

Second Step® Insights

Reducing Absenteeism with Social-Emotional Learning Strategies

August 28, 2024 | By: The Second Step® Team



Chronic absenteeism in American schools continues to make national headlines. Unsurprisingly, during the pandemic, student absences surged. But now, years later, [record numbers of kids](#) continue to miss school. They're losing out on important academic foundations as well as social-emotional



growth. The long-term damage can extend into adulthood, negatively affecting employment and health.

Why are kids missing school, and what can we do about it?

Our current absenteeism crisis stems from complex and often overlapping challenges such as poverty, physical and mental health, family responsibilities, and transportation to school. Education leaders are implementing diverse interventions to get kids back to class. Different districts launched a multitude of learning recovery programs and social service home visits. Some schools are considering fining parents.

Meanwhile, one effective but sometimes overlooked solution is available in schools right now. Social-emotional learning (SEL) can help [reduce absenteeism](#), [increase student engagement](#), and [improve school climate](#). Is it really that simple? Can SEL cure chronic absenteeism? By itself, of course not. But SEL does offer one effective part of the solution.

SEL strategies for reducing absenteeism

Strengthening teacher-student connections

[Social-emotional learning increases](#) self- and social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. When teachers prioritize connecting with students, making them feel seen and heard, those relationships are [associated with](#) higher student engagement, achievement, and attendance. Teachers can build rapport by [asking students for their ideas](#) and getting to know them. Interactions as simple as greeting them when they come through the door are [shown to increase](#) students' enjoyment in class, which leads to increased engagement and improved attendance.

Fostering school belonging

[School belonging or connectedness](#) is vital to students' social-emotional well-being and has positive benefits on engagement. Studies show that kids who feel like they belong have [better mental health](#), are [more engaged](#), and do [better academically](#). Teachers can foster belonging by engaging with students in class, using inclusive curriculum, and practicing classwide social-emotional skills like empathy and perspective-taking. Schools can broaden their efforts for connectedness by offering a variety of clubs and groups so everyone can find a place where they feel like they belong.

Encouraging student agency and praise in high school



In high school, teenagers frequently want more control over more aspects of their lives. Consequently, school engagement and attendance often decrease. But, recent [studies show](#) that giving students more agency and choices over their learning opportunities leads to higher engagement.

It's also important to note that praise is a powerful influence on student engagement. Yet, during high school, praise seems to drop off, with high school students receiving less than their younger counterparts. Just like simple greetings can drive change, sharing praise more readily [can increase student engagement](#).

Implementing bullying prevention initiatives

Bullying is on the rise in schools across America. Increasingly, [students report](#) purposely missing school because they don't feel safe or because they want to avoid bullying situations. SEL programs teach fundamental relationship skills like empathy and perspective-taking, and schoolwide SEL initiatives [are shown to](#) improve school climate and reduce bullying. When schools commit to SEL and anti-bullying policies, students can feel safe coming to and participating in class. In addition, social-emotional learning empowers students to move from bystander to ally, whether an incident happens in person or online.

Taking action

Absenteeism isn't a new problem in our schools, but it is a growing problem that's continuing to harm children and adolescents. Tackling the causes requires collaboration from schools, communities, and families. Schools can do their part by implementing social-emotional learning programs. SEL can help build vital connections that can reduce absenteeism, moving kids from absent to engaged and thriving.

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