taking responsibility for school goals, classroom roles, leadership teams, and problem solving.	Attendance improves when students see school as a place where their presence matters.
Common Language	Adults and students using shared habits, goals, and expectations across classrooms and home communication.	Shared language makes expectations clearer and helps families and students understand the same message.
Adult Mindset Shift	Adults describing a move from managing students to developing students as contributors.	Attendance work depends on adults seeing absence as a signal to understand and support.
Coaching and Implementation	Schools naming coaching as the infrastructure that helps the work become consistent across classrooms.	Consistent adult practice is essential because attendance improvement requires a schoolwide response.

What the Data Shows: Chronic Absenteeism in Leader in Me Schools

The national attendance analysis used school-level chronic absenteeism rates from SchoolDigger for the 2022 through 2025 school years, retrieved in April 2026. Schools with black engagement status were excluded because they were exited schools and reliable exit timing was not available. Leader in Me records were included only when LiM Year Calc indicated an active Leader in Me year. The final national analytic sample included 2,381 Leader in Me Schools across 34 states with usable chronic absenteeism data.

2,381	6.57	76.2%
Leader in Me Schools in the national analytic sample	fewer chronically absent students per 100, estimated (2022 to 2025)	of same schools improved from 2022 to 2025

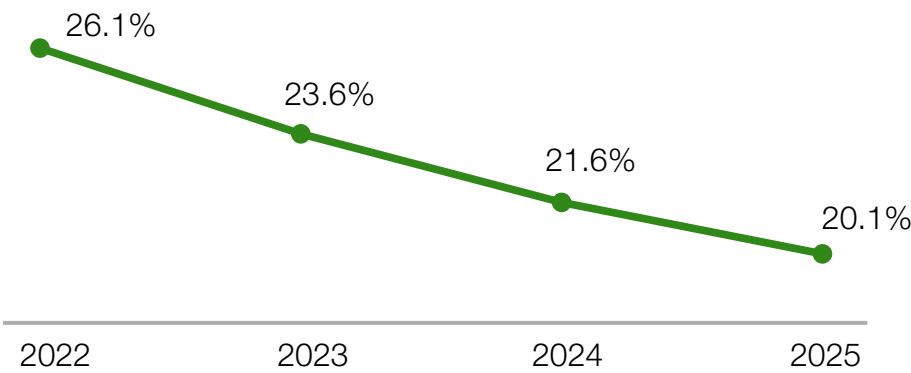
National Decline in Chronic Absenteeism Across Leader in Me Schools

Average chronic absence in Leader in Me Schools declined from 26.07 percent in 2022 to 20.11 percent in 2025. Said plainly, the average Leader in Me School moved from about 26 chronically absent students per 100 to about 20 per 100. A school fixed effects trend model estimated an annual decline of 2.19 percentage points, equal to an estimated three-year decline of 6.57 points (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Average chronic absence declined in Leader in Me Schools.

% of Students Chronically Absent



Source: SchoolDigger absenteeism data (2022–2025); FranklinCovey Education analyses. See Appendix A for methodology.

FIGURE 3

Year	Leader in Me Schools with Data	Average Chronic Absence
2022	1,396	26.07%
2023	1,774	23.61%
2024	2,235	21.59%
2025	1,924	20.11%

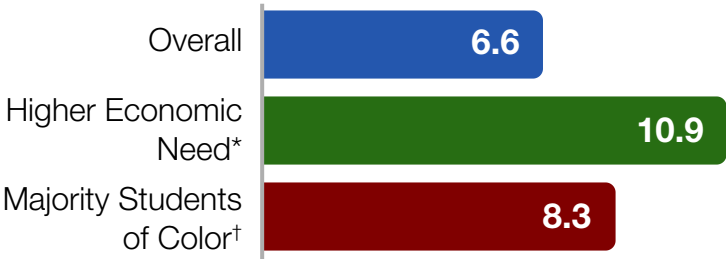
Schools Serving Higher-Need Communities Saw Largest Improvements

The largest improvement appeared in Leader in Me Schools serving communities with higher economic need, defined as schools where 75 percent or more of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. These schools improved by an estimated 10.94 points from 2022 to 2025. Schools where more than 50 percent of students were students of color improved by an estimated 8.31 points over the same period (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4

The largest absenteeism declines were in schools serving communities with high economic need.

