



Chronic Absenteeism is a Hard but Addressable Problem

Findings from Surveys of School Principals

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KEY FINDINGS

- **Schools widely use a core set of attendance improvement strategies.** High percentages of principals report using strategies such as family engagement, communication with families and students, improving student-teacher relationships and student-peer relationships, mental health supports, and attendance teams.
- **There is a substantial gap between strategy use and perceived effectiveness.** There is no single or small set of strategies that principals have found to be universally or even widely effective.
- **Strategies focused on school connectedness received the highest effectiveness ratings.** Improving student-teacher relationships, improving student-peer relationships, and creating a supportive school environment were rated as effective by more than half of principals.
- **Many principals did not use surveys, interviews, or focus groups to understand why students are not attending.** This was the least frequently used of the attendance improvement strategies examined.
- **Schools reporting multiple effective strategies also report greater attendance improvement.** Fifty-two percent of principals reported that their school was using four or more effective attendance improvement strategies. These principals were substantially more likely to report significant improvements in chronic absenteeism than principals who reported that their schools had only one or no effective strategies.
- **Effective attendance teams are associated with greater attendance improvement.** Principals who reported having an effective attendance team were more than three times as likely to report good improvement in attendance as principals who reported having a somewhat effective, ineffective, or no attendance team.
- **Some of the most frequently cited barriers to attendance extend beyond the school.** Unstable housing, transportation, and sibling caregiving were among the most frequently cited out-of-school factors contributing to absenteeism.
- **A comprehensive approach appears to matter.** The findings suggest that substantial reductions in chronic absenteeism are more commonly reported in schools that have multiple effective strategies aligned with the major reasons their students are not regularly attending and have the capacity to implement those strategies at scale.
- **The work is difficult, but progress is possible.** The complexity of identifying the right combination of strategies, implementing them effectively, and reaching enough students may help explain the uneven progress across schools and over time. The survey findings also indicate that many schools are making meaningful progress and that the core elements of effective attendance improvement are within most schools' capacity to implement, often with support from partners beyond the school.

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The nation's chronic absenteeism rate doubled in the aftermath of the pandemic. As a result, in at least half of the nation's school districts, chronic absenteeism rates increased by 10 percentage points or more from 2017-18 to 2021-22 ([Kim & Balfanz 2026](#)). Schools that had not previously experienced high rates of chronic absenteeism suddenly found themselves addressing a new problem. Schools that had faced high rates of chronic absenteeism before the pandemic found themselves confronting an even greater challenge, with the number of chronically absent students climbing to more than 100 in some elementary schools and 200 in some high schools ([Chang, Balfanz & Byrnes 2023](#)).

Some states and districts have responded with guidance and support ([Attendance Works, 2026](#)). Ultimately, it falls to the nation's school principals to determine how their schools can respond effectively to historically high levels of chronic absenteeism.

The urgency of the need for an effective response to the rise in chronic absenteeism is underscored by the fact that more than two-thirds of students attended schools in 2021-22 with chronic absenteeism rates of 20% or more. This is the point at which research has found that all students in the school become impacted ([Chang, Balfanz & Byrnes, 2023](#)).

Since 2021-22, some schools have made progress, and as a result, district and state chronic absenteeism rates, on average, have declined, though most still remain substantially above pre-pandemic levels ([Malkus 2026](#)). A smaller number of schools have made substantial progress: Fourteen percent of districts that experienced a 10-percentage-point or greater increase in chronic absenteeism in 2021-22 had returned to near pre-pandemic levels by 2024-25 ([Kim & Balfanz, 2026](#)).

At the other end of the spectrum, some schools have seen only minimal or no declines in chronic absenteeism.

Thus, understanding how the nation's school principals have responded to the rise in chronic absenteeism is crucial to understanding the mixed pace of improvement to date, as well as the actions which could accelerate declines in chronic absenteeism more broadly. This brief takes a step in that direction by analyzing findings of two nationally representative surveys of school principals conducted during the 2024-25 school year. Principals were queried on their understanding of the causes of the rise in chronic absenteeism, the actions their schools have taken to address it, and their views on what has and has not been effective. Principals' self-reports on their schools' post-pandemic attendance improvements are then used to analyze what distinguishes schools that have seen significant reductions in chronic absenteeism from those that have not.

SURVEYS ANALYZED

The first survey examined was conducted by the Partnership for Student Success (PSS) in collaboration with the RAND Corporation to survey a nationally representative sample of public school principals. Principals were asked a series of questions about their schools' response to chronic absenteeism, including whether their schools used one of nine commonly advocated strategies for improving attendance, and if so, how effective it has been. Principals were also asked to self-report the extent to which their schools had reduced chronic absenteeism from their post-pandemic high.

This brief focuses on findings from a survey conducted during the 2024-25 school year so that they align with findings from the second survey. The analysis is also informed by a replication of the PSS/RAND survey conducted during the 2025-26 school year.

The second survey analyzed in this brief was conducted by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), U.S. Department of Education, during the 2024–25 school year. It was the final School Pulse Panel survey conducted in the years following the pandemic and asked a nationally representative sample of public school principals to identify the reasons their students were missing too much school and rate the effectiveness of a range of actions schools could take to improve attendance. Details on both surveys, including their methodologies and how their nationally representative samples were constructed, can be found in the appendix.

INTERPRETING SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' SURVEY RESPONSES

Key findings from both surveys of school principals are detailed below. In reviewing them, it is important to keep in mind that they are based on self-reports from school principals. As such, we do not know the extent to which responses are based on data or driven by impressions and beliefs. For example, when the Pulse survey asks principals to identify why their students are missing too much school from a list of possible reasons, it is likely that principals have a better sense of the scale and scope of factors they can observe throughout the school year than those which occur outside of school. Similarly, when rating the effectiveness of attendance improvement strategies, it is also possible that principals may be making judgements based on a general sense of what has worked or on a limited number of observations, rather than a more complete or data informed evaluation. That said, whether a principal's views are shaped by impressions, beliefs, or data, they still have consequences for the actions schools take, as well as the intensity and fortitude with which they pursue those actions.

SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVES ON WHY THEIR STUDENTS ARE MISSING TOO MUCH SCHOOL: FINDINGS FROM THE FEDERAL PULSE SURVEY

The Federal Pulse survey asked principals to review a list of potential reasons for student absences and identify those that contribute to their students missing too much school. The Pulse survey enables disaggregating the principals' responses in multiple ways¹. In this brief we examine principals' views at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, as well as for schools serving higher- and lower-poverty student populations. These results are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 – Federal Pulse Survey School Leader Responses to “Students in my school miss too much school because of ...”, by School Level

	All public schools	Elementary	Middle or Combined	High or Secondary
Students at my school did not miss too much school	8%	8%	7%	8%
Bullying	7%	6%	10%	9%
Food insecurity	2%	2%	2%	4%
Instruction was perceived to not be interesting or relevant	12%	6%	15%	22%
Lack of access to health care	8%	7%	7%	9%
Lack of relationships to adults at the school	9%	6%	12%	13%
Lack of relationships to peers at school	15%	9%	21%	21%
Lack of routine	26%	28%	24%	24%
Mental health issue	50%	38%	61%	68%
Physical illness	57%	58%	54%	57%
Staying home unnecessarily for minor symptoms	70%	75%	66%	63%
Student apathy	33%	19%	46%	54%
Taking care of siblings	27%	19%	29%	43%
Transportation issues	40%	43%	33%	42%
Unstable housing	37%	36%	34%	41%
Violence in the community	4%	4%	3%	7%
Work schedule conflicts with school	14%	14%	7%	20%
Other	6%	7%	5%	5%
Parent apathy	49%	47%	52%	51%
Family vacations	48%	52%	47%	39%

¹ The Pulse survey allows school principals' responses to be disaggregated by school level, urban/rural locale, school size, geographic region, percentage of minority students, and percentage of students living in poverty.

The reasons provided can be organized into health, out-of-school, school avoidance/disengagement, and student/family choice/value factors.

Health Factors

Staying home unnecessarily for minor symptoms was identified by the greatest number of principals as a reason their students miss too many days of school.

Seventy percent of principals cited this as a reason, including 75% of elementary principals, and 63% of high school principals.

More middle and high school principals see mental health as a cause of increased absenteeism than physical illness.

Among all principals, slightly more (57%) identified physical illness than mental health (50%) as a reason their students miss too much school. More middle and high school principals, however, identified mental health as a reason for absenteeism than physical illness. Sixty-one percent of middle and 68% of high school principals cited mental health, compared with 38% of elementary principals.

A higher percentage of principals from lower-poverty schools (52%) cited mental health as a reason for increased absenteeism, than those from higher-poverty schools (44%). In both groups, however, mental health was seen as a major reason for absenteeism. This indicates, from a principal's point of view, the mental health impacts of the pandemic and other influences, such as social media, cut across the nation's schools.

Table 2 – Federal Pulse Survey School Leader Responses, by poverty level

	All public schools	Higher school neighborhood poverty	Lower school neighborhood poverty
Students at my school did not miss too much school	8%	6%	8%
Bullying	7%	10%	7%
Food insecurity	2%	4%	2%
Instruction was perceived to not be interesting or relevant	12%	14%	11%
Lack of access to health care	8%	10%	7%
Lack of relationships to adults at the school	9%	10%	9%
Lack of relationships to peers at school	15%	13%	15%
Lack of routine	26%	30%	25%
Mental health issue	50%	44%	52%
Physical illness	57%	58%	56%
Staying home unnecessarily for minor symptoms	70%	72%	69%
Student apathy	33%	31%	34%
Taking care of siblings	27%	36%	24%
Transportation issues	40%	52%	37%
Unstable housing	37%	46%	34%
Violence in the community	4%	8%	3%
Work schedule conflicts with school	14%	16%	13%
Other	6%	6%	6%
Parent apathy	49%	46%	50%
Family vacations	48%	33%	52%

Out-of-School Factors

Transportation and unstable housing are the two out-of-school factors cited by the greatest number of principals as a reason their students miss too many days of school.

Forty percent of all principals cited transportation challenges, and 37% identified unstable housing as reasons for absenteeism. Responses were broadly similar across elementary, middle, and high schools.

The more notable differences were between higher- and lower-poverty schools. In higher-poverty schools, the majority of principals (52%) identified transportation challenges as a cause for absenteeism, compared to 37% of principals in lower-poverty schools. Similarly, 46% of principals in higher-poverty schools stated unstable housing led to absenteeism for too many students, compared with 34% of principals in lower-poverty schools.

Although the percentages were lower than in higher-poverty schools, it is notable that more than one-third of principals in lower-poverty schools identified transportation and unstable housing as factors for absenteeism. This suggests that family economic stressors and challenges with school transportation systems extend beyond low-income neighborhoods.

Taking care of siblings was the third most often cited out-of-school factor driving absenteeism.

Twenty-seven percent of all principals said too many students were missing school because they had to take care of siblings. More than twice as many high school principals (43%) as elementary principals (19%) said it was a key factor. The percentage of principals identifying sibling care as a significant reason for absenteeism was greatest in higher-poverty schools (36%) but still substantial in lower-poverty schools (24%).

Other out-of-school factors were either more localized or more difficult for principals to observe - they were identified by much smaller numbers of principals.

Food insecurity (2%), violence in the community (4%), and lack of access to health care (8%) were each cited by no more than 10% of principals, including those from higher-poverty schools, as reasons students were missing too many days of school. Work schedules that conflicted with school were selected by 14% of principals.

Avoidance/Disengagement Factors

No single school avoidance or disengagement factor was widely identified by principals as a reason students miss too much school. Different principals cited different factors, and avoidance and disengagement reasons were identified more often at the middle and high school levels than elementary school level.

Among school avoidance and disengagement issues, lack of routine had the highest percent of principals (26%) citing it as a reason students missed too many days of school.

Lack of relationships with peers was identified by 15% of all principals, but by more than twice as many middle (21%) and high school (21%) principals as elementary school principals (9%). A similar pattern was seen for lack of relationships with adults: Twelve percent of middle school and 13% of high school principals identified this as a reason for absenteeism, compared to 6% of elementary principals.

The same pattern emerged for instruction perceived as not interesting or relevant. Twelve percent of all principals say this is the reason students miss too much school, but only 6% of elementary principals did so, compared to 22% of high school principals.

Seven percent of principals identified bullying as a reason students miss too much school, with broadly similar rates across school and poverty levels.

Family/Student Choice/Value Factors

Significant numbers of principals see students and parents not valuing regular school attendance as a key reason for increased absenteeism.

Almost half of all principals say parent apathy (49%) and family vacations (48%) are reasons students miss too many days of school. Parent apathy was identified at similar rates by elementary, middle, and high school principals, and even more so by principals in lower-poverty schools (52%), than in higher-poverty schools (46%).

Family vacations were identified as a reason for absenteeism more often by elementary school principals (52%) than high school principals (39%), and by principals in lower-poverty schools (52%) than those in higher-poverty schools (33%).

Student apathy, on the other hand, was identified more often by middle (46%) and high school principals (54%), than elementary principals (19%).

WHAT DO PRINCIPALS' VIEWS ON THE REASONS THEIR STUDENTS ARE MISSING TOO MANY DAYS OF SCHOOL TELL US?

