

EMPTY DESKS: TACKLING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

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WHAT IS CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?

Chronic absenteeism describes a pattern of missed school days that significantly disrupts a student’s ability to learn and thrive in a classroom setting. It is typically defined as when a child is absent for 10% or more days of school in a given year, or 18 days out of a 180-day school calendar, and includes both excused and unexcused absences as well as those due to suspension (Balfanz, 2016; Chang et al. 2016).

INQUIRY QUESTIONS

- HOW WIDESPREAD IS CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM? WHO IS MOST AFFECTED?
- WHAT ARE THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?
- HOW CAN CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM BE ADDRESSED THROUGH POLICIES OR AT AN INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL?
- HOW CAN TEACHERS THEMSELVES WORK TO ADDRESS CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM AND SUPPORT CHRONICALLY ABSENT STUDENTS?

RATIONALE

From my early work as a paraprofessional to my MIT teaching internship, I saw firsthand the way chronic absence disrupts learning, social development, and classroom routines. Those students who needed the most support were also those most frequently absent, and thus unable to access any of the support systems, social services, and learning opportunities schools provide. My initial research confirmed my lived experience with this issue. Chronic absenteeism has been called a ‘hidden educational crisis’ by the Department of Education (Birioukov, 2021) and is strongly associated with lower academic performance, increased risk of dropping out, and negative long-term health and socioeconomic outcomes for students (Mahowald, 2023; The Phi Delta Kappan, 2016; Schoeneberger, 2012). While the U.S. education system faces a number of urgent challenges, including student mental health, safety in schools, and funding concerns, chronic absenteeism represents a unique barrier to student success.

TPEP ALIGNMENT

Criterion 5: Fostering and managing a safe, positive learning environment.

Description: The teacher fosters and manages a safe and inclusive learning environment that takes into account: Physical, emotional, and intellectual well-being of students.



A HIDDEN EDUCATIONAL CRISIS?

Half of all chronically absent students are concentrated in just 6% of districts, with the highest rates being in high-poverty and predominantly minority urban districts (Balfanz, 2024; Malkus, 2024), although rural districts face challenges as well. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic roughly 15%, or 5 to 7.5 million, K-12 public school students were chronically absent each year, with rates rising to 20% for Black and Hispanic students and 25% for students with disabilities (Malkus, 2024; Balfanz, 2016). Following the pandemic chronic absenteeism rose to 28% nationwide and has remained alarmingly high despite the return to in-person schooling. Demographic disparities have likewise grown over time, 39% of Black students and 36% of Hispanic students being chronically absent in 2022 compared to 24% of White students and 16% of Asian students. (Malkus, 2024). Students with disabilities and English language learners are similarly disproportionately affected, suffering from chronic absence rates of 36% and 33% respectively (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Just as chronic absenteeism affects all students but does so unevenly, chronic absenteeism affects students across all grade levels but is most severe for high schoolers and during key academic transitions and developmental stages. In elementary school, chronic absenteeism is highest in Kindergarten and 1st grade and rises again in middle school before reaching reaches its peak in ninth and tenth grade (Balfanz, 2016; Weathers et al., 2023; Liu & Lee, 2022). The true scope and scale of chronic absenteeism has been underestimated by poor data collection at times (Balfanz, 2016) and obscured by reliance on traditional metrics such as average daily attendance.

CAUSES

Chronic absenteeism stems from an interwoven set of student, school, family, and community-level factors which vary greatly in different contexts (Birioukov, 2021; Jacob & Lovett, 2017). At the student and school levels, issues like illness, the early accumulation of unexcused absences, bullying, disengagement, and a lack of belonging often drive absences (Murphy & Neely, 2023; Liu & Lee, 2022), especially in schools with unsafe climates or rigid disciplinary practices (Wilkins, 2008). Older students are particularly affected by individual and school-level factors as they typically have more autonomy and may choose whether or to attend (Eklund et al., 2020, Jacob & Lovett, 2017). Family and community-level causes often stem from broader socioeconomic conditions, including unstable housing, lack of healthcare, and limited transportation options. Low parental engagement in children's education (Balfanz, 2016; Kearney, 2008). The COVID-19 pandemic added new dimensions to the issue, disrupting educational norms and weakening school-family connections, leading to a cultural shift in how attendance is valued (Malkus, 2024). As a result, absenteeism today reflects both long-standing inequalities and structural barriers and a sense of disconnection from school post-COVID.

Institutional Solutions

Address Basic Student/Family Needs:

- School-based health centers reduced absenteeism by 3.9% (Murphy & Neely, 2023).
- Breakfast After the Bell programs cut absenteeism by 14–16% (Kirksey & Gottfried, 2017).

