

October 2023

BRIGHT SPOTS:

Improving High School Student Attendance in Connecticut



Preface

A widespread and lasting consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is the surge in the number of students across the nation who are chronically absent (missing 10% of the school year for any reason). Data from multiple states shows that chronic absence from K-12 schools has increased dramatically, often doubling. Similarly in Connecticut, chronic absence rates swelled from 11.7% in 2018-19 to 23.7% in 2021-22. While Connecticut data from May 2023 shows a slight decrease to 21%, it is still substantially higher than before the pandemic.

Tackling today's unprecedented levels of student and family disengagement requires a multiple year, intentional and sustained focus on re-engagement and re-establishing regular routines of attendance. It requires us all to build off lessons learned from successes achieved before the COVID-19 emergency and adjust those approaches to meet the needs arising from multiple years of health and economic impacts as well disrupted learning.

Connecticut's deep commitment to treating attendance as foundational to student success and making strategic investments in a systemic approach to reducing chronic absence is an example of a way forward for other states. Connecticut has a rich track record for ensuring comparable and actionable data. In 2008, the state established a common definition of a day of attendance (missing .5 day or more school). In 2015, the state established an official definition of chronic absence, and mandated the creation of teams to tackle attendance when chronic absence rates reached 10% for a district or 15% for a school. In 2017, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) broadly disseminated its easy to use chronic absence prevention and intervention guide. CSDE's long-standing practice has been to integrate efforts to combat chronic absence with the technical assistance offered to its lowest performing districts.

This report reflects CSDE's continued commitment to using data to inform timely action. When the pandemic arrived, CSDE shifted from yearly to monthly collection of attendance data. The availability of high-quality monthly data informed Governor Ned Lamont's decision, along with the CSDE, to quickly launch the Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP), which has helped to significantly reduce chronic absenteeism, especially among middle and high school students. In addition, CSDE has leveraged the success of virtual forms of professional development to increase the frequency of opportunities for educators to share approaches that improve attendance despite the emergence of new challenges.

CSDE was especially concerned about chronic absence in grades 9-12 which had increased from 14.5% in 2018-19 to 29.1% in 2021-22. Seeking to address this, CSDE asked Attendance Works to document the work of high schools that were showing promise for improvement. Examining 2021-22 chronic absence data, Attendance Works identified a number of schools, each serving high needs families, that either performed better than state averages or significantly reduced the rates of chronic absence from the prior year. These bright spot schools offer important lessons about what is possible.

While a few schools documented in this report were able to sustain and improve their attendance in the following school year, several schools experienced increases in chronic absence. This situation reflects the reality that students and families continue to struggle with economic stresses, mental health challenges and social inequities. At the same time, as the difficulties of the pandemic continue, staff turn-over and burnout makes it challenging to sustain the energy needed to re-engage students and families and implement relationship building strategies with fidelity over time. In addition, high schools are struggling to re-engage and create an academic and enriching experience where students want to come to school every day.

Another factor that may have slowed efforts to reduce chronic absence was a change in Connecticut's approach to attendance during remote learning. During 2021-22, CSDE allowed quarantined students to learn remotely, and students could be counted as present even if they were not physically in the classroom. During 2022-23, the policy shifted. Remote learning during quarantine was not an allowable option because it did not meet CSDE's [quality standards for remote learning](#). While districts were encouraged to provide resources to students if they could not show up in person, students were only counted as present if they were physically present.

CSDE and Attendance Works are committed to learning from the educators and staff working in the seven high schools in this report. In the meantime, we believe the strategies employed in these schools are well worth sharing, because they illustrate how schools can work towards reinstating the foundational supports so necessary to creating a positive learning environment for students, families, educators and staff. In today's constantly changing environment, success depends upon our ability to work collectively as we run the marathon and learn from lived experience.

- Hedy Chang, Executive Director and Founder, Attendance Works

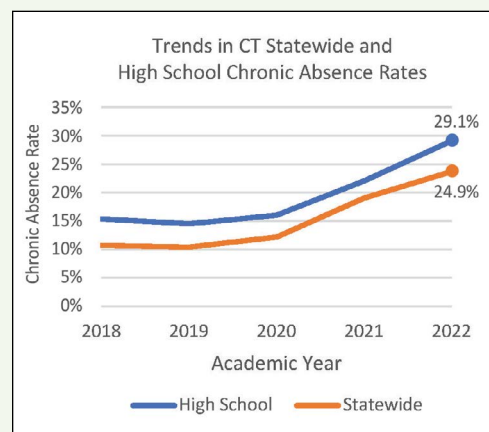
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Introduction

Since the onset of the pandemic in 2020, chronic absence in Connecticut has more than doubled. In the 2021-22 school year, the statewide chronic absence rate was 24.9%, with a high school rate of 29.1%. In February 2022-23, the numbers were only slightly better, with 27% of high school students on track for being chronically absent. (See figure at right).

High school attendance presents a different set of opportunities and challenges than elementary or middle school. As teens gain more independence, high school students are often left to their own devices to get themselves to school, and, unlike neighborhood elementary schools, high schools are often miles away from home with a patchwork of transportation options. The transition to high school is also complicated by both academic and social challenges that are layered onto ongoing developmental processes. For example, students who are accustomed to smaller, more nurturing learning environments may find themselves in larger classes with more demanding academic content that they are expected to complete more independently than before. Socially, high schools typically have larger, more diverse student bodies, and students may not have opportunities to build strong relationships with adults because they may see as many as six or seven teachers a day. These changes occur while students continue to build their self-management capacity and develop their personal identity as well as their intellectual capacities and interests.



High School Bright Spots

High schools vary in governance structures, focus, size and demographic diversity. Some, however, have been more successful than others in their efforts to tackle chronic absence. What did these school leaders do to keep or bring their chronic absence numbers down?

To understand the unique challenges and opportunities that high schools present to attendance and engagement, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) engaged Attendance Works to learn more about the practices, policies and partnerships that high school leaders have incorporated in their schools to improve attendance and engagement, particularly since the COVID-19 public health emergency closed schools. The work began by examining Connecticut's 2021-22 attendance data to identify high schools that either had chronic absence rates lower than the statewide average or had significant reductions in their chronic absence rate from the prior year. Geographic diversity and school demographics were also considered to ensure that the schools chosen for review served populations that

have experienced the most challenges with attendance. Attendance Works, in collaboration with CSDE, then invited school and district leaders to meet via Zoom for hourlong interviews to discuss their efforts using a semi-structured protocol that focused on factors that contribute to their success, including school and district attendance team practices, interventions for students flagged for chronic absence, partnerships and ongoing challenges.

Ten high schools and one Youth Service Bureau¹ (YSB) were invited to participate, resulting in conversations with staff from seven schools/districts, one Learner Engagement and Attendance Program² (LEAP) home visit leader and three staff members who work closely together as part of a YSB partnership. Different types of high schools — comprehensive, charter, and career and technical schools — and schools of different sizes, ranging from 280 students to more than 1,600 students, were included in the interviews. Attendance Works recorded the interviews and prepared summaries of each school's efforts to address chronic absence. Those summaries appear at the end of this brief.

School	2021-22 Enrollment	Description
Bassick High School Bridgeport, CT	969	Comprehensive school (9-12)
Bristol Central High School Bristol, CT	1,220	Comprehensive school (9-12)
East Hartford High School East Hartford, CT	1,632	Comprehensive school (9-12)
Henry Abbott High School Danbury, CT	712	Technical and career education school (9-12)
Francis T. Maloney High School Meriden, CT	1,235	Comprehensive school (9-12)
Naugatuck High School Naugatuck, CT	1,284	Comprehensive school (9-12)
The Bridge Academy Bridgeport, CT	280	State charter (7-12)

Cross-cutting themes

Shifting mindsets. The most common first step in addressing chronic absence was shifting adult mindsets about high school student absence, which is often viewed as willful defiance and treated punitively through local truancy policies. Instead, adults were encouraged to view students as wanting to attend and learn while the adults are responsible for identifying and removing barriers. School leaders described five strategies they used to facilitate that shift.

- **Ensuring that students feel known:** School leaders described the need to hear, understand and connect with each student, and this, they said, begins with knowing the name of each student, their strengths and their challenges and needs.
- **Providing relationship-focused professional development:** Several school leaders noted the important role that district-sponsored professional development focused on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) played in shifting staff mindsets. DEI and social emotional learning (SEL) training gave staff members a deeper understanding of how childhood trauma and home life can affect students at school.