Mental health, transportation, unstable housing, and taking care of siblings stand out as factors that large percentages of principals identify as reasons for absenteeism. Given that principals from different regions, school levels, school sizes, and poverty levels identified these factors as significant contributors to increased chronic absenteeism, they point to areas that often require responses beyond the individual school and call for additional local, state, regional, or national support.

Parental decisions to keep students out of school for what may have been viewed in the past as minor health issues, or to take them out for vacations, also stand out as prominent reasons principals believe their students are missing too much school, particularly at the elementary level. These findings speak to a need to strengthen school-family partnerships, connections, and trust around the importance of regular attendance.

Principals' responses regarding student disengagement and avoidance call for deeper investigation. Larger percentages of principals cited student and parental apathy as reasons for absenteeism than school climate engagement, or relationships. Yet, as will be shown shortly, improving student-teacher and student-student relationships and building a supportive school environment for students were the attendance improvement strategies rated as most effective by principals.

This suggests that some principals who cited parental and student apathy as reasons for absenteeism, also found school-level actions effective in addressing it. These findings raise important questions for further investigations: To what extent might school-level factors contribute to disengagement and avoidance that principals perceive as student or parental apathy?

THE USE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF COMMON ATTENDANCE IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES: FINDINGS FROM THE PSS/RAND LEARN SURVEY

During the 2024-25 school year, both surveys asked nationally representative samples of elementary, middle, and high school principals whether their schools were using commonly advocated strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism and how effective the strategies were in their school.

There was some overlap in the types of strategies principals were asked about, but each survey also asked about strategies not included in the other. Collectively, two surveys query principals about the use and effectiveness of over a dozen strategies, encompassing most of those that have been widely advocated as effective or evidence-based approaches to reduce chronic absenteeism.

Each of the strategies principals were asked about has evidence of effectiveness, at least in some locales and under some circumstances. It is not known to what extent the strategies were actually implemented in the reporting principals' schools in ways that align with the actions which resulted in attendance improvements in other schools or locales. Collectively, what the principals' responses do tell us is how principals view the effectiveness of recommended strategies when they are put into practice under varied conditions and circumstances.

These perceptions matter. Even if a strategy is not implemented as designed, if substantial numbers of principals find it not very effective, it may develop a reputation as something that has been tried and did not work.

The PSS/RAND survey asked principals to note if they used each of nine commonly recommended or used strategies to improve attendance and, if they did, to rate how effective, in their view, the strategy has been in reducing chronic absenteeism in their school. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 – PSS/RAND Survey School Leader Responses, effectiveness of chronic absenteeism strategies

	Have not used	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Effective	Very Effective
Family engagement and outreach	2%	10%	43%	31%	14%
Providing parents and students with frequent and timely data on how much school has been missed and what the effect is on the student's learning	4%	14%	43%	30%	10%
Increasing student's school connectedness by improving student to teacher relationships	3%	5%	32%	42%	18%
Increasing student's school connectedness by improving student to student relationships	8%	5%	34%	40%	13%
Increasing the number of students engaged in extracurricular activities	20%	6%	32%	29%	13%
Providing more mental health supports	9%	6%	39%	35%	10%
Having a school attendance team that identifies students who are trending toward becoming chronically absent and proactively working to prevent it	15%	6%	33%	31%	16%
Using surveys, interviews or focus groups to gain a deeper understanding into the reasons for chronic absenteeism	41%	16%	30%	11%	3%
More vigorously enforcing existing truancy laws and consequences	14%	21%	35%	21%	10%

The strategies examined in the PSS/RAND survey are commonly used in schools across the U.S. to reduce chronic absenteeism.

Ninety percent or more of principals reported that their school was working to decrease chronic absenteeism through family engagement and outreach (98%), providing parents and students with frequent and timely data on how much school has been missed (96%), improving student-teacher relationships (97%), improving student- to-student relationships (92%), and providing mental health support (91%).

Eighty percent or more of principals reported using attendance teams to address chronic absenteeism (85%), more vigorously applying truancy laws and consequences (86%), and increasing extracurricular participation (80%).

Improving student relationships with teachers and peers were the strategies that the highest percentage of principals rated effective or very effective in addressing chronic absenteeism.

Sixty percent of principals reported that “Increasing students’ school connectedness by improving student-to-teacher relationships” was an effective (42%) or very effective (18%) strategy for reducing chronic absenteeism. Fifty-three percent of principals stated that “Increasing students’ school connectedness by improving student-to-student relationships” was an effective (40%) or very effective (13%) way to improve attendance.

These were the only two strategies that at least half of principals found to be effective. Of the more than 90% of principals who reported using these strategies, only 5% rated them as ineffective. About one-third rated them somewhat effective.

The least used strategy was “Using surveys, interviews, or focus groups to gain a deeper understanding into the reasons for chronic absenteeism.”

Four out of ten principals reported that they have not used this strategy, and 16% said it was not effective in their school. Thus, over half of principals reported not undertaking or seeing value in gaining a deeper understanding of why their students were not attending school. 15% reported that it was an effective or very effective strategy, while close to one-third said it was somewhat effective.

Principals were divided in their views of the effectiveness of “More vigorously enforcing existing truancy laws and consequences” with only one-third of principals reporting it was an effective way to reduce chronic absenteeism.

It had the highest percentage of principals (21%) reporting that it is not an effective strategy, while 14% stated not using it. Another third found it somewhat effective.

There was split opinion on the effectiveness of family outreach and communication strategies.

“Family engagement and outreach” and “Providing parents and students with frequent and timely data on how much school they have missed” are two commonly recommended attendance improvement strategies. Almost half the principals (45%) reported that family engagement and outreach was effective or very effective in reducing chronic absenteeism in their school, and 40% reported this for providing parents and students with frequent and timely data on how much school they have missed. This was balanced by an almost equal percent of principals (43%) finding both practices, as enacted in their school, to be only somewhat effective, with between 10% and 14% finding them ineffective.

For the other attendance improvement strategies, slightly more than four in ten principals found them effective or very effective in their schools. About the same percentage found them only somewhat effective or did not use them.

Forty-seven percent of principals stated that having attendance teams act proactively to prevent students from becoming chronically absent was an effective or very effective strategy in their school. Forty-five percent reported the same for increasing mental health supports, and 42% for increasing extracurricular participation.

At the same time, one-third or more of principals reported these strategies were only somewhat effective in their school. Thirty-two percent reported this for “Increasing the number of students engaged in extracurricular activities” while 33% reported this for school attendance teams. A slightly higher percentage (39%) reported that “Providing more mental health supports” was only somewhat effective.