Improve School Climate:

- Punitive discipline increases absenteeism and harms student and family trust in the school system (Mahowald, 2023; Gage, 2013).
- Supportive practices like counseling and restorative discipline improve attendance outcomes (Weathers, 2023; Kearney, 2008).

Early Detection & Family Engagement:

- Track absences and rates of excused vs. unexcused absences to catch early signs of chronic absence (Liu & Lee, 2022; Gottfried, 2009).
- Outreach efforts like home visits, communication, translators, parental classroom involvement, and close school-family collaboration to address barriers all reduce absences (Nauer, 2016; Allensworth & Evans, 2016).
- Personalized messages to families lowered absenteeism by 15% (Robinson, 2018).

Figure 1. State Average Chronic Absenteeism: 2019

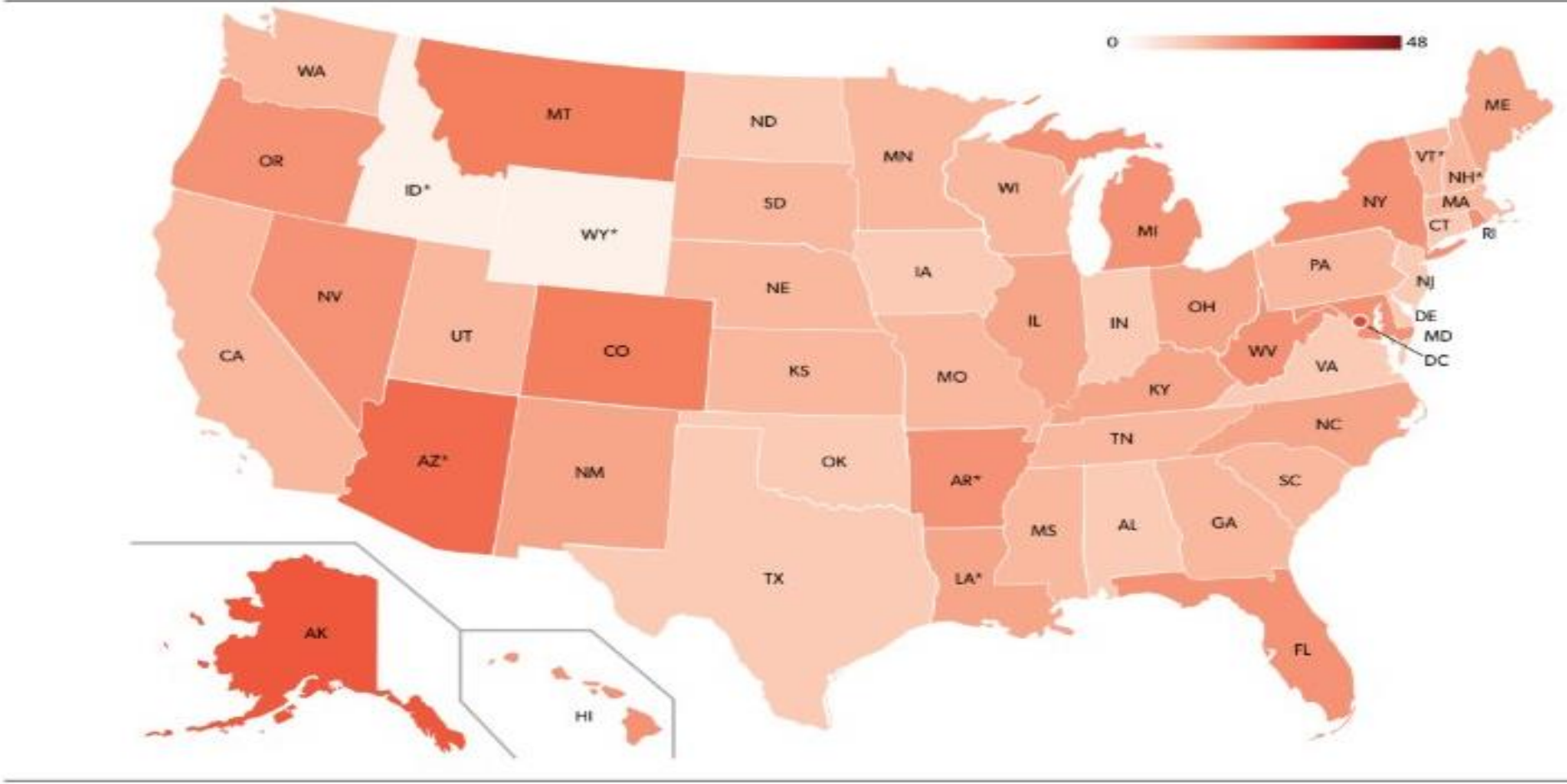
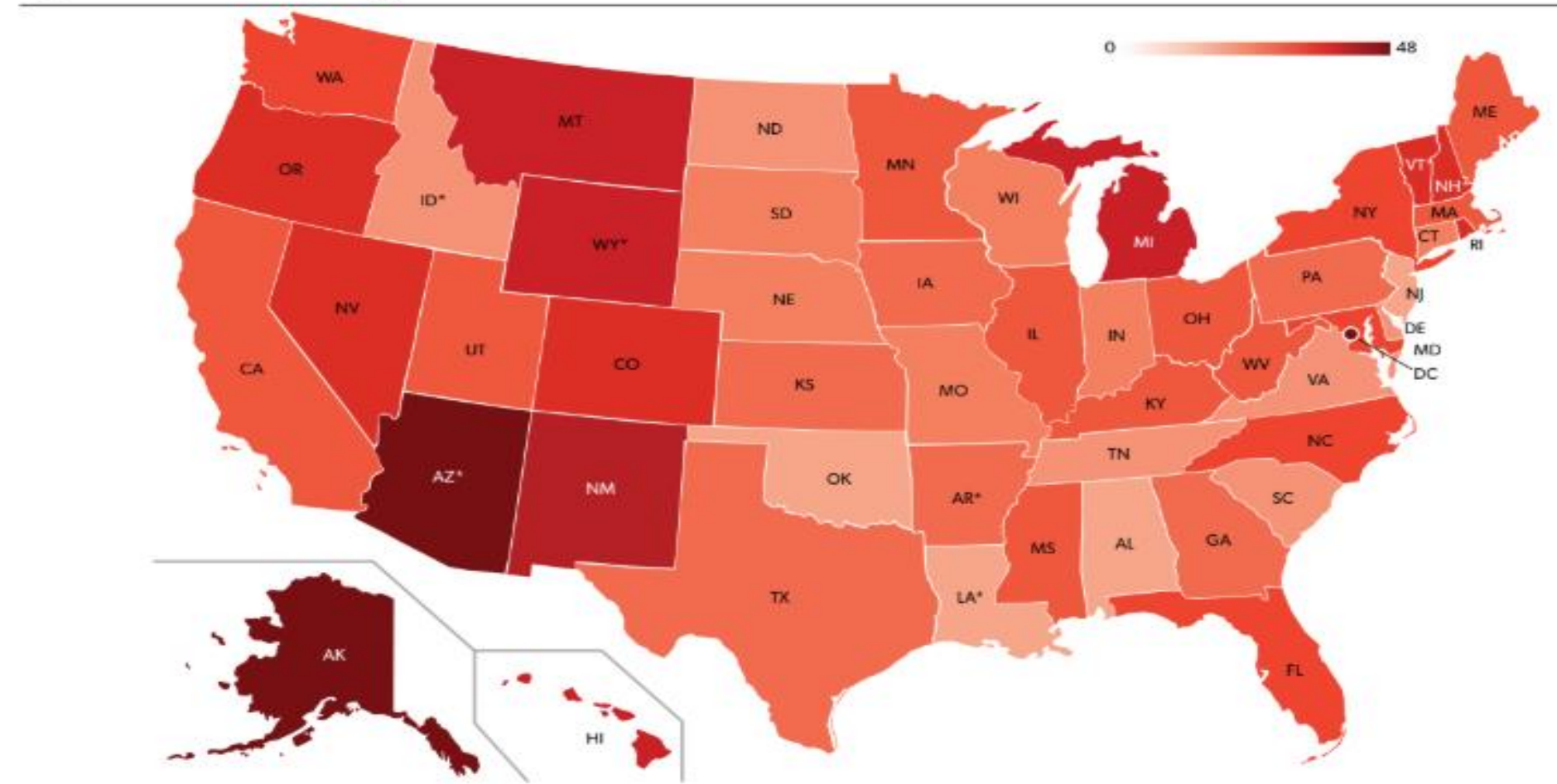


