



Social and Emotional Learning and Student Attendance: Research and Policy Recommendations

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Abstract

Chronic absenteeism, which rose sharply during the pandemic, has remained persistently high post-pandemic, with detrimental consequences for students and schools. One aspect of absenteeism that is particularly challenging is the potential for absences to be self-reinforcing; missed school erodes relationships and academic confidence, which in turn could make future absences more likely. This brief argues that social and emotional learning (SEL) has the potential to address multiple root causes: weak relationships, low sense of belonging, and unsupportive school climates. Drawing on a growing evidence base, we show that SEL programming is associated with meaningful reductions in absenteeism, that relationship skills and educator-student trust are consistently linked to better attendance, and that school climate predicts absenteeism rates at scale. We then translate this evidence into policy recommendations for federal, state, and district leaders, including innovative legislative solutions, embedding SEL and climate measures into state accountability systems, eliminating exclusionary discipline practices that push students further from school, and equipping state education agencies to help districts treat attendance as part of a broader system of student support rather than a stand-alone metric.

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Introduction

Absenteeism is one of the most pressing challenges facing schools nationwide. Across the United States, the share of students characterized as chronically absent (i.e., missing 10 percent or more of school days) increased from approximately 15 percent before the pandemic to over 28 percent by 2022 (Malkus, 2026; [Return to Learn Tracker](#)). Rates have remained persistently high, with most states having a chronic absenteeism rate greater than 20 percent and no state having returned to pre-pandemic levels (Gee et al., 2025). **Progress on reducing chronic absenteeism has stalled across every grade in K-12, with chronic absence rates high even in cohorts of students across early elementary school whose schooling was not directly impacted by the pandemic (Malkus, 2026).** These patterns suggest that chronic absenteeism will not self-regulate to pre-pandemic rates over time.

Heightened rates of absenteeism are consequential and have implications for students, classrooms, schools, and school districts. Students who are frequently absent develop weaker socialization and reading skills and tend to exhibit lower grades, test scores, graduation rates, and college enrollment and completion (Gottfried, 2014). Importantly, each accumulated absence is associated with lower achievement, a pattern that is nearly as strong post-pandemic (Allensworth et al., 2025; Blazar et al., 2025). Therefore, every absence matters, whether students cross the chronic absence threshold or not. The linear relationship between absence and academic achievement points to two clear conclusions: (1) Early intervention matters; disrupting the cycle of absences will mitigate achievement losses and (2) it is never too late to intervene; catching students at any point during the cascade is better than never reaching them at all.

Additionally, absences impact all students. Missing students disrupt the creation of class culture, and teachers have less time for all students when devoting time to work with students who have been absent (Blazar et al., 2025). Finally, for many, high rates of absenteeism impact school and district resources. As of publication, 22 states have funding calculations based on seat count(s),¹ while an additional six fund schools based on average daily attendance (Fischer & Duncombe, 2024), meaning that schools with lower attendance are at heightened risk for receiving lower funding than those with higher attendance. This reduces the funding a district needs to address everyday operations as well as to implement initiatives to address absenteeism itself. In other words, schools and districts struggling with student attendance miss out on the financial resources to address barriers for students and families.

The relationship between attendance and funding illustrates part of what makes the problem of absenteeism so pernicious: The ease of entering cycles that become self-perpetuating. Students who miss school, for example, miss opportunities to make friends or have their teacher get to know them, making them feel less connected and therefore less likely to attend in the future. In addition, as students fall behind on work, they tend to feel more incapable of meeting academic expectations and begin to give up on making the effort.

The cyclical nature of absenteeism—and the potential for these cycles to be mutually reinforcing—makes it a particularly difficult issue to solve. As such, many efforts to address absenteeism have

¹ The number of students in seats on "count day(s)."

only had small-to-moderate effects. For example, attempts to change behavior—e.g., through data teams and nudge letters—are helpful in creating awareness and, when framed well, encourage attendance, but they do not mitigate root causes of why students are absent, and they do not provide solutions to improve learning or social losses already set in motion through prior absences (Mac Iver et al., 2022; Rogers & Feller, 2018).

An effective solution must break into this self-perpetuating cycle by targeting root causes of absenteeism.

