TEACH +PLUS

HOW TO GET OUR STUDENTS BACK IN THE CLASSROOM

Recommendations from Teach Plus Colorado
Policy Fellows Shaped by Parental Feedback

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Too many Colorado students are absent from school and missing out on meaningful instruction, critical relationships, and the stability school provides. Chronic absenteeism, where a student misses 10 percent or more of a school year, spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic and has remained a persistent issue since. In the 2023-2024 academic year, more than a quarter of students were chronically absent. Research has shown that this negatively impacts student learning outcomes, graduation rates, and future opportunities.[1] In response, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) has launched the "Every School Day Matters! Attendance Campaign" alongside its ambitious goal to reduce chronic absenteeism to 17.8 percent by the 2026-2027 school year.[2] When systems are adjusted, students perform better, as evidenced by Attendance Works' growing success, grounded in a shared commitment to rethinking attendance awareness through innovation, local partnerships, and a strong focus on student engagement and well-being.[3]

We are a group of highly effective educators and Teach Plus Colorado Policy Fellows who are committed to identifying and implementing policy solutions that improve student attendance and outcomes. To better understand the root causes of absenteeism and highlight strategies for re-engaging students, we conducted a survey of parents across the state of Colorado to find what is causing children to miss school regularly and what could help ensure students are in the classroom. In this brief, we present our survey findings and identify the systemic barriers contributing to absenteeism. We also outline policy recommendations to help re-engage students in school. Our hope is that schools move beyond awareness campaigns in favor of implementing research-backed strategies that address chronic absenteeism.

We learned that:

1. The growth in access to online learning during the pandemic shifted the perception of the importance of school attendance, with parents prioritizing mental health and students feeling less engaged.

2. Systemic barriers including limited transportation, a lack of before- and after-school care, and limited mental health resources contribute to chronic absenteeism.

3. A lack of clear attendance policies and academic support systems undermines re-engagement and accountability.

To support engagement and attendance, school, district, and state leaders should:

1. Improve access to transportation and before- and after-school care through school and community partnerships.

2. Increase focus on academic support and student engagement with clear accountability standards for truancy.

3. Strengthen mental health support and whole-child learning within schools.

INTRODUCTION

Too many Colorado students are absent from school and missing out on meaningful instruction, critical relationships, and the stability school provides. A student absent 10 percent or more of the school year is chronically absent.[4] In Colorado, chronic absenteeism is a persistent issue, affecting 27.7 percent of students in the 2023-2024 school year.[5] Chronic absenteeism negatively impacts student learning outcomes, graduation rates, and future opportunities.[6] Chronic absenteeism rates spiked during the pandemic, when according to the Brookings Institution, the percentage of students chronically absent nearly doubled from 15 percent to 28 percent, and schools are struggling to re-engage many students across the state.[7] In response, CDE has launched the "Every School Day Matters! Attendance Campaign" alongside their ambitious goal to reduce chronic absenteeism to 17.8 percent by the 2026-2027 school year.[8] The department has focused its efforts on spreading awareness about the importance of regular attendance. Our survey shows most parents already understand the significance of regular attendance in school; what they need is support in getting their kids there.

Our research reveals that despite this awareness, parents struggle to get students to school regularly due to mental health concerns and a lack of transportation or before- and after-school care. Our data also indicates mental health absences are increasingly common, and students aren't motivated to attend regularly without strong peer and staff relationships. Educators struggle to support students who miss significant instructional time, leading to classroom disruptions and an increased workload of reteaching content to frequently absent students.

Research shows that school districts across the U.S. are adopting various strategies to address chronic absenteeism with mixed success.

+ For example, one of the most common interventions—early warning systems that identify at-risk students—has been widely implemented, yet one-quarter of districts report that no intervention has been particularly effective.[9]

+ Indiana has mandated parent conferences for chronically absent elementary students and funded attendance liaisons in schools.[10]

+ In Washington, D.C., a high-impact tutoring initiative showed promise for middle schoolers and those with extreme absenteeism.[11]

+ In Iowa, new legislation has strengthened attendance policies by standardizing excused absences at the state level, requiring schools to follow truancy court guidelines, and increasing engagement meetings with families. Districts now track attendance by grading period rather than the full academic year and must notify county attorneys at specific benchmarks.[12]

+ Fourteen states, including Colorado, have committed to reducing chronic absenteeism by half over the next five years through family engagement, mental health support, and student-centered strategies rather than punitive measures.[13] In Colorado, this has led to a 3.4 percent decline in absenteeism from the 2022-2023 school year, but more must be done as absenteeism continues to disrupt student learning, engagement, and overall academic success.

METHODOLOGY

Between November 12, 2024, and December 20, 2024, the Teach Plus Colorado Chronic Absenteeism Working Group conducted a survey of 126 parents and guardians across Colorado. Participants' children in preK-12 attend school in 17 districts with one homebound; two are from two rural districts and 15 are from urban and suburban districts per CDE data.[14] Our research aimed to assess parental perspectives on chronic absenteeism, identify key factors influencing student attendance, and determine the services and supports families believe would most effectively re-engage students in school.

Once the survey was created, it was sent to CDE's Dropout Prevention & Student Re-engagement specialist for feedback and further review. The survey consisted of 19 questions, incorporating multiple-choice and open-ended responses to capture a range of quantitative and qualitative data, and was offered in English and Spanish. The survey link was distributed statewide through multiple outreach channels, including social media, email, newsletters, and text message campaigns.

Following the survey's conclusion on December 20, 2024, we conducted a two-phase analysis. First, the quantitative data was reviewed to identify broad trends and patterns. Subsequently, the qualitative responses were systematically coded using open coding; we analyzed them as a whole working group to extract key themes and insights.