Figure 2. State Average Chronic Absenteeism: 2022



Pictures from Malkus, 2024, p. 6

EFFECTS

Chronic absenteeism has profound negative effects on students’ academic outcomes across all grade levels, including GPAs, test scores, and reading and math skills development, and is strongly linked to course failure in high school (Liu & Lee, 2022; Eklund et al., 2020; Allensworth & Evans, 2016). Absences in early grades have long-term effects, reducing achievement in later years lowering students’ chances of graduating or attending college (Balfanz, 2016; Liu & Lee, 2022). Chronic absence also harms schoolwide performance, with data from New York schools showing that a 1% increase in chronic absenteeism corresponds to a 1.3% drop in students achieving proficiency on state tests compared to other schools (Nauer, 2016). Chronically absent students likewise show lower social-emotional skills, particularly in areas such as self-efficacy and social awareness, (Santibañez & Guarino, 2021; Gottfried, 2014). In the long term, rates of substance abuse, unemployment, criminal behavior and involvement in the justice system are all closely associated with chronic absenteeism (Liu & Lee, 2022; Balfanz, 2016). These consequences disproportionately affect minority and low-income students, further reinforcing existing disparities and achievement gaps for disenfranchised schools and communities (Robinson, 2018).

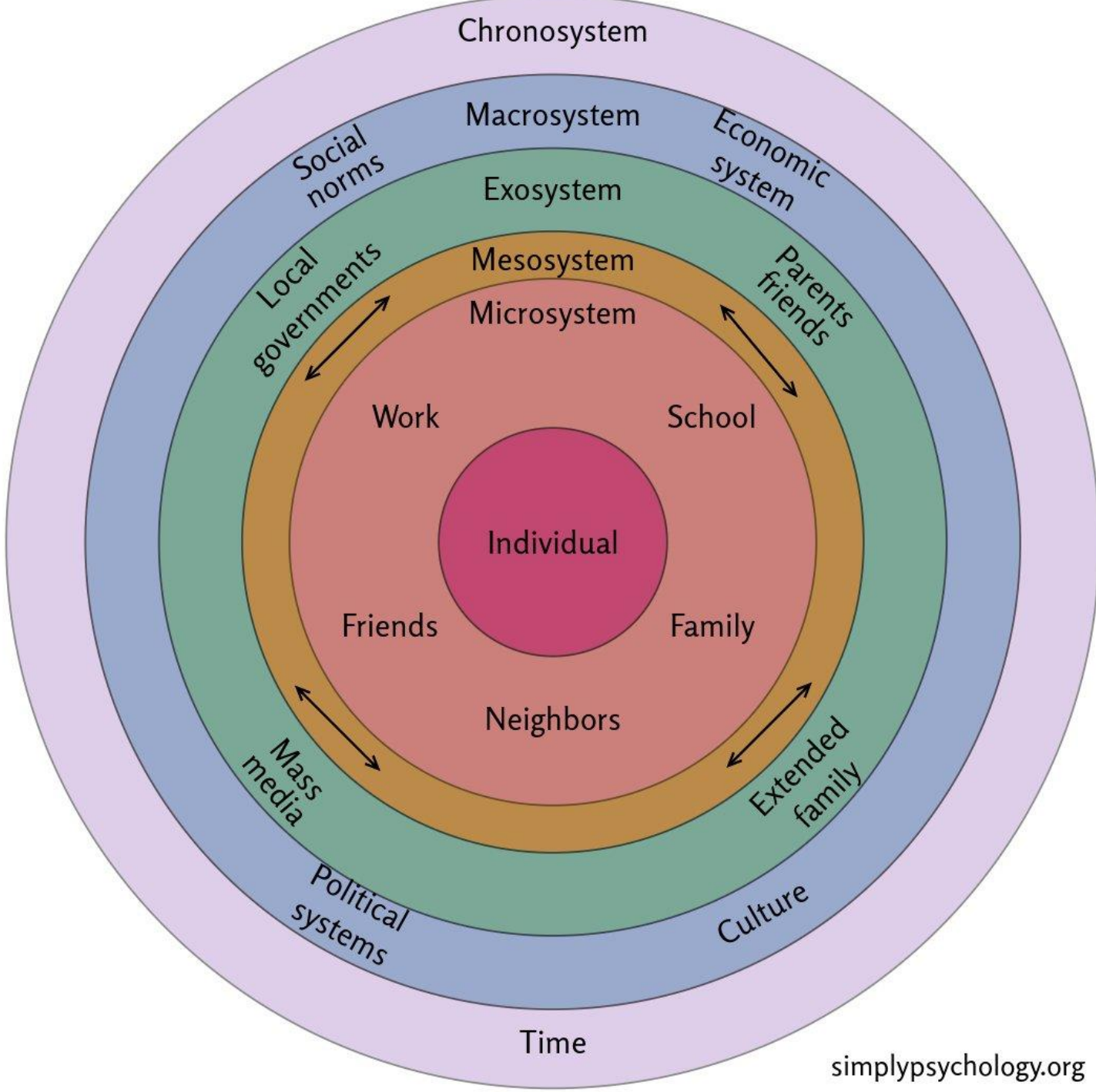
What Can Teachers Do?