- **Supporting home visits:** LEAP home visits also provided staff with insight into the challenges students face. “Staff begin to better understand the community they serve and are better able to articulate what some of these barriers and challenges are and how we can support kids,” said Bridgeport Deputy Superintendent Karen Baldwin. Home visits were also an important part of the Bridge Academy’s approach to building relationships with students and families.
- **Getting to root causes:** Changing the tenor of conversations when students are absent or late is also key. Rather than having negative conversations and imposing consequences such as detentions or Saturday school, adults asked students why they were not coming to school and what the school could do to support their being there. Doing so often uncovered barriers and challenges students were facing that schools were unaware of and could address. Those conversations also helped build the foundation for the kinds of caring relationships with students that contribute to positive conditions for learning.
- **Shifting policy:** The shift from a punitive mindset was true not only for the schools that are featured in this report but for at least one YSB. YSBs are charged with advocacy and coordination of comprehensive service delivery for students who have been identified as truant. When the state of Connecticut removed truancy as a reason for referring students to juvenile court in 2017, YSBs across the state were charged with supporting the most chronically absent and truant students. The goal of Stamford’s Mayor’s Youth Services Bureau is to promote the development of successful young people through several programs, including the Mayor’s Youth Leadership Council, the Mayor’s Youth Employment Program, Pathfinders Adventure Learning, and the Restorative Justice Project. In addition to its own programs, the YSB provides youth and families with information and referrals for family support services and to other youth-serving organizations. According to Youth Services Director Teresa Drew, the YSB focuses on developing leadership skills, self-confidence and life skills in young people and provides critical support for some of the most marginalized families in Stamford.

- Developing infrastructure for coherent student and family support:** Taking a broader view of youth development required that the YSB mobilize community partners to support positive youth development. Over the past several years, the Stamford YSB has been working closely with Stamford Public Schools and many other youth-serving organizations in an effort to build collective impact by defining a common agenda for serving the most marginalized students and families. According to Mike Meyer, director of family and community engagement for Stamford Public Schools, the collaborative called Here to Help is an umbrella organization that includes several family and youth support organizations located throughout Stamford. Here to Help coordinates services across multiple agencies to provide coherent support to students and families experiencing the most significant challenges. In addition, though truancy referrals have historically resulted in punitive consequences for students (and sometimes for families), the Stamford YSB has been working with school counselors and social workers, local police and other youth-serving agencies to ensure that referrals are sent to the YSB's Chronic Absenteeism Program Coordinator, Susan Lauria, who coordinates services through Here to Help. Rather than working through multiple organizations and agencies, students and families in crisis can get the coordinated help they need through this one organization. According to Meyer, Here to Help is a work in progress — there are many individuals representing a range of agencies who are on board with the approach, but their efforts have not yet become institutional practice.

School attendance teams that drive the work.

Although school leaders described the importance of a whole-school effort to improve chronic absence, they also pointed to their school attendance teams as important drivers of the schoolwide approach.

- Diverse membership:** School attendance teams were composed of a variety of staff members, including the principal, assistant principals, attendance secretary, school counselors, deans, school psychologists and teachers. Each member of the team brings a different perspective. School leaders also pointed out that being at the school attendance team meetings was essential. One



principal said, “I need to know what’s going on, and I can’t find that out sitting in my office.”

- Access to data:** Access to robust data portals provided timely, actionable data (one school leader referred to it as “live data”) disaggregated by subgroup such as ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, migrant, foster, homeless, language or English learner status, disability, grade, class period, day of the week or ZIP code. School attendance teams, some of which are subsets of school climate teams, met to examine data for patterns that might be emerging so they can intervene early. Disaggregating data in those ways is particularly important at the high school level, where the sheer number of absences can feel overwhelming. As one leader admitted, “We have a school of about 1,270 students on the heels of a global pandemic. And so, the work is not easy and it’s overwhelming at times.”
- Beyond a case management approach:** Looking at patterns rather than individuals, one team noticed that students from the same neighborhood were missing school, particularly on bad-weather days. When they spoke with students, they learned that the long walk to the bus stop was a barrier, so the principal negotiated additional bus stops. And schools shared those larger attendance patterns with the entire school staff, which, according to one school leader, helped teachers understand and take responsibility for student attendance.
- Incorporating tiered interventions:** School leaders described the necessity of targeting “bands” of students with tiered interventions, from students who are moderately chronically absent (defined as missing 10% to 19% of school) to students who are severely chronically absent (defined as missing 20%



or more of school) — and even earlier for students who are at risk of becoming moderately chronically absent. Teams meet regularly, ranging from daily (focusing on a targeted group of students each day) to monthly to identify students and make plans to reach out to students and families. Sometimes, just that initial contact with the student is enough as it demonstrates to students that people notice when they are not in school and care enough to ask whether they need support. In other cases, schools provide a wide range of supports, including systems for students to check in each day with their counselor or another trusted adult, establishing concrete goals for improving and monitoring attendance, a washer and dryer for school uniforms, free personal hygiene products, vouchers for haircuts/styling, or free bus passes. School teams also had systems set up to monitor interventions and communicate with key staff about the nature of the challenges students face and what actions are being taken. For students who are more severely chronically absent, several principals mentioned home visits using Connecticut’s LEAP home visit protocol. District LEAP leads and those participating in home visits received training that included scripts to use to guide conversations, scenarios to work through and follow-up suggestions. Though home visits were reserved at most high schools for the more severely chronically absent students, home visits are a universal, tier one intervention for those referred to the Stamford YSB for truancy. One district leader indicated that he would like to see home visits become a tiered practice for all schools — with teachers conducting

home visits for a handful of students who are randomly selected, targeted visits for students who are chronically absent and universal home visits for the most chronically absent and truant students.

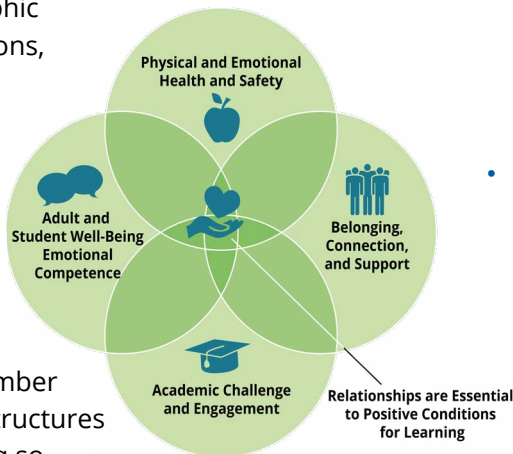
- **Building capacity for coherent interventions:** Because students who are chronically absent may also fall behind academically or exhibit disruptive behaviors, several school leaders described the importance of having a point person who coordinates across all interventions to prevent the siloing of services and supports. These additional staff were sometimes Connecticut-licensed school counselors and had a variety of titles: on-track coordinator, behavior intervention specialist, transition liaison. Some school leaders traded a full-time equivalent teacher to pay for the additional position. Others paid for these additional staff using federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency relief funds initially but found the additional staff so helpful, they added the position to their general budget. According to one school leader, the additional staff members have been a “game-changer.”

District role. Districts played an important role in supporting school teams not only by providing access to and professional development in the use of robust data but also in identifying attendance as a key issue. “Attendance is central; it’s not an aside,” one school leader noted.

- **Learning with and from one another:** Districts also served as conveners of school leaders, which provided opportunities to learn with and from one another. Schools that participate in the RISE Network³ (two schools participated in this project: Naugatuck and Maloney) also cited the value of learning with and from other school leaders. RISE Network schools and several districts also focused attention squarely on equity and the ways that chronic absence disproportionately affects some groups of students. Professional development also focused on culturally responsive teaching, student voice and youth dialogue to gain a deeper understanding of students’ realities. One school leader noted that participating in these professional development opportunities gives staff a deeper understanding of how childhood trauma, family and home life can affect young people in school.

- **The central role of relationships:** Positive conditions for learning⁴ serve as the foundation for any effort to address chronic absence.

As indicated in the graphic depicting those conditions, relationships sit at the center of any strategy schools use to create those conditions. Every school leader talked about the importance of building connections with students and families and used a number of different activities, structures and strategies for doing so.



- **Advisories:** Advisory classes were a common strategy for ensuring that students have at least one adult on campus who knows them well; advisory class teachers are often the first to communicate with families when students are absent. The structure of advisories differed, not only in the frequency but in the length of time spent in an advisory class. Time during advisories often focuses on SEL that draws either from staff-developed curricula or a purchased curriculum such as Connections. In other schools, advisory was a time when students could set goals and monitor their progress with the guidance of an adult. At the Bridge Academy, ninth and 10th grade students participate in an accredited course that focuses on character and skill building. The teacher of this course is available 24 hours a day to mentor participating students.
- **Organizing advisories:** Strategies for assigning students to advisory classes also varied. At some schools, only credentialed teachers served as advisory teachers; at others all adults with credentials that allow them to work directly with students (counselors, deans and other administrative staff) served as advisory teachers. One school loops advisory classes so that students have the same advisory teacher for four years; this allows students to develop deeper, longer-term connections with adults. Another was exploring how it might loop advisories in the next year.
- **Learning communities:** Several schools also used learning communities — called houses or teams — to organize students into smaller groups that share the same core teachers. At one school, each grade level was served by a support team that included a secretary, assistant principal, social worker, two school counselors and a behavior manager. That team follows students through their four years.
- **Intentional focus on school culture:** Efforts to provide opportunities for students and teachers to connect beyond academics have been particularly important since students returned to in-person learning. Every school leader noted the impact that remote learning had on students. Many shared that they felt unprepared for the behaviors students exhibited once they returned to in-person learning, which put educators and staff in a reactive rather than proactive position. All also noted the importance of intentionally re-creating the positive school culture that they took for granted prior to the disruptions COVID-19 caused. School leaders shared that they wanted to make school a place where kids feel like they belong and want to hang out again. One school offered morning circles that “create a soft landing spot for students.” Another principal noted that students are now hanging out in the cafeteria to attend after-school activities. “They’re not leaving.... They are here after school. So, okay, if this is where you feel good and this is where you want to hang out, I’ll pay people to hang out with you in the cafeteria. This is good for kids. It’s what high school is supposed to be about,” the principal said.

