



## Tackling Chronic Absenteeism: A Call For Action In Chicago Public Schools – OpEd

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By [Maria Kyriacou](#)

*This article recommends establishing an interagency task force and mentorship program—judged most effective, equitable, and cost-efficient—to reduce Chicago Public Schools chronic absenteeism to 20% within three years.*

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) are grappling with a profound crisis known as chronic absenteeism. Defined as missing 10% or more of school days in a calendar year, this issue has swelled significantly since the pandemic, impacting students across all demographics as the national average for chronic absenteeism hit a record 28% from 2021-2022.

In 2022, a staggering 44.6% of CPS students were chronically absent, a substantial leap from the statewide rate of 16.8% in 2018. In particular, African American, Hispanic, and low-income students have experienced the most drastic decline in student attendance. The reasons for absence are complex, ranging from health issues and lack of transportation to family challenges and disengagement from school. Many students simply feel unnoticed. We need a proactive, comprehensive strategy to re-engage these students and set them on a path to success.

While a 2022 Illinois Senate bill allowing five excused mental health days aimed to address student well-being, it hasn't resolved the problem, with 39.8% of CPS students, or over 125,000 individuals, still chronically absent in 2023. This alarming trend puts thousands of students at greater risk of academic underperformance and dropping out.

One promising solution lies in establishing an interagency task force, similar to the successful model implemented in New York City. From 2010 to 2013, then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg's task force tackled chronic absenteeism among 60,000 students. A Johns Hopkins study followed the task force's efforts in one hundred New York City public schools. A key component was the creation of the NYC Success Mentor Corps, which leveraged school staff, social workers, retirees, AmeriCorps volunteers, and even high school seniors to mentor at-risk students. This initiative proved remarkably effective: absent students, once paired with a mentor, attended school for an average of two additional weeks, and students in temporary shelters were 31% less likely to become chronically absent.

The program's strength lay in its ability to personalize the school experience, identify underlying barriers to attendance, and connect students with crucial support. While establishing a robust mentorship program, public awareness campaigns, and data infrastructure would require a substantial investment—an estimated \$30 million for a new team of 500 AmeriCorps members in Chicago over three years—its proven impact across all K-12 grades makes it a highly equitable and effective choice.

Alternative approaches, while less costly, fall short in their comprehensive impact. A text-message communication system, called Connect-Text, was implemented in low-income Pittsburgh Public Schools to communicate announcements and attendance information to parents. The program demonstrated success in reducing chronic absenteeism among kindergarten

students, lowering the rate of absenteeism from 24.4% to 13.3%. However, similar efforts in high schools yielded no discernible impact, highlighting a significant limitation in cross-age equity. The cost of such a system, approximately \$600,000 for 10 AmeriCorps members over three years, is considerably lower; however, the restricted age group's effectiveness makes it less ideal for addressing a district-wide problem.

Maintaining the status quo is not an adequate option. While national chronic absenteeism rates may be gradually declining post-pandemic, relying on this natural ebb to solve Chicago's deeply rooted issue is unreliable. The current mental health day policy, while beneficial in its intent, hasn't curbed the overall absenteeism trend. Waiting for rates to return to normal levels without intervention would take years, further compromising the academic futures of thousands of CPS students.

The most effective, equitable, and ultimately cost-efficient path forward for CPS is the creation of an interagency task force with a strong mentorship program. Similarities between the cities and public schools allow the policy to be scalable and applicable to CPS. By first conducting a data analysis to identify schools and demographics with the highest absenteeism rates, Chicago can strategically deploy a 500-member AmeriCorps team.

These mentors can build the vital connections and provide the individualized support necessary to re-engage students and drive chronic absenteeism rates below 20% within the next three years. This proactive, person-centered approach is essential to ensuring all CPS students have the opportunity to thrive academically.

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