

# Chronic Absence 101:

A foundational conversation  
investigating root causes and  
best practices

*Session 1*  
*Spring 2026 Zoom Series*

Heidi Schumacher, MD  
Nick Conner



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# What if you had one measure?



# Speakers

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# Spring 2026 Zoom Series



## Chronic Absenteeism: Best Practices and Spotlights of Innovation Across Vermont

*All Wednesdays, 12 – 1pm. Sessions will be recorded and available online.*

- March 25: Chronic Absence 101: A foundational conversation investigating root causes and best practices
- April 8: Building Bridges for Student Success: Student Engagement Strategies
- April 29: Stronger Together: Leveraging Health Personnel and Partnerships to Improve Attendance
- May 6: Building Belonging: How the Community Schools Approach Reduces Chronic Absenteeism

# Every Day Counts



University of Vermont

Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships

• County Seat  
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# Agenda

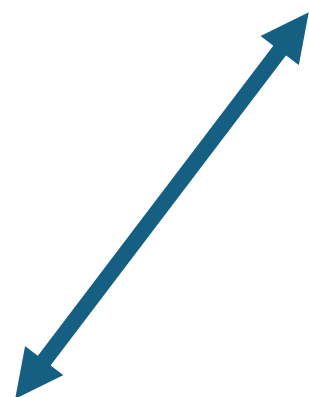
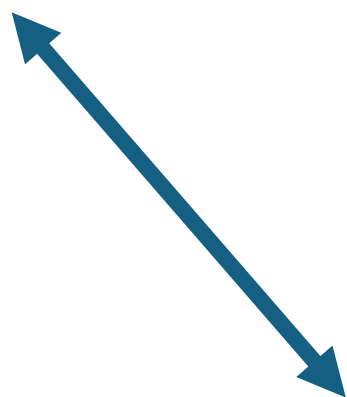
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1. Chronic absence: What, who, why?
2. Foundational principles for how schools and partners can prevent and respond



Health

Education



Social  
Factors



# Definitions

## TRUANCY

Counts unexcused absences

Rooted in compliance with attendance law, and can result in legal action

COMPLIANCE MINDSET

VS

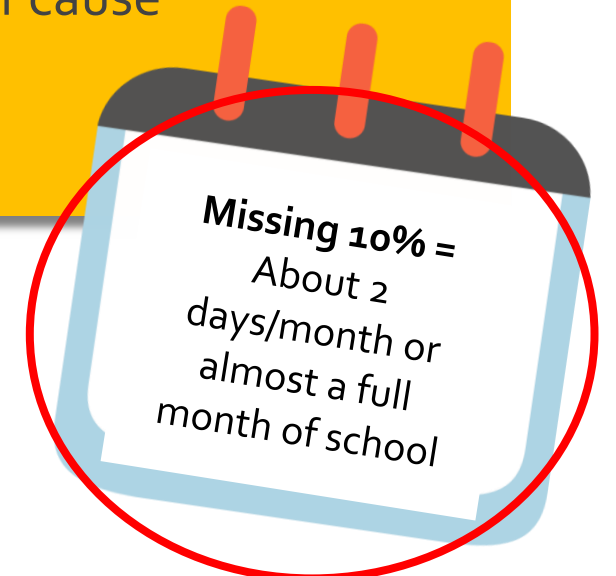
## CHRONIC ABSENCE

Counts all absences:

Excused, unexcused and suspensions

Emphasizes impact of missed school, regardless of cause

CONNECTION MINDSET




# Chronic Absence Can Be Calculated ANYTIME During the School Year

## CHRONIC ABSENCE

Counts all absences:

Excused, unexcused and suspensions



Missing 10% =  
About 2  
days/month or  
almost a full  
month of school

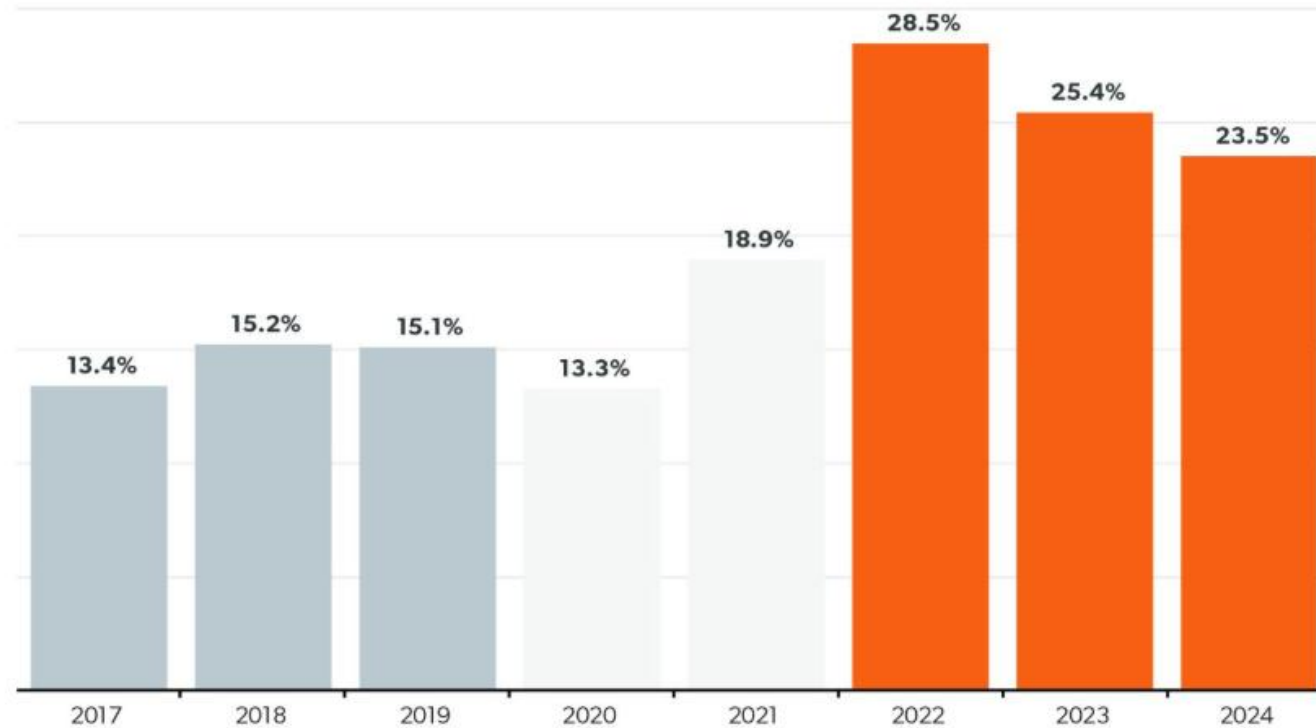
**Students missing two to four days in September are five times more likely to be chronically absent throughout the school year.**

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# Who? (And Why Now?)



