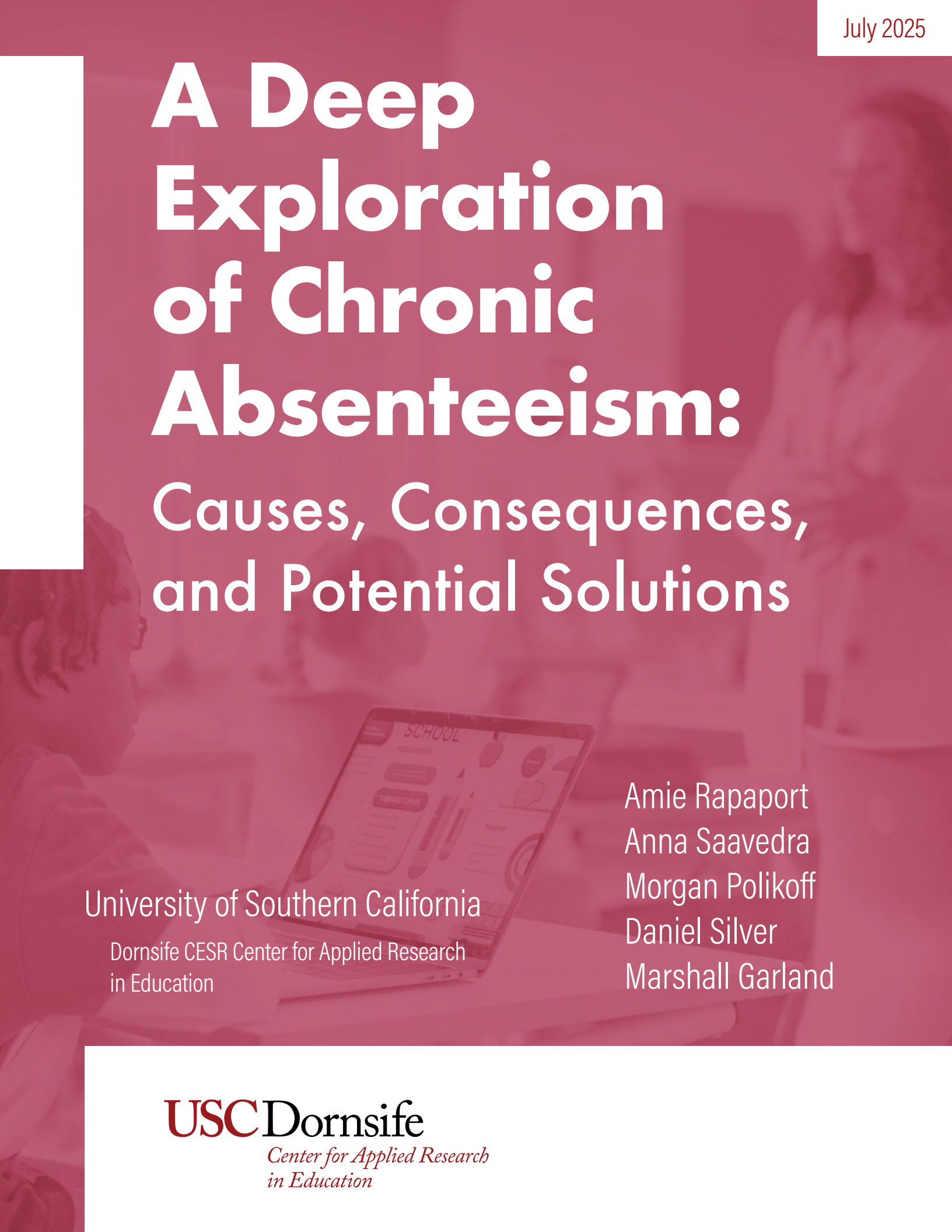
July 2025

A Deep Exploration of Chronic Absenteeism:

Causes, Consequences, and Potential Solutions



Amie Rapaport
Anna Saavedra
Morgan Polikoff
Daniel Silver
Marshall Garland

University of Southern California

Dornsife CESR Center for Applied Research in Education

USC Dornsife
Center for Applied Research in Education

We are grateful to the **Center for Reinventing Public Education** and the **Walton Family Foundation** for their financial support, while also acknowledging the opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this material are the authors', and do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation. The authors assume full responsibility for the accuracy of the report's contents.

Many thanks to the **Understanding America Study (UAS)** administration team, including **Marco Angrisani**, **Jill Darling**, **Bart Orriens**, and **Bas Weerman**, for supporting our survey's administration, and to **Arie Kapteyn** and **Tania Gutsche** for their overall leadership of the UAS panel.

