



## FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH ON CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

### METHODOLOGY

This report presents the findings of a focus group study conducted on behalf of the SC Education Oversight Committee. The primary objectives of the study were to better understand the underlying issues that contribute to chronic absenteeism and how South Carolina's public high schools can develop strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism.

Three online focus groups were conducted among South Carolina high school students on October 29 and 30, 2024. Among the 26 students who participated, seven missed 18 or more days of school last year and an additional four missed between 10 and 17 days.

In addition to the primary research conducted, this report includes some secondary research on the topic of chronic absenteeism.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The SC Department of Education defines chronic absenteeism as “any student in grade K-12 who misses 50 percent or more of the instructional day, for any reason, for 10 percent (or more) of the enrollment period (and) includes excused absences, unexcused absences, and suspensions.”

Data from the US Department of Education indicates that national chronic absenteeism rates significantly increased following the COVID pandemic – from 15% in 2019 to nearly 30% during the 2021-22 school year. South Carolina mirrored national trends showing a significant increase in chronic absenteeism rates after the COVID pandemic from 13% in 2019 to 25% during the 2022-23 school year.

Chronic absenteeism contributes to negative educational outcomes for students.

According to the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, children who are chronically absent as early as preschool, kindergarten, and first grade are [much less likely to read at grade level by the third grade](#). Students who cannot read at grade level by the end of third grade are four times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school.

Focus group findings indicated that the high school students included in the study were not familiar with the term chronic absenteeism and did not know what it meant to be chronically absent. They seemed to be more familiar with truancy (both with the term and its definition). This is an important finding, as it identifies awareness of chronic absenteeism as an issue.

Finding a solution to chronic absenteeism is challenging because the reasons that a student might be chronically absent are varied, diverse and interrelated. For example, focus group discussions identified the following factors as contributing to chronic absenteeism:

- > The mindset that you don't need to be in school everyday
- > Bullying (in person and/or online)
- > Feeling the school environment is not safe

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- > Mental health issues
- > Physical health issues
- > Students who don't see education as a priority
- > Parents who don't see education as a priority for their children
- > Parents who do not see school attendance as a priority
- > Transportation issues
- > Teacher shortages/turnover
- > Teachers who are unprepared to handle high school students
- > Unstable living conditions
- > Drug and alcohol use (by students, parents or both)

Due to the number of factors that can contribute to chronic absenteeism and the fact that some are within the control of the student and/or school and some are not, addressing chronic absenteeism will often require a one-on-one approach so the underlying issue or issues can be identified.

Another important take-away is that many students do not feel enforcement around absenteeism in general is very strong. Some remarked that out-of-school suspension is not exactly a punishment for someone who is chronically absent. Similarly, several remarked that seat time is not a strong deterrent. In addition to consequences and enforcement, students also suggested high schools could do a better job of recognizing, rewarding and celebrating good attendance.

## DETAILED STUDY FINDINGS

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

## COMMUNITY AT SCHOOL

Students were asked if they felt their school had a sense of community and if they felt like they were a part of that community.

Involvement with a school, whether it is through sports or clubs, has a lot to do with how much a student likes his or her school.

*That's what I love about my school is that I have the opportunity for that. So, I am in, I do theater, I do chorus, I do play two sports and I also am the head of four clubs or I'm on the office of at least four clubs. And I think that definitely builds community very well. I think it well represents that.*

*And last year I took dance – and freshman year as well – and I felt like most of us got along really well and it was really nice that we all had a common interest, so it was very enjoyable.*

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*When I get to school, my teachers, they'll greet me out in the hallway and be happy to see me and it feels like I'm glad to be there and they're glad I'm there.*

*What I like most about high school is the opportunities to just take initiative and do what you want to do. Join a club if you want to, join a club and all of the opportunities that are with higher education.*

*Oh yeah, I mean I love high school. I don't have any complaints. I like the sports, and I have good friends.*

*Well, I like lots of things. I like getting to hang out with all types of people and hang out with all my friends. I like learning the topics I like in class. It's very nice and I also like my teachers because they're really funny.*

*I have to say mine does [have a sense of community], it's at least one Friday of every month we have a thing called Greek Day. Basically, it's based off of Greek gods and each house is a different homeroom and we kind of do games in the cafeteria or gym to have one house win whichever game it is. And so, it's a pretty big thing for the entire community at PSA. So, I'd say that is definitely a thing there. Community.*

Some recognize that community exists at their schools, but involvement in it – specifically too much involvement – can cause stress. At the same time, others say there is community, but they don't feel a part of the community.