Recent research points to a strong candidate for an intervention: strengthening student connection and sense of belonging. Researchers found that substantial differences in attendance—among schools within the same neighborhood—were largely due to differences in school climate and connection, including feelings of safety, relationships with peers and teachers, and parent engagement (Allensworth et al., 2026). This echoes decades-long research on the transformative effects of positive school culture on student outcomes (Schaps et al., 2004; Solomon et al., 2000; Watson et al., 1997).

In this brief, we review literature and make policy recommendations for improving attendance by bolstering students' connection and belonging at school. We draw on social and emotional learning—the process through which young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2020)—to advance a systemic approach to improving student attendance and engagement by fostering connection, community, and engagement.

Social and Emotional Learning and Attendance

Social and emotional learning has a robust evidence base spanning several decades and providing evidence of positive impacts on myriad student outcomes including the development of social and emotional competencies, improving student well-being, and enhancing academic outcomes (e.g., Barnes et al., 2026; Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg, 2023; Ha et al., 2025; Taylor et al., 2017). A number of social and emotional learning programs have tracked attendance as a measured outcome, with findings showing that SEL programming reduces chronic absenteeism (Bos et al., 2022; Jones, 2015; Snyder et al., 2009) and results in a higher growth rate in attendance (Gage et al., 2025; Xia et al., 2022), with high-quality implementation in particular being associated with lower school absences (Gómez et al., 2023).

Additionally, correlational and data modeling suggest an important connection between social and emotional learning and attendance. In one study of more than 8,000 middle schoolers, students who showed meaningful growth in social-emotional competence over a single school year had 47.7 percent lower odds of being chronically absent than matched peers who did not grow, with the strongest effects for students who began with the weakest skills (Johnson et al., 2026). Additionally, 15-year-old students with higher levels of cooperation and emotional control were at least 15 times less likely to display chronic absenteeism (Yin et al., 2023). And a quasi-experimental data modeling approach indicated that social and emotional competencies—and particularly self-efficacy and self-management—have predictive validity for attendance, with an even stronger relationship post-pandemic (Meyer, 2025).

Fostering Relationships That Are Critical for Attendance

One social and emotional competency that stands to make a sizable difference in attendance is relationship skills (**Figure 1**). Social and emotional learning programs and practices help students develop the skills needed to nurture connections with others. Those connections are imperative for attendance. Peer relationships, school connectedness, and student-teacher trust were more important for attendance post-pandemic than they were pre-pandemic (Allensworth et al., 2026). Practices and programs that target relationships (e.g., through mentorship initiatives) have been particularly successful in increasing student attendance and reducing chronic absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018; Berman, 2023; Search Institute, 2025; Yeager, 2024). Teachers who show care and respect for their students, respond to their interests, and take their perspectives seriously enable students to experience their presence as valued and consequential, motivating them to attend (Sprick & Berg, 2019).