Special thanks in this volume to **Lila Rabinovich**, **Tabasa Ozawa**, **Mark Gonzalez**, and the **UAS helpdesk** for scheduling and conducting interviews. Finally, to the 40 **Understanding America Study panelists** who participated in our interviews, we could not do this work without you; we are so grateful for your time and thoughtful responses.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Rapaport, A., Saavedra, A.R., Polikoff, M., Silver, D., & Garland, M.W. (2025). *A deep exploration of chronic absenteeism – causes, consequences, and potential solutions.* Volume I. Beyond the Numbers: Parent Perspectives on Absenteeism. University of Southern California. https://dornsife.usc.edu/cesr/care

CONTENTS

Introduction

Chronic Absenteeism

Decades of research have established a clear link between student absences and negative student outcomes: lower grades and standardized test performance, higher drop-out rates in high school, and poor long-term social and economic consequences. In short, missing school harms children.

Pre-COVID, absenteeism was already widely viewed as problematic, branded "a national crisis" by the U.S. Department of Education. While absenteeism was a challenge even before the pandemic, the percentage of students missing a meaningful amount of school – 10%, or approximately 18 days – has surged since. Roughly a decade ago, about 15% of students met this threshold, referred to frequently as "chronic absenteeism." By the 2023-34 school year, that figure had doubled to nearly 30% (Future Ed, 2024). The burden is not evenly distributed, with marginalized student populations, particularly those living in poverty, experiencing the highest levels of absenteeism and the most pronounced increases. These rates have only come down modestly since their peak in 2022-23.

Extensive research over the decades has identified key drivers of absenteeism, and numerous frameworks have been proposed to explain the reasons for student absence. For instance, the nonprofit Attendance Works organizes the root causes of absenteeism into four categories:

- **Barriers**: systemic and structural features that impede attendance.
- **Aversion**: situations that lead students to want to avoid school.
- **Disengagement**: students not engaged in or valuing of their educational experience.
- **Misconceptions**: faulty beliefs about the importance or effects of attendance.

Most school systems are implementing strategies aimed at restoring attendance to pre-pandemic levels. One study reported 93% of school leaders surveyed implemented at least one new approach in 2024. Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have developed numerous tools to assist schools, including Future Ed's comprehensive "Attendance Playbook," which catalogs more than two dozen approaches to reducing absenteeism. Yet progress remains slow, and uneven – some districts have reported success, others are struggling to find effective levers. Despite widespread adoption of attendance-focused initiatives, and tools and resources available, still approximately one in four students are missing 10% of school annually, with the highest rates of absenteeism among low-income, high-need students.

So why is absenteeism proving to be such an intractable problem? A critical limitation lies in the data typically used to explore its prevalence and causes. Most district- and state-level systems classify absences simply as "excused" or "unexcused"– a distinction that can obscure underlying causes rather than clarify them. For example, the same illness may be categorized as excused if the family produces a doctor's note, but unexcused without the note. District records provide no differentiation between school days missed for a family vacation versus a child needing to take care of an ill sibling. Meaningfully different causes of absences are simply not recorded. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to identify potential levers to lower absenteeism.

Our Study

Between January 2025 and July 2026, our mixed-methods study will be: a) strengthening the evidence base documenting root causes of absenteeism, the prevalence of those causes, and for which students; b) examining how individual and family characteristics relate to absenteeism patterns; and c) informing the design of effective attendance interventions.

We are addressing these objectives by surveying and interviewing parent[1] and teen panelists from the Understanding America Study (UAS), a nationally representative, probability-based online panel demonstrated to produce high-quality, reliable estimates of measured constructs.

This report is the first volume in a three-volume series, so that we may share results as they become available. Results across the three volumes will address a pressing policy need by determining which interventions have the potential to reduce absenteeism rates nationwide. Featured in this document, interviews with panel members provide a rich, in-depth understanding of today's attendance context, inform the development of survey questions, and provide detailed examples that will help illustrate and explain later quantitative findings. In Volume II, forthcoming in fall 2025, we will share nationally representative estimates from UAS surveys quantifying the prevalence of different absence reasons, as well as perspectives on attendance interventions, overall and by key student subgroups. In spring 2026, Volume III will present results from leveraging the UAS panel's randomization capacity to learn how different policies may affect the attendance behaviors, both anticipated and actual, of parents and teens.

[1] We use the term "parents" here, but we include any adult household member responding on behalf of a child in the household. In approximately 70% of cases, this individual is a parent; in 20% it is a grandparent, and the remainder tends to be older siblings or other family members.

Volume I.
Beyond the Numbers: Parent Perspectives on Chronic Absenteeism

Volume I Summary

Chronic absenteeism has emerged as a pressing educational challenge, exacerbated by norms and policies that developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite widespread efforts, high levels of absenteeism persist, with more than a quarter of U.S. students missing 10% or more school days annually. This qualitative report aims to deepen understanding of the current drivers of absenteeism; these results are part of a larger mixed-methods study designed to understand absenteeism's root causes, the prevalence of those causes and for which students, and inform the design of effective interventions for raising/improving school attendance.