Rigorous, relevant instruction. School leaders also pointed to the importance of providing students with academic content and instruction that is challenging, engaging and relevant. One principal noted that “tier 1 interventions begin with classroom instruction.” And nearly all mentioned that their staff had participated in professional development focused on culturally relevant pedagogy.

- **Bringing community into schools and schools to the community:** Rigorous, relevant instruction was perhaps most prominent at Henry Abbott Technical High School, where students select a trade and develop the knowledge and skills for that trade that can lead to multiple pathways after high school — whether directly into the workforce, to further



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training and certification or to a two- or four-year degree. Students attend academic classes and spend time in their chosen trade in two-week cycles where they can immediately apply their academic learning to their trade. As students progress, they have opportunities to work in the various work studios on campus. For example, community members bring their cars to the school's garage for repair or regular maintenance or schedule appointments at the cosmetics salon. Plumbing and Heating Ventilation and Air Conditioning students go into the field to repair or install HVAC systems in businesses and homes in the community. Community members pay a fee for these services that is used to support the trade program. Some students even earn slots in paid apprenticeship programs that count toward their trade class credits.

Engaging student voices and providing leadership opportunities. Efforts to include students' views and provide student leadership opportunities was also a common theme across schools. This is particularly important at the high school level as students continue to develop their social skills, explore and deepen their academic interests and find their passions. Again, schools had several different ways to tap into student energy, including regular surveys, student focus groups, visits to leadership classes to listen and gather feedback, and student councils that include representation from all extracurricular activities and clubs. Students also took on leadership roles in planning and implementing activities that engage students beyond academics, such as a schoolwide Black History Month assembly where

students tapped community leaders to participate. One school develops student leadership skills during a summer bridge program. While incoming ninth graders participated in orientation, campus tours and "fun, team-building activities," upperclassmen were honing their leadership skills. Those upperclassmen then attend ninth-grade advisory classes to provide additional support. In another school, student council members identified monthly themes and planned activities linked to those themes to encourage a sense of belonging and community.

Intentional outreach to and support for incoming ninth graders. Although all schools provided intentional, early outreach to and support for incoming ninth graders, how they approached the transition into high school varied. In most schools, outreach began in eighth grade when students and families were invited to open houses in the fall and spring to explore course offerings and extracurricular activities and meet staff members.

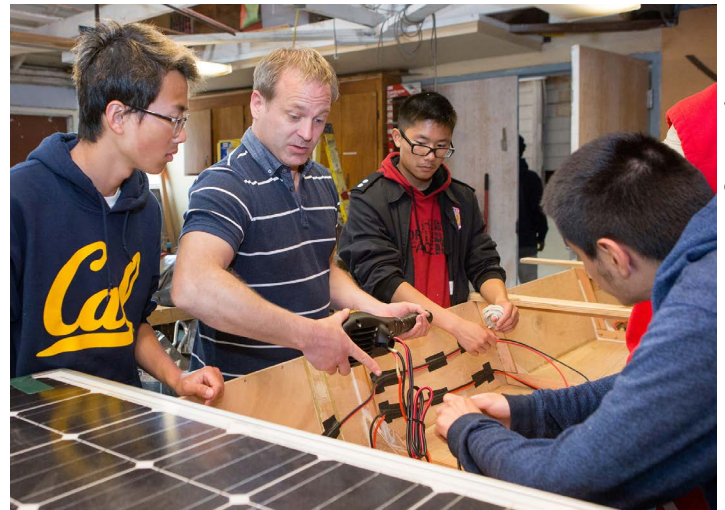
- **Summer bridge programs:** Once students were enrolled, several schools offered summer bridge or orientation programs. Some summer programs were open to all incoming ninth graders; others targeted students who struggled with attendance in middle school. Many times, the summer programs were organized and led by older students with adult guidance.
- **Home visits:** Staff members at the Bridge Academy visited all incoming ninth-grade students and families at home, which was facilitated by its small size. However, targeted home visits for students who have struggled in eighth grade might be feasible for larger schools.
- **Intentional grouping of incoming ninth graders:** Another school accessed data for incoming ninth graders to identify the 120 students who would be most at risk for behavior, attendance and grades. Those students were then divided into two groups and supported by a transition support specialist, a credentialed school counselor whose focus is on just 60 students throughout their first year. The model has been so successful that it has become the norm for high schools in the RISE Network.
- **Opening day welcome:** Because of its unique structure, Henry Abbott High welcomed ninth graders into the school on the first day with only senior ambassadors on campus who guided

incoming students through the day. Ninth graders were then scheduled in each of the various trades offered before making a selection at the end of the first semester.

Supporting adult well-being. Because efforts to support students who may be traumatized is often so taxing for adults, ensuring that staff members take care of themselves is critical. One principal said that school staff must find strategies to “fill their cup” to be fully present during the day with students. To support this, they often discuss some of those strategies for self-care together as a staff. Another wondered about the correlation between student and staff attendance: “At the same time we have been seeing student absenteeism rise, we’ve also been seeing staff absenteeism rise.” A third noted that “COVID happened to adults too” and acknowledged her sense that staff members seem just a little less resilient than they were prior to the pandemic. School leaders need to be sensitive to the capacity of staff and find opportunities to honor their hard work while looking for opportunities to support one another.

School-community relationships. For years, research on effective schools has pointed to the importance of school-community relationships as integral to positive youth development, not only to provide additional resources for student support but to offer sites for learning and application that increase the relevance of academic learning.

- **Leadership consistency:** Several leaders cited the length of their tenure and staff stability as an important feature of their schools, not only for the students but for the broader community. One principal noted that prior to his acceptance of the position, the school had seen 12 principals in nine years. He said that school staff and families benefit from leadership stability because it can provide families with a clear understanding of expectations and staff can strive for a consistent set of goals across multiple years. Of those leaders we spoke with, four had been in their positions for more than 10 years, two for five years and one for four years. In addition, leadership consistency allows schools to deepen their partnerships with community-based organizations, businesses and other agencies that support the work of educating high school students.



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- **School as an integral community resource:** Leaders also viewed the school as an integral part of the communities they serve. Their schools are preparing future leaders for the cities and towns where they are located, and the buildings are a community resource that provides a gathering place and activities for young people and their families. One school leader noted that “it’s not my building, it’s the community’s building.” She said the school is open until 10 p.m., and though it’s a challenge for custodial and other staff members, staying open for these additional hours is worthwhile because the gatherings create a sense of community. Several of the leaders grew up in the communities where they now work, so they are strongly connected to the community. And where that natural sense of being part of the community does not already exist, school leaders build connections with students, families and communities by hosting barbecues, attending after-school events and activities and attending gatherings of community-based organizations and business leaders in the evening.
- **More than school leaders:** All the leaders said they saw themselves not just as school leaders but as community leaders. They acknowledged that students, families and the broader public looked to their actions during the multiple challenges that have recently faced young people — COVID-19, community unrest after police shootings and the uptick in school shootings. And they embraced that responsibility.

Ongoing challenges

Mental health. When asked about ongoing challenges, every leader pointed to the mental health of students, family members and staff. This is a particular challenge for low-income families. Not only has the prevalence of mental health crises increased, delays in access to timely care has exacerbated the issues schools are facing. Although this is a communitywide challenge that deserves urgent action, schools can play a role in early identification and intervention.

Social media has also contributed to students' deteriorating mental health. Although online learning was necessary during the public health emergency, online interactions are poor substitutes for in-person communication, the principals said. Students need to learn how to be together again in person. One principal whose school provides an alternative lunch space for students who feel overwhelmed by fellow students and noise in the cafeteria said that before the pandemic five students requested the smaller lunch space. That number has grown to 50 students. Another concern is that students who can earn money through their online presence will be less motivated to continue to attend school. In addition, a recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study found⁵ that although social media can provide a source of support, it can also negatively affect self-esteem and emotional well-being.

Rebuilding school culture. Although principals indicated there has been some progress in rebuilding school culture since the pandemic, they also noted that there is work to be done. "Online learning is not a thing anymore," one principal said, and students need to learn how to "do school again." One school leader said the school they left in March 2020 was not the same school they returned to. Rebuilding a climate and culture where all students feel comfortable and safe, where students and adults truly enjoy being together and where relationships are at the heart of their work will be essential.



