



## **CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM – THE PARENTS’ PERSPECTIVE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This report presents the findings of a focus group study conducted on behalf of the Education Oversight Committee. Three online focus groups were conducted among parents with children in public school. The groups were conducted on January 14 and 15, 2025. One group was comprised of parents of elementary school students, one was comprised of parents of middle school students, and one was comprised of parents of high school students.

This study complements a focus group study that was conducted among South Carolina public high school students in October of last year.

The primary objectives of the study were to better understand the underlying issues that contribute to chronic absenteeism and how South Carolina’s public schools can develop strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism.

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

As a general principal, parents feel their children should be in school every day. At the same time, they recognize that their students will be absent some. In fact, as discussions delved into acceptable reasons their student might be absent, parents identified many reasons they would consider acceptable for their child to be absent. Further, when discussing whether or not absenteeism is a problem, many parents view absenteeism as situational. For example, some parents feel if a student has good grades and is keeping up with his/her classes, being absent a few days here and there is acceptable. The age of the student is also a factor in that parents recognize that it’s easier to “catch up” after missing two days of kindergarten than two days of high school.

Unlike students, who see a lot of different behaviors related to attendance in the schools they attend, the perspectives of parents are somewhat limited to their children and their children’s peer group. In other words, parents could not speak broadly to the problem. Instead, their comments were more narrowly focused on their children.

Still, many of the same themes emerged around why students are absent, including safety, bullying, mental health (medical or stress induced), teachers, and transportation. Of note, parents, particularly parents of elementary middle school students, had different views on bullying and problems with teachers and other students than the high school students did. While students identified those issues as reasons to be absent, parents said those were issues that would be addressed immediately with a meeting with school officials.

As with students, many parents are not familiar with the term chronic absenteeism and there is some confusion between chronic absenteeism and truancy, how much of a day a student can miss before being considered absent, tardy versus absent, etc.

### **DETAILED STUDY FINDINGS**

The remainder of the report follows the outline of the focus group discussion guide. The narrative includes verbatim quotes from parents on the various topics covered. The verbatims have been edited in some cases for clarity, grammar, etc.



## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING IN SCHOOL EVERY DAY

Most parents began the discussion by saying their student should be in class every day.

*I think my kids should be in school every day unless they're sick. If my kids aren't sick, they're not running a fever, they're going to school.*

*I think it's very important to be at school every day.*

*Yeah, I agree. We do our best to try to get them there and if they're not there, we definitely request their schoolwork and things from their teachers, so they don't get behind and stay up to date.*

*Yes, I agree the same. I believe that they should be physically in school every single day.*

*I believe it's important to be able to articulate the curriculum more appropriately. They're able to ask questions, they're able to be more informed about the curriculum that they're learning about.*

*I agree. I also think there's a lot of social interaction where kids have to navigate people who come from all different lifestyles and walks of life and have different attitudes and opinions and things of that nature as well.*

However, as the conversations developed, parents were quick to mention a lot of reasons why their students would not necessarily be in class every day. (This topic is covered in detail later in the report.)

*I'm big on mental health days in our house. I feel like first of all, education is his only job right now, so of course he should definitely try to be there as often as possible. But even as an adult, some days I wake up and I can't... So granted it might be once a school year, but I don't make him go. He goes because he knows that's his job and he needs to focus on his education right now, but I will flex that a little bit if he's like, mom, I don't feel like going today. Sometimes I will let him off with that. But I do feel like it's important to be in school every day because it teaches interaction skills, it teaches them responsibility for getting up and being where they say they're going to be and putting in the time.*

## HOW MANY DAYS CAN YOU MISS AND HOW EASY IS IT TO CATCH UP?

Parents had a hard time answering the question regarding how many days their student could miss school without being negatively impacted. They also struggled with how hard or easy it would be for their student to catch up after missing a class. Understandably, a lot of it depends on the class, the student, the communication between the family/student and the teacher, the time of year, whether it's a half day or a full day, etc.