In this report, we summarize themes that emerged across 40 in-depth interviews with parents across varied demographic groups. Conversations about reasons for their child's absences in the previous school year revealed:

This qualitative report aims to deepen understanding of the current drivers of absenteeism …

- **Widespread, rigid return-to-school-after-illness policies and illness-sensitivity are increasing illness-related absences:** Nearly universal among interviewees, heightened post-pandemic illness sensitivity and strict school policies around illness are likely resulting in increased absences.
- **Disengagement and dissatisfaction:** Many perceive modern schooling as misaligned with student interests and real-world relevance.
- **Reduced value of in-person attendance:** After several pandemic learning years, students' continued use of online resources as well as changing norms have convinced many parents and students that physical attendance in school is less critical than it is.
- **Ease of "catching up":** The widespread availability of online materials and school norms for accessing missed work has led parents and students to underestimate the educational and social costs of absenteeism, as their experience is that catching up from absences is easy.

- **Shifting societal values:** Parents communicated a worrying cultural shift in which education itself has declined as a societal priority since COVID-19 closures, and so has consistent in-person school attendance.
- **Individualized factors:** Many high-absence cases were linked to specific, acute family circumstances (e.g., chronic illness, family crises), underscoring that broad interventions may overlook critical nuances.

From these insights, critical lessons emerge:

- **Schools must tailor responses,** directly engaging parents and students to understand and address specific attendance barriers.
- **Schools need to engage students** through fostering environments and curricula that are engaging, promoting attendance and increasing students' perceived value of in person learning.
- **Communication strategies** addressing absenteeism must be respectful, personalized, and sensitive, avoiding stigma or generic messaging.
- **Reevaluation of illness policies** may be necessary to balance health considerations with practical attendance outcomes.

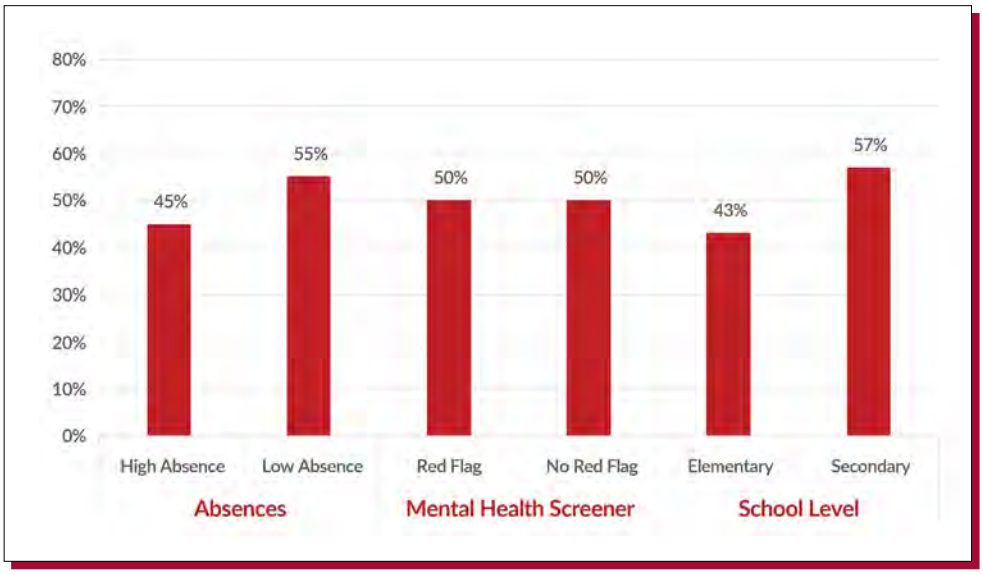
These findings are valuable to informing strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism, while also providing an essential foundation for our ongoing survey-based research into the prevalence of absence reasons across different student groups.

Research Approach

Our interview approach leveraged the Understanding America Study (UAS) – a probability-based, nationally representative panel of U.S. residents invited to participate in surveys and interviews every month, if not more often. Drawing from the rich history of data previously collected from UAS families, we selectively sampled 40 UAS households as follows:

- **Chronic absence:** Half our interviews came from households with a child whose parent had reported in a prior survey administration that they had 16 or more absences during the 2023-24 school year[2]; the other half had fewer absences.
- **Mental Health:** We chose half the families because a child in the household scored high on one or more dimensions of a standardized mental health screener[3] administered in January 2024; in the other half of the families, the child did not score high on any dimension.
- **Grade level and gender:** We sought roughly equal representation of elementary (K–5) and secondary (6–12) students, and an even gender balance (43% male, 57% female).[4]

FIGURE 1. COMPOSITION OF INTERVIEW SAMPLE – CHILD LEVEL



[2] The 16 or more child absences are according to parent self-reports of the child's number of days absent. Future research will examine the extent to which parent reports of child's absences align to school records.