Across all the common attendance improvement strategies, there was a high degree of variability in reported effectiveness across schools. No single strategy or consistent set of strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism was reported as effective or very effective by a large majority of principals.

Four out of ten principals reported that they have not used this strategy, and 16% said it was not effective in their school. Thus, over half of principals reported not undertaking or seeing value in gaining a deeper understanding of why their students were not attending school. 15% reported that it was an effective or very effective strategy, while close to one-third said it was somewhat effective.

Principals were divided in their views of the effectiveness of “More vigorously enforcing existing truancy laws and consequences” with only one-third of principals reporting it was an effective way to reduce chronic absenteeism.

None of the nine common strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism were found effective or very effective by more than 60% of principals, even though 85% reported using six of the nine strategies. Only two strategies, improving relationships with teachers and improving relationships with peers broke the 50% threshold for effectiveness. Four other strategies were seen as effective or very effective by between 40% and 47% of principals. Using surveys and focus groups to understand why students are not attending (14%) and more vigorously enforcing truancy laws and consequences (31%) received the lowest effectiveness ratings.

When principals reported that an attendance improvement strategy was not effective, they most commonly rated it as only somewhat effective. In fact, somewhat effective was the response category selected by the highest percent of principals for seven of the eight strategies, ranging from 32% to 43%.

Each strategy was also reported as not effective in their school, by some principals, although in most cases, only a small percentage reported this outcome. For five of the strategies (improving relationships with teachers and peers, increasing extracurriculars, increasing mental health supports, and having attendance teams act proactively), only 6% or fewer of principals reported that the strategies were not effective in reducing chronic absenteeism in their school. For family outreach, keeping students and parents informed about absenteeism, and using surveys or focus groups to understand reasons why students are not attending, ineffectiveness rates were slightly higher, ranging from 10% to 16%. More vigorously enforcing existing truancy laws and consequences was the strategy that the highest percentage of principals (21%) found to be ineffective.

These results indicate two things. First, no strategy or set of strategies were found to be commonly effective across most schools. At the same time, all but two of the strategies (surveying students on why they are not attending and increasing the use of truancy laws) were found to be at least somewhat effective by a large majority of principals indicating they are frequently seen as having some utility in improving attendance. Taken together, these results show that widely used attendance improvement strategies are seen as working better in some schools than in others.

In examining these results, it is important to consider that the effectiveness of an attendance strategy is a combination of three factors: fit, implementation, and reach.

A strategy can be well implemented but have limited impact if it is a poor fit - for example, if it addresses a cause of absenteeism that is not prevalent in the school. Alternatively, a strategy may be a good fit but have limited effectiveness if it is not sufficiently implemented, or the school lacks the capacity to provide it to a significant share of students who could benefit.

The role reach plays in effectiveness can be seen in principals' responses about the use and impact of people powered student supports (tutoring, mentoring, success coaching, post-secondary advising, and wraparound supports) in reducing chronic absenteeism.

As seen in Table 4, about half the principals reported using mentoring, high-intensity tutoring, and wraparound supports as part of their schools' efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism. About a quarter of principals reported using success coaching as part of their attendance improvement efforts, while one-third reported using college and career advising or postsecondary transition coaching.

Table 4 – PSS/RAND Survey School Leader Responses, use of student support services

Service	% of Respondents
High-intensity tutoring	45%
Mentoring	51%
College and career advising or postsecondary transition coaching	33%
Student success coaching	29%
Wraparound supports to address students' out of school needs	57%

Principals were then asked, “In the context of addressing chronic absenteeism, do more students need these supports (high-intensity tutoring, mentoring, success coaching, and wraparound supports) to attend school regularly than your school currently has the capacity to provide?” Sixty-one percent responded, “Yes, more students at my school need these supports to attend school than my school currently has the capacity to provide.”

THE USE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF COMMON ATTENDANCE IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES: FINDINGS FROM THE FEDERAL PULSE SURVEY

As seen in Table 5, the Federal Pulse survey used different wording than was used in the PSS/RAND survey to describe common strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism. In most cases, the Federal Pulse descriptions are either more general or more specific than the strategy descriptions in the PSS/RAND survey. In addition, the Federal Pulse survey asks about two strategies — use of incentives and changing the school calendar — which were not included in the PSS/RAND list of strategies and did not query principals on the effectiveness of increasing extracurriculars and using surveys, focus groups, and interviews to better understand why students are not attending.

Table 5 – Federal Pulse Survey School Leader Responses, effectiveness of chronic absenteeism strategies

	% of schools using strategy	Not at all effective	Slightly effective	Moderately effective	Very effective	Extremely effective
Increased communication when days absent reaches a certain number	97%	4%	33%	44%	17%	2%
Increased communication about the importance of school attendance	89%	8%	41%	38%	11%	2%
Efforts to build a supportive environment for students	88%	1%	26%	44%	24%	4%
Use of support services	79%	4%	32%	43%	18%	3%
Incentives for students	73%	5%	31%	42%	18%	3%
Use of legal system services	73%	11%	31%	33%	21%	5%
At-home visits by school or district personnel	61%	4%	27%	42%	22%	4%
Adult-student mentoring programs	36%	4%	28%	45%	21%	1%
Peer mentoring programs	17%	4%	36%	45%	14%	2%
Changes to school calendar	9%	9%	26%	42%	16%	7%

The Federal Pulse survey of school leaders, like the PSS/RAND survey, indicates that there is a core set of attendance improvement strategies that most schools are attempting to employ.

Seventy-three percent or more of principals reported using six of the ten strategies examined. Nearly 90% of school leaders indicated their school sought to improve attendance through, “increased communication when days absent reached a certain number” (97%), “increased communication about the importance of school attendance” (89%), and “efforts to build a supportive environment for students” (88%). At least seven in ten reported “using support services” (79%), “use of the legal system” (73%), and “incentives for students” (73%). Sixty-one percent reported the use of “at-home visits by district or school personnel.” Smaller numbers reported that their school sought to reduce chronic absenteeism through “adult-student mentoring programs” (36%), “peer mentoring programs” (17%), and “changes to school calendar” (9%).

The Federal Pulse survey also found substantial variation in principals’ views on the effectiveness of the identified attendance improvement strategies.

The Federal Pulse survey asks principals to rate the effectiveness of 10 common attendance improvement strategies. In addition to using different wording to describe the strategies, the Pulse survey uses different response categories than the PSS/RAND survey. As seen in Table 5, the Pulse survey asked principals to identify if the strategy was “not at all,” “slightly,” “moderately,” “very,” or “extremely” effective compared to the PSS/RAND survey which used “not effective,” “somewhat effective,” “effective,” and “very effective.” Despite the differences in response categories, the Pulse survey findings are similar to the PSS/RAND survey. Based on principal ratings, no single strategy or small set of strategies stands out as universally effective or nearly so.