# Rates of Chronic Absence Have Skyrocketed



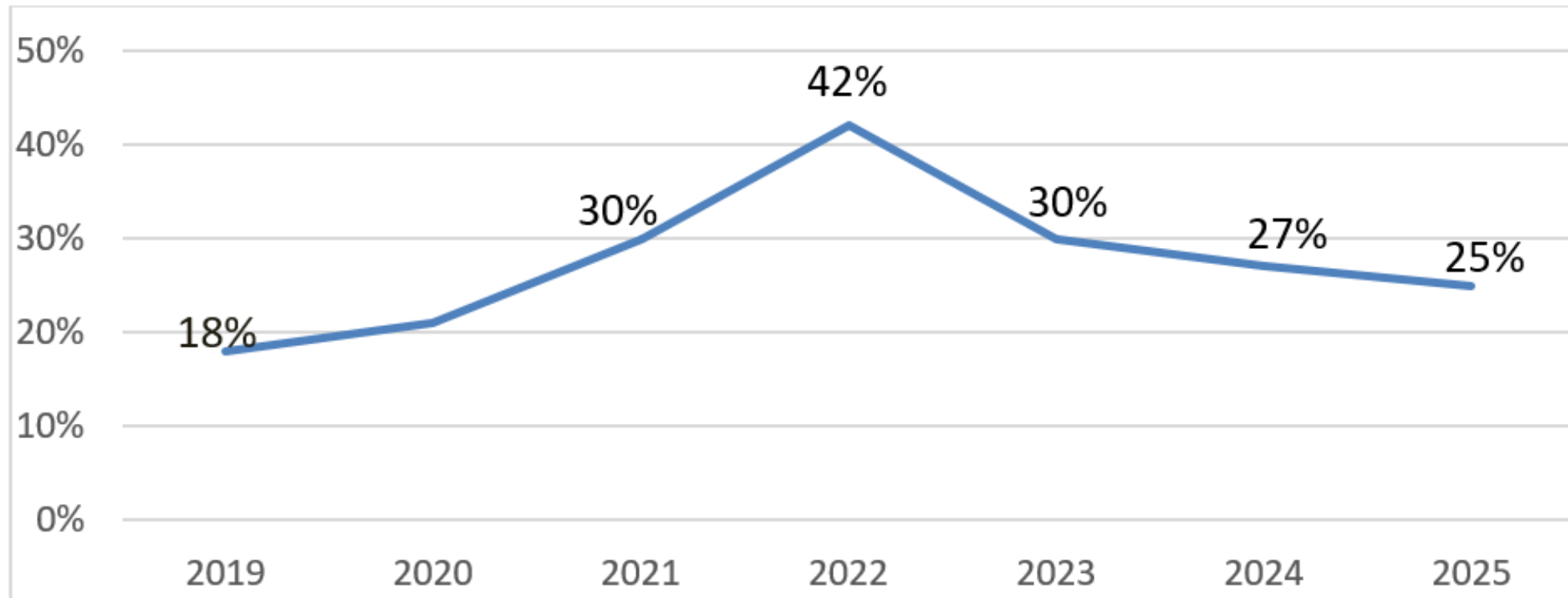
Source: Return to Learn Tracker, "Chronic Absenteeism: 2017–2024," American Enterprise Institute, <https://www.returntolearntacker.net>.

Note: Pre-pandemic years are in grey, pandemic years that had potentially unreliable attendance data are in light grey, and post-pandemic years with reliable data are in orange. School years are referred to by the spring year.



# Rates of Chronic Absence in VT

**% of Chronically Absent Students Over Time (VT)**



Source: VT Agency of Education



# Crisis of Absenteeism



ANNALS OF EDUCATION

## HAS SCHOOL BECOME OPTIONAL?

*In the past few years, chronic absenteeism has nearly doubled. The fight to get students back in classrooms has only just begun.*

By Alec MacGillis  
January 8, 2024



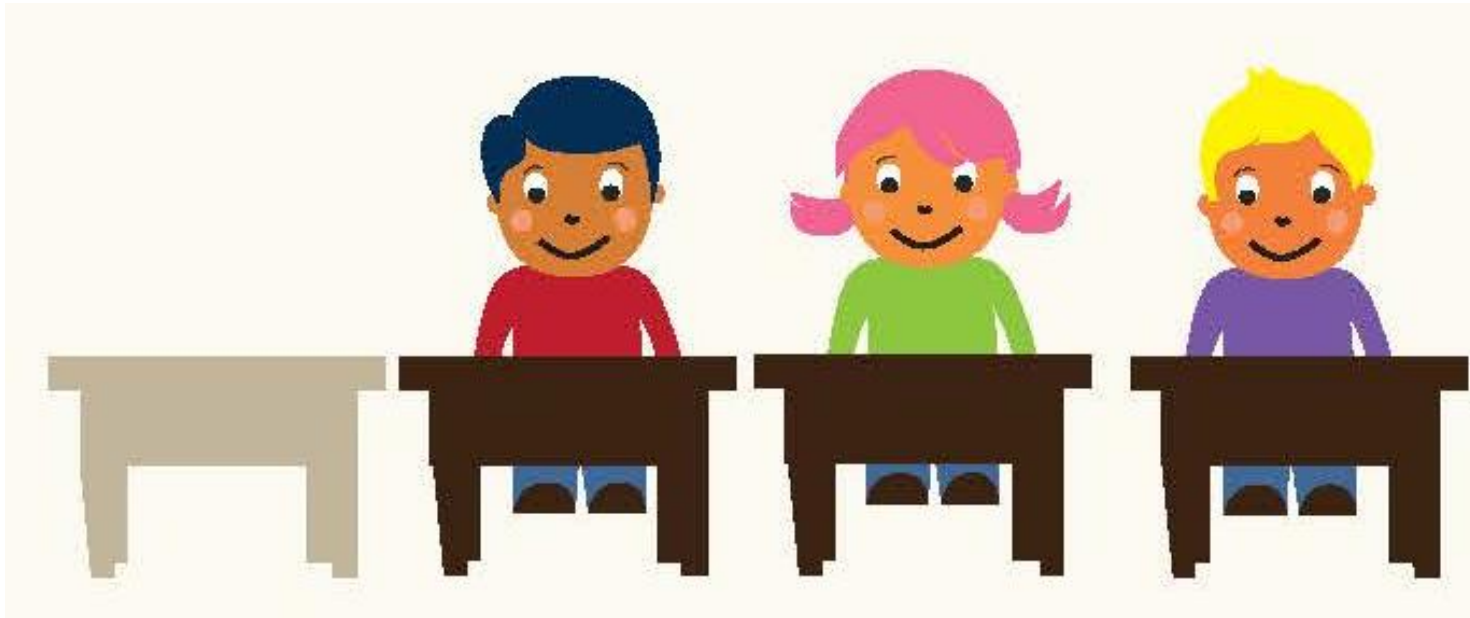
## Vermont schools battle chronic absenteeism