*I was just going to say at [my] school we have our student council, so they usually try to emphasize high school schoolwide participation with things like Spirit Week and all that. But it's definitely like, if you participate in that, then I guess you would consider yourself a part of a community. But for a lot of people that either can't do stuff like that or don't really see the fun in stuff like that, it can feel a little off at times. And then there's all the sports and things, so there's different branches of community at our school, but it's like, I wouldn't say there's an overarching community.*

*It definitely does [have a sense of community], but it's a big stressful commitment, especially if you're playing year-round sports or stuff like that. It's a big-time commitment.*

*At my school, I would definitely say that we have a sense of community, but I feel like there's really only certain people that are a part of that community. It's not inclusive and I don't think that I am a part of it. I guess I feel like it's probably the people that are really social and want to hang out with each other are a part of that community. And then there's other people that kind of feel outcasted I guess. And I guess I could say that I feel like that, but that's how it is at my school.*

## ATTENDANCE

Students were asked if they think they need to go to school every day during the week. This part of the discussion was interesting in that many students do not feel they need to be physically present every day.

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Some students who were in AP classes said it's better to be there in person in order to keep up. Others, however, tended to think it was pretty easy to keep up and get their work done online. This includes, for many, a feeling that you can catch up pretty easily if you skip a day. It is also important to consider if students' belief that they do not need in-person instruction to successfully complete class work was validated through their grades on those assignments.

*I don't think that we need to go to school five days a week because we don't even have most of our teachers ... and the people there aren't very nice. The teachers are just mean. Most of them don't even have everything they need to do to teach. Last year I was taught by a substitute for English. I haven't had a normal English teacher in three years.*

*My sister and I are both given opportunities to skip school. Our mom likes to call them mental health days because given how much coursework we both are given in our individual classes, skipping school gives us a chance to reset.*

*I know for my schedule right now I have my first class in the mornings, broadcast, as an in-person class. And then my second block class is dual enrollment, so I can really stay at school, go home, do whatever, as long as I'm getting my work turned in.*

*I feel like in middle school it wasn't as important to go, but now in high school you have to go.*

*And I also take AP classes and honor classes like [name] mentioned and I don't think I could do most of the stuff that I do at school at home right now. I understand if you have one or two classes online or online pace classes or something like that, but I don't see any way I could do my whole high school journey from home.*

*I know personally for me, whenever COVID happened and we went online – I mean this was still in middle school – but my grades in the majority of my classes, they all fell significantly because I just couldn't keep up with online and I would've rather been in the class with the teacher asking for help rather than being at home behind a computer.*

*I actually just yesterday finished up all the coursework for a Business 105 course for the rest of the semester, so I don't have to worry about doing that anymore, which it's a hybrid in-person virtual class, so we don't have to attend the class as long as we're getting our work done, which has been really great for me. Then I can go have the extra time to go get a job or go hang out with friends or get other stuff done. I don't have to worry about sitting in that class when it's something I could just sit down one day and just knock it out.*

*For me that's kind of split because of my classes. I have two classes that are mainly in person, but they're easy for me to understand. But also, most of my teachers, they post copies of everything online and a lot of our work is online. So, I feel like since it's online, if you miss a day of school, it's going to be easy for you to still redo all that work.*

## CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: WHAT IS IT?

This part of the discussion technically fell under attendance, but warrants being broken out. The high school students who participated in the focus groups were not familiar with the term chronic absenteeism and did

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not know the number of days associated with being chronically absent, or what type of absences counted towards chronic absenteeism. Students were much more familiar with truancy (both with the term and its definition, as well as the consequence of having to go to court). Students were asked, “when you hear “chronic absenteeism, what does that mean?” and “how many days do you think you might have to miss to be chronically absent?”

*I haven't heard that term used before, but based off the words I can probably infer what it means.*

*I think I've heard it before, but never really paid any mind to it. But again, like he said, based off the words I can kind of picture what it means.*

*I feel like chronic absenteeism, the term chronic, when I think about it, it's something that gets really severe, like chronic pain or something. So, I feel like it would be your absences get so severe, like truancy can't even get to it, or you're just skipping days in a row and then you're going on and doing that multiple times in the year. That's what I feel like it would be.*

*I guess maybe past the 20 - 30 day mark you're really considered a chronic absentee.*

*I know 10 days in a row is truant, so I would guess probably around that number or higher.*

*I think it's 15 days. Unexcused?*

*But I know a lot of people that have a big problem with skipping. There are some kids in my classes who they'll skip every other day.*

Students were also asked who they think is responsible for making sure students are in school each day.