FINDINGS

1. **The growth in access to online learning during the pandemic shifted the perception of the importance of school attendance, with parents prioritizing mental health and students feeling less engaged.**

The pandemic has had a lasting impact on how families perceive and approach school attendance. While most parents continue to recognize the value of attending school, the pandemic reshaped their priorities and decision making. Physical health and mental wellness now take greater precedence. Simultaneously, increased familiarity with online learning platforms has made it easier for both parents and students to believe schoolwork can be completed remotely. Combined with lingering declines in student motivation and well-being, these shifts reveal a fundamental change in how families weigh the role of school in daily life—highlighting the need for schools to adapt their engagement strategies, support systems, and attendance policies to meet evolving family needs and perceptions.

Our survey results reflect that parents overwhelmingly understand the academic consequences of missing school. A substantial 84 percent of parents in the survey acknowledged that academic achievement is impacted before a student reaches the threshold for being chronically absent (two days a month or 18 days or more a year).[15] One parent explained, *"Our family believes in the importance of doing things you need to do even when you don't want to, building resilience, being dependable, learning, and gaining experience."*[16]

Another parent echoed that same sentiment while acknowledging a broader shift in norms following COVID-19:

"As a family, we think school attendance is important. I think this changed for a lot of families during COVID. … Work could be done to help families understand the benefits, from the learning to the healthy habits of it, of going to school every day."[17]

These responses highlight that while families still value and understand the importance of consistent school attendance, there is a growing need for renewed efforts to communicate its long-term benefits in the context of evolving post-pandemic priorities.

One of the clearest examples of post-pandemic shifts in attitude toward school attendance is the increasing emphasis on supporting students' physical and mental health. Since returning to in-person learning, many parents have become more cautious about sending their children to school when they are unwell. A significant 87 percent of parents reported keeping their child home due to physical illnesses. In addition, several families expressed that school no longer holds the same unquestioned priority as before the pandemic, making them more likely to keep students home when unwell.[18] One parent noted, *"We take illness precautions very seriously, so don't push the boundaries of sending them if they are sick. School also lost a bit of its sacrosanctity. It is not the end-all be-all of life—relationships and connections are."*[19] This indicates a fundamental rebalancing of priorities, with families now more willing to place physical and emotional well-being ahead of daily attendance.

Closely tied to health concerns is a decline in student motivation and lingering mental health challenges. Many parents reflected on how their children's engagement with school has changed since the pandemic, describing a sense of ongoing detachment. One parent shared, *"It has put a fog on school in general; [it] seems like the whole country lost motivation towards learning after COVID lockdowns."*[20]

Another shared that attendance after the pandemic never returned to previous levels for their older children, who now see in-person learning as more optional. These responses point to a deeper disengagement from school, where students continue to progress and recover following the disruptions of the pandemic. As one parent put it, *"All of my children were negatively impacted by the pandemic and have never recovered."*[21]

These reflections underscore the urgent need for schools to prioritize mental health support and re-engagement strategies that acknowledge the lasting emotional and motivational impacts of the pandemic on students.

Adding to this behavioral shift is the widespread access to online learning platforms such as Schoology and Google Classroom, which have altered how parents and students perceive the necessity of being physically present in school. After growing more comfortable with these platforms during the pandemic, many families are now fine with students completing coursework from home, particularly when a child is feeling unwell. One parent explained that having access to materials online *"increased the options to complete some part of the assignments and learning online, so I am more likely to keep a child home if they are feeling sick."*[22] Some students have begun to advocate to stay home from school and learn remotely, reassuring parents that they can *"just do [their] work online."*[23] Because of the abrupt shift to online learning during the pandemic, there is a newfound dynamic where physical attendance may no longer feel as essential, especially when catching up academically appears more manageable from home.

Nearly one-third (31 percent) of parents indicated that student absences were due to family travel, a trend influenced by behavioral shifts following the pandemic.[24] Access to online learning during school closures changed perceptions about the necessity of in-person attendance, with many families relying on digital platforms to keep their children academically on track. One parent expressed a desire for more formal integration of online academic instruction, stating, they *"would love an online component so on days we were traveling my child could stay caught up. ... Not sure why in the post-COVID world these are not options for high school students."*[25] Another parent shared that access to classroom materials online has helped the family. *"We travel a lot and rely on the online platforms to keep up to date with assignments."*[26] One more parent shared they will not stop traveling and need more support from the school in accessing online materials, while also sharing frustration about district efforts to improve attendance:

"I wish the district would stop being so restrictive. We travel a lot due to my husband's job. We are not going to stop taking the travel opportunities we get. [Our school district] up until recently has been very accommodating. Now, they're implementing stricter attendance policies which don't take travelers into account. Ultimately it impacts the kids in a negative way and defeats the purpose in my opinion."[27]
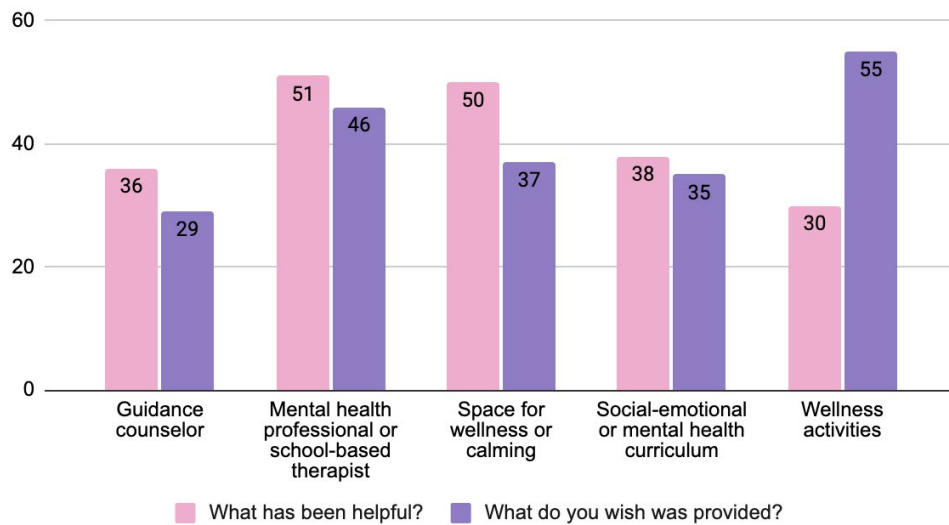
During the pandemic, it was feasible for students to travel and stay caught up in their classes with reduced workloads and lower expectations. As students have returned to the classroom, many parents in the survey felt online coursework could continue to replace the richness of in-person learning. As online access to assignments continues to be a commonplace practice, a growing number of families continue to perceive student attendance as optional, leading students to miss out on the relational, academic depth of in-person instruction.

2. **Systemic barriers including limited transportation, a lack of before- and after-school care, and limited mental health resources contribute to chronic absenteeism.**

Families face a range of barriers that affect their ability to maintain consistent school attendance, particularly around transportation, childcare, mental health resources, and student engagement. While many parents expressed commitment to supporting their children's education, these systemic challenges often limit their ability to do so effectively and consistently. Parents and guardians identified needs in district-provided transportation, before- and after-school care, and enhanced mental health resources. Coordinated efforts from districts, schools, staff, and community partnerships are needed to help students attend regularly and catch up efficiently when absences do occur.

The need for more mental health resources emerged as another critical factor that would assist students in achieving more consistent attendance. Many families shared how essential in-school mental health support has become to their child's ability to attend and thrive. Currently, students benefit from school-based therapists (41 percent), wellness centers or calming spaces (40 percent), and social-emotional learning curriculum (30 percent).[28] Parents expressed a desire for additional resources, including wellness activities (44 percent), more mental health professionals (37 percent), and expanded wellness and calming spaces (29 percent).[29]

What has been helpful? and What do you wish was provided?

	What has been helpful?	What do you wish was provided?
Guidance counselor	36	29
Mental health professional or school-based therapist	51	46
Space for wellness or calming	50	37
Social-emotional or mental health curriculum	38	35
Wellness activities	30	55

The largest discrepancy between what has already been helpful to what parents wish was provided is increased access to wellness activities. These activities range from simple exercises and mindfulness breaks to structured programs like yoga, healthy eating initiatives, and social-emotional learning activities. Programs such as Sources of Strength[30] can provide an accessible curriculum to promote better mental health practices. Further, creative programming within the school day can provide opportunities for connection and community.

Parents named having accessible support in the school day through mental health professionals (40 percent) and wellness or calming centers (40 percent) as important programming.[31] Parents continually emphasized the critical need for trusted adults and emotional support systems within the school day. A parent suggested advisory programs where students *"meet in small groups with a trusted adult during the school week."*[32] Another parent named the importance of these programs: *"Having a safe person and place for my kids to go if they are upset about going to school (counselor office). Unfortunately, after using this frequently, we now are being told my child goes too much and the counselor will no longer see him. So having leadership who doesn't take away key support and relationships would be helpful."*[33] Parents frequently mentioned that having access to these supports during the school day increased levels of attendance, as students were not left to suffer in silence at home.

These needs for additional in-school mental health support are especially urgent given that nearly half (47 percent) of respondents shared that their children utilize mental health days.[34] One parent shared the immense struggles their daughter faced during the pandemic, explaining that when their current 9th grader was in 7th grade, she *"had some crippling anxiety that made it tough for her to go to school."*[35] With access to therapy and support provided in her school building, she was able to return to school. This story, echoed by others in the survey, illustrates how accessible mental health resources within school buildings can make a tangible difference in student attendance and well-being. These findings reflect a pressing need for schools to bolster in-school support systems that help students feel seen, supported, and safe—encouraging students to seek help at school rather than withdrawing at home and avoiding attendance.

For many families, district or community-provided transportation and before- and after-school care are not just conveniences, but essential lifelines. These services are especially critical for working parents and low-income families who rely on them for stability and routine. Parents navigating community and school programs indicated a need for assistance accessing these resources, revealing the necessity for more family liaisons.

Before- and after-school care plays a particularly important role in helping families manage their schedules and allow for working parents to more easily manage parenting and earn an income. As one parent explained, before- and after-school care *"has been very helpful—when schools don't have that it's hard for working parents."*[36] In the survey, 21 percent of parents reported that childcare services have helped ensure consistent attendance for their children.[37] Child care can be accessed in school environments, but also through community-based resources.