By Melissa Cooney  
Published: Apr. 2, 2024 at 5:26 AM EDT



# 1 in 4 VT Students is Chronically Absent



Used with permission from Attendance Works

- 25% of all VT students
- 32% of students with disabilities
- 34% of students living in poverty
- 57% of students experiencing homelessness

# Why Do Kids Miss School? *It's Complicated.*

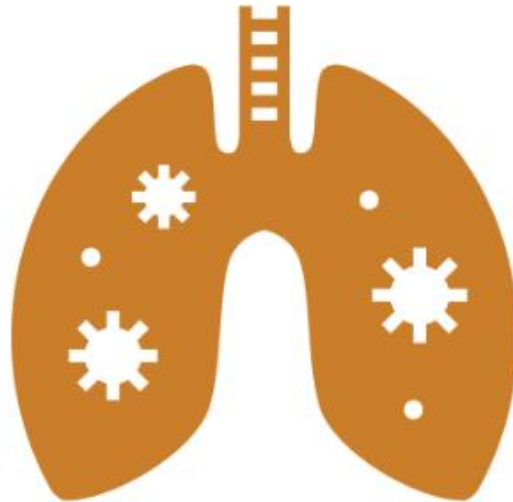


Source: Attendance Works

# Why Do Kids Miss School? *Health Reasons*



Mental health and trauma



Asthma



Oral health concerns

Source: Jessica LaClair, Vermont Department of Health, [2024 LA Trust Data xChange SBHC Impact Report](#), [Student Mental Health: Survey Results from Students and Education Leaders - EdWeek Research Center](#), [The Impact of School Mental Health Services on Reducing Chronic Absence - Attendance Works](#), [Mapping the Early Attendance Gap: Charting a Course for Student Success- Attendance Works](#), Accessed October 2025.



# Why Do Kids Miss School? *It's Complicated.*



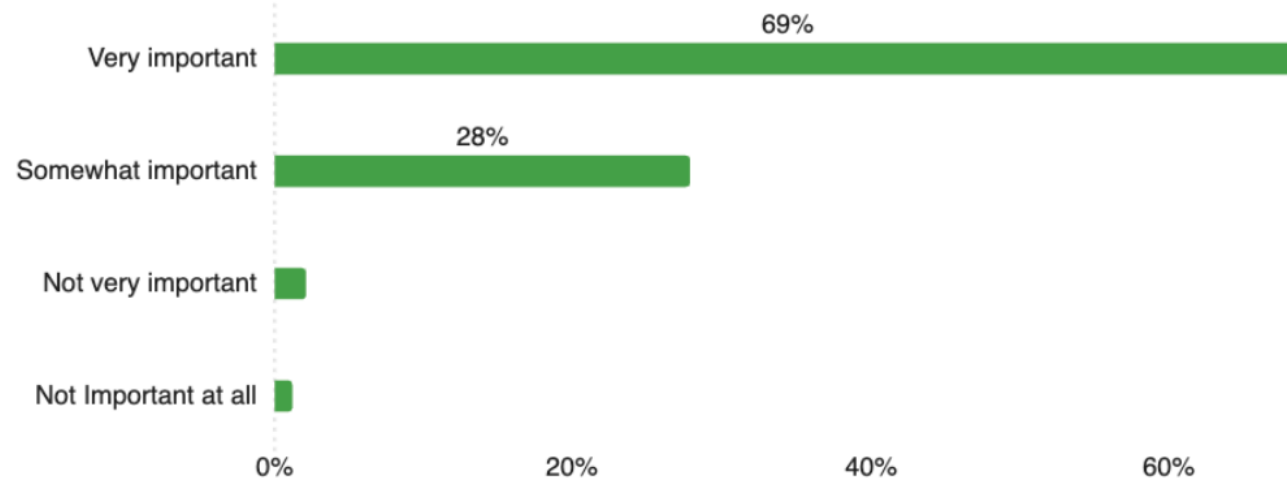
Source: Attendance Works

# Key Findings from Every Day Counts Family Survey

- Surveyed 300+ parents and caregivers across 4 Vermont SDs
- Overall, **97% of respondents said that it was very or somewhat important for children to attend school every day.**

How important is it, if at all, for children to attend school every day during the school year?