We talked to 40 parents from 40 school districts across 17 states, representing a wide range of geographic regions, school policies, and contexts. Twenty-two of the 40 families identified as White, eight as Hispanic, seven as Black/African American, one as Asian, and two describe their race as "other." Households spanned a range of socio-economic backgrounds: one-third earn less than $50,000 annually, nearly 40% earn between $50,000 and $149,000, and 20% earn more than $150,000. Educational attainment and marital status also varied widely (Table 1).

TABLE 1. COMPOSITION OF INTERVIEW SAMPLE – HOUSEHOLD LEVEL

CHARACTERISTIC	PERCENT OF SAMPLE
Race	
Black/African American	**18% (n=7)**
White	**55% (n=22)**
Hispanic	**20% (n=8)**
Asian	**3% (n=1)**
Other	**5% (n=2)**
Marital Status	
Married	**70% (n=28)**
Divorce	**15% (n-6)**
Widowed	**3% (n=1)**
Never Married	**13% (n=5)**

CHARACTERISTIC	PERCENT OF SAMPLE
Household Income	
Less than $25k	**20% (n=8)**
$25k - $49k	**13% (n=5)**
$50k - $74k	**10% (n=4)**
$75k - $149k	**38% (n=15)**
Greater than $150k	**20% (n=8)**
Education	
High school or less	**10% (n=4)**
Some college	**43% (n=17)**
Bachelor's degree or more	**45% (n=18)**
Missing	**3% (n=1)**

[3] The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is a standardized "mental health" screener, scoring children on four problem domains: Emotional Symptoms (e.g., worries, fears, anxieties); Conduct Problems (e.g., lying, cheating, losing temper); Hyperactive/Inattentive (e.g., restless, fidgety, distracted); and Peer Problems (e.g., prefers being alone, is bullied or picked on).

[4] When a participant had multiple school-aged children, we selected one for them to reflect on and discuss with us.

We transcribed and thematically analyzed interviews to identify common themes and meaningful patterns of variation. The findings we report reflect ideas that emerged frequently and consistently, and are not outliers or isolated anecdotes.

This report shares what parents told us about why their children miss school, what makes it difficult to attend, and what might help improve attendance. These insights, grounded in lived experience, offer crucial context for interpreting attendance data and crafting policy responses. It would be impossible to learn these perspectives from administrative records or surveys alone.

Results

Anxiety and Conservatism About Illness: *"If you're sick, stay home."*

In our interviews, illness emerged as the most common reason parents gave for children missing school. No other reason came close. Illness was mentioned in nearly every interview (all but one[5]); typically, it was the first explanation offered. This pattern held for both chronically absent students and those with good attendance; for students flagged and not flagged on the screening measure for mental health; and for elementary- and secondary-aged students. Simply put, kids get sick.

Notably, parents often spoke of heightened sensitivity since the COVID pandemic to illness, and/or increased caution about sending their sick children to school. As one parent put it. *"I think parents are scared of the reactions of the [other] parent[s]. I think they're scared of what other people are going to think."* Another reflected on how norms have shifted: *"When I was younger, everyone would come to school sick or not. It would be, 'Get out. It's time for school, got to go.' Whereas now a lot of parents are keeping their kids home either in spite of them getting sick or the fact that they're sick and they don't want to spread it to other people."* We heard similar comments repeatedly, as another shared: *"They say nowadays if you're sick, stay home. At one time, it was like, if you're a little sick, you still went where you needed to go. Nowadays, you cough or sneeze, and people are like, 'Oh, you should have stayed home.'"*

Parents described being guided by caution. As one put it, *"The last thing you want is to share your sickness with others."* Another parent mentioned that people are *"paranoid about sicknesses,"* and will play it safe unless they know for sure the child is not contagious. Exemplifying the fear around contagion, one parent's philosophy is simply, *"So if we know he's not contagious, then fine. If we're not sure, we keep him home."*

Schools have reinforced this new cultural norm through consistent and explicit messaging of illness-related policies. Across our sample – from 17 different states and 40 different school districts – we heard about stringent rules requiring children be fever-free (or symptom-free) for 24, 48 or even 72 hours before returning to school. Examples included:

> *"And the school district will give out a notice in the beginning of the school year. 'If your child is not feeling well, if they have a fever, if you feel like they've got the flu, it's best to keep them home.'"*

[5] The one child who never missed school for illness suffered from significant behavioral issues. The school frequently asked the parent to keep the child home for a few days at a time following behavioral incidents.