Monitor absenteeism and develop close relationships with students and families to work towards identifying and addressing barriers to regular attendance (Allensworth & Evans, 2016; Nauer, 2016; Kearney, 2008).

Collaborate with other teachers to create a positive, inclusive, and most importantly safe school climate (Gershenson, 2016; Allensworth & Evans, 2016).

Emphasizing the importance of regular attendance to students and communicating with parents to help shift family attitudes to increase the value they place on regular school attendance (Gershenson, 2016).

Cultivate a calm, focused learning environment and implement engaging teaching techniques with an emphasis on addressing student's individual academic needs (Liu and Loeb, 2016; Wilkins, 2008)



Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory – simplypsychology.org

THEORETICAL CONNECTION

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory explains human development as shaped by interactions between five systems, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, with each representing a different level of a child’s environment and has been used to link psychological and educational theory to curriculum and educational practice (McLeod, 2025). This theory offers a valuable lens through which we can understand chronic absenteeism as the result of multiple interacting systems, from personal relationships and school climate, to family resources and social policies, to the sociocultural shifts that take place over time. Rather than blaming students or families or simply calling for harsher punishments for absenteeism, this framework emphasizes the need for multi-level interventions that address root causes in individual circumstance, home, school, community, and society.

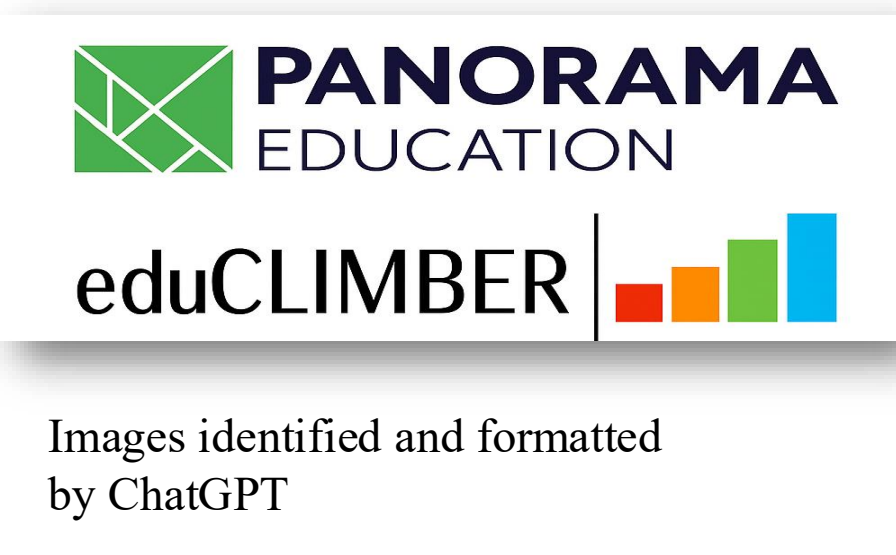
TOOLS

Data Analysis and Collaboration Platforms

- Compile both quantitative and qualitative student data to identify and track both trends and specific causes of student in absenteeism and evaluate the effectiveness of different intervention plans
- Facilitate sharing of information to promote collaboration between administrative staff, teachers, and families

Classroom Communication Apps

- Instant, two-way communication with parents across several mediums
- Allows for translation of messages into dozens of languages for easy of communication with multilingual families



Images identified and formatted by ChatGPT

A CALL TO ACTION

As I enter my first year as a full-time teacher, I recognize that, while I can’t individually solve issues like poverty, systemic inequities, or healthcare access, I can have a profound impact on my students' lives and combat chronic absenteeism by consistently striving to create a safe, welcoming classroom and building strong, supportive relationships with my students and their families. I will commit to the use of communication tools like Bloomz and TalkingPoints to connect with multilingual families and foster partnerships that address attendance barriers. I will take an active role in addressing the concerns of all my students' and their families and will implement culturally responsive teaching practices and restorative disciplinary procedures to ensure I provide all students with the inclusive learning environment they deserve. I plan to collaborate with colleagues through PLCs, learn from their experience, and advocate for the integration of data driven interventions through data-driven collaborative platforms. My goal, first and foremost, is to ensure that every student feels seen, supported, and encouraged to stay connected to school while in my care.