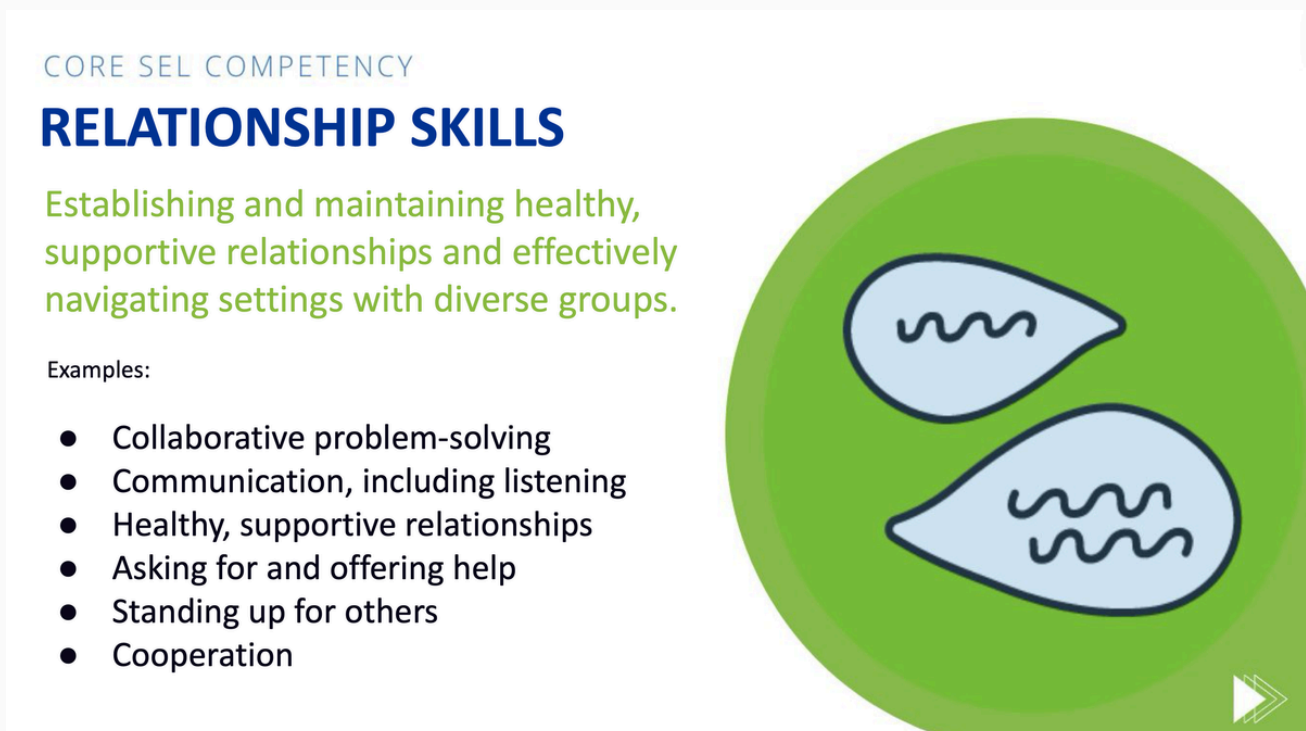


Figure 1. SEL core competency: Relationship Skills

When centering relationships, social and emotional learning is essential for the educators and other adults in the school context, given the strong evidence that educator-student relationships improve through social and emotional learning (Baroody et al., 2014; Berger et al., 2022; Hwang et al., 2019). There appear to be diverse pathways to improving educator-student relationships, with specific social and emotional competencies—such as empathy—playing a larger role in some contexts more than others (Aldrup et al., 2022; Zee & Koomen, 2016). Stronger relationships and relationship skill-building can go hand-and-hand, with social and emotional learning supporting both (Domitrovich et al., 2022). But educator preparation programs do not consistently provide relevant curriculum and training (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017), and the current educational environment poses a risk to these relationships, for example, with teacher burnout eroding educator-student relationships (Wartenberg et al., 2026). Systemic solutions that address culture and climate create conditions that support students and educators in building these relationships.

Creating Conditions to Improve School Culture and Climate

One of the pillars of social and emotional learning is reflecting on, and improving, the culture and climate of a school (**Figure 2**; [CASEL SchoolGuide](#)). Research has long-recognized that the culture and climate of a school community is a driver of regular student attendance (deJung & Duckworth, 1986; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Rumberger, 1987). When school climates are characterized by physical and emotional safety, positive peer relationships, and active parent-teacher partnerships, middle- and high-school students are more likely to attend (Allensworth, 2026; Graham et al., 2026). For example, using statewide data from Georgia middle and high school students, aggregated student-reported school climate significantly predicts school-level absenteeism rates, with the relationship strongest for Black students and White students (Graham et al., 2026). These aspects of the school environment showed even greater effects post-pandemic than the demographic or socioeconomic characteristics of their neighborhood (Allensworth et al., 2026), and latent profile analyses show that schools in which students report climate-related challenges see higher rates of chronic absence (Van Eck et al., 2017).



Figure 2. Schools and classrooms are key settings for SEL implementation and culture building.

These findings reflect the powerful impact of creating a “caring community of learners” (Schaps et al., 2004; Solomon et al., 2000; Watson et al., 1997). A community is realized when students feel that they: (1) belong and feel cared for and valued; (2) are accomplishing worthwhile goals, acquiring meaningful skills, and becoming effective and competent; and (3) have autonomy to act on their own initiative rather than in response to outside pressures. Part of cultivating this type of community is educators and parents understanding developmental science (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Environments are grounded in a collaborative developmental framework see lower absenteeism (Borman et al., 2002; Gravel et al., 2007). On the flip side, schools whose structures, relationships, and norms are not supportive are more likely to see negative student behaviors such as violence and peer victimization alongside higher levels of absenteeism and lower achievement (Astor et al., 2010).