327 Responses

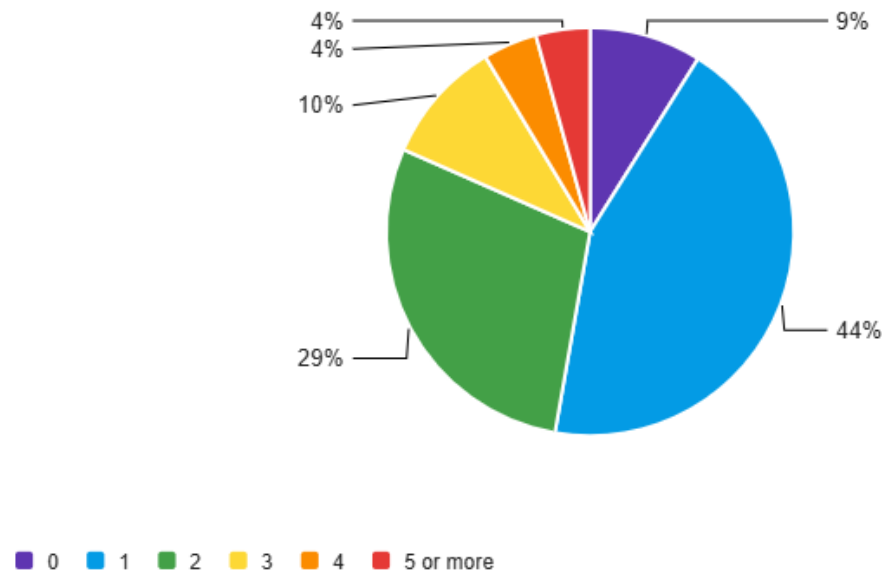


# Key Findings from Every Day Counts Family Survey

- However, **nearly half of respondents reported that an acceptable number of absences per month was 2 or more.**

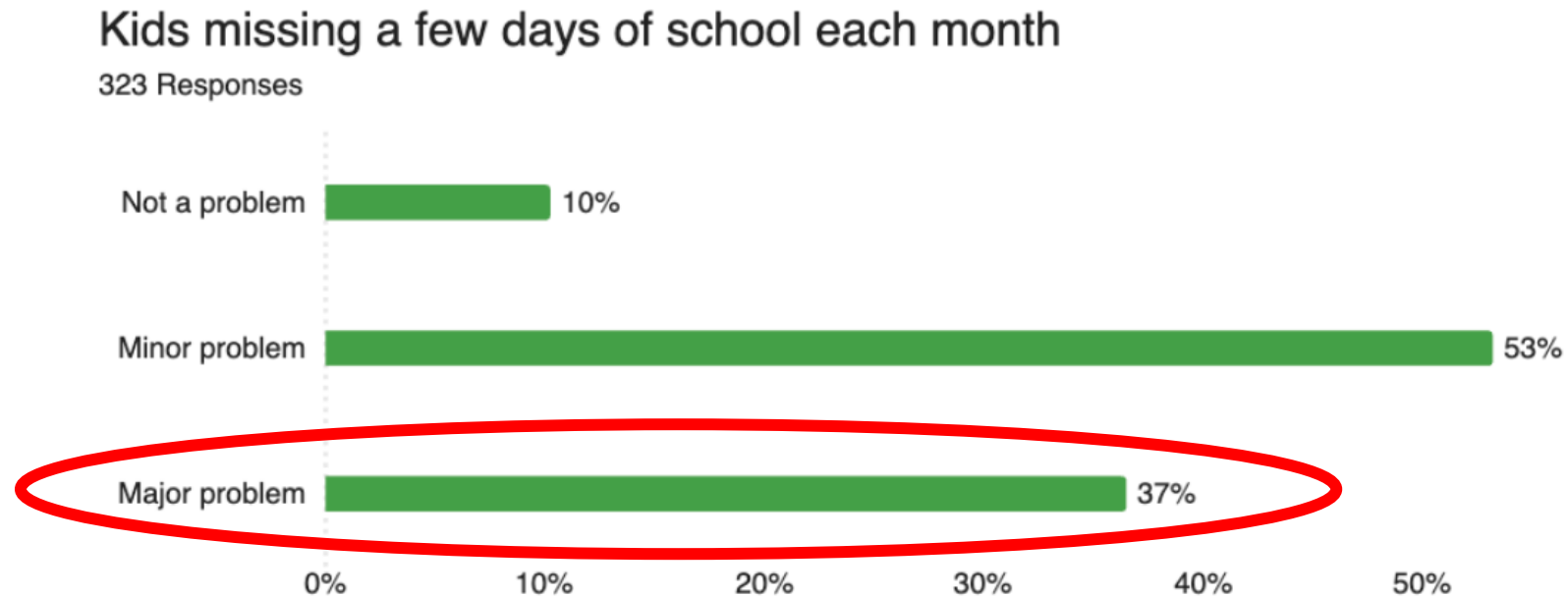
What would you consider to be an 'acceptable' number of school absences per month for your child?

326 Responses



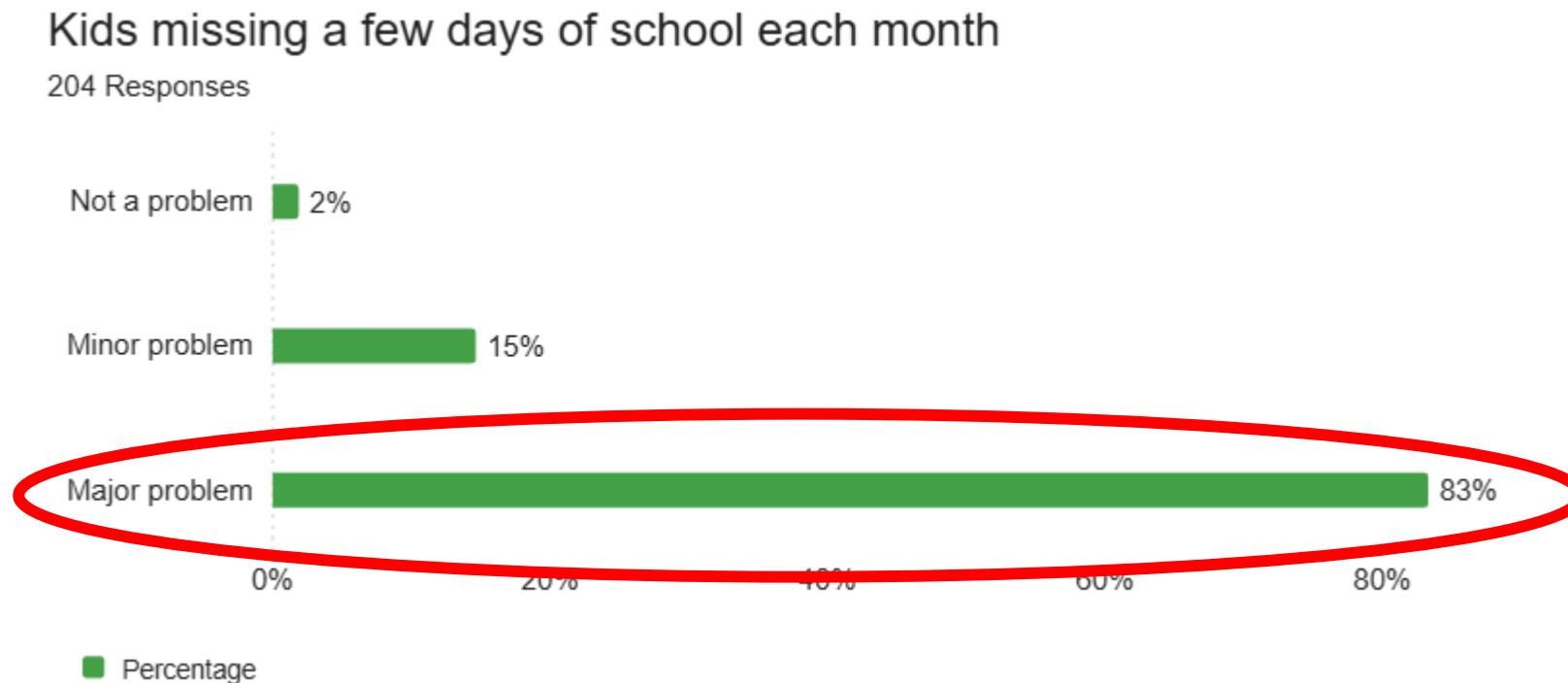
# Key Findings from Every Day Counts Family Survey

