

COVID-19 Impact Memo

Promising Practices In Education

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to all levels of education that could impact student outcomes for months and possibly years ahead. The SCORE series of COVID-19 Impact Memos analyzes challenges, examines emerging innovations and research-supported practices, and highlights student-centered approaches for educators to consider.

Addressing Chronic Absenteeism And Reengaging Students

Summer 2021

A new school year has just begun, and school leaders continue to grapple with challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Chronic absenteeism and a lack of engagement with learning are two pressing challenges that must be addressed to accelerate learning, especially for students from historically underserved groups.

Last year, schools across the country saw a significant rise in the number of students who were chronically absent. Tennessee defines chronic absenteeism as missing 10 percent or more of the instructional days of the school year. In Tennessee, five districts in SCORE's COVID-19 Innovative Recovery Network (CIRN) found students attending school at significantly lower rates than the previous year. Data from these districts reveal the following trends:

- **One-fifth** of students across all five districts were considered chronically absent by the end of the fall 2020 semester.
- From fall 2019 to fall 2020, there was an **88 percent** increase in chronic absence among elementary students, a **92 percent** increase in chronic absence among middle school students, and a **33 percent** increase among high school students.
- High schools still had the highest chronic absenteeism overall with **28 percent** of students being chronically absent in fall 2020.

In addition to introducing challenges that prevented some students from attending school regularly, COVID-19 also introduced challenges that prevented students from fully engaging with classroom instruction and other learning supports — even when they were present for in-person learning or virtual instruction. Schools must use innovative planning to support consistent attendance and meaningfully reengage students as they return for the fall 2021 semester.

Student Perspectives

Last spring, SCORE partnered with five districts to conduct focus groups with high school students who were “critically absent” — a term we defined as missing 20 percent or more of instructional days. We developed focus group questions to get feedback on eight key drivers of engagement.

Drivers Of Engagement	
Access	Do students have the instructional and/or technological resources needed to meet school expectations?
Clarity	Do students understand what is expected of them and how to deliver on it?
Connections	Do students feel connected to their school communities and the students and adults in it?
Environment	Do students have an environment conducive to learning?
Learning Supports	Do students have the academic supports they need to meet grade-level expectations?
Relevance	Do students see reason and purpose in their school experience?
Social-Emotional	Are students in an emotional and mental place to engage in learning?
Time	Do students have sufficient time to meet school expectations?

Across all five districts, we conducted twelve focus groups and heard from more than seventy students. Four key themes emerged from the perspectives shared by these students:

- ◆ **Connections to peers and teachers impact student engagement as much as or more than environment.** With students learning at home and in socially distanced classrooms last school year, group work and social interactions were limited. Even when all students were brought back to schools for in-person classes, students expressed that this return did not fully repair the feeling of connectedness to their peers.
- ◆ **When disengaged students believe their teacher is invested in their success, they report a stronger sense of self-efficacy and are more motivated to complete their work and improve their grades.** The focus groups raised questions to try to unearth why students were so disengaged during the last school year, more so than in past years. When asked how connected students felt to adults in their buildings this year, one student remarked, "There's no relationships or bonds between the teachers and the students this year. Last year, they had the connections and took the effort. I just think they're really stressed out now."
- ◆ **When students feel disconnected from structural supports at home or at school, it impacts their social-emotional development.** When we asked students how they would rate communication from their district and schools, aside from the timeliness of the messages received, they said the calls, texts, and emails they received were clear. However, complications arose when students either had questions or had to leverage existing skills and competencies to manage their time and finish their coursework. When we asked students what the hardest part of this year was, one student said, "All we do is online work without anyone to help you. You have to depend on yourself, but you can't learn from yourself."
- ◆ **Students experience barriers to engagement when they feel the relevance of school is short-term and disconnected from their post-graduation plans.** During the pandemic, in both virtual and in-person instructional models, students struggled to find relevance in the work that they were assigned. This may have been true for some students prior to COVID, but, like other educational concerns, it was only exacerbated by the lack of group work,



diverse learning experiences, social interaction, and conversations with teachers and counselors about their future.