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*Okay, so not to be impacted. I would say maybe four to five at the most, but it depends on... if it's like a half a day or doctor's appointments, stuff like that, orthodontist, stuff of that nature. But if they're missing over seven to eight for just unexcused, that's a problem.*

*I don't know if I have an exact [number of] days in mind, but it all really depends on the time of year too because it seems like certain times of the year, especially right before report cards come out, at least at our school and his teachers, they kind of cram everything in right before that happens. So, if he misses that, he's going to miss a whole bunch more than leading up to let's say spring break or something where, I mean they're half days and watching movies type of deal.*

*One class or one day? Easy. Yeah, any more than that, it gets a little overwhelming.*

*One day. I think one day is pretty easy, but two to three days is where they're going to struggle.*

*I feel being in middle school, it is hard to miss days because they have so much work that if they miss one day they're behind six different classes. In each class you have your physical online work that you're doing as well as paperwork as well as what you're hearing from the teacher. So, it is hard when they miss a day.*

*It depends. If it's a consecutive back-to-back, they'll be extremely behind, but if it's sporadically here and there they can catch up.*

*I agree with [name]. I think it's the multiple days in a row that really causes a snowball effect and [make it] harder to catch up and you're missing what the teacher's saying, you're trying to catch up on Schoology and it is kind of harder to keep up with that, but a day here and there it's a little bit easier to pick back up where you left off.*

*Also, I think it depends on the subject. In ELA, they might be doing a novel study where they can catch up with that reading. Math, they might be learning a new skill or building on that skill, whereas if they're missing that they might be missing how to do that. So, it might be a little bit more difficult class to class.*

*I was going to say, I think it depends on what time of the year, too. We all know the day before break they aren't doing anything.*

*I feel like it's pretty easy for us as in that its elementary, it's like third grade, so it's stuff that I feel confident that I'm knowledgeable about enough to explain to him about and get him to understand, kind of keep him updated even though he is missing the seat time, he's still learning.*

## HOW ARE PARENTS CONTACTED WHEN THEIR STUDENT IS ABSENT?

Parents said they are contacted via phone, email and through apps when their student is absent. Parents say they receive an automated in the morning if their student is absent. They also receive automated

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emails and are apprised via apps like Schoology and PowerSchool. Even though the communication is automated, parents feel it is very effective. Parents did not report instances where teachers, guidance counselors or principals called them.

*We'll receive a call early in the morning if they're not there. And then same thing, we actually receive notifications from, I think it's PowerSchool or Schoology or maybe the county app, same thing. And then I'll receive an email at the end of the day and usually another phone call or text message at the end of the day. So, there's at least three to four communications for us throughout the day.*

*Yeah, our school calls us by 10 30 in the morning if our student is absent.*

*We get contacted, we get text, phone calls, emails and carrier pigeon. I feel like we get all kinds of contact when they're absent.*

*I get a notification through PowerSchool saying your child was marked unexcused or absent in this class. So it'll start as soon as first period, but I drive him so I know he is there.*

## WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR MAKING SURE STUDENTS ARE IN SCHOOL EACH DAY?

Parents feel very strongly that they are responsible for making sure their students are in school each. While this might be obvious for parents of elementary school students, parents of middle school and high school students also say they are the ones responsible.

*Agreed. The parents. Even though when I had a senior last year, she actually worked half the day and then went to school after and it was kind of difficult to get to school on time, but I was still the one, even after she turned 18, they called me. It was still my job to get her there even though I wasn't driving her, and I had no control really of her getting from work to the school, but the school still held me responsible.*

*They're just large babies. They're still just large babies. You got to wake them up.*

## WHAT DOES CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM MEAN?

As with students, chronic absenteeism is not a household term among parents. Further, there is some confusion between chronic absenteeism and truancy, how much of a day a student can miss before being considered absent, tardy versus absent, etc.

*I would think just over 10 days, if that's kind of the rule, you cannot miss more than 10. Then anything over that would be chronic absenteeism.*

*I thought there was a legal amount of days that if you have missed 12 or 15, I don't actually know what it was. I don't think I've ever gotten close to that.*

*I think it's like five [to be chronically absent].*

*15, 11 or more?*

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*[I think] it's 10%. I don't know what the number is.*

Most parents have a general understanding that missing 50% or more of the day is counted as an absence, although some are not clear on the specific percentage, time, etc.