> *"The school's had a policy that if you have a fever, you have to stay out of school for 24 hours without a fever before you're allowed to come back, and it's 48 hours if you've thrown up."*

> *"That's another thing that we would hear at school about sickness: If your child is sick – you know, runny nose, a cough, a fever – do not send your child to school."*

> *"Our requirements for being able to go to school when we're sick or not sick are very tight after COVID."*

Some parents welcomed these stricter policies, viewing them as necessary to protect their children from getting sick. One said simply: *"There is no reason to send a contagious kid to school, in my opinion."* Another voiced frustration at those who don't follow the rules:

> *"A lot of kids go to school when they're super-sick. And that's a huge problem that should be addressed. They have the flu or they have this weird disease or whatever… And so what happens is the other kids are gonna get sick. It's obvious…This past two months has been really hard because I send [my child]… Then she comes back and then she's super-sick. Then I send her back again to school. Again, someone's sick… Again, [my child] get[s] sick. Really? Do not send your kids when they're sick!"*

Yet not all parents agreed with the broad application of these policies. Some questioned whether keeping kids home for mild or non-contagious symptoms was necessary. One parent expressed skepticism, saying, *"I understand it's contagious but our kids wash their hands a hundred times a day… And if I'm not getting it [diarrhea] from them at home, I don't think it would be an issue at school. And also, running a fever and they are acting OK? A lot of times when you're running a fever, that means your body is fighting it off."* Parents described situations where children who felt well stayed home simply *"to be safe."*

These policies are clearly contributing to increased absences due to illness. Some parents made this link explicit: "*Those policies have also contributed to why, in the last two years, she's been out for sickness more… They had rules like that before, but it was just 24 hours for both… When you have daughters, they sometimes throw up because their menstrual cramps are so bad. Do they really need to be out for 72 hours for that? You know, it's just kind of a blanket policy… It's frustrating for her to miss when she's feeling fine, and she doesn't feel like she needed to miss."*

Whether these policies have succeeded in reducing the overall frequency and duration of child illness is a separate – and important – question. As we discuss later in this report, flu incidence has more than doubled in the past 10 years, so both the explanation for absences and more rigorous policies and norms monitoring its spread are rational. However, understanding the tradeoff is essential to evaluating how stricter absence policies affect student health and learning.

The Norm of In-person Attendance has Shifted: *"It doesn't even matter if a child is in the classroom." "Everything is online anyway."*

A central tenet of most education systems worldwide is that students must be in school to learn. A recent review of high-quality research shows that time spent in school has a significant impact on student learning, and that differences in time in school contribute meaningfully to educational inequality. It is common sense – but worth reiterating – that students who are not in school simply do not learn as much.

Yet this fundamental understanding of what defines "school" has been upended since the pandemic. With systems for remote learning now in place, and the normalization of work-from-home in other sectors, many families have internalized the message that students can learn just as well virtually (and even asynchronously) as they do in the classroom. This belief is almost certainly inaccurate, as evidenced by devasting impacts of pandemic-induced remote learning, as well as poor outcomes among virtual schools.

Some parents place the blame on schools for creating this norm. Continued virtual options reinforce the idea, even if inadvertently, that physical presence isn't essential. One parent noted that their school still offers *"some virtual classes."* Another described *"a day each semester where everyone stays home and does their e-learning day,"* calling it *"a waste of a day, even though it counts as a school day."* As one parent put it: *"So I don't even blame the kids if they don't feel like going on campus."*

The rapid shift to digital learning tools – online platforms, apps, 1:1 computing, remote learning models – has made it easy for students to access missed work. They can see assignments, view teacher notes and presentations, and sometimes even view recorded lectures (or YouTube videos the teachers post). Many parents reflected on this shift. One said: *"I think after COVID, it doesn't even*

matter if a child is in the classroom, because they put the agenda online and you can watch the lesson. Like teachers aren't really teaching as much anymore either." Another remarked, *"everything is online anyway"* so online schooling is *"a lot more… I don't want to say acceptable, but people don't think as much about it as I think they probably did before COVID."*

Students are Disengaged: *"Boring." "Irrelevant." "Drudgery."*

Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers often emphasize family- or child-level factors that contribute to poor attendance, such as transportation barriers, parent awareness of the importance of attendance, or parent lack of knowledge of their child's attendance patterns. However, many parents we spoke with pointed instead to school-related causes. We repeatedly heard that school is boring, irrelevant, unengaging, not hands-on, and/or that the curriculum is not sufficiently challenging. Rather than focusing on the child or the family, parents want schools to improve in ways that make students want to attend. As one parent lamented, *"It's not fitting the needs of our society anymore, and the kids are not engaged."*

Another parent likened today's schooling to *"a sweatshop,"* elaborating, *"It sounds terrible. It's horrible. But if you think about it, at least for a lot of kids, school is the same thing – but they don't even get money out of it; it's still this drudgery work that they have to do every day. So maybe we should think about, does our current K-12 education system fit a lot of kids, just normal kids, anymore?"*

Another parent made the careful differentiation between improving student presence versus improving student learning: *"If you're just talking about schools staying the same, the same expectations of kids, being in the classroom, and you just want to force them to be in there, you could do it, but you're not improving anything. You're not improving their education."*

Another criticized standardized testing and the all-encompassing focus of teaching to these tests: "*And I'm sorry to say that those stupid tests that are just worthless to me – that's what I think. They focus so much attention into, 'Oh, we need to teach them so that they could do good in that test.'… But I feel like they focus too much on that and they forget to teach the important things, the things that they're going to use in their life… It's taking away time from learning real things."*

Whatever the specific reasons – and they undoubtedly vary from school to school and child to child – interviewed parents communicated widespread student disengagement with school-based learning. Uncertain is whether this student disengagement stems from schools becoming less engaging or

failing to address shifts in students' needs and preferences, or students' own shifts in expectations for constant entertainment (e.g., as how their social media provides), or a combination of factors. What is clear, though, is the urgent need to better understand and respond to this crisis.