Reliable transportation emerged as a separate but equally pressing concern that especially supports working parents. Fifteen percent of parents identified transportation as a current barrier to attendance, and many emphasized that having dependable, free transit options would dramatically improve their child's ability to attend school regularly.[38] One parent simply stated that their wish was that the district would "*provide free transportation to school."*[39]

Another explained that transportation and childcare are both essential. It would

"be really helpful in maintaining attendance if my kids were bussed to their schools. It would be extremely helpful for me if I could have childcare for my youngest child who is supposed to be in preschool, but I have not heard back from the preschools concerning him because we are low income. ... I've never gotten any information about before or after care for my children."[40]
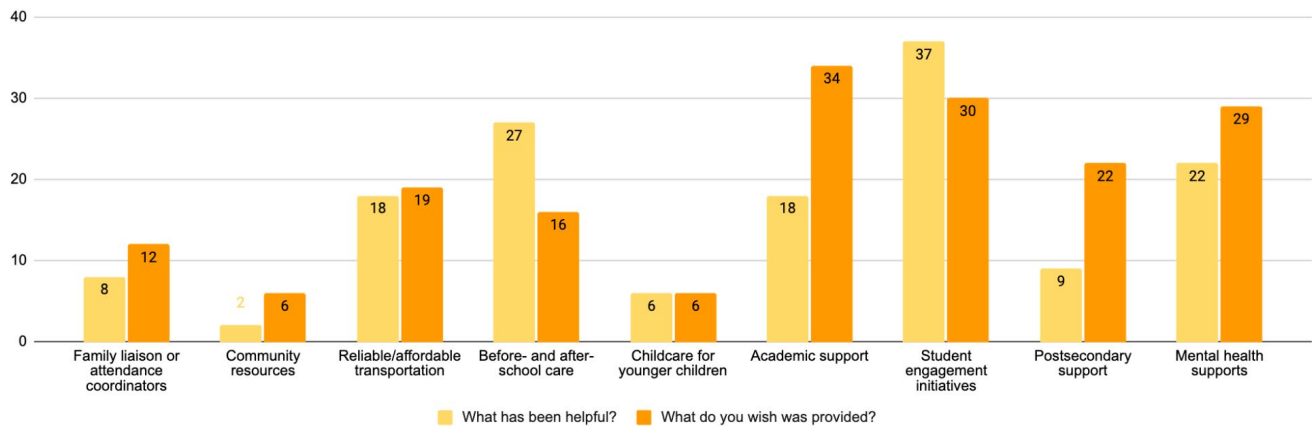
Together, these statements indicate that transportation and childcare remain critical, yet often inaccessible, supports that families depend on to maintain regular attendance.

3. A lack of clear attendance policies and academic support systems undermines re-engagement and accountability.

Parents expressed a consistent desire for clearer attendance policies, structured academic support, and meaningful consequences that could help re-engage students and reinforce the importance of attending school. Across the board, families shared that when these systems are missing or inconsistently enforced, it becomes much harder to help children stay on track academically, return to school after absences, and understand the importance of consistent attendance.

Parents reported that the most helpful services currently encouraging student attendance include student engagement initiatives (29 percent), before- and after-school care (21 percent), mental health support (17 percent), reliable transportation (14 percent), and academic support (14 percent).[41] However, there was a significant discrepancy when looking at what services in which parents wished they had access. The most requested services included academic support (27 percent), followed by student engagement initiatives (24 percent), and mental health support (23 percent).[42] These findings indicate there is a gap between existing services and actual family needs that would lead to more consistent attendance.

What has been helpful? What do you wish was provided?

Category	What has been helpful?	What do you wish was provided?
Family liaison or attendance coordinators	8	12
Community resources	2	6
Reliable/affordable transportation	18	19
Before- and after-school care	27	16
Childcare for younger children	6	6
Academic support	18	34
Student engagement initiatives	37	30
Postsecondary support	9	22
Mental health supports	22	29

One of the most common frustrations expressed in the survey was over unclear attendance policies and a lack of structured academic support following absences. In the survey, 27 percent of parents indicated that additional academic support was needed to help their students recover from time away.[43] Parents specifically emphasized that improved communication from teachers and timely access to missing assignments on a streamlined online platform would be beneficial. Many suggested that students need a designated point person, such as a counselor or homeroom teacher, who could guide them in catching up on work. One parent at the secondary level expressed their frustration regarding the difficulty of catching their student up after an absence: *"When kids have 8 classes, it is overwhelming and frankly beyond their capacity to do this with each individual teacher."*[44] This response highlights a broader need for schools to implement clear, consistent systems that support academic recovery and reduce the stress and confusion families face when students return from absences.

Another key academic intervention parents found helpful was the consistent use of digital learning platforms like Schoology or Google Classroom. For instance, one parent highlighted how helpful it was when *"teachers are consistent about posting assignments and/or recording the lesson they taught in class and posting online makes it super easy to keep up with assignments! [That] eliminates confusion and they get as close as possible to the in-class experience if they do have to miss."*[45] This suggests that consistent use of digital platforms can serve as a vital bridge between home and school, helping students stay on track academically should they have to miss school. This support, while helpful, also does not replace the depth of in-person learning. In connection with Finding 1, the pandemic has changed how families and students view the importance of school attendance, affecting both their behaviors and attitudes. Access to online learning and coursework can encourage students to avoid attending school in person, but the intentionality of close student-teacher relationships that drive increased student attendance cannot be replaced by online work.