None of the strategies were found to be very or extremely effective by more than 28% of principals. When the moderately, very, and extremely effective categories are combined, however, for seven of the ten attendance improvement strategies, about two thirds of principals (between 61% and 68%) who used them, reported they were at least moderately effective. Use of the legal system (59%) and increased communication about the importance of attendance (51%) had the lowest moderately/very/extremely effectiveness ratings.

At the same time, for six of the ten strategies, a substantial portion of principals (between 31% and 36%) found the strategy to be not at all effective or only slightly effective in reducing chronic absenteeism in their school. Increased communication about the importance of school attendance (49%), use of the legal system (42%), and peer mentoring programs (40%) had even higher ratings for being not at all or slightly effective.

Efforts to build a supportive environment for students had the strongest overall principal endorsement, followed by home visits, use of student support services, and increased communication when days absent reached a certain number.

Building a supportive environment for students was widely used as an attendance improvement strategy, with 88% of principals reporting that their school used it to reduce chronic absenteeism. Among those principals, 72% rated this strategy as moderately, very, or extremely effective, while 27% rated it as slightly effective or not effective. This represents the largest difference between the proportion of principals rating a strategy as more effective and those rating it as less effective, with 2.7 principals rating it more effective for every principal rating it less effective.

Although only 61% of principals reported conducting home visits by school or district personnel, the strategy had the next highest more effective to less effective ratio at 2.2 to 1, with 68% rating it moderately effective or above, and 31% rating it slightly or not effective.

Increased communication when days absent reached a threshold was used by 97% of principals and use of student supports was employed by 79% of principals, with both strategies having a more effective to less effective ratio of 1.7.

Increased communication about the importance of school attendance had the lowest effectiveness rating.

This strategy was used by 89% of principals, but only 51% found it to be moderately or more effective. About the same number, 49%, found it was only slightly effective (41%) or not effective at all (8%).

WHAT DO PRINCIPAL VIEWS ON THE USE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF COMMONLY RECOMMENDED ATTENDANCE IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES TELL US?

In both surveys, strategies that promote students' school connectedness had the strongest and most widespread effectiveness ratings. In the PSS/RAND survey, improving students' relationships with teachers and peers, and in the IES Pulse survey, building a supportive environment for students, were viewed by the largest share of principals as effective strategies to improve attendance. This indicates that, at least in the view of the nation's principals, how students experience school may play an important role in reducing chronic absenteeism. When students feel that nobody knows them, nobody cares about them, and that they will not receive the support they need to succeed in school, their motivation to overcome even small barriers to attendance is likely to be low. In contrast, if they feel a human connection to and support from their teachers and peers, school becomes a place they want to be.

There is a broader group of strategies that significant percentages of principals found to be effective, while others found them to be only somewhat or slightly effective. These include family communication and engagement strategies, home visits, increasing mental health supports, using incentives, expanding extracurricular participation, increasing communication when absences reach a certain level, and using support services. These are likely the strategies where school-specific factors come into play including fit — the extent to which the strategy is aligned with reasons students are not attending; implementation fidelity and consistency; and reach — the percentage of students who might benefit from the strategy who are receiving it.

Finally, there are some strategies that, on average, principals reported as less effective or that they were not using them. These include using surveys, focus groups, and interviews to learn why students are not attending, and increasing communication about the importance of attending school. Given that some principals have found these strategies as effective and both have an evidence base, the principals' views may indicate a need for greater clarity on what is needed for these strategies to have a broader impact.

EXPLORING ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN PRINCIPALS' USE OF EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES AND SELF-REPORTED ATTENDANCE IMPROVEMENTS

The data provided by the PSS/RAND survey enables an exploration of the association between the type and number of attendance strategies principals rate as effective or not and their reported improvements in their school's chronic absenteeism levels. Specifically, the data allow us to examine whether having one or two effective attendance strategies is associated with improvements in chronic absenteeism or whether large declines are more commonly reported when principals say their schools are employing a more comprehensive approach and deploying multiple effective strategies.

Table 6 – PSS/RAND Survey School Leader Responses, self-reports of change in school's chronic absenteeism rate compared to pre-pandemic levels

	% of Respondents
Our current chronic absenteeism rate is equal to or below our pre-pandemic rate.	27%
We have seen good improvement in our chronic absenteeism rate, but it is still above pre-pandemic levels.	33%
We have had some improvements, but our chronic absenteeism rate remains much higher than pre-pandemic levels.	25%
We have not had improvements, and our chronic absenteeism rate remains much higher than pre-pandemic levels.	10%
Not sure	5%

According to principals, by the 2024-25 school year, some schools were experiencing good reductions in chronic absenteeism, and others were not.

As shown in Table 6, one-third of principals reported, “We have seen good improvement in our chronic absenteeism rate, but it is still above pre-pandemic levels” (33%), while another third reported “We have had some improvements but our chronic absenteeism rate remains much higher than pre-pandemic levels” (25%), or “We have not had improvements” (10%). Slightly more than a quarter of principals (27%) reported “Our current chronic absenteeism rate is equal to or below our pre-pandemic rate.” This last group likely contains principals from both the 26% of districts which experienced only small post-pandemic increases in chronic absenteeism of less than five percentage points and from the 14% percent of districts that have been able to bounce back from significant post-pandemic increases ([Kim & Balfanz 2026](#)).

There is significant variation in the number of attendance improvement strategies principals say are effective in their school in reducing chronic absenteeism.

As seen in Table 7, 20% of principals did not find any of the attendance improvement strategies listed in the PSS/RAND survey to be effective or very effective in their school. Another 17% reported that only one (9%) or two (8%) of the strategies were effective in reducing chronic absenteeism in their school. At the other end of the spectrum 11% of principals said eight or nine of the strategies were effective in their schools, and 25% of principals reported six or more of the strategies were effective. Overall, half of the principals reported that four or more of the strategies were effective in their school while half reported that fewer than four strategies were effective (0, 1, 2, or 3).

Table 7 – PSS/RAND Survey School Leader Responses, number of strategies rated as effective or very effective in reducing chronic absenteeism

# of Strategies	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	>=4
All Schools	20%	9%	8%	11%	11%	11%	10%	8%	6%	5%	52%
Elementary	20%	9%	9%	11%	11%	11%	10%	9%	6%	6%	52%
Middle	22%	9%	7%	11%	9%	11%	12%	7%	7%	5%	51%
High	19%	8%	7%	13%	12%	13%	9%	10%	7%	3%	53%

Overall, there is a moderate, statistically significant association between the number of attendance improvement strategies principals reported as effective in their schools, and the degree of decline in chronic absenteeism they reported.