- Just over **one third** report that missing a few days each month is a “major problem” ...



# Key Findings from Every Day Counts Educator/Staff Survey

- ...while **83% of educators and school staff** (from 4 Vermont SDs) do!



# Why Do Kids Miss School? *It's Complicated.*



Source: Attendance Works

Health



Education



Social  
Factors



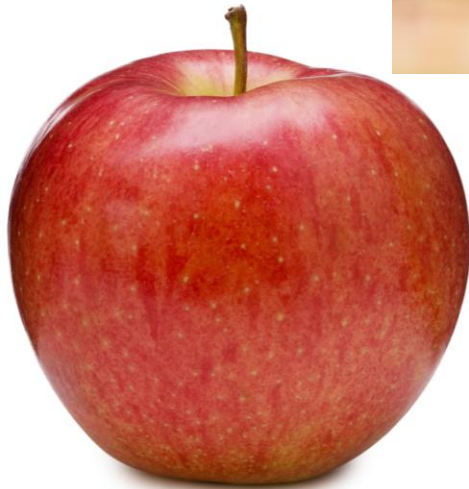
Health

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Factors



# Impact of Absenteeism



# Long Term Impact of Absenteeism

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**Impact begins early:** Chronic absence as early as pre-K predicts third grade reading proficiency.



**High school graduation:** A student who is chronically absent any year between 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade is 7x more likely to drop out.



**Long-term life expectancy:** Not earning a high school diploma is associated with poorer long-term health and shorter life expectancy.

# Chronic Absence as an Early Warning Indicator

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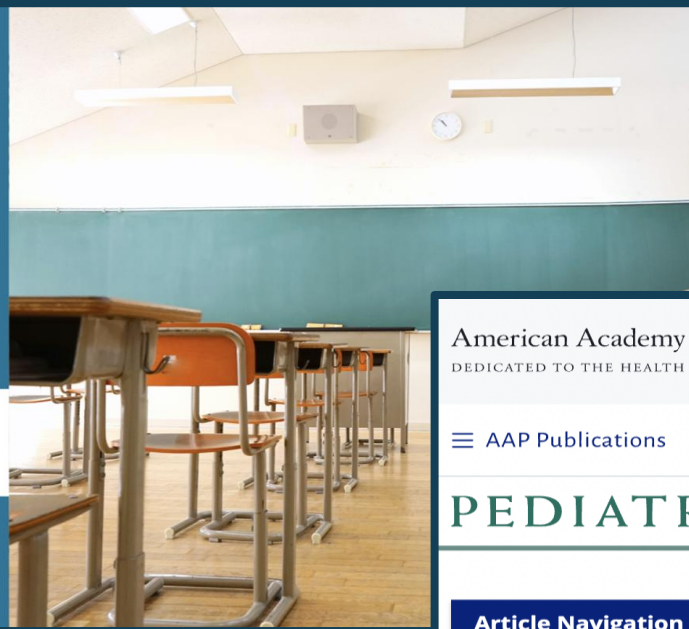


# Chronic Absence as a Pediatric Vital Sign

## Vital Signs for Pediatric Health: Chronic Absenteeism

A National Academy of Medicine Discussion Paper

[nam.edu/Perspectives](http://nam.edu/Perspectives)



American Academy of Pediatrics  
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### PEDIATRICS®

**Article Navigation**

COUNCIL ON SCHOOL HEALTH PROGRAM | MAY 01 2018

#### Making School Attendance a Vital Sign: A Cross-Sector Collaboration 🛒

Danielle Dooley, MD, MPhil, FAAP; Heidi Schumacher, MD, FAAP; Julia DeAngelo, MPH; Desiree de la Torre, MPH, MBA; Cynthia Adams, MPH, CHES; Megan Tschudy, MD, MPH; Andrew Masters, M. Ed

*Pediatrics* (2018) 142 (1\_MeetingAbstract): 735.  
<https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.142.1MA8.735>



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# How Do We Prevent and Respond?





## Pathway for Change

Mindset

Actionable  
Data

Capacity

Strategies

Outcomes

# Mindset



- **View Absence as a Symptom**
  - View missing school as a signal of an underlying barrier, not a character flaw
- **Assume Positive Intent**
  - Start with the belief that families want their child to succeed and attend
- **Focus on the "Why"**
  - Ask curious questions and co-solve problems with families as partners

**We spend more time trying to be a lie detector than we do trying to believe our families...**

# Actionable Data

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## Strategic Disaggregation

Data reveals barriers when we ask the right questions

- **By Grade Level**
  - Identify critical transition years (K, 6th, 9th) where absence patterns emerge
- **By Subgroup**
  - Uncover equity gaps across race, disability status, income level, language
- **By Type & Timing**
  - Analyze excused vs. unexcused; patterns by day of week and time of year

The goal isn't just to report percentages—it's to understand barriers and target interventions