Parents also recommended built-in time during the school day through advisory, study hall, or homeroom for students to catch up on missed work or meet one-on-one with teachers. These academic recovery periods were seen as crucial, especially for families balancing work and other responsibilities. One parent explained: *"It would be helpful for the teachers to help him catch up on the work that he needs to do. … I wish that I could help [my child] with every single thing that he needs, but I can't. I'm a single mother with*
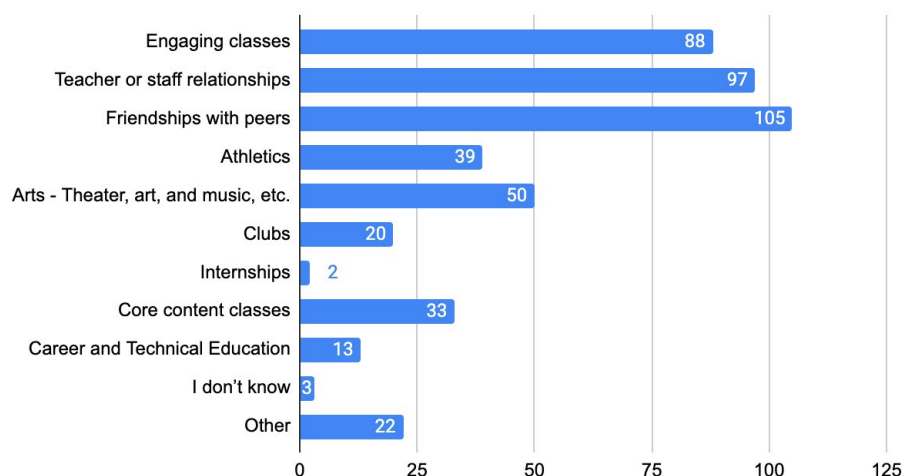
four children and I work in healthcare. I cannot help him as much as he needs help and if the teachers can help him get caught up, that would be a huge burden off of us."[46] Clear expectations for makeup work and direct teacher support are essential in ensuring that absences do not lead to academic failure.

Alongside academic support, families emphasized the importance of maintaining student interest and connection through engaging classroom environments and extracurricular activities. When asked what motivates their child to attend school, 83 percent of students were motivated to attend because of friendships with peers, 77 percent due to teacher and staff relationships, and 70% because of engaging classes.[47] These findings underscore the value of human connection and meaningful instruction in encouraging daily attendance. Parents noted that teachers who build strong relationships and offer relevant, engaging lessons help motivate students to show up. As one parent put it, *"Having teachers who care and interesting classes make all the difference."*[48]

Creating a supportive and engaging school culture and environment plays a crucial role in motivating students to attend regularly and feel connected to educational experiences that reflect their career aspirations.

What do you believe motivates your child to go to school?

Category	Value
Engaging classes	88
Teacher or staff relationships	97
Friendships with peers	105
Athletics	39
Arts - Theater, art, and music, etc.	50
Clubs	20
Internships	2
Core content classes	33
Career and Technical Education	13
I don't know	3
Other	22

Extracurricular opportunities also play a significant role in supporting attendance and getting students excited about going to school. Nearly a third (29 percent) of parents said these activities helped keep their students engaged and attending more regularly.[49] Parents appreciated when schools provided chances for students to explore their interests and build community beyond core academics. One parent explained that it was beneficial to their children to find *"extracurricular activities [that help] keep interest,"*[50] while another said they wanted their child to *"stay active and be challenged in unique ways."*[51] These supports become increasingly important as students get older and find community through their extracurricular activities while also finding relevance in their coursework that connects to their career aspirations.

As students reach high school, postsecondary support becomes an increasingly important need. One-third of parents of grade 9-12 students said postsecondary support would be helpful, but only 14 percent report having access.[52] Considering there is substantial research that indicates Career and Technical Education (CTE) helps prevent

students from dropping out, parents' request for expanding these services could result in greater attendance and excitement for attendance.[53] Parents expressed a wish for *"clases mas dinámica"* or more dynamic classes.[54] These insights emphasize that fostering strong relationships and dynamic learning experiences are not only beneficial but essential to improving attendance and re-engaging reluctant learners and chronically absent students. Addressing postsecondary opportunities in the secondary classroom can influence positive attendance outcomes, with students feeling more connected to meaningful and engaging coursework.

In addition to these supports, parents called for clearer and more consistently enforced attendance policies that address accountability for students and families. Several parents described situations in which students missed school without consequences or systems-level structure from the individual schools. These parents crave real repercussions for chronic absenteeism. One parent shared, *"My husband and I both work and can't be around to get our senior up on time and make sure he gets to school. He needs to be accountable to someone in the school for attendance. But it seems like there's no real enforcement mechanism. Bring back law and order!"*[55] These responses indicate that while parents support efforts to improve attendance, the lack of structured accountability from schools contributes to the persistence of chronic absenteeism among students.

Parents also advocated for stronger consequences and structure from the school system, paired with the appropriate support for students and families. As one parent argued, *"Legally enforce consequences like truancy, report educational neglect to [Child Protective Services], make missing school uncomfortable and inconvenient by limiting excused absences and keeping firm to due dates, and holding students back (or require remedial learning) when they are falling behind grade-level expectations."*[56] These suggestions reflect a desire for the school system to take a more proactive and consistent approach to enforcing attendance, ensuring that students face meaningful consequences for chronic absenteeism.

Still, many parents emphasized that accountability should be paired with support. Structured interventions, such as regular check-ins with school staff, accessible transportation, or reminders, were viewed as essential. One parent summarized this need: *"Those families of students with chronic absences need to be held accountable. They need to be given support (bussing options, [ride-shares], etc), and if those supports aren't used, there should be consequences."*[57] Families expressed a desire for schools to serve as partners, offering both compassionate support and clearly communicated expectations.
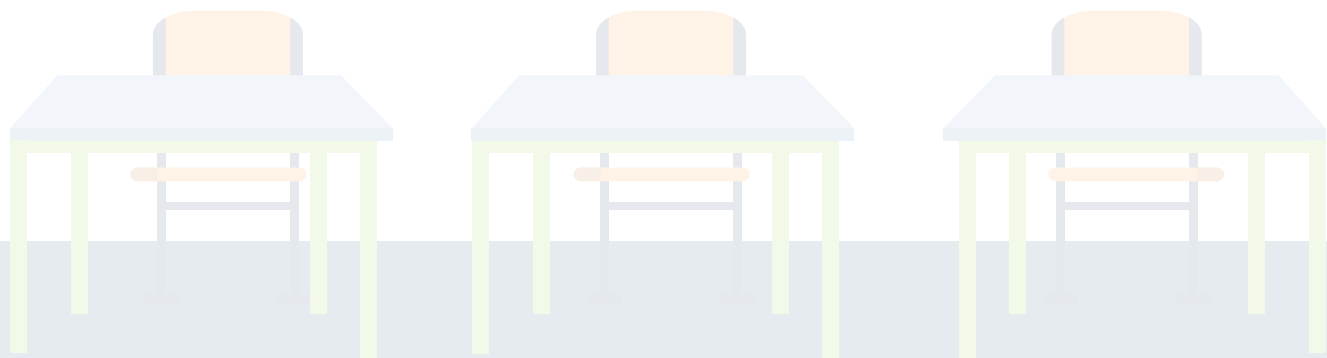
RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Improve access to transportation and before- and after-school care through school and community partnerships.**