As seen in Tables 8 and 9, the more attendance improvement strategies that a principal rates as effective in reducing chronic absenteeism in their school, the greater the progress in reducing chronic absenteeism that they report. This is true for all schools, with the strongest correlation at the high school level. Table 9, for example, shows that almost twice as many principals who said four or more of the strategies were effective in their school, indicated that their school had made good progress in reducing chronic absenteeism, compared with principals who reported only one or none of the strategies were effective in their school. Conversely, nearly five times as many of the principals who said only one or none of the strategies were effective, reported no improvement in chronic absenteeism, compared with those who reported four or more of the strategies were effective in their school.

These correlations and associations do not establish causality. It is possible that principals who have seen their chronic absenteeism rates improve are more likely to see the strategies their school used to improve attendance as effective. In short, if attendance improves, everything attempted to improve it might be more likely to be viewed as effective, even if different factors were responsible for the improvement.

Table 8 – PSS/RAND Survey School Leader Responses, correlation between # of strategies rated as effective or very effective in reducing chronic absenteeism and self-reported categories of chronic absence improvement since pandemic

School Level	Correlation
All Schools	.345**
Elementary	.300**
Middle	.372**
High	.459**

Table 9 provides some additional insight. Twenty-eight percent of principals reported that only one or none of the common strategies to improve attendance were effective in their school. Among these principals, 59% reported only some or no improvement in chronic absenteeism. However, 24% reported good improvement, even though they stated that many of the strategies their school tried were only somewhat effective. This indicates that at least some principals are differentiating between the effectiveness of a given strategy their school has attempted, and overall improvement in chronic absenteeism.

Similarly, half of the principals reported that four or more of the common strategies were effective in their school. Among those principals, 24% said despite this effectiveness, their school had only experienced some or no improvement. Together, these findings provide further evidence that principals are not simply assessing the effectiveness of individual strategies based on their overall level of improvement their school has experienced.

Table 9 – PSS/RAND Survey School Leader Responses, number of strategies deemed effective vs. self-reported changes in chronic absenteeism

# of Strategies rated as Effective or Very Effective in Reducing Chronic Absenteeism	% of All Principals	Self-reported categories of chronic absence improvement since pandemic			
		Not Improved	Some Improvement	Good Improvement	Equal to or Below Pre-Pandemic Rate
<=1	28%	22%	37%	24%	17%
2-3	19%	12%	30%	36%	23%
>=4	52%	4%	20%	40%	37%
>=6	30%	2%	16%	40%	42%

Schools with effective attendance teams are more likely to be schools in which principals report that multiple attendance improvement strategies are effective.

Effective attendance teams can increase a school's capacity to address chronic absenteeism in several ways. They can increase the frequency with which attendance data is monitored and acted upon. By engaging more adults in attendance improvement work, they can broaden the insights and solutions generated by the school and have additional person power to enable implementation. When attendance improvement work falls to one or two people, as has traditionally been the case in many schools, it is difficult to take a proactive approach and implement multiple strategies. Table 10 clearly shows that schools in which the principal views the attendance team as effective are also schools in which the principal reports multiple effective attendance strategies are in place.

In schools where the principal reports there is not an attendance team or the team is not or only somewhat effective, 40% of these principals report none of the common attendance improvement strategies being used in the school are effective. Not a single principal with an effective attendance team reported this. Four out of five principals who report having an effective attendance team report that four or more of the school's attendance improvement strategies are effective, compared to only one out of four principals without effective attendance teams. Thus, having an effective attendance team is associated with more than a tripling of the likelihood that a principal reports that their school has four or more effective attendance strategies.

Table 10 – PSS/RAND Survey School Leader Responses, number of strategies deemed effective vs. effectiveness of attendance teams

# of Strategies rated as Effective in Reducing Chronic Absenteeism	0	1-3	>=4
School attendance team (not effective)	40%	36%	24%
School attendance team (effective)	0%	18%	83%

Schools where principals report using surveys, interviews, or focus groups to understand why their students are not attending school as an effective attendance improvement strategy, are also schools where nearly all principals reported their schools were employing four or more effective strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism.

Using surveys, interviews, and focus groups to better understand why their students were not attending was by the far the attendance improvement strategy that the largest percent of principals (41%) reported not using. An additional 16% said using them was not effective and 30% said they were only somewhat effective in improving attendance. Only 14% of principals reported that they used surveys, focus groups, or interviews to better understand why their students were not attending school and found it to be an effective attendance improvement strategy.

As seen in Table 11, nearly all the principals (95%) who found the strategy to be effective also reported that their school had four or more effective attendance improvement strategies. This compared to only 44% of principals who found the strategy not effective, somewhat effective, or did not use it. This suggests that a better understanding of what makes using surveys, interviews, or focus groups an effective attendance improvement strategy could be impactful.

Table 11 – PSS/RAND Survey School Leader Responses, number of strategies deemed effective vs. effectiveness of surveys/interview/focus groups

# of Strategies rated as Effective in Reducing Chronic Absenteeism	0	1-3	>=4
Surveys, interviews or focus groups (not effective)	25%	31%	44%
Surveys, interviews or focus groups (effective)	0%	5%	95%

Improving school connectedness is associated with greater reported attendance improvements.

Improving relationships between students and teachers and students and their peers were the two attendance improvement strategies that the highest percentage of principals rated as effective in improving attendance. Schools in which principals reported that these were effective strategies had noticeably higher rates of reported attendance improvement. In these schools, principals reported good improvement in attendance or attendance at pre-pandemic levels at rates approximately 10 percentage points higher than average.

Having sufficient capacity to address the scale and scope of chronic absenteeism in a school matters. Combining effective attendance teams with success coaches or mentors and wraparound supports is associated with higher reported attendance gains.

One reason why it has been challenging for schools to reduce post-pandemic increases in chronic absenteeism is that the sheer number of chronically absent students can exceed the capacity of traditional student support systems. Systems designed before the pandemic to support tens of chronically absent students cannot reach a hundred or more chronically absent students. In response, schools have sought to address this by creating attendance, MTSS, or student success teams designed to serve larger numbers of students; partnering with community organizations to provide success coaches or mentors to students; and increasing their ability to provide wraparound supports that address out-of-school barriers. Principals in schools that report having an effective attendance team, using success coaches, and providing wraparound supports also report higher levels of attendance improvement.

Twenty-one percent of principals reported having all three capacity building elements — effective attendance teams, success coaches, and wraparound supports. Nineteen percent of schools reported having none of them. Twice as many principals who stated their school had none of these capacity building elements reported their schools had seen only some or no attendance improvement as those who reported having all three elements (41% to 21%). Seventy-one percent of principals who reported their school had all three capacity building elements reported good attendance improvement or chronic absenteeism levels at pre-pandemic levels, compared to 63% of all principals and 59% of principals reporting none of the capacity building elements.