*I mean obviously it's your parents' responsibility since you're still a minor, but at the same time it's like if you're responsible for driving yourself to school, once you get to that certain age, it should be your responsibility, not theirs. They can motivate you and look after you, but at the end of the day when you leave to go to school, that's on you.*

*I think it's mostly your parents' fault and sometimes your fault.*

## CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: REASONS

In order not to bias the discussion by providing any reasons, the moderator began this part of the discussion by asking, “what are some of the reasons a student might be chronically absent?” Follow-up questions and probes were asked later.

Students identified many reasons why students might be chronically absent, which include:

### SAFETY

Safety concerns contribute to many students feeling uncomfortable at school. As demonstrated in the following quotes, violence, bullying (online or in person), etc. were discussed at length. This is an important finding.

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*But another thing... I wish I could change about my school is my school is very unsafe. It's a lot of violent activity going on in my school, like a boy got stabbed last year, guns getting brought inside of school, a lot of blunts in the bathroom. It's just an unsafe school. So, I fear for my safety a lot.*

*But when you see in an academic setting, it's strange having people play music really loud in the hallways that are filled with curse words and things. That's just normal. That's high school for you. And then having people get into near fights almost every single week. You would hope you wouldn't see someone get punched in the face when you're trying to go to third period, but it just happens. And then of course people doing whatever, saying whatever, acting any kind of way in front of administrators, administrators not doing anything. It's just I guess the public high school experience.*

*For me, I don't really look at school as welcoming. The teachers aren't the best towards me. I guess it's just the school. I don't really feel safe most of the time because most of the shootings going on.*

*But I know the days that I chose not to come to school, it was normally because of the setting of people that I was like, I'm a friendly person, but that doesn't mean that everybody is going to be friendly towards you. And I had a group of people that weren't necessarily that friendly towards me and it made me not want to come to school. I just didn't want to put myself in that situation.*

*Safety in my high school is a really big issue because at my high school ... every other week we got to have metal detectors at the high school. So, I don't think many people want to show because safety in my high school is not really good. My high school is one of the worst high schools in my area, so I don't think that's why people want to show up every day because they're scared.*

*The drama, the arguments, the petty fights.*

*Somebody brought a gun to school last year consistently. I've heard about kids stabbing each other with pencils and pens and forks and whatnot.*

*I think safety can be an issue. Fights at my school every other day over nothing.*

*I think that technology has upsurged cyber bullying, but recently our school has been having an epidemic of Barstool accounts. And I don't know if you know what that is, but I can give a little – a Barstool account is basically a school, somebody in a school will take up the name of it and they'll be competing with other Barstool accounts. They both post photos of students back and forth, making fun of them, making fun of teachers, making a lot of accusations that are really harmful. And then also Instagram confession pages have been a really big thing in our school recently as well, that administration has had to step in to try to rectify it to the point that if somebody is on the page during school hours, they're going to be sent to the principal's office.*

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## MENTAL HEALTH

The topic of mental health surfaced quite frequently and is viewed by students as one of the biggest contributors of chronic absenteeism. Findings identify an opportunity for high schools to alleviate some of the factors that contribute to mental health issues such as concerns about safety at schools, bullying, the amount of homework assigned, etc.

*I think [mental health is] the biggest factor now. I would say 10 years ago it would've been transportation, but now it's people feeling overworked or stressed.*

*Mainly because of my mental health. I've had a lot of problems with my mental health. Last year, I think I missed 30 days. So, sometimes I just feel super drained and it just makes it really difficult for me to get up, get out of bed and go to school.*

*I know in my friend group personally a lot of us missed a lot of days, especially my other friends. One of my friends, she spent half the year out of school, but it was medical stuff, but most of the time it was just she didn't feel like coming so she didn't come. And then I had one of my friends, she didn't show up one time just because she didn't want to come to school. She didn't feel like it, she couldn't get out of bed. So, things like that. The mental health... I guess she wasn't ready to handle school, so she just didn't come.*

*I definitely was absent a lot last year and I guess I'm on that track now for this year. Last year it was the same thing. I had a lot of appointments, braces appointments, mental health things. And then there was one week in February I went on a cruise, and I was gone for a week of school. So that kind of really messed me up. And then this year it's been a lot of mental health stuff that comes with being a senior.*

*Sometimes I think they skip just because it gets stressful for them at times, so they take a break and go skip it.*

## TEACHERS

Overall, students spoke highly of their teachers. While negative comments about teachers were not a major part of the discussions, topics like teacher shortages, the quality of instruction and the inability of some teachers to cope with high school students surfaced.