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Punitive policies. School leaders also mentioned that policies regarding unexcused absences and credit accrual at the high school level may have the unintentional consequence of pushing students out of school altogether. Some principals noted that there are processes for families to appeal such decisions. However, recent research in California found that the consequences for unexcused absences disproportionately affect students of color and those who are economically disadvantaged.⁶ Just two schools apparently have no such policy; their leaders said that students who demonstrate mastery of course content receive credit.

Districtwide communication with families. Finally, although many leaders noted the positive contribution that the app Parent Square has had on their ability to connect and communicate with families, there is still work to be done on districtwide vertical communication so they can coordinate family services for those with multiple children attending different schools.

Recommendations

- Focus first on foundational, whole-school supports that contribute to positive conditions for learning, including physical and emotional health safety; belonging, connection and support; challenging and engaging academics (such as career exploration and preparation); and adult and student well-being. This begins in the classroom where students have opportunities to engage in relevant instruction in an environment that is welcoming to all. These foundational supports extend beyond the classroom and engage young people in activities that build a sense of agency and leadership and are meaningful beyond the school building. Make school a place where students want to be — where they can explore their interests and skills beyond academics and where people care for and support one another.
- Shift mindsets from punitive approaches to caring conversations that allow adults to understand student and family realities through professional development focused on DEI, trauma-informed approaches and home visits that engage a range of staff members.
- Ensure that schools have access to robust data systems that provide real-time information on student behavior, attendance and grades. Access those data frequently to identify and support students early and monitor the effectiveness of those interventions.
- Identify a school team to be the champions for attendance, to monitor students and interventions and mobilize the whole school in the effort to reduce chronic absence. Ensure that there are multiple voices and perspectives at the table. These teams can be subsets of other school teams, such as school climate, school improvement or multitiered system of supports teams.
- Re-examine attendance policies to ensure they disrupt systems and practices that currently contribute to expanding disproportionality and achievement gaps and that are unintentionally pushing high school students out of school. This might include rethinking policies and practices related to truancy and unexcused absences.
- Engage families and community members as partners in student learning and development. School leaders can access Connecticut's Full Equal and Equitable Partnerships With Families to learn more about high-impact activities that support high school student learning and success⁷ and reducing chronic absence.⁸ Consider expanding the reach of LEAP home visits that have been found to strengthen positive relationships between families and schools.⁹
- States also have a role to play in supporting districts and schools focusing on improving attendance and engagement. In Connecticut, the State Department of Education convenes professional learning networks such as the Attendance Peer Learning Network, Communities of Practice and information sharing sessions such as Talk Tuesdays. Talk Tuesdays are open to all who are working to improve attendance and engagement to provide updates on state policies, practices and events, share successes, and troubleshoot common concerns. Participants help identify topics for future meetings. Talk Tuesdays has created a strong community of support that other district and school leaders might consider joining.

School Summaries

Bassick High School

Bassick High School Demographics	
Total Enrollment	969
African American	35.2%
Hispanic/Latino	56.2%
White	6.2%
Free and Reduced Price Meals	68.8%
Students With Disabilities	29.9%
English Learners	25.3
Chronic Absence Data 2021-22	
CT Statewide Total	23.7%
CT High School Total	29%
Bassick Total	32.2%
African American	32.5%
Hispanic/Latino	32.6%
White	26.5%
Eligible for Free Lunch	36.7%
Eligible for Reduced Lunch	22.5%
Students With Disabilities	32.3%
English Learners	25.7%
High Needs	33.1%

Background: Bassick High School is a comprehensive high school located in Bridgeport, Connecticut, that serves 969 students. (See demographics above.) Recently, its chronic absence rate has significantly improved, moving from 44.9% in 2019-20 to 32.2% in 2021-22. Although Bassick's chronic absence rate is slightly higher than the overall average for Connecticut high schools, it is worth exploring the school's strategies that resulted in a 12.7% reduction in chronically absent students.

Attendance Works spoke with Joseph Raiola, Ph.D., Bassick High School principal, and Karen Baldwin, Ph.D., deputy superintendent of schools in Bridgeport, about their efforts to reduce chronic absence. When asked to describe his school, Raiola, who is in his fifth year as principal, noted the stability of staff and leadership at the school and the resilient, hard-working, caring students they serve.

Prior to Raiola's arrival at the school, Bassick had 12 principals in nine years. Both Raiola and Baldwin pointed to leadership stability as essential for students, staff and the broader community. With stable leadership, routines can be established and maintained during regular attendance team meetings where staff examine data and develop strategies for intentional outreach to families. In addition, leadership stability allows the school to build deeper relationships with community partners who can support the school's efforts. One partnership offers wraparound services for students in conjunction with after-school credit recovery.

A whole-school effort: When asked what reduced chronic absence, Raiola emphasized that supporting regular attendance is a whole-school effort. The entire staff, from the principal to teachers to those working in the cafeteria, reinforces the importance of students' attendance and active participation in their education. Raiola hired a dean of students to lead the Office of School Climate, resulting in a deeper focus on social emotional learning (SEL) this year. Raiola said his experience working in a technical high school underscored what research says about the importance of student connections with caring adults. The school-based health clinic provides basic health assessments and other services to help reduce health-related absences.

Two years ago Bassick implemented advisory classes, which helped the school accomplish several goals. The advisories have helped staff see that relationships with students promote student success, and they provide an opportunity for focused attention on SEL. During advisories, students have time to develop and review their own student success plans, which help them make intentional decisions about their goals and monitor their progress throughout high school. Advisory teachers build intentional relationships with families and are the first to contact families when students are absent. In addition to advisory classes, Raiola has divided his ninth-grade students into three professional learning communities made up of 70 to 80 students who share the same English, math and social studies teachers. This, he believes, also aligns with research that points to the importance of ninth grade for charting a path to high school success and on-time graduation.

Although Raiola emphasized the whole-school approach to improving chronic absence, an attendance team also meets regularly to examine schoolwide data and identify students at risk of becoming moderately chronically absent (those missing 6% to 8% of school), those already chronically absent and those severely chronically absent. For students at risk of becoming moderately chronically absent, advisory teachers touch base with students (and families if necessary) to understand the challenges students face. For those moderately chronically absent, attendance team members reach out to students and families in an effort to understand what might be causing absences and generate plans to remove barriers and promote reengagement. For students severely chronically absent, team members, in partnership with trained district staff, conduct Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP) home visits to reach out to students and families.

District role: Raiola noted the value of an entire system — from the district central office to the school building — that focuses on attendance. The Bridgeport Public Schools provides essential support to Bassick's efforts, including consistent messaging in the district and the community about the importance of attendance, identifying promising practices that can be scaled across the district, convening a districtwide attendance team where school leaders learn with and from one another, and curating a folder of resources that schools can access to support students and families. In addition, the district has partnered with the state to strengthen their LEAP practice and to train a wide range of school staff to conduct home visits. Security staff, secretaries, principals, counselors and teachers have all been trained to conduct home visits, and, according to one district leader, the visits are mutually beneficial. Baldwin said, "Staff begin to better understand the community they serve and are better able to articulate what some of these barriers and challenges are and how we can support kids."

Ongoing challenges: Despite its successes, Bassick continues to be challenged by students who arrive late because they drop younger siblings off for school or who need to provide child care at home. In addition, although translation services are available, the school staff are sometimes challenged by their inability to communicate in a timely manner in families' home languages. Finally, district attendance policies, such as those that prevent teachers from granting students credit after a certain

number of absences, can work against school efforts to support student attendance. The districts might consider revisiting such "loss of credit" policies in the future.

Key Takeaways

- School attendance teams meet after school to focus on students in the "moderately chronically absent band," those with 6% to 8% chronic absence rates. Team members check in with students and reach out to families in collaboration with LEAP home visits.
- In addition to providing families with connections to school staff, LEAP home visits help school staff gain a deeper understanding of the community they serve, some of the challenges families face and how to better support students and families.
- District-level attendance teams provide consistent communication throughout the community and the school system about the importance of attendance. Teams meet regularly to examine data, share successes and challenges and curate folders of resources for schools that address attendance.
- Leaders acknowledge that attendance is a whole-school concern and a byproduct of students' feeling safe and having access to high-quality instruction.
- Student success plans help students chart a course through high school. Plans are revisited regularly during advisory class.
- Ensuring that every student has a meaningful connection to an adult is essential. This can be achieved through advisory classes and smaller cohorts of incoming ninth-grade students.
- Drawing upon student governance councils and including student voice in schoolwide decisions is important.
- Leadership stability is important for staff, students and the broader community.

Bristol Central High School

Bristol Central High School Demographics (2021-22)	
Total Enrollment	1,220
African American	6.5%
Asian	2.1%
Hispanic	36.6%
White	50.5%
Two+ Races	4.3%
Free and Reduced Price Lunch	50.2%
English Learners	4.2%
Students With Disabilities	19.4%
Chronic Absence Data (2021-22)	
CT Statewide Total	23.7%
CT High School Total	29%
Bristol Central High Total	17.1%
African American	*
Asian	*
Hispanic	21.8%
White	13.5%
Two+ Races	22.2%
Free Lunch	27.2%
Reduced Price Lunch	18.5%
English Learners	27.4%
Students With Disabilities	23.6%
High Need	24.1%

Background: Bristol Central High School, with a student population of 1,220, saw nearly a 12% reduction in chronic absence in the 2021-22 school year, to 17.1%. This chronic absence rate is more than six points below the state average.