KEY LEARNINGS: REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IS A HARD BUT ADDRESSABLE CHALLENGE

Examining school principals' responses to the PSS/RAND and Federal Pulse survey provides insight into why some schools have been able to bounce back to pre-pandemic chronic absenteeism rates, while others made slow but steady progress, others have experienced fluctuations in their rates, or made limited or no improvement.

The answer is not lack of exposure to evidence-based or commonly recommended attendance improvement strategies. Between seven in ten and nine in ten principals report attempting to use the key strategies which have been broadly recommended including family engagement; more consistent parental and student communication on importance of attendance and current absenteeism status; increased mental health supports; working to improve student-teacher and student-student relationships; creating a more supportive school environment; increasing extracurriculars; and having attendance teams.

More impactful is the large gap between reported use of attendance improvement strategies and principals' views of their effectiveness in reducing chronic absenteeism in their schools. None of the widely used strategies were rated as effective by a large majority of principals. The strategies that came the closest were those focused on increasing student connectedness to school. Improved relationships with teachers, improved relationships with peers, and efforts to build a supportive environment for students, were found by over half the principals to be effective. Most evidence-based and commonly recommended strategies were rated as effective by 40-45% of principals, with another third rating them as somewhat effective.

All of the attendance improvement strategies principals were queried about on the PSS/RAND and Federal Pulse surveys have been found to have impact in some schools, in some locales, and some more widely. They all have clear rationales for how they can reduce chronic absenteeism. This does not, however, guarantee universal effectiveness.

The effectiveness of an attendance improvement strategy is a combination of its fit, implementation fidelity and consistency, and reach.

To be effective, an attendance improvement strategy has to address a barrier to regular attendance for students in a principal's school. If the barrier it addresses is not one faced by many students in the school, it will not be effective in improving attendance. If it is a good fit, the strategy needs to be implemented with reasonable fidelity to the design that produced an impact or be a successful adaptation to local circumstances. Implementation also needs to be consistently maintained over time, even as key staff change. Even if a strategy is a good fit and well implemented over time, it still might not be effective in reducing chronic absenteeism if a school has the capacity to reach only a small fraction of the students who need it.

Providing more mental health supports is an example of a strategy where all three aspects of effectiveness can come into play. Forty-five percent of principals who took the PSS/RAND survey reported that this was an effective or very effective strategy for reducing chronic absenteeism in their school. In the Federal Pulse survey, 50% of all principals identified mental health issues as a reason too many of their students were missing school. Thus, it is possible that the 39% of principals who said this was only a somewhat effective strategy and the 6% who said it was not effective were from schools where mental health challenges are not a major driver of chronic absenteeism. In other words, there are schools where increasing mental health supports could have value, but this strategy is not going to substantially improve school attendance.

Alternatively, principals might not have a complete view of the challenges their students face, and mental health supports could be a key factor in reducing absenteeism for students whose mental health challenges are not perceived by principals as a significant driver of absenteeism. In this case, reach might come into play, with a lack of sufficient mental health supports being provided to impact all the students for whom mental health is a barrier to regular attendance. Finally, sustaining implementation could be challenging for schools that used federal pandemic relief dollars to bolster their mental health supports.

What this collectively says is that identifying and implementing a strategy which addresses a reason that students are not regularly attending their school and having the capacity to reach enough students for it to meaningfully reduce chronic absenteeism, is difficult. The principal surveys further suggest that finding doable and efficient ways to understand why their students are not attending are challenges for schools and a key area in which schools may need better tools and supports. Absent this, the surveys indicate that some schools may rely on broad explanations — such as parent or student apathy — which in themselves are not very actionable.

The survey results further show that principals who report larger improvements in attendance typically also report that their schools have four or more effective strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism.

This is consistent with broader learnings that students miss school for multiple reasons. Some face barriers outside of school, while others avoid aspects of school participation, become broadly disengaged with school in general, or are influenced by misinformation. Moreover, some students have been chronically absent in prior years, while others are becoming so for the first time. No single strategy, or even pair of strategies, can address all these dimensions ([Singer, Lenhoff, & Lyle, 2026](#)).

This tell us that schools need to be able to do the difficult work of identifying and implementing a combination of strategies that addresses the main reasons for their students' absenteeism, implementing those strategies well, and ensuring they reach all, or at least most, of the students whose attendance they can improve. Thus, it is not surprising that it could take most schools multiple years to put this in place, and that, in some schools, the work would proceed in fits and starts.

Approximately 40% of principals reported they had effective attendance teams. These principals were more than three times as likely to report good attendance improvements than those who reported their attendance teams were only somewhat effective, not effective, or nonexistent. This suggests that having an effective attendance team may help accelerate a school's ability to implement four or more effective attendance improvement strategies. It also points to an area where district and states could play a role in helping more schools facing significant chronic absenteeism challenges develop and sustain effective attendance teams and ensure they have access to the data they need.

While schools are the primary setting where effective attendance improvement strategies need to be implemented at the scale required, results from the Federal Pulse survey indicate that schools cannot address all of the reasons contributing to student absenteeism on their own. About 40% of all principals reported that transportation and unstable housing are significant causes of absenteeism in their schools. Among high school principals, 43% reported that taking care of siblings was a significant factor. These factors were cited by higher percentages of principals in schools serving higher-poverty student populations, but they were still reported by more than one-third of principals in schools serving lower-poverty student populations.

Transportation, unstable housing, and sibling care are issues that extend beyond the capacity of individual schools and require community- and even state-wide actions. The survey findings point to a need for broader support from community and public-sector partners, including transportation agencies, housing authorities, and other organizations to address the out-of-school barriers that contribute to chronic absenteeism.

All the above helps explain why addressing the large post-pandemic increases in chronic absenteeism has been difficult for schools and why progress has been uneven. The principals' survey responses indicate that schools that have seen major declines in chronic absenteeism are more likely to report having four or more effective attendance strategies, aligned with the major reasons their students are not attending. In addition, they have been able to implement those strategies consistently with the capacity to reach large numbers of students.

The findings also suggest that these outcomes may be more achievable when schools have an effective attendance team. Effective attendance teams typically require regular access to data which can support early identification of students who need additional support or problem-solving and to align in attendance improvement strategies with when, where, and for whom they will most likely have impact.

The more heartening news is that, while it is difficult for schools to reduce chronic absenteeism, approximately half the principals indicate that their schools are making good progress towards doing so. Sixty percent report good progress or better in reducing chronic absenteeism, even if many of them still have a way to go to reach pre-pandemic levels. Fifty-two percent of principals state that their school is using four or more effective attendance improvement strategies, and about forty percent report they have effective attendance teams. This suggests that the core elements of attendance improvement that emerge from school principals' survey responses are within most schools' capacity to implement.