*That's what we have at our school. If you're not there by 11 o'clock or if you leave before a certain time, you're considered absent for the day. But there's individual absentees for each class loaded into their file as well.*

*I mean I guess maybe not that term, but I'm understanding I think what it means, right? Somebody [that's] absent all the time.*

*Our school has a cutoff. I believe it's either 11:00 or 1:00. I honestly can't remember. It's kind of confusing to me because even if they're tardy, they count them absent and I had some confusion with that because I was like, how are they tardy and absent? I thought you get so many tardies that equal an absence, but they do it where your tardy is considered an absence and it's an unexcused absence. So, that doesn't sit well with me and I'm still trying to learn what's going on.*

*Mine's broken down based on classes: first, second, third, fourth period. If you're out for the first two, but you're there for the second two, then it just breaks down per class.*

## WHAT ARE SOME ACCEPTABLE REASONS FOR STUDENTS TO MISS 50% OR MORE OF A SCHOOL DAY?

Parents did not have any trouble mentioning acceptable reasons for their student to miss 50% or more of a school day. As mentioned previously, parents began the conversation by saying their student should be in school every day during the school week but quickly identified many and varied “acceptable” reasons for their student to be absent. Although most of the reasons surfaced naturally in group discussions, the moderator probed parents on the “acceptability” of following reasons for being absent:

- > Doctors' appointments
- > Vacations
- > Concerns about school safety
- > Sports activities
- > The student is ill
- > Mental health struggles/depression
- > Problems with teachers/other students
- > Student saying they are not feeling well

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## > Extracurricular activities

As illustrated in the quotes that follow, the general take-away is that the reasons above are acceptable as long as the student isn't missing too much class, keeping grades up, etc.

There were two notable exceptions: concerns about school safety and problems with teachers/other students. With respect to safety, parents feel it is acceptable for their student to be absent if there is a bomb threat (or something similar). However, if the issue with safety directly pertains to their child, they say would meet with school officials to resolve the issue. Similarly, parents would request a meeting with school officials if their student had problems with teachers or other students. Parents view these issues as ones that need to be resolved so their student can learn in a healthy environment.

*Appointments are during the school day. You try, I mean try to get something that's 3:30 or later, but that's impossible. Impossible first thing in the morning and you try to miss the least amount of school or try to pick them up. But it is nearly impossible to try and get something that's not inside the school hours.*

*Vacation? The thing about vacations is sometimes the week before it's [less expensive] versus the week of, so that'd be kind of tricky too. But vacation, not really, unless it's towards the end of the year and they haven't missed any major days maybe.*

*Financially, some of us can't afford to go on the holidays when everybody's off school, when prices are skyrocketing. We can only afford to go when it's off season, which is [during school].*

*We've done that with my oldest. There's been bomb threats called in and stuff to where it's a text and it hasn't been official, but we're going to. Okay, we're going to miss a little bit just in case.*

*I mean as a dad who has a traveling soccer kid, we haven't had to miss school, but that would be a reason to miss, but I don't think that that would become a chronic thing. Tournaments are usually on the weekends; games are on the weekends. So, I mean I don't think that there should be a lot of scheduling interference there, but I do think it's a legitimate reason if that's something that that person is into.*

*That might be the opposite of what she just said. As I said, my kid's an athlete, we're trying to get him on the 3.5 GPA. So, to motivate him, if he busts his tail for a very long period of time, then maybe he can take Friday off. Really anything that will work with him, anything that will work, I'll do it.*

*Being sick, maybe a death in the family [are acceptable reasons].*

*Extreme medical condition [would be an acceptable reason].*

*I'm not one to give in easily on something like this, but there are days where you just didn't wake up in a good place in the world and I see it more in some of our friends that have kids*

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*that are a touch older than mine, more in the seventh and eighth grade, but some days you just wake up, you're not ready to take on the world and I think there's certain days where that can be okay.*

*I went through this with my fifth grader who was a fourth grader last year, and just a flip of a switch, he just decided he didn't want to go to school out of nowhere. And so it was like every day a struggle for us. Turns out it was anxiety of starting the new school year, even though we were at the same school.*

*For us and our family and our situation, I'm okay if she only missed one day a month. Unfortunately, it seems like we're missing more often. I'm okay with one day a month and of course anytime you miss you, you're going to get behind on work. So, they're going to have to make that up and again, it causes anxiety and stress. So again, I'm okay with one day a month and that probably adds up to eight or nine or ten days. Most of them are doctor notes for her issues. They don't have an individualized education program yet for folks with mental health issues like they do for folks who have physical disabilities, and I am an advocate of mental health being in that same category of disability. So, we're working through it with our situation.*

*As a parent, I think it's very important for her to be there every day. However, she does have anxiety and depression issues, so we take those days as needed and she makes up her work even though it compounds more anxiety and stress when you fall behind. So, we try to have a balance of not missing too many days, but I know as a parent and as a person who's been through school and an adult learner, if you don't go, you do miss stuff.*

Many parents feel there are situation aspects to absenteeism and that it's okay for their student to be absent here and there as long as it doesn't become an issue or cause a problem.