When asked to describe their school, Principal Pete Winger and Assistant Principal Ryan Broderick used one word: “Ramly,” which represents their mascot (a ram) and the sense of “family” that exists at the school. Advisory classes help strengthen those connections between students and adults. And students notice the sense of family at the school — not only among students themselves but among staff as well. As one student said to Broderick: “You guys really like each other, don’t you?”

Winger and Broderick have strong ties and commitment to the community. Winger has served as principal for 13 years but has worked at the school for 19 years. Prior to his arrival at the school, Winger worked in an alternative

education setting and suggested that his experience there gives him unique insight into the students who are struggling with regular attendance. Broderick has been at the school for 16 years and grew up in Bristol. Both emphasized that they are invested in the community and the success of students. Their hope is that graduation night is not the apex of students’ lives but simply a milestone along the way to greater achievements.

Improving chronic absence: Key to Bristol Central’s success is the use of data to drive interventions. “Attendance can be overwhelming. We have a school of about 1,270 students, on the heels of a global pandemic. And so, the work isn’t easy,” Broderick said. As a result, school leaders have targeted particular groups of students throughout the school year and increased the number of faculty members who support and monitor student progress. In addition, school leaders have made consistent communication with families an important part of their work. The school emphasizes how absences affect student achievement, particularly because the block schedule doubles the impact of missing just one day of instruction, Winger said.

Another important contribution was the addition of two key staff members: an on-track coordinator and a behavior intervention specialist, both paid for with Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds. The on-track coordinator focuses on ninth and 10th graders and coordinates each student’s supports and interventions. Doing so prevents the siloing of supports and provides school staff with a holistic view of the students. School leaders found the on-track coordinator such an important addition to their staff that they now fund the position through the general budget. The behavior intervention specialist started in the 2022-23 school year. Students who are on track to becoming chronically absent meet in small groups, where they hear about how absences affect learning and set realistic attendance goals. Both school leaders agree that the addition of these two staff members has been “a game-changer.”

Bristol Central’s attendance team is a subgroup of the climate and culture team. Team members meet monthly to analyze attendance data. The team also shares successes and areas for improvement with the entire faculty each month. According to Broderick, sharing the data helps teachers understand and own it. Collecting faculty and student feedback is also an essential part of

Bristol's approach. For example, when faculty expressed interest in looping advisories, or keeping students with the same adviser for two to three years, leaders explored how that might be implemented. When students provided feedback on transportation challenges, the school worked with the district to provide additional winter bus stops.

District role: Prioritizing attendance as a key issue districtwide is an essential element of Bristol Central's success. Attendance is "central; it's not an aside." Leaders indicated that some of the most effective professional development they have attended has been facilitated by the district. Broderick noted the support he has received from job-alike convenings the district has facilitated. Winger cited professional development that focused on social, emotional learning (SEL) and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). Replicating that DEI training in their building, followed by a grant-supported schoolwide reading of Steve Pemberton's book, *A Chance in the World*, was a turning point for faculty. Both activities gave staff a deeper understanding of how childhood trauma and family and home life can affect young people in school, driving home the fact that "there isn't a single story for every student who walks through our doors," Winger said.

Ongoing challenges: Although Bristol Central has an attendance team, one area of growth this year will be codifying and strengthening how that team works. In addition, both leaders agreed that neither the district nor the school was properly prepared to return to in-person learning. They now realize that the climate and culture they took for granted prior to the pandemic needed to be intentionally rebuilt. Prior to the pandemic, student ambassadors in higher grades facilitated freshman orientations, but the older students have not had a typical Bristol Central High School experience themselves. So school leaders have taken a more proactive approach to orientation, guiding older students as they co-lead orientations, at least for now. Students who were unprepared for the return to in-person instruction are exhibiting negative behaviors, such as acting out in class, resulting in school staff being more reactive than they have ever been. "The Bristol Central we left on the eve of the pandemic was not the Bristol Central we came back to when we came back in person last year. And as soon as we realized that, we started to build a plan to address the things that concerned us the most. That was

a big part of our self-reflection and a big part of the way we changed how we do things," Winger said. Having that climate and culture where students feel safe and comfortable, where students and adults enjoy being together, where relationships are once again at the center of their work continues to be an essential part of the Bristol Central focus.

Key Takeaways

- Bristol Central school leaders noted the importance of building relationships and connection both within the school community and in the broader community. Principal Winger: "For us, it's not just a job. We do live it. You'd be hard pressed to find anyone who spends more time in and around our kids in the building than Ryan and I."
- Advisories help strengthen the sense of family at the school and ensure that students have at least one trusted adult to whom they can turn. Looking at student feedback on surveys helps inform improvements to those advisories.
- A school attendance team meets twice each month to look at attendance data. In the first meeting, team members use a multitiered approach to target interventions based on student need. The second meeting is used for outreach to families.
- Support staff play a crucial role for students, including an on-track coordinator and a behavior specialist, both of whom were funded with ESSER dollars. The on-track coordinator, who provides oversight and monitoring for the range of interventions a student might receive, proved to be so important that leaders have decided to pay for that position out of the general fund.
- The district not only elevates the issue of attendance with consistent focus and messaging but provides opportunities for job-alike professional learning. In addition, professional development focused on SEL and DEI proved to be a turning point for the Bristol Central staff.

East Hartford High School

East Hartford High School Demographics 2021-22	
Total Enrollment	1,632
African American	31.1%
Hispanic/Latino	50.4%
White	10.1%
Asian	4.1%
Two+ Races	3.7%
Free and Reduced Price Meals	63.4%
Students With Disabilities	21.3%
English Learners	13.2%
Chronic Absence Data 2021-22	
CT Statewide Total	23.7%
CT High School Total	29%
East Hartford Total	15.5%
African American	13.3%
Hispanic/Latino	19%
White	11.3%
Eligible for Free Lunch	21.7%
Eligible for Reduced Lunch	11.7%
Students With Disabilities	24.5%
English Learners	24.9%
High Needs	19.6%

Background: East Hartford High School is a comprehensive high school that serves 1,632 students. (See 2021-22 demographics above.) East Hartford’s chronic absence rate of 15.5% is significantly less than the statewide average and was just 3 points higher than 2019-20, despite the fact that the statewide chronic absence rate nearly doubled during that period. Principal Matt Ryan, who has served in that role for 16 years, believes that the relationships adults build with kids in, out and after school contribute to their success.

Structures that build connections: Their goal — to know every kid’s story — is accomplished through a variety of structures and processes. The process begins even before the school year officially opens when students are invited to attend Leadership Alliances, a leadership academy that includes about 150 incoming ninth graders, and Summer Leadership Institute for 40 to 50 students from each of the upper grades. The program serves as a summer bridge program for incoming ninth graders, all of whom are invited to attend, and includes activities that

allow students to get to know East Hartford High School, learn about service and participate in team building. For students in 10th through 12th grades, the program is a summer leadership-building opportunity.

Once the school year begins, all students participate in advisories and stay in the same advisory for four years. This allows teachers and students to form deeper relationships. During the first week of school, advisory teachers make contact with each family to check in and be sure families know they can reach out should any challenges emerge. Advisories meet for 25 minutes on Fridays using a curriculum called Connections, which focuses on academics, personalization and service. In addition, seniors who have participated in the summer Leadership Alliances activities co-lead ninth-grade advisories. According to Ryan, this has helped the school intentionally rebuild the school culture after the disruption of the pandemic. When asked, Ryan tells people, “School is back to normal,” citing examples such as students greeting one another in the halls rather than just walking by with their head down, attending sporting events and sharing food between games in the cafeteria. “They are here after school. So, okay, if this is where you feel good and this is where you want to hang out, I’ll pay people to hang out with you in the cafeteria. This is good for kids. It’s what high school is supposed to be about,” Ryan said.

Each grade level is served by a support team that includes a secretary, assistant principal, social worker, two school counselors and a behavior manager. That team will follow one group of students for all four years. Incoming ninth graders — and, when possible, 10th graders — are organized into teams of about 90 students who share the same four teachers, a strategy that also facilitates relationship building.

Regular team meetings and tiered supports: The attendance liaison, family liaison, principal and grade-level support teams meet briefly every day to discuss student attendance (for about 15 minutes per grade). Each day has a particular focus: Monday’s focus is BAG – behavior, attendance, grades; Tuesday’s focus is tardies; Wednesday’s focus is moderately chronically absent students (those who have missed 10% of school); Thursday’s focus is “thorough,” where they dig deep into specific student stories; and Friday focuses on the Data Dashboard and review, when they reflect on the week’s data and discuss the experiences of a particular group

of students who might be experiencing attendance challenges. The grade-level teams take a multitiered approach to attendance. During the meetings, absent students are identified using live data from that day's A period, and staff members follow up with phone calls home. Students who are determined to have moderate chronic absence meet with their counselors and perhaps a teacher to find challenges to being in school, and — if warranted — develop attendance goals and/or a plan, such as check in/check out. When students are seriously chronically absent (missing 20% or more of school days), staff organize home visits and, where helpful, refer families to a variety of wraparound service organizations that partner with the school. Addressing barriers to student attendance is “just hard work,” Ryan said. As he described it, one first must acknowledge that there are barriers, then deepen those relationships so people feel comfortable enough to be honest about what's happening, and only then think about the kinds of supports that might address the barriers.