Students Can Easily Catch Up After Absences: *"She's able to bounce back."*

Almost all parents we spoke with described their children having an easy time catching up after absences. They attributed this to: helpful and supportive teachers; online apps and/or portals; children (typically older) who are conscientious or academically driven; and other kids (typically younger) who just love school. Only 10 families mentioned any challenges with catching up, and of those, just three said it was difficult to make up for lost classroom time.

On one hand, it's reassuring that students are not suffering when they miss school – especially given how many illness-driven absences simply are unavoidable. At best, helping students navigate missed classroom time are online platforms (e.g., Schoology, Google classroom), responsive teachers, and supportive families. We heard examples of teachers preparing homework packets in advance, or sending them home when students were sick. There were also many accounts of parents assisting with homework – particularly among younger children – as well as smart, driven students doing what needed to be done to stay on top of work, and (almost universal) use of online portals and apps for students to access what they need or what they missed. As one parent put it: "*Post-COVID, it's so much easier to make up your work, figure out what was missed – that it just it makes it less of a big deal to miss a school day."*

But the overwhelmingly consistent message of "easy to catch up" raises a key disconnect between parents' and experts' understanding of the consequences of absences. Parents believe absences do not have meaningful consequences, demonstrated through comments such as: *"He has the ability to catch up very quickly;" "I feel like it (absence) doesn't affect him much;" "She didn't have a problem with any work that she needs to make up;" "She understood it, knew how to do it, and it wasn't hard for her;" "She's able to bounce back and sponge up whatever she missed quite quickly;"* and *"Sometimes, it just doesn't feel like they're missing that much."*

In contrast, researchers consistently have documented, in multiple contexts, the various harms for children of missing in-person schooling. Missing school should be seen as a loss – not only from a learning perspective, but also from a social one. That so many parents seem to believe nothing is lost when students miss school poses a serious challenge to efforts aimed at encouraging attendance.

Cultural Devaluation of Education: *"Education has lost its priority in people's lives." "We don't value education at all."*

Attendance isn't only about the physical and logistical aspects of waking up, getting on the school bus (or walking/driving), and entering the school building. If it were, solutions to the chronic absenteeism crisis might be more straightforward, and progress swifter. Instead, we heard troubling perspectives from parents about deeper shifts in how education is valued today. As one parent put it, *"Education has lost its priority in people's lives,"* while another remarked, *"A lot of people don't value school the same as they did."* Several noted this post-pandemic decline in societal regard for schooling: *"I think, as a society, we value education very differently than we used to. And, so, I think some of that is reflected in the way absences are more acceptable."*

One interviewee described apathy about in-person attendance as *"a reflection of society's value for education right now… I think Americans do not value education, and I think that chronic absenteeism kind of just shows that."* Parents observed that school closures and the rise of remote learning during the pandemic sent a powerful and lasting signal: *"I think (COVID) made a statement, to both kids and parents, that school isn't that important – especially in places where schools were closed down a long time. Suddenly, people weren't as concerned about having the kids in school."*

Some parents questioned the very structure of traditional schooling: *"Eight hours of being in the classroom all day is really unnecessary,"* said one. Another reflected, *"The importance of going to school and being there every day was kind of taken away."* For a third, pandemic-era at-home learning led to deeper skepticism *"opening up the eyes of a lot of parents"* by showing them what was happening in classrooms. Parents were *"eavesdropping and seeing the classrooms and the structures, and what teachers were saying and doing."* This parent believes these glimpses fueled *"lost trust in the education system."*

Finally, parents pointed to shifting aspirations among students, shaped by a digital culture. One explained that children today think: *"'Well, I could be a Tik-Tok influencer. I could be a social media influencer. I could do certain things that don't require those… I could be a gamer.'"* As one parent put it, *"There are so many other things that you could be than go to college – 'Oh, I want to be an attorney. Oh, I want to be a doctor, or I want to be a teacher.' – that they don't hold value in those things anymore."*

Individual Circumstances: *"Focus on the individual—What is happening with this kid?"*

One of the biggest surprises in our conversations with the 40 families was the prevalence of what would typically be considered extreme, acute, chronic, or otherwise "outlier" situations that contributed to student absences. By definition, outliers or extreme events should be rare; we expected high rates of absences would be due to common struggles or barriers. But among the 20 families who reported high absences the prior year, more than half (60%) described some form of extreme event or circumstance that would not be considered common by any reasonable person. These included the death of a parent, loss of a home in a wildfire, a death in the family that required a months-long overseas trip, chronic and somewhat rare physical illnesses (e.g., cystic fibrosis, severe asthma), as well as severe psychiatric or psychological conditions requiring hospitalization.