*What are their grades? I mean, if they've got straight A's and they're not struggling in anything and they're getting all good marks in their tests, I mean they're not in trouble... In my book, the grades matter. I mean, if you're sitting on C's and you're flunking a class, we've got a whole lot more issues going on. So, I wouldn't have as much focus on the number of days, I'd be looking at, oh, you're doing fine. You understand everything.*

*I'm probably a little bit more on the lax side with letting some days slide, especially if she keeps good grades. I feel like I almost wish that they could correlate days that they could miss with her grades. If they're getting good grades, give them a day or two as long as they're keeping them up. But yeah, I'm probably much more lax. When I was in high school, my mom was the same way. She would let me miss the maximum amount of days that I could, as long as my grades were up there, she didn't care. So, I'm kind of the same.*

*There's a lot of good reasons they could just have a personal day is a good reason for just a day off. I agree with that.*



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*If he needs a day to stay home, then by all means do it. He's a good kid. He's on the honor roll, he's diligent and getting caught up on his work. I'm comfortable with him saying, you know what, I don't want to do this today and we'll take a little break.*

*A lot of times if it's a day that they've done all their tests, they're just waiting on Christmas break to come and oh, today's going to be a half day and we're not really going over anything, no [they wouldn't have to go]. All that's going to happen is they're going to come back home riled up because they're not doing anything in class.*

*Yeah, I've let them miss half days if they want. I give them a choice. Do you want to go, or do you want to stay home?*

*I think it depends on the child's academic success. Some kids are able to retain information a lot quicker than others and so if they do miss a day or two, they're able to look back and pick right up where they [left off]. I think sometimes too, some people have some learning challenges, and it might be a little bit more difficult for them to retain information and get caught up quicker than others. I think it just depends on the individual child itself.*

## DISCIPLINARY ACTIONS FOR BEING FREQUENTLY ABSENT

Only one parent spoke up about their child being frequently/chronically absent and it was for a medical condition, so the topic was not pressed as the situation did not involve a decision to be absent, it was a medical necessity.

## IDEAS FOR REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Several parents mentioned ideas around rewarding good attendance, particularly when the student with good attendance had a good GPA and no disciplinary problems.

*In elementary school they, they got perfect attendance, and they got a pizza or something. I mean I remember there being an award, it was a big deal. I can't miss any days of school because I want to get this piece of paper. Or even if it was just something small, they got a pizza party or they got ice cream or something.*

*So, if you really want that carrot, I think you got to shorten the timeframe down. So hey, for the whole month of September, these 20 kids didn't miss a day, and they all get a prize. They get a Chick-fil-A gift card, or they get pizza party or something simple, not expensive.*

*Attendance awards and my first grader thinks it's the coolest thing in the world. Mom, you're going to come this week and celebrate me going to school every day.*

*That's true. If they make [attendance] a bigger deal, that would encourage them to want to go to school and push [them] to get there no matter what.*

While positive reinforcement is a good idea and one worth exploring, the following quotes speak to the complexity of some of the underlying factors related to chronic absenteeism that serve to remind there is not a one size fits all solution.



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*I think there's a lot of factors that maybe play into that, a lot of socioeconomic factors that I think aren't discussed at times. And so, I know that we talked about parents being responsible about getting their kids, but what if they're having to go to work first thing in the morning and their kid's getting on the school bus or they don't have the means to get the kids to school? So, I think it just all depends on the family and the individual outcomes for absenteeism.*

*That's kind of a hard question for me to answer. And I think the reason is because it depends on what were the reasons for why the person was out. So, if there was some type of family situations going on, maybe there's some counseling that needs to be added.*

## CONCLUSION

The underlying issues and factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism are varied, diverse and interrelated. Safety and mental health seem to be two of the biggest issues related to chronic absenteeism and perhaps should be the priorities for the Education Oversight Committee. Addressing the teacher shortage should be among the top priorities as well, as having adequately staffed schools will help address safety and, likely, mental health for both students and teachers. Finally, schools should consider recognizing/rewarding students with good attendance.