# Capacity

Attendance is a **whole-school responsibility**, not a single person's job



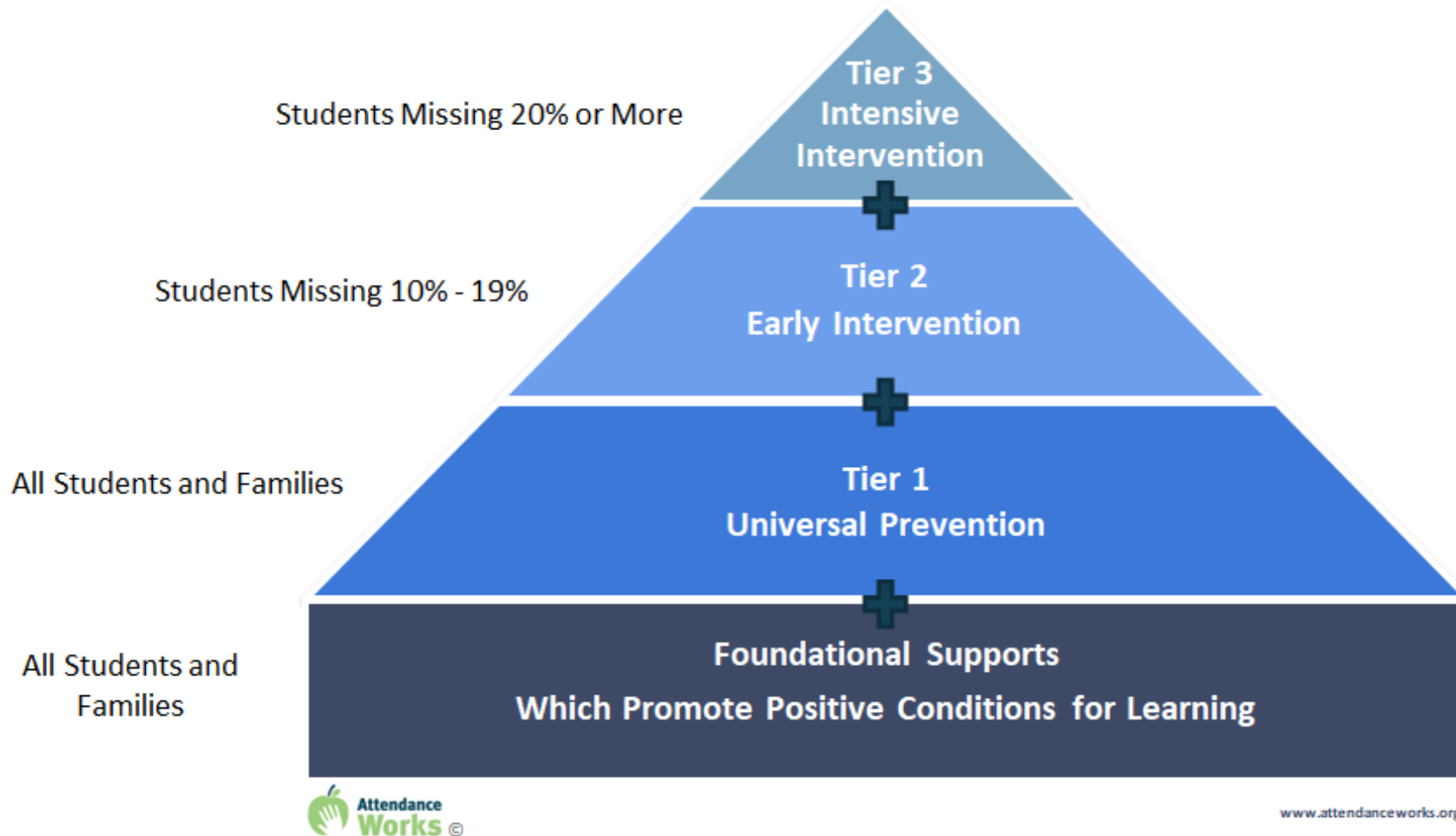
## The School Attendance Team

Cross-functional membership ensures comprehensive support:

- **Administrator (decision-making authority)**
- Counselor (student support)
- Social Worker (family connection)
- Attendance Clerk (data expertise)
- Nurse (health expert)
- Teacher (classroom perspective)
- Community health partners (community & health experts)