When schools intentionally improve culture and climate, they have the potential to create a protective buffer that mitigates the effects of other influential conditions such as poverty, housing instability, and other family factors. Indeed, schools that have targeted culture and climate see notable gains in attendance (Berman, 2023; Young et al., 2026). Importantly, the culture and climate of the school are within a school's and district's control.

Teachers and administrators underestimate their role in addressing attendance issues, often placing the onus on parents (Plate, 2026), and parents themselves report that attendance is their responsibility (Newall & Rollason, 2024). However, educators and administrators are more likely to recognize their role in shaping school culture, a promising route to empower educators in addressing attendance issues (Plate, 2026).

Further, positive outcomes for students are maximized when schools and families work together. Teacher-parent trust and parent involvement in school were each more strongly related to attendance post-pandemic for middle- and high-school students (Allensworth et al., 2026). Additionally, in schools where family engagement was strong, researchers found a 39 percent smaller increase in post-pandemic chronic absenteeism, equating to 6.2 percent reduction in chronically absent students (Bergman & Riddick, 2026). Indeed, the relationship between family engagement and chronic absenteeism was stronger than the relationship between poverty and chronic absenteeism. Researchers further examined the characteristics of strong family engagement, revealing relational and mindset factors that educators and administrators can promote: (1) belief that families are equal partners with educators in helping students succeed, (2) leaders developing a clearly communicated vision for family engagement, (3) proactive, consistent, and persistent communication with families, and (4) personal connections with students and families beyond the academic year and space.

In the introduction, we noted that absenteeism is a more persistent and intractable problem because cycles have the potential to self-perpetuate. The solutions have the potential to do the same, but with positive effects. For example, transforming the school culture and climate can promote attendance while also providing support to address learning losses, cutting out a root cause of chronic absenteeism (Daily et al., 2020).

Policy

Policymakers at the federal, state, and district levels can improve attendance by creating accountability structures, providing resources, strengthening data systems, and enabling schools to address the root causes of chronic absenteeism. Together, these policies shape the environment in which states, districts, and schools develop and implement attendance strategies.

Federal

The federal government can establish priorities, provide resources, and build the data systems needed to address chronic absenteeism and inform state and local efforts. In Congress, for example, the recently introduced All in For Attendance Act ([H.R. 9320, 119th Congress](#)) would elevate evidence-based approaches to address chronic absenteeism by explicitly identifying strategies such as “social and emotional learning strategies and programs aimed at strengthening

student relationships, ... improving sense of belonging, and cultivating a more inclusive school culture and climate,” as well as restorative justice practices. And when Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2015, they helped create accountability around attendance by establishing the school quality and student success (SQSS) indicator as part of state accountability systems, and suggested chronic absenteeism as a potential measure (see below for more information on state uptake of this measure), creating an avenue for states to incorporate measures of attendance and chronic absenteeism into their accountability frameworks.

The Department of Education (ED) can also strengthen the data and evidence base needed to understand chronic absenteeism and inform state and local responses. This includes establishing clearer definitions around attendance and chronic absenteeism for states and districts to use consistently. Although federal data collection and reporting have historically provided a picture of attendance trends across states and student groups (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2024), additional data and research are needed to better understand the conditions associated with and impacting absenteeism and identify effective responses. Finally, ED’s What Works Clearinghouse can also highlight best practices to strengthen attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism.

State

At the state level, policymakers have considerable authority to build on the federal policy environment, accountability structures, and data, while developing their own concrete policies to improve attendance. Legislatures have taken up chronic absenteeism in recent sessions, particularly since the pandemic. They have taken a variety of approaches, including enhancing data collection, increasing outreach services, improving parental notification, restricting punitive practices related to absenteeism, and addressing transportation problems (Milligan, 2024; DiMarco, 2024 & 2025; Moon, 2026).

As legislators continue to face attendance concerns, it is critical that they provide financial resources to districts and schools to support attendance improvement (as New Mexico did in 2024²); continue the shift away from exclusionary discipline based solely on a students’ absenteeism (as Indiana did in 2025); establish pilot programs that help districts identify root causes of absenteeism and address students’ individual needs and sense of belonging (as Minnesota did in 2024); and fund community partnerships that emphasize connecting students to behavioral and physical health supports (as legislators in Washington State proposed in 2025).