To learn more about the stories and themes we heard from students, read the SCORE white paper [**“A Student Perspective On Chronic Absenteeism.”**](#)

Strategies For Addressing Chronic Absenteeism And Reengaging Students

To address chronic absenteeism and increase engagement with learning, school leaders should consider implementing one or more of the following strategies this fall:

- ◆ **Develop support systems that nurture authentic connections and support social-emotional development and well-being at school.** This starts with positively reengaging chronically absent students — sending a nonpunitive message that they are welcome members of the school community.
 - **Positively reengage chronically and critically absent students.** Proactively reach out to families for students with excessive absences and encourage them to return to school. Lead with positive messaging, setting a tone that schools want to restore a relationship, not punish a behavior.
 - **Provide structured advising or mentoring.** Find time to authentically connect with students to build relationships. This could take place through academic advisory or mentoring programs that help students connect and grow.
 - **Assess and address students’ needs.** Prepare staff to connect students who have experienced trauma with appropriate supports.
- ◆ **Provide systemwide structures that prepare teachers to build strong partnerships with students and families and communicate high expectations for all students.** Engage students and families in dialogue about their experience. Open a line of communication with teachers about supporting students’ well-being at school as they accelerate learning.
 - **Design and administer a reengagement survey.** Capture the perceptions of all students about returning to school. Identify trends and plan short- and long-term goals to address concerns. Administer brief follow-up surveys as needed to ensure progress and plan next steps.
 - **Educate staff about emotional well-being and targets of social interactions.** Outline practices that will support consistent actions for all teachers to address students’ concerns and to support them in building out high expectations for all students.
 - **Ensure frequent communication between home and school.** Plan to keep students and parents informed regarding schedules, changes in structures, and new procedures. Send messages via email, automated message, and share on social media platforms. Conduct periodic focus groups with students and families to hear stories and identify opportunities for stronger partnership.
- ◆ **Encourage student agency in course offerings to align with career goals.** Ask students about their interests and goals early, help them explore careers, and find innovative ways to match interests with course offerings.
 - **Empower students to share their voices with course offerings.** Begin advising early and know where each student is in their thinking about what they will do after they graduate. Enact a student council designed to advocate for student courses and choices that interest them when funding allows.
 - **Improve clarity for students and families about postsecondary opportunities and student progress toward those opportunities.** School counselors should meet with students and their families at least annually to create and monitor career and



education goals as a part of the High School and Beyond planning process. High school students should be encouraged to use the [CollegeforTN](#) platform to explore postsecondary opportunities.

- **Plan future ready options.** Increase exposure to high-quality career pathways by ensuring all students have access to rigorous coursework that is part of one of Tennessee's 16 career clusters.
- ◆ **Institute restorative policies that give students viable pathways to improve GPA and attendance records.** Consider potential careers paths of critically absent students and identify GPA, attendance, and course barriers they face because of COVID. Consider their feelings about coming back to school and what it will take for them to successfully rejoin the school community.
 - **Implement restorative grading policies.** In addition to credit recovery courses, schools should have clear policies for completing missed assignments and could consider long-term shifts towards mastery-based grading systems.
 - **Minimize referrals to and the effects of truancy court.** Ensure that a multitiered system of intervention for chronic absenteeism includes the student, family members, teachers, staff, and mentors before making a referral to truancy court.
 - **Engage community members when revising policies.** Include staff, students, and families in the development of new policies, clearly communicate changes, and adjust course based on feedback.

Last year, the COVID-19 pandemic presented significant barriers to student attendance and engagement with learning. To address these barriers school leaders should prioritize implementing strategies to assess students' academic and nonacademic needs and to foster positive student-staff relationships. This is a first step to ensuring students, particularly those who have been most adversely affected by the pandemic, have the support needed to succeed this school year.