*I mean it really depends on the teacher. I will say this, I'm speaking for a whole of our school. My school can barely even keep teachers. A lot of our teachers are in Texas. Teachers quit. We have empty classrooms all the time. We have people on Zoom meetings, we have a lot of online classes. They started making a lot of kids take online classes. A lot of us don't even really come to school anymore because they cannot find new teachers. But the teachers we do have, they're not that kind towards the students and our school doesn't listen. It doesn't listen to us until something bad happens. There's been multiple teachers that show signs of racism that have been caught on video being racist and saying the N word. They don't get fired, she's still here and that happened two years ago.*

*I have friends that skip specific classes. They don't want to be around that teacher.*

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*Most of the time I just keep my nose down, but I've had teachers, sexist teachers that look down on me just because a guy or I've seen racist teachers before. Obviously, it doesn't affect me as much, but I've seen on some of my friends and there's not much you can do about it. You can't go, there's no one really to tell about it or you can, but it's like nothing's going to happen.*

## TRANSPORTATION

Transportation issues have long been associated with chronic absenteeism. From family issues and conflicts to a shortage of bus drivers, students talked about how transportation issues can make them be tardy or miss altogether.

*I think transportation's a big deal because I got an early bird class meeting, I got to get to school an hour before school starts and one of the girls in my class, she's late every day, but it's not her fault. Her mom is a nurse, and especially in the medical field, your shifts can be long at night and having siblings and other people in your family and having to get those kids to school first can make you late for school. Also, people can miss the bus. I'm the only child and it's just me and my mom. So, I was blessed enough to not really be worried about school. But other kids, getting to school is a big deal. People's bus drivers can be late. Like I was saying, my school isn't really the best at being professional or put together.*

*I'm not absent. I am late. I'm a changed person. But last year I really tried to show up on time and it just wasn't working out for me. So, after 15 minutes you get mark absent.*

*I do know in my school district we have a big lack of bus drivers and whether they do come early or not, I know mine comes really early, but my neighbor down the street, we have two buses that come on our street for some reason. And I know her bus driver wasn't in commission for two weeks and she just didn't have a ride to school, so she didn't, didn't go to school for what?... seven plus seven - 14 counting weekends. But she didn't go to school for 10 days and they were all principal excused too, just because she didn't have a ride to school.*

## JUST DON'T CARE ABOUT SCHOOL

The high school students we spoke with talked a lot about students who “just don't care” about school. Whether it's the student, the parent(s), or both, education is not a priority for everyone. This problem is a particularly challenging one. Addressing some of the other issues like safety, teacher shortages and bus driver shortages could be straightforward. Changing perceptions that education is not important is more difficult to overcome.

*They think this is the highest I'm going to get in my life, which is sad to think about, but they think this is the highest I'm going to get in my life. I can treat people however I want. I can say whatever I want. I can do whatever I want. I'm having fun right now, so I'm going to throw away everything and then bring down my friends with me. High school is just not the peak life. It's the beginning of your life.*

*I feel like if you excel in school then you don't really have a reason to skip. But at the same time, if you're doing bad in school and you really don't see the point and then that would lead you to just not show up anymore.*



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*All the people that I know that do it are juniors or seniors and they're either about to graduate or doing early graduation, so they're on their last few credits and don't really care.*

*Well, some people just don't care about coming to school. They just don't.*

*Yeah, I think it's the same at my school that some just they really don't care about their grades, or I guess their future in their life because they just don't show up and it doesn't matter to them.*

*Well, some they just don't think school is important. They'd rather stay home and if they go to school, they feel like it's just boring.*

*And sometimes I remember talking once to this one girl and her mom would just let her stay home when she didn't feel like going, which my parents would never do. So, I feel like some just they either don't care, or they don't feel like going.*

One student suggested that some students might not value education because they see influencers making money online and think they will do the same.

*I feel like it's just changed with how students see with all these people online showing off their money, thinking that a lot of them are going to make it big, which I'm not saying again, it's not impossible. It's just the fact that because of all the content that's online now, all the creators, all the kids are thinking, oh, I'm going to be a streamer. I'm going to be a YouTuber one day. It's going to be easy for me. I'm not going to have to worry about school. And they see these inspirational videos where they're like, oh, I failed college. I failed sixth grade. But look at where I am now. I feel like it's just people seeing that in general on social media, it's like promoted.*

Students also recognized that it's not always the fault of the student. Some students live in homes where their parents don't prioritize education and/or live in a household that is not conducive to getting a good night's sleep, etc.