Transportation Needs:

One of the most consistent barriers families identified in our survey was the lack of reliable transportation and limited access to childcare options outside of traditional school hours. These logistical challenges disproportionately impact working families and students in rural or under-resourced communities, making it difficult for students to consistently attend school. To address this issue, schools must collaborate with local governments and community organizations to develop reliable, accessible systems that ensure every student has a pathway to the school building and a safe, supportive environment before and after the bell rings. School districts and community partners across Colorado have piloted a variety of promising solutions that, if replicated or expanded, could make a significant difference in helping students be in the classroom.

Free and consistent transportation is a foundational requirement for regular school attendance. Several Colorado districts and local partners have pioneered creative solutions that could be expanded statewide. For instance, Denver's Regional Transportation District (RTD) offers free passes for youth ages 19 and under, significantly improving access for students in urban areas.[58] City and county governments, school district leaders, and regional transportation agencies should work together to expand this type of access across Colorado.

In rural Colorado, where both public transit and walkable infrastructure are limited, access to regular transportation is an even greater challenge. District and city officials in these communities must continue to consider creative solutions that offer students opportunities to get to their school buildings, especially in suburban and rural communities without regional transportation access.[59] For example, Columbine Elementary in Boulder Valley School District offers the "Bici Bus," where students commute together on bikes with adult supervision.[60] Community-organized group biking or walking initiatives provide not only a healthy way to travel but also a safer way to build community into students' school day routine.

The Colorado Safe Routes to School program, administered by the Colorado Department of Transportation, provides grants for communities to invest in safe and accessible active transportation routes for students who walk or bike to school.[61] The program funds a mix of infrastructure improvements like sidewalks and crosswalks. The applications for these grants have been extremely competitive, and expanding access to the Safe Routes to School program offers underserved areas a low-cost, high impact solution that can help reduce chronic absenteeism.

Before- and After-School Care

Just as important as the school day itself is what happens before and after it. For many families, especially those with full-time working caregivers, access to affordable before- and after-school care is essential. Without it, students may miss partial or full school days

due to scheduling conflicts or a lack of supervision. Several Colorado school districts, such as [JeffCo](#) and [Adams 12](#), and schools like [Frisco Elementary School](#), offer before- and after-school programs, but capacity remains limited.[62]

To bridge the gap, community partnerships have stepped in. The [Boys and Girls Club of Metro Denver](#) collaborates with families to provide extended care options.[63] In Southern Colorado, the City of Colorado Springs partners with community centers like [Leading Edge Before and After School Care](#)[64] to provide discounted before- and after-school care.[65] [Breckenridge](#) offers high-interest after-school activities through municipal support, while organizations like the [YMCA](#) serve students across multiple districts—including Boulder Valley, St. Vrain Valley, Weld RE-5J, Thompson, and Laramie County—with transportation-included care.[66]

Implementation of Support through a Meaningful Team

These examples reveal that meaningful progress occurs when school districts, local governments, and community-based organizers work together. It's this kind of multi-level collaboration that leads to better outcomes for Colorado's students. Successful efforts are often flexible, locally tailored, and grounded in relationships with the community. Programs that address transportation and before- and after-school care directly support students' ability to attend school consistently. When scaled equitably, these programs can help close the attendance gap that continues to affect outcomes across the state. In order to get students and families to access these resources, school and community liaisons should connect families with existing programs that can assist in more consistent attendance.

Since parents indicated they struggled to access appropriate services, community and school liaisons are needed to connect parents to existing programs and resources. Families repeatedly cited logistical barriers as major obstacles to regular attendance. Improving transportation and care infrastructure addresses these root causes—not just the symptoms—of chronic absenteeism, which can't be solved solely from the classroom. Continued investment in creative, inclusive solutions is the only way to ensure that access to education is not determined by a family's zip code.

2. **Increase focus on academic support and student engagement with clear accountability standards for truancy.**

To address chronic absenteeism holistically, schools and local districts must take a dual approach: Offer timely and equitable academic supports that re-engage students after absences and implement consistent, compassionate accountability structures that prevent and respond to chronic absenteeism with solution-based actions.

When students miss class, the pathway back into learning must be clear and supportive. School districts should support student re-engagement by funding and organizing structured, designated spaces and times for tutoring. Liaisons could work with families to access existing scholarships for academic tutoring. Effective tutoring programs—when consistent, well-publicized, and staffed by compensated educators—can help students catch up on missed work and rebuild essential skills lost during disrupted instruction. Tutoring is one promising strategy among others to help students reconnect with their learning.