The survey findings also suggest some actions that districts, state departments of education, mayors, nonprofit partners, community organizations, and national research, development, dissemination, and school support groups can take to increase the number of schools able to make substantial reductions in chronic absenteeism. Many schools likely need support in finding more feasible ways to understand why their students are not attending school. A majority of schools may benefit from assistance in establishing or improving the effectiveness of attendance or student success teams. Two-thirds of principals report needing additional people to serve as mentors, tutors, success coaches, postsecondary advisors, and wraparound support providers as part of their attendance improvement efforts. This shows a continuing need for college students, community members, retired teachers, and older high school students to join local and national efforts to provide high-quality people-powered student supports in K-12 schools.

There is also a clear need for external support in addressing the impacts of unstable housing, transportation, and sibling caregiving on absenteeism. The fact that middle and high school principals cite mental health more often than physical health as a driver of absenteeism suggests that schools may need additional support to staff and fund mental health services as federal support declines. Finally, there is ample opportunity for applied research and development efforts to increase understanding of why so many principals rate attendance improvement strategies viewed as evidence based as only "somewhat effective" in their schools.

Students attend or do not attend schools, and school principals lead and direct schools. Two nationally representative surveys of school principals conducted during the 2024-25 school year, examining their views of what stands in the way of their students regularly attending school and the use and effectiveness of the commonly recommended attendance improvement strategies, indicate that what schools do matters.

Principals can lead schools in selecting attendance improvement strategies that will be more or less effective depending on their school's circumstances. They also can build their schools' capacity to successfully implement and sustain multiple attendance improvement strategies at the scale required to achieve substantial reductions in chronic absenteeism.

This is difficult and challenging work and is only one of the multiple key actions school leaders and staff need to do well every day. For all schools to achieve major improvements in chronic absenteeism and ultimately get back to pre-pandemic levels or better, school principals will need patience, district support, and, very often, external help from partners beyond the school.

HOW TO HELP PRINCIPALS REDUCE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

- Support the development and effective use of attendance and student success teams.
- Develop more effective and feasible ways for principals to understand why their students are not attending school.
- Develop community and state solutions to address the roles of unstable housing, transportation, and sibling caregiving in student absenteeism.
- Support the scale and sustainability of effective mental health and student connectedness strategies.
- Create pathways for college students, community members, retired teachers, and older high school students to serve effectively as mentors, tutors, success coaches, postsecondary advisors, and wraparound support assistants.
- Invest in research and development to understand why many evidence-based attendance improvement strategies are viewed by principals as only “somewhat effective” in their schools.

APPENDIX - SURVEY METHODOLOGY AND DETAILS

RAND Learn Network School Leader Survey Details

The survey was fielded by the RAND American Educator Panels (AEP) using the American School Leader Panel (ASLP), a nationally representative sample of K-12 school principals recruited through probability-based methods using a list of principals obtained from MDR Education. The panel consists of more than 7,500 principals who respond to online surveys several times yearly. Survey collection began on April 22, 2025, with RAND inviting 3,328 ASLP members to take the survey. RAND selected these principals at random using probability sampling. The collection closed on May 28, 2025, with 1,023 eligible respondents who answered at least 10% of the questions for a completion rate of 31%.

Respondents were weighted to produce a sample similar to the target population of K-12 principals leading public schools in the United States during the 2023-24 school year. The weighting process accounts for the probability of selection into the survey from the school leader panel and the likelihood an invited principal completes the survey. Additionally, these likelihoods were calibrated to reproduce the known population distribution of K-12 principals based on National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data. The nonresponse adjustment is important to eliminate known sources of bias and ensure the weighted sample matches the national characteristics of school leaders at the individual (e.g., gender, education, race) and school (e.g., school size, level, urbanicity, sociodemographics) levels. The sampling and weighting approaches were designed to provide a sample close to a representative random sample design. The final weighted analytic sample was representative of an estimated 87,972 national school leaders. There are approximately 100,000 K-12 schools in the United States.

School Pulse Panel Survey Details

The School Pulse Panel (SPP) is a Federal Statistical Rapid Response Survey that collects data on high-priority, education-related topics from public K-12 schools and is conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) within the Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES). The SPP was designed as a sample panel of schools in the 50 states and the District of Columbia, as well as a separate census of public schools in the U.S. Outlying Island Areas, that are surveyed monthly to track status and change over time. The estimates in this report came from the monthly data collection in June 2025. SPP is designed to produce national-level estimates overall, as well as for subgroups of public schools defined by key characteristics, such as level (elementary, middle, and high schools), locale (city, suburb, town, rural), racial/ethnic distribution for student enrollment, and poverty rate around schools.

The sampling frame for the SPP was derived from the National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) 2023-24 frame, which itself was largely derived from the 2021-22 Common Core of Data (CCD), NCES's database of public schools that is updated annually with information provided by state education agencies about themselves, their school districts, and each of their public schools. The sampling frame was updated by adding schools that were newly added to the 2022-23 CCD. Regular public schools, charter schools, alternative schools, special education schools, vocational schools, and schools that have partial or total magnet programs in the 50 states and the District of Columbia were included in the frame. Certain types of schools were excluded from sampled schools in the 50 states and the District of Columbia, as well as from the census of Outlying Island Area schools, including newly closed schools, home schools, private schools, and schools with the highest grade of kindergarten or lower (e.g., preschools or early learning centers). Stratification was used in sampling to ensure adequate representation of schools on key characteristics. For sample allocation purposes, explicit strata were defined by grade level, and the sampling frame was then sorted within grade level by implicit strata including geographic region, percentage of enrollment that was students of color, locale, school district, school size (based on student enrollment), and charter status. The selected sample size was 4,000 schools allocated proportionally across the strata and selected systematically within strata, from whom data for 1,580 respondents was ultimately collected in June 2025.

Survey weights were designed and applied to the data to produce national estimates of schools by various characteristics. The final SPP weights were created by adjusting school-level sampling base weights by various factors to account for nonresponse and coverage. A nonresponse adjustment allocates the weights for nonresponding schools to respondents within each stratum. In addition, a coverage adjustment is done by iteratively raking the responding school weights to control counts of schools from the SPP sampling frame. There were four dimensions used in the raking procedure to account for various school characteristics: Census region, percentage of enrollment that was students of color, locale, and grade level. The final sample weight is the product of the base weight, the nonresponse adjustment factor, and raking adjustment factors and leads to an analytic sample representative of an estimated 94,079 national public schools.

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