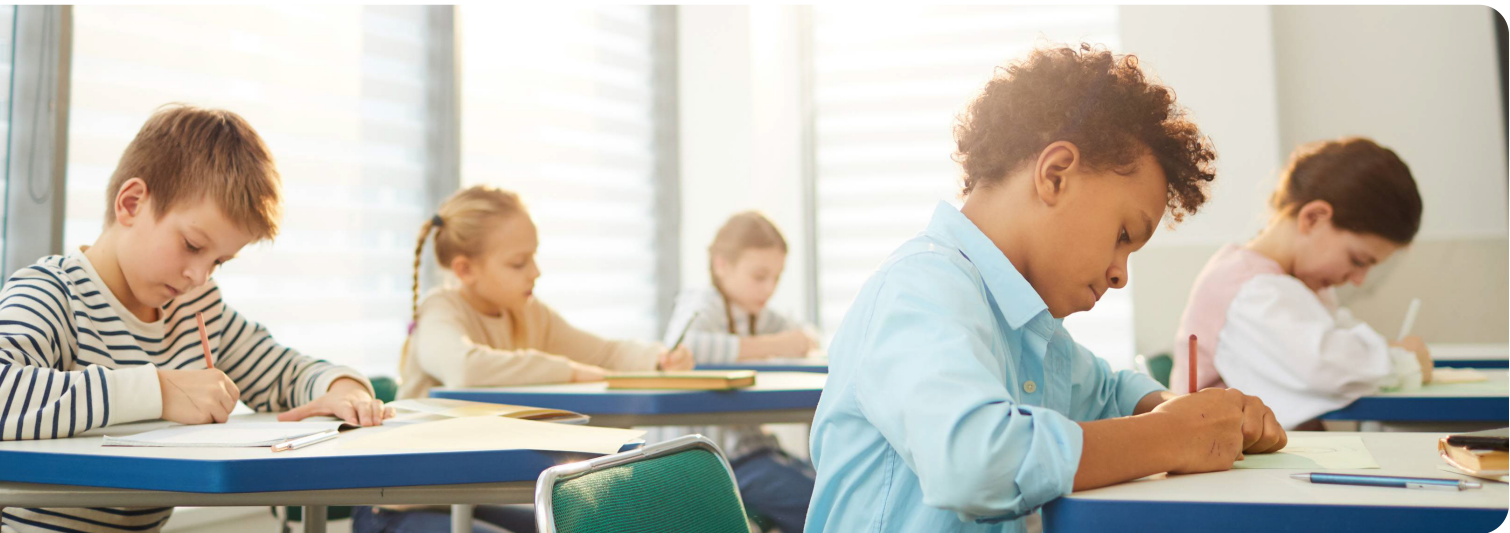
Estimated decline in points, 2022 to 2025



Source: SchoolDigger absenteeism data (2022–2025). Estimates derived from school fixed-effects trend models. See Appendix A.

*75% or more of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

†More than 50% of students identified as students of color.



Tracking the Same Schools Over Time

The paired same-school analysis follows schools with chronic absenteeism data in both 2022 and 2025. This approach compares each school with itself, making the results easier to interpret and reducing the risk that changes are driven by a different mix of schools across years.

Across 1,077 paired Leader in Me Schools, chronic absenteeism declined by 6.9 percentage points on average, with 76.2 percent of schools improving. The strongest movement appeared among the 322 paired Leader in Me Schools serving communities with high economic need, where chronic absenteeism declined by 11.8 percentage points on average and 87 percent of schools improved (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5

Group	Paired Schools	Average (2022)	Average (2025)	Average Improvement	Schools Improved
Overall	1,077	26.25%	19.33%	6.92 points	76.2%
Elementary	581	24.77%	17.76%	7.02 points	75.0%
Secondary	496	27.98%	21.16%	6.82 points	77.6%
Higher Economic Need*	322	35.72%	23.90%	11.82 points	87.0%
Majority Students of Color†	568	30.76%	21.87%	8.88 points	79.8%

*75% or more of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.
†More than 50% of students identified as students of color.

The result for schools serving communities with high economic need is especially meaningful because these schools began in the most challenging attendance context. Rather than reflecting a pattern of persistent disadvantage, the data show measurable progress against it: an 11.82 percentage-point decline, equal to nearly 12 fewer chronically absent students for every 100 students served.



Comparison with Non-Leader in Me Schools

A national comparison model tested whether Leader in Me Schools improved faster than non-Leader in Me schools during the national attendance recovery period (Figure 6). The model compared each school to itself over time and accounted for state-specific conditions in each year, helping isolate the Leader in Me attendance trend from broader national improvement.

Leader in Me Schools reduced chronic absenteeism 0.32 percentage points per year faster than comparison schools (Figure 7). This difference reflects added improvement beyond the attendance recovery already seen in comparison schools, after accounting for state and school-year conditions. In practical terms, the Leader in Me trend translates to about one-third fewer chronically absent students per 100 students each year, on top of the broader recovery trend.

FIGURE 6
Leader in Me Schools improved faster than comparison schools.
Annual decline in chronic absence in points per year



Source: SchoolDigger absenteeism data (2022–2025). Comparison analyses included more than 51,000 non-Leader in Me schools. See Appendix A.