# Strategies

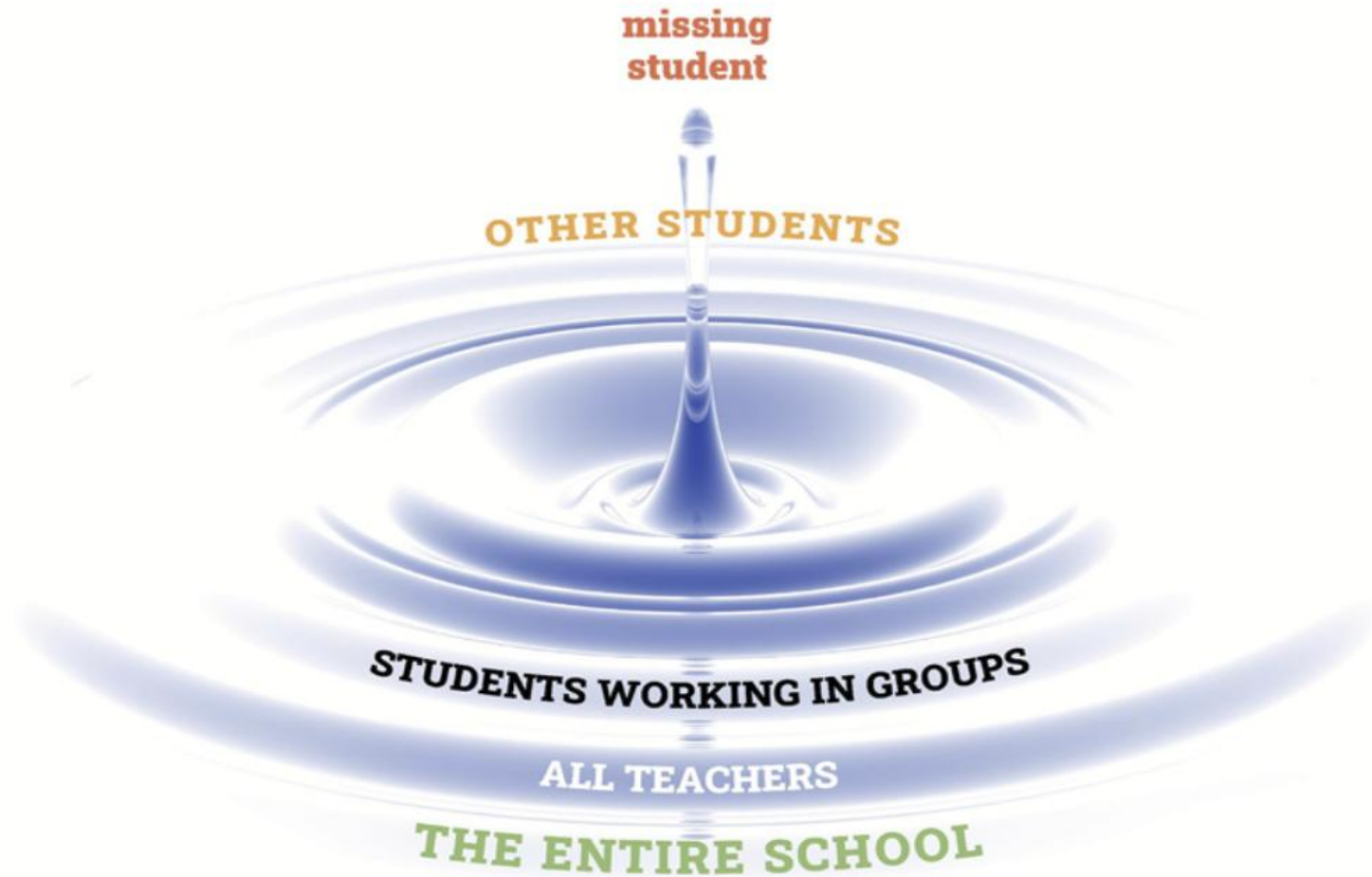


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# When a Student Misses School, the Impact Ripples





## Pathway for Change

Mindset

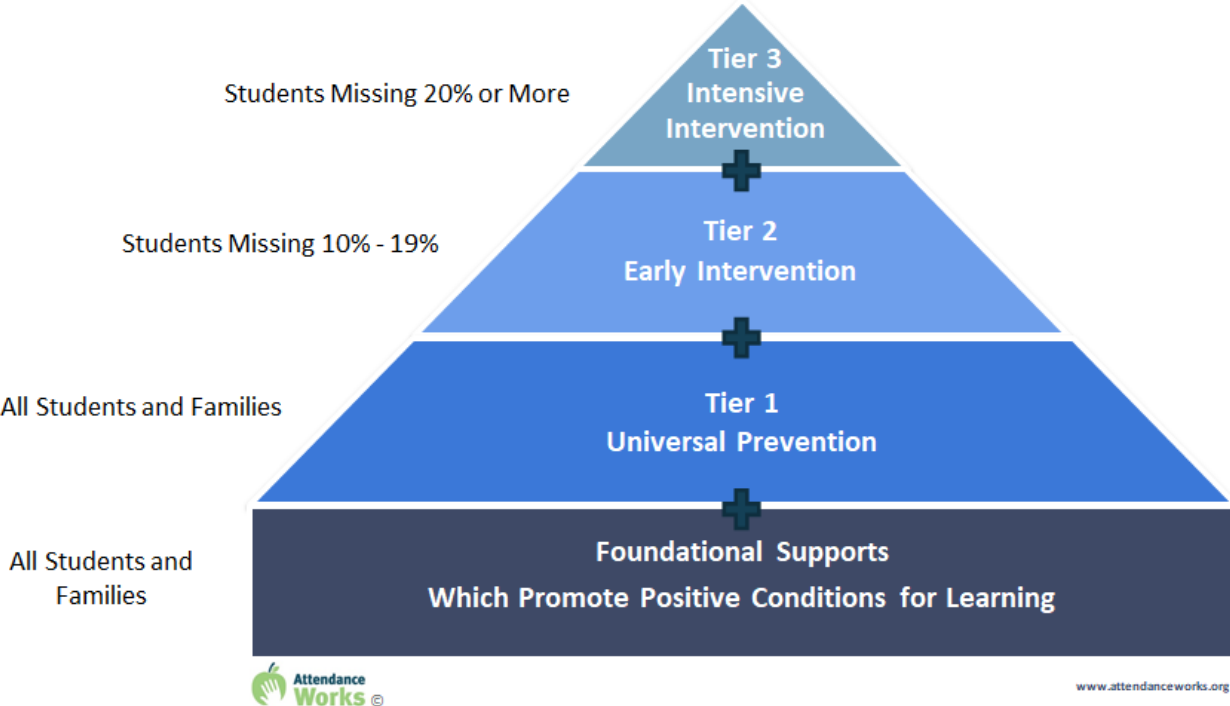
Actionable  
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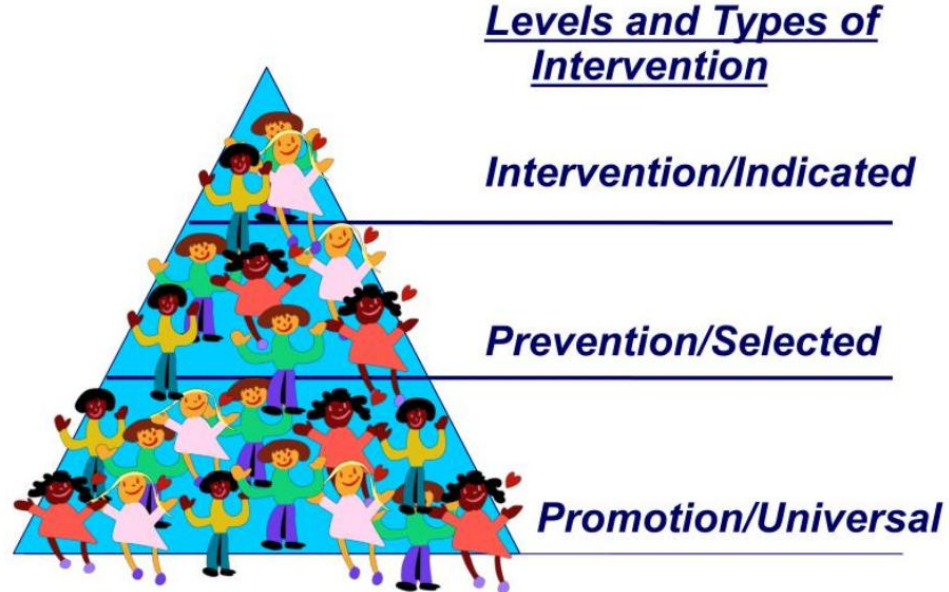
Outcomes