Ongoing learning and ongoing challenges: Ryan said that he values the professional learning he receives as a participant in the RISE Network, where school leaders meet every other month to discuss their data, challenges and potential solutions. “I get to hear about strategies from across the state,” he said. In addition, he participated in three consecutive Harvard Summer Institutes, one of which focused on family engagement. “That's where a lot of our ideas came from,” Ryan said. And finally, Ryan does a lot simply by being immersed in the work: “If I'm not at that attendance meeting three or four times a week, I don't know what's happening with attendance.”

The most pressing challenge at school today is the increase in anxiety — both for students and adults, Ryan said. Schools, families and medical providers need to partner to understand and address the mental health challenges that have increased as a result of the pandemic.

Key Takeaways

- School attendance teams meet daily to examine attendance data and patterns with a different focus each day of the week. This approach gives team meetings focus and provides team members with clear next steps for follow-up.
- A team of adults follow the same group of students throughout their four years at school, which provides students and families with consistency and stability. Knowing the right people to contact and having a trusting relationship where students and families can be honest with school staff is an essential component of the attendance efforts at East Hartford.
- Structures such as houses (where students share the same core content teachers) and advisory classes ensure that students have at least one — and often more than one — adult on campus well acquainted with them, the challenges they face and their background.
- Intentionally rebuilding the culture at the school has resulted in a number of positive indicators that “school is back to normal.”
- Leadership stability is important for staff, students and the broader community. Ryan has been principal for 16 years but has been in the district for 25 years. He and his staff see the school as an integral part of the broader community.

Henry Abbott Technical High School

Henry Abbott Technical High School Demographics (2021-22)	
Total Enrollment	712
African American	3.5%
Asian	1.7%
Hispanic	47.3%
White	43.8%
Two+ Races	3.7%
Free and Reduced Price Lunch	34.3%
English Learners	4.6%
Students With Disabilities	15.6%
Chronic Absence Data (2021-22)	
CT Statewide Total	23.7%
CT High School Total	29%
Henry Abbott Technical High Total	16.7%
African American	*
Asian	*
Hispanic	15.8%
White	16.9%
Two+ Races	*
Free Lunch	21.8%
Reduced Price Lunch	*
English Learners	24.2%
Students With Disabilities	20.4%
High Need	19.5%

Background: Henry Abbott Technical High School is one of Connecticut's 17 Technical Education and Career System (CTECS) schools. Located in Danbury, Connecticut, the school serves 712 students. (See demographics above.) Although there was a significant bump in Abbott's chronic absence rate in 2021-22, the school has historically had very low chronic absence rates (between 5% and 6%) and is on track to have similarly low rates in 2022-23.

Kevin Durkin, who was born in Danbury, has been principal for four years. He described the school as one of Robert Marzano's High Reliability Schools, which follow a framework that includes five elements that intersect to create positive conditions for learning¹⁰. According to Durkin, focusing on those five elements results in a welcoming climate where students are engaged in

academic and applied learning (through their elected trade) as well as extracurricular activities. Durkin also credits staff consistency for creating that sense of belonging and for communicating the importance of attending school every day through their own regular attendance. Graduates of Henry Abbott have a wide range of postsecondary options that include two- and four-year college, advanced technical training, skilled employment, and the military. Academic rigor and relevance are built into the CTECS model. Students "live" their trade, Durkin said. Students alternate between academic instruction and trades in two-week cycles and, by the time they are in 11th and 12th grade, can participate in "production work," providing services to customers from the community under the supervision of teachers.

Student assistance team: Abbott's dean of students oversees attendance at the school, including monitoring the accuracy of attendance-taking. The student assistance team meets weekly and uses the Scientific Research-Based Interventions (SRBI) model, adopted by the state in 2009, to inform their deliberations. SRBI is grounded in early identification and intervention.

At Abbott, universal intervention includes communicating with families using Parent Square and a monthly "Abbott Update" newsletter. Every Abbott student is assigned an advisory group, where they meet monthly in groups of eight to 10 with an adult. Lesson plans for advisories are developed by an advisory committee and are tailored to address student needs. For example, when students returned to in-person instruction after the COVID-19 public health emergency, lesson plans focused intentionally on how to re-engage and connect in school, with peers and adults. According to Durkin, the adults needed those opportunities for reconnection as much as the students did. Students flagged for attendance issues meet with the dean, and families are contacted by phone. The goal is to build an understanding of both the importance of attendance and what might be preventing a student from coming to school. Students who are moderately chronically absent meet with counselors and might set up a check-in system to build connections. For extremely chronically absent students, the dean or school counselor will visit the home to see whether supports might be provided. Students might also be scheduled in a smaller homeroom where teachers can provide more targeted support and intervention. Abbott has two psychologists on campus, a food pantry and a licensed

clinical social worker (LCSW) who works at the school health clinic on campus. These resources help provide wraparound services for behavioral, mental and physical health as well as support for families in need.

Attention to incoming ninth-grade students: Because of its unique structure, Abbott spends a significant amount of time orienting students to the school. Abbott offers an open house to eighth graders who are considering applying, where they can learn more about the programs and tour the campus and shops. Once enrolled in May, students and families attend orientation to hear more about the academics and again tour the shops.

Typically, Abbott organizes academic classes for ninth and 12th graders on the same days that 10th and 11th graders are in the shop classes and academic classes for the 10th and 11th graders when ninth and 12th graders are in their shops. However, on the first day of school, the only seniors on campus are the senior ambassadors who accompany ninth graders to classes, help them locate lockers, and generally create a welcoming atmosphere for students. During the first semester, ninth graders participate in an exploratory program, cycling through all 12 of the shops before selecting their trade.

Ongoing challenges: Despite efforts to create an environment that motivates kids to attend, there are greater struggles in some families that require services beyond what schools can provide. According to Durkin, the students struggling most at Henry Abbott are those dealing with mental health challenges. Though the school has psychologists and a LCSW on staff at its health center, sometimes mental health or family dynamics crop up that are beyond their ability to address. However, gaining access to outside service providers has been difficult, particularly since the pandemic, with students and families sometimes waiting two months or more for appointments.

Key Takeaways

- The CTECS model builds relevance into the curriculum as students cycle between academic content and their chosen trade. Students “live” their trades, and most students have opportunities to do “production work,” providing customers with services under the supervision of teachers. Students who work in carpentry, electrical, HVAC and plumbing work on houses and businesses in the community. Students also can participate in work-based learning in 11th and 12th grades where they get paid by an employer in their trade and earn Career and Technical Education credits at the same time.
- Focusing on creating a welcoming climate — for both students and staff — at the school has been an intentional strategy. With shortages of teachers and substitutes this year in particular, addressing the needs of adults has paid off. Durkin points out that it requires a “collective effort” to make students feel welcome.
- A student assistance team meets weekly to assess student progress and attendance and identify students early who might need additional support. The team facilitates the ongoing discussion of barriers and monitors student interventions.
- Working to intentionally bring students back to in-person instruction was an important aspect of Abbott’s work when school reopened. Emphasizing student-staff activities helped rebuild a sense of connection between students and adults.

Francis T. Maloney High School

Maloney High School Demographics (2021-22)	
Total Enrollment	1,235
African American	11.1%
Asian	*
Hispanic	53.8%
White	27.4%
Two+ Races	3.7%
Free and Reduced Price Lunch	69.4%
English Learners	11.6%
Students With Disabilities	15.5%
Chronic Absence Data (2021-22)	
CT Statewide Total	23.7%
CT High School Total	29%
Maloney High Total	29.1%
African American	33.1%
Asian	17%
Hispanic	33.8%
White	19.7%
Two+ Races	28.3%
Free Lunch	40.8%
Reduced Price Lunch	18.6%
English Learners	36.4%
Students With Disabilities	45.7%
High Need	34.8%

Background: Francis T. Maloney High School is a comprehensive high school located in Meriden, Connecticut, that serves 1,235 students. (See demographics above.) Although the school's chronic absence rate of 29.1% in 2021-22 is higher than previous years, it is slightly less than the state average for high schools. Principal Jennifer Straub, who grew up in Meriden, has been an educator for 26 years, 13 of them at Maloney High School, first as an assistant principal and the past eight years as principal. She described the great sense of pride and spirit that characterizes the school and noted the strong relationships that teachers form with students. The sense of belonging and how accepting students are of one another is "palpable," she said. Straub believes that one reason students and staff have that sense of belonging is the school's sense of responsibility to the community at large. The building is open until 10 p.m. Monday through Friday. And while the hours may tax the custodial and administrative staff, Straub says, "It's not my building, it's the community's building." In addition,

there is an intentional effort made to welcome incoming ninth graders, who are organized into two teams that share the same core teachers. By the end of September, all students have met with their school counselor and have been assigned an advisory that meets weekly, both efforts done to ensure that there is at least one other adult on campus with whom a student has a relationship.