Several organizations in Colorado have already seen positive results from implementing such initiatives. For example, the I Have a Dream Foundation of Boulder County, offers students free tutoring for several days after school.[67] The Denver Test Prep (DTP) organization funds the ACHieve Scholarship, which covers at least 90 percent of the costs for a DTP tutoring package in one of five key service areas: Test Prep, K-12 Course Tutoring, Reading Intervention, AP Exam Prep, and Academic Coaching.[68] These targeted interventions help students recover academic ground in ways that are both personalized and sustainable.

In tandem with tutoring, districts must guarantee consistent access to course materials through digital platforms. When schools require the use of tools such as Schoology and Google Classroom across all classes, students and families are better equipped to navigate missed work. Survey responses revealed that students are significantly more likely to catch up after an absence when they can access lessons, posted assignments, and clear instructions online. To make this happen, district and school leaders must provide funding for platform licenses, offer training for staff, and adopt policies that require teachers to maintain updated digital platforms. Alongside digital access, schools must establish clear and consistent policies regarding attendance and make-up work. School leaders should set expectations that every teacher maintains the same process and expectations for missed school. This consistency alleviates confusion, improves communication with families, and ensures students understand what is expected of them when they return from an absence.

Just as academic support is key to bringing students back into the classroom, clear accountability systems help prevent absences in the first place. Parents in our survey called for better enforcement of truancy policies and more follow-through from schools when absenteeism becomes chronic. A lack of structured intervention can leave students without any accountability or support.

For chronically absent students, clear follow-through on student truancy and checking up on educational neglect is necessary to create stricter expectations for student attendance. In Iowa, school districts have achieved pre-pandemic attendance levels by strictly adhering to existing policies surrounding truancy.[69] Following these efforts, Colorado schools should frequently communicate to parents their child's absences, but also follow truancy guidelines that offer families the chance to access wraparound support that already exists to encourage more consistent attendance.

Colorado's attendance initiative aims to be more support-based and attempts to avoid punitive measures. A way to provide this multisupport-based model while avoiding punitive measures is seen in Montgomery County, Maryland, where a multi-tiered approach is used to combat chronic absenteeism. This includes steps such as establishing dates for regular school-based attendance data review meetings, individualized well-being-focused support, and collaborative problem solving with families.[70] This kind of multi-level model balances compassion with accountability, ensuring students don't fall through the cracks.

Closer to home, Boulder Valley School District has implemented a community-based review panel that meets with students and families prior to initiating court proceedings.[71] This collaborative approach helps address underlying issues without immediately resorting to legal consequences, offering a more humanistic path toward re-engagement.

Another clear trend in the survey was that students are more likely to attend school when they feel engaged in what they're learning. Families highlighted the importance of programs that make school feel relevant, especially through elective offerings, CTE, and workforce readiness initiatives.

Colorado districts have seen success with implementing Colorado's Career Development Incentive Program, which is one workforce readiness program already in place that could be utilized by more high schools.[72] Programs like these are engaging for students because they move beyond their core content classes and help students have a clear pathway into careers after high school. Several school districts in Colorado are leaders in this initiative, with St. Vrain's Career Elevation and Technical Education program, Adam 12's Career Pathway program, Brighton High School's CTE program, and District 2's Career Readiness Academy all models for implementing such coursework, career certifications, and meaningful internships.[73] Encouraging students to see the applicability of their learning in school with workforce readiness programs and district-based CTE programs can motivate students to attend school more regularly.

Families want meaningful academic support, clear expectations for attendance, and engaging learning environments that give students a reason to attend school. By investing in tutoring, accessible coursework, multi-tiered accountability systems, and career-connected learning, Colorado can reduce chronic absenteeism while improving academic outcomes. These initiatives shift the focus from punitive discipline to purposeful support, ensuring every student has the tools and motivation to succeed.

3. Strengthen mental health support and whole child learning within schools.

Survey findings made it clear that for many students, chronic absenteeism isn't due to a lack of effort from families; it's about mental health. Parents told us their kids miss school not because they don't care, but because they are overwhelmed by anxiety, depression, or just the stress of showing up. If Colorado really wants to get serious about reducing chronic absenteeism, student mental health can't be an afterthought; it must be part of the regular school day. That means schools and districts need to be thoughtful and creative in meeting students' needs. Some districts are already doing this through community-based mental health services, with embedded social-emotional learning as part of the regular school day, and expanded access to calming spaces where students can reset and take a mental health break.

One major theme across parental responses was the need for accessible, affordable mental health care beyond the school day. Some Colorado programs already serve as models. Initiatives like I Matter, Community Reach, and Rise Against Suicide offer free or low-cost therapy to youth, meeting a critical need for students who cannot access private services.[74] These programs reduce barriers for families and can prevent the escalation of mental health issues that result in chronic absenteeism. However, these programs are often overburdened by a greater need for services than can be met. Additional support for programs with proven track records of success as listed above will continue to support students who need it most. School leaders should advertise these programs to ensure students are aware of their existence, and school liaisons should work with families to access these resources.

Strong coordination between schools and mental health providers also ensures that students don't fall through the cracks and that families are supported so that they can take advantage of existing programming. Embedding family liaisons and resource centers like those in District 20's Family Resource Center, strengthens the bridge between families and services.[75]

Embedding social-emotional learning into the school day provides students with tools to manage emotions, build relationships, and navigate challenges. Colorado school districts have already adopted several high-quality social-emotional learning programs, such as Sources of Strength, CharacterStrong, and RULER.[76] These programs integrate activities and lessons into the school day, creating space for reflection, connection, and personal growth. Combined with advisory programs in which students have a specific staff member to connect with to support them both academically, socially, and emotionally, these supports can help students at all levels of education. State lawmakers should require school districts to implement such programs in order to ensure access for all Colorado students to engage in social-emotional learning.