# Multi-Tiered Approach



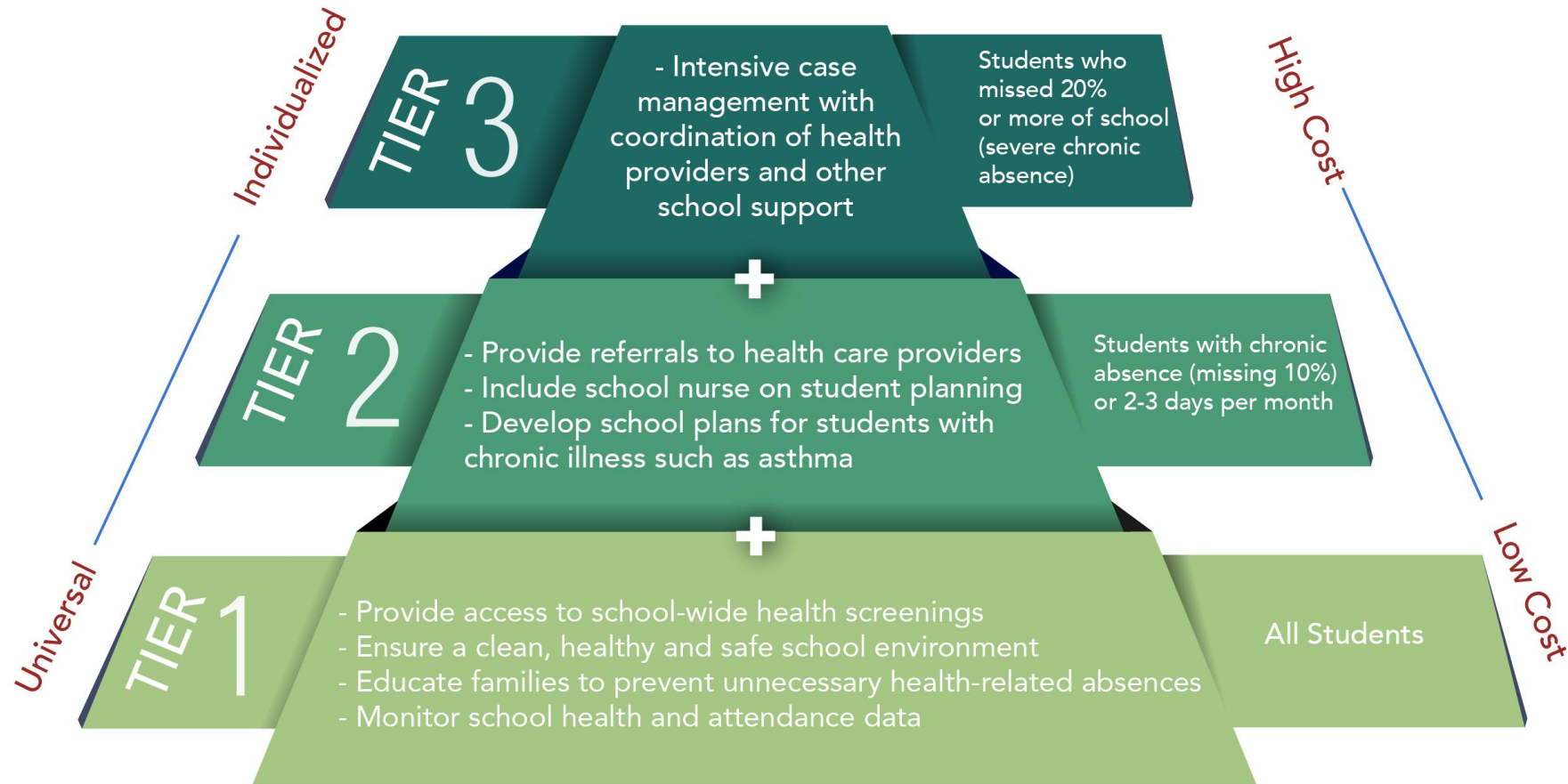
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## Public Health Triangle



Source: [public-health-triangle-l.jpg](#)

# Tiered Approach: Health



# Align Partners and Interventions to Reasons for Absences

Reason for Absence	Possible Interventions	Potential Partner
Anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Enlist trusted messengers to talk with families about health and safety</li><li>• Meet with school counselor, social worker or psychologist</li><li>• Offer small groups to teach calming skills</li></ul>	Local pediatricians Community mental health NAMI – online courses
Disengaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Assign a peer group mentor</li><li>• Create an individualized learning plan</li><li>• Explore afterschool options (art, music, STEM, etc.)</li><li>• Offer alternatives for credit recovery</li></ul>	MENTOR Parks & Rec program Boys & Girls Club
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Messaging on how to stay healthy</li><li>• School nurse educates on preventing spread of illnesses (e.g. flu)</li><li>• Ensure hygiene supplies available (soap, tissues, hand sanitizer)</li><li>• Onsite vaccinations, preventative health and dental screenings</li></ul>	School-based health center Local Clinic / Pediatrician
Transportation Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Walking School Bus</li><li>• Free municipal bus passes</li><li>• Carpools</li></ul>	Parents City government



## Pathway for Change

Mindset

Actionable  
Data

Capacity

Strategies

Outcomes

# ATTEND TODAY FOR A



# HEALTHIER TOMORROW

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# References

For more information on this subject, see the following publications:

For education and health professionals:

- Attendance Works: [www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org)
- [Attendance Playbook: Smart Solutions for Reducing Student Absenteeism Post-Pandemic - FutureEd](#)
- American Academy of Pediatrics: [School Attendance](#)
- [Attendance - National Association of School Nurses](#)

For families:

- [www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org)
- [www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org)

Every Day Counts: <https://www.uvm.edu/ruralpartnerships/every-day-counts-reducing-absenteeism-vermonts-schools>



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*Recordings of all sessions will be archived at <https://www.uvm.edu/larnermed/vchip/every-day-counts>*

# Thank you!

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**Questions?** [EveryDayCounts@med.uvm.edu](mailto:EveryDayCounts@med.uvm.edu)