*I definitely think home life has some involvement into it. Your parents just don't really care to push you to go to school or maybe you just don't care enough to actually attend and go to school.*

*Sometimes they could be having family issues, or they could be just not wanting to go or their parents just don't care what they be doing on their free time, so they just really want to come to school. Some they don't want to be there or they getting them bullied or something. Who knows?*

*Could have family problems and they can't go to school because they don't have anybody to take them.*

*I know some people whose family do not care if they go to school or not. It doesn't mean anything to the parents of these kids for them to go to school. So, they either go to school and do terrible, they just don't do anything or they don't go to school and have to repeat or make up. And like [name] said, sometimes there are bigger responsibilities. I know people that have to take care of their younger siblings or an older relative, like a grandparent*

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## PHYSICAL HEALTH PROBLEMS/ FAMILY HEALTH PROBLEMS

Although to a far less extent than mental health, physical health was mentioned as a factor as well.

*However, an example of another thing is my sister, she got diagnosed with diabetes her junior year of high school and that had her out of school for weeks and weeks*

*I know from personal experience, my freshman year I was absent every other Friday because my grandparents were diagnosed with cancer. So, every other weekend we were driving up there to Tennessee to help them with cancer, their issues. And I know for me, I was kind of putting my classwork on the back burner for the time being because I cared more about spending the last couple of, at the time we didn't know if it was going to be days, weeks, months, so I valued the time with them more than my schoolwork.*

## CONSEQUENCES

An important take-away is that many students do not feel enforcement around chronic absenteeism is very strong. Some remarked that out-of-school suspension for someone who is chronically absent is not exactly a punishment. Similarly, several remarked that seat time is not much of a deterrent.

*I've seen kids not show up for months at a time or weeks at a time and then they just show up. I have a current friend who hasn't come for weeks, hasn't shown up in weeks. I don't know if he still goes here anymore. Last year there was another guy that just wouldn't come for weeks at a time, and I don't know if he was punished for it. I mean I know he had to do afterschool stuff to make up the time, but he was never kicked for it. I haven't really heard of anyone being kicked at my school for missing so much time.*

*Yeah, we're supposed to have seat time, and I had 40 hours of seat time last year. I'm just going to be honest; I did have to do those 40 hours. It was supposed to be in person. I didn't do it. It was online. So, all I had to do was keep my Chromebook open on a certain tab for 40 hours, which was real easy over the weekend. And boom, I got my 40 hours. But that's not helping me want to come to school, I know I can just get away with it. They need to be more strict on it.*

*[Schools should] keep up with the absences.*

*Not really [when asked about consequences]. They just get late on their work, and they get zeros for it, but the school doesn't really care.*

*Ours is the same way. If you miss a certain amount of days, you have to do seats program, which is like you just go sit to make up the time, but it's not like there's some crazy repercussions for missing these days and stuff until once you get to a certain amount you're marked as truant, which is a problem obviously, but it's not like there's [big consequences].*

*But if you're skipping that many days of school, you don't care about your grades though. I agree with you [name], there's actually more repercussions for being tardy at my school than there is for just not going altogether. The biggest repercussion you would face is that you would have to go to court over truancy, but those days can be made up super easily. Like you guys said, you*

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*just sit down in a room for an hour or two hours and you've made up one or two blocks depending on how long your class times are.*

*I know a kid who missed two months consecutively and still was able to move on because he did so much seat time in summer school.*

*Make the policy on missing days more aggressive.*

*I think honestly tying in, I know in colleges attendance is graded. Having a system like that to where I know people are skipping, don't care about their grades as much, but if it's going to force you to repeat the grade or force you to drop out, maybe that would appeal more.*

## SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

In addition to consequences and enforcement, students also suggested high schools could do a better job of recognizing, rewarding and celebrating good attendance.

*Think if you provide opportunities for people to get congratulated when they do go to school. Our school used to do something called the tardy party, and it was if you were [present for] a consecutive amount of weeks, we would have a pep rally that you could go to or there was some sort of prize for coming to school, just having some initiative for people to actually want to consistently be there.*

*I think they should make school more fun, have more field trips and more pep rallies so people could want to have fun in school.*

Others suggested schools do more to help students who are chronically absent.

*Well, I feel like if some people struggle in class, maybe enacting more tutoring opportunities at my school, people can get a tutor through the National Honors Society. So, I feel like that would definitely help with people that struggle with their work.*

*Maybe if they're gone for a long while of time, maybe first ask the parents if they're okay because sometimes the parents are the reason why the kid is not there. Or if the parents didn't respond, then they could try and figure out what's happening. And also, most kids don't want to talk about any sort of traumatic experience. They have seen bullying, and their parents are arguing or something. So maybe have a place where the kids who have those type of things could talk to each other about it.*

## 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 contributors to chronic absenteeism. 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, efforts around consequences for absenteeism should be enforced and schools should consider recognizing/rewarding students with good attendance.