Leading with data: Attention to data is frequently the focus of the attendance committee and the entire school. All school staff have access to a robust data dashboard that provides teachers, counselors and school leaders with information about student behavior, attendance and grades. The data portal enables users to see patterns of single-period absence, which can identify cases of class avoidance, a critical feature for high schools. When this occurs, the attendance committee explores the reasons why a student might avoid a class, such as a poor relationship with the teacher or the student's sense that attendance won't make a difference in passing the class. "A sense of hopelessness can creep in" if a student feels as though the effort is futile, said Straub.

To avoid getting to that point, the attendance committee takes a tiered approach to interventions. After the third absence, families receive a phone call and notification on Parent Square, the communications app. Straub says Parent Square has been a game-changer for connecting with families, noting, "We have a 100% contact rate." Students who have been flagged for absences agree to a plan with seven rules, and for some students that works just fine, according to Straub. But for other students who have been struggling with attendance, adhering to the seven rules in the contract is just not possible. In those situations, Straub meets with each student and modifies the contract, which might include a call or text to her if they're going to be late to school. In other situations, the attendance team works with each student to create a "promotion plan," a step-by-step plan that can lead to small wins. Key to the school's success is understanding the challenges to attending that are experienced by each student. A bilingual family-school liaison also makes home visits for students with severe chronic absence (missing 20% or more of school days) to explore a pathway to reengaging in school.

Sometimes students can be transferred to different classes or enrolled in semester credit courses that can help lead to summer school eligibility. Some students work with the school psychologist to participate in a school refusal assessment, and depending on the results, the school creates an abbreviated school day schedule

that allows for some credit recovery. Straub said the abbreviated day might seem counterintuitive when students have many credits they need to make up, but “step one is come in the door, just come in the door.”

For incoming ninth graders, school staff use data from their previous school to identify the 120 who are most vulnerable for poor behavior, attendance and grades. These students are divided into two groups and are supported by two transition support specialists, credentialed school counselors who focus solely on those students throughout the school year. Straub acknowledged the tradeoffs: She traded an English teacher for one of the counselors. As a participant in the Connecticut RISE Network, Straub received grant funding for the other counselor from the Dalio Education Foundation. Because the approach was so successful, it is now the norm for RISE Network schools.

Professional development for school leaders:

Professional development opportunities provided Straub with several new ideas. Following a visit to Chicago Public Schools she saw that these schools were struggling with similar on-track indicators for ninth-grade students, although on an entirely different scale. She implemented several strategies she saw in action in Chicago, such as the transition support specialist.

The RISE Network provides professional development (PD) through quarterly meetings, including role-alike sessions where principals from across the state who serve similar communities can discuss a problem of practice. The PD uses a specific protocol that allows the group to dig deeply into the root causes of low attendance and generate solutions. Equity is an important focus of those conversations which, at Maloney, has been bolstered by an active student African American Alliance. Straub said that in the end, it’s about relationships and not being afraid to learn from students.

The district has also been supportive of professional learning for school leaders and all staff. Maloney has engaged in professional learning focused on culturally responsive teaching and more recently, student voice and youth dialog to get a deeper understanding of students’ realities.

Ongoing challenges: Many states and districts have policies in place that prevent students from earning credit for classes in which they have had unexcused absences. At Maloney, students are denied credit after seven absences

for a semester class, which can present a disincentive for students to engage in school. However, an appeal process allows students to apply for a waiver. If students are receiving medical or mental health treatment or have a 504 plan on file, they can appeal to the principal to earn credit for those classes if they can demonstrate mastery of the content.

Straub pointed out that teachers are also experiencing stress and mental health issues. “Something happened to adults too during COVID that [we] can’t underestimate,” she said. “The adults seem less resilient; it’s hard for them to rally back.” Straub suggested that what we want for all students — a sense of belonging, relationship and support — is also what we need for the adults in the schools.

Key Takeaways

- Access to a robust data portal allows school leaders at Maloney High School to track student progress in a timely manner.
- Identifying incoming ninth graders who might benefit from additional support and providing those students with a transition support specialist has improved attendance and engagement. The model was so successful that it is now the model for the RISE Network schools.
- Working to understand students’ experiences and background is essential to finding interventions that will truly make a difference.
- Creating opportunities for the school to be part of the community by offering activities until 10 p.m. most days, as well as honoring student voice when developing solutions, helps create a sense of belonging where students feel welcome at school.
- Providing support for adult health and wellness is important, too.
- Meriden uses LEAP to partner with the local YMCA and Boys & Girls Clubs for home visitors to engage with families of high school students. The use of this community partner ensures that adults who are relatable to teens are engaging families, reconnecting students to school and to the programs and supports at these local organizations.

Naugatuck High School

Naugatuck High School Demographics (2021-22)	
Total Enrollment	1,284
African American	10.7%
Asian	4.1%
Hispanic	32.9%
White	48.3%
Two+ Races	3.3%
Free and Reduced Price Lunch	50.9%
English Learners	5.1%
Students With Disabilities	18.1%
Chronic Absence Data (2021-22)	
CT Statewide Total	23.7%
CT High School Total	29%
Naugatuck High Total	24.9%
African American	24 %
Asian	*
Hispanic	30.5 %
White	22.3%
Two+ Races	*
Free Lunch	35.6%
Reduced Price Lunch	30.8%
English Learners	28.9%
Students With Disabilities	33.5%
High Need	33.5%

Background: Naugatuck is a comprehensive high school that serves 1,284 students. (See school demographics above.) After a spike in its chronic absence rate in 2020-21 to 42%, Naugatuck's rate has returned to near a prepandemic level of 24.9%, a 17.1% drop in one year. Principal John Harris, who is in his fifth year as principal, described his school as essentially a microcosm of America in terms of its ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. That diversity is one of the school's strongest assets, which, he says, prepares students to connect with and relate to a wide array of people after high school. Relationships and creating a welcoming, warm environment are at the center of the school's efforts, a focus that is supported and reinforced districtwide.

Improving chronic absence: When asked about the factors that contribute to their success in reducing chronic absence, Harris said teachers were the primary drivers of their efforts to build student self-efficacy and ensure

they feel safe, respected and heard. He said professional development and professional learning communities focus on seeing students holistically — in addition to their performance in math or English. Teachers are encouraged to greet all students at the door and welcome back students who have been absent in a warm, positive way: “We should welcome students back because we missed you, not because I'm worried about your grade in my class.” Students are also actively engaged in creating a welcoming school. Student council members identify monthly themes and plan “fun activities” linked to those themes to develop a sense of belonging and community.

A primary driver of their efforts has been their participation in the RISE Network, a collaboration among nine high schools in Connecticut to improve student outcomes. Areas of focus for the RISE Network schools include grade nine on-track achievement, including attendance. Principal Harris said that one benefit of participation in the network has been access to a robust data hub that allows them to target bands of students who are in danger of becoming chronically absent and those who already are chronically absent so they can target different kinds of supports and communicate with students and families in different ways. The RISE Network has also provided important professional development opportunities for school leaders with job-alike meetings where leaders review data together and share ideas. According to Harris, “The network is the greatest asset that we get out of [our participation].”

The school attendance team meets weekly and includes the attendance secretary, a family liaison, the grade nine dean and counselor and the four grades 10–12 counselors. During those meetings, team members review attendance data and plan outreach and intervention strategies for students and families. Harris also discussed ways in which they creatively use study hall time to engage students. Sometimes, when the attendance team notices students who might be struggling with attendance, they assign them to duties in the building, such as working in the front office or in the library during study hall. Not only does that time count toward students' community service hours, it creates a sense of responsibility — that the people in the office are relying on the students to perform important work.

Another positive contribution to their efforts has been the advisory class that meets each Monday for 30 minutes. That time is spent on social emotional learning (SEL)

activities and helping ensure that students are on a path to becoming college and career ready. Each year, teachers are asked to share their hobbies and interests outside of school, and students register for their top three choices for advisory. “We’ve always been able to give students one of their top three choices for advisory,” Harris said.

District role: Although the school examines its own disaggregated data to determine whether there are disproportionate numbers of students who are chronically absent, the district has also played an important role in engaging all staff in intentional learning around equity. Prior to the pandemic, the district offered modules on “things like implicit bias and microaggressions, just to focus on our own practices on a human level,” Harris said. Last year, they did a book study focusing on culturally responsive teaching and the brain. “Equity,” Harris said, “has been pretty front and center for us here in Naugatuck.” The Special Service Department has been particularly supportive of removing barriers for students with special needs, and Curriculum and Instruction Department leaders share the mindset of creating warm and inviting environments: “If that’s not there for the student, then it doesn’t matter what the curriculum is,” Harris said. Units are designed to build in time for creating that environment before the academic skills and content.