FIGURE 7

Group	Leader in Me Schools	Comparison Schools	Leader in Me Advantage per Year	Result
Overall	2,381	51,183	0.32 points faster	Statistically significant
Elementary	1,212	18,265	0.28 points faster	Statistically significant
Higher Economic Need*	731	13,734	0.64 points faster	Statistically significant
Majority Students of Color†	1,297	25,791	0.43 points faster	Statistically significant

*75% or more of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.
†More than 50% of students identified as students of color.

How to Read the Evidence

The strongest evidence in this brief comes from three converging findings.

1. Chronic absenteeism in Leader in Me Schools declined substantially from 2022 to 2025.
2. The same schools with data in both years improved at a similar scale, making the trend easier to trust.
3. The national comparison model found that Leader in Me Schools improved faster than non-Leader in Me schools after adjusting for school characteristics and state-year conditions.

The pattern of improvement was strongest in the schools facing the most difficult attendance conditions. Leader in Me Schools improved during a difficult period for attendance recovery, with the largest reductions appearing in schools serving communities with high economic need. Because these schools began with the highest chronic absenteeism rates, the size and consistency of their improvement is especially meaningful.



What This Looks Like Inside the School

While quantitative findings demonstrate measurable improvements in attendance outcomes among Leader in Me Schools, qualitative interview findings help explain the school conditions and daily practices associated with those changes.

- Students described voice as a real part of the school. One high school student said, “Our voice is the foundation of our school.”
- Educators described students moving from being managed to being trusted with meaningful responsibility. One coach described schools releasing control and partnering with students so they could become part of the solution.
- School leaders described common language moving across classrooms, offices, student relationships, and family communication.
- Coaches and leaders described the role of implementation support as personal, relational, and essential to consistency across the building.

These patterns matter for attendance because students rarely return consistently to a place that feels anonymous. They return to a place where adults know them, peers rely on them, goals are visible, families hear from school, and students can see how their presence contributes to something larger than a seat count.



Implications for Leaders

The findings suggest several practical implications for leaders working to improve attendance outcomes through stronger culture, relationships, and systems of support.

- **Make attendance a school culture priority.** Treat absence as information about connection, support, barriers, and student experience rather than simply a compliance issue.
- **Respond early enough to interrupt the pattern.** Use attendance data in the first weeks of school to identify students who may need outreach, encouragement, or additional support.
- **Build the adult system behind the student experience.** Students benefit when teachers, administrators, counselors, and support staff share responsibility for noticing, welcoming, and following up.
- **Give students meaningful opportunities for contribution.** Student leadership, goal tracking, peer support, and shared responsibility help schools become places students actively help shape.
- **Choose implementation support that strengthens coherence.** Attendance improvement is most sustainable when schools use a coordinated approach that connects adults, students, families, and daily routines.



The findings across this brief reinforce a consistent message from the broader research base: attendance improves when schools strengthen the conditions that support connection, responsibility, and trust. In this way, chronic absenteeism reflects not only attendance patterns, but the overall health of a school community.

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Appendix A

Source Notes and Methodology

Figure 2: School-level chronic absenteeism data for U.S. public schools (2022–2025) were compiled from publicly available state education data by SchoolDigger and provided to FranklinCovey Education as a custom data export in April 2026. Analysis by FranklinCovey Education.

Figure 4: School-level chronic absenteeism data for U.S. public schools (2022–2025) were compiled from publicly available state education data by SchoolDigger and provided to FranklinCovey Education as a custom data export in April 2026. Estimates are derived from school fixed-effects trend models.

Figure 6: School-level chronic absenteeism data for U.S. public schools (2022–2025) were compiled from publicly available state education data by SchoolDigger and provided to FranklinCovey Education as a custom data export in April 2026. Comparison analyses included more than 51,000 non–Leader in Me schools.

Data Notes

Chronic absenteeism data came from SchoolDigger through an API that is updated four times a year, on the first business day of October, January, April, and July, and automatically updated in FranklinCovey Education's business intelligence tool. The analysis used data retrieved in April 2026.

Leader in Me analyses excluded schools identified with black engagement status, which indicated that the schools had exited the Leader in Me process. Because reliable exit dates were not consistently available, those records were removed from the analysis. Records were included only when LiM Year Calc showed an active year of Leader in Me implementation. The main analytic window was 2022 through 2025 because most schools had returned to in-person learning by this period and earlier years were not a stable baseline for many schools.

The findings are observational. Schools were not randomly assigned to Leader in Me, and unmeasured differences may remain. The report therefore avoids causal claims that would require random assignment. The strongest statement is that Leader in Me Schools showed meaningful national attendance improvement, with broad comparison models showing faster improvement than non-Leader in Me schools and matched models pointing in a favorable but inconclusive direction.

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