Highly individualized circumstances like these do not lend themselves well to broad, generic interventions aimed at improving attendance. While schools may implement absence-notification systems or encourage attendance via small incentive programs, these strategies are unlikely to address the complex barriers described by many families.

Parents repeatedly emphasized that schools must *"get to the bottom of"* the reasons behind absenteeism, to learn *"the driver,"* and *"what is behind that,"* to *"focus on the individual,"* and "*find out what's happening."* Some parents expressed frustration that schools sometimes default to *"nagging," "pestering,"* or *"shaming"* parents, as well as *"labeling"* kids, rather than working to understand and help. Indeed, if there were a simple solution to chronic absenteeism, it would already have been identified and easily implemented.

Incentives and Rewards: The jury is out

School systems have used attendance awards for decades, even before the concept of chronic absenteeism was named and measured. Many districts are revisiting incentive programs as a way to bring students back to the classroom. Preceding COVID-related increases in absenteeism, organizations like Attendance Works provided numerous examples and strategies for implementing attendance incentive programs, ranging from hallway recognition boards and star stickers on lockers,

to cash rewards and tickets to sporting events. In recent years, incentives often have included opportunities for students to boost their grades, either through dropping a failing grade or opting out of a final exam. Research continues to show mixed effects of incentives, with some experts calling them demotivating while others showing improved outcomes.

Asking parents what they thought about attendance incentives, their feelings were decidedly mixed. For every parent who thought incentives or rewards were a good idea or could be effective, there was another who thought they sent the wrong message or would be ineffective. Some had both positive and negative views towards incentive programs, even within a single breath.

On the positive side, we heard simple basic beliefs that rewards are *"nice," "always a good idea,"* and that young children in particular are motivated by small things – as simple as a sticker, a toy, or an ice cream treat. As one parent said: *"You have to find your kids' currency."* We also were told that incentives should both keep the students coming who already have good attendance while also motivating the ones who are absent more often. One parent explained that motivating good attendance early on with rewards systems will help children *"begin to acquire a certain responsibility and discipline over the years."*

Several parents mentioned that adults appreciate rewards, so there is no reason children should not benefit similarly. As one said, *"Recognition is great when things are achieved, goals are achieved. We, as adults, appreciate our pats on the back. Of course we should give them to children, too, and encourage that behavior, which is completely different than bribery."* And another similarly stated, *"I mean, I think that you should be rewarded for doing good jobs no matter what. Even in a workplace as an adult, you should be rewarded for doing good jobs, or at least spoken to and told you're doing a good job. So, I think getting awards for somebody being there is definitely warranted."*

On the negative side, we heard that incentives can motivate students to attend school when sick. We also heard exasperation from many that attending school is the only thing we ask of children – it's the one "job" they have. For example, one parent asked, *"Why do we have to pay kids to go to school now?"* while another said, *"I don't think kids should be rewarded for something they're already supposed to be doing. Like going to school. Like, that's part of your job as a child. It's your only job as a child. It's the only job you have."* Some parents also spoke about mental health. One described an anxious child who was further stressed by these incentive programs: *"Her school placed very high*

importance on attendance. They spoke a lot about it to the kids. They offered rewards to the kids if they attended a term with no absences. She would get these little keychain things. She was all stressed about it. When we're running late, she would freak out. She'd freak out, and she'd worry about not only being late, she was always like, 'Mom, I can't miss school.' … But that was always the thing on the forefront of her mind; She's always worried about being late and being absent." Another parent explained that incentives undermine mental health and self-care, that sometimes it is more important to stay home from school to tend to oneself than just to go to school to earn the attendance award.

Other parents fundamentally disagreed with the idea of incentivizing attendance. More than one parent mentioned that incentives motivate presence, but not actual learning or engagement. Another felt that they measure, and incentivize, productivity: *"And I disagree that your worth is determined by your productivity. So having those awards, I think, sets us up for this idea that someone's self-worth is tied to how productive they are, which I think is ultimately a negative view."* Another common complaint was that incentive models aren't fair to kids, particularly at the younger ages, where it is up to the parents to get the kids to school – this disproportionately benefits families that have more means to do so.

On balance, no single opinion dominated.

Rethinking Responses to Chronic Absenteeism

There is No One-size-fits-all Solution.