Ongoing challenges: Despite the district support Harris outlined, he also suggested that there are areas for growth. More vertical communication would help. So, for example, “if the high school has a student who has been absent for a couple of weeks and the elementary school has a student who has been absent for a couple of weeks, there is no system for us to communicate with each other.” If those two students are from the same family, that vertical alignment would help provide more holistic supports. In addition, coming out of the pandemic when there were so many accommodations in place because students were not in school, a major challenge has been communicating with students and families about why those accommodations are no longer in place. The school had to communicate that “we did these things because we were in a public health crisis, but these are not things that are good for your learning at the end of the day,” Harris said. And finally, Harris said he’s been wondering “about the correlation between student attendance and staff attendance. As we have been seeing student absenteeism rise, we’ve also been seeing staff

absenteeism rise. I’m not sure it’s a challenge, but I think that it is. If we assume that creating a warm, welcoming environment encourages students to attend and that teacher is frequently absent, it’s just one less reason to come to school.” Working to ensure that staff receive the support they need to continue to work at their best is an important part of this work.

Key Takeaways

- As a member of Connecticut’s RISE Network, Naugatuck has benefited from a robust data hub that helps school leaders identify students in specific bands — those who are at risk of becoming chronically absent, those who are moderately chronically absent and those who are severely chronically absent. Doing so allows school leaders to lead with data and target resources appropriately.
- Advisories that focus on SEL as well as progress toward college and career readiness help students build relationships with another adult on campus. Teachers publish their interests and hobbies so students can select teachers with whom they might share interests.
- Naugatuck looks to a variety of resources to learn more about how they can support students and remove barriers to attendance, including other high school leaders in the RISE Network, the families they serve and the students themselves.
- Looking at data disaggregated by subgroup has advanced conversations about the classroom environment and making sure that classrooms are warm and welcoming for their diverse array of learners. As a district, there has been intentional work around equity, including modules on implicit bias and microaggressions as ways of reflecting on their own practice on a human level as well as a book study on culturally responsive teaching and the brain that focused more on pedagogy. Equity “has been pretty front and center” in their work.

The Bridge Academy

The Bridge Academy School Demographics (2021-2022)	
Total Enrollment	280
African American	55.2%
Hispanic/Latino	43%
Free and Reduced Price Meals	78.1%
Students With Disabilities	19.7%
English Learners	2.9%
Chronic Absence Data (2021-22)	
CT Statewide Total	23.7%
CT High School Total	29%
The Bridge Academy Total	14.9%
African American	15.5%
Hispanic/Latino	8.4%
Eligible for Free Lunch	18.1%
Students With Disabilities	19.2%
English Learners	*
High Needs	*

Background: The Bridge Academy is a state charter school that serves 280 students in grades 7–12 in Bridgeport, Connecticut. (See demographics above.) Prospective students learn about the school most often through word of mouth or social media and are admitted through an open lottery. The Bridge Academy had a chronic absence rate of 14.9% in 2021-22. Although that rate is slightly higher than the prior year, it is well below the statewide average. Superintendent and high school principal Tyrone Elliott has been at the school for 10 years, first as a middle school teacher, then as a dean of students and now as the school leader. He described the school as a unique, small school that grows students and prepares them for a wide array of postsecondary options, whether two- or four-year college, technical school or the military. The most successful students at the Bridge Academy begin in seventh grade and stay through graduation in 12th grade.

Intentional focus on climate and culture and removing barriers to attendance: Just prior to the pandemic, the Bridge Academy began to shift how it viewed and responded to attendance along with intentional changes to its climate and culture. The shift began with a change in adult attitudes so that

conversations focused not on negative consequences for being tardy or absent but “what can we do to support your being here?” In addition, staff were trained in restorative practices. An intentional focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) activities also contributed to a more welcoming environment. The school offers morning circles that “create a soft landing spot for students,” said Elliott, whole-school assemblies that create a sense of family where students are celebrated and robust after-school activities that engage students not only in the school but in the community. While those activities make school a place where students want to be, the school also works to remove barriers to attendance. There are a washer and dryer on campus for uniforms; personal hygiene products and vouchers for haircuts and styling are available; and free breakfast and lunch are offered.

Because the Bridge Academy is not a neighborhood school, transportation can present a particular challenge. To address that barrier, the school has an Uber account that is accessible to any student who needs it, and the school has purchased bus passes for some students who live within a two-mile radius of the school. Students who live more than two miles out are eligible for a free city bus pass.

Having an attendance team, looking at data, and understanding why students are not coming to school helped shift mindsets at the school. Social workers also helped staff understand more deeply the challenging circumstances some students face. The attendance team, composed of administrators, special education teachers, social workers, a school nurse, counselors and secretaries, meets bi-monthly to discuss attendance data, the causes for student absence and interventions. The morning after a student has been absent, the attendance clerk calls home to find out why that student was not in class and whether the student plans to come to school that morning. Information is recorded in a spreadsheet that counselors and the school nurse have access to so they can follow up as needed.

Communication and building relationships: During the summer, staff at the Bridge Academy call families of students who struggled with attendance to ask what happened and whether there is anything the school can do to support the student. Weekly texts, emails and quarterly newsletters inform families of school news and upcoming school activities. And every five weeks, a communication goes home with a table comparing

their child's attendance with peers'. In 2022, the school instituted home visits for all incoming seventh and ninth graders before school begins. Those visits allow families to get to know staff at the school and allow school staff to hear more about student and family hopes and goals. Hosting schoolwide BBQs in spring and summer is another opportunity for students, families and school staff to get together informally. In addition to home visits and informal opportunities for school staff to build relationships with students and families, ninth and 10th graders participate in an accredited course taught by Elevate teachers that focuses on character and skill building. Those teachers serve as teacher-mentors for students 24/7.

According to Elliott, student voice is another important component of the Bridge Academy's success. Conducting student focus groups where students can express their honest opinions and suggest ideas for improvement without adults' commenting or judging them has been very effective. Afterward, knowing that their thoughts and ideas have been heard, considered and, where possible, implemented is equally important as hosting the focus group.

Ongoing challenges: Lack of funding for transportation has been an ongoing challenge. Although students have access to free bus passes, public transportation is not always a safe alternative. The Bridge Academy does have a transportation budget (that funds the Uber account and other transportation needs), but it cannot fill in for the loss of buses in the community. Another ongoing challenge has been intentionally rebuilding school culture since the disruptions of the pandemic. Students need to learn how to do school again when online learning "is not a thing anymore," said Elliott. Making school a place where students want to be, including students' voice in how schools can become more relevant and engaging, will be important going forward.

Key Takeaways

- Forming a school attendance team with diverse members can help make the shift from a punitive approach to an early identification and intervention approach. Learning more about student circumstances from school social workers also can help make that shift.
- Taking the time to understand why students are absent helped the Bridge Academy remove several barriers to attendance.
- Building trust and relationships with students and families opens lines of communication with families. Bridge Academy staff visit homes of all incoming seventh and ninth graders and offer several informal activities where students, families and staff can meet and get to know one another.
- As a small school, the Bridge Academy engages multiple partners who help the school offer a vast array of enrichment activities after school that allow students to engage in activities they might not otherwise be able to access. The school's partnership with Elevate provides ninth and 10th grade teacher-mentors who are available 24/7.
- The school recommends generating solutions to persistent barriers such as transportation by employing innovative approaches such as using travel companies Lyft or Uber.

Endnotes

1. YSBs were established in Connecticut in the 1960s to address concerns about growing family needs, juvenile offenders, drug and alcohol abuse and truancy. Currently there are 102 YSBs that serve 145 towns across the state. YSBs not only provide direct services to youth and families but are also tasked with conducting needs assessments and the coordination of youth and family services. YSBs provide services for students who are in tier three for chronic absence.
2. The LEAP was launched in 2021 to address student absenteeism and disengagement from school through a home visiting program that identifies and partners with families to build trusting relationships and help improve attendance and engagement.
3. Two schools in this report participated in the RISE Network: Naugatuck and Maloney high schools.
4. For the report, see https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Attendance_Works_Using_Chronic_Absence_091619.pdf.
5. See <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2023/p0213-yrbs.html>.
6. See https://edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/r_mcneely-march2023.pdf.
7. See <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Publications/Full-Equal-and-Equitable-Partnerships-with-Families/Chart-4>.
8. See <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Publications/Full-Equal-and-Equitable-Partnerships-with-Families/Chart-5>.
9. See <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Chronic-Absence/Learner-Engagement-and-Attendance-Program-LEAP>.
10. For more information, see <https://www.marzanoresources.com/hrs/high-reliability-schools/>.



Attendance Works (www.attendanceworks.org) is a national nonprofit initiative that promotes equal opportunities to learn and advances student success by inspiring and catalyzing policies and practices that prevent and reduce chronic absence. Its website offers a wide array of free materials, tools, research and success stories to help schools, districts and communities work together to reduce chronic absence.

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