Continued investment in social and emotional learning ensures that all students, regardless of background, receive research-based strategies that support emotional resilience and prevent disengagement due to mental health challenges.

While community partnerships and social-emotional learning are essential, students also need immediate, in-school access to supportive spaces where they can manage their emotions and reset. Wellness and calming centers are models for in-the-moment support that keeps students in school rather than needing to remove themselves from their campuses.

Schools across Colorado are already piloting innovative approaches. Boulder High School's Wellness Center allows students to use a pass system to take a break in a supervised calming space; if they are unable to regulate after 15 minutes, they are referred for additional support.[77] One author of this brief shares that their school, Prairie View Middle School, offers a similar approach, providing green sheet passes and teacher referrals to a calming space where students can access help throughout the class period. At Frontier Elementary School, calming corners are integrated into each classroom and tied to the broader RULER program, giving students opportunities to regulate and re-engage.[78]

Mental health needs don't follow a set schedule. With the state making mental health days an excused absence with the passing of Senate Bill 20-014 in 2020, schools must step up and provide effective programs that help students during the day, rather than the students suffering alone at home.[79] Schools that give students access to supportive environments during the school day can help students interrupt cycles of distress that lead to absences and, instead, build patterns of resilience and re-engagement.

When schools meet students' mental health needs, students are more likely to show up, stay engaged, and succeed. All across Colorado, multi-tiered, school-centered mental health strategies are both effective and necessary in addressing chronic absenteeism. What's needed is more approaches that combine community partnerships, integrated social-emotional learning, and in-school wellness supports to create environments where students feel safe, seen, and supported rather than silently struggling on their own.

CONCLUSION

To boost student attendance, schools must move beyond awareness campaigns and implement student-centered interventions that support students overcoming attendance challenges. If Colorado is serious about improving attendance, we must build systems where showing up to school feels possible, purposeful, and supported. Colorado has already piloted promising approaches in pockets across the state. Now, it is time to scale these successes, invest in what works, and create a statewide culture where every student is welcomed, valued, and empowered to thrive.

Colorado must act with urgency to reduce chronic absenteeism, not through punitive measures, but by building systems that make regular attendance possible, purposeful, and supported. Teach Plus Colorado Policy Fellows are eager to work with policymakers on developing solutions that encourage students to re-engage in classrooms in meaningful, sustaining ways.

ABOUT TEACH PLUS

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that affect their students' success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning for students. Learn more about Teach Plus Colorado: teachplus.org/co

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APPENDIX

Survey Questions

1. First name*
2. Last name*
3. Email address*
4. Which of the following best describes you? Click all that apply.
5. What school district is your child in?[80]
6. Which grade level(s) is/are your student(s) in? (Select all that apply.)
7. How many days has your student been absent over the last year?
8. If your student has been absent in the last year, which of the following best describes your student's absences from school? (Select top five.)
9. What services or supports have been helpful in ensuring your child consistently attends school?
10. What services or supports do you wish your child's school provided to ensure your child consistently attends school?
11. After how many absences do you believe the academic achievement of your child's learning will be negatively affected?
12. What do you believe motivates your child to go to school? Click all that apply.

Mental Health Questions

13. In 2020, Colorado passed a law that requires school districts to include a policy for excused absences for behavioral health concerns, more commonly referred to as mental health days. Mental health days can be for students who need a break due to stress/anxiety/depression or need to miss due to a mental health appointment. How many mental health days does your student take a year?
14. What mental health-specific services or supports have been helpful in ensuring your child consistently attends school? (Select all that apply.)
15. What mental health-specific services or supports do you wish your child's school provided to ensure your child consistently attends school? (Select all that apply.)

Open-Ended Questions

16. What support would be most helpful to help your child to catch up after they come back from an absence?
17. How has the pandemic impacted your child's ability to maintain steady attendance, if at all?
18. Would you like to share anything about what has been helpful in maintaining attendance?
19. Would you like to share anything about what you wish schools would do to help maintain attendance?

DEMOGRAPHICS FOR SURVEY PARTICIPANTS' DISTRICTS

What school district does your child attend?*	Frequency	Percentage (%) of Survey Respondents From Each District	District's Student Population	District Type	District's Chronically Absent Rate (2023-24)	District's Median Household Income - Parents of Children in Public School
27J	9	7.14%	24014	Suburban, Large	26.8	125,809
Academy District 20	8	6.35%	26569	City, Large	19	140,013
Adams 12 Five Star Schools	8	6.35%	34466	Suburban, Large	31.1	111,947
Boulder Valley School District	30	23.81%	27991	City, Midsize	17.8	162,579
Cherry Creek	1	0.79%	52672	City, Large	25.5	132,436
Cheyenne Mountain	1	0.79%	3725	City, Large	10.4	142,756
Colorado Springs D11	10	7.94%	22265	City, Large	29.2	81,893
DPS Denver Public Schools	41	32.54%	90450	City, Large	37.1	90,621
District 49	6	4.76%	26649	City, Large	26.8	122,683
Douglas County	1	0.79%	61851	Suburban, Large	17.1	172,268
Harrison School District 2	3	2.38%	12301	City, Large	30.9	60,811
Jeffco	1	0.79%	75495	Suburban, Large	25.3	131,244
Moffat County	1	0.79%	204	Town, Remote	51.2	77,365
St. Vrain	1	0.79%	32414	Suburban, Midsize	21.8	132,825
Weld RE3-j	1	0.79%	110	Rural, Distant	17.7	106,061
Widefield School District 3	3	2.38%	9292	Suburban, Large	27.8	96,571
home-bound	1	0.79%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total:	126	100.00%				

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