Parents repeatedly urged schools to understand why children are absent, rather than applying blanket strategies that treat everyone the same. If schools are to make meaningful progress reducing chronic absenteeism, schools must internalize this lesson. Given the highly idiosyncratic reasons for absences reported by our small group of families, different supports clearly are necessary. This suggests that broad communication interventions – such as messaging families when a child is absent – are unlikely, on their own, to significantly shift attendance patterns. Schools need to engage directly, talking with families and students.

One promising example comes from a New York district where intentional engagement with families revealed attendance barriers that were previously unknown. These included local cultural norms that encouraged keeping children home on rainy days, confusion about bus schedules, and a lack of bus service for some families. In response, the district collaborated with local health and transportation departments, as well as a local community organization to provide backup transportation – turning insight into action.

Improve Schools, and (Some) Students Will Come

Many parents disillusioned with the current education system proposed ways to make school worth attending. Suggestions were numerous, though they clustered around improving school climate, enhancing educational quality, and improving the school environment. Parents called for safer schools, smaller class sizes, more engaging and relevant curriculum, more group work, better-resourced classrooms, more highly qualified teachers, personalized learning, differentiated pathways based on student interests, and hands-on learning.

A few offered more sweeping visions of change, with fundamental shifts in how school functions. For example, one parent described a future where schools are designed to promote students' investment

[6] One or two parents identified themselves through conversation as a teacher or former teacher.

in their own learning through personalization to students' interests. Schools provide all the resources they do now, but *"students should be able to put their time and their energy and their focus where they want to … and have enough adult teachers, guidance counselors, to help these students find where their learning interests are and encourage those interests."* While no school system can implement all these changes parents recommend at once (nor would it be wise to do so), these ideas reflect a deep concern that current structures fail to meet students' needs.

Notably, most interviewed are not educators, practitioners, or policymakers – and fewer than half have completed a four-year college degree. Yet these suggestions echo improvements advocated for by experts: more relevant curricula, hands-on learning experiences, and student-centered approaches. These results demonstrate that vital to restoring education's perceived value within families and communities are rigorous improvements to school systems so they encourage and sustain student engagement.

Be Cautious and Thoughtful with Communication Strategies

Communicating with parents is a central focus of many absenteeism interventions. Research shows that parents need to be aware of absences and understand the importance of regular attendance. While we agree with these fundamental ideas, schools must consider the form and tone of those communications. As we heard, some parents hear these communications as "nagging," "shaming," or irrelevant; at worst, communications have been perceived as threatening.

Fortunately, schools need not start from scratch. Resources like Attendance Works provide templates, tools, and messaging toolkits to help schools create effective attendance communications. Best practices include contacting families before the first day of school, maintaining up-to-date family contact information, and using clear, supportive materials like letters, flyers, and infographics – useful examples are included in these resources.

For districts without such systems, establishing them can be fruitful – as in one rural school district that saw a 5% decrease in absences after implementing a notification system. While following communications best practices are likely a necessary foundation, schools must go further. Prioritizing direct, compassionate communication that acknowledges individual circumstances, rather than stigmatizing them, has the potential to get to root causes of absences, which has more promise for impact.

Rethink Illness-related Absence Policies: Balance Caution with Prioritization of In-person Learning

One clear lesson is that absence policies related to illness need to strike a better balance between protecting public health and supporting learning. Parents overwhelmingly cited illness as the most common reason for absence and described how both cultural norms and school policies have shifted toward greater caution since COVID. Flu rates are indeed higher now than they were 10 years ago – data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control show that from 2014 to 2024, among children aged 5 to 17, incidents of flu increased from 7,516 per 100,000 to 17,097. Whether these increases would have been even greater without school policies and parent norms designed to decrease children's exposure is unknown.

Thus, while stricter rules – such as requiring children to be fever-free or symptom-free for extended periods – reflect understandable concern about contagion, blanket approaches may contribute to unnecessary absences, especially when applied to mild or non-contagious symptoms. Moving forward, schools, with input from experts in public health, should consider refining these policies so they distinguish between illnesses that warrant exclusion and those that do not, and communicating policies clearly and empathetically. A more nuanced approach could protect health while minimizing avoidable instructional loss.

Closing Thoughts

Our qualitative exploration of parents' perspectives underscores an essential yet frequently overlooked reality in addressing chronic absenteeism: Policies and interventions must move beyond standardized responses to deeply consider the nuanced, individualized factors faced by families. The lessons articulated through interviews emphasize the critical need for educational institutions to offer empathy, adaptability, and proactive engagement.

This study, grounded in the lived experiences of parents, lays a critical foundation for subsequent quantitative analyses we will share in Volumes II and III. Moving forward, insights from our broader nationwide survey of more than 2,000 families and approximately 500 teens will provide deeper clarity into the prevalence and patterns of absenteeism drivers, which helps policymakers, educators, and researchers craft targeted, effective strategies. Ultimately, addressing absenteeism effectively demands a sustained commitment to understanding students' and families' realities – ensuring educational spaces not only require attendance but genuinely inspire it.