States can take an additional step by explicitly recognizing the role of social and emotional learning in improving student attendance. For example, a 2026 bill introduced in Mississippi in 2026 (H.B. 231) sought to require school districts identified as “high priority” for dropout prevention and attendance to assess their practices and policies, including those related to students’ acquisition of behavioral, social, and emotional skills. A bill passed in Illinois in 2025 (S.B. 407) established a Chronic Absenteeism Task Force with the requirement that it include an expert in “social-emotional issues” and make recommendations regarding a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) that promotes ongoing professional development.

² The New Mexico Legislature appropriated \$5 million for “attendance improvement interventions, including evidence-based programs to train educators on social emotional skills and self-regulation...”

States also have a responsibility to build accountability systems that make attendance data visible and actionable. This includes measuring attendance in ways that identify issues early, tracking trends over time, and providing schools with information that is usable and understandable. Oregon, for example, enacted legislation in 2026 requiring the state education agency (SEA) to publicly report school district attendance data four times per year, providing more timely information for schools, districts, families, and policymakers to identify and respond to attendance trends.

States, alternatively, can elect to include attendance and/or chronic absenteeism as an SQSS measure. This can support states' ability to better investigate the conditions associated with absenteeism and take a more systemic approach to improving student attendance. Although 36 states and the District of Columbia (DC) include attendance and/or chronic absenteeism as an SQSS indicator, just three (Illinois, Maryland, and Montana) also include school climate (Erwin & Bloomquist, 2024). Taken together, these measures can help to examine both attendance outcomes and the conditions that affect them, such as student engagement, sense of belonging, and relationships.

Effective attendance policy, however, requires attention not only to the conditions that increase attendance, but also to existing policies that may be undermining attendance, students' sense of belonging, and connection to school. According to a 2025 23-state scan conducted by EdTrust, many states have yet to “eliminate harmful discipline practices that contribute to chronic absenteeism” (e.g., suspensions for disrespect, minor disruptions, and other non-violent behaviors).

Room for growth also remains in replacing such practices with supportive discipline practices that “keep students connected to learning and contribute to their social [and] emotional development.” This is a critical foundational step for policymakers, as research has shown that exclusionary discipline not only removes students from instructional time, but that more severe exclusionary discipline can also negatively affect middle and high school students' attendance for one to four years after an incident (LiCalsi et al., 2021).

Finally, SEAs also play an important role in translating attendance policies and accountability requirements into effective practice. SEAs can provide technical assistance and professional learning to help districts use attendance data to identify patterns, understand root causes, and develop tiered supports for students experiencing or at risk of chronic absenteeism. They can also provide model policies (e.g., Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, 2025) and tools, facilitate communities of practice among districts, and identify and disseminate promising approaches.

Importantly, SEAs can help districts align attendance efforts with broader systems of student support, including school climate, social and emotional learning, and MTSS, rather than treating attendance as a stand-alone issue. This approach can help districts move beyond simply identifying which students are absent toward understanding the conditions that contribute to absenteeism—and building the relationships, supportive environments, and targeted supports that help students attend and remain engaged in school.

Local

School boards and districts can also use their policies and other local decision-making tools to establish how schools work to improve attendance. Board policies can establish clear attendance expectations, supportive approaches to addressing absenteeism, and limits on punitive or exclusionary responses. These policies can then be reflected in school-level procedures, student and family handbooks, discipline policies, and school improvement plans. Districts can also establish shared processes for regularly reviewing attendance data, connecting students to tiered supports through MTSS, engaging families and communities in two-way communication and decision-making, and identifying and addressing root causes of barriers that impact regular attendance.

Conclusion

Chronic absenteeism will not be solved by treating it as an isolated compliance problem. Instead, we should examine it as a symptom of deeper conditions such as weak relationships, low sense of belonging, and unsupportive school climates. Identifying and addressing underlying conditions have the potential to more effectively break the cycle and create schools as places students want to attend. The evidence reviewed here makes clear that social and emotional learning offers a viable path forward, not as a replacement for attendance policy but as its foundation: strengthening the adult and peer relationships, school culture, and academic engagement that students hunger for will result in students wanting to show up in the first place.

Policymakers and education practitioners at every level have a role to play, whether through implementing programs and policies that promote positive school cultures, embedding climate and belonging measures into accountability systems, eliminating harmful discipline practices, or giving districts the tools and technical support to treat attendance as part of a coherent system of student support. Just as the causes of absenteeism compound over time, so too can the solutions—and a sustained, systemic investment in connection and belonging offers one of the clearest ways to turn that cycle in a